

THE MYSTERY OF THE SCAR-FACED BEGGAR

William Arden

Introduction

A Word from Hector Sebastian

Welcome aboard, mystery lovers!

I'm pleased and proud that The Three Investigators have asked me to introduce their latest adventure. It's a baffling case with international complications, involving a lost wallet, a bank robbery, and a band of terrorists--all connected by a scar-faced blind man.

I don't want to say more, for fear of giving away the story. If your curiosity is aroused, turn to Chapter 1 and begin reading. But if, by chance, you haven't met The Three Investigators before, you'll want to know that these young private eyes live in Rocky Beach, a small community on the California coast. Jupiter Jones is the leader of the group. He has a photographic memory, a brain like a steel trap, and an air of self-confidence that is amazing in one so young. Pete Crenshaw, the second investigator, is athletic, steadfast, and much more cautious than Juve. Bob Andrews is in charge of records and research, and he also likes to go adventuring and do some sleuthing of his own.

I have never introduced an adventure for the boys until now, and you may wonder who I am, and what I am doing at the front of this book. Read on, and you'll find out.

HECTOR SEBASTIAN

The Blind Man Runs

"IF IT DOESN'T STOP SOON, I'll scream!" said the woman in the raincoat.

A gust of wind whirled up Wilshire Boulevard. It snatched at the woman's umbrella and turned it inside out. Then it rushed on, sending raindrops spattering against the shop windows.

For an instant Bob Andrews, standing at a bus stop, thought the woman really would scream. She glared at her ruined umbrella. Then she looked accusingly at Bob, as if he were to blame. Then, quite suddenly, she laughed.

"Darn!" she said. She tossed the umbrella into the trash basket that stood at the kerb. "Serves me right for coming out in a California rainstorm." She sat down on the bench next to the bus-stop sign.

Bob shivered and hunched his shoulders against the chill and the wet. It had been the rainiest April he could remember. Now, at nearly six o'clock on Easter Monday, it was cold, too, and already dark because of the storm. Bob had come to Santa Monica earlier that afternoon, bound for a fabric store to get a dress pattern for his mother. He hadn't minded giving up some of his spring vacation to do the simple errand, but now the wait for the bus back to Rocky Beach seemed endless. He impatiently wiped his glasses dry for the umpteenth time.

"Oh, here comes the blind man," said the woman on the bench.

Bob looked up the street. Over the sound of rain on the pavement he heard the tap-tap of a cane and the rattle of coins being shaken in a metal cup.

"Poor soul," said the woman. "He's been around this neighbourhood a lot lately. I always try to give him something when I see him."

She fumbled in her purse as the blind man came closer. Bob saw that he was quite thin, and he stooped as he walked. His collar was pulled up around his ears and a cloth cap was pulled down over his brow. Dark glasses covered his eyes, and a neatly lettered sign was pinned to the front of his windbreaker. It was covered with plastic and it read, "God bless you. I am blind."

"Nasty night," said the woman. She stood up and dropped a coin into his cup.

"Argh!" said the blind man. His white stick rapped against the kerb, then banged on the bench. He tapped back and forth along the edge of the bench, then sat down.

Bob and the woman watched the blind man for a moment, then turned away and stared at the lighted windows of the bank across the street.

The cleaning people in the bank had just finished their chores. The counter-tops gleamed and chairs were placed in precise order. There were two cleaners--a man in bib overalls who wore his grey hair long and shaggy, and a short, stout woman. They waited at the door that led from the bank out to the lobby of the office building in which the bank was located.

A uniformed security man with a bunch of keys hurried forward from the back of the bank. He exchanged a word or two with the cleaning people, then unlocked the bank door and let them out.

As the cleaning people crossed the lobby and disappeared into an elevator, Bob glanced down at the blind man again. He could see grey hair at the edges of the man's cloth cap, and a Stubble of neglected beard on the man's cheeks. A broad, ugly scar ran from the man's jaw to his cheekbone. The accident that caused the scar must have been a terrible one, thought Bob. He wondered whether that accident was what had cost the man his sight.

The beggar leaned forward, as if to get up from the bench. His foot somehow caught on his cane and he lurched sideways, half-sitting and half-standing.

"Oh!" cried the woman. She seized the beggar's arm to steady him.

The metal cup fell to the ground and bounced away. Coins scattered in all directions.

"My money!" cried the beggar.

"We'll get it!" said the woman. "Don't you move."

She crouched to pick coins off the wet pavement and Bob began to fish in the gutter for the money. The woman retrieved the metal cup, which had rolled against the trash basket, and dropped the coins into it.

"Have you got it all?" said the blind man. "It took me all day to get that much."

Bob dropped a wet quarter and two dimes into the cup. "I don't think we missed any," he said.

The woman handed the cup to the blind man, who dumped the coins out into his palm and fingered them over. He made a wordless, guttural sound, then said, "Yes. It's all right."

"Are you waiting for the bus?" said the woman. "I think I see it coming now."

"No," said the man. "Thank you, lady. I live near here."

Bob glanced across the street. The cleaning man had appeared again in the lobby. He stood rattling the bank door. The security man was coming from the back of the bank with his keys out. He opened the door and there was a brief exchange between himself and the cleaning man. Then the cleaner went into the bank.

The blind man got up and started away, tapping at the pavement with his stick.

"Poor soul," said the woman. "I hope he doesn't have far to go."

Bob watched the blind man's slow progress down Wilshire.

"Oh, he's dropped something," said the woman.

"Hey, mister!" called Bob. "Wait a second!"

The beggar didn't hear him. He tapped on down the street.

"Wait!" called Bob. He trotted forward and scooped a wallet from the pavement.

The blind man reached a side street now. He stepped to the kerb, felt his way with the cane, and stepped out on to the road.

The beggar's thin figure was caught in the glare of oncoming headlights. A car was coming up the side street, a little too fast. As it braked for the stop sign, it skidded on the wet surface. The

woman at the bus stop screamed, and Bob shouted. Brakes squealed. The blind man twisted and tried to dodge away from the car that sped down upon him. Then there was a thud, and the beggar was rolling on the road.

The car stopped. The driver leapt out. Bob ran, and so did the woman. All three reached the fallen man at the same time.

The driver went down on his knees beside the blind man and tried to take his arm.

"No!" screamed the beggar. He struck at the man with his fist and the man pulled back.

"My glasses!" The beggar groped wildly.

The woman picked up the dark glasses. They had not broken, and she handed them to the beggar.

The blind man put the glasses on and felt for his cane.

The driver of the car was a young man. Bob saw in the glow of the headlights that his face was white with shock. He picked the cane up and put it into the blind man's hand.

Slowly the blind man got up. He turned his head in a searching way, as if he could see if only he tried hard enough, and he started off down the side street. He was limping now. As he went he gasped with pain.

"Mister, wait a second!" cried the driver.

"We ought to call the police," said the woman. "He must be hurt!"

The blind man went on, striking out with the stick, limping, gasping, yet moving almost at a trot.

Bob ran after him, calling for him to wait.

The man disappeared into an alley behind a row of stores. Bob followed. It was so dark that he stumbled, his hands out in front of him to feel for obstacles. At the end of the alley he came out

into a little yard. A light bulb burned over the back door of a building, shining on a garbage bin and a cardboard carton that was slowly disintegrating in the rain. Bob saw a second passageway that led back out towards Wilshire, but he saw no sign of the beggar. The man had vanished!

2

The Lost Wallet

"HE COULDN'T REALLY BE BLIND," said Bob. "How could a blind man get away so fast?"

"Perhaps a blind man can move quite rapidly when he's familiar with a place," said Jupiter Jones. "And, of course, a blind person is used to navigating in the dark." Jupe spoke in the careful, somewhat fussy way that was characteristic of him.

It was the next morning, and Bob was with his friends Jupiter and Pete Crenshaw in Jupe's outdoor workshop at The Jones Salvage Yard. The rain had passed. The morning was clear and fresh, and the boys were reviewing the events of the evening before. The wallet that the beggar had dropped lay on Jupe's workbench.

"Even if he was a phony, why would he run?" said Bob. "He acted as if he were scared of us."

Bob stopped and thought for a moment. "I guess none of us were acting as if we had much sense," he said. "The lady who was waiting with me at the bus stop just disappeared while I was in the alley. I suppose the bus came and she automatically got on it. And the driver of the car that hit the blind man drove off when I told him the man was gone. And I stood there like a dope with the wallet. I should have given the driver the blind man's name, and my name too."

"You were in shock," said Jupe. "In emergencies, people often behave in odd ways."

While listening to Bob, Jupe had been tinkering with an old television set that his Uncle Titus had brought into the salvage yard the week before. Jupe had replaced worn tubes with new ones and had made several adjustments to the inside of the set. Now he put the television upright on the workbench and plugged in the set.

There was a promising hum. "Aha!" said Jupe.

"You've done it again," said Pete, in mock admiration.

"Perhaps," said Jupe. He twisted a dial.

The three boys grinned. Jupiter Jones was something of a genius when it came to repairing things or making things out of salvaged parts. He had put together three walkie-talkie radios which the boys used with great enjoyment. He had repaired the old printing press that now stood in one corner of the workshop. He was also responsible for the periscope that was part of the equipment in Headquarters--an old mobile home trailer which was hidden away near Jupe's workshop, concealed by piles of junk and all but forgotten by Jupe's Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda.

Jupiter's aunt and uncle were aware that Jupe, Bob and Pete were interested in crime and detection. They knew that the boys called themselves The Three Investigators. But they did not know how really active the boys were in the field. The mobile home had been fitted with all sorts of equipment to help the Investigators solve the puzzles that came their way. It held a small crime lab, complete with fingerprint equipment and a microscope. The boys did their own film developing in the photographic darkroom. A filing cabinet was filled with notes on their cases, and there was a telephone which they paid for with money they earned helping out around the salvage yard.

It appeared that a television set would now become part of the furnishings in Headquarters. The set on Jupe's workbench squawked to life, and a picture flickered on to the screen and steadied.

". . . coming to you with a mid-morning news-break," said an announcer.

A newscaster appeared on the screen and wished everyone a good morning. He then said that the latest Pacific storm had passed through Los Angeles, and that Southern California could look forward to several days of clear weather.

"There have been mudslides in the hills above Malibu," said the newsman. "And in Big Tujunga Canyon, residents are mopping up after yesterday's flash flood.

"On the local crime front, our remote unit is on the scene of a daring robbery that took place at the Santa Monica Thrift and Savings Company less than two hours ago.

"Thieves entered the bank yesterday evening disguised as the cleaning crew. They imprisoned the security guard in the bank's board room, and were waiting this morning when employees reported to work. When the time lock was released at eight forty-five this morning, Samuel Henderson, executive vice-president of the bank, was forced to open the vault. The holdup men escaped with approximately a quarter of a million dollars in cash and an unknown amount in valuables from the safe-deposit boxes. Stay tuned for additional details when we return at noon."

"There!" said Jupe. He switched the set off.

"Good grief!" exclaimed Bob. "The Santa Monica Thrift and Savings! I was right across the street from that bank last night when the blind man . . . when . . ."

Bob stopped. He looked rather pale. "I must have seen one of the holdup men," he said.

Pete and Jupe waited, watching Bob.

"Yes, sure I did," he said. "From the bus stop I could look across the street right into the bank. I saw the cleaning people leave and go up in the elevator. Then the man came back--the cleaning man--and he knocked at the bank door and the security man opened it."

"He came back?" said Jupe. "The same man?"

"Well, I suppose . . . I suppose . . ." Bob looked puzzled. "I don't know," he said. "The blind man dropped his cup and his money rolled all over the place. So the lady and I picked it up, and after we gave the cup back to the blind man, that's when I saw the cleaning man at the bank door."

"So it could have been a different man?" said Jupe.

Bob nodded.

"What a scheme!" cried Pete. "The cleaning people finish their work and go upstairs. Then somebody who's dressed up to look like a cleaning man comes and knocks at the door. The security guy lets him in and whammo! The security guy winds up stashed in a back room and the crooks are inside the bank and they're home free. No alarms. Just sit and wait for the employees to show up."

"Why sure!" said Bob. "It must have been that way."

"Did you see where the cleaning man came from?" asked Jupe. "I mean, whether he came into the lobby from the elevator or the street?"

Bob shook his head. "The guy was already at the bank door in the lobby when I noticed him. I thought he'd come back down in the elevator. But I guess he could have come in from the street, if he wasn't one of the cleaners in the building."

"Which opens up an interesting line of thought," said Jupiter. He picked up the wallet that Bob had left on the workbench. "Say the man came down the street. The blind man dropped his money just as the bogus cleaning man was approaching the bank door. You and the woman at the bus stop bent down to pick up the money. Anyone would do the same. And you were so occupied with the task that you didn't see the robber enter the lobby. Does that suggest anything?"

Bob gulped. "The blind man was a lookout!"

Jupe examined the wallet. "This is very nice," he said. "It's made of ostrich skin and it came from Neiman-Marcus. That's one of the most expensive stores in the city."

"I didn't notice that," said Bob. "I only looked to see if the blind man had a telephone number in it so I could call him. But he doesn't."

Jupe looked through the wallet. "One credit card, twenty dollars in cash, and a temporary driver's licence. Now what would a blind man be doing with a driver's licence?"

Bob nodded. "Right. Of course. He was faking. He's not blind."

"Hector Sebastian," said Jupe, reading from the licence. "According to this, he lives at 2287 Cypress Canyon Drive in Malibu."

"Malibu is a nice place," said Pete. "Maybe being a beggar pays better than you'd think."

"It may not be the beggar's address," Jupe pointed out. "Perhaps the man is a pickpocket and he stole the wallet. Or perhaps he just found it somewhere. Have you looked in the telephone directory for Hector Sebastian, Bob?"

"He's not listed," Bob answered.

Jupiter stood up. "We may have something here that would interest the police," he said. "On the other hand, the fact that a blind man dropped this wallet may mean nothing at all. The fact that the blind man ran away may mean nothing. But Cypress Canyon Drive isn't very far from here. Shall we investigate before we decide what action to take?"

"You bet!" said Bob.

The boys all had their bicycles with them. In a few minutes they were on Pacific Coast Highway pedalling north towards Malibu. In less than half an hour they had passed the main shopping area of the famous beach community.

Cypress Canyon Drive was a narrow road that turned and twisted for a couple of hundred metres as it climbed up from the Coast Highway, then ran roughly parallel to the highway but some distance inland from it. As the boys rode along the drive they could hear cars and trucks on the highway, and they could glimpse the ocean between the trees that lined the drive on the left. On the right, the coast range sloped up and away, with the sky clear and blue beyond the tops of the mountains.

"I don't think anybody really lives here," said Bob, after they had gone some distance along the rutted, muddy road. "I don't see a single house. Do you suppose the address on that driver's licence is a phony?"

"The plot thickens," said Pete. "Why would a blind man have a driver's licence? And if that is the beggar's licence, why would it have a fake address?"

The drive dipped into a hollow where a small stream of water ran across. Then it climbed again. On the far side of the rise the boys stopped. There was a gully in their path which might have been dry in summer, but which was now a torrent of brown water. And beside the road on the left, almost at the edge of the muddy wash, there was a shabby, barnlike old building with dormer windows in the second story. Neon tubing ran along its eaves. A sign across one end proclaimed that it was Charlie's Place.

"A restaurant?" said Bob.

Jupe took the wallet out of his pocket and looked again at the driver's licence. "Number 2287," he said. "That's the number on that new mailbox out in front."

The boys heard a car on the road behind them. They moved aside, and a red sports car came splashing slowly through the little stream they had already forded. A thin man with greying hair and a lined, somewhat sad face passed without seeming to notice the boys. He turned into the muddy yard that was the parking lot of Charlie's Place, stopped his car, got slowly out, and took a cane from the floor of the vehicle. Then he went slowly up sagging steps into the ramshackle building, letting a dilapidated screen door slam behind him as he disappeared.

"He's got a limp!" exclaimed Pete. "Hey, Bob, didn't you say that the beggar limped when he ran off last night?"

"Well, he limped after he got hit by the car. Who wouldn't limp?"

"Could that man be the beggar?" said Jupe. "Is he at all like the beggar?"

Bob shrugged. "He's about the same size, and I guess he's about the same age, but there must be a million guys like that."

"Very well," said Jupe. Suddenly he was brisk and businesslike. "I'm going in there."

"What are you going to do?" asked Pete. "Go in and buy a hamburger?"

"I may," said Jupe. "Or I may simply ask for directions. But one way or another, I'll find out who that man is. Bob, you had better keep out of sight. If that man was outside the bank in Santa Monica last night, he might recognize you--and he might get nasty."

"I'll wait with Bob," said Pete. "I'm allergic to guys who might get nasty."

"Chicken!" Bob taunted.

"I'm only ambitious," said Pete. "My ambition is to live until I am very, very old."

Jupe chuckled. Leaving his friends standing beside the road, he pushed his bicycle into the parking area of Charlie's Place. He leaned the bike against the wall of the building and went up the steps. He crossed the little porch, put his hand on the screen door, and pulled. The door opened.

Jupe stepped out of the sunlight into a place that was dim. He saw polished hardwood floors and dark wood panelling. Straight ahead through a wide doorway was a large, empty room. Its front wall was made entirely of windows, which looked out through the trees to the sparkling ocean beyond. Jupe guessed this room had once been the main dining room of a restaurant. The restaurant was clearly out of business now.

Jupe was standing in a wide passageway that was really a sort of lobby outside the huge room. To the left of the lobby was an area that was a dusty jumble of coffee urns and counters and stools and booths. Jupe realized that this had once been a coffee shop. He looked to the right and saw a wall with several doors in it. There were cartons and crates piled in the coffee shop and more cartons piled up in the lobby. Several crates stood on the hardwood floor of the big room. One crate was open, and packing material overflowed and drifted down its side.

Jupe moved forward slowly. He was about to call out when he heard the sound of a telephone being lifted from its cradle. He stood still and listened. Someone out of sight in the big, bright room ahead of him dialled a number.

There was a pause, and then a man said, "This is Sebastian."

After another pause the man spoke again. "Yes," he said, "I know it will be expensive, but everything has its price. I'm prepared to pay for it."

At that moment something small and hard pressed into Jupe's back just above his belt.

"Please to reach for the sky," said a soft voice. "If you move I make you in two pieces!"

3

A Man of Mystery

JUPITER RAISED HIS HANDS above his head. He could feel his scalp prickle.

"I only wanted . . ." he began.

"Please to be quiet!" said the person behind him.

There were footsteps on the hardwood floor. The grey-haired man who had driven up a few minutes before appeared in the doorway to the big room. He stood leaning on his cane, looking at Jupe with his head slightly to one side, as if he were puzzled.

"What is it, Don?" he said. "Who is this?"

Jupe frowned. There was something familiar about this man. Jupe could not be sure whether it was just the voice, or the tilt of the head. Had they met somewhere? If so, where? And when?

"This person breaks and enters," said the individual who was holding Jupe at gunpoint. "He stands and listens to you talk on the telephone."

"I only wanted to ask directions," said Jupe. "The sign outside says this is Charlie's Place. Isn't it a restaurant? And I didn't do any breaking and entering. The door was open."

"Well, of course," said the grey-haired man. He came towards Jupe, smiling. "It used to be a restaurant, and the door is open, isn't it?"

Jupe saw that the man's cheeks were ruddy, and that his high, thin nose had recently been sunburned. It was now peeling. The eyes under the thick, grey-black brows were very blue. "Relax, young friend," said the man. "Don couldn't shoot you even if he wanted to."

Jupe cautiously lowered his arms. He turned to look at the person called Don.

"You think I have gun," said the man with satisfaction. He was an Oriental, not much taller than Jupe, quite slim, with a smooth, pleasant face. He held a wooden mixing spoon with the handle pointed towards Jupe. "You see it is not really gun," he said. "It is trick I see on television."

"Hoang Van Don came from Vietnam recently," said the grey-haired man. "He is presently learning English by watching late-night television. I see now that he is also learning other useful things."

The Vietnamese man bowed. "If imprisoned in upper room, proper course to follow is to braid bedsheets into rope. If bedsheets not available, slide down drainpipe."

The Vietnamese bowed again and disappeared into the shadows of the coffee shop. Jupe stared after him with curiosity.

"You wanted directions?" said the grey-haired man.

"Oh!" Jupe started. "Oh, yes. A river crosses the road just beyond here." Jupe pointed. "Does the road continue on the far side? Is there any place we can cross, or should we go back to the highway again?"

"The road doesn't go on. It dead ends just beyond the river. And don't even try to cross that gully. It's quite deep. You'd be swept off your feet."

"Yes, sir," said Jupe, who was not really listening. He was staring curiously at one of the cardboard cartons that stood in a corner of the lobby. Half a dozen books were piled on the carton, and all seemed to be copies of the same title. Jupe saw black dust jackets and brilliant scarlet lettering. The cover illustration on the top copy showed a dagger stuck through a document. Dark Legacy was the title of the book.

"Hector Sebastian!" said Jupe suddenly. He walked over and picked up one of the books. Turning it over, he found a photograph on the back--a photograph of the man who now stood facing him in the dim little lobby.

"Why, it is you!" said Jupe. For once the poise on which he prided himself completely deserted him. "You are the Hector Sebastian! I mean, you're the one who's been on television!"

"Yes, I have," said the man. "A few times."

"I read Dark Legacy," said Jupe. His voice sounded strange in his own ears. It was high and excited. He was babbling like a star-struck tourist. "It's a terrific book! And so is Chill Factors! Mr. Sebastian, you sure don't need to rob any banks!"

"Did you think I did?" said Hector Sebastian. He smiled. "Well, now, I don't think you just wandered in here looking for directions. What's this all about?"

Jupe's face got red. "I . . . I don't even like to admit what I was thinking," he said. "Mr. Sebastian, are you missing your wallet?"

Sebastian started. He felt in the pocket of his jacket. Then he patted his hip pocket. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "It's gone! Do you have it?"

"My friend Bob has it," said Jupe. Very quickly he told Sebastian of Bob's adventure the night before. He described the blind man who had dropped the wallet, and he mentioned the bank robbery and the accident in which the blind man was hit.

"Terrific!" said Mr. Sebastian. "It sounds like the beginning of a Hitchcock movie."

Jupe immediately looked crestfallen.

"What's the matter?" said Mr. Sebastian. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Not really," said Jupe. "It's only that Mr. Hitchcock was a friend of ours. When Bob wrote up our cases, Mr. Hitchcock used to introduce them for us. We felt very bad when he died, and we miss him."

"I'm sure you do," said Mr. Sebastian. "But I don't understand. What sort of cases? And where is your friend Bob, who found my wallet?"

"I'll get him!" said Jupe. "He's right outside."

Jupe barrelled out the door and trotted across the parking lot. "Come on!" he called. "Mr. Sebastian wants to meet you. You know who he is?"

Bob and Pete looked at one another, and Pete shook his head. "Should we know?" he asked.

Jupe grinned. "I should have known," he said. "I should have recognized the name right away. My brain must be turning to oatmeal! He's the one who wrote *Dark Legacy* and *The Night Watch* and *Chill Factors*. He's been on all the television talk shows lately. Moorpark Studios just finished making a movie of *Chill Factors*, and Leonard Orsini is going to compose the score for the picture."

Pete suddenly grinned. "Oh yeah! I heard my father talking about *Chill Factors*. You mean this guy Sebastian is the writer?"

"You bet he is!" said Jupe. His face was flushed with excitement. "He used to be a private detective in New York City, but he was hurt when the small plane he was piloting crashed. His leg was crushed. While he was waiting for it to mend, he began to work on a novel inspired by one of his cases. It was called *The Night Watch*, and it became a big-selling paperback. After it came out Mr. Sebastian wrote another book called *Dark Legacy* about a man who pretended to be dead so that his wife could collect his insurance, and that was made into a movie. Remember? And then Mr. Sebastian gave up completely on being a private detective and became a full-time writer. He wrote the screenplay for *Chill Factors* after the book was sold to Moorpark Studios. Come on! Don't you want to meet him? Bob, have you got the wallet?"

"I gave it to you," said Bob. "Don't you remember? Boy, you really are bowled over!"

"Oh," said Jupe. He patted his pockets, then grinned. "Yes. Okay. Come on."

Pete and Bob followed him back to the building, and when they were inside he introduced them to Mr. Sebastian. Sebastian ushered them into the big windowed room and motioned them to the folding chairs that were placed around a low, glass-topped table. It was the sort of table that is usually outdoors on a terrace or beside a pool. The table, the chairs, and a telephone were the only furnishings in the room.

"Eventually we'll have all sorts of luxury here," said Sebastian. "Don and I moved in only last week, and we haven't had time to do much."

"You're going to live here?" said Pete.

"I am living here," answered Sebastian. He limped to the lobby and bellowed for Don. Presently the Vietnamese appeared with a tray on which there was a glass coffee server and a cup and saucer.

"Something for the boys," ordered Sebastian. "Do we have any soft drinks in the refrigerator?"

"Lemonade," said Don as he set down the tray. "Nature's Own, for tree-ripe flavour."

Jupe smiled, recognizing the advertising slogan of one of the popular brands of lemonade. No doubt this was a bit of wisdom that Don had learned from his television watching.

"Lemonade okay?" said Mr. Sebastian. He looked to the boys, who quickly nodded. Don went back to the kitchen, which was located in the far corner of the house, beyond the coffee shop.

"I wish Don would watch some cooking programmes, instead of all those old movies with commercials stuck in every five minutes," said Mr. Sebastian after the Vietnamese left. "Some of the meals that we have are unbelievable."

Mr. Sebastian then went on to talk about the old restaurant that he had just moved into, and the plans that he had for making it over into a home. "Eventually the coffee shop will be a formal

dining room," he told the boys. "There's a storeroom next to the lobby that can become Don's bedroom, and I'll have a bathroom put in for him over there, under the stairs."

The boys looked towards the staircase that went up along the inner wall near the lobby. At the top of the stairs was a gallery that ran the length of the building, overlooking the huge room where Sebastian sat with the boys. The big room had a vaulted ceiling that was two stories high. The other half of the building--the front half occupied by the lobby, storeroom, coffee shop and kitchen--had rooms on the second floor, with doors opening on to the gallery.

"I know this place is a wreck," said Mr. Sebastian. "But it's structurally sound. I had an architect and a building contractor look at it before I bought it. And do you know what it would cost me to buy a house this size so close to the ocean?"

"A fortune, I'm sure," said Jupe.

Sebastian nodded. "And think what a beautiful place this will be once it's fixed up. This is a great room just the way it is--a fireplace at each end and all these windows facing the ocean! And the roof doesn't leak. That's the sort of thing you may take for granted, but I lived for twenty-three years in a Brooklyn apartment where the roof leaked regularly. I had to keep a collection of buckets and pans to set under the drips when it rained."

Mr. Sebastian grinned. "Who was it who said that he'd been rich and he'd been poor, and rich was better? Whoever it was, he knew what he was talking about."

Don came in then with the lemonade. As he served the boys, Sebastian picked up the handsome wallet that Jupe had put on the glass-topped table.

"Dropped by a blind beggar, eh?" said Mr. Sebastian. He looked into the wallet. "He couldn't have been a beggar in great need. He didn't spend any of the money."

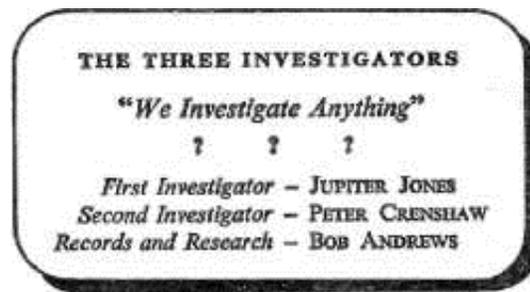
"But he was begging," said Bob. "He had a tin cup with coins in it. He kept shaking the cup."

Mr. Sebastian looked thoughtful. "I wonder how he found the wallet?" he said. "If he was blind . . ."

"Exactly," said Jupiter. "Blind people don't see things that are lying on the pavement. Of course he might have stumbled on it and picked it up. Where did you have it last, Mr. Sebastian?"

"You sound very professional," Sebastian told Juve. "I almost expect you to whip out a pencil and pad and take notes. You mentioned Alfred Hitchcock a while ago. You said he used to introduce your cases? Are you boys learning to be detectives?"

"We are detectives," said Juve proudly. He pulled out his own wallet and took a small card from one of the compartments. He handed the card to Mr. Sebastian. It read:



"I see," said Sebastian. "You call yourselves The Three Investigators, and you volunteer to investigate anything. That's a rather brave statement. Private investigators can be asked to do some very odd things."

"We know," said Jupiter. "We have encountered some highly unusual circumstances--even bizarre ones. That's our speciality. We have often been successful in cases where ordinary law enforcement people have failed."

Mr. Sebastian nodded. "I believe you," he said. "Young people have nimble minds, and they aren't burdened with notions about what can happen and can't."

Bob leaned forward. "We're interested in the blind beggar because we wonder whether he might have something to do with the robbery at the bank," he said. "Were you in Santa Monica yesterday? Did you drop the wallet there? Or could he have picked your pocket?"

"No." Mr. Sebastian leaned back in his chair. "I know I had the wallet yesterday morning. I remember putting it in my pocket when I left the house to go to Denicola's. I never thought of it again until just now. Obviously I must have dropped it at Denicola's, since that's the only place I

went yesterday, but it must have been an accident. I certainly didn't get into any crowds where someone could have jostled me and picked my pocket--and I would have noticed a blind man."

"Isn't Denicola's the place up the coast where they have a charter boat for sports fishermen?" said Pete.

Mr. Sebastian nodded. "I keep my speedboat there," he said. "It's closer than any of the marinas. When I want to use the boat, the boy who works for Mrs. Denicola rows me out to the buoy where it's tied up. I had the boat out for a run yesterday. I must have dropped the wallet near the dock, or maybe in the parking lot there."

"And the blind man picked it up," said Pete.

"Then the blind man went to Santa Monica without saying anything to the people at Denicola's about the wallet," said Bob. "And he happened to be across the street from the bank at the exact moment the holdup men got in disguised as cleaning people. Maybe he even created a diversion by dropping his cup of coins so that the people at the bus stop wouldn't guess what was going on."

"The cup of coins may have been slippery in the rain," said Mr. Sebastian. "Or the man may have been tired. It could mean nothing at all that he dropped the cup."

"He ran away after he dropped the wallet and Bob went after him to give it back," Jupe pointed out. "He ran again after he was hit by a car."

"Not unusual," said Mr. Sebastian. "He could have been in shock. He could have had a guilty conscience about carrying a wallet that wasn't his. He could have been afraid of the police. The police are often hard on beggars. It doesn't seem likely that he has any connection with a bank robbery, but why don't you go to the police and tell them what you've just told me? Give them my name if you want to. I'll be glad to co-operate in any way I can."

"Of course," said Jupiter, disappointed. "That's the thing to do. And probably you're right and the blind man happened to come along only by coincidence. I guess this case is over before it really began."

"Looks that way," said Mr. Sebastian. "Listen, I really appreciate your coming here with the wallet." He was fumbling in the wallet now, frowning at the bills there.

"It was no trouble," said Pete quickly.

"We were glad to do it," Bob put in. "Please don't even think about giving us anything."

"Well then, can I reward you some other way?" asked Mr. Sebastian. "How about a ride in my speedboat? Want to go with me the next time I take it out?"

"Hey, could we?" cried Pete.

"You sure could. Just give me your telephone numbers so I can give you a call."

"We can be here in half an hour," said Pete happily.

He gave Mr. Sebastian his telephone number, and so did the other boys. When the Three Investigators left, the famous detective-turned-writer trailed them to the door and stood watching as they wheeled their bikes out on to the road.

"Nice guy," said Pete when they were out of earshot.

"Yes, he is," Jupe agreed. "He seemed sorry to see us go. I wonder if he isn't kind of lonely out here in California. He's lived almost all of his life in New York."

"Anytime he wants company on his speedboat," said Bob, "I'll be ready. Wow! That's really--"

Bob stopped. A small, tan sedan had appeared on the road. It passed the three boys at a sedate pace, then slowed at the entrance to Mr. Sebastian's yard and turned in. An elderly man got out. He approached the steps of Charlie's Place and said something to Mr. Sebastian, who still stood in the doorway.

The boys were too far away to hear the conversation, but they stayed on the road and watched. After a moment Mr. Sebastian stepped back. The newcomer went up the steps and disappeared into Charlie's Place.

"Well, how about that!" exclaimed Bob. "This investigation isn't over yet!"

"Why do you say that?" asked Pete.

"The security man," said Bob. "That guy was the security man who let the robbers into the bank in Santa Monica. Now why would he come calling on Mr. Sebastian?"

4

The Investigators Find a Client

"IT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE!" said Jupiter. "Hector Sebastian must have more money than he can ever spend! His books are best sellers!"

"Okay!" said Bob. "But if he didn't have anything to do with that bank robbery, why did the security man from the bank go to see him?"

"I don't know," said Juve.

It was early afternoon, and the Three Investigators were in their secret Headquarters at The Jones Salvage Yard. The boys had waited in the road outside the old restaurant on Cypress Canyon Drive until the security man from the Santa Monica bank had left Hector Sebastian's home and driven away. They had briefly considered talking to Sebastian again, and asking about the visit of the bank guard, but Jupiter vetoed the idea. He was reluctant to intrude a second time on the

famous writer for no better reason than curiosity. So the boys had returned to Headquarters to discuss the events of the morning. They were now sitting around the old oak desk in the trailer. Bob was jotting down items in a notebook as he remembered them.

"The beggar limped last night after the accident, and Mr. Sebastian has a limp," he said.

"Mr. Sebastian broke his leg in a dozen places," Jupe pointed out. "His limp is permanent. Did the beggar limp last night before the accident?"

"I'm not sure," said Bob.

"The limp could be a coincidence," said Pete, "but what about the wallet? That's another coincidence. And then the man who actually let the thieves into the bank goes calling on Mr. Sebastian. That's a third coincidence, and three is too many."

"Why don't we go to the police?" said Bob. "It's what Mr. Sebastian said we should do. And why would he say that if he's involved with the robbery?"

"He had to say it," Pete declared. "He'd be afraid not to. It's what grownups always say."

"I think the police would feel that our theories are far-fetched," said Jupiter. "Perhaps they'd be right. It's impossible to believe that Mr. Sebastian helped rob a bank. He has too much to lose. But there must be some connection between him and that event. Perhaps Mr. Bonestell can help us find it."

"Bonestell?" said Bob.

Jupiter unfolded a newspaper which had been lying on the desk. It was the early edition of the Santa Monica Evening Outlook. He had purchased it from a rack when the boys stopped for pizza on their way home.

"Walter Bonestell is the name of the security man who let the robbers into the bank," he said. "It's here in the story on page one." He reached for a stack of phone directories and found the one he wanted. "Hmmm . . . the Santa Monica telephone book lists a Walter Bonestell who lives at 1129 Dolphin Court. That's just a few blocks up from the beach."

"Jupiter!" The call came from outside the trailer. "Jupiter Jones, where are you? I want you!"

Jupe sighed. "Aunt Mathilda sounds annoyed. She hasn't seen me since breakfast. By this time she must have a whole list of things for me to do."

"My mother is probably looking for me, too," said Pete.

"I was going to suggest that we visit Mr. Bonestell," said Jupe. "Perhaps we could do that early this evening. Can you get away then? If we could meet in front of the Rocky Beach Market about seven, we could ride down the coast and see the security man on his own ground."

"Sounds okay to me," said Pete.

Bob grinned. "No school tomorrow. Shouldn't be any problem. See you tonight."

The boys left the trailer, and Jupiter spent the afternoon working in the salvage yard. That night, after an early supper with Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus, he was waiting with his bicycle in front of the market. Bob and Pete appeared at five minutes to seven, and in the dark the boys set out for Santa Monica.

Dolphin Court turned out to be a short, dead-end street in a neighbourhood of small, single-family homes. Number 1129 was a frame house halfway down the street. The little car that the boys had seen on Cypress Canyon Drive stood in the driveway. The front of the house was dark, but a light showed at a window in the back. The boys drifted down the driveway and looked through the window into the kitchen.

The security man was there, alone. He sat at a table near the window with a heap of newspapers in front of him and a telephone at his elbow. He was not calling anyone at the moment. He was simply staring at the plastic tablecloth in an unseeing way. He looked older than he had that morning, and more frail. His hair seemed thin and sparse and there were purple shadows under his eyes.

The boys did not speak. After a moment Jupe turned to go to the front of the house and ring the doorbell.

Blocking his way in the driveway was a man who held an automatic pistol!

"Exactly what are you up to?" demanded the man.

He did not aim the pistol, and his voice was low and controlled, but Jupe had the nightmare feeling that he and his friends were in deadly peril. There was something cold and determined about the man with the gun. His mouth was a straight, thin line, betraying no hint of humour. Wrap-around sunglasses perched on his head like a second set of cold eyes.

Pete made a startled sound, and the man snapped, "Be still!"

The kitchen window went up and Mr. Bonestell leaned out. "Shelby, what is it? What are you doing?"

The man with the gun gestured towards the boys. "These three were looking in the window at you."

"Oh?" said Mr. Bonestell. He sounded puzzled and curious. But then he said "Oh!" again, and his tone was alarmed.

"Into the house!" ordered the man with the gun. "That way! March!"

The boys marched. They went around to the backyard and in through a service porch to the kitchen.

"What is this all about?" said Mr. Bonestell. "When I went to see Mr. Sebastian this morning, he said three boys had just called on him. It was you three, wasn't it? You were on the road when I drove up, weren't you? With your bicycles."

"Yes, Mr. Bonestell," said Jupiter.

"Won't you sit down?" said Mr. Bonestell. He pulled a chair out from the table near the window.

"Walter, what is all this?" demanded the man with the gun. "What's going on?"

"I'm not sure," said Mr. Bonestell. "Shelby, would you put that gun away? Guns make me nervous!"

Shelby hesitated. Then he hitched his trouser leg up over his shin and slipped the gun into a holster that was strapped to his leg just below the knee.

Pete blinked and stared, but said nothing. The boys took seats at the table.

"Mr. Sebastian said you'd seen a suspicious character near the bank," said Mr. Bonestell.

"Will you please tell me what's going on?" cried Shelby.

Mr. Bonestell sighed. "Haven't you heard the news on the radio?" he said. "There was a robbery at the bank this morning."

"A robbery? I didn't hear. I didn't have the car radio on. What happened? And what about these kids? I don't understand."

Mr. Bonestell quickly related the details of the robbery. "And I'm the one who let the thieves in," he said. "I think the police suspect that I'm involved with them."

Mr. Bonestell's expression was bleak. "It was careless of me," he admitted. "If I'd really looked at that man at the door, I'd have know it was a stranger. But even if I was careless, that doesn't mean I'm a crook! I never did a dishonest thing in my life! Only, the police don't know me, so I have to find someone to help me prove I'm innocent."

"A lawyer," said Shelby. He nodded smugly, like one who always has the correct answers. "Very wise of you, Walter, but what has that to do with these boys. Why were they looking in the window?"

Mr. Bonestell looked downcast. "I suppose they're suspicious, too." He leaned towards Jupe. "At first I thought maybe Mr. Sebastian might help. He was on the Harry Travers Show last week talking about the movie he just finished working on, and he said that sometimes people get into

trouble just because they happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm one of those people, aren't I? So I thought maybe Mr. Sebastian would be interested in my . . . my case. One of the secretaries at the bank thought maybe he'd help me, and she got his address for me from the Downtown Credit Reporting Service. He's got an unlisted phone--I guess a lot of famous people do--so I went to see him and . . ."

"Walter, stop blithering!" ordered Shelby. "Who is Mr. Sebastian, for heaven's sake?"

Jupe cleared his throat. "He's a novelist and a screenwriter," he said. "He used to be a private investigator. We saw him this morning. You see, someone dropped a wallet belonging to Mr. Sebastian outside the bank, and Bob here--Bob Andrews--picked it up."

"I think I was across the street from the bank when the robber came to the door," Bob put in. "I saw you let him in, Mr. Bonestell."

"When we saw you come to Mr. Sebastian's house this morning after we returned the wallet," said Pete, "we were kind of suspicious. We thought that there might be some connection between you and Mr. Sebastian and . . . and the robbery."

Pete paused, his face growing red. "It sounds silly now that I'm saying it out loud," he confessed.

"I was only going to ask for help," said Mr. Bonestell, "but Mr. Sebastian is starting work on a new book, and he doesn't have time to help. He gave me the names of some private investigators here in Los Angeles, but he thinks if I see anyone, I should see a lawyer. I made some calls this afternoon. Do you know what lawyers cost? And private detectives? I can't afford either!"

Jupe sat straighter in his chair. "Mr. Bonestell, perhaps we were suspicious when we first came here, but I'm not suspicious any longer. I think we can help you. You see, Mr. Bonestell, we are private detectives."

Jupe took out a Three Investigators business card and handed it to Mr. Bonestell.

"How quaint!" said Shelby, reading over Mr. Bonestell's shoulder. His tone was sarcastic.

"We are hardly quaint," said Jupe. He kept his voice even. "We have a record of success that many conventional agencies might envy. We are not hampered by many prejudices, as older people often are. We believe that almost anything is possible, and we believe in following our best instincts. Mr. Bonestell, I don't believe that you could have had a part in a bank robbery. I think my friends feel the same way."

Jupe looked at Bob and Pete, who nodded.

"Mr. Bonestell," said Jupe, "if you will accept us, The Three Investigators would like to have you as a client."

Walter Bonestell seemed stunned. "You're so young!" he said.

"Is that really such a handicap?" asked Jupe.

Bonestell twisted his hands nervously. "I should get a real firm only . . . only . . ."

"Walter, what would that cost you?" said Shelby.

The younger man pulled a chair up to the table. He looked past Mr. Bonestell and the boys to the night-black window, frowning at his own reflection. He brushed back his straight fair hair with his hand, took off his sunglasses, and put them into the pocket of his corduroy jacket.

"I don't know why you're so worried," he finally said. "According to your system of justice, you're innocent until you're proven guilty."

"I don't feel so innocent," said Mr. Bonestell. "I did let the robbers in, you know."

"They can't send you to jail for that," said Shelby. "But if you're going to get into such a stew, why not hire these boys? I don't know how they can prove you didn't do it, but maybe they can."

"We'll sure try," promised Pete.

"You do seem eager to help," said Mr. Bonestell. "I can't tell you how nice it is. So few people today have been that nice. I think . . . if you really may be able to help . . . well, I'll be your client. It's high time I had someone on my side!"

5

Mr. Bonestell's Story

"IT'S BEEN A NIGHTMARE!" said Mr. Bonestell. He fingered the design in the plastic tablecloth, and looked anxiously from Jupiter to Bob and from Bob to Pete. "They asked me not to come to work again until the robbery is cleared up. They didn't say I'm a robber, but I could tell. How could they think a thing like that? Do I look like a man who'd help rob a bank? Does this look like a place where crooks hang out?"

The boys looked at Mr. Bonestell, and then at his orderly kitchen. Jupe wanted to smile. He could not imagine Mr. Bonestell plotting a crime, and he could not believe thieves had ever conspired in this place. The house was so neat that it managed to have no character at all.

"Oh, gosh!" said Shelby. "My groceries!"

He disappeared into the service porch, and the boys heard the back door slam as he went outside.

"Why not begin at the beginning, Mr. Bonestell?" said Jupiter. "If you'll tell us everything you remember about the robbery, perhaps you'll recall some detail that you may have overlooked earlier."

Bonestell did not look hopeful. "Sebastian said it's harder to prove that a man is innocent--if he has no alibi, that is--than to prove that he's guilty."

"Well, are you sure you have no alibi?" said Jupe. "Stop and think about it. If you were one of the robbers, some of your time in the last few days would have been taken up with planning the robbery. And you would have to know the other robbers. Can you give an account of your activities for, well, for the last two weeks?"

Mr. Bonestell shook his head sadly.

"What about your friend Shelby? I take it he lives here. Can he tell much about what you've been doing for the past few days?"

Again Mr. Bonestell shook his head. "Shelby rooms here, but he isn't home much. He's a field representative for Systems TX-4. That's a computer company. He travels around advising companies that are putting in computer systems. He was gone all last week and over the weekend. A firm in Fresno is buying the TX billing system and he was working with them. He got home just a while ago. Even when he's home, he doesn't pay much attention. When I was with TX-4, he seemed much friendlier than he does now."

"You worked for Systems TX-4?" said Jupe.

"That's right, after they took over Jones-Templeton Office Machines." For the first time, a hint of pride showed in Mr. Bonestell's face. "I was with Jones-Templeton for over thirty years," he said. "I started there right after World War Two. I was in the mail room at first, and then I went into purchasing and worked my way up. At one time we had twelve people in the department, and I was second in command. That was while the kids were growing up'. It was a good place to be, and my kids had a good life. Stable, you know. Not all that moving around that some men get into."

Mr. Bonestell got up and went to the living room. He returned after a moment with a framed photograph. It was a picture of himself--a younger self with dark, thick hair. He was posed with a round-faced, fair-haired woman and two children.

"My wife, Eleanor," said Mr. Bonestell, indicating the woman. "We were married the year after the war ended. She died four years ago of congestive heart failure. She was very young to go that way."

He stopped and cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry," said Jupiter.

"Yes. Well, these things happen. But it was lonely here with the children gone. My son is a production co-ordinator at Elliott Electronics in Sunnydale, and Debra is married now. Her husband is an insurance adjuster. They live in Bakersfield and they have two children.

"So that's a lot to be grateful for--to raise two kids and have them turn out well. But I wish they lived closer. They don't, though. They won't live at home again, so while I was still at TX-4 I started looking for someone to help with expenses. Shelby--Shelby Tuckerman--needed a place to live, so we got together. . . ."

The back door opened and Shelby came in carrying a brown paper bag. He went to the refrigerator and began to store away packages of frozen foods.

"About what happened last night," said Jupe after a moment. "Would you mind going over it for us?"

"If you think it will help," said Mr. Bonestell. "There wasn't anything unusual at first. I've had the job almost a year. I go in at noon and take care of some odds and ends--nothing important. I only took the job because time hung heavy after I was . . . uh . . . retired from Systems TX-4. I was replaced by a computer.

"So now I'm sort of a uniformed odd-job man at the bank. After the bank closes I supervise the cleaning people. They don't take long. They're usually finished by six. After I let them out and lock up after them, I check the place one last time to make sure everything is in order. Then I leave. There's no night security man at the bank. With a time lock on the vault, they don't need one. No one could open the vault without setting off an alarm that would bring every cop in the city."

"That's why the crooks kept you prisoner all night," said Bob. "They couldn't move while the time lock was in operation."

"That's right," said Mr. Bonestell. "There were three men, and of course they knew the system. They must have been watching and waiting someplace until the cleaning people left and went up in the elevator. Then one of them came to the door and rapped. There isn't too much light in the

lobby, and when I looked out through the door I saw a man in bib overalls with a lot of shaggy grey hair and a cap pulled down over his eyes. I thought it was Rolf coming back for something. I opened the door and he came in, and then I saw it wasn't Rolf. He had a gun, so it was too late to do anything.

"Two other people came right away. They had wigs and fake beards and fake moustaches. They made me go back to the board room where I couldn't be seen from the street. They kept me covered all night, and they didn't even go near the vault. When the staff started to arrive in the morning, they herded them into the board room. And when Mr. Henderson came in--he's the one who has the combination and opens the vault--they knew who he was. They made him open the vault as soon as the time lock went off."

Shelby Tuckerman sat down next to Pete. "I think someone in the neighbourhood's been spying on you," he told Mr. Bonestell. "Either that or one of those old codgers at the senior citizens' centre decided that the bank would be a pushover."

Mr. Bonestell looked annoyed. "Shelby, I would recognize a neighbour or a friend. I did not know those men last night. They were strangers."

Shelby got up and put a kettle on the stove. "They were disguised, weren't they?" he said. "I don't think it would hurt if the boys kept an eye on the neighbours. They aren't really a superior lot."

"Are they supposed to be superior?" demanded Mr. Bonestell.

Jupe leaned forward. "Of course you don't want to be suspicious of your neighbours," he said, "but it does seem that someone is thoroughly familiar with the routine at the bank. Are you sure no one has been watching you in recent days? Has anyone been asking questions about your job?"

"No." Mr. Bonestell looked completely miserable.

The kettle began to boil, and Shelby spooned instant coffee into a cup and poured hot water over it. He came back to the table and sat sipping the black liquid, looking from Jupe to Mr. Bonestell and then back again.

"Perhaps we will have to prove that someone else is guilty before we can prove that you're innocent," said Jupe. "We may have a clue."

"A clue?" said Mr. Bonestell eagerly. "What is it?"

"At this point we can't be sure that it is a clue," said Jupe. "It's probably best if we don't discuss it with you. We'll investigate, and we'll call you in a day or two. Meanwhile, if you notice any unusual behaviour or any extreme curiosity among your acquaintances, let us know. You have our number on the back of our card."

"Yes, of course."

The boys left the house. When the door had closed behind them, Bob said, "A clue? You mean that wallet? Is that the clue?"

"A very slim clue," said Jupe, "but it's all we have. I think we have already concluded that neither Mr. Sebastian nor Mr. Bonestell is a criminal. But if the blind man had any connection with the robbery, Mr. Sebastian may well have come into contact with a crook. His wallet is the link, so it's worth following up."

"If you say so," said Pete. "Just try to keep us out of places where people pull guns on us, okay?"

6

The Frightened Dreamer

BOB ANDREWS LEFT Rocky Beach before nine the next morning. He rode his bike south along the Coast Highway, bound for Santa Monica. He was to ask in stores near the Thrift and

Savings Company if the blind man had returned to the neighbourhood since the robbery. Then he had to return to Rocky Beach to put in some hours at the library, where he had a part-time job shelving books.

Jupiter and Pete watched Bob go. Then they started north, and before nine-thirty they had passed Malibu. They pedalled up a steep rise beyond the town, then sped down the other side towards the pier that was owned by the Denicola Sport Fishing Company.

The boys stopped on the shoulder of the road across from the Denicola pier. They had both seen the place thousands of times as they went up and down the highway, but neither had paid much attention until now. Before this morning, Denicola's had been simply another wide spot on the road where fishermen gathered. Some campers and vans were parked beside the highway now, and men and women were fishing off the beach to the south of the pier. Even in the chill spring wind, a few hardy people in wetsuits rode surfboards out where the breakers began to crest.

"Good surf today," said Pete, envy in his voice. Pete was an excellent surfer, and he would have loved to be out on his board.

But Jupe wasn't interested in the surf. He was studying the pier and the fishing boat that was tied up beside it. The boat was the Maria III. She was a sturdy, well-kept craft about fifteen metres long, with a wheelhouse for the pilot and open decks for the fishermen who chartered her. A hatch in the deck was open, and a young man in a blue windbreaker was peering down at the engine of the boat.

Tied to the north side of the pier, opposite the boat, was a raft with a gangway leading down to it. A rowboat was tied to the raft. In the deep water beyond the pier, the boys saw a sleek white motorboat moored to a buoy. The cockpit of the motorboat was covered with a tarpaulin.

"That must be Mr. Sebastian's speedboat," said Jupe.

"Um," said Pete. His eyes were fixed on the surfers.

"Want to stay there and keep an eye on the bikes?"

Again Pete said, "Um."

Jupe smiled, left his bike, and crossed the road.

A driveway led from the highway straight down to the pier. To the left of it was a small parking lot, empty at the moment. To the right, a spur of the driveway went to a house with faded grey shingles and white wooden trim. A station wagon stood in the carport next to the house. Between the house and the pier there was a tiny office cabin which had large windows on three sides and a door in the side nearest the dock. Through the office windows Jupe saw that a grey-haired woman in a black dress sat at a desk examining a ledger, while a younger woman with a mass of very curly red hair talked on a telephone.

Jupe went to the office, smiled through the glass at the red-haired woman, then opened the door and went in.

The office smelled of sea water and rubber boots and seaweed and mildew. There was a wooden bench against one wall, and a table with brochures about sport fishing and charter trips to the Channel Islands off the coast.

The red-haired woman covered the mouthpiece of the telephone with her hand. "Be with you in a minute," she said.

"No hurry," said Jupe.

The older woman looked up, and suddenly Jupe felt pierced by her gaze. A thrill of fright went through him. The woman's dark eyes were strangely knowing, as if she were aware of Jupe's thoughts. Yet her smile was absent-minded. She seemed unaware of the effect she was having on Jupe. After a glance at him, she went back to her ledger.

Uncomfortably, Jupe turned away and looked out at the dock. The young man in the windbreaker had finished checking the engine of the Maria III. He closed the hatch, jumped from the boat to the pier, then came whistling towards the office.

"Okay," said the red-haired woman. "We'll expect forty-three on Saturday. If there are any more, let me know, huh?"

She hung up as the man in the windbreaker came in. "Can I help you?" she said to Jupe.

"I was wondering if you've seen a wallet?" said Jupe. "Has anyone turned one in? Mr. Sebastian lost his wallet a day or two ago."

"Mr. Sebastian? Was he here recently? I didn't see him. Ernie, did you row him out to his boat? Want to check the rowboat? See if there's a wallet in there."

"There isn't," said the man in the windbreaker. "Mr. Sebastian was here two days ago. I bailed out the rowboat after I brought him back to the dock. I'd have found a wallet if he'd dropped it in the boat."

He looked at Jupe in a puzzled way. "How come Mr. Sebastian didn't come himself? Or telephone?"

"He's busy," said Jupe. "He was at a couple of places in the last two days, and he doesn't remember where he had the wallet last. I said I'd check for him. You get better results that way. If you just call, people don't always take time to look for lost things."

Jupe was about to go on to say that Mr. Sebastian had seen a man with grey hair and dark glasses and a scar on his face, but before he could describe the blind beggar, the older woman looked up at him.

"You ask about a wallet," she said. "That is strange. Last night I dreamed of a wallet."

The younger woman smiled. "My mother-in-law is a terrifying person," she told Jupiter. "She dreams dreams that sometimes come true."

"It is not I who am terrifying," said the older woman. There was a trace of accent in her speech, and it grew stronger now. "Sometimes the dreams make me afraid. Last night I dreamed that a man came who is a stranger. He picked up a wallet from the ground and put it in his pocket, fast.

"He was a strange man, that one. He had grey hair like my Vincenzo's hair before he died, but he was not small and old like Vincenzo. He was younger, and he had black glasses. On his face was a scar, like someone cut him once with a knife. He tapped his way with a stick like a blind man, but he knew that I was watching him. He was a danger to me, I knew. It was a bad dream, and very real."

She looked around to the younger woman. "It makes me uneasy, Eileen."

Next to Jupe there was a sound that was almost a gasp.

Jupe turned. Ernie had gone pale, and it seemed to Jupe that he shook slightly.

"What's the matter, Ernie?" said the younger woman. "Does that description fit anyone you know?"

"Oh, no!" Ernie spoke quickly and too loudly. "It's just scary when Mrs. Denicola does that."

"I know what you mean," said the younger woman.

No one spoke for a moment. Then Jupe thanked the two women and backed out of the office. He hurried across the highway to Pete, who was still watching the surfers in a dreamy way.

"We have just hit the jackpot!" said Jupe. "The old lady in the office there is Mrs. Denicola, and the younger woman is her daughter-in-law, and she says the old lady dreams true dreams."

"You mean she dreams about things that are going to happen?" said Pete.

"Maybe," said Jupe, "but she also dreams about things that have happened. She just dreamed of a man who found a wallet and put it in his pocket. He was a man who tapped his way with a stick-- a blind man. And he was a danger to her!"

Pete stared. "You made that up!" he accused.

"I didn't. I'm repeating exactly what she said. She's afraid, and so is that guy who was out on the boat when we first got here. Hearing about that dream scared him stiff. He knows something about the blind man, and he doesn't want anyone to know that he knows! He has something to do with our puzzle. I intend to find out what it is!"

Pete Gatecrashes a Meeting

IT WAS PETE who decided that he would stay near the Denicola pier and watch the man named Ernie.

"If he's up to something, we'd better find out what it is," said Pete, "and he's seen you. He'll think it's funny if you hang around. He hasn't seen me, so I can stick close. He'll never notice."

"Be careful," warned Jupe.

"You know I'll be careful--which is more than I can say for you!"

Jupe went off then, skimming down the highway, and Pete crossed the road to the beach. He wheeled his bicycle in under the pier, which near the water's edge was tall enough to stand up under, and locked it to one of the pilings. He was careful not to show any interest in Denicola's. Anyone watching him would think he was just another kid looking for a safe place to park his bike.

Pete moved down the beach a short distance, past some fishermen. Then he sat on the sand and looked out across the water towards the Maria III. Ernie was aboard the boat again. He was polishing the brass fittings.

The morning passed pleasantly enough. A group of children came to play in the sand near the pier. Pete found out they lived nearby and started questioning them. They told Pete that Ernie lived in the little house just up the highway, and that he had two friends who lived with him. They were men who spoke to each other in a foreign language. Pete was pleased with the information. He thought that Jupe couldn't have done any better.

Pete lunched on a sandwich which he bought in a small market down the highway from Denicola's. Then he returned to the beach and watched Ernie through the afternoon. Shortly after five, Ernie left the pier and started up the highway, walking on the shoulder of the road. Pete followed at a distance.

Ernie made straight for a dilapidated little house that stood with its face to the highway and its back extending out over the sand, supported by pilings. When he disappeared into the seedy, sagging cottage, Pete stood and wondered what to do next. How could he find out more about this man who might know the beggar?

A shabby old truck came rumbling up the highway. It pulled to the side of the road across from Ernie's cottage, and a young man got out of the cab. He waved and called out thanks to the driver, then crossed the road and went into the house. The truck went on its way.

A few minutes later a third young man appeared on the scene. This one was driving an ancient Buick. He parked it in a weed-choked patch of level ground next to the house, then went into the house and slammed the door.

There were few fishermen left on the beach now. The sun was dipping towards the west. Pete decided that he would watch for ten more minutes, and then he would get his bike and go home.

No sooner had he made the decision than the door of Ernie's cottage opened. Ernie and the other two men came out and headed down the highway. Pete trailed after them. The men passed Denicola's, then crossed the road and began trudging up a winding driveway. It led to a building that stood atop the cliffs and overlooked the sea. A sign on the hillside announced that this was the Oceanview Motel.

Ernie had his friends had reached the top of the hill when a car turned into the motel driveway and climbed the grade. A second car arrived and followed the first one up the hill, and a third car stopped beside the road. A man and a woman got out of that car and started up the drive on foot, just as two young men on motorcycles roared up the incline.

Pete watched and wondered. When a van loaded with young people pulled to the side of the road, he decided to act. He crossed the highway as a small sedan parked. A middle-aged couple got out, accompanied by a pair of teenage boys. The man and woman started up the driveway and the boys trailed after them. Pete fell into step a few yards behind the boys.

He followed the family to the top of the hill and around behind the motel to the parking lot and pool area. The doors of the motel rooms all opened on to the back. Above them, lights already beamed out from under the eaves. Rows of folding chairs had been set out on the decking around the pool and in part of the black-topped parking area. Beyond the pool was a clear area where Ernie and his two friends were putting up huge easels and mounting great photographic blow-ups on them. One black and white portrait photograph showed a white-haired man who wore an elaborate uniform which was heavy with braid. A colour picture showed a city that was golden with sunlight. The third picture made Pete gasp. It was a photograph of a man who had shaggy grey hair, a scar that ran from his cheekbone to his chin, and eyes covered by dark glasses. He looked just like the blind beggar Bob had described.

Pete began to feel nervous. He had no right to be here. He felt a strong urge to flee, but he knew Jupe would never forgive him. Some kind of meeting was going to take place, and it might tell him who the scar-faced man was. The meeting seemed to be free; no one was taking tickets. And no one was paying any attention to Pete. He guessed that he could safely stay if he kept quiet and pretended to belong.

He sat down on one of the folding chairs, and managed a friendly smile when a stout man, who was breathing heavily after the climb up the hill, sat down next to him.

More and more people came. When the chairs were filled, people sat on the steps outside the motel office and on the wall at one side of the swimming-pool area. No lights showed inside the motel, and Pete wondered if the place was open only in the summertime.

It was nearly dark when Ernie stood up at a small lectern which had been placed in front of the row of photographs. One of Ernie's friends came marching from behind the motel office with a flag made of blue satin edged with gold. There was a cluster of golden oak leaves in the centre of the banner.

A woman in the audience began to sing. Another woman joined her, then a man. Soon everyone was standing and singing. The music swelled and grew majestic. Pete stood up and pretended to sing. He'd never heard the tune before, but it sounded like a battle hymn or an anthem. When the music ended, the singers sat down with much coughing and scraping of chairs, and Ernie stepped back away from the lectern.

An older man came to the lectern and began to speak in Spanish. Pete groaned silently. He didn't understand Spanish! If only Jupe were here!

At first the speaker's voice was subdued. Soon it became stronger. The man waved a raised fist as if he were angry with the crowd, or with someone who was just beyond the circle of light there at the top of the hill.

There were cheers when the man finished speaking and stepped back from the lectern. Then a young woman with long, straight blonde hair came out of the audience. She stood before the crowd and shouted something that sounded like a slogan. People clapped and whistled, and some stamped their feet.

The woman held up her hands and the audience grew quiet. She began to speak. She was fiery, almost dancing in the glare of the floodlights, gesturing to the photographs behind her. Every time she pointed to the picture of the man with the scar, there was a new roar from the crowd.

There were more cheers and whistles when she finished. Ernie came back to the lectern, and gradually the crowd became quiet. Then, to Pete's horror, Ernie began to single out people in the audience, pointing, urging them to get up and speak. One by one they did, always speaking in Spanish. First there was a man in the first row, then a woman halfway back in the crowd, then a boy who sat on the motel steps. As each one got up, Ernie shouted encouragement, applauding and laughing.

Then Ernie was pointing to Pete, and the men and women around Pete were looking at him.

Pete shook his head, but the man who sat on his right tugged at Pete's elbow and gestured to him to stand.

Slowly, as if he were caught in a nightmare, Pete got to his feet. He knew he had to think fast, but his brain was frozen.

Ernie said something, and there was laughter in the crowd. Then there was silence. Pete saw faces, all of them turned towards him, waiting.

Pete wanted to run. He wanted to get away, out of the crowd and down the drive, before these people found out that he was a spy.

The man next to Pete said something softly. Was it just a question? Or was it a threat?

Suddenly Pete put his hand to his throat. He opened his mouth and pointed and made a sound that was half-gasp and half-gurgle. Then he shook his head.

"Aha!" said the man next to him. "Laryngitis!"

Pete nodded, forcing a smile. There was laughter and Pete sat, weak with relief. His neighbour patted him sympathetically. The crowd turned away. Ernie made some remark and pointed to another person in the audience, and that person stood and spoke. At last Ernie and one of his friends began to pass a basket down the rows of chairs. The young woman with the blonde hair spoke again, evidently urging the audience to be generous.

The basket was heaped with paper money when it reached Pete. He put a dollar on top of the pile and passed it along. And then someone called out from the top of the driveway, and the basket was whisked out of sight.

There was a shuffle and a rush, and Ernie and two other men were suddenly seated in front of the audience with guitars and an accordion. Ernie struck a chord on his guitar. The accordionist began to play and the blonde young woman sang softly.

The audience joined in a melody that was sweet and simple, like a country song sung by children.

Pete heard the roar of a motorcycle. He turned as a uniformed highway patrolman sped up the drive.

The singers wavered and the song died.

The highway patrolman left his motorcycle and went to clear the area near the lectern. "Sorry to interrupt you folks," he said. "Who's in charge here?"

"I am." Ernie stood up. "What's the matter? We have permission from Mr. Sanderson to rehearse here."

"Sanderson?" The highway patrolman looked towards the motel office. "He the guy who owns this place?"

"That's right. We rented the community room from him. Want to see the receipt?"

"No. I believe you. But this isn't the community room, and didn't Sanderson--or somebody--tell you the motel is unsafe? Why do you suppose it's closed? The ground is unstable after all the rain, and the hill can slide any minute. What are you doing here, anyway? Who are all these people?"

Ernie's smile was beautifully innocent. "We're the Sunset Hills Music Federation," he said. "We're practising for the Country Music Jamboree at the Coliseum on the twenty-seventh."

The officer stared at the audience. "All of you?" he said. "You're all rehearsing for this . . . this jamboree?"

"The Country Music Jamboree is for large amateur groups," said Ernie patiently, "and yes, Mr. Sanderson did say the hill was unstable. But it was too late to cancel the rehearsal, and some people here come from as far away as Laguna, so we decided to practise out here in the open. It's safer. Even if the motel goes, nobody will get hurt, huh?"

"Don't count on it," said the highway patrolman. He raised his voice. "Sorry, folks, but I've got to ask you all to leave just as quickly as you can. Don't panic, but there is some risk, so don't delay. Come on now. Move out, please. Never mind about the chairs. Just leave them and go."

The crowd began to stream out, quietly and in good order. As Pete started down the hill, he heard Ernie saying to the officer, "Well, okay, but give me a chance to pack my guitar, will you?"

Pete shook his head in amazement. He could only think, wait till Jupe hears about this!

New Leads

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT they were up to," said Pete, "but I'll bet my entire allowance for April that it had nothing to do with folk singing."

It was the next morning, and Pete sat on the floor of Headquarters. He scowled fiercely at nothing in particular.

"I won't take your bet," said Jupe. He had the entertainment section of the Los Angeles Times open on the desk in front of him. "There's a livestock show at the Coliseum on the twenty-seventh."

Bob sat on a stool near the curtain that separated the office in the trailer from Jupe's crime laboratory. He had been discouraged when he returned from Santa Monica the day before, for he had been able to learn nothing more about the blind man. Now, having heard Pete's story, his spirits were high. He held a world atlas on his lap, and was slowly turning the pages.

"The flag they used at that rehearsal or rally or whatever it was--it isn't the Mexican flag," he reported. "The flag of Mexico is red and white and green. And it isn't the Spanish flag, and it doesn't belong to any of the Central American countries."

"Maybe it isn't the flag of a country at all," said Jupe. "Maybe it's the banner of some organization."

But then Bob said "Aha!" loudly, and Jupe sat up straight.

Bob studied a page in the atlas for a moment, and then looked up. "Mesa d'Oro," he said. "It's a small South American country. There are two flags shown next to the map. One is green with a state seal in the centre and one is blue with a cluster of gold oak leaves. The green one is the official flag of the country; the blue one is the flag of something the atlas calls the Old Republic. There's a note that the blue flag is still used in some remote provinces and by some conservative groups on special holidays."

Bob looked down at the atlas again. "Mesa d'Oro has seaports on the Pacific," he told his friends. "It exports coffee and wool. Barley is grown in the uplands south of the capital, which is a port named Cabo de Razon. Population is three and a half million."

"That's it?" said Pete.

"An atlas doesn't give a lot of information," said Bob. "Just maps and population and stuff like that."

"Very curious!" said Jupiter. "A rally of some sort at which money is collected--possibly money for a small South American country. The leaders of the meeting are furtive; they lie to the highway patrolman when he appears. A huge photograph of the blind beggar is displayed, and the man who is leading the meeting is the same one who reacted with alarm--or at least with strong emotion--when Mrs. Denicola told of a dream in which a blind man appeared and picked up a wallet.

"What were those people really doing last night? Did they have anything to do with the robbery or do we have a separate puzzle here? Certainly they didn't want the police to know the purpose of their gathering."

"They couldn't have been planning any crime," said Bob. "That would be ridiculous. Not with so many people, and not without any security. Pete just walked in and sat down and was accepted."

Jupe frowned and pulled at his lip--a sure sign that he was trying hard to find the answer to a question.

"Maybe the man whose picture I saw last night isn't the same man Bob saw outside the bank," said Pete. "Maybe it's a different blind man."

"That would be too much of a coincidence," said Jupe quickly. "There is the scar, and there is the fact that Mr. Sebastian must have dropped his wallet near Denicola's pier, and the fact that Ernie recognized the description of the blind man when Mrs. Denicola told about her dream. It must be the same man. But what does he have to do with a country called Mesa d'Oro? And does he have anything at all to do with a bank robbery in Santa Monica?"

"Maybe Ernie is a foreign agent and the blind man is his contact," Pete said. "If Ernie is really a spy, he wouldn't want the highway patrol to know, so he'd pretend to be something else--like a folk singer."

"You watch television too much," said Bob. "In real life, people don't act like that."

"I think that in real life people behave in ways that are even more fantastic," said Jupe. "But we don't know enough yet about Ernie--or anyone--to understand what's going on in this case. Fortunately, Pete's adventure last night gives us some new leads to investigate. Mesa d'Oro, for one. We've got to keep digging until we find something that will clear Mr. Bonestell."

Bob said, "I'm due at my job at the library at ten. I'll look up Mesa d'Oro there and see what I can find out."

"Jupiter!" It was Aunt Mathilda calling from somewhere in the salvage yard. "Jupiter Jones, where are you?"

Pete grinned. "Aunt Mathilda sounds as if she really means it," he said. "She wants you--on the double!"

Bob opened a trapdoor in the floor of the trailer, and a moment later the boys had lowered themselves through it. Beneath the old mobile home was the end of a large corrugated iron pipe which was padded inside with pieces of discarded carpeting. This was Tunnel Two. It ran through heaps of neglected lumber and other junk to Jupe's outdoor workshop. It was only one of several hidden passageways that the boys had rigged up so that they could go in and out of Headquarters without being seen by Aunt Mathilda or Uncle Titus.

It took the Three Investigators only moments to crawl the length of Tunnel Two, push aside an iron grating that covered the exit from the pipe into the workshop, and emerge into the open.

"Jupiter Jones!" Aunt Mathilda was very close now.

Jupe hastily pulled the grating over the pipe.

"There you are!" said Aunt Mathilda. She had appeared at the entrance to the workshop. "Why didn't you answer when I called? Hans needs you. He has to make a delivery. You go along, too, Pete, as long as you're here. There's some furniture--you know those tables and benches that your Uncle Titus painted blue and red and green and yellow? What gets into that man sometimes I can't imagine. But a woman was in yesterday and bought the lot of them. She's opening a nursery school in Santa Monica, on Dalton Avenue. Thank heaven for nursery schools, or we'd have that furniture forever. Bob, where are you going?"

"My job," said Bob quickly. "I'm due at my job in the library in ten minutes."

"Then don't dilly-dally," ordered Aunt Mathilda.

She bustled away, and Jupe and Pete went to look for Hans, one of the two Bavarian brothers who worked in the salvage yard. In a very short time they had helped Hans load the nursery furniture on to a salvage-yard truck and were headed south, with Hans at the wheel.

The Children's World Day Nursery was on a side street near the ocean front in Santa Monica. When Hans pulled to the curb in front of the place, the boys saw that the Ocean Front Senior Citizens' Centre was just beyond. It was a one-storey brick building surrounded by lawns and benches. Four elderly men were playing shuffleboard in front. One of the men stood leaning on his stick, watching the other players. He looked weary and discouraged, and Jupe sighed when he saw him.

It was Walter Bonestell.

Pete pointed. "He doesn't look as if he's slept a lot, does he?"

Jupe shook his head.

"Is it my imagination," said Pete, "or are those other guys ignoring him?"

"Perhaps they are," said Jupe. "That's the trouble with being under suspicion. People don't really know how to behave with you."

"You know that man?" asked Hans, curious.

"He's a client," said Jupe. "I should go and talk with him, but I really have nothing to tell him. We are trying to help him."

"Then he will be all right," Hans declared.

Hans climbed out of the truck and marched up to the door of the nursery school. While he waited for someone to answer the bell, Pete looked ahead, beyond the senior citizens' centre, and suddenly gasped.

"What's the matter?" asked Jupe.

"That girl!" Pete pointed, then slid down in the cab of the truck so that he could not be seen from the outside.

Jupe saw a remarkably pretty young woman come striding along the sidewalk. Her long blonde hair bobbed with each step she took. She wore slacks and a huge, shapeless sweater, and a Saint Bernard dog trotted beside her with his mouth open and his tongue lolling out.

"Who is it?" said Jupiter. "Do you know her?"

"The girl at the meeting," said Pete. "You know, the one who got up and made that speech? Everybody cheered for her?"

"Hm!" Jupe sat up straighter, taking in every detail of the young woman's dress and her walk. "She looks very . . . very friendly," he said. "In fact, she's giving Mr. Bonestell a hug."

"What?" Pete straightened up and stared.

The blonde girl let go of the dog's leash. She stood with her arm around Walter Bonestell's shoulders and smiled warmly at him. Then she kissed Mr. Bonestell on the cheek.

Mr. Bonestell flushed and looked pleased.

"That's it!" crowed Pete. "There's the link between Mr. Bonestell and the bank robbery and that bunch of people at Denicola's pier and . . . and Mr. Sebastian's wallet and the blind man!"

"That girl is the link between all of those things?" said Jupe.

"Sure," Pete declared. "It's simple. The girl is a member of the gang, see, and she gets to know Mr. Bonestell and she pumps him about the bank--the routine there and the cleaning people and all. The blind man is the boss of the gang, and he acts as the lookout before the others rob the bank. The girl could be one of the robbers, couldn't she? She could be wearing a disguise when she went into the bank so Mr. Bonestell wouldn't recognize her. Or she could just be an informer."

"You mean informant," said Jupe absently. He was busily examining Pete's theory. "It's possible," he said. "But what about all the other people who attended that meeting last night?"

"Why they're . . . they're . . ." Pete stopped, at a loss. "They're innocent dupes?" he ventured. "The crooks are using them to . . . to . . ."

Again Pete fell silent.

"The crooks took up a collection last night because people who have just stolen a quarter of a million dollars from a bank need more money," suggested Jupe.

"Well, I know it sounds dumb," said Pete.

"Actually, it doesn't sound that dumb," said Jupe. "It is yet another remarkable coincidence that the girl who had such a prominent role in last night's performance seems to know Walter Bonestell rather well. When he is alone, we must ask Mr. Bonestell how much information he has given her about the bank."

The blonde girl was laughing now. Her dog had tangled his leash in a hibiscus bush, and she went to rescue him.

"You stay here and help Hans," said Jupe softly. "I'm going to follow that girl and see where she lives and who her friends are. Psst, get down! Here she comes."

Pete slid down below the dashboard so the girl couldn't see him. "Come on, boy!" Pete heard the girl say, and she walked past the truck, her heels clicking on the sidewalk.

Jupe waited for a moment, then slipped out of the truck and took off after the girl.

9

The Makeup Artist

JUPE LAGGED half a block behind the blonde girl, but when she reached the end of the street and turned to the right, he stepped along a bit faster. He reached the corner in time to see her go into the courtyard of an older apartment building partway down the block.

Jupe walked slowly down the street. The building the girl had entered was built around three sides of a swimming pool. A white-painted iron fence protected the fourth side of the pool from the street. Jupe did not see the girl, but an apartment door on the first floor of the building stood open. As Jupe hesitated outside the fence, the Saint Bernard came bounding out of the door.

"Brandy, you come back here!"

The girl dashed out and the dog retreated to the far side of the pool, where he sat down in a flower bed.

"Monster!" she cried. "Want to get me thrown out of here?"

Jupe quietly opened the gate in the fence and stepped into the courtyard. He stood gazing thoughtfully at the bank of mailboxes beside the gate.

"You looking for someone?" asked the girl.

"N-not exactly," said Jupe. "I was wondering . . ." He paused as if he were afraid to ask a question.

"What?" said the girl.

"I was wondering if . . . if you'd like to subscribe to the Santa Monica Evening Outlook?"

"Sorry," said the girl. "I don't have time for a daily paper. Thanks anyway."

Jupe produced a small pad and a stub of pencil from his pocket. "How about the Sunday edition?" he said.

"Thanks, but no thanks," said the girl.

"Oh." Jupe looked downcast. "Hardly anyone wants to take a newspaper anymore," he said.

"Times are tough." The girl smiled at him. The dog, unwilling to be ignored, came out of the flower bed and sat down on her feet. She rubbed his ears. "Are you working your way through school?" she asked Jupiter. "Or will you win a ten-speed bike if you get a hundred subscriptions?"

"Neither," said Jupe. "I'm just trying to get a paper route and earn some money. Do you suppose there's anybody else here who might like the paper?"

"Nobody else is home right now," said the girl. "Not on a Thursday. Everyone works."

"Oh." Jupe let the corners of his mouth droop, and he sat down gingerly on the edge of one of the chairs that faced the pool. "Delivering papers is easy," he said sadly. "Selling them is the hard part. Would you . . . that is, could you . . . could you . . ."

"Could I what?" said the girl. "What's the matter? Are you okay?"

"Oh, yes. I'm just thirsty. Do you suppose you could let me have a glass of water?"

She laughed. "No problem. Just sit right there. I'll be back in a second."

She disappeared into the open apartment, and the big dog followed her. She was back in a few moments with water in a tall tumbler. As she came out she shut the door, closing the dog inside.

"I should always ignore him," she said. "He only gets out of hand when I try to make him behave."

Jupe thanked the girl and sipped the water. The girl sat down in a chair near him and leaned back to catch the sun on her face.

"You should do your selling at night when people are home," she said.

"Guess so," said Jupiter. He gazed at the girl as if he weren't too bright. "Still, you'd think a few people would be around. Like you. You're home."

"Not often," said the girl.

"Oh," said Jupe. "You work, too?"

"Sure. But not right now."

"Oh?" Jupe looked distressed. "Did you lose your job?"

"No. Not at all. I work in the motion-picture industry, and that's an on-again, off-again sort of thing. I do makeup, and when a picture is in production, I work. When it isn't, I don't."

Jupe nodded. "I have a friend whose dad works for the movies. He does special effects."

"What's his name?" said the girl. "Maybe I know him."

"Crenshaw," said Jupe.

She shook her head. "Doesn't ring a bell. Guess we haven't been on any of the same pictures. Those special effects people are really something. Sometimes I think I should forget about makeup and try to get into effects. On the other hand, I do okay with makeup, and I still have time for my courses."

"You're going to school?" said Jupe.

"Not exactly. I take lessons--acting lessons--with Vladimir Dubronski. In case . . . you know . . . I get a chance for a part."

Jupe nodded. He tried to look sleepy, but his brain was racing.

"I guess everybody wants to act," he said. "But makeup can be terrific. I saw a picture last week about this guy who stole an idol out of a temple, so he had a curse put on him."

"Oh," said the girl. "One of those. I suppose he turned into a turnip when the moon was full, or something."

Jupe laughed. "He turned into a snake, only he still looked like a man."

"Oh, yes," said the girl. "The Invasion of the Cobra Men, wasn't it? They made that picture for about thirty-seven cents, but it wasn't too bad. I know the guy who did the makeup for the snakeman. Arnold Heckaby. He's really into that sort of thing. One of these days he'll get a big budget picture and then he'll probably be up for an Academy Award."

"Did you ever do any of that special makeup?" Jupe asked. "I mean, making somebody look like a bat or a werewolf or anything like that?"

"I've made a few people look older than they really are," said the girl. "That takes more time than regular makeup, but it isn't really hard. I've never done a monster or a werewolf."

"Is it hard to do monsters?" said Jupe. "What about scars? Remember the story about the wax museum where the villain was all scarred?"

The girl shrugged. "It takes time," she said. "Given enough time, you can do almost anything. Except you can't make old people look young. You can age a young person, but once an actor gets really old, well, they're old. You can help a little bit, and of course lots of them get face lifts or have tucks taken in their chins, and they dye their hair and the cameraman shoots them with a soft focus, but eventually they're just too old to play young romantic leads anymore."

Jupiter's glass was almost empty. He'd asked for water so he'd have an excuse to sit around talking, and he now decided he'd learned enough. Finishing the water in a gulp, he set the glass down on the small table beside his chair.

"Thanks very much," he said. "That was good."

"Okay," she said. "Want some more?"

"No thanks. I'm going to tell Mr. Crenshaw I met you. Maybe you'll meet him sometime when you're working on a picture."

"Your friend's dad?" she said. "The one who does special effects? That would be nice."

"What should I say your name is?" Jupe asked.

"Graciela Montoya," said the girl, "but everyone calls me Grade."

"Okay," said Jupe. "Thanks again for the water."

He went out through the gate and headed back to the nursery school, pleased with the results of his dumb-kid act. But when he rounded the corner on to Dalton Avenue, he stopped and groaned.

Hans and Pete and the truck were gone! Jupe would have to get back to Rocky Beach as best he could.

"Blast!" he said out loud. Then he set out for Wilshire, where he could get the bus. As he went his head buzzed with a new idea.

10

The Terrorists

JUPITER SAT BEHIND THE DESK in Headquarters and looked at his two friends. It was after lunch, and he had just finished relating his talk with Graciela Montoya.

"Just suppose," said Jupe, "that the blind beggar is a woman."

Bob thought about this for an instant, then shook his head. "No. I don't think so."

"But isn't it a possibility?" said Jupe. "She's a makeup artist and she seems to be very friendly with Mr. Bonestell. Pete, perhaps you're right. Perhaps Grade Montoya is the link between the beggar and the robbers and the crew at Denicola's."

"She isn't the beggar," insisted Bob. "The blind man had whiskers. I was standing right behind him at the bus stop, looking down at his face. He hadn't shaved for a couple of days. Would a makeup artist bother with whiskers?"

"Hm!" said Jupe. He looked disappointed. "Still, the girl might have pumped Mr. Bonestell for information and then passed it along to the robbers--one of whom might have been the blind man. The scar--"

"The scar is a fake," said Bob.

"Oh?" Jupe grinned. "You found something at the library."

"I sure did," said Bob. He had been holding a Manila envelope on his lap. Now he took copies of several news magazines out of it.

"Mesa d'Oro is an interesting little country," he said. "Only fifteen thousand square miles and less than four million people, but it's had its share of trouble."

Bob opened one of the magazines to a place he had marked with a slip of paper. "Here's a recap of its history in World Affairs, from three years ago," he said. "As you'd suppose, the country was once a Spanish colony. Then in about 1815 the landowners threw out the Spanish governor and declared the country's independence. They elected a president and formed a legislature."

"That's nice," said Pete. "And what does that have to do with blind men and bank robbers?"

"Maybe nothing," said Bob. "It's background. Now, in 1872 there was a revolution. People got killed, and they're still getting killed today!"

Pete and Jupe both sat up straight.

"A revolution that started in 1872 is still going on?" cried Pete. "You've got to be kidding!"

"Well, yes and no," said Bob. "The revolution of 1872 was something like the French Revolution or the revolution in Russia in 1917. The landowners in Mesa d'Oro--the ones who had thrown out the Spanish governor--they'd become corrupt. They got rich on the labour of the poor people and didn't give anything in return. Most of the poor people were descended from the Indians who had owned the country in the first place, but the landowners didn't think they were important.

"Finally an Indian named Juan Corso began to get his own people organized. He went around the country giving speeches about rights for everyone. The landowners didn't like this at all, so they tossed Corso in jail."

"You said something about a revolution," reminded Jupe.

"Jailing Corso was the start of it," explained Bob. "Corso was very popular with the common people. They got mad and stormed the capital. They freed Corso from prison, and then hanged the president, a guy named Arturo Rodriguez from a tree. The president's son, Anastasio Rodriguez, fought back. There was a lot of bloodshed, and the government changed hands several times, but finally Corso was made president and Rodriguez fled to Mexico City.

"Now that should have been the end of that," continued Bob, "but it wasn't. Rodriguez sat in Mexico City and began acting like an exiled king. Meanwhile the landowners left in Mesa d'Oro weren't a bit happy because the labourers now had the vote and made the rich people pay heavy taxes."

"Must have been frustrating," said Pete.

"You bet it was," said Bob. "Anyhow, the landowners started talking about the good old days when Arturo Rodriguez was president, and how nice it would be to bring Rodriguez' son back. They called themselves Soldiers of the Republic. They used the blue flag with the golden oak leaves as their banner. That was the flag of the Old Republic--the government that existed under Rodriguez. The new government that began with Juan Corso used a green flag with a seal in the middle."

Jupiter frowned. "All of this took place more than a hundred years ago," he pointed out. "What could it possibly have to do with our client? Don't tell me the landowners are still agitating for a return of the old president's son. He must be dead by now!"

"Well of course he is," said Bob, "but today his great-grandson, Felipe Rodriguez, lives in Mexico City. This Felipe is waiting for a chance to return to Mesa d'Oro and be the head of the state. He has spies who report to him on conditions in his homeland--which he's never seen!"

"Oh, come on!" cried Pete.

"I know it sounds fantastic," said Bob, "but it's all true. World Affairs says that the conflict in Mesa d'Oro is called a traditional cause. The side a citizen is on depends on his family. Descendants of the old landowners become Soldiers of the Republic. That isn't an outlaw party. It's recognized, and the members are called Republicans--not that they're much like our Republicans. On Sundays they have rallies and they make speeches about how great it used to be. They manage to elect a representative to the legislature every now and then.

"Now if that's all there was to it, nobody would care. But some people in Mesa d'Oro aren't satisfied just to be Soldiers of the Republic. There's an extremist group of Republicans that wants to throw out the present government by force. They call themselves the Freedom Brigade, and they are outlaws. They stir up riots and kidnap people and blow things up. And when the police get too close, they flee the country--and some of them come here!"

Pete gulped. "Do you mean to tell me that those people I was with last night are a bunch of terrorists?"

"Perhaps," said Bob. "Perhaps not. There are a lot of expatriates from Mesa d'Oro who live in the United States. Some of them support the Soldiers of the Republic--the legal, nonviolent party. They contribute money to help Rodriguez in Mexico City, for instance, and to try to elect Republicans in Mesa d'Oro. But some of them do support the outlaw Freedom Brigade."

"Oh, great!" exclaimed Pete.

"Okay. So much for ancient history," said Bob. "What's really interesting is that I saw a blind man outside the bank and he ran when the police were mentioned. Then that guy named Ernie got scared when old Mrs. Denicola mentioned a dream about the blind man and the wallet. And then last night Pete saw a photograph of a man with a scar and dark glasses. He was definitely a hero to the people at that rally or meeting or whatever it was."

Bob turned back the pages of one of the magazines he had brought from the library. He held up the magazine, and Jupe and Pete stared at a picture of a man with dark glasses and a scar. The man stood at a microphone, his arm upraised. He looked as if he were shouting.

"Pete, was this the photograph you saw?" said Bob.

"It's . . . it's not the same picture," said Pete, "but it's the same man. Yes. I'm sure it is!"

"And it's the man I saw outside the bank," said Bob. "And yet I couldn't possibly have seen this man. This is a picture of Luis Pascal Dominguez de Altranto. At one time he was an aide to the Felipe Rodriguez who is in Mexico City right now. He was a terrorist. He masterminded a bombing in Mesa d'Oro that killed fourteen schoolchildren. He claimed that justice was on his side, and that the blood of the innocent children was on the heads of the government which takes away property from his countrymen."

"A fanatic," said Jupe. "A real fanatic. But why can't he be the same person you saw outside the bank?"

"Because Altranto is dead!" said Bob. "He's been dead for several years."

No one spoke for a moment or two. Then Pete sighed. "But if Altranto is dead . . ." He didn't finish the sentence.

"The beggar looked exactly like a dead man--even to the scar? And the blindness? Was Altranto blind?" asked Jupe.

"Yes. He was blinded in a fire he set himself in a warehouse in Mesa d'Oro. The handicap didn't stop him. In fact, it helped make him sort of a hero."

"So the beggar was disguised to look like Altranto," said Jupe. "All it took was makeup and a pair of dark glasses. I wonder if Gracie Montoya was the artist behind the disguise? But . . . but why was there a disguise? What was gained by it? There was no one--"

Jupe stopped in mid-sentence. The telephone on the desk was ringing. He glared at it, annoyed by the interruption. Then he picked it up.

"Hello," he said. "Oh. Oh, yes, Mr. Bonestell."

Jupe listened for a minute, then said, "Well, it may not mean a thing, but it could be disturbing. I can come over if you want me to. I'd like to talk to you about . . . about a new element that has been introduced into the case."

Jupe listened for another minute, then said, "Yes. It will take me about half an hour."

He put the receiver back in its cradle.

"Mr. Bonestell has been questioned again about the robbery," he said. "He's very upset. I doubt that the police are really as suspicious as he thinks, but I'll go see him and try to make him feel better. I'll also ask him about Grade Montoya. We need to learn how well he knows her."

Jupe looked eagerly at Bob and Pete. "We also need to keep her under surveillance. I wonder if she's in close contact with the group at Denicola's--Ernie and his friends."

"Don't look at me," said Pete. "My mother is going to do something really desperate if I don't mow the lawn this afternoon. Our grass grew about six inches in all that rain we had last week. Anyway, that girl might recognize me."

"Bob?" said Jupe.

"I can watch the girl's house," Bob said. "They don't need me at the library this afternoon."

"Better watch out," warned Pete. "If these people think it's okay to go around bombing and killing . . . you don't want to mess with them."

11

Attack!

WHEN JUPITER RAPPED at Mr. Bonestell's door half an hour later, Shelby Tuckerman let him in. He was wearing a black turtleneck shirt and his wrap-around sunglasses.

"Ah, good!" said Shelby. "Our super-sleuth! Maybe you can think of something encouraging to say to Walter."

Jupe felt a twinge of anger, but he said nothing. He followed Shelby through the dustless and orderly living room to the kitchen. Walter Bonestell was there, sitting at the table near the

window and stirring a cup of coffee. Jupe sat down across from him. Shelby offered Jupe some coffee, which Jupe politely refused. "I don't drink coffee," he said.

"Of course," said Tuckerman. "I forget. Kids don't, do they, in this country."

"We have some grape soda," said Mr. Bonestell.

"I don't need anything, thank you, Mr. Bonestell," said Jupe. "I had lunch just a little while ago."

"Aren't kids always supposed to be stuffing themselves on junk food?" said Shelby. "Don't tell me you're an exception. You don't look like one!"

Jupe gritted his teeth. He was overweight, and he was sensitive about it. But he wasn't about to show his annoyance to Shelby.

"I suppose you do diet . . . now and then," said Shelby.

Jupe held his tongue, and Shelby turned to the stove, where the kettle was beginning to sing. He made a cup of instant coffee for himself, then sat down between Mr. Bonestell and Jupe. There was a sugar bowl with a lid in the centre of the table. Shelby reached for the bowl and spooned a bit of sugar into his coffee.

"I hope you have some progress to report to Mr. Bonestell," he said.

"Not really," said Jupe. "We have a lead, but it may not pan out."

"And if it does?" said Shelby.

"Who knows? Perhaps we'll share it with the police."

"The right thing to do, of course," said Shelby. He drank his coffee down then, and got up to rinse his cup out at the sink. He went out and Jupe heard a car start in the driveway. Then Shelby drove past the kitchen window in a late-model sports car.

Mr. Bonestell sat brooding.

"When the police were here earlier, they weren't accusing, were they?" asked Jupe.

Mr. Bonestell shook his head. "Not really. But they made me tell what happened three times. Three times, right from the beginning!"

He looked up at Jupe. "Do you suppose they were waiting for me to make a mistake? I . . . I don't think I made any mistakes."

"If you told your story just as it happened, how could you make mistakes?" asked Jupe reasonably. "Mr. Bonestell, are you sure you're not getting upset about nothing? It was unfortunate that you were alone at the bank when the thieves came, but that's only an unhappy accident. I'm sure the police understand that. They know that the robbery would have taken place no matter who was there. At least the robbers weren't violent."

"No, they weren't," said Mr. Bonestell. "Actually, they were quiet and polite. At least the one who did all the talking was polite."

Jupe pricked up his ears. "One of them did all the talking?"

"Yes. The one who was gotten up to look like Rolf, the regular cleaning man."

"Don't you really mean that he did most of the talking?" asked Jupe. "He gave the orders, and the others didn't say anything important. Isn't that it?"

Mr. Bonestell shook his head. "No. He did all the talking. The others didn't say anything at all."

"You spent an entire night with three people, and two of them didn't talk at all?"

"That's right."

"Not one word?"

"Not one word," said Mr. Bonestell. "Now that I think of it, it does seem strange, but at the time it didn't strike me as odd. What was there to talk about? It was just a matter of waiting until morning, when the rest of the bank staff came in."

"Hm!" said Jupe. "Could one of the robbers have been a woman? Is that possible?"

"A woman?" Mr. Bonestell looked startled. "I suppose it's possible. They were all about the same size--about five foot seven or so. They all had on baggy overalls and loose shirts. And gloves. They wore gloves. And they had so much stuff on their faces, you couldn't tell what they really looked like. One of the silent ones had those sunglasses that reflect everything, so you can never see the person's eyes behind them. That one also had a beard that I think was fake. The other one had a red wig and a big moustache, and big, bushy fake eyebrows that hung over his eyes."

"What about the man who did the talking?" said Jupe. "Did he have an accent? Was he young? Old? What could you tell about him?"

"His voice didn't sound like an older man's voice. I think he was young. In his twenties or thirties. With no accent."

Jupe said, "Hm!" again, and sat thinking for some time. Then he said, "Mr. Bonestell, do you know the Denicola Sport Fishing Company? They run a charter fishing boat out of the dock up the coast past Malibu."

"Yes, I know the Denicolas," said Mr. Bonestell. "I used to go fishing with my son before he was married. I remember the old woman there--old Mrs. Denicola. She was a handsome lady. And her daughter-in-law, Eileen. Irish. Pretty. Eileen's husband died young, and she got her own master's licence. Did you know that? She's the pilot when the boat goes out."

"There's a young man named Ernie who works for the Denicolas," said Jupe.

"Is that so? When my son and I went fishing, there was a young man named Tom or Hal or something like that. They probably change pretty often. It's the kind of job boys have when they're still in school."

"You haven't been to Denicola's recently?" said Jupe.

"No."

"So you don't know Ernie. What about the blind man?"

Mr. Bonestell looked blank. "A blind man?" he said. "What blind man?"

"You haven't seen anyone near the bank--or anywhere else--who is blind? A man with a scar on his face? He taps his way with a cane and wears dark glasses."

Mr. Bonestell shook his head.

"There's a pretty girl who talked with you this morning when you were playing shuffleboard," said Jupe. "What about her?"

"Grade? Gracie Montoya? What about her? And how did you know that I talked with her this morning?"

"We just happened to see you," said Jupe, "and we saw Miss Montoya."

Mr. Bonestell looked at Jupe in a defiant way. "What about it?" he demanded. "A pretty girl comes along and I talk to her. I may be old, but I'm not dead yet!"

"I didn't think you were, Mr. Bonestell, but we have to check everything out. Do you know her well?"

"I've talked to her quite a lot," said Mr. Bonestell. His tone was still defiant. "She walks her dog around the block all the time. I think she does some kind of work for the movies. She's a nice girl--always willing to stop and spend a few minutes."

"Does she know that you work at the bank?" Jupe asked.

"I'm not sure. I may have mentioned it. But she's never made a point of finding out anything, if that's what you're getting at. She's just friendly."

"I see," said Jupe. "And what about your other friends, Mr. Bonestell? Have you talked with them about your job?"

"I suppose I have. But I can't recall anybody being especially interested in what I do."

"What about Mr. Tuckerman?" said Jupe.

"Shelby? Shelby is interested only in Shelby," said Mr. Bonestell. "He's out of town most of the time, and when he's here he keeps himself to himself. He eats out usually, and when he's here in the house he's usually locked in his room. And I'm not kidding about that--I can show you the locks."

"That won't be necessary." Jupiter stood up. "Don't be discouraged, Mr. Bonestell. The police have to keep going over the story with you. They may not have any other leads, and perhaps they hope you will come up with some detail you forgot earlier."

Walter Bonestell did not answer. He did not look at all cheered up. Jupe left him sitting at the table, staring straight ahead.

It was four-thirty when Jupe reached The Jones Salvage Yard again. Instead of going in through the main gate, he stopped his bike at a front corner of the yard, outside the wooden fence. The fence had been colourfully decorated by the artists of Rocky Beach. This corner showed a sailing ship about to be overwhelmed by gigantic green waves. A fish reared up in the foreground to watch the ship. When Jupe put his hand on the painted eye of the fish and pushed, two boards in the fence swung up, making the opening that the boys called Green Gate One. It was one of the secret entrances that allowed them to move in and out of the salvage yard without attracting the attention of Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus.

Jupe opened the gate now and pushed his bike through into his outdoor workshop. Pete's bike was there, leaning against the printing press. Jupe smiled and let the boards in the fence drop closed.

And then he heard a small sound in that corner of the workshop. It was no more than a rustle of clothing and a drawn breath.

Jupe turned his head.

The blind beggar was there! His scarred face was turned towards Jupe, his head lifted slightly. There was no stubble on his cheeks now, and he wasn't carrying a cane. Jupe saw with a shiver that the scar pulled one corner of his mouth into a sinister sneer.

For a heartbeat Jupe did not move. The beggar was still. Then Jupe took a breath and the beggar moved, his head still lifted in an attitude of surprise, his mouth still twisted disdainfully. There was something in his hand. His fingers were closed tightly. He started to dodge past Jupe, and suddenly Jupe wanted to know--had to know--what he was holding. Flinging his bike to one side, Jupe threw himself at the man and caught at the closed fist with both hands.

The man shouted and pulled back, but Jupe held fast to the fist, prying at the fingers. They opened slightly and something fell to the ground.

The beggar jerked away. Then he attacked! He struck, and the blow landed high on Jupe's cheekbone. Lights flashed in Jupe's head. There was a stab of pain under his eye. Waves of blue and red and yellow filled his vision, and he went limp.

For a bare instant he lost consciousness. Then he was aware of himself again, and of the beggar stepping over him. The boards in the fence swung open and banged shut, and Jupe was alone.

12

The Bug

JUPE SAT ON THE GROUND, feeling slightly dizzy. As his vision cleared, his eyes fell on the thing the beggar had dropped. It had bounced under the workbench. Jupe saw a little plastic box with some perforations in one side.

"How interesting," he said.

He said it aloud, and as if in response to the remark, the iron grillwork to the side of the printing press swung open. Pete put his head out of Tunnel Two.

"What's the matter?" said Pete. "Did you yell?"

"We had a visitor," said Jupe. He got to his knees and crawled to the workbench to retrieve the little box. He held it up for inspection. "Unless I'm mistaken, this is a listening device," he said. "It's a tiny microphone, usually called a bug. I've seen pictures of them. The blind beggar was here, and he sure didn't act blind. I think he was trying to wire the workshop for sound."

"The beggar?" Pete took the tiny device from Jupe and peered at it. "W-why would he want to bug us? And how did he find us?" Pete looked around as if the scar-faced man might be standing right behind him. "Creepy!" he said.

Jupe sat down in the chair near the workbench. He took the listening device from Pete and prised it open with a penknife. "It's really a miniature broadcasting unit," he said. "It picks up sounds and sends them a short distance--up to a quarter mile or so. Usually a bug broadcasts to a voice-activated tape recorder that's hidden somewhere nearby. With a bug and a recorder, the beggar could eavesdrop on the conversations taking place here in the workshop."

"Are you sure the bug isn't working right now?" Pete said. "It could be broadcasting every word you're saying!"

With the tip of his knife, Jupe removed several tiny components from the unit. Then he snapped the plastic box shut.

"There!" he said.

He sat thinking for almost a minute, then looked up at Pete. "How long ago did you enter the salvage yard?"

"Oh, maybe twenty minutes ago."

"Did you come in through Green Gate One?"

"Yep."

Jupe looked grim. "I think the beggar must have followed you in here."

"Not a chance!" cried Pete. "No way!"

Ignoring Pete's protest, Jupe went on. "Maybe he spotted you at that rally and followed you back to Rocky Beach. Or maybe he spotted the two of us at Denicola's yesterday, or maybe all three of us at Mr. Bonestell's the night before. Sometime in the last three days we crossed his path, and he followed us here. And just now I think he followed you inside. I wonder if he had a chance to plant another bug before I came in."

Again Pete looked around as if the blind man lurked at his elbow. Then he and Jupe began to search the workshop. There was no trace of a second bug, and no sign that anything had been disturbed. The barriers of junk that surrounded the workshop were just as usual.

Pete looked very troubled. "I came here from home," he said. "If he followed me here, you . . . you don't suppose he was watching my house, do you?"

"Not necessarily," said Jupe. "He could have been waiting here at the yard."

Jupe got nails and a hammer and was preparing to nail up the gate in the fence when Bob appeared. After Bob helped close the secret gate, the three boys withdrew through Tunnel Two to Headquarters. Jupe took his accustomed place behind the desk and prepared to listen to Bob's report on Gracie Montoya.

"It got interesting for a while," said Bob, "because somebody named Ernie showed up to see Gracie. He looked like the guy you told me about. He rang the doorbell and Gracie didn't invite him in. She came out of her apartment and stood by the swimming pool and they yelled at one another in Spanish."

"No kidding!" Pete looked amused.

Bob nodded. "Actually, she did most of the yelling. He sounded as if he was trying to explain something to her, and she wouldn't listen. Finally he got mad and he yelled, too. A lady who lived in the next building came out and stood on the sidewalk and listened, and then she threatened to call the police.

"Then the guy left, and Gracie Montoya went back in and got her handbag. I saw her drive away a few minutes later. I waited for half an hour or so but she didn't come back, so I left."

"Hm!" said Jupe. "I wonder what that was all about. Now, let's see where we are."

Jupe leaned forward, intent. "We can place the beggar at the scene of the crime," he said. "And through the wallet, we can also connect him with Ernie and his friends up near the pier. Gracie Montoya is involved with that group and also with Mr. Bonestell, and it is most interesting that she is a makeup artist. Could she have been the one to disguise someone as the dead terrorist from Mesa d'Oro--Altranto? And could she have disguised herself as a man and taken part in the robbery? She's tall enough to be one of the thieves, according to Mr. Bonestell's description. And he told me this afternoon that only the thief who impersonated the cleaning man spoke during that robbery. The other two people never said a word."

"If one of them was Gracie Montoya, she wouldn't have said anything," Pete said. "Her voice would have given her away."

"So one of the other robbers may have been a woman," said Jupe, "or perhaps the other robbers didn't speak English and didn't want to reveal that fact. Perhaps they're from Mesa d'Oro."

"They could be the two guys who share the house with Ernie," said Pete. "I mean, I don't know where those guys come from, but they speak Spanish like natives. Maybe they don't know any English."

"And Ernie is fluent in both languages," said Jupe. Suddenly he was brisk. "I think it's time we learned more about Ernie and his friends. Bob, you're the only one who isn't known to the people at Denicola's. You could simply hang around the pier. Someone is always hanging around watching whenever a person works on a boat. Ernie has already seen both me and Pete, so we can't do it."

"Sure," said Bob.

"Then I'll go to Gracie Montoya's and see what's to be seen there," said Jupe. "And Pete, can you stay here in Headquarters? The blind man made a move today. I have a feeling we'll see him again, and if we do, we may need to contact one another. You can be our liaison person."

"You mean I can mind the phone," said Pete. "Okay. Glad to do it. But if the blind man shows up here, you can bet I'll use the phone to call the cops."

"You do that!" said Jupe cheerfully. "Of course," he added, "I think we should all be careful. The beggar knows where we are, and he may know--or suspect--what we're doing. He ran earlier, but he may not always run. He could be a threat--anytime!"

13

The Warning

"THAT LOOKS FUN," said Bob Andrews.

Bob stood on the edge of the Denicola pier. It was Friday morning. The tide was out, and Bob looked down on the deck of the Maria III. Ernie was there, painting the outside of the wheelhouse.

Bob waited for a moment. Ernie did not respond to the remark. He did not even look up.

"We had our house painted last year," said Bob. "The painters let me help. I did the window boxes."

Ernie paused and looked up at Bob. He looked down at the brush in his hand. Then he stepped back away from the wheelhouse and held the brush out to Bob.

Bob jumped from the dock to the deck of the boat. He grinned, took the brush, and began to paint, being careful and neat. Ernie watched with amusement.

After a few minutes of silent work, Bob started talking.

"Gee, it must be really neat to work on a boat!" he said.

Ernie merely grunted.

"I went on a boat ride once," confided Bob. "My friend's uncle took us. It was terrific--until the waves got rough." Bob then made up a long gruesome story about being seasick. Ernie finally laughed.

"Yeah, it hits some people like that," said the young man. He spoke without a trace of accent. "Me, I never get seasick."

With a little prompting, Ernie told Bob about the worst storm he'd ever been in. Bob questioned him like an admiring little kid, and Ernie got more friendly. But before Bob could learn anything useful, two men about Ernie's age came strolling down the pier. They addressed Ernie in Spanish, and when he answered them he looked sideways at Bob. An instant later Ernie had climbed on to the dock, and he and his two friends walked away from the Maria III.

When they were out of earshot, the three men plunged into a discussion. Bob tried to watch them without seeming to. The men gestured towards the shore, and one pointed as if to indicate that something was approaching down the coast from the north. Ernie shrugged and one friend clenched his fists and waved his hands in the air. The other pointed to his wristwatch and made some extremely emphatic statement to Ernie.

Ernie turned away from his two friends at last. They wandered off the pier and back up along the beach to the shabby little house that stood with its face to the highway and its back to the sea. Bob concluded that they were Ernie's room-mates.

Ernie came back on to the boat and examined Bob's work with appreciation.

"Very good," he said warmly.

"You sure talk Spanish like a whiz!" Bob exclaimed. "Your friends, too."

"It's my second language," bragged Ernie. "My friends are from South America. They aren't so good with English, so we speak Spanish."

Bob saw old Mrs. Denicola come out of the house near the parking lot. She was carrying a tray with what looked like a Thermos jug and some cups. Halfway between the house and the little office where Eileen Denicola sat, the old lady looked out to the Maria III. She saw Ernie and Bob there, with Bob holding the paintbrush, and she paused for an instant. Though he was at least thirty metres away from the old woman, Bob saw that there was tension in her figure.

After a few seconds the old woman went on into the office. A moment later Eileen came out along the pier.

The younger woman wore a rough blue work shirt, open at the neck, with a blue and white bandanna knotted around her throat. She had on faded jeans and worn blue sneakers. She looked confident and also somewhat angry.

"You're the one who's supposed to be painting the wheelhouse," she said to Ernie. She did not raise her voice, but she sounded stern.

Ernie shrugged. "The kid wants to help. He likes painting."

"That's right, ma'am," said Bob. "I do. Really."

"Okay, but Ernie will do the rest," she said. "My mother-in-law wants to see you."

"Me?" said Bob.

"She's in there." Eileen gestured towards the office. "I don't know what it's about, but she sent me to get you. Give Ernie the brush and come along."

Bob surrendered the brush and followed Eileen Denicola towards the office. She turned back to tell Ernie to be ready to take the boat out right after lunch. "Don't be late," she warned. "We've got to go to Kelleher's and get gas. There will be forty-three people here at seven tomorrow morning and we won't have time then."

"Yes, Mrs. Denicola," said Ernie, and he began to paint faster.

Bob smiled. Obviously Eileen Denicola was used to being obeyed. She marched in front of him now with her red hair bouncing at every step. Old Mrs. Denicola came out of the office to meet them.

"We will go to the house," said the older woman. She gestured to Bob. "You, young man, you come with me."

Bob followed her to the house, wondering what was going on. She led him into a living room that had a stiff, rather foreign air, with great high-backed armchairs and a long, very ugly sofa.

"Sit down." Mrs. Denicola pointed to a chair that stood at right angles to the sofa. They both sat. The old woman folded her hands in the lap of her black dress. Then she looked at Bob with eyes that were so keen that Bob had to look away.

"I have seen you before," she said.

"I . . . I don't think so," said Bob.

"You would not know of it, but I have seen you," said Mrs. Denicola. "It was in a dream that I saw you, and then I saw you again out there." She waved towards the window. "I think you should not be here."

She seemed to expect some reply. Bob opened his mouth to speak, but his voice had deserted him. What came out was something between a choke and a cough. He closed his mouth and took a deep breath, then cleared his throat.

"I was just . . . just helping with the painting," he said. "I was never here before, and . . ."

He stopped, suddenly feeling awkward and anxious. He did not want to offend this old woman, or to displease her, but he felt scared of the power he sensed in her. She reminded him of the oracles in the old myths--those wise women of ancient times who lived hidden away in caves, and who foretold the future and warned men when doom would come upon them.

It was stuffy in the little house, and yet Bob felt cold.

Mrs. Denicola bent towards him, her hands still folded against her black dress. Her face was an arrangement of crags and shadowy hollows. She looked gaunt and weary.

"You should not be here," she said again. "You came for some purpose, I think. Why did you come?"

"W-why?" whispered Bob. He was surprised to find himself whispering, yet he could not speak more loudly. "No reason. I was only . . . only killing time."

Then he looked away, sure that the old woman could see into his mind and know that he lied.

"You are in danger," she said. "You must go away. Go now and do not come back. If you stay, there will be a great trouble. A terrible thing will happen. In my dream you were in a place that twisted and shook. There was a loud noise and you were falling and the place was falling, too, and all around the earth was tearing apart."

Bob stared at her, frightened. He realized his hands were clenched into fists. He forced them to relax.

Eileen Denicola had told Jupiter that the old woman sometimes dreamed true dreams. And the old woman had told Jupe she had dreamed of a blind man who picked up a wallet from the ground. Now she had dreamed of the earth tearing apart and Bob falling. What did it mean?

An earthquake! She had dreamed of an earthquake! But what good did it do to tell Bob about it? He could not escape an earthquake by leaving the pier.

She sighed. "You think I am a crazy old woman," she said sadly. "Perhaps I should not tell you of my dream. You will go and bring other boys and they will laugh and call me an old witch--a crazy old Italian witch! But it is true that I saw you in this place that was breaking to pieces and I . . . I was there, too!"

The front door of the house opened and a gust of fresh air blew into the house. Eileen Denicola appeared in the hall and looked in on them. Her face was amused, but there was concern, too.

"What's going on?" she said. There was a note of forced heartiness in her voice. "Not another dream, I hope."

"And so? If there is?" said the old woman. She leaned forward and touched Bob's knee. "I sense this boy is a good, hard-working boy," she said. "I am telling him he should do well and go far--so long as he listens to the advice of those who wish him well."

She stood up. "I think I must hurry now," she told Eileen. "Our guest will come before the afternoon is half over, and there is much to do."

She went out without speaking to Bob again.

"Everything all right?" said Eileen Denicola.

"Yes," said Bob weakly. "Thank you."

He got up and went out past the younger woman in a rush. This place gave him the creeps. He couldn't wait to get away!

Ernie Makes a Deal

THE TWO YOUNG MEN who roomed with Ernie were coming back down the beach towards the pier. Ernie was still painting away at the wheelhouse. Everything was as it had been twenty minutes earlier, and yet it was all changed.

Danger! Mrs. Denicola had spoken of danger.

About a hundred metres down the highway there was a tiny shopping plaza. Bob saw a little market, a launderette, and a real-estate office. And he saw a telephone in front of the market. He went down to it and dialled the Headquarters of The Three Investigators.

Pete answered immediately. When he heard Bob on the telephone he said, "You okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I guess I am. But the old lady--old Mrs. Denicola--she told me she had a dream about me. You remember that her daughter-in-law said she dreamed true dreams? Well, in this dream she had about me, I was in danger. I was in a place where everything was twisting and falling. Like in an earthquake. She told me I shouldn't be here. Creepy, huh?"

There was silence for a second. Then Pete said, "Hey! Hey, Bob, if that old lady really does dream true dreams, maybe you should get away from there. You want me to come and take over for you?"

"It was only a dream," said Bob. He said it more to convince himself than to persuade Pete.

"Well, listen, be careful, huh?" said Pete.

"I will," Bob promised. "I don't want to leave right now. There's something up. You know those two guys who are Ernie's room-mates? They're churning around the dock today, talking Spanish with Ernie. They're really excited about something."

A pickup truck was coming slowly down the highway. It turned in at Denicola's drive and stopped in the parking area. A tall, rangy man in khaki work clothes got out and started towards the pier.

"Stay by the phone," said Bob. "I'll keep in touch with you."

Bob hung up and stepped out of the phone booth. There were campers and vans and cars parked along the highway, and Bob kept these between himself and the pier as he walked back towards Denicola's.

The newcomer from the pickup truck had joined Ernie and his friends on the dock beside the Maria III. Bob paused and watched Ernie talk to the man. Ernie's expression was angry, and he gestured with great animation.

Bob edged around a parked van and stepped down from the shoulder of the road to the beach. The men did not notice as he crossed the sand, and in a few minutes he was under the pier. Ignoring his bicycle, which was padlocked to a piling, he headed down to the waterline.

When Bob reached the edge of the water, he stopped and listened. He could hear the voices of the four men, but he could not make out what they were saying. They were still too far away, and the noise of the breaking surf was too near.

Bob frowned. Probably he could make no sense of the conversation even if he could hear it. They were probably speaking in Spanish.

But then there were footsteps on the pier. The men were coming closer. They walked, then stopped to talk for a moment, arguing about something, and then walked again. They came nearer, and nearer, and then they were directly over Bob's head and he was moving with them, looking up, listening, his feet noiseless on the sand.

"Okay, Strauss." That was Ernie speaking. He stopped walking, and so did the others. "I can understand that you don't want to move until you see some money, but we need to see the merchandise. It had better be good, too!"

"It's good," said a second voice. It had to be Strauss, since he spoke without an accent. His tone was brisk and businesslike. "But you guys don't look as if you're good for it. Why am I talking to you at all? I want to see Alejandro. He's the one who set up the deal."

"I speak for Alejandro," said Ernie. "If you insist, we can arrange for an advance."

"I insist," said Strauss.

"One quarter of the total," said Ernie. "The balance we hold ready, so you get it after we take delivery--if the things are as promised."

"One half in advance," said Strauss. His voice was flat now. He sounded almost indifferent. "The second half on delivery. But nothing moves without the advance--not a thing. I don't need you, you know. I have plenty of places I can peddle the stuff."

There was silence for a few moments, then Ernie said, "All right, one half in advance. But we get the merchandise before you see the other half. You go back to Pacific States and wait there. I'll call you when I have the money."

"Why don't I wait here?" said Strauss. "I don't like all this running around."

"Because it will take time and that lady who's my boss is sitting in her office right now getting very irritated because she thinks I'm loafing on the job. So you go back up the coast and wait for my call."

There was silence, and Bob assumed that the man turned towards the glass-enclosed office. No doubt Eileen Denicola was there, and no doubt she was watching.

"Yeah," said Strauss at last. "Okay. Maybe I shouldn't have come here in the first place. Okay. I'll wait for your call at Pacific States. But don't try to stall. Remember, you need me more than I need you."

Strauss walked away from Ernie and his friends, and Ernie said something in Spanish. It did not sound like a compliment, and the young men with Ernie murmured in angry agreement.

There were light footsteps on the dock then, and Bob heard a voice that was tight with annoyance.

"Who was that?" demanded Eileen Denicola.

"Somebody who belongs to some kind of fishing club," said Ernie. "He said he saw the Maria III from the highway. He wanted to know if she's available.

"The next time someone wants to know if the boat's available, you send them to me," said Eileen.

"Yes, Mrs. Denicola," said Ernie.

"Now go and get your lunch," Eileen ordered. "I want you back here at one o'clock sharp so we can go and get gas. And leave you pals at home, you hear me?"

"Yes, Mrs. Denicola," said Ernie meekly.

The young men moved off, and Eileen walked away. Bob waited in the shadows under the pier. When he saw Ernie and his friends strolling across the sand towards their ramshackle little house, Bob turned and went in the opposite direction. He wanted to find out where Pacific States was. It sounded like a town, but Bob had never heard of it before. He jogged back to the market and the telephone booth.

The telephone directory in the booth did not list a town of Pacific States, but under the P's Bob found a Pacific States Moving and Storage Company on West Albert Road in Oxnard. He called the number listed and asked to speak to Mr. Strauss.

"He isn't in right now," said the man who answered the telephone. "Can I have him return your call?"

"No," said Bob. "I'll call back."

He hung up. He was about to dial Headquarters again when he spied a familiar-looking man coming out of the market. As the man headed for his parked car, Bob stepped out of the telephone booth and casually walked in his direction.

"Hey, Bob!" said the man. "What you doin' here?"

"Hi, Mr. Soames!" It was a neighbour--a man who lived just across the street from Bob in Rocky Beach. "I was just . . . just checking out the fishing here," said Bob. "My dad and I might go fishing this weekend."

The man looked around. "You come on your bike?"

Bob shook his head. "I got a lift with a friend," he said, lying almost as expertly as Jupe could when the need arose. "Say, you wouldn't be headed north, would you?"

"Well, yeah," said Mr. Soames. "I'm going to Carpinteria to see my sister."

"I thought that's where you might be going. Could I ride with you as far as Oxnard?"

"Sure, but . . . but I won't be coming back today. How are you going to get home from Oxnard?"

"I'll catch the Greyhound," said Bob easily. "Gee, thanks, Mr. Soames. I sure appreciate this."

Bob slid into the passenger seat of Mr. Soames's little sedan, smiling to himself. Jupe couldn't have done it better. He was saved a long trip on the highway by bike, and perhaps, before the day was over, he would know what sort of merchandise Ernie and his friends had bargained for--and how much they planned to pay for it!

JUPITER SAT on the curb across the street from Gracie Montoya's apartment. He felt frustrated and bored. He had rung Gracie's doorbell at nine that morning, and had tried once more to interest her in subscribing to the Santa Monica Evening Outlook. She had refused to take the paper, and this time she had not been inclined to stop and chat.

Jupe had retreated to the apartment house across the street and watched Gracie's apartment all morning. He watched her carry laundry into a room at the back of her building, and later return with piles of neatly folded clothes. She was now sitting beside the pool fixing her nails. Jupe wanted very much to talk to her again. He decided that he would pretend to be searching for a lost order book.

Jupe got up from the curb and crossed the street. But when he reached the gate of Gracie's house, he stopped. The girl had a telephone now, on a long cord, and she was talking with someone named Marilyn.

"The acting isn't any good," she said, "but I hear the effects are great. When they blow up the spaceship, you can feel the seats shake. I called, and the first show's at two. Want to have a sandwich before we go in?"

Jupe turned away. Grace Montoya was about to leave for a movie. Even if he could follow her, he decided he would learn little sitting in a theatre all afternoon.

Jupe wondered whether Bob was having a more rewarding time at the Denicola pier. He wondered, too, whether he and his friends were really doing anything to help Mr. Bonestell. Could Ernie and his friends be the bank robbers? And if they were, how could The Three Investigators prove it?

Suddenly Jupe remembered something he had seen in movies and on television shows. He got his bike and sped back to the salvage yard.

Pete was in Headquarters, leafing through a sports magazine and looking bored.

"Glad to see you," said Pete. "It's been dull here. But Bob called once."

"Oh?" said Jupe. "What did he say?"

"He thinks there's something up at Denicola's. Ernie's two room-mates are hanging around talking with Ernie. Bob says they're excited about something. And old Mrs. Denicola had a dream about Bob. She said he was in danger, and told him he shouldn't be there at the dock!"

Jupe felt a flicker of excitement. He wasn't sure he believed in Mrs. Denicola's dreams, but Ernie was another matter. "How long ago did Bob call?" he asked.

"Maybe half an hour, maybe a little longer. I said I'd go to Denicola's to take over for him, but he wanted to stay."

Jupe nodded. "Okay. Listen, I'm going up there. I'm going to try to photograph those three guys. If I make prints of the photos and touch them up with a felt pen--draw on moustaches and wigs--I can show them to Mr. Bonestell. He might recognize them."

Jupe ducked into the darkroom and brought out a camera equipped with a telephoto lens. "You stay with the phone," he ordered. "I'll call you after I've seen Bob."

Half an hour later Jupe was across the road from the Denicola pier. The Maria III was not there, and the little glass-enclosed office near the dock was empty. Ernie and Eileen were nowhere about.

Shrugging, Jupe wheeled his bicycle across the highway. He bumped down over the rocks to the beach and found Bob's bike locked to a piling under the pier. Jupe locked his own bike next to it, then looked up and down the beach. He saw surf fishermen, and children playing with a dog, but no Bob. Carrying his camera, he climbed back up to the Denicola parking lot. There was no one around. Then he spotted the station wagon in the carport of the grey-shingled house near the pier. Someone was home at the Denicolas'.

Jupe crossed over to the house. He did not have to ring the bell. The door opened and old Mrs. Denicola stood there. She looked at him piercingly.

"Mrs. Denicola, have you seen my friend?" said Jupiter.

"Your friend?"

"He was here this morning and you talked to him then," Jupe told her. "You had a dream about him."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Denicola. "So that boy--the small one with glasses--he is a friend of yours. I think somehow that I knew this."

She frowned at Jupiter in a severe manner, but Jupe guessed that she was not really angry.

"Have you seen my friend since this morning?" asked Jupe. "His bicycle is under the pier, but he isn't here. Could he have gone out in the boat? Would your daughter-in-law have taken him for a boat ride?"

Old Mrs. Denicola shook her head. "Ernie went with Eileen on the Maria," she said. "I saw them go. There is no one with them."

"I wonder where Bob could have gone," Jupe said, almost to himself.

"I do not know," said Mrs. Denicola. She stepped back and opened the door wide. "But I think something bad is going to happen. I dreamed it, and I am afraid. I think you must tell me about you and your friend. Please come in."

The old lady sounded like the voice of doom. For the first time Jupe wondered if Bob could be in danger.

Miles away in Oxnard, Bob approached the Pacific States Moving and Storage Company. It was on a barren lot on Albert Road. Bob saw a high chain-link fence, a windowless cement-block building, and a few grime-spattered white moving vans. The driveway that led away from the gate was rutted and pocked with puddles, and the gate was padlocked shut.

There was no one in sight. Bob started to circle the property. He saw weeds and broken crates and crumpled papers around the blank-walled building. At the back, parked vans prevented him from seeing the rear of the building, but he could hear voices from somewhere inside the yard.

Bob stood still and listened. The conversation continued, but Bob couldn't make out the words. He noticed that one of the vans was parked alongside the fence here. He looked left and right, then took a deep breath. Putting his toe into a link in the fence, he climbed to the top and scrambled on to the roof of the moving van.

Bob lay still for a second and caught his breath. He was not as athletic as Pete, but he had done it! He was safely inside the yard. He got to his hands and knees and crept forward.

"It ain't gonna dry in time," said a voice that was quite near now.

"Who cares?" said a second voice. "We can take it dry or not."

Another van was backed up close to the one Bob was on. He stood up. His sneakered feet made no sound as he stepped across the small space to the second van. He crouched again, and again crept forward. Then he was looking down into a clear area where two men with their backs to him were staring at a gleaming white truck. Bob immediately flattened himself on the van's roof and raised his head to watch.

"It's okay, Harry," said one of the men. It was Strauss. He stood with his hands on his hips and his head cocked to one side. "You do nice work."

The man named Harry made a wordless sound. He had a can of paint in one hand and a small brush in the other. The odour of paint was strong in the air. The truck that the men were admiring had freshly painted lettering on the side, replacing the name of the moving and storage company. The new lettering said: MCCUTCHEON'S MARITIME SUPPLIES.

Bob grinned to himself. The men had disguised one of the moving vans.

"A lot of trouble to go to," said Harry, gesturing with his brush.

"There's a lot at stake," said Strauss. "We can't take a chance. Anybody sees a moving van parked outside Denicola's, there might be questions."

Strauss turned away and vanished into the open doorway of the huge, windowless building. After a moment his companion followed him, and for a time Bob heard nothing except the sound of wood scraping on concrete. At last Strauss appeared again. He was wheeling a dolly that held three wooden crates. Strauss trundled them to the newly painted truck.

Harry came bumping out of the building with a second load of crates. Before he had gone two metres, however, he ran his dolly into a rut. One of his crates slid to the ground and broke open, spilling dozens of small boxes into the dirt.

"Hey, watch it!" yelled Strauss.

"Okay, okay!" said Harry. "Take it easy, huh?"

He knelt down and gathered up the smaller boxes, crammed them back into the broken crate, then hefted the crate on to the dolly again.

From his perch on top of the idle truck, Bob saw that one of the small boxes had split. Several objects had escaped from it, and they now lay on the ground. Bob held his breath and waited. Neither Strauss nor Harry noticed the fallen objects. They went on loading crates into the back of the refurbished truck, then returning to the building to bring out more crates.

The two worked for nearly half an hour. They loaded crates of all sizes and shapes. Some were made of wood and some of corrugated cardboard. Some were so heavy that it took both men to lift them. At last, the men closed the doors at the back of the truck and secured them with a padlock.

"We could've used some help on that one," said Harry. He mopped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"We don't need more witnesses," said Strauss.

The men moved off into the cement-block building, and Bob lay still, waiting. Five minutes went by, and then ten. Strauss did not appear again, and there was no sign of Harry. Bob judged that the two were not going to return to the loaded van.

Bob crawled to the front of the truck that had been his hiding place. He slid down to the top of the cab, then to the hood, and then to the ground. He went swiftly to the spray of small objects that had fallen from the broken box and knelt to pick one up.

It was heavy. Bob felt cold with fright when he saw what it was. A bullet!

Then he looked up, and his fright became utter terror. He tried to swallow, but his throat was dry. He was frozen--too paralysed even to tremble.

A dog was watching him! A Doberman! It stood at stiff attention not three metres away. Its black eyes were fixed on Bob, and its ears were erect. It made no sound. It watched, pinning Bob with its gaze.

"Hey!" said Bob. It was a whisper--a breathless, rattling little whisper. "Hey, fella! Hey there, boy!"

Bob stood up slowly, and took one step back from the dog.

The black lips lifted from white teeth, and a low, threatening growl sounded.

"Hey!" said Bob.

The growl was louder. The dog moved forward, then stopped.

Bob did not move again. The dog was a guard dog, and Bob knew it. It would hold Bob there all day if it had to. Bob was caught!

THE DENICOLA HOUSE was warm with the smell of cheese and herbs and rich tomato sauce. But for once Jupe was unaware of the smells of good food. He sat in the living room across from old Mrs. Denicola, listening to her tell about her dream.

"In my dream I saw your friend in a room," said the old lady. "There was a terrible noise, and the walls twisted and came apart. I did not know the room where he was, and I did not know the boy. Then this morning I saw the boy painting for Ernesto, and I knew he was the boy from the dream and that he must leave here. The danger is here. I feel it very strongly. And the danger is not just for him. It is for me, too. So I tell him to go, and he must have listened. He is not here."

Jupe frowned. "Mrs. Denicola, do your dreams always come true?" he asked.

"No. Most of my dreams are like the dreams of everyone. They are nonsense. They are made of the pieces of old memories. But some dreams are different. Sometimes in dreams I meet strangers. Then, when I am awake, I meet these same people and I know that it was a true dream. I do not know everything, of course. In my dream I have only a glimpse of something. It is like a light that flashes--a beacon. If it is a bad dream you know to beware, for the beacon marks the place where there is danger."

"Are your dreams always about danger?" Jupe asked.

"Oh, no!" She smiled suddenly. "I dreamed of a young lady with red hair before my son Alfredo met Eileen. That was a good dream . . ."

Jupe saw that she was about to embark on family history, and hastily changed the subject. "The man you call Ernesto--is he a relative?"

"No that one!" She looked scornful. "He is what we call the beach bum, eh? He does not amount to much. But perhaps he has a good heart. Those two who live with him in the little house on the beach, they are from South America. Always Ernesto has one or two from South America. They live with him until they have jobs. They learn a little English. Then they move on. I think Ernesto's father was from South America, and once he needed such help, and now Ernesto gives help out of respect for his father. And so no one is completely without worth."

Mrs. Denicola frowned now. "And you?" she said to Jupe. "You did not really come to find a wallet, did you? And your friend who pretends to be a schoolboy idler--I think he was spying, was he not? Who does he spy on? On Ernesto? Something is happening that we do not know. Something that is hidden from Eileen and me."

"I think something is happening," said Jupiter. "But I don't know exactly what. Mrs. Denicola, you dreamed of a blind man who found a wallet. Have you seen that man since your dream? When you were awake?"

"No. I have not seen him."

"But my friend Bob has seen him, and so have I," said Jupe.

Jupe took a Three Investigators card out of his wallet, wrote a number on it, and gave it to her. "If you see the blind man, would you call this number?" he said. "If I'm not there, someone will take the message. And if anything unusual happens--perhaps something Ernie does or says--would you let us know? I'm worried about my friend."

"Yes," she said. "You are wise to worry."

"In fact," said Jupe, "I'd like to use your telephone, if I may. Maybe there's been some word from Bob."

Mrs. Denicola gestured towards the hall, and Jupe went to the telephone there. He dialled the number of Headquarters. Pete answered after half a ring.

"Hey, Bob called," said Pete. "Just after you left. He was somewhere in Oxnard. He said there's a new person in our puzzle--a guy named Strauss. He's going to see if he can find out what he's up to, and he'll check in later this afternoon."

"Good!" said Jupe. "He left his bike here, and I was afraid something had happened to him."

"No. He's okay. Where are you?"

"I'm with Mrs. Denicola. I'll be back later."

Jupe hung up. Mrs. Denicola had come to stand beside him. "So your friend is all right?" she said.

Jupe smiled. "Yes. He called from Oxnard. He had an . . . an errand to do there."

"Very good," she said. "So for now the mind is relieved and I go to get dinner for my guest, who comes soon. And you, you will be about your business, I think. But go carefully, eh?"

Jupe promised he would. He then headed up the highway to the house where Ernie lived with the two young men from South America.

Jupe found a good place to sit on a bank of ice plant across the road. He held his camera and he waited. It was more than an hour before a dusty old truck rolled down the highway and deposited one of Ernie's room-mates beside the road.

Jupe aimed the camera. The shutter clicked and clicked again. Before Ernie's friend disappeared into the little house, Jupe had photographed him six times with the telephoto lens.

Jupe relaxed and prepared to wait some more. When the Maria III came into view, he smiled. The fishing boat ran past him and docked at the pier. Two figures left the boat. Ernie and Eileen. Sooner or later, thought Jupe, Ernie would return to the house across the road. In the meantime, Jupe would wait for the second room-mate.

The minutes ticked by, and Jupe watched the gulls dip and soar over the beach. When he looked to the left he could see Denicola's driveway. Now and then a car turned in there, and now and then one pulled out again. The Denicola house blocked Jupe's view of the office, but he guessed Eileen Denicola was inside it. Possibly Ernie was helping her.

Jupe looked away and surveyed the beach to the right. Surf fishermen were there, busy with their lines, and a man was slowly making his way along the beach with a metal detector. Surfers waited for waves far out in the water. Clouds were building up on the horizon, and the wind was colder. The day had started clear and beautiful, but it would end in rain.

Ernie's room-mate came out of the house across the road and started down towards the pier.

Jupe glanced at his watch. It was almost three now. Bob had told Pete that both of Ernie's room-mates were on hand this morning. Where was the third man now?

Jupe looked towards the Denicola house. Earlier he had seen a station wagon parked in the carport beside the house. Now he suddenly noticed that it was gone. When had it been moved? He had not seen anyone drive it away. He had been hypnotized--lulled by the wind and the gulls and the sound of the surf.

Jupe got up and started to walk down the highway. When he was opposite Denicola's driveway, Jupe saw that Eileen Denicola was not in the office near the pier. Ernie was there, sitting in Mrs. Denicola's chair with his feet up on her desk. He was smoking, leaning back and laughing easily. His room-mate sat cross-legged on the desk, and he seemed to be telling a story to Ernie. His face was animated and he talked steadily, his hands making motions in the air.

Where was Eileen Denicola? Was she in the house with her mother-in-law? What would she say if she looked out and saw Ernie and his friend lounging in her office, sitting on her desk? Jupe felt quite certain that she would be furious.

But then Jupe noticed that the house had a vacant air. The windows were closed and the drapes had been drawn. As Jupe wondered, a car pulled into the drive and stopped by the house. A white-haired woman got out, carrying a little package wrapped in pink paper. Jupe guessed that she must be Mrs. Denicola's dinner guest. He watched her ring the doorbell of the Denicola house. No one came, and after a minute she rang again. Still there was no answer. She walked across to the office.

Ernie had been watching her, and he got slowly to his feet. His friend still sat cross-legged on the desk.

Ernie and the woman exchanged a few words. Then she wrote something on a paper, folded it, and handed it to Ernie. When she returned to her car, her face was set in angry lines.

Ernie sat down after she drove away. He put his feet back on the desk, and flipped the note the woman had given him into the wastebasket.

Ernie's friend laughed.

Now Jupe was thoroughly alarmed. He turned away and walked up the highway until the Denicola house was between himself and the men in the office. Then he crossed the road to the house.

There was an unlocked window in the rear of the place, next to the kitchen door. When Jupe got the window open, he reached through and turned the lock on the inside of the door. He went into the kitchen and closed the door behind him, but did not lock it again. He might have to leave in a hurry.

The kitchen was warm, and the air was heavy with the smell of food. But the sauce for pasta was congealing in a kettle on the stove, and a roast was cooling in the oven while greens for salad grew warm in a colander. Old Mrs. Denicola must have left in a hurry.

Jupe moved silently into the dining room, where the table had been set for three. The room was gloomy with the drapes drawn, and so was the living room where he had sat with Mrs. Denicola only an hour or two earlier. In the living room there was now an unpleasant tang in the air that almost overcame the odour of food from the kitchen. Jupe saw that someone had dropped a cigarette on Mrs. Denicola's hearth, and had stepped on it to put it out.

Jupe went to the foot of the stairs and called softly, although he really did not expect to be answered.

"Mrs. Denicola! Are you there? It's me! Jupiter Jones!"

There was silence in the house. After a moment Jupe went up the stairs.

The blinds had not been drawn in the bedrooms, and the light streamed in. One room was filled with massive, dark wood furniture, including a bureau crowded with photographs. Across the hall was a room with white furniture and coloured prints on the walls. Jupe had just peeked into this room when a telephone rang loudly.

Jupe jumped. Then he saw that there was a telephone on the table next to the bed. He glanced out the window towards the office.

Ernie was staring at the telephone on Eileen's office desk. He looked doubtful.

The phone on the bedside table rang again.

Ernie picked up the telephone on the office desk. The telephone in the bedroom abruptly stopped ringing. Jupe smiled. This phone was an extension of the one in the office. Quickly, Jupe lifted the receiver and put it to his ear.

"Si," said Ernie.

The caller at the other end of the line plunged into a torrent of Spanish. Jupe held his breath and listened, concentrating, struggling to make out as much of the conversation as he could.

The caller identified himself as Alejandro. He said that he was leaving now to see Strauss. There was something said about money. Jupe heard the name Denicola mentioned, and then his own name! Alejandro reminded Ernie that Jupiter Jones had spoken to old man Bonestell about the Denicolas and about the blind man. Alejandro cautioned Ernie to be careful. Ernie said that he would, and that he and Rafi had everything under control. Jupe gathered that Rafi was the roommate in the office with Ernie. After a few more words, Ernie hung up.

Jupe put the telephone down and looked out. Ernie was in front of the office now, scanning the beach. He was frowning, and when his friend joined him he gestured up the beach towards his little house.

Rafi shrugged and started towards the place.

Ernie's eyes lighted on the Denicola house. He suddenly looked curious, and he started forward.

Jupe backed away from the window. Darn! he thought. Ernie must have noticed the click when Jupe picked up the telephone.

Jupe heard a step on the porch downstairs, and a key being put into a lock. Ernie was down there. In a second he would be inside. Jupe had no time to get down the stairs. He could be caught and .

..

And what?

A bathroom adjoined the bedroom. Jupe heard a tap in there dripping slightly.

The front door opened with a creak.

In three steps Jupe had crossed the room. He entered the bathroom and turned on the shower. Then he returned to the bedroom, hid his camera under the bed, and stood behind the door.

Ernie pounded up the stairs, lurched to the doorway of the bedroom, and stood there for an instant, staring into the bathroom. Steam was coming from the shower now. It billowed out through the bathroom door.

Ernie strode through the bedroom into the bathroom, and yanked the shower curtain aside. As he did so, Jupe slipped out from behind the door, ran into the hall, and sped down the stairs. He could hear Ernie shouting as Jupe got the back door open, but he didn't pause. He raced out of the house.

But now where could he go! He was out in the open, and Ernie would spot him any second!

17

The Final Clue

JUPITER RACED across the Denicolas' yard towards the highway. He was too heavy to run fast for very long. He needed a place to hide from Ernie. But where?

Jupe saw that a camper was parked nearby on the shoulder of the road. The door in the back was open, and the man who owned the vehicle had turned away for a moment. He stood looking up at the cliffs across the road while wiping his hands on some paper towelling.

Jupe didn't hesitate. He got swiftly and noiselessly into the camper, curled up on the floor next to some buckets of clams, and pulled a stained tarpaulin over his head. An instant later the door of the camper slammed shut. Then the owner got into the cab and started the engine.

The camper pulled away from the shoulder of the road. It drifted south about a hundred metres, then made a U-turn and picked up speed as it headed north. Jupe pushed off the tarpaulin, sat up, and looked out the window. He saw Ernie as the camper passed Denicola's. The young man was looking up and down the highway. His fists were clenched, and on his face there was a look of total bewilderment.

Jupiter laughed out loud.

Halfway through the city of Oxnard, the camper stopped for a traffic signal for the first time since it had left Denicola's. Jupe was ready and waiting. The moment the camper stopped moving, he was out the rear door and heading for the curb.

Jupe walked briskly down the street, turned the corner, and hurried on his way. Ten minutes later he was in the Greyhound Bus Terminal. When the bus pulled out for Santa Monica, Jupe was aboard.

Jupe felt a certain jubilation as the bus sped south. There was now not the slightest doubt that the young men at Denicola's were spying on Mr. Bonestell. They knew of the conversation Jupe had had with him yesterday in which the blind man was mentioned.

But how could they know?

Jupe frowned. Mr. Bonestell must have talked with someone. Was it Gracie Montoya? Was she the connection? Jupe felt a surge of irritation. How foolish of Mr. Bonestell to talk!

The bus sped past the Denicola pier. There were no cars in the parking lot there, and the little office was empty.

Where was Ernie? Where were his friends? And where were the Denicola women? Ernie was up to some villainy, Jupe was certain of that. There was a conspiracy of some sort going on at the pier. Were Eileen Denicola and her mother-in-law victims of that conspiracy? Were they innocent bystanders who had been spirited away somewhere? Or were they part of the plot?

Suddenly Jupe was frightened. Was Mr. Bonestell safe? Eileen and old Mrs. Denicola had vanished. Would Mr. Bonestell be next?

Jupe was the first one out of the door when the bus stopped in Santa Monica. He had money in his pocket and there were cabs at the kerb. He took one to Dolphin Court.

It was four-forty when the taxi set Jupe down in front of Mr. Bonestell's house. Jupe rang the doorbell. He felt real relief when Mr. Bonestell came to answer the ring.

"I didn't even send for you!" exclaimed Mr. Bonestell. He looked hopeful, yet apprehensive. "I was wishing you'd call. Do you have any news?"

"I think so," said Jupe. He followed Mr. Bonestell to the kitchen and sat down at the table.

"Mr. Bonestell," he said, "who have you talked with since I left here yesterday?"

Mr. Bonestell looked startled. "Talked with? Why nobody. I haven't been out of the house."

"Then someone called," said Jupe, "or someone came to see you."

"No," said Mr. Bonestell. "Nobody called. I . . . I don't have lots of really close friends. Why do you ask?"

"Because it's important. Think, Mr. Bonestell. Yesterday afternoon we talked about the Denicolas, and about a blind beggar. Now you must have mentioned this conversation to someone, or how did a person named Alejandro know about it?"

Mr. Bonestell looked upset. "I didn't talk to anyone," he insisted. "There wasn't anyone here--nobody but Shelby, and I didn't say anything to him. I didn't! Nothing at all! Shelby isn't--well, he isn't easy to talk with. He acts as if what I have to say isn't very interesting, and I guess maybe

it isn't. Anyway, when he came in last night he went right upstairs and locked himself in his room."

"And you didn't talk to him then? Or this morning?"

"No. No more than to say hello. I'm sure of it!"

Jupe sighed. He pulled at his lower lip and gazed blankly at the sugar bowl. Then into his mind came the picture of Shelby Tuckerman--Shelby with his wrap-around sunglasses and his turtleneck shirt. "According to your system of justice," Shelby had said, "you're innocent until you're proven guilty."

"Odd that I didn't notice that," said Jupe out loud.

"What?" said Mr. Bonestell.

"Shelby doesn't care for your neighbours, does he?"

"I suppose not," said Mr. Bonestell. "He thinks they're common."

"Is he so uncommon?" said Jupe.

Mr. Bonestell shrugged, and Jupe continued to stare at the sugar bowl. "When did Shelby start taking sugar in his coffee?" Jupe suddenly said. "He didn't always do it, did he? The first night we were here he made a cup of coffee for himself, and he drank it black."

"Why . . . why yes, I suppose he did," said Mr. Bonestell. "He only started to use the sugar a day or two ago. He said it gave him a quick lift to have a spoonful of sugar."

Eyes gleaming, Jupe reached for the sugar bowl. He poked a finger deep into it and quickly lifted out a small, flat plastic box with perforations in one side.

Mr. Bonestell looked at the thing. "What is it?" he asked.

"A listening device, Mr. Bonestell," said Jupe. "A bug. You didn't have to talk to Shelby. Once that sugar bowl was put on the table, he was able to eavesdrop on everything that was said here."

Jupe went to the kitchen telephone. "Shelby works at Systems TX-4," he said. "Do you know their number offhand?"

Mr. Bonestell told him the number, "and Jupe dialed. It was just 4:59 when his call went through. He asked to speak to Shelby Tuckerman, and was told that no one by that name worked at Systems TX-4.

"Mr. Tuckerman used to work there," said Jupe. "When did he leave?"

"I can't give you that information," said the operator. "If you call back Monday morning, perhaps someone in Personnel can help you."

Jupe thanked the operator and hung up.

"He doesn't work there?" said Mr. Bonestell. "I don't understand. He has to work there. He was in Fresno on a job for TX-4 just the other day."

"I doubt that very much," said Jupe. He went to the refrigerator and opened the freezer compartment. The frozen food that Shelby had put in several days ago was gone. It had been a huge cache of TV dinners and frozen pizzas. But nothing remained except for a single carton of ice cream back in the corner.

Jupiter closed the freezer. "That must be where it was the whole time," he said.

"What?" said Mr. Bonestell.

"Nothing," said Jupe. "That is, I'm not sure. And we may be too late. Mr. Bonestell, did you say that Shelby Tuckerman kept his door locked?"

"That's right. Shelby's a very private person."

"An understatement if ever there was one," said Jupiter. "Mr. Bonestell, I have to get into his room--and I have to do it right away!"

18

The Prisoners

JUPE AND MR. BONESTELL GOT an extension ladder from the garage and put it up on Shelby Tuckerman's window. The window was unlocked and Jupe got in that way.

There was a recording system set up on the dresser. Jupe rewound the tape on the machine and played it back. He heard the conversation he had just had with Mr. Bonestell. He heard himself dial the telephone and talk with the operator at Systems TX-4. He heard the refrigerator door open and close, and he heard his remark that it might be too late.

Jupe smiled grimly and erased the tape. Then he set the machine to record again, and he turned away and began a quick investigation of Shelby's room.

It was a strangely barren place. No letters or postcards lay on the desk; no books rested on the bedside table. There were no pictures and no plants. There was not so much as a stray safety pin to show that anyone lived there.

Jupe looked into the closet and saw jackets and shirts and slacks. The pockets were empty. He opened the dresser drawers and saw underwear and socks and turtlenecks.

But then, in the bottom drawer, covered over with folded sweaters, he saw the knife.

It was a very sharp knife, in a fine leather sheath. It was not the kind of knife used for sharpening pencils or for cutting bits of fishing line. It was the kind of knife one might use for throwing.

Jupe left it where it was. He climbed out of the window, and told Mr. Bonestell what he'd found while they put the ladder away.

"I wonder if he wears the knife strapped to his ankle, the way he wears the gun," said Jupe.

Mr. Bonestell shook his head in a dazed way. "He says he needs the gun because he's out on the road so much, and you never know what might happen if you break down. But a knife? Why does he need a knife? He doesn't go camping or anything like that. He doesn't do anything interesting. Just watches TV and takes a lot of naps."

Jupe nodded. "He doesn't act very dashing, but he's a man with secrets. He bugged your kitchen. And he kept something very valuable in your freezer."

"What? All he had in there was his frozen food."

"I don't think those packages held food. I think they held money. It may have been the loot from the bank robbery."

"No," said Mr. Bonestell. "That's not it. Shelby's been keeping heaps of frozen food for a long time. It wasn't that he ate at home. It just seemed to make him feel secure to have food on hand. He knew I hardly ever used the freezer, so he kept it filled with his food."

"Hm!" said Jupe. He pulled at his lower lip and frowned. "If he didn't eat at home, what eventually happened to the things in the freezer? Did he ever take anything away?"

"Why, come to think of it, I . . . I don't know what happened to all the food. Once in a while he cooked. And he did bring in a lot, but . . . but it couldn't have been money from a robbery unless Shelby's been a bank robber for a long time. Somehow, I don't think Shelby is like that."

"Aha!" said Jupe. "Then it could be drugs. That would explain his connection with the crew at Denicola's. The Maria III might be used to rendezvous with another boat out at sea. Or perhaps to go to Baja California to get drugs."

"Or perhaps Shelby and Ernie are bringing in illegal immigrants and the blind man--"

Jupe pulled himself up short. "No," he said. "That wouldn't have anything to do with the freezer unless . . . well, we can't be sure. We don't have enough to go on. Not yet."

"Are we going to call the police?" said Mr. Bonestell.

"I don't think we can. How could we prove that Shelby didn't take his frozen food and give it to the poor? Or that the bug in the sugar bowl isn't a practical joke? Is Shelby involved with the bank robbery, or is he concerned with something else entirely? What about the Denicolas? Where are they? I have a strong feeling that Shelby knows."

For the first time, Mr. Bonestell looked determined and angry. "I want to help," he said. "What can I do?"

"A lot," said Jupe, and he told his plan to Mr. Bonestell. Bonestell agreed eagerly, and he and Jupe went to the house next door and asked to use the telephone. Mr. Bonestell explained to the woman who came to the door that his own telephone was out of order.

Jupiter called Pete at Headquarters, and Pete agreed to meet Jupe and Mr. Bonestell at the corner of Dolphin Court and Second Street.

"I should be there in twenty minutes," said Pete.

"In case we're not there," said Jupe, "go back to Headquarters and I'll call you when I can."

After Jupe finished talking with Pete, he and Mr. Bonestell went to Mr. Bonestell's backyard and rehearsed. Then they went into the kitchen and put on a brief performance for the benefit of the bug, which Jupe had replaced in the sugar bowl.

"Mr. Bonestell," said Jupe, being careful to speak clearly, "I know you must be getting impatient, but we may have news for you soon. Eileen Denicola may be about to give us the break we need. Pete was in to see Chief Reynolds in Rocky Beach just a little while ago, and Eileen Denicola called while he was there. Pete only got one end of the conversation, of course, but he gathered

Mrs. Denicola was hysterical. Chief Reynolds kept trying to calm her down. Finally he said he'd be right there, and he got up and ran out of the office."

"But I don't even know Mrs. Denicola," said Mr. Bonestell carefully. "What could she have to do with the bank robbery?"

"There's some connection," said Jupe. "We're sure of that. Pete wants us to come to the Rocky Beach Police Station. He thinks Chief Reynolds will bring Mrs. Denicola there."

"I'll get my jacket," said Mr. Bonestell.

Jupe snapped off the overhead light in the kitchen, and he and Mr. Bonestell went out and got into Mr. Bonestell's little car. Mr. Bonestell backed out of the drive and went to the corner, where he parked in the shadows beneath a huge willow tree that overhung the sidewalk. They waited.

Soon Pete appeared on his bicycle. Mr. Bonestell flicked his headlights on and off to let him know they were there, and Pete stowed his bike under some shrubs that grew nearby. He climbed into the back seat of the car.

"What's up?" he said eagerly.

"Shelby has been bugging Mr. Bonestell's kitchen with a device in the sugar bowl," said Jupe. "He has a voice-activated tape recorder in his bedroom. Does that remind you of anyone?"

"The blind man!" cried Pete. "He tried to plant a bug in the salvage yard. Do you mean that Shelby . . . ?"

"Possibly," said Jupe. "We'll see."

Jupe then told Pete of the message he and Mr. Bonestell had recorded. "The Denicolas have disappeared, and I'm really concerned about them," said Jupe. "I hope that after Shelby plays back that recording, he'll lead us to them."

It was very dark now. The rain that had been threatening half the afternoon had begun to fall. There was little traffic on Second Street, and none on Dolphin Court--not until well after six. Then Shelby's car turned the corner. Mr. Bonestell and the boys watched Shelby turn into Bonestell's drive and park. Shelby got out of the car. A moment later the lights went on in the back of the house, and then in the front rooms.

"He's looking for me," said Mr. Bonestell. "I'm always home at this time unless I'm working."

Soon there were lights upstairs, in the bedroom where Shelby lived.

"It won't be long now," said Mr. Bonestell. He fairly cackled with glee. Jupe realized then how much Mr. Bonestell disliked Shelby Tuckerman.

The lights continued to blaze all over Mr. Bonestell's house, but the front door opened and Shelby came out. He sprinted across the patch of lawn to the drive and got into his car. The engine roared and Shelby shot out into the street. A split second later he passed Mr. Bonestell's car and sped around the corner on to Second Street.

Mr. Bonestell already had his engine running. He followed Shelby up Second and then out across Ocean Avenue and down to the Coast Highway.

"He's going to Denicola's," Jupe decided.

Mr. Bonestell dropped back and let another car get between himself and Shelby, but he kept Shelby's car in view. They went steadily north in heavy rain. Shelby drove exactly at the speed limit. He slowed going through Malibu, then picked up the pace again.

"He has to be going to Denicola's," said Jupe. "I wonder if . . . if . . . Mr. Bonestell, do you know anyone named Alejandro?"

"No. Shelby's middle initial is A, but I doubt it stands for Alejandro. That's Spanish for Alexander, isn't it? Shelby isn't Spanish."

Mr. Bonestell slowed the car. They were approaching Denicola's. There was very little traffic, and they could see Shelby's car ahead of them, the tail-lights reflected in the rain-slick surface of

the road. They could also dimly see a white truck backed up to the Denicola pier. But before Jupe could wonder about it, Shelby braked abruptly and turned right, away from the ocean. He roared up the driveway of the Oceanview Motel.

"The motel!" exclaimed Pete as Mr. Bonestell quickly pulled off on to the shoulder. "That could be where Mrs. Denicola is--her and the old lady!"

"I should have thought of it," said Jupe. "Okay. Now we know. Mr. Bonestell, will you wait here for us? If we're not back in fifteen minutes, get to a phone and call the police."

"You bet!" said Mr. Bonestell. "Be careful now."

Jupe and Pete got out and looked up. The motel was no more than a dark shape above the road. There was not a light anywhere. The boys went up the drive without speaking, their shoulders hunched against the driving rain. When they had reached the top and the pavement broadened into the parking area, Pete tugged at Jupe's sleeve.

"There's Shelby's car," he whispered. "I don't see Shelby anywhere."

"Probably inside the motel," said Jupe.

They stole forward into the pool area behind the motel. As soon as they had the motel building between themselves and the ocean, they had some shelter from the wind. The night was not so intensely black, either, for the slanting raindrops now reflected a hint of light.

Jupe pointed. One window in the motel showed a faint glow around the edges. A lamp was lit behind a heavy curtain.

The boys crept towards the window and leaned forward to listen.

And suddenly Jupe heard something behind him that was not just a part of the wind and the rain. Someone was behind him.

Jupe turned his head.

"Be still!" said Shelby Tuckerman. He was holding his gun. "Don't make a move."

Then Shelby shouted.

The door of the motel room opened. Light streamed out. In the doorway stood one of Ernie's room-mates--the one who had been missing all afternoon. He also had a gun.

"In there, you two!" ordered Shelby.

Jupe and Pete went into a room that was rank with cigarette smoke. Eileen Denicola sat there on a small straight chair, her wrists tied to its arms. She looked furious. Her mother-in-law was tied to an armchair near the bed.

Shelby came dripping into the room, and Ernie's room-mate shut the door.

"Hi!" said a very familiar voice.

There in the corner behind the door, also tied to a chair, was Bob Andrews!

19

The Nightmare Comes True!

"THAT CONVERSATION YOU HAD with Walter about the police," said Shelby Tuckerman.

"It was a trick, wasn't it? You staged it."

"And you led us here," said Jupiter.

He and Pete were seated now. Ernie's room-mate, who was called Luis, had put away his gun and brought two more chairs from another motel room. He was tying Jupe and Pete to them with strips torn from sheets, while Shelby covered them with his pistol.

"Much good may it do you," said Shelby. "Where is Walter? Waiting for you down on the highway?"

Jupe didn't answer. Shelby smiled angrily. "We'll see that he doesn't wait too long," he said. "I wouldn't want him to get nervous."

Luis finished tying the boys. Shelby put away his gun, too, then he spoke to Luis in rapid Spanish. As he spoke there were two quick raps at the door, then two raps again. Ernie opened the door and came in. He stopped in surprise when he saw Pete and Jupe.

"What are these other kids doing here?" he demanded angrily of Shelby. "One was bad enough. Oh, never mind. You take care of them. I came to get Luis. The boat is almost loaded. Strauss is pulling out now, and Rafi is finishing up."

Bob muttered to Jupe, who sat next to him, "Strauss is a guy who runs a moving company in Oxnard. I watched him load up a truck this afternoon. One of the crates broke open. There were bullets in it."

"Ammunition!" exclaimed Jupe. "And guns, I bet." He looked at Shelby Tuckerman. "I thought it might be drugs," he said. "I thought Ernie and his friends were using the Maria III in some sort of drug-smuggling operation."

"Over my dead body!" cried Eileen Denicola. "If you think Ernie ever took that boat six inches from the dock without me aboard, you're sadly mistaken!"

Ernie grinned. "We're going to take it now, Mrs. Denicola," he said, "and you won't be aboard."

"There will be guns aboard," said Jupe. "And that, of course, is why you robbed the bank. You needed the money for guns. What could be more natural for a bunch of revolutionaries? You'll ship the guns to Mesa d'Oro, where they'll be used to shoot innocent people."

Ernie drew himself up to his full height and looked righteous. "They'll be used in the battle for justice," he said.

"According to some published reports," said Jupe, "the battle for justice can include sniping at unarmed civilians."

"If you mean the Civil Guard of Mesa d'Oro, they represent the spoilers who have stolen our land," said Ernie. His cheeks burned with colour.

"Don't listen to him, Ernesto," said Shelby. "It doesn't matter what the boy thinks."

"You were the scar-faced beggar," said Jupe to Shelby. "You used the disguise to watch the bank without being recognized by Mr. Bonestell. You knew about the vault with the time lock, and you knew Mr. Bonestell would be alone in the bank after the cleaning people left. If only you hadn't been so greedy. You found Mr. Sebastian's wallet at Denicola's the day before the robbery. It was a beautiful wallet, and instead of turning it in or dropping it into a mailbox, you put it into your pocket and kept it. But you dropped it at the scene of the robbery, and it led us right back here to the dock."

"I . . . I was going to drop it in a mailbox," said Shelby quickly.

Luis looked from Ernie to Shelby, then back again. He said something in Spanish, and Ernie motioned to him to be quiet.

"So the blind man did pick up the wallet," said Ernie. His face was stern and accusing. "For a wallet, you endangered our cause? Is this true?"

"Certainly not!" snapped Shelby. "I said I was going to drop it in the mail. Let's not stand here and argue. That old man's down on the highway and--"

"Why didn't you give the wallet to me?" cried Ernie. "I would have called Mr. Sebastian and there would have been an end to it. There wouldn't have been anything to bring these kids down on us!"

"I tell you it doesn't matter!" insisted Shelby. "You'll be out of the country soon. I'll take care of the kids!"

"You're not leaving, Mr. Tuckerman?" said Jupe. "I can guess why. You're going to stay here and enjoy some of the loot from the robbery, aren't you? You aren't going to give it to the Republicans."

Ernie stared at Shelby, and Shelby's colour rose, then drained away again until his face was a ghastly white. It was clear that Jupe had hit on the truth.

"What is this?" said Ernie. There was a note of menace in his voice.

"The money has gone to pay for the guns!" snapped Shelby. "You know that, Ernesto!"

"I know only about two hundred thousand dollars," said Ernie. "This afternoon you gave Strauss half. And tonight I gave him the other half. But what about the rest of the bank money? You said you sent it to Rodriguez, but your face says you didn't! Don't worry about a thing, you said. Always you were such an organizer. You took care of the wigs and the funny clothes and the getaway car and the money. And we trusted you. You'd been the courier for such a long time. You carried the money we collected for Rodriguez, and you said it didn't mean anything to you. You said it was like carrying so many cabbages or pieces of paper. It was only a shipment to you. Did some of that money stick to your hands, too?"

"How dare you!" cried Shelby. "You'll answer for that!"

"No. You're the one who's going to answer," said Ernie. "You're coming with us tonight, and you'll speak to Rodriguez' people in Mexico City. And maybe you'll come all the way--to Mesa d'Oro, and--"

"You're being ridiculous!" cried Shelby. "I can't leave tonight! I have important work to do here. My mission isn't finished!"

"There is at least fifty thousand dollars in Mr. Bonestell's house," said Jupiter.

"You lie!" shouted Shelby. He turned suddenly on old Mrs. Denicola. "You old crone!" he shouted. "You dreamed about that, too, didn't you? And you told that kid and . . ."

"Mrs. Denicola told me nothing," said Jupiter. "However, I can tell your friend Ernesto where the money is. It's in the freezer of Mr. Bonestell's refrigerator, hidden in an ice-cream carton."

Shelby took two quick steps across the room and slapped Jupe hard.

Ernie shook his head. "That was very foolish, my friend," he said. "Now you must come, and we won't talk any more about it, eh?"

Shelby's hand went to his coat. A second later there was a gleam of dark steel, and Shelby's gun was in his hand.

"So it's like that, eh?" said Ernie.

Luis had been watching quietly, unnoticed and forgotten. He moved now. So quickly that Shelby could not react, Luis stepped behind him. His hands went to Shelby's neck. Shelby cried out once, dropped his gun, and crumpled to the floor.

Ernie stepped forward, picked up the gun, and pointed it at Shelby.

Shelby groaned and sat up, and Luis yanked him to his feet. A moment later the men were gone. They were out and down the hill, and the rain was drumming on the roof and Eileen Denicola was struggling with her bonds.

"I stalled them as long as I could," said Jupe. "I hope Mr Bonestell got away in time, that he'll get the police and they'll be nabbed before they can leave the pier."

"I think it will not be that way," said old Mrs. Denicola. "I think there is something that has yet to happen before the police can come--before we can leave this room."

"What?" said Eileen. Then she caught her breath. There was a new sound--a sound that came not from the storm, but from the earth itself. It was a groaning sound. Somewhere close by a window shattered.

"Holy Saint Patrick!" gasped Eileen Denicola.

"My dream!" whispered the old lady. "The danger! The room that twists around the boy and me!" She closed her eyes and began to pray rapidly in Italian.

Timbers groaned again, and more glass smashed. But it wasn't an earthquake, as Bob had thought. Inch by inch the sodden, rain-soaked hillside was sliding out from under the motel!

20

A Fiery End

THE ROOM LURCHED!

Lamps smashed to the floor, and there were showers of sparks as the wiring began to tear apart.

"Don't let it burn!" prayed Eileen Denicola. "Dear heaven, please don't let it burn!"

More sparks flew, blue-white and dying as they fell. Then there was darkness--a darkness filled with the shrieking of timbers and the screech of nails being pulled out of wood.

There was another lurch, and old Mrs. Denicola cried out.

"Help!" yelled Pete. "Hey, somebody! Help!"

No one shouted back. No help came.

"This whole hillside is going to go any minute!" said Eileen Denicola.

She had no sooner spoken than the motel slid another couple of metres, sickeningly, sending chairs tumbling in the dark. Pete crashed into the bed and Jupe's chair went over on its side.

"Mrs. Denicola?" called Jupe. "Are you all right?"

"If it's me you speak to, I have been better," said the old lady. "Eileen, where are you?"

"On the floor," said Eileen.

"The police have got to come!" said Jupe. "Mr. Bonestell must have reached them by now. Bob, are you okay? Pete?"

"Okay," gasped Bob.

"I'm here," said Pete.

They waited, listening again. Jupe heard water running--a sound nearer than the rain that drummed on the roof. He lay on his side, his arms aching where they were tied to the chair. He felt wetness and smelled a muddy, chemical sort of smell. He puzzled about it for a moment, then closed his eyes in terror and despair.

The swimming pool was beginning to break up! It was the water from the pool that was running down through the room. If the pool really went, tons of water--thousands and thousands of gallons of water--would come sweeping down on them.

"Hey, where's all the water coming from?" Pete demanded in the darkness.

Eileen Denicola had realized the truth too. She began to shout for help.

Suddenly there was an answering shout from the treacherous, slippery hill outside.

"Over here!" yelled someone. "They're over here!"

Someone tried to open the door, but it was jammed.

There was another horrid lurch, and the window that faced the pool shattered and fell into the room. Then there was some light. Two men were on the hillside with torches. There was more shouting, and more water pouring through the room.

"Mrs. Denicola!" Jupe yelled. "Get Mrs. Denicola!"

A highway patrolman came through the window, followed by a fireman. When the fireman saw the boys and the women tied to chairs, he said, "What the . . ."

That was all that was said. The two men had old Mrs. Denicola out in a twinkling, still bound to her chair and praying loudly as she went. More men arrived and Eileen was carried out, and then the boys. In seconds they were free of their bonds and stumbling quickly down the hill, falling and being picked up and helped along, and then falling again.

On the highway, traffic was stopped. The night throbbled with the sound of engines, and searchlights swept the hillside. There were flares and barriers. The rescuers hustled the boys and the Denicolas across the road to safety.

"I told them you were up there!" It was Mr. Bonestell. He had fought his way past the barriers, and he almost danced as he grabbed Jupe's hand and shook it. "I told them you were up there! You're safe! Thank God!"

"The boat!" cried old Mrs. Denicola. She pointed.

The Denicola house was dark, and so was the office. There was no sign of the white truck at the end of the pier. But a hundred metres or so beyond the pier were the running lights of the Maria III.

"Those . . . those pirates!" yelled Eileen Denicola. She glared after the Maria III. "If they think they're going to get away . . .!"

She started towards the pier.

"Come on!" yelled Pete. He grabbed Bob's arm and started after her.

"Mr. Bonestell, tell the police to get the Coast Guard," said Jupe. "The men on that boat are gunrunners!"

"I will tell them all about it," announced old Mrs. Denicola. Jupe nodded, and ran after the others.

Eileen dodged into the office and snatched a key that was hidden away in a desk drawer. She ordered Pete to get a pair of oars from the locker behind the office.

There was a shout from the highway, and a roar of engines as the firemen backed their trucks away. The hill slid at last, bringing the motel crashing and splintering down with it. The wreckage covered half the road. The swimming pool collapsed completely, and a muddy flood rushed down the hill and across the highway.

Eileen and the boys looked at the wreckage for just a moment. Then she turned and ran out on to the rain-swept dock. The boys went after her.

"We'll take Sebastian's speedboat," called Eileen. "She'll overtake the Maria easily!"

They got into the rowboat that was waiting there. Pete began to row hard towards the buoy where the speedboat was moored.

"I can't see the Maria's lights anymore," said Eileen Denicola.

"She's heading down the coast," Jupe told her.

"That Ernie is one rotten pilot," said Eileen. "He'll run her on the rocks."

They reached the speedboat and scrambled to uncover the cockpit. Mrs. Denicola got into the boat and the boys tumbled in after her, and Jupe fastened the rowboat to the buoy. The engine

choked and ground and then took hold. Then they were skipping and bounding over the water in the rain-dark night. The prow of the speedboat slapped the waves with a report that was as loud as gunfire. Eileen Denicola gripped the wheel with both hands, and the boys hung on to the sides and braced themselves.

The lights onshore were distant and misty when Bob spotted lights ahead of them.

"There she is!" he cried.

"Right!" Eileen Denicola gunned the speedboat to a still wilder rate.

There was a glare of light which blinded them for an instant. They heard a helicopter clatter overhead. Then there was darkness again as the searchlight from the helicopter swept away across the black water.

"The Coast Guard!" said Mrs. Denicola.

The lights on the Maria III were doused, and the fishing boat became just a black shape in the night. But the speedboat was close now, and Eileen and the boys could see the wake the fishing boat threw up.

"Blast!" shouted Eileen. "She's heading for the open sea! Those creeps! They'll get away!"

She yanked at the wheel. The speedboat swerved. The engine strained and the small boat flashed through the wake of the Maria. Then the hull of the fishing boat was beside the speedboat and someone fired a shot from the deck of the Maria.

"Cowards!" yelled Mrs. Denicola.

The speedboat spurted ahead of the larger craft and streaked across the Maria's bow.

The fishing boat veered and lost speed.

Now the searchlight from the Maria III stabbed at the speedboat. There was another shot from the Maria. It missed and plunked harmlessly into the water. And then the helicopter was there again, and its powerful blue-white beam found the Maria III.

"They've got her now!" said Jupe as the helicopter held the Maria in a circle of light.

Jupe looked towards shore. The lights there were much closer now.

"Darn!" cried Eileen Denicola. "Where is that coast-guard cutter?"

The Maria had picked up speed again. She turned and swerved for a few moments, as if she could shake off the hovering helicopter. Then she set her prow towards the open sea again and raced for freedom.

Eileen Denicola laughed roughly and sent the speedboat careering after the fishing boat. Once more the speedboat raced in front of the Maria, and once more the man at the helm reacted, swerving to avoid a collision.

Jupe saw foaming surf on his left, and he heard breakers rumble and surge.

"Watch out!" yelled Pete.

Mrs. Denicola pulled hard at the wheel and the small boat stood on its side and almost skidded on the waves. Then they were out in the blackness again, free and safe.

But the Maria III struck the rocky seabed with a scraping, grinding crash that tore half her bottom out.

The fishing boat was lifted partway out of the water, and she tilted over on one side. The men on her deck shouted and scrambled. The speedboat passengers saw a flick of orange-red flame.

"She's burning," said Eileen Denicola.

The shouting and the rage were gone. The speedboat drifted in neutral, bobbing on the waves, and Eileen Denicola cried. Tears ran down her cheeks and caught the light from the stricken fishing boat. "A fuel line must have ruptured," she said.

A man dived from the deck of the Maria, then a second man, and then two more.

"Get the boat hook," ordered Mrs. Denicola. "Keep it handy. If anyone tries to climb in here, give them a swat."

"Yes, ma'am," said Pete.

A swimmer came splashing through the water. "There are life jackets under the seats," said Mrs. Denicola.

Jupe tossed a life jacket to each shipwrecked man as he approached the speedboat. Ernie tried to swim in close, and Pete brandished the boat hook. All four men got the message and kept their distance.

Bob found a length of rope which the men in the water could hold. They drifted, bobbing in the waves and watching the Maria.

The fishing boat blazed with a fierce fire that lit the night. Then there was an explosion. Part of the hull blew out, and the boat slid off the rocks and sank like a stone.

When the coast-guard ship arrived, the speedboat was still there. Four young men clutching at life jackets floated nearby.

There was nothing left of the Maria III and its deadly cargo but some bits of wreckage bobbing on the waves.

Mr. Sebastian Gets Curious

A WEEK AFTER THE SINKING of the Maria III, the Three Investigators rode north again through Malibu, and turned off the highway on to Cypress Canyon Drive. Hector Sebastian was waiting for them outside the old restaurant called Charlie's Place. Inside, in the huge room that looked out towards the ocean, the smiling Vietnamese named Don was setting out a feast on the glass-topped table.

"All-American favourites for all-American champs!" announced Don. "Mr. Goober peanut-butter-marshmallow-fluff sandwich. Super-Juicy frankfurters for taste of yesterday with all-meat goodness. Burger on Sunshine Bran bun and Picky Pickle Taste-Treat relish."

Don grinned broadly and backed out of the room, bowing as he went.

Mr. Sebastian sighed. "I think if Don were turned loose in a market that had no advertised brands, he would be completely paralysed. He wouldn't be able to buy a thing."

"Everything looks very good," said Bob politely.

Mr. Sebastian scowled. "Do you mean that you could eat a peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwich?" he demanded.

"Well," said Bob, "I'm not sure about the sandwich, but I like frankfurters."

"And hamburgers," said Pete. "And we get Picky Pickle relish all the time at home."

"Then help yourselves," said Mr. Sebastian.

The frankfurters and hamburgers quickly disappeared, but the plate with the peanut butter and marshmallow fluff sandwiches was left untouched. Pete looked at them in a doubtful way.

"Maybe we should eat some of those," he said. "Don seems so . . . so proud of them."

"Sooner or later, Don has to face reality," said Mr. Sebastian. "It won't hurt him to know that Americans aren't nourished entirely by peanut butter, carbonated drinks, and Hostess Twinkies."

"Now about the scar-faced man and the wallet--I'm curious. I've talked with Mrs. Denicola several times, but she has a temper to match that red hair. When she thinks about Ernie Villalobos and his friends, she gets too mad to talk. She splutters. I think she feels personally deprived."

"Because the fishing boat sank?" asked Pete.

"No. Because the police won't let her get her hands on Ernie and do something drastic to him."

Jupe chuckled. "She's a strong-minded lady. She doesn't like being duped."

"Who does?" said Mr. Sebastian. "However, since she does have this tendency to choke up with rage, and since she's very busy arguing with the insurance agent for the Maria III and negotiating for the purchase of the Maria IV, I thought you boys might fill me in on the case. After being an investigator for so many years, I have an itch to know more than the newspapers tell."

"Would you like to read my notes on the case?" said Bob. He picked up a Manila envelope that had been under his chair and took a file folder out of it.

"Mr. Hitchcock used to review our cases with us," said Pete.

Mr. Sebastian bowed. "I'm honoured," he said, and began to read Bob's notes on the mysterious beggar and the patriots of Mesa d'Oro.

For a while there was no sound in the room except the hum of traffic on the Coast Highway. Mr. Sebastian was completely absorbed in the notes. When he finished reading, he looked away, out at the trees and at the ocean beyond.

"There are times," he said, "when we must be grateful for the small vices of men. If Shelby Tuckerman hadn't been a petty, greedy man, he wouldn't have kept my wallet and you wouldn't have stumbled on the gun-running plot. How many people would have died if that shipment had gone through? We'll never know."

Jupe nodded. "People like Ernie will probably go right on bombing and sniping in Mesa d'Oro, but at least we did stop one shipment of guns."

"I assume that Mr. Bonestell isn't under suspicion anymore," said Mr. Sebastian. "He wasn't mentioned in the newspaper stories."

"He never really was a suspect," said Jupe, "and Ernie and his two friends have cleared him of any suspicion. They're really angry at Shelby, so they're talking. They feel that Shelby is a cheat, that he was just playing at being a spy and courier. There were lots of groups like Ernie's contributing to the cause of the Republicans of Mesa d'Oro. Shelby would collect the money from the leaders, bring it home to Mr. Bonestell's, in frozen-food packages, and hide it in the freezer. Then, once a month or so, he flew to Mexico City to turn it over to Rodriguez' people there. Ernie and his pals think Shelby was siphoning some of the funds into his own bank account--and that certainly seems more than likely."

"Shelby was Alejandro, wasn't he?" said Mr. Sebastian.

"Alejandro is his middle name," said Jupe. "His mother was from Mesa d'Oro. She was a terrorist who had to flee the country, and she married an American named Tuckerman. Shelby is named after his father, and after Alejandro, his mother's father."

"Although Shelby is an American, his mother raised him to believe that he is an aristocrat of Mesa d'Oro, and that the cause there is all-important. Shelby's mother was very active. She spoke at fund-raising events and made a lot of money for Mesa d'Oro. After she died a few years ago, Shelby tried to take over and do the same thing. He didn't have the magic, however. He couldn't persuade people to give till it hurt, so he became a courier instead."

"How did you know he had kept back some of the robbery loot?" asked Mr. Sebastian.

"I didn't, but it seemed a reasonable guess. I had to say something to delay Ernie and Shelby so Mr. Bonestell would have time to get the police. Also, I was afraid of what Shelby might do if

Ernie departed on the Maria and left Shelby behind. We and the Denicolas could accuse him, couldn't we? But if Shelby got his hands on Mr. Bonestell and then silenced all of us . . ."

Jupe stopped. He looked grim.

"Yes," said Mr. Sebastian. "Your position was delicate. You're probably lucky that Ernie took Shelby when he got aboard the Maria III."

"I know we're lucky," said Bob. "You see, it was Shelby who brought me to the motel. He discovered me at Strauss's place when he arrived with the first half of the gun money. Boy, was he mad! I heard him arguing with Ernie about what to do with me. Ernie didn't care because he was leaving the country. But Shelby was on the spot. He tried to convince Ernie to take me on the boat and drop me overboard at sea!"

Mr. Sebastian grimaced. "You boys could certainly make things hot for him, but was there any actual proof that he was part of the bank robbery?"

Pete chuckled. "Right there in the ice-cream carton, like Jupe guessed. Shelby was supposed to fence some jewellery that Ernie took from safe-deposit boxes during the robbery. But Shelby hung on to the prime pieces, and they were there in the freezer for the police to find. They were identified by the owners.

"And the police found the makeup and the wigs in the trunk of Shelby's car. Shelby thought it was daring and dramatic of him to be the lookout for the robbers while he was disguised as the terrorist Altranto."

Mr. Sebastian laughed. "I guess I'm glad this was your case, not mine," he said. "Shelby is so busy playacting it's hard to believe he's for real."

"He's for real, all right," said Jupe. "So are Ernie and his friends. They're doing their own kind of playacting right now. If you're a terrorist in Mesa d'Oro and you get caught, it's stylish to boast about how really black your crimes have been. It seems to make you a hero, instead of just an unbalanced person who likes explosives and firearms."

"Better a revolutionary than a beach bum, eh?" said Mr. Sebastian.

"Nobler," said Jupiter. "Of course, I should have suspected Shelby right away. He was in the perfect position to know about the routine at the bank, and he said to Mr. Bonestell, 'According to your system of justice, you're innocent until you're proven guilty.' A person who thought of himself as an American would have said, 'According to our system of justice . . .'"

"True," said Mr. Sebastian, "but don't be so hard on yourself. You did all right."

Bob grinned. "Thanks for not saying, 'You did all right for a bunch of kids.'"

"You did all right, period," said Mr. Sebastian. "You did better than a lot of investigators might have done. I imagine Shelby was anxious for Mr. Bonestell to hire you because he thought you wouldn't do all right. Then, later, he must have had second thoughts about it and tried to wire your workshop for sound."

"And he wired the sugar bowl on the table," said Juve. "Once I found the bug in the sugar bowl, I knew he was the scar-faced man and the link to the robbers. But I didn't guess that gun-running was involved. I thought it might be drugs or aliens."

"Speaking of gun-running, what about that moving company in Oxnard?" asked Mr. Sebastian.

"Strauss and his cronies are hijackers," said Bob. "The shipment of guns and ammunition was hijacked from a truck back east. Divers recovered some of the guns and they've been identified. Strauss and his men have disappeared. They left everything and ran. We heard that the trucks and equipment they left behind were no great loss. Pacific States Moving and Storage Company was about to declare bankruptcy."

"It must be hard to run an efficient moving business when you're so busy with stolen goods," said Mr. Sebastian. "Well, what about the makeup woman who made the speech at the rally that night?"

"Grade Montoya wasn't part of the plot," said Pete. "Her family's from Mesa d'Oro and she was brought up to believe in the Republican cause, that's all."

"It's a tradition," said Jupiter. "It's handed down from parent to child. I think Gracie is having second thoughts about that tradition now. She didn't mind collecting money for an exile in Mexico, but collecting money for guns to kill people--that's something else."

"The police asked her about the fight she had with Ernie," Bob put in. "He wanted a date with her, and she didn't want to go out with him. That's all that was about."

"Good for her," said Mr. Sebastian.

He handed the file back to Bob. "These are good notes," he said.

"I'm glad you like them," said Bob, "because, if you're not too busy, maybe you'd do something for us."

Mr Sebastian looked inquiringly at the boys. It was Jupe who put the request to him at last.

"Mr. Hitchcock used to introduce our cases for us," he said. "I know you're busy with your own writing, but the introduction needn't be long."

Mr. Sebastian grinned. "I'll do my best. And when I'm finished, perhaps you'll take me up on my original offer of a speedboat ride. Of course, I'm not so dashing with a boat as Eileen Denicola, and we probably won't sink any fishing boats. On the other hand, you never really know."

Mr. Sebastian paused and grinned. "That's what makes life interesting, isn't it? You never really know!"