

THE MYSTERY OF GALLOWS CLIFF

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 MYSTERY OF GALLOWS CLIFF

By Bruce Campbell

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THE MYSTERY OF GALLOWS CLIFF

CHAPTER I

DELAYED RECOGNITION

HEAT waves rising from the sun-baked highway formed shimmering mirages far ahead of the red convertible as it swept smoothly up the steep mountain grade. Ken Holt, at the wheel of the car, glanced at the speedometer. Then he nudged his friend Sandy Allen, slumped deep into the soft leather seat beside him.

"That's the last of my hundred miles," Ken said. He let the car lose speed and guided it off the pavement onto the gravel shoulder. When it came to a dead stop he set the emergency brake, opened the door, and stepped out. "It's all yours, Sandy-and about time." Ken stretched to ease his stiff shoulder muscles.

Sandy yawned widely before he too stepped out onto the gravelly edge of the highway.

When they stood side by side the difference between the two boys was striking. Black-haired Ken was two inches short of six feet and slim for his height, but there was a hint of hidden power and stamina in the smoothness of his movements. The power in Sandy's frame, measuring well over six feet, wasn't hidden. It showed in the breadth of his shoulders and the muscles of his bare forearms. When he propped one foot on the left front fender, the car settled down a full inch under the redhead's weight of nearly two hundred pounds.

"Do a couple of deep knee bends for me, will you,

Ken?" Sandy asked lazily. "I'm too stiff even to try to loosen up. I don't suppose," he added, eyeing Ken hopefully, "you'd care to keep the wheel for another hundred miles?"

"Not a chance," Ken assured him unsympathetically. "Besides, you won't even have to drive a full hundred-if we're going to stop at Gallows Cliff. According to the map, that's only about sixty-five miles from here. Of course if you'd rather go on, I'll sacrifice myself and give up the chance of visiting the archaeological dig we heard about. I'd hate to cheat you out of an extra thirty-five miles of driving," he added, "just for my own selfish pleasure."

Sandy glared at him. "You planned it this way," he said accusingly. "You wait until I'm tired, and then you tell me I can stop driving earlier if I let myself get roped into another one of your archaeological sites."

"But I just said I was willing to go right past Gallows Cliff," Ken pointed out, grinning.

"Oh, sure." Sandy opened the door and slid under the wheel. "Come on," he told Ken. "You win- again."

Ken was laughing at the exaggerated suffering in Sandy's voice as he got into the car beside his friend. "Why don't you admit that you always get as excited at a dig as I do?" he asked. "If I hadn't suggested stopping at Gallows Cliff, you'd probably have suggested it yourself."

Sandy was easing the car back onto the highway. Once on the smooth pavement he pressed his foot down on the accelerator. "I wouldn't have suggested it in a hundred years," he said. "Not after the terrible meal we had at that other town you made us stop in, just so you could watch a couple of sunburned scientists grubbing around in the dirt."

"Mmm," Ken said thoughtfully. "That was a pretty bad meal-on the second night we were there, that is. The food was fine the first night-remember? But when you insisted on staying over a second day, so you could take some photographs of the plaster casts they were making-and the good restaurant happened to be closed because of-

Sandy was laughing now too. "Why do I ever let myself get into an argument with you?" he demanded. Then he sobered. "Say, Ken, bring the log up to date, will you?" he asked. "I meant to do it while you were driving, but I got drowsy and forgot. You know you'd rather do it yourself, anyway," he added, "because you regard your writing style as highly superior to mine."

Ken reached into the glove compartment and brought out the notebook in which they had been keeping a record of the trip that had begun eight days earlier at the boys' home in Brentwood, New Jersey.

"It's not your fault that your style is poor," Ken said kindly. "When every sentence you write consists of nothing but a list of camera angles and shutter speeds--"

"It does not!" Sandy contradicted. "I always give our menus in detail. If they're worth it I even stick in some adjectives, straight from the heart-words like 'delicious' and 'hotly spiced'--"

Ken, ignoring him, had been checking the mileage on their speedometer and comparing it with the one on the first page of the notebook. "Whew!" he whistled. "In another ten miles we'll have covered exactly three thousand miles so far! Did you realize we'd gone so far?"

Sandy whistled too. "And how much farther would you say it was from here to San Francisco?"

"It can't be more than another thousand miles," Ken said. "Of course we're pretty far south, and--"

"Pretty far!" Sandy echoed. "We're about as far as we can get and still be in the United States. Gallows Cliff is practically on the Arizona-Mexican border, isn't it?"

"Just about," Ken said. "Are we still agreed that we're going down into Mexico for a couple of days? Today's only the tenth, and Dad doesn't expect us to meet him in San Francisco until the twentieth."

"Do you think it would be all right with your father if we took a detour through Mexico?" Sandy asked. "After all, he's staking us to this trip and- You know, Ken," he said

abruptly, "every time I stop and think what a colossal present he's giving us-the trip itself, and more than a week in San Francisco besides-"

"The Allens, of course," Ken broke in, "never do anything for anybody. They never lift a finger for the Holts, for example. I just happen to live at the Allen house, and work with the Allens. And once, I remember, when I didn't have a friend in the world, the Allens-"

It was Sandy's turn to interrupt. "Why don't you get to work on the log and let me concentrate on my riving?" he muttered.

Ken grinned sideways at his friend. He had known that the one sure way to break off any discussion with Sandy was to try to express something of the gratitude he and his father felt toward the Allen family.

Ken himself had met the family first, on the night when he had stumbled by accident into the office of the Allens' weekly newspaper, the *Brentwood Advance*. Ken had been terrified and on the run then, trying to escape from the same criminals who had kidnaped his father, the foreign correspondent, Richard Holt. Ken knew that that night would have had a tragic ending, for himself and his father too, if Pop Allen and his sons, Bert and Sandy, hadn't immediately offered their staunch support.

Since then Ken, motherless for many years, had made his home with the Allens. Tiny Mom Allen ruled him as firmly as she ruled the three oversized redheaded Allen men. Even Richard Holt took her orders when he visited the Allen house between assignments for the international news syndicate, Global News.

And ever since that same night Ken had been able to follow in his father's footsteps by carrying out assignments for the *Advance*. Often he and Sandy worked together, as reporter and photographer. Ken knew they made a satisfactory team when Global News began to accept their illustrated stories, and occasionally give them an assignment.

More than once the boys' work had led them into dangerous adventures. The most recent one-*The Mystery of the Invisible Enemy*, a press headline had dubbed it-had taken place only a few months earlier. Deliberately, Ken now pushed out of his mind a sudden recollection of that contest with a fiendishly clever criminal. He knew his father had sent Sandy and himself on this trip because Richard Holt thought they needed a rest and a change after that harrowing experience.

Half to himself, half to Sandy, Ken murmured, "Of course Dad was glad of an excuse to get us out to this San Francisco conference on Western Hemisphere relations he's covering. He's written a lot of stuff himself about the need for friendship among all the nations of North and South America. I guess he wants us to be prepared to write that sort of thing too, because he thinks it's so important."

"Are you saying it isn't?" Sandy demanded.

"Of course not," Ken said. "I was just thinking- in answer, my good man, to a question you put some miles back-that Dad probably would be glad if we spent some time in Mexico. He knows we didn't see too much of it on our one other trip. And he's a great one for thinking that the more you know about people, the better friends you can be with them."

Sandy grinned reminiscently. "I don't see how we could ever get to be better friends than we were with Ramon Gonzalez. I'd certainly like to see him again."

"So would I," Ken agreed.

"And, of course," Sandy added, "I wouldn't mind sampling some of that Mexican food again, either. Tacos-enchiladas-"

As he spoke a sign loomed up beside the highway advertising the Patio Restaurant of Gallows Cliff. The restaurant specialized, the sign declared, in Mexican food.

Silently Ken raised a hand and pointed it out.

"You didn't think I'd miss it, did you?" Sandy asked. "I

may have to apologize to you after all, much as I cringe at the thought. Gallows Cliff may turn out to be one of my favorite stopping places."

Only fifteen miles separated them by then from the small Arizona town they were heading for. Ken finished his entries in their log just as they neared the outskirts of Gallows Cliff. He closed the notebook and was putting it back in the glove compartment when Sandy indicated a motel on their right—a long, low building stretching back at a right angle to the highway, and painted white under a red tile roof.

Ken nodded. "Looks fine to me."

Sandy started to turn in at a crossroad that paralleled the motel building.

"Not yet," Ken told him. "The entrance is up there - see? On the other side of the building. Curb your impatience," he added. "You can't be that hungry. It's only five thirty."

"I am always hungry," Sandy said with quiet dignity. "It is only through monumental self-control that I manage to keep my eating down to a frugal three meals a day."

They approved of the room the motel manager showed them a few minutes later. At six thirty, refreshed by a shower, they were parking their car on the single business street of Gallows Cliff, not far from a glass-fronted building whose sign declared it to be the Patio Restaurant.

They were just stepping out of the car when Sandy grabbed Ken's arm. "Look," he said, gesturing toward an ancient sedan parked on the opposite side of the street, some distance away.

"Look at what?" Ken asked. "The car with Mexican license plates? There's nothing remarkable about that, Sandy. Remember we're only a few miles from the border."

"I know," Sandy said impatiently. "But isn't that Ramon Gonzalez at the wheel?"

"Gonzalez?" Ken narrowed his eyes. "It could be!" he said excitedly a moment later. "Let's go see."

Eagerly they crossed the street and started toward the battered green sedan. The closer they came to it the more sure they both were that the stocky dark man in the front seat was the Mexican detective they had come to know and respect on their trip to Mexico some time before. He was facing them as they approached, but not looking in their direction.

"It is!" Sandy said, when they were within half a dozen feet of the car. A moment later he bent down to peer through the open window. "*Buenos días*, Señor Gonzalez," he said.

The man at the wheel turned a square swarthy face toward them.

"We thought it was you," Ken said, "but we couldn't be sure until-"

"Is it that you make an error?" the man interrupted him. He spoke with a heavy Spanish accent, his dark eyes blinking as if in polite puzzlement. "I think you mistake me for some man of your knowledge, no?"

Sandy laughed. "Ramon!" he said. "Don't you remember us-Ken Holt and Sandy Allen? We were with Mort Phillips of the FBI when-" His voice faltered to a stop as the dark man slowly shook his head.

"I am very sorry, *senores*," the man said. "I would be most glad to remember you if that were possible. But I am Juan Pedro Ortiz, and I think we are not acquainted. And now if you will forgive me, please, I must go." He leaned forward to turn the ignition key, and his motor sprang to life.

Ken and Sandy stepped back automatically from the car. An instant later it roared off.

"But that was Ramon!" Sandy exploded. "I'm sure it was!"

"I certainly thought it was too," Ken agreed, his voice puzzled. "And it isn't as if we'd just met him once or twice. We really got to know him pretty well. But I suppose there could be somebody else who looks exactly like him."

"That wasn't somebody who looks like him," Sandy said. "That was Ramon. And he couldn't have forgotten us either."

"That's the point," Ken said. "Ramon wouldn't forget a face-he's too good a policeman for that."

"But he could have pretended not to recognize us-as some kind of joke," Sandy pointed out.

Ken frowned. "It wouldn't be a very funny joke. And it doesn't sound like Ramon's kind of humor. Come on, Sandy," he added. "We were on our way to eat-remember?"

The Patio Restaurant was a pleasant place. The food it served was excellent. But even Sandy ate absent-mindedly, and they talked very little. The sight of the man they had been so sure they recognized had given them both a sense of excitement. Now they felt a kind of flat disappointment.

"I suppose it sounds crazy," Sandy said, "but I'm not nearly as excited at the idea of getting back to Mexico again as I was before-before that happened."

"I know what you mean," Ken told him. "It's hard not to feel as if we'd been cut dead by a good friend."

"That's just the way I do feel," Sandy muttered. "I'm still absolutely positive that was Ramon."

"Well, if it was," Ken said, "then we know he must have recognized us. And if he chose not to admit it, then he must have had some good reason. Maybe sometime we'll find out what it was. Come on," he added, with an effort at briskness, "let's finish up here and go look for a movie."

"All right." Sandy swallowed the last of an enchilada. "We passed a drive-in theater on the way into town. That'll be better than sitting around feeling snubbed, I guess."

Less than half an hour later they were pulling into place in a half-filled row of cars in a big open-air movie theater. Sandy was at the wheel. Ken fastened the speaker to the door on his side of the car.

The picture had already started. But the big figures moving back and forth on the screen seemed to speak in whispers.

"Can't you turn the volume up a little?" Sandy asked.

Ken reached toward the control knob. His fingers closed around empty air.

Startled, he swung his head to find that the door had opened silently. A dim face looked in at them through the darkness.

"Ken-Sandy-it is I. Ramon." The words were barely audible. "Move forward, Ken. Allow me to enter."

Too astonished to speak, Ken started to slide toward Sandy, to give the shadowy figure room to slip in beside him.

"No, no. I prefer the back," the whispering voice told him.

Ken leaned forward then, and sensed the figure squeezing past his seat into the rear of the car.

"Hold it, Ken. Let me in too. Mort Phillips- remember?"

The second voice, lighter and unaccented, spoke close to Ken's face while he was still hunched forward. A moment later a second figure squeezed past into the rear of the car.

Mort Phillips of the FBI spoke again almost instantly. "Now you can shut the door, Ken. And you might turn the volume up a little, to give us a cover. Ramon and I are not exactly making a public appearance here tonight."

CHAPTER II

UNEXPECTED ASSIGNMENT

"RAMON! Mort!" Ken breathed, twisting around in an effort to see the newcomers.

"So it *was* you! I knew it!" Sandy exclaimed. "But why did you-?"

"We are here to explain," the Mexican detective said, leaning forward so that he could speak quietly under the noise of the movie's sound track. "I told Mort that it was essential-that I could not so badly mistreat good friends like yourselves. He agreed with me that it was safe to speak to you."

"We know we can trust you to forget that you've seen us together," Mort Phillips said.

"We can forget anything we have to," Ken assured him. "Does this mean you're working together again, you two? Sorry," he added quickly. "If you can't tell us what it's all about, we won't ask questions."

"We can't tell you as reporters," Mort Phillips said. "But off the record-just so you'll know Ramon had a good reason for what he did this afternoon-yes, we are working together, and on a really ticklish international case. If we can't get somewhere on it pretty soon," he went on, in a voice that betrayed severe strain, "they might just as well cancel that Western Hemisphere conference that's going to take place in San Francisco in about ten days."

"It's as bad as that? We've been pretty well briefed on

that conference-we're on our way to meet my father there," Ken said.

"You were on your way to join Richard Holt the first time we met you," Ramon Gonzalez said. "Meeting us that time delayed your trip. But do not worry. We will not let that happen again."

"We never regretted that for a minute," Ken assured him.

"We certainly didn't," Sandy echoed. "Working with you that time-or maybe I should say horning in on what you were doing-was one of the greatest experiences of our lives." He was referring to an adventure that was eventually reported fully through Global News, over Ken's by-line and illustrated by Sandy's pictures-an adventure that had come to be known as *The Mystery of the Green Flame*.

"Well," Mort Phillips said, his voice lightened for a moment, "I suppose there's no accounting for tastes." Then he sounded grim once more as he added, "Of course Ken's father may be covering a revolution somewhere south of here, instead of attending that conference, if Ramon and I can't pull a couple of rabbits out of a couple of hats sometime pretty soon."

"A revolution?" Ken repeated, startled. "Where?"

"That we don't know." Phillips bit off the words. "All we do know at the moment is that if and when it takes place, the United States is going to be accused of supplying the insurgents with arms. And Mexico is going to be accused of permitting the transshipment of those arms."

"Such charges-of interfering with the internal affairs of another nation-they are like dynamite," Gonzalez added.

"Wow!" Sandy said softly. "Dynamite is right! But if nobody knows where the revolution is going to take place, how can you two be expected to stop it?"

"It's not our business to try to stop it," Phillips said. "Our business is only to see to it that our own governments aren't involuntarily involved in the affairs of

some other nation. For all I know, the insurgents are planning to overthrow a government that deserves to be overthrown. Maybe they have right on their side. But they certainly have no right to endanger the position of the United States and Mexican governments. And that's what Ramon and I are hoping to prevent."

"I understand that," Sandy said meekly. "What I really meant to ask was what you can do-and why you two are the ones who have to do it."

"Oh. Well, Ramon got into it because it was one of his road patrols that picked up the first lead to the whole business, about two months ago," Phillips said. "As a result, he's naturally in charge of the Mexican end of the investigation. Ordinary routine, plus the fact that we've worked together before, brought me into it on this side of the border."

"What was the lead?" Ken's question was automatic. Even when he knew a story couldn't be printed, his mind functioned with a reporter's instinctive curiosity.

"An innocent-looking truck heading south through Mexico carrying baskets apparently filled with farm produce-innocent-looking, that is," Phillips added, "until Ramon's patrol discovered rifles, carbines, ammunition, and grenades under the vegetables in all those baskets."

Ken and Sandy had both forced themselves to turn straight in their seats, so that they appeared to be watching the picture on the big screen several hundred feet away. But neither of them was aware of the plot being unfolded before their unseeing eyes. Heads pressed against the seat back, ears strained for the quiet voices speaking behind them, they concentrated all their attention on the startling facts disclosed by the youthful-looking FBI agent and the Mexican detective employed by his own country's federal investigation agency.

"What made the patrol suspicious of the truck?" Ken wanted to know.

"The ironic thing, Ramon says, is that the men in his

patrol weren't in the least suspicious at first," Phillips replied. "They were just asking routine questions during a license check. The driver of the truck owned the vehicle, but he said that he and his truck had both been hired, at his own little village just south of the border from here, for a three-day job. He said he was supposed to deliver baskets of vegetables to a certain hotel on a stretch of practically uninhabited coastline along the Gulf of California. It might have seemed like an extravagant way for a hotel to get its vegetables, but it wouldn't have seemed any more than that-except that one of the men in the patrol happened to know that that particular hotel had been abandoned a couple of years ago."

"So the patrol officer asked to inspect the vegetables," Bamon Gonzalez went on. "And that is when he discovered that every basket was filled, almost to its top, with surplus United States defense materiel that had been smuggled across the border into Mexico."

"Smuggled! The driver admitted that outright?" Sandy asked.

There was a grim smile in Ramon's answering voice. "He admitted nothing. And we think he spoke the truth when he said he knew nothing."

"But surely when his truck was loaded, and he saw the arms-"

Sandy's objection was answered before he could finish putting it into words.

"The driver had nothing to do with the loading- or so he says, and so we believe," Ramon broke in. "The man who rented his truck took it away, loaded it, and brought it back ready for the journey. The truck owner had only to transport the goods." Ramon laughed briefly. "He told us he'd even been assured he would not have to assist in unloading the truck at its destination."

"And you couldn't find the man who'd hired him?" Ken asked.

"The truck owner could give us only a very inadequate

description-one that could fit dozens," Ramon explained. "Together with a name which was clearly fictitious. He thought the man was American, but he was not sure. Neither are we. We had even less luck when we checked at the abandoned hotel on the coast," he went on. "Someone had been there recently. Cigarette stubs and an empty cigarette package proved that. But by then the place was deserted. Lookouts posted along the truck's route no doubt sent a warning along when the truck failed to pass a given point."

"The hotel was a most excellent spot for a rendezvous, however." Ramon's voice showed his reluctant admiration for the men who had eluded his law-enforcement officers. "It would be most easy, at that spot, to load arms into a small coastal boat and send them safely on their way, at night, toward some port in Central or South America."

"You thought the other two rendezvous points were just as skillfully chosen," Mort Phillips reminded his friend.

"Other two?" Ken echoed. "Wait a minute. We've missed something. Was the truck supposed to go to three places?"

"No, *amigo*," Gonzalez said grimly. "There have been three trucks-the last one just a few days ago. Each one was hired in the same way, at some small village just over the border from here. Each was secretly loaded with guns and ammunition most cleverly hidden in baskets of produce. And each was sent on its way with the owner-driver at the wheel. According to the drivers, each truck also had its own destination. Always it was some conveniently deserted spot on the Gulf Coast opposite Lower California. *Si*, these gunrunners are most clever. They never try to use the same rendezvous a second time. And always, so far as we can tell, it is a different man who makes the arrangements with some innocent Mexican truck owner."

"Well," Sandy said, "they must be getting pretty

discouraged by now just the same-if you've picked up all three of their trucks."

"We have picked up three-that is true," Gonzalez agreed. "But all? Ah, that we doubt. We have no idea how many others have slipped through our hands."

"I suppose," Ken said tentatively, after a moment, "you were never able to discover where in the United States the arms had been purchased, or who bought them?"

"That end is just as dead as the one over the border," Mort Phillips said flatly. "Nobody bought those arms-at least they weren't bought by the men who smuggled them into Mexico."

"Nobody?" Ken could only echo his friend blankly once again.

"That is so, amigo," Ramon agreed. "These men we deal with are very smart *bandidos*. They stole the arms. That is right, is it not, Mort?"

"That is right. All the arms picked up so far were last seen on a New York pier about a year ago. They were there legitimately, awaiting shipment to a legitimate European purchaser, when they were hijacked -hijacked so slickly that no clues to the thieves ever turned up. And the stolen stuff simply couldn't be traced-until it began to show up in vegetable baskets in Mexican trucks."

"It sounds fantastic," Ken murmured. He was wishing his father were at hand to hear the story. Maybe, he thought, his father could even be of some help to the frustrated men now sitting glumly in the darkness at his back. Certainly, if his father knew the facts, Richard Holt would want to help. The situation was one that would arouse all his fighting instincts. "How about the money paid to the truck owners?" Ken asked suddenly. "That couldn't be traced, I suppose?"

"You're right. It couldn't," Phillips told him. "It was all in small bills-even though it amounted, in each case, to more money than the Mexican trucker had ever seen in his life before."

"One thing I can't understand," Sandy said, "is why the truck owners themselves weren't suspicious. It must have seemed pretty queer to them-having their trucks taken away to be loaded, and being paid so much for an apparently routine delivery job."

"Suspicious? Ah, but they were." Ramon spoke in quick defense of his fellow countrymen. "But the bandidos were prepared for that. They dropped hints-only very small hints, you understand, but clever-about oil-exploration programs in Mexico. Everyone in Mexico knows such programs go on constantly. Everyone knows they are conducted often with utmost secrecy, and that much money is always involved. So each of the truck owners-as he confessed to us after questioning-believed there was something besides vegetables in those baskets he carried. But he believed it was a collection of the tools and instruments necessary for oil prospecting. So it was not surprising, he thought, that he was offered so much money for his truck and his time, and he was eager to take the job because it was hinted that there would be other such jobs in the future if he did this one well and made no mention of it in his village."

The sigh at the end of Ramon's words emphasized the Mexican's discouragement.

"It seems to me," Ken said slowly, "that if you're stymied at both ends of the line-if you can't find a lead anywhere in the States, or in Mexico either- that the only place left to work on is the spot in the middle, the spot where the arms are smuggled across the border to be delivered to the Mexican truckers on the other side."

The moment he finished speaking he could feel his face go red in the darkness. "Sorry," he muttered. "I should have realized that's exactly what you two must be doing here in Gallows Cliff, practically on the border."

Ramon Gonzalez chuckled unexpectedly. "In a world that changes so rapidly, Mort," he said, "it is pleasant to find that some things remain the same, no? It is pleasant

to discover that these boys still function as well in the head as they did that time when we were all together in Mexico."

"If this is your subtle idea of kidding-" Ken began.

"But no, no. I do not kid, as you say," Gonzalez assured him. "You are right, Ken. Mort and I are indeed in Gallows Cliff because we hope to find some clue to those bandidos here on the border. All three trucks were rented at villages very close to here. So it must be near here, we think, that the arms were smuggled over the border."

"Also," Mort Phillips put in, "we'd like to find out how anybody-the bandits Ramon speaks about, or anybody else-can get heavy loads of stuff across a border we regard as pretty well controlled. Nobody could get guns and ammunition in that amount past our regular check points-the customs offices where a highway crosses the border, that is. And we can't figure out how they could be taken across anywhere else either, especially with the extra patrols we've added lately."

"There's no river at the border here, is there?" Sandy muttered, visualizing the map in his mind. The Rio Grande, he knew, marked only the eastern, or Texas, half of the Mexican-United States boundary.

"That's right," Phillips agreed. "Smugglers operating in this area wouldn't need a boat, in other words. But they probably would need a truck, to transport even the amount of stuff we've already confiscated. And we've been keeping an extra watch at every place where a truck could get through- where the terrain isn't too rugged for any kind of wheeled vehicle."

"The stuff couldn't be flown in?" Ken asked.

"We've pretty well ruled out the possibility that they use planes," Phillips answered. "Our spotting system is too effective."

"And you say you've got a lot of extra border guards on duty?"

"More than we've ever had in this district before,"

Phillips admitted. "Plus the few plain-clothesmen the area can absorb-men who just drift around, keeping their eyes open. One trouble is, of course, that Gallows Cliff is not exactly a metropolis. Strangers are pretty noticeable here. So we haven't been able to spot many men in the area, besides ourselves. And Ramon and I have had to work out our own covers very carefully."

"*Si, si,*" Ramon said. "I am-as I tell you today, no?-Juan Pedro Ortiz, farm laborer." His accent had thickened. His voice had taken on a humble, almost cringing note. "I am most *afortunado* to find good job, no? Me, who know nothing."

The boys grinned.

"How do you like that?" Phillips said admiringly. "The stage certainly lost a great actor when Gonzalez decided to make a career of law and order. Personally I have to stick to roles that don't require genius," he added. "I'm in these parts-or so I tell everybody -to paint the beauties of the Southwest. I've made a couple of pretty good studies of the saguaro cactus, if I do say it myself. But that's all I have accomplished."

"Couldn't you just bring in as many men as you want, and let them pass themselves off as fishermen or hunters?" Sandy asked.

"Not very well," Ramon told him dryly, "since there are no lakes or streams in the area, and since this is not the hunting season."

"Well, how about some ordinary tourists then?"

The skepticism of the men in the back seat was almost audible.

"Gallows Cliff," Mort Phillips said, "is the sort of town most people hurry through. It doesn't boast a single famous sight. It's not old enough to be historically interesting. The surrounding country isn't rugged enough for real climbers, or attractive enough for campers. Take yourselves, for example. You happened to come through here, on your way west. But I'm willing to bet you wouldn't

have stopped for five minutes if you hadn't pulled into town at the end of the day, when you were looking for a place to eat and sleep. Am I right?"

"This is a memorable moment," Sandy said solemnly. "This will go down in history as the occasion when Holt and Allen caught Mort Phillips in an error of judgment. Tell him, Ken."

"Huh?" Phillips laughed briefly. "What is this?"

"Sandy's right," Ken said. "We're in Gallows Cliff on purpose, because we heard a couple of days ago- when we were in a museum in New Mexico-that there were some archaeologists working around here -a group from the Brewster Natural History Museum, directed by a Dr. Frazer Talbott. And we couldn't resist the chance to see if they'd let us visit their dig and look at the stuff they've found. We understand that they've already unearthed part of a mammoth skeleton and some Stone Age tools."

"Ken couldn't resist it, he means," Sandy said under his breath.

"Well!" Phillips let out his breath in surprise. "I guess that'll teach me a lesson-not to take anything for granted about you two. We've heard about that dig," he added. "It's some three or four miles east of town, on a hill called El Diablo-The Devil. I made some inquiries about it, because I thought if the hill was high enough, and overlooked the border, it might pay us to try to get a man on the laboring crew. But apparently El Diablo is only a kind of small butte, with larger hills between it and the border. So it didn't sound as if it would be useful to us, and I never even got out to see it. Well, I hope you find it worth looking at."

"We are glad you stopped, even if the dig is not open to visitors, or is of no interest to you," Ramon Gonzalez said. "It has been good to see you again, and to talk as in-how do you say?-in old times."

"That sounds like a farewell speech," Ken said over his shoulder. "Are you trying to get rid of us, Ramon? Because

we're figuring on staying around for-oh, maybe a week or so. Aren't we, Sandy?"

"Get rid of you? But no," Gonzalez said warmly, before Sandy could answer. "I thought only that you would not be visiting a dig for more than one day."

Sandy spoke up then. The note of excitement in his voice told Ken that his friend had grasped the meaning in his own last speech. "A day was about what we did have in mind-earlier this evening," he said. "But I agree with Ken. I think we may be here longer-just sort of wandering around, you know, and keeping our eyes open."

Mort Phillips leaned swiftly forward. "Now listen, you two," he said. "I can guess what you're up to. You think maybe you could help us out-and I'm not saying you couldn't. I have a good deal of respect for your sharp eyes and the kind of intuition you've got. But I've told you that Gallows Cliff is a small town. You'd be conspicuous just wandering around here. And I've got a hunch it's not wise to be conspicuous in this neighborhood these days. You'll notice Ramon and I went to a good deal of trouble tonight not to be seen with you. We're careful not to be seen together either-we came here in separate cars. So don't get the idea that we'll let you stick your necks out, just in an effort to help a couple of old friends."

"But what makes you think we'll be conspicuous- in the way you mean?" Ken asked. "If a couple of accredited newspaper reporters from Global News have an assignment to do a story about archaeologists digging into America's past, why would anybody worry about them staying in Gallows Cliff until the story was done?"

"Oh." Mort Phillips sounded surprised. "Have you got an assignment? You didn't say so."

Ken grinned in the darkness of the car. "Well, not exactly-not yet," he admitted. "But I should think we could convince Granger that he needs a story about that mammoth skeleton-or those Stone Age tools or something."

"Oh," Mort Phillips said again. "I see." His low chuckle proved that for a moment, at least, he had forgotten the strain under which he and Ramon Gonzalez had been laboring.

"Si, si. I also see," Gonzalez murmured.

Ken settled deeper into his seat. "From now on we'll just listen," he said. "This movie won't last forever, and you probably have a lot more to tell us- about what to look for, and how to get in touch with you, and-well, whatever else you think we ought to know."

"I suppose," Phillips said quietly, after a moment, "there's no use trying to persuade you to forget that assignment you don't have anyway?"

"Of course not!" Sandy assured him in a shocked voice. "Why, if you knew Granger, you'd know he'd never forgive us if we forgot any Global assignment -whether we had it or not."

That time Mort Phillips and Ramon Gonzalez both laughed. Then Phillips said, "Well, all right. We know when we're licked. Listen carefully, then, because I may not have time to say things more than once."

CHAPTER III

SANDY'S IDEA

IT WAS seven thirty the next morning when the boys walked out of their motel room into the bright desert sunshine. At that hour the clear air was still cool and fresh.

"We could call Granger right away," Ken said, "from the motel office."

"Oh, no." Sandy shook his head. "That means calling him at home. You know he doesn't get to the office until nine. And he's going to be irritated enough at accepting a reverse-charge call from us, without-"

"Sandy," Ken broke in quietly, "let me tell you about an interesting fact which you apparently have not observed. Our earth rotates on its axis, giving us the impression that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west once every twenty-four hours. Furthermore, the sun appears to rise earlier in, say, New York than-"

"All right, all right." Grinning sheepishly, Sandy waved him silent. "I forgot about the difference in time. But that just proves what I was going to say."

"It proves what-how?" Ken demanded.

"I was going to say I thought we ought to eat before we phoned Granger, anyway, to sharpen our wits. That man is hard enough to deal with when we're at our best. I don't see any point in trying to approach him when we're weak from hunger and still half asleep. Which I've just proved I am."

Ken grinned. "I admit I'd rather have a good stimulating cup of coffee myself, before I try to wangle anything out of Granger. Come on, then. There's a diner not far down the road."

As Ken slid behind the wheel, and Sandy got in beside him, Ken added, "I suppose there'll be a phone in the diner."

"Unh-unh." Sandy's yawn made the sound unintelligible, but his shaking head said he disagreed.

"How do you know there's no phone there?" Ken asked. "Don't tell me you've taken to eating in the middle of the night too?"

Sandy ignored the question. "Let me," he said, imitating Ken's voice of a few moments earlier, "tell you about an interesting fact which you apparently- how did you put it?-have not observed. The name of our motel owner is Clint Tomen. The proprietor of the Patio Restaurant is a Will Tomen. The largest grocery store in Gallows Cliff is the Tomen Market. Gallows Cliff, in other words, appears to be well populated with Tomens."

"Is that so?" Ken kept his eyes on the road. "I agree with you. That is a positively fascinating fact. But what has it got to do with us-or the lack of a phone in the diner?"

"I didn't say the diner had no phone," Sandy pointed out. "For all I know it has a dozen. But this call we are about to make will prove to anyone who overhears it that we are legitimate Global News staff men. If we prove that to one Tomen, and he happens to be a talkative type, we will in effect be proving it to all Tomens. And that would mean a good part of Gallows Cliff."

"I think you'd better skip breakfast," Ken told him admiringly. "I won't be able to stand living with you if your wits get any sharper. You've put me in my place. You've sold me. We will return to the Saguaro Motor Court to make our call, and thus establish our cover in the eyes of the entire town at one stroke."

"After breakfast," Sandy added.

"Whatever you say. After breakfast it is."

A moment later Ken pulled the red convertible to a halt in the diner's parking lot. Only one other car occupied the area—a fairly new but battered station wagon, its open tailboard sagging under the weight of a load of cartons, gasoline cans, and assorted packages. Ken peered at it intently when he read the lettering on the door: BREWSTER NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM.

He nudged Sandy. The redhead's eyes widened when he read the name.

"That's the sponsoring institution of the dig!" he muttered.

"Right." Ken grinned. "Let's take it as a good omen. And maybe we can pick up a little information ahead of time, about the dig. But let's not be too ready to introduce ourselves. It'll be better to wait for Granger to put in a word for us with the museum. Of course," he added, "if we discover Talbott himself eating right beside us, and he introduces himself first . . ."

"We'll be courteous and tell him who we are," Sandy completed.

Except for the cook, behind the counter, there were only two people in the diner—a small elderly man in wrinkled coveralls and his larger and younger companion. The elderly man's cheeks and chin were covered with gray stubble, the fringe of gray hair around his bald head was straggly, and his denim work clothes were wrinkled and earth-stained. The younger man was clean-shaven, with a thick head of straw-colored hair and work clothes of crackling freshness.

Ken led the way to a place near the other two customers, and climbed on a stool. Sandy sat beside him.

"What'll it be, boys?" The cook gestured toward the menu neatly chalked on the blackboard above his head, and then leaned on the counter waiting for their order.

Sandy wasted no time on his decision. "Orange juice,

ham and eggs-sunny side up, please-and plenty of toast and some coffee."

"Orange juice, bacon, and scrambled eggs for me," Ken said.

"Right."

The other two men were already busily eating. As the boys drank their fruit juice, they could watch them through the mirror that faced the counter. The big man was dunking a doughnut methodically in his coffee, and biting off huge mouthfuls. The older man chewed steadily with toothless gums. Was either of them Talbott? Somehow Ken didn't think so.

Suddenly the older man's eyes met Ken's in the mirror and the man nodded and grinned with the ready friendliness the boys had so frequently encountered in the Southwest.

Ken grinned back. "Nice morning," he said. "That your station wagon out there?"

"Yep. Right loaded down, ain't she?"

"Sure is. We noticed it was a Brewster Natural History Museum car," Ken went on casually. "That must mean you're working on the dig we heard about, up on El Diablo."

"Yep. I guess some people'd call it work," the old man added. "I call it just messin' around." He picked up his coffee cup and took a noisy swallow. "But I guess all them old stones and burned bones keep the perffesser happy-him and his assistant."

"Professor Talbott, you mean?" Sandy asked, leaning forward to look past Ken.

"That's him. He-"

"You know Doc Talbott?" The sharp interruption came from the younger of the two men, and Ken noticed that he held half a doughnut suspended in midair over his coffee cup, as if waiting intently for the answer to his question.

"Oh, no-we've never met him," Ken said easily. "We've just heard about him, and about some of the things he's

been finding. We gather the expedition has been very successful so far."

The younger man shrugged and returned wordlessly to his breakfast.

"You interested in them old stones and sech too?" the old man asked, peering at the boys out of his faded blue eyes. "'Cause if you are, I reckon the per-fesser'd be glad to show you some of the stuff he's dug up. Don't look like much to me, but-

Once more his companion interrupted him. "Doc Talbott doesn't like visitors, Jed," he said. "You know that. He doesn't want 'em around."

"Why, he ain't mean, Gus," the old man protested. "If somebody wanted to look around that cave of his, I don't think he'd mind-if they don't get underfoot, or try to make off with some of those old stones he thinks are so important."

"You're makin' trouble for yourself, Jed," the man called Gus said flatly. "I'm the foreman. I know Doc Talbott better'n any of you. And I say he don't like visitors. You go tellin' people different and you're likely to find yourself out of that soft job you've got."

"Shucks, Gus, I didn't mean no harm," Jed said unhappily. "If these folks just wanted to drive up to El Diablo and look around, I-

"You run off at the mouth, Jed." As the big man spoke he put some coins down on the counter and got off his stool. "Come on." He didn't speak again until he was herding a silent Jed through the door a moment later, and then he only called back over his shoulder a brief, "So long, Harry."

Harry put the boys' breakfast orders down in front of them as the door shut. "You don't want to mind Gus Parks," he said. "I can't recall a day when he wasn't gousin' about something or other." He turned away to draw their coffee.

Ken grinned. "We won't let him spoil our appetite," he

promised. "Is Dr. Talbott really as bad as Mr. Parks makes out?" he added.

The cook shrugged. "Can't tell you much about him. He's been in here a couple of times, but he and the other scientist with him always get into a corner booth and just talk business-least, I always imagine they're talkin' about their old stones, as Jed calls 'em. The few words I've heard 'em use don't make any sense to me at all." He put their coffee down in front of them, checked to make sure there was salt and pepper within their reach, and asked, "Got everything you want?"

"Looks like plenty to me," Ken assured him.

"You don't happen to have a map of Gallows Cliff around, do you?" Sandy asked.

Ken eyed him curiously, but Sandy avoided his glance.

"There's a county map over there, under the glass." The cook pointed to the glass-topped cigar case near the door. "But if you just want to know how to get out of town, you don't need a map for that. This highway is the only main road around here."

Sandy had already left his eggs to cool, and had slipped off his stool to bend over the glass-protected sheet the cook had pointed out. "Thanks. We know about the highway," he said over his shoulder.

Ken carefully concealed his own surprise at Sandy's abrupt abandonment of his breakfast. "He's a fiend about maps," he said easily, in response to the cook's unspoken question. It was true. But Ken had seldom seen Sandy leave a meal unfinished even to look at a map of unusual interest. He wondered what had prompted the redhead's sudden curiosity.

A moment later Sandy was back beside him. "These eggs are done just right," he said, as if to forestall any discussion of the map or his own interest in it. "But I'm going to want another order of toast, please."

"More toast comin' right up."

When they left the diner, Ken said, "All right, talk. It's

not like you to let your eggs get cold, even for a map."

Sandy motioned him into the car and got in himself. "That map," he said, as he turned the ignition key, "shows El Diablo." There was a note of excitement in his voice. "It also shows the Mexican border. And so far as I could tell, the hill can't be more than a mile and a half from the boundary line."

"And so?" Ken prompted.

"But don't you see?" Sandy had swung the car around and was heading back toward their motel. "Or didn't you hear the old man use the word 'cave'?"

Ken wrinkled his brows. "Cave? Oh, yes, of course," he remembered. "He did talk about the professor's cave. So what? Lots of archaeological excavations are in caves."

"But if Talbott and his crew are excavating a cave," Sandy pointed out, "isn't it possible that they discovered an underground passage-a natural tunnel -running all the way to the border and over it into Mexican territory? And if they did, wouldn't that tunnel be a handy smuggling route?"

"What!" Ken exploded. "Are you serious?" And when he saw that Sandy had meant every word of his surprising suggestion, he added, "But, Sandy, you surely don't think a professor from the Brewster Museum would be involved in a gunrunning plot- do you?"

"Who said he was?" Sandy demanded. "Talbott might not even know about the tunnel. It might begin far back in some part of the cave he's never seen. It might have been discovered by-well, by old sour-puss Gus, for example. It's not so impossible to imagine him involved in gunrunning, is it? Well?" he urged when Ken didn't answer immediately. "Is it?"

Ken shook his head slowly. "No, it isn't," he admitted. When he spoke again, after a moment's silence, he was grinning and there was excitement in his voice too. "We've got to get into that cave, Sandy, even if Granger has to promise a personal donation to the Brewster Museum to

get us there."

CHAPTER IV

PRESS OF TIME

CLINT TOMEN was a big man who obviously didn't believe in moving faster than was absolutely necessary. He was sitting at his desk in the motel office, looking more asleep than awake, and his nod of greeting when the boys entered was like something in a slow-motion film.

"Checkin' out?" he asked.

It was the second time within less than half an hour that a Gallows Cliff resident had assumed that the boys would be immediately on their way. If Ken and Sandy had once doubted Mort Phillips, when he said it was unusual for strangers to do more than stay overnight in the town, they could doubt him no longer.

"Not yet," Ken told him. "We just want to use the phone."

"It's over there." Tomen's head inclined a fraction of an inch to indicate the far wall of the office. "Need change?" he asked politely.

"No, thanks." Ken dropped a coin into the slot, dialed the operator, and told her he wanted to place a collect call to Global News in New York. Sandy stood beside him. He winked at Ken when they both noticed the slight raise of an eyebrow that, in Clint Tomen, indicated a strong surge of curiosity.

Tomen's eyebrow raised another fraction when the operator at the world-famous news syndicate, after

hearing Ken's name, immediately agreed to accept his call.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Granger," Ken told her, asking for the New York editor with whom Sandy and he had long enjoyed verbal feuds, but whom they knew they could always call on for help.

A moment later Granger's voice was booming out of the receiver, so loudly that Ken was glad he had already pulled the instrument back in order that Sandy-and perhaps Tomen too-could hear the editor's words.

"What are you two up to now," Granger demanded, "that will be worth a long-distance call from -where'd the girl say you were?"

"Gallows Cliff, Arizona," Ken told him.

"Gallows Cliff!" Granger snorted. "That sounds like a lively town! What have you got for me-a couple of fresh-hung corpses?"

"No," Ken told him. Grinning, he added, "But some people-and some animals-died here about twelve thousand years ago, and we thought-"

"Twelve thousand years!" Granger interrupted. "What is this?"

"Seriously," Ken told him, "we think there's an interesting story here that-"

Once more Granger's bellow interrupted him. "You *think* there's a story! Don't you know yet what a good news story is?"

"This isn't a news story," Ken said. "It's a human-interest yarn-a feature for the Sunday issue-about an archaeologist who's dug up prehistoric tools and charred animal bones that are supposed to date back twelve thousand years."

"I see." Granger's terrifying bellow had been replaced by a voice of even more terrifying calm. "They've been lying around for twelve thousand years-and you can't let them lie for another day or so, while you write me a letter. Instead, you have to call me collect!"

"Of course we had to call you," Ken told him calmly. "If

you want the story, we'll stay here long enough to get it. Otherwise we'll shove on. We've been hoping to get down into Mexico, anyway."

"And now you're threatening me!" Granger's sigh sounded just as long-suffering as the boys knew he meant it to, and his voice had become plaintive. "Sometimes, Ken, you talk so much like your father it frightens me. I doubt if Global can survive two generations of Holts-with an Allen tossed in for good measure on the second round." He sighed again. "All right, go ahead. Tell me what it's all about."

The boys grinned at each other, forgetting everything else for the moment in their pleasure over finding Granger up to his usual form. Then Ken sobered and began to recite the facts he knew about the El Diablo dig-facts he had collected from the New Mexico museum curator who had first suggested that the boys would find Gallows Cliff worth a visit. He spoke in crisp timesaving sentences that wasted no words.

"So if we can get permission to spend a couple of days at the dig," he concluded, "I'm pretty sure we can come up with some interesting pictures and a good yarn."

"Hmm." Granger too was now all newspaperman. "There hasn't been too much published lately about prehistoric America. O.K., Ken, give it a try. But tell that redheaded animated camera not to shoot too many pictures-not if he expects to get paid for them. All stone tools have a tendency to look pretty similar in photographs."

"Right. Now there's just one more thing," Ken said quickly. "The chief archaeologist here is a Dr. Frazer Talbott, and the expedition is sponsored by the Brewster Natural History Museum. Could you ask the museum officials to give us a kind of long-range introduction to Dr. Talbott, to assure his co-operation?"

He held his breath. Granger clearly wasn't too enthusiastic about the story. He might well decide that it

should be done later, by some other journalist already known to Dr. Talbott, if the boys couldn't get the archaeologist's co-operation on their own.

But Granger merely said, "That'll be easy. I know a couple of the museum's directors. I'll talk to them right away and I'm sure they'll be glad to notify Talbott that you'll be calling on him with their blessing. By the way," he added, "give me your address out there."

"The Saguaro Motor Court," Ken said, "in Gallows Cliff, Arizona." Granger never forgot a thing he had once been told. "Wait a minute," he added suddenly. "Is that near the Mexican border?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Because your father heard about some serious trouble brewing up in one of the small Central American republics-trouble that-"

At Granger's mention of trouble Ken had once more swiftly pressed the receiver tight against his ear. Then, still listening to the voice from New York, his eyes met Sandy's and he nodded imperceptibly toward Tomen. The man's big figure was bent over a magazine spread out on his desk, but something about the tilt of his head made it clear that he had been straining to hear their entire conversation. Sandy nodded in return, and started across the room toward the motel owner, raising his voice in a question as he moved.

While Ken concentrated on the rest of what Granger had to say, he was aware of Sandy's voice throwing up its protective wall of sound between Tomen and the instrument across the room.

A few minutes later Ken joined his friend beside the motel owner's desk. He knew Sandy sensed his tenseness, but he hoped he was concealing it from the stranger.

"I've been asking Mr. Tomen about some of the Mexican villages nearest the Arizona border," Sandy said. "I gather they're pretty interesting."

"That where you boys are headed?" Tomen asked.

"We'd like to get down into Mexico," Ken told him, "if we have time. But we may have an assignment that will make it impossible. Our editor will let us know about it later today."

"Kind of thought you two were newspapermen," Tomen said slyly. "Couldn't help overhearin' you ask for Global News," he went on, as if trying to convince them that he had not intentionally listened to everything Ken said, and to Granger's voice through the wire as well. "You work for that outfit, eh?"

"Not full time," Ken said. "But we do special stories for them once in a while."

"Coin' to do one around here?" Tomen asked.

"We'd like to," Ken said. If Tomen enjoyed his pretense of having heard nothing, it would probably be as well to play along with him, he thought. "We believe the archaeological expedition working on El Diablo might make a good Sunday feature."

"Say! That's an idea!" Tomen feigned surprise effectively. "Be a fine thing for the town if it got printed-good for business, you know." He leaned back and hooked his thumbs into his belt. "If you need any help on it, boys, don't hesitate to call on me. If you'd like me to get you in up there, I happen to know the foreman, Gus Parks, real well."

"Is that so?" Ken asked politely.

"Yep. And he's the man who really runs the job. He rounds up the workmen they need, and keeps the men supplied with tools and all, and sees to it that the place is guarded at night-does just about everything, I guess. Don't suppose Doc Talbott would know how to get along without him," Tomen concluded.

Ken nodded, hoping he looked sufficiently impressed. "Mr. Parks and a man he called Jed were eating breakfast in the diner up the road when we were there this morning," he said.

"Jed? Sure, that'd be old Jed Liscomb," Tomen said.

In an effort to learn more about the man who, Sandy had said, looked capable of gunrunning, Ken asked, "Did they both come here with Dr. Talbott?"

"Come here with the professor?" Tomen laughed. "I should say not-lived here all their lives, both of 'em. Jed used to be a prospector, in the old days. Never had much luck, I guess, and when he did make a find he couldn't seem to hang on to a penny. Parks has got stickier fingers when it comes to money- always seems to know where to put his hand on a dollar. He usually handles the temporary help folks use around here, for example-men to get in the cotton and fruit harvest. Makes a good thing of it too."

"We could see," Ken said carefully, "that he took a good deal of responsibility for the expedition. In fact, he as good as told us that Dr. Talbott didn't want visitors up at the dig."

He had wondered what Tomen's reaction would be to that, since Tomen had said he could get them permission to visit El Diablo through Parks. To Ken's surprise, Tomen laughed.

"That's Gus, all right," he said, with an admiring shake of his head. "He's always got an angle. Probably figured that if he made it sound hard to get in up there, you'd give him a little present if he managed it for you. Newsmen do pay for help sometimes, don't they?"

"Maybe some of them do," Ken agreed. "We've never found it necessary, on the kind of assignments we've had."

"Well, I'll be glad to speak to Parks for you, if you'd like," Tomen offered. "And if he thinks he's goin' to get paid for givin' you boys a hand, I'll just remind him that I've done him a couple of favors in the past, and he can do me one now. No, no," he added, waving a hand in a slow gesture of protest, as Ken opened his mouth, "don't need to thank me. Like I said, it'd be good for business to have a story about Gallows Cliff get into the papers. Might bring a lot of strangers to town. So I'd be doin' myself a favor as

much as you."

"I was just going to say," Ken explained, "that we may not have to ask your help because Global News probably will try to get word directly to Dr. Talbott about us. But thanks just the same."

Ken and Sandy started for the door then.

"So you're not givin' up your room, eh?" Tomen said before they reached it.

"That's right," Ken told him. "Not today, at any rate."

"And not," Sandy said under his breath as they stepped out into the sunshine, "for several days-if we're lucky. Now tell me-quick! What was Granger talking about? What kind of trouble?"

Ken's face no longer wore the casual look he had assumed for Tomen's benefit. "Dad has learned," he said grimly, "that the little Central American republic of Rio Plata plans to charge Mexico and the United States before the Security Council of the ' United Nations-charge them both with arming and supporting a revolution against the Rio Plata government. Dad said he thought the charges probably would be made within a week."

Sandy stared at him. His lips pursed in a silent whistle. "Wow!" he said softly, after a long moment.

"Exactly," Ken said.

"And within a week!" Sandy suddenly pounded a fist into his palm. "But that means Mort and Ramon have to move fast if they're going to accomplish anything at all."

"Plenty fast," Ken agreed. "And if your idea about a tunnel doesn't work out, I can't think of any other way we can help them. Except for getting in touch with them right now," he added, "and letting them know what Granger said."

Ken was sliding into the car as he spoke. "Where are we heading for?" Sandy asked.

"A phone that is a little more private than the one we just used," Ken told him.

They knew how to get in touch with Gonzalez. He had

told them the night before. He could be reached by phone at the large fruit ranch where he worked, or a message could be left for him there. Gonzalez had chosen his cover well. Woodrow, the fruit-ranch owner, was utterly trustworthy and knew the Mexican's true identity. Furthermore, the Woodrow property edged the border, at a spot about eight miles east of Gallows Cliff. This meant that Gonzalez, who had been ostensibly hired as a fence inspector, was able to roam for miles through the hills along the border without exciting suspicion. The short-wave radio that had been installed in the rancher's jeep enabled Gonzalez to communicate directly with Mort Phillips, camped with his paints and his easel some seven miles to the west of Gallows Cliff.

Five minutes later Ken pulled up at a gas station with an outdoor telephone booth, and shut himself inside it as Sandy took the opportunity to fill the car's gas tank.

Quickly Ken dialed the number of the Woodrow ranch. Woodrow himself answered. Gonzalez, he said, had been delayed in starting on his usual rounds, and was still in the bunkhouse. He could be called to the telephone immediately. Ken waited less than a minute before Ramon's voice came over the wire.

"We can speak freely," Gonzalez said quietly. "I am alone in this room now, and I know that this telephone is safe. What is on your mind, amigo?"

Ken reported the vital facts of his call to Granger, wishing as he spoke that Gonzalez did not have to learn the nearness of the deadline from him. Gonzalez listened without comment.

"Si, si," the Mexican detective said, when Ken had finished. "I think you do not like to have to tell me this, Ken. So I must inform you that the same news has come to me earlier, from my own superior."

"Oh," Ken said.

"I heard from him this morning, amigo," Gonzalez explained, "and I heard at the same time that he himself

will arrive here on Saturday to take over the responsibility from me. He would come sooner, he says, but another critical affair will keep him in Mexico until then." The brisk, faintly smiling tone in Ramon's voice told Ken that he was seeking merely to state a fact, and not to ask sympathy for the unpleasantness of his own position.

"I see," Ken said. His own anger made his voice gruff. "I don't like to say anything against your boss," he added, "but if he thinks he can do anything you can't do--"

"Please-amigo," Gonzalez protested, "do not trouble yourself. A demotion for me is of no-how do you say?-consequence, yes. The important thing is to do the job that must be done."

"Demotion!" Ken repeated, startled. "But, Ramon, surely it wouldn't mean that? Nobody can blame you for not accomplishing the impossible."

"Failure is failure, Ken," Gonzalez said quietly. "Tell me," he added, deliberately changing the subject, "do you and Sandy still persist with this plan to do a story about the dig at El Diablo?"

"Yes, of course." Ken told him of the arrangements that Granger was even then presumably making.

"And there's one other thing," Ken went on. He and Sandy had agreed, as they drove along the highway in search of a phone, that they would not confide in Gonzalez Sandy's idea of trying to find some sort of a boundary-crossing tunnel leading out of the cave where the archaeologists were at work.

"Let's not mention it at least until we've seen the cave ourselves," Sandy had said. "Then we ought to have some idea of whether there might be a tunnel there or not."

But now, in his determination to prove to Gonzalez that the gunrunners might be tracked down within the next few days, Ken decided to take on himself the decision to speak. Swiftly he poured out Sandy's idea.

Gonzalez said nothing for a moment when Ken finished.

"Ah," then he said softly. "I had not heard of a cave there. And a tunnel-? But anything is possible. And sometimes when help is most needed, that is when help appears, no? You have given me good heart. I will speak of this to Mort pronto. You must take no chances, you understand. You must be careful."

"We will," Ken assured him. "With luck," he added, "we'll make our first visit to El Diablo this afternoon. We probably won't have much time to do any serious looking around then, but if we do see anything that looks at all hopeful, we'll get in touch with you as soon as possible."

"Bueno, amigo. Very good, my friend."

When Ken left the booth he was smiling, buoyed up by the new hope in Ramon's voice.

CHAPTER V

A HUNDRED CENTURIES TOO LATE

KEN was silent until they had driven out of the gas station. Then he repeated to Sandy the whole conversation with Gonzalez.

Sandy was as outraged as Ken had been, at the thought that the Mexican might suffer the shame of demotion. He nodded when Ken explained that he had confided Sandy's idea before hanging up.

"I guess I'd have done the same," Sandy said. "But it's not going to be much fun admitting I was wrong, if that's the way it turns out."

"I know," Ken agreed. "Let's just hope it doesn't. If there's any sign of a tunnel on El Diablo, we're going to find it," he added grimly. "If Granger doesn't come through, we'll try some other system. Because, somehow, we've got to manage to explore every inch of that cave."

With Sandy at the wheel they had been driving idly north as they talked, along the highway by which they'd entered town the day before. "Do you suppose there is anything we can do right now that would be helpful?" Sandy asked after a minute. "We can't expect to hear from Granger yet," he added, referring to the wire Granger had promised to send them if the Brewster Museum directors agreed to urge Talbott to give an interview.

"We can just ride around, keeping our eyes open," Ken

pointed out. "If Mr. Tomen has talked, people in town are already finding out that we're waiting word from New York. So if anybody is curious about us wandering around with no apparent purpose, he can easily find out why we've got nothing to do but kill time. After all, that was the whole point of trying to get this assignment in the first place-to give us a chance to hang around here legitimately."

"Right," Sandy agreed. "So let's turn around and head south. We can drive around town a little, and then go on as far as the border. And afterward we can drive west on that road that goes close to Mort's camping place, and east at least as far as the Wood-row ranch. The road east," he added, "will take us within sight of El Diablo."

"Good," Ken said. "I'm curious to get a look at it, even from a distance. And in the meantime we'll keep an eye out for-well, for whatever there is to see."

Before they had parted from Phillips and Gonzalez the night before, Mort Phillips had said that his only advice to them was to watch for, and report, anything they noticed that seemed in any way unusual. And when the boys asked what might be considered unusual in Gallows Cliff, he had tried to be more specific.

He had said, first, that all local delivery trucks had already been thoroughly checked-but that nevertheless one of them seen driving off into the desert, for example, should be noted and reported.

He had also said that any long-distance truck, stopped along the road as if its driver were waiting to make a contact of some sort, should be regarded suspiciously. There was a big depot in town, he'd explained, where goods brought into Gallows Cliff by truck were unloaded and transferred to local delivery vans.

"So a big truck stopped anywhere except at that depot," Mort had pointed out, "especially if there's a small truck or car nearby, is something we'd want to know about. It's possible that a cargo of arms might be transferred by that method to one or more of the privately

owned local vehicles we find it most difficult to check."

The sun had grown warmer as the morning advanced, and soon Ken was pulling two pairs of dark glasses out of the glove compartment, to protect their eyes from the dazzling glare on the road.

They watched for side roads to explore, but found none at all as they retraced their way along the highway toward the town. Gallows Cliff, they discovered, consisted of only two main streets, parallel to each other, one of which was the highway itself. The only object of interest on the second street was the big truck depot Mort Phillips had mentioned. Small stores and homes bordered the few short unpaved blocks connecting the two main thoroughfares. Within five minutes they had seen all there was to see of Gallows Cliff, and were following the highway on south, through the flat, scrub-strewn desert which surrounded the town on three sides.

They drove as far as the border, where they stopped long enough for a cold drink and a few words of casual conversation with the customs officials. Then they turned around and headed north again.

The east-west road they planned to explore crossed the highway only a few miles north of the border, less than halfway back to Gallows Cliff. They turned to the left when they reached it, to drive westward parallel to the boundary line.

"About eight miles from that crossroads," Ken remarked, "we should see a giant saguaro close to the road, with two smaller ones at its foot. If we walked past it, toward a low hill in the distance, we'd come to Mort's camping place."

"That's right." Sandy too remembered what Mort had told them the night before.

They saw the cactus simultaneously—a huge stiffly branched object that was visible for almost half a mile on the flat terrain. Reluctantly they drove past it, continued on for another few miles, and then turned around and

headed east. At the crossroads they stopped for an early lunch at a roadside restaurant, and then got back in the car again.

Ken sagged low in the seat. "This is a pretty dull kind of sleuthing," he muttered. "If Mort and Ramon have been doing it for weeks, and not seeing anything more unusual than we've seen this morning, I'm surprised they haven't gone crazy."

Sandy grinned at him. "Cheer up," he said. "In a few minutes now you will be getting at least a long-range look at an archaeological site, and you know how much you'll enjoy that."

Within a mile they were riding among the chain of hills that rose out of the desert southeast of Gallows Cliff.

Ken took his dark glasses off and squinted into the sun. "They all look pretty much alike—all rocky, all red, all barren except for those scraggly bushes, all pretty much the same height. If nothing shows from the road, are you going to be able to tell which one it is, just from having studied the map?"

"Probably not," Sandy admitted. "But I figured that El Diablo ought to be just about five miles from the crossroads. And it should be not far to the right—that is to the south—as we drive past."

A few minutes later Ken said "Look!"

There had been slight chance of them missing the archaeological site. El Diablo was a smaller hill than its neighbors, but even at a distance of half a mile there were unmistakable signs of the work going on there. A rough trail led toward it and continued up the hillside in a series of sharp zigzags. Halfway up the steep slope the trail halted in front of what appeared to be four small white dots, and which were, the boys decided, four tents. Above the tents a thin hairline of path curved on upward to a place where part of the hillside had apparently been cut away, for some purpose they couldn't understand.

Sandy pulled the convertible off the road and parked it

on the hard-packed desert floor. "We ought to be able to get a better look from up there," he said. As he spoke he gestured toward a hill rising on the same side of the road as El Diablo, and only a thousand feet or so away from it.

Ken nodded. He took his binoculars out of the glove compartment and put them in his pocket before he got out of the car. Sandy hung his new miniature camera around his neck. Side by side they walked across the sun-baked earth toward the hill Sandy had indicated, and climbed some distance up its lower slope. When they were several hundred feet above the level of the road they stopped, and Ken put the glasses to his eyes.

"Mmm," he said, after a moment. "Those are tents, all right. And there are a couple of cars parked beside them."

"Can you see the entrance to the cave?" Sandy wanted to know.

"Not from here. Maybe it's behind those tents. Or maybe it's somewhere at the next level, where part of the hill has been cut away. We're not high enough to see what's up there."

Sandy took the binoculars and stared through them for a few moments. When he lowered them from his eyes, he said, "We'd have to climb clear to the top of this hill to see the whole face of El Diablo. And I'm not sure it's worth it right now," he added.

"I don't think it is," Ken said. "With any luck we'll be over there later this afternoon. Let's go on down now, drive as far as the Woodrow ranch gate-just so we'll know where it is-and then head back for the motel. Granger may have wired us already."

He took the binoculars and put them back in his pocket. Sandy squinted once through his camera and then shook his head. "Too far away for a shot to mean much," he murmured, and started back down the slope.

They were approaching their car when a station wagon bounced off the road onto the trail that led to El Diablo.

"Looks like the museum car we saw this morning,"

Ken said.

"It is," Sandy said. "That's Gus Parks at the wheel."

The boys completed their self-assigned tour less than an hour later, having stopped in Gallows Cliff on their way through to purchase a large-scale county map, of the kind Sandy had studied that morning in the diner.

Mr. Tomen informed them, as apologetically as if he were at fault, that no wire had arrived for them during their absence.

"All right. Thanks," Ken told him. "We'll be in our room from now on. Will you let us know if a message comes?"

"Of course. Immediately," Tomen assured them.

Back in their air-conditioned room, they settled down to study their new purchase.

The map itself, and what they had seen during their morning drive, convinced them that Mort and Ramon had known exactly what they were talking about the night before. They had said that it was no doubt possible for a man on foot-or even several men-to slip across the border into Mexico, unobserved. But men on foot, the detectives were convinced, could not have transported even the quantity of arms and ammunition which had already been confiscated in those three hired Mexican trucks. And the detectives had declared that they did not believe a loaded truck could cross the border without being apprehended. A truck could make its way through the rugged border terrain at only a few places-and all of those places were under careful observation.

"But the stuff is getting across somehow, and probably right in this neighborhood," Ken said aloud, turning away from the map to stare unseeingly out the window. "Mort and Ramon are convinced it isn't being flown in." He turned back toward Sandy. "It looks as if your idea must be right, simply because it's the only method left for the gunrunners to use."

"You mean," Sandy said with a grin, "that if there isn't a natural tunnel through these hills, they've had to dig

one?"

The shrill of the telephone followed hard on his words. Ken crossed to the instrument and picked it up.

"This telegram," Tomen's voice said, "just came in over the phone. I took it down for you."

"Thanks." Ken hoped his amusement didn't show in his voice. Tomen could have transferred the call directly to them, instead of accepting the message himself. But when Ken heard what the wire said, he was pleased that Tomen had chosen to learn its contents first. Now the boys' role as legitimate newspapermen was officially sanctioned-and Tomen could report the fact to all the many other Tomens of Gallows Cliff.

Ken scribbled the words as Tomen repeated them, so that Sandy could read over his shoulder.

Talbott notified by wire to expect you. Luck.

Granger

"Let's go," Ken said, the instant he had hung up.

"Right," Sandy agreed, slinging his camera once more around his neck.

Ken took the wheel. The hands on his wrist watch pointed to three o'clock as he backed the convertible out of the carport adjoining their room.

"If the men took time off for a siesta, they ought to be back at work about now," he murmured.

Twenty minutes later he was turning the car off the paved road into the shallow pair of ruts leading toward the hill called El Diablo. Twice the barely marked trail dipped down into one of the arroyos, or dry stream beds, so common in that desert region. Then it began to climb the hill itself, on the first long slant that ended in a hairpin turn. Ken maneuvered the car carefully around the sharp angle, and kept it at slow speed from then on, as the trail zigzagged its way on up the hill.

Loose pebbles and sand spurted out from under the

convertible's wheels. Each turn seemed more sharply angled than the last.

"This is no pleasure drive," Ken muttered.

"But it does what I suppose Dr. Talbott wants it to do—gets you to the dig fast," Sandy pointed out. "We must already be a couple of hundred feet above the level of the desert floor."

"I'll take your word for it," Ken said, keeping his eyes glued to the stretch of gravelly earth just ahead of the car.

The fifth hairpin turn was the sharpest yet—a turn so pinched that it seemed the red car would scarcely be able to make it and still stay on the trail.

"Easy does it," Sandy murmured, looking down at the desert far below. "Hug your side, Ken. I won't even complain about a scratch on the paint." A moment later he took a deep breath and added, "That was the last one! There are the tents right up ahead."

As Sandy spoke, Ken saw a white canvas peak. A moment later he was easing the convertible into a narrow space between a jeep and the battered station wagon they had seen twice before, both parked to one side of a cramped flat area gouged out of the hillside.

Two other station wagons stood on the opposite side of the area. In its center, ranged closely side by side, were the four tents. Behind the crowded earth platform a steep narrow footpath went on up the hill for another few hundred feet. At that point it seemed to disappear, but the sound of voices drifting down to the boys told them that the path must lead to the actual site of the excavation.

Suddenly Ken found himself wondering if they would be able to recognize a tunnel entrance in the cave even if they saw one. It might be hidden behind a boulder that was moved only when the tunnel was being used. It might be camouflaged by piles of crates, or other supplies.

"Come on," Sandy said impatiently, getting out of the car.

Just as they emerged onto the small open area in front

of the tents, a tall figure stepped out through the low doorway of one of the canvas shelters. It was the man they had seen in the diner-Dr. Talbott's foreman.

"Oh, it's you." Gus Parks' voice was flat. He stared at them through narrowed eyes. "I guess maybe you didn't hear me this mornin'," he said, "when I was sayin' Doc Talbott don't like visitors."

"Yes, we heard you." Ken looked steadily into those narrow eyes. "But you see we-"

Parks' gaze shifted slightly, so that he seemed to be looking past Ken. He spoke as if no one but himself had uttered a word. "Visitors interrupt the work. You can see how that would be. So I guess you've had your trip for nothin'. Ill wait here and guide you while you get your car out and backed around."

"If Dr. Talbott asks us to leave-" Ken began again.

This time Parks conceded by his own words that he had heard Ken. "He won't have to. I'm askin' you for him. That's my job-one of my jobs. I protect him from folks like you, who think they can just come bargin' up here without a by-your-leave."

"We haven't done that," Ken said firmly, stepping forward a pace. "I think Dr. Talbott is expecting us."

"Expectin' you?" Parks looked surprised. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"A reporter-photographer team from Global News Service," Ken said. "We're here because we want to do a story about the dig."

Parks' mouth dropped. He stared. But almost immediately he recovered. "Reporters, eh?" he snapped. "Well, Doc Talbott don't like reporters. So-"

"Gus!" The call from above cut his words off. Parks twisted around to look up along the path.

At the point where the path seemed to disappear a man was standing-a short, thin figure dressed in faded khaki pants and shirt. His bald head gleamed in the afternoon sun.

"Plaster of Paris, Gus," the voice said. "Did you get any in town today?"

"Sure. There's five bags of it in the wagon. I'll haul one right up." Gus Parks turned back to the boys. "All right, now. You can see I don't have any more time to waste."

The slight figure had not moved. "Gus," it called down once more, "who is it you're talking to?"

Parks glanced swiftly at the boys before he answered. He had not yet addressed the man on the path by name. He didn't now. "Just some folks who want to see what the dig looks like. I told 'em visitors aren't convenient. They're just leavin'."

Ken took a chance. If the man was not Dr. Talbott himself, Ken felt sure he was the archaeologist's assistant. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he called upward. "We're reporters from Global News Service, sir-the ones you got a wire about."

"A wire? A telegram?" The voice seemed puzzled. But the man on the path had started down toward them. "Telegrams aren't delivered up here," he went on, as he came. "They're either sent to my lodgings in town, or left in my box at the post office." He slithered down the last dozen feet of the incline and stood before them, six inches shorter than Ken, a foot shorter than Parks and Sandy. His tanned, lined face was friendly. "I'm sorry if there's been a mix-up," he said. "But Gus picked up the afternoon mail not long ago-didn't you, Gus? You'd have told me if there was a telegram with the letters."

"I didn't notice," Gus Parks said, his voice even. "I just put everything on your desk in there, as usual."

"Oh. Well, go take a look, will you, Gus?" As Parks turned on his heel and made for one of the tents, the small man said, "I'm Frazer Talbott, of the Brewster Museum. And you say you're from-where was it?"

"Global News," Ken told him. "I'm Ken Holt, and this is my partner, Sandy Allen. We'd like to do a feature story about the dig here, Dr. Talbott."

Sandy spoke up then, mentioning the name of the museum curator who had originally told them about the Gallows Cliff dig, and referring to a few of the finds the boys had been told they might see there.

Talbott smiled. "I'm sorry," he said. "I guess Gus- he's our foreman here-took you for tourists who just happened in."

The boys glanced swiftly at each other. Neither of them corrected the archaeologist's mistaken assumption that Gus Parks had not known who they were.

"And of course it's true," Talbott was going on, "that a lot of strangers tramping over the dig can hold up the work. Sometimes-without meaning to, of course-they even cause damage. So we don't encourage them as a rule. But of course if people have a real interest, or some real purpose in coming here-" He broke off as he saw Parks approaching with a yellow envelope in his hand.

Parks handed him the telegram. "Too bad I didn't notice it before," he said.

Talbott didn't seem aware that there was no sign of real regret in his foreman's voice. He was busy opening the envelope. He smiled when he finished reading the message it contained. "One of the museum's directors," he said, "apparently feels you two would do an intelligent story about our work here. I'm glad to hear it-glad to welcome you to our Gallows Cliff site. Any scientist likes to have the public well informed about the work he's doing," he added. "I know my assistant, Dr. Ralph Gill, will be willing to help you all he can. I will too. So if you'll just let us know when and how you want to go about your job-"

He let the sentence hang in mid-air.

"Well, sir," Ken said, "we think it would be a good idea if we just took a general look around the site today. We'll want to interview you and Dr. Gill, of course, but we don't want to take up your working time for that."

"We might have a talk at our lodgings this evening," Talbott suggested.

"Fine," Ken said.

"We're staying at Mrs. Brown's, on Sagebrush Avenue," Talbott went on helpfully. "You can't miss it. It's the only boardinghouse in town."

"Fine," Ken repeated.

"Shall we say eight thirty?"

"Fine," Ken said again, controlling his impatience to explore the dig.

"Excellent." Talbott nodded. "By the time you come back up here tomorrow, then, you'll know better what you're looking at. So this afternoon we'll just give you a quick survey. Is that the plan?"

"That would be perfect, so far as we're concerned," Sandy assured him.

"Well, come along then." Talbott turned toward the path. "Don't forget that plaster, Gus," he reminded his foreman.

Parks nodded and started toward the station wagon.

"One thing I'd like to do today," Sandy said, as they toiled up the path, "is to get a good look at the cave itself, so I'll know the kind of photographic equipment I might want to bring tomorrow."

"I shouldn't think it would give you any special trouble," Talbott said.

"Oh, no," Sandy agreed. "I don't think it will, either. But any dark place-any place that has to be artificially lighted-"

Talbott turned his head. "But it's not in the least dark," he said.

"It isn't?" Sandy was puzzled. "You mean the entrance to the cave is so large that the whole interior is brightly lighted?"

Talbott's sudden laugh startled them both. He paused on the steep path and turned to look back at them. "It's the word *cave* that has confused you," he said. "Oh, it's true there was a cave here, perhaps as recently as ten thousand years ago. But the roof long ago collapsed

entirely, completely filling in what was once an opening in the hillside. Now we're digging out all the fallen rock and other debris, and getting down to the original cave floor. But our dig is actually just a huge open pit. That's why I was puzzled for a moment when you spoke about darkness. The fact is we sometimes have to stretch a tarpaulin over the area where we're actually digging, to give us a little shade from this hot desert sun."

Neither of the boys could speak for a moment.

"I see," Sandy said finally.

Talbott grinned. "You both look as if I'd just ruined your whole story," he said, "as if you'd expected to be writing about some fantastic underground cavern, complete with tunnels and secret passages and what not. You're a hundred centuries too late for that."

Ken managed to grin back at him. "I'm afraid we were looking forward to something a little more mysterious than a wide-open pit."

"Yes," Sandy said, "we were. We certainly were."

CHAPTER VI

SURPRISE FOR SANDY

THAT afternoon on El Diablo always remained a kind of blur in the boys' minds.

They could remember reaching the top of the path, on the heels of the agile Dr. Talbott, to find themselves on a flat area that looked as if it had been hacked out of the hillside by the strokes of some gigantic ax. It measured about a hundred feet on its outer rim, and ran back twice that distance to the rough-hewn rock wall that rose almost vertically above its far side.

In the center of the area was a pit fifty feet long, half as wide, and almost twenty-five feet deep at its far end. The nearer portions of the excavation were less deep, the shallower ones leading to the deeper ones like a series of huge descending steps. Ladders led down to the deepest level, which, the archaeologist had informed them, was probably the actual floor of the cave at the time when it had served as a habitation for prehistoric Stone Age men. It was on that level that bones and stone tools at least twelve thousand years old had been found.

Ken and Sandy could remember climbing down those ladders, and listening to a long enthusiastic lecture by Dr. Talbott, interrupted now and then by comments from his eager young assistant, the round-faced Dr. Ralph Gill. They could recall handling the stone tools that were shown them, and they hoped they had made appropriate remarks

over finds that Talbott and Gill obviously thought were extremely important.

They could remember climbing up the ladders again, and making their polite farewells to the two scientists. But until they slithered down the path to their car, carefully edged it out of its parking space, and looked at their watches before starting on the zigzag road down El Diablo, they didn't know how long they had been on the hill.

"Two whole hours!" Sandy muttered under his breath. "Two totally wasted hours-just because I thought I had such a bright idea! A tunnel to Mexico! I must have a tunnel in my head!"

"Save the dramatics," Ken told him. "In the first place we would have had to come up here, whether you'd had your idea or not. Mort and Ramon are the ones who said we had to have a cover, and our assignment here is just that. We were all set to do a story on this dig, even before you had your idea. So don't pretend that things are worse than they are."

"They couldn't be," Sandy said morosely. "And Mort and Ramon-that's another thing. Now we've got to tell Ramon-and Mort too, if he passed the word on to him-that my brilliant inspiration has fallen on its face."

"I'll do that," Ken said quickly. "Well stop at the first phone we come to, and I'll call Ramon."

"Thanks," Sandy muttered.

"Don't thank me," Ken told him. "It's the least I can do. They wouldn't know about it if I hadn't opened my big mouth this morning."

Ken was guiding the car around the first of the hairpin turns as he finished speaking. He didn't talk any more after that, in order to concentrate on his driving. And Sandy roused himself enough to watch his own side of the narrow trail and warn Ken when the convertible's wheels were getting dangerously close to the edge.

But once they were at the bottom of the zigzagging road, and had bounced over the desert trail to the paved

highway, Sandy again voiced his disgust.

"I don't see how I can put in another couple of hours with Talbott and Gill tonight," he said. "It's not that the stuff isn't interesting-it is. What Gill was telling us about the different methods of making stone tools-" He broke off, shaking his head. "But right now all I can really wonder about is how a gang of bandidos, as Ramon calls them, could smuggle truckloads of guns and ammunition across the border. We're always thinking we're so smart. Why can't we figure out how they're doing it?"

"Probably," Ken said wryly, "because we're not all that smart. I didn't even know we thought we were," he added. "Have you always been under the impression that we were smarter than the FBI and the Mexican federal police, for example?"

"Don't be an idiot," Sandy muttered.

Ken grinned. He'd been deliberately trying to snap Sandy out of his grim mood, and he thought he was succeeding. "You're the idiot," he said. "After all, these bandidos have stymied the efforts of one of the FBI's best men, and one of Mexico's best detectives. So you're just being swell-headed when you carry on like this because you-you, the great Allen-didn't trip up the gunrunners on your first try."

"Me? Swell-headed!" Sandy swung in his seat to stare at Ken. A moment later he grinned a sour grin. "Of course," he said. "That's just what I am being. O.K. I'll stop lamenting the loss of a reputation I never had and start worrying about those bandidos instead. Remind me," he added, "to pull that same stunt on you the next time you have a great idea that doesn't work out."

"You'll have to do your own reminding," Ken told him. "I'll be too busy feeling sorry for myself. How about dinner?" he asked. "I don't know about you, but I'd just as soon eat now, and then stop at the motel and get cleaned up for our interview with Talbott and Gill this evening."

"All right. But let's go to the diner," Sandy muttered.

"The way I feel, that good food at El Patio would be wasted on me."

"Suits me," Ken agreed. "I'm not feeling any too chipper myself. After all, you have had one idea about this business, even if it didn't work out. I've been an absolute blank so far."

"Watch it," Sandy said softly. "Don't get swell-headed."

They were both grinning sour grins when Ken saw a roadside telephone booth. By the time he pulled up beside it, Ken was grinning no longer.

"I'll call Ramon," Sandy offered.

Ken shook his head and slid out of the car.

He was back in less than a minute. "He wasn't there," he reported. "All I could do was leave my name, the way he told us to do if we couldn't reach him." He sighed as he started the car again. "So telling Ramon is something we've still got ahead of us."

Tough steaks and soggy French fried potatoes didn't lighten their spirits. Neither did gluey apple pie. But a shower helped. So did the rapid drop in temperature that came with nightfall. They opened their windows, turned off their air-conditioner, and at a few minutes after eight were resignedly ready to leave for their appointment.

"We've got plenty of time," Sandy commented, as he got into the car beside Ken, who was already at the wheel. "It shouldn't take us more than ten minutes to get there, so we can drive up and down the streets of Gallows Cliff a couple of times first, as if we were lost. Who knows? We might spot something interesting."

"Who knows?" Ken agreed, trying to match Sandy's deliberately more cheerful mood.

They were driving slowly past Gallows Cliff's one drugstore a few minutes later when Sandy said, thoughtfully, "You know, maybe some more decent food would be inspiring, after all. If you'll pull up somewhere, I'll go in there and get us a couple of icecream cones."

Before Ken could maneuver toward the curb, Sandy

had put his hand in his pocket and then looked suddenly startled. "Forgot my wallet!" he muttered. "I guess it's not serious, as long as you're driving- and provided you've got some money. Have you, Ken? Will you let me have a dollar?"

"Sure." Ken waited until he had the car at the curbside and then he reached for his own pocket. "You won't believe this," he said quietly. "I don't really believe it myself. But I don't have my wallet, either."

They looked at each other for a moment and then both burst out laughing.

"Holt and Allen, those great detectives!" Sandy gasped.

"Bring us your problems!" Ken contributed. "We have never lost a case yet. We have never lost anything-except our own wallets!"

But their laughter was short-lived. "This isn't really so funny," Ken said. "Not a driver's license between us! If we get back to the motel without being arrested, it'll be more than we deserve."

Cautiously he moved out of his parking space. He didn't risk a U-turn. He went to the next corner, turned right, and then turned right twice more in order to bring himself back into the highway again. With one eye on the speedometer, he headed back toward the Saguaro Motor Court.

When he finally pulled into the motel's driveway they both heaved a sigh of relief.

"It's eight twenty-five," Sandy informed him. "I'll jump out and get the stuff while you turn around."

The grin they exchanged that time marked the first carefree moment of the day. Amusement over their own forgetfulness had made them temporarily oblivious to everything else.

"Mine's on the bureau," Ken said, "where I put it when I changed clothes."

"I figured it was," Sandy said, heading for the door. "So's mine."

Ken turned into the carport beside their room and pulled out again, swinging the convertible so that it was heading back toward the highway. Sandy had already disappeared, leaving the door to their un-lighted room half open behind him.

Clint Tomen, Ken saw, was approaching the convertible from the direction of the motel office.

"Saw you come back," the big man said, in his usual slow manner. "Hope nothin's wrong."

"No, thanks," Ken said politely. "We just forgot something-that's all."

"How'd you get on with those scientists today?" Tomen asked, leaning crossed arms on Ken's door as if for a lengthy conversation.

"Oh, fine. Dr. Talbott was very helpful. So was his assistant," Ken assured him.

"And Gus? Gus Parks treat you all right?" There was a chuckle in Tomen's voice.

"Why-er-yes." Ken and Sandy hadn't really thought about it since they left the dig, but now that he tried to recall Parks' behavior, Ken realized that the foreman had simply avoided them after those first few moments of unfriendliness.

"He didn't try to convince you to give him a couple of dollars for the privilege of lookin' at that big hole they got up there?" Tomen asked.

"No." Ken made an effort to match the man's easygoing friendliness. "Dr. Talbott had received a wire about us, you see. So I guess Mr. Parks realized the thing was more or less out of his hands."

"Ha-ha." Tomen looked amused. "Must be kind of a shock to Gus when it's brought home to him once in a while that those scientists have got somethin' to say about runnin' their own show."

Ken smiled with an effort. He wished Sandy would hurry. What was keeping him so long? he wondered.

"So you got all finished up, did you?" Tomen said.

"No. Not yet. We're interviewing Dr. Talbott and Dr. Parks tonight. And then we'll be up at the dig again tomorrow."

"My, my!" Tomen shook his head slowly. "You really go to a lot of trouble to write your stories, don't you?"

"There's a lot to learn at an archaeological dig- any dig," Ken spoke automatically. It had suddenly occurred to him that their wallets had disappeared, and that Sandy was fruitlessly searching the room in the hope of finding them before he had to tell Ken the bad news.

But Sandy couldn't be making a search, Ken told himself an instant later. He had never even turned on the light in their room.

Ken pulled up the hand brake with a jerk. "Excuse me, sir," he said, clicking the latch on his door. "I want to see what's keeping my friend so long."

"Hmm?" Tomen looked surprised at Ken's abruptness, but he backed away from the door so that Ken could get out.

"Sandy!" Ken called, as he pushed back the half-open door to the room. He flicked the light switch on the wall and stepped over the threshold. "What are you-?"

He never finished the question. His eyes had fallen on Sandy's figure on the floor in the middle of the room, arms outstretched, one cheek against the carpet.

CHAPTER VII

THE CLUE OF THE CAMERA

"SANDY!" Ken was beside the silent figure in an instant, hand automatically outstretched toward the redhead's heart.

Sandy's eyes were closed, his breathing inaudible. But under Ken's shaking hand the heart was beating.

"Somethin' happened to your friend?" Tomen's bulk loomed in the doorway.

"Yes! He's sick-or hurt. I don't know-" Ken spoke confusedly, scarcely aware of what he was saying. "Sandy!" he whispered again, in a pleading voice.

"Now, now," Tomen said calmly, when he had come closer and stared down at Sandy, "looks to me as if he'd just fainted. Don't you worry. I'll get some water and we'll have him around in no time." With surprising speed he disappeared into the bathroom and came out almost immediately with a dripping towel. "Here," he said, "you kind of wash his face with this-it's good and cold-while I get a glass of water for him." Once more he turned toward the bathroom.

Ken sponged Sandy's forehead. Tomen was back almost instantly, the glass looking small in his big hand.

Relief flooded over Ken as Sandy showed the first sign of consciousness.

"Sandy!" he said. "It's me-Ken. Can you hear me? Open your eyes!"

"Mmm? Huh?" Sandy's eyelids fluttered once as he mumbled unintelligibly.

"Here," Ken said. "Try to drink this." He held the glass to Sandy's lips, and the redhead swallowed a little of the water.

"He's comin' round," Tomen said. "He's goin' to be all right!"

Sandy's eyes opened wide. He looked at Ken blankly for a moment, then at Tomen, and finally at himself stretched out on the floor. "Oh!" he said. "Now I remember!"

"Sandy, what happened?" Ken asked.

Tomen bent forward. "Did you faint, son?"

"Faint?" Sandy repeated the word indignantly. With Ken's help he hoisted himself to a sitting position. "I was hit on the head-that's what happened."

"What! But that's impossible!" Tomen protested. And when Sandy looked up at him angrily, he added, "Your friend was waitin' for you outside all the time you were in here. He'd have seen if anybody came out. And there was nobody here with you when we came in." He sounded as if he were begging Sandy to withdraw the claim of having been assaulted on the premises of the Saguaro Motor Court. "You probably fell and hit your head on somethin'," Tomen added hopefully.

"Sorry, Mr. Tomen," Sandy said. "But somebody else hit my head for me. I haven't got any doubts about that." He raised a careful hand and touched a spot just behind his left ear.

Tomen leaned close to peer at the nasty lump already rising there. "Look at that! I guess you must have been struck, son," he admitted. "Nothin' else could cause a lump like that."

"Can you get up, Sandy?" Ken asked quietly. "I think we ought to put something on that. But wait a minute!" he said suddenly, before Sandy could try to move. "If somebody hit you he must still be inside here-because it's

true nobody walked out of this room after you came into it."

"You're right, lad!" With unexpected swiftness Tomen turned and jerked open the door of the closet.

All three peered into its interior.

It was completely empty except for the few clothes Ken and Sandy had hung there, and two pairs of their shoes on the floor.

"The shower!" Tomen spoke the words just as they popped into Ken's mind. And again the big man moved quickly to the open bathroom door.

The boys could see him as he jerked aside the shower curtain. The shower stall too was completely empty.

Slowly Tomen turned back toward the bedroom. The forefinger of his right hand was scratching at an ear.

"Mighty queer," he muttered. "Nobody can vanish into thin air. Yet there's no place in these rooms to hide."

"What happened to the bathroom screen?" Ken asked suddenly.

Tomen looked at the bathroom window. "So that's it!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" Sandy asked, struggling to rise. With Ken's assistance he got to his feet and slumped down onto one of the twin beds just as Tomen's voice exploded into angry words.

"A sneak thief!" the man shouted. "That's what it must have been. You surprised him when you came back in here-and he pushed out that screen and took off. Yes, sir! That's how he got out-by this bathroom window! And with me standin' right out in front there! Why, that's more downright plain nerve than I ever seen in a man before! A sneak thief! First one we ever had around here too! If I could get my hands on him-!" He had moved heavily back into the bedroom, his big hands curled menacingly, as if to illustrate his unfinished threat.

"But how did he get in?" Ken wondered, walking toward the outer door that still stood open after Tomen's

entrance. "We left the door locked, and it doesn't seem to have been jimmed."

"Well-" Tomen looked suddenly uncomfortable. "I've got to admit that lock don't amount to much. An ordinary skeleton key would open any of these doors here, I'm afraid. This has always been an honest neighborhood," he explained. "I never figured there was much sense in buyin' expensive locks when the fact was we didn't really need any at all. But I can see things have changed, all right." He shook his head grimly. "There'll be new locks on those doors soon's I can get some ordered."

Suddenly Ken remembered. "Our wallets!" He spun on his heel. "They're still there-both of them!" He stared in amazement at the two leather objects in plain sight on top of the bureau.

"Maybe they're empty," Sandy suggested.

Quickly Ken picked up first Sandy's wallet and then his own, flipping them open. "Money, license- everything's here!" he said a moment later.

"I don't understand," Tomen said, looking from Ken to Sandy and back again. "Do you mean your wallets were left here when you went out-that they were right there on that bureau when the thief was in this room?"

"That's right," Ken told him. "We'd forgotten them. That's why we came back here."

"Well, think of that!" Tomen shook his head wonderingly. "Why, you might have lost everything you owned-if you hadn't come back right when you did, and scared the rascal off before he had a chance to pick those things up."

"Sandy, your cameras!" Ken said. "We'd better check up on those." He started for the camera case lying on top of Sandy's suitcase.

"They're probably all right," Sandy told him. "You can see my new miniature's been left right where I put it down when we came in this afternoon-on the bed here."

Ken nodded. "I noticed that." He handed Sandy the

case. "But just take a look at the rest of your stuff."

Sandy checked the contents of the case one by one. "All here," he reported. Then he picked up the miniature camera and turned it in his hands, as if to assure himself that it had suffered no damage. "What I really can't understand is why he didn't at least grab this up on his way out," he murmured. "It's worth a couple of hundred dollars, and any thief-"

"A couple of hundred dollars!" Tomen interrupted him, eyes wide. "Well, I never heard the like! Man risks goin' to prison by breakin' in here-and then, as you say, don't even pick up a valuable thing like that! I guess you surely must have startled him, turnin' up the way you did. Maybe he'd never tried such a thing before," he suggested, "and was so scared he couldn't think of anythin' but savin' his skin when he heard you drive up."

"He couldn't have been quite that scared-if he waited to knock Sandy out before he took off," Ken pointed out. "How'd it happen, Sandy?"

"I don't know too much about it myself," Sandy said, still holding the small camera. "I unlocked the door, walked in, heard a faint sound behind me-as if someone had been standing where the door would hide him when it opened-and then I got hit behind the ear. The next thing I knew you were pouring water over me, Ken."

"You didn't even get a look at the thief?" Tomen sounded disappointed. "You mean you won't be able to identify him for the police?"

Sandy shook his head. "I didn't even catch a glimpse of him."

"But you must have had at least some feelin' about him-as to whether he was big or little, say, or light or dark," Tomen pressed. "The police are goin' to want to hear every least little thing you can tell 'em, you know, when we report this."

Again Sandy shook his head, but he winced as he did so, as if the movement were extremely painful. "I just won't

be able to tell them a thing," he said. "So I suppose in a way there's no use reporting this at all. We can't list anything as missing. We can't-"

"But, Sandy," Ken said, "we'd have to report a breaking-and-entering, whether anything's been stolen or not."

Sandy put a hand to his head. "If your skull was pounding the way mine is, you wouldn't look forward to chatting with the police, either," he said. "Could you take care of it for us, Mr. Tomen?" he asked, looking up at the big man. "You must know the local police pretty well. They'd believe you, wouldn't they, if you explained that I just couldn't answer any questions tonight? Of course I'll go down and see them tomorrow, if they want me to. But right now-" His body went slack and he slumped back onto the bed.

Jaws clenched, Ken stood looking down at his friend. He had caught the swift wink Sandy sent from behind the limp hand he had raised to his bruised head. Ken knew Sandy was up to something-knew the redhead was not suffering as acutely now as he pretended to be. But why Sandy was so determined not to see the police tonight, Ken didn't know. Reluctantly he followed Sandy's lead.

He crossed the room to the bed and knelt down at Sandy's side. He felt Sandy's pulse with what he hoped would appear to be a knowing look. "I'm afraid he ought to be put to bed right away, Mr. Tomen," he said. "I know it's a great deal to ask you to take care of reporting this for us, but I really don't think there's any point in trying to question Sandy tonight."

"Of course there isn't," Tomen said sympathetically. "I can see that. And don't you worry. I'll explain to the police so they'll understand. Maybe you'd like me to send for a doctor?" he added.

Ken sent Sandy a swift glance. Sandy's head twitched back and forth once, a fraction of an inch.

"I just want to sleep," Sandy mumbled.

"That's probably what he needs most-a good night's sleep," Ken said.

"I expect you're right," Tomen agreed. "Suppose I send him a couple of aspirins, eh? That should help him to get a proper sort of rest. Then if he's not feelin' himself in the mornin', I'll see to it that he has the best doctor in this part of the country. After all, I feel mighty responsible, you know-havin' this happen in the Saguaro Motor Court."

Ken accepted the offer of aspirin on Sandy's behalf, and then Tomen left.

The moment the door closed behind him, Ken said, "I know you've really got a bump on your head, but-

"I certainly have," Sandy said.

"But-" Ken began again.

"But," Sandy picked it up, suddenly grinning at Ken and sitting up, "I also have something to tell you - something hot! I know what that alleged sneak thief was doing in here."

"You do? You mean you saw him?"

"I didn't have to. I saw this." Sandy had picked up the miniature camera which was still lying on the bed. "Look at that exposure counter," he demanded, pointing to the small dial. "That number means thirteen pictures have been taken on this roll-right?"

"Of course. And this is no time for another of your long lectures on photography."

"Don't worry. I'm keeping this short," Sandy promised. "The point is that I didn't take thirteen pictures with this camera this afternoon. I took fourteen!"

Ken put a hand to his own head. "I see," he said patiently. "You took fourteen pictures-but the camera registers thirteen. Which means, I suppose, that you forgot to turn the dial when you took your last picture-or that the counter itself is out of order."

"I didn't forget anything," Sandy interrupted. "And the counter is not wrong."

"Then it looks to me," Ken said, "as if you didn't take

fourteen pictures after all. You just think you did."

"I know I did," Sandy insisted. "I can remember every one of them. Check me on it."

He began to rattle off a list. "Two over-all shots of the whole excavation, from above. One of the deepest part of the pit-where the men are working-from the head of the ladder leading down into it. Three of the winch hauling up baskets of excavated dirt out of the pit. Three of old Jed Liscomb sieving dirt through that screen."

"That's nine," Ken said. "And I remember all those myself. You also took two of Gill cleaning that mastodon tooth with a little brush."

"And two close-ups of the tooth itself," Sandy added. "Which makes thirteen. The last shot I took was of that chipped stone tool Dr. Talbott's so proud of."

"All right." Ken nodded. "I can't argue with you. You took fourteen pictures. Which suggests to me-as I said before-that the counter on your camera is wrong."

"It suggests to me-in fact, it practically proves to me," Sandy contradicted, "that somebody came in here tonight to take the film out of this camera, expose it to the light in order to destroy any pictures taken on it, and then put the film back again. But he slipped up. He didn't roll it quite as far in as it had been."

"And I suppose you also know why he did this?" Ken asked.

"I can think of only one reason," Sandy said smugly. "But it's a reason I like. He did it because the pictures I took today could be dangerous to someone, and therefore they had to be destroyed."

"I see." Ken eyed Sandy skeptically. "I'd like that too, if I could believe it," he admitted. "It would suggest that we were on to something-even if we didn't know what."

"That's right," Sandy agreed. "And it might even be something to do with the smuggling of guns across the border. Now wait!" he added hastily, as Ken opened his mouth to protest. "I didn't say it had to be. I just said it

could be. But the one thing I am sure of is that this roll of film has been tampered with. And I can prove that much by developing the roll. If it turns out to be completely black, I'll know I'm right."

"Aren't you forgetting a few possibilities?" Ken asked. "If it turns out black, couldn't that just mean it was a defective roll? Or that there was a light leak in your camera?"

Sandy grinned. "So you do listen to some of my lectures! You just don't listen carefully enough. Yes," he admitted, sobering, "total blackness could mean a defective roll. But of all the hundreds of rolls I've used, I've never yet had one that was defective. I've never heard of anybody else having one either. So that's a chance I'm willing to ignore."

"As to a light leak-" He shook his head. "A leak would blacken only the frames that had already been exposed-the ones I'd used. If only the first fourteen frames of this roll are black, when it's developed, and the rest are clear as glass, I'll know I have a light leak. But if it's all black, that will positively mean that the roll has been removed, exposed to light, and then-" He broke off abruptly as they both heard the sound of footsteps outside.

Ken motioned to Sandy to stay where he was, and went to the door. In a low voice, as if to suggest that Sandy should not be disturbed, he thanked Tomen for the small bottle of aspirin he had brought, and promised to let him know in the morning how Sandy felt. Within less than half a minute he had closed the door again.

"All right, go on," he said. "You were saying-? Do you want this?" he asked parenthetically, putting Tomen's offering on the top of the bureau.

"I could do with a couple of aspirin," Sandy said. "My head really is pounding. But I certainly don't want to go to sleep before I develop this roll. You can make my excuses to Talbott and Gill, can't you?"

Ken whistled. Swiftly he looked at his watch. "I'm not

sure I can even make excuses for myself-turning up at this hour," he muttered. "I think I'd better call them and say there's been a slight accident-that we just can't make it."

"Why?" Sandy asked argumentatively. "Why not get the interview over with? Who knows?" He grinned. "There might be other items on our agenda by tomorrow. We might be helping Mort and Ramon make an arrest, for example."

Ken looked at him. "You ought to be in bed, sleeping off the effects of our prowler. You ought-" He gave it up with a shrug. "I might as well save my breath. But get some rest, will you? I'll be back as soon as I can."

Ken stopped for two containers of ice cream on his way back to the motel almost two hours later. Sandy would need the comfort of food, he thought, if that roll of film had proved to contain nothing more exciting than the shots taken during the afternoon.

Sandy had the door open for him by the time he walked out of the carport. Quickly he pulled Ken inside.

"Look!" Sandy said, pointing to the long roll of thirty-five-millimeter film hanging from the jamb of the bathroom door. "I was right!" he said triumphantly. "The whole thing is black-completely light-struck! In other words deliberately ruined!"

CHAPTER VIII

REPEAT ASSIGNMENT

KEN automatically handed Sandy the ice cream before he walked slowly across the room to stare at the dangling strip of film.

"It's certainly black," he said. "And I suppose I've got to take your word for it that-barring the slim possibility of a defective roll-it could be black for only one reason."

"That's right," Sandy agreed, cheerfully prying up the lid of one of the ice-cream containers. "It's black because somebody wants it that way. Said somebody being a so-called sneak thief who doesn't have enough sense to steal two wallets and a valuable camera, all left out in plain view. Very poor cover-pretending to be a thief and then not taking anything. Mort or Ramon would never let one of their men put up such a bad show. Which reminds me," he added, digging in his spoon.

Ken turned around. "Yes," he answered Sandy's unspoken question. "I did try to call Ramon again. And he still wasn't there. Or, rather, he'd been in and had left again."

"Let's hurry and finish this stuff," Sandy suggested, swallowing a cold mouthful, "and go out and try him again. I'm feeling better-honestly I am," he said, when Ken opened his mouth to protest. "And I'd like to know what they think about this. It certainly seems to me it means there's something fishy going on up at that dig."

Ken was reaching for the second container when he paused, head cocked to listen. An instant later he moved swiftly across the room and into the bathroom. Two faces were peering in at him through the window against which, a moment earlier, Ken had heard a faint knock. Alongside one of the faces-the lighter one-a hand was raised, pointing to the door of the motel room.

Mort Phillips was smiling. So was Gonzalez. It was Mort who was silently mouthing the words, "Let us in."

Ken grinned, glanced over his shoulder to make sure the Venetian blinds were closed in the bedroom, and pushed up the window. "You don't have to go around to the door," he explained. "An earlier visitor has already removed the screen, so you might as well come in this way. It's more private."

When the men were in the bedroom, and clearly visible in the glow of the lamp, their weariness was apparent.

"What kind of visitor comes through your window?" Mort asked. "And what's all this about a tunnel leading out of a cave up on El Diablo?"

"I told him what you said over the phone this morning, Ken," Ramon explained. "And that you tried to get me late this afternoon. We thought perhaps it was worth coming to hear the report in person-especially," he added, "because we would be most glad to have some cheerful news this evening. We give each other nothing but bad news."

Ken swallowed. "I'm afraid that we've got more bad news for you," he said. "It seems there is no tunnel. There's not even a cave-hasn't been one for about ten thousand years. Its roof fell in and-well, it just got all filled up. Talbott is exploring it by digging a big hole straight down."

"There is no tunnel. There is no cave." Mort repeated the words in a slow, tired voice. "I see." He sat down on one of the beds. "Go on and eat your ice cream," he added, with an attempt at a smile.

Gonzalez said nothing. Seated on the edge of a chair,

elbows on knees and hands clasped, he was staring fixedly at the floor, as if wanting to conceal the disappointment Ken knew must show in his eyes.

"I'm sorry I even mentioned the cave to you this morning," Ken said.

"It wasn't Ken's fault-it was mine," Sandy protested. "I'm the one who dreamed up the tunnel just because I heard somebody talk about a cave. And now I've dreamed up something else," he added quickly. "Maybe it's a blind alley too, but I'm going to tell you about it, anyway. See that roll of film over there?" And Sandy plunged into his story, beginning with his entrance into the room earlier that evening. He repeated Ken's questions on the validity of his reasoning, and his own answers. No one interrupted him for the five minutes he spoke.

"Well?" Sandy concluded. "What do you think? Doesn't it seem pretty obvious that somebody up at the dig wanted those pictures destroyed? And that probably it was because the pictures showed something connected with your gunrunning business?"

"I think, Sandy," Gonzalez said quietly, "that you were most clever to guess that the film was spoiled when you saw the number thirteen on the dial. I think also that the film was almost certainly destroyed by someone who works at the dig. But that he has anything to do with the gun smuggling-" Ramon smiled. "Well, that is not so probable, I think."

"Not so probable?" Sandy stared at him, looking baffled. Like Ken he had completely forgotten the ice cream melting to liquid in its containers.

"Let's put it this way, Sandy," Mort Phillips said. "You do Ken and yourself an injustice when you tie up the destruction of your pictures with the gun-running. After all, you both have good eyes and good brains, and you know how to use them. The gun smuggling is on your mind. Therefore if there were something around the dig-something connected with that smuggling-you would

almost certainly have noticed it and recognized its significance. But you saw absolutely nothing. And I suspect the reason for that was that there is nothing to see."

"But-"

"But," Phillips took the word out of Sandy's mouth, "the pictures were undeniably destroyed, as you've pointed out. Therefore they must show something that is dangerous to somebody. That 'something,' however, could be almost anything. The most likely possibility, I'd say, is simply a face-a man's face. Wouldn't that be your guess, Ramon?"

The Mexican detective nodded. "You see," he pointed out to the boys, "if one of the men working at El Diablo is, for example, a fugitive from the law, he would not wish his picture to be printed in every paper that subscribes to the Global News service. Or if he is simply a man who has left his home and family, and does not choose to be found out, then too he would not wish a picture of him to appear in print. This is logical, no?"

"Yes-I guess it is," Sandy said reluctantly. "I never thought of that," he admitted.

"If you have the names of the men working there," Phillips said, "I'll send them through to Washington for a routine check. Who knows?" He smiled a tired smile. "You may have turned up a man wanted for a burglary in Walla Walla ten years ago."

"I've got all the names," Ken told him, looking sympathetically at Sandy as he spoke.

"But if the film was ruined just because some man doesn't want his picture in the paper," Sandy burst out, "what made him think I wouldn't come back and take the roll over again? If he-" Suddenly he interrupted himself. "I get it," he said bleakly. "That's why he did it the way he did, hoping nobody would notice that the film had been tampered with. Maybe he thinks I send my stuff to New York, to be developed by Global, and that by the time the

trick was discovered it would be too late to take the pictures again. I get it," he repeated. He picked up the ice-cream container, looked at its contents with disgust, and put it down again.

"Besides," Phillips said, "even if you did discover the trick, and did take the pictures over again, he could simply arrange not to appear in the second round. You arrived unexpectedly this afternoon. And -if I know you-you were snapping shots left and right, hoping to catch people before they had time to look posed and phony. Another time the subjects would be warned and ready for you."

"But that's what we ought to do then!" Ken spoke so suddenly into the silence that followed Phillips' last words that they all swung around to look at him.

"Don't you see?" Ken demanded excitedly. "We're scheduled to go to the dig again tomorrow, anyway. Suppose, when we get there, we tell everybody that the roll Sandy took today was-well, defective." He grinned briefly at Sandy and hurried on. "So, we say, it will be necessary to take all the shots over-the same shots that were taken today. We know exactly what they were. Sandy could draw every one of them for you right now-if he could draw. But we can pretend we're not absolutely certain, and that we need the men's help. We'll ask them to re-pose all the shots for us. If they don't do it accurately-if one man claims he wasn't in a picture and we know he was- well, we'll have proof that it was nothing more than a man's face that made that roll dangerous to somebody."

"Excellent!" Ramon murmured.

"Good idea," Phillips said, nodding briskly.

"But if everybody agrees to pose," Sandy said slowly, "if we duplicate the shots exactly-camera angles and all-and then tomorrow's roll is also destroyed, what then? Won't that be evidence that the camera today may have spotted something we didn't spot ourselves? And that somebody-I won't say a gunrunner, but that's what I'm thinking-knew he'd be in danger when that roll was developed?" Sandy

was grinning by the time he'd finished speaking. Ken met his eyes and grinned too. And suddenly, for the first time that evening, Phillips and Gonzalez smiled with genuine cheerfulness.

"If you duplicate today's pictures exactly, and the new roll is also destroyed," Phillips promised, "we'll be convinced that there is something mighty peculiar about the dig at El Diablo, and we'll give it our fullest attention. Won't we, Ramon?"

Ramon nodded. "But I hope," he said, "someone will have the chance to tamper with your film-if he wishes to do so, that is-without having to knock you out again, Sandy."

Sandy was still grinning. "We'll see to that. Don't worry." Not long afterward the two men prepared to depart by the window, as they had arrived. Their cars, they said, were parked some distance down the side road that led off the highway a few hundred feet to the north of the motor court.

Sandy had a last question. "What shall we tell the local police tomorrow, if Tomen brings them around after he's reported our 'sneak thief'?"

"Tell them everything you know about the man," Phillips advised. "Which, as I understand it," he added dryly, "is nothing."

"That's right," Sandy agreed.

"Tomen probably will try to make light of the affair to the police, if you don't insist otherwise," Mort said. "He obviously wants to do his best for you, because he hopes you're going to publicize Gallows Cliff and give his motel business a boost. But on the other hand he doesn't want the word spread around that people in his motel are likely to be hit over the head. Perhaps he's even afraid you may sue him for damages. So on the whole I'd let him handle it. That's probably the best way to have the situation buried pretty fast, so far as the local people are concerned."

"There's one more thing," Ken said. "I told Talbott

tonight that we'd had a sneak thief here. I knew the word would get around, anyway, with Tomen saying he'd go to the police. So they'll know at the dig tomorrow what happened."

"That's all right, I should think," Phillips said. "Just tell everybody what you'll tell the police—that Sandy was knocked out by a person unknown, but that the prowler had been startled and rushed off without taking anything." "Right," Ken agreed, and Sandy nodded.

When the boys were driving out of the motor court the next day, in midmorning, Tomen waved them to a stop. After asking how Sandy felt, he said that he had already talked to the Gallows Cliff chief of police.

"He tells me he probably can't do much, seein' as you can't give him any clue at all about the scoundrel," Tomen concluded apologetically. "But he's comin' by here today, just to look the place over."

"I suppose that's all he can do," Sandy said, sounding resigned.

"I suppose so too," Ken agreed. "Especially," he added, "since you and I can't tell him anything, either, Mr. Tomen."

"Nope. Not a thing." The big man's sigh was not completely convincing. "I'm afraid he'll just have to drop it."

Ken couldn't resist his next remark. "But as long as Sandy wasn't seriously hurt, and we didn't lose anything, that's just as well, isn't it, Mr. Tomen? I mean, in that case your motor court's reputation won't suffer."

Tomen looked embarrassed. "I've got to admit that side of it has occurred to me, son," he said. "But mind you," he added earnestly, "I'm orderin' new room locks today, even if they won't be on in time to do you folks any good. You said you'd be finishin' up here today, didn't you?"

Ken thought fast. "Yes, we hope to finish the research today, and the pictures. But we plan to stay on here long

enough to get the story written, so that we can check it with Dr. Talbott."

"Oh! I see. Well, that's fine, just fine." He was smiling broadly at them as they drove off.

Once more they climbed the zigzag road up El Diablo, parked their car, and started up the steep footpath, Sandy with his camera dangling conspicuously around his neck.

Dr. Ralph Gill, Talbott's round-faced young assistant, was the first to see them when they reached the top. A look of mock despair immediately flooded Gill's cheerful features.

"Not more pictures!" he cried. "Don't you know we're scientists, and that scientists can't waste time looking handsome for the public?" Then he bared his teeth in a mock ferocious scowl at Sandy. "That was me," he said menacingly, "who came sneaking into your room last night and knocked you out. I did it for science. Yes, for science!" He raised a fist high in a wild gesture of triumph, and then let it fall. "But you have recovered. I could not defeat you. It was all in vain!"

For one startled moment the boys had stared blankly at the young archaeologist when he described himself as Sandy's attacker. But they recovered themselves instantly, in time to laugh at the performance along with Dr. Talbott and the workmen who had been close enough to witness it.

"Sometimes I think it's a miracle we ever get any work done at all, with this young clown around the dig," Talbott said, shaking his head over Gill with affectionate amusement. "If he didn't happen to be the cleverest of the younger men in the field, I wouldn't put up with him for a moment." Then he turned to Sandy, his voice earnest. "Are you really all right, lad? We were worried when we heard what had happened to you."

"I'm fine," Sandy assured him. "A good long night's sleep was all I needed. The fact is," he went on, "we don't really need more pictures, sir. We-"

"Ah!" Gill exclaimed. "Then today our work can march forward to success, unhampered by-"

"Gill!" Talbott interrupted him. "Be serious for a moment."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir," Gill replied, grinning irrepressibly.

"What we need is yesterday's pictures over again," Sandy went on. "I-er-well, I guess I had a bad roll of film in the camera yesterday. Anyway, something went wrong. When I developed the roll there wasn't a single decent negative on it. The whole tiling was just black."

"We're awfully sorry this had to happen," Ken spoke up. "We know that duplicating the pictures will take a lot of your time."

"Nonsense," Talbott said easily. "Don't let it worry you. Accidents can happen to anybody. You want to try to take the same pictures over again-is that it?"

"That's it," Sandy said. "We think we know more or less what they were, but any help will be welcome. Of course," he added casually, "they don't have to be absolutely exact reproductions. But the ones we did yesterday did cover your work here pretty completely."

"Well, we'll all do what we can, won't we?" Talbott looked around at the workmen, and they nodded.

"Sure we will." It was Gus Parks who spoke, but Ken and Sandy had to turn their heads and look at the man to make sure. His voice had lost all its surly enmity of the day before. "I think the very first picture you took was of the whole excavation, from the top of the pit here," Parks offered. "In fact, I think you took two from here."

The boys' eyes met briefly. The change in Parks' manner provoked their curiosity, but any discussion of it would have to wait until they were alone.

"You're right!" Sandy said admiringly. "Maybe this won't be so difficult after all."

"I knew Parks would be able to help you," Talbott said. "Phenomenal memory the man has-simply phenomenal."

Parks' memory, the boys soon realized, was indeed good. And he was more than ready to use it for their assistance. He rounded up one after the other of the workmen who had appeared in Sandy's photographs the day before, and had them ready, with the correct equipment and in the correct pose, almost before Sandy had finished taking the previous shot. Finally Sandy was deliberately stalling, using his light meter before each exposure, so they would still be on the site when lunchtime came. It took all his skill at delaying tactics, and all the additional questions Ken could invent, to stretch their work out until noon. But they succeeded. When the men all stopped work at Parks' signal, the final photograph had just been completed.

"That all you want?" Parks asked. "The men won't mind postponin' their lunch a few minutes, if-

"No, thank you. That's the lot, I'm sure," Sandy said quickly.

During the one brief moment the boys had had alone, Ken had whispered, "I guess Talbott must have bawled him out for not being more friendly yesterday. He's certainly making up for it today!"

"He certainly is," Sandy had agreed.

Dr. Talbott appeared at the boys' side. "I know Ken here has finished his questions," he said. "Did you get all of your pictures, lad?"

"Yes, thanks. All of them."

Talbott smiled. "Good. Well, it's been a pleasure to have you visit us," he went on, as if preparing to say good-bye.

Ken hastily forestalled him. "We've enjoyed it," he said. "And if you don't mind, we'll sit down with you and eat the sandwiches we had the man at the diner put up for us. We weren't sure we'd be finished by noon, you see, so we-

"Excellent!" Talbott seemed genuinely delighted. "Come along down to the tents, then. That's where Gill and I usually eat."

The workmen were already straggling down the narrow path to the parking area, where each one picked up a packaged lunch and found a place in the shade.

"I'll get our sandwiches," Ken told Sandy, as they neared the tent Talbott indicated. "You go ahead." He started toward the convertible which they had been careful to park almost out of sight, beyond one of the station wagons.

Sandy waited until Ken was a few steps distant from him, and then he called out clearly, "Oh, Ken! Put my camera in the car, will you?"

Ken winked at him as he took the miniature in its neat leather case. The wink told Sandy that his announcement of the camera's location during the noon hour had been spoken loudly enough for every man on El Diablo to hear.

Ken scarcely noticed what he was eating. Seated in Talbott's tent, with his back to the entrance, he kept wondering if anybody was quietly taking the camera from the seat of the convertible, and removing the partly exposed roll it held.

So far as he could tell, the events of the morning had not upheld the theory advanced by Mort and Ramon. Neither the two archaeologists, nor any of their workmen, including Parks, had shown a reluctance to be photographed. Each man's face appeared in at least one picture, and in every case Sandy had obtained a clear front view.

So nobody, Ken said to himself-knowing that Sandy must be thinking the same thing-is afraid of having his picture appear in the paper. What was somebody afraid of then? Why had the roll of film exposed the day before been destroyed? Ken couldn't answer his own questions.

Ever since they had arrived at the dig that morning he had been studying it-peering into every nook and cranny, even glancing behind the crates of specimens piled close against the rock wall, awaiting shipment to the Brewster Museum. He had seen nothing at all unusual, nothing

that he wouldn't have expected to see at an active archaeological dig. And he was certain, furthermore, that everything at the dig was exactly as it had been the day before.

Then why, he asked himself once more, had yesterday's roll been destroyed? What had the camera recorded that spelled danger for somebody?

And had the camera recorded the same thing today? They would know only when they had a chance to check the loaded camera that had been left where anybody could pick it up, during the casual back-and-forth movements of the informal lunch hour.

Finally the bell sounded that called the men back to work. Ken and Sandy made their farewells, speaking individually to Talbott, Gill, and Parks, calling out their thanks and good-bys to the workmen. They asked Dr. Talbott if he would check through the article when it was finished. They conscientiously made a note of the restaurant in San Francisco which Gill had insisted they visit.

The final moments seemed endless. But at last Parks and the two scientists started up the path toward the excavation, and the boys walked toward the far corner of the parking area. They forced themselves not to hurry.

"Well, this is it," Sandy said under his breath, when at last they stood beside the car. He opened the door on the driver's side, standing so that Ken could see in.

"It's exactly where I left it," Ken said quietly, noting the camera's position in relation to the buttons in the leather upholstery—a position he had memorized as he put the camera down.

"And what about the tape?"

"Here. You look." It has been Ken's idea to place a tiny piece of transparent adhesive across the back, where it would be torn if the camera was opened. But it was Sandy who most confidently believed that their experiment that morning would result in a clue valuable to Mort and

Ramon. Holding the camera back down, Ken handed it over.

Sandy turned it in his hand. The piece of tape was so small that he had to touch the spot to know whether or not it was still in place.

It was. Its presence proved that the camera had not been opened.

"Yesterday," Sandy said slowly, "somebody slugged me to get at these same pictures. Today nobody has any interest in them at all."

CHAPTER IX

KEN CLICKS

As SANDY drove the car along the highway toward town, Ken found himself thinking grimly that they should never have stopped at Gallows Cliff.

Of course it had been interesting to see the dig, as they'd known it would be, and to meet Talbott and Gill. But he and Sandy had been selfish, it seemed to Ken now, when they said they wanted to help solve the serious problem that faced Mort and Ramon. They should have realized that wanting to help was not enough. They should have continued on their way, as the two detectives advised them to do. Because the only tiling they had accomplished by remaining in town was to bring trouble and disappointment to their two friends, who already had trouble enough on their hands.

The conclusion Ken reached, as the car turned into the motor-court driveway, was that he and Sandy should leave as soon as possible. He didn't know whether Sandy would agree with him or not. It had been Sandy's idea, both times, that had sent their hopes up, only to be dashed again. So it was possible, Ken thought, that if he himself suggested leaving, Sandy would be hurt or insulted.

But Sandy, Ken told himself instantly, was more sensible than he himself was being. Ken turned toward the driver's seat to say what was on his mind when he realized

that Sandy was jerking on the brake, in response to a commanding wave from Tomen, standing outside his office door.

"You're fine ones!" Tomen said, moving toward the car as it pulled to a halt. "Why didn't you tell me who you really are? Why didn't you say right out you were detectives?"

Ken stared at him blankly.

"Huh?" The tone of Sandy's voice showed that he too was startled and confused.

Was Tomen telling them that he knew what their purpose had been in remaining in Gallows Cliff? But how could Tomen have learned the truth? How had they given themselves away?

The man chuckled. "Thought you could stay here incognito, I guess," he said. "But I've got my motor court to think of, you know, so I'm always watchin' out for a chance of free advertisin'. And playin' host to a couple of celebrities means I can get a mention of my place in the *Crandon Gazette*-our county weekly newspaper, that is. I'm gettin' it too," he added happily. "I've found you out. Guess you just wanted to be modest, but Clem Hyatt told me all about you-and now that he knows you're stayin' here, he's goin' to give me a good write-up."

"Clem Hyatt?" The strange name only added to Ken's confusion.

"*Gazette* reporter," Tomen explained. "I was tellin' him about you visitin' those scientists over on El Diablo, and soon's I mentioned your names he knew right off who you were. Said he'd read your names on stories for that outfit you work for. And then he told me all about you, how you'd helped track down some pretty tough characters-some thieves, I remember he said, and some smugglers another time."

Long before Tomen finished his speech Ken was telling himself, with great relief, that the motor-court owner really had no idea after all of why the boys were in Gallows Cliff

at that moment. When Tomen had called them detectives, he had been referring to things they'd done in the past-not to what they'd just been trying to do for Mort and Ramon.

The situation was serious enough, Ken knew, but not as bad as he'd feared. He managed what he hoped would be taken for an embarrassed grin, and kept it on his face even when Tomen spoke of Sandy and himself having had a hand in rounding up a gang of smugglers.

"You know how reporters are, Mr. Tomen," Ken said quickly. "They like to make a good story. Your Mr. Hyatt has made us sound a lot more important than we really are, believe me."

"But he said you'd helped the police, and-"

Sandy broke in. "The police haven't always called it that, sir," he assured Tomen. "Sometimes we've been around when things happened-things that the police got involved in. But Ken's right, Mr. Tomen. Your Mr. Hyatt has been giving us a reputation we don't deserve."

Tomen shook his head stubbornly. "You're just modest, like I said. But we're not goin' to let you get away with it. Hyatt's goin' to make a great story of how you foiled that thief that got into your room, so that he had to take off without gettin' so much as a thin dime. Yessirree, a great story."

"You see, I figured," he went on in a confiding tone, "that it would be better for the motel to have that story printed than not to have any mention in the papers of the thief at all. I mean, thieves can give a motel a bad name-but celebrities stoppin' at a place, and workin' at their specialty, as it were, right on the premises-well, that sounds fine. You'll see," he concluded. "When next Monday's paper comes out, you can read it for yourselves."

Tomen's voice floated after them as they made their escape with mumbled excuses. If the boys left Gallows Cliff before Monday, Tomen was promising, he would personally mail them a copy of the *Crandon Gazette*.

"Whew!" Ken said weakly when they were safely alone

in their room.

Sandy looked grim. "That's the last straw," he said. "We've got to get out of here. Gallows Cliff won't even have to wait until Monday to hear Tomen's description of those great detectives, Holt and Allen-and anybody in these parts who has good reason to be afraid of the law will be on the alert. And that," he said, jaw clenched, "won't do Mort and Ramon any good. We've given them enough trouble as it is."

"I think you're right, Sandy," Ken agreed. Ten minutes ago he had been thinking they should leave. Now he was even more convinced of it. "And the sooner we're out of here, the better."

"I suppose you've got to write that story first," Sandy said, pacing to the far end of the comfortable room and then back again.

"I suppose so," Ken agreed reluctantly. "I've told everybody I was going to do it here. Might look strange if I didn't. But it shouldn't take me more than a couple of hours, if I settle down to it. We might get off yet this afternoon." He was taking his portable typewriter out of the closet as he spoke.

"You promised Talbott you'd show him the story," Sandy remembered, frowning.

"I know." Ken put the typewriter on the desk and sat down in front of it. "But I didn't actually say I'd wait around for his comments, if any. We can let him mail them to us. Fortunately, we don't have a definite deadline for getting the stuff in."

"Fine. Get on with it, will you? I'll be packing." The grim disappointment they both felt put a sharp edge on Sandy's voice. "I certainly can't figure out what kind of message we ought to leave for Mort and Ramon," he added, jerking open a bureau drawer.

"That is going to be tough," Ken agreed. He had the cover off his typewriter, and was inserting paper and carbon in the machine, so that he would have one copy of

his story for Talbott, and one for himself. "But if I start thinking about that now, I'll never get this done. It's going to be hard enough putting my mind on it as it is. You worry about the message while you're packing."

Some minutes later the lead of Ken's story was done—a brief paragraph summarizing the principal finds to date at the dig on El Diablo. He read it over and then stared at the wall of the room.

The words he wanted next failed to come. Instead, the weary faces of Mort and Ramon rose up before him, and he could hear Ramon's voice declaring calmly that his own demotion was of no importance. "The important thing," Ramon had said, "is to do the job that must be done." Angrily Ken thrust the voice and the two faces out of his mind. There was no use thinking about them, he told himself, because there was nothing he and Sandy could do. They had already proved that. And if they so much as remained in town now, with Tomen cheerfully informing all Gallows Cliff that the guests in his end room were detectives, they would almost certainly further complicate their friends' problem.

"What does the dig look like?" Ken mumbled, half aloud, trying to channel his thoughts toward the job he had to complete before they could leave. The outline already fairly clear in his mind called for a physical description of the place before he wrote further about the work being done there.

He shut his eyes, to close out the room he sat in and try to recapture his own first impression of the site. Sandy and he had had their first good look at it, he remembered, when they had climbed part way up the neighboring hill, and looked across a thousand feet or so of desert floor to the slope of El Diablo, with its zigzagging slash of trail. Standing there on that hill, he recalled, they had—

A sudden thought exploded in Ken's mind with such force that he pushed his chair back and stood up before he realized what he was doing.

"Now what?" Sandy demanded. "Can't you finish one simple story without-"

"Sandy!" Ken interrupted him, unaware of the fact that Sandy was speaking. "You had your camera with you yesterday afternoon when we climbed up the hill to look at El Diablo, didn't you? I mean, when we climbed the hill next to it."

"That's right," Sandy agreed, with a puzzled frown. "I thought I might want a picture of the dig from there, but-"

"But you didn't take one!" Ken finished for him.

"That's right," Sandy said again. "Say, what's the matter with you?" he demanded.

"You had your camera with you on the hill," Ken repeated. "You had it with you when we came down."

"Naturally," Sandy said scathingly. "I don't go around leaving two-hundred-dollar cameras on-"

"And Parks saw you with it then," Ken said, raising his voice to drown out Sandy's words. "At least, he could have seen you with it. He went past in the station wagon-remember?-just before we got back to our car."

"Sure I remember. But-"

"And he had no way of knowing that you hadn't taken a picture up there," Ken swept on. "And therefore we have no way of knowing that the picture you *didn't* take on that hill-but which Parks might have thought you took-" Ken gave up the confused sentence and started over, running his words together in his hurry to share his idea. "I mean," he said, "that Parks might be the one who destroyed your roll of film yesterday, because of some picture he thought it contained-the picture only he was in a position to think you'd taken from the other hill."

"Oh!" Sudden comprehension flooded Sandy's face, followed immediately by excited amazement. "But that could explain it!" He almost shouted the words. "That could explain why nobody touched today's roll! Parks knew for certain that the only pictures taken today were the ones he helped us make on the dig."

"Exactly! What do you think? Doesn't it all hang together? It could mean," Ken hurried on, "that there is definitely something funny going on over there-not right at the dig, maybe, the way we first thought, but somewhere near it-somewhere on El Diablo. Parks thought you had photographed it-or something that pointed to it, anyway. So he destroyed your film."

"But what?" Sandy wondered. "We looked at the hill. You even looked through your binoculars. And we didn't see anything suspicious."

"Because we were concentrating on the dig itself," Ken offered. "Maybe if we went up there again, and took another look at El Diablo, at the entire hill-"

"Let's go!" Sandy slammed shut a half-packed bag. "What are we waiting for?"

They were both grinning, completely lifted out of their previous grim mood by the thought that they might after all have a lead to something that would help Mort and Ramon. If Parks had a guilty secret, it seemed almost certain that it was involved with the gunrunning, if only because it was unlikely that numerous illegal activities were going on at once in a town the size of Gallows Cliff.

But Ken said firmly, "Hold it. Let's make sure we know what we're doing. We don't want Mort and Ramon having to pick up the pieces, if we start something we can't finish."

"But we won't even be starting something," Sandy protested, "just by walking up that hill and taking a look."

"We might. If you were knocked out last night because we walked up that hill yesterday-"

"Are you suggesting," Sandy broke in, "that we should get in touch with Mort and Ramon first? I think myself this is the best lead we've had. Certainly it sounds a lot more hopeful than that phony idea of mine about a tunnel leading out of a cave that hasn't existed for ten thousand years. But it is pretty vague, even so, and we've-"

"I'm not suggesting getting in touch with them yet,"

Ken told him. "I'm just saying we'd better be careful on that hill."

It was half an hour later, well after three o'clock, before they finally left their room. By then Sandy too was convinced of the need for caution, and they were agreed on a plan which, they thought, should remove any danger from the long-distance exploration of El Diablo they were both determined to make.

They had a story ready for Tomen, if his customary curiosity had to be satisfied when they drove past his office. They had changed from the dark slacks they'd been wearing to tan slacks and matching shirts-outfits which they knew would make them almost invisible against the sand-colored desert hills. They had even found, in the car's glove compartment, a pair of tan caps that were remnants of some long-forgotten fishing trip. The caps still smelled faintly of fish and brine, but they effectively covered Ken's strikingly black hair and Sandy's vivid red thatch. Ken's binoculars were hidden away in a capacious shirt pocket. And they had promised each other to park the car well away from the road and the cross-desert trail leading to El Diablo, and out of sight of anyone at the archaeological dig. They planned to climb the hill that was their goal by the north slope, away from the dig, and to use every possible means to conceal themselves as they studied El Diablo through Ken's high-powered glasses.

Their first carefully planned precaution proved useless. Tomen was not in evidence as they drove past his office.

"And we wasted five minutes thinking up a good story for him," Sandy muttered disgustedly.

"Cheer up," Ken said. "Maybe we can use it on somebody else some time."

They grinned at each other, both aware that anything they said now was just an attempt to cover up their mounting excitement.

After they had turned left onto the east-west road that

ran past El Diablo and the hill they were heading for, the only car they saw was a grocer's truck, also heading east. Ken, at the wheel, slowed down not long after the truck had rattled past.

"Somewhere along in here we ought to drive off the road," he said. "This is a good time for it. There's no car in sight. And we're close enough to the hill so that we could walk there in a couple of minutes. Watch for a good place."

"There!" Sandy said a moment later.

Ken had noticed it at the same instant, a patch of the cottonwood trees occasionally seen at those low places where even in the desert a little water sometimes accumulated briefly. The trees stood perhaps a couple of hundred feet from the hill they planned to climb, in what appeared to be a dry gully.

Ken drove off the road and bumped the convertible across the stony earth until they were close enough to see that the gully in which the trees stood would easily conceal a car. It was some time before they found a spot where the side wall of the gully slanted gently enough to be used as a ramp. Then, a few moments later, the car was parked among the trees on the gully floor. The boys knew that it was completely hidden from the sight of anyone on El Diablo or anyone passing along the road.

"Look," Ken said, as he stared around. "This is the bottom of a gully that starts almost at the top of the hill. We can follow it and keep out of sight ourselves, until we get at least part way up the slope. That will save us going all the way around to the north side of the hill."

They stood for a moment looking up at the eroded butte that was to be their vantage point for studying El Diablo. Its sides, which had once probably been almost straight, were now carved into ridges and hollows, as if a giant's fingers had been drawn down the slopes, each finger gouging out a long vertical valley. Some of the valleys extended far onto the desert floor. The gully in which they stood was one of those. Others ended at the

foot of the hill, in a fan-shaped hollow heaped with the large and small rocks that had been washed down the hillside during every flood since the beginning of time.

"I seem to have made this remark before," Sandy said. "Let's go. What are we waiting for?"

Ken grinned and led the way forward, along the gully that gradually narrowed as they approached the hill itself.

Once they were following the gully up the hillside, they found the going harder. The loose rocks underfoot turned and rolled beneath their weight. Sometimes the sides of the gully were so low that they had to crouch down in order to be sure they couldn't be sighted from the El Diablo dig. They were both hot and out of breath when Ken finally said, "O.K. We ought to be able to see something from here. Let's stop and take a look."

He pulled the binoculars out of his pocket, put them to his eyes, and focused on the slope of El Diablo about a thousand feet distant.

Sandy, studying the same slope with his naked eye, murmured, "That's a different kind of hill entirely from this one-rounder, no gullies to speak of, fairly smooth on the whole except for that jumble of rocks at the foot and the cuts made for the dig."

"What am I supposed to be learning from this geological lecture?" Ken asked, moving the glasses slowly from right to left and then back again.

"I have no idea," Sandy confessed. "What are you expecting to see over there, anyway?"

Ken echoed Sandy's own answer. "I have no idea. We know there was once a cave in the hill," he went on. "I suppose I'm hoping there's another cave-one that's still in existence, and that has an opening we could see if we were lucky."

"And a tunnel leads from the cave clear across the Mexican border?" Sandy asked wryly. "We're back to my old idea again?"

"I just don't know," Ken admitted. "Have you got

another suggestion? Of course we can't see the whole north face of El Diablo from here-we'll have to work our way farther around before we can do that -but right now I certainly can't see a thing that looks in the least suspicious. Here, you take a look."

Five minutes later Sandy handed the glasses back, shaking his head, and they moved on up the gully another few hundred feet to try again from that vantage point.

Once more they both studied El Diablo through the glasses, sighed, and started on again.

Their third pause brought them on a level with the raw cut that marked the site of the dig on the hill opposite. The glasses showed them men moving about, carrying on the work the boys had become familiar with under Talbott's guidance.

Sandy was about to hand the glasses back to Ken when he put them to his eyes for another moment. "Quitting time over there," he reported. "They're stacking the tools. Some of the men are already starting down the path to the parking area."

"In that case," Ken said, "we'd better stay where we are for a few minutes. Any movement over here just might be noticed by somebody walking down that path, or driving down the road."

Sitting quietly, at the foot of a huge boulder that completely screened them from El Diablo, they tried not to admit discouragement.

But they were relieved when a cautious glance told them that the last of the cars carrying the men from the dig was rapidly disappearing in the direction of Gallows Cliff.

"Let's be on our way," Ken said then.

"Where?" Sandy asked. "Shall we move on around the hill a way, so that we'll be able to see the whole north face?"

"Let's do that," Ken suggested.

They scrambled up out of the gully, crossed the ridge

that divided it from the next gash in the hillside, and soon found themselves in the stony bed of another wash.

"Let's try from here," Ken said, pulling the glasses out of his pocket once more.

While he was making a painstaking inspection of the opposite slope, Sandy glanced upward.

"There's an overhanging rock up there above us," he said. "Almost like a platform. It's enough higher than we are here to give us a really good perspective."

Ken nodded absent-mindedly, moving the glasses in a slow arc as he did so. "Good," he muttered. "We'll try that next." He kept the glasses several minutes longer and then turned them over to Sandy.

Sandy hesitated. "You've already had a good look from here," he said. "There probably isn't much point in my repeating the process."

"Of course there is," Ken insisted. "Something that looked like a bush to me, or an ordinary rock, might look different to you. Remember," he added, "we're just staring over there in the hope of getting an inspiration. It isn't as if we knew what we were looking for."

"It certainly isn't," Sandy agreed dispiritedly, lifting the binoculars to his eyes.

Ken glanced overhead, toward the platformlike projection Sandy had mentioned. Yes, he thought, that would make a fine lookout. They would make it their next stop. But it was growing harder and harder to believe, he admitted to himself, staring out toward El Diablo again, that they were actually going to find something on its slope which would justify the high hopes that had brought them rushing out of the motel nearly two hours earlier.

Still, he reminded himself, it was a fact that Sandy had been knocked out in their room the night before. It was a fact that the roll of film in his camera had been destroyed. There must have been some reason for-

A rattling noise above his head made him swing around.

For a paralyzed instant he stood staring upward, unable to believe the fearsome sight that met his eyes.

A huge boulder was bounding down the gully straight toward the spot where he and Sandy stood, picking up more and more lethal speed with every foot, loosening dozens of smaller rocks and pebbles as it rolled and carrying them along in a hideous wave of destruction—a wave that could not be halted, that no living being could survive.

Ken opened his mouth to shout a warning to Sandy, but no sound emerged from his throat.

Then Sandy himself, his concentration snapped by the roaring sound overhead, also swung around and stared upward.

For what seemed an endless moment they stood side by side, unmoving, held rigid by the terrifying sight.

The oncoming rockslide was now almost as wide as the gully down which it poured. Safety from its deadly weight existed nowhere closer than the upper portion of the gully walls.

Afterward, neither of them could remember which moved first. But suddenly, clutching at each other, they were hurling themselves against the nearer wall. Even as they fell flat against it they were trying to scramble up its steep slope, fighting for handholds in loose gravel, digging their toes into earth that fell away beneath them.

And then the rolling mass of stone, like some monstrous roaring beast, poured over the spot where they had stood a moment before. Small pebbles bounding up from its surface struck their bodies like a rain of buckshot. Stones big enough to kill a man passed within a yard of their feet.

They were still lying flat, faces pressed into the hard earth, when the vast noise rumbled slowly into silence. The rockfall had spread itself out harmlessly on the desert floor several hundred feet below. It was over. And they were still alive.

CHAPTER X

CORNERED

THE dust of the crashing rocks had settled before either of the boys stirred. Finally Ken raised himself cautiously on one elbow. Half a dozen small stones rolled off his body as he moved.

"Sandy," he breathed hoarsely. "You all right?"

Sandy's long figure shifted under its layer of dust and debris, and came to a sitting position. "I feel," he said, "as if I'd been ground between two millstones."

"Me too." Every inch of Ken's body ached. He was weak and shaken.

Here and there a pebble still skittered down the steep grade. They watched for a moment, almost afraid to get to their feet for fear the motion might start a second slide.

Ken drew a hand across his dry, dust-caked lips and then tried to wipe some of the stinging grit out of his eyes. "It ought to be safe to go now," he muttered. "Let's get out of here."

Slowly they stood up, careful as to where they set their feet.

Sandy was looking toward the overhanging rock at the head of the gully. "What started it, do you suppose?" he murmured.

"Who started it is what I'd like to know," Ken said quietly.

"Who?" Sandy repeated the word sharply. "You?"

"I mean it all right," Ken said quietly. "But I'd rather not discuss it here. Let's head for the car- and let's not travel in any more gullies, either."

They moved as fast as their aching limbs would permit them, following the rim of the valley in which the rockslide had caught them. From that vantage point they could see clearly in all directions. Not until they reached the foot of the hill did they slither back into the gully again, cross it, and continue toward their car along the shortest possible route.

"My shoes are full of stones," Sandy said, before the car came in sight. "Let's stop long enough to-" He broke off abruptly. "Unless you think somebody might take a pot shot at us, now that we've survived that little accident back there."

"I'll feel safer in the car," Ken admitted. "But I guess I can't make it either, without emptying my shoes." They both stopped long enough to get rid of the sharp sand and tiny pebbles that were cutting into their feet.

"I don't really think anybody will take a shot at us," Ken went on, as they started forward again. They were at the foot of the hill now, on flat, open desert, and he could be sure of not being overheard by any concealed eavesdropper. "I think somebody wants to get rid of us, but I'm pretty sure they want to do it so that it will look like an accident. That rockslide could have done the job perfectly, if we hadn't been lucky. But bullets call for investigations, and I don't think our friends want to risk anything like that."

"I still don't know why you're so sure that slide didn't just happen," Sandy said, limping along at Ken's side.

"It's mostly hunch," Ken admitted, "but not entirely. There hasn't been any rain lately, to loosen stones and shift them around. The timing was perfect -it didn't start until all the men on El Diablo had gone home, so there'd be no one around to say exactly what had happened. And besides, the last time we climbed that hill somebody

sneaked into our room, exposed your film, and slugged you."

"But exposing that film-even slugging me-those things aren't in the same class as trying to bury us alive," Sandy pointed out, looking unconvinced. "I thought you must have seen someone up there at the head of the gully-somebody who-"

Ken shook his head. "No. I can't prove somebody started that slide. But I'm absolutely sure of it just the same."

He looked back over his shoulder as he spoke, pulling out of his pocket the binoculars Sandy had automatically returned to him earlier. When he saw that they were unharmed in their sturdy leather case, he paused briefly to peer through them at the hillside they had just descended. As he put the glasses back into their case again he shook his head. "I still don't see anybody up there, or anything that looks at all suspicious," he admitted. "But I'll never be convinced that big rock started downhill without some help."

Sandy looked at him skeptically, but neither of them spoke again until they reached the car.

"I'll drive," Ken said, heading for the left side of the convertible.

Sandy walked around the car to the other door, and then turned back to look at the right front tire. He kicked it.

"What's the matter?" Ken asked.

"Nothing, I guess," Sandy said slowly. "I just had a vague feeling there was something wrong, but I must have imagined it. The tire seems hard enough." He opened the door and started to slide onto the seat.

Suddenly he stepped down to the ground again, as if a delayed message had just reached his brain.

He knelt beside the tire for an instant, and then he said, "I thought something was strange! Ken, look here!"

He was pointing to the dust-coated hubcap when Ken

joined him. "That's what caught my eye-those marks in the dust. Somebody's handled that hubcap pretty recently. Let's find out why." An instant later he had opened the glove compartment and taken out the small tool kit. With the screw driver he found in it he pried off first the dusty hubcap and then the small inner cap-the metal cup covering the nut that fastened the wheel hub to its axle.

When the nut was exposed Sandy tried it gingerly. It turned easily in his fingers.

"The cotter pin's gone," he said grimly. "And the nut's unscrewed almost all the way. This wheel would have come off before we'd driven two miles!"

"And we could have been killed in the accident," Ken said.

"Right." Sandy reached inside the tiny hubcap and showed Ken the two halves of the cotter pin he pulled out. "Look! Our friend's a thorough worker, whoever he is. He even left these inside here, so that if anybody checked the car after the crack-up, it would seem obvious that the wheel had come off accidentally when the cotter pin broke."

Sandy looked up at Ken. "All right," he said slowly. "I am now buying your theory of the man-made rockslide-buying it lock, stock, and barrel. I wasn't really convinced by your reasoning before--"

"I told you it wasn't all reasoning," Ken reminded him.

"Well, by your hunch then," Sandy corrected himself. "But I'm convinced now. Let's get through to Mort and Ramon as fast as we can, and tell them what's happened. We've become dangerous to somebody, even if we don't know why. But it must have something to do with the gunrunning, because that's the only thing we've tried to pry into. Maybe Mort and Ramon can figure it out."

"Can we use the car?" Ken asked.

"We can if we've got a paper clip," Sandy said.

Ken found the paper clip-it was holding together a sheaf of notes in the glove compartment-while Sandy

tightened the wheel nut with a pair of pliers. They moved quickly, aware that they might be watched by unseen eyes. Then Sandy made a temporary cotter pin out of the clip. In three minutes they were ready to leave.

Ken took one last look around, saw no sign of another living being, and slid under the steering wheel. "Quarter to six," he said, checking his watch. "With luck Ramon ought to be in his quarters now. We'll try to reach him by the first phone we come to."

"There's an outdoor phone booth beside that crossroads lunch stand," Sandy reminded him.

They bumped across the desert floor until they reached the east-west road, and then picked up speed as they headed toward its junction with the north-south road connecting Gallows Cliff with the border.

There were no cars parked in front of the lunchroom, and no traffic in sight. Ken opened his door.

"Are you going to ask Ramon to meet us somewhere?" Sandy asked.

"I think we ought to give him as much as we know right away, over the phone," Ken said, "if he says it's safe to talk."

"Just what I was thinking," Sandy agreed. "For all we know, our mysterious ill-wisher is still somewhere in the neighborhood of El Diablo, thinking that his cotter-pin trick has worked, even if we did escape the landslide. So Ramon and Mort may want us to play dead from now on, while they start prowling around El Diablo themselves."

Ken nodded and started for the phone booth, marshaling his thoughts as he moved. Sandy and he still had no idea of why they became dangerous to somebody as soon as they set foot on the hill which gave them a good view of El Diablo. But he thought there was no doubt that Ramon and Mort would both agree now that El Diablo was worth a full-scale investigation. And the bruises Sandy and he had suffered, Ken thought, would be a small price to pay for a lead that put their good friends on the right

track at last.

Two minutes later Ken came out of the phone booth, his fists clenched in frustration, his mouth tight.

"Wasn't he there?" Sandy demanded.

Ken shook his head. "And neither was Woodrow, the only other person I'd have dared to talk to. The cook answered the phone. He said the Woodrows were out to dinner and that all the field hands were working late tonight-that none of them were in the barracks yet. All I could do was to leave a message for Ramon-for Juan Ortiz, that is-saying his friends had called and we hoped he'd get in touch with us as soon as possible."

"Do you think he'll even know who phoned?" Sandy asked.

"I think so. No one but us would leave that kind of message. Mort would get in touch with him by radio, and so would any of their men." Ken drummed impatiently on the wheel. "But what shall we do now? We'd counted on Ramon to get the word to Mort."

"Maybe we ought to go straight back to our room and wait there for Ramon to reach us."

"I suppose so," Ken said reluctantly. "But why," he asked a moment later, "couldn't we try to reach Mort ourselves? We know where his camp is. And if we keep our eyes open we ought to be able to get to it without being seen. The country's flat around there-we'd know soon enough if anybody was trailing us."

"Let's try it," Sandy said quickly.

Ken flipped the ignition key. Mort had never given them an explicit order against visiting his camp. And Ken knew Sandy agreed with him that time was pressing. The landslide and the broken cotter pin both suggested that the enemy was growing reckless. Recklessness could mean the approach of a crisis.

Ken swung the car back onto the road and headed west toward the big saguaro that was the landmark for finding Mort's camp.

Sandy sat sideways on the seat, watching the road behind them. It had been empty when they started out. It was still empty ten minutes later.

"Seen anything?" Ken asked.

"Not a thing since we left the crossroads," Sandy said. "And I can see at least half a mile of the road all the time. I'm sure we're in the clear."

When they reached the giant saguaro they forced themselves to wait there a full five minutes by Ken's watch. Still no car appeared behind them. And no car approached from the west.

"This must be one of the least-traveled roads in the United States," Ken said, as he turned the ignition key on again.

"It suits me," Sandy assured him. "This is one of those times when I appreciate solitude."

There were faint tire tracks leading off southward into the desert, past the big stiff-armed cactus. Ken followed them, heading for a clump of cotton-wood trees about a mile off the road. Among the trees, when they were still half a mile away, they could make out the white shape of Mort's tent. Ken's foot pressed down a little harder and they were parking under the nearest of the trees a few moments later.

Mort had arranged his camp so that anyone who came across it, by accident or by design, would see exactly the sort of place an artist might set up as his living and working quarters. There was nothing secretive about the open tent flap, or the table set up just inside it. A stack of rough pencil sketches was held in place by a stone, in the center of the table, and a stained box of oil paints lay beside it. The painting of a saguaro stood on an easel. A narrow camp bed, neatly made, a folding chair, a small kerosene stove, and two wooden lockers were the only other items inside the tent. Even the lockers were open, one revealing food in cans and cartons, the other several clean but paint-stained shirts and pairs of slacks.

Mort himself was nowhere to be seen. A quick glance told the boys that his car was also missing.

"Now what?" Sandy asked, dispiritedly. Mort's absence was a blow they had been unprepared for.

"I don't know," Ken admitted. "I'd like to wait a while, in the hope that he'd turn up. But we probably ought to be back at the motor court in case Ramon tries to reach us there."

"I think we should too," Sandy said.

"I've got it!" Ken said. "We'll leave him a message."

"We can't do that!" Sandy protested. "Mort's got this place fixed up so that--"

"Don't worry," Ken told him. "We won't leave anything incriminating." He went to the table as he spoke and riffled through the sheets of sketches. He found a soft black pencil, with which they had obviously been drawn, standing among several other pencils in an empty coffee tin.

He chose a sheet on which Mort had made several rough drawings of hawks in flight. They filled less than half the page, and on the other half Mort had drawn meaningless squiggles and curlicues, as if he had been doodling while awaiting another chance to study a wheeling bird. Among the doodles Ken drew a crude rendition of the Global News trademark—a globe with a streak of lightning for its axis.

"There!" he said. "Now, if we leave this sheet on top of the pile, Mort will see it as soon as he comes in, and he'll know we were here. But it probably wouldn't mean a thing to anybody else who happened to see it."

"Good!" Sandy said. "And we can add something else, so he'll know we're in a hurry to talk to him." He picked up the pencil Ken had dropped back in the coffee can, and surrounded the lightning-pierced globe with a framelike series of dots and dashes. "Mort had a message like that from us once before," he added. "He'll know what it means."

Ken's brow wrinkled briefly and then cleared as he recognized the pattern Sandy had drawn. It was a repeated row of the continental Morse code symbols for SOS. The other time they had sent Mort a similar message had been on the occasion of their first meeting with the FBI agent in Mexico. Ken knew Mort would respond as rapidly now, at the sight of those dots and dashes, as he had responded then. "Yes," Ken said. "He'll know what it means."

They had done all they could.

A sense of urgency gnawed at them, a feeling that they ought to follow up the advantage that had been put into their hands that afternoon. The attempts to injure them were clues that demanded interpretation-but the boys knew they were helpless to interpret those clues on their own.

They looked once more around the neat camp, which gave away nothing of Mort Phillips' real purpose. They stared past the cottonwood trees into the surrounding desert, hoping against hope that they would see Mort's radio-equipped car bouncing toward them. But the barren earth was empty of life and movement, silent and hot under the slanting rays of the setting sun.

Ken said abruptly, "Let's get back to the motor court."

Their return trip was unobserved, so far as they could tell. Once again they saw no vehicles at all on the east-west road. The first cars they encountered were a pair of gasoline trucks which Ken overtook and passed just as they entered Gallows Cliff.

Tomen was standing at the open door of his office as they turned into the court. Ken slowed, hoping that Tomen was waiting for them with a message from Ramon. Ken even had time to wonder how Ramon had phrased the message, so that it would be meaningless to the gossip-loving Tomen, and yet would not rouse Tomen's curiosity to the point where the boys would have difficulty getting away from him. Then Ken realized that Tomen's hand was raised in the slow gesture that passed with him as a wave.

Tomen was not trying to halt them. He was simply greeting them on their return.

Ken's foot moved away from the brake and he kept the car moving toward their own room. "I thought -" he began.

"So did I," Sandy said grimly.

Ken parked the convertible in its carport. Sandy had the room key in his pocket, and unlocked the door, gesturing Ken ahead of him into the shadowy interior. Ken turned toward the nearest window, to open the blind they had closed that morning against the heat of the day, as Sandy shut the door.

The strange voice spoke immediately from the far side of the room. "Don't touch that! Stand where you are, both of you. I've got a gun and it's pointed right in your direction."

In the moment of utter silence that followed the words the click of the desk lamp was loud, and for an instant the lighted bulb dazzled their eyes. Then the boys could see the stranger seated at the desk. A dark raincoat shrouded his figure. A broad-brimmed hat pulled down over his eyes concealed most of his face. But the heavy automatic in his hand showed clearly in the glow of the lamp.

"Lock the door and take out the key," the man said, shifting the gun briefly toward Sandy.

Sandy obeyed, his arms and legs moving with the slow jerkiness of an automaton.

"And now sit down there on the bed, close together-so I can keep an eye on you both at once," the man ordered.

Ken found his voice. "Who are you?" he asked. "And what-?"

"Sit down, I said. And I can do without the questions."

For a brief second Ken's eyes met Sandy's. There was no doubt in either of their minds that this unknown man was one of the bandidos Mort and Ramon were so determined to track down. They were both equally sure that the gun in his hand was the weapon for completing the job that the landslide and the broken cotter pin had

failed to accomplish. But the look they sent each other said that the man would not dare to fire that heavy gun at once, in the motor court. Tomen, in his office only a few hundred feet away, guaranteed their safety so long as they kept their heads and weren't panicked into going along, at gun point, to some more secluded spot. And in the meantime it was possible that they might at last learn something of real value to Mort and Ramon.

Slowly the boys sat down on the bed, side by side.

"That's better," the man said. "Obey my orders and perhaps I won't have to use this after all."

"If it's money you want," Ken began, trying to sound as if no other reason for the stranger's intrusion had occurred to him, "we have-"

The voice interrupted him. "It's not money I'm here for."

"Then-" Ken interrupted himself this time, at the sound of a knock on the outer door. Tomen! Once again, he supposed, Tomen had taken down a message and was delivering it in person, so that he could satisfy his insatiable curiosity.

"Stay where you are!" the stranger snapped, as Ken half turned toward the door.

"But that's Mr. Tomen," Ken said, deliberately raising his voice. "He knows we're in here and-" Even as he spoke he was sure he heard a key turning in the lock. Had Tomen realized already that they were in trouble? He hadn't seemed capable of such quick thinking.

Sandy must have heard the noise too. He also raised his voice as if to cover it up. "It's true," he said. "Mr. Tomen saw us come in just a minute ago. If we don't answer the door-" Sandy started to rise.

"I said stay where you are!" the stranger commanded.

At that moment the door swung open and Tomen's big heavy body stepped forward into the room.

Ken's muscles were tense. Sandy, beside him, was taut as a steel coil, ready to spring the moment the

stranger's attention was directed at the new arrival.

But the gun didn't waver from its aim at the boys, and the man holding it continued to gaze at them steadily.

Ken sensed the truth then. It flooded over him in all its terrifying intensity a split second later, as Tomen pushed the door shut behind his back and said quietly, "Good work, Joe. I see you handled them without any trouble. I was afraid they might have kicked up a little fuss."

"Fuss?" The man called Joe laughed shortly. "These two squirts?"

Tomen chuckled. His face was as bland and innocent as always. "Come, come, Joe," he said. "You mustn't talk about 'em like that! Why, they're detectives-yes, sir, real detectives."

He turned to look at the boys then, and the scornful flick of his glance was like the lash of a whip. "Detectives," he said softly, "who have just poked their noses into their last case."

CHAPTER XI

BRAINS AGAINST BULLETS

KEN felt a shudder run through his body, as if the temperature of the room had suddenly become icy cold. He clenched his hands at his sides and forced himself to speak-to dispel by the sound of his own voice the terror that gripped him.

"What makes you think," he asked, "that we've stuck our noses into anything?"

Tomen laughed. "Let's not talk nonsense," he advised. "You're a smart pair. Even before I got Clem Hyatt to give me the full run-down on you, I'd figured that out. And now you've discovered I've got a brain or two myself, eh? So we don't have to try to fool each other any longer."

"If you don't want 'em to talk, boss-" Joe began, but Tomen waved him silent.

"I didn't say that, Joe," he explained patiently. "As a matter of fact, I'd Hke them to give me the answers to a couple of questions, and we've got plenty of time for that right now, while we wait for it to get dark enough so we can move on."

He sat down, ignoring the way the chair creaked under his weight, and crossed one heavy leg over the other.

"Of course I'd like you to tell me first," he said, "whether you're workin' with somebody else or not. Somehow I don't think you got onto this on your own. Mind you," he added, chuckling once more, "I haven't

forgotten that you're detectives. No sir. The Boy Wonders, I expect they call you back East. But even so I don't reckon you tumbled to this whole thing by yourselves. Who put you onto it, eh? Who persuaded you to start pryin' into what goes on at El Diablo?"

"You might as well save your breath," Sandy burst out. "We're not telling you anything. Not a thing!"

Tomen shook his head sadly. "You disappoint me," he said. "You really do. I thought you were smart enough to figure out that if you gave me a little help, I might go easy on you-maybe even give your luck a slight boost. It's about run out, you know. You were lucky twice this afternoon. But you can't expect luck like that to continue unless it gets some assistance. And you know, boys," he added slowly, "I'm about the only one who can give it the kind of assistance it needs. So suppose you tell me who sent you up to El Diablo."

Sandy's outburst had alarmed Ken. He knew this was no time to enrage Tomen. The moment might come when they could turn on the big man. Ken realized their lives were worthless if that moment didn't arrive. He was also sure the present demanded quite different tactics.

"But, Mr. Tomen," he said, trying to put a note of pleading into his voice, "you already know why we went up there. You heard us make that call to Global News about doing a story on the dig."

Ken didn't expect Tomen to accept his answer at face value. He had spoken only to gain time, to keep Tomen himself talking. Tomen's scornful shake of the head was the reaction Ken had anticipated.

"You don't think I believe that," the man said. Suddenly he leaned forward. "Was it the customs men?" he snapped. "Was it somebody on the State Police? Have they got a plain-clothesman around here I haven't spotted?"

"Clint, you know you get the story on every stranger that turns up around here," Joe protested. "Nobody could

fool you that way."

"Be quiet, Joe," Tomen said impatiently. "Come on -are you going to answer me?" he asked the boys.

Joe interrupted again, as if he wanted Ken and Sandy to be certain that he and Tomen were equal partners despite the arrogant way in which he was spoken to by the big man. "They'll talk, Clint, when we get them back to El Diablo and down in the cave."

Ken's heart leaped. Beside him, he could feel Sandy stifle the gasp that rose in his throat.

Now they knew! There *was* a cave after all!

Tomen was getting to his feet. The glare in his eyes when he looked at Joe would have withered most men. "Anythin' else you'd like to tell 'em?" he asked through tight lips. He walked to the door without giving Joe a chance to reply. There he turned briefly. "We'll leave in about twenty minutes," he told Joe. "I'll be back then. Keep your gun on 'em every second, and use it if you have to. I'm the only one that'll hear it, and the sound won't bother me."

His eyes narrowed as he looked over at the boys. "I suppose I'll never know whether you'd actually sighted the cave or not. But I'm not goin' to worry about it-or about you, for that matter. And you won't have to strain your minds much longer, either. You're goin' to see the inside of that cave you've been tryin' to find. Ain't that nice?"

The silence in the room after Tomen's departure was as thick as a fog that makes even breathing difficult.

The shaking weakness that had gripped Ken after the landslide that afternoon was gripping him again. But this time, he knew, they had not escaped a danger. This time they were trapped.

Yet, at this very moment, the clue to the problem Mort and Ramon were struggling to solve was in their hands! Once more Ken thought of his father, and of how willingly Richard Holt would make this his own fight if he had the chance. If Sandy and himself weren't going to be able to

walk out of this trap, Ken told himself grimly, they were at least going to do their best to leave word somehow about the secret they had finally unearthed.

But how?

Ken's mind seemed unable to function.

Think! Think! he commanded himself desperately. He knew the next twenty minutes were their best- perhaps their only-chance. Then Tomen would be back, and the odds would be even more heavily against them. They were heavy enough at the moment, with that menacing automatic staring at them with its one, round, black eye.

Joe's eyes were steady on them too. Ken wasn't sure whether or not Joe even understood what he had done when he spoke the word *cave*. But Joe certainly understood that Tomen was displeased with him, and that Tomen had given him permission to use his gun if necessary, rather than let the boys get away. Joe would use it, too. For all his bluster in Tomen's presence, it was clear that Joe was afraid of the big man.

Maybe that was their chance, Ken thought suddenly. Could they play on Joe's fear? But they would have to do it in such a way that Joe didn't guess what was happening.

Suddenly a daringly simple plan sprang into Ken's mind. If it worked, Mort-or Ramon-would almost certainly obtain the information now in the boys' hands. One or both of the men would come to the motor court that night, Ken felt sure, and they would manage to get in if they found the room shut and unexpectedly deserted. They would find any message that had been left for them. The only problem was to prepare that message under Joe's eye, and Ken thought he knew how that could be done.

He didn't dare risk a glance at Sandy. But he did move his right arm cautiously out from his body until it nudged Sandy's elbow lightly. That was the sole warning he could give of the campaign he was about to undertake. He could only hope that Sandy would follow his lead, however surprised he might be.

Ken took a deep breath and cleared his throat. He thought he probably looked frightened, but he knew that a show of bravery at this moment wouldn't suit his purpose.

"I want to ask you something," he said abruptly, leaning forward to look directly into the face of the man with the gun.

Joe didn't reply immediately. It was as if he had to assure himself first that Tomen would approve of permitting Ken to speak. "Go ahead," he said finally. "But askin' me questions won't do you any good."

"I'm thinking about you, Joe. I'm thinking about trying to do you some good," Ken said earnestly.

"You! Do me some good! That's a laugh." Joe grinned widely.

"But I really think we can," Ken said. "If you'll tell us how much you're getting for-well, for your part in this-we can promise that you'll get more than that if you'll help us to get away."

Joe laughed outright. "You can, huh? I suppose you go around with a couple of million dollars each in your pockets."

Ken tried to look as if Joe's amusement hurt his pride. "Of course we don't have very much money with us," he said stiffly. "And I know you'll take that away from us, anyway, if you want to. But that's not the money I'm talking about. We could see to it that you got a thousand dollars. Couldn't we, Sandy?"

Sandy swallowed. "Sure, sure," he said. Ken knew Sandy was still completely baffled, but he also felt sure Sandy would do his part.

"A whole thousand dollars, huh? Well, well!" Joe laughed once more.

"That's right." Ken spoke more eagerly, as if he hoped to take advantage of Joe's momentary good nature. "You see, we work for one of the biggest news services in the world-Global News, it's called. And if you help us to get away from here, I'm pretty sure Global News would pay

you a thousand dollars."

"You think they would, huh? I shouldn't have thought you'd be worth a thousand cents, myself." This time Joe laughed heartily at his own humor.

"I can practically promise you they would," Ken said insistently. "We could write a note that you could take to them, and I'm sure you'd get the money. And besides, we could say in the note that you'd helped us, and then if anybody goes to jail for trying to hold us like this-well, you could show that note to the police too, and they'd know you didn't do us any harm. Will you let us write the note, Joe? Will you?"

Joe's grin died slowly, and he studied the boys through narrowed eyes. It was almost possible to see the mental process going on in his head-to see when and why he decided to say yes. It was clear that he hoped to prove to Tomen that nobody could outsmart him.

"Why, sure you can write the note," Joe said finally, with false good nature. "I guess I'd be real glad to have a valuable piece of paper like that, now I come to think it over. Sure-if you've got a piece of paper and a pencil, go right ahead and write it."

Ken was afraid the thudding of his heart was audible across the room. "There's a notebook and a pencil in my breast pocket," he said. "You won't fire that gun if I reach up to get them out, will you?"

Joe smiled tolerantly. "Go ahead. I know you two squirts don't carry guns."

Ken raised his hand with exaggerated slowness, and pulled out the notebook and pencil he had mentioned. "I'll hold them right in front of me," he assured Joe. "So you can see what I'm doing."

"That's right. You do that." Joe was growing more and more amused at Ken's fearful manner.

Carefully Ken riffled through the book, looking for the first of the blank pages toward the rear. When he reached them he picked up two pages, holding them tightly

between thumb and forefinger so that he seemed to have only one. When he had torn the pair out, with no protest from Joe, and put them down on top of the closed notebook, he let out a sigh of relief. The first part of his plan had worked. The harder part was still to be accomplished.

"Now let's see," he said seriously. "Exactly what should we say, Sandy?" He looked toward the redhead as he spoke. He had curled his left hand around the front of the notebook, partly concealing the paper lying on it, and as he spoke he was already writing on the upper sheet. He used very small letters, so that the motion of his pencil could not be detected, he hoped, across the room where Joe sat.

"Well . . ." Sandy hesitated. The faintest flicker of his eye told Ken that Sandy suddenly realized what he was doing.

Ken tried to shift the notebook slightly so that Sandy could read the beginning of the message he was printing. It said:

CAPTURED. BEING TAKEN TO CAVE NORTH FACE EL DIABLO

"We could say 'This is to certify,'" Sandy began, "'that the undersigned-'"

"No," Ken objected. "That's too long-winded. How about-" He too hesitated, biting his lip, aware that Joe was watching his and Sandy's struggles with an ill-concealed grin. Ken was quite sure Joe was unable to see the small movements of his pencil as he added a few more words to the upper sheet. WATCH CLINT TOMEN, they said. "I know!" Ken said suddenly. "How about 'Ken Holt and Sandy Allen guarantee that Joe-'" He broke off. "Joe what?" he asked the man with the gun. "We'll have to put your full name in here, you know, so you'll be sure to get the money."

"Smith," Joe said. He was finding it more and more difficult to keep his face straight. "Joe Smith's my name."

"Smith? I see." Ken pretended to accept the name without question. He had completed his message as Joe spoke. Its final words were NEED HELP-COME QUICK. Now he put his right hand over his left, and with the fingers of his hidden left hand he began to fold up the top sheet of notepaper. "Ken Holt and Sandy Allen guarantee that Joe Smith gave them invaluable assistance which saved their lives, and that he should be given one thousand dollars-"

He had folded the small sheet three times by then. Palming it in his left hand he bent over the second untouched paper. "I'd better start writing this down or we'll forget the way it goes," he murmured, and let his pencil move in strokes that Joe could easily distinguish, as he wrote out the words he had just recited.

Five minutes later Ken finished the statement which would, he insisted, be worth a thousand dollars to Joe Smith if or when it was presented to Global News in New York.

"Here it is." Ken held it forward.

Joe held up his hand alertly, to prevent Ken from rising to his feet. "Throw it over," he ordered.

Ken creased the sheet and tossed it. It fluttered to rest on the desk beside Joe's hand. Joe was grinning widely even before he picked it up.

"And you two are supposed to be smart!" Joe said, laughing aloud. "Why, you must be the dumbest pair in the world, if you thought I'd be caught by a crazy scrap of paper like this! Did you really think you could make a sucker out of me by promisn' me a measly thousand dollars you don't even have? Tomen and I'll be laughin' over this together for the next ten years!"

His secret message hidden in his clenched fist, Ken had to make an effort to look chagrined and defeated. "You mean-you mean you won't save us after all?" he asked.

Sandy helped out. "But that isn't fair!" he said loudly.

"'But that isn't fair!'" Joe mimicked the words gleefully.

He was still enjoying the joke when Tomen arrived some minutes later, and the moment the big man entered the room Joe handed over the note.

"Take a look at this," he said. "Can you imagine these kids tryin' to bribe me with a phony promise of a thousand bucks?" He waited while Tomen read the note, obviously expecting Tomen to applaud his skill and the loyalty which caused him to laugh off even the possibility of accepting a bribe in return for helping the boys to escape.

Tomen read the note quickly, and then tore it into small pieces with several swift gestures.

"Say!" Joe protested. "That's mine! I thought I'd save it, so the rest of the boys could have a laugh too."

"I've told you before not to try to think, Joe," Tomen said softly. He turned to the boys. "On your feet," he commanded. "We're takin' you for a ride in your own car, so we can leave it later in a good convenient place. Ill drive. You," he pointed to Ken, "will sit in front with me. Red will sit in back with Joe here. And remember-the first move either of you makes, or the first bit of noise, Red will get it from Joe's automatic. Is that clear?"

The boys didn't speak, but they both nodded. And Sandy meekly handed over the ignition key when Tomen demanded it.

Tomen started toward the door. "I'll go out first. Then you two will come along, and Joe'll bring up the rear. Just don't either of you forget he'll be right behind you."

As Tomen moved across the threshold, Joe said, "All right-get movin'." He gestured with his gun.

Sandy went ahead, passing in front of Ken and blocking him for a split second from Joe's sight.

That was all the time Ken needed. The palmed message dropped onto the bed and Ken walked away from it, deliberately moving close to Joe to make the man fall back slightly and face the door, so that his back was toward the bed where the note lay.

Joe closed the door with his free hand.

Ken bit his lip. If one of the men decided to return to the room for some reason, he would be certain to see the folded slip of paper.

"In here beside me," Tomen was telling him. "Here, Joe-let me hold the gun while you and the redhead get in. That's it." He handed the gun back to Joe, and turned the ignition key. The motor started. An instant later Tomen was guiding the red convertible down the driveway and onto the road. He turned south and headed for El Diablo.

Ken let out his breath in a long sigh. They had done all they could. Now they would just have to wait-and hope that Mort or Ramon found that note in time.

Tomen drove fast once they had passed through Gallows Cliff. It seemed to Ken they had been traveling for only a few minutes when the big man was turning off the east-west road toward the dark mass of El Diablo.

Tomen hadn't taken the trail used by the archaeological dig's vehicles. He drove straight across the unmarked desert floor in a more easterly direction. When he brought the convertible to a halt its bumper was almost touching the rocky base of the hill.

In the brief moment before the man turned off the headlights, the boys saw two other vehicles. One confirmed Sandy's earliest suspicion. It was the dig's station wagon that Parks always used. The other was a battered grocery truck. Ken recognized it as the vehicle that had passed them when they had started out earlier that day to inspect El Diablo from the hill opposite.

"Oh," he said, nodding.

"What's that?" Tomen snapped.

"I was just noticing the truck," Ken told him. "It was following us this afternoon, I suppose."

"Of course." Tomen let it go at that, as if the boys must be aware by now that he had had them watched for some time. "Come on," he ordered, getting out of the car. "Joe will be behind you as before."

For an instant Ken could not understand where they

were going. Then Tomen's flashlight illuminated a narrow path between a free-standing rock, twice as high as a man, and the hill behind it. And once they were behind the rock they saw it plainly—a crevice in the hill itself, a slitlike opening barely large enough to take Tomen's bulky figure.

Joe had his flashlight turned on now too. Ken, walking between Tomen and Sandy, stepped through the opening into a narrow corridor that widened slightly after the first ten feet. Loose fragments of stone underfoot made the walking hazardous, and the rock walls were cool and clammy to the touch.

The passage took a sharp turn to the left. Twenty paces later it turned just as sharply to the right.

It was after the second turn that Ken began to hear voices somewhere in the distance. A moment later, after still a third bend, he saw light up ahead.

Tomen stepped abruptly to one side as the passage widened out into a circular chamber some fifty feet across, with a domed stone roof perhaps fifteen feet above the floor and only faintly visible in the white light of a single hissing gasoline lantern.

Three men stood in a group, some thirty feet off to the right. One of them was Gus Parks. He came forward immediately.

Parks stared in amazement at the boys, and then turned a furious face toward Tomen. "You gone crazy, Clint?" he demanded. "Bringin' them here- you must be out of your mind! And that one too- who is he, anyway?" As he asked the question Parks turned and pointed to a dark figure that seemed to be seated on the stone floor near the two men with whom he had been talking a moment before.

Tomen turned his flashlight in the direction of Parks' finger. The boys' eyes followed its gleam.

The man on the ground raised his head. Even at a distance Ken could see the streak of blood marking one side of the face from temple to jaw. But the face was still

recognizable.

The figure on the floor, slumped against the rock wall, was Mort Phillips.

CHAPTER XII

EVIL GENIUS

KEN stifled his instinctive movement toward the injured figure of the FBI man. A swift glance at Sandy, almost beside him now, warned the redhead too to show no sign that he recognized Mort Phillips. Until they discovered why and how Mort happened to be in the cave, it seemed wisest not to offer Tomen the information that they knew him.

Mort himself had apparently reached the same conclusion. He seemed to be looking directly at them, as his glance traveled over the group that had just entered the cavern, but there was no recognition in his gaze.

Parks had taken a step closer to Tomen. His big fists were clenched in rage. "Well? Are you goin' to answer me?" he demanded. "What are you tryin' to do? Give the whole show away?"

"I brought these two here for a very good reason," Tomen said coldly, indicating Ken and Sandy with a jerk of his head. "I don't know who he is," he went on, glancing toward Mort, "but I assume-

"We brought him here, Clint," one of the men standing beside Mort broke in eagerly. "And believe me, we had a good reason too. We-

Tomen silenced him with a raised hand. "I'll hear from you and McGuire later, Hendricks," he said. "Right now I want to say to you, Gus, that you've got a mighty big mouth, and that you're goin' to get in trouble some day,

shootin' it off."

"I'm in trouble already," Parks said furiously, "on account of your dumbness. I keep this cave a secret for five years. Then six months after I let you start usin' it, half a dozen people are trampin' in and out, includin' a couple of newspapermen!"

"Shut up, Gus." There was a quality of deadly menace in Tomen's quiet voice. "I'm the boss here, and don't you ever forget it."

"The boss!" Parks laughed shortly. "I'd like to know how much of a boss you'd be if I'd never told you about this cave!"

"We've never said you weren't a valuable member of our team, Gus. Have we, boys?" Tomen's eyes swept from Joe, still holding his automatic on Ken and Sandy, across the cavern to the two men he'd already referred to as Hendricks and McGuire.

"That's right, Clint," Hendricks said quickly, and Joe and McGuire echoed the words.

"You've made your contribution, Gus, and you've been paid well for it," Tomen went on. "But I'm be-ginnin' to think you've outlived your usefulness. After all, we know about the cave now, you see—we've gotten what we wanted out of you—"

"Why, you dirty double-crossin'-!" Parks' enraged shout broke in on Tomen as his right arm swept forward and his big fist landed flush on Tomen's jaw. "I'll show you—"

Tomen staggered backward, but he didn't go down. Even before he'd recovered his balance his right hand had flashed into his coat pocket and emerged holding a stubby revolver. "You'll show me nothin', Gus," he rasped. "I'm loyal to men who are loyal to me. I'd have kept you on in the organization, and continued to give you your cut, as long as you knew your place. But you don't know it any more, Gus. I'm not kickin' you out—you've kicked yourself out. You're finished, Gus! Do you understand? You're

through!" The revolver, lifted high enough to aim right between Gus's eyes, emphasized the last words.

Gus opened his mouth but no words came out. His big fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. "Have it your way, Clint," he said finally. "If that's the way you want it, it's O.K. with me." Then his mouth tightened in a grin and he added, "I'll just be interested to see how you manage to get the guns and ammo out here when I'm not haulin' 'em in for you in fake Brewster Museum packing cases."

Ken caught his breath at the words. So that was how the stuff had reached Gallows Cliff!

"You mustn't worry about us, Gus," Tomen was saying coldly. "Now that Rogers is in with us, he'll go right on holdin' the fake cases at the truck depot until we call for 'em-just the way he's held 'em for you. And the Tomen grocery truck can do the haulin' job just as well as you've been doin' it in that station wagon."

"So that's it! You've had it all figured out for quite some time, haven't you?" Parks demanded.

The venom in the man's voice gave new strength to a hope that had risen in Ken some moments before- the hope that Parks' quarrel with Tomen might somehow be used to the advantage of Mort and themselves. For a split second Ken's eyes met the eyes in the blood-streaked face ten yards away, and he knew that Mort Phillips had had the same idea. But the gun in Tomen's hand made the contest so unequal that at the moment it promised little. And if Parks was driven defeated from the cave, at gun point, he would take with him what might be their only chance of escape.

Parks was still talking. Ken forced himself to listen to the man's words.

". . . probably planned like this from the beginnin', wasn't it, Tomen? Why I ever let you talk me out of givin' up my own smugglin' deal I'll never-

"That cheap little operation!" Tomen scoffed. "Spare machine parts, cigarettes-

"It was a good business," Parks snapped. He seemed to be recovering some of his heedless rage, in spite of Tomen's gun. "And I'd have it yet-and be makin' myself a comfortable livin', with no worries- if it wasn't for you. But you're not goin' to last much longer yourself, Cunt. I can tell you that. Now that you've been fatheaded enough to bring those two reporters in here."

"Don't worry about them, Gus," Joe said, deliberately shining his flashlight on the gun he held pointed at Ken and Sandy. "Did you think they were goin' to be writin' a story about what goes on here?" He laughed. "No, sir. Clint's goin' to take care of them all right"

"Take care of them!" Parks repeated. He looked past the revolver into Tomen's face. "What does that mean, Clint? You can't be that crazy!" he went on, when Tomen didn't answer immediately. "Why, I let up on 'em fast, as soon as you told me they were legitimate reporters. And now you-! Don't you realize this whole areall be thick with State Police, private detectives-"

"It won't be your problem, Gus. Remember?" Tomen said softly. "You're leavin'. Now! And you're goin' to keep your mouth shut. Because if you start talkin', we're goin' to talk too. And we'll all tell the same story-about how you're the real brains of this operation, and responsible for everything that goes on. Everthing, Gus. Don't that make you proud, the way we plan to give you credit for the whole shebang? Why, we're goin' to say that *you're* the boss, Gus!" Tomen laughed quietly at what he obviously thought was a neat twist of his own earlier claim.

Once more Gus Parks' jaw dropped open in wordless defeat. Ken's heart sank.

"And now you can go, Gus. Quietly, if you understand me." Tomen deliberately turned away from him. "I'd like to hear from you now, Hendricks. Who's that you've got over there?" The big man's gaze fastened on the figure of Mort Phillips.

"He's a friend of those two reporters, Clint," Hendricks

told him.

"A friend of theirs?" Tomen's eyes went quickly from Mort to the boys, standing stiff and expressionless under the shock of Hendricks' announcement, and back to Mort again. "Why didn't you say so?" Tomen demanded.

"We haven't had a chance, Clint," Hendricks said. "We were trailin' those two, like you told us, and it was when they stopped to make a phone call that we managed to get in touch with you-to tell you the landslide had missed 'em, and that they'd somehow spotted that broken cotter pin before they got into their car. The reason we didn't follow 'em clear back to the motel was-"

"Never mind that," Tomen cut him short. "Tell me who that man is and where you found him."

"But that's what I'm doin', Clint!"

"Well, get on with it."

"Well, after those two made their call, they headed west. The road was empty and we had to be pretty careful. We got right off the road and ran along parallel to 'em, in the desert. And by usin' our glasses we were able to see that they went to this fellow's tent."

"He's a painter, Clint. One of them artists," McGuire put in.

"Oh." Tomen nodded briefly. "Yes, I know who he is then."

Ken bit his lip. Did Tomen really know? Or was it true that Mort had been seized only because Sandy and himself had led Tomen's men to the tent? Desperately, now, Ken wished they had never gone near the place.

"They only stayed in the tent a couple of minutes," Hendricks went on, "and when they left it looked as if they were headin' back to town. So we went to the tent ourselves. There was nobody there, but we stayed to look around-and while we were still goin' over this guy's stuff he comes in. He talks like we're thieves or somethin', so McGuire lays a gun barrel across his jaw to quiet him down. Then we try to make him tell us about those two

comin' to see him, and he says he don't know 'em. We figure he's lyin', so we bring along. I hope we did all right, Clint."

Tomen's big round face was a blank mask. "I hope you did too," he said. "I won't know until-"

"Why, boss," Parks spoke up tauntingly, "you mean to say there's somethin' you don't know?"

Tomen swung on him. "You still here, Gus? I thought I told you to go."

"That's right. You did, Tomen." Mort Phillips' quiet voice startled everyone in the dimly lighted cave. "But I wonder if you realize that your warning to Mr. Parks not to talk about what goes on here won't do you any good-or him either, for that matter."

Tomen was the first to recover himself. But his blustering speech lacked his usual icy authority. "You'll speak when you're spoken to, and not before."

"Very well." But Mort accompanied the words with a grin that gave his blood-streaked face a bold and utterly fearless look.

Into the little silence that followed, Parks said softly, "It's a good thing you know all about him, isn't it, Clint? You do, don't you? You said you did."

"Certainly I know who he is," Tomen said. "His name's Phillips. He came here-"

"That's right," Mort said. "Phillips of the FBI."

"Of the FBI?" Joe croaked, and his gun hand went so limp that Ken knew he and Sandy could have jumped their guard without endangering themselves-if Tomen himself hadn't had his revolver out, and if Hendricks hadn't had his own gun still trained on Mort.

"What do you mean-the FBI?" Tomen demanded.

"The initials," Mort told him, still grinning, "stand for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. And I can assure you I know a good deal more about you than you seem to know about me. I know, for example, that you're washed up, that-"

"It don't matter what you know!" Tomen snarled. "You're never goin' to get out of here to-"

"But I'm not the only one who knows these things, Tomen," Mort interrupted him calmly. "There are about twenty men from the Bureau at work right in this area now. And the information we've already got on file in Tucson-about Gus Parks, for example-"

"But I didn't have anythin' to do with bringin' you here!" Gus broke in, his voice high with panic. "And I didn't touch them, either!" he rushed on, pointing at the boys. "You can't have a thing on me except-" He stopped short and turned blindly toward the cavern entrance. "I'm gettin' out of here!"

"Gus!" Tomen's gun spoke once and dust spurted up from the floor an inch from Parks' fleeing feet. "One more step and it'll be your last."

Parks halted.

"That's right," Tomen said. "Now turn around and come back here." And when Parks started to move back toward Tomen, at a slow, dragging shuffle, his face blank and slack-jawed, Tomen went on. "Move faster. Get on over there alongside that FBI character."

"What for?" Parks mumbled. "What-?"

"You'll find out what for," Tomen told him.

"What are you goin' to do, Clint?" Hendricks asked nervously. He kept his gun pointed at Mort, but his eyes shifted rapidly from the detective to Tomen, and then back to the detective again. "If he's really an FBI man, maybe-"

"I'll take care of things, Hendricks," Tomen said coldly. "You and McGuire-and you too, Joe-just do as you're told and we'll be all right. We're goin' to take Gus back into the organization again. He's too valuable a man for us to let him leave now."

"But I don't get this, Clint," Joe said. "First you throw Gus out-and he had it comin' to him, too, tryin' to tell you where to get off, the way he was doin'. And now-I don't get it."

Ken's body was rigid. Joe, he thought, must be the only man in the room who hadn't already realized what was in Tomen's mind.

Mort understood. Ken could read Mort's knowledge in his eyes, narrowed to slits-eyes behind which Ken was sure Mort's brain was racing. But what could Mort-or Sandy and himself-do in the face of five enemies, at least three of whom were armed?

Even Hendricks and McGuire understood what Tomen was planning. The tense grins on their faces said that they had taken in the meaning of Tomen's last words.

"Get out of here, Parks!" Mort said suddenly. "Get out fast-and bring help! It's your only chance to stay alive!"

Parks understood then too. Still only halfway across the wide cavern, he suddenly stopped, his head jerking up. Pivoting on one heel, with remarkable speed for so big a man, he suddenly leaped at Tomen with cocked fists.

Tomen took one quick step to the right and his gun arm raised high. Parks stumbled as he tried to swerve toward the big man. Tomen's snub gun landed behind Parks' left ear.

Parks' knees buckled. He went down slowly, landing with a final heavy thud on the stone floor. His right leg jerked once and then he lay motionless.

"All right," Tomen said. "Now let's get movin'." He turned toward Joe. "I'll watch these two," he said, eyeing Ken and Sandy, "while you help McGuire drag Gus over there." He gestured toward a spot just beside Mort Phillips.

Joe swallowed uneasily. "But I still don't get what's goin' on, Clint," he said. "First you throw Gus out, and then you say he's too valuable for us to let him go. And now-" He moistened his lips as he looked down at Gus, as if he were seeing an unpleasant vision of his own future in Parks' prone body.

McGuire, a stocky black-haired man, was crossing the cavern with springy steps. "Come on, stupid," he told Joe. "Give me a hand here, like Clint says, and I'll be explainin'

it to you. The FBI fellow is goin' to be a hero, see? He's goin' to capture this here dangerous smuggler named Gus Parks. Only while he's capturin' him, Gus is goin' to have a gun, see? And they'll shoot it out. And when it's over Gus and the hero won't either one of 'em be doin' any more talkin'. It'll all work out just like in a play. The FBI will get its man. But none of us-Clint or Hendricks or you or I-are goin' to be that man. D'you see now? Clint Tomen's a genius, Joe. I'm tellin' you, he's a genius."

CHAPTER XIII

DESPERATE MEASURE

SUPPORTING the dead weight of Gus Parks between them, Joe and McGuire dragged the unconscious man across the stone chamber to Mort's side.

"And now you get over there too," Tomen ordered. "And sit down."

For a moment neither Ken nor Sandy realized that the man was speaking to them. Utterly dazed by the suddenness with which their one hope of escape had exploded under Tomen's savage blow alongside of Parks' ear, they stared at the man uncomprehendingly.

"Over there," Tomen repeated impatiently. "Walk single file, the redhead first."

For an instant Ken was tempted to leap at the big man-to invite Tomen's bullet in the hope that Sandy and Mort could take advantage of the diversion to make good their own escape. But Sandy, Ken knew, would not leave the cavern without him even if he could. And Mort, who would leave both the boys behind if he felt his work demanded it, was injured- they didn't know how badly. It was no use. The gesture Ken longed to make-to leap, hands outstretched, for Tomen's throat-might well result not only in his own death but in that of Sandy and Mort as well.

A moment later, as Ken lowered himself to the floor between Gus Parks' outstretched figure and Mort, his eyes

met first Mort's and then Sandy's. And somehow he knew, without words, that each of them had also considered the possibility of the kind of lunge Ken had contemplated, and that each of them, like himself, had known it would be a useless gesture.

But they wouldn't wait much longer, Ken promised himself grimly. They'd try something-somehow-

Tomen's voice cut through the futile circling of his thoughts.

"All right, Joe," the man was saying. "They're close enough together now so one gun can handle all three of them, if necessary. That's your job. The rest of us have to get busy unloadin' those crates from Parks' car. Don't forget, now-use that gun if they so much as move. And stand well away from 'em, so they can't jump you."

"We could tie 'em up, Clint," Joe offered.

"No, we couldn't," Tomen told him shortly. "We don't want any rope marks on 'em. Stop arguin' and do as you're told."

"Sure. Sure, Clint. You don't have to worry about me."

As the other three men in the cavern headed in a group for the entrance, Joe squared his shoulders and stared fixedly at the row of three figures seated before him-Mort in the middle, Ken and Sandy on either side. "You heard what the boss said," he warned. "So don't try anythin' funny, see?"

The hissing of the gasoline lantern was the only sound in the chamber as Joe's voice died away into silence.

Ken felt as if his heart were shriveling slowly in his chest. Now he told himself, for the first time, that their situation was utterly hopeless. Even if they could somehow manage to outwit Joe-in itself not a complete impossibility-they would make their way out of the cave only to fall into the hands of Tomen and his other two men.

One long, slow minute dragged by and then another.

Beside Ken, Gus Parks' figure heaved suddenly, sat

half upright, and then slumped to the floor again. "Water," Parks muttered.

Joe's eyes flicked toward the man for a moment and then away.

"He asked for some water," Mort Phillips said quietly. "Isn't there any water in the cave?"

"A whole riverful of it," Joe said, grinning. "But he won't get any of it from me. I'm stayin' right here and not movin'."

The final words of Joe's speech were lost on Ken. He sat frozen, the phrase, *a whole riverful*, echoing and re-echoing in his head.

The last missing piece in the mystery of the smuggled arms had fallen into place. An underground river led out of the cave in which they sat. Almost certainly it came to the surface somewhere in Mexico. And along that river-almost certainly-floated the arms and ammunition that had once been stolen from a pier more than two thousand miles away in New York.

Ken glanced at Mort, wondering if he too had caught the significance of Joe's phrase. Mort was staring straight ahead, but something about the rigidity of his shoulders told Ken that Mort too now guessed at what must be the route the arms followed across the border into Mexico.

Just then Tomen reappeared, bent under the weight of a big wooden packing case held on his back by a broad canvas strap. Behind him staggered McGuire and Hendricks, carrying between them a second and even larger packing case. The men put their burdens down close to the hissing gasoline lantern, a scant fifteen feet from where Mort and the boys sat. At that distance it was easy, even in the flickering light, to make out the words stenciled on the cases. They read BREWSTER NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, GALLOWS CLIFF EXPEDITION.

Tomen straightened up. "O.K., Joe?" he asked immediately.

"Fine, Clint," Joe assured him. "No trouble at all."

"All right. Get these open," Tomen ordered, gesturing toward the cases. Quickly McGuire and Hendricks set to work, using the hammer and chisel McGuire pulled out of his pocket. The squealing of drawn nails and the splitting of boards reverberated in the chamber.

Now? Ken thought tensely. It seemed to him that under cover of the noise they ought to be able to improve their situation in some way. But even as the thought occurred to him, he realized that Tomen had his gun out again and was eyeing Joe's charges as if he didn't quite trust Joe to handle them himself.

The hammering stopped as suddenly as it had begun. McGuire reached into an opened case and lifted out an object perhaps three feet square and two feet high. It was completely white, with a surface that glittered oddly in the lantern light.

Ken stared. A moment later he recognized the puzzling stuff. It was the light aerated synthetic foam used in Me preservers and for the packaging of delicate machinery.

"Bring the light, Hendricks," Tomen ordered, and the three men started toward the wall of the chamber opposite the entrance, McGuire first with the white object, Hendricks after him with the lantern he stooped to pick up, Tomen in the rear, his gun still in his hand.

The light gleamed sharply on the white object McGuire carried, and Ken could see that it consisted of two halves held together by thin flat bands of some white metal.

Tomen glanced briefly straight at Mort Phillips as he passed. "Seventy-five pounds of thirty-caliber ammunition," he said, his voice smug with triumph, his free hand gesturing toward the white package. "On its way to Mexico, where it'll be put aboard a coastal fishin' vessel for another little trip."

Ken's eyes, like Mort's and Sandy's, were glued to the package as McGuire stopped suddenly. Only then did they see what they had been unable to see earlier, while the lantern occupied a position closer to the cave entrance. At

McGuire's feet-twenty feet from where the boys and Mort sat, and directly opposite the cavern entrance-the rock floor dropped off sharply into black water.

Cold and ominous in the flickering light, the surface of the underground river stretched smoothly to the wall of the cavern. Not a ripple marred its surface.

"All right," Tomen said quietly.

McGuire bent and let the white package down into the stream. For a moment Ken thought it was going to sink. But it remained barely afloat, only an inch or two projecting above the dark water as it seemed to rest motionless where it had been put.

Then it began to move slowly away, tugged by the invisible current toward the far wall of the cavern. When it bumped gently against that wall it rested there too for a moment, and then it sank silently out of sight.

Once more, as Tomen and the two men walked back across the cave toward the packing crates, Tomen glanced at Mort Phillips. Once more he couldn't resist gloating to the FBI man. "Sometime tomorrow," he said, "that package will be fished out of a small stream ten miles below the border. Saves the customs duties, you see." He chuckled. "And gives us very low shippin' costs-which increases the percentage of profit."

As Tomen went on toward the still-unpacked crates, Joe grinned in echo of Tomen's pride. "Like McGuire says, Clint's a genius. Guess you boys wish now you'd never tried to tangle with him, huh?"

Nobody answered him. But at that moment there came a breathy sound from Gus Parks, and Ken, beside the man, could feel him struggling to sit up. Instinctively Ken turned toward him to help.

"Keep your hands to yourself!" Joe commanded. "Clint!" He raised his voice. "Gus is comin' to."

Tomen's reply was impatient. "So what? Can't you handle four at once?"

"Oh, sure, sure," Joe said. "Hey, you!" he went on

urgently, to Ken. "I told you to keep away from him."

Ken heard the warning only muzzily. A new idea had just sprung into his mind with the sudden recollection that Parks had discovered the cave in which they were imprisoned. Perhaps, Ken was thinking wildly, Parks knew that it had another entrance other than the one by which they had come in-or, at least, a place in which they might hide themselves in temporary safety if they could just manage for one moment to elude the pointed muzzle of Joe's gun.

"Hey, you!" Joe repeated menacingly.

"He'll fall over if I let go of him," Ken said. As he spoke he gripped Parks' shoulders hard, in what he hoped Parks would take as a gesture of encouragement and a plea for co-operation. It was the kind of gesture Sandy would have understood in an instant. Ken had no way of knowing whether Parks would understand it at all-or whether he was even conscious enough to realize what was happening.

Parks himself supplied the answer to Ken's second question almost immediately.

"What's the matter, Joe?" he mumbled. The words were blurred but perfectly audible. "You get afraid of me as soon as I can sit up?"

"Afraid of you? That's a laugh. You could stand on your head for all I care," Joe assured him contemptuously. "Go ahead," he told Ken. "Hold him up if you want to. It makes no difference to me."

Deliberately Ken settled Parks more comfortably against himself. "Sorry I can't get you some water," he said distinctly. "But these men seem to think you don't have any rights to that underground river any more-not even the right to a drink." Parks' body stiffened. Ken clamped a hand more firmly on the man's shoulder.

"Say! That's a laugh too!" Joe grinned to show he appreciated the joke. "Old Gus discovers a whole river-and now he can't even have a drink."

Ken hadn't heard the cruel speech, but it had served his purpose. While Joe spoke, Ken had moved his own mouth to within an inch of Parks' ear and breathed, "Tell us about the river! It's our only chance!"

At that moment Tomen, Hendricks, and McGuire walked past again, lowered another container into the dark water, and then returned to the still partially unpacked crates, carrying the lantern with them as before.

When McGuire's hammer once more filled the cavern with its noise, Parks began to talk. His phrases were disjointed. At first Ken couldn't be sure the man knew what he was saying. But after a moment he realized that Parks had understood his demand, and was doing his best to give Ken the information he had asked for.

"Sure. I discovered the river. Just me-no one else. Only man who ever explored it too-far as a man could go." Parks' eyes were shut. His voice was the monotonous murmur of a man who talks in his sleep.

Ken looked away from him, as if Parks' words had no interest for him. Joe, he saw, was grinning his foolish grin. Apparently he thought Parks had lapsed again into semiconsciousness, and was mumbling nonsense.

"Scared me plenty the first time," Parks went on. "Dove down under that wall-thought I might never come up. Didn't know-might not get out again. But I came up. 'Nother cavern there-plenty of air-and only about-" His voice thinned to a thread. "Only about twenty feet away."

Ken could have shouted aloud.

He wanted to repeat Parks' words at the top of his voice, to be sure that Mort and Sandy had heard them too. What Parks had said meant they had a chance after all.

Mort raised a hand to his head just then, as if to touch the wound on the side of his face, and Ken saw that for an instant Mort's fingers sketched the gesture of a salute. "Thanks!" the hand was saying mutely.

And Ken could have shouted aloud again, because he knew that Mort understood too.

Parks had told them all they needed to know. It was up to them now to take advantage of what they had learned.

Suddenly Parks slumped sideways. Ken tried to hold him, but the man muttered, "No-want to sleep," and Ken let him slide down to the stone floor.

Ken looked down at him. In the flickering light of the gasoline lantern he saw Parks' right eyelid flutter briefly in a wink. Ken knew what that wink meant. Parks was telling them to make the attempt without him-that he was too badly injured to fight.

"Poor old Gus!" Joe was saying, shaking his head in mock sympathy. "Always claimed to be so tough. But he can't take it, I guess."

Ken took a deep breath, and set himself grimly to consider their situation from every angle.

The water, and the safety it represented, was at least twenty feet from where they sat. Joe, armed and only too ready to use his gun, stood between it and them. He was their most immediate danger.

Hendricks and McGuire were busy opening the crates, their hands occupied with tools, their attention on their job. But Tomen, although he kept a careful eye on their progress, still had his gun in his hand and frequently cast sharp glances toward Joe and his four charges.

The question was whether Mort, Sandy, and Ken himself could get out of sight, under water, before they were stopped in their tracks by the guns Joe and Tomen held. Once out of sight, of course-

Ken's train of thought broke abruptly. He had suddenly realized that he and his friends did not necessarily have to be under water to be out of their captors' sight. They could become invisible without moving an inch-if the single gasoline lantern that illumined the cavern could be shattered by a blow.

Shattering the lantern might ensure them no more than a few seconds of darkness. But a few seconds should

be enough.

Ken leaned forward, trying to see past Mort to Sandy. The stone fragments scattered on the floor near his own feet offered him a weapon, but he didn't trust his own aim. There would be opportunity for only one throw, and therefore it had to be Sandy who made it. Sandy's aim, Ken knew, was deadly.

But even Sandy couldn't be sure of hitting the lantern where it stood at the moment. It was too far away. The attempt would have to be made when the light was closer—when Tomen carried it near them on the way to the water.

Mort seemed to sense Ken's desire to communicate silently with Sandy. The detective appeared to straighten, as if to ease cramped muscles, but he drew back far enough to give Ken a clear view of his friend.

Ken cleared his throat. Sandy glanced at him.

Ken's fingers closed around a stone near his own right shoe. At the same time he looked first into Sandy's eyes, then quickly down at the stone he held, and finally at the lantern. Sandy's barely perceptible nod coincided with a raspy order from their guard.

"Drop that stone!"

Ken looked up at him. "Who? Me?" He glanced down at the stone, as if unaware until that moment that his fingers had briefly held it. Just then McGuire picked up another of the white containers.

"You take one too, Hendricks," Tomen said. "I'll carry the lantern."

The procession of three men was about to cross the cavern once again, McGuire in the lead, Hendricks following, and Tomen bringing up the rear. Ken felt sure Tomen would be quick on the trigger, but with the lantern in his other hand he might be at least momentarily occupied with the job of angling its light most effectively. And he would be passing within ten feet of the boys as he moved toward the water.

There would never be a better chance. Sandy would

almost certainly not miss even a moving target at that range.

"Did I pick that stone up?" Ken was asking Joe, in a voice of exaggerated innocence. "Why, I didn't even realize-"

"Don't try to kid me!" Joe told him. "I wasn't born yesterday, you know."

His eyes were fastened directly on Ken. The men were almost halfway across the floor-almost in line with the place where the boys sat on either side of Mort. Tomen's finger was on his gun trigger, but he was raising the lantern higher, to spread its light, and looking up at it.

Ken tried desperately to think of something more to say, to hold Joe's attention on himself for the next two or three crucial seconds.

Mort was quicker. "What makes you think he was trying to kid you, Joe? Nobody tries to kid a man who's holding a gun."

"They'd better not!" Joe said. He pulled himself more stiffly erect and started to turn his head, to swivel it toward Sandy in the back-and-forth pattern he had so conscientiously followed until then.

Ken's heart stopped. At this very second, he felt sure, Sandy's hand was about to loose a stone at the lantern.

"Joe!" Ken said. "I was trying to fool you! And I did!"

He saw Joe's head jerk. He could see Joe's finger tighten on his trigger.

Ken threw himself flat.

The gun barked.

At the same instant glass shattered and a blanket of darkness dropped over everything.

CHAPTER XIV

SNARED

KEN moved then, with the speed of a tight spring uncoiling. Half rolling, half leaping, he flung himself in the direction of the water. He felt his foot strike Parks' prone figure, felt the flailing impact of an arm he thought was Mort's.

Again the roar of a gun filled the chamber with earsplitting thunder and an eerie explosion of light.

Ken's left foot felt nothingness beneath it a split second later. He fell forward. And then the shock of cold water struck him, and the icy underground river was closing over his head. The loud shouts in the cavern were silenced as abruptly as if a radio program had been switched off.

Four times Ken's arms moved forward, sideways, and rearward, in four powerful breast strokes that he calculated would carry him under water to the wall on the far side of the cavern. When his fingers touched it he knew he had to surface, to get his bearings before he submerged once more in search of the exit through which the white containers had disappeared, one by one.

Flinging his head back to clear the water from his eyes, he opened them and shouted at the same instant, "Sandy! Mort!"

Mort's face was within six inches of his own. Against a background of confused noise Mort said, "Down-quick! Lights!"

For one terrifying split second Ken found himself staring into the blinding brilliance of a flashlight. Then, as he dove, he caught a brief glimpse of Sandy's red head sinking out of sight to his right, and Mort's face, mouth open to gulp air, as it too tilted toward the water.

The last thing Ken heard was Tomen's bellow. "Get them!"

After that Ken knew only the sensations of touch. Something-a foot perhaps-struck his arm. Dull pain went through his shoulder as it grazed the roof of the completely water-filled tunnel.

One stroke-two-three-four-five. Ken counted as he drove himself forward, the pressure pounding against his ears.

Twenty feet underwater to the next cavern, Gus Parks had said.

If Parks had been speaking the truth, Ken thought, completing his seventh stroke, there should be air somewhere above him now-precious, life-giving air.

He fought back the impulse to surge upward with all his strength. If he had miscalculated-or if Parks had not been accurate or truthful in what he said- he might give himself a crippling blow by banging his head against the roof of the tunnel.

Arms upstretched, hands probing for solid stone, he let himself rise slowly.

He was barely conscious of chill air on his upflung hands when his head too emerged above the surface.

Gasping for breath, he thought for a moment he had imagined the voice that said, "Ken!"

Then he recognized the voice as Sandy's, and he moved his arm in a wide half circle. "Sandy! Where are you?" Sandy, he knew, was a far less powerful swimmer than himself. Sandy might be in trouble.

Ken's hand struck yielding flesh. "Sandy?" he gasped.

"No-it's me, Mort. But Sandy's here-on my right."

Their whispered voices, bouncing back from walls

invisible in the darkness, gave Ken the sensation of being lost in a wilderness peopled by ghosts. But a moment later reality returned, as he felt his hands close on two firm shoulders-Sandy's on one side, Mort's on the other. In a tight intertwined group, their three figures, all treading water, formed an island of security.

"Now what?" Ken managed.

At that instant the water in which they floated abruptly became luminous. Dazzled and blinking, they all gazed down at their own legs suddenly visible in what appeared to be liquefied pale-blue glass, shot through with streaks of paler light.

Ken stared into the oddly illuminated faces of his friends. Then he stared down again into the water.

The glow which illumined it, he saw, came from the mouth of the tunnel from which they had just emerged. Its pulsing, shifting quality told him that it was created by flashlights striking at a long angle down into the water on the other side of the thick rock wall beneath which they had had to find their way to this inner cavern. The shape of the tunnel itself was now clearly outlined in the light. He could see the end of the path by which they had escaped their captors.

Sandy spoke aloud the thought that came into Ken's mind at the same moment.

"Suppose they come after us-with guns?"

Now that they themselves knew how short was the distance that separated them from Tomen and his men, it seemed impossible that Tomen too did not realize how easily he might recapture his escaped captives.

"Maybe there's another way out of here," Ken said finally.

"Let's look for it fast-while we've still got that light to guide us," Mort said.

The luminosity of the water reflected off the ceiling of the cavern in tiny shimmering glints. The rock roof was perhaps fifteen feet above the surface of the water. The

cavern itself was narrow-apparently no more than a roofed channel for the underground stream. Rock walls seemed to rise straight up from the water on either side. Near the end opposite the opening through which they had entered, the light in the water faded away. If the river flowed under rock again at that point, they were unable to see the level at which it left the small cavern in which they found themselves.

They explored that spot first, probing with their feet for an opening. None revealed itself.

"The stream must leave somehow, at this end," Ken said, "but-" He didn't have to finish the sentence. None of them was ready to plunge into a channel of uncertain depth and uncertain length, at least not until they had explored every possibility of aid offered by the cavern itself.

In single file, then, they made their way along both side walls of the cavern, feeling underwater for possible exits of the stream, feeling the walls above the water level for a ledge that would give them at least a resting place out of the icy water.

Ken was the first to find the shelf-like outcropping that was wide enough for them to stand on-even wider for part of its length.

"Here, Sandy," he said quickly, aware that his friend's breathing had become more rapid in the past few minutes. "You can crawl out on this ledge." Instinctively, in that eerie cavern, they still talked in whispers.

Ken gave the big redhead a boost that lifted him half out of the water. Sandy found handholds and hauled himself the rest of the way onto the shelf.

"We might as well get out too, Mort," Ken was saying, when Sandy's sudden warning silenced him.

"Shh!" Sandy breathed. "I hear voices."

"Voices?" Ken looked questioningly at Mort's pale face, close beside his own at water level, and then he looked upward.

Sandy was on his feet, head lifted as he strained his

ears to listen. "They come from some place above my head," Sandy whispered. "I'm going to investigate."

He turned away from them, hands raised upward in gestures of exploration, as Ken climbed onto the ledge and Mort prepared to follow.

"Look!" Sandy's single amazed word drew their eyes upward. He had moved a few feet along the ledge, to a place where it widened abruptly as if into a tiny alcove. He was standing in that alcove, and his face was curiously lit by a single shaft of light striking it from just below his chin—a light that seemed to come directly out of the wall of the cavern itself.

"There's a hole here," Sandy whispered hoarsely. "A long hole—like a little tunnel. It goes right back to the other cave. I can hear voices through it!"

For the space of two pulse beats no one moved. Then Ken reached back toward Mort. "Need help?"

"Thanks." Mort took the hand Ken offered. "I've got a bad ankle. Our friends Hendricks and McGuire were a little rough."

Ken blinked. "You didn't tell us that! And they hit you on the head too!"

"The head's not bad—and the ankle will be all right," Mort assured him. "It just means I can't be quite as fast as I'd like."

Ken could see Mort's face twist with pain as he spoke, but he knew the FBI man wanted no sympathy—would not have mentioned his injury at all except that it was a factor they might have to take into consideration.

"Go on—get up there and take a look at what Sandy's found," Mort added, when he was sitting on the ledge, legs still dangling in the water.

Ken didn't hesitate. A moment later he was close beside Sandy, peering into a miniature tunnel not more than a foot in diameter—a tunnel created by some inexplicable action of water on rock through the centuries. It angled steeply downward into the outer chamber, where

Ken assumed its opening must be hidden among the rough outcroppings of the cavern walls.

Peering through the opening, Ken thought, was like peering down a rifle barrel. He could see nothing at the far end but a patch of rock, fitfully lighted in the shifting beams of what Ken supposed were flashlights. But he had no difficulty in hearing clearly the words that came through the tunnel at that moment.

"It was your job to guard them, Joe," Tomen was saying, in a voice of cold anger. "So you're goin' through there and bring 'em back."

"But I'm tellin' you, Clint, I can't!" Joe's voice was high and frightened. "I can't swim!"

"And I'm tellin' you, Clint, there's no use chasin' 'em." Parks' voice had regained so much of its usual strength that Ken scarcely recognized it for an instant. "They'll be gone before anybody could reach them. If they're smart enough to have got out of here, they'll be smart enough to find the way out of the next cavern."

"You're lyin', Gus!" Tomen snapped. "There's no way out of the next cavern-except back through this one."

"You can think so-if you want to," Gus Parks told him. "I suppose you know everythin', since you're the boss."

"There can't be another way out of there, or you'd have told me about it long ago," Tomen said.

"Would I?" The two words were an outright taunt.

"If he's tellin' the truth, Clint," Hendricks said worriedly, "we might have police pourin' in on us here pretty soon."

"He's lyin'!" Tomen said flatly.

"Suckers!" Gus Parks said.

"Joe! Use your gun on Gus if he opens his big mouth again," Tomen commanded.

"Sure, Clint. Sure."

After that no one spoke in the outer cavern for some seconds.

"Keep listening," Ken breathed into Sandy's ear. "I'll let

Mort know what's going on." And he paused long enough to explain to Sandy about Mort's ankle.

When Ken finished his report, Mort said, "Parks is bluffing, I think. I don't believe there's a way out of here, and I think he knows there's not. In my opinion he's just trying to draw Tomen and his men out of the way, so we can get back by the same route we came."

"But it's not working," Ken pointed out. "Tomen keeps saying he doesn't believe Parks."

"Maybe he doesn't," Mort agreed. "But maybe some of his men do. And if they get jittery enough they might revolt and clear out themselves."

But Mort didn't sound convincing, even to himself, and a moment later he struck an angry fist into the palm of his hand. "If only I'd been able to leave some sort of message for Ramon! He'll go to my tent sometime tonight, when he gets back from a trip across the border. When he finds I'm not there-and when he sees that drawing you left there for me- he'll know something's wrong. But he won't know where to start looking for us."

Recollection swept over Ken in a wave that made him speechless for a moment. "Yes, he will!" he managed finally, gulping out the words. "If he goes to our room he will! We left a note!"

"What!" Mort stared at him with dawning hope in his eyes. "Tell me-quick!"

Ken repeated the words on the slip of paper he'd left, and explained how he'd managed to write it under Joe's very nose.

When he'd finished speaking, Mort's fingers closed in a congratulatory squeeze on Ken's arm. "Then we're going to be all right," Mort said quietly. "Ramon'll find us-trust him. So all we've got to do is sit tight and wait." He grinned for the first time. "Sandy may get pretty hungry," he said. "But even Sandy will be able to hold out."

At that moment Sandy came slithering down from his perch. "Listen!" he said intently.

"You listen," Ken told him cheerfully, and reminded Sandy of the note they had left behind when they were led out of their room at the point of Joe's gun.

Sandy brushed the words aside. "That's what I want to tell you about. Tomen keeps insisting Parks is lying about there being another way out of here. He says he'll just keep a guard on outside there until we give up and come out. And he's getting ready to send Hendricks or McGuire or somebody to the motor court, to clear out all our stuff-so he can say we've left, if anybody asks for us."

"All our stuff!" Ken repeated the words blankly. "But that means they might find the note!"

"That's right," Sandy agreed grimly. "It means Ramon won't have any chance of finding us. He doesn't know about this cave. He doesn't know-"

"Wait!" Ken clamped one hand on Sandy's wrist and the other on Mort's. "Why can't we help convince Tomen that there's another way out of here? He could hear us-through the same hole we hear him. Couldn't he? So why don't we talk loudly, up there by the hole, about leaving here? With Parks to back us up-"

"It might work," Mort said quietly. "It's certainly worth a try."

"Anything's worth a try," Sandy said. "Let's go."

"Wait a minute," Mort said. "Let's figure out exactly what you're going to say first."

Three minutes later Ken and Sandy were both crowded close up against the end of the tiny barrel-like tunnel. They waited a moment until a voice- Hendricks', they thought it was-stopped talking. They hadn't been able to distinguish the words, but they thought it was Tomen who answered with a single sharp syllable.

Then Ken put his mouth over the hole and said into it, distinctly, "All right-we're all set then."

Faintly, through the hole, they could hear Tomen's sharp command. "Quiet, everybody. I heard a voice from-from somewhere."

"Repeat it," Sandy breathed against Ken's ear.

"All right," Ken said again, as clearly as before. "We're all set." He went directly on with the next words in their planned conversation. "I'll go first, Mort second, and Sandy third. O.K.?"

"O.K.!" Sandy said into the hole.

"When we get to the fork," Ken went on, "I'll take the left branch. Mort, you're taking the center one, aren't you? And, Sandy, you're taking the one to the right."

"That's the idea," Sandy said.

They waited a moment then, and into the silent cavern at the other end of the little tunnel Parks' voice spoke. "I thought you were so sure there was no other way out of that cavern, Tomen."

"Shut up!" Tomen snapped. "Listen!"

"Of course we'll all be coming out at different places," Sandy went on. "But we'll all head straight for the highway and the nearest telephone booth. You'll want to get your FBI men back here to this cave immediately, Mort. And we'd better report to the customs authorities right away too."

"That's right," Ken said in a firm tone of agreement. "Well," he went on, after a brief pause, "I guess we're ready then. Let's go-and good luck."

"Good luck," Sandy repeated. And then he said the words again, through clenched teeth, in the hope that their hearers would take him for Mort Phillips. "Good luck, boys."

After that they stood rigid, heads touching as they both leaned close to the opening in the rock, breath suspended so that they would not miss a word of what was said below.

It was McGuire's voice that first broke the ten-second silence.

"Parks wasn't lyin', Clint!" He almost shouted. "He was right all along!"

"Quiet!" Tomen said furiously. "Let me think!"

"But this is no time for thinkin', Clint!" Joe said, his voice high with fright. "This is a time to be makin' tracks. Let's get across the border fast and-"

"That's my idea too," Hendricks broke in. "We'll have at least an hour's start if we take off right now. They've got to swim-or walk or somethin'-to get out of there. And then they've got to phone. So if we clear out immediately, and start for Mexico, we could be across the border before anybody comes lookin' for us."

"Shut up!" Tomen ordered. "Don't you realize they can hear us-if we can hear them? Do you want them to know exactly where to send the cops after us? O.K. So you want to go to Mexico. But let's use our heads and plan it. First, McGuire, you'll tie up Parks-gag him too. We'll leave him right here. Then . . ."

The voice dropped to an unintelligible mumble.

Ken and Sandy remained at their listening post for the next several minutes, but they could make out no other words of the conversation at the far end of the tunnel, and they could hear nothing else except vague shuffling sounds as of movement back and forth over the cavern floor.

Then, abruptly, they found themselves in utter darkness. The faint glow coming through the small tunnel had died without warning. The luminousness of the water below had given way to blackness.

"What happened?" Mort's whisper floated up from below.

Carefully, feeling their way in the dark, Ken and Sandy rejoined Mort at the water's edge.

"They've gone!" Sandy reported jubilantly. "At first Tomen held out. But his men turned against him -just as you said they would, Mort-and now they've all taken off for Mexico. Except Parks," he added. "They've left him tied up out there."

"So all we have to do," Ken said, "is swim back the way we came. Will you be able to make it, Mort?"

"I'll manage," the detective promised. "But you two swim to either side of me when we get through the tunnel. That way I'll be able to head straight for the nearest landing place-and that's probably about all I'll be good for. You ready?"

"More than ready," Sandy assured him. "I'll swim to my left on the other side, Ken. And don't worry about me. I made it through this way without any trouble."

"I'll wait for you at the tunnel entrance," Mort said, and let himself slide down into the stream.

The water felt colder than it had earlier, but once they were completely immersed it wasn't too bad.

When they were all treading water at the end of the narrow chamber, Mort said, "All right. The tunnel is right below us. I can feel it with my feet. Give me three seconds. Then you come after me, Sandy. Ken will follow you in another three seconds."

It was an eerie feeling to be the last one to leave the dark, echoing cavern. Ken kept his eyes open as he plunged down in a powerful surge, but he could see nothing but blackness.

He had just taken his sixth stroke when the water all around him was flooded with light. For an instant his stroking faltered, and then he drove himself forward and upward in a sweep of power. His head broke the surface and he shook the water out of his eyes as his open mouth sucked in air. What he saw then twisted his stomach into a knot of fear.

Tomen was standing at the very edge of the stream, a flashlight in one hand, his gun in the other, both pointed directly down at Mort's head, a few feet away.

"Welcome back, G-man," Tomen said triumphantly. "That was a pretty cute trick-cute enough to scare my stupid partners into runnin' off to Mexico. But it didn't fool me, you notice. So get up out of there now, and let's go ahead with the rest of the program. My program, that is."

CHAPTER XV

BATTLE IN THE WATER

KEN'S reactions were completely automatic. There was no time to think even if he had wanted to. There was no time to plan. There was time only for action.

His hands reached out for the edge of the stone bank, clutching for the leverage that would let him come out of the water in a single lunge. Hazily, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a blur of motion that told him Sandy was already heaving himself up onto the stone floor of the cave.

Ken's left hand clamped itself firmly on solid rock. His right palm slid over a loose stone and dropped back into the water. Ken found that the orange-sized object was still gripped in his hand. Instantly his right arm flashed back and then forward, and the missile shot through the air to thud solidly against Tomen's thick neck.

The man gave a single choked cry of rage and pain and turned his gun savagely from Mort toward Ken.

Ken had one terrifying look into the downward-angled muzzle of the revolver before Sandy's two hundred pounds struck Tomen from behind.

Tomen's back arched like a bow under the impact. His arms flew upward, aiming both gun and flashlight toward the roof. When the convulsive contraction of his finger squeezed the trigger, the explosion was deafening in the underground chamber. The bullet bounced harmlessly against the stone ceiling, but Tomen didn't go down under

Sandy's onslaught. He managed to twist halfway around, to bring his gun up over Sandy's head. Ken and Mort watched, helpless, as the gun flashed downward.

The blow missed. With an incredibly quick movement Sandy had ducked, tucking his head beneath Tomen's left arm. The gun landed on Sandy's shoulder and back. Before Tomen could bring his weapon up again, Sandy drove his shoulder into the man's stomach, hurling him rearward toward the water.

Tomen fought desperately for a foothold, struggling to lean his big body forward instead of backward. Then he dropped gun and flashlight and flung his arms around Sandy in the powerful death grip of a boa constrictor.

The interlocked figures struck the water with a tremendous splash and sank immediately out of sight. Tomen's last shout ended in a choked gurgle as the water closed over his head.

The man's flashlight was still rolling, still sending erratic bouncing beams of light across the cave, when Ken dove. He felt something strike him just below his left ear, grabbed at it, and drove himself upward. When he broke the surface he found himself clutching Tomen's foot. Immediately it broke out of his grasp with the violent kicking motion of a terrified man—a man who couldn't swim.

Ken dove again, found one of Tomen's arms, and tried to loosen its grip around Sandy's thrashing body. The arm was hard as iron, strong as steel. Ken gave up and shifted his grip to Tomen's thick thatch of gray hair, pulling at it with all his strength. The man's head remained rigidly buried in the angle of Sandy's neck and shoulder.

Ken was desperate for air by then. He had to let go and surface. But as he pushed himself upward, he grabbed at Sandy's head and pulled the two figures up with him. The instant the redhead and the gray one surfaced, Ken took one gasping breath and then clutched at Tomen's hair again, trying to jerk him backward, away from a limp and

gasping Sandy.

"Let go!" It was Mort, beside him in the water, trying to pull Ken's hands from their frantic grip.

Ken hadn't yet understood him when Mort thrust hard against his shoulder, driving him away from the interlocked pair. As Ken was thrust aside he saw Sandy and Tomen begin to sink below the surface once more.

Then Ken saw Mort's hand, gleaming with wetness in the beam of light that angled flatly across the water from the flashlight now lying still on the cave floor. The hand raised, flat as a board, and chopped down. The side of the palm struck the side of Tomen's neck.

For an instant the big man stiffened. Then he collapsed completely, his arms slid off Sandy's shoulders. His gray head sank slowly beneath the surface.

"Take care of Sandy!" Mort ordered, and dove at the spot where Tomen had gone down.

A single long stroke took Ken to Sandy's side. He supported the sagging figure with one hand, while he pushed for the bank with the other. "Hang on just for a second," Ken said, pressing Sandy's limp hands over the stone that rimmed the water. Then he hauled himself out, reached down, and caught the hands just as they slid back over the edge.

A moment later Sandy was sitting on the cavern floor, head bent forward, coughing and sputtering water.

Mort, Ken saw then, was swimming slowly toward the bank, towing behind him a near-unconscious Tomen.

"Can you hold him until I climb out?" Mort gasped, thrusting Tomen toward the bank.

"Sure." Ken bent, grabbed the front of the big man's shirt, and held him with his head out of the water. Looking down at the sagging cheeks, the gasping fishlike mouth, it seemed impossible that this man had been a dangerous enemy only seconds before.

Ken felt a hand on his shoulder. Mort was beside him. "Ready?"

Together they heaved. The big body came up out of the water like a wet sack of meal. They stretched Tomen out on the rock floor, a few feet back from the water.

Ken stepped back from him a little, wondering if Tomen would need artificial respiration. Neither Sandy nor Mort nor himself, he thought, was in a very good condition to supply it. Then he remembered the last words they had heard Tomen speak, when they had believed he was getting ready to take off for Mexico with the others, and he looked around.

Parks was there-bound and gagged near the cavern wall, his back to the water. Maybe Parks could work on Tomen, Ken was thinking vaguely, when suddenly the sound of voices coming faintly from the entrance tunnel made him spin around.

Sandy's head jerked toward the sound. Mort hobbled swiftly to the flashlight, picked it up, and swept it around the cave. "Get the gun!" he whispered.

Ken saw it first, grabbed it up, and handed it to the FBI man.

"Untie Parks," Mort murmured, as he took it. "We may need his help again."

As Ken moved to obey him he saw, out of the corner of his eye, that Sandy had crawled to Tomen's figure and brought one of the man's beefy arms up behind his back in a hammer lock.

"Good for you," Mort commented. "We don't-"

The rest of his sentence was lost in a shout from the entrance tunnel.

"Bandido! Dog! Pig!" The voice they all knew so well echoed noisily in the stone passageway. "If one hair of the heads of my friends is harmed, I will personally convey you to the Mexican desert and feed you to the red ants! I, Ramon Arturo Fernandez Gonzalez, guarantee this!"

Ken, Sandy, and Mort were all grinning as the curious procession appeared at the cavern entrance a moment later. Even Parks looked grimly amused.

Ramon's right hand gripped Joe's collar and propelled him forward. Behind him, guarding Hendricks and McGuire, were two uniformed border patrolmen and two other men in plain clothes.

"Chief Detective Gonzalez, I presume?" Mort said formally. "We didn't expect you quite so soon."

Ramon stood perfectly still for a moment, looking at each one of them in turn, as if to assure himself that they were safe and unharmed. Then he too grinned. "Myself," he said, "I must confess I had no intention of coming to this place tonight. It was only when-" He interrupted himself and stood briefly silent, eyeing Ken and Sandy and shaking his head admiringly. "Sometime," he said, "you must tell me how you found the time to leave a note in your room while you were busy being kidnaped."

Four hours later Ken and Sandy lay stretched out on their beds at the Saguaro Motor Court. They were uncertain as to who would be on hand to accept payment for their room, when they left the next day, since Clint Tomen was already behind bars.

"The town is full of Tomens, remember," Ken muttered sleepily. "Somebody's sure to turn up. I don't think it's one of the things we have to worry about."

"Is there anything else we have to worry about?" Sandy asked. His voice was as sleepy as Ken's. "We've sent off my negatives-and I wouldn't be surprised if Granger thought they were the best things I've ever done, in spite of the light being so bad there in the cave. You've phoned him your story. You've talked to your father. We've told Mort and Ramon everything we know-including everything we could think of that would make things easier for Parks."

Ken roused himself. "You didn't charge him with knocking you out here in the room that night, did you-when he came to take the roll of film out of your camera?"

Sandy shook his head. "I couldn't. We probably wouldn't be alive now if it weren't for him. Besides" -he

grinned-"we took all the pictures over again, anyway."

"Good." Ken slumped back again. "Then I suppose there's really nothing else we can do. We might as well get undressed and get some sleep."

But neither of them moved. Tired as they were, they still felt keyed up after the events of the long and memorable day.

At the brisk knock on the door they both sat upright in a single movement. Mort Phillips and Ramon Gonzalez were inside the room before they could get to their feet.

Mort, limping heavily, was carrying a huge paper bag. Ramon carried two, equally large.

"I remembered," the Mexican said, grinning, "that you two, especially Sandy, have a liking for-what do you call it?-die snack. So we have brought a little snack."

Mort dumped his bag on Ken's bed and dropped wearily into the desk chair that Joe had occupied earlier that evening. "Little!" he repeated scornfully. "You call eight containers of coffee, eight steak sandwiches, four orders of apple pie, and four containers of ice cream a *little* snack?"

"You really shouldn't have done it," Sandy assured them with mock earnestness. "We simply couldn't eat all that. You must share one of the cups of coffee between you."

Mort stared at him for a moment, almost convinced that Sandy meant what he said-that Sandy was fully prepared to eat his way through the contents of all three bags, with no help but Ken's. Then Mort too grinned. "You win," he said. "I'm going to struggle along on one steak sandwich myself, for the pleasure of watching you eat three."

Sandy had begun to open the bags. "Funny," he murmured. "A minute ago I thought I was too tired to stand up. But while there's life there's appetite. Mmm." He sniffed. "Smells good."

Over his first mouthful Ken asked, "Have you heard

anything from New York about the men who supplied the guns and stuff to Tomen?"

Mort nodded. "The New York police have already picked up one of the men Tomen mentioned-the mobster who was in on that pier hijacking. They'll get the others. We're not worried about that."

"And I have a report from Mexico," Ramon told them. "Twelve of Tomen's confederates there have been arrested so far, including the farmer who owns the land at the place where the underground river comes out, the man who caught the packages when they appeared."

"It seems strange," Ken said, "that Dr. Talbott never suspected a thing."

"Why should he have been suspicious?" Mort asked reasonably. "He never saw those fake cases that Parks delivered to the cave. Parks was good at his job-and Talbott is an enthusiastic scientist who was glad to have Parks take on all the work of keeping the dig supplied with equipment and workers."

Mort took a long swallow of coffee. "I've talked to my superior," he went on. "Told him it was you two who first had the idea that something was going on at El Diablo. I think he probably got in touch with Granger, your Global News friend, and added a few facts to the story you phoned in."

"About us, you mean?" Sandy demanded.

Mort nodded. "You see, I should have suspected El Diablo myself. And I couldn't let my boss think I was responsible for a nice piece of reasoning that had actually never occurred to me."

"But you know it was just luck on our part," Ken said. "We just happened to stumble into something. And we certainly don't feel like taking any credit after practically handing you over to Tomen by going to your tent when we were being followed."

Mort grinned. "I have decided to forget that," he said. "It was a party I wouldn't have wanted to miss. Just seeing

Ramon's face when he walked in on us there-that would have been worth two bad ankles and at least three blows on the head."

"You must not object if we give you credit," Ramon said quietly. "It is our governments that insist upon it. I also insist upon it," he added with a sudden twinkle. "Now I do not have to look forward to directing traffic once more. I have talked to my superior also, and he tells me he has changed his mind about my demotion."

"I should think he would!" Ken said. "Doesn't he realize what a swell detective you are?"

"Sandwiches!" Ramon's explosive denunciation accompanied a scornful gesture, as he held his steak sandwich at arm's length and regarded it with disgust. "Now in my country we eat food of more flavor-more imagination!"

Ken and Sandy both seized gratefully on the new subject. To cover their embarrassment over the sober words of thanks the two detectives had just spoken, they spoke more loudly than usual.

"You're absolutely right," Ken said.

"*Absolutamente*," Sandy said, feeling sure he had put the accent on the wrong syllable, but knowing Ramon wouldn't mind. "Why, when I think of those enchiladas we had down there, and the tacos, and-"

"But then perhaps you would enjoy a visit of a few days in Mexico now?" Ramon was sitting up very straight, eyeing them eagerly.

"Sure we would. In fact before we ran into you-" Ken broke off, not wanting the two men to think that they had sacrificed a pleasure jaunt in order to remain in Gallows Cliff.

"So you did plan to go to Mexico, eh?" Ramon looked pleased. "I wondered if you could find yourself so close to my country and not want to visit it again. You still have a few days before you must start for San Francisco?"

"I guess so. My father doesn't expect us there until the

twentieth," Ken said.

"Good! Then you will be the guests of my government, for a few days, no? We will fly to Mexico, and you will be flown back here to pick up your car. We will thus have time to visit certain excellent restaurants that I know well. We will catch fish in a certain stream, and the chef of one of those restaurants will cook them for us. You would like this, no?"

"We would like this-yes," Sandy said, grinning.

"It sounds great, Ramon," Ken said.

"I've got a few days leave coming to me," Mort Phillips mused, staring up at the ceiling. "And I like enchiladas too, you know."

"Amigo!" Ramon beamed at him. "My friend! You are all my friends," he added quietly. "But I think you know this, so it is not something of which we must speak. Instead we will speak of our trip together, no? Of the enchiladas and the tacos, and the fish we shall catch . . ."

The trip to Mexico proved to be all that Ramon had promised it would be. But as Ken and Sandy winged their way across northern Mexico the next morning, they had no inkling of the kind of fishing expedition they would soon be involved in-an expedition in which they often felt as if they themselves were the fish caught hopelessly on an evil barb. They couldn't know, as they grinned cheerfully at each other and at their two companions, that they would soon be desperately involved in an adventure that would become known as *The Clue of the Silver Scorpion*.