

A phone that rings at one in the morning is rarely bringing good news, Jupiter Jones reflected as he blinked the sleep from his eyes and reached for his cell phone. A quick glance at the screen told him who was calling, and he took a deep breath before answering.

"What happened, Bob?" he asked.

"I'm sorry to call in the middle of the night, but I've got bad news—"

"Obviously." He didn't need to use his famed powers of deductive reasoning to figure that one out. It was simply common sense. "You're a reporter, Bob. Give me the facts."

He heard his old friend draw a shaky breath before telling him the answers to the basic journalistic *who, what, where, when, why*. It was a routine traffic stop gone wrong for a young police officer and his mentor just a few hours earlier. Shots were fired and acts of heroism had been in vain, and in the end one friend went to the hospital while another went to the morgue.

It seemed impossible that something like this could happen in the sleepy little town of Rocky Beach, California, where they had all grown up together. And even more impossible to believe that someone who had been a part of their lives for so long was just . . . gone.

Jupe closed his eyes and swallowed noisily. "I'll be on the first available flight out there," he promised. "Is—how bad is—"

"Still in surgery," Bob reported. "I'm here at the hospital, waiting for any word. I'll call you again as soon as I hear anything at all."

"Thank you."

"I'm glad you're coming home," Bob said, after an awkward silence. "We need you here. I mean, it was always the three of us, you know? It just seems like we should all be together again right now."

It took longer than expected to make arrangements for the flight from Boston to California, and there were so many delays and layovers that Jupiter was ready to explode with impatience by the time he arrived at LAX. It felt strange to be out of his lab coat and away from his job at the crime lab for so long, but it felt surprisingly normal to see Bob Andrews waiting for him at the airport.

It had only been a few years since they'd last seen each other, but Bob had changed a bit during that time. His blond hair was starting to thin, although he was making a valiant effort to disguise that fact with a rather artistic-looking comber. He was still slim and trim, but Jupe detected a bit of a paunch hidden behind the loose suit jacket the other man wore.

Still, he'd changed a bit himself, Jupe reflected as he waved and began pushing his way through the crowd. He was still stocky, of course, and he still had a full head of thick, dark hair. But he'd finally given up on his penchant for loud, oversized Hawaiian shirts in favor of simpler, more professional clothing that fit better. Worn with loud Hawaiian-print ties, naturally.

Bob clasped his hand in silence before pulling him in for an awkward one-armed hug. "It's good to see you," he said, his voice husky.

"You, too. Any word?"

Bob took his bag and started moving toward the exit. "No change," he said. "He's out of recovery now and in his own room, but mad as a hornet because the hospital won't release him to go to the funeral."

Jupe almost stumbled at the mention of the funeral. Of course, that was the *real* reason they were all back together. It was easy to focus on the injured friend and pretend that another friend wasn't gone forever. They moved on in silence until they reached the parking ramp.

Bob glanced in his direction. "We'll have to go directly to the funeral home," he said. "There's no time to go to the hospital first, or even stop anywhere to freshen up. I'm sorry."

"We can visit him after the service," Jupe told him. They had stopped beside an old blue Volvo station wagon that had definitely seen better days. "I can't believe you're still driving this thing, Bob."

"What's wrong with it?" Bob demanded. "It's a good, safe car that gets me where I need to go. Besides, it's so old and beat-up that my wife wouldn't be caught dead driving it. Susan never wants to drive my car, and that means I never have to worry about the kids leaving toys or Cheerios in between the seats."

"No, it looks like you make a big enough mess of it on your own," Jupe observed, shoving wrappers and empty water bottles off the passenger seat before gingerly sliding into the vehicle. "Jesus, Bob, do you *live* in this car?"

Bob laughed. "Sometimes feels that way. My job keeps me pretty busy."

Jupe waited until they were out of the parking ramp on onto the road before speaking again. "Have they caught the shooters?"

"Yes. They turned themselves in the next day."

"Do police know the motive?"

Bob sighed. "Don't be a detective right now, okay? Just be a friend. The three of us were friends before we were the Three Investigators, remember?"

"I remember," Jupe said quietly. Of course he remembered; how could he forget? Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw, and Bob Andrews, better known in their youth as The Three Investigators. He'd been their leader, persuading a famous Hollywood director to sponsor them and pushing them to tackle increasingly complex cases. He'd even convinced the local chief of police to provide a reference for them as well.

He caught his breath at the thought of Chief Reynolds, their mentor. "How is Mrs. Reynolds doing?"

"As well as can be expected." Bob shrugged. "The Chief's retirement party was already planned for next week. Did you know that?"

Certainly, he knew that. He'd put in his vacation request and purchased a plane ticket just for the event.

"He wasn't supposed to be on patrol that night, but Pete's regular partner called in sick for his shift. Nobody expected anything to go wrong." Bob cleared his throat. "From what I understand, they pulled over a car that had an expired plate. As the chief approached the driver's side, a passenger jumped out and drew a weapon. Pete jumped out and tackled him, and all hell broke loose. I—I had my police

scanner on in the car, Jupe. I was listening, hoping something would happen because it had been a slow news day."

"Bob—"

"It sounded like popcorn. *Pop! Pop!* I heard Pete shouting 'Shots fired! Shots fired!' and then the Chief started yelling 'Officer down!' and— I just *knew*."

"Bob." Jupe touched his friend's arm. Bob drew a ragged breath and stopped talking, staring straight ahead at the road. "How is Allie handling things?"

"Allie is being Allie," his friend told him with a wry smile. "In charge of everything, telling everyone just how everything needs to be done. I don't think she's cried yet. Susan says we need to watch her closely because she's going to break soon. The baby is due in just a month or so, and it's not good for her to keep pushing herself like this."

"And knowing Allie, she probably won't listen to anyone who tells her to take it easy."

Bob snorted. "Has Allie *ever* listened to anyone? Other than Pete, that is."

"I think we both know she's never listened to him, either."

They laughed for a moment, but sobered quickly as Bob pulled into the parking lot of the funeral home. A man in a black suit cast a doubtful look at Bob's Volvo before trotting over to attach a little flag to the front of the vehicle. He directed them to park in the long line of vehicles that were lining up for the procession after the service.

"Are you ready?" Bob asked.

"No." But Jupe opened the door and stepped out into the warm sunshine. He scratched his bristly face and wished there had been enough time for him to shave and change out of his rumpled clothes, but Bob had been right when he said there was no time. They managed to slip through the doors and find seats in the back of the crowded room just before the service began.

Jupe listened to the kind words spoken about a man who had given his life in the line of duty, but he found his mind wandering as his gaze sought out familiar faces. There was Allie Jamison-Crenshaw, Pete's wife, her reddened eyes and pale face betraying just how difficult these past few days had been for her. Beside her, Susan Andrews held her hand.

That was a friendship that had stunned everyone. Bob's wife was a quiet, dainty woman with a deadly sense of humor, while Allie was . . . well, they had all known Allie since their teen years, and it was still hard to come up with the right words to describe her. Spunky, feisty, outspoken, ambitious—none of those words went quite far enough to describe the woman who had stolen the heart of their childhood friend.

Jupe thought about the woman he had been seeing back home in Boston and tried to imagine her fitting in with Susan and Allie. No, he thought, Kitty was just too bubbly and silly and vivacious to ever blend in comfortably with those two. She was so totally unlike anyone he had ever dated before, and so completely his opposite in every way that she constantly took his breath away. She was everything he wasn't, he realized, and he wanted her here beside him in these horrible moments. If he wasn't careful,

he knew, he might just reveal his emotions and tell his friends that he adored her and couldn't wait to get home so he could tell her just exactly how he felt about her.

Jupe allowed his gaze to travel down the line of uniformed police officers who were there to honor their fallen comrade. Near the end of the line, he noticed one uniformed man sitting at an awkward angle, favoring his right arm. The arm was heavily bandaged and restrained in a heavy black sling; the officer shifted in his seat, and Jupe's frown deepened as he made out the outline of more bandages under the man's dress uniform.

Jupe elbowed Bob and nodded in the officer's direction. He watched Bob's eyes narrow as he took in the dark brown hair and familiar profile of one of their oldest and dearest friends.

*Idiot*, Bob mouthed.

Jupe nodded.

There was no time to talk to him between the ceremony and the graveside service that followed immediately. But when that was over, Bob and Jupe were determined not to let him escape without a few choice words.

"I thought your doctor wouldn't release you in time for the Chief's funeral," Bob said, not even trying to keep the accusing note out of his voice.

"I wasn't going to miss this," Pete Crenshaw told them. "Sam Reynolds is the reason I became a cop, and it could just as easily have been me that died that night. I checked myself out of the hospital AMA so I could pay my last respects."

"You look terrible," Jupe said.

Pete beamed up at him from his seat. "So do you. I took two bullets. What's your excuse?"

"My best friend took two bullets." Jupe's voice was suddenly hoarse. "Pete, I—"

"I know, Jupe."

Without another word, Jupe and Bob moved in closer to surround their injured friend and mourn the loss of the man who had believed in and encouraged all three of them for so long. The silent group hug opened to admit Allie and Susan, and for the moment at least, The Three Investigators found strength in being together again.