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The Three Investigators in
**The Mystery of the
Slipped
Disk**

by Mark Zahn

Based on characters created by Robert Arthur

Illustrations by Martha Schwartz



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In Memory of Dennis Lynds (1924-2005)

It was a crisp Autumn day in October when the following events took place – October thirty-first, Halloween, to be exact. In Southern California the weather is mild and pleasant even this late in the year, but there are still days that have a chill; particularly when evening comes and the fog rolls in off the Pacific as it so often does here in Rocky Beach. By the way I'm Jupiter Jones, First Investigator, and it was at my aunt and uncle's salvage yard where the mystery began.

Other than jack 'o lanterns on doorsteps and the occasional ghost, ghoul, and goblin strolling merrily down the sidewalk, it was another typical day at the Jones Salvage Yard. As I mentioned above, the salvage yard is owned by my aunt and uncle: Titus and Mathilda Jones. It's a fascinating destination for anyone searching for curious old objects. Uncle Titus does most of the buying for the yard and he has a real knack for finding unusual, even bizarre items. In fact, people come from all over California to search through his finds! Aunt Mathilda often lectures him for the oddities he brings home, but he almost always sells what he finds – and usually for a tidy profit. That's all it takes for Aunt Mathilda to hold her tongue... at least until the next shipment arrives.

Pete Crenshaw, the firm's Second Investigator, and Bob Andrews, Records and Research, had biked over that morning. Since the large iron gates were still locked, they let themselves in through Green Gate One, a secret opening in the salvage yard's tall fence. On the other side of the opening is my workshop. Nearby, hidden beneath strategically placed junk, is our secret Headquarters. I was busy re-wiring a large table lamp shaped like a pelican when my partners made their appearance. I set my screwdriver aside, checked my wristwatch, and grinned.

"Seven-thirty – right on schedule!"

Pete grunted and Bob removed his glasses and rubbed the

sleep from his eyes.

“What’s the big idea of calling us so early, Jupe? Don’t you ever sleep in?”

“Why waste your time sleeping when there’s so much to be done!” I exclaimed. “As both of you know, Rocky Beach’s *All Hallow’s Eve Festival* is tonight in the town square. As you are also aware, our monetary funds are at an all-time low. Most of the town will be present participating in the carnival, games of chance, and spook-shows. I know that I, for one, would like to take part in the festivities, and I’d wager that you would like to as well. Therefore, we must put our time to good use today. Hans and Konrad have the day off, so there’s ample opportunity for Aunt Mathilda to put us to work. We’ll spend the morning working for her, and then use our day’s pay as spending money for tonight!”

Pete yawned, stretched his arms, and rubbed his belly. “I hate it when he makes sense,” he said to Bob. “But when he’s right, he’s right. Feed me a stack of Aunt Mathilda’s pancakes with a side of bacon and put me to work!”

Bob nodded in agreement. “Sounds like a good plan, Jupe. But I promised Miss Bennett I’d put in an appearance at the library today. I shouldn’t be long – a couple of hours at the most.”

Bob worked part-time at the library here in town; sorting, shelving, and repairing books. It kept him pretty busy, but he always found time to spare when it came to a mystery.

“Fair enough,” I said. “Let’s see if Aunt Mathilda will cook us some breakfast, and then we’ll get to work!”

We exited through Green Gate One and walked along the tall fence toward the front of the yard where my aunt and uncle’s house is located. We had just reached the big gates when a fancy blue sports car screeched to a halt in front of the drive.

“Is that Skinny Norris?” Pete wondered. “It may be



Halloween, but I'm in no mood for any of his tricks!"

E. Skinner Norris – known to us as Skinny – is a long-time adversary of The Three Investigators. A spoiled rotten kid of a wealthy businessman, Skinny can't help showing off and trying to prove that he's smarter than us. He has yet to succeed, but that doesn't stop him from trying. A bit older than us, Skinny has a license to drive and a fancy sports car to cause trouble in.

"I guess military school hasn't changed Skinny a bit." Bob said, shaking his head in disgust. At the conclusion of a case of ours we called *The Mystery of the Headless Horse*, Skinny got into a lot of hot water and was shipped off to a military school in Arizona. We hadn't seen him since then. But knowing his love for Halloween, and the *All Hallows Eve Festival* in particular, I thought perhaps Skinny had gotten leave from the school to attend. Skinny just couldn't resist the temptation to take part in a night of tricks, pranks, and jokes!

Much to our surprise a woman got out of the car – it was Skinny's mother! She was middle-aged but still quite pretty. A trail of tears ran down her face, leaving her hazel eyes a little puffy and red. She was wearing an expensive designer jogging outfit, and a huge diamond ring glittered impressively on her ring finger as she dabbed the tears away from her cheeks. She hurried over to us, clenching her hands together in agitation.

"Good morning, Mrs. Norris," I said, giving her a moment to regain her composure. "Is there something we can do for you?"

"Y-y-yes..." the woman gulped. "It's Skinner – he's missing! He's supposed to return to the academy tomorrow. I know he dislikes the place, but it's really the best thing for him. You boys are friends of his – he has spoken of you so much that I thought maybe he had contacted you, or perhaps he was hiding out amid all that awful... *junk!*"

I had to bite my tongue to keep myself from pointing out that

this was not a junk yard but a salvage yard – however now was not the time to clarify the misnomer. Skinny's mother was clearly upset, and, despite her misconception that we were friends with her son, we immediately felt compelled to help her out in any way possible.

"Honestly, Mrs. Norris," Pete blurted out, "we're the *last* people Skinny would come to for help. Why, I think..."

Fortunately, a well-timed kick in the ankle from Bob kept Pete from saying anything nasty about Skinny. After much effort, Mrs. Norris continued her story.

"Skinner has been home on a one week leave from the academy. My father – Skinner's grandfather – died last week."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," I said truthfully. Bob and Pete offered their condolences as well.

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness. You're such nice boys – I can see why Skinner speaks of you so often. And that leads me to my real problem. You see, when Skinner ran off, he took my laptop computer with him. They don't allow computers at the academy, and it's a good thing, too." Mrs. Norris leaned in close and spoke in a hushed, confidential manner, as if she didn't want anyone else to hear. "I'm afraid my son is somewhat of a troublemaker when it comes to computers. He hacks into other people's computers as a sort of hobby; and he has also been known to create a virus or two."

"Would you like us to track down Skinny, ma'am, and find your laptop for you?" Bob asked.

Mrs. Norris dabbed at her nose and laughed. "Heavens no – I could care less about the computer. I could buy *ten* computers if I wanted. It's what's *inside* the computer that's important!"

"But there's nothing but wires and electronics inside a computer," Pete shrugged. "What's so important about this one?"

The woman paused, and then spoke again in her hushed tone.

“There’s a disk inside the computer. It has the password to my father’s computer saved on it. With all of the funeral arrangements I never had a chance to look at it, much less make a copy. My father was working on his last will and testament before he died. A rather large inheritance is at stake – millions if you must know. According to my father’s lawyer, we have ten days to produce a will before my father’s assets are divided evenly between his surviving relatives. That means distant relatives who never even visited my father once when he was sick will get the same share of money as I will. And I took care of him for all these years. Tomorrow is the last day... oh, it’s not fair!”

Mrs. Norris began crying again. I patted her hand and tried to reassure her. When she had regained her composure, she began talking once more in a choked voice.

“You may not know this, but Skinner has caused a lot of heartache for me over the years. His father only encourages him. I’ve tried to raise him right, I really have. And now this. If something should happen to that disk – if it gets broken or scratched or lost and I lose the password to my father’s computer...”

An idea suddenly began to take shape in my mind. “Perhaps we don’t need your disk, ma’am.”

“Of course we need it!” she said rather pointedly. “The password was never written down. My father refused to tell anyone – even me! He saved it to the disk and gave it to me just hours before he died. Without the disk I’m afraid the password is lost forever.”

“But maybe not,” I persisted. “Maybe there’s a way!”

Bob’s face lit up as he suddenly understood my line of thought. “Do you mean we might be able to guess what the password is, Jupe; even without the disk?”

“With proper deductive reasoning, we should be able to keep guesswork to a minimum,” I replied.

A hopeful expression appeared on Skinny's mother's face. "Do you really think you can do it?" she asked breathlessly. "Do you really think you can crack the code?"

"My friends and I have had experience with this kind of thing in the past." I explained, trying to sound as confident as possible. "We've solved numerous riddles that have left the most intelligent of adults completely baffled. Our card..."

THE THREE INVESTIGATORS

"We Investigate Anything"

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Jupiter Jones.....	First Investigator
Peter Crenshaw.....	Second Investigator
Bob Andrews.....	Records & Research

Mrs. Norris studied the card gravely and sighed as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "I'll take any help I can get. When can you start?"

"Immediately," I said, completely forgetting about breakfast. "It would be most helpful if we could see your father's computer. Perhaps it might give us a clue to the missing password."

"Of course. But I'm afraid there's not enough room in my car for all three of you. Perhaps you could bicycle over." She gave us her address, asking if we knew where it was located.

"I think we can find it," Pete said, trying not to snicker. I knew what he was thinking – our last case had taken us right into Skinny's own back yard!

"Thank you so much, boys," Mrs. Norris said, smiling graciously. "I'll meet you there." She fired up her sports car and in a flash she was off, leaving us to locate our bicycles.



“Creeps!” cried Pete. “Old Skinny has sure done it this time!”

“Do you really think you can figure out the password, Jupe?” asked Bob. “I mean, it could literally be *anything*!”

“We won’t know until we try,” I said simply. I had a plan in mind, but I was reluctant to spell it out until I had put it in motion and tested its validity.

After retrieving our jackets to fight the chill in the air and our bicycles from my workshop, we made haste to Skinny’s house. Within minutes we were pedaling up the drive to the biggest house in Rocky Beach. A grinning paper skeleton was taped to the front door and several pumpkins lined the walkway. We parked our bikes in front of the massive front porch. Mrs. Norris appeared at the door before we could even ring the bell.

“Come in,” she said, “it’s right this way,”

We barely had time to take in the opulent splendor of the decor before we were rushed upstairs to a cramped study. Mrs. Norris explained that this had been her father’s office when he was alive. Everything about it was contrary to the rest of the house. Where most walls displayed priceless paintings and lithographs, the office held simple prints of hunting dogs and outdoor life. The room was cozy with a distinct ‘lived in’ look that approached being on the messy side. A computer was centered on a large cherry roll-top desk that seemed too big for the room. Skinny’s mom switched it on, and, once the desktop appeared, she double-clicked on a red folder icon that read: *LWAT*.

“What’s *LWAT* mean?” Pete wondered.

“*Last Will And Testament*,” Bob explained, beating me to it.

I took a seat at the leather chair in front of the computer. As I did so, my feet kicked an oblong black and orange box that had been stored underneath the desk. Smiling, I pushed the box aside and grasped the computer mouse.

I clicked on the single item inside the red folder. It was a doc-

ument from a word processing program, presumably with which the dying man had typed up his will. Before the program could begin, however, a window popped up with two blank spaces asking for a **USERNAME** and **PASSWORD**. The 'username' part was already filled in with *LWAT*, but the 'password' entry was blank, with only enough space for two letters to be typed in.

"That's a pretty short password," Pete remarked.

"Maybe it's his initials," suggested Bob.

Mrs. Norris shook her head in frustration. "I already tried that. And *my* initials, my husbands, Skinner's... everyone in my family! My father and his puzzles – he always loved a good trick – and Halloween was his favorite time of the year. I swear he did this on purpose! And Skinner is just like him – always another prank!"

As I sat before the flickering monitor, my eyes scanned the contents of the room. I was sure that hidden somewhere in the study there would be a clue to the missing password. Perhaps in a picture, a notation, or some trophy or item that was significant to the recently deceased.

"You said your father gave you the disk only hours before he died. Did he say anything to you?" I asked. "Did he give any hint or clue when he slipped you the disk – even if it sounded strange to you at the time?"

Skinny's mother sat on the edge of the desk and was quiet for a moment as she recalled that fateful day.

"Yes, he did say something odd now that I think about it. I don't recall his exact words – it sounded like gibberish at the time. He handed me the disk and said: 'For Skinny.' I asked 'what is it, dad?' He only laughed and winked and said: 'The password. Take two from five and make four.'"

Pete snorted. "That's impossible! If you take two from five, you only get three. He must have counted wrong."

I wasn't so sure. I asked for a paper and pen to see if I was on

the right track. After a minute of work I was positive I had the answer. I turned to Mrs. Norris and smiled.

“Is your husband’s name also E. Skinner Norris, ma’am?”

Mrs. Norris looked surprised. “Why, yes it is. But I don’t...”

“Would I be correct in assuming Skinny’s other grandfather also had that name. And *his* father before him?”

Mrs. Norris threw up her hands. “Yes! Yes! But what does this have to do with the password?”

“Ma’am, you should have no problem finding Skinny. He will almost certainly show up at the *All Hallow’s Eve Festival* that’s going on tonight at the town square.”

I pulled the black and orange box from underneath the desk and held it up for her inspection. It was a container for a Halloween costume – a picture of a scarecrow was on the lid.

“Just search for a kid in a scarecrow costume carrying a laptop computer. If you’d like, we can help you look. As for the password to your father’s last will and testament... I took your father’s advice and took two from five to make four. See for yourself!”

*What is the password and how did Jupiter solve it?
Turn to the next page to find out!*



SOLUTION

Jupiter really did take two from five to make four. Jupe suspected it might be a puzzle when Skinny's mom said the old man loved a good prank. Skinny's grandfather provided Jupe the clue he needed to deduce the password when he said 'For Skinny.' Jupe surmised that what the dying man was *really* saying was: '*Four Skinnys*' – as in four generations of Skinners, or, simply put, E. Skinner Norris IV. Once this had been established, Jupe jotted down the following on a piece of paper:



When he scratched out the 'F' and the 'E' of the word 'FIVE' he was left with 'IV' – or the Roman numeral for the number four. By taking two letters from the word 'FIVE,' he was left with IV. The two letter password to Skinny's grandfather's last will and testament was: IV

P.S. Skinny was found that night at the *All Hallow's Eve Festival* carrying the laptop computer, just as Jupiter had predicted. He was sent back to military school the next day.

HAPPY HALLOWEEN!



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