Cold Sweat (Hardy Boys Casefiles #63)

Franklin W. Dixon

Chapter 1

"You did *what?"* Frank Hardy stared at his younger brother in disbelief.

Joe Hardy's smug grin didn't disappear, nor did the devilish glint in his blue eyes. "I signed us up for memberships in the Harbor Health Club. That's where we're heading right now." He steered the Hardys' van toward Bayport's newly renovated dockside area. "They were running a two-for-one deal."

"I heard that the first time you told me," Frank said. "This time around, I was hoping to hear *why* you'd sign me up for something I hadn't okayed."

"I did it *for* you, Frank." Joe reached out and squeezed one of his brother's lean arms. "You could use a little chunking up, you know, and

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we have a few days off from school to concentrate on it."

Frank shook his arm free. "Okay. Give me the whole story. How did you find out about this big bargain?"

"It was a miracle," Joe explained. "I was just checking the place out and saw Chet Morton there, signing up."

"Chet?" Frank shook his head. "If you'd said he was trying a new fast-food joint, I could buy that. But Chet Morton at a gym?"

"After he signed up he went to talk with this gorgeous blond girl," Joe went on. "I think she must teach an aerobics class—she was wearing these purple tights, a high-cut blue-and-purple leotard, and an instructor's T-shirt—"

*"Now* I understand why you joined," Frank said. "You've found a new place to chase girls— or one girl at least. And you expect me to help you do it."

"Hey, I only expect a little financial help— like paying half my expenses." Joe was smiling as he pulled into the club's parking lot and brought the van to a stop. "Trust me, Frank, I won't need help with the girl."

"You're a real case." Frank rolled his eyes as they walked toward the gym.

Joe shrugged. "You found me useful enough when we tangled with those crooks in Las Vegas."

Silently Frank had to admit the truth of that.

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Both he and Joe had pushed themselves to the limit on the *Final Gambit* case. So why did his brother have to be a pain now? Couldn't he just ease up?

Joe tugged on Frank's arm. "Come on, let's hustle. We've got to get to our first training session."

Shaking his head, Frank followed. "I suppose somebody has to be around to catch you when you fall on your face."

Besides, Frank was interested in seeing the new Harbor Health Club. Five years before, it had been the Dockside Gym, located in the basement of an old warehouse. Frank remembered the place as a sweat-and-strain shop where aspiring boxers worked out.

The neighborhood had changed, and the old warehouses were turned into condominiums. The owners of the gym had bought the whole warehouse, renovating it into an upscale health club. The poor boxers stopped coming, and the rich newcomers didn't pour in, so the Harbor Health Club went broke.

Frank remembered when Pete Vanbricken, a football star, bought the club. Was it doing better now, he wondered?

It looked pretty ritzy, Frank had to admit. The grimy old redbrick building had been sandblasted clean, and new windows had been installed. He could see beach umbrellas scattered

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on the roof. Frank was willing to bet there was a pool up there, too.

Joe led the way past the reception desk and down one flight of stairs to the locker room. Inside the room a tall man with dark, slicked-back hair glanced up at them and grunted. He shoved a long black gym bag into his locker, slammed the door shut, and strode off. Huge muscles, straining against a skimpy athletic shirt and shorts, rolled and bunched as he moved.

Another locker door was slammed shut, and Chet Morton was revealed in slightly tight sweats stretched over his bulk. His greeting was almost as cold as the stranger's. "What are *you* two doing here?" he demanded.

"We signed on for a little toning up," Joe explained as he stripped off his clothes and pulled on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. "We're supposed to be training with somebody named Jan." He glanced at Chet. "Do you know her?"

Chet just gave him a dirty look and stomped off upstairs to the gym.

Shaking his head, Frank finished changing into the workout clothes Joe had brought for him. Then he and Joe followed Chet upstairs to the gym.

Frank was a little surprised by the large and airy gym. Years ago, as a kid, he'd sneaked a peek through a basement window into the Dockside Gym. Subconsciously, he'd expected to see the same cramped, badly ventilated room. But

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instead of rough concrete floors and cracked, yellowing plaster, he found thick carpeting and cool gray walls. The double-height room was lit from a rooftop skylight and high windows.

The people were different, too. Instead of the hopeful boxers and the old pugs training them, now well-built trainers supervised the workouts of people in expensive exercise clothes. Frank saw the guy with slicked-back hair from the locker room. He was working out with a huge barbell in an area with rubber tiles on the floor. Frank watched the impressive play of muscles in the man's back as he curled the barbell up to his chest.

Around the room potted plants had been placed for decoration, and enormous mirrors stretched along all the walls. Frank knew that the mirrors were supposed to help people check their form as they exercised, but he suspected that vanity was involved as well.

Frank noticed Chet Morton standing in front of a mirror. Chet's gaze moved around the room and back to his own reflection. Instinctively, he threw back his shoulders and sucked in his gut.

As the Hardys moved behind his mirror image, Chet turned to them. "You guys really going through with this?"

"I'm looking forward to working out," Joe said, grinning. "Not to mention meeting Jan."

"It's pronounced *Yonn,"* a deep voice rumbled from behind them.

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Joe's smile slipped a little when he turned to see the owner of the voice.

Just call him Jan the man, Frank thought, taking in a tall character whose chest pulled against the instructor's T-shirt he wore. Tall, mean, and muscles on top of muscles.

"Jan Cole," the man identified himself. "You three must be Hardy, Hardy, and Morton." He squeezed Joe's arm muscles as if they were so much meat. "Good."

Then casting a careful eye over Frank's physique, Jan Cole said, "You have potential."

Looking at Chet, however, he frowned. "Maybe we can shape you up—after we get rid of this lard." His slap to Chet's stomach echoed like a cannon shot.

Chet winced. But Jan Cole had already turned away to talk to a muscular young instructor who was showing one of the club members how to use an exercise machine. "Hey, Penman," Cole said, "work up an exercise routine for these guys."

The younger man nodded, annoyance creeping over his dark features. Cole didn't notice. He had turned back to the Hardys and Chet. "You"—he pointed at Joe—"know how a lat machine works?"

Joe glanced over at a machine that vaguely resembled a gallows. A crossbeam rose slightly over Joe's head, and weight plates were set into the bottom of the riser. A wide handle on a cable

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dangled from the crossbeam. The cable ran through a pulley system and attached to the weights.

Cole led Joe over, sat him in a seat in front of the machine, and adjusted a padded clamp that rested over his thighs. "I'll give you a low weight—just so we can see what this will do for those latissimus dorsi muscles." He slapped the muscle group just below and behind Joe's underarm.

Cole then led Frank over to a cable rowing machine. "You can try this out," he said, and helped Frank to get started.

Then he turned back to Chet and frowned. "And *you* can drop to the floor and give me fifty—or as many as you can manage."

Frank didn't like the way Cole spoke to Chet—or the way Joe was grinning over at the resistance machine.

"Don't sweat it," Joe said, watching Chet puff through his first push-ups. "I mean, a little exercise never killed any—"

His words were interrupted by a moan over at the treadmills. Joe turned to see a young man in a sweat-stained running suit wobbling on the moving belt. The runner's face went from red to white. His eyes rolled up in his head, but he didn't drop. Instead, he was flung off at the same speed the track was moving.

Both Frank and Joe dropped their cables.

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Before they could get up, though, the man had dropped—right on top of Chet.

Penman, the young trainer, rushed over from the desk where he'd been working on the boys' exercise program. He helped the runner up onto wobbly feet.

"I warned you, Mr. Laufner." Penman shook his head. "Overextending yourself is not the way to go."

Jan Cole swaggered over, giving the runner a slap on the back. The poor man nearly collapsed again. "Either a guy wants to get strong, or he's not good enough." Cole looked down at Chet. "You should remember that, Morton."

Penman sent the runner off to the showers. "I've got a program set up for you," he said to the boys, handing them each a piece of paper. "It's a six-day schedule. Mondays and Thursdays, you'll tone up your legs. Tuesdays and Fridays, you work on your chests and backs. Wednesdays and Saturdays, it's time for your shoulders and arms."

"And on Sundays we pray for strength to live through this," Frank added, glaring at his kid brother.

"Every day you'll work on your abs—those are your abdominal muscles—and you'll get some cardiovascular exercise—treadmill, stationary cycles, maybe some aerobics."

"Really?" Chet brightened at that thought.

His expression changed when Penman handed

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him another paper. "This is a diet plan," Penman explained. "I'm afraid that you'll need a little more than exercise to get into top shape."

Turning from the crestfallen Chet to the Hardys, the instructor said, "Okay, you've had a quick orientation. You can stay and work out a little more or you can come back tomorrow, rested and ready to work."

The boys headed back down to the locker room and took showers and changed. Laufner, the runner who had collapsed, was still sitting on a bench resting as they tied their shoes. Frank noticed that the color had returned to his slightly flabby face.

"Hey, Cosgrove," Laufner called to a man who was just finishing dressing. He slid his arms into an expensive-looking black satin bomber jacket. Cosgrove was the muscle man they'd seen earlier. Frank wondered why he'd had such a short workout.

The big man spoke as he slipped his shoes on. "Well, Laufner. Glad to see you got your breath back."

Laufner flushed. "Has your gambling luck gotten any better, Big Walt?" he asked nastily.

Cosgrove whipped around, hauled Laufner off the bench, and slammed him into the wall of lockers.

"Little man," he said grimly, "watch your mouth. It might start a fight the rest of you can't finish."

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Laufner slid to the floor. Before Frank or Joe could move, Cosgrove grabbed his gym bag and started from the room.

Laufner scrambled to his feet, and Frank Hardy blocked him from taking off after Cosgrove. "Take it easy," he advised. "That guy could finish you."

Frank had noticed two things about the mysterious Mr. Cosgrove. His big black gym bag had turned into a small red one, and the red bag hadn't been zipped closed. Frank spotted something sticking out of it. What he saw made him stop Laufner. The runner didn't have the muscle to take Cosgrove on.

He'd have even less chance against the pistol Frank had seen in Cosgrove's bag.

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Chapter 2

Joe stared in surprise when Frank suddenly grabbed his arm.

"Come on," Frank said. "We're getting out of here."

"What's the big idea?" Joe wanted to know as his brother steered him up the stairs to the main entrance and foyer.

"Something weird is going on. That Cosgrove was carrying a gun." Frank quickly clued Joe in on what he'd noticed about Cosgrove's bag.

"From the way he treated Laufner, Cosgrove doesn't seem to be wrapped too tightly," Frank said. "And when you add a gun—well, let's just say I'd like to keep an eye on him."

They were in the parking lot, opening the doors to their van, when Chet Morton came

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running up. His hair was wet, and the tail of his shirt hung out over his jeans. "What's with you guys?" Chet demanded. "First you push in where you're not wanted, then you run off without even saying goodbye. I want—"

The mysterious Mr. Cosgrove roared past in a low-slung red Porsche right then. "Some car," Chet said appreciatively.

"I'd be more impressed if it weren't rented," Joe cut in. "You can always tell by the first three letters on the license plate."

Frank and Joe realized that they wouldn't have a chance of following the Porsche, so they stood talking with Chet. The front door of the health club swung open, and Jan Cole came swaggering out. Before the door had time to shut, it was pushed open again, and another man stepped out.

Joe recognized him immediately—Pete Vanbricken. He'd seen Vanbricken's face on the sports pages often enough, first as a local football hero—Bayport High's star quarterback. Then there were Vanbricken's triumphs in college games, the trophies and awards he'd won. Most recently Vanbricken's victories had been in pro ball. He'd been the first-string quarterback for the Midland Foxes, leading them to the play-offs at the top of their division for three straight seasons.

Too bad about last season, Joe thought. He'd been watching the game on TV and knew there'd

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be trouble when those two linebackers hit "Pistol Pete" both high and low. Not only had he gotten sacked, he'd wound up with a separated shoulder. End of career.

Pete Vanbricken had come back to Bayport and bought the Harbor Health Club. Almost every local TV show had an ad featuring a smiling Pistol Pete inviting people down to his club.

Pistol Pete wasn't smiling now, however. As the ex-quarterback stalked out of the club, his face showed nothing but rage. "Cole!" he yelled.

Jan Cole glanced almost languidly over one shoulder. "Whatsamatter, boss?"

Even from a distance the boys could see a vein stand out on Vanbricken's temple. "Where do you think you're going?" he demanded. "This isn't your break time. You're supposed—"

"I don't see any time clock in there," Cole interrupted. "And I'm not just one of the employees around here."

"That's another problem," Vanbricken said. "I've been getting complaints from club members -and the staff—complaints that you've been harassing them."

"Yeah, yeah," Cole scoffed. "We've been through this already."

Joe was surprised. This didn't sound like an employee talking to his boss. Cole was nose to nose with Vanbricken, sneering at him.

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Cole's next words were even more surprising. "Look, Vanbricken, you need me. So you should learn to cut me a little slack. You couldn't keep this place going without the help I give your cash flow."

Pete Vanbricken completely lost it. His fist whipped around to crash into Jan Cole's stomach. Joe could hear the force of the blow, but Cole stood unmoved, his face still in the club owner's.

Vanbricken was not a small guy. He was an athlete, and even at thirty, he had a quarterback's physique. But the hulking Cole had five years and at least fifty pounds on Vanbricken.

Cole raised a fist as if he were pleased with what was about to happen. Joe took a step forward. He had to stop this slaughter!

Behind him, Frank never moved. He just leaned back against the van and cleared his throat very loudly.

It was as if he had blown a trumpet. Both men stepped back from their confrontation. Cole glared at the audience, while Vanbricken just stared blankly at the boys. Turning, Vanbricken stalked back into the club.

Cole hesitated for a second, almost as if he were about to speak. Then he glared once more at Chet and headed back inside, too.

"Wherever he was going," Joe said softly, "he changed his mind in a hurry."

He was about to say more when a yellow car,

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a small but sporty model, rolled into the parking lot.

The car pulled up near the Hardys' van, and a very pretty young woman jumped out, already dressed in a leotard and tights. She had a perfect figure for the workout clothes, shoulder-length blond hair, and the faintest sprinkling of freckles across her high cheekbones and snub nose.

Joe recognized her immediately as the girl he had seen Chet speaking with when he'd checked out the gym. Seeing her up close confirmed Joe's initial impression. She *is* gorgeous, he thought.

"Chet!" the girl said, smiling as she walked over to them. "I see you've started your training. Great!"

"Uh—yuh," Chet managed, staring at her, his heart in his eyes. One hand went to tuck in his shirttail, the other to straighten out his tousled, still-damp hair.

"So, Chety—Joe moved in smoothly—"aren't you going to introduce us to your friend?"

Judging from the look he got, Joe thought Chet would have been more willing to introduce him to a passing steamroller.

"Dawn Reynolds, this mental misfit is Joe Hardy," Chet finally said. "And this is his older brother, Frank."

"Nice to meet you, guys," Dawn said. She smiled again at Chet. "Guess I'll see you around."

"Every day," Chet promised fervently.

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Dawn glanced at her watch. "Yow! Got a class to start. I'm going to be late."

Her hand went to her forehead. "Oh, great. I forgot my sweatband." Dawn dashed back to her car, rummaging around on the front seat.

At the same time, Chet rushed over to his car. He came back a moment later, a dark blue terry- cloth band in his hand.

"Can't find it?" he asked. "Here, use one of mine. It's clean," he hurriedly assured her. "Never even been used."

"That's so sweet," Dawn said, taking the band from him. One end fell from her hand, exposing the length of the band. In brilliant yellow letters, the name *Chet* had been embroidered onto the toweling material.

Chet blushed. "My mom made it," he quickly explained. "But you can wear it so your hair hides the name."

"It was nice of her to do that—and nice of you to lend it to me," Dawn said with a smile.

Chet's face grew even pinker as she raised her arms, slipped the band on, and fluffed her hair over his name.

"How do I look?" Dawn asked.

"G-great," Chet assured her.

"Very nice," Frank said.

"Yeah—really hot," Joe added.

"Well, I will be, after a few minutes," Dawn assured them. She ran for the entrance.

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"Dawn seems nice," Frank said to Chet, who was grinning broadly.

"Yeah," Joe added. "I look forward to getting to know her better."

His comment earned him another black look from Chet. "I'll tell you right now," he said, "I don't want you bothering—"

"Hey," Frank spoke hurriedly to cut off an argument, "let's head to the mall to Mr. Pizza."

That put Chet in a good mood.. Soon they were seated in a booth at their favorite pizza joint. Chet had a faraway look in his eyes and a silly grin on his face even as he ordered a pie with the works.

"How soon they forget," Joe teased him, shaking his head in mock sadness.

"What are you talking about?" Chet asked.

"I'm talking about those diet sheets, all crumpled up and stuck in your shirt pocket." Joe pointed to the bent papers curling out from Chet's breast pocket. "I'll bet monster pies aren't on that list. Tsk-tsk. What would Dawn say?"

Chet bit his lip and Joe laughed. His laughter quickly ended when Chet pushed the pie away. "Here," Chet said, "you guys can have this, too. My treat."

He turned to their pal Tony Prito, who ran the place. "Hey, Tony," Chet called. "Give me a salad. No oil, just vinegar."

The Hardys watched Chet attack the green

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salad in grim silence. "Hey, it was just a joke," Joe said a little lamely.

"No, you were right," Chet told him. "I ought to get used to eating like this." He finished the last forkful, then stood up. "I've got to train myself to stay away from temptation. See you guys tomorrow."

Joe stared openmouthed as Chet walked away. "I never thought I'd see the day."

"What day?" Callie Shaw asked as she walked up to their table. Frank's girlfriend carried several shopping bags of various sizes, which she dumped on the seat beside Joe. Then she slid in beside Frank, a smile on her cute face as her sharp brown eyes took in Joe's expression.

"You look as though you've heard they repealed the law of gravity," she said.

"No, it's something weirder than' that," Joe told her. "Chet Morton just turned down a pizza—he paid for it and gave it away." He pointed to the pie, which still sat in the middle of the table. "Help yourself."

"And get my arm broken when Chet comes back from the men's room or something?" Callie asked suspiciously.

"No, Joe's telling the truth," Frank assured her.

"It may be true, but I don't believe it," Callie said.

"From now on, call Chet Mr. Willpower."

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Joe told Callie the whole story, making it as humorous as possible.

Frank Hardy didn't laugh, though. "I don't think this is so funny," he said. "I mean, we all know about Chet and pizza. If he's willing to give it up for this Dawn Reynolds, he must feel pretty strongly about her. I don't know if it's a good idea, you pushing in and competing for her."

"Competition is the American way," Joe assured him. "Chet wouldn't appreciate it if he had too easy a time. What's that line from school? The one about the bumpy road to love?"

" 'The course of true love never did run smooth,' " Callie quoted. "That's Shakespeare, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream."*

"Exactly!" Joe nodded energetically. "If Chet's truly in love, it shouldn't run smooth. Otherwise, 'May the best man win' as someone else said."

Frank shook his head. "Let's head home," he said to Callie, "before he quotes himself to death."

\* \* \*

The next morning Joe was seated at the breakfast table when Frank walked into the kitchen. Frank clung theatrically to the door frame and stared at him. "The world must really be upside down if you're up and ready before me."

"Let's cut the comedy," Joe said, smothering

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a yawn. "We need a. healthy breakfast if we're going to survive the workout planned for us this afternoon. Did you see the weights those sadists expect us to lift?"

"I hope you're satisfied," Frank said, heading for the refrigerator. "If you ask me, we should leave Chet to suffer alone."

"If there were a mystery behind this, you'd happily take on the torture," Joe kidded. He reached over to turn on the kitchen radio, hoping to catch the weather report.

Instead, he got a special bulletin.

"The police have identified the body found this morning floating in Barmet Bay," the announcer said. "The man, who was not a resident of Bayport, was tentatively identified as Walter Cosgrove. ..."

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Chapter 3

Joe nearly spewed cornflakes across the kitchen table. "That couldn't be—I mean, it has to be a coincidence. The Cosgrove we met at the health club yesterday doesn't have to be *this* Walter Cosgrove."

Frank's eyes narrowed in thought. "That runner who nearly passed out—Laufner—called Cosgrove Big Walt. So it would seem that he is or was a Walter Cosgrove."

"So maybe he *was* up to something weird with that gun, the way you figured." Joe shrugged. "I guess we'll find out today at the club."

\* \* \*

The locker room at the Harbor Health Club was buzzing. Members who never spoke to one another were talking together, all about Walt Cosgrove.

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"It *has* to be our Cosgrove;" Laufner, the runner who'd almost passed out the day before, said as he shut his locker. "The newspaper described him as dark-haired, muscular, and in his middle thirties. That fits Big Walt to a T."

"If he walks in and hears you talking that way, he's not going to like it," a heavyset member said, pulling on his sweatpants. "He'd think you were wishing him dead."

Laufner snorted. "And what if I did?" he asked. "Cosgrove thinks he can push anybody around. He's the biggest pain in the club." His voice dropped. "If you don't count Cole."

After pulling his T-shirt on, the heavyset man shook his head. "You really like to live dangerously, don't you? If Cole heard you talking like that, *you* could end up floating in the bay."

Laufner grayed a laugh. "The only thing he can do is exercise us to death—and I think he's already doing that."

The two men headed up the stairs to the gym.

Joe turned to Frank. "Looks like our friend Cosgrove was loved by all," he said in a low voice.

"We still don't know if he's the Cosgrove from the news reports," Frank said.

Dressed and ready, they went up to the gym, where they found Chet Morton talking with Terrance Penman. "Hey, guys," the young trainer said. "We've got a couple of people using the

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free weights, so start with some exercises."

Joe glanced over at the lightly tinted glass wall that separated the gym from the aerobics studio. He saw a leotard-clad female figure in there. "How about some aerobics?" he asked.

Chet noticed Dawn and nodded. "Sounds fine to me," he said.

Dawn Reynolds grinned at the three boys as they opened the glass door and stepped into the studio. A small group of men and women had already congregated there, forming into ranks.

"Hi," Dawn said, "and welcome to the wonderful world of aerobics. This is a basic class—just the thing to get you warmed up for your work out there." She nodded toward the gym.

"I hear it's just like dancing," Joe said, needling Chet. Joe was a good dancer, but Chet tended to stay off the dance floor.

"Let's start with some leg lifts," Dawn said. Rock music with a heavy beat started playing as she took her place at the front of the group. "A hundred!" Dawn called, starting the exercise. As the pretty instructor counted down, they all performed the exercise. By the time they reached fifty, Joe's leg was beginning to get tired. It wasn't exactly like dancing, and his muscles were protesting at the unfamiliar exercise.

Joe glanced over at Chet. Face red and panting a little, Joe's friend grimly tried to keep pace.

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"Yeah, that's the way to do it!" Joe called to him. Joe worked hard to eliminate any trace of being out of breath and tried to lift his leg even higher.

For a second Chet took his eyes off Dawn to glare at Joe, and his face went even redder. Then he continued with the exercise.

For the next half hour th*e* class continued. Joe felt sweat trickling down his back. Chet had big wet blotches appearing on his T-shirt.

Dawn continued leading the exercises, her voice normal, hardly a blond hair out of place. Joe began thinking of a cartoon he'd seen once. The caption had read "Aerobics in Hell." It had featured a devil leading a bunch of sinners in an apparently endless workout session.

At last the music ended and Dawn said, "That's it—very good, everybody!"

As soon as he could trust himself to speak normally, Joe walked over to Dawn. "That was a great starter," he said, pumping his arms a little. "It really gets the blood moving. Right, Chet?"

Chet only nodded, apparently not trusting himself to speak without panting.

Frank Hardy joined them, letting out a deep breath. "The only thing is, I feel as if my session has just ended, instead of just begun."

Dawn's laugh was bright and bubbly. "No goofing off, now," she said in a mock-stern

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voice. "Terrance is ready for you. And remember—I can see everything that goes on out there." She laughed, indicating the glass wall.

"We'll do our best to give you a show," Joe promised. He could feel Chet's eyes burning into his back.

"Why don't you cool it a little?" Frank whispered as they headed out. "You're going to push Chet into hurting himself or something."

"I just want Dawn to know how fit I am," Joe whispered back. "Besides, all's fair in love and war."

"You're just full of quotations lately," Frank said, shaking his head.

Terrance Penman set Joe up at a rowing machine, showing him how to set the weight resistance for ninety pounds. Joe leaned back against the weight, pulling on a bar and cable that was almost like the attachment for waterskiing.

Instead of skimming along the water, he had to haul against the weight. Now I know how galley slaves must have felt, rowing those big boats around, Joe thought.

He had three sets of exercises to do, repeating his hauling motions first ten times, then eight, then six. By the time he finished, the ninety- pound weight he was trying to move felt more like a ton and a half.

Straining, Joe finished the last set of repetitions. Chet Morton came over, wiping sweat from his face. "Finished with your reps?"

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Joe nodded.

"Penman said you could show me how to change the weights."

"You want them lighter?" Joe asked.

Chet glanced from the weight setup to the list in his hand. "No—more. I'm supposed to be pulling one hundred sixty pounds."

Joe stared. "You're pulling seventy pounds more than I am?"

His only response was a shrug from Chet. "It's because of my build—and because I've worked out with weights before."

Joe remembered Chet's weight room, set up in the old barn near his house. Sure, Chet had worked out in there, but Joe had never taken it seriously—until now.

As Joe rearranged the weight plates, Chet said sweetly, "I wonder if Dawn can see *this."*

Joe jerked upright, stung. "There. I've reset the pin for one hundred sixty pounds. Did you see how I did it?"

Chet nodded. "Thanks. Well, I might as well get down to it."

"Yeah. Good luck on finishing it."

Glancing upward, Chet only smiled. "Oh, I'll finish it, all right. See, this *isn't* like dancing."

He leaned back and pulled with an even, steady stroke. Joe watched as the stack of weight plates rose at the end of the cable.

A little farther along on the rubber-matted surface, Frank was lifting a barbell weighted at one

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end while bending over. "Six," he granted, letting the barbell down and releasing his two- handed hold. "Wait till you try this one, Joe. It's a real killer."

Joe checked the weight on the barbell. "That's one hundred thirty-five pounds, the same as I have to do," he said. "Okay, I might as well do it now."

"Could be worse," Frank said, toweling off. "When I took these from Chet, he was pulling fifty pounds more."

"What is this guy, Superman?" Joe grumbled as he took over the barbell.

By the time he finished his sets, Joe was beginning to feel a sensation of heat in the muscles over his upper ribs and at the rear of his shoulders. This must be what iron-pumpers call "feeling the burn," he thought.

His next exercises were with dumbbells. First came the flat fly, where he lay on a bench, raising the dumbbells straight-armed until they met over his chest. Then he did dumbbell pullovers, lying with his hands clasped together holding the dumbbell behind his head, then bringing it over his chest.

Joe glanced over at the bench beside him, where Chet was lying down, pressing a barbell straight over himself. Judging from the plates on the bar, he was pressing more than two hundred pounds! Man, if his arms give out, that thing will land right on his throat, Joe thought.

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Then he noticed that Frank was standing at the head of Chet's bench, ready to take the weight if needed—"spotting" it was called. A much lighter barbell stood off to one side. That must be the one Frank had used, Joe decided.

Finishing his last set, Joe sat up. "How did your bench pressing go?" he asked Frank, who was still spotting Chet.

"Okay," Frank said. "I managed to get through it all." He stared at Chet, silently counting his reps. "That's it."

Chet let Frank take the weight over his head. "I'm beginning to get back into this," he said happily. "Bet I could do another set of six before my muscles maxed out."

" 'Maxed out'?" Joe repeated.

"When your muscles have done the maximum amount of work they can, they just give out," Chet explained. "It can be scary. One second you're doing the exercise, the next, your arms or legs are like rubber."

"Nice time to tell me," Joe said, glancing at the barbell Frank was lowering to the floor.

"Hey, you get the light one that Frank used. It weighs only one hundred seventy-five pounds," Chet said.

Joe rolled his eyes. "Great. That's like picking up Frank and doing bench presses with him."

Chet shrugged. "Hey, iron man, your brother could do it."

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"Then get off that bench and let me get to work."

Frank stepped away. "I'll let you guys sort this out while I get some water."

Chet walked over to the smaller barbell. "Okay, hotshot, I'll spot for you."

Joe positioned himself on the bench, and Chet carefully lowered the barbell over Joe's chest. He didn't let go until Joe had a steady grip.

"Okay," Joe said. "Here we go."

He bombed his way through the first set of ten repetitions. "Take it easy with those reps," Chet warned. "There's no reward for speed."

"Sez you." Joe went into the second set, eight reps this time, but he didn't do them as quickly.

"Joe, I mean it," Chet said. "You can't rush weight training. If your muscles aren't ready—"

Teeth gritted, Joe performed the third set, eight more repetitions. He was gulping for air by the time he'd finished. It felt as if he were trying to push a mountain up off his chest.

"Joe—" Chet began.

"Don't tell me what to do," Joe wheezed. He launched into the final set, only six reps this time. Three times Joe raised the bar, more slowly with each repetition.

Halfway, he thought. Again, he pressed the bar upward until his arms locked. Four. It was a struggle not to let the weight drop down on his chest.

Chet started to reach for the barbell. Furious,

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Joe lowered the weight and pressed it up again. "Back off, Morton." His words emerged as gasps. "You're making me look bad!"

Joe's spurt of anger-induced strength wore off halfway through his final rep. Now he knew what maxing out meant. His right arm felt as if it were going to crumple.

The barbell wobbled, and Chet moved forward again, leaning over Joe to grab for the bar.

But the barbell wobbled more, the weights on the right-hand side sliding right to the end! The grip that was supposed to hold them in place fell to the floor as the unbalanced bar tipped under Joe's waning strength.

Chet managed to get hold, but only with one hand. He tried to wrestle the bar up by himself— Joe was no help at all. Weight plates clattered on the floor as the unbalanced bar tore loose. Neither of them could exert control as the bar swung in a horrible parody of a cheerleader's baton twirl.

In this case, though, the "baton" was moving with more than one hundred pounds of force on its weighted side—and the open end of the barbell was heading right for the side of Chet Morton's head!

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Chapter 4

Frank Hardy was stepping back to the weight section, sipping water from a paper cup, when he saw things going wrong for Joe and Chet.

He dropped the cup, splashing water on the carpet as he flung himself forward. Frank barely beat the swing of the barbell. His open palm caught Chet in the chest with a hearty slap. Chet bounced back, his head moving away from the deadly arc the barbell was following.

Frank's impact also made Chet lose his grip on the flying bar. It spun round till it crashed into the floor, bounced, then flew off to smash against one of the mirrors lining the walls.

Shards of glass filled the air, and everyone dove for cover. A young woman working out with dumbbells dropped them and yelled as a

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piece of glass caught her in the leg. Blood ran down over her knee, the red in sharp contrast to her green workout clothes.

Joe was up and off the bench, miraculously unhurt. He caught the young woman before she fell. "Wha-what happened?" she asked. Her big brown eyes, wide with pain, stood out from her pale face.

"I'll tell you what happened," an angry voice loudly announced. Jan Cole stomped over and pushed his face into Chet Morton's. "Stupidity happened."

Chet was so shaken up from the disaster that he couldn't even answer. "What's the matter with you, kid?" he demanded. "You said you knew your way around weights. Don't you understand what a spotter's job is supposed to be? The minute Hardy began to have trouble, you should have taken that weight from him."

"I—I tried—" Chet began, licking his parched lips.

" 'I tried,' " Cole mimicked him bitterly. "Well, *I* don't think you were even paying attention. You were probably too busy checking out the girl exercising next to you to take care of your buddy. So she's hurt, and you and Hardy nearly got killed. Too bad that bar *didn't* hit you in the head—maybe it would have knocked some sense into you!"

Chet stood frozen, white-faced, as Cole turned

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from him to the injured girl. "You okay, Linda?"

She nodded, her short dark hair bobbing. "I think so," she answered in a faint voice. "The glass—it's still in my leg."

Lips pressed tightly together, Linda looked down at the wound in her leg. A long, sharp piece of glass gleamed in her outer thigh.

"Oh, gross," a member of the gathered crowd—Frank thought it was Laufner—muttered. As far as Frank could see, it hadn't gone in too deep or cut any major blood vessels.

Still, the sight was enough to make Linda squeeze her eyes shut and turn her head away.

"We'd better get someone to take a look at that," Cole said. He glanced around at the collection of glass shards on the floor. "And I'll have someone clean up this mess—not you, Morton."

Cole's voice rose, and Chet stopped as he was bending over to pick up one of the pieces. "You'd probably break something else." His voice dripped with sarcasm.

"It's not Chet's fault," Joe spoke up. "He told me to stop, and I didn't listen to him." He took a deep breath. "If anybody's responsible for this, it's me."

"He should have done more than talk—he should have acted," Cole said. "And how come those weights slipped off? Morton, did you check that barbell before you gave it to Hardy?"

Chet opened his mouth. For a moment no

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words came out. "Well, no," he finally said. "But Frank had just used—"

"You were supposed to check it." Cole turned away, dismissing him.

Boy, this guy is a real sweetheart, Frank thought.

As Cole led Linda carefully toward the exit, the glass doors of the aerobics studio swung open. Dawn Reynolds rushed to the scene of the disaster, her face pale.

"What happened, Chet?" she asked. "I had my back to the glass wall, but I knew something had gone wrong when my class stopped dancing. That girl—was she bleeding?"

Chet could barely speak. He stepped away from them, so Joe got the job of telling Dawn what had happened.

As Dawn listened to the story, her face grew even paler. She rushed over to Chet, who stood with round blank eyes, turned on the damage surrounding him.

"Chet." It was nearly a whisper, but Frank could hear her clearly. Dawn's voice shook as if she were on the verge of tears. With a stifled gulp, she went on. "Maybe—maybe I did the wrong thing, encouraging you to join the club and work out. I know you want to get healthy. But I would never forgive myself if you got hurt."

"It wasn't his fault," Frank spoke up. "Joe even said so."

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"That's not the point," Dawn said in a constricted voice. "You can do a job on muscles— and even bones—if you push yourself too hard. I wouldn't want to be responsible for your getting hurt."

Chet stared at Dawn, wide-eyed. From the look on Chet's face, Frank knew Dawn had already hurt him pretty badly.

"You think I can't handle myself?" Chet asked in a low, hoarse voice. "Or maybe, maybe this is a brush-off." Chet's voice became louder and higher as his facial muscles grew hard. " 'Hey, Chet, it was nice, but now, bug off. I've found a more *interesting* member at the club.' "

The glare Chet shot at Joe Hardy sizzled with hate. "I saw him showing off for you. But he can't pump as much iron as I can—or as much as his brother can!"

"Chet, I was wrong," Joe began.

Chet cut him off. "Big deal. You spoke up kind of late. I'll never get an exercise partner around this place."

He checked out the gym, his lips in a straight, tense line. "I've paid for my membership, and I'm staying in the club, no matter how anyone tries to get me out."

Dawn stepped back as if Chet had slapped her in the face. She opened her mouth as if to speak, then turned and ran—not to the aerobics studio, but to the main exit and out of the club. Chet had obviously hurt her.

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Chet turned to Joe, his voice poisonous. "Well, go on, lover boy. I'm sure she's ready to cry on your manly shoulder. Or maybe you can go the pity route. You know, 'That maniac almost killed me!' "

Chet's face twisted, and for a second Frank thought his friend was going to spit on Joe. Chet spat words instead. "Well, all I can say is too bad!"

He kicked at a pile of glass fragments and stormed off to the locker room. The maintenance man who had appeared shook his head and began to sweep up the debris.

Laufner and the other bystanders in the gym quickly resumed their exercises, careful not to make eye contact with Frank or Joe. To Frank it seemed as if he and Joe had become surrounded by a bubble of silence. I don't think Chet's the only one who'll have a hard time getting exercise partners, Frank thought.

Joe Hardy stood stock-still for a moment longer before turning to Frank. He seemed greatly troubled.

Frank almost didn't have the heart to say "I told you so"—almost.

"Well, Mr. True-love-never-did-run-smooth, are you happy with your little competition with Chet now?" he finally asked.

Joe couldn't meet his eyes, and Frank felt a twinge of regret. His comment had been a cheap shot.

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"It couldn't have happened on purpose, could it?" Joe finally asked in a quiet voice.

The question was so out of left field that Frank didn't understand it at first. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"I mean, it was an accident, right? Chet's been my friend—well, as long as I can remember."

Frank could do nothing but stare.

"He just about laid it out, in front of everyone," Joe said, still bewildered. "He talked about how he almost killed me."

Frank felt a chill run down his back as he stared at his brother. "You can't believe that Chet—" he began.

"If you had asked me yesterday, I *wouldn't* have believed it," Joe said. "But then, I wouldn't have believed Chet could ever act the way he just did. I still want to believe that what happened was plain bad luck."

His voice faltered as he raised his eyes to Frank's. "The question is, what if Chet *made* it happen?"

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Chapter 5

The Hardy brothers waited in uncomfortable silence to go down to the locker room until they thought Chet Morton would have left the club. Even then, they didn't speak until they were in their van, out of everyone's earshot.

Joe saw that Frank's first reaction to his suggestion had been disbelief. But Joe knew his brother and believed that even now he was examining the situation from every angle, tearing it apart as logically as possible.

Frank got behind the wheel of the van, started the engine, and pulled out of the lot. "Let's go over the whole chain of events, step by step. We got to the club, heard rumors about Cosgrove, then went upstairs and met Penman."

"Who sent us off to warm up with some aerobics," Joe said.

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"Where you goofed on Chet and tried to turn the class into an exercise in one-upmanship," Frank said, accusing him.

"Then we went on to hit the weights," Joe said, accepting what Frank had said. "I started with the cable rowing machine."

"I worked out with the dumbbells—flat flys," Frank said. "I also saw Chet working on the dumbbell pullovers."

They worked their way through all the exercises until they reached the bench press. "I did my presses with Terrance Penman spotting," Frank said. "He showed me how the set screw works on the collar that restrains the weight plates. I did my four sets, no problem. By then, Chet had finished with the lat machine. Because there was another barbell available, he loaded it up, saying we'd save the one I'd used for you."

"So it sat around waiting for me after you finished." Joe frowned. "Did Chet go over to it at all?"

Frank shook his head. "He couldn't—he was lying on the bench. As far as I know, he never went near your barbell."

"Until he picked it up for me." Joe frowned. "He couldn't do anything. He'd know he'd be suspected right away. Who else could have done it? Cole? Penman? What reason would they have, though?"

"So Chet's got a bit of a motive and not much

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opportunity. That's if you can possibly suspect one of your best friends."

Joe gave his brother an uncomfortable smile. "I don't have much of a case, do I?" They drove home the rest of the way in silence. Joe couldn't erase Chet Morton's angry face from his memory.

\* \* \*

The Walter Cosgrove case was getting lots of media attention. As the boys walked into the kitchen, the hourly radio news was giving more details on the mystery man.

"Cosgrove was a traveling salesman who often visited Bayport," the announcer said. "When he was found in the bay, he was wearing an expensive black silk bomber jacket and a gold chain. His car, a late-model red Porsche, was found abandoned on Millman's Pier."

"That's definitely our Cosgrove," Joe said. "Black jacket, red Porsche."

Frank nodded. "And they found the car not far from the Harbor Health Club."

The radio report continued. "Chief Ezra Collig said that at this time the police are treating the case as one of suspicious death."

Turning from her place at the kitchen stove, where she'd been listening, the boys' aunt Gertrude shook her head. "It's just as I always say," she said. "That dockside neighborhood is an awful area. I read that it's trendy to move

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down there. Although why anyone would want to live in an old warehouse is beyond me."

"They renovate them first, Aunt Gertrude," Frank said.

"But people get murdered down there all the time," his aunt said, as if that would settle the argument. "You wouldn't find me dead down there."

"I certainly hope not," Joe said, stifling a chuckle.

Aunt Gertrude's face went red. "You know what I mean. Why do you boys have to go to a dangerous area to visit a health spa or whatever it is? If you need exercise, you could always help with the housework."

The boys disappeared before she could discover any chores to back up her theory.

By the time the evening TV news was on, the police had released the coroner's report.

"At the top of the news tonight, more about the death of Walter Cosgrove," WBPT's anchorman announced. "According to the coroner's report, Cosgrove did not die by drowning in Barmet Bay. There was no water found in the dead man's lungs. The medical examiner has pinpointed the cause of death as a brain aneurysm, a blood vessel bursting in the brain. Here with us tonight is our science correspondent, Dr. Burl Alpert, to explain the phenomenon of—"

With animated graphics and simple words,

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the science reporter explained what a brain aneurysm was. "Not an everyday way to die," he ended, "but not suspicious, either. Apparently, Mr. Cosgrove had parked on an old pier. We'll never know why for sure. The quick onset of an aneurysm could have killed him instantly, and his dead body could have fallen into the bay."

The camera pulled in for a close-up on the science reporter. "There was no sign of violence on the body—unless you count the odd condition of the deceased's feet. According to the coroner, the skin of the soles was bleached white in several spots with frills of dead skin at the edges. That's a sign that Cosgrove must have suffered from blisters before he died."

Burl Alpert paused with a puzzled look. "But the violence there, I'm afraid, would have to be self-inflicted. Over to you, Scott."

Frank went to bed after the report on Cosgrove. Joe stayed up for the sports scores, but hit the sheets soon as well.

\* \* \*

The Harbor Health Club was not its usual well-run self when the boys visited it late the next morning. They found a rather harassed-looking female staff member behind the reception desk, her instructor's T-shirt plastered to her leotard top with sweat. She passed them through with only a quick look at their membership cards.

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"You may not find your usual trainer available today," the woman warned them.

"Why?" Joe asked.

The woman was obviously too tired to do anything but tell the truth. "They're giving statements to the police about Walter Cosgrove. Even Mr. Vanbricken is down at headquarters." She glanced at her watch. "And so is the person who was supposed to be relieving me."

The locker room attendant was full of his experiences "down at the precinct," as he put it. He also had some colorful theories about what had happened to Cosgrove, but Joe wasn't interested. He had promised himself, he would be all business and concentrate on exercising.

That promise was broken the moment he walked up the stairs.

Dawn Reynolds was hovering by the entrance to the gym. She had lost a lot of perkiness in one day. There were dark shadows under her eyes, and even her blond hair seemed to hang limply.

"Joe, I need to talk to you," she said, the words coming out in a rush. "I've got this problem, this, uh, situation ..."

She spent another moment fumbling for words before falling into a painful silence.

Joe immediately understood why, as he heard Chet come stomping up the stairs behind him.

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He neither looked at nor spoke to either of them.

Dawn squeezed her hands together and watched Chet move off.

"Dawn!" An instructor rushed up, grabbing the girl's arm. "I've been looking all over for you. Barbara's supposed to be teaching an aerobics class, but she's still with the police. We need you to fill in."

Staring helplessly at Joe, Dawn let herself be pulled into the aerobics studio. Joe shrugged and decided to hit an exercise bike for his warm-up, staying far away from Dawn—and temptation. After a few miles of pedaling and fifty stomach crunches, he was ready to face the iron again.

That day's target was his shoulders and arms. Joe began with four sets of military presses, raising a ninety-five-pound barbell behind his neck. Then came the front presses, using a seventy-five-pound bar.

As he worked out, he was joined by a dark- haired young woman, also using a barbell. Joe didn't need to see the bandage wrapped around her leg to identify the girl who'd been injured the previous day. "You're Linda, aren't you?" he asked.

"And you're Joe." She grinned. "I thought you might need an exercise partner."

"You're on," Joe said.

As they worked together, Joe felt a warmth beyond the burning of his muscles. Linda was a

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very committed bodybuilder. It showed in the definition of muscle under her skin, and in the serious way she pushed herself to the limit in her exercises.

"I thought you'd be home after what happened yesterday," Joe said between sets of barbell curls. His upper arms ached slightly as he pumped them up.

"No pain, no gain," Linda said with a grin. "I don't want to fall behind on my training. The injury wasn't bad. If I'm careful, my body can handle it."

Joe glanced over to where Chet Morton stood at the pressdown machine, working on his triceps. In between straining against the machine's resistance, he kept peeking over at Joe.

Good, Joe thought. Maybe he'll lighten up a little if he sees me paying attention to another girl.

Joe was working on consecutive curls when Chet came over and picked up a barbell. There wasn't much room in the weight area, so he set up the bar in front of the power rack. The rack was a sort of mechanical spotter. Struts placed in the back of the rack ensured that the bar couldn't fall below a given height.

Whoever had used the cage last must have been doing squats—the struts were at waist level. Joe continued his curls as Chet assembled a one-hundred-forty-five-pound barbell.

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Picking up the weight, Chet began front military presses as Jan Cole came by.

"Know what you need, Morton? You need to use *all* of your body. Ever done any power movements?"

"A few," Chet cautiously admitted.

"Well, you ought to do more. Put that thing down."

Chet carefully lowered the barbell.

"See, *this* is what you need." Cole squatted down, grabbing the barbell in an overhand grip. In an explosive movement he brought the weight up, straightening his legs, then his back, which brought the barbell to hip level. In a smooth continuation of the movement, he flexed his arms at the elbows. The weight rested on the heels of his palms, at shoulder level. "Now you try it," Cole said, pushing the weight up and over to Chet.

Chet wasn't ready for it. He stumbled back, hands up, trying to wave Cole back. But Cole couldn't stop. Nearly one hundred and fifty pounds were rushing straight at Chet!

Joe's friend did his best. He grabbed the barbell, staggering into the power cage.

"Drop!" Joe yelled. "Let the cage catch the weight!"

Chet must have heard him. He let his feet fall out from under him.

Too late, Joe realized that Chet was falling at an angle—the bar wasn't going to catch!

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"*Get* out from under there!" he yelled to Chet in horror.

Chet was on the ground, unable to move. Above him, the left-hand side of the barbell had caught on the protective strut.

But the right side hadn't. The heavy weight smashed to the floor, right where Chet lay!

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Chapter 6

Frank Hardy had come out of the locker room a bit later than his brother. He was only warming up on a stationary bike when he heard the commotion behind him.

Turning, Frank was just in time to see Chet Morton go down. Frank leapt from the cycle and sprinted over to the power cage, joining Joe and Linda, the female bodybuilder.

Jan Cole stood horrified in front of the cage, staring down at Chet's still form. The barbell lay half across the stocky teenager's chest.

Cole licked his lips. "Chet, you're not—?" he began in a hoarse voice.

As if in answer, Chet gave a low groan.

Terrance Penman came rushing up. "What happened?" he demanded.

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"It was an accident," Cole said rapidly. "I handed him a weight, but I guess he wasn't ready for it."

"You *handed* him a weight?" Joe said incredulously. "You nearly shoved that barbell down his throat."

"Let's not talk about that now," Frank said, kneeling by the side of the power cage. "Chet is our only concern." He looked worriedly at the heavy barbell, resting across the left half of Chet's chest. That could mean danger not only to his left lung, but also to his heart.

Frank glanced up at Terrance Penman, who stood beside Linda on the right-hand side of the cage. "We'd better get this weight out of the way first."

Penman grasped the barbell to take some of the weight. Still on his knees, Frank took hold of the bar as well, shifting it gingerly. He was in a clumsy position, though, and couldn't use his full strength to move the bar.

Realizing this, Joe pushed past Jan Cole to add his muscle to the effort. With the three of them, moving the barbell was easier. As soon as the bar was off Chet, Frank left the weight to Joe and Penman and turned back to his friend.

"Chet?" he said in a low voice.

Chet's eyes fluttered open, and his right hand moved to his left side. "Hurts," he muttered, and his face contracted in a spasm of pain.

"Don't talk," Frank said quickly. "Don't do

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*anything."* He looked up at Cole. "Is there a phone around here?"

The big man stared dumbly down at him.

Frank felt a surge of impatience. "Look, we have to call an ambulance and get him to a hospital. We've got to do it as fast as possible."

Chet could have broken ribs, Frank realized. One of those broken bones could slide into his lung and puncture it. Frank replayed the fall in his mind. It didn't seem likely that Chet would have damaged his spine, though.

Penman pushed past Cole, who still stood unmoving. "The closest phone is in the hall on the way to the locker room. I'll go." He headed off.

Cole seemed to snap out of his trance. "What do we need an ambulance for?" He stepped forward, reaching toward Chet. "I'll help him up and take him in my car."

Frank rose to his feet, blocking Cole's way. "We don't know how badly off Chet is. A slightly wrong move and we could kill him."

A shadow of scorn passed over Cole's face. "He's probably faking it."

Joe Hardy leaned into Cole's face. "Let's see how *you'd* look if some creep tossed a barbell at you."

Frank gave his brother an elbow in the ribs. "Cool it, Joe. We've got other things to worry about."

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Penman ran back. "The phone's dead and so's the one in the locker room. We've had lots of trouble with the service here—they can't seem to get it right. I should stay with Chet. Will one of you run to the main office and try to call?"

"I'll go," Frank said.

Frank took off and pushed through the knot of onlookers who had stopped exercising to stare at Chet. "That guy must be jinxed," Frank heard Laufner mutter.

On the way to the exit, Frank passed the glass wall that separated the aerobics studio from the gym. He could just make out the pounding beat of music, but nobody was dancing inside. They were all clustered against the glass, staring out at Chet.

Frank saw Dawn Reynolds, her hands clutched together, her eyes staring fixed and unfocused. She seemed to be viewing the most terrible thing she'd ever seen in her life. Frank watched as a tear trickled out from the corner of one eye and down her cheek.

Seems as if she was right, Frank thought grimly. Chet stayed at the club, and he did get hurt.

The more he thought about it, the angrier Frank became. This whole situation was Jan Cole's fault. Where did he come off, tossing a heavy barbell like that at anyone?

Frank reached the reception desk, which was

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still empty. That phone wasn't working either. Behind the desk was a door marked with the word *Office.*

Pete Vanbricken's office. Frank decided to see if he had a working phone. Also the sooner Vanbricken heard about Chet's accident, the better.' Especially if he heard about it before Jan Cole had time to concoct a story for him.

Frank walked up to the office door, rapped sharply, and said, "Mr. Vanbricken?"

There was no answer, but the door swung slightly open at his knock.

Frank pushed the door open wider and stepped inside. The lights were off, and the office was empty.

It was a spacious room, carpeted in the same industrial gray tweed carpeting that covered most of the floors in the club. The walls were painted Harbor Health Club gray. Even the plants in front of the windows were indistinguishable from the greenery decorating the main room of the gym.

The only nonstandard items in the room were the framed photographs on the walls—mementos of Vanbricken's glory days—and the big teak desk by the window. In the pictures, a very young Pete Vanbricken grinned shyly while holding aloft a college championship trophy. An older, more confident Vanbricken slapped a high-five with his teammates as the Midland Foxes won a final play-off game.

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For a moment Frank wondered where Vanbricken was. Then he shook his head. The shock of Chet's injury must have addled his wits. Hadn't somebody mentioned that Vanbricken was away from the club, down at police headquarters?

Frank tried the phone. It worked and he stood glancing out the window as he relayed the information to 911.

Frank's gaze dropped and passed over the top of the desk. Abruptly, he zeroed in on a piece of paper. He'd spotted his name on the sheet. It seemed to be a list of new members of the Harbor Health Club. Chet, Frank, and Joe were listed, with their membership fees beside their names.

Frank frowned when he saw the figure. He and Joe had gotten a two-for-one membership deal. Yet the dollar amounts beside their names were much larger than what they'd actually paid.

Scanning the list, Frank noticed that almost all of the new members were paying hefty sums. His eyes stopped again on another name he recognized—Hurd Applegate.

Something wasn't right. Hurd Applegate could certainly afford the amount listed by his name, but he was an old man, almost a recluse. Why would he enroll himself in a health club?

Frowning, Frank turned to the door as it was pushed open. Jan Cole stepped in, his

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shoulders almost brushing the door frame. When he saw Frank, he stopped in his tracks and glared. Muscles bunched and grew in the man's shoulders and biceps as he clenched his hands into fists.

"What are you doing in here?" Cole growled.

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Chapter 7

Frank watched as Jan Cole's suspicious eyes moved to the papers on Pete Vanbricken's desk. Then they went back to Frank's face, filled with worry as well as suspicion.

Whatever's going on, he knows about it, Frank thought. And now he's afraid I know about it, too.

Out loud, he said, "What am I doing here? I'm using the phone. Also I'm looking for your boss, to tell him about that stunt you just pulled with the barbell."

Frank walked toward the door, and Cole reluctantly gave way. "You're just lucky that Mr. Vanbricken's not here and that I have to go with my friend to the hospital," Frank went on.

Frank stepped past the reception desk and

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started back to the gym. He met Joe halfway back.

"At last!" Joe said. "I thought maybe there wasn't a working phone in this whole place."

Frank and he ran back to the gym and got there just as the ambulance pulled up. Two paramedics tore inside to Chet. After a quick examination, they lifted Chet onto a gurney and wheeled him back out to the ambulance.

Penman rode with Chet, and Joe and Frank followed in their van to Bayport General Hospital.

Frank explained what had happened to the Emergency Room doctor.

"Possible chest trauma," the woman said, writing on a clipboard. "And you say he was out. Do you mean unconscious?"

Frank shrugged. "I don't know. His eyes were closed, and he didn't seem aware of where he was."

"He's been awake since then," Joe put in.

"Right," Penman agreed. "I talked to him on the way here, and he made sense."

Chet was rolled into an examination cubicle, while the Hardys and Terrance Penman were left to take seats in the waiting room.

"This has been some week," Penman said, shaking his head. "First Cosgrove dies, then Joe nearly gets nailed on the bench press, and now this." He managed a weak smile. "Well, you

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know what they say—bad luck always comes in threes."

Silence fell as they waited for news on Chet's condition. After a while Penman rose to his feet. "I guess I should check back with the club."

He stepped toward the pay phone, then came back a second later, looking a little embarrassed. "Uh, guys, all my money's back at the club."

Grinning, Joe and Frank shrugged. They were in their gym clothes, too.

Penman went to the nurse in charge and asked to use the phone. Moments later, he was back. "Word of the accident got to Mr. Vanbricken. He's coming over. As soon as he arrives, I'm supposed to head back to the club. They're still understaffed, and the place is a madhouse. I hope I can get cab fare from the boss."

A few minutes later the Emergency Room door opened, and Pete Vanbricken strode inside. He was still a young man and moved with the confidence of someone who'd been named all-pro quarterback before he was twenty-five. Frank had always thought Vanbricken's face would have made a perfect logo for the Midland Foxes. He looked like a fox, with bright red hair and handsome, yet pointed, features.

Right now, as he motioned to Terrance Penman, an anxious frown creased his handsome face.

Watching the two men confer, Joe gave a sour chuckle. "He's probably worried sick about a lawsuit."

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"I think he's got more than that to be concerned about," Frank said. "There's some funny business going on at that club, and old Pistol Pete is right in the middle of it."

He quickly explained about the list he'd noticed on Vanbricken's desk, with the inflated payments noted beside their names and the odd additional members.

"Old Man Applegate a member of a health club?" Joe said in disbelief. "Stamp collecting would be more his speed."

"That's right," Frank agreed. "So something has to be—Uh-oh, later for that."

Pete Vanbricken came over to the boys. "I'd have been here earlier, but it took a while for the message to get to me at police headquarters." He shook his head, a little exasperated. "If I'd only known the trouble I'd let myself in for by going to the police."

"You contacted them?" Frank asked.

Vanbricken nodded. "When I heard that a Walter Cosgrove had died, I figured I ought to tell them that he was a member of my club. So the cops were all over me. They even made me identify the body."

"They needed *you* to do that?" Joe looked confused. "Why?"

"The police are having a hard time getting a line on him," Vanbricken explained. "And I can understand why. The guy's not married, and he listed no family on his application form. The

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company he works for, Interstate Sales, is supposed to be sending their regional manager, but he can't fly in from Detroit until sometime tomorrow. So all the police have are a name, a driver's license, and some other paper ID. It seems that Cosgrove moved away from the address in his license, and there are enough Walter Cosgroves in the United States to make checking into his background a real chore."

Vanbricken sighed. "Answering the cops' questions was a real chore, too. They even had me go through Cosgrove's personal effects over at headquarters."

He gave them a strained smile. "But I'm sure you don't want to hear about that. Right now, all I want to know is that your friend is all right."

The door to the examination area opened, and the ER doctor came out. "Frank and Joe Hardy?" he called.

"Right here," Frank said. He and Joe stepped forward, followed by Pete Vanbricken.

"Your friend was very lucky," the doctor said as she led them through the door, then down a hallway lined with small cubicles. "If that weight had landed an inch or two farther to the right, it would have crushed his chest."

Vanbricken breathed very hard through his nose.

"We've taken X-rays, and they show no broken bones or internal damage," the doctor went on. "Your friend is in here." She pushed aside

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the curtain on one of the cubicles, and there was Chet.

At first Frank thought he was sitting up, but then he realized Chet was actually lying back against the raised top half of a mechanized hospital bed. Chet's T-shirt had disappeared, and a heavy swath of taping ran around his midsection. But his color was back, and he smiled when he saw the Hardys.

"That tape job makes you look like the mummy's brother-in-law," Joe said, grinning with relief that his friend looked so well.

"Don't make me laugh," Chet said, his right arm going over to his left side. "They taped my ribs, even though they think they're only bruised." He glared at Frank. "And what's the big idea of telling them that I passed out? Now they're afraid I might have landed on my head and gotten a concussion."

"If they'd only asked me, Chet, I'd have told them that landing on your head couldn't hurt *you,"* Joe said.

"Chet, I told them everything that happened to make sure they'd give you the right treatment," Frank said.

"Sure! And now they want to keep me overnight for observation," Chet said in disgust.

"And what's so bad about that?" Frank wanted to know.

"Have you ever eaten hospital food?" Chet asked.

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In spite of himself, Frank had to laugh.

Pete Vanbricken stepped up to the bed. "Chet, I'm glad to see you looking so well."

Chet was surprised. "Mr. Vanbricken! What are you doing here?"

"Call me Pete," Vanbricken said. "As soon as I heard there'd been a little accident at the club, I came right over." He tried to give Chet a smile. "Boy, talk about beginner's bad luck—"

"Chet's only bad luck was having that clown Cole as an instructor," Joe interrupted. "I don't know what Cole told you, but Frank and I both saw what went on. Cole pushed a one-hundred- forty-five-pound barbell onto Chet before he was ready. If Chet had been anywhere else instead of in front of the power cage, we wouldn't be talking about this here. We'd be talking in the morgue."

"I *thought* I'd find you here," a voice said from the doorway.

Joe, Frank, and Vanbricken turned to find Con Riley leaning against the door frame, arms crossed over the chest of his blue uniform jacket.

"Officer Riley! What a surprise to see you!"

From the tone of Vanbricken's voice, Frank suspected it wasn't a pleasant surprise.

"Do the police need me for something else?" the club owner asked.

"Actually, Mr. Vanbricken, you aren't the

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one I was looking for. It's these two young men." Con smiled at the Hardys.

Vanbricken stared in surprise. "What?"

"I heard the Hardy brothers had come with Chet to the hospital." Con Riley gave the boys a long, appraising look. "I didn't know that they were members of your health club. But when I mentioned it to the chief, he thought we should talk to them."

Vanbricken stared at the Hardys as if they'd suddenly sprouted feathers. "The chief wants to speak to these kids? But they only became members the day Cosgrove died.

Con Riley shrugged. "What can I say, Mr. Vanbricken? Orders is orders."

"No need for handcuffs, Con," Frank said. "Joe and I would *love* to talk to you about this case."

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Chapter 8

"Well, I'd better get back to the club and see what's going on." Pete Vanbricken glanced uncomfortably around the hospital cubicle. He left with a halfhearted wave to Chet, looking even more worried than when he'd come in.

The boys watched him go in silence. Then Chet managed a grin. "Well, he certainly went in a hurry." He glanced at the police officer in the doorway. "I guess you guys have to be going, as well."

"We'll come back to visit," Frank promised.

"Yeah, just as soon as we find out where they've put you," Joe said with a grin.

"Just do me a favor," Chet begged. "Bring me a decent burger when you come."

Laughing, the Hardys said goodbye to Chet and went with Con Riley down the hallway.

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"Con, can we ask a favor?" Frank asked.

Riley seemed dubious. "And what might that be?"

Frank gestured at the workout clothes he and Joe were still wearing. "We came here straight from the gym. Our street clothes are back there. Could we change before we see the chief?"

"Yeah," Joe said, looking down at his shorts. "I always prefer to wear long pants when I tangle with Chief Collig."

Laughing, Con Riley promised them changing time.

The Hardys returned to the club and changed into their street clothes. Back in their van, Joe wanted to know, "So what are we going to tell the cops?" He got behind the wheel and started the drive to headquarters.

"We'll tell them about what we saw in the locker room the first time we came," Frank said. "Including the gun."

"I didn't see any gun," Joe objected. "Although I did see Cosgrove acting like a gorilla."

"Well, I guess that's about all we can say about Cosgrove." Frank shook his head. "Too bad we never got to follow him."

He thought back to the near-fight between Vanbricken and Cole, then Dawn's showing up, and the caveman competition between Joe and Chet.

Maybe if all that whole nonsense hadn't happened, they might have had time to observe

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Cosgrove before he died. Of course, then there were all the accidents. What had Penman said? Bad luck comes in threes?

The glimmer of an idea passed through Frank's mind. Two of those accidents involved one person. Joe was acting as if the slipping weight had endangered him. But in reality, *Chet* was the one who had had to be rescued from that swinging barbell.

Frank tried to concoct a scenario where Cosgrove's death, the strange list on Vanbricken's desk, and the attempts on Chet were somehow tied together. He gave up with a frustrated sigh. If there was a common thread, he couldn't find it.

At headquarters Con Riley brought the boys to the detective squad room. Spread over several desks were clothing, a toiletries kit, luggage, and other personal belongings.

Staring down at the collection was Chief Ezra Collig. Sitting at a typewriter was a detective Frank had met a couple of times before. What was the guy's name? Owens? Nevins? Something like that, Frank knew.

The man had a hunt-and-peck style of typing, hitting the keys only with his forefingers. He looked up as the Hardys entered. So did the chief, who frowned a greeting.

"Frank and Joe Hardy," Collig said grimly. "We were just about to finish up this case when

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we heard that you may have known the deceased."

"Just for a few minutes," Frank said. "We joined the health club he belonged to and met him in the locker room twice."

"And that's it?" Collig asked. His eyes were suspicious as he looked at the Hardys. "I've known you guys too long. You have a very bad habit of upsetting my cases after I think they're finished. So I figured I'd check with you this time."

Joe shrugged and Frank seemed to be studying the dingy tile floor.

Collig sighed. "As far as we can find out, this Cosgrove guy was a loner with no home, no family, no life. We don't even know where to ship his personal effects. He's a nothing, a zero, who happened to drop dead and fall in the bay."

"Well, he was a gambler, and not a very lucky one, from what I overheard," Frank said.

Collig nodded. "We heard about that."

"He had a nasty temper," Joe put in. "We saw him nearly deck someone in the locker room."

"Yeah, the guy seemed like a bundle of laughs," the detective said. "Everybody at the health club mentioned that."

"Did anyone mention his gun?" Frank asked.

The three police officers glanced at one another, then at Frank.

"What gun?" Collig wanted to know.

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"The last time we saw Cosgrove in the locker room at the Harbor Health Club," Frank said, "he nearly decked a guy named Laufner. After that he grabbed his gym bag and left. The zipper on the bag happened to be open, and I saw a gun inside it."

The police officer's eyes shifted to Joe. "You saw this, too?" Con asked.

Joe shrugged. "I saw Cosgrove nearly deck Laufner. I didn't see the gun."

The detective frowned. "Frank, are you sure you saw a gun? By your own admission, you only got a quick glimpse. Maybe you saw something that *looked* like a gun—the handle of a portable hair drier, for example."

"Cosgrove wore his hair slicked back. Was a hair drier found in his luggage?" Frank asked.

Now it was Collig's turn to frown. "No. But neither was a gun."

Frank stepped to the desk with the little red gym bag on it. A pair of sweatpants, a black athletic shirt, an athletic supporter, and a towel were piled beside it. "This is the bag I saw. There was a gun in it. What more can I say?"

"I think you've said enough already." The detective pushed back his chair and bitterly pointed a finger at the typewriter. " 'Go ahead and write up the report,' the chief said. 'We'll just ask these kids on the off chance they know something.' "

He gave the Hardys a black look. "I was on

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the last page of a fifteen-page report. And you see the way I type."

Even Con Riley had to laugh at that complaint.

"So, is it a case of the Hardy boys strike again?" Collig asked. "Have you sent us professionals back to square one?"

Frank wasn't about to answer. When the chief sounded nice and quiet, almost friendly, that was the time to watch out for an explosion.

Collig's expression darkened. "We thought we'd covered this guy as well as we were able to. We got the boss of the health club to identify the body. And, of course, we filled a lot of notebooks with statements about Cosgrove from the people who worked there."

"About nine million useless questions and answers," the detective at the typewriter griped.

"We even identified that stupid red bag you were pointing at," Con Riley added. "Vanbricken knew it right away—he said it was like Cosgrove's trademark."

"Right," the annoyed detective chimed in. "We even got a confirmation on that from the head trainer over at the club. What was his name? Cole?"

"What about the big black bag Cosgrove carried?" Frank asked.

The police looked at one another again. "What bag is that?" Collig asked with a resigned air.

"It was another weird thing I noticed," Frank

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said. "When he was changing into his workout clothes, he had a large black bag. When he left, he had that red one."

Frank frowned. With everything else that had happened, he'd almost forgotten that fact.

What *had* happened to that big black bag? he wondered.

"So this is what it comes down to," Collig said quietly. "You saw a gun, which no one else did, and also saw another bag. None of this is supported, of course."

"That's just about it." Frank gave an embarrassed little shrug*.*

Collig looked at the evidence spread out around the squad room, his face twisting into a scowl. As far as they knew, this was everything Walter Cosgrove owned in the world. "Con, you arranged for copies of this guy's fingerprints to be sent to the feds in Washington. I know you can't speed up their computers, but see if you can move us ahead in the line."

Collig then glanced at the fourteen pages of the report his detective had prepared. Frank, understood the timing. It was supposed to have gone out to the media the next morning.

The chief clasped his hands behind his back, set his teeth, and gave a low growl from the back of his throat. "I hate to tell you this, Nevins, but it looks like this investigation isn't over yet."

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Chapter 9

As the Hardys walked down the steps of police headquarters, Joe shook his head. "You know, Frank, I expected Chief Collig to kill you."

"He shouldn't have," Frank protested. "I just raised some questions. And I think that the chief is cop enough to want answers to them."

Joe glanced at his brother. "Frank, are you *sure* about this? Maybe the black bag was Cosgrove's sample case. I mean, he was a salesman, after all."

"Do you know what he sold?" Frank suddenly asked.

Joe stared at him blankly for a moment, then shrugged. "I don't know," he admitted. "What would a company called Interstate Sales sell?"

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"Sounds like something the Gray Man would set up to use as a spy cover."

That got a laugh out of Joe. "Yeah, I can see it now—Walt Cosgrove, Secret Agent. So who do you think got him, Frank? The Purple Claw? The Yellow Fang?"

Frank gave him a look. "I'm just suggesting that the company name sounds like a phony," he said. "My interest is in what happened to that bag and gun."

Joe shrugged again. "Well, he was a salesman and obviously traveled. Maybe he had the gun for protection."

"So what happened? The minute he dropped dead, his gun and his sample case disappeared?" Frank shook his head. "There's something screwy there."

"Looks like you're finding something screwy everywhere," Joe countered. "The only fact we've got is that Cosgrove is dead. There's not even any sign of foul play. Hey, maybe we should face it—we might never know what happened."

Frank stopped in his tracks. "No, but we can try to find out more about that black bag—ask some questions around the club, maybe. It strikes me that there's one person who might be able to tell us something."

Joe stared. "Who?"

"Pete Vanbricken," Frank replied. "He was able to tell the cops all sorts of stuff about

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Cosgrove's red bag. Maybe he'd have something to say about the other one."

Joe thought for a minute. "We've even got something to sweat him with," he said. "What about those records with the fake fee payments you saw in his desk?"

"Right. If he's got one thing to hide, maybe he's got more. Let's see if we can find anything more about him." Frank climbed into the van, and Joe followed.

They didn't drive very far until Frank found a parking spot near the offices of the Bayport *Times.*

"This may not be the right place to start researching," Joe warned. "The *Gazette* is much more of a scandal sheet. If any paper's going to have dirt on Vanbricken, that would be the place to look."

"But we don't have a friend at the *Gazette,"* Frank pointed out. "With luck, we'll find Liz Webling in the office."

Liz Webling's father was editor of the Bayport *Times. A* budding reporter herself, she was often found around the offices of the paper, doing odd jobs.

That day she was at the front counter, taking classified ads. As far as Joe could figure, she seemed pretty disgusted with her assignment.

"Hi, guys." Liz looked up from the pad where she was writing down information. "So what's the story on this fancy health club you

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joined?" She leaned over the counter, toward Frank. "I've got a scoop for you," she said. "Callie Shaw is pretty p.o.'ed that you haven't invited her to the club as your guest. She's bought a leotard just for the occasion."

"Boy, Frank," Joe said. "You're in major trouble."

"I've been hoping that Chet would give me a guest pass to check out the place," Liz said a little wistfully.

So, Joe thought, Liz hadn't heard about two things: Dawn Reynolds and Chet's injury.

"I don't know if Chet's going to be around the club much for a while," Frank began. "He's in the—"

He was interrupted by a ringing telephone. Liz picked up the receiver and began frantically scribbling. "What model car, sir? Right. What year?"

She finished the call and tore another sheet off her pad, adding it to the pile at her elbow.

"What's the matter with Chet?" Liz asked.

"He's in the hospital," Frank began again, only to be interrupted by another call.

"Chet hurt himself working out, but he's really okay," Joe quickly said when Liz hung up. "They're only keeping him for observation. He'll be fine. We'll explain more about it later. Right now, though, we need to look in your morgue."

"Nobody's back there now," Liz said, turning

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toward the rear of the offices. "Does this have something to do with a case you're working on?"

The boys were saved from answering her question when a man walked in to place a classified ad in person. Hurriedly stepping past Liz, Joe said, "We know how the system works. You can trust us. We won't mess anything up."

With Liz trapped by her client, they managed to make it back to the morgue. Frank immediately went to the clipping files, searching for a folder with Pete Vanbricken's name on it.

The file turned out to be a heavy manila envelope about four inches thick. Frank and Joe split the folders inside into two sets and began riffling through them.

Joe wound up with clippings from Vanbricken's high school days up to his first play-off victory for the Midland Foxes.

"How's it going?" Frank asked as he scanned his set of clips.

"Well, a movie titled *Vanbricken*—*the Early Days* would probably be rated G," Joe said dispiritedly. "He was a very good boy."

"His later life looks much the same," Frank said, riffling on. "There's a whole lot of stuff here about fame not spoiling him. Here's an article about him visiting an orphanage, another about him dedicating a youth center, and still another about him running a booth at a street fair to raise money for a community group."

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Joe finished with his files. "So maybe we were wrong, thinking he's got things to hide?"

Adding Joe's files to his, Frank replaced them in the envelope, refiled the whole thing, and closed the cabinet with a thump. "Maybe we're wrong to depend on reporters and press agents for our information," he said, rising from his seat.

With the telephone still attached to her ear, Liz turned pleading eyes on them as they started out the front door. "Come on, guys," she said, placing a hand over the receiver. "Tell me what's going on."

"We'll be back with the story," Frank promised.

*"If* there's a story," Joe added.

Outside, Joe asked, "Okay. Now do we check the scandal sheet?"

"We do better than that," Frank told him with a grin. "We'll check in with the one person who probably knows the most dirt in this town."

Joe looked at his brother, his eyebrows raised. "And who's that?"

Frank's grin got broader. "Dad."

Fenton Hardy was in his office when the boys got home. The door was open, and Fenton was sitting at his desk.

"Dad?" Frank said. "Are we interrupting anything?"

Fenton raised his eyes from the papers he was

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reading. "Nothing important. What's up, boys?"

"We were wondering what you could tell us about Pete Vanbricken," Joe said.

"Football hero at Bayport High, some years before you went there," their father said. "He was a college all-star, went pro, played for some team out in the Midwest, got injured, and returned to Bayport. He also happens to own the health club you two joined."

Fenton gave them a keen glance. "My turn. Why are you asking?"

Frank leaned against the wall. "We were wondering if you knew anything about him having trouble with the law."

"Or getting into any other kind of trouble," Joe added.

Fenton was interested. "So, you suspect that our local hero has feet of clay?"

"We're just wondering," Frank said. "Can you tell us anything?"

"Only that as a kid—and even as a celebrity— Pete Vanbricken seemed to be a real straight arrow," Fenton said. "Whenever there was a good cause, you could depend on him supporting it, even if it wasn't always convenient. He always volunteered for police anticrime programs. He used to go into tough neighborhoods and talk to the kids."

"Not even a breath of scandal around him?"

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Joe asked. "Gambling, fighting, chasing women?"

"Vanbricken dated a lot of glamorous women when he was riding high—right up to the time his shoulder got injured," Fenton said. "But I wouldn't say he chased them. He didn't bet on anything, and he didn't get into fights. As far as I know, he's got the best-polished halo in town."

The boys thanked their father and went out.

"So much for getting any dirt." Joe sighed.

"We still have one other source," Frank said, frowning. "The man himself."

Joe stared at his brother. "What do you expect him to do? Come up to us and say, 'Oh, by the way, fellas, have you noticed that I've become a crook lately?' "

"No," Frank admitted. "But there are a few questions I'd like to ask him." The expression in his eyes became remote and thoughtful. "And I'd be real interested to see how he answers them."

Supper was going to be late that night, so the boys got into their van and headed back to the Harbor Health Club. The place was a lot livelier than it was when they had worked out earlier.

"Looks like the joint is jumping," Joe said, staring at the crowded parking lot. "How come it's not like this during the day?"

"I guess after work is the time when the condo owners come in to sweat." Frank gave his brother a grin. "Here's your choice, Joe.

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Quick access to everything but no company during the day, or lots of babes on exercise bikes and a long line for all the equipment you want to use at night."

Joe sat silently behind the wheel, a frown on his face.

"Well?" Frank asked.

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking."

Laughing, Frank opened his door and headed toward the club.

They were in luck. The young woman behind the reception desk told them that Mr. Vanbricken was still in his office.

Moments later Frank and Joe were inside the spacious room. This time, Pete Vanbricken sat behind his desk. There were papers spread all over it, but Frank didn't see that interesting list.

"Hello again, guys," Vanbricken said. "Normally, I wouldn't be here, but I had a lot of catching up to do after losing most of the day." He gestured at the piles of paper on his desk. "What can I do for you?" A look of. concern came over his face. "There's no problem with your friend Chet, is there?"

"No," Frank replied. "We're just puzzled by some things the police told us about Walter Cosgrove."

"Or rather," Joe said, "what you told the police about Walter Cosgrove."

"Cosgrove?" Pete Vanbricken sat straighter in his seat, his face a blank mask now.

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"Yes," Frank went on. "I'm a little confused. You told the police that he always carried a little red gym bag. But when I saw him, the afternoon before he died, he had a big black bag."

Vanbricken's eyes narrowed. "Wait a second," he said. "You're Frank Hardy, aren't you? Jan Cole told me he'd found you in this office unauthorized and unaccompanied. That's trespassing."

"I came in to use the phone and to tell you what happened to Chet," Frank said. "Unfortunately, you weren't here."

"Yes," Vanbricken said. "Unfortunately. Everyone in the club knew I was speaking with the police."

He opened a desk drawer and took out a large binder. When Vanbricken opened it, Joe realized the binder was actually a large checkbook, the kind that businesses used.

Vanbricken took up a pen and scribbled rapidly across two checks. Then he tore them out and handed one each to Frank and Joe.

"What's this for?" Joe stared suspiciously at the piece of paper in his hand.

"It's a refund on your membership fee," Vanbricken told him.

He rose from his chair and leaned across the desk. "I want both of you out of this club—and don't come back!"

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Chapter 10

Frank Hardy threw his check down on Vanbricken's desk. "You don't understand," he told the health club owner. "Maybe you think you can stonewall us, but the police know about Cosgrove's black bag—and also about the gun he carried in the red one."

"Apparently, *you* don't understand," Vanbricken said. "I just asked you to leave these premises. You have no right to be here." He stabbed a finger onto his desk intercom. "Rosalie," he said, "get Jan Cole in here, please."

A moment later the door opened, and Jan Cole stood in the doorway. As he saw Frank and Joe, his eyes hardened. "The Hardys, huh? In here shooting off their mouths?"

Vanbricken folded his arms across his chest.

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"Jan, these gentlemen are no longer members of the club. They will not be allowed back on the premises, and you will escort them out now."

Frank glared at Vanbricken. "This isn't going to work, you know."

Vanbricken scooped up Frank's check from his desk. "Don't forget your refund. Now— out!"

"Listen," Frank began again.

Cole shrugged his massive shoulders, bringing his brawny arms up. "You heard the man— out!"

With Jan Cole looming over them like an unfriendly thundercloud, Frank and Joe left the office.

"Hey, don't I at least get a chance to say goodbye to the friends I made around here?" Joe asked as Cole marched them around the reception desk. "What about Dawn Reynolds?"

"She's gone," Cole said. "And you're history. Out the door."

A moment later the boys were standing in the parking lot. Joe gave Frank a look. "Here's another fine mess you've gotten us into," he said, quoting Oliver Hardy. "I was just beginning to get into this club stuff. *And* I was about to ask Dawn out."

He shook his head. "But I'm not in as much trouble as you are."

Frank looked at his brother in puzzlement. "What are you talking about?"

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Joe grinned. "How do you think Callie's going to take it when she discovers she's bought a new leotard for nothing? No membership, no guest passes."

Frank shook his head. "That's the least of my worries," he said. "What's eating me is that something wrong is so obviously going on in that club and we don't have a clue as to what it is."

Joe had to nod. "Maybe Vanbricken didn't tell us anything, but he did give away how he felt about Cosgrove. As soon as you mentioned him and his black bag, Vanbricken acted scared to death."

"He certainly did," Frank agreed. "But over what?"

Joe glanced at his watch. "I don't know about you, but I do my best thinking on a full stomach. We're late for supper."

\* \* \*

Frank only picked at his food, his mind obviously miles away.

As they cleared the table, Joe shook his head. "You're still a growing boy, you know. Thinking so hard is making you lose your appetite."

"I'm only trying to apply a little logic." He grimaced. "The only problem is, all my thinking isn't working."

"Do you want to run what we know by me?" Joe asked.

"Okay. Let's think of it this way. Walt Cosgrove was a member of the Harbor Health Club.

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Walt Cosgrove got killed. Chet Morton is a member of the Harbor Health Club. Twice, Chet Morton almost got killed."

"Hey," Joe objected. "I was a member of the Harbor Health Club, too, and one of those accidents nearly got me."

"I've thought about that," Frank said. "And it seems to me that Chet was the one in more serious danger."

Joe shrugged. "Then I guess it's a case of pure logic not being able to conquer the real world."

Frank nodded. "But we do know something funny is going on at that club."

Joe grinned. "Frank Hardy sees Cosgrove with a black bag and a gun at the Harbor Health Club. Frank Hardy mentions those facts to the owner and gets thrown out of the club."

"At least it beats being almost killed," Frank said.

"Chet was in the locker room with Cosgrove, too. You noticed the gun and bag, so suppose Chet noticed something else."

"Ergo," Frank said in his most professorial tone, "logically, we should talk to Chet Morton."

He looked at his watch. "The hospital visiting hours are on. Let's get moving."

\* \* \*

At the hospital, the boys found that Chet was in Room 318. They rode the elevator up to the

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third floor, Joe carrying a light jacket over one arm.

After the elevator doors opened, they made their way down the hallway to Chet. "Nice," Frank said, walking in. "Your own private room—as long as they don't bring somebody in for the other bed."

Chet was sitting up, dressed in his own pajamas. He looked pretty much like his usual self, except for the wince of pain when he raised his arm to wave hello. "How's it going, guys?" he asked.

Joe advanced to the bed, keeping his face very serious. "We bring you gifts, O Mighty One." He whipped the jacket off his arm, revealing the fast-food burger and fries hidden underneath.

Chet's eyes glowed. "Great!" he said. "You wouldn't believe what they tried to feed me. Meat loaf, creamed spinach, and mashed potatoes like setting plaster."

Frank glanced over at the empty dinner tray at the end of the bed. "I see you managed to choke it down, though."

Chet opened the burger box and took a bite of the quarter-pounder inside. "Yeah," he said, his mouth full. "But man does not live by creamed spinach alone."

"Anyway, now that we've bribed you, we want to grill you," Joe said.

Chet paused in midchew. "About what?"

"About Walt Cosgrove," Frank said. "You

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were down in the locker room before us, that first day in the gym. Did you notice him?"

"The big guy, slicked-back hair, black jacket?" Chet said. "Yeah. I noticed him. He was opening a combination lock when I came in. He had a black bag on the bench behind him, and he was opening the locker." He frowned. "Funny how the dumbest things stick in your brain. I recall clearly that it was locker thirteen. The lock had a smear or a rust mark on the U-shaped piece that locks in—"

"The shank," Frank said.

"Whatever." Chet shrugged. He squinted, trying to think back. "Funny thing is, I saw the same lock the next day—on the same locker." He looked at the Hardys. "I remember thinking there weren't supposed to be permanent lockers. Doesn't the club have a rule about emptying lockers every day?"

Frank frowned. "It does look like Cosgrove kept his own personal storage space there."

"Maybe he greased the palm of the locker room attendant," Joe suggested.

"I don't care about that." Frank had a curious glint in his eye. "I wonder if Cosgrove's locker is still there, untouched."

"Yeah," Joe said. "It's too bad some idiot got us thrown out of the club."

"What?" Chet sat straight up, then winced again at the pain in his side.

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Frank explained about their brief interview with Pete Vanbricken.

Chet suddenly grinned. "Well, I've got the perfect reason for you to return to the Harbor Health Club," he said. "And I even have the tickets to get you through the front door."

\* \* \*

Early the next morning Frank and Joe were heading down to the Harbor Health Club's locker room when a voice roared from the top of the stairs.

"Hey! What are you two doing here?" They turned to see Jan Cole glowering down at them.

"We're guests of Chet Morton," Joe said airily. "He got two free passes with his membership, after all."

"But don't worry," Frank told the trainer. "We won't sully your precious gym. We're just here to pick up Chet's things."

"Oh." Cole thought for a moment but didn't come up with any reason to stop them. "Just be quick about it."

"We will," Frank said. He and Joe continued down the stairs.

"Well, you guessed right," Joe said as they stepped into the empty locker room. "There's no attendant here."

"I saw him wheeling a big load of laundry around the back of the club." Frank hurried over to the lockers. The attendant might be gone, but how soon before he'd be back?

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Chet's locker had been number seventeen, in the same bank as thirteen. There was a lock still on thirteen. Frank grinned. He'd counted on the confusion at the club the day before, and it looked as if the lockers hadn't been cleaned out.

He glanced into the showers. Nobody was around. "Keep watch," he whispered to Joe.

"I hope you know what you're doing." Joe stepped over to the locker room door, keeping a nervous eye on the stairway.

"That's two of us," Frank muttered. He reached under his shirt and removed the stethoscope he had tucked into the waistband of his jeans.

It's good that Dad has such a large collection of useful tools, he thought, inserting the earpieces. Where else could I find a safecracker's best friend?

Moving to locker thirteen, Frank set the disk of the stethoscope to the back of the lock with the streaked shank.

As he slowly turned the dial on the combination lock, amplified clicks resounded in his ears. Then came a loud clunk as the first tumbler set. Frank immediately started turning the dial in the opposite direction. At last, he got another clunk.

Just one more to go, he told himself, carefully spinning the dial again.

The final clunk sounded in his ears, and he pulled down on the lock. It slid open.

Leaving the stethoscope looped round his

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neck, Frank removed the lock and eased the door open. The space was empty, except for a large leather duffel bag standing up in the bottom.

Frank reached for the zipper that fastened the bag and tugged it down. It would be just my luck to find a month's worth of stinky sweat socks in here, he told himself.

As the bag opened, the hiss of Frank's indrawn breath echoed off the tiled locker room walls. He hadn't found sweat socks.

Instead, the bag was stuffed with bundles of hundred-dollar bills!

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Chapter 11

Joe Hardy turned at his brother's involuntary gasp. What he saw caused his eyes to grow round. Frank was jamming his arm as far as it would go down between the packaged bills.

"There's nothing underneath. The whole bag is packed with money!" Frank whispered.

Quickly he stuffed the bills back into the bag and zipped it closed again. "Let's get out of here," Frank said quietly. "There may be lots of legit reasons for keeping a fortune in cash hidden in your gym bag. But this bag combined with a dead man—"

"And the best bet is that this is dirty money." Joe rushed over to Chet's locker while Frank closed locker thirteen. "Let's not forget why we came in the first place."

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Using the combination Chet had given them, Joe undid Chet's lock and opened the door. He pulled out Chet's gym bag and began stuffing the contents of the locker into it. "Shoes, socks, pants, shirt, undershirt—what's this?"

Caught in a seam between metal pieces, an envelope fluttered against the inside of the locker door from the breeze Joe made packing.

Joe pried the envelope free. On the front, in scrawled handwriting, he made out the name of Walt Cosgrove and a midwestern post office box address.

Inside the envelope were ten hundred-dollar bills.

Whistling silently, Joe stuck the envelope on top of Chet's things, zipped up the bag, and slammed Chet's locker shut. He turned to Frank, who had closed and locked locker thirteen.

*"Now* let's get out of here," Joe said.

They went up the stairs and out of the club with only a friendly smile from the receptionist. The boys crossed the parking lot in silence, not talking until they were in the privacy of their van.

"Well, what do you make of that?" Frank asked when they were inside.

"If Cosgrove was a salesman, I wonder what kind of commissions he made!" Joe exclaimed. "This is beginning to look fishier and fishier,

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Frank. We've got a guy who can't be traced and a bag full of money in his locker."

Frank nodded. "If Cosgrove had been murdered, I'd say we had a strong motive—in fact, a lot of them."

Joe unzipped Chet's bag, showing him the envelope with the bills in it. "This was in Chet's locker, stuck on the back of his door."

"Very interesting," Frank said, checking the envelope over carefully. "Seems like Cosgrove lived out of a post office box in Midland, Iowa."

"Skip that for a minute. An envelope like this is just the right size to slip through the ventilation slits on a locker door." Joe frowned thoughtfully. "It must have been dropped in through the locker door and got stuck there."

"Maybe the money in Cosgrove's bag didn't belong to Cosgrove," Frank said, still staring at the envelope. "Maybe Cosgrove made an unauthorized withdrawal from that mother lode of cash. Then he found out he was going to be discovered and had to hide it."

"And we know why he'd steal some of those hundreds," Joe added. "Cosgrove didn't have just a gambling problem—he had a losing problem. He took some cash, then heard someone and had to hide it quickly. So he just stuck it in the nearest locker at hand. But he probably got killed for stealing anyway."

He frowned. "That would make perfect sense,

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except for one thing. There's no indication of foul play in Cosgrove's death."

"Unless you count the blistered feet," Frank pointed out.

Joe gave him an impatient head-shake. "They printed the whole coroner's report in the *Times,* and we both went over it. The blisters on Cosgrove's feet weren't from burns. They were contact blisters."

Frank was silent for a moment. "Do you remember what Cosgrove wore on his feet?" he suddenly asked.

Joe stared at him but answered. "A pair of flashy black Italian loafers."

"Was he wearing socks?"

Closing his eyes, Joe tried to visualize the scene. "No!" he finally said. "He wasn't wearing socks." His eyes opened—wide. "I remember now how odd I thought it was that he put his jacket on before slipping into his shoes. Hey, I saw his bare feet for a second, and I don't remember seeing any blisters on his soles."

"And he didn't walk as if he had blisters when he left the locker room," Frank said.

"So he had to get the blisters after he left the health club," Joe said. "But how?"

"Tight shoes, no socks. Maybe he walked for a few miles. That could raise blisters." Frank shrugged. "Running would raise them even faster."

"But he left in a car—that red Porsche the

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cops found abandoned on the pier," Joe pointed out. "Maybe he was running from someone."

"A big, muscular guy with a gun?" Frank seemed dubious. "Why would he have to run?"

"As long as we're at it, who was he running from? To where? *From* where?" Joe slumped back in his seat, reclosing Chet's bag with the envelope inside. "Right now, our questions seem to outnumber our answers by about ten to one."

Behind the steering wheel, Frank slipped the key into the ignition. "Well, we won't find out anything more around here."

As the engine turned over, he heard a voice call, "Hey! Hardys!" Frank saw Terrance Penman waving from the entrance of the club. The instructor, dressed in a warm-up suit, ran over to the van.

Frank killed the engine and Joe rolled down his window.

Penman leaned in. "Just wanted to say goodbye to you guys, since I heard you canceled your memberships."

Joe and Frank glanced at each other, but neither of them corrected Penman's mistaken idea. "You were a good trainer, Terrance," Frank said. "We'll miss you."

Penman's voice got lower. "I can understand why you'd want to bail out of this place." The hand he'd rested on the door tightened into a fist. "It's so frustrating! The Harbor Health Club

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could be a gold mine. But the way the place is mismanaged is criminal."

"What do you mean?" Joe asked.

"For starters, why did Vanbricken hire Jan Cole as head trainer?" Penman shook his head. "I've watched him work. He's not qualified. And as far as I've been able to find out, he's not certified. He's like a guy who bulled himself into shape by lifting weights like crazy, and who thinks that's the only way to get fit."

The young man's dark face twisted. "Cole finally got smart and asked me to design the training programs, before he killed a member. But— well, you've seen him out on the floor. That caveman style of his doesn't work. It turns people off. They don't renew their memberships— or like you, they get out. All the sane people, at least."

"So nobody at the club likes Cole?" Frank asked.

"He pals around with the out-of-towners, the traveling salesmen, those kinds of people. Cole's the one who set up the special visitor's rate that lets them use the club facilities. But compared to the people he turns off, there's a net loss. A *big* loss. How can the club keep going if it loses more members than it takes in?"

"How, indeed?" Frank said.

Penman lowered his voice again. "So I just wanted to tell you you're doing the right thing, leaving. Look, here's my card."

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The card showed the outline of a muscular man. Underneath ran the caption "Bodybuilding by Penman—call 555-0909."

"I train people on the side," Penman explained. "If you want to continue training, give me a call. I'll probably be at a new club soon."

"You're going to quit?" Joe asked, surprised.

Penman shrugged. "A lot of staffers have, since I came on board. You know who left yesterday? Dawn Reynolds."

He looked at his watch. "My break's going to be over before I get any breakfast. Take it easy, guys. Maybe I'll see you again."

"Maybe," Joe said, watching the young man dash off.

His expression was skeptical as he glanced across Frank. "If Dawn quit yesterday, what's her car doing over there in the lot?"

Frank followed Joe's pointing finger. From their higher vantage point in the van, they could see over the other cars parked in the lot. They had a clear glimpse of the distinctive little sports model that Dawn drove sitting off in one corner.

"Let's move it," Frank said, hitting the ignition again. As they started out of the lot, Joe reached out to flick the radio on.

"The news at this hour." An announcer's voice came out of the speakers. "Police have found a strange new wrinkle in the Barmet Bay drowning. Walter Cosgrove was merely an alias of the man who died in the bay. Police

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announced this morning that a fingerprint check has positively identified the dead man as Walter Ostrowski, a convict released three months ago from Midland Penitentiary in Mid—"

Joe turned off the radio. "This is getting weirder and weirder. We not only have dirty money, but a dirty dead guy."

"And the connection seems to be the Harbor Health Club," Frank said. He cast a worried glance over to Joe. "You know something else? Those 'accidents' that kept happening around Chet now seem less and less accidental."

"But who would be after Chet?" Joe asked. "And why?"

"Maybe he saw something he wasn't supposed to see," Frank suggested. "Something he doesn't even remember, but if he did—"

"Somebody would be in trouble." Joe pulled on his seat belt. "Well, what are you hanging around for? Chet was supposed to be sprung from the hospital this morning. Let's go out to his house."

The Morton farm was on the outskirts of Bayport. The road Frank and Joe took to get out there was more like a country lane.

Mrs. Morton was out in the yard, and she waved to the boys.

"We stopped by to see how Chet's doing," Frank called.

"Well, the invalid isn't acting very sick," Mrs. Morton said with a smile. "Believe it or

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not, he's off for a run. I can't believe the good that health club has done for him."

Joe and Frank glanced at each other. "Maybe we'll go out and join him," Joe said. "Which way did he go?"

Mrs. Morton pointed to the far end of the yard. "That trail goes through the forest, then loops around back to the main road," she said. "You might be able to catch up with him."

Getting out of the van, Frank and Joe set off at a brisk pace. The trail curved its way around the trees, so they couldn't see very far ahead.

Only when they reached the main road did they finally catch sight of Chet. He was in his slightly tight sweat suit, jogging determinedly along.

Joe grinned. "I'll bet he's regretting this," he said.

"I don't know," Frank said. "It beats aerobics." He gestured after Chet. "Let's pick it up until we get close enough to call to him."

The Hardys had pretty much used up their first wind by the time they got within calling distance. Chet had reached the foot of a low hill. Faced with the prospect of running to the top before catching Chet, Joe decided it would be easier to use his voice. Even so, he puffed for a moment before yelling Chet's name.

Chet turned. Waving them on, he stayed where he was, running in place.

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"He's serious about this." Frank's voice had a slight wheeze.

"At least we can take it easier catching up to him." Joe set a decidedly less brisk pace as they jogged toward their friend.

They were still a good fifty feet away when a car came over the crest of the hill. Joe immediately recognized the trim yellow vehicle. "Hey! That's Dawn Reynolds's little buzz bomb," he said.

Checking back over his shoulder at the engine noise, Chet must have recognized the car, too. He stood at the side of the road, waving.

Then he stopped waving and froze for a moment as the car swerved and aimed straight for him. From where they were, both Hardys could hear the engine's whine of increased acceleration.

The car was almost on top of Chet before he moved. He did move with surprising agility and vaulted over a fence at the roadside, landing in the drainage ditch on the other side.

Perhaps Dawn Reynolds had missed Chet, but she wasn't finished. The yellow car raced on, engine roaring, racing down the wrong side of the road.

Now it was headed straight at Frank and Joe.

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Chapter 12

The yellow car continued down the road, bearing down on the Hardys, moving at top speed. Frank and Joe had a few seconds' more warning than Chet had gotten. The only problem was they had no convenient fence to jump over.

The boys did the best they could, though. When the car was right on top of them, they leapt in opposite directions. Frank dove left, Joe jumped right, and the car roared through the spot where they'd been. The Hardys rolled ungracefully to the pavement.

Frank scrambled to his feet, staring down the road to see if the car was coming back for another try at them. All he saw was a rapidly disappearing yellow blur heading back toward Bayport. "You okay, Joe?" he asked.

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Joe rose slowly to his feet, rubbing his knee. "I'd ask if anybody got the license plate number, but in this case, we know that car—and who drives it."

"Did you see Dawn behind the wheel?" Frank asked.

Joe looked up from examining the hole in the knee of his jeans—and the scraped flesh under it. "We saw her car, isn't that enough?"

He shook his head. "To think I wanted to get into competition over her! Now I see she really wanted to get close to poor Chet." Joe frowned, "Close enough to put the imprint of her front bumper on his head."

Frank, however, wasn't convinced. "I didn't see the driver, either. Come on, let's help Chet," he said.

They ran over to the fence in time to see Chet climb stiffly back over it. He favored his left side as he climbed up to the road and winced as he bent to swing a leg over the fence. But Chet had the oddest expression on his face. "You know," he said, "I don't know if I'd have been able to do that if I hadn't been working out."

"Did you get a look at who was driving that car?" Frank asked.

"I'm afraid Frank and I were too busy jumping to get a decent ID," Joe said. "You sort of froze there for a moment, so we were hoping that maybe you got a glimpse of who was behind the wheel."

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Chet shrugged, a little embarrassed. "At first when I recognized the car, I was happy. Then I saw the person driving—and, well, it didn't look right."

"You mean it wasn't Dawn?" Joe asked.

"The person behind the wheel was wearing a broad-brimmed hat, pulled low, and sunglasses." Chet frowned. "It didn't look like Dawn. At least I don't think it did."

Frank frowned, too. "What you mean is, it didn't *not* look like Dawn, either. In that getup, the driver could have been anybody, including her."

Chet nodded uneasily, giving the Hardys a wary look. "So what brings you guys to this neck of the woods?" he asked.

"We wanted to see how you were doing," Joe said.

"And it looks like we came along at just the right time." Frank hesitated for a second. "As I'm sure you've begun to suspect, those accidents at the health club may not have been accidents. It seems as if someone's out to get you. And we think those attacks on you may tie in with Walt Cosgrove's death."

"There was a report on the radio about him," Chet said. "It turns out he's a crook or something. But what does he have to do with me?"

"I don't know, and it sounds like you don't know," Frank said. "But somebody thinks you know something about Cosgrove that you

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shouldn't. And that's what we've got to find out, if we have to go over every second you spent with him."

"Even if we did, we wouldn't waste much time." Chet rolled his eyes. "I only saw him twice, for about five minutes in all."

"But you must have noticed something," Joe insisted. "Maybe it didn't seem important at the time, but it means something now that he's dead."

"Was there anything out of the ordinary?" Frank asked. "Was there anything peculiar about the bag Cosgrove was carrying? Did he talk with anyone?"

"He didn't talk, he just grunted," Chet told them.

"Take it right from the top," Joe suggested. "From the moment you entered the locker room."

Chet shrugged, but began to recite the facts. "I came through the door, and the locker room was empty except for this big guy. He looked up, grunted at me, and opened the locker."

"We remember this part," Joe said. "He opened the lock with the streak on the shank. What happened then?"

"What else? He began changing out of his street clothes and putting on his workout gear.".

"You didn't notice *anything* else?" Frank asked.

"I noticed the guy had a great build, but that's!

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about it." Chet looked down at his still-ample stomach and gave the Hardys a rueful smile. "You know, if I had a bod like that, I wouldn't mind advertising my name on a sweatband."

"What?" Frank looked puzzled.

"My sweatband. Remember? The one with my name on it? You were there when I gave it to Dawn." Chet sighed. "You know, I never got that back."

Joe gave him an uneasy glance. "If Terrance Penman is right, you may never get the sweatband back. He claims that Dawn quit the Harbor Health Club."

Chet gave them a goofy smile. "Well, even if she *is* gone, she'll have my sweatband to remember me by." He sighed. "Too bad I never got her number."

Frank and Joe exchanged glances. She may be trying to kill him, Frank thought.

"Look, Chet," he said. "Right now, you should be thinking about your safety, not your sweatband. You had two close calls at the gym, not to mention this last little brush with Dawn's car. Be careful, okay?"

"Okay, sure," Chet said.

"We'll walk you back to your house, and please don't go out unless you absolutely have to."

At least our words are finally sinking in, Frank thought as he watched Chet's expression go goofy to worried.

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"We're on this now," Frank said. "We'll find out who's after you."

"And then we'll put 'em out of business," Joe promised. "But till then, watch it, will you?"

Chet was silent all the way back to his house.

When Frank got home he read the newspaper reports on Cosgrove/Ostrowski's criminal record.

His reading gave him an idea. He led Joe to their father's office.

"Dad, we need help, and we're hoping you can give it to us," Frank said.

Fenton Hardy looked up from his desk. "What kind of help?"

"If I remember, you've got a police friend who's an assistant warden at the Midland Penitentiary."

Frank's father nodded warily. "Does this have something to do with the fact that the guy who was found in the bay served time there?"

"Guilty as charged," Frank admitted. "We'd like a copy of his record."

"I think I'll need a few more reasons," Fenton told his sons.

"We've gotten some indications that Ostrowski's death ties into the Harbor Health Club in some way," Frank said. "Maybe it's a long shot, but now it turns out that Ostrowski and Pete Vanbricken were both in Midland a few years ago."

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"One in the football stadium, the other in the pen," Fenton pointed out.

Frank shrugged. "I said it was a long shot, Dad. But maybe they had associates in common. That's what I really want. A list of Ostrowski's known criminal associates."

Fenton Hardy looked at his sons for a long moment. "A shot that long needs a moon rocket, not a cannon." Then he grinned. "But maybe it's worthwhile."

He reached for his phone. "Let me talk to my contact, and we'll see."

Frank and Joe headed into the kitchen.

By late afternoon their father caught up to them, a sheaf of flimsy, curling papers in his hand. "The wonders of modern technology," he said. "Walt Ostrowski's entire prison record, fresh off the fax machine."

He spread the papers across the kitchen table, and the boys began to read. Joe's eyebrows rose as he scanned the arrest record. "This guy's life story reads like a bad gangster movie. Six months for assault and battery. Two years suspended sentence for weapons possession."

The more Joe read on, the more his eyebrows rose. "Assault with a dangerous weapon, case dismissed. Assault with intent to kill, also dismissed. Attempted arson, dismissed for lack of evidence. Then they finally arrested him for assault with intent to kill, and it got plea-bargained down to reckless endangerment."

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He shook his head. "Ostrowski certainly wasn't a saint, but he must have had a tremendous lawyer."

"The real story isn't there, but my friend told it to me," Fenton Hardy said. "Ostrowski was connected—he was a low-level thug in the Stanek crime organization based in Midland. Notice all those assault arrests? Ostrowski was a leg- breaker for one of Stanek's most lucrative operations—loan-sharking."

"Stanek lent people money at a ridiculously high rate of interest," Frank said.

Fenton nodded. "In the business, that interest is called the vig—vigorish. Under the classic form of the racket, the loan would be compounded weekly, with large unpleasant types like Ostrowski sent around to collect the payments. The catch was that most of the payment only covered the vig. Victims could never pay off the basic amount of the loan, and wound up eternally in debt."

"And if they couldn't make the weekly payment, Ostrowski would play rough," Joe said.

"More recently, crime types have used loansharking as a wedge to get control of legitimate businesses," Fenton went on. "A company would get a desperately needed loan from Stanek, then discover the loan could never be paid off. But Stanek would forgive the debt for a partnership. Not only would he get a share of the company's profits, he could use his influence to

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steer business toward other companies he controlled."

"Sounds like a sweet deal," Frank said. "Get money from lots of small people, then use it to build yourself a business empire."

Fenton shook his head. "A closer description is 'extort money from lots of people.' Remember, the source of Stanek's cash flow is thugs like the late, unlamented Mr. Ostrowski." He frowned. "Big guys with guns who beat people up for a living. Of course, that's how Stanek started out himself. His nickname is Big Ed, and he's famous for forcing money out of deadbeats with a baseball bat."

"I don't think I want to hear any more," Joe said, putting his hands up.

"Here's something you might be interested in hearing." Frank looked up from the fax sheet he was reading, a triumphant glitter in his eyes. "Here's the long-awaited list of known associates. The third guy down on the list is a man named Jan Kolachev."

Joe frowned. "So?"

"Think about it for a second," Frank said. "Walter Ostrowski changes his name to Walt Cosgrove, a nice, WASPy, white-bread last name. One of his associates is named Jan, JA-N, pronounced 'Yonn' Kolachev. And here in town we've got a Jan Cole. The last name is nice and white bread, but that Jan belongs with names like Ostrowski, Stanek—"

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"And Kolachev." Joe began nodding. "Cole—Kolachev. I get what you mean."

"My friend at the prison had one other piece of information that's not on the record," Fenton added. "When Ostrowski was released from prison, he apparently got a promotion. The rumor is that he's now working as a courier for the Stanek organization."

"And he visits Bayport—where perhaps an old buddy just happens to be working," Joe said.

Frank got to his feet. "Come on, Joe. I think we've got some good reasons to chat with the bully of the Harbor Health Club."

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Chapter 13

Frank and Joe climbed into their van in the early evening twilight. Frank got behind the wheel, started the engine, and headed for the Harbor Health Club.

"I think the pieces are beginning to come together now," Frank said. "Walt Cosgrove, actually Walter Ostrowski, is a low-level thug in a criminal organization. He's a courier—"

"And we know what he's delivering," Joe cut in. "We saw it in his locker at the Harbor Health Club. Cosgrove delivers money—by the big, black bagful. And if my guess is right, he delivers it to Jan Cole, a.k.a. Jan Kolachev. What bothers me is why."

"Oh, it's strictly business. The money comes from the Stanek loan-sharking

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operation." Frank gave his brother a grim smile. "You see, the big problem with making illegal money is that you're still expected to pay taxes on it."

"Or you go to jail," Joe said. "That's how the feds nailed a lot of gangsters, like Al Capone."

Frank nodded. "And the feds start asking embarrassing questions when you obviously have a lot of income and a lavish life-style and can't explain Where your money comes from. What's going on here is obvious. Stanek is taking dirty money extorted through his loan-sharking racket and turning it into clean money here in Bayport. It's called money laundering."

"So the Harbor Health Club isn't just a gym, it's also a laundry," Joe said. "But I don't see how sending it here makes the money clean."

"Remember that list I found on Vanbricken's desk? The one that showed us paying an incredible amount for a membership? The one that showed Hurd Applegate as a member? That's how they do it."

The light bulb appeared over Joe's head. "We paid a rock-bottom membership rate. But on their records, they pad that amount out with dirty money."

Frank nodded. "Not only that, but they must add names at random to their membership records—also at inflated rates."

Joe grinned. "They must have picked Hurd Applegate out of the A's in the telephone book.

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Anybody who actually saw him would know he wasn't gym material."

"It's actually a clever scam," Frank said. "A gym's financial success is marked by having lots of members who never come in."

Joe looked puzzled again.

"The idea is to have people pay for memberships, but not increase the demand for more machines or more trainers. Health clubs make the most profit out of people who sign up in a burst of enthusiasm, then give up exercising. The club still keeps the person's money but doesn't have to provide any services."

"That's a very nasty way of looking at the situation," Joe said.

"No, it's just a very clear way," Frank responded. "Now look at the Harbor Health Club. Not only do they inflate the amount of membership dollars coming in, but a lot—maybe most— of their members don't even know they belong to the club. The result is a very tidy profit."

"And that probably goes back to one of Stanek's front companies, which is an investor in the club." Joe nodded, impressed. "Very slick. The club pays taxes, and the dirty money becomes all legal and legit."

He looked at Frank. "No wonder Cole doesn't care how he treats people at the club. As long as they keep them on the books, the place looks like it's making money like crazy."

Frank nodded. "It's just like he told

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Vanbricken when they argued out in the parking lot. He's responsible for the club's cash flow, because a lot of it is actually coming from Midland."

He frowned. "The big question is, how does Vanbricken fit in?"

"You mean, is he really the boss of the operation?" Joe asked. "After all, he is supposed to be the owner of the club. He was on the Midland expansion team—right in Big Ed Stanek's backyard. And didn't you say that those phony records were on his desk?" From Joe's expression, he obviously thought the question was answered.

"But what about the way Vanbricken and Cole fought that first day we came to the club?" Frank said. "Pistol Pete wasn't acting like the boss. He sounded as if he couldn't keep Cole under control."

"What's that old saying about a falling-out among thieves?" Joe shrugged. "I mean, these guys are crooks, Frank. You can't expect them to act like honest people."

He turned to Frank, eagerly going on. "In fact, that explains what happened to Cosgrove—"

"Ostrowski," Frank said.

"Whoever," Joe said impatiently. "He was a crook, too, and he was stealing from the money he was delivering for Stanek. He was found out and got killed. End of questions."

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"End of one set of questions," Frank said, bursting Joe's smug bubble. "But it's the beginning of a bunch of new ones. How come the money is still in the locker?"

"Whoever killed Ostrowski didn't have time to move it," Joe said. "The killer probably didn't expect Ostrowski's body to be found and thought there'd be lots of time to take care of the cash. Instead, the police declared it a suspicious death and then started questioning everybody who worked at the health club. Not a good time to be moving the money—or to be caught with it. So it was left."

"I'll buy that," Frank said. "But tell us, Mr. Wizard, how did Ostrowski get killed without leaving traces of foul play?" His tone grew serious. "More importantly, where does Chet fit into all this nonsense? And let's not forget Dawn Reynolds. Why was it her car that nearly ran the three of us down?"

They rounded a corner, rolling toward the parking lot entrance for the Harbor Health Club. An older compact car, white with a black roof, pulled in ahead of them. But the small car didn't stay. It veered to a corner of the lot, screeched into a U-turn, and tore back to the entrance, engine roaring.

Frank stared, annoyed. His eyes went wide when he recognized the person in the passenger seat. "We may get the answer to one of our

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questions," he said. "That's Dawn Reynolds!"

Whipping the wheel around, he took the van into a tight turn and set off in pursuit.

The driver of the compact car must have noticed them, because the car suddenly accelerated, half-skidding into a turn.

Both Hardys were rocked in their seats as Frank took the van through the same maneuver. "Of all the lousy spots for a car chase," he complained between his teeth.

Bayport's waterfront had always been considered picturesque, in a decrepit sort of way. It was the oldest part of town, with streets that twisted like snake tracks, joined up at odd angles, and in some cases extended only for a block or two.

The van's brakes and tires shrieked protests as Frank attempted a high-speed chase through this winding course. He muttered under his breath as the little white car consistently eluded him. His van was much more powerful than the smaller car he was pursuing. On a straightaway, he'd have been right on his quarry's back bumper.

There were no straightaways here. Thanks to its size, the compact was more maneuverable.

For about the fifteenth time, Frank brought the van slewing around a sharp turn. The usual view appeared in his windshield—a vista of red brick buildings, stretching about half the length

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of a normal block. Some of the buildings were run-down, dingy, and dark—those were the abandoned warehouses, leftovers from the old dockside neighborhood.

Some other buildings were sandblasted and had lights blazing in all the windows. These were the newly renovated condos.

Ahead of them, the little white car fishtailed down the block, skidding off to the left as the road took another winding turn.

Frank goosed the gas pedal down, sending them rushing forward, then feathered the brakes to send them shuddering through the turn.

The far end of the curved road came to an intersection. It also showed something a little different—a condo under construction. Half the street had been torn up by a combination back- hoe and earthmover.

Probably digging to set up new plumbing or cable TV, Frank thought. His attention was focused on the fleeing compact car, which screeched around the work area and made a hard right onto the intersecting street.

But when he tried to follow, a loud, bleating tweet echoed off the brick walls on the block. The earthmover was working overtime. It was backing up, blocking the remaining strip of street!

Sweating, Frank tromped on the brakes. A quick look told him that at the speed they were

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going, they wouldn't be able to stop in time. He turned the wheel, aiming for the sidewalk. Not the best choice, he realized, but it beat smashing into the construction machine or the hole in the ground.

The van overreacted, swerving instead toward the brick wall of the empty warehouse across the street from the construction zone. In the passenger seat, Joe braced himself for a crash.

Frank gripped the wheel so tightly, his knuckles went white. He'd have to steer into the skid, hoping he'd have enough maneuvering room to regain control of the van before it impacted.

He fought the steering system in a desperate struggle to keep the wheels from locking. By cutting the wheel farther and farther to the left, it might just be possible to spin the van around. Of course, he might also send them broadside into the wall, or just overturn the van.

Momentum had them lurching onto only two wheels. Frank kept feathering the brakes, still guiding them into a turn.

The van spun out, coming to a stop with its rear wheels on the sidewalk and its front wheels pointing back the way they had come.

Inside, Frank and Joe Hardy let out shaky sighs of relief.

"Next time I want that feeling, I'll go on an amusement park ride." As Joe unclenched his grip on the dashboard, his hands still trembled.

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"Hey, I'll even pay for your ticket. But I *never* want to feel like that again," Frank said.

A gloved fist thumped on the driver-side window. It was the worker who'd been operating the earthmover. "You guys crazy?" he asked in the furious voice of a man who's nearly been scared to death. "You could have gotten killed driving like that."

Frank glanced over at the construction site. The driver had obviously shifted gears when he saw them flying at him. The big mechanical digger now teetered on the lip of the pit it had dug.

"Hey, mister," Frank quickly said. "Isn't your machine about to fall into that hole?"

As the man turned to look, Frank whipped the van into another tight turn. They bumped off the curb, swung around the construction worker, roared down the open stretch of street, and duplicated the turn the little white car had taken.

The street ahead of them was empty.

"Now what do we do?" Joe wanted to know. "We've lost them."

Frank cut back on their speed. "Check every cross street as we pass," he said. "Maybe we can get some clue as to the way the car went."

The Hardys did even better than that. As Frank drove past an alley mouth, Joe yelled, "Hold it!"

Frank brought the van around to block the alley. It was a skinny dead-end street, and at the brick wall that marked the end of the alley, a

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small white car with a black top straddled the curb at a weird angle.

The Hardys got out of their van and cautiously approached the other car. No one was inside, and the trunk was open. Several pieces of luggage were scattered around on the street and sidewalk.

"Looks like we interrupted somebody's getaway." Frank turned on his heel and started back to the van. "They can't have gotten far on foot. We'll split up and search. You take the cross streets on the right-hand side, I'll take the ones on the left. Meet you back here in five minutes."

He reached the intersection of the street they'd driven down, turned, and vanished behind dingy brick walls.

A moment later Joe followed. When he reached the street, it was empty again. Frank had already disappeared into the maze of side streets that branched off.

Walking along, Joe noticed several things. For one, this part of the dockside area hadn't been touched by urban renewal yet. The buildings were dirty brick, with heavily padlocked doors. The streets were cobblestoned, probably untouched in the last hundred years. And there was nobody around. He felt all alone in the gloomy shadows cast by the pale twilight glow.

Or was he alone?

In the distance Joe could hear scuttling

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sounds. For a second he thought of rats. Then he recognized what it had to be—the scuff of athletic shoes on cobblestones.

Zeroing in on the faint noise, Joe turned a corner, ran down another curving street, took another turn, and found himself surrounded by the blank brick rear walls of a bunch of warehouses. No doors or windows broke the expanse. But about halfway down the block was the black entrance to an alley.

Joe started forward, then stopped. The noises ahead of him had ceased. He picked up his pace, running for the alley.

He whipped around the corner and was surprised to see Dawn Reynolds hunched against the wall, a wild light in her eyes.

Since she'd left the abandoned car, Joe had expected to find her carrying a piece of luggage. Now, he discovered, that wasn't why she'd opened the trunk.

Dawn was carrying something, all right—the heavy metal tire iron from the car's repair kit.

Joe saw it clutched in her hand as she swung it straight at his head!

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Chapter 14

Joe had no choice as the deadly length of metal swept toward the side of his head. He could only throw himself backward.

Landing flat on the cobblestoned street was a nasty jolt to his body. But it beat having his brains knocked out.

The tire iron swept through the space his head had occupied a moment before to smash with a dull clang into the brick wall. Dawn was strong, and she hadn't held back on her swing. Chips of broken brick flew from the point of impact.

Dawn's weapon rebounded from the wall, but she still held on to it as she turned to Joe, who had managed to rise only to a sitting position. With a wordless cry, the young woman charged forward, tire iron held high.

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If I try to get up, I'll only be up to her waist before she starts hammering me, Joe realized. I've got to bring her down.

So, Joe made no effort to rise. He waited until Dawn had almost reached him, then pushed off from the ground, swinging his feet in a wide arc.

Joe's low-level roundhouse kick caught Dawn right behind the knees. She dropped like a felled tree, throwing one hand out to break her fall. Still on the ground, Joe dodged desperately to avoid Dawn's other hand. Even so, the tire iron clanged onto the cobblestones mere inches from his ear.

Both of Joe's hands shot out to seize the wrist of Dawn's club-wielding hand. That was the immediate danger to him. He had to disarm her.

She yelled wildly, punching at him, kicking at him, as he increased his grip. Dawn's free fist smashed into the side of his head, her knee hit his ribs with bruising force. But she didn't distract Joe from what he had to do.

A click came from the compressed cartilage under his fingers, then a grinding sound as he squeezed wrist bones together.

Dawn's yells changed to screams, and Joe could feel the play of muscles in her imprisoned wrist. Now, he thought, shaking her arm violently. Dawn's fingers lost their grasp on the tire iron. It clattered to the ground.

Joe let go with one hand and loosened his grip

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with the other. He didn't really want to hurt her, after all.

The girl's only reaction was an attempt to pull loose. She was still screaming, and now she was scratching at Joe's fingers with her free hand.

Surprised, Joe slackened his hold, and Dawn tore free. She was halfway to her feet before Joe threw a tackle into her. Dawn dropped facedown to the cobblestones. The second impact seemed to knock the fight out of her. She lay where she fell, unmoving, sobbing.

For the first time, Joe could make out what she was saying.

"Don't kill me," Dawn pleaded in a low, hoarse voice. "Please, don't kill me."

"Dawn," Joe said.

The girl didn't even raise her head to look at him. She remained turned away, one cheek resting against the cobblestones.

"Dawn, listen to me." Joe put a hand on her shoulder, about to shake her.

The moment he touched her, however, it was as if every muscle in her body went rigid. *"Please!"* she screamed.

As gently as he could, Joe turned her resisting body toward him. "Look at me—look!" he insisted. Dawn's eyes held no trace of recognition.

"My name is Joe Hardy. We met out in the parking lot at the health club, remember? I even took an aerobics class with you."

Dawn remained frozen.

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How do I get through to her? Joe wondered. "C'mon, Dawn. You've got to remember me. I'm a friend of Chet Morton's."

"Ch-Chet," she stuttered through clenched teeth. "Joe. Joe Hardy."

It was like watching a computer turn on, Joe thought. At first, it processes data very slowly.

"You're Joe Hardy, Chet's friend," Dawn finally said, the fear partly leaving her eyes. "You're not a hit man."

"A hit man?" Joe repeated, surprised. "People have called me a lot of things, but never that." He stared at Dawn curiously. "Why would you think I was a hit man?"

"Because I'm sure there's one after me," Dawn spoke rapidly, the words tumbling out. "That's why I quit my job, why I'm leaving Bayport. They want to kill me, as soon as they figure it out."

"Figure what out?" Joe asked. "And who are 'they'?"

But Dawn wasn't listening. She pulled herself to a sitting position in the middle of the alley and clung to Joe, trembling.

"My friend Monica helped clean out my apartment, then we were going to pick up my car. But when we got to the club parking lot, it was gone! I—I guess we sort of lost it. Monica whipped her car around and sped out of—"

"Dawn," Joe began, but the girl's story kept tumbling out.

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"I guess she was right because this big black van started chasing us. Monica tried to lose them, driving through Dockside, but she didn't know the neighborhood and got us cut off in a blind alley. So we decided to split up and run for it. I took the tire iron—"

Dawn's eyes seemed finally to focus as she looked at Joe in horror. "I could have killed you! Just because I thought you were chasing me."

Joe looked closely at the young woman. At least she didn't seem crazed anymore. Still, he'd have to proceed carefully.

"To tell you the truth, I *was* chasing you," he said quietly. "My brother, Frank, and I were in the black van."

Dawn's face tightened, and every muscle went rigid again. "Why?" she whispered.

"To ask you some questions," Joe said as gently as he could. "You said your car was gone, but we saw it this morning. It nearly ran down Chet Morton."

"Chet," she said. A tear ran down her cheek. "It's my fault. I'm going to get him killed!"

"Whoa," Joe said. "Hold on. I want you to tell me everything. But I also want my brother to hear."

Joe helped Dawn to her feet, and together they retraced their steps back to the abandoned car. Frank was standing alone beside the

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Hardys' van. "I came up empty," he said with a nod at Dawn. "But I see you had better luck."

"Just listen," Joe said. "I think she's got something very important to say to us."

"Everything's my fault," Dawn said miserably. "And I didn't know what to do."

"Start from the beginning, Dawn," Joe said in a calm voice. "How did it all start?"

"It was Monday." Dawn blinked in surprise. "The day I met you. Or rather, Monday night. I take the afternoon through evening shift on Mondays. After my classes, I was in my car heading home when I remembered I had some paperwork to take care of. I turned around and drove back to the club. It wasn't locked up, so I figured somebody was still working."

A shadow came over Dawn's face. "When I went to get my papers, I heard noises coming from the gym. I checked it out, and—" She gulped and began shivering.

"Just take it easy," Joe crooned.

"I saw Jan Cole and Walt Cosgrove. Walt was on the treadmill, which was kind of funny. He only worked out with weights. Then I saw the gun in Jan's hand."

"He was going to shoot Cosgrove?" Frank said.

Dawn shook her head. "He was just threatening Walt. Jan kept pushing up the speed and the incline on the treadmill, making Walt work harder and harder. Walt kept pleading with Jan

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to stop. I guess he wasn't used to running. He kept saying his feet were getting all cut up, but Jan paid no attention."

While Dawn shuddered at the image, the Hardys exchanged a triumphant glance. So *that's* how Ostrowski's feet got all blistered, Joe thought.

Dawn continued with her unpleasant memories. "It was so weird. Jan kept hollering, 'Why are you short?' It doesn't make any sense. Walt was taller than Jan."

"Was that all Cole said?" Frank asked.

"No. He also asked, 'Where is it?' He sounded so angry, so scary, I couldn't figure it out."

"What happened then?" Joe asked.

"Jan upped the speed again, and all of a sudden, Walt let out a yell and grabbed his head. He wasn't running anymore, and he got thrown from the track of the treadmill." Dawn shuddered again. "He landed like—like a sack of potatoes. I thought I was going to be sick. Somehow, I don't know—the look on Walt's face, the way he fell—"

She looked at the Hardys. "I've seen lots of people pass out. But this was worse. I knew Walt Cosgrove was dead."

"What happened then?" Frank asked.

"I got out of there," Dawn said. "But Cole must have heard me. He came after me, I heard him running. I knew he'd catch me if I headed

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for the parking lot. So I went upstairs to the pool. It sounded like he was right behind me. But I managed to jump off the tanning deck—I used to do gymnastics—and I got away."

Her lips trembled. "It was only when I got home that I realized I'd dropped something in the chase. I'd left the sweatband I was wearing."

Joe stared at her. "The sweatband with Chet's name on it."

Dawn nodded. "I didn't think Cole would find it. The lights were off in the stairwells, and it was dark up on the roof."

Frank's eyes narrowed. "So he didn't get a look at the person who saw Cosgrove die. Chet's headband would be his only clue."

"I came back the next morning to look for it," Dawn said. "But it was gone. The news talked about how Cosgrove's body had been found, but there was nothing about him being killed. Maybe I'd been wrong. So I didn't say anything." She looked at the boys. "I was scared—afraid of Jan Cole." She shivered. "I saw him in a fight once. He was—bad." Her voice ran out.

"And then?" Frank pressed.

"That day, Chet nearly got his head smashed in by a barbell." Dawn bit her lip. "I tried to tell myself that it was just an accident. Then, the next day Jan dumped the barbell on him and nearly killed him again. And all of a sudden,

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the news was saying Walt Cosgrove was actually some gangster named Ostrowski. I—I decided to get away and fast."

"And just leave Chet to be taken care of by Cole?" Joe felt the anger igniting in his chest. "That was real nice. Especially since you're the one who got him into the club in the first place."

Dawn shrank back, staring at the ground. "I tried to get him to leave the club," she said. "But he wouldn't listen to me. And I couldn't tell him why I was afraid for him. Jan Cole would be after us both."

She looked at Joe. "I tried to talk to you about it, the day after the first accident, but you acted so weird, and I got called away—"

"Oh." Joe could feel his face turning bright red. "I didn't know what was going on. I thought that, you—"

"Forget about what you thought," Frank cut in. "Now we know the whole chain of events. Cosgrove/Ostrowski was bringing dirty money to Cole, so he could turn it into clean investment money. Ostrowski was stealing from his shipments and kept coming up short. Cole tried to sweat the money out of him but accidentally killed him instead."

He glanced at the young woman. "Dawn saw that, but because of the sweatband, Cole thinks Chet is the mystery witness. So Cole tried to arrange accidents at the club for Chet. When that didn't work, he must have stolen Dawn's

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car to try to run him down. It was available, Dawn wasn't around—and Cole probably knew that in that car he could get real close to Chet."

"It all holds together," Joe said.

"We've got one witness here, but we'd better get Chet to explain about the accidents to the police."

Frank dug into his pockets and came out with some coins. "I noticed a pay phone on the next corner over," he said, "the only one for blocks. How's that for a good omen?"

"And because we told Chet to stick tight at home, he should be easy to catch. As soon as he gets down to headquarters, this whole thing will be tied up." Joe grinned. "Well, what are you waiting for? Start dialing."

Dawn didn't say anything. She kept looking down at the pavement. A tear fell from her eye to the cobblestone. "That's what I should have done," she said in a strangled voice. "I should have gone straight to the police, instead of wimping out."

Frank started off for the pay phone. Behind him, he could hear Joe trying to soothe the young woman.

"Okay, you didn't do it right away, but you're doing it now. And you'll have us to help you. Chet, too. You should have seen how he handled that hit-and-run attempt. Maybe he's not an aerobics whiz, but he sure can pump iron— and jump out of the path of speeding cars."

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Too bad Chet isn't around to hear Joe acting as his fan club, Frank thought, heading around the corner. Looks like Joe is over Dawn Reynolds. I wish I knew where Chet stands.

Night had come, and the pay phone's light was on. Frank picked up the receiver, happy to get a dial tone. Quickly, he punched in Chet's number on the keypad.

Mrs. Morton answered.

"Hi, it's Frank Hardy," Frank said with a grin. "Could I talk to your invalid, please?"

"I'm afraid he's not here," Mrs. Morton said.

The grin erased itself from Frank's face as he listened.

"That Mr. Vanbricken from the health club called. I didn't quite understand what got Chet so excited." Mrs. Morton sounded puzzled.

"But it had something to do with one of the aerobics instructors—Dawn Somebody."

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**Chapter 15**

"Well, uh, okay, Mrs. Morton. Just let him know I called."

Frank Hardy didn't know how he managed to sound natural as he got off the phone With Chet's mother. Inside he felt numb.

Sure, the way Chet felt about Dawn, he'd go running if there were something he could do for her. The call had come from Pete Vanbricken. Maybe if Jan Cole had been on the line, Chet might have hesitated.

Frank "broke into a run, heading back to the van.

Joe and Dawn had been working on Dawn's abandoned getaway car, locking the doors, putting the luggage back in the trunk. Dawn was

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slipping a piece of paper under the windshield wiper.

"It's a note to my friend Monica, telling her everything's okay." Dawn's smile faded when she saw Frank's face.

"Bad news," Frank announced. "The money launderers must be getting desperate. They've decoyed Chet down to the club—"

"That doesn't sound good," Joe said, throwing his door open. "But how did they get him out so easily?"

"They used his weak spot—Dawn."

Dawn Reynolds gasped as she realized what Frank meant. "Then I'm coming, too," she said.

Frank got behind the wheel, started the engine, and pulled out of the alley.

"Shouldn't we call the police?" Dawn asked.

Frank sighed. "If we try to present our case, they'll have to check things out. And while they do that—"

"Who knows what will happen to Chet?" she finished in a faint voice.

"On the other hand ..." Joe said. "Hey, Frank. Stop at that pay phone, and I'll make the call."

Frank pulled over to the curb, and Joe hopped out. He picked up the phone and dialed the emergency number.

"Hello? I'd like the police, please." He spoke in a nasal tone, more high-pitched than his usual

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voice. "Yes. I want to report suspicious characters hanging around the Harbor Health Club."

Joe hung up with a grin and got back in the van.

"What 'suspicious characters'?" Dawn wanted to know.

Frank took the van around a turn. "In about five minutes, us."

The parking lot for the club was surprisingly empty as they pulled in. "I don't get it," Dawn said. "This is yuppie hour—our busiest time."

"Not this evening," Joe said, pointing to the glass double doors. A hand-lettered sign announced that the club was closed because of plumbing difficulties.

"That would turn *me* off," Frank admitted. He pressed against the door handle. The door didn't move. "Locked," he announced. "This may be a problem."

Frank turned to Dawn. "Unless—did you turn in your keys when you left?"

Dawn nodded. "Yeah, I turned them in."

She suddenly glanced up, frowning in thought. "But there might be another way in—the opposite route to the one I took to get out that night."

Leaving the van parked at a slant in front of the entrance, the Hardys followed Dawn around the side of the building.

In its past life as a warehouse, this single-story section must have been a loading dock.

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Obviously some deliveries were still made to this area. But the rooftop above had been fenced in with an elaborate trellis.

"This is the tanning deck," Dawn said, looking upward. "There's a rooftop stairway leading up to the second-story roof. The pool's up there—and that's where I got out. There's a sliding glass door that doesn't lock correctly."

"So our only problem is getting up there," Frank said.

"Just get *me* up there," Dawn said. "I can take care of the rest."

Joe laced his fingers together, and Dawn placed her foot in the improvised stirrup as Joe crouched. "One, two—three!"

Grunting, Joe straightened his legs and back, throwing his arms up as Dawn leapt. The girl used Joe's impetus to send herself even higher. Her fingers caught in the trellis work fence, and she scrambled over.

A moment or two later, a long strip of heavy canvas came rippling down from the top of the fence.

"What's this?" Frank called up.

"It used to be part of the canvas awning from our snack bar," Dawn whispered back. "I think it will hold you."

The Hardys quickly scaled the improvised rope until they were on top of the roof.

"Nice setup," Joe muttered, looking around. "Too bad I never got the chance to use it."

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Frank tried to relate the rooftop layout to the facilities below. "There's the skylight for the gym," he said, pointing.

They set off, moving as quietly as they could. "The bad guys might be right under us," Frank warned in a whisper. "Let's not warn them by clomping around up here."

He carefully set a course to pass the skylight. With luck, they might get a glimpse of what was waiting for them down on the ground floor.

Crouched down, Frank peered through the glass—and froze. After hearing Dawn's story, the scene he was witnessing seemed all too familiar—horribly familiar.

Jan Cole was standing beside a treadmill. Now, instead of Walt Cosgrove, Chet Morton was running for his life.

A hiss of indrawn breath beside him made Frank turn. Dawn and Joe were also taking in the same view.

"We'd better get in there—and fast," Joe said.

The rest of Dawn's route worked perfectly. The glass door slid open, and they crept quickly down the darkened stairwells.

As Frank eased the ground-floor stairwell door open, they were just around a corner from the entrance to the gym.

"You can't do this, Cole," a voice pleaded over the hum of the moving treadmill. "It's not going to work."

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Frank recognized the speaker. It was Pete Vanbricken. He hadn't seen him from the skylight, but Frank knew the club owner must be in the gym. And he seemed to be arguing for Chet's life.

"Shut up, Vanbricken." Jan Cole's voice was hoarse and cold. "I've heard enough of this whining from you. The kid has to die, and this time I'm making sure you're in on it, right down to getting rid of the stiff."

Cole gave a chilling laugh. "I don't want you getting any attacks of conscience later. I mean, a guy can't afford a conscience when he's taking money from Big Ed Stanek."

"I don't care about the money," Vanbricken said desperately.

Frank crept to the doors, peering into the room through the thin space by the hinges. He could see Chet's running figure from behind, and Cole, but Vanbricken was still invisible.

"Hey, what more does a washed-up football player need?" Cole asked sarcastically. "You've got a pretty little health club, everybody looks up to you, you're a regular hometown hero. And nobody has to know how lousy your business really is, because Big Ed keeps your cash flow going. Of course, he cleans up his own, too. But one hand washes the other."

"Money laundering is one thing," Vanbricken said. "And, yes, I let that slide. But I

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can't let this get completely out of hand. We can't have a murder—"

"Get it through your head, chump!" Cole's yell was like an animal's cry. The mask was off, Frank realized. Cole had given up trying to act civilized. Now he was just a desperate, sweating thug, winning arguments with the loudest voice—and a ready gun.

"We already *got* a murder," Cole went on a little more quietly. "I croaked Ostrowski—Cosgrove, to you. And this kid knows about it. He saw me. I found his dopey sweatband, and I knew I had to shut him up—permanently. Otherwise, he'll end up putting the bite on me."

"You never told me any of this!" Vanbricken's voice was anguished. "I'd never allow—"

"That's why I didn't tell you." Cole cut him off. "You still have this stupid idea that your loan deal left you and Stanek partners. It ain't that way, stupid. That's why I'm here, to run things. You sure couldn't do it."

"I put every penny of my own money into this place!" From his hiding place, Frank could hear the despair in Pete Vanbricken's voice. "I figured it was my last chance—coming home where I belonged. What else could I do? I came out of college knowing only one thing—how to throw a football. Then those big gorillas wrecked my arm in a game. I bought this place and watched it sink week by week.

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Then some friends back in Midland said they knew a guy who would give me a bridging loan."

Vanbricken laughed bitterly. "And Big Ed Stanek winds up as my partner. Then this whole money laundering thing starts. Now I find out you've been going around killing people."

"Just one." Jan Cole sounded almost offended, as if Vanbricken had attacked his professionalism. "And I tried to off the Morton kid here. My first shot would have been a perfect accident. Everyone was too busy pumping their pecs to notice me loosening the grip on the barbell. But it didn't work," he growled.

"So I tried a little harder. And *that* didn't work. Finally I decided on a hit-and-run bit, nice and far away from the club. I even stole that dizzy Reynolds kid's car, because I know this jerk is hot for her."

Chet's shoulders pulled in when he heard Cole's words. Then he winced and grabbed for his taped ribs.

"I figured the dope would just stand there smiling and waving while I ran him down. Instead, somehow he jumps out of the way. So it's time for another accident."

Cole flung out an arm to point to Chet's wheezing progress. "Why do you think I got the kid on the treadmill? Maybe he'll go the way Ostrowski did. Then everybody will say it was natural causes.

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For a moment the two men stared at each other. The big room was silent except for Chet's gasping breaths.

"Cole, Cosgrove died from a brain aneurysm—he had a weak blood vessel inside his skull. He died by accident." Vanbricken tried hard to persuade the thug. "It's not murder."

"That's not the way the cops would see it— not with my record," Cole objected. "Besides, they'd start asking questions about why I was sweating Ostrowski. And Big Ed wouldn't like it if word of his little operation here got out."

"And what if the treadmill doesn't kill this boy?" Vanbricken asked.

"Then I blow him away." Cole's voice was casual, as if he were discussing swatting a fly. Then a note of ice entered his words. "That's what happens to anybody who gets in my way."

Joe and Dawn joined Frank behind the angle of the door. "We've heard enough," Joe whispered. "We've got to get in there and stop that maniac."

"Cole is facing away from these open doors. Let's try a straight rush—we don't have time to do anything fancy. From the way Vanbricken's talking, he may even help us."

They crept around the door, then ran flat out into the room. The carpeting and noise of the treadmill would hide their footfalls. Frank now saw where Pete Vanbricken was standing,

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beyond the treadmill, out of Frank's line of vision, but in Cole's line of fire.

There was just one thing Frank hadn't calculated on—the decor of the gym. He'd forgotten that the walls were lined with mirrors.

Cole saw them before they got three strides into the room. But he didn't turn to the Hardys. Cole took care of the nearer danger—Pistol Pete Vanbricken, who had tensed for a lunge.

Before the ex-football star could launch himself, however, Cole's gun went off, deafening even in that large room.

With a hoarse cry, Vanbricken went down. Thick red blood soaked the sweatpants he was wearing and the rug he lay on. He clutched at his leg, trying to slow the flow.

"Keep running, Morton, or you get the next bullet!" Cole shifted his aim to cover the Hardys. Their rush stumbled to a halt, just a yard short of attack range.

"Well, well," Cole said, "the smart guys.Bet you're wishing you did what Pistol Pete said and stayed away from here."

"Not really, Mr. Kolachev." Frank was banking on the chance that using the man's real name might distract him enough to let them try something.

It didn't work. Jan Cole's eyes just got colder, and he moved a step back, the better to cover the two boys. "You really are smart guys," the

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gunman said, smiling thinly. 'Too smart for your own good. Now, back up."

"And who's going to make us?" Joe bluffed. "You may be able to shoot one of us, but the other will be on top of you."

"Kid, I could probably put this gun away and still handle the two of you," Cole said. "But I got an easier way. How you doing back there by the door, Dawn?"

With a sick feeling in his gut, Frank turned to see Dawn Reynolds standing frozen, peering in the doorway. Cole's gun was now centered on her head.

"Curiosity killed the cat," Cole said. "Now, come on, step in. And don't try pulling back. You're not giving me much of a target, and that means I'd have to go for a head shot, which would ruin that pretty face."

The Hardys both watched as Dawn slowly, unwillingly, stepped into the room.

"Now, you were wondering how I could make you back off, I believe," Cole said with an ugly smile. "I'm going to count to three. By then, if you aren't moving back, I'll shoot Dawn in the leg. She's farther away than Vanbricken is, so I can't guarantee hitting a vein. Maybe I'll hit an artery, and she'll bleed to death all over the floor. But it'll be your fault. One . . . two ..."

The Hardys stepped back.

"See? You guys *are* smart."

"Jan—Jan, look," Dawn began. "Chet didn't

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see anything. I did. I was wearing his sweatband—"

"Too late now, honey," Cole said. "He's heard and seen too much. And with all you witnesses, it looks like I can't hope for an accident. Guess I'll have to shoot you all and make a run for it."

"At least you'll have that bagful of money in locker thirteen," Joe said boldly. "But I don't know how Big Ed will take your using his money as a getaway fund."

Cole froze long enough for the Hardys to step forward again. But he snapped the gun on Dawn. "Back off or the girl gets it!" he screamed.

Defeated, Frank and Joe retreated out of attack range again. Cole calmed down.

"You got a point, kid," he said. "Since you're so good, maybe you can help with one more future plan. Who gets it first, huh?"

Cole shifted over so he could more easily cover the three people standing in front of him. The treadmill was directly behind him, and for a second, Frank thought that maybe Chet could sneak up from the rear.

But, no, he realized, Cole had been checking the mirrors. He was out of Chet's range, too.

"So, smart guy," Cole taunted, "who do I shoot? You? Your brother? Or the pretty blond?"

Cole's smile vanished, and his voice went flat. "I think I've made my choice, Dawn."

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Frank tensed himself for a hopeless jump— and stared.

Behind Cole, Chet Morton launched himself up and over the handles and electronic controls of the treadmill. He was propelled by more than just the strength of his muscles or the juice of his emotions.

He had the mechanical assist of a full-speed treadmill!

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Chapter 16

Chet flew as if he'd been shot from a cannon.

Jan Cole must have caught the movement in the gym mirror. He hesitated an instant and didn't shoot at Dawn.

Cole was just turning his gun to Chet when Chet smashed into him. The impact caught Cole off balance, toppling him to the floor.

The gun went off once, sending a bullet into the ceiling. By then Cole was on the floor with Chet on top of him.

Chet's face tightened with the impact on his bruised ribs. But that didn't stop him. Once again Joe Hardy was reminded that there was muscle under Chet's bulk as his friend aimed a thunderous blow behind Cole's right ear. The thug's whole body shook.

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"I'll go for the gun," Frank barked, leaping for Cole's outstretched right arm, where the pistol was still clutched in his hand.

Joe decided to come in on Cole's left.

Chet sprawled across Cole's back, a choke hold around his neck, throwing punch after punch into his head.

The big man was in trouble, but he wasn't out for the count. In spite of Chet's weight on him, Cole pushed himself up with his left hand. His right hand started bringing the gun up.

Chet's fist spread into a claw, going for Cole's eyes.

He didn't have to strike.

Joe Hardy was already on hand, kicking Cole's left hand from under him.

As the big man fell, Frank Hardy grabbed Cole's gun hand by the wrist, yanking the arm out straight. He dug his foot into Cole's armpit, putting tension on the gunman's shoulder, and twisted.

Cole yelled, and Joe knew why. That particular move would dislocate the thug's arm if a little more pressure were applied.

The gun dropped from Cole's nerveless fingers.

After this, Joe thought, our only problem is getting Chet to stop beating up on this guy.

The fight officially ended, however, when a small army of police burst into the gym, guns at the ready. "Freeze!" yelled Con Riley.

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Chet froze in midpunch, staring at all the weapons aimed at him.

Joe Hardy raised his hands and glanced at his watch. "Does it always take you guys this long to respond to a prowler report?"

"Oh, our first unit was here early enough. They radioed in for reinforcements when they realized who owned the van outside," Con said. "We were working our way in from the roof—some helpful soul had left a rope ladder dangling down—when we heard the shots." He turned to the other officers. "I guess we can put up our guns, people."

"Let's get down to business," Joe said. "We all can testify that the beaten-up character down there attempted to murder us, especially Pete Vanbricken."

Police officers were already moving to give Vanbricken first aid.

"But this lady over here," Joe went on, "can testify that Mr. Cole killed Walt Cosgrove, a.k.a. Walter Ostrowski."

Dawn Reynolds, however, was paying no attention. Her eyes were locked on Chet Morton as she stepped closer to him. "Chet—what you did—that was the bravest thing I ever saw."

Chet stared at Dawn, his face turning bright red as he stammered, "I—uh, well, uh—he was; going to kill you, and I couldn't let him do that," • Chet finally blurted out.

He didn't have a chance to say any more.

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Dawn threw her arms around Chet and kissed him.

Joe sighed. "Win a few, lose a few," he muttered.

"Hey, there's always that girl Linda," Frank said with a smile. "Maybe you can work out with her and leave me alone."

\* \* \*

Two days later Joe, Frank, and Callie Shaw were walking through the food court of the Bayport Mall.

"So, what's the big deal, guys?" Callie wanted to know. "Why are we expected at Mr. Pizza?"

"I just got the call from Chet," Joe said. "All he told me was that Dawn had a big announcement to make."

"Announcement?" Callie suddenly stopped in her tracks, her eyes wide. "What could that be?"

"The only way we'll find out is by going there," Frank said.

"I'm still not speaking to you," Callie informed him frostily. "After going to the trouble of joining a health club—"

"Actually, Joe signed me up," Frank said.

"You'd think that someone would have the decency to invite his girlfriend to use one of his free guest passes—"

"They threw us out of the club the third day

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we were there," Frank continued a little desperately.

"Especially when I went to the expense of buying some new workout clothes," Callie finished.

"Yeah," Joe said. "Liz Webling told us the leotard you bought was pretty hot."

Color crept up Callie's cheeks. "One of these days, I'm going to kill that girl," she muttered.

Then her face brightened. "But now that you're heroes for saving the club, don't you think they'll let you back in again? Maybe I could still use one of your—"

"I hate to break this to you, Callie," Joe said, "but the Harbor Health Club has been closed."

Callie looked as if her whole world had crumbled. "What?"

"The club's accounts were ordered frozen by the feds. They're looking into the Stanek connection. Pete Vanbricken gave the staff two months' wages from what's left of his own money," Joe reported.

"What happens to Vanbricken?" Callie asked.

"He's cooperating in the investigation," Frank said. "From what I understand, he's come completely clean on everything that happened at the club."

"I bet Big Ed Stanek doesn't like that," Callie said.

"I think Big Ed has bigger worries than that," Frank said with a smile. "Almost two hundred

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thousand dollars was seized in that locker. It looks as if the club wasn't just one of Stanek's money laundries, it was a major distribution center."

"So Cole was a bigger fry than you guys suspected?" Callie said.

"We should have guessed it," Frank admitted. "Terrance Penman mentioned a whole crew of out-of-towners—traveling salesmen."

"They must have been shipping money around like mad," Joe said. "No wonder Ostrowski thought a grand here or there wouldn't be missed."

Callie shook her head. "And Cole could tie the whole network in—if he talked." Her eyes had a faraway look as they continued to walk.

"Look on the bright side," Joe whispered to Frank. "At least she's not mourning her workout clothes anymore."

"I heard that," Callie said.

Frank gave his brother a look. "Well, how about this?" he said to Callie. "The next time we have a mystery in a gym, I promise to send you undercover in your leotard."

"For myself, I can hardly wait," Joe added.

"One day, Joe Hardy," Callie muttered darkly.

Joe pretended not to hear. "We'd better hurry. After all, we don't want to miss Chet and Dawn's announcement."

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They walked into Mr. Pizza to find Chet and Dawn seated at a long table. Also sitting beside Dawn was a big middle-aged man in a rumpled suit.

To Joe's eyes, the young couple seemed very quiet and subdued.

Callie busily scanned the whole place. "No sign of Chet's parents," she whispered. "It looks like this big announcement is just for us."

"But who is the mystery man sitting beside Dawn?" Joe whispered back.

As soon as they reached the table, Chet stood up. "Callie, Frank, Joe, this is Mr. Jarvis."

"Are you a relative of Dawn's?" Callie asked.

Frank rolled his eyes. "Ever the investigator," he muttered.

Jarvis stared at Callie as if she'd grown an extra head.

"We haven't told anyone," Dawn quickly explained.

"And I wish you still wouldn't," Jarvis growled.

Dawn seemed determined. "They deserve to know. And I don't want Chet to be the one to explain it."

She looked about to say more, but Tony Prito appeared with his helper. They carried two pies with everything and two salads.

"I figured I'd just order for us," Chet said. Dawn got one of the salads. He got the other.

"I wanted to thank you guys for helping me,"

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Dawn said. "You showed me what I should have done. And, Chet, you saved my life."

She took a deep breath. "I also wanted to take this opportunity to say goodbye."

Frank, Joe, and Callie all stared. "Goodbye?" They almost spoke in chorus.

Dawn rested her fingers on Chet's hand. "Chet knows already. I've had a lot of long talks with him. In fact, he's the one who convinced me to testify."

"And go into hiding for a while," Chet added.

"Go into hiding?" The Hardys and Callie exchanged another shocked glance.

"Mr. Jarvis is a federal marshal," Dawn explained. "We're leaving—well, right after this."

"With Miss Reynolds's testimony, we can put Cole away for a long time," Jarvis said. "Unless he rolls over on Big Ed Stanek's whole money- laundering operation."

Joe sat up straighter in his chair. "You mean that if Cole turns informer, you'll let him off?"

"You didn't seem so excited when you suggested Vanbricken might make a deal," Frank said.

"Vanbricken didn't murder anybody!" Joe turned to Chet. "And Cole almost murdered you."

"I thought about that," Chet admitted. "In the end, I decided this was just one battle in a much bigger war." He shook his head. "Sounds

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pretty overblown when I put it that way. But this is what Dawn and I decided. We were lucky enough to beat the bad guys in Bayport. But Cole can shut Stanek down all across the country."

"Maybe I didn't speak up when Chet needed me," Dawn said. "But I can do some good now." She lowered her gaze to the tabletop. "This is harder than I thought."

Turning abruptly, Dawn kissed Chet. "So long," she said. "I wish I could deserve a guy like you."

"The problems of two people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world," Chet said, managing a smile.

Joe noticed, however, that Chet's eyes never left Dawn as she and Jarvis left the place.

Joe opened his mouth to say something, but Callie was already leaning over, her hand on Chet's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Chet. I wish there was something better I could say."

Chet shrugged and gently removed her hand. "You win a few, you lose a few. . ."

He looked down at the salad in front of him, pushed it aside, and took a piece of pizza.

"I'll tell you one thing," Chet said between bites. "In the future, any weight I lose, I'll do it in the training room in my barn." He sighed. "Those health clubs can be rough on your heart."