

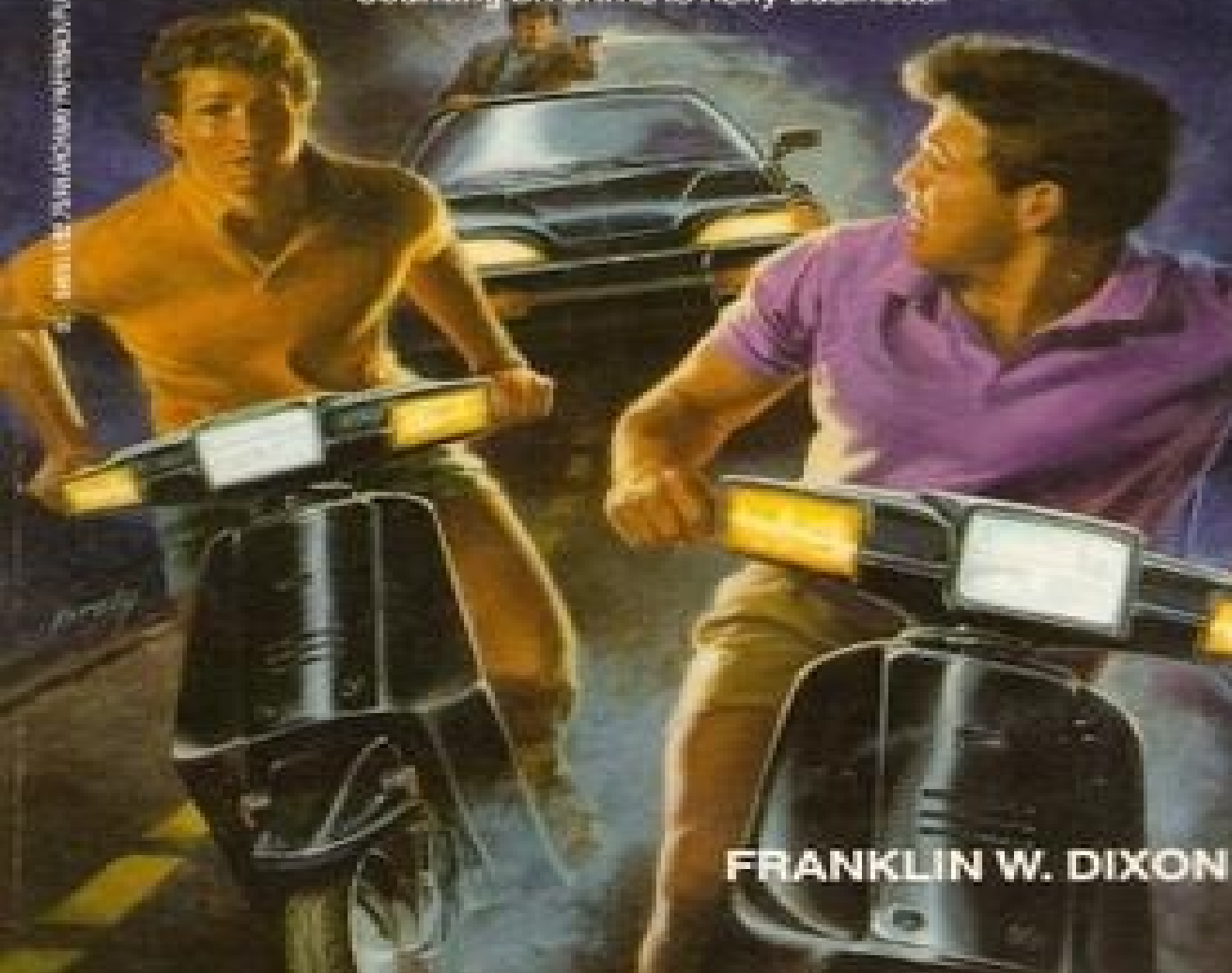
THE HARDY BOYS

NO. 17

CASEFILES™

THE NUMBER FILE

Counting on crime is risky business.



FRANKLIN W. DIXON

Illustration by [unreadable]

The Number File

By

Franklin W. Dixon

Chapter 1

"JUST ONE SHOT LEFT," Joe Hardy muttered. "I'd better make it count." His blue eyes narrowed in concentration as he sighted along the barrel of his gun. He squeezed the trigger, then his hand whitened on the gun stock. Joe knew he'd missed.

"You're through!" Laughter came from behind Joe, and he turned. His brother, Frank, stood there, grinning in triumph, his teeth bright against his tanned face. "That was your last clay pigeon — I win."

Frank patted Joe's blond hair, which the early-morning sea breeze had tangled into curls. "Nice aim, Joe," he teased.

Joe shrugged. "My aim was better yesterday—when I shot Kruger."

"There's a big difference between shooting a camera and shooting a gun," Frank answered.

Joe silently agreed and cracked open his shotgun to eject the spent shell. The Hardys had recently found themselves on both sides of guns—being fired at and firing when desperate.

Joe was remembering their last case, Line of Fire. They'd both been targets, trying to keep a snaphooting friend from becoming a murderer.

"Well, this case is a lot easier than that last one," Frank said. "Just observe, take pictures, and enjoy the sun."

Frank and Joe were on the island of Bermuda, in a small town called Somerset Village. They were doing a surveillance job for their famous detective father, Fenton Hardy. For the past few days they'd been staying with an ex-colleague of their dad's, Alfred Montague, and his daughter, Alicia.

Montague, as he preferred to be called, had been a detective with Scotland Yard, and had helped Fenton Hardy with several international cases. He was only too glad to give his friend's sons a base. And he'd been giving the boys some pointers on trap-shooting during their few free hours.

"Want to try another round?" Joe suggested.

Frank glanced at his watch. "We should be heading for Kruger's villa."

"Why? We haven't gotten anything yet," Joe said. "Nothing but a bunch of pictures of Kruger and his house and a tan. If our source was right, in just two days a batch of counterfeit credit cards is going to the U.S. from here. And we have nothing new to tell Dad."

Frank ran a hand through his brown hair. "So you think we'll accomplish more blasting clay pigeons?"

"Well, I'll feel better, beating you."

Frank drew himself up to his full six-one and grinned at his slightly shorter, slightly younger brother Joe who was seventeen. "You're on." Then he turned to wave to the trap house across the carefully tended lawn as Joe reloaded. Montague was inside, running the machinery that would catapult the clay pigeons into the air.

Joe stood seemingly at ease, the shotgun loose in his hands. Frank knew he was tenser than he looked. Joe loved action—and the past few days he'd seen little of it.

Loading his gun, Frank said, "Do you want to take every other shot?" Joe nodded as Frank continued, "At least the stakeout's easy. We sit on a rock under a cedar tree and take pictures of a house by the ocean — "

Joe yelled, "Pull!" The clay pigeon soared into the sky. Joe's gun rose smoothly to his shoulder, barked, and the clay disk shattered into hundreds of pieces.

"Three shipments with fifteen thousand credit cards already left here," Frank mumbled to himself. "And we only find out about it by accident."

"What did you say?" Joe asked.

"I was just thinking about our source—that counterfeiter who got caught and talked."

"Yeah, if he hadn't supposedly been one of Kruger's couriers, we wouldn't know anything." He smiled, then yelled, "Pull!"

Caught off-guard, Frank jerked up his gun—and missed. He gave Joe a dirty look and added, "Supposedly?"

Joe shrugged. "Well, there's no proof, remember. They only found this guy with the cards made from stolen plates. He rolled over and named Kruger. But we don't have proof that Kruger's involved. I mean, who's going to believe that sleaze? Pull!"

Another clay pigeon soared. Joe blasted it and went right on talking. "All we know is that he said there was going to be another shipment on Friday."

"The whole racket better be stopped soon. Dad said they cost the real cardholders more than two million bucks so far," Frank added. "They're pretty smart—buying stuff with the

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fake cards, and then selling it at half price. They only use the duplicates for a couple of days, so there's almost no chance of them being caught. We've got to stop it at this end—before the cards get to the U.S."

Joe yelled "Pull!" again, but this time Frank was ready and hit the clay pigeon.

"And that means checking Kruger out, even if there's no hard evidence against him. So it looks like

we're stuck sitting outside his walls, taking pictures," Joe said.

"Speaking of pictures," Frank said, "is that Alicia coming out of the darkroom with the latest batch?"

Always willing to look at Montague's dark-haired daughter, Joe turned toward the sliding glass doors in the white bungalow behind them.

No one was there.

Frank took advantage of his distraction to yell, "Pull!"

Joe whipped around, but his shot missed. Now it was his turn to glare at his brother.

Frank smiled, saying, "Now we're even." He signaled Montague that they were through.

Montague walked toward them from the trap house, carrying a manila envelope. Tall and slender, he looked fifteen years younger than his almost-seventy years. The only sign of age was his soft voice which sounded worn down after years of relentless interrogations of British villains. "Alicia left these pictures for you before she went to town," he said, handing them to Joe. "I thought you'd like to see them before you go."

The shots were all too familiar to Joe — trees, the top of Kruger's fence, his villa with the beach below. "Low tide," he said, fishing one picture out. "High tide," he added in a singsong. He fished out another. "And the big cheese himself." Joe held up a picture of Kruger. "This guy looks mean."

Joe's telephoto lens had caught Kruger's square face head-on. A pair of steel gray bushy eyebrows pushed their way up onto the man's forehead over a pair of calculating eyes. Kruger looked like a man who'd just been struck by a wonderfully sinister idea. He was smiling slightly, deep creases showing up in his leathery tanned face. Kruger wore a turtleneck with a sport jacket over it.

Montague grunted as he looked at the picture. "Hasn't changed much since he was captured back in forty-three. Still looks like a U-boat captain."

He slid out a photo from under the pile in Joe's hand. "I had Alicia make a copy of this from an old file." It was another picture of Kruger, showing a much younger man. His hair was dark instead of gray, and his face was lean. But his cold blue eyes looked just as evil.

"We'd just caught his sub sneaking into a quiet cove here in Bermuda," Montague explained. "I never knew what made him decide to settle here after the war."

"The climate's better than Hamburg's," Frank said.

"Maybe the legal climate," Montague said. "The local chaps say your man always made frequent trips to Miami and New York. I suspect Kruger's had his fingers in lots of pies."

"Better get moving," Joe said. "Who knows? Maybe we'll get lucky today."

Montague tossed them a set of car keys. "Take the old bus, but be careful — those Yank tourists are always driving on the wrong side of the road."

Laughing, the Hardys drove off, heading for Kruger's villa. The ride was beautiful along the North Shore Road to Kruger's place. After they passed the dirt road leading down to the house and the beach they pulled the old red MG off the road into the cover of some trees. They yanked the convertible top up and locked it in place.

Hanging a pair of binoculars around his neck, Joe made his way up the rocky hill that overlooked the walled estate. "Guess I'll find my favorite rock," he said, feeling sorry for himself. He was already peering through his glasses when Frank joined him, carrying the camera with the 400mm lens.

They had a great view of the rambling, whitewashed building and the bay below them. There were no boats at the small dock, but a red-and-white buoy peacefully bobbed up and down about one hundred feet out in the calm blue-green water.

Joe was slowly scanning the house. and paused at the bay window of Kruger's living room. He refocused the glasses. Then his shoulders stiffened.

"See something?" Frank asked.

"Yeah." Joe's voice was grim. "A guy— with binoculars looking at me." He turned to Frank. "We've had it for today, bro'. Should I wave bye-bye?"

"Let's just get out of here—fast!"

They tore down the rocky hill to the underbrush, where Montague's little "bus" was hidden. In minutes they were on their way back to Somerset Village.

"What do we do now?" Joe asked, rolling up his window. A stiff breeze had just come up. "If they're on to us — "

"There's nothing we can do," Frank finished for him. He pulled onto one of the many bridges that connected Bermuda's six islands. "It's so peaceful here," he said, looking at the water shimmering all around him. There were no guard rails to block his view.

Near the end of the bridge a powerful black BMW started to pass them on the right. Dark-tinted windows on the sleek performance car made it impossible to see if the driver was male or female— or if there were any passengers.

The BMW held its position, creeping toward the MG. "Why doesn't this idiot pass?" Joe grumbled.

"He's not passing!" Frank shouted suddenly. "He's trying to drive us off — "

Before Frank could hit the brakes, four thousand pounds of BMW slammed into the side of the little MG.

"Watch out!" Joe shouted. Frank fought to stay on the bridge, but it was a lost battle. The little car spun out of control, jumping over the small curb. It rammed into the rocky slope on the left that the bridge had led up to.

The brothers were tossed forward as the car plummeted backward down the steep incline. Finally the

splash-landed in thirty feet of water! As they drifted down into the crystal clear depths, Frank shook his head. Sunk, he thought. We're really and truly sunk.

Chapter 2

"I CAN'T GET the door open!" Joe rammed a forearm against the metal.

"Don't touch the door or windows!" Frank's voice was firm, but calm. Water was coming under the doors and floorboards.

Joe shook his head, groaning. "I think I must have bumped my head." He still looked a bit dazed as he took a deep breath, trying to relax himself. He hung on tightly as the little MG sank toward the soft ocean bottom and finally settled, in slow motion, onto the driver's side. Frank was moving quickly now, unbuckling both seat belts and checking out the position of the car.

"There's too much pressure from the water on your door," Frank said rapidly. "Breathe deeply and stay cool. You have to open your window just a crack."

It was hard for Joe to remain calm as he turned the car into a perfect watery grave. But he knew he had to do it. Because of the way the car had settled into the mud, Joe's window was facing toward the surface.

The water streamed in, and in less than a minute the two brothers were submerged up to their shoulders. They both pressed their faces into the narrowing air pocket above them.

"Okay," Frank said. "Take a deep breath — now open your door and then just swim toward the surface."

"Can't," Joe said, leaning into the door. "The frame's bent."

"Then open the window. Easy — don't panic. I'll be right beh — "

Frank's last words were drowned out by the water which had now filled the entire MG. Joe started cranking the handle. Slowly the window started to open more. One inch, two inches, three — His cranking came to a stop. The window was jammed!

Frank knew immediately that something had gone wrong. He leaned over his brother and began pushing down on the window. Joe continued to press against the handle. Finally the window gave way.

Joe squeezed through the tiny opening diagonally. Frank started to follow, hunching his shoulders as they scraped against the twisted frame. But a sharp piece of metal snagged a shoulder seam of his shirt. He was caught — his shoulders jammed against the two sides of the window and his arms pinned at his sides.

With his knees slightly bent, Frank planted his feet against the door on the other side of the car. Then he straightened his legs and inched his body forward. His shirt sleeve ripped as he continued forcing

his way through the opening. He knew he could make it, but would he make it in time? He was almost out of oxygen.

Joe was already halfway to the surface, his head throbbing and his heart beating rapidly. He glanced behind him, expecting to see Frank swim up to him.

He instantly reversed direction when he did see Frank. Joe reached the MG in two seconds and forced his hands under Frank's arms. Then, bracing himself against the side of the car, he pushed off with his legs.

Frank was free! His face was a frightening deep red. As he kicked feebly, he prayed his natural buoyancy would carry him to the surface.

Joe pushed off against the car and made like a torpedo for the surface. He, too, was out of air.

"Uaahhhh!" The sound of the two brothers gasping for air seemed unnaturally loud after the deadly underwater silence. They bobbed up and down in the water as they gulped in great lungfuls of air.

They were only a short distance from the embankment and slowly dog-paddled to it. They pulled themselves up onto the rocky slope and collapsed onto their backs.

Their chests were still heaving when Joe spoke. "That was a close one." He coughed, then grinned. "Good thing that car didn't have electric windows!"

Frank finally smiled. "You're all right?"

"Yeah. You okay?"

"Uh - huh—but this was my favorite shirt." Frank looked at the shredded left sleeve, then grinned at Joe.

"Well, now it can be your favorite short-sleeved shirt," Joe offered, and the two brothers laughed.

"Whooaahh," Joe groaned as he tried to stand up, but only toppled back onto the rocks. "I guess I'm a little dizzy from punching the windshield of the car with my head. I wonder how many of my brilliant little gray cells died from the battering and the lack of oxygen?"

"I'd worry more about the damage your head did to the window," Frank said.

"My only worry right now is getting home and getting dry." The bump on the head had done nothing affect Joe's impatience.

"What's your hurry?" Frank asked. "It's a long climb up and then a long walk back to the village. I think we should just take it easy for a few minutes."

Frank glanced up to the road to see if anyone was observing them. Joe lay back with his eyes closed, still taking long, deep breaths and occasionally rubbing the spot on his forehead, which was working its way into a lump. Frank broke the long silence.

"No one around. Nobody would have even known we went off the bridge."

"Except whoever was in the BMW," Joe reminded him.

"Did you get a look at anyone?" Frank asked.

"Couldn't see a thing through those windows, and he, she, or it was already alongside us by the time I looked. I don't even know if the car followed us from Kruger's. But somebody tried to kill us, and that means we are getting close to something." Joe frowned.

After the brothers had rested, they climbed up over the rocks to the road.

"We can either walk back to those stores we passed and phone Montague, or try to hitch," Frank said.

Joe stuck out his thumb and started walking backward toward Somerset. "I don't think I want to tell Montague on the phone that the car he's loved since 1968 is thirty feet underwater."

"But I don't know who's going to pick us up looking like this," said Frank. "We look so disheveled."

"'Disheveled'?" Joe repeated. "I think you were underwater too long — you sound like Aunt Gertrude!"

As Joe stretched out his thumb again, a pickup truck bounced by and came to a wobbly stop.

"Need a lift?" the long-faced, unshaven man behind the wheel shouted.

The brothers ran toward the truck and started to jump in the back.

"You can ride up front," the driver insisted. "A little water isn't going to hurt this baby. What happened to you guys?"

"You know how it goes," Joe answered, hoping his vague reply would do.

The lean man nodded his head and grinned. He dropped the brothers at the driveway that led up to Montague's villa.

As they were closing the door to the house, Montague called down from upstairs. "That you, boys?"

Joe cleared his throat, which suddenly had become dry. "Uh, yes, we're back."

"I didn't hear the car pull up. I'll be right down."

Frank and Joe looked at each other in awkward silence. They had no idea how to tell Montague what happened to his "bus." But their host made it easy for them—the moment he walked downstairs he knew something was wrong. He cut off Frank's explanation about the MG. "Never mind the car — are you boys okay?"

"We're fine," the boys assured him, relieved that Montague was more concerned about them than his car. They told him about the attempted killing.

"You'll have to report this to the Hamilton police," Montague told them. "And you'll need some way get around. ~~There are no rental cars on the island, but you can rent mopeds. There's a place in~~ Hamilton. Let's see ..." He looked at his watch. "Alicia said she'd be back at four — that'll give you time for a wash-up and rest.

"Alicia and I have a five o'clock engagement we can't break, but we can drop you at the ferry to Hamilton."

Later they heard a car pull into the driveway, and in a minute Montague's eighteen-year-old daughter burst in. Her sparkling dark brown eyes widened in concern as she listened to a recap of the boys' story. It left her pale under her smooth tan. Her short black hair danced as she turned from Frank to Joe, her eyes drawn to the bump on Joe's head. "You're hurt!"

"Not enough to slow me down," Joe told her. "We'd better hurry, so we can make the bike rental place before closing."

The quiet of the ferry ride to Hamilton was shattered by the sound of the ferry crunching against the dock. After the brothers left the boat, they walked the three blocks to the moped rental place.

The bikes were all the same—squat-looking scooters with small, fat wheels—so the choice was easy. Frank handed the burly attendant his father's credit card, which had been given to him for emergencies.

"I'm sorry," the salesman said after making a phone call. "I cannot allow you to have the bikes. Your credit card is more than three thousand dollars over the limit, and I've been instructed to cut up your card."

"We haven't spent anywhere near that much!" Frank stared at the man.

"You can't destroy our card," Joe said, leaning into the counter as if he'd push his way right through it. "And you've got to give us those bikes."

"Sorry, chum," the attendant repeated in his flawless British accent. "You must take it up with the credit card company."

"The card!" Joe demanded, his hand stretched out.

"Take it easy," Frank cautioned. "It's not his fault."

"Yeah, well it's not our fault, either, and why should — "

"Come on, Joe," Frank said, interrupting him and grabbing him by the arm. "We'll straighten this out later. It's getting late and we still have to see the police."

Frank and Joe walked through the narrow two-lane streets and watched as the shops were beginning to close. When they were two blocks from the station, they heard the sound of a car behind them picking up speed. A maroon sedan shot past them, then screeched to a halt, its red brake lights flashing on. Then, the two clear backup lights came on as the car roared back to them.

Two large, well-dressed men jumped out of the car and approached them. One of them, a tall black man wearing a conservative pinstriped suit, pulled back his coat to reveal a gun tucked into his belt. The other man, shorter, opened his dark blue suit and drew a small revolver from a shoulder holster.

"Just hold it right there," he said. "Don't do anything stupid."

The blue suit stood in front of the Hardys as the tall man with the hat walked behind them. Joe, standing in front of Frank, could hear the click-clack as the tall man snapped handcuffs on Frank's bare wrists. Two more clicks and Joe, too, was handcuffed. Finally the tall man spoke: "You're under arrest for fraud, conspiracy to defraud, and credit card counterfeiting."

Chapter 3

"COUNTERFEITING! WHAT'RE YOU talking about?" Joe turned his head back and forth between the two men.

"Who are you?" Frank asked.

Blue suit holstered his gun with one hand as he reached into his back pocket with the other. "I'm Bill Baylis," he said as he produced identification. "And this is Walt Conway. I'm from the Interagency Banking Commission, and Detective Conway is with the Bermuda police, assigned to work with me."

"We happened to see you leaving Bernhard Kruger's," the man called Conway chimed in. "And we know about the faked credit card you just tried to use."

"There must be some mistake," Frank insisted.

"Where've we heard that one before?" countered Baylis. "Let's go to police headquarters. You can tell your story there."

"We were just on our way there," Joe admitted, realizing how phony it sounded.

"We're private investigators," Frank told them, "staying with Alfred Montague."

"Into the car." The tall man's tone made it clear he wasn't interested in any more conversation. He opened the back door and ushered them in.

Within minutes they were seated in the office of Chief Boulton. The blond police chief with his dark walrus mustache was bigger than Biff Hooper and very impressive in his immaculate, all-white uniform. He seemed out of place in an office where every flat surface was cluttered with papers, books, and boxes. He looked at the boys with cold blue eyes. "May I see some identification, please?"

"We do get one phone call, don't we?" Joe asked, half-joking.

"Of course," the chief responded. "Local or long distance?"

"Local. We're staying with Alfred Montague. He's a retired policeman — do you know him?" The chief nodded. "He'll vouch for us." Joe dialed Montague's number. After the seventh ring, he hung up remembering Montague's five o'clock appointment.

Frank explained to the three men the purpose of their visit to Bermuda and why they had the Kruger villa under surveillance. He told them about Fenton Hardy's involvement in the case back in the U.S. and how ironic it was that they were now being held for a crime they were trying to stop.

"I know of your father," the chief said, lightening up a little. "Shall I ring him?"

The boys hated to use their dad to bail them out, but after exchanging a brief look, they nodded their agreement.

Chief Boulton called Fenton Hardy, spoke briefly with him, and turned the phone over to Frank. Frank filled his father in on everything that had happened so far. He learned that his father hadn't put more than two hundred dollars on the credit card that the merchant confiscated.

The chief got back on the phone. "Makes sense to me," he said after listening silently for a long time. "Fine, then. I'll call Chief Collig in Bayport. Then if everything checks out, I'll be happy to release your boys and give them all the help I can." After a quick goodbye, the chief hung up.

Frank asked why they had been arrested when they hadn't done anything but try to use a card over its limit. And Chief Boulton confessed that they thought Frank and Joe might be couriers for the counterfeit credit card gang because they had been seen leaving Kruger's earlier. And then, when they tried to use the overdrawn card, they had decided to bring the Hardys in with the hope of sweating information out of them about Kruger.

Before they were released, Frank and Joe officially reported the incident with the black BMW. Although they couldn't connect the attempt on their lives with their investigation of Kruger, there didn't seem to be any other explanation.

Chief Boulton gave Frank and Joe some additional information about the counterfeiting racket. The police thought that stolen blank cards were being shipped to Bermuda—possibly from Puerto Rico. They were "punched" in Bermuda and then sent to the U.S. for distribution. The police suspected Kruger, but they didn't have enough evidence to search the man's house.

"That's it," the chief said. "That's everything I have on Kruger. I can't get your credit card back, but if you're going to continue your investigation, I'll call the moped agency and arrange for you to rent two bikes. Meanwhile, your father said he would arrange to get you a different card."

"Thanks," the brothers replied. "And if you're short of cash in the meantime, just let me know."

Frank and Joe smiled, pleased that the chief had turned out to be so good-natured.

"Now just fill out these accident report forms," the chief continued. "And list everything that was in the car when it sank."

"Oh no!" Joe blurted out. "I completely forgot about the stuff in the trunk." Joe's face fell as he realized out loud that both cameras were thirty feet underwater. "And the binoculars," Frank added. "You can rent scuba gear across the street," the chief suggested, "if you're in the mood for a do-it-yourself rescue. But I don't know how good the cameras will be after that dunking!"

"One of them was an underwater camera," Joe explained. "We used it when we went diving near Kruger's dock a couple of days ago."

"I'll ring the scuba shop and make the arrangements."

It was almost six-thirty by the time Frank and Joe loaded rented scuba gear on the back of the moped to ride out to the MG. It was a pleasant ride. The summer light made the pastel ice-cream colors of the houses outside Hamilton shimmer. The temperature was still warm, even though an ocean breeze blew across the narrow highway.

"Here's the spot," shouted Frank, pointing down to where he knew the little car lay. Joe pulled up next to Frank, parking beside a pile of rocks.

"Do you want to set up on the flat rock down there?" Joe asked, extending his arm toward a flat rock below them.

"Looks good." Frank nodded.

In fifteen minutes the boys were ready. Joe had stuck a spare key to the trunk into a small pouch attached to his weight belt.

"The water's so still," Frank said.

"Yeah. It's hard to believe it almost buried us."

Frank and Joe slipped into the warm water and dived. It didn't take long to spot the MG, which had sunk another two feet into the soft sand. Joe motioned to Frank to check the inside of the car for the binoculars while he swam around to the trunk.

Frank was able to force the passenger door open very slowly, granting him easy access to the car's interior. He found the binoculars and was looking to see if anything else had been left inside when he heard a sharp bang against the metal frame of the car. He turned to see Joe waving his arm for Frank to come. Joe's eyes were opened wide under the small mask, and Frank knew instantly something was wrong. He swam to Joe at the rear of the MG.

The trunk lid was wide open and bent out of shape. Frank saw that the lid hadn't gotten twisted from the accident. Someone had forced it open. The two cameras were gone!

Joe could understand why they had been run off the road—if Kruger was behind it. But why would he order someone to dive thirty feet underwater to take two cameras from the submerged car? Was he afraid of what the film might show? But would the film even be all right after getting wet?

As Joe's mind was wandering, searching for answers, Frank was swimming around the MG, looking for clues. Trying to get his younger brother's attention, Frank clanged the base of his knife against Joe's tank, snapping him out of his daydream. Joe nodded after Frank made a swirling motion with his hand indicating they should scour the area.

The water was so clear that there was enough light to see even at thirty feet, although Frank was using a flashlight anyway.

They finished their underwater search, and Frank gave Joe a thumbs-up sign. It was time to surface. The two brothers swam toward the darkening sunlight above and climbed out near the rocks where they had left their gear.

"That was a waste of time," Joe said, pulling off his face mask.

Frank shook his head, disagreeing. "I don't think so. We learned that Kruger's really afraid that we might have something on him."

"That's what I figured. A picture of something," Joe said.

"Could be. Or maybe he just wanted our stuff to see if they could learn more about us. What else was in the trunk? Do you remember?" Frank asked.

"Let's see," Joe replied, closing his eyes and trying to visualize the trunk. "My bag, which had a change of clothes and our towels and swim trunks, and some shells — maybe ... "

"What about that lifesaver we found on the beach near Kruger's villa?" Frank was talking about a ring-shaped life preserver that must have fallen from a boat and been washed ashore.

"That's right." Joe nodded, then stared at his brother. "But what would anyone want that for?"

"Nothing—unless it belonged to them in the first place!"

Frank and Joe gathered up their gear for the trek back up to the mopeds. They checked the ground carefully for any signs left by the underwater thieves during their approach or getaway.

"Someone might have walked over here, but that doesn't tell us anything," Joe mused, talking to himself.

"I don't see anything," Frank said.

When they reached the bikes, they checked for tire tracks or footprints — anything that might help them later in establishing the thieves' identity.

After Joe loaded his gear onto the moped, he scanned the surroundings. "They had to leave something behind," he said. "No one's that good."

"Looks like they were careful. Pros always are.

"But maybe not careful enough!" Joe had just noticed something glinting under a low bush.

Frank followed Joe's gaze about fifteen feet from where they had climbed down to the water. A small object was shining, reflecting the early-evening light. "I see it!"

"I hope it's not just a pack of cigarettes or something," Joe said as he jogged over to the bush. "Whoa — this just might be our first clue. Looks like a credit card!" Joe smiled.

"Well?" Frank said.

"Well," Joe mimicked, "it is a credit card, a Bank Eurocard." The sun was gleaming off the card's hologram. As Joe looked closer, his triumphant grin disappeared.

"Well?" Frank urged.

"It'll be very easy to track down the person who owns this," Joe continued. "According to the name on the card, it belongs to—Alfred Montague!"

Chapter 4

"MONTAGUE?" FRANK REPEATED, complete disbelief on his face.

"Alfred Montague. That's what it says. I can't believe he's involved in this."

Frank agreed. "Me, neither. There must be some explanation."

"If there isn't?"

"If there isn't," — Frank paused — "we might be staying in the home of someone who's trying to kill us!"

"What do we do? How do we find out?"

Frank thought for a second. "We'll ask him." He made it sound as if it would be the easiest thing in the world. But Frank knew the confrontation with Montague would be awkward—and possibly dangerous.

"Okay. But I'd feel a lot better if Alicia wasn't around when we meet with Montague." He looked at his watch. "Almost eight o'clock. They should be home by now. Why don't I give her a call — think of something to get her out of the house," Joe suggested.

Frank nodded and got on his moped to join his brother. After a few minutes of riding, Frank pointed out a pay phone next to a small roadside restaurant. Joe dropped two coins into the box, then slowly dialed. He was still trying to think of some reason to get Alicia away from the house.

"Hello? Alicia? ... Hi ... " Joe was thinking in double time. Maybe he could ask her to meet him somewhere, then he and Frank could go to the house when she left. But he rejected that idea because it would leave her stranded. "Do you, uh, feel like coming out to meet me?" he asked, still fumbling for words. " ... Oh ... Where? ... Could you give that to me again? ... Wait, let me write it down." Joe fished for a pencil and then jotted something down as Alicia talked. "Thanks," he concluded. "I — we'll see you soon."

Thoughtfully Joe replaced the phone on its hook and walked back to where Frank was waiting, straddling his moped.

"Could you get her out of the house?" Frank asked.

"She can't go anyplace because Montague had to borrow her car. But she did say she got a strange call about half an hour ago from some guy she didn't know. He said that Montague was supposed to be meeting with him, but he hadn't shown. And this guy," — he paused to check his notes — "Martin Powers, said the meeting was urgent. He left her his address."

"Well, where is he? Let's go check it out." Frank was ready to take off.

Joe checked his notes again. "Saint George's Harbor." He handed the note to Frank on which he had hastily scrawled "Martin Powers, #1 Blue Vista."

The two scooters lurched forward as Frank and Joe sped off toward St. George.

It was dark when the Hardys drove down into town. They parked their bikes and carried their scuba gear into a small cafe.

"Yes, I do know where that is," said the proprietor after looking at the address. "You can leave your gear in the back room and then I'll accompany you outside and set you in the right direction."

Joe and Frank found a clear corner for their stuff, then followed the proprietor outside.

"Just go through the square there," the man explained as he pointed, "and take a right out onto the quay. It should be one of the boats out on the left of the dock."

"Boats?" both brothers said simultaneously. Joe stared at the man. "You mean this address is a boat?"

"Definitely! One Blue Vista is the name of a boat. Happy sailing!"

Sailing wasn't what they were thinking of when Frank and Joe located the boat that had the name painted in bright blue letters across its stern. Martin Powers's boat took up an entire corner of the dock. "That's no sloop," Joe remarked. "That's a full-size yacht."

"I wonder where this Powers guy is. Doesn't look like anybody's on board." Frank's observation was pretty obvious—there wasn't a light on.

"You want to have a look?" Joe asked.

"It's trespassing," Frank reminded his younger brother.

"Yeah, but we're trying to find out what happened to Montague. Maybe he's on board—hurt or something. We should check it out."

Joe took out his small underwater flashlight. He was going on board, with or without Frank.

"Okay," Frank finally agreed. "But let's make it quick — someone may come soon, and there's no back door to this house." He followed Joe onto the deck of the large boat, walking silently in case someone really was on board. The sound of the water lapping against the side of the boat drowned out the creaking of the deck under the boys' weight.

"Here's the door that leads down to the cabins," Frank whispered.

Joe's flashlight lit up the small latch on the cabin-house door. Frank pulled on it, and the small door swung open.

"I'll go first," Joe said. Frank checked to make sure no one from shore could see what they were doing.

The dock was empty. "Follow me," Joe said, forcing Frank's attention back.

The two brothers moved stealthily down the few steps into the small living compartment. "Watch yourself," said Frank from behind.

Just as Frank spoke Joe tripped over something, stumbling noisily forward. The flashlight flew from his hand, to make a hard landing against the wooden floor.

Frank winced as he heard the sound of breaking glass, followed by the lopping sound of the flashlight as it rolled across the floor. The light winked on and off with each turn of the flashlight. "You okay?"

Joe had landed on one knee, but recovered quickly. "Yeah. The lens on the flashlight broke, but the light still works." Joe reached down and picked it up, shaking it gently every time the small light flickered out.

"Are you clumsy, or what?" Frank asked his brother.

"I tripped over something," Joe said, annoyed.

Joe shone the light on the steps that had led down into the cabin. "But there's nothing on the stairs." Just then the light reflected off a thin wire that ran across the last step.

"Uh-oh," said Frank. "I don't think that's a regulation part of the boat."

Frank took the light from Joe and followed the wire with it. The dim glow barely illuminated the corner of the cabin, where the wire eventually led to a small box about fifteen inches square.

Frank's worst fears were realized. He now could hear the faint ticking of a clock. "Is that what I think it is?" Joe asked, knowing what Frank's answer would be.

"Yep. It's a bomb," Frank said, moving quickly to examine it more closely. "You triggered it when you tripped on that wire."

"Then why didn't it go off?" Joe asked.

Frank was shining the light on two wires that ran from the little box to a small digital clock set in its face. "It's a time delay." Frank stared at the changing numbers on the clock. "And we have less than six seconds! Hit the deck! It's going to blow!"

Joe dived into the darkness, overturning a small table, which he scrambled behind.

Frank had gingerly picked up the bomb when he shouted for Joe to take cover. He had had to drop the flashlight, and the room was now in total blackness. For only a fraction of a second Frank stood motionless. Then he noticed the light coming in from the outside through a small porthole. Four seconds left.

Praying that the porthole was open, Frank rushed toward it.

Two seconds.

"Here goes!" He pitched the small box toward the light. But just before the bomb reached the small, circular opening, Frank saw a reflection on the glass, and he knew the tiny porthole was closed!

One second later the room filled with a flash of hot, bright whiteness as the bomb exploded—inside the small cabin!

Chapter 5

THE ROAR OF the explosion was deafening. Within seconds an entire side of One Blue Vista was blown out and engulfed in flames.

"Frank! Frank!" Joe cried out, pulling himself free of debris.

There was no reply.

Joe tried to push down his thoughts of losing Frank. He had been protected, in the far corner behind the collapsed table. But Frank had been in the middle of the room, completely exposed.

Fire was spreading rapidly through the tiny cabin. Furniture, books, and papers had been thrown around the room by the force of the blast. Shattered glass covered the deck, and heavy black smoke fell from the ceiling. Joe saw their plastic flashlight melted into the floor.

Only a moment earlier Joe had been in desperate need of light. Now the glow from the flames was blinding.

"Frank! Where are you?" Joe knew his brother would answer if he could.

Then Joe saw him. Frank's legs were sticking out from under a door just a few feet away. Obviously Frank had tried to protect himself by crouching between the bulkhead and a closet door, which he'd pulled open just before the blast. The door must have been blown from its hinges, and now lay on top of Frank's lifeless body.

"I'll get you out!" Joe yelled as he moved on all fours through the rubble toward his brother. Frank continued to lie motionless. Smoke was beginning to fill the room from the ceiling down. Joe tore the door off his brother, then he grabbed Frank under his arms and crawled through the smoke, dragging him.

"We'll make it," he said, not even knowing if Frank was dead or alive. "Here we go." He stood up and threw Frank over his shoulder and charged up what remained of the steps.

Aware that when the fire reached the fuel tanks for the engines there would be another explosion, Joe darted to the guard rail. He shifted Frank so he lay across his shoulders, clambered over the rail, and plunged into the oily waters.

"Got to swim clear," he kept saying. Side-stroking with one arm around Frank's chest, Joe swam parallel to the main dock toward the next pier. Joe suddenly realized he was getting some help. Frank was moving his legs and kicking feebly! "That's it!" Joe cried, as they moved a little faster. "Swim, swim!"

The wailing of the fire engine and ambulance sirens cut through the crackle of the flames. Then all sound was drowned out by a tremendous roar. The fire had reached the boat's fuel tanks.

"Down!" Joe yelled, pulling his brother underwater with him. They felt the force of the new explosion ripple through the cushioning effect of the water, but they were safe. They had swum far enough away from the yacht.

When they came up for air, Joe checked Frank out to see how badly he was hurt. He could see numerous cuts and bruises on his brother's arms, but Frank's face was okay except for a large bump over his left eye. "Are you all right?"

Frank groaned. "What happened?"

"You were on an exploding boat," Joe reminded him.

"Ohhh," Frank groaned, stretching his arms and neck. "I forget, does that make us flotsam or jetsam?"

Joe smiled. "How do you feel?"

"Like a soccer ball—after a game. Are you okay?"

"I think so, but I've been too busy saving you to check!"

Exhausted, the brothers were slowly dog-paddling toward a pier when suddenly they were bathed in a circle of bright light. It was coming from a spotlight bobbing up and down in the water. It had to be a boat, the boys knew, even though they couldn't see a thing beyond the blinding glare. The source of the light reached them in a few seconds, and the two Hardys could hear excited voices over the roar of the boat's engines.

"Grab my hand!" a voice ordered as the boat pulled beside them. "Come on, son, I've got you," said one man as he grabbed Frank and pulled him up over the side of the boat. "You next, friend," another man said.

"Easy does it!" the first voice said. "You boys all right?" And before anybody could answer, he added "Just lie there and take it easy."

Both Joe and Frank could tell from the crew's brisk, precise movements that they'd gone through this drill often. The uniforms on the crew members and the blinking blue and red light on the stern told the Hardys they were aboard a police boat. Joe spoke first. "So what happened after I took cover?"

"I tossed the bomb and then realized that the porthole was closed," said Frank. "The bomb must have exploded just before it hit the porthole — it blew the glass right out and then released its full force outside the boat."

"Yeah," Joe agreed, "that must be why the room wasn't trashed more than it was." He shook his head. "Good timing. A few seconds sooner and the bomb would have bounced off that glass right back at you. A few seconds later would have been too late."

"I took a dive for the corner just after I threw the bomb," Frank explained. "I didn't have time to get

into the closet, but I was able to yank the door open. And then the lights went out."

The two had almost forgotten they were surrounded by a small group of police and Coast Guard. One of them leaned over to question the brothers. His eyes narrowed and he stared directly at Frank. "Now why were you trying to plant a bomb on Martin Powers's boat?"

"Are you kidding?" Joe said, exasperated. "We were trying to get the bomb off the boat."

"How did you know there was a bomb on the boat?" the harbor policeman continued.

"I tripped over it," Joe confessed, before he realized how silly it sounded.

"Just what were you doing on the boat?"

But before Joe could answer, the police boat had reached the pier and the two brothers were helped onto the dock, where a few curious onlookers had gathered. Six or seven people stood around immediately in front of them, one taking pictures. Someone shouted from the back of the small group. "Arrest these two! Arrest them! They blew up my partner's boat! They've killed him!"

"Oh, no," Frank said. "Here we go again." He could see the man's fist waving above the heads of the others.

"Arrest them," the stranger kept insisting.

"No need to worry, we've got them now, and we'll take care of them," one of the officers said as he handcuffed the two brothers.

"Hold it," Joe objected, turning his head away from the blinding flashes of the photographer's camera. "We didn't do anything." But no one listened.

Then the stranger, a squat man with bushy, steel-gray eyebrows, emerged from the back of the small crowd. "Lock them up!" he yelled, staring at the two of them as he moved closer.

Joe immediately recognized the well-dressed, gray-haired man from the photos he had been looking at earlier that same day. "Kruger!" he shouted.

The sinister-looking German curled the corner of his lip into an evil smile. "Yes, Kruger — Bernhard Kruger." He let out a short laugh, and then turned and walked toward the burning boat.

"He's the one that should be arrested!" Joe yelled, pointing into the crowd. But no one was listening as he and Frank were being towed toward the waiting police car. Joe was furious. "Wait a minute!" he objected, struggling to turn around. But as he looked back, he saw that Kruger had disappeared into the curious crowd.

Joe and Frank were quickly checked by one of the medics who had arrived and then were escorted into the waiting patrol car. As they were pulling away, they turned and could still see the glow from the fire. Fifteen minutes after their ordeal the two Hardys were sitting in the St. George police station, wrapped in blankets and drinking hot tea.

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