

The Three Investigators

in

The SECRET of the
ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS



The Three Investigators

in

The Secret of the Ancient Astronauts



The Three Investigators

in

**The Secret of the
Ancient Astronauts**

Text by Christopher Workman

Based on characters created by Robert Arthur.

Illustrated by Christopher Workman.

Design by Ian Regan (based on an original design by Jackie Vedovato, née Mabli).

Story, text, and artwork © Christopher Workman 2012, 2016. The Three Investigators and related characters are trademarks owned and copyrighted by Random House and the Estate of Robert Arthur (Elizabeth Arthur, Robert Andrew Arthur) 1996. *The Secret of the Ancient Astronauts* is a work of fan fiction intended for entertainment purposes only and may not be reproduced or sold.

Contents

A MESSAGE FROM ACTOR STEPHEN TERRILL	7
1. JUPITER JONES LANDS A CASE	11
2. A SECRET MEETING	23
3. INCIDENT ON A COUNTRY ROAD	32
4. THE OLD DARK HOUSE	46
5. BOB MAKES A DISCOVERY	61
6. THE ECCENTRIC MILLIONAIRE	71
7. A BRIEF OUTLINE OF OLMEC HISTORY	86
8. CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE SECOND AND THIRD KINDS	103
9. IN AND THEN OUT	118
10. THE TWO INVESTIGATORS MAKE PROGRESS	131
11. THE DIARY OF A MADMAN	143
12. A GHOSTLY MESSAGE	150
13. THE NOT-SO-FIERY EYE	165
14. ANCIENT ALIENS	175
15. MYSTERY AND MORE MYSTERY	191
16. INTRUDER IN THE YARD	204
17. TURN OF EVENTS	215
18. THE LURKER IN THE DARK	229
19. THE PLAN	236
20. PETE STEPS UP	247
21. THE MASTER OF THE KEY	260
22. THE CURSE OF THE ANCIENT ASTRONAUT	276
23. THE MYSTERIOUS BENEFACTOR	294

A Message from Actor Stephen Terrill

BEAR WITH ME: I've never introduced anything before. I'm an actor, you see, not a writer or an editor, although I've worked with some of the greatest horror directors the world has ever known, including Alfred Hitchcock, John Carpenter, and Wes Craven. Still, there's always a first time for everything, and this is one for me. Up until now, my literary experience has been restricted to reading movie scripts. Now I'm putting pen to paper to tell you about some remarkable boys who fancy themselves juvenile detectives.

Perhaps I shouldn't use the word *fancy*. If my experience with these lads tells me anything, it's that they *are* detectives. They may not be old enough to be licensed investigators, it's true. But they can solve a mystery like nobody's business. And if you're already familiar with *The Three Investigators*, there's no need for you to stick around for this introduction. Skip right on to Chapter 1 and become embroiled in one of their most fascinating and terrifying cases yet. If, on the other hand, you've never met these intrepid young men, then let me give you a brief description—and whet your appetite for some thrills and chills.

Before I tell you about this trio of lads, though, let me give you some background on how I met them. It was two years ago, and the world believed I was dead. You see, a couple of decades ago, I was considered filmdom's leading horror actor. But then the tide turned, as it always does, and audiences lost interest in my work. My films were too old-fashioned, they said. Not gory enough, they said. Distraught, I pretended to commit suicide and for a long time afterwards holed up in my castle in the hills outside Los Angeles.

A few years later, The Three Investigators decided to charm a world-famous director into introducing their stories. He was going to make a film in a real-life haunted castle, so they figured that if they found the perfect place for him to shoot, he'd be grateful enough to work with them. That's how they stumbled upon my home—and discovered that I was still alive. They blew my cover in the process, but ultimately that was a good thing. I'm working again, after all, and I'm more popular than ever. Gothic horror has made a comeback of late, and I have these boys to thank for jumping in when they did and pulling me back into the thick of things.

Unfortunately, the director who introduced their stories died about a year and a half after the team formed. A mystery writer took up the mantle, but six months later he had a *New York Times* bestseller on his hands. And you know bestselling authors: they love their

worldwide book tours. That's when the boys approached me. At first I was reticent about introducing one of their cases, but after some consideration, I realized how much I owe them.

So here I am.

But enough about me and the boys' history. Let me tell you about *them*. The leader of The Three Investigators is a stocky youth named Jupiter Jones. Don't let his looks fool you, though. Jupe, also known as the First Investigator, is as brilliant as they come. His brainy detective work has led to the capture of some infamous criminals. Like myself, Jupiter was once an actor (though he doesn't like to be reminded of the fact), and that early experience groomed his talent for assuming uncanny disguises in his pursuit of the truth. He also has a photographic memory, and often when he thinks deeply, he gives himself away by pinching his lower lip.

If Jupe is the brains of the team, then the brawn is the Second Investigator, Pete Crenshaw. Pete is tall and athletic and as strong as an ox. He's also the son of a special effects wizard in the film industry, a man who has worked on many of my pictures. Because of this, Pete has seen more than his fair share of horror films—and, truth be told, he's a little scared of them. Or anything that has the appearance of the ghostly or the supernatural. You can't blame him really, but in the end

it's never been a problem. He never shirks his duty to the team, even if it sometimes takes a little nudging.

Last but certainly not least is the Records and Research member of the group, Bob Andrews. Bob is a slight kid and nice enough fellow, though his poor eyesight requires him to use glasses and his small stature often results in adults underestimating his abilities. He's certainly no dummy, and he's learned his skills from the very best, thanks to a father who's the editor of Los Angeles's largest newspaper. Industrious beyond his years, Bob is also a part-time employee of the Rocky Beach Public Library, a position that works to his advantage when he needs to research a case.

Together, these three boys have solved over forty mysteries, some of them serious, some of them funny, a few of them downright scary. And let me tell you, this case might be the scariest of them all. An ancient South American statue, an alien visitation, and a secretive organization are at the heart of *The Secret of the Ancient Astronauts*. But as you turn the pages to come, you won't be braving it alone; you'll be riding along with Jupiter, Pete, and Bob. So get set as they guide you on a harrowing journey into the twilight realms.

STEPHEN TERRILL

Chapter 1

Jupiter Jones Lands a Case

JUPITER JONES RECOGNIZED the sound of his uncle's pickup truck the moment it pulled into The Jones Salvage Yard. He put down his book about the tribes of South America and got up off his bed, excited about what his uncle might have purchased. Bounding down the stairs, he ran out the door and across the small, mostly unused side street to Rocky Beach's swankiest junkyard. Being a bit on the stocky side, he was already out of breath by the time he reached the truck.

A short, strong man with salt-and-pepper hair and a handlebar mustache, Uncle Titus was just stepping out of the driver's side door of the truck. He was followed by Hans and Konrad, the two Bavarian brothers he employed who lived in the little cottage behind the Jones's two-story white house. The back of the truck was loaded with material from the estate auction the men had been to earlier in the morning.

"Is everyone okay?" Jupiter asked. He was bent over with his hands resting on his knees.

"How did you know—?" his uncle began.

Jupiter interrupted him. "All three of you are getting out of the driver's side door, which suggests that the passenger door won't open. Since it worked fine this morning and the truck is loaded with material from the auction, most of it in disarray, I assume that something happened to you on the way home."

"Well, yes," his uncle began, "something did happen." He hesitated, took off his cap, and scratched the back of his head, as if trying to find the right words.

"Small car sideswipe us," Hans said in his peculiar, semi-broken English.

"Try to run us off road," his brother chimed in.

"What makes you think it tried to run you off the road?" Jupiter asked. "It's not like bad drivers are uncommon between here and Malibu Beach."

"I'd like to believe that, Jupiter my boy," Uncle Titus responded, placing a cigar in his mouth and lighting it. "But that isn't what happened. The car sideswiped us twice, and it looked like it was about to try again when a cop drove by in the opposite lane—"

"And the car sped off," Jupiter finished for him.

Suddenly Aunt Mathilda rushed from the house. She was a robust woman in her early forties, with sweeping dark hair and shrewd eyes. She wore her usual apron, which was tied snugly around her waist and smudged with food.

“What on earth happened?” she demanded loudly. “Why is the side of the truck dented in?” It was obvious she had seen the vehicle through the kitchen window while fixing a late lunch. “And get that cigar out of your mouth, Titus Jones! You know what the doctor told you about those things.”

Uncle Titus spat the cigar out of his mouth. It landed in the dusty gravel at his feet, a faint orange glow on its tip.

“It’s all right, honey,” he said soothingly. “We can get the dents out ourselves. We won’t have to turn the accident in to the insurance company, will we, boys?”

The two Bavarian brothers nodded in agreement.

“That’s not what I’m worried about and you know it, Titus Andronicus Jones!” Aunt Mathilda exclaimed. She only used people’s full names when she was angry or worried, and right now Jupiter could tell she was both.

“If I may, Aunt Mathilda—” Jupiter started before his aunt cut him off.

“I’m not interested in hearing any of your fancy explanations, Jupiter. You weren’t even with them.” She turned back to her husband. “I want to know what happened to the truck and if anyone’s been hurt, and not in that order!”

“No one’s been hurt,” Uncle Titus said before telling his wife what had happened. Meanwhile, Jupiter walked from the back of the truck to the passenger side. He

knelt and examined the damage. There was a crumpled dent that ran from the rear wheel well to the middle of the door. It was fairly long and deep. The truck's paint was also missing in spots, replaced by flakes of blue from the offending vehicle.

Something else caught Jupiter's eye, and he leaned forward to get a closer look. Ground into several of the blue spots was a brownish powdery substance. He made a mental note to come back when no one was around and collect some of it for closer analysis, though he believed he already knew what it was.

"Well I never—" Aunt Mathilda started when Uncle Titus finished his story. This time Jupiter cut *her* off.

"What kind of car was it?" he asked, rejoining the group.

"A Dodge Neon," Konrad responded. "Very bad shape. Paint peeling off, and maybe it had dents in it already."

"A blue Dodge Neon," Jupiter murmured more to himself than to anyone else.

A look of bewilderment spread across Konrad's face. "How do you know color, Juve?"

Jupiter ignored the question. "I wouldn't think someone would want to use a new car to run you off the road," he observed, again mostly to himself. "But *why* would anyone want to do something as dangerous as run

someone else off the road? *That's* the million dollar question."

"Maybe something I did made him angry," Uncle Titus suggested. "Maybe he was having an attack of road rage."

"It's possible," Jupiter admitted. Then his eyes brightened. "I take it something got knocked off the back of the truck during the altercation."

"Yes," Uncle Titus returned. He stepped to the back of the truck and let down the tailgate. Roped onto the bed were a few large items—the unassembled parts of a canopied bed, an ornate dresser with curious engravings carved onto its wooden surface—and numerous smaller items, most of them held in place by their close proximity to each other. There was also a box of old science fiction magazines and a crate of bizarre knickknacks. It was all sloppily askew, packed in a way that suggested Uncle Titus and his helpers had been in a rush when loading it.

Even more interesting to Jupiter was what was sandwiched between a mattress and the dresser: the broken remnants of a stone statue.

"The second time we got hit, several items fell off the bed and onto the highway," Uncle Titus offered, anticipating Jupiter's next question. "The officer rushed us to get them put back onto the bed. I suppose he was afraid we'd block traffic. This poor devil was the most

damaged.” He waved his hand toward the statue. “We picked most of it up and brought it back, but the smaller parts aren’t much more than gravel now.”

“We kick and sweep them off road,” Hans explained.

“Wasn’t that dangerous?” Aunt Mathilda asked. “Sweeping the road, I mean.”

“Not with road closed,” Konrad said.

“The officer temporarily roped off the road,” Uncle Titus clarified. “It helped that it was a back road. We had so many items roped onto the truck that we didn’t want to drive too quickly, but we also didn’t want to hold up traffic. Now I kind of wish we’d taken the highway. I doubt anyone would have pulled a stunt like this there.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Jupiter said. “At least the driver didn’t know to hit the bed right behind the rear wheel. That would have sent you careening off the road for certain.”

Uncle Titus frowned. “We would have been knocked into a gully on the one side or into a rock face on the other.”

“How on earth did the car manage to get between you and the gully or the rock face?” Aunt Mathilda asked, oddly suspicious for a moment.

“Just enough room on shoulder to pass,” Hans answered.

While the adults continued talking, Jupiter climbed onto the back of the truck and inspected the goods. Most of the items had an antiquated European air to them.

“Were these things expensive?” he asked.

“I certainly hope not!” Aunt Mathilda proclaimed. “There’s nothing worse than putting a lot of money into stock you can’t turn around. Though I imagine we’ll sell that four-poster bed quickly enough.”

“No,” Uncle Titus answered his nephew. “The auction was for the estate of an old recluse. Most of it was junk, but I got whatever I thought I could make a profit on.”

“Was this statue the only esoteric thing in the bunch?” Jupiter inquired.

Uncle Titus knitted his brow and looked at Aunt Mathilda, waiting for the reply he knew was coming.

“Speak in words the rest of us can understand, Jupiter Jones,” Jupiter’s aunt demanded.

Jupiter examined the broken bits of statue, among which lay a distinctive head that was too large for the figure’s body. He tried to pick it up but found that it was much heavier than he had expected.

“That’s stone, my boy,” Uncle Titus said.

Jupiter shot him a dirty look. There were two things he hated: condescension and being told the obvious.

“Look here,” his uncle continued, getting up onto the bed and directing Hans and Konrad to help him remove

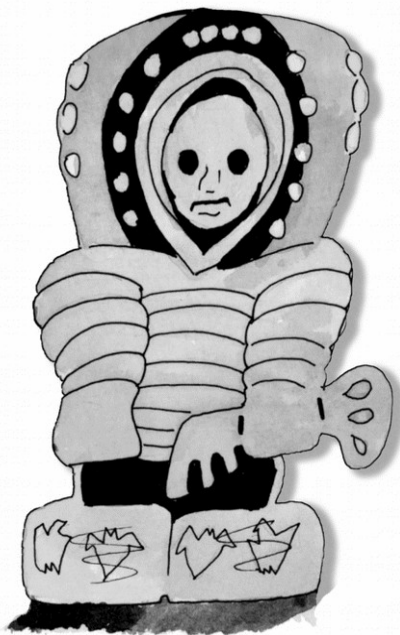
the dresser. He motioned for Jupiter to look at what lie behind it.

Jupiter did as directed and found himself surprised. There were three smaller statues, each one also made of stone. The figures appeared to be male and, like the larger statue, had heads much too large for their bodies. The features of the two outer figures, which were kneeling toward the middle statue, were vaguely African. Those of the middle figure, which was standing upright, appeared to be Caucasian. A box-like helmet wrapped around its entire skull, leaving only the face visible.

Perhaps the strangest thing of all, however—at least to Jupiter's wondering mind—was the fact that the helmet had a bizarre object attached to its throat. Upon closer inspection, Jupiter noted its resemblance to a mouthpiece. Yet the apparent antiquity of the statue suggested that the figure had been carved before such technology had been invented. The figure also bore a scepter or large key in its left hand.

All three of the statues appeared to have interlocking bases. In his mind, Jupiter arranged them. The image he came up with was one in which the two outer figures paid respect to or worshipped the middle figure.

“Intriguing,” he whispered to himself. “I wonder if these are the reason someone tried to run you off the road.”



“How would anyone know we had them?” Uncle Titus asked. “And if they knew what we had and where we got it, why wouldn’t they have just gone to the auction and bought it themselves? I got this stuff pretty cheap.”

“Maybe they didn’t have any money,” Jupiter suggested. “Or perhaps they got to the auction late, after the figures had already been sold. There are a number of possibilities.” He pinched his lower lip between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, a surefire sign

that he was thinking deeply. "This may be a case for The Three Investigators."

"Jupiter Jones," Aunt Mathilda snapped, "your uncle, Hans, and Konrad could have gotten killed today. Men who would do something like that are dangerous. I refuse to allow you to get involved in this."

Jupiter looked at his aunt in dismay. "But—"

"No *buts*, young man. No *ifs* or *ands*, either. Do you hear me? Keep out of this. You and your friends don't need to stick your noses into things that don't concern you. And besides, your uncle can make enough of a profit on the remaining items that we probably won't lose any money on that broken statue anyway. Hans and Konrad can fix the truck door. No harm done."

"Yes, ma'am," Jupiter gave in. Often, protesting Aunt Mathilda's directives could be useful. Despite her authoritative exterior, she was usually a soft touch. It was obvious as she turned and stomped back into the house, however, that this was not one of those times.

"Uncle," he said, "is it possible we could at least set the remains of the broken statue in my workshop? Who knows, maybe I can repair it."

Jupiter's workshop was in a corner of the yard where two of the tall, private fences separating the salvage from the outside world came together. A third wall was made up of a pile of junk. Over these was a canopied roof, about six feet wide, that provided pro-

tection from the brackish moisture that sometimes blew in from the Pacific. It was here that Jupiter, who was a whiz at electronics, sometimes repaired broken things his uncle had bought. In some cases, he was even able to craft entirely new items, including complicated tracking or communication devices, from bits of old technology.

“Repair it?” his uncle laughed. “Jupiter, you’re crazy if you think you can repair this. Too much of it got swept off the side of the road.”

“You never know, though,” Jupiter dissented weakly.

Uncle Titus let loose with a *harrumph*. “You know what I think? I think you want it in your workshop so you and your friends can poke around and see what you can find out. That’s fine, I guess. I won’t tell your aunt, but I will tell *you* that I don’t want you boys involved in anything dangerous. The police officer who stopped to help us will file a police report on the car that did this. Let him take care of the investigating. You got me?”

“Yes, sir,” Jupiter replied, trying unsuccessfully to sound dejected rather than excited. After all, what could a police officer find out that Jupiter Jones could not?

Jupiter, Hans, and Konrad moved the remains of the broken statue to the workshop. The three other statues were cautiously placed inside the office to prevent weathering from the sun or rain. Jupiter would look

them over later, when no one was around to get nosy about what he was up to.

As soon as Hans and Konrad were gone, Jupiter entered Tunnel Two, one of the secret passages leading into The Three Investigators' hidden headquarters, a mobile home trailer hidden behind carefully orchestrated piles of junk. Uncle Titus had bought the 30-foot mobile home trailer cheaply several years before, but because of damage it had sustained in some sort of accident, he found it impossible to sell. He eventually gave it to the boys to use as their headquarters. Over time so much debris had accumulated around it that it was now impossible to see from the outside. Jupiter was certain that his aunt and uncle had long since forgotten it was even there.

Debating his next move, Jupiter sat down at his desk and pinched his lip. Because cell phones received such poor reception inside the mound of scrap, the boys had installed a landline, which they paid for from the earnings they received working around the yard.

Jupiter picked up the phone and dialed first one and then a second number. He left the same cryptic message on the voice-mail of each.

“Red Gate Rover, Door Four, 1500 hours. We've got a case!”

Chapter 2

A Secret Meeting

“WHY DID YOU WANT us to use Red Gate Rover and Door Four?” Pete Crenshaw asked. Red Gate Rover was one of two secret entrances The Three Investigators used to access The Jones Salvage Yard without the adults getting wind of it. The other was known as Green Gate One.

On the outer wooden fence at the back of the yard was a painted scene depicting the San Francisco Fire of 1906. Horse-drawn fire engines battled blazing buildings while people fled in terror, many carrying the few belongings they could retrieve.

The most striking aspect of the scene, however, was not the fire itself, but the image of a dog mournfully awaiting its master as its home burned. To enter the yard, the boys merely had to remove the knot that served as the dog’s eye, use a single finger to release a catch on the other side, and wait a moment while three boards in the fence swung up. The resulting entrance was large enough to afford passage for not only each boy, but also his bicycle.

Just inside the secret gate was enough space to park the bikes. From there a narrow trail, surrounded on each side by piles of junk, twisted through a small portion of the yard to the hidden trailer. A sign containing an arrow and the word OFFICE pointed the way for anyone in the know.

The last leg of the short journey, a tunnel that disappeared into a mound of junk with planks over it, had to be navigated on hands and knees. Though the planks appeared to be lying haphazardly around, they actually formed a sort of roof. Beneath it was the secret entrance into Headquarters that the boys called Door Four. By using Red Gate Rover and Door Four, The Three Investigators could enter Headquarters without Mr. and Mrs. Jones (or anyone else, for that matter) being the wiser.

“Red Gate Rover, Door Four, 1500 hours,” then, was Jupiter’s secret message: at exactly 3:00 pm Pacific Time, enter the salvage yard through Red Gate Rover, then enter Headquarters using Door Four. He had given this message to Pete Crenshaw, the Second Investigator of the team known as The Three Investigators, and Bob Andrews, Records and Research.

Pete was a tall, athletic boy with considerable strength and courage. His one drawback as an investigator was his habit of jumping to supernatural conclusions before exhausting more realistic possibilities. Bob was shorter, thin and wiry, and studious. Both were good-

looking and popular youths, with friendly and unassuming personalities. Both had arrived precisely at the specified time, and both now sat in their chairs waiting for Jupiter to brief them.

“Now let me ask again, Jupe,” Pete said. “Why did you want us to use Red Gate Rover and Door Four?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Bob responded. “He didn’t want his aunt seeing us. She might put us to work.”

Jupiter nodded. “Exactly, Records. I have no doubt that if she saw all three of us together in the yard, she would find something for us to do that would take up the rest of our day. But we have a case of the utmost importance to solve.”

“What case?” Pete asked. “It doesn’t involve silver spiders or talking skulls, does it? ‘Cuz if so, you can count me out. I’ve had enough mumbo jumbo for a lifetime.”

“There was no mumbo jumbo in either of those cases, Second,” Jupiter insisted. “In fact, there’s no such thing as mumbo jumbo at all. But to answer your question, there isn’t even the *appearance* of the supernatural to this one.”

“Who’s our client?” Bob asked, pushing his glasses into place. He had piercing blue eyes, and his neatly trimmed blond hair was parted neatly on the right side of his head.

“We don’t have a client,” Jupiter answered. “At least not in the typical sense.”

“If we don’t have a client, then how do we have a case?” Bob said.

“Why can’t you just spell it out, Jupe?” Pete demanded. “You always have to complicate everything. I’ll bet that whatever it is, Bob and me are smart enough to understand.”

“If you talk real slow,” Bob added, also a tad annoyed.

“Bob and I,” Jupiter corrected. “Anyway, someone tried to run Uncle Titus, Hans, and Konrad off the road earlier today, and I believe it was to steal something they bought at an estate sale this morning.”

“Wow,” Bob exclaimed. “That does sound case worthy. I take it they didn’t manage to get what they were looking for?”

“No,” Jupiter replied. He then told his fellow Investigators the story. When he was done, both leaned back in their chairs and exhaled.

“Okay, so we have a case,” Pete agreed. “But what do we do now?”

“We could always visit the estate and see what we can learn there,” Bob suggested, not waiting for Jupiter to explain his plan.

Beaten to the punch, Jupiter shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Yes, that’s one plan, Records. But I would

suggest first riding our bicycles out to the area where the incident happened.”

“What do you expect to find there?” Bob asked.

“Probably nothing, but you never know,” Jupiter replied. “I got an exact description of the location from Hans. It’s on a country road just outside Malibu Beach, several miles from here. It will take us a while to get there on our bikes. I suggest we leave now so we have time to check out the spot before it gets dark. It’s possible there’s a clue among the remnants left behind by the broken statue. Hans and Konrad swept the material off the side of the road. We might find something in it to explain why someone would be willing to put other people’s lives in danger.”

“What are we waiting for, then?” Bob asked. “Let’s go.”

“Before we do, can I ask a question?” Pete inquired.

“Certainly, Second,” Jupiter answered. “What is it?”

“Why is Bob wearing a 1960s sweater vest on a Saturday afternoon in sunny California?”

Bob rolled his eyes. “Why do you think? Mom saw on the news yesterday that the temperature might drop a few degrees.” While the average temperature in California in February hovered around seventy degrees Fahrenheit, it was known to drop without warning, particularly at night. “She’s afraid I’ll get pneumonia or something. She gets weird about stuff like that.”

“So your mom made you wear a sweater vest? Nice!” Pete retorted.

“You know my mom,” Bob said. Though he frequently dressed in clothes associated with much older people, he was charming enough that others, especially girls, tended to overlook it.

“With moms like that, who needs enemies?” Pete said good-humoredly.

Jupiter stifled a yawn. “If I may cut short the frivolities, I suggest we exit through Tunnel Two into the workshop. You may wish to examine the broken statue yourselves. Who knows, you just might see something I missed by being too close to the case.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Bob agreed, though he didn’t believe for one instant that he or Pete would find a clue Jupiter had overlooked.

The three boys opened a trapdoor in the floor and crawled, one at a time, through the corrugated pipe that served as Tunnel Two. It had been carpeted to make the short trip easier on the boys’ knees.

Jupiter was the last to exit. “I believe we may soon need to replace the Tunnel Two pipe. We’re all growing older and getting bigger.”

“Speak for yourself,” Pete protested. “Bob and I don’t have any problems getting through Tunnel Two. Maybe you should lay off the midnight Pop Tarts.” He

pointed toward Jupiter's stomach, which pooched out over his belt.

Frowning for only a moment, Jupiter proceeded to show the other Investigators the broken statue. Though it was in multiple pieces, two large parts remained intact: the base and the head.

"From the features of the face, I surmise it to be of African origin," the First Investigator said.

"I don't think so, Jupe," Bob countered. "I've seen this kind of statue before. The large head, the African features, the extremely small body." He closed his eyes in an effort to recall just where he had seen the image. Then suddenly he opened them and snapped his fingers. "The Olmecs. They were a tribe that lived in either Central or South America, I can't remember which. We had someone check out a book about them from the library a few days ago."

Bob worked part-time as a junior assistant at the Rocky Beach Public Library, a job he had had for several years now. He loved it, though he sometimes imagined himself a reporter for a big daily newspaper like the one his father worked for.

"You remember what books are checked out?" Pete asked. "I didn't think you even worked the front desk."

"I don't," Bob revealed. "The reference librarian mentioned it to one of the library assistants for some reason. I just happened to overhear her."

“So how do you know what the book looks like?” Jupiter asked.

“When the librarian said the name, I recalled having shelved the book a few times. Believe me, when you’ve spent two years shelving books, you start to memorize their covers. If I recall correctly, this book has a picture on the front of a huge head with features that look African, even though the tribe wasn’t from there.”

Jupiter stared off into space for a moment, the wheels in his head turning. “So these features aren’t African? You’re sure about that?”

“I don’t know,” Bob admitted. “Maybe the Olmecs originated in Africa and sailed west at some point.”

“This bears further investigation, Records. Do you—?”

“Yes,” Bob interrupted. “I have to work at the library tomorrow after church, from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. I get a fifteen-minute break. I’ll use that time to see what I can find out about the Olmecs.”

“Excellent, Records,” Juve commended. Then, suddenly, his eyes lit up. “You guys wait here; I’m going to run back into the house for a moment to get something.”

“Wait a minute,” Pete objected. “If you go back into the house now, your aunt is bound to spot you, and who knows what kind of work she’ll force on you—and us! We need to get out of here if we’re going to check out that spot before dark.”

Jupiter stopped in his tracks. “You’re right, Pete. I wasn’t thinking. I can check out that line of inquiry upon our return.”

“What line of inquiry?” the other two asked simultaneously.

“I’m reading a book about the tribes of South America and thought it might contain some information we could find useful. Anyway, I’ll take a look later tonight. Let’s go back through Tunnel Two into Headquarters and then exit Door Four to our bicycles. That way we don’t have to walk around the trailer and risk being seen.”

“Good idea,” Pete whispered, as if Mrs. Jones could hear them talking through the mountains of junk stacked around them.

Chapter 3

Incident on a Country Road

“I can really feel this in my bad leg,” Bob Andrews exclaimed, referring to the fact that he’d fallen down a hill when he was younger and broken his right leg in several places. He’d worn a brace for several years, but it was finally removed shortly after *The Mystery of the Whispering Mummy*. Though he usually walked and ran normally now, extreme exertion over lengthy periods of time often left him with a throbbing pain and a slight limp.

After the boys had left Headquarters, they had biked to the area where the Neon had tried to force Uncle Titus, Hans, and Konrad off the road. The weather was balmy, and the traffic had been thin. Still, the trip had taken a little longer than expected, and they only had about an hour of daylight left before the February sun went down. Even now, it was lighting the ocean in a gorgeous orange glow.

“Are you okay?” Pete asked, noticing the grimace on Bob’s face.

“Sure,” Bob responded, gritting his teeth. “I’ll just need to rest for a few minutes once we get off our

bikes.” Back when he had worn the brace, riding his bicycle was a relief from walking. These days, however, too much riding usually proved a bit of a bane.

On one side of the road was a deep *barranca*, or gorge, overcrowded with dense shrubbery and a few small trees. On the other side of the road was a short hill, perhaps twenty feet high. The bottom of the hill had been cut to make way for the road, leaving a bare rock face rising about ten feet over the level asphalt.

The boys parked their bikes on the shoulder, where a short guardrail separated the road from the *barranca* at its steepest point, and began to examine the ground at their feet. Jupiter directed Pete to walk along the rock face for about two hundred feet in the hopes that he might find something to indicate where exactly the vehicular incident had begun. Meanwhile, he and Bob checked out the road near the *barranca* to see if they could find where Uncle Titus and his two assistants had swept the remnants of broken statue onto the shoulder.

Pete walked along the rock face in the direction from which Mr. Jones had come earlier in the day.

“I’m not seeing much,” he called back to his companions as he scanned the ground. “Are you sure this isn’t a waste of time, Jupe?”

“No, I’m not sure,” Jupiter called back as he and Bob poked around the dirt and gravel. Bob limped north, eyeing every inch of shoulder as he went, while Jupiter

walked south, doing the same. For some time no one said anything.

Finally, Bob whistled. "I think I may have found something, guys."

Pete and Jupiter turned from what they were doing and ran to where Bob now knelt. He was picking around in the gravel with a short stick. Sure enough, there were remnants of stone that looked as if they might have broken off a large statue.

Jupiter knelt beside Bob. "This is curious." He picked up a globular piece of what appeared to be stone. Smaller bits of dirt and debris were attached to it. It was gray, yet it felt different in the First Investigator's hands than regular stone. It was lighter, with a different texture.

"What is it?" Pete asked, also kneeling to take a closer look.

Jupiter held it up to his eye. Then he held it away from him for a moment before bringing it in toward his waist. He wet his thumb with his tongue and attempted to rub off the dirt. "My educated guess is that this was once part of the statue."

"Could it have been one of the eyes?" Bob asked. "I noticed that the eye sockets in the head were empty when we looked at the statue this afternoon. Olmec sculptures are famous for their large eyes, so it seemed kind of strange."

“You might be right, Records,” Jupiter agreed. “Look, the debris is attached to the globe only on one side.” He blew on it, then wet his thumb again and rubbed off the last bit of dirt. When he was done, the globe was almost shiny.

“What is it made of?” Pete asked. “It doesn’t really look like stone to me.”

Jupiter had an idea, but he was not about to divulge it. Instead, he placed the object in his pants pocket and went back to sifting through the dirt. “Let’s see what else we can find, shall we? If it is indeed an eye, perhaps we’ll find the other one.”

“I need to get up,” Bob said, making his way to his feet. “This hard ground is killing my leg.”

The three of them—Bob on his feet, the others still on their knees, all squinting at the ground—searched for about half an hour but found nothing else of importance. The daylight had begun to fade rapidly by then, and they still had to bicycle home. Though their bikes were equipped with reflectors and headlights, it could get tricky, even dangerous, meeting traffic in the dark on a narrow country road like the one they were on.

“I think we should get going,” Pete declared emphatically.

“You’re right, Second,” Jupiter said. “Let’s go. I doubt there’s anything left to find here. And if we abso-

lutely have to, we could come back again when we're less pressed for time."

Pete and Jupiter stood, and the three boys walked back to their bicycles. As they mounted them, a car came slowly around the hill. It had only one working headlight, the one on the right. When the vehicle drew closer, the boys could see that the other headlight had been knocked out, and the entire front-left side of the car had been damaged.

They could also see that it was blue.

A blue Dodge Neon.

The car moved slowly past them, its driver invisible in the dimness. About fifty feet down the road, its rear brake lights suddenly lit the asphalt in a red ruddiness.

Suddenly the car came to a complete stop, its engine idling loudly.

"What do you think he wants?" Bob asked.

"I don't know," Jupiter responded.

"Should we wait and see, or make a break for it?" Pete asked.

"I don't know," Jupiter repeated.

"Well, Jupe, you're the leader of the team. Tell us what to do."

"Let's see what he does first," Jupiter suggested.

"How do you know it's a he?" Bob asked.

"Just a guess," Jupiter responded, almost in a whisper. He shivered from the falling temperature.

The Three Investigators watched, transfixed, as the car slowly began to back up. Then it stopped, reversed direction, and sped off into the distance.

“Guess he doesn’t want to meet us after all,” Pete observed.

The boys began to ride. For the next half hour they said nary a word, each lost in speculation about what the story of the vehicle’s driver was. As they rode, the sun disappeared completely. A quarter moon rose in its place, providing just enough light to illuminate their surroundings.

The Investigators turned on their bike lights. On one side of them the hill had leveled out, the flatness covered by a small forest of invasive, nonnative Eucalyptus trees. On their other side the barranca remained. The boys encountered few fellow travelers as they progressed, but the air around them felt oppressively thick. Even worse, it was clear that Bob’s leg continued to give him difficulty.

Noticing Bob’s condition, Pete broke the silence. “Maybe we shouldn’t have ridden our bikes out here after all.”

Bob gave Pete a grim but appreciative smile. He was beginning to slow down, holding the other two back despite his best efforts. The three pressed on nonetheless.

About forty minutes into their journey, they noticed a dark car parked in a clearing among the grove of trees. Its lights were out, but in the feeble glare of their bike lights they could see that the vehicle's left side had sustained some kind of damage.

"Is that what I think it is?" Pete asked, just loud enough for his fellow Investigators to hear.

"I believe so," Jupiter answered. "Let's scoot. We haven't much farther to go."

They sped up, but their single-speed bikes limited how fast they could move. A few moments later, they realized that the car had pulled out behind them. Instead of turning on its lone headlight, however, it drove slowly through the darkness, using their bicycle lights as a guide.

Bob, his leg pounding from the extra exertion, realized anxiously that he could not keep up. "Guys!" he called.

Pete motioned for Jupiter to continue on. Jupiter did so as the Second Investigator purposefully fell behind. The stocky First Investigator tried to see what was going on in his mirror, but the darkness made it impossible. And he was afraid to turn his head back too far lest he wreck.

Pete fell in line with Bob and gave him a reassuring nod.

“I don’t think . . . I can . . . make it . . . much farther,” Bob said, gasping.

“It’s all right. You don’t have to,” Pete quietly assured him. He feared that if he spoke too loudly, the driver of the Neon could hear him, particularly if the guy had his window rolled down. “I have an idea. When I give you the signal, ride your bike into the grove as fast as you can.”

“That’s . . . going to be difficult . . . in this darkness,” Bob answered.

“It’s either that or get run down or murdered,” Pete said. “Whoever’s in that car didn’t care if he killed Mr. Jones or Hans and Konrad this afternoon, so I doubt he’ll care if he kills us.”

“Gotcha . . .” Bob nodded and paused. “Whenever you give . . . the green light . . .”

Pete was by far the most athletic of the trio. He slowed his bicycle considerably so that the car behind him would have to slow down as well, giving Bob a little bit of leeway to move forward.

“Now!” he shouted.

Bob darted off into the trees. Pete, on the other hand, sped toward the barranca. The car behind them suddenly sped up as well, and as Pete hit the side of the road, he leapt from his bike, over the guardrail, and into the ravine.

The car and the bike collided with a horrible, metallic crunching sound.

Pete slammed into the ground at full force, taking the impact with his left shoulder, and rolled into a bounce toward the bottom of the barranca. There were few trees but many shrubs, which, through pure luck, he managed to avoid.

He came to a rest in the dry dirt of the gorge. Although pain quickly spread from his shoulder to his arm, he fell still nonetheless, hardly daring to breathe for fear of being heard. Above him, a man's voice cursed loudly. Pete guessed that whoever had been in the car did not have a flashlight or he would have been searching either the ravine or the grove for one of the boys.

Unfortunately, none of the growls of profanity that cut through the air gave a clue as to the mysterious assailant's identity or motivations.

The sounds faded. The Second Investigator got up and made his way quietly along the barranca, in the same direction as Rocky Beach. After about a hundred feet, he decided to climb the ravine wall to see what was happening on the road behind him. He did so silently, peering over the top to spy the driver's silhouette as he attempted to free his undercarriage of Pete's mangled bicycle.



Pete pounced on the opportunity to run quickly and quietly across the road and into the grove. Once in the deeper darkness of the canopy of trees, he called in a loud whisper to Bob.

After several minutes, Bob's voice responded from somewhere to his left. "I'm right here."

Pete started, turned, and saw the Third Investigator standing in the broken slivers of moonlight.

"Darn it, Bob, creeping up on a guy like that," Pete whispered. Then, in a hushed tone: "I don't think our friend is going anywhere for the next couple of minutes. He's struggling to get my bicycle out from under his car!"

"Why doesn't he just drive over it?"

"I don't think he can. It might have gotten caught in the suspension somehow." Pete turned his gaze toward the road and then back toward Bob. "We've got to get out of here. He could have a gun."

"I heard the crash, Pete," Bob said with concern in his voice. "I was scared something had happened to you."

"I'm fine," Pete responded, though he held his left arm tightly. "My bike isn't, though."

"You don't look so fine," Bob observed and pointed at Pete's arm.

"It hurts right now," Pete responded, "and I'm sure it'll be sore tomorrow and the day after, but it'll be okay. I've been a high school wrestler long enough to

know I didn't break or sprain anything. Now, let's get out of here as quickly as we can. Where's your bike?"

"I left it in the woods back there," Bob answered, using his thumb to point behind him. "I figured we could get Hans or Konrad to come back for it in the morning."

"Good idea," Pete grinned. "Now come on."

They started walking through the woods, trying to make as little sound as possible.

Bob whispered, "Let's get far enough away from this creep that we can call Jupiter on your cell and tell him to get off the road."

"Why would you need to call me?" The ethereal voice came from out of the darkness to their right.

Pete and Bob both jumped. Jupiter was standing next to them.

"Jeepers, Jupiter, what are you doing here?" Pete demanded, more loudly than was advisable. "I told you to take off."

"I'm sorry, but I simply couldn't leave my friends behind in a dangerous situation," the stocky boy declared.

The three of them started to move again, hastily but stealthily.

"How did you know we'd be in here?" Bob asked.

"I didn't," Jupiter informed him. "When Pete motioned for me to ride on, I did so for a little bit, then

decided to hide in the grove and watch what happened. That's when I heard the crash and figured I should creep back through the trees to see what was up."

"Exactly what were you planning on doing then?" Pete questioned.

Jupiter shrugged. "I can't say I really had a plan."

"What?" the athletic boy teased. "The great Jupiter Jones didn't have a plan?"

Jupiter ignored Pete's ribbing. "When I heard the crash, I was afraid that maniac had driven over one of you."

"Well, he tried but didn't succeed," Pete replied. "Anyway, I'm glad you're here now, Jupiter. This way, when that jerk does manage to get his car going again, he won't come across you farther up the road! By the way, where's *your* bike?"

"It's lying in the woods not too far from Bob's." He motioned to the rear of them. "I'm on board with Bob's plan to come back with Hans or Konrad—or both—to get our bikes tomorrow. You and I can do that, Pete, while Bob goes to the library. We're also going to visit the estate where Uncle Titus bought those statues."

"That's no fair," Bob cried. "You guys always get to do the interesting—"

They all froze. In the distance, the car was moving again.

They each crouched behind a tree and watched as a solitary headlight moved slowly forward, searching for them. In the heart-stopping seconds that followed, it passed them and finally vanished into the darkness of the night.

“You know what?” Jupiter began. “Let’s forget this creeping-around-in-the-dark business. I’m calling Uncle Titus to come get us in the car now.” He reached into one of his pants pockets and pulled out his cell phone. “Thank God my aunt and uncle and your parents finally decided we were responsible enough to get cell phones. Just think: if we were stuck with those walkie-talkies we used to use, we’d never be able to call for help now.”

“Are you scared, Jupe?” Pete goaded his friend.

“Yes,” Jupiter confirmed, flipping open the phone. “And I can almost hear your teeth chattering, so please don’t tell me you aren’t.”

The other two Investigators agreed that they, too, were frightened. After all, the evening had turned out to be a most unnerving one.

Chapter 4

The Old Dark House

HANS AND KONRAD brought the truck to get the bicycles, while Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda followed in the car to pick up the boys. None of them were too pleased to discover what Jupiter, Pete, and Bob had been up to. But once they learned what had happened, their anger turned to fear and concern—and then back to anger, this time toward the boys' attacker.

The Joneses dropped Pete and Bob off at their homes. Once they got back to the salvage yard, Aunt Mathilda strictly forbade Jupiter from having anything more to do with the case. Jupiter's response was to go to bed early. He'd planned to read up on the Olmec in his book about the tribes of South America but quickly learned that it didn't cover them. There was only a brief mention of them in the book's afterword, where it was revealed they had lived in the northern part of Latin America (Mexico, to be specific), in North America rather than in South America.

Because he had recently spent most of his money on the computer and software that now sat on Headquarters' desk, Jupiter did not have a personal laptop.

He debated going downstairs to do additional research on the household computer, but he was afraid his aunt would realize he was still investigating the case.

He toyed with the idea of telling her that he was researching a paper on Native Americans. It wouldn't have been a complete lie, since that was the reason he'd checked out the book in the first place. But the evening's ordeal had tired him out. As he weighed his pros and cons, he fell asleep on his bed without even making it under the covers. He slept soundly, and twelve hours later his alarm clock, a gift from a clock-maker The Three Investigators had once helped out, woke him with a discordant scream.

His aunt put him to work in the yard, sorting piles of junk and recording what they were. Pete came over around 11 a.m. and got roped into work as well. They divided the duties: Pete sorted and Jupiter recorded, and they got the job done quickly despite the pain that lingered in Pete's right arm.

The two boys then finished several other jobs around the yard, hoping that at some point Aunt Mathilda would notice how hard they were working and give them the afternoon off. The fact that they only took one fifteen-minute break at noon when Mrs. Jones brought them lunch—two ham and cheese sandwiches and a bottle of soda each—worked in their favor. After lunch they got right back to it, and although Aunt Mathilda

didn't cut them loose early, they did wind up running out of work at precisely 1:30 p.m.

Back in Headquarters, they mapped out their plan for the afternoon. They gave Bob a quick call to make sure he remembered what he was supposed to do at the library. He did not pick up but instead texted Jupiter's cell, informing them that he was working the reference desk.

Jupiter called the Rent-'n-Ride Auto Agency, asking that their car be sent around. Two years earlier, he had correctly estimated the number of beans in a large glass jar, thus winning the use of a gold-plated Rolls Royce sedan for thirty days. When The Three Investigators' limited use of the car ran out, a grateful client—whom they'd helped find a priceless ruby—rewarded them by allowing each additional use of the vehicle to be billed directly to him.

Shortly after the phone call was made, the gold-plated Rolls pulled into The Jones Salvage Yard. Jupiter and Pete got in, and the First Investigator handed the driver, a British chauffeur named Worthington, directions to an estate in Malibu Beach. Worthington was the vehicle's usual driver, and he had helped the boys on several of their cases.

"Very good, Master Jones," Worthington said in his rich English accent.

When they got to the house, the boys were surprised by just how big and foreboding it was. It was a mansion, really, with innumerable peaks and gables and two tall towers, one on each side. It sat some distance off the road, towering above a mass of thick trees that surrounded all but the front of it. French windows were evenly distributed across the face of the domicile's first three stories, and an apparent fourth story—possibly a ballroom, a large walk-in closet, or servants' quarters—featured sundry smaller casements and stained-glass windows.

To the back of the house was a large five-car garage. An old, rusty work van sat in front of it.

Worthington turned onto the narrow, blacktopped drive that led to the mansion's massive front door.

"Please park under the *porte-cochere*, Worthington," Jupiter directed.

"As you say," the chauffeur responded.

"What on earth is a *porte-cochere*?" Pete asked, confused. "Jupe, why can't you talk like the rest of us?"

"It's French for 'carriage porch'," Jupiter explained. "Like many foreign terms, it has made its way into our language."

"Well, excuse me all over the place," Pete said. "I must have been home with the measles the day they taught that one."

Jupiter didn't miss a beat. "Let me fill you in, then, so you'll know next time someone says it. The carriage porch, or porte-cochere, that you're looking at here was no doubt originally used by wealthy family members and guests who were dropped off by their coachman at the mansion's front door. If there was rain or a snow-storm outside, the porte-cochere allowed visitors to avoid getting wet."

Pete assumed a studious expression, faking interest. "Ah, that makes sense. If there's one thing rich people hate, it's getting wet."

"It was later used for the same purpose by people driving motorized vehicles," added Jupiter, "and—"

"How about I just take your word for it?" Pete interrupted, rolling his eyes.

"Fine," Jupiter said, cutting the lesson short. "Here I am trying to expand your intellectual horizons, and somehow *I'm* the bad guy."

The two fell silent, though each of them had a smile on his face.

When the car came to a stop, the Second Investigator opened his door and stepped out. "I don't like the looks of this at all," he commented. The mansion's massive front door made Pete feel like a hobbit.

"Why?" Jupiter asked, sliding out of the car behind him. "Are you afraid it might be haunted? If so, I assure you it isn't. There are no such things as spirits."

“Says you,” Pete returned.

Jupiter turned and poked his head into the car’s opened door. “Wait here for us, Worthington. We shouldn’t be too long. If we don’t return in an hour’s time, please feel free to come looking for us.”

Pete, still eyeing the brooding mansion, said, “Come rescue us, more like.”

“I will remain with the car, Master Jones,” Worthington said confidently. “If you have not returned in one hour, I will look for you, though I have the utmost faith that you will return promptly and in one piece.”

“Thank you, Worthington,” Jupiter said, closing the door gently.

“Why did he have to say that?” Pete asked.

“Say what?”

“That he had faith we’d return in one piece. It came out like, ‘nice knowing ya.’”

“You’re talking nonsense again, Pete,” Jupiter chided. “We’ve faced far more dangerous situations than this and been fine.”

“But they didn’t have ghosts.”

“That’s not what you thought at the time,” Jupiter pointed out.

“Point taken. But I feel pretty certain that this house just might be the real deal.” He nodded toward the imposing edifice. “Look at it!”

“Thank you for the input, Mulder,” Jupiter said sarcastically.

“If I’m Mulder, who does that make you?” Pete retorted, grinning.

Jupiter suppressed a smile. “I’m surprised you get the reference.”

“Really?” Pete said. “My dad’s in special effects, and you’re surprised I know something about a horror series?”

The two boys ascended the stone steps to the front door of the old house and pressed the doorbell. They heard no ring to assure them that it worked. If it did work, no one answered.

“This place looks awfully deserted,” Pete said, scanning the property. “There isn’t a car in sight, just that nasty old van. You’d think that the day after a major estate auction, someone would be here cleaning up or something.”

“Yes,” Jupiter agreed. He pressed the doorbell a second time. Again there was neither sound nor answer. “Perhaps we should knock.” He rapped on the door, gently at first and then harder. Still no response.

“No one’s home,” Pete observed. “But what else did you expect? I’m guessing the owner isn’t here. He’s probably as leery about this place as I am.”

“I’m glad to see you’re beginning to use your innate deductive abilities,” Jupiter observed mordantly. “I

never expected anyone to be home, but I wanted to make sure before we let ourselves in.”

“You didn’t expect anyone to be here?”

“Simple deduction,” explained Jupiter. “There was an estate auction here yesterday, which means that the owner is probably dead. Dead people, as a rule, don’t come to the door.”

An uncertain look came across Pete’s face. “Why would we let ourselves in?”

“Why do you think, Second?” Jupiter replied. “There may be clues inside as to why someone might hurt others to get those statues.”

“If that’s really what they wanted,” Pete said.

“The more I think about this case, the more I’m certain those statues are exactly what our mysterious assailant wants,” Jupiter replied. “Now we just have to find out why. And in order to do that, we have to investigate. Hence the reason we’re entering this house today.”

“Makes sense, I guess,” Pete agreed, “but what if the owner’s ghost is in there?”

Jupiter’s face flushed with frustration. “I’m not even going to respond to that question.”

“You just did,” Pete pointed out.

Jupiter tried the door. To his surprise, it was unlocked. “Hm. This is a bit unusual.”

“Perhaps someone forgot to lock up yesterday,” Pete speculated. “Or maybe the ghost wants to make sure we go in.”

With a gentle push from Jupiter, the door slowly creaked open. The place was devoid of furniture, and because there were no curtains draping its tall French windows, it was flooded with warm afternoon sunlight.

“See there,” Jupiter said. “It isn’t nearly as scary as you thought it was going to be.”

“Speak for yourself,” Pete shot back. “You aren’t sensible enough to be afraid even when you should be. People can get killed in the daytime just as easily as they can at night.”

Slowly and deliberately, Jupiter entered the house. He motioned for Pete to enter, close the door, and follow him. After a moment’s hesitation, Pete did as instructed. As soon as the door closed and shut out the ambient sound of nature, an unnatural stillness fell over the place. There was no sound or movement, not even dust riding cheerful sunbeams to the floor. To Pete, it was all very heavy and oppressive.

“Let’s start upstairs and make our way down,” Jupiter directed in a quiet voice, as if afraid of disturbing the decaying atmosphere. “We may not find anything, but at least we’ll have exhausted this place as a lead.”

“What we could possibly find here that could lead us to the owner of that Dodge Neon?” Pete whispered.

“We’ll know it when we see it,” Jupiter answered. “If we do see it . . .”

They made their way up the massive marble stairwell, past the second floor to the third. There the stairwell proper gave way to a steep, narrow wooden staircase accessing the fourth floor.

“Talk about claustrophobic,” Pete observed. “There’s barely enough room to walk on those stairs.”

“Yes,” Jupiter concurred. “I imagine this house was built in the mid-1800s, when people were considerably smaller than they are now.” He started up the staircase but found it an awkward fit.

“What are you saying?” Pete asked as he followed. “That people back in the old days were no bigger than young teens are today?”

“Pretty much,” Jupiter said.

“Speak for yourself,” Pete responded, following up with a friendly dig. “I may be tall, but I’m not that wide.”

At the top of the stairs, the two boys entered a dark and spooky hallway. Along it branched the servants’ quarters, which included bedrooms, a communal living room, a kitchenette, and two bathrooms, one for each gender.

“We’ll get through this a lot more quickly if you go one way and I go the other,” Jupiter proposed.

Pete started to protest but quickly realized it was a waste of time. Resigned, he explored the rooms on the right while Jupiter struck off to the left. Every room Pete entered was empty, apart from the considerable coat of dust on the floors and walls and the cobwebs infesting the corners.

When they were done, they met again at the head of the servants’ staircase.

“Did you check every closet?” Jupiter asked.

“I hate to break it to you,” Pete said sarcastically, “but I’ve been in the amateur detective business the same amount of time you have.”

They departed the servants’ quarters and went back down to the third floor, which they also searched thoroughly and to no avail. Items of non-interest included mouse droppings and a bird’s nest with a single smashed egg inside it. Then came the second floor, and after that the first; those two floors looked as if they had been meticulously cleaned, possibly in preparation for the estate auction or the house being placed on the market in the near future.

Jupiter and Pete noticed that the interior rooms were much darker than those nearest the building’s exterior and wished they had brought their flashlights. But even as they felt their way around the darkness, they found

nothing that gave them a clue to the identity of their mysterious assailant.

Pete shrugged. "It looks like this trip was a colossal waste of time. I sure hope Bob has better luck finding something out."

"We aren't done yet," Jupiter said gravely. "We still have the basement. I saw stairs to it in a pantry behind the kitchen."

"A basement?" Pete gulped. "But homes in California don't have basements. They can flood too easily."

"This one does," Jupiter underscored. "I noticed several pumps around the house. I have no doubt they're to prevent the basement from flooding."

Pete exhaled. "Great. It's going to be really gloomy down there, and we don't have any flashlights or matches."

"I doubt it will be any gloomier down there than it has been up here, Pete, at least not in the rooms along the outer walls. When we were driving up to the portecochere, I noticed what appear to be fairly large cellar windows."

"If you say so," Pete muttered under his breath. He had to admit, Jupiter noticed everything.

The basement, however, turned out to be even gloomier than Pete had expected. It was clear that a false inner wall had been constructed, creating a façade that kept the daylight out. So, although there were mul-

tiple rooms, there was no way of seeing what was inside them.

“Now what do we do?” Pete asked.

Jupiter instinctively felt for a light switch. When he found one, he flipped it. A dank, foreboding hallway was instantly illuminated.

“The electricity’s on,” Pete chuckled. “And we only thought to check after going through the whole house. We’ve really got the detective thing down.”

“Better late than never,” Jupiter said.

Pete sighed, realizing that his excuse for abandoning the search was now gone. “How are we going to divvy this up, First?”

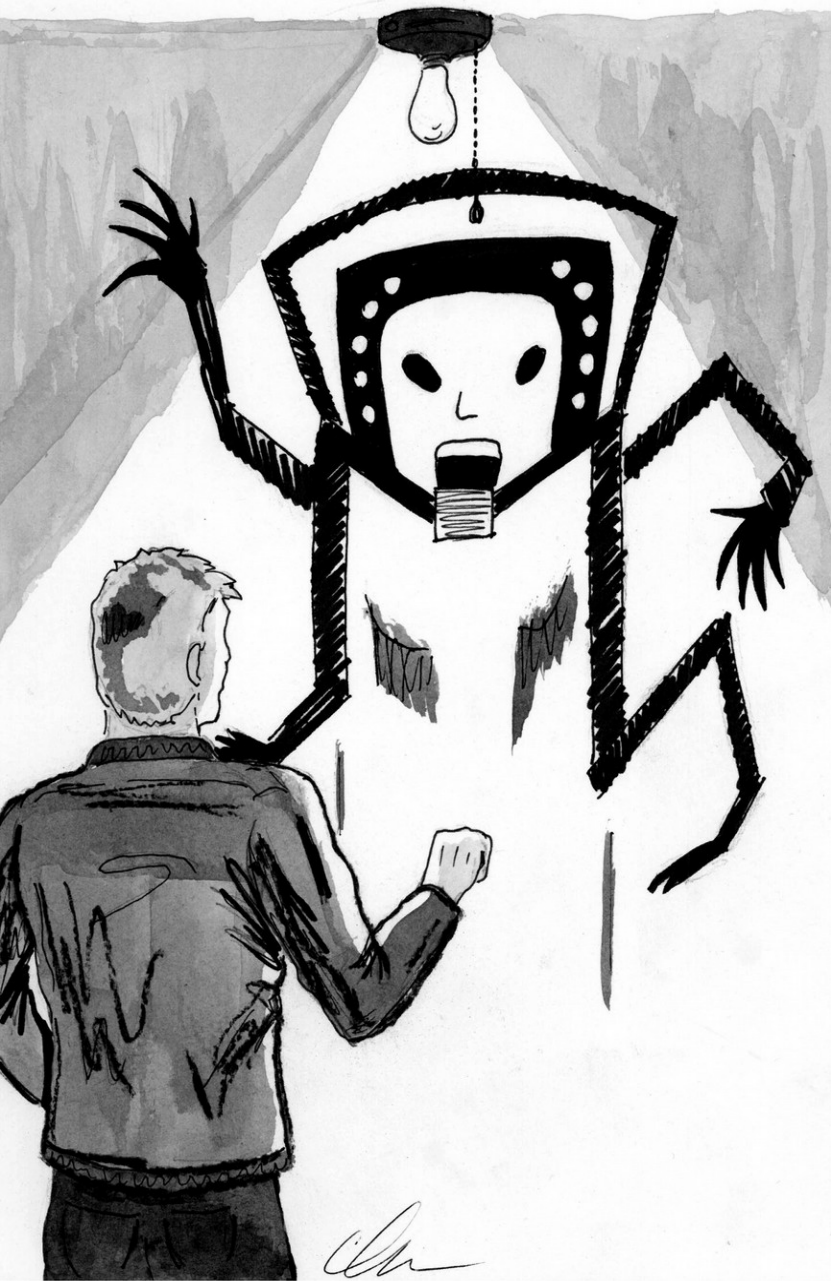
“You take the rooms on the right, and I’ll take those on the left,” Jupiter instructed. Then he quickly added, “Let’s do this and get out of here.”

“Is the place starting to give you the creeps, too?” Pete asked, a little smugly.

Jupiter shook his head. “Not the creeps, really. But there’s something amiss that I just can’t put my finger on. It makes me uneasy.”

“Yeah, that’s called ‘getting the creeps,’” Pete said.

Ignoring his friend, Jupiter disappeared through the first door on the left. Pete sighed and entered the room across the hall from the one Jupiter had entered. He flipped on the hanging overhead light, washing the room in a bright yellow glow.



As with the rooms upstairs, there was no furniture. But one thing struck him as peculiar: there was a strange, simplistic stick figure, drawn in black chalk, on the gray wall opposite him. It seemed to dance in the light, its arms and legs askew and a strange helmet-like box on its head. Where the eyes should have been were two eerie red splotches.

The image jarred Pete, touching something primal in him. Irrationally, he wanted to scream. Fear shot down his spine and raised goose bumps on his flesh. An extra bolt of pain shot through his aching arm.

As he instinctively turned to exit the room, something flitted into his peripheral vision. Something far too large to be Jupiter. Something moving toward him very rapidly.

Reflexively, he dashed to the doorway. As he reached it, long, spiky talons latched onto his shoulders from behind. He let out a yell as he tried to jerk free, and his head hit the door's wooden frame.

With a loud thud, Pete fell limply to the floor.

Chapter 5

Bob Makes a Discovery

“DO YOU KNOW where I can find books about Bette Davis?” a cute, freckled girl asked as she flashed Bob an iridescent smile. She stood in front of the Rocky Beach Library’s reference desk, where Bob was seated assembling a folder of material about the Olmecs.

Bob was not normally allowed to work the reference desk, but the librarian in charge, Miss Bennett, had taken pity on him because of his pronounced limp. She had given him only one admonition: if he found a question too difficult to answer, he was to immediately come to her. She really didn’t think that was likely, however. She had worked with Bob for well over two years, and she trusted his abilities. In her mind Bob was an innate librarian, and despite her feigned reluctance, she was happy to help him nurture and develop his research abilities.

Just as the girl asked her question, Bob felt his cell phone vibrate in his pants’ pocket.

“Excuse me,” he said. “This will only take a second.” He pulled out his phone, looked at the number, and saw that it was Headquarters. He ignored it, instead taking

the girl to the 92 section in the stacks, where the biographies were kept. He quickly scanned the Ds, found *Davis, Bette*, and pulled out three books.

The girl took them gratefully. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Bob replied. "If you need anything else, please don't hesitate to ask. I'll be sitting at the reference desk."

The girl started to leave but hesitated. "May I ask you a question?"

"Sure," Bob answered. "What is it?"

"Are you one of The Three Investigators?"

Stunned, Bob said, "Yes. How did you know . . . ?"

"I helped you out on a case once," she answered. "Don't you remember me?" There was a look of disappointment on her face.

Bob searched his memory. The girl seemed familiar but he couldn't quite place her. "I'm sorry," he said a bit sheepishly. "We've investigated so many cases. What did you help us with?"

"Well, it was you, really. You came to my door wanting a bust of Octavian."

Bob smacked his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Of course! You helped us in *The Mystery of the Fiery Eye* case. Your name is Liz, right?"

Another smile brightened the girl's features. "Yes, yes, that's right." She nodded her head eagerly. But unsure where to take the conversation next, she said,

“Well, you’re working, so I guess I should leave you alone. Maybe I can call you sometime.”

“Sure,” Bob said, his heart thumping in his chest. He wrote his number on a piece of scrap paper and handed it to her. “I’d like that.”

The girl nodded appreciatively and carried her books to an unused table.

Bob limped back to his post, sat down, and texted Jupiter’s cell, letting his friend know that he had been too busy to pick up. He knew what Jupiter wanted, however; the First Investigator was curious to know whether Bob had made any progress in his search for information about the Olmecs.

The reference desk was situated amid the encyclopedias, from which Bob had already gleaned a great deal of material about the tribe. He also had access to the Internet, but the little information he had found there seemed dubious.

His research wasn’t helped by the fact that he was getting a steadier stream of patrons than he had expected. Still, he was happy that on only two occasions he’d had to ask Miss Bennett for assistance. Most of the questions were simple. People wanted to know where specific books could be found, and since Bob had been the library’s resident shelver for a couple of years, he knew exactly where to direct them. Then there were the students who came in wanting the answers to their

homework questions. Bob had become very skillful at helping them find the correct answers without actually doing their work for them.

Because the reference desk was located outside the computer room, he also received numerous requests for help about how to use the library's word processing programs, how to find things on the Internet, or how to connect to the proper printer. He quickly moved from one patron to the next, always with a friendly smile. Between questions, he researched furiously, making copies on the Xerox machine next to the desk.

Sundays were busy for the library, particularly during the school year, and the afternoon went by very quickly. Before the Third Investigator knew it, it was 4:30 p.m. At 4:45 the announcement would go out over the intercom that the library would close in fifteen minutes. At that time patrons were expected to take any materials they wanted to check out to the front desk. Bob would also shut down the reference desk computer and check the computer room to make sure patrons were concluding their business. Once he finished heralding people out of the computer room, he would then have to check the stacks to ensure that no one was lurking there before the library's doors were locked for the evening.

As Bob put his copies into their folder, he saw a brown-haired man approach the front desk and slip a

book into the deposit. Seconds later the man approached the reference desk.

Bob greeted him pleasantly. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Yes," the brown-haired man said. "I'm looking for information on the Olmecs. I just returned a book the librarian helped me find a few days ago, but it wasn't any good. Do you have others?"

Bob was dumbfounded for just an instant. Then he got hold of himself. "I . . . believe that was our only book, at least in the adult section. But we do have encyclopedias here that might help you." He waved his hand toward the reference shelves.

"Can I check some of them out?" the man asked.

Bob hesitated. "Reference books can't be checked out, I'm afraid. Too many people need them."

The man tightened his brow and pursed his lips. He seemed to be taking the whole matter personally. "I really need to find some books. Are there any other libraries in town? Or maybe some bookstores?"

"There aren't any other libraries," Bob confirmed. "There's a used bookstore in the strip mall on Troy Street, and there's a new bookstore over on Harshman Drive. I can't imagine they'll have much on the Olmecs, though."

"What makes you say that?" the man asked disbelievingly, giving Bob a suspicious eye.

“I work in a library,” Bob said, trying to sound relaxed. “A lot of what’s available out there either passes through here or gets offered to us. I haven’t seen many books about the Olmecs. You might be able to find information about them in books about the tribes of Mexico or Central America.”

The man ran his fingers through his oily hair. “You seem to know an awful lot about the Olmecs. Have you helped someone else find information about them recently?”

“No, sir,” Bob answered innocently.

The man’s shrewd eyes continued to scrutinize Bob. “You’re awful young to be working a reference desk. How old are you anyway?”

“I’m fifteen,” Bob answered. “I don’t normally work the refer—”

“Where’s the real reference librarian?” the man rudely interrupted. “She might be able to help me find something better than the stupid book I just returned.”

“You’re right,” Bob said placatingly. “She’s very good. A few days ago she was able to help another guy who was looking for information about the Olmecs.” He was lying; there had been no one else besides himself and the man in front of him researching the Olmecs, not to his knowledge, at least. But Bob wanted to see what kind of a reaction he might get.

His fib did the trick. The man grew angry.

“So someone else *was* in here looking for information about the Olmecs! Tell me: What did he look like, kid?”

Bob thought for a moment, pretending he was trying to remember. “He had red hair,” he said. “Yeah, he had red hair, and he was maybe in his mid-thirties. What’s so interesting about the Olmecs anyway?” He hoped his little act might pry some information from the man.

Instead, the man reached out and grabbed Bob by the collar. “Look, kid. If I wanted you to know, I’d tell you. And I’d mind my own business if I was you. You got that?”

“Sh-sure,” Bob stammered, but before he could say more, the intercom blared that the library would be closing in fifteen minutes. People from all over the building headed toward the front desk.

The man took his eyes off Bob and looked around. Then, as if realizing where he was, he let go of Bob’s collar, turned around, and strolled quickly out of the library.

Bob raced after the man despite his limp, hoping to get a look at the man’s vehicle through the front windows. Unfortunately, he was interrupted by one of the library assistants working the front desk.

“Bob, would you mind going downstairs and making sure there’s no one in the genealogy room?”

“No problem,” he responded, though he first hobbled behind the front desk to grab the book about the Olmecs from the book deposit. Thankfully, the library assistants had been too busy waiting on patrons to get it checked in. The book was titled *The Olmecs of Mexico: Proof of Alien Visitations on Earth in Pre-Columbian Times*, by Ian Cohen. Rather than check the book back in, Bob placed it inside the front office, on a ledge where he kept his personal belongings.

He took the elevator down to the genealogy room, made certain that no one was there, shut off the lights, and locked up. Upon returning upstairs, he was again interrupted by one of the library assistants.

“Bob, hadn’t you better check that book back in?” She pointed to the book he had laid with his belongings.

“I will before I leave,” he answered. “I just need to see something first.”

He then returned to the reference desk computer, shutting it down before helping the patrons in the computer room finish up what they were doing. When those tasks were completed, he returned to the front desk and helped the last few remaining people check out.

Miss Bennett ushered everyone outside and locked the front door as Bob did a quick run of the stacks to make sure no one was hiding among them. Then he made a quick run to the Carnegie building next door, where the audio-visual department was located, to make

sure everything was done and locked up there. Though the two buildings were separate, they were connected by an enclosed walkway, and each had its own library assistants on duty. Still, it was Bob's job to make sure both sides closed on time.

When he got back to the nonfiction department where he usually worked, he noticed that one of the library assistants was about to shut down the last computer.

"No, wait!" he called out frantically. "I need to check something out first."

"Okay," the young woman responded. "But make sure you shut it down when you're finished."

"I will," Bob assured her. After the woman had walked away, Bob scanned the barcode on the back of the Olmec book. But instead of checking it in, he looked to see who had checked it out. The screen blinked and a man's name and address came up: *Timothy Spalding, 116 Ocean Way, Rocky Beach*. Interestingly, the man had applied for and gotten his library card the same day he had checked out the book.

Bob recognized the address as belonging to an apartment complex on the other side of town. He wrote the name and address down on a sheet of paper and placed it within the file folder for Jupiter's perusal later. He also checked the book in, then checked it back out to himself. After a quick online search of the library's cat-

ologue, he shuffled to the stacks, grabbed several more books, went back to the desk, and checked them out. Quickly, he shoved them into his backpack. A few minutes later he exited the back door with his fellow employees, got on his bike, and rode the few blocks that separated the library from his home.

During that brief trip, he offset the pain in his leg by focusing on the mystery at hand. He contemplated the brown-haired man and pondered what his connection to the case might be, if there was one at all. The man might, after all, simply be someone who had heard the name Olmec somewhere and decided to read up on the ancient tribe. Life often dealt out little coincidences like that.

For some reason, though, Bob doubted it.

Chapter 6

The Eccentric Millionaire

PETE, SPRAWLED FLAT on his back, slowly opened his eyes and instinctively reached for his forehead. It was tender, and he could feel a bump starting to form. Without moving his head, he looked around but couldn't see much because his vision was obstructed by three blurry shapes kneeling over him. Slowly they came into focus. Frantic voices began to register, calling his name, asking him whether he was all right.

He blinked a couple of times. After several attempts, he could just make out who the three shapes were: Jupiter, Worthington, and a large man in a black suit he'd never seen before. He shook his head and started to raise himself up, but a firm hand held him back.

"Don't get up too quickly," the stranger said gruffly. "You may have a concussion." The man looked to be in his mid-to-late fifties.

Pete gave up his attempt to rise. Again he rubbed his forehead. "What happened? I can't really remember anything after seeing that awful drawing on the wall."

"You knocked yourself out trying to escape," Jupiter answered him.

Pete slowly sat up on his elbows. “Trying to escape what?”

“Me,” the stranger said without a hint of friendliness in his voice. “I heard someone talking and came down here to see what was going on. Now, do you boys mind telling me what you’re doing in my house?”

“Your house?” Pete asked. “I-I was under the impression that the owner had died . . . and that all his belongings were sold yesterday at an estate auction.” He felt groggy, his thinking processes addled.

“That’s correct,” the stranger said grimly. “But I inherited this house and the property surrounding it, which makes it mine. In any case, you knew it wasn’t yours, and I’d like to know what you were doing snooping around in here.”

Jupiter ignored him and instead focused on Pete. “Do you think you can stand now? If so, Worthington and I can help you up.”

Worthington nodded in affirmation.

“Wh-where did you come from, Worthington?” Pete asked.

“Your hour was up, so I came looking for you,” Worthington informed him. “Unfortunately, I found you here on the floor with Jupiter and this . . . this unfriendly bloke kneeling over you, trying to wake you up. It appears the owner of the house startled you, and in your

attempt to flee, you struck your head against the door frame.”

Pete shook his head, trying to jog his memory. “I-I don’t remember any of that.”

“Do you think you can stand?” Jupiter repeated.

“I-I think so,” Pete mumbled.

Jupiter and Worthington positioned themselves on either side of the Investigator. Jupiter slid an arm beneath Pete’s armpit while Worthington did the same from the other side.

“When I say so, stand up,” Jupiter said. “But move slowly.”

“Sure,” Pete responded, grimacing. Jupiter gave the signal, and the two lifted the Second Investigator slowly, with the majority of the boy’s weight resting on Worthington. Once he was in a standing position, Pete leaned against the wall for support.

“I must be the unluckiest guy in the world right now. First my arm, and now my head.”

Before anyone could respond, the owner of the house interrupted. “Now, would one of you kindly answer my question, please? What were you doing breaking into my house and searching it?”

“We didn’t break in,” Jupiter shot back. “The door was open . . .” Then, a little shamefaced, he said, “It was unlocked, I mean.”

“And you thought you could just let yourselves in and help yourselves to whatever you saw, is that it?”

“Take care how you address my employers,” Worthington said gravely. “If there is one thing Master Jones and Master Crenshaw are not, it’s thieves.”

“It’s not like that at all,” Jupiter said, placing his hand in front of Worthington to prevent the chauffeur from physically threatening the man. The First Investigator stepped forward, sucked in his gut, and elongated his face so that he looked older and more mature than he really was. He also deepened his voice, taking on an adult inflection as he spoke. “We came here with my chauffeur to look the house over.”

As a child, Jupiter had been an actor in a popular television show titled *The Wee Rogues*, a sort of modern-day take on *The Little Rascals*. He had played the part of Baby Fatso. It was a role he hated to be reminded of, though the acting ability he developed then served him well as team leader of The Three Investigators.

“Your chauffeur?” the man said doubtfully.

“Yes,” Worthington replied sternly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I must insist we get Master Pete to a doctor.”

Pete dismissed Worthington. “I think I’m fine now. I just needed to stand and get my blood flowing.”

The man ignored the exchange between Pete and Worthington. “Why did you want to look this house over? It isn’t on the market, not yet, and you had no way of knowing that it would be.”

“True, we had other reasons for coming,” Jupiter explained loftily. “My uncle purchased some material here yesterday, and someone tried to kill him for it—”

“What?” the man roared. “That’s preposterous. Nothing sold here yesterday is worth a plugged nickel. My father collected replicas of antiques and classical works of art and little else. Certainly nothing that would be worth killing for.”

“Oh, really?” Jupiter countered. “Someone tried to run my uncle off the road yesterday on his way back from here, and my friends and I have reason to believe his assailants were after some stone statues my uncle purchased. I’ve examined them, and I assure you that the art he bought was real, not cheap imitations.”

“And I assure you,” the man replied resolutely, “my father never bought an authentic piece of art in his life. He may have been worth millions, but he was the cheapest man I ever knew. Why do you think all those Rembrandts and Dalis and Picassos went for pennies on the dollar yesterday? I’ll tell you why: because they weren’t even as valuable as the frames they were housed in.”

“If I may ask,” Jupiter broached, “why would a man worth millions of dollars, as you claim, collect worthless replicas rather than the real thing?”

“No, you may not ask,” the man snapped. Then he sighed. “But I’ll answer anyway. He was an insufferable cheapskate. He was not only reclusive, he was eccentric also. When he wasn’t filling this beautiful home of his with inexpensive fakes or buying furniture at Cheap Lots, he was obsessing about how mankind used to be monkeys until we were tampered with by aliens.” He twirled his fingertip at his temple. “He wasn’t all there, you see. The best thing that can be said about him was that, despite being a crackpot who inherited a small fortune, he knew how to invest money, just like *his* father.”

“So why did he leave it to you?” Jupiter asked, not really thinking about how the question sounded.

The man drew himself up, breathed deeply, and exhaled furiously.

“How dare you, you insolent runt! Why *shouldn’t* I inherit every last penny he had? I’m his son. And not that it’s any of your business, but he didn’t leave it all to me. He left most of his fortune to that stupid society of his.”

“What society?” Jupiter asked.

“A bunch of morons who believe we’re the descendants of aliens,” he replied in a near shout. “They think

Adam and Eve arrived from the stars and experimented on apes or something. They're completely cuckoo."

If the man had expected to surprise or silence Jupiter with this information, he failed. Instead, the First Investigator withdrew a metal case from his pocket. Then he withdrew a card from the case and handed it to the man. "Our card, sir; I think it might explain a few things."

The card read:

THE THREE INVESTIGATORS

"We Investigate Anything"

? ? ?

First Investigator	—	Jupiter Jones
Second Investigator	—	Peter Crenshaw
Records and Research	—	Bob Andrews

Below the names was a phone number and email address.

Smirking, the man examined the card. "Am I expected to believe this is real?" he demanded in a tone that was the vocal equivalent of an eye-roll.

"It most definitely *is* for real," Worthington assured him in his most dignified British accent. "I am proud to have chauffeured some of the most famous people in Hollywood, but none more so than The Three Investigators on some of their most important cases." The chauffeur pointed at the card the man held. "No Holly-

wood actor or director has been quite as astounding as the three lads listed on that card you hold.”

“Absurd,” the man snorted, tossing the card into the air behind him. “I’ll need more proof than your word and a lousy business card.”

“You will note, sir,” Jupiter said debonairly, “the card you just threw behind you is not of the kind typically associated with computer printers. Rather, our card is printed on the very best paper stock, using an actual printing press. In addition, you may inspect our gold-plated Rolls Royce sedan, which is sitting outside as we speak, to see whether it meets the standards you would associate with three boys simply *playing* at being detectives.”

Pete grinned. Jupiter could certainly turn on the arrogance when he wanted to.

“A gold-plated Rolls Royce?” the man responded, his surliness beginning to crack.

“Yes,” said Jupiter. “I won the use of it several years ago, and when my time ran out, a grateful and wealthy client arranged for my detective firm to continue using it at our leisure.”

“Detective firm? Do you really expect me to believe that a couple of 13-year-olds could—?”

“Actually, each one of the *three* of us is 15 years of age, sir,” Jupiter corrected without letting the man finish his sentence. “There’s more, too.”

From the metal carrier that contained the team's business card, he withdrew a second card of crisp white paper. It read:

This certifies that the bearer is a Volunteer Junior Assistant Deputy cooperating with the police force of Rocky Beach. Any assistance given him will be appreciated.

*(signed) Samuel Reynolds,
Chief of Police.*

The man turned the card over in his hands as if trying to determine its authenticity.

"You may call the Rocky Beach Police Department to confirm that it's genuine," Jupiter informed him.

"What are the three question marks for?" the man asked. "Do you doubt your own abilities?" He chuckled dryly at his own wit.

Even with his pounding headache and still-sore arm, Pete managed a smile. He knew Jupiter's response and mouthed the words even as Jupiter said them aloud: "They are the symbol of The Three Investigators, sir. The question mark, also known as the interrogation mark, stands for mysteries unsolved, enigmas unanswered, conundrums requiring a resolution—"

"Sheesh!" the man interrupted, "Okay, okay . . . let's say I believe you. What does this have to do with me

and my house? Or the fact that my father was a cheap-skate who preferred chintzy imitations to real art?"

"We don't know yet," Jupiter answered. He then described what had happened to his uncle the day before, as well as what had happened to The Three Investigators when they tried to investigate the incident.

"I've got to admit," the man conceded, "all of this does sound mighty suspicious. But boys your age shouldn't be playing detective when there are people out there trying to do you harm. What you need to do is call the police."

"In our experience," Jupiter said casually, "the police are better off when they call on us. In fact, we've helped the police out on several notable occasions."

"Goodness, you're certainly not afflicted with low self-esteem," the man said, his voice sarcastic.

"No, sir, I am not," Jupiter responded. "I have a very justifiable faith in our abilities. Even one of the most famous directors in Hollywood has recommended us to his friends." He spent the next couple of minutes briefly recounting the details of several cases.

When Jupiter at last paused, the man considered the teenager's words. Then, reaching out his hand, he said, "I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions about you boys, but I think you understand why. By the way, I'm William Randolph Ryker the Third."

“Ah, so you’re the grandson of the great William Randolph Ryker, the oil magnate,” Jupiter declared. “I should have connected those dots. He lived in a huge mansion close to Malibu Beach, and I’d read that his son passed away recently.”

“Yes, my grandfather was once the world’s richest man, but when he died, he left most of his money to charity. He left my father a small fortune, but my father made wise investments in the stock market and built it up nearly to the amount his father had accumulated. Then, when he died, he determined to follow in his father’s footsteps and leave the majority of his assets to so-called ‘charity.’”

“Only, this so-called charity is a society of people who believe in ancient astronauts,” Jupiter perceived.

“Yes. How did you know?” Mr. Ryker asked.

“Simple deduction, really,” Jupiter responded. “That, and the fact that you mentioned it a few moments ago. I wonder if you might tell me more about this society. How did your father get involved in it?”

“I don’t know if my father got involved in it after it formed or whether he helped found it,” Mr. Ryker said. “But either way, he tried to force his views on everyone who knew him. He once even organized a direct mailer claiming that the Bible offered detailed descriptions of alien visitations and abductions. Did you know that Enoch was taken by aliens? You would if you had read

that mailer. Not long after that, many of his friends stopped associating with him. The more he insisted his outlandish beliefs were true, the more people shied away from him. After a time, listening to his nonsense became such an unnerving experience that even his wealth couldn't draw others to him. After my mother divorced him, he became reclusive, associating only with the members of his society. In recent years, he even stopped speaking to me, his only child. I'm surprised he left me anything at all after those liars and thieves got to him."

"What's the name of this society?" Jupiter asked.

"I can't remember exactly," Mr. Ryker responded. "I'm sure I could find out for you, though."

"We would appreciate that," Jupiter said. He then pointed to the chalk drawing on the wall. "I take it this figure has something to do with your father's beliefs?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say yes," Mr. Ryker answered. "It looks like some kind of Native American art. I'm guessing it's a replica of something that's been found in a cave or on a rock wall in some canyon or other. My father chose to believe that figures like this one were proof aliens had visited the Native Americans. Oh, and given them the secrets of technological advancement and agriculture and what have you."

“The box around the head,” Jupiter said, pointing to the figure. “Did your father believe it was some kind of astronaut helmet?”

“That’s exactly the sort of nonsense he chose to believe. But I can’t say for sure about this specific image, given that I was never allowed down here during my father’s lifetime. I saw this drawing for the first time last week.”

“Just what is the aim of this society your father was a part of?” Jupiter asked. “Is it simply to tell others that aliens were involved in our evolution, or does it have a greater goal?”

“Now that I couldn’t tell you,” Mr. Ryker admitted. “I know very little about the people in the group. Not long after dad got mixed up with them, I tried finding out more. But for a group claiming to dispense the truth, they’re actually quite secretive. In retrospect, I wish I’d set a private investigator on them, given that they swindled my father out of the majority of his fortune.”

“Hm.” Jupiter pinched his lower lip, a surefire sign his mental machinery was at work. “You said earlier that you didn’t know whether your father started this group or became involved in it after its inception. I propose that at some point it approached him and he readily accepted it.”

“What makes you think so?” Mr. Ryker asked.

“You suggested that, from your own knowledge, the group was fairly secretive, yet your father sent out a mass mailer espousing his views. That doesn’t sound congruous to the group’s clandestine nature, so I assume your father sent the mailer out before he got involved in the group.”

“What Jupiter said,” Pete chimed in.

“It’s possible, but I couldn’t say for sure,” Mr. Ryker said. “You never know with these crackpots. I suspect, now that they have the majority of father’s fortune, we won’t hear much from them. They’ve gotten what they wanted.”

“Perhaps,” Jupiter said solemnly. Then: “Is there anything else we should know before we leave?”

“I’m not sure how any of this helps you with your case,” Mr. Ryker pontificated, “but if I think of anything else, I’ll give you a call.” He turned around, located the boys’ card on the floor, and picked it up.

“I assume this phone number and e-mail address is current,” he said.

“Of course,” Jupiter confirmed.

Without further comment, Ryker withdrew his wallet and placed the card inside it. He then slid the wallet back into his rear pocket.

Jupiter thanked the man before he, Worthington, and Pete exited the old dark house.

“How bizarre,” Pete said as they piled into the Rolls. “Do you think this Ryker guy is on the up and up, Jupiter?”

“I have no reason to suspect otherwise,” Jupiter returned. “He certainly seemed like it. But if there’s one thing we’ve learned in this business, it’s that appearances can be deceiving, if you will excuse the cliché.” Jupiter pulled the door closed behind him. “The salvage yard, Worthington. Pete and I have a great deal of work to do.”

“As you wish, Master Jones,” Worthington said.

“We do?” Pete asked. “Please don’t tell me Aunt Mathilda has more for us to do around the yard.”

“Not Aunt Mathilda,” Jupiter explained. “I’m talking about *real* work. It shouldn’t be long before Bob’s shift at the library ends, and I’m anxious to learn what he’s discovered.”

“What do the Olmecs have to do with all this?” Pete asked.

“I have my suspicions, Second,” Jupiter rejoined. “I have my suspicions.”

Chapter 7

A Brief Outline of Olmec History

BOB POPPED UP through the trap door in the floor of Headquarters to find Jupiter and Pete waiting impatiently for him. Pete was playing a game of Solitaire on the computer while Jupiter, who was seated across from him, sorted through the box of old science fiction magazines his uncle had purchased at the Ryker Estate auction. His Aunt Mathilda had tasked him with pricing them for sale through one of the online auction sites the salvage yard used.

An excited look crossed Jupiter's face as Bob entered, and Pete tore his gaze from the computer screen to see what it was Bob carried. The Records and Research member of the team had his backpack with him, and from it he withdrew a manila folder thick with paper.

"Hey, guys!" he greeted them happily, setting his backpack on the floor and the folder on the desk. He pulled up a chair and sat at the damaged corner of the desk. Some years before, the Joneses had bought salvage from a house that had caught fire. Most of it had been damaged by smoke but, once cleaned up, proved

sellable. Among the goods had been a partly burned desk. Jupiter had sanded the charred surface away and varnished the entire thing, but with one side darker and less attractive than the other, it remained unsellable, though not without practical use. Fortunately for the boys, Uncle Titus had given it to them for use in their “club.”

“What have you got there?” Pete asked, casting his eyes toward the folder. His forehead had a shiny red bump on it.

“What happened to you?” Bob returned, a look of concern on his face.

“I knocked myself out on a door frame,” the athletic boy answered.

“Have you seen a doctor? You could have a concussion.”

“No, but Mom and Dad may force me to go to Urgent Care when they see it tonight.”

“That’s probably not a bad idea.” Bob shuffled the papers absently, his attention momentarily diverted. “It looks pretty nasty. I hate to see what it’s going to look like once it bruises. How’s your arm?”

“A lot better, actually,” Pete answered. “It’s a little sore, but that’s about it.”

“I take it you found something out about the Olmecs?” Jupiter interrupted, his keen interest focused on how Bob’s research had gone.

“Boy, have I!” Bob exclaimed, a grin playing on his lips. “You don’t have any idea just how productive today has been. How did you guys fare?”

Jupiter gave him a quick rundown of the day’s events, leaving much of it out. He was far more anxious to hear what Bob had learned than he was to dwell on his and Pete’s adventure.

“So the Olmec statue did come from the Ryker Estate,” Bob said after Jupiter wrapped up his story.

“Yes,” Jupiter confirmed. “Now, please proceed. And remember, start at the beginning and leave nothing out.”

Bob did as instructed, telling his fellow Investigators all about his encounter with Timothy Spalding and how he was able to obtain Spalding’s name and address. He then reached into his backpack and pulled out the book about the Olmecs.

Jupiter’s eyes sparkled. “Good job, Records,” he said, taking the book in his hands. “You’ve outdone yourself this time. You not only obtain valuable information about a possible suspect, you also procure a book that may link him with the Ryker Estate *and* the Olmec statue.”

“How so?” Pete asked.

Jupiter held the book up. “Note the title,” he said carefully, pointing to it. *The Olmecs of Mexico: Proof of Alien Visitations on Earth in Pre-Columbian Times.*

“It’s definitely a link between the statue, which Uncle Titus bought at the estate auction, and the previous owner of that statue, who had an interest in alien visitations. And to judge from Bob’s description of Spalding’s behavior, he was not only desperate to get information about the Olmecs, but he was also concerned that others might be seeking information about said subject. While this could be a coincidence, I highly doubt it.”

“That’s what I thought,” Bob agreed. “So you think this guy may have been the person who tried to run your uncle off the road and who tried to follow us?”

“It’s possible, but we haven’t any way of verifying that suspicion,” Jupiter mused. “Not yet, anyway. Too bad you weren’t able to see what Spalding was driving. But let’s look at what we *can* find out. What did you learn about the Olmecs?”

Bob shuffled and reordered his papers before beginning, then glanced at them intermittently as he spoke. Part of the time he read from them directly. “Evidence of the first real Mesoamerican civilization surfaced in the late 1850s, when a farmer who was clearing land for a *hacienda* in Veracruz partially uncovered a giant stone head with features that looked like those of African natives.”

“I hate to ask,” Pete interjected, “but what’s ‘Mesoamerican’ mean?”

“Mesoamerica,” Jupiter answered, “refers to the area that stretches from central Mexico down to Costa Rica. It can also refer to the culture that existed there in Pre-Columbian times, or before European—Spanish, to be exact—settlement and colonization occurred. If you paid attention in history class, you would know this already.”

“History is so boring, though,” Pete grumbled.

Bob ignored his fellow Investigators and continued. “A few years later a guy named Miguel y Serrano visited the site to see the giant head for himself. It still wasn’t completely uncovered, so he helped excavate it. In 1869 he published an account of his adventure, which included a description of the head. This generated a lot of interest in archeological circles at the time. Over the years, more of these giant heads were found. For decades no one knew much about the civilization that produced them, and up until the mid-1920s, the Olmecs were still believed to be contemporaneous with the Mayans.”

“I take it, then,” Jupiter surmised, “that the Olmecs predate Mayan civilization?”

“Yes,” Bob answered. “It’s believed that many years before the Mayans, smaller groups settled the area because of its water-enriched alluvial soil—”

“Alluvial is a sediment deposited into soil by flowing water,” Jupiter said, looking at Pete.

“I wasn’t going to ask,” Pete returned.

Jupiter threw an ink pen at the Second Investigator and hit him in the chest.

“Hey,” Pete cried, laughing.

“Proceed, Records,” Jupiter said, a smile playing on his lips.

Bob continued. “It’s not certain exactly when the Olmecs formed, but it is clear their civilization existed from at least 1600 B.C.E. Some ancient astronaut theorists believe they actually date back as far as 5000 B.C.E. Anyway, I’m getting off subject.”

“Isn’t it B.C.?” Pete asked.

“No,” Jupiter replied. “Most scholars today use the term B.C.E., which means *Before the Common Era*. The time frames are approximately the same, however.”

“Oh,” Pete mumbled, not really all that interested.

Bob surveyed his papers, looking for something specific.

“Yes, here it is,” he said, pulling out a sheet of paper, which he proceeded to examine. “The Olmecs lasted until about 400 B.C.E. Or B.C., if you prefer.” He winked at Pete.

Pete tilted his head and smiled sarcastically.

Bob went on. “Some scientists believe the climate changed so fast that the Olmecs couldn’t adapt and broke up into smaller groups. Others think they may

have been wiped out by disease, though that one seems to be a minority opinion. And finally—”

“Let me guess,” Jupiter interrupted, harrumphing. “There are those who believe that the tribe’s disappearance may have had an extraterrestrial connection.”

“Yes.” Bob grinned. “It seems pretty ridiculous to me, too, but there’re people out there who’ll believe anything.”

“What is it about the Olmecs that would cause someone to believe their disappearance had anything to do with aliens?” asked Pete. “There must be *something* to it.”

“Really?” Jupiter asked. “Why’s that?”

Sensing that he was being asked a trick question, Pete clammed up.

Bob went on. “There are several pieces of . . .”—he let go of the paper long enough to make air-quotes—“. . . ‘evidence.’ First off are the facial features. The Olmecs appear to be African. Until a few years ago, we had no way of knowing that people from Africa may have settled Central or South America. So some ufologists chose to believe the Africans were transported there by aliens.”

Pete’s head was spinning. “I can tell this case is going to be a skull buster. These people actually call themselves ufologists?”

“That’s a word for people who study unidentified flying objects and the circumstances surrounding them,” Jupiter said.

“Yah, I got that,” Pete retorted. Tapping his temple with his index finger, he said, “Context clues, Jupiter. I used context clues. Not bad for a jock, huh?”

Keeping his face straight, Jupiter suppressed a laugh. “There are some people today who object to the term UFO because it’s become associated with flying saucers. They prefer the term UAP, or unidentified aerial phenomenon, which doesn’t carry the same negative connotation.”

Bob wrested the conversation back from Jupiter and returned to the subject of the Olmecs. “Another reason people have connected the Olmecs to aliens is the size of the statues. The heads are really big. Some weigh as much as fifty-five tons. Theorists suggest that humans wouldn’t have been able to move these statues themselves. Therefore, they must have had help beyond their technological means.”

“That’s just silly,” Jupiter said. “We now know that the Egyptians moved large, heavy blocks not only long distances, but also upward hundreds of feet.”

“There are those who believe the Egyptians had alien help as well,” Bob pointed out.

“Of course they do,” Jupiter answered. “But we know just how the Egyptians did it, and if people

choose to believe otherwise, they're either misinformed or in a state of denial."

"Everywhere there are large, ancient statues," Bob said, "there are people who believe aliens helped put them there. Just look at the giant heads on Easter Island."

"How can I?" asked Pete. "I'm in Rocky Beach, not on some island somewhere!"

Jupiter asked, "Are there any other reasons theorists might believe the Olmecs communicated with aliens, Bob?"

"Yes," Bob answered. "Theorists look at the helmets on the Olmec heads and believe they represent alien space suits."

"What do *you* think?" Jupiter asked, hoping to take the conversation onto a whole new level.

"If you believe the archaeologists who've studied the Olmecs, and I do," Bob said, "then I'd have to say the helmets represent athletic gear."

Pete snapped to attention. "Huh? The Olmecs had athletes?"

"Virtually every civilization has had its share of athletes, Second," Jupiter responded.

"The Olmecs definitely had ballplayers of some sort," Bob said. "Today we have all kinds of art from the Olmecs, not just the mysterious bigheads. And they

say a lot about the people who made them, including what kind of sports they played.”

“Cool,” Pete commented, suddenly interested in the conversation.

The Third Investigator extrapolated further on the topic of ancient aliens. “There’s a place in Peru called the Plain of Nazca. It’s famous for these weird roads, made of pebbles and rocks, that were evidently built around fourteen hundred years ago. For a long time nobody knew what they were, until planes were invented and began taking flights over them. It was then discovered that some of the roads are giant figures while others appear to be designed for navigational purposes. Most scientists believe they were intended to be seen by the gods of the Nazca people, but others believe the Nazcas couldn’t have made them without some sort of flight to guide the builders.”

“In other words,” Jupiter said, “aliens guided their creation.”

Bob nodded. “One guy, *not* an alien astronaut theorist, thinks that the Nazcas might have built hot-air balloons to help them create the figures, but he’s never found any hard evidence to back up his claim. Some ufologists suggest that the figures were intended to be used as flight markers by interstellar craft. Others think they might have been runways.”

Jupiter scoffed. "So ships designed to travel the vast universe and requiring energy sources we can't even imagine would need flight markers to make a successful landing? And runways? Runways are for aircraft that use jet propulsion, which alien spacecraft couldn't possibly use to move light years from one galaxy to another. It's simply too limited an energy source." He paused for effect, just in case his point hadn't been made, and concluded, "I find this alien astronaut stuff extremely unbelievable."

"Me, too," Bob agreed.

Pete wasn't so sure. "It sounds plausible to me, guys. Look at all the people who have seen flying saucers. You don't think they were all lying, do you?"

"You also believe in ghosts, Pete," Bob said.

"Your point?" Pete responded.

"You mean *claim* to have seen flying saucers," Jupiter responded. "I'm sure most people who believe they've seen a UFO aren't lying, Second. But sometimes, when we can't find a rational explanation for something we've seen, our minds latch on to the fantastic as a way of explaining it. I have no doubt that the majority of UFO sightings can be explained scientifically."

"But unidentified flying objects *are* a scientific explanation," Pete objected.

Jupiter sighed.

Bob jumped back into the conversation. “There’s one thing in my research I found very telling. Whenever UFOs were described by witnesses in the past, it was always through their understanding of science at the time. So UFOs have been described as flying wheels, chariots, ships, and balloons, then later as saucers, cigars, rockets, and so on.”

“Excellent point,” Jupiter said. “If Earth has been visited by extraterrestrial beings throughout the centuries, why have their ships always resembled the technology of the people they were visiting at any given time?”

Pete shrugged. “It sounds to me like you guys are just making excuses.”

“I won’t entirely discount the possibility that there’s an extraterrestrial explanation for a small percentage of such sightings,” Jupiter conceded. “Particularly those that have been captured by military radar and viewed by experienced pilots with trained eyes.”

“So . . .” Pete cautiously put forth. “What you’re saying, Juve, is that you believe in UFOs.”

Jupiter paused for a moment, selecting his words carefully before he said them. “The universe is vast and old, and we’ve only just begun to discover what’s out there, including other planets that could possibly sustain life. There was a time when people didn’t believe in dinosaurs, but we know better now.”

The other two stared at him expectantly.

Sighing, he continued. “The point I’m making is this: while I don’t strictly believe in advanced alien civilizations, we don’t know enough at this time to prove or disprove their existence.”

“Wow,” Pete cried. “Jupe believes in aliens. Woo-hoo!” He shook his fist happily in the air.

“If you repeat anything I’ve said here today, Pete Crenshaw, you’ll be sorry,” Jupiter teased.

Pete and Bob both laughed. Jupiter’s eyes glazed over for a moment. Then, without warning, he jumped up.

“What else do you have in your bag, Bob? I suspect you have something more to show us.” He reached toward Bob’s backpack.

“Dude’s got spidey sense,” Pete muttered.

Bob lifted his backpack and emptied its contents onto the desk. “When I saw the subject of the book about the Olmecs, I thought you might be interested in other books about alien visitation, Jupe,” he said.

Jupiter scanned the books lying on the table. Three of them—*Chariots of the Gods*, *Gods from Outer Space*, and *The Gold of the Gods*—were written by a single author, Erich Von Däniken. The others were an assortment of young adult and adult books by various authors.

“That’s all nice, Records,” he said, “but I think you’ve got even more.”

Bob chuckled. "Tell me why you think that, First."

Jupiter gladly complied. "You were supposed to get here around 5:30 p.m. but you didn't make it until almost 7:00. So either your parents made you do some housework, which I doubt at this late hour, or you did something else before you came here. Now, let's get down to it. Is there something more you want to show or tell us?"

"Nothing gets past you, Jupe," Bob chuckled. He pulled a printout from the manila folder and tossed it at his friends.

"Here," he said. As the sheet of paper fluttered to the floor, he added, "I thought you might find this interesting."

"What is it?" Pete asked as Jupiter picked up the sheet of paper.

"It's an outline," Bob answered. "I got so caught up in the whole ancient alien thing, I made a timeline of supposed visitations."

"Nice work," Jupiter commended, examining the printout with wide eyes even as he shook his head in disbelief. "It's hard to believe that people give some of this stuff credence."

"Please, Jupe, speak in plain English," Pete pleaded. After a brief pause, he added, "So what does it say?"

Jupiter summarized portions of what he was reading. "It appears that God is an alien, according to some peo-

ple. They think spaceships landed on earth either before humankind came into existence and tampered with apes to move them toward humanity; or they arrived shortly after humankind evolved and gave us various technological advances, such as language, writing, the zero in mathematics—”

“That’s another reason theorists think the Olmecs had alien visitors,” Bob said. “There’s some evidence they were the first civilization to develop the concept of the zero, which changed mathematics and science forever.”

“Interesting,” Jupiter muttered, “but I would have to see a lot more evidence than this to believe we owe everything we know and have to alien involvement.” The leader of the team made himself comfortable in his chair as he changed the subject. “Since tomorrow is a holiday and school is closed, I wonder, Bob, if you might have time to go see Chief Reynolds. Try to get a copy of the police report for the incident involving my uncle if you can. I’m sure it’s been filed by now, and such records are available to the public. The police may have been able to find something out about the car that tried to run Uncle Titus off the road.”

“Wouldn’t the report be online?” wondered Bob.

“You can look, but it usually takes a few weeks for reports to be uploaded.”

Bob realized something. “The incident didn’t happen in Rocky Beach.”

“No,” Jupiter said. “But our police department and the county p.d. are on the same system. Looking here will save you having to find a way to Malibu Beach. I believe Worthington has the day off, but if you must, the Rent-‘n-Ride Auto Agency should have another driver available.”

“I don’t see why I couldn’t go,” Bob responded. “My dad has to work, but my mom will be home. She’ll probably give me a couple of chores to do in the morning, but at most they’ll take a couple of hours. I doubt she’ll have anything planned for the afternoon.”

“Good,” Jupiter lauded. “There probably won’t be any new leads in the report for us to follow up on, but we should check it out anyway.”

“What are you two planning on doing?” Bob asked.

“I thought Pete and I might pay a visit to Timothy Spalding’s apartment to see what we can find out. Who knows? There may be a blue Dodge Neon with a dented front fender and a smashed headlight sitting in the parking lot.”

“Yeah, right, Jupe,” Pete chided. “The clue that ties it all together will be parked right there with a bow on top.” He tittered at his own drollness. “Who are we, the Hardy Boys?”

Jupiter’s comeback was cut short by a shrill ring.

All three of them looked at the phone.

It rang again.

On the third ring, Jupiter's arm darted out and snatched the receiver to his ear. "Hello. You've reached the office of The Three Investigators. This is First Investigator Jupiter Jones speaking. How may I help you?"

"It's William Ryker," the shaky voice on the other end said. He sounded frightened, and his voice was loud enough that Jupiter did not need to hold the phone over the amplifier—which acted as a makeshift loudspeaker—he had constructed and kept on the desk. "Is there any way you can come to the Ryker Estate tonight? I . . ." He hesitated for some time before completing his sentence: "I think I've seen . . . something . . ."

"What do you believe you saw, Mr. Ryker?" Jupiter asked.

There was a long pause.

"There's something in my house, and it isn't human."

Chapter 8

Close Encounters of the Second and Third Kinds

AFTER HANGING UP the phone, Jupiter directed Pete and Bob to call their parents and ask if they could stay the night at his house. They did so, and while Bob's mother said yes, Pete's said no. Mrs. Crenshaw had some work she wanted Pete to do in the garage bright and early the next morning. With a sigh of disappointment, Pete told his cohorts the news, and he and Jupiter arranged to meet at Headquarters the next morning once Pete's chores were completed. Pete then left.

Jupiter instructed Bob to wait, then went into the house to ask Aunt Mathilda if he could get Hans or Konrad to drive him and Bob to Malibu Beach. When Aunt Mathilda asked why, Jupiter told her they were visiting a friend who needed a puzzle solved. He knew his aunt would find this unthreatening. After all, she believed the boys operated a puzzle-solving club from the salvage yard, which wasn't exactly untrue. And

because she trusted her nephew, she said yes to his request.

Uncle Titus owned two trucks, a larger one to carry bigger hauls and a smaller one for smaller hauls. Because the larger one had been damaged, Hans used the smaller one to take the boys to Malibu Beach. It was a snug fit, thanks mostly to Jupiter's girth, but half an hour later, Hans pulled beneath the porte-cochere of the Ryker Estate. The three of them quickly got out, breathing a sigh of relief as they escaped the cab's tight confines.

Mr. Ryker stood on the steps to the front door, a large mastiff sitting by his side, and greeted them. "Thank you for coming at this late an hour."

"It's not a problem, Mr. Ryker," Jupiter said.

"Where's the other boy you were with this afternoon?" he asked. "I figured you'd come back in the gold-plated Rolls Royce."

"Pete was unable to make it this evening, but this is our Records and Research man, Bob Andrews. He'll be taking notes."

As if to confirm this, Bob held up a yellow notepad and an ink pen.

"As for our chauffeur, Worthington," Jupiter continued, "we don't like to overtax our benefactor's generosity when it isn't necessary." He gestured toward their driver. "This is Hans. He works for my uncle."

Hans acknowledged Mr. Ryker with a nod and one of his peculiar Germanic grunts.

“Nice to meet you both,” Mr. Ryker responded.

“I see you have a dog,” Bob noted, leaning in and petting the animal on the head. It had an unhappy look on its face, but it bowed to Bob’s gentle touch.

“He’s normally a lot more outgoing,” Mr. Ryker said, tugging the animal’s leash to arouse it from its torpor. “But I’m afraid he’s had as much of a scare tonight as I have.”

“What happened?” Jupiter asked. “You sounded pretty alarmed on the phone.”

“Come on in and I’ll tell you.” Mr. Ryker waved for them to follow him into the house. The dog hesitated, but a jerk on the leash helped it to overcome its resistance.

Inside, the foyer light was on, and there was a bright glow coming from the kitchen area.

“I’m sorry there are no chairs to sit in,” Mr. Ryker apologized. “We got rid of everything at the estate auction yesterday in preparation of selling the place.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Jupiter said, his tone businesslike. “Now, if you’ll tell us what happened in detail, from the beginning.”

Bob smiled. He was used to hearing Jupiter give such instructions. Noticing things came naturally to the First Investigator, and he took it for granted that others, even

if they didn't know it, were similarly observant. It was just that people often saw things they didn't realize they had seen, and it sometimes took prodding to bring those memories to the forefront of their minds.

"After you boys left this afternoon, I went home to look through some of Dad's personal belongings," Mr. Ryker began. "I figured I'd find the name and address of that group I told you about. I did find this." He took from his back pocket a small, leather-bound journal and tossed it to Jupiter, who caught it. "You'll find that enlightening. It's from about a decade ago, but in it Dad describes the incident that left him believing in aliens. I looked through some of his other journals, but they didn't seem like they'd be useful to you."

"I wouldn't mind seeing them nonetheless," Jupiter said. "You never know when some small, seemingly inconsequential detail will point to a mystery's solution."

"Well . . . I suppose," Mr. Ryker cautiously agreed. "I'll look back through them first, though. I'd be happy to loan you anything that doesn't contain personal family matters."

"Thank you, sir," Jupiter responded.

"As I was saying," Mr. Ryker continued, "I went home to find the name of that group Dad was associated with. I live on the other side of Los Angeles, so when I found it, I figured I'd come back here, which is a lot closer to Rocky Beach, and give you a call to meet me. I

brought my dog along, thinking I'd walk him while we were here.

"I let myself into the house, but my dog didn't want to come in. He just stood at the door and whimpered. When I pulled him inside, he started to growl at something, but I didn't see anything. He kept looking toward the kitchen, so naturally I went to see if there was anything there. There wasn't, and after a while Bailey calmed down."

"But you didn't call us then," Jupiter pointed out. "What did you see that prompted the call?"

"I heard a sound outside and went to investigate." Mr. Ryker cracked his knuckles nervously.

"What kind of sound?"

"Well, I'd left the front door open, and it sounded like someone was rustling the bushes out by the trees. I went outside but didn't see anyone, so I grabbed a flashlight from my van. I grabbed a hammer, too, just in case I needed to use it as a weapon. Then I went to explore the bushes and the grove of trees."

"What was the dog doing while you were investigating?" Jupiter asked curiously.

"He sat on the steps leading to the front door. I have to admit, I was more worried about who or what might be in the grove than what Bailey was doing, so I didn't pay a whole lot of attention to him. When I didn't find anything, I returned to the house."

“And Bailey was still by the front door, so you know no one entered or left the house by that particular door.” Jupiter looked at Bob to indicate that this was an important detail. Bob made a record of it.

“Yes, he was there,” Mr. Ryker said, “but he was staring into the house, growling.”

“What did you do next?” Jupiter asked.

“I knelt down and asked Bailey what he was growling at. His hackles were up, and he was afraid to go back in. With a little coaxing, I got him to, though.”

“I take it that once back inside,” Jupiter said, “he continued to stare at the kitchen.”

“Yes,” Mr. Ryker said. “Good guess.”

“It wasn’t really a guess, sir,” Jupiter corrected him. “It was a simple deduction. You stated that the dog initially showed an interest in the kitchen. When we got here, the only two lights on was the one here in the foyer and the one in the kitchen. This suggests to me—”

“I see your point,” Mr. Ryker acknowledged, cutting him off. “You’re an intelligent young man.”

“Thank you,” Jupiter said. “Now, what did the dog do next?”

“It was weird,” Mr. Ryker answered, looking off into space as if he could see his memory there. Then he looked back at Jupiter. “He seemed both scared and angry. One moment he would whine and whimper, the next he would grit his teeth and growl. He sensed some-

thing I couldn't see. I've always read that animals can detect the supernatural . . .”

“I doubt the supernatural had anything to do with it,” Jupiter said matter-of-factly. “Dogs have a stronger sense of smell than humans do. It may be that he smelled someone in the kitchen and could sense danger. When we exhibit emotions, it's possible that something in our sweat, which may be noticeable to animals with a strong sense of smell but not to us, can give us away.”

“Anything's possible,” the older man said. “Either way, I'm glad you bought Dolph Lundgen with you.” He looked at Hans, who wore a battered white T-shirt that revealed just how big his chest and arms were. “I feel safer with an extra guy around.”

Hans smiled. “Anyone try to hurt boys, I hurt *them*.”

“Anyway, I may have used the wrong word when I said *supernatural*,” Mr. Ryker said. “Perhaps what I should have said was *extraterrestrial*.”

Jupiter frowned. “You believe there was some form of alien life in this house tonight?” He made no attempt to conceal his skeptical tone.

Mr. Ryker puffed out his chest and puckered his lower lip.

“Yes,” he said resolutely. “When the dog refused to move toward the kitchen, I went a second time to see what might be in there. It was empty, but the door to the pantry was open. I walked inside, and there, standing at

the top of the steps leading down into the basement, was a . . . a . . .”

“A what?” Jupiter asked. “Remember, no one is here to ridicule you. We want to solve this mystery as much as you do.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry.” Still, he hesitated before finally blurting it out. “There was a tall, thin man with a bald head much too large for his body. His skin, it burned with a kind of light green glow. And his eyes, they were black, deep black . . . and extremely large. He looked exactly the way aliens are described by people who have been abducted by them.”

“You mean people who *claim* to have been abducted by them,” Jupiter corrected. “Do you know just what you’re alleging, Mr. Ryker?”

“Um . . . yes,” the older man said hesitantly. “Not everyone is as dim as you seem to think.”

Jupiter stuck to the subject. “If what you’re saying is true, then your dog has had a close encounter of the second kind, and you’ve had a close encounter of the third kind.”

“Like in the movie?” Bob asked excitedly.

“Yes,” Jupiter said. “Josef Allen Hynek, a scientist and UFO researcher, created a scale of one to three to describe encounters with unidentified flying objects. The first ‘kind’ describes a UFO sighting. The second is used to classify a UFO sighting with physical effects,

such as heat or radiation, damage from either, electrical or magnetic interference, lost time, or animals behaving strangely.”

“Like Bailey,” Bob said eagerly.

“Exactly, Bob.” Jupiter gave him a reassuring nod. “A third-kind encounter is one that involves the sighting of an animate being in association with a UFO. Now, in this case, there was no sighting of a UFO, at least not to my knowledge.” Jupiter gave Mr. Ryker a studied look, but the older man merely shook his head *no* to confirm Jupiter’s assessment of the situation.

The First Investigator continued. “The scale has been added to by various researchers and ufologists since its inception, so there are debatably now seven types of encounters. There are also subtypes of the original three. For instance, Mr. Ryker’s encounter is a subtype E because of the lack of UFO sighting.”

“When did you learn all this, Jupiter?” Bob asked.

“If you think about it, Bob, you’ll be able to make an accurate deduction as to when I learned it,” Jupiter responded.

“Or you could just tell me,” Bob countered.

Jupiter sighed. “It was a few months back, when we investigated a case involving possible aliens on a desert compound.”



“Are you telling me you’ve investigated a case of alien visitation before?” Mr. Ryker asked. “You certainly do seem knowledgeable.”

“Yes,” Jupiter confirmed. “Some months back we were involved in a case that appeared to have both a sighting of a UFO and an encounter with animate beings. But what we uncovered was nothing more than a carefully planned hoax to steal a man’s fortune.”

“I hope you don’t think I’m out to *steal* my father’s fortune,” Mr. Ryker said, his tone a little defensive.

“The cases really aren’t as similar as they sound,” Jupiter pointed out. “The rich old man in that case was alive, and the people swindling him were able to do so because he’d shuttered himself away from society on a large compound in the desert hills. If *you* wanted to deceive people into believing some kind of hoax, I doubt you would have contacted us rather than the police or the media.”

“So you think this might be a real alien visitation?” Bob asked, his mood a curious mix of elation and alarm.

“I can’t say, Bob, whether this is the work of real aliens or human swindlers of some sort, but I have my suspicions.” It was clear Bob was going to get no more of an answer than that. Jupiter could be amazingly tight-lipped when he didn’t have the evidence to support his suspicions.

“This sound bad,” Hans said. “We should leave case to the police.”

“If I called the police to claim I’d seen an alien, I’d become a laughing stock overnight,” Mr. Ryker said. “I can see the headlines now: HEIR TO RYKER FORTUNE SEES LITTLE GREEN MEN. My career doesn’t need that kind of publicity, thank you very much.”

“I failed to ask earlier today,” Jupiter interjected, “but just what is it you do, Mr. Ryker?”

“I’m a stockbroker,” Mr. Ryker responded. “If my clients believed I was a crackpot, they’d pull their stocks and give them to a different broker. I’d be ruined.”

“Yes, you probably would be,” Jupiter agreed.

Bob looked up from his note-taking and said, “I don’t know, Jupe. Maybe Mr. Ryker did see an alien. We can’t exactly disprove they exist.”

“We don’t have to,” Jupiter said, his tone conveying disdain for the idea. “The burden of proof is always on those making the claim. You can never prove that something like this doesn’t exist, and anyone suggesting you have to is making a fallacious appeal to ignorance.” He looked back at Mr. Ryker. “Would you mind if we explored your basement? Pete and I had intended to do it this afternoon, but, as you know, we were interrupted. Now may be the perfect time to finish the task.”

“It doesn’t sound like the perfect time to me,” Bob said.

“Now you’re sounding like Pete,” Jupiter replied. “If you think I’m not scared too, you’re wrong. It’s always possible that aliens do exist and that Mr. Ryker has seen one. However, we also have to keep in mind that, while it’s possible, it isn’t probable.”

“When you say it like that, Jupe, it does seem kind of silly,” Bob agreed.

“Yes,” Mr. Ryker said. “Maybe I’ve been too quick to jump to conclusions. If it hadn’t been for the dog’s behavior, I’d more readily believe I’d imagined it all. And maybe, after our talk of aliens this afternoon, my mind played some kind of trick on me, mistaking a common burglar for an extraterrestrial visitor.”

“Any of that’s possible,” Jupiter said. “Let’s check the basement and see if we can find anything.”

“Sure thing,” Mr. Ryker said. He led them to the pantry and then down the steps into the basement, flipping on the hallway light as they passed the switch. Bailey followed.

“Whatever was here, it appears to have gone,” Jupiter noted. “Bailey shows no sign of fear or anger whatsoever.” Then, to Mr. Ryker: “I take it there are no exits down here other than the stairs into the pantry?”

“None that I’m aware of,” Mr. Ryker responded. “The windows have all been covered by a false wall.

When I was a kid, this was one large room with pillars to provide support for the house above. At some point, my father must have separated it into various rooms. But as I said earlier, he preferred to do everything on the cheap. Hence the plywood.”

Jupiter asked, “Do you have any idea why your father wanted windowless rooms down here?”

“I assume he wanted to engage in some kind of behavior he didn’t want outsiders to see,” Mr. Ryker replied.

“Yes,” Jupiter agreed, almost in a whisper, his gaze far off. Then, he focused and said, “I think we should station Hans and the dog at the foot of the steps in case someone is still down here and tries to escape. The rest of us as a group can explore each room. If someone is hiding in one of them, we’re safer together than we would be apart.”

Everyone agreed to Jupiter’s plan. Hans sat down on the next-to-the-bottom step, and Mr. Ryker ordered Bailey to stay behind with the Bavarian. The dog licked the back of Hans’s hand to show his approval. Jupiter, Bob, and Mr. Ryker left the pair and began their search in the room containing the weird chalk drawing.

Hans yawned and turned to pet the dog but quickly changed his mind. Bailey’s hackles were up again. He was staring intensely at something behind Hans, his ears flattened and his mouth set in a snarl. Someone—or

something—was at the top of the stairs. As Hans stood and turned, the door slammed shut. There was the clicking sound of a lock catching.

Hans ran up the stairs and grabbed the doorknob.

The door refused to budge.

Chapter 9

In and Then Out

HANS SHOOK THE DOORKNOB vigorously to no avail.

“Hey,” he shouted. “Let us out!”

On the steps beside him, the dog growled angrily. Jupiter, Bob, and Mr. Ryker ran out into the basement hallway and looked toward the commotion.

“What happened?” Jupiter demanded.

Hans turned and came back down the steps. Bailey followed him.

“Someone lock us in,” the handyman snarled as he approached the others. The dog went to Ryker and sat submissively next to him.

“Shhh! Listen,” Jupiter whispered, placing his finger to his lips. They could hear, in the kitchen above, cabinet doors being opened and closed. Someone was searching for something. After a few moments, whoever it was moved into another room. The sounds of ransacking became more muffled, continued for a short time, and then stopped altogether.

“Whatever he’s looking for,” Mr. Ryker said, “he isn’t going to find it. This place has been completely cleared out.”

“He apparently doesn’t know that,” Jupiter said. “Whatever he wants, he must have figured he could scare you out of the house before searching for it. When that didn’t work, he decided to lock us down here.”

“Why would an alien be searching the house?” Bob asked.

“My thoughts exactly,” Jupiter said, as if Bob had made a statement rather than asked a question. “For now, since we’re trapped here anyway, I suggest we at least finish what we started. On a positive note, this basement isn’t as big as the house it sits under or we’d be at it all night. As it is, it will probably only take us a few minutes to get through each room.” He looked at Mr. Ryker for confirmation. “I assume they’re all empty.”

Mr. Ryker didn’t look so sure. “As far as I know, but I have to admit: I haven’t been down here since we first started clearing the place out. I hired laborers to move everything into the yard for me.”

“So there could still be something down here,” Jupiter prompted.

“I doubt it,” Mr. Ryker said. “The men had specific instructions to move everything out. But yes, it’s possible.”

“Shouldn’t we maybe start by trying to find a way to get the door open?” Bob asked. “Jupiter, do you have

your Swiss army knife? If so, we may be able to use one of the blades to trip the lock.”

“I doubt that would work,” Jupiter answered. “This house is old. If I’m not mistaken, these interior locks are the old-fashioned kind that uses skeleton keys.”

“I didn’t anticipate this, or I would have brought in my batch of skeleton keys,” Mr. Ryker said. “I have a ring of them in the van. The front door takes a newer-type key, as well as a code for the alarm system.”

“Whoever is up there may be armed, so we might not want to get out of here anytime soon anyway,” Jupiter observed.

The others mumbled in agreement.

Hans grunted, turned, and climbed the steps to fiddle some more with the door. Bailey, afraid of missing something, assumed a post on the step behind him. The dog wagged its tail happily as it watched the Bavarian work, suggesting to Jupiter that the intruder had moved beyond the range of the animal’s sharp senses.

The rest of the group split up and completed their search of the rooms, which proved as empty as Mr. Ryker had said they would be.

“There’s one thing that bothers me,” Jupiter said as they regrouped in the hallway. “Mr. Ryker, after you saw the alien disappear into the basement, did you call us immediately?”

“Yes,” Mr. Ryker responded. “And about half an hour later, you guys showed up.”

“While you waited for us, did you go anywhere?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, did you wander around the house, or did you stay in the foyer?”

Mr. Ryker thought for a moment. “I stayed in the foyer, near the front door with Bailey. When I heard you pull up, I went to greet you.”

“There are only two exits from the kitchen,” Jupiter noted, “the one into the pantry and the one into the foyer. If someone fled into the basement, he should have still been here when we checked the rooms, unless a) he represents an EDI rather than an ETI; b) he snuck out through the kitchen and foyer when you weren’t looking; or c) there’s another exit we don’t know about.”

“But, Juve,” Bob protested, “we just searched every room and we didn’t find a door or window anywhere, so option *c* can’t be it.”

“What’s an ETI?” Mr. Ryker asked.

“It means extraterrestrial intelligence,” Jupiter explained. “EDI stands for extra-dimensional intelligence. The latter could explain how the alien was able to disappear without accessing any known door or window. He simply teleported from this dimension into whatever dimension he’s from.”

“So he may not be from space?” Mr. Ryker asked.

“No,” Jupiter answered. “He could be from another dimension, which would also explain the lack of a UFO.”

“I don't like what I'm hearing,” Bob said.

“I wouldn't let it worry you too much, Records,” Jupiter declared. “The most likely answer actually is *c*. We weren't looking for a means of exit when we searched the basement, which suggests to me that we simply missed it. This entire basement is surrounded by an artificial wall. There has to be some way to get behind it. I suggest we retrace our steps, but this time let's look for cracks of any kind. They may signal a hidden door of some sort.”

“You may be on to something, Jupiter,” Mr. Ryker said. “My father was such a misanthrope he could have installed any number of secret entrances and exits into this old house.”

“If he had meetings of his secret society down here, he might have had good reason—at least in his mind—to install such exits,” Jupiter mused.

“It certainly isn't like we haven't been in an old house or two with secret passages,” Bob agreed.

“Just how many cases have you kids been involved in?” Mr. Ryker asked.

“Between forty and fifty,” Jupiter answered.

“Forty-three to be exact,” Bob answered. “That is, if you combine those instances where we set out to solve two different mysteries that ended up having a single solution.”

Everyone looked at him.

“I have to write them all up,” he said awkwardly.

“And how many of said cases have you solved?” the older man asked.

“All of them,” Jupiter answered. “Of course, that doesn’t mean we won’t have a failure sooner or later.”

“You’ve been lucky,” Mr. Ryker said.

He was quickly corrected by Jupiter. “I would credit our rate of success to skill, not luck. Luck implies supernatural causation.”

Mr. Ryker was about to reply when the light was suddenly extinguished.

A moment later Hans called down to the group. “Light also out in kitchen. See that through keyhole. Electricity shut off, I guess.”

“It would seem so,” Jupiter concurred. “Do you know where the breaker is, Mr. Ryker?” He spoke into the all-enveloping darkness.

“I . . . I don’t know,” Mr. Ryker confessed somewhere to Jupiter’s left. “I haven’t really paid attention.”

“How are we going to find that hidden exit now, Jupe?” Bob, somewhere to Jupiter’s right, asked worriedly.

From outside came the sound of a car engine starting.

“Apparently our alien drove himself here,” Jupiter observed. Then, to Mr. Ryker: “I don’t suppose you brought that flashlight of yours, did you?”

Mr. Ryker responded through the darkness. “No, I didn’t. I think I left it sitting on one of the windowsills in the foyer.”

“Hey, Jupe,” Hans called from atop the stairs, “I have lighter.” Suddenly there was a flame flickering in the darkness. “Does this help?”

“Hans, I could hug you right now,” Jupiter yelled. “It isn’t much, but, yes, it certainly does help.” He ran up the stairs and took the lighter from Hans, who was now sitting on the top step.

“Me and Bailey wait for you to return,” the Bavarian said. The dog sat next to him, its tongue lolling from its mouth, its sharp eyes reflecting the flickering flame.

With only the lighter to guide them, Jupiter, Bob, and Mr. Ryker got caught up in exploring every wall, nook, and cranny for any sign of a hidden door. Finally, after exiting the final room at the far end of the hall, Jupiter called to Hans that they had been unsuccessful.

“Hokay,” Hans responded sullenly. “You care if I try pocket knife on door, Jupe?”

“Not at all, if Mr. Ryker doesn’t mind,” Jupiter responded.

“No, I can’t say as I do,” Mr. Ryker said. “I just want to get out of here. And would you all please start calling me William?”

“Sure, Bill,” Bob replied.

“Um . . . William.”

Jupiter handed the lighter to Mr. Ryker and fished his Swiss army knife from his pants pocket. Then he walked to the foot of the stairs and tossed the object to Hans.

Bob, who had been exploring the back wall of the hallway with his hands, suddenly called out. “Guys, I think I’ve found something.”

Jupiter and Mr. Ryker turned toward him.

“What is it?” Jupiter asked.

“The wall here, I never noticed it before because it’s painted the same dull gray color as everything else,” the Third Investigator said. “But it’s brick, not wood.”

“What?” Jupiter said excitedly. “The artificial wall doesn’t cover the basement’s real wall here? Why would your father cover everything over with wood except this one portion of brick?”

“I don’t have any idea,” Mr. Ryker said. “Maybe there’s a latch here somewhere that opens a secret door.”

All three of them felt along the wall, applying pressure to various points, but they found nothing. Not a single brick was loose.

“This is pointless,” Bob finally said, his hopes fading. He plopped down onto the floor and leaned his back against the brick wall.

“Not futile,” Hans called. Bob rose and they all went to the foot of the stairs. Hans stood at the top, next to the now-open door.

“How did you do it?” Jupiter asked, stunned.

“Door never fitted with new lock, so I insert smooth knife between door and frame and catch the lock there.”

“Duh!” Bob laughed. “Why do simple when you can do complicated, right, Jupiter?”

Jupiter ignored Bob’s comment. “Come on, I want to test something.”

He ran up the stairs, through the door, and made his way to the outside of the house. Bob, Hans, Mr. Ryker, and Bailey followed.

With the others in tow, Jupiter walked around the building, testing one basement window after another to see if he could raise one. Finally, he found one that was already raised.

“Here,” he pointed, handing Hans’s lighter to Bob. “See if you can fit through this open space.”

“I can fit through there easily,” Bob assured them. He grabbed the lighter, slid through the open window, and disappeared into the darkness.

Several minutes passed. The group grew anxious.

Finally, Jupiter called through the aperture, “Bob, where are you? Can you hear me?”

There was no response.

“What if something’s happened to him?” Mr. Ryker whispered apprehensively.

“Don’t worry, nothing’s happened to me,” a voice answered from behind them.

They all jumped.

Startled, Hans bellowed, “Bob, where you come from?”

“The basement,” Bob replied. “You’re right, Jupiter, there *is* a narrow hall between the real wall and the false wall, along the west side.”

“And the door into the actual basement, where is it?” Jupiter asked.

“You’ll never guess,” Bob said, a grin spreading across his face.

Jupiter thought for a moment, the operation of his mental machinery reflected by an intense look on his face.

“Aha.” He snapped his fingers. “The only place we would never have spotted it.”

“Where?” demanded Mr. Ryker. “We looked everywhere, and we didn’t see any evidence of a door.”

“That’s because it’s carefully concealed behind black chalk,” Jupiter shouted elatedly.

“You mean . . . ?” Mr. Ryker began.

“Yes,” Bob confirmed. “The chalk drawing of the alien hides the door.”

“But how do you trip the door from the inside?” Jupiter asked, perplexed.

“I don’t know,” Bob answered. “It was too dark for me to explore. Besides, it’s creepy in there.”

Mr. Ryker laughed. “You boys are ingenious.”

They went back into the house. This time armed with Mr. Ryker’s flashlight, they found the fuse box in the pantry. Flipping the breaker, they restored the home’s electricity. The kitchen, foyer, and basement were instantly flooded with light.

They went downstairs to the room containing the chalk drawing. Close examination revealed nothing on the walls or floor that could trip the door, which was still open from Bob’s discovery. Finally, Jupiter asked Hans to lift him up to the base of the light on the ceiling.

“I try, but you big, Juve,” Hans said.

Mr. Ryker came to his aid and together they elevated the First Investigator high enough to examine the light fixture. Near the drawstring that turned on the light was a button. Jupiter pushed it. Below him the door swung silently shut. He pushed the button again and the door swung open.

“Good work, Juve,” Hans congratulated as he and Ryker lowered the First Investigator to the floor.

“Well, we now know how the secret door works,” Jupiter proclaimed, “but what we don’t know is how a normal-sized man could reach the trigger.”

“Well, if it was an alien, he could probably do it with his mind,” Bob joked. “Or, if he’s really extra-dimensional, maybe he teleported up there, poked the button, and teleported back down. So much easier than just teleporting through the door.”

“I suspect that an agile man might be able to jump and hit the button with his fingertips.” There was a hint of a smile playing on Jupiter’s mouth. “But still, we’ve solved one mystery only to be confounded by another. Who searched this place, and how did he know about the secret entrance?”

“All good questions, Jupiter,” Mr. Ryker said, “but I’m afraid they’ll have to wait for another day. It’s getting late, and you boys had better be getting home before your parents start to think something happened to you.”

Jupiter yawned. “True, we’d better get back to the salvage yard soon or Aunt Mathilda will get worried. I’m surprised she hasn’t called my cell phone yet.”

“Me, too,” Bob agreed. “And besides, I’m getting tired myself. It’s past my bedtime. Thank God there’s no school tomorrow. We can sleep in.”

Mr. Ryker secured the open window and the secret door. The others went outside and waited as he locked the old dark house up for the night.

“I can’t thank you boys enough for coming out tonight,” he said when he rejoined them. “You’ve helped me realize that there’s definitely something fishy going on here.” He turned toward the First Investigator. “You’ve got my father’s journal, Jupiter. I’d appreciate it if you fill me in on anything you learn about this group he was mixed up in.”

Jupiter smiled. “Don’t worry, Mr. Ryker, when I learn something, and I will, you’ll be the fourth to know.”

With that, everyone parted ways and returned to their respective homes. Except for Bob, who spent the night in the guest room at Jupiter’s. It had indeed been an exciting and eventful evening. As soon as he hit the guestroom bed, he was out like a light.

Chapter 10

The *Two* Investigators Make Progress

BOB WAS AWAKENED EARLY by the sound of Jupiter's heavy footfalls as the First Investigator raced to the bathroom. The Jones's guest got up, dressed, and went downstairs. There he learned from Mrs. Jones that Jupiter had gotten sick with some sort of stomach ailment during the night, probably the result of something he had eaten the day before. She insisted that Bob eat breakfast there but refused to allow Jupiter to get out of bed to join them. Instead, she took his breakfast to him.

Bob ate quickly, said a quick goodbye to Jupiter, thanked his hosts, and rushed off. His mother had told him that, though he could spend the night at Jupiter's house, he had to be home early the next day to do some chores around the house. Despite it being a holiday, Bob's dad still had to go to work. This left Bob at the mercy of his mother. Thankfully all he had to do was wash the garage windows. And since the garage didn't

have that many windows, the task only took a little over an hour.

The library was closed for the holiday, so he didn't have to work. This left him the rest of the day to visit the Rocky Beach Police Department. Around 10:00 a.m. he grabbed his notepad, got on his bike, and pedaled to the station. His leg gave him no problems and felt much better than it had the day before.

When he got to the station, he locked his bike to the rack outside and went directly to the service desk. A young police officer he had never seen before was on duty. The officer gave Bob a pleasant smile and asked, "What can I do for you, young man?"

"My friend's uncle, Titus Jones, was in an accident on Saturday, around noon. I was wondering if a police report had been filed yet."

"Seriously, kid?" The officer had a look of disbelief on his face. "Why would you need a police report?"

Bob smiled in an attempt to be disarming. "My friends and I are investigating the incident. You see, someone tried to run Mr. Jones off the side of the road—"

"Investigating?" The officer looked incredulous. "Are you guys amateur P.I.'s or something?"

"My friends and I, we have our own firm, yes," Bob answered to the officer's laughter.

“Get this,” the officer called to another, older officer making copies behind the desk. “This kid thinks he’s a private investigator.”

The older officer turned around and saw who his colleague was referring to. “That’s because he is,” he said. “He’s one of The Three Investigators.”

Bob recognized the older officer as someone who had been involved when the boys had tracked down the whereabouts of a missing child a few months back.

“The Three Investigators?” the younger officer smirked.

“Yes, sir,” Bob replied, pulling from his pocket the little metal case that held not only the team’s business card but also the endorsement from Chief Reynolds. He handed them both to the officer. “Is Chief Reynolds here?”

“No,” the officer said, reading the letter over. “He never works on holidays unless he gets called in for something big. Say, is this for real?” He looked quizzically at Bob before turning back to the older officer. “You aren’t pulling my leg, are you?”

“Don’t you ever read the newspaper?” the older officer asked. “The Three Investigators are local celebrities. They’ve solved a couple of high profile cases. The chief will have your hide if you don’t help the kid out.” He gave Bob a sly wink.

“Okay,” the younger officer said, turning back to Bob. “What is it you need to know?”

“I need a copy of the police report for an accident involving Titus Jones,” Bob repeated. “It didn’t happen locally. It happened in the county up near Malibu Beach.”

“We’re connected to the entire county’s police departments through the Internet,” the officer said. “So if the report’s been filed, I should be able to find it. Do you mind repeating the name of the man involved?”

“Titus Jones.” Bob then spelled each name.

The officer typed the name into the computer, called up the report, and printed it.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” he asked, handing Bob the printout. His eyes sparkled as if he were in on some secret game.

“Could you tell me if you’ve had any kind of break in the case?” Bob asked. “Is this report up-to-date?”

“I hate to tell you, kid, but this case probably isn’t the county’s priority, especially with all the robberies they’ve had up in the hills near Dial Canyon. Let me take a look at the file and see what’s there.” He called something up on his screen. Unfortunately, because it was facing away from Bob, the Third Investigator could not see what it was.

The officer frowned. “I don’t know if this’ll help you any, but a blue Dodge Neon was stolen from San Mateo

County a couple of weeks ago. The sheriff thinks it might have been stolen by whoever tried to run your friend's uncle off the road. I'm afraid that's all I've got for you."

"That's more to go on than I had before," Bob replied.

The officer chuckled. "That's true, I guess."

"Well . . . Thank you, officer," the Third Investigator said. He left the police station, report in hand. Nothing in the report or in what the officer had told him seemed to be of much importance, but he tucked the information in his pocket anyway and headed home. He had no doubt that Jupiter would tease something significant out of it.

? ? ?

When Pete got to the salvage yard late the same morning, he was informed that Jupiter had gotten food poisoning. The First Investigator's aunt, being the protective woman she was, had decided that her beloved nephew was not to leave bed for any reason other than to go to the bathroom. She assigned Konrad salvage yard duty while her husband and Hans drove out in search of yard sales. Meanwhile, she put her own business chores on hold, keeping to the house to take care of Jupiter.

After expressing concern for the bump on Pete's forehead, Aunt Mathilda told him, "You can go upstairs to see Jupiter. But I don't want him getting tired out, so don't stay too long. I know how worked up you boys can get when you're trying to solve one of your puzzles."

"I don't have any puzzles for Jupiter this morning, Mrs. Jones," Pete assured her. "Jupe and I were supposed to ride our bikes across town—"

"Across town? What on earth for?" she exclaimed.

Pete thought about her question for a moment. He refused to lie, but he also didn't want to be too honest.

"Uh, exercise," he said.

"Exercise?" Aunt Mathilda cried. "You boys get plenty of exercise working in the yard. If you ask me, your mothers aren't feeding you enough. You and that Bob Andrews are just too skinny. You need to put on some weight so you can have more energy."

"Bob, maybe," Pete laughed. "But I'm afraid my wrestling coach would flip if I moved up a weight range. I wouldn't be able to compete in the lightweight division."

Aunt Mathilda scoffed before handing Pete a tray containing a warm bowl of chicken soup and a glass of chocolate milk.

"Would you mind taking this up with you?" she asked.

Pete accepted the tray, but his stomach churned at the sight of the soup and milk. He walked up the stairs and knocked lightly on Jupiter's door. He heard a softly spoken "Come in" and pushed the door open with his knee.

Jupiter was lying in bed, looking upset.

"I'm sorry," the First Investigator said. "I didn't expect this to happen. And I certainly didn't expect Aunt Mathilda to become a storm trooper about it."

"You didn't?" Pete asked, surprised. "Your aunt's always a storm trooper when she thinks you're sick."

"True," Jupiter admitted. "I'm not thinking clearly. Blame this stomach ailment."

He then told Pete about the excitement of the night before.

"Are you kidding me?" Pete asked. A note of terror crept into his voice. "There might be real aliens running around this case?"

"You're missing the greater point," Jupiter admonished the Second Investigator. "Someone wanted us out of that house so he—"

"You mean it!" Pete interrupted.

"—could search for something important. What we need to figure out is what he was looking for," Jupiter finished.

"I think we should rethink this whole case," Pete said.

Jupiter dismissed the idea. "Right now the best thing we can do is find out whether Spalding is connected to all this. Unfortunately, since I'm sick, you're going to have to ride out to his apartment by yourself."

"I was expecting that," Pete sighed. "You got any special instructions for me, then?"

Jupiter sat up in bed and took his bowl of soup. "First and foremost, be on the lookout for any signs of the blue Dodge Neon. We really need to know whether Spalding is our assailant."

"How exactly am I supposed to find that out if he isn't home?" Pete asked.

"You're smart, Pete. I'm sure you'll figure something out."

? ? ?

Ten minutes later Pete was on his bike and headed toward the other side of town. Since his mountain bike had been destroyed two nights before, he was forced to take his ten-speed. He didn't like it as well but it was actually much faster. It was made for long-distance travel and fared well against the commuter traffic passing through Rocky Beach on its way to and from Los Angeles.

The only problem with the Second Investigator's current mode of transportation was the rain. While it rarely

poured in this part of California, he could see a dark blue storm brewing in the distance, out over the Pacific. And judging by how quickly it was encroaching on the remainder of the sky, he judged that it would hit him in about half an hour.

No problem, he thought. He would have reached his destination by then. And as a last resort, he could take refuge in the laundromat across the street from his terminus: Ocean Way Apartments on Ocean Way Drive.

A cold chill blew in from the ocean, and he biked a little harder. He shivered, wishing he had brought a jacket. He knew it would get a lot colder when the rain began to fall, and all he was wearing was a T-shirt and spandex shorts. At least he had on a bicycle helmet that would protect most of his head and face.

About two blocks from his destination, he felt the first cold drops on his bare arms and neck. They were solitary heralds, signaling the storm to come. At least storms in this part of the state rarely lasted longer than ten or fifteen minutes. If he were forced to take refuge, it wouldn't have to be for long.

The first of the bigger drops were falling as he reached the apartment complex. He made it to the laundromat, locked his bike to the rail, and rushed inside. Immediately, a blast of warm air caused by the churning dryers hit him in the face.

There was only one customer inside, a pretty young woman stuffing the last of her wet laundry into one of the smaller dryers. She and Pete smiled at each other.

“You forgot your laundry,” she said, her voice friendly.

Pete explained, “I’m just getting out of the rain. It got unpleasant pretty fast out there.”

The woman gave a mock shiver, and the two laughed.

“Ouch!” she said. “Where did you get that bruise on your forehead?”

“Believe it or not, I ran into a wall,” Pete explained. “There was a knot there last night, but it’s gone down now, so I guess it isn’t anything too serious.”

They talked for a couple more minutes. Finally, Pete turned to survey the apartments across the street under the pretext that he was watching for the rain to end.

The three-story, brick apartment complex was constructed like a row of townhouses, each of which had its own door to the outside. If Pete could discern which one was Timothy Spalding’s, he would have no problem keeping a close eye on it.

The car port, where Spalding—if he owned it—would have parked the Neon, was behind the building. There was only one means to get to it, an entrance to the left side of the complex.

Pete wanted to run across the street in the rain rather than wait it out, but doing so would look suspicious, and he didn't want to give himself away. He had memorized the address: 116 Ocean Way. Because all the apartments were on the same side of the road, they all had even-numbered addresses. And because there were so few of them, they all had three digits. This made differentiating the numbers from this distance difficult.

After about twenty minutes of intense lightning flashes, the storm began to abate and the volume of the raindrops lessened considerably. By then, the woman had opened her dryer, taken out some of the smaller articles, folded them, and placed them in a basket. She started the dryer again, said goodbye to Pete, and walked from the building toward a small drug store down the block.

Pete had seen absolutely nothing of significance so far, so he went out and unlocked his bike. He wiped off the seat with his arm, hopped onto it, and rode across the street.

The second door from the left was numbered 116. Pete knew that each apartment would almost certainly have a second door in the back, so he rode around the side of the building into the rear parking lot, circling it a few times. He tried to look casual, as though he were getting in his daily exercise. In reality, he was scanning

the lot for the blue Dodge Neon with the crumpled front fender and smashed headlight.

There was no such car anywhere to be seen, and nothing hinted that anyone was home in Apartment 116. He went back around to the front of the building, then back to the lot, and then back to the front again before deciding to ride up and down the block a few times. As he went back and forth, he kept a keen eye on front door of the apartment. No one went in or came out.

It struck him that he might look conspicuous to anyone watching from his or her window. Realizing that he could sit and relax without fear of being seen, he decided to return to the empty laundromat and watch from there. But just as he was about to dart across the street, a car turned onto Ocean Way and nearly hit him.

Pete wheeled his bike out of the way and skidded to a stop on the other side of the street.

He whipped around to get a clear view of the vehicle that had nearly run him over.

It was a blue Dodge Neon—and its front end was damaged.

No bow on top of it, Pete thought spontaneously, but the joke he'd made to Jupiter didn't seem all that funny now.

Chapter 11

The Diary of a Madman

BY ONE IN THE AFTERNOON, Jupiter was feeling considerably better. This did not impress his Aunt Mathilda, who refused to let him leave his bedroom, insisting that he still needed to rest. Just as he resigned himself to boredom, however, the First Investigator was struck by the idea that he now had the perfect opportunity to examine William Randolph Ryker's journal.

He picked up the book from the stand next to his bed. The volume was bound in black leather and heavily worn, suggesting that it was several years old. Jupiter opened it to the first page and began to read. The first twenty pages or so were fairly dull. They were full of bland descriptions of how Old Man Ryker had spent his days and evenings, peppered with angry complaints about the few people in his dwindling social circle.

The March 17 entry was a whole different story, however. On that date Ryker had described numerous media reports of bright lights in the sky over southern California. Witnesses had been interviewed, many claiming to have seen a host of lights streaking across

the sky at extraordinary speed. Perhaps even more remarkable, according to Ryker's second-hand account, were claims that the lights had flown in a V formation for several miles before dashing off in different directions. According to observers, they had not changed course in the way that airplanes do. Rather than making wide arcs, they had executed instantaneous maneuvers that were impossible by any known, human-made craft.

Ryker's description of the news reports expressed both gnawing doubts and intense curiosity about the claims, though he wrote nothing more on the subject until April 23. At that point the journal became a page turner, and Jupiter read with fresh enthusiasm.

April 23 – Evening. I saw one of them tonight. It brightened the whole sky over Malibu Beach like a fireball. At first I thought it was a meteorite, but it was too controlled to be anything other than a manned craft of some sort. It flew out over the ocean for several miles, though it remained bright enough for me to see plainly. Then, without slowing down, it reversed course and came back over the land. It flew off and in a matter of seconds I lost sight of it.

The handwriting for the next entry was difficult for Jupiter to read. It was sloppy, as if Ryker had written it in haste and with a jittery hand.

April 24 – Midnight. Very scared. I don't know if I can even write this. The craft was back tonight. I saw it out my bedroom window. I grabbed my shotgun and went outside to investigate. It was low, hovering over the trees. At most it may have been about eighty feet in the air, not that high over the treetops. It was triangular, and it had lights all around its sides. They were red, but a single light on the underside of the craft was white. When I looked at it directly, it blinded me for several seconds, so that I later had to turn my eyes away from it. The light cut through the treetops and lit up the ground below it. I don't know what, but something compelled me to sneak into the woods to get a closer glimpse of the craft. At the same time, I felt unbearable fear. I moved slowly and quietly through the trees, afraid I would alert the craft or its occupants to my presence despite somehow knowing that they were already aware of me. When I got close to the light, I crouched behind a tree and watched. It was unlike any light I had ever seen. It seemed to slice cleanly

into the woods, but it ended abruptly on all sides, not like real light that dims the farther out it travels. All around the beam the woods were very dark, almost black. Not wanting to blind myself, I stared at the edge of the darkness instead of directly into the light. What I saw was so terrifying that I don't know how to describe it. There were two men — I call them men because I have no idea what else to call them — wandering around the darkness near the edge of the beam. Both of them were about the same height, somewhere around six feet tall.

I don't know what kind of clothes they wore, only that they were dark and blended with the shadows around them. But their heads and arms were bare, and their skin seemed to glow green. They had large heads and big, black, pupil-less eyes. I think they saw me because, when I pulled back, they turned in my direction. Then the light grew stronger until I had to close my eyes. I could feel its heat on my skin, and the brightness penetrated my eyelids. Then the heat and the light vanished, and when I opened my eyes again, the craft and what I can only assume to be its occupants had disappeared.

Excited, Jupiter read on.

April 25 – Morning. I have no one to talk to because I'm afraid they'll think I'm crazy. Even worse are the dreams I had last night. They were terrible, like nothing I've ever dreamed before. I'm now certain the beings I saw last night implanted some kind of ideas into my head and these affected my dreams. I don't believe they meant to harm me, but that makes them no less terrifying. If anything, they were as curious about me as I was about them, and when they looked at me, they sent me a message through telepathy. They told me they'd been here before, a long time before we were here, when the world was covered in ice. They had found a species of animal more intelligent than any they had ever seen in the universe, just on the cusp of symbolic thought. The visitors were lonely, for they'd traveled long distances without meeting anyone like them, and they longed to meet a species they could communicate with. So they gave us a nudge toward humanity, and now they are checking up on us to see how we're doing.

The implications this idea conveyed struck my mind like a thunderbolt. I was filled with a

sense of dread. I turned on all the lights in the house, afraid they would come out of the darkness and take me away for study. Questions crowded my mind. Are we far enough along for them? If not, will they wipe us out and start over? Or will they feel the need to experiment further?

I was awake most of the night, trembling at every sound I heard. The rats in the walls, the old house settling. These were magnified in my mind into the sounds of horror, of loathsome humanoid monstrosities come in the night to take me into the cold, uncaring reaches of space. After all, I had seen them, and they had communicated their purpose to me.

When finally I fell asleep, sometime after 4 a.m., I dreamt of apes and monkeys slit open by the alien surgeon's scalpel, minds vivisected and implanted with intelligence not entirely their own. And I knew: my dreams reflected what had really happened.

April 25 – Afternoon. I can think of nothing else but those horrible beings with their black eyes and evil plans. I now know what they did to me when they looked my way. They did not simply implant a message in my mind. They

tapped deep into my subconscious and plucked memories from the id, passed down through the generations via genetic inheritance. Whether some or all humans are the descendants of such tampering I do not know. But this I do know: I, William Randolph Ryker, am an ape born of alien intelligence. I am chimpanzee, I am man. I am something not of this world. And someday, the very beings who made me what I am shall return to claim what is theirs. They will call mankind to account, and mankind must be ready to meet their challenge.

Jupiter returned the journal to his nightstand. It contained a great deal to think about. But if there was one thing the First Investigator was now certain of, it was that William Randolph Ryker had seen something so terrible that it had unhinged his brain.

Chapter 12

A Ghostly Message

“WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?” Bob asked eagerly. He, Jupiter, and Pete were sitting around Headquarters’ desk, discussing the day’s events.

“Nothing,” Pete answered. “To the guy driving, I’m sure I was just another cyclist. Especially since I was on a different bike and was wearing headgear.”

“And don’t forget,” Jupiter interposed, “the night he tried to run us down, it was already dark outside. The only light he had was our bike headlamps, and they were in front of us. All he could see of us were probably just dark silhouettes.”

Pete shook his head in agreement. “I decided to follow the car into the parking lot and see who got out.” He described the man he saw in detail, winding up the account with, “*And* he went into Apartment 116.”

“Well, if that isn’t confirmation that Timothy Spalding is our assailant, I don’t know what is,” Bob said.

Jupiter leaned back, the shrewd look on his face indicating that he was deep in thought. He then leaned forward again. Elbows firmly on the desk, he placed his head in his hands. “It is possible, though I highly doubt

it, that Mr. Spalding wasn't driving the car when it attacked either Uncle Titus or us. The bigger mystery now is, why did he or someone else do it? We suspect it was to get the statues. But why? And does William Randolph Ryker's interest in ancient aliens have anything to do with it?"

Bob and Pete sat silent and perplexed for several seconds.

"It's hard telling," Pete finally said. "If we knew more about this Spalding guy, we might be able to connect him to the Ryker Estate."

"Yes," Jupiter agreed. "At this point, all we can connect him to are the two attacks."

"But aren't the attacks connected to Mr. Ryker?" Bob asked. "Think about it! Uncle Titus wasn't attacked until he was on his way home from an auction where he picked up several items formerly owned by Mr. Ryker. Something—a statue—was knocked from the bed of the truck. And later, when we went to visit the place where it had fallen, the same vehicle showed up again and came after us."

"You make a strong correlation, Records," Jupiter acknowledged. "Unfortunately, all we have right now is circumstantial evidence. What we need is something concrete to go on." He looked searchingly at his fellow Investigators.

Pete shrugged. "We have what we have, First. I think we've gone pretty far toward solving this case in just a little over two days."

"Agreed," Jupiter replied. "Bob, why don't you tell us what you learned at the police station today?" He said it more as a directive than as a question.

Bob withdrew from his bag three copies of the police report, two of which he'd scanned and printed on his dad's personal printer. He handed one to Jupiter and another to Pete, keeping the third one for himself. The other two boys examined their copies as Bob explained the information in the report.

"As you can see, there's really nothing in the report that could possibly tell us anything. According to the officer working the desk, there's been a series of robberies in Dial Canyon that has kept the county officers busy. Mr. Jones's accident is small potatoes compared to those."

Jupiter's eyes lit up. "A series of robberies in Dial Canyon? Why is this the first time I'm hearing about it? One would think it would've gotten coverage on the news."

"Back on topic, Jupe," Pete chided. "We've already got one mystery to solve, and it's a doozy. I'm not sure we need another just yet."



Jupiter conceded the point, although he did so with a disappointed look on his face. “Were you able to learn anything else?” he asked Bob.

“There *was* one other thing,” Bob answered. “The officer told me that a blue Dodge Neon was stolen from San Mateo a couple of weeks ago. As you both know, San Mateo is quite a ways north of here, just south of San Francisco. Interestingly, Timothy Spalding is new in town; he got his library card the same day he checked out the book about the Olmecs last week. I just so happened to stop by the library today after getting back from the police station. It’s closed, but Miss Bennett was there working, and she let me in. Guess what?”

“What?” Jupiter and Pete said simultaneously.

“We keep all our registration cards on file. I looked up Mr. Spalding’s, and he listed an apartment in San Francisco as his previous address. And here’s another thing: I called Ocean Way Apartments and learned that not only are they low rent, they don’t demand a deposit or make renters sign a lease.”

Jupiter was suddenly excited. “In other words, you can move in or out as you please. Like in a motel.”

Bob nodded.

“There’s more,” the bespectacled youth said, smiling. “I called back a little bit later and pretended to be Mr. Spalding’s previous landlord. I told Ocean Way’s manager that he’d left some of his belongings behind and I

thought they might be worth something, but I needed to confirm his address before I sent them. The manager not only confirmed that Mr. Spalding was living there, he actually told me the date he moved in!”

“Let me guess,” Jupiter interjected. “It was approximately two weeks ago.”

“To the day.” Bob grinned.

“So let me see if I have this straight,” Pete said. “Mr. Spalding moves from San Francisco to Rocky Beach. Around the time he does so, a car is stolen from San Mateo, which is on the way. The same make and model is then used by Mr. Spalding to attack Mr. Jones and us the day of the Ryker auction.”

“That sums it up, Second,” Bob said.

“Well, this mystery was easy to solve,” Pete said happily.

“Not quite,” Jupiter reprimanded. “This is circumstantial. We need some actual proof. Plus, there’s still quite a bit we don’t know. For instance, what was Mr. Spalding after?”

“I think we can safely conclude he was after the Olmec statues, don’t you?” Bob said.

“Possibly, Records,” Jupiter replied. “But why does he want them? Is he working for or with someone else? What does any of this have to do with Mr. Ryker’s secret society, if anything? Why did an alien imperson-

ator lock us in the Ryker basement and rummage through the house?”

“My guess would be that Spalding *is* the alien impersonator who ransacked the Ryker Mansion,” Bob offered.

“Wait a minute there, Records,” Pete protested. “How do we know it wasn’t a real alien who did that?”

Jupiter rolled his eyes. “While possible, the probability of that is so statistically low as to be—”

“You’re killing me here, Juve,” Pete interrupted. “Seriously, I’m dying over here.”

Jupiter ignored the Second Investigator, instead addressing Bob’s conclusion. “The problem is, we have no way of knowing whether Spalding or someone else posed as the alien who locked us in the basement. We need proof either way.”

“OK, fine. How are we going to get it?” Pete asked.

“Think, Second,” Jupiter suggested. “What is the one thing we can do when we need information fast but don’t want most adults to know what we’re up to?”

“Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup,” Bob and Pete cried together.

“Exactly,” Jupiter responded.

The Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup was a strategy The Three Investigators had devised early in their careers to get information quickly and easily. The method was simplicity itself. Each of them contacted five friends

and asked them to be on the lookout for something specific within a particular time frame and geographic area. That put fifteen people on the case right off the bat. In addition, each of those five people contacted another five, which raised the total number of observers to seventy-five . . . and so on and so on. Usually, participants were instructed to limit contacting The Three Investigators to landline communications only, thus avoiding the kind of electronic trails that email and cell phones created. That way, the investigation took place without any possibly interested party knowing what The Three Investigators were up to without first receiving a court order.

It was called a Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup for three reasons. One: the term resembled “coast-to-coast,” harkening to the days when people communicated via radio band. Two: because The Three Investigators did not know the overwhelming majority of people who contacted them, their informants remained ghostly figures, incorporeal voices on a telephone. And three: by using the word *ghost* to refer to their informants, The Three Investigators would never, intentionally or unintentionally, put their contacts, mostly children or young teenagers, in harm’s way.

“What’re we gonna have the ghosts look for?” Pete asked.

Bob answered with a “Duh!” and Pete gave him a playful punch on the arm.

Jupiter answered Pete’s question. “We ask them if they’ve seen a blue Dodge Neon with a battered grill and damaged headlight on the front left side. If so, when and where did they see it?”

“Should we limit our contacts to Rocky Beach?” Bob asked.

“We should go a little wider than that,” Jupiter opined. “Perhaps to the Los Angeles and Malibu Beach areas. Since the damage to the car appears to have been done when Mr. Spalding attacked Uncle Titus, we should clarify that we’re only interested in the vehicle’s whereabouts over the last two days.”

“Gotcha,” Bob said. “And this is the perfect time for a Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup, what with Skinny Norris out of town. He’s on vacation with his parents for the week.”

Skinny, or E. Skinner Norris as he was properly named, was the trio’s arch-nemesis. A tall, skinny, slightly older boy who drove around in a blue sports car, Skinny had made it his life’s work to throw a wrench into everything Jupiter and his partners did. It was obvious to anyone and everyone who wasn’t in Skinny’s intimate circle that he was jealous of both the First Investigator’s intelligence and the team’s achievements.

Though Skinny's pranks were mostly designed to humiliate The Three Investigators, he had on several occasions actually put them in harm's way. Whether it was nearly sending them over a waterfall or putting a pack of angry dogs on them, there was no telling when his actions would veer from the mean to the irresponsible and dangerous. Yet, in the end The Three Investigators had not only solved each and every case Skinny had attempted to thwart, they had also revealed just how duplicitous and unintelligent he really was. Skinny now had a reputation that was considerably less awe-inspiring than it had been before he had first gone toe-to-toe with Jupiter Jones, and his stubbornness and bullying had cost him many friends. The few he still had hung with him only because of his father's money and Skinny's reckless willingness to throw it around.

"No, we won't have to contend with Skinny this time out," Jupiter said gratefully, "though I never tire of humiliating him at his own game." The other two laughed. "Now, let's start the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup, shall we?"

Each Investigator made his five phone calls, instructing the ghosts on the other end to call the Headquarters phone and leave a message if they saw anything. Most of the kids around Rocky Beach knew who The Three Investigators were, and they were usually excited about helping out in a real criminal investigation.

After the calls were made, the boys sat around talking for a while. Finally, Bob asked, "What are we to do now, Jupe, other than wait?"

"There's nothing more we can do this evening," Jupiter replied. "But there are some things we can do tomorrow. For instance, before we met here tonight, I had a difficult time convincing Aunt Mathilda that I was no longer sick and should be allowed to leave the house. When she finally relented, I went straight to the office to do something I hadn't done."

"Which was?" Bob asked.

"Inspect the other statues," Jupiter said firmly.

"And . . . ?" Pete leaned back in his chair, placed his hands behind his head, and stretched out his feet.

"They all have the same eyes," Jupiter said. "On the surface, each eye appears to be made of the same stone as that in which it's encased. But, in fact, each eye is the same as the one we found by the side of the road." He pulled the small eye from his pocket and held it up for them to see. "What we need to do now is figure out just what these things are made of."

"How do you propose to do that?" asked Bob.

"Tomorrow after school, I would like for the two of you to visit Professor Yarborough at UCLA," Jupiter answered. Professor Yarborough was an anthropologist who focused on Egyptology specifically and mythology in general. The boys had once helped him out on a case.

He had since become tenured at the University of California, Los Angeles. "I phoned him at his home earlier," Jupiter continued, "and he's expecting the two of you in his office at four-thirty. I described to him what we had. What I want you to do is take the eye and, if you have to, leave it with him. I doubt he'll know offhand what it is, but he may be able to point us in the right direction."

"Sounds easy enough, Jupe," Pete said. "But what are you going to be doing while we're gallivanting around UCLA?"

"I'm going to visit with Robert Robertson," Jupiter informed them.

The other two laughed.

"Robert Robertson? That's a name?" Pete asked.

"Believe it or not, the name's for real," Jupiter said. "He's president of the mysterious society to which William Randolph Ryker left the bulk of his fortune. I found his name in Old Man Ryker's journal. Ryker visited Robertson after his so-called 'sighting.'"

"Wow," Pete teased. "Pretentious much?" Jupiter looked at him blankly, so Pete mocked, in a bad imitation of Jupiter's voice, "He's the president of the mysterious society to which William Randolph Ryker left the bulk of his fortune."

Bob explained, "You *are* allowed to end a sentence with a preposition, Jupe. It's just us you're talking to."

“I know that, but I choose not to do so,” Jupiter answered with a haughty air. “It’s grammatically incorrect, even if it has become something of a standard for English-language speakers.”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure I’ve heard you end sentences in prepositions before,” Bob said. “Why, I think I may have heard you do it just a little bit ago.”

The phone rang, killing Pete’s effort to formulate his own response. They all looked at one another silently as the phone rang again.

Bob broke the silence by saying what they were all thinking. “That couldn’t possibly be the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup working already, could it?”

Jupiter picked up the receiver. “Hello. This is Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators speaking. How may I help you?” The other two Investigators signaled First to hold the phone to the loudspeaker he had rigged, but he wasn’t paying them any attention. Instead, he listened intently to the voice on the other end of the phone. “Hm. That *is* interesting . . . Yes . . . What time was this? . . . You’re certain? . . . Okay . . . Well, it certainly sounds plausible. Thank you so much, and if you remember anything else, please feel free to give us another call.”

He hung up the phone, sighed disappointedly, and rubbed his eyes.

“What is it?” Bob asked.

“It appears our Mr. Spalding is not the alien who ransacked the Ryker Estate,” he said.

“How do you know, Jupe?” Pete inquired.

“A ghost saw his car at a gas station last night in Rocky Beach at approximately the same time Bob and I were locked in the basement in Malibu Beach.”

“He may have gotten the time wrong,” Bob proposed.

“I don’t think so, Bob. He said he happened to look at the clock on the dashboard as they pulled into the station.”

“Could he be pulling our leg?” Pete asked.

“It’s always possible, but in this case it doesn’t seem likely. He said he noticed the car because the guy who got out of it acted like a jerk to the ghost’s father while they were both pumping gas. That certainly fits the personality profile Bob described from his sole interaction with Spalding. Our ghost also said that the paint was severely chipped on the car. None of us prompted our ghosts to issue such a description, though it fits perfectly with what Konrad said about the vehicle.”

“There is just no way the first call from a ghost we got this evening gave us such great information,” Pete exclaimed. “This has to be proof we’ve got luck on our side.”

“There’s no such thing as luck, Pete,” Jupiter rebuked. “It’s just a coincidence. Besides, we should have a lot more calls coming in. I’ll come out and check for additional messages first thing in the morning, before I head to school.”

“Where does this leave us, then?” Bob asked. “I mean, about Spalding?”

Jupiter sighed. “Well, we *have* narrowed down our list of suspects who ransacked the Ryker Estate.”

“Yeah, by one,” Bob cracked.

“Out of how many?” Pete asked, perplexed.

“Around ten million, give or take a few hundred thousand,” Bob answered, depressed. Imitating Jupiter’s voice to the best of his ability, he added, “mathematically statistically speaking, of course.”

Pete laughed but Jupiter, lost in thought, maintained his frown.

Chapter 13

The Not-So-Fiery Eye

“UNLESS I’M MISTAKEN, boys, what you’ve got here is a pearl.” Professor Yarborough sat at a table in his office at UCLA, turning the dull gray object over in his hands. He was an older man with grayish-white hair, a mustache, and a goatee. “In fact, it’s the largest pearl I’ve ever seen.” Bob and Pete sat across from him.

“Really?” Pete was unable to suppress his surprise. The eye was dull and gray, and while it was basically spherical, it was far from perfectly round. “It seems awfully imperfect.”

“It is,” Professor Yarborough replied. “The overwhelming majority of natural pearls aren’t worth squat. It’s those that are perfectly round and have beautiful, shiny surfaces that fetch the most dollars.”

“But aren’t pearls hard to get?” Bob asked.

“Pearls aren’t nearly as uncommon as most people think,” the professor replied. “You can find them just about anywhere there’s remotely deep water. Right here in the United States there are people who dive for them in the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers as well as off various coasts.”

“Aren’t most pearls about one-third the size of this one?” Bob asked.

Pete gave his fellow Investigator a curious look.

“What?” Bob said defensively. “I’ve glanced through books about them at the library.”

“Of course you have,” Pete responded sarcastically.

“And don’t forget, Second,” Bob reminded his friend, “we did solve a case of pearl theft recently.”

“Actually, I *had* forgotten that,” Pete said, embarrassed.

“I figured you had,” Bob chided. “After all, it’s not like pearls look anything like softballs.”

Professor Yarborough peered over the top of his glasses at the two boys before returning to the subject at hand. “This one is definitely big, and it would fetch a high price if it were a Tahitian pearl. But I don’t think it is.”

“What’s so special about Tahitian pearls?” Pete asked.

“Tahitian pearls are natural pearls found in the South Seas,” the professor explained. “While most pearls are white or yellow, Tahitian pearls are black, green, or gray.”

“Then how do you know this isn’t a Tahitian pearl?” Pete asked. “It’s gray.”

“I’ve seen Tahitian pearls,” Professor Yarborough replied. “My wife has one that accentuates a necklace of

cultured white pearls. And trust me, this isn't anything like that one, outside of the obvious characteristics shared by all pearls."

"I remember reading about a pearl that was discovered five hundred years ago," Bob said. "I think it may have been in the possession of Elizabeth Taylor."

"Who's Elizabeth Taylor?" Pete asked, nonplussed. "Wait, I know this one. She was a famous singer, wasn't she?"

"She was an actress in old movies," Bob answered, keeping his gaze on the pearl.

"You're thinking of *La Peregrina*," Professor Yarborough said. "It was discovered by an African slave in the 1500s in the Gulf of Panama. For having discovered such a treasure, the slave was set free, and the pearl passed into the hands of Ferdinand the Fifth, the King of Spain. Ferdinand then passed it on to Charles the Fifth before it settled with Phillip the Second. Phillip then offered it to Queen Mary of England as a sign of their impending marriage."

"Was she the same queen who was known as Bloody Mary?" Bob asked.

"She was," Professor Yarborough confirmed. "She died several years later, and the pearl was returned to the Spanish, where it passed from queen to queen. It stayed in Spain for several hundred years, until Napoleon Bonaparte of France conquered the country.

His brother absconded with it after the defeat of the French at the Battle of Vitoria. The pearl came to be known as La Peregrina, or The Wandering Pearl, because of the distances it had traveled. Some also call it The Pilgrim. You can actually see it in the portraits of several queens, including those of Margaret and Elisabeth.”

“You really know your stuff,” Pete said, clearly impressed.

“Despite how it sounds, I’m not a pearl expert,” Professor Yarborough laughed. “I know of this one because I watched a documentary about it recently. It sold at auction for almost twelve million dollars.”

Pete’s eyes bulged. “Are you serious? Twelve million dollars for a tiny little pearl?”

Professor Yarborough nodded.

“Is there some way to find out more about this one?” Bob probed, looking fixedly at the eye.

“You’re in luck,” Professor Yarborough answered. “UCLA actually has Southern California’s leading invertebrate zoologist on its staff, and his focus is malacology. Let me call him and see if he’s busy. I don’t think he has a class right now, so he may be able to step in and tell you boys more about this thing.”

“Thank you,” Bob said. “We appreciate your help.”

Professor Yarborough nodded and picked up the phone. He dialed, and someone on the other end of the line answered.

Bob looked at Pete and silently mouthed, *What's malacology?*

How should I know? Pete mouthed back. *You're the librarian.*

I'm not a librarian, Bob mouthed. *I'm a library assistant.*

Professor Yarborough finished talking and hung up the phone. "Dr. Norton's on his way."

A few minutes later, Dr. Norton entered the room. He pulled up a chair and sat at the table where Bob, Pete, and Professor Yarborough were already parked. Introductions followed.

"May I see the pearl?" Dr. Norton asked.

Professor Yarborough passed the dull gray eye to the bearded, dark-haired professor.

"Wow, this *is* big," the zoologist said. "I've seen a lot of pearls, but I don't think I've ever seen one this big before."

"Can you tell us what kind it is?" Bob asked.

"Sure," Dr. Norton said. "It comes from the waters off one of the Pearl Islands in Central America. It's imperfect, and it's too dull to be worth much, but I have to ask, where did you find it?"

“In an Olmec statue,” Pete blurted out. “It was one of the eyes.”

Professor Yarborough looked incredulous. “The Olmecs were an indigenous people in pre-Columbian Mexico, not all that far from the Pearl Islands, but I’ve never heard of one of their statues having pearl eyes before.”

“No,” Dr. Norton agreed. “Pearls have been a part of past Mexican jewelry for years, but I’ve never heard of the Olmecs using them as eyes in their statues. You see, boys . . .”

Pete tensed, sensing a history or zoology lesson—or both—coming.

Dr. Norton continued. “When something like a parasite enters a type of marine mollusk known as a bivalve, the mollusk fights back by forming a concretion around it. It secretes calcium carbonate around the intruder to prevent the intruder from harming it. After it’s done this many times over a lengthy period, a hard pearl forms.”

“You sure do know a lot about mollusks,” Bob observed.

Dr. Norton smiled and nodded. “For thousands of years, people have been diving into the sea to collect these pearls. Before technological advances came about that made pearl cultivation possible, divers sometimes had to brave over a hundred feet of water, the bends, and dangerous animals like sharks—all while holding

their breath—to get to the hard-shelled mollusks. Then, after the mollusks were brought to the surface, they sometimes had to sift through over a ton of them to find just a few valuable pearls.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Pete said.

“It was,” Dr. Norton agreed. “The danger, inaccessibility, and general rarity is what made pearls so expensive. But beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cultivation became possible, and the demand for natural pearls suffered.”

“That’s pretty interesting,” Pete said. “But if this is worthless, why would someone want to run Jupe’s uncle off the road for it?”

Bob kicked him under the table. Pete winced and closed his mouth, but the cat was out of the bag.

“Someone tried to run Jupiter’s uncle off the road?” Professor Yarborough asked.

Bob hesitated, then decided to come clean. He told the two professors the complete story, which resulted in exactly the kind of response he had expected.

“This sounds like something better handled by the police,” Dr. Norton said.

“The police *are* involved,” Bob said, stretching the truth just a little bit. “About the pearl, is there any kind of religious or mythological reason someone would be willing to hurt or kill someone else for it?”

“I suppose so,” Dr. Norton said, but his mind was a blank. “That’s a question better answered by Professor Yarborough, as you’re getting into his field and out of mine. I should say, though, that zealots have been willing to kill for lesser things than a pearl.”

Professor Yarborough thought about Bob’s question. “In some cultures, pearls are believed to have supernatural powers or medicinal attributes. In cultures around the Indian Ocean, for example, they’re often ground into powder and ingested as a curative for various ills.”

“People *eat* them?” Pete said, a disgusted look on his face.

Professor Yarborough went on. “In some Chinese myths, they can—”

“Extend life,” Bob finished for him.

“How did you know what I was going to say?” Professor Yarborough asked, squinting his eyes and cocking his head slightly.

“I . . . That just . . . sounded like where your sentence was headed,” Bob responded.

Professor Yarborough remained unconvinced. “If you boys have gotten mixed up in anything too dangerous, like the case in which we met, I suggest you tell me about it. I might be able to help you.”

“It really isn’t so serious.” Pete tried to sound as if he believed his own words, but he was unable to pull it off.

“We really have to get going,” Bob said. “We both have to be home for supper.” He stood, and Pete followed suit.

The two professors rose from their seats. The boys shook their hands and thanked them. A couple of minutes later, the Investigators were walking toward the university parking lot, where they planned to catch the next bus back to Rocky Beach. Bob was pensive, a fact that didn’t go unnoticed by Pete.

“You’re holding out on me,” the Second Investigator prodded. “What did you figure out back there?”

“Think about it, Pete. Does the eye remind you of something we’ve seen before?”

“Yeah, kind of,” Pete responded, “but I can’t remember exactly what.”

“Think harder. It’ll come to you.”

“Give me a break, Bob. You’re starting to sound like Jupiter. I love Jupe, but I don’t think I can take two of him.”

“Gray pearls that can be eaten to extend life,” Bob said excitedly.

Pete stopped walking, stunned. “No way!”

“Way!” Bob said. “It has to be!”

“I guess it makes sense,” Pete acquiesced. “Man, Jupe is going to be upset when he finds out you solved the case instead of him.”

“I doubt that,” Bob grinned. “Let’s get home, eat, and then stop by the workshop to see if we can find him. He’ll want to hear what we found out.”

Chapter 14

Ancient Aliens

“I’M IMPRESSED THAT A BOY your age would have the insight to come directly to us with your questions,” said Robert Robertson, his interest piqued by his dim-looking, overweight visitor. “I’m just back from San Francisco, where we’re creating an outreach program to educate young people about the affect aliens have had on human history.”

The president of The Society for the Preservation of Evidence Regarding Ancient Aliens was a short, skinny man of about thirty, with mussed black hair, dark brooding eyes, and a Van Dyke beard. He sat across a desk from Jupiter Jones, who’d shown up on the Society’s doorstep just a few minutes before, his notepad in hand. The deceptively unimposing caller said he was writing an essay for science class about possible alien involvement in the evolution of the human race.

“I don’t doubt that aliens visited our species early in its history,” Jupiter said. His yellow notepad was on the desk in front of him, his ink pen at the ready. “I watched a show on television about ancient aliens and cavemen, and it got me convinced. Now I have to write a paper

convincing enough that my Advanced Biology teacher will take it seriously.”

“Ah, yes. Where to begin?” Robertson’s mouth stretched into an indulgent smile. “There’s so much evidence. But our government has a vested interest in painting adherents of ancient astronaut theory in such a ridiculous light that society and the media refuse to consider the proof.”

“I hope you don’t mind if I play devil’s advocate,” Jupiter interjected. “I want to take down your arguments so I can be prepared when my teacher voices hers.”

“That’s quite understandable, young man,” Robertson said. “Play away. The truth is on our side, which gives us a distinct advantage.” He gave Jupiter a sly wink.

Jupiter nodded. “Why do you think the government cares if people believe in God, or ancient aliens, or evolution, or Vishnu?” Saying *if* when he should have said *whether* bothered Jupiter, but he didn’t want to appear too bright.

Robertson sat a little straighter in his chair, taking on a more dignified air. “Between half and two-thirds of Americans identify with an organized religion. Religions have their own myths about how we got here, and those myths keep people in line. The government believes that if people suddenly learned the truth, it would cause turmoil. Our entire system of governance

would break down and lawlessness would result. Those fears might be valid. But I ask you: why would that happen?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Jupiter stammered in fake perplexity.

“I’ll tell you why,” Robertson said. “The nation’s economy is controlled by the government and religion working together. Our rulers want blind adherence to strict religious tenets so that collection plates keep hauling in the revenue.” The strange little man straightened his tie as Jupiter considered what he’d just been told. Obviously, the man expected some sort of reply. Jupiter obliged.

“You say the nation’s economy is controlled by religious leaders, but how do you explain why so many government-controlled scientific institutions accept evolution as fact?”

The word *evolution* seemed to set Robertson off. “Evolutionists are part of the problem. They’re no better than the blindly religious. Those who believe our intelligence came about purely by chance encounters between microscopically minute particles have to have faith to believe such nonsense, and faith is hardly scientific.”

“But,” Jupiter countered, “if there’s evidence for ancient astronauts, why do scientists fear it? Aren’t they supposed to be impartial judges of empirical evidence?”

He stopped, fearing that his lofty use of words might have given him away.

Robertson didn't appear to notice. "Scientists, impartial judges? Don't be fooled by the media's representation of them, young man. These people are not the impartial judges you think—or I would like—them to be. They thrive on funding from government grants, but they also get an amazing amount of money through the private donations of the duped. If they endorsed the truth about ancient aliens, they'd lose much of that funding."

"Hm," Jupiter mumbled as if taking Robertson seriously.

"Look," Robertson declared, "God is an alien race, and those aliens are the ones who guided evolution."

"But how do I prove that God is an alien race in my essay?" Jupiter asked as he took notes.

"The proof is everywhere," Robertson said, "including in the Bible." He pointed to a large black book on the corner of his desk. "There, locked away in mankind's most sacred tome, is the code. It just has to be broken."

"You mean like Da Vinci's Code?" Jupiter asked, again feigning stupidity.

"Exactly," Robertson said eagerly. "What most people don't realize is that there are descriptions of aliens in the Bible."

“There are?”

“Yes. Who do you think the Sons of God are in the Book of Genesis? They’re aliens. They came to Earth because they saw how beautiful women were and wanted to take them for their wives. Chapter 6, verses 1 through 4 say so.”

“It does?” Jupiter ached to respond to Robertson with all the logic and reason at his disposal, though he knew it wouldn’t get him far. “But wouldn’t the aliens have been a different species from human beings? How could they have had children?”

“That’s not all,” Robertson continued, too excited by his own claims to hear Jupiter’s rebuttal. “For centuries religious leaders have prevented the Book of Enoch from being published as part of the Bible canon. Why? Because it establishes that the Sons of Man were alien beings.”

Jupiter stopped writing and gave the Society’s president a questioning look.

“The Sons of God were celestial beings known as ‘watchers,’” Robertson went on. “These watchers kept an eye on humanity to ensure that our evolution ran according to plan. But they fell in love with our women and came down to earth to marry them.”

“Wouldn’t they have found human women repugnant?” Jupiter asked. “Being a different species and all.”

Mr. Robertson dismissed Jupiter's question with a wag of his finger. "Oh no, no, young man. We men and women were *made* in the image of our alien parents. Inter-marriage was the most natural thing there could have been." He was off and running now. "The children born of these half-alien, half-human parents were giants. Unfortunately, they inherited the worst rather than the best traits of each parent. They set upon mankind, lord-ing their physical power over our ancestors. To save us, the elder race destroyed them in a deluge. They also punished the rebellious watchers by imprisoning them in the earth. There, they eventually rotted away and their bones became jumbled and fossilized."

Astonished, the robust youth asked incredulously, "So you think dinosaur bones are the remains of watchers?"

Robert Robertson furrowed his brow, plainly annoyed.

"You really are having a difficult time with this, aren't you?" he said condescendingly.

"I guess so," Jupiter replied sullenly. Against his every instinct, he decided to pick Robertson's brain for further nonsense, hoping the man would reveal some kind of connection to Spalding in the process. "Is there evidence for aliens in the Bible books that are a part of the accepted canon?"

“Oh yes, in the Book of Ezekiel,” Robertson said. “The prophet saw an interstellar craft and described it almost exactly as many eyewitnesses today have described UFOs.”

Jupiter literally bit his tongue. It was all he could do to not rip into every batty claim Robertson was making. Mentally, he pointed out that the flying chariot described in the Book of Ezekiel looked absolutely nothing like modern-day descriptions of UAPs. And the dinosaurs-are-really-aliens theory, he knew, could be torn to bits with equal ease. Doing so aloud, however, would kill any chance he might have of gaining much-needed information. So he kept quiet and resumed writing.

Robertson continued. “If our forebears really believed that angels had wings and could fly, then why did Ezekiel describe them as coming down from the heavens in a ship?”

Jupiter shifted uncomfortably in his seat, committed to keeping his mouth shut.

“Oh, let’s forget the biblical evidence for a moment and examine other facts. The ancient documents say—”

“Excuse me,” Jupiter interrupted, at last unable to help himself. “Can you give me examples of these ancient documents?” Then, after a pause, “I’d like to quote them in my essay.”

Robert Robertson hesitated, scrutinizing Jupiter intensely. Then, to Jupiter's utter lack of surprise, the Society president replied without answering the question. "The records are elusive, but you can find them in any archive in Europe. It's not important that we commit to any one document. Just look at the ancient megaliths: Machu Picchu, the Pyramids of Giza, Stonehenge, the giant heads of Easter Island. None of these could have been made by man at the time they appear in the historical record. Mankind didn't have the tools or the knowledge to build such intricate and massive testimonials to the gods. And what about the giant figures that exist in desert and mountain areas all over the world? From the ground, you can't even tell what they are. You have to travel through the air to see them. But when they were created, there were no craft capable of doing so." He paused for effect, then concluded, "At least . . . no *human*-made craft."

Jupiter maintained his composure, desperately wanting to point out that archaeology, anthropology, paleontology, and geology had logically explained every example Robertson had cited. And unlike Robertson's loopy claims, the conclusions of scientists were testable using the scientific method.

"I read about some giant stone heads found in Mexico," Jupiter went on, hoping to steer Robertson toward a discussion about William Randolph Ryker. "I think

they were called . . . Ol . . . Olmec? I read that their features are African even though they were made by Native Americans. How could that be?”

“What a terrific example you bring up!” Robertson said jubilantly. “I see you’ve done some of your homework already. Those heads are images of African visitors to pre-Columbian Mexico. They didn’t have the kind of seafaring vessels they needed to travel from their native land to the Olmec civilization. So it *had* to have been alien visitors with their interstellar craft, transporting their African children to the new world. Our alien parents wanted to bring their children together, you see. They had watched us war with each other and felt the need to intervene.”

“I didn’t know South America and Africa had ever gone to war with each other,” Jupiter observed. “How terrible! When did that happen?”

A flustered look crossed Robertson’s face. “They haven’t,” he answered. “But one tribe has slaughtered another since the beginning of our existence. That’s what I was trying to illustrate.”

Now abandoning his *devil’s advocate* pretense, Jupiter took firm but polite exception to Robertson’s illogical ramblings. “It’s all very interesting, what you’re saying, Mr. Robertson. But you still haven’t cited any real scientific proof for any of it.”

“The proof is in the pudding,” Robertson asserted, as if stating something strongly made it more likely to be true. “The features are African, yet we’ve found no proof that Africans were ever able to travel as far as Central America at that time. Aliens must have transported them. Surely you can see that. How else would they have gotten there?”

“Their fishing boats could have been blown off course by storms at sea,” Jupiter replied, unable to bear the blatant dismissal of evidence in favor of self-serving speculation. “And I hate to say it, but there’s considerable evidence that Africans may have made their way to South America a few thousand years ago. And if they could make their way to South America, they could surely then travel on up to Central America. Besides, the features on the Olmec statues, though they look African, actually aren’t, so the point is moot.”

Suddenly, realizing he’d gotten carried away, Jupiter stopped. Flabbergasted now and at a loss as to how to proceed, Robertson cut the interview short.

“I have things I need to attend to,” he said abruptly. “I’ve already spent too much time here today. It was nice talking with you, Mr. Jones, and I hope your essay goes well.” He stood and ushered Jupiter toward the door. “Here, let me get you some pamphlets. They’ll give you the information you need for your report.”

Jupiter rose and followed the awkward little man into the hallway. “Is it easy to join your group?” he asked, hoping to regain the advantage. “I’d really like to learn more.” His attempt to again ingratiate himself sounded flat even to his own ears.

The question seemed to catch Robertson by surprise. “Why don’t you join our outreach program? It’s aimed at open-minded teenagers such as yourself.”

Jupiter looked humbly at the floor, trying to appear dejected. “I’d really like to be involved with the grownups, not a bunch of stupid kids.” He looked up and scrutinized Robertson’s face, searching for a sign that his performance was convincing.

“Well, er . . . no, our group is a very dedicated assembly of believers. While we welcome young people through our outreach program, we adults have our own meetings.”

“Why can’t people my age be a part of those?” Jupiter asked with fake despondence.

“Think about it this way,” Robertson said. He hesitated for a moment, as if trying to clarify in his own mind the approach he was going to take. “Mankind went thousands of years with the wheel being his only real technology. Then suddenly, in the last century, we created cars and airplanes and calculators and computers and GPS devices and cell phones and on and on. How do you think that happened?”

“I don’t know,” Jupiter answered.

Robertson was grave. “It’s because the world’s governments have gotten most of their technological advancements from aliens.”

“You mean, they continue to give us new technologies so our evolution will keep moving in their direction?”

Robertson shook his head no. “I don’t know how to say this delicately, my young friend, so I’ll be blunt. In 1947 a spaceship crashed near Roswell, New Mexico. It was recovered, with all its terrible secrets, by the United States government. A few years later a similar thing happened in Russia. What do you think led to the Cold War?”

Jupiter ventured an educated guess. “Alien technology?”

“Precisely!” Robertson clapped his hands triumphantly. “Do you see now why it’s so dangerous to be a part of our group? The government would do anything to stop us. It can’t kill us; doing so would bring too much attention to our goals. So it has to make our beliefs look absurd. That’s the only way to diminish our standing. It does this through the media. Therefore, the names of our group’s members must remain anonymous, even as we attempt to educate the public in anticipation of the day that we can out ourselves as believers in ancient astronauts.”

“Aren’t you scared the government will come after you?” Jupiter asked. “I mean, couldn’t it assassinate you and make your death look like an accident?”

Robert Robertson remained stoic. “The government can’t come after me, young man. I’m much too important. They’re afraid of what I know.”

“If they’re afraid of what you know, then why would they go after your organization’s members?”

Robertson grimaced, as if suddenly struck by an insight. “Just who are you?” he asked. “You’re not *really* a high school student writing a report, are you?”

Jupiter’s mask was beginning to slip. “Excuse me? I don’t understand.”

“You’re one of *them*, aren’t you?” Robertson accused, his voice unsteady.

“One of whom?” Jupiter asked. He instantly regretted his proper use of English at a moment he wanted to convince an adult that he was nothing more than an ordinary kid.

“You’re from the government,” Robertson stated, his voice full of conviction. His faced twitched as he attempted to maintain his composure. “You’ve been . . . sent to infiltrate my group. Just how old are you, anyway?”

Hoping to somehow salvage his mission, Jupiter came clean. “No, sir, I’m not a plant from the government. I . . . I admit I’m not writing an essay for my class. I’m a

member of The Three Investigators.” He took out his business card and laid it on the hallway table of pamphlets next to where Robertson stood. “My friends and I are investigating a case of alien visitation—”

“I don’t believe you,” Robert Robertson snapped, ignoring the card. “You’ve already established that you’re capable of great dishonesty. Why should I believe you now?”

“You can call Chief Reynolds of the Rocky Beach Police Department. He will confirm my credentials.”

“He’s in on it with you,” Robertson almost shouted. “The government is behind this, behind you.”

“Just let me explain,” Jupiter said in an effort to calm the man down. “Mr. Ryker’s son hired us to solve the mystery of an alien visitation he had on Sunday night.”

At the mention of Ryker’s name, Robert Robertson exploded. “So that’s it! You aren’t working for the government. You’re working for William Ryker! I should have known. Ever since his father left us the majority of his inheritance, William Ryker has acted duplicitously to undermine us. First, he filed a lawsuit to reclaim his father’s estate, then he broke into our offices hoping to find evidence of illegality amongst our group, and now he’s sent a young spy to infiltrate us.”

“When was your office broken into?” the First Investigator asked. “Was it before Saturday?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know, you young punk!” Robert Robertson shouted.

“Listen,” Jupiter said, trying to inject some sanity into the conversation. “Someone tried to run my uncle off the road on Saturday in an effort to get the Olmec statues Ryker’s father had owned—”

“The Olmec statues?” Robertson’s voice dropped to a low whisper. “You have them?” Then, louder: “They’re ours, do you hear? They belong to the Society. They are the beacon. When our alien fathers return, they will home in on those statues. You must return them to us.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Jupiter said coolly. “They belong to my uncle now.”

“We’ll pay whatever price you want!” Robertson declared.

“I’m afraid they’re not for sale.” Jupiter held firm, despite the fact that Aunt Mathilda had already priced the statues and would have killed her nephew if she knew he was passing up an opportunity to sell them.

“We’ll get them back,” the Society president belted. “We *will* get them back.” He moved threateningly toward the First Investigator.

Jupiter backed away, inching toward the building’s exit. “I don’t think you will.”

His anger uncontrollable, Robert Robertson screamed at Jupiter. “Get out of here before I have security throw you out, you fat young imbecile!”

Jupiter held up his arms. "I was just leaving."

Robertson snatched the notepad out of Jupiter's right hand and threw it against the hallway wall. Jupiter turned and ran out the front door. Outside, he paused briefly to see whether Robertson was chasing him. The short, thin, and very angry man was not. The Investigator breathed a sigh of relief.

A few moments later, as he turned the corner of the brownstone building that held the Society's offices, he noticed something peculiar out the corner of his eye.

He stopped to get his bearings. He was standing in an alley that directly abutted the building's foundation. On the side of the building, about two feet above the ground, the reddish-brown brickwork had been damaged, exactly as if a vehicle had scraped it and ground away part of the sandstone.

Jupiter bent down and looked closer. Imbedded in the brickwork were several small chips of blue paint.

Chapter 15

Mystery and More Mystery

“YOU WON’T BELIEVE what we found out, Juve,” Pete Crenshaw announced as the First Investigator entered Headquarters. Reclining in his chair, Pete’s feet were propped up on one corner of the desk. Bob Andrews leaned on the desktop, his head resting on one hand. An enormous grin stretched from one side of his face to the other. Both boys had cans of soda in front of them, and there was an unopened can waiting for Jupiter.

“It can’t wait until I’ve made it all the way into the room?” Jupiter finished climbing through the trapdoor in the floor, after which he proceeded to situate himself in his own chair.

“I, too, have learned a great deal,” he announced haughtily in an effort to one-up his fellow Investigators. Jupiter hated it when others arrived at correct conclusions before he did.

“You’re welcome to go first, First,” Bob announced smugly. “In fact, Pete and I would prefer to wait, since we’ve only just discovered what the secret of the ancient astronauts actually is.” It wasn’t often that he

and Pete solved a case. They usually played second fiddle to their boy-genius leader.

Refusing to be ruffled by Bob and Pete's claim, Jupiter asked nonchalantly, "Did you know that my parents once considered naming me Jason?"

"Wow, that's interesting," Pete replied in a tone that indicated he actually thought the opposite. "Did you know my parents once considered naming me Richard?"

Smirking, Bob chimed in. "Mine thought about naming me Superman but instead settled on Robert Arthur Andrews, Jr. What do our names have to do with anything?"

Jupiter's gambit had exactly the effect he intended; it confused his fellow Investigators. Snootily, he went on. "Our names have nothing to do with what we're discussing. I was merely testing the two of you, and you both failed. You lost your concentration, you were sidetracked by my question, and it discombobulated you."

"You're babbling, Jupe," Pete said and turned to Bob. "What's he talking about?"

"I don't have any idea," Bob responded.

Jupiter laughed. "You two should see the looks on your faces right now." He sat back comfortably. "But back to the case. I may not have solved it, but I *have* found some clues that may bring us closer to the solution. Now, what makes you both think you've solved the secret of the ancient astronauts?"

Bob laid his and Pete's cards out on the table. "This afternoon when we visited Professor Yarborough, we made a major discovery about the astronauts' eyes." He paused, waiting for a reaction from Jupiter.

Jupiter remained unmoved. "And that would be?"

Unable to contain himself, Pete blurted out, "They're pearls. The eyes are pearls, Juve."

Bob sighed. "Way to make him work for it, Second." Then, to Jupiter, he revealed, "Not only are they pearls, but, according to Native American mythology, they prolong life."

Jupiter stared off into space, considering what Bob and Pete had told him. Almost as if speaking to himself, he said, "Based on this information, let me see if I can figure out the solution to our mystery just as you two have done." He settled even more deeply into his chair, effortlessly out-smugging his two colleagues. "The eye is a pearl believed to prolong life. In *The Mystery of the Green Ghost*, we went up against a criminal madman who sought such pearls in an effort to prolong his own life. The last we heard of Mr. Wan—by the way, Bob, when you typed up the notes on the case, you misspelled his name Won—he was holed up in an underground lair somewhere in Chinatown, San Francisco. Our suspected assailant, Timothy Spalding, is from San Francisco. Therefore, Spalding is in the

employ of Mr. Wan and is seeking the pearls for his employer.”

Bob and Pete stared at Jupiter, astonished by how easily he had stolen their thunder.

“Yeah, something like that,” Pete mumbled.

“There are just a few problems with your theory,” Jupiter asserted.

Aping Jupiter’s superior tone, Bob and Pete said in unison, “And what would those be?”

“Don’t get me wrong, Investigators. It was a noble effort,” Jupiter observed. “The two of you have outdone yourselves in the art of deduction, I must admit. I’m most pleased by the skill you’ve both shown. Unfortunately, the pearls Mr. Wan was after were from a bay in the Indian Ocean and come from an entirely different species of mollusk than the species found off the coast of Central America . . . the Gulf of Panama, I deduce. If you had ever read anything about malacology, you would know that.”

Bob and Pete looked at each other, puzzled.

“What on earth is malacology?” Pete asked.

“It’s the branch of zoology that studies mollusks,” Jupiter answered, as though the term was a household word. “But back to my point. The pearls are only distantly related. We have no evidence that Mr. Wan even knows about the second kind of pearl, especially considering that the world’s pearl industry is largely based in

Asia, where Mr. Wan is from, and not Central America, where he is not from. In addition, I have found evidence that points to Spalding as being in cahoots with Robert Robertson, the president of The Society for the Preservation of Evidence Regarding Ancient Aliens.”

Bob and Pete looked at each other again and then back at Jupiter.

“Talk about a mouthful,” Bob said. “Fitting for a guy with two *Roberts* in his name!”

“For all we know, his middle name is Robert,” Pete cracked.

“Anyway,” Jupiter said, “Robertson desperately wants the Olmec statues because he believes they’re a beacon, a homing signal, to an alien race.”

“Why would an alien race need a beacon?” Pete asked. “I mean, wouldn’t they have GPS or something?”

“Interstellar GPS,” Bob corrected. “We’ve practically got it ourselves, and we’re not nearly advanced enough to create starships that span the galaxies.” He lifted his can of soda and took a drink. “I suppose they’ve got their GPS locked on those statues, so if anything happens to the statues, the aliens are out of luck.”

“I didn’t say it made much sense to intelligent people,” Jupiter pointed out. “But the fact is, Robertson believes an alien race came down from the heavens during our prehistory. According to him, they programmed us with an artificial intelligence reflecting their own

because they were a lonely species who needed companionship.”

Bob snorted involuntarily, nearly forcing soda out his nose. “Are you kidding me?”

“Unfortunately, no, Records,” Jupiter stated flatly. “I wish I were.”

“Is it possible for an entire *species* to get lonely?” Bob asked. “Doesn’t it go against the idea of survival of the fittest for one race to fashion a possibly competing race just because it wants a *friend*?”

Jupiter shrugged. “Robertson and his group want those statues, but apparently they were among the things William Randolph Ryker willed to his son.”

“I’d rather have had the fortune,” Pete announced.

“Me, too,” Bob agreed.

“Me three,” Jupiter said. “And Mr. Ryker makes four. He’s actually suing the group to retrieve his father’s fortune. If a court determines that the elder Mr. Ryker was mentally unfit, Ryker the younger may end up with both the statues and the fortune.”

“What grounds does Mr. Ryker have to sue?” Bob asked.

“This is only an educated guess,” Jupiter answered, “but I surmise that Mr. Ryker has plenty of evidence his father had a screw or two loose. Old Man Ryker’s journal could certainly serve as a starting point.”

“You’ve got a point there, Juve,” Bob agreed.

Pete moved his soda aside and rested his arm on the desk. "If Ryker's so anxious to prove his father was of unsound mind, why give us the evidence he'd need to prove it? Shouldn't he have held on to it a little tighter?"

"You mean the journal?" Bob asked.

"No, I mean his hairpiece," Pete retorted.

Bob didn't catch the sarcasm. "He wears a hairpiece?"

"You ask a good question, Pete," Jupiter interrupted, pinching his lip. "My guess is that he's up to something. On the subject of Robertson, he's been in San Francisco a lot lately, organizing his group's outreach to young people. I got the impression they've been working on this for quite some time, and it's possible he met Spalding while there."

Pete cracked his knuckles. "What are you getting at, Juve?"

Jupiter answered. "Let's say the redundantly named Mr. Robertson needed someone shady to do some dirty work in Los Angeles or Malibu Beach, so he hires Spalding and sends him there. Spalding moves into a cheap apartment in Rocky Beach that doesn't require a lease and that he can move out of at any time. Rocky Beach is also very close to both L.A. and Malibu Beach, allowing Mr. Robertson to call on him easily. Do you follow me so far?"

Pete and Bob nodded.

“But why not just move directly to L.A. or Malibu Beach?” Bob asked.

“I don’t know the answer to that,” Jupiter responded, “though there must be a reason.” He continued with his original line of thinking. “Now, let’s also suppose Robertson knew nothing about Mr. Ryker’s plan to auction off his father’s property, but that he found out about it on Saturday. Unable to make it back into town in time to bid on the statues, he sent Spalding instead. This was even better, since Spalding would have been unknown to Ryker, who might have tried to prevent Robertson from getting the statues. But by the time Spalding got to the auction, the statues had already been sold. With orders to get them at all costs, the only thing he could do was wait for an opportunity to steal them. He found out my uncle had them, and when my uncle left the estate, he followed with the intention of running Uncle Titus off the road and taking the statues by force.”

“Wait a minute,” Bob protested. “You thought *our* story was farfetched, but this is what *you* came up with? Based solely on the fact that Robertson has spent time in San Francisco lately?”

“No,” Jupiter said. He opened the main drawer in the desk, withdrew a small, clear plastic bag, and tossed it to Bob, who caught it.

Pete leaned in close while Bob opened it. Inside was a tiny amount of a reddish-brown powder.

“Take a look at that,” Jupiter suggested.

Bob lifted it to his nose and took a whiff. If he smelled anything, he didn’t give any indication of it.

“What is it?” Pete asked.

“Sandstone,” Jupiter revealed, “possibly from a brownstone apartment. I retrieved it from the dents in Uncle Titus’s truck after the accident.”

“Oh,” Pete mumbled. “What’s it got to do with anything?”

Jupiter shot him a quick look of disbelief and went on. “I checked it under the microscope in the lab to make sure.” Headquarters had a small lab with a microscope, a fingerprinting kit, and other paraphernalia related to crime scene investigation. “Now, where do you think the office for The Society for the Preservation of Evidence Regarding Ancient Aliens is?”

“In a brownstone building?” Bob hesitantly guessed.

“You got it,” Jupiter confirmed. “What’s more, here’s what I found at that very same brownstone building today after school.” He reached into his pants pocket and pulled something out of it, which he held up for Pete and Bob to see. There, pinched between his fingers, was a plastic baggy containing two tiny flakes of blue paint.

This time, the significance of the find did not escape the other two.

“You’re kidding!” Pete exclaimed. He wanted to applaud.

“No,” Jupiter replied. “I haven’t had a chance to look at these paint chips under the microscope to compare them to the paint chips I lifted from the salvage yard truck. When I do, I have no doubt they’ll be identical.”

Bob grasped what Jupiter was saying. “So these paint chips and the sandstone residue connects the stolen vehicle Spalding is driving to the building Robertson’s office is in.”

“Sounds like you got it, Captain Obvious,” Pete said.

Jupiter nodded. “Now, we know Robertson wants those statues, and we know Spalding has tried to steal them. We also know Spalding is from San Francisco and that he moved to Rocky Beach about two weeks ago. During the same period, a blue Dodge Neon was stolen in San Mateo County, just south of San Francisco. And we know that Robertson has been visiting San Francisco.”

“Wow, when you put it like that, Jupe, it really does make our idea about Mr. Wan seem wrong,” Pete conceded. “I’d say you’ve solved this case already.”

“I wish it were that simple,” Jupiter replied with a sigh. “Unfortunately, it isn’t. There are a couple of new wrinkles. For instance, the Society’s offices were broken into last week. The only thing stolen, it seems, was a file on William Randolph Ryker.”

Pete wrinkled his brow. “How do you know that, Jupe?”

“Because I stopped by the Rocky Beach Police Department on the way home and checked with Chief Reynolds.” Jupiter pulled back the tab on his soda can and took a sip.

“Okay, so their offices were broken into.” Pete leaned toward Jupiter. “What has that got to do with our ancient astronauts?”

“It throws a kink into everything,” Jupiter clarified. “Think about it. Who broke into their offices, and why? Could it have been Ryker, looking for information to prove his father was insane? Losing a big bundle of money would be enough to drive many men to criminal activity. And there’s the question of who locked Bob and me in the Ryker Estate basement while he—”

“—or she,” Bob interrupted.

“—searched the place,” Jupiter finished. “We know it wasn’t Spalding, thanks to our ghosts. I checked our messages this morning. Some of them pegged the wrong car, but a couple of them described our blue Dodge Neon to a T, and they confirm that on Sunday night, it was nowhere near Malibu Beach.”

“So if Spalding wasn’t the alien William Ryker saw, who was?” Bob asked, stymied. “Robertson?”

“A real alien?” Pete added fearfully.

Jupiter shook his head. "I doubt both of those possibilities. William Ryker described the alien as being tall, remember. Robertson is pretty short. The only thing the two have in common is that they're both thin."

Pete groaned. "It seems like every time we take a step forward, we take another step back."

"That it does," Jupiter agreed, staring off into space again.

There was a sudden, loud banging sound outside Headquarters, diverting them all from the subject at hand. The Three Investigators looked at each other. Although it was unlikely that anyone could hear them from outside, Jupiter's tendency toward caution kicked in.

"Pete," he whispered, "man the See-All."

Pete turned and jumped up from his chair, grabbing the makeshift periscope Jupiter had created out of unused stovepipe and mirrors. Snaking through the ceiling of the hidden trailer and towering over the piles of junk that surrounded it, the periscope allowed the boys an almost complete view of the surrounding yard.

Midway through his scan of the area, Pete flinched as if he'd been shocked. Then, just as reflexively, he jumped back from the periscope.

"What is it?" Jupiter asked, taking control of the See-All and looking through it.

He cried out, excitedly and way too loudly. "I must be seeing things!"

“What is it, you two?” Bob demanded in a low whisper. Without waiting for an answer, he shoved his way in front of Jupiter and peered through the See-All.

He gasped in horror.

Skulking through the yard was a tall, green-skinned alien, its head and hands glowing dully through the thin layer of fog drifting in from the Pacific Ocean.

Chapter 16

Intruder in the Yard

“WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?” Pete demanded, stage-whispering.

“We have no choice,” Jupiter returned, his voice equally hushed. “We have to go outside and confront it.”

“But what if it’s a real alien?” Pete asked. “What if it has some kind of weapon that can turn us into dust or something?”

Jupiter quickly regained his composure. “It isn’t an alien, Pete. At least, I don’t think it is.” The First Investigator sounded to the others as if he were trying to convince himself of the truth as much as he was them.

“How do you know?” Pete asked. “If the number of people who’ve reported seeing aliens is any indication, those things are everywhere. Why shouldn’t we see one, too?”

“Because the majority of people who say they’ve seen aliens aren’t telling the truth,” Jupiter countered. “Either that, or they’re mistaken.”

“But what if just *one* of those people was telling the truth and wasn’t mistaken?” Pete said, casting a brief chill over the conversation.

“Why would people make up alien sightings when they know it’ll get them laughed at?” Bob asked.

“There are numerous reasons,” Jupiter contended. “Attention, money, insanity. Of course, that excludes the people who really have seen something but, for whatever reason, misidentified it.”

“I ain’t buyin’ it,” Pete contested. “Have you heard some of those stories, Jupe? People abducted and medically examined? There’s no way people could make that stuff up.”

“Please,” Jupiter said. “Haven’t you ever heard of human imagination, Pete? Human beings think symbolically; it’s what gives us our edge over the rest of the animal kingdom. If we can create vast supercomputers and technology that will get us to the moon, why can’t we make up silly stories?”

“How do you know we didn’t get that technology from the alien crash at Roswell?” Pete demanded hotly.

Jupiter sighed. “Where do you hear this stuff, Pete? If I didn’t know any better, I’d believe you had joined Robert Robertson’s outreach program.”

“I’ll have you know I read it in a book,” Pete informed the First Investigator. “One I checked out from the library.”

“Just because it’s in a library doesn’t mean it’s factually accurate,” Jupiter pointed out. “Every time we

credit some human accomplishment to aliens, we're denying our own intellect, our creativity, our resolve—"

Pete shook his head. "No way, Jupe. Aliens are real. If you want to confront that thing, then go for it. I'll tell your aunt and uncle you got disintegrated in the line of duty. But I'm staying put. Have fun."

"I'm with Pete," Bob put in. He took another look through the See-All. "Something about it just doesn't look natural."

"What's it doing?" Jupiter asked, taking the periscope away from Bob.

"It's looking through the salvage," Bob answered as he moved aside.

Jupiter took a look. The alien was sneaking toward the salvage yard office, its gait more an awkward shuffle than a walk.

"Hm," he said. "Interesting . . ."

"What's interesting?" Pete sounded worried. "Does it have a ray gun?"

"A what?" Bob asked, looking at Pete. "A ray gun? Really? This from the guy who cracked on my vest for looking like it was from the 1950s?"

"No I didn't," Pete corrected. "I said it was straight out of the 1960s. Those are two different decades, Mr. Records and Research."

"My point is still made," Bob defended.



“Stop arguing, you two,” Jupiter snapped. “We have to get out there and—.” He stopped abruptly and turned the See-All slightly. “Wait, I understand what he’s doing now.”

Pete and Bob both looked at him expectantly.

“Well?” Bob prompted.

“He’s looking for the statues,” Jupiter told them.

“Huh?” Pete was bewildered. “So they really *are* a beacon and he’s homed in on them!”

Jupiter looked from the See-All into Pete’s worried face. “If those things emitted homing signals, Second, the alien wouldn’t need to look for them.” He turned his gaze to Bob. “Simple deduction, don’t you agree, Records?”

“I see your point, First,” Pete responded. “So okay, maybe I overreacted to this whole alien thing out of natural, normal, human fear. I see that now. Just tell me what to do and . . . and I’ll do it.”

“Emergency One, Pete; Bob, exit Secret Four. I’ll take the tunnel. We’ll converge on the other side of the salvage yard office, each from a different direction. You approach from above, Pete.”

Pete nodded. Goosebumps had risen on his arms, but if there was one thing the Second Investigator never did, it was let his pals down. He got up on his chair and pushed open the ceiling’s skylight. Through it, he fumbled for the rope ladder on the roof and pulled it down.

Then he climbed quickly and quietly up onto the top of the mobile home trailer.

Standing on the roof, he scanned the entire yard. The Pacific fog was thicker now. Through it he spotted the alien, its back to him. If it hadn't been for the glow of the alien's green skin in the murk, Pete would not have been able to see it through the haze.

Crouching, the Second Investigator moved quickly across the trailer's roof. He reached the edge and noiselessly hurdled a small path onto a sturdy pile of junk running parallel to one of the yard's fences. Tires cushioned his blow and softened the sound.

He moved stealthily across the debris, keeping the alien in sight until it vanished around the front of the office, which was a small, one-story building made of concrete blocks painted white.

Despite his nervousness, Pete couldn't help smiling as he watched Jupiter exit Headquarters' secret tunnel and move stealthily toward the office building. He could also make out Bob in the hazy darkness, navigating piles of junk on his way to the side of the building opposite Jupiter.

Pete positioned himself atop the end of the row of junk. He was still behind the office building, with its roof about four feet away from him. He could clear the distance easily if he had a running start, but it looked a little too wide to hurdle from a standstill.

In the stillness, he could hear the alien fussing with the office's front door. He half-expected a loud boom, the sound of a death ray blowing the wooden entrance open. No such sound occurred.

Despite the distance, he had to get to the office roof, which was so close and yet so far away.

The sounds from the front of the building became more forceful.

Pete could wait no longer. He took a deep breath and jumped with all his might. Although he didn't quite make it, he caught the edge of the roof with his hands. As his body slammed into the side of the building, the sounds from around the front ceased. Pete hung there for a moment, imagining the alien gawking around, trying to pinpoint what it had heard.

If the thing even had ears or knew what sound was.

Pete looked down, trying to decide whether he should simply let himself drop. Below him stood Jupiter. The First Investigator looked up, placing his finger to his lips. Pete tried to nod as he dangled.

The Second Investigator was a strong youth, and it took all of his strength to pull himself up. After swinging one leg atop the roof and catching it there, he paused. Looking around, his eye caught Jupiter again, a misty figure in the cloudy air, stealing inaudibly to the corner of the building. Pete knew that on the other side

of the office, at an angle he could not see, the Third Investigator was doing the same thing.

He pulled himself to the roof quietly, then ran softly to the front of the office and peered over the edge. The fog was thicker now, but he could make out the alien below, tall and frightening, its head and hands aglow with a greenish translucence.

The time to attack was now or never.

Pete leapt over the edge and landed full-force on the sinister intruder. Both of them hit the ground with a heavy thud. As they tussled, Bob and Jupiter hopped into the fray.

“I’ve got his legs,” Bob yelled.

“I’ve got one of his arms,” Jupiter yelled back.

“You’re capturing *me*, you guys!” Pete wheezed and gasped, trying to catch his breath. “Get off me, Jupiter! The alien’s getting away.”

Jupiter and Bob both looked up to see the alien’s form vanishing into the fogbank, moving surprisingly fast despite its peculiar gait. Bob got to his feet and tried to follow, but his bum leg would have none of it. The overweight Jupiter simply stood and tried to gain his balance, winded from his brief but exhausting workout.

Pete scrambled to his feet and took after the alien, but it had gotten too much of a head start. The Investigator realized he needed to cut the creature off before it found its way over the main gate, which was the only

way out thanks to the six-foot tarp surrounding the rest of the yard. Luckily, the exit was closed and locked at this late hour.

The athletic detective made a beeline for the gate, only to discover that the alien had already figured out the sole means of escape. The creature was halfway up the wooden fencing as Pete closed in. With all the speed the trained runner could muster, he went airborne. His hands caught the alien's waist, and his weight brought them both down.

They struggled. Pete landed a solid punch to the alien's head, but its rubbery flesh absorbed the blow. The alien responded with a kick to Pete's stomach. The boy fell back and let out a cry of pain.

It was all the time the wiry alien needed to steal over the fence.

Pete was up like a bolt and over the gate in an instant, only to find that the glowing green intruder had disappeared into the fog.

A light came on in an upper window of the Jones's house, cutting through the fog. The window opened. Aunt Mathilda leaned out and shouted, "What's all the commotion out there? Is that you, Jupiter?"

"Yes, Aunt Mathilda. It's me, Bob, and Pete. We just chased off an intruder trying to break into the office."

"Heavens to Betsy," she cried, "I'd better call the police."

She withdrew into the house.

“Just what I was afraid of,” Jupiter grouched to Bob.

There was a scratching at the gate. A moment later, Pete clambered over it and into view. He dropped to the ground, landing in a crouch in front of Jupiter and Bob.

“Are you okay, Second?” Bob asked, concerned that Pete might have been hurt in the altercation.

They paused as they heard someone, probably Uncle Titus, emerging from the house. The Jones’s home was located next to the salvage yard, but there was a small, seldom-used side street between the two. Now they heard heavy footsteps walking quickly across it, approaching them.

“He got me good in the stomach,” Pete said, catching his breath. “Otherwise I’m unhurt.”

“Good,” commented Bob.

Pete added, “I did manage to get this.” He opened the palm of his hand to display its contents. It was a piece of clothing. “I tore it off the alien,” he explained.

They heard a lock turn in the gate, and almost immediately it swung open. Uncle Titus stood in his pajamas, a bathrobe thrown over him to protect him from the cool evening air.

“What happened?” he demanded.

The boys told him, sort of, before the four of them went to the workshop to wait for the police. Pete hid the shred of cloth in his pocket as they silently agreed to tell

the police only part of the story. They were too close to solving the case, and the last thing they needed was well-meaning outsiders—even if they were authorities—hindering their progress.

Chapter 17

Turn of Events

AFTER THE POLICE HAD taken statements, searched for evidence, and left, The Three Investigators reconvened in Headquarters. Pete took from his pocket the shred of alien cloth and placed it on the desk.

“It looks like part of a suit jacket,” Jupiter observed.

“A cheap suit, judging from the thinness of the material,” Bob noted.

Jupiter stated the question that was on everyone’s mind. “Why would an alien from outer space be wearing a threaded human suit?”

“They do things like that,” Pete said. “Weird things that don’t make sense to humans. I read about it in that book from the library.”

Jupiter gave Pete a brief, exasperated glance.

“Here’s something else,” the glance’s recipient went on. “When I punched it in the face, it felt kind of rubbery, like I always suspected alien flesh would feel.”

“Think about what you just said,” Jupiter replied. “Its rubbery flesh felt real. Now, what’s the key word there?”

Pete thought a moment, then answered sheepishly. “Rubbery? Like a rubber mask would feel?”

“Well, folks, I think we have a winner.” Jupiter grinned. “And not only was our alien a man in disguise, but I think I know both who he was and why he was trying to get into the office.”

“You do?” Pete asked excitedly.

“Yes,” Jupiter said. “And you two should at least have an idea about the ‘why’ part.”

Bob furrowed his brow. “He was . . . looking for the statues?”

Jupiter neither confirmed nor denied Bob’s speculation, and the other two Investigators knew it was pointless to push the matter. There was no way Jupiter would reveal his hypothesis until he had a chance to test it.

“You know,” Bob said, “there’s no need for you to be secretive, since you told us that before we even went out and confronted the thing . . . er, guy, I mean.”

“Well,” Pete sighed deeply, “as exciting as this has all been, I have to get home. I’ve already missed supper. I’m surprised Mom and Dad haven’t called your aunt and uncle to ask where I am.”

“The same goes for me,” Bob added. “If I don’t get home soon, I’m sure to get in trouble.”

The three boys said their goodbyes. Pete and Bob exited the trailer, got onto their bicycles, and rode off

into the foggy evening. Jupiter went to his workshop and remained there for a while, reexamining the remnants of the broken Olmec statue. He hoped to find something, anything, he might have missed earlier.

Outside, Uncle Titus, Hans, and Konrad walked around the junkyard, their eyes peeled for any evidence the police might have overlooked. The yard's gate remained open, and the yard lights shined brightly. Despite the gray mist, the halogen bulbs illuminated both the area around the office and Jupiter's workshop.

After finding nothing new, Jupiter left his workshop and went to the office. He flipped on the light and inspected the three interlocking statues. When he had looked at them earlier, he had concentrated mostly on their faces, their eyes in particular. Now he focused his attention on the bases to which they were fixed.

Each base contained a carving of what could only be described as a birdman. The figures had bodies that were human enough, but their unmistakably avian heads bore gazes directed upward, as if toward the heavens.

There was dirt caked on the carvings. From this, the First Investigator surmised that the statues had at one time been buried, probably together, and had never been given the kind of cleaning they would have gotten from a museum staff. He deduced that they were likely purchased by a private collector—specifically, one William Randolph Ryker—who had either stored them

or put them on sequestered display for only close associates to view.

Jupiter got down on his hands and knees and positioned his face close to the middle statue's base. It struck him how deeply the lines were set into the rock, as if they delineated a secret compartment. Excited, he rubbed and pushed every inch of the stone surface, but he could find no button or switch with which to open the suspected compartment.

The bases of the two bookending statues each contained a protrusion that fit into a long, thin recession on either side of the central statue. Jupiter carefully linked the three figures together. As he completed the task, a slight click broke the stillness. Examining the central statue more closely, he noticed that where the deeper lines had been, there was now a very small block of stone protruding from where a depression had been.

It was just as Jupiter had suspected. There *was* a secret compartment in the base of the middle figure, the one most likely to be perceived by the uninformed as an ancient astronaut. The First Investigator pulled the small drawer open and peered inside. Within was a folded sheet of tawny paper. Fearing that it might crumble at his touch, he cautiously removed and unfolded his find.

There was an image judiciously drawn onto the paper's dry and cracking surface.

It was a map.

A map of the world.

A very old map of the world.

There were no political divisions on the map, or anything to indicate the period in which it had been sketched. It did, however, show all seven continents. The area around the equator was the most accurately wrought, with the continental divisions increasingly distorted the further one looked toward the north and the south.

When Jupiter realized what exactly he was looking at, he felt as if he had been struck by a blow to the head. The map displayed the continents exactly as they would appear from outer space!

Even more shocking, the antiquity of the paper and its style of cartography strongly suggested that the map had been created before Antarctica had even been discovered. Something about it reminded him of something he had seen in one of the books Bob had checked out from the library for the investigation.

Aunt Mathilda's voice called from outside, interrupting his thoughts.

He rose and left the office. His aunt stood in the junkyard's open gateway.

"Yes, Aunt Mathilda?"

"Is Bob here?" she asked. "Mrs. Andrews just called and said he hasn't returned home yet."

“He left a little bit ago,” Jupiter explained. “I imagine he’ll be getting there any minute now. Why doesn’t his mom just call his cell?”

“She did,” Aunt Mathilda said. “I’ll call her back and tell her he’s on his way. His cell’s battery probably needs charged.” Then, as an afterthought she added, “Don’t forget you have school in the morning, so don’t be out here much longer. It’s nearly ten o’clock.”

“I won’t,” Jupiter promised as his aunt turned and went back to the house.

Once she had stepped through the door, the First Investigator raced to his workshop and removed the iron grating that hid the entrance to Tunnel Two. He crawled into the corrugated pipe and scrambled the forty feet to the trapdoor that opened into Headquarters. Once there, he grabbed the library book he had been thinking about and thumbed through it, looking for a poorly reproduced photograph that had caught his eye the day before.

He found it quickly. According to the caption, the picture was of an ancient map drawn on gazelle skin sometime in the early 1500s. The cartographer was a Turkish military captain named Piri Reis. Reis had claimed that the source of his map was a number of older maps, including one ordered drawn by Christopher Columbus.

Jupiter read the text accompanying the photograph of the Piri Reis map. It pointed out what Jupiter had

already noticed, that the map showed Antarctica some three hundred years before the continent was actually discovered!

The First Investigator continued reading, fascinated. It was not uncommon for cartographers of the time to base new maps on multiple old ones, as Reis claimed to have done. If Reis's claim was true, as the writer of the book proposed, it meant that the older maps he had used had been drawn by people with access to greater technology than humans had in the early 1500s. Furthermore, the writer suggested, those maps were likely supplied by extraterrestrial beings who had seen the contours of the continents from space.

Jupiter had his doubts, of course. After all, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, and the book's author provided little verification, extraordinary or otherwise, of his declarations. The Piri Reis map's presentation of what the author asserted was the southernmost continent could easily be explained as a distorted rendering of South America.

The map Jupiter had just discovered, however, was a different story. There was no doubt that, on it, each and every continent was represented, and in amazingly accurate detail.

Jupiter grabbed the book and returned to his workshop. There, he spread the map out on the desk and stared at it. He couldn't dismiss the idea that it was a

clever hoax. After all, it was drawn on paper—not animal skin—a luxury to which many Pre-Columbian tribes would not have had access.

If, however, the map was real, then what it contained just might prove to be a scientific bombshell. While it in no way, shape, or form proved that aliens had arrived on earth in the distant past, much less communicated their knowledge to natives, it did raise one enormous question. How would an ancient culture such as the Olmecs have been able to chart the world's landmasses at a time when technological advancement was so limited?

As Jupiter sat thinking, he heard a car pull into the yard. He stood and walked outside to see who it might be at so late an hour.

The car was small and blue. Jupiter momentarily flashed on the Neon that had stalked him and his friends before realizing that this car was smaller and sportier. His stomach tightened as he recognized it. It belonged to none other than E. Skinner Norris.

The car door opened and Skinny got out. Jupiter could see that there were other teenage boys sitting inside the vehicle.

“Well, well, if it isn't Fatboy-Not-So-Slim,” Skinny called out.

Skinny's friends laughed at his not-so-clever remark. Though Skinny was a little older than Jupiter, he had been held back in school. As a result, he and Jupiter

were in the same grade. Because of this, kids of Skinny's own age did not associate with him much. He had adapted by forming an entourage of younger followers who believed that hanging out with an older, wealthier kid made them cool.

"What do you want, Skinny?" Jupiter asked. "I thought you were out of town, on vacation with your parents."

"You know how it is," Skinny responded. "There's an emergency at work and Dad gets called back. Lucky for me, though. You know what I heard? I heard it from a friend who . . . heard it from a friend who . . . heard it from a friend that you been investigating around."

Annoyed by Skinny's deficient attempt at wit, Jupiter tried to brush off the unwelcome visitor. "As usual, you're talking out your hat, Skinny. Why don't you take your little friends and go home? I'm not in the mood to play games with my intellectual inferiors. It's too much like teasing a dog, fun at first but it gets old quick."

Skinny sneered. "What's that supposed to mean, Jones?"

"Exactly what you think it means," Jupiter said. "Oh wait! I'm sorry. Maybe you really *don't* know what it means. Which hard word do you need defined? Intellectual? Inferiors? Dog?"

"Who do you think you're talking to, Bubba?" Skinny demanded. He snapped his fingers and waved,

and his friends got out of the car. There were three of them, all boys Jupiter recognized as students in remedial class at school. They had few friends apart from one another, and the First Investigator suspected that none of them really liked Skinny much. They undoubtedly did, however, enjoy the expensive gifts Skinny's father lavished on anyone who put up with his obnoxious son.

"I see," said Jupiter. "You aren't man enough to handle a fatty like me on your own. You've got to get your friends to help you."

Skinny and his supporters stepped threateningly toward the First Investigator.

"You watch your mouth, Jones," Skinny growled. "Me and my friends don't take to being insulted." He threw a look to his posse. "Do we, boys?"

"No," they said in unison like well-trained parrots.

"I think you mean *my friends and I*," Jupiter corrected, smiling. "And don't forget, you're on my property now. You threaten me and you'll have to deal with the consequences."

"What? You gonna tell on us? Ooooooh, we're so scared." Skinny shook his entire body as if afraid. "Like anyone would believe you over the four of us."

Jupiter had no doubt that everyone would believe him over the four of them, but he didn't feel that the issue was worth bickering over. So instead he said, "You should be scared. Look behind you."

“You think we’re stupid enough to fall for that?” Skinny sneered. “Well, we aren’t, are we, guys?”

A deep, German-accented voice from behind him spoke up, cutting through the forced laughter. “Boys should be scared.”

The group turned. Standing behind them were the two large, muscled Bavarian brothers, along with Uncle Titus. Hans held a tire iron, Konrad a heavy chain.

Having heard the commotion, Aunt Mathilda had also gotten dressed and come outside. Now she walked into view.

“Are you threatening my nephew?” she barked at Skinny.

“What you want us to do with bullies?” Konrad asked. He looked larger than life in the bright light of the yard’s lamps.

Skinny and his associates began backing toward Skinny’s car.

Aunt Mathilda gritted her teeth, something she rarely did except on those occasions when she neared a state of rage. No one threatened *her* family. “If they don’t get off my property this instant,” she called to Hans and Konrad, “you can do whatever you want with them.”

“Hokay,” Hans returned and stepped toward the intruders.

The boys quickly piled into the blue sports car. Skinny started the engine and put the vehicle in reverse.

As the car backed away, he yelled out the window, "I'm leaving, you bunch of freaks, but if you know what's best for you, you'll all go home to Germany. We don't care for foreigners round here." Then, once safely out the gate and on the street, he added, "And as for you, lard-o, I heard about your stupid search. It was pretty easy to find the driver of that blue Dodge Neon, and now he knows what you're up to. Sayonara, tubby!"

The car peeled out, squealing its tires as it entered the street in reverse, and found itself right in the path of an SUV. An instant too late, Skinny swerved. The larger vehicle clipped the sports car's rear bumper and sent it into a tailspin. Metal screeched against metal as the bumper fell off, sparking as it scraped against the pavement.

The SUV screeched to a stop and an angry man emerged.

"Why don't you watch where you're going, you idiot?" he bellowed. "You could have killed somebody!"

Skinny slammed his car into drive and sped away. No sooner was he out of sight than the driver of the SUV approached Aunt Mathilda. She explained just who Skinny was and what he was doing, making certain to include Skinny's complete name and home address. The driver immediately produced a cell phone from his pocket and called the police.

Elated, Jupiter realized that Skinny was about to be picked up for fleeing the scene of an accident. His happiness was quickly diluted, however, when he remembered that Skinny's father was not only wealthy but also friendly with too many bigwigs around Rocky Beach for anything of consequence to happen to his son.

Skinny's parting words echoed through Jupiter's mind. Obviously, the older boy had gotten wind of the Ghost-to-Ghost Hookup, which was unsurprising in an area where everybody knew everybody else. Although excluding adults from the networking method was key to its success, it also made it likely, if not inevitable, that even Skinny would eventually get a call from someone spilling the beans.

Jupiter's train of thought was cut short by a flashing red light mounted over his workshop. It was the signal he had installed to alert him when the phone in Headquarters was ringing.

The First Investigator slipped off and scurried into Tunnel Two. A few seconds later he emerged through the trapdoor into the hidden trailer's main room. The telephone, a colorful 1960s model he had restored from junk to working order, rang shrilly. He snatched up the receiver.

"Hello. This is Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators speaking. How may I help you?"

The voice on the other end was frightened to the point of terror.

“Jupiter, it’s me, Bob. You’ve got to help me. I’ve been kidnapped.”

Chapter 18

The Lurker in the Dark

AFTER BOB AND PETE had left the salvage yard, they'd split up to go to their respective homes. Neither of them noticed the blue Dodge Neon with a single working headlight as it edged into view from a side street and turned in the direction Bob rode.

It sat idly on the street for a few minutes, waiting for the Third Investigator to get some distance ahead, before pulling slowly away from the curb and following. In his hurry to get home, Bob failed to notice as the vehicle pulled up behind and then alongside him. When he did so, however, he realized instantly who it was.

Fear shot down his spine. His heart racing, Bob jumped his bike off the street and onto the sidewalk. At the same time, the cell phone in his pocket sounded its familiar ringtone. He desperately wanted to answer it, but he was afraid it would slow him down. There was an alley just ahead, and Bob hoped that Spalding—if indeed that was who it was—would assume he was going to take it. Mentally, he plotted a surprise route across a private lawn and through several of his neigh-

bors' backyards. That would get him home, where he hoped he would be safe.

His plan didn't work. Simultaneously, his phone stopped ringing.

The car sped up and raced onto the sidewalk in front of him, cutting him off. There was no time to veer away, and Bob hit the front left side of the vehicle. He careened over its hood and landed roughly in the soft grass on the other side. His glasses landed next to him. Unable to see much without them, he instinctively grabbed for them, found them, and put them back on his face. Thankfully, they remained unbroken.

The car door opened and a tall, brown-haired man of average weight stepped out. Just as Bob feared, it was Timothy Spalding. As the man grabbed Bob by the shoulder and pulled him off the ground, a porch light went on across the street. Beneath the light, which scattered the thinning fog in its immediate vicinity, a front door opened.

"What's going on over there?" someone called out.

"It's nothing," Spalding answered. "My son tried to run away from home."

"I'm not his son," Bob yelled. "Call the police—"

Spalding backhanded The Third Investigator, cutting him off and sending him reeling into the side of the car.

“Hey . . . ?” The man across the street approached them quickly. In one hand he held a cell phone. With the other, he poked 911 into the keypad.

Spalding pushed Bob into the car through the driver’s door. He slid in beside the boy, slammed his door, and turned the key in the ignition. Bob tried to open the passenger door but was stymied by the child safety lock. A moment later they sped away.

“W-What do you want?” Bob stammered. “I don’t have anything.” Fighting total panic, he contemplated how he might escape through the passenger-door window. He quickly realized that the car was moving too fast, and he feared that Spalding could easily stop him before he got very far.

“You know what I want, kid,” Spalding spat. “I want those pearls.”

“Why?” Bob asked. “They’re worthless. We know. We had them appraised by a malacologist.”

“What’s a malacologist?” Spalding shouted.

“A person who studies mollusks,” Bob shouted fearfully back.

“What’s a person who studies mollusks got to do with a couple of pearls in a statue?” Spalding challenged.

In his adrenalin-heightened state, Bob quickly and clearly comprehended that Spalding was in fact far stupider than any of them had suspected. It struck the Third

Investigator that if he played his cards right, he might actually outwit the thug.

He would have to concentrate, though. And that was proving difficult because, for some unfathomable reason, his mind had suddenly decided to focus on chalk. Specifically, green chalk. Carrying a piece of it at all times had been a strategy that Jupiter—laid up at the time with an injured foot—had concocted back when the three of them had conducted their very first major investigation. The idea was for each of them to always carry colored chalk—green for Bob, blue for Pete, and white for the First Investigator. That way, if any one of them found himself in a jam, he could make a mark that would, when the others came looking, tell them where he had been.

As unproductive as it was at the moment, Bob's mind clung to the image of his green chalk. He pictured it clearly, sitting safely atop his bedroom dresser, where he had left it the last time he'd changed his pants. Not that it would have been all that useful, it dawned on him. After all, how well could a green chalk mark show up on the car's blue interior?

A second useless thought followed the first: It would be even worse if Pete had been kidnapped. No way would blue chalk ever show up on—!

“Give me those pearls!” Spalding yelled, inadvertently snapping Bob to attention. “I won't ask again!”

“What, you think I ride around on my bicycle with them in my pocket?” Bob shouted. “They’re back at Headquarters. First has them.”

“First?” Although it had seemed impossible, for an instant Spalding sounded even denser than he had the moment before.

“Jupiter,” Bob explained. “We sometimes call him ‘First’ because he’s the First Investigator.”

Spalding laughed. “Oh, yeah. That’s right. You and your buddy are amateur detectives or something.”

“We’ve solved a few cases,” Bob said.

Spalding laughed again. “You’re a couple of kids. What do you know about solving crimes?”

“A lot,” Bob replied. “We’ve even helped Chief Reynolds of the Rocky Beach Police Department a few times.” An idea hit him, and he added, “If you don’t believe me, just call him up and ask.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” the kidnapper scoffed. “What do you think I am, kid? Stupid?”

“N-no, sir,” Bob lied, sputtering. He looked out his window at the houses as the car sped past them. He tried to pinpoint where they were. “How did you know where to find me?”

Spalding sneered. “Funny thing, one of your friends knocked on my door tonight. Told me about you guys and your clubhouse and the little Nancy Drew thing you got going. He said you were on the lookout for my car.

After he left, I drove to that salvage yard the fat kid's parents own and just waited. It didn't take long. For detectives, none of you are very observant."

"They aren't his parents," Bob corrected.

"What?"

"Jupiter's parents are dead. The couple who own the salvage yard is his aunt and uncle."

"Did I say something to suggest I cared?" Spalding said. There was something very cold and sinister in his voice. "If so, I apologize."

"What are you going to do with me?" Bob asked.

"I got some ideas I'll clue you in on later," the brown-haired man replied. "Right now I'm getting those pearls, and you're going to help me."

"How?" Bob's frightened voice was nearly inaudible.

"You'll see" was all the information Timothy Spalding offered. For the remainder of the drive, neither one of them spoke further, leaving Bob to wonder if it had been his parents who had called earlier to find out where he was. He hoped so. Someone needed to figure out he'd been kidnapped.

After what seemed like hours but in reality was only a few minutes, the car turned into an alley next to the Ocean Way Apartments. A moment later Bob was dragged through the back door of Apartment 116 and thrown into a kitchen chair.

“I assume you have a cell phone,” Spalding said. It was a statement, not a question.

Bob nodded.

“Use it,” Spalding commanded. “Call your butterball friend and tell him you’ve been taken hostage. Tell him I’ll set you free once he does what I want him to.” He looked down at his seated captive, his eyes a pair of menacing slits. “And make sure you tell him not to call the police unless he wants you to get your throat slit.”

Bob gulped, touching his throat reflexively. “What can Jupiter do?”

“You know exactly what Jupiter can do, wise guy,” Spalding spat. “He can get me those pearls.”

Bob pulled out his cell phone and nervously speed-dialed Jupiter’s cell. No one answered. Desperately, he tried the number for Headquarters.

Please be there, Juve, he thought to himself. *Please!*

After several rings the line was picked up and a voice came through. “Hello. This is Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators speaking. How may I help you?”

“Jupiter, it’s me, Bob,” the Third Investigator said. “You’ve got to help me. I’ve been kidnapped.”

Chapter 19

The Plan

“BOB, WHERE ARE YOU?” Jupiter said urgently.

There was a noise on the other end of the line, followed by a long pause, before a new voice came on. “If you ever want to see your friend alive again, *flab-meister*, you need to listen carefully to everything I say. You got that?”

“Yes,” Jupiter whispered back.

“What’s that?” the muffled, unfamiliar voice asked. “I can’t hear you.”

“Yes,” the First Investigator repeated, this time much louder.

“I’m going to call you back in a little while.” There was an edge to the raspy voice. “When I do, I’m going to tell you exactly when and where I want you to deliver those pearls. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Jupiter repeated again. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“Ha!” the voice barked. “You don’t. I *will* tell you this, though: I’ve had to kill before, and I won’t hesitate to do it again if you don’t follow my directions to the letter.”

“I got you,” Jupiter said nervously. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple.

Silence followed on the other end of the line, then an ominous click as the line went dead.

For several seconds Jupiter sat and gathered his thoughts. Then he picked up the receiver again and dialed Pete’s cell.

Pete answered drowsily. “What is it, Jupe? I was just about to fall asleep.”

“Can you sneak out?” Jupiter asked, a slight tremor in his voice.

“What?” Pete was instantly awake. “What’s wrong, Jupe? What’s happened?”

Jupiter exploded. “Bob’s been kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped?” Pete asked anxiously. “How? By who?”

“I’m not one hundred percent certain, Pete, but I think I know. Something Skinny Norris said.”

“Skinny Norris?” Pete sounded skeptical. “I thought that knuckle-dragger was on vacation.”

Jupiter returned to his point. “Can you sneak out?”

“Of course,” Pete said without hesitation.

“Good.” Jupiter sounded slightly relieved. “Here’s what I want you to do.” He told Pete his plan.

The two hung up. Jupiter fell back into his chair, allowing his tense muscles to relax a little. All he could

do now was wait for the second call from Bob's mysterious kidnapper.

He fidgeted, grappling with the idea that he could do nothing more. It was now all up to Pete Crenshaw.

? ? ?

Within seconds of hanging up, Pete was out of bed and into a pair of dark jeans, a black t-shirt, and a dark jacket. Grabbing his tennis shoes, he tiptoed to the window, raised it, and threw the shoes out onto the yard below. He then collected his wallet and keys and stuffed them into his pockets. He climbed slowly onto the front porch roof, made his way to the edge, and looked over.

His parents were still awake and watching the downstairs television—a sitcom, to judge from their laughter.

Pete slipped over the edge of the roof and onto the trellis. He hoped the ivy plants would muffle the sounds of his departure. About halfway down, however, there was a loud pop as a board broke and he dropped the rest of the way to the ground.

He landed unharmed in a squatting position and ran quickly to the far side of a large tree in the front yard. There he froze, afraid that his parents had heard the cracking wood and would decide to check things out.

His position blocked any view of the house, but for the following minute or so he heard no door being

opened or window being raised. Soundlessly, he ran to his shoes, grabbed them, and disappeared through the bushes along the side of the front yard. On the other side, he sat down and put on his shoes.

Crouching, he moved through his neighbors' yard to their rear garden and from there to his own backyard.

He went to the side door of his family's garage, fished his keys from his pocket, unlocked the door, and entered. A moment later he emerged with his ten-speed. After closing and locking the door, he hopped on the bike and headed down the alley toward the Coast Highway. As the highway was busy during all but the very latest hours, he took it only so far before turning toward Rocky Beach's downtown.

As he rode, he pondered Jupiter's suspicions. He hoped the First Investigator's hunch was right. If so, the situation could probably be resolved pretty quickly. If not, Bob would be in even worse danger.

? ? ?

Back at Headquarters, Jupiter passed the time by examining the box of magazines his uncle had bought at the Ryker Estate auction. He spread them across the desk and sorted them into stacks as he looked for one in particular. He had rummaged through them two nights before, but something he had learned since made him

realize that he'd seen something of great importance in one of them, possibly the key to the mystery.

The magazines were all pulp mystery and science fiction publications, dating roughly from William Randolph Ryker's childhood. There were multiple copies of *Amazing Stories*, *Argosy*, *Black Mask*, *Unknown Worlds*, *Wonder Stories*, and many others. Particularly interesting to Jupiter were the two or three copies of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, his personal favorite as it focused on mystery rather than science fiction or horror.

At last he found the magazine he was seeking. Titled *The Mysterious Traveler*, it contained stories by some of the most noted sci-fi and horror writers of the 1940s and '50s. The First Investigator turned to the table of contents, found the story and page number he was looking for, and flipped to it. He skimmed the twenty-five yellowed pages of the tale in search of the clue he was sure he had seen.

On page 64 he found it.

Using the Headquarters phone might have resulted in missing the kidnapper's call, so Jupiter ran to the house and grabbed his cell from the dresser in his bedroom. As he ran back to Headquarters, he punched the number for William Ryker. After a couple of rings, the wealthy man answered.

“Hello,” the older man said gruffly. He was obviously in a bad mood and unaware of who was on the other end of the line.

Jupiter spoke quickly, before Ryker had a chance to dismiss his call. “This is Jupiter Jones speaking. I’m sorry to bother you, Mr. Ryker, but I wondered if you might have a few minutes to answer a couple of questions.”

“What’s this about?” Ryker asked. “It’s getting late.”

“It’s about your father,” Jupiter answered. “My uncle bought a collection of old pulp magazines at the estate auction on Saturday. I wondered if you could tell me to whom they belonged.”

There was no hesitation on the other end of the line. “They were Dad’s. When he was a kid, his father didn’t have much to do with him, so he read a lot. He was obsessed with fantasy stories, and my grandmother indulged him. I think it was a way for her to feel less guilty about the lack of affection he got from his father.”

“I see,” Jupiter said. “Have you ever looked through these magazines?”

“I’ve never been interested in hack fiction, so no,” Ryker said disdainfully. “Not to any real degree, anyway. Why? Do I need to?”

Jupiter shifted the cell phone from one ear to the other. “Yes, I think so, sir. You might be surprised by what one of them contains.”

“Or you could just tell me. Then I’d know right away,” Ryker said.

Jupiter didn’t respond to the request. Instead he asked, “Is it true you’ve filed a lawsuit against The Society for the Preservation of Evidence Regarding Ancient Aliens in an effort to reclaim your father’s fortune?”

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. Then: “Why is that any of your business?”

“I need to know,” Jupiter insisted.

“I’m not sure I like your line of questioning, young man.”

“I’m not just being nosy, sir. It’s important,” Jupiter assured him. “If you want us to find out who the alien is that locked us in the basement and ransacked your father’s estate, it’s important you tell us everything.”

There was another lengthy pause. “Yes, I’ve filed a suit. My father was crazy. There’s no other way to explain what he wrote in that journal of his. He believes we’re the product of alien tampering. Why would he write things like that—and leave his fortune to some organization of alien theorist cuckoos—if he wasn’t insane?”

“I don’t know,” Jupiter said, not really wanting to discuss that particular matter. “Anyway, thanks for your help, Mr. Ryker. You’ve told me all I needed to know. Have a nice evening.” He hung up without giving Ryker a chance to respond.

Ten minutes later the land line rang. Jupiter snatched it up, certain it was Bob’s kidnapper calling back with his list of demands. “Hello, this is Jupiter Jones of The Three Investigators speaking. How may I help you?”

The voice on the other end of the line was not the kidnapper’s.

“Jupiter?” It was Bob’s father.

“Yes,” Jupiter answered, steeling himself for what he knew was coming next.

“Jupiter, hello. This is Bob’s father. Is Bob there?” There was a worried crack in Mr. Andrew’s voice.

“No, sir,” Jupiter replied, his own voice tightly controlled. “He left a little bit ago.” He did not want to tell Mr. Andrews the truth—at least not yet—but he didn’t have it in him to lie.

“How long ago, Jupiter?” Mr. Andrews insisted. “My wife called your aunt a half hour ago, and she said he had already left then.”

“Yes, about that . . .” Jupiter began, hesitated, and went on. “Please, don’t get too upset by what I’m about to tell you. We’ve got the situation under control.”

Jupiter was certain he could hear Mr. Andrews swallow. Then the newspaper man demanded in a flinty voice, “You have *what* under control?”

Jupiter tensed again and said, “Bob’s been kidnapped.”

“*What?*” came the shouted response.

“You have to believe me . . . Mr. Andrews . . . it’s . . . under control,” Jupiter repeated, speaking in short bursts. “And you can’t . . . call the police or anything. The kidnapper said that if I told anyone, he would . . . he would hurt Bob.”

? ? ?

The trip took Pete less time than it had the day before, thanks to the minimal amount of traffic on the side streets.

He locked his bike to the rack outside the laundry-mat, ran across the street to the Ocean Way Apartments, and stole quietly into the parking lot in the rear. There, sitting in the lot just as he expected, was the blue Dodge Neon with the smashed front end. It was confirmation that Spalding was home and, if Jupiter was right, holding Bob captive in Apartment 116.

Pete moved stealthily across the lot, bent down, and placed a magnetic GPS tracker under the rear bumper of the car. That way, if Spalding took flight, Jupiter would

be able to follow his whereabouts from the computer in Headquarters.

After positioning the tracker, Pete ambled up the small hill on which the apartment building sat. 116 was a ground-floor apartment. Because so much of Rocky Beach was barely above sea level, there were no basement apartments.

When he'd first examined the front of the building, the Second Investigator had noticed that there were no lights on in any of 116's windows and that all of its curtains were drawn. Through the back door window, however, he could see a light on in what he guessed was the kitchen. Although the back curtains were likewise drawn, there was a thin crack between where they came together, and through it Pete saw Bob seated at a table. The Third Investigator, who appeared to be tied, gazed helplessly at his captor as the latter paced around the kitchen table. Neither of them appeared to be speaking.

On the table sat a cell phone, which Pete saw Spalding lift and flip open. He conferred with Bob and entered a number. A moment later he spoke, but not loudly enough for Pete to tell what the man was saying. He wondered whether Spalding was speaking to Jupiter, telling the First Investigator where to deliver the pearls.

Pete tried to contact Headquarters and clue Jupiter in, but he got a busy signal for his efforts. Flipping the cell shut, he looked back through the window. Spalding now

held the opened phone toward the bound Bob's face. Bob spoke into it, no doubt corroborating to Jupiter that he was still alive and unharmed.

Pete crouched beneath the window, trying to decide what to do next. Jupiter had instructed him to call Chief Reynolds's home number the moment he found evidence that Bob was being held captive in the apartment. But now that he was here, he considered whether he might be able to rescue Bob, using the element of surprise to avoid placing his friend's life in danger.

The Second Investigator snuck back around to the front of the building, where he contemplated ringing the doorbell. But what would he do once Spalding answered? The kidnapper would immediately know who he was, and it was a sure bet that he had a weapon handy.

Pete sighed and decided that Jupiter's original plan was best. He would call Chief Reynolds.

He turned toward the street and looked over at his bike, opening his cell phone as he did so. As he entered the chief's number, something slammed hard into his upper back. The phone flew from his hand and shattered on the cement path to the sidewalk. He fell forward and would have tumbled down the small hill had someone not caught him by the arm. Too stunned to react, Pete was spun around and shoved through the opened front door of Apartment 116.

Chapter 20

Pete Steps Up

PETE STUMBLED THROUGH the doorway, tripped, and sprawled face-down onto the floor. Instantly, his wrestler's instincts kicked in, and he flipped onto his back. His assailant leapt, arms spread with the intention of pinning him down, but Pete thrust both legs up and out, slamming his feet into Spalding's gut with brutal force. A painful "oof" escaped the crook, followed by a long moan as he half-staggered, half-slipped backward through the door and tumbled onto the concrete walk outside.

Pete was on his feet in a flash. He slammed the door shut and flipped the lock, then slid the chain bolt into place. For a second he stood, breathing heavily, listening for a clue as to what Spalding would do next.

It wasn't long in coming.

Pete tensed his every muscle as his ears caught the sound of a key sliding into the lock. The instant the latch turned, the Second Investigator turned it back. He gripped the thin piece of metal tightly, battling Spalding's efforts to unlock and enter.

“Bob, I could really use some help right now,” he yelled.

“I’m tied to the chair,” Bob pointed out from the kitchen.

The latch turned, briefly overcoming Pete’s two-handed grip. The mechanism clicked threateningly. Pete turned it back.

Then, abruptly, the resistance stopped.

“Can’t you get yourself free?” he yelled. With one hand still on the lock, he peered through the peephole. Spalding was not visible; he was either gone or standing outside the peephole’s range.

“Free myself?” Bob yelled back. “Wow! That’s a *great* idea!”

Pete ignored the wisecrack. “Spalding’s disappeared. I don’t see him out there.” His eye scanned the front lawn as fully as the aperture allowed, but still he saw no one. “I’d come and untie you, but I’m afraid he’ll get in.”

“How do you know he isn’t going around to the back door?” Bob said as he struggled in his chair. One of the chair’s legs creaked as he moved.

Pete removed his hands from the lock and turned. He roared with frustration. “How on earth am I supposed to guard both doors?”

“You don’t have to,” Bob replied. “He’s back here! I can hear his footfalls on the ground outside!”

Through the charged air came the sound of a key working the lock on the back door.

“He’s getting in!” Bob shouted, near hysteria. “His gun is lying on the table in front of me!”

“Thanks for mentioning that before, Records,” Pete cried, darting in Bob’s direction.

As the Second Investigator made his way to the kitchen, Bob gritted his teeth, pressed his chin to his chest, and flipped his chair backward in hopes that it would break when it hit the floor. He capsized loudly onto the linoleum, but, despite a loud crack from the chair’s wooden frame, it remained intact.

“What’s that? Did he bust the door down?” Pete shouted, entering the kitchen.

Before Bob could respond, the back door flew violently open. A second later Spalding was through it and in Pete’s face. He grabbed the athletic Investigator and flung him against the kitchen wall. Pete rebounded and, instinctively balancing himself, made a headlong leap into Spalding’s legs. Spalding went down, cracking his head against the table’s edge as he fell. Despite the pair of loud thuds—Spalding’s head on table, head on floor—it was several seconds before the dazed Second Investigator, still clutching his adversary, gathered his wits enough to realize that Bob’s captor was out cold.

At that same moment, Bob observed, “I think he’s unconscious.”

“Yeah.” Pete regained his feet and went to the table. Grabbing the gun, he moved to where Bob had nearly freed himself from his bonds. As it turned out, the Third Investigator had rolled the old chair over onto its side during the commotion, causing one of its legs to break off. The resulting relaxation of the ropes had allowed Bob to loosen himself by twisting his body.

Pointing the gun in a safe direction, Pete gave his colleague what little assistance he needed to free himself. He stepped back, reached his free hand to Bob, and helped the Third Investigator stand.

Bob kicked the loose rope from his feet. “Boy, am I glad to see you right now!”

Pete inhaled deeply and exhaled a sigh of relief. “Back at you.” He turned toward Spalding, who was beginning to stir. “I was worried this freak might have hurt you.”

“How did you know where I was?” Bob asked.

“How do you think?” Pete responded. “Jupiter figured it out.”

Bob shook his head. “How is that possible? Do you think he might have psychic powers he’s never told us about?”

“You tell me,” Pete laughed. “Either way, whatever works.”

Spalding groaned and lifted his head off the floor. He forced himself to a seated position, looking around as if

unsure of where he was. Then he groaned again and placed his hand on his forehead. The skin had split where it had struck the table, and blood had resulted. He stared at his hand for a moment, then wiped it dry on his pants.

“Blood . . .” he mumbled. He sounded like he was going to be sick.

“It wouldn’t bother you so much if it was *my* blood on your hand, would it?” Bob asked.

“It will be before I’m done,” Spalding replied, his voice low.

With the hand holding the gun, Pete motioned toward the living room. “Over to the couch. And don’t try anything funny. I’m not good with guns, and I’d hate to accidentally shoot you because you tried something stupid and scared my trigger finger.”

Spalding painfully gained his feet. “I bet you thought you were pretty sly sneaking around out there in the dark,” he said, limping from the kitchen with the two Investigators following closely. “Ain’t nothin’ that makes more noise than some teenage punk trying to be quiet.”

“Just keep those hands where we can see them,” Bob advised as Spalding reached forward and sat himself slowly on the couch. “It was pretty dumb leaving your gun behind. Just what were you thinking?”

“What are you, my mother?” Spalding snapped.

“Where did you get this furniture?” Pete asked. “On a street corner during trash pickup at the trailer park?”

“It came with the apartment,” Spalding said.

“Why did you abduct Bob?” Pete asked.

“It’s none of your business, kid,” Spalding spat.

“Really?” Pete asked. “You’re going to play that game with me when I have your gun pointed at your face?”

Spalding sneered. “As if a goody-two-shoe like you would use it.”

“Maybe I would, maybe I wouldn’t,” Pete retorted. “Just remember: I’m a teenager. We aren’t exactly known for thinking things through.”

“And teens aren’t really tried as adults all that often,” Bob added. “I know. I’ve seen the stats.”

Ignoring Bob, Spalding sat silently. He stared at Pete, attempting to unnerve the teen.

“Thinking about jumping me?” the Second Investigator asked. “Don’t deny it. I hear those gears turning.”

“I don’t,” Bob said, and both he and Pete laughed.

Spalding mustered his best tough-guy expression. With bright red blood streaming down his face, he looked pretty intimidating. “I want those pearls,” he growled.

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned that,” Bob replied. “But why? We visited Professor Yarborough at UCLA, and he told us they aren’t worth anything.”

Spalding answered stiffly. "They're worth everything to my boss."

"And just who would that be?" Pete demanded.

"Like I'd tell you," Spalding hissed.

"You don't need to." Bob smiled coldly. "We already know."

Spalding squinted, sneering yet again. "I don't believe you. Nobody knows who my boss is."

Bob assumed a superior tone and said, "Robert Robertson."

If the boys had expected a surprised or angry reaction from Timothy Spalding, they didn't get one. He just leaned back into the sofa and relaxed. His blood-streaked features were smug, as if he had gotten one up on the two Investigators.

"Call the police," Pete said.

"This jerk took my phone," Bob replied. "I think he left it in the kitchen somewhere." He looked at the now-docile Spalding. "Do you have it?"

Spalding rolled his eyes and snorted.

"He's probably not going to tell you if he's got it," Pete pointed out. He wiggled the barrel of the gun at Spalding. "Stand up and empty your pockets."

Spalding started to say something nasty. Then he fell silent and his face went expressionless, his attention suddenly caught by something behind Bob.

"Oh, here we go," Bob said.



“Not falling for that one,” Pete said at the same time.

“He’s not trying to trick you!” came a voice from behind the two.

Bob let out a small cry. Startled, both Investigators spun, momentarily forgetting Spalding.

A police officer entered quietly from the kitchen, his gun drawn. Chief Reynolds and another officer followed.

“What happened?” Chief Reynolds demanded, stepping in front of the other two officers. “Are you boys all right?”

“Chief Reynolds,” Pete said, pointedly placing Spalding’s gun on the floor safely away from the criminal. “How did you know . . . ?” He paused as the answer occurred to him. “Let me guess: Jupiter Jones.”

The chief grinned. “He’s outside in the squad car right now, along with Mr. Andrews. They’re both worried sick.”

Bob pointed at Spalding. “That man, Timothy Spalding, kidnapped me on my way home from The Jones Salvage Yard tonight. I’m fine, thanks to Pete. But he showed up not a moment too soon.”

Chief Reynolds cocked his head toward Spalding. “Arrest him, men.”

Within a minute the San Francisco native was handcuffed and on his way toward the kitchen door.

“Wait a minute,” the chief interrupted. “I want to ask him a few questions.” He walked to Spalding, looked him square in the eye, and asked, “Why did you do it?”

Spalding didn’t say a word.

“You know we’ve got you on some serious charges, don’t you?” Chief Reynolds prodded. “You might as well talk. And if you think you’re going to get off, you’re wrong. We had a neighbor of Bob’s call into police headquarters a little while ago to report a kidnaping, and he described you to a T.”

“How could he see me? It was dark and foggy out—” Realizing he had just told on himself, Spalding shut his mouth.

The chief grinned. “Streetlamps: Expanding the frontier of daylight since the 1920s. Surely you’ve heard of them.”

Spalding frowned. “You didn’t read me my rights. That confession won’t count.”

“Maybe not,” Chief Reynolds agreed. “Good thing we don’t need it.”

“I’m not saying another word,” Spalding said, and he didn’t.

Chief Reynolds sighed. “Take him to the station, men.”

There were three cruisers in the apartment building’s parking lot, their lights flashing. Spalding was led to one, forced into the backseat, and driven off. Jupiter and

Mr. Andrews got out of another and rushed to Pete, Bob, and Chief Reynolds.

“Son,” Mr. Andrews said, hugging Bob even as he reprimanded him. “If anything had happened to you . . .”

“I’m fine, Dad,” Bob pointed out, “thanks to Pete and Jupiter.”

“I’m glad my hunch proved correct,” Jupiter began. “I would hate to think—”

He was cut off by Chief Reynolds. “Just what are you boys mixed up in? I told you to contact me if you were involved in anything dangerous.”

“We didn’t really think it was that dangerous,” Jupiter answered.

Mr. Andrews nodded solemnly. “You were lucky this time. Next time you might not be. Something’s going to go very badly at some point if you keep this up.”

Jupiter puffed up his chest and elongated his face. It was a persona he often assumed when speaking to adults in situations such as this.

“Sir,” he said with an authority beyond his years. “If I may point out, we were merely investigating where some stone statues my uncle bought came from.”

“Jupe just ended a sentence in a preposition,” Bob whispered to Pete.

Jupiter continued. “We had no idea we’d incur the wrath of someone such as Mr. Spalding. I speak for all

of us when I assure you that, had we known just how dangerous he was, we would have come to you and Chief Reynolds immediately.”

“I’m not sure you’re being entirely honest, Jupiter,” Chief Reynolds replied. “I think you knew good and well what you were doing. I usually support your investigations, but you know how I feel when you get involved in something dangerous. This isn’t the first time, either.”

Jupiter was tempted to interrupt but thought better of it.

“I’ve been willing to overlook it in the past because you helped me save face more than a few times,” Reynolds went on. “But tonight Bob was kidnapped by a dangerous criminal. Spalding is suspected of murder back in San Francisco, and there’s not a doubt in my mind he would’ve murdered Bob once he got what he wanted.”

“But, sir,” Pete said, “we had it all under control—”

Chief Reynolds cut him off. “I don’t want to hear it, Pete. Your days of playing Sherlock Holmes and His Two Watsons are over. *Finito*. You got that? As of right now, I’d better *never* get wind of any of you investigating anything more serious than a missing pet.”

Jupiter sighed. “Very well, sir.” He maintained a sober expression, although inwardly he grinned, recalling the times when they *had* investigated missing pets.

A search for a parrot had led to the near-capture of a world-famous art thief. An investigation into a missing Abyssinian cat had resulted in the arrest of a thieving Egyptologist. Then there was the search for a retired film director's missing dog, which had led the boys to a bank heist in progress . . .

"There *is* one other thing, though," Jupiter said.

"Do tell," said Chief Reynolds. He spoke lightly, not wanting Jupiter to know just how seriously he was being taken.

"Timothy Spalding may have kidnapped Bob in pursuit of some worthless pearls, but he wasn't working alone."

Both Chief Reynolds' and Mr. Andrews' brows furrowed. They stared at Jupiter, afraid to validate him but simultaneously afraid not to.

The First Investigator clarified his statement. "Spalding was just the muscle. He definitely wasn't the brains."

Chapter 21

The Master of the Key

“IT WAS NICE OF CHIEF REYNOLDS not to believe us,” Bob commented dryly.

“How was that nice?” Pete asked, not catching Bob’s sarcasm. “One minute he’s all over us like we’re the best thing since sliced bread, the next he’s a grump who can’t stand to have us around.”

“He wasn’t too bad last night,” Jupiter observed. “I think he’s just worried. He’s always a little moodier when he thinks we’ve put ourselves in harm’s way.”

The Three Investigators were in Jupiter’s workshop. Bob stood, watching a seated First Investigator fiddle with an old boom box. Pete was practice-swinging a baseball bat he had found in the junkyard. They had all arrived together ten minutes earlier, getting off the afternoon school bus on the corner by Jupiter’s house.

Bob paused for a moment but decided not to get into a discussion about Chief Reynolds. Instead he said, “Robert Robertson’s going to wind up getting away with everything. Unless Spalding talks—”

“Which he won’t,” Pete interrupted. “He’s like a stupid dog. He’s going to be loyal to his owner no matter how bad he gets kicked.”

“Badly he gets kicked,” Jupiter corrected. “Now, before we go on, there’s something I have to say . . . *Need* to say, really.” He paused.

The other two waited.

Jupiter gathered the courage to speak again. “About last night . . . I don’t know what I would have done if anything had happened to either of you. Pete, you really did save the day. I know I never thank you guys for all that you do for this team . . . for me . . . but you’re both pretty remarkable. If anything had happened to either one of you and I never had a chance to say how much I appreciate you . . . How much I care about you guys . . . Well, I’d never forgive myself.”

Bob and Pete stood in stunned silence.

Bob drew in a breath and exhaled slowly. “Thanks, Juve. You’re the brains of this team, and it took both you and Pete to save me. So I should be thanking you. You guys really are my two best friends. I don’t think I could put into words how much you mean to me.”

“Same here,” Pete put in.

The boys looked at each other, uncertain what to say next, before Jupiter returned to what he was doing.

He unscrewed and removed the boom box's back. On the corner of his workbench table sat a small, wooden storage box. Its lid was locked tight.

"Well," he said, "Chief Reynolds has the one man he *can* prove guilty of a crime, and it's not like we offered any real evidence that Robert Robertson was involved."

Bob shrugged. "I would have thought we had enough circumstantial evidence to at least rate a search warrant of Robertson's office."

"Look on the bright side," Pete interjected, still swinging. "At least we know who the alien was that tried to break into the office last night."

"We do?" Bob asked.

"Please explain yourself, Second," Jupiter said. He placed the boom box face-down on the tabletop and inspected its wiring, waiting half-heartedly for Pete's reply.

Pete leaned the bat against a tall stack of old reference books and joined the other two.

"It was Spalding," he said. "I mean, it's pretty obvious, right? He's tall, and so was the alien. After he failed to steal the pearls, he decided to hang around near the yard and kidnap one of us. That way, he'd be able to force us to give them up."

"Your hypothesis sounds nice," Jupiter sort-of complimented, "but I don't think it's correct."

“Why not, Jupe?” Pete asked. “You said yourself that Skinny told Spalding we were on to him. How else can you explain both the alien and Spalding being here last night?”

“I wish I could,” Jupiter intoned mysteriously, his fingers now poking at the boom box’s inside wires with a screwdriver.

Pete placed his hands on his hips. “Well, if I’m wrong, Jupe, please tell me how.”

“Could you hand me those batteries, Records?” Jupiter asked, ignoring the Second Investigator as he pointed to a pile of scrap in the corner.

“No, I can’t,” Bob replied.

Jupiter glanced up at him, irritated. “You *won’t*, you mean.”

“That’s right,” Bob corrected himself. “You don’t get to hold out on us this time, Jupe. Pete and I could have been killed last night. I think we have a right to know what you’re thinking!”

Jupiter sighed theatrically and set down his screwdriver.

“Yes, I suppose you do,” he said. Looking intently at Pete and Bob, he explained. “Last night when Spalding was being taken to the squad car, I analyzed his movements, the way he walked, his posture. I’m certain he’s not the same man who searched the yard in an alien costume. And remember, Bob, the night we were locked in

the basement of the Ryker Estate, Mr. Ryker himself said he saw an alien. Our Ghost-to-Ghost hookup confirmed Spalding's whereabouts at that time, and he wasn't at the estate."

"Okay then, Encyclopedia Brown," Bob sniped. "Who *is* acting the part of the alien?"

"I don't know," Jupiter answered, shrugging. "Robertson is much too small, and given that he — if he *is* in charge — sent Spalding to retrieve the pearls, it's unlikely that he'd want to get his hands dirty by dressing up like an alien and paying us a visit. All of which leads, I daresay, to another rather dispiriting possibility."

"Oh no." Pete rolled his eyes. "Not a dispiriting one."

"It means depressing," Bob said.

"I know that," Pete muttered.

Jupiter spoke precisely, as if addressing a pair of young children. "I'd postulate that there's a third person skulking about, one whose identity we don't know but who's also trying to get his hands on those pearls."

"That's just great!" Suddenly ticked off, Pete slammed the palm of his hand down on Jupiter's workshop table. "We capture one criminal and another one comes crawling out of the woodwork."

Jupiter nodded and brushed off Pete's outburst. "It does seem frustrating, Second, but it is what it is.

Instead of worrying about the unknown right now, we need to focus on the known.”

“Could the third person be Ryker?” Bob asked. “He’s tall enough to fit the bill.”

“That occurred to me.” Jupiter pinched his lip. “It seems logical on the surface, but what reason would he have? He’s the one who got rid of the statues in the first place.”

“Maybe he’s trying to frame Robert Robertson,” Pete suggested.

“That’s possible, too,” Jupiter concurred, “and Robertson did think that it was Ryker who broke into his office. Still, we need evidence before we can accuse anyone of anything.”

“Let’s go get some, then,” Pete said. “We can just tell Chief Reynolds that we’re looking for a lost hamster or something.”

“First things first,” Jupiter replied, asserting his leadership status. “Before we go after Ryker, we need to trick Robertson into confessing. If there’s one thing I’m sure of, it’s that Robertson and Spalding are in cahoots to get the pearls.”

Pete gave Jupiter a cold, hard stare. “And you propose to get Robertson to confess how?”

“I’ll pay him a visit this evening,” Jupiter revealed. “And when I do, I’ll play the one trump card we have.”

“The pearls!” Pete guessed excitedly.

“No,” Jupiter answered. “This!” He picked up the mysterious box from the table, unlocked it, and set it back down. From it he withdrew a folded piece of paper, stained and yellowed with age.

“What’s that?” the Second Investigator asked, frowning.

Jupiter slid the boom box to the edge of the table, unfolded the paper, and laid it out flat for the others to see.

Bob looked confused. “A map?”

“An *ancient* map,” Pete said, trying to sound observant. “How exactly does this trump the pearls, Jupe?”

“Well,” Jupiter responded, “take a look. The map is obviously centuries old, yet look at what it shows.”

Bob ventured a guess. “The world?”

“Exactly,” Jupiter confirmed. “All seven of the continents, and with a stunning degree of accuracy despite the fact that it appears to have been drawn before Antarctica was discovered.”

“Um, and . . . ?” Bob nudged.

Jupiter looked directly at him. “Come on, guys. Think. What does Robert Robertson want to prove more than anything else in the world?”

“That aliens visited our ancestors?” Bob hazarded.

“Yes,” Jupiter said excitedly. He refolded the paper and put it back in its box.

“So what’s the plan, Juve?” Pete asked. “Just how is this going to make Robertson tip his hand?”

But “You’ll see” was all Jupiter would say.

? ? ?

A half-hour later, Jupiter exited the small truck and instructed Hans to wait, assuring the Bavarian that he would return shortly.

“No hurry.” Hans reached beneath the seat and retrieved a small, thin paperback book, its cover green and faded. From behind his right ear he produced a pencil. He held up the objects, displaying them to Jupiter through the open truck window. “A book of mystery puzzles,” he explained. “Easy puzzles for my bad English.”

Jupiter chuckled. “Good luck with those.”

He turned and walked to the brownstone, holding the small, locked box against his side. Once through the building’s front door, he strode down the hallway, past the office doors on either side. When he got to the one with the words **THE SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF EVIDENCE REGARDING ANCIENT ALIENS** in big, black, block lettering, he looked at his watch. It was nearly five p.m. now, and he hoped that Robert Robertson would still be there.

Choosing not to knock, he walked in. The secretary was gone for the day, and the door to Robertson's private office was open. From within the room came the sound of typing.

Jupiter hesitated, gathered his nerves, and entered the office slowly.

Robertson was at his desk, keying something into his computer. He finished his typing, then looked up.

"What are you . . . ?" He stood swiftly and assumed a threatening stance.

"I come in peace," Jupiter said in a lame attempt at humor.

If Robertson got the reference, it did not impress him. He glared at the First Investigator through a pair of horn-rimmed glasses.

"What do you want?" he asked. But before Jupiter could answer, the diminutive man said, "Get out of here!"

Jupiter once again drew upon his acting expertise, drawing his stomach in, pressing his chest out, and lifting his head to project authority. "I'm not leaving until I show you this," he informed Robertson, holding up the box.

Robertson shrank back a little. "What is it?" he asked warily before slowly sitting back down.

Jupiter stepped up to Robertson's desk and placed the wooden box on it. Then he took a key from his shirt

pocket and inserted it into the lock. When he turned it, the lid sprang open.

Robertson flinched at the sudden motion, as though half-expecting a bomb.

Jupiter removed the map, unfolded it, and spread it on the desk, upside-down from his own perspective but right-side-up to Robertson. “Does this interest you?”

Robertson stood up and stared down at the drawing, his mouth agape. “What is that? Where did you find it?”

“My best guess is that it’s a map,” Jupiter answered innocently. “A map of the world as it might look from space.”

“Yes,” Robertson agreed, shaking his head cautiously. “How old is it?”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Jupiter said. “You’re the expert on these things, correct?”

Robertson reached out to touch the map but Jupiter caught his hand. Apparently having an aversion to being touched, Robertson quickly pulled back.

“Sixteenth century, maybe older,” he said.

“That’s my guess,” the First Investigator agreed. “Would you like to know where I got it?”

“Of course,” Robertson answered. It seemed to the First Investigator that Robertson wanted to believe the parchment was authentic but was also wary of being tricked.

“I found it in the base of one of the statues my uncle procured from the Ryker Estate,” Jupiter announced.

Astounded and off-balance, Robertson replied, “You lie!”

Jupiter shook his head no. “Just look at it,” he insisted. “Does this map look like a fake to you?”

Robertson bent forward, studying the parchment carefully through the bottom part of his bifocals. He was already convinced, even if he didn’t admit it. “Which statue did it come from?” He spoke softly, as if afraid he might startle Jupiter—and the map—into flight.

“My uncle bought three statues with interlocking bases,” Jupiter explained. “When I fitted the bases together, a drawer appeared in the bottom of the middle statue.” He paused, then placed the cherry on the sundae. “You know, the one that looks like an ancient astronaut—”

“The Master of the Key?” Robertson shouted hysterically. “You found the map in the Master of the Key?”

Jupiter had no idea what Robertson was talking about but replied, “Um . . . Yes. Why do you call it The Master of the Key?”

“The middle figure has in his hand what appears to be a key,” Robertson told the First Investigator. “That’s how you knew, isn’t it? Ancient astronaut theorists have long suspected that the key was a symbol . . .”

“Right,” Jupiter played along. “The most important symbol of all—”

“Yes, my boy! Yes!” As Robertson grew more excited, he also grew more careless. “Of scientific knowledge, of the stars, of our past! This is precisely the evidence we need to prove our claims once and for all!”

“That’s what *I* thought,” Jupiter agreed, pretending to be caught up in Robertson’s hysteria.

“If it’s as real as it appears to be, it’s greater than the Piri Reis map!” Robertson said. “Ancient astronaut theory indicates that it most likely comes from an amazing cache of knowledge locked away in some forgotten Central American pyramid!”

Jupiter feigned ignorance. “Piri Reis?”

Robertson nodded elatedly. Jupiter stepped back a little, half-expecting the man to begin frothing at the mouth.

“Antarctica was discovered in the early 1800s, not in the middle of the last millennium,” he said animatedly. “The only way a cartographer could have drawn this map with such accuracy was with alien assistance! It is . . . it *has* to be . . .” He paused, his eyes moist with emotion. “. . . the KEY!”

“I know! I know!” Jupiter said, raising his voice and widening his eyes.

Robertson paused, sputtering, momentarily overcome.

The First Investigator repeated, in an awed whisper, “The key.”

As intended, this got Robertson off and running again. “Yes, yes! The key! This map is the reason the Master of the Key exists!”

In his mind, Jupiter imagined himself shooting fish in a barrel.

“The key!” Robertson repeated. “The . . . the . . . the statue was obviously designed to hold this map until the world was ready for the arrival of the God-race. We of the Earth-race are so stupid, so doltish, so backward! Even we should have seen it! Ryker had these statues in the basement of his house all along, and we never once thought to take them apart—or put them together! We were convinced that they were a beacon! Can you imagine the raw stupidity it took to overlook the obvious in such an oblivious manner?”

Again he paused.

“Yes, we humans are dunderheads all right,” Jupiter acknowledged, borrowing a word he had learned from Pete. “If only it *had* been the beacon, though. Right?”

This did not, as Jupiter hoped, prompt an explanation of what the beacon was supposed to be. Instead, Robertson wrung his hands. His wet, keyed-up eyes looked directly into Jupiter’s own. His body shook with exhilaration. The overall effect was quite creepy.

“*You’ve* been chosen to deliver the message,” he declared. “That’s why you’ve been sent here. Together we shall tell the world what we’ve discovered! We shall finally have the vindication that we bearers of the truth have been so long denied!”

“Well . . .” Jupiter began.

The First Investigator’s subdued tone put a crimp in Robertson’s ecstatic rambling. “Well what?”

“We have to do the right thing here,” Jupiter said innocently. “I believe this map proves aliens exist. Frankly, there’s no other explanation. Unfortunately, I also believe that I . . .”

Robertson’s eyes narrowed, shooting daggers.

“. . . um, ‘we,’ I mean . . . we’d be cheating Mr. Ryker out of something that belongs to him. After all, he probably wouldn’t have sold the statues if he’d known about the map.”

“Well, finders keepers—” Robertson began.

“No,” interrupted Jupiter. “I’m sorry. First thing tomorrow morning, I’m taking this back to Mr. Ryker. If he wants to sell it to us or something—”

“You can’t!” Mr. Robertson barked. His eyes had grown watery and red, as if he were about to burst into tears. “He hates our group. He believes we corrupted his father. He would destroy the key!”

“I’m afraid it can’t be helped,” Jupiter said, ready to grab the map and run from the room if need be. “Mr.

Ryker sold my uncle the statues in good faith. Nobody involved had any idea of what was inside them. If there's one thing my uncle is, it's an honest businessman."

"Some things go beyond honesty," Robertson asserted. "Surely you—"

Jupiter decided it was time to throw a fib into the mix. "I showed my aunt and uncle the map. They agree that it belongs to Mr. Ryker and must be returned. And we both know that the God-race won't allow it to be destroyed anyway. So . . ."

"No!" Robertson pounded the side of his fist against the top of his desk. "No, you can't return it! I'll buy it from you!"

"Even if it were mine to sell," Jupiter said, "I'm afraid I'd have to price it beyond your ability to pay."

"Try me," Robertson countered. "The Society has inherited hundreds of millions of dollars from William Randolph Ryker. Buying this map is exactly what he would have wanted us to do with it."

"All well and fine," Jupiter replied, "but my understanding is that Ryker's son is suing to prevent you from claiming that inheritance. At the very least, that money's going to be tied up in the courts for years. I don't see how you'd be able to pay me."

Robert Robertson shifted his strategy, hoping to appeal to a kindred spirit.

“Surely you can see my side,” he pleaded. “This is what I was born to do, to reveal to mankind the truth about our alien heritage. Some things are more important than money, wouldn’t you agree?” There was pleading in his eyes. “Please help me.”

By way of reply, Jupiter refolded the map, placed it within its box, and locked it tight. Robertson watched wordlessly, unable to believe what he was seeing.

Jupiter picked up the box. “I’m afraid I really have to get going. I just wanted to get your opinion on the map’s authenticity. I do appreciate the help you’ve given me, and I’ll doubtless be back in touch after conferring with the map’s rightful owner. Good day, Mr. Robertson.”

Robertson said nothing as Jupiter turned and strode from the office, his chin held high. Jupiter could feel the man’s silent pleading fade behind him as he left the building. He smiled knowingly as he returned to the waiting Hans, who set his book of mystery puzzles on the dash, put his pencil behind his ear, and started the truck.

The web had been spun more precisely and tightly than Jupiter had hoped. Now all he had to do was return to the salvage yard and wait for the fly to drop by.

Chapter 22

The Curse of the Ancient Astronaut

“WHAT MAKES YOU SO SURE he’s going to show his hand tonight?” Bob asked.

The Third Investigator sat across the desk from Jupiter Jones in their hidden trailer Headquarters. Pete Crenshaw stood between them at the desk’s side, his arms folded. The ancient map was spread out in front of them, taking up the greater part of the desk’s surface.

“Of course he will,” Jupiter answered, his voice rife with assurance. “I’ve convinced him that if he doesn’t, it will become Mr. Ryker’s property tomorrow morning. He’s not about to let that happen.”

“None of this makes any sense to me,” Pete said. “How did Robertson know the map was in one of the statues in the first place?”

“He didn’t,” Jupiter explained. “He wanted the statues because he and his fellow society members believe them to be beacons. Now he’s convinced that the map is some kind of key to understanding and that it’s intended for the world. He thinks that if it’s revealed to humankind, everyone will suddenly buy into the notion that aliens have visited our planet in the distant past.”



Bob shook his head. "I'm with Pete. This is all very confusing. Why didn't William Randolph Ryker just leave the statues to Robertson's society in the first place? And if they suspected the statues were beacons, why didn't they inspect them before?"

"Beacons are homing signals, not treasure chests," Jupiter said. "I doubt anyone thought to check the statues for secret compartments. And even if they had, they probably wouldn't have found any. There was too much dirt on the statue, which hid the seam of the compartment, and the only way to open it was to interlock the bases."

"What, they don't know how to clean things?" Pete asked. "I mean, why didn't Old Man Ryker at least take a rag to it?"

"Who knows?" Jupiter responded. "Maybe he hadn't had them all that long and just hadn't gotten around to it. The fact that the statues weren't left to the society suggests that they came into Ryker's possession after his will was written. He simply didn't get the document updated. His death *was* unexpected, after all."

"If you can call the death of a man Ryker's age unexpected," Pete said flippantly.

Jupiter suppressed a smile. "The point is, Robertson wants those statues and we have to ensure that he tries to get them. It's dark out now so it's likely that Robertson is out there somewhere watching us. When we leave

the salvage yard, we have to make sure he sees us. He needs to believe we're no longer in the yard so he can make his move."

"How are you going to catch him when he does enter the yard, First?" Bob asked.

Jupiter told the other two his plan, and minutes later they left the yard, talking loudly to draw attention to themselves. They then entered the Jones house and went up to Jupiter's bedroom.

"Leave the light off," Jupiter said as they entered. He opened the bedroom window and drew the curtain. Peeping through the crack provided an unobstructed view of the junk yard, and the opened window assured that they would hear any activity below.

For the next half hour they watched and waited.

"Do you see anything, Records?" Jupiter whispered anxiously as Bob took his turn peering out.

"No, not yet," Bob said quietly before backtracking. "Wait, I see someone outside the fence . . . moving toward Green Gate One! It's an alien!"

"What?" Jupiter pushed him aside and took over the post. "Well, I'll be . . . He's disappeared behind the fence. The stacks of junk are too high to see whether he actually entered the yard through Green Gate One."

"An alien?" Pete gulped. "Are you sure aliens *aren't* real, Jupe?"

“Oh, stop it. Of course I’m sure,” Jupiter insisted dismissively.

“But that alien is too tall to be Robertson,” Bob pointed out.

Jupiter either didn’t hear Bob or ignored him. “He’s inside the fence, guys. So it appears that whoever is in that costume *has* observed us using Green Gate One.”

“Either that or he has access to alien entrance-finding technology,” Pete murmured half-jokingly.

“Yes, Pete,” Jupiter said in a low voice. “I’m sure that’s it. They have the technology to learn the statues’ whereabouts but they aren’t afraid to risk exposure by breaking into the junkyard. They can’t just beam the statues up to their spaceship. They’re not *that* advanced.”

“How would we know the inner workings of the alien mind?” Pete retorted.

“It’s not the alien’s mental inner-workings I’m taking issue with,” Jupiter replied good-humoredly.

“Don’t you mean, ‘with which I’m taking issue?’” asked Pete.

Bob snorted. “I’m impressed by the speed with which you came up with that one, Second.”

“Oh, just . . . just . . . shut up,” Jupiter spluttered, laughing.

“This is fun, guys,” Bob said, “but hadn’t we better get down there before our alien gets the map and escapes?”

Jupiter did not reply, distracted by the fact that the glowing green alien was now visible again and moving toward the office.

“What do you see?” Bob asked.

Jupiter stepped back from the curtains, forced them completely shut, and turned.

“Come on, guys,” he said. “We have to hurry.”

“Huh?” Pete’s mouth dropped open. “We aren’t actually going out there, are we?”

By way of reply, Jupiter headed toward the bedroom door, gesturing for the other two to follow. The First Investigator led the way down the stairs and quietly out the house’s back door. With his hands, he directed Pete to use Green Gate One to access the yard, indicating that he and Bob would access it through Red Gate Rover.

Once inside the yard, Jupiter and Bob moved stealthily toward the office, dodging junk piles even as they used them for concealment. They quickly reached their goal—a long, rusted Cadillac about twenty feet from the office—and crouched behind it. From there they watched the alien, its gait clumsy as it made its way to the building.

“I left the front door unlocked,” Jupiter said quietly.

“Good thinking,” Bob replied.

The alien wiggled the knob, opened the door, and disappeared inside. From within came the sound of heavy objects being clumsily moved. A few minutes later the alien exited the office, the statue of the ancient astronaut in its arms. The creature progressed slowly, struggling with the heaviness of the thing it carried.

Jupiter stepped from behind the car.

“I believe what you’re holding there belongs to my uncle,” he said.

The alien halted. Still gripping the statue, it turned its entire upper body toward Jupiter. Its large, black eyes stared at the boy without a hint of emotion. Then, oddly, it raised its head and tipped its face back, as if getting a clearer view of the First Investigator.

“That mask seems pretty difficult to see out of,” Jupiter commented.

The alien emitted a rather lame attempt at an unearthly sound.

“Nice try,” said Jupiter. “Now if you don’t mind, Mr. Robertson, please place the stolen merchandise on the ground and step away.”

The alien complied with the first request but not the second. After placing the object on the ground, it whipped out a gun.

A muffled voice came from behind the large rubber mask. “How did you know it was me?”

Jupiter remained steady, his voice calm. “You certainly do look a lot taller than you normally are, but you made one mistake. You can move pretty fast in that get-up, but not very smoothly. And there’s the reason.” The First Investigator pointed toward the alien’s shoes. The bottom of each was about three inches tall.

Jupiter went on. “Combine platform shoes with an alien mask that has a large, bulbous head, and you appear about six inches taller than you actually are. I’m sure it helped that when Mr. Ryker saw you in the Ryker mansion, you were framed in a doorway built over one hundred and fifty years ago for people much smaller than we are today.”

“Clever boy,” Robertson laughed, “but it isn’t going to help you any. What’s to stop me from shooting you where you stand?”

“I don’t believe you’re a killer,” Jupiter said. “In fact, I think you’re very much the opposite. In your own weird way, you really care about mankind, which is why you turned to ancient astronaut theory to explain our shortcomings—and hoped to help us out of them.”

“Don’t be so sure of what I would or wouldn’t do,” Robertson threatened, raising the gun a little higher. “You’ve cornered me, and you want to stop me from helping my fellow man. Certainly one rather . . .” —he searched for a relatively polite term— “. . . portly boy’s life is a fair exchange.”

Jupiter ignored the insult. "I take it you met Timothy Spalding in San Francisco. You planned on using him as muscle to frighten Mr. Ryker into dropping his suit. When you learned about the auction at Ryker's estate, you knew you couldn't get away from your conference, so you sent Spalding to bid on the statues in your stead. What you didn't expect was for Spalding to suspect they were valuable and attempt to double-cross you."

The alien eyes of the rubber mask glared at Jupiter.

The First Investigator went on. "You told Spalding to get those statues at all costs. He somehow learned what they were, and he went to the library to conduct additional research, such as it was. On the day of the auction, something happened and he got there late, blowing his chance to bid. That's why he tried to run my uncle off the road. To get those statues for you."

"You aren't nearly as smart as you think you are," Robertson's muffled voice said.

"Yes, I am," Jupiter replied confidently.

The alien tittered. "No, not really. I didn't come for the statues myself because I didn't learn about the auction until it was too late. I did go to the Ryker Estate the next morning to try to find out who'd bought them, but I had no idea where they were until you clued me in."

Jupiter hesitated for a moment. His mind raced, trying to determine whether Robertson was lying.

“Got you stumped, do I?” Robertson taunted, sensing Jupiter’s confusion.

Jupiter shook his head. “I know Spalding visited you at your office in Los Angeles. At some point his car scraped the side of the building while exiting the parking lot. It damaged not only the car but the building as well.”

“Not even close.” Robertson laughed. “You need to get out of the detective business, you insufferable oaf.” He waved the gun, gesturing for Jupiter to move aside. “Now let me pass or I’ll shoot.”

Despite his nervousness, Jupiter stood his ground.

“If you didn’t send Spalding after the statues, who did?” he asked.

“How am I supposed to know?” Robertson demanded angrily. “Maybe the government sent him. I don’t know, and right now I don’t care. I’m leaving this place, and this statue is going with me.”

“You’re lying about Spalding,” Jupiter said. “The two of you have been working together from day one. Last night you came here intending to steal the statues. Spalding was waiting for you outside the gate. When you didn’t succeed, you sent him to kidnap one of us, hoping to force us to hand the statues over. Only Spalding had erroneously come to believe that the pearl eyes were worth a fortune and went for those instead.”

“You’re way off base, kid,” Robertson insisted. “Why would I care if you know the truth now? I’m the one with the gun, not you. All along it’s been this statue and this statue alone that I’ve wanted, and now I have it. If one of you was kidnapped last night after I left the yard and I was the one who directed this Spalding guy to do it, wouldn’t I have been in the car with him?”

Jupiter pondered what he was hearing, decided the exchange had gotten pointless, and took a different tack.

“Did you even check that statue for the map?” he asked. “You don’t believe I’d be stupid enough to put it back in there, do you? And surely you suspected that I was setting you up for a trap, right? I even left the door to the office unlocked for you.”

“A trap?” Robertson said, sounding suddenly nervous. “If you’ve set a trap, why isn’t there anyone else here with you? Looks like you didn’t think it all the way through, did you, brainy-boy. Unless you think you can take on a grown man with a gun.”

“There is someone here with me,” Jupiter informed him. He turned to where Bob was silently hiding. “Records, why don’t you come out of the shadows? There’s no need to hide now.”

Bob stepped out from behind a mound of junk and joined the conversation.

“I’m not the only one,” he said. “Hand over the gun. We’ll testify in court that you never intended to hurt anyone. You just wanted the map. Fair enough?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Robertson replied in a stifled shout. “I’m not going to let a couple of kids stop me from fulfilling my destiny. If I’m going to kill one of you, I might as well kill you both.”

“Do you really want to add murder to the list of charges you’re going to face tomorrow?” Jupiter asked. “The police are here, and you’re not going anywhere.”

Robertson looked quickly around, then chuckled. “The invisible police, you mean? Give me a break. If the cops were here, I think I’d see them.”

“Are you sure?” Jupiter asked coolly. “Maybe I can see more than you can. I’m not the one wearing the cheesy mask with poor eye-holes that limit my vision.”

Robertson’s voice was shaky. “The police are the government’s goon squad. They’d love a chance to kill me, and they’d have done it by now if they were here.”

“Yeah, well . . .” Jupiter began, then admitted, “Oh, all right, I lied. The police aren’t here. But there is a third one of us, in case you’ve forgotten, and he’s standing behind you right now with a baseball bat aimed at the back of your legs.”

Robertson laughed out loud. “Oh, please. Do you think I’m going to fall for that old trick? That’s just sad!”

Jupiter smiled. "You're falling for the old trick right now, pal."

Right on cue and before Robertson could comprehend what was happening, a blow to the back of his knees took him down. He crumpled to the ground, dropping his gun. His wits regrouped quickly, however. Quickly enough to register that Pete now stood over him, the wooden baseball bat poised to strike again, most likely in the vicinity of the mask-covered head. His arm reached out toward the gun.

"If I were you, I wouldn't do whatever you're thinking about doing," the Second Investigator advised, his voice humorless. "Baseball bats can be deadly, even through a layer of rubber."

Robertson froze, abandoning his attempt to grab the gun.

"Sit up," Pete instructed. "And do it very, very slowly. I'm a tee-ball champ from way back."

As Robertson complied, Jupiter and Bob ran to him. Like clockwork, the First Investigator pulled the mask off the intruder's head as Records nabbed the weapon. Robertson glared at The Three Investigators, his dilated pupils still looking too alien for anyone's comfort. His brow furrowed and his chin quavered with rage.

"I'll do the honors," Bob announced. "It'll give me a chance to break in my new cell phone."

"You really go through those things," Pete chuckled.

“Tell me about it. The cops said it might be a month before I get my other one back.” Bob took the phone out of his pants pocket, entered 911, and launched into an explanation of the situation, backing away from the others as he did so.

“Let me go,” Robertson pleaded to Pete and Jupiter. “You don’t have any idea what you’re doing. This is the excuse they’ve been looking for. They’ll kill me.”

“I doubt that,” Jupiter said firmly.

Bob flipped his cell phone shut. “They’re on their way.”

Robertson fell silent for a moment, pondering something. Then, suddenly and without warning, he laughed. “You kids are *way* out of your depth.”

“Said the man who’s about to be arrested,” countered Pete.

“Meh,” Robertson said dismissively. “If they don’t kill me—which I guess they likely won’t since it would be too hard to keep secret—they won’t have enough to hold me on. I’ll be free by tomorrow morning. One call to my lawyer and you’ll regret you ever met me.”

“Why is that?” Jupiter asked.

“Because I’ll sue your pants off, and I’ll win.”

“Not even,” Jupiter said. “The first thing we’ll do is show the police the footage from the hidden camera in the office. The one that shows an alien stealing the very statue you’re lying next to.”

“That one, yeah,” interjected Pete.

“Yes! He ends another sentence in a preposition,” Bob said.

Jupiter continued. “And when the alien—”

“That’s you,” clarified Bob.

“—left the office, the camera stationed above the door recorded its altercation with The Three Investigators.”

“You can’t argue with video,” Pete chimed in.

The First Investigator returned his attention to Robertson. “Everything that’s happened here in the last fifteen minutes is on record, and I have no doubt your fingerprints are all over this cheap, glow-in-the-dark mask I ripped off your head. The police will also doubtless find the platform shoes you’re wearing of interest, as well as the fact that you probably have The Three Investigators’ business card tucked securely on your person somewhere. It took me a while to realize that it was only after I gave it to you that the alien appeared here. After all, it has the address of The Jones Salvage Yard on the bottom of it. I’d also speculate that the gun Bob is holding is registered either to you or to a member of your society.”

Jupiter fell silent.

A thought occurred to Robertson, and his demeanor transformed from dejection to joy. “It doesn’t matter what you do to me,” he said, a weird passion in his eyes.

“The time is right. The Master Race wanted that map found, and it was. They’re not going to let puny beings like us, even a big, fat puny being like you . . .”

Jupiter sighed as if bored.

“. . . stand in their way. What’s federal justice compared to the laws of the universe?” He laughed, hollow and crazy. Off in the distance, sirens sounded, coming ever closer.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Jupiter replied. “The federal government couldn’t care less about you. You committed your crime in Rocky Beach, California, and it’s the Rocky Beach judicial system that will see to it you’re put out of commission. Which reminds me . . .”

He paused and walked to the yard’s closed gate, fishing a key ring from his pocket. After unlocking and pushing open the entrance, he turned and gloated, “Let’s make it easy for them to get inside, shall we?”

As if in a movie, several squad cars pulled up, sirens blaring and lights flashing. Chief Reynolds emerged from one of them as several officers, their guns drawn, disembarked from the others. Seconds later Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus, as well as the two Bavarian brothers, appeared.

“Goodness!” Aunt Mathilda exclaimed loudly. She stared at her stocky nephew, trying hard to get angry but managing only concern. “Jupiter Jones, what have you gone and done now?”

“We’ve just captured a thief, Aunt Mathilda,” he informed her, a sparkle in his eyes.

? ? ?

The police arrested Robert Robertson and took The Three Investigators to police headquarters to fill out the necessary paperwork. Mr. and Mrs. Crenshaw and Mr. and Mrs. Andrews arrived shortly afterward, and once the questioning was over, everyone was permitted to leave.

For Jupiter, the ride home was a quiet one. Titus and Mathilda Jones had long since learned not to be too harsh with their nephew when it came to his investigations. Despite—or more accurately, because of—their love and concern for Jupiter, they trusted him. The police, as was usually the case in situations like this, seemed pleased with what he had accomplished. So for the time being, Jupiter sat silently in the backseat of the car, lost in his own thoughts. In the darkness his aunt and uncle couldn’t see him pinching his lower lip as he reflected on what Robert Robertson had told him. His theory that Robertson and Spalding had been working together was apparently wrong, but whatever the correct solution to the mystery was, it eluded him.

Once home, his aunt insisted that he go straight to bed. Jupiter protested politely, informing her that he

needed to retrieve a few things from his workshop before he turned in for the night. With a sigh, she acquiesced.

Jupiter's mind was racing, so sleep wouldn't really have been an option anyway. Therefore, the First Investigator made his way into Headquarters, unable to shake a sinking feeling that something remained seriously wrong. His instincts told him that Robertson wasn't really smart enough to lie convincingly, which meant that Jupiter had indeed misread the situation. He was now certain that he had underestimated a dangerous enemy, the question being exactly who that enemy was.

Thankfully, the map was lying on the desktop where he had left it. With a sigh of relief, he folded it up and put it away. Tomorrow his uncle would have to decide what to do with it—whether to return it to Ryker, sell it for a tidy sum, or donate it to the experts at UCLA for study. Jupiter planned to encourage the latter.

Deciding to seek out just a little additional bit of reassurance, Jupiter went to check on one more thing before calling it a night. Unlocking a drawer in the desk, he removed a box and opened it.

He was simultaneously surprised and unsurprised by what he found.

The pearls were gone.

Chapter 23

The Mysterious Benefactor

“I’M AFRAID I HAVE SOME BAD NEWS,” Stephen Terrill said grimly. “Chief Reynolds told me this morning that the judge set Spalding’s bond at \$250,000 believing he’d never be able to post bail. But someone bailed him out, and he’s now disappeared.”

It had been nearly a week since Robert Robertson had been arrested in The Jones Salvage Yard. Horror star Stephen Terrill had called a meeting with The Three Investigators and William Ryker, and they now sat around a small table in Terrill’s World Studios office in Hollywood.

“I’m not surprised,” Jupiter muttered, his hands folded over the old magazine lying on the table in front of him.

Bob asked, “Who did it?”

“I wish I could tell you,” Stephen Terrill said regretfully. “He was a middle-aged man in a dark blue business suit. He said he was an attorney, and Chief Reynolds got the idea that he’d been hired by an anonymous benefactor to clear Spalding’s name. Spalding was supposed to appear in court yesterday but never showed.

And when the police department did a background check on the name the alleged lawyer gave, they came up empty handed.”

“So Spalding is out there somewhere,” Pete ruminated. He had an uneasy look on his face.

“If I may, Mr. Terrill,” Jupiter interjected. “I’ve been processing this whole thing, and I believe I now know what really happened.”

“Do tell,” the actor invited. “God knows no one else has had any luck connecting Spalding to Robertson, from what the chief told me.”

“When I found out that Spalding and Robertson had been in San Francisco at the same time not long before the attack on Uncle Titus,” Jupiter began, “I assumed Robertson had sent Spalding after the statues. I was wrong.”

“Ouch,” cracked Pete. “*That* had to hurt.”

Jupiter ignored his friend’s quip and continued. “In point of fact, the two men were not connected to each other at all, at least not in the way I had assumed. That they were both in San Francisco at the same time was purely coincidental. I’m now certain that Spalding was sent after the statues by the same mysterious benefactor who bailed him out of jail. Someone who wanted the pearls.”

“But why, Jupe?” Bob asked. “The pearls are worthless.”

“They have no significant monetary value, it’s true,” Jupiter confirmed. “But that doesn’t make them worthless. They were valuable enough to someone for Spalding to be sent after them. Here’s what I suspect: Spalding had gotten into some severe trouble and owed someone in San Francisco a great deal of money. As we know, he’s a suspect in a murder case, which may have something to do with why he’s acted so desperate lately. Anyway, the person he owed the money to offered to waive his debts if he obtained the statues.”

“That’s a lot of guesswork,” Mr. Terrill noted. “What makes you think he was trying to work out a debt?”

Jupiter exhaled. “What tipped me off was the fact that he found an apartment in Rocky Beach rather than in Malibu Beach. Crime bosses are notoriously wealthy. If Spalding was working for one of his own accord, his crime boss likely would have paid for an apartment in Malibu Beach close to the Ryker Estate. On the other hand, if Spalding was forced to act on his own but had little money, he would have found a much cheaper apartment in a neighboring community.”

“Sounds logical to me,” Pete offered in support.

“In addition,” Jupiter continued, “we know that Spalding didn’t own transportation. In fact, he was forced to steal a car in order to get to the Los Angeles area in the first place. I doubt this would have happened

had he been sponsored, as it were, because the theft of the car might have endangered his mission.”

“You make a strong case, Jupiter,” Mr. Terrill complimented. “I can also now confirm that Spalding traded the Neon’s plates with those of another car, according to Chief Reynolds. That way, if an officer ever ran the plates on the Neon while Spalding was driving it, they’d come up as legit.”

“That makes sense,” Jupiter agreed. “It would be unlikely that the owner of the other car would have memorized his plates. Therefore the owner would have been unaware of the change. And because there wasn’t an all-points-bulletin out on that car, its plates would never be run and the switch never caught, thus ensuring that the stolen Neon would, at least for the time being, go unnoticed.”

Stephen Terrill nodded. “I’ve heard of this kind of thing happening before.”

Jupiter took the acknowledgment as his due and continued. “So this mysterious benefactor sent Spalding to Malibu Beach to purchase the statues at auction. Only, Spalding must have learned something about them from his benefactor, at least enough to know that they were of Olmec origin, and his curiosity got the better of him.”

“Let me guess,” Bob interjected. “Understanding they must have had some kind of value, he went to the

library, got a card, and checked out the one book we had on the subject.”

“Yes,” Jupiter said. “I believe it was around this time that Spalding also became aware that the eyes were pearls. Once he figured out the pearls were of great value to the person who held Spalding’s life in his hands, Spalding got the bright idea that he could hold them for ransom. I’m sure he believed he could extort money from his benefactor, go into hiding, and live comfortably for the rest of his life.”

“That doesn’t explain why Spalding didn’t just buy the statues,” Bob pointed out.

“No, it doesn’t,” Jupiter agreed.

“It also sounds like a lot of supposition, Jupiter,” Mr. Terrill put in.

“Once I’m done, you may not think so, sir,” Jupiter said. “Anyway, I suspect that when the time came for Spalding to purchase the statues, something came up and he didn’t make it to the auction in time. For all we know, he could have been out drinking the night before and had a hangover. What does seem apparent, however, is that Spalding got to the auction before my uncle had left with his haul.” He paused, waiting to be asked to explain further.

“Go on,” Mr. Terrill requested.

The First Investigator did. “Understandably worried that he might lose what he perceived to be his meal

ticket, Spalding followed Uncle Titus and tried to run him off the road in order to get the statues. Thankfully for everyone but Spalding, a police cruiser came along and prevented him from completing his task.”

“I’m curious how he knew to attack us later that same night,” Bob said.

“I have an answer for that,” Jupiter returned. “Having been scared off by the police cruiser, Spalding must have decided to lie low until dark, then come back with a flashlight to see if he could find anything. Instead, what he found was us. In his paranoia, he must have rightfully assumed that we were on to something and decided to follow and then attack us.”

“But, Juve,” Pete interrupted, “if I can go back a little bit . . . If what you say is true and there’s no connection between Spalding and Robertson, how do you explain the damage to Robertson’s office? Or the paint chips in the brickwork?”

“It’s simple,” Jupiter said. “Remember, Robertson told me that Mr. Ryker had broken into his office and stolen his father’s file.”

Affronted, Mr. Ryker drew a deep breath and exhaled. “I did no such thing. Why would I need to steal a file about my father from Robert Robertson?”

“I don’t believe you would,” Jupiter said. “It was Spalding who stole the file. My guess is that his mysterious benefactor suspected Robertson was after the

statues. Either Robertson told him, or he heard about it when Robertson was lecturing in San Francisco. Robertson may even have passed out pictures of the statues and informed people that they were in the collection of William Randolph Ryker. Spalding's benefactor noticed the eyes of the statues and thought they might be the very pearls he was so desperate to procure. So he sent Spalding to break into Robertson's office and steal the file on your father, hoping to get more information."

"That sounds plausible to me," Mr. Ryker said.

Jupiter explained further. "What he discovered was that your father was dead. Then, when he learned that the statues were to be auctioned off, he sent Spalding after them. It was just before the office break-in that Spalding stole the blue Dodge Neon and came here. I looked at San Francisco's newspaper online and found that there was an article announcing the estate auction two weeks before it occurred, just as there was in the Los Angeles and San Diego papers."

"Hm. You certainly are tying all the knots together, Jupiter," Mr. Terrill said.

"But Spalding messed things up," Jupiter continued. "In his haste to depart the scene of his crime, he scraped the office building where he'd stolen the Ryker file, leaving paint flakes behind. The car also lifted some of the building's sandstone at the same time. When he later

tried to run Uncle Titus off the road, some of that sandstone transferred to my uncle's truck."

"But what about Robertson?" Mr. Terrill asked. "What's his story?"

Jupiter sighed. "As we know, Robertson is desperate for evidence that aliens exist. He originally wanted the statues because he believed them to be beacons calling to an alien race. Having already been at the reading of the will, he knew the statues hadn't been left to him or his group, though a great deal of money had. He didn't expect the statues to be auctioned off as quickly as they were, so he scheduled his trip to San Francisco in relative certainty that nothing would be done with them in the meantime."

"Man, I'm glad you're the brains of this team and not me," Pete said. Everyone laughed.

Jupiter went on. "My guess is that a member of the group phoned Robertson sometime on Saturday to let him know what was up, and he cut his trip short and came back early the next day. He believed that somewhere in Ryker's mansion there must have been information as to who had bought them, so he decided to ransack the place. Unfortunately, Ryker's son—" Jupiter tilted his head toward Mr. Ryker— "was there, and we showed up not long after. When Robertson saw his chance to lock us in the basement, he took it, and then he searched the house. What he wanted wasn't

there, though. It wasn't until I showed up under the pretense of interviewing him for a school project that I gave the game away."

"But why on earth did he wear that silly outfit?" Mr. Ryker asked.

"There were two reasons," Jupiter answered. "First off, he hoped that you, Mr. Ryker, would be a chip off the old block and believe you'd seen an alien, thus scaring you into joining the society and dropping your lawsuit. And secondly, to disguise himself in case he was seen. Not only did the mask cover his face, but coupled with the platform shoes, he appeared much taller. This fact would have thrown most people off, but anyone with a brain would notice that the platform shoes gave Robertson an awkward gait."

"Amazing," Mr. Terrill laughed. "He really thought he could get away with it."

"Yes," Jupiter smiled. "But when he found out about the map, it became his new *raison d'être*, as I suspected it would."

"There's one question I have," Bob said. "Why did William Randolph Ryker have the false wall put in, and why did he leave a secret hallway behind it?"

"I think I can answer that," Mr. Ryker interjected. "My father was the paranoid type. The wall covered all the windows, and it also provided the backbone for several extra rooms. By covering the windows, he created

an atmosphere of secrecy for Robertson's society to meet in, yet the hallway allowed for a quick getaway route if the society was ever discovered."

"Wow," Bob said, admiration in his voice. "To call your father paranoid would be an understatement."

"I have a question," Pete interjected. "When Robertson disappeared after he attacked me in the house, how was he able to reach the button to open the secret panel? He's a pretty short guy, and we found it on the light overhead."

"Maybe he was good at jumping," Bob said.

"The simplest explanation is probably the correct one," Jupiter said before putting the conversation back on track. "Anyway, Robertson found the map too tempting, and the rest is history."

"You're still holding out on us about something, Juve," Pete insisted. "I can tell. What is it?"

"Is Pete right, Jupiter?" Mr. Terrill asked.

Jupiter hesitated. "Yes, sir."

"Out with it," the actor demanded.

"I believe I know who the mysterious benefactor is," the First Investigator announced.

Mr. Terrill's eyes widened. "And . . . ?"

"It was Bob who really solved the mystery," Jupiter revealed. "Only, at the time I was too blind to see it."

"I did?" Bob asked incredulously.

“Yes, Records,” Jupiter replied. “After you visited Professor Yarborough at UCLA, you pieced it all together.”

“So Mr. Wan *is* responsible?” Pete cried.

Jupiter nodded. “I’m afraid so. The pearls looked so much like the ones from the Bay of India that he believed they might have the same properties of prolonging life.”

“You’re pulling my leg,” Mr. Ryker said.

“No,” Jupiter replied, “at least not about Mr. Wan believing that pearls from a species of mollusk can prolong life. I seriously doubt they actually do. Otherwise, a lot more people would be looking for them.”

“Mr. Wan?” Mr. Terrill said. “The name is familiar!”

“He was behind one of our earlier cases, *The Mystery of the Green Ghost*,” Jupiter said. “He was the one responsible for Pete, Bob, and Chang being kidnapped.”

Mr. Terrill snapped his fingers. “Now I remember from reading Bob’s notes. Old Hitch introduced that case. Wan was from San Francisco, and he wanted a pearl necklace that had been given as a gift by old Mathias Green to his Chinese bride. Your notes on that case say he believed each pearl in the necklace could extend his life by a certain amount of time.”

Jupiter shook his head. “Unfortunately, we have no way of proving that Mr. Wan’s behind all this, and in the end, he succeeded in getting the pearls. They were

stolen from Headquarters the night Robert Robertson was arrested.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Pete asked, astonished.

“There didn’t seem to be any point,” Jupiter maintained. “We can’t *prove* he did it. And I seriously doubt we could retrieve them now anyway. They’ve probably been ground to dust by now.”

“So this case ends the same way as the *Green Ghost* case,” Mr. Terrill observed.

“Yes,” Jupiter concurred. “At least for now. Anyway, there’s one more thing, Mr. Ryker.” He pushed the magazine at his fingertips toward the older man. “Your father was not of sound mind, and I can prove it.”

“What’s this?” Mr. Ryker asked.

“It’s an issue of *The Mysterious Traveler*,” Jupiter answered. “It was in the box my uncle purchased from your father’s estate. Turn to page 64 and you’ll see why I’m giving it back to you.”

“What is it, Jupe?” Pete asked. From where he sat, he couldn’t see what was on the page.

Jupiter answered, “It’s a story about a farmer who witnesses an interstellar spacecraft in the woods behind his house. The aliens in it mentally communicate with the farmer and tell him they’re from an ancient race that tampered with human evolution ages before. Now they’ve come back to check up on their experiment.” Jupiter crossed his arms. “The story bears a remarkable

resemblance to William Randolph Ryker's own sighting sixty-some years later."

Mr. Ryker looked up from the magazine. "What are you saying, Jupiter?"

"I'm saying that your father read this story when he was a kid and eventually forgot about it. Later in life, he witnessed some strange lights in the skies over Malibu Beach. Shortly thereafter, he experienced a night terror inspired by them. By that time senility had set in, and he couldn't differentiate between his dream and reality. He really believed he had experienced the story rather than read it in his childhood."

Mr. Ryker was stunned. "You . . . you've given me the evidence I need . . . to prove . . ."

"Yes," Jupiter said. "To prove your father was not of sound mind when he wrote his last will. Once a judge sees this short story and what your father later wrote in his journal, I imagine he'll issue an order nullifying that will."

Mr. Ryker's eyes filled with water. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Well, I'll be old enough to drive next year," Pete said, half-jokingly.

"We could never have too many computers," Bob chimed in.

"And we'll all be going to college in a couple of years," Jupiter announced with a grin.

“Now, boys, you know it would be illegal to take a payment from Mr. Ryker,” Mr. Terrill laughed. “None of you are licensed to practice private investigation because of your ages.”

“Thanks for raining on our parade,” Pete grumbled.

“I don’t think the chief would have much problem if I contributed to your college funds as a gift,” Mr. Ryker offered. “It’s the least I could do.”

Jupiter smiled politely. “We’re just happy that our search for the truth benefitted you.”

“Really, sir, the best way to thank us is to tell everyone you know about us,” Bob added, and the other two agreed.

“I have one last question, Juve,” Pete asked. “What did your uncle decide to do with the map?”

“He donated it to UCLA,” Jupiter answered.

The Third Investigator laughed. “I’m sure you didn’t have anything to do with that.”

“Is it really a map of the entire globe?” Pete asked. “I mean, before the whole earth was explored and mapped?”

Jupiter uncrossed his arms and leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. “Professor Yarborough doesn’t know. He’s invited several anthropologists and geologists from other universities to come and study it for themselves. Even if it is an ancient map of the Earth, he insists that there’s no evidence its cartographer was guided by ancient aliens. Furthermore, from the paper

stock, it's obvious that the map does not date back to Olmec times. It had to have been placed in the statue at a much later date, possibly by Spanish conquistadors, who might have discovered and then lost them again. Who knows what happened between that time and the point at which they came into the possession of William Randolph Ryker."

"But none of this disproves that the map could have been drawn by aliens," Pete noted.

Jupiter sighed heavily. "No, Pete, it doesn't. Who knows? Maybe your grandmother was an alien. I don't really believe that, but it would explain some things."

Everyone laughed, including Pete.

? ? ?

As the boys left World Studios, Bob was the first to speak. "So Mr. Wan is going to get away with it again."

"Not much we can do about it, Records," Pete responded.

"Maybe, maybe not," Jupiter said. "I can't help thinking that this isn't the last we'll hear from him."

"Why not?" Pete asked.

"Call it a hunch," replied the First Investigator. "Only, the next time we meet, we'll be ready for him."

"I sure hope so, Jupe," Bob said quietly. "I sure hope so."

A Note From the Author

AT THE AGE OF EIGHT IN 1979, I checked out my first Three Investigators book, *The Mystery of the Magic Circle*, from Mrs. Daugherty's third-grade classroom in Blue River Valley Elementary School. Excitedly, I took the book home to find my dad just as interested in reading it as I was. From that point on, he read every T3I book I brought home as eagerly as I did. In August 2011, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given a couple of months to live. In December, while on break from college, I decided to write my own T3I book just for him. Unfortunately, by the time I finished it a few months later, he was beyond the point that he could read, and he died in March 2012 unaware that it even existed. I wish you could have read it, Dad; I love you.

All books are a labor of love that involves a number of people. In the case of *The Secret of the Ancient Astronauts*, I have to give a special shout out to Mark Fara, who edited the endeavor out of the charity of his good heart; and to Sandy Brogdon, who was kind enough to copy edit it. Without their assistance, the book would read much more roughly

than it does. I also have to thank Ian Regan, who did such a superb job of designing the cover and interiors; Ian also combined two original pieces of art to create the cover. Finally, there's Seth T. Smolinske, without whom this book never would have seen the light of day. Thanks to Seth's kindness—and his heartfelt desire to keep *The Three Investigators* alive—you are reading this book now. I cannot thank these four people enough for their invaluable input.

CHRISTOPHER WORKMAN