

## 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.