

The Dognapper

Robert Borland Mystery #6

When the muse is with me, there aren't enough hours in the day. I write. I research. I take notes. I reread and rearrange notes I've taken previously, organizing them into a logical progression of the story. I rewrite. On days like that, everything I write is an absolute masterpiece. I might reread what I wrote in a few days and decide it was complete drivel, but at that moment, when I'm in the flow, it's the best thing I've ever written. The best thing anyone has ever written.

This morning, the muse had abandoned me. I stared blankly at the laptop on my knees. There were at least a dozen articles I needed to read. Articles I had downloaded the previous week, when the muse was with me. None of them interested me this morning. The pile of books beside my chair was equally uninteresting. I really should go through them and take notes, but I couldn't find the motivation. I knew I'd have to return some of them to the library soon. Hell, some were probably overdue already, but what was the point? My book wasn't coming together. It would never come together.

My gaze wandered absently around the room. I frowned slightly when I saw massive, boxy Victrola Robert had recently dragged home from an antique shop. Ever since we met George Swanson he had developed an interest in old records, especially jazz music from the 1920s. I nearly gave myself a hernia helping him drag that thing into the house. It was too big to fit in his bedroom, so we rearranged the furniture in our living room to make room for it. Every time he found a new record in an antique store, or the mail brought some new treasure he'd bought online, he would play it for me. I like jazz, but I like the smooth, melodic jazz recorded by modern musicians with infinite fidelity. The records he bought were fast and raucous, with muffled bass and treble, and annoying pops and scratches. Robert somehow seemed to be able to tune that out and hear the music as it must have sounded in the recording studio, instead of the music that was actually playing. Sometimes he would say "Just think, this is an acoustic recording. There were no microphones. All this music was captured by a tin horn." He would say this with admiration, as though that somehow made it sound better.

At this moment Robert stepped into the room. "Are you busy?" he asked.

"Not particularly," I said. "There's a lot of work I could be doing, but I can't seem to get enthused about it."

"Want to help me in a wild goose chase?" he asked.

"Beats sitting around here. What's up?"

"A police sergeant I know called me about a missing dog. There's nothing she can do about it. No evidence of any crime, but she said the man's story rang true and she got the impression there might be more to it than just a runaway dog. Her instincts are usually pretty good. She's the one who put us in touch with George Swanson."

I cringed inwardly when he mentioned George, not because I didn't like George but because he was the one who was responsible for the Victrola in our living room. Still, chasing after a missing dog sounded more interesting than sitting around staring at my laptop. In a little while we were navigating a maze of residential streets near MacArthur Park, looking for the home of a Mr. Mike Anderson.

Mike Anderson lived in a small, one-story house surrounded by larger two and three story houses. His house appeared to be well kept, but it looked older than the surrounding houses. I suspected this had originally been a neighborhood of small houses like Mike's, but the other houses had been torn down and replaced by larger, more elegant homes as the city grew to engulf the neighborhood. Mike's tiny yard was enclosed by a white privacy fence. The gate was secured by an electronic keypad lock, with a doorbell beside the lock. Robert rang the bell, and a short time later a buzz told us the gate had been unlocked. Mike greeted us from inside a glass storm door at the front of his house.

Mike looked to be in his mid-50s, with close cropped graying hair. He had a round, friendly face, a slightly florid complexion, and a large stocky body that was confined to a wheelchair. He waved us to his couch and immediately offered us coffee or soda. When he returned with the drinks Robert commented "I see you used to be in the Marines."

Mike looked at Robert in surprise. "Very observant, Mr. Borland. I've got a Marine Corps tattoo, but it's covered by my shirt. Was it my haircut that tipped you off?"

"Hardly," Robert laughed. "I'm afraid detective shows have made people expect wizardry. There's a photo of you in uniform on the mantle."

"Oh, that." Mike chuckled. "I forgot all about that. Yes, I was in the Corps."

"Thank you for your service," Robert said.

"Thank you for your support," Mike replied. "But don't start thinking I'm some sort of a hero. It was the best job offer I had when I graduated from high school, and these Marines were very good to me. This," he gestured to his wheelchair as he spoke, "is the result of a helicopter accident during a training exercise. I was eating an MRE at the time, not making the world safe for democracy."

"You were serving your country," Robert said, "and that's an admirable thing. But we came here to talk about your dog."

"Freckles," Mike said with a note of sadness. He took a picture off the table next to him and handed it to us. It was a picture of Mike on his patio, with a small reddish-brown and white dog in his lap. It looked like some sort of a spaniel to me.

"He was just a mutt I picked up at the pound," Mike continued, "but he became my best friend. Smart as a whip, that dog. He used to curl up next to me on the bed at night. In the morning I'd let him out and he'd bring in my newspaper. If the weather was nice we'd go for long walks in the park, but if

the weather wasn't nice or if I wasn't feeling well he'd never beg or complain. It's been almost three weeks since he disappeared."

"How did he disappear?" Robert asked.

"I used to let him out every night around ten, so he could do his business before we went to bed. One night he started barking at the patio door a little before ten. I figured he needed to go out early so I let him out. I heard him barking in the yard, which was unusual, but then he stopped barking. He never stayed out for more than five or ten minutes on these nightly rounds, so when fifteen minutes had passed and he hadn't barked to come in I started to get worried. I stood at the door and called, but he didn't come. Then I turned on all the yard lights and went outside, but he wasn't anywhere to be found. I haven't seen him since."

"Was the gate closed?" Robert asked.

"Definitely," Mike answered. "I remembered closing it when we came back from our walk that day, and I checked it that night. It was closed and locked."

"The gate isn't as high as the rest of the fence," Robert commented. "Could he have jumped over it?"

"I don't think so. He wasn't a particularly good jumper, and he'd never even tried to jump the gate before."

"So you think someone took him?"

"I'm afraid so," Mike answered.

"Do you suspect anyone in particular?"

Mike hesitated a long time before he answered. "I think maybe Hong, my gardener, took Freckles. Actually, and this is going to sound crazy, I think someone is impersonating Hong and I think that person took Freckles." He looked at us expectantly as he said this, trying to judge our reaction.

"Tell me about Hong," Robert said, "and why you think someone would want to impersonate him and steal Freckles."

"Hong's a really nice guy," Mike began. "In his mid-30s maybe. He looks Oriental. Chinese, Japanese, or maybe Vietnamese? I've heard Hong is a common name in Vietnam. Anyway, he's really nice but a bit, uh, slow mentally. You know what I mean? He just showed up at my gate one day, pulling a wagon that had a rake, a shovel, some other gardening tools, and one of those push-type lawn mowers. He offered to cut my grass for \$20. I don't have a very big lawn, but even so \$20 sounded like a good price so I said OK. He not only cut my grass for that price, he raked up the clippings and put them in a garbage bag. He did a really good job, so when he came back a week later I immediately hired

him to cut my grass again. I became a regular customer. He didn't keep a precise schedule, but he showed up roughly once a week to cut my grass. In the spring I'd buy flowers and give him an extra \$20 to dig up my garden and plant them. I gave him the combination to my gate - I had to show him how to enter it a couple times before he caught on - so if I wasn't home when he came by he could mow my grass anyway. I'd pay him for it the following week. He was great."

He stopped as though he had finished his story, so Robert prompted him to continue. "But you think somebody else took his place?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah." Mike continued. "It was the damnedest thing. Freckles loved Hong, and Hong loved to play with Freckles. Whenever Hong came to mow my lawn Freckles would pick up this little rubber ball and stare out the patio door at Hong, wagging his tail like mad. As soon as I saw that Hong had finished mowing I'd open the door and Freckles would run up to Hong and drop the ball at his feet. Hong would laugh and throw the ball and Freckles would fetch it and bring it right back. Sometimes they'd play this game for half an hour before Hong would come to the door to get paid. Then I'd bring Freckles inside and Hong would go on his way."

"Then one day when Hong finished mowing Freckles ran up to Hong then stopped short, dropped the ball, and started barking and growling as he backed away. I had to go outside and haul him back into the house. I apologized to Hong and said I didn't know what was wrong with Freckles, but Hong seemed more irritated than disappointed. I say Hong, but I wasn't certain it was Hong. He was dressed like Hong and he looked almost like Hong, but something seemed different. I can't put my finger on it, but I just had the feeling it wasn't Hong. He talked slowly and deliberately like Hong, but somehow his voice wasn't quite the same either. This happened a few days before Freckles disappeared."

"Did you ever ask him about Freckles disappearance," Robert asked.

"Yes, and that was a little strange, too. The next time he came by to mow I asked if he had seen Freckles around the neighborhood. He replied very slowly, 'I'm sorry. I don't know where your dog is.' Something about that seemed strange, but it took me a while to realize what it was. A couple months ago Hong raised his rates. He said 'I am sorry. I must ask for twenty-five dollars.' He said 'I am' instead of 'I'm,' and it sounded like a speech he had rehearsed. The guy who said 'I'm' spoke just as slowly, but it sounded like he was doing that on purpose, not like he was struggling to think of the words. I know this sounds crazy, but I just don't think that guy was Hong."

Robert sat for a moment and thought about this. "I don't think it sounds crazy," he said. "I think you're very observant. Does he still come by to mow?"

"About once a week," Mike answered. "No set schedule, but roughly once a week."

"When he mows your lawn, do you ever take him a glass of water or a can of soda?"

"Sometimes," Mike said. "Especially if it's hot."

“Next time he comes by, please take him a glass of something,” Robert suggested. Make certain it’s a clean glass, and try not to touch it where he’s held it afterward. I think I can get some friends to dust it for fingerprints. If this guy who’s impersonating Hong has a record, we can find out who he is. In the meantime, there’s not a whole lot I can do. I’ll check with the local police to see if they know a ‘Hong’ who mows grass in the area, but without a more specific ID there’s not much to go on.”

We said our good-bye’s and drove back to the house.

“What do you think?” Robert asked me as we were driving.

“Not much to go on,” I said. “He’s a nice guy, and I feel bad that he lost his dog, but all he has is a vague suspicion that somebody is impersonating his gardener. He doesn’t know the gardener’s last name, he doesn’t know what nationality he is other than ‘Asian,’ and there’s no real connection between the gardener and his dog’s disappearance. Seems to me it’s more likely the dog just jumped the fence and ran away.”

“Why would the dog do that?”

“I don’t know. Dogs run away all the time. Maybe there was a cat in the back yard. Or a raccoon. That’s why the dog was anxious to go out. The cat jumped over the fence and the dog clambered over and chased it.”

“That’s certainly a possibility,” Robert said. “But it doesn’t explain the change in the gardener. Mike couldn’t put his finger on it, but the dog definitely sensed it. To me, the fact that he couldn’t identify the gardener’s nationality makes him more believable. If he’d been absolutely certain the gardener was Chinese, or Japanese, I would have wondered how he could be so certain. Could you be positive after a few casual conversations? I certainly couldn’t. It’s not like there is only one ethnic group in Japan, and there are dozens of ethnic types in China. But you’re right about the fact that we don’t have much to go on. Still, I wonder. . .” We drove the rest of the way in silence, with Robert deep in thought.

I asked Robert about the case a few days later but he hadn’t learned anything useful. The local police were familiar with a man named Hong who did yardwork in the area, but there had never been any complaints about him and they didn’t know where he lived. Robert seemed irritable about the case because it wasn’t progressing, so I didn’t ask any more questions.

That afternoon Mike called to say that Hong had come by to mow his grass. He took him a glass of water as Robert had suggested, but Hong didn’t take off his gardening gloves to drink it.

“Hang on to it anyway,” Robert told him. “There may be DNA evidence.”

“It’s a long shot,” Robert told me as he hurried out of the house to pick up the glass. “I’ll have to call in a lot of favors to run a DNA test, but we haven’t got anything else to go on.”

Based on TV shows, I thought DNA analysis could be done in a few hours. I was surprised, therefore, when it was over a week before Robert got the results back. He assured me that was really a fast turnaround, based upon the fact that they were doing this as a favor and also on the fact that it was an unofficial test, not subject to the safeguards and procedures that would be required for forensic evidence. The results were disappointing. “Hong Yang. No criminal record.”

“So that man *is* Hong,” Robert said, as much to himself as to me. “How could the dog have been wrong? But DNA tests don’t lie. . .” He thought for a while and then shrugged. “At least we’ve got a last name.”

He called Mike to tell him the news. “It’s possible that a man named ‘Hong’ is impersonating the Hong who played with your dog, but that doesn’t seem very likely.” He also told Mike to call him if anything new happened concerning the gardener or his dog.

Robert spent the rest of the day searching for “Hong Yang” on his computer. He wasn’t very optimistic about the results.

“There are a lot more Hong Yongs in the world than I suspected,” he said. “Assuming he was born in LA, and assuming Mike’s estimate of his age is correct, and assuming he’s not any of the Hong Yongs who are working as stockbrokers, researchers, or other occupations that would preclude yard work, my best guess is that he was born in the mid-80s to a woman named Li-Jing Yang. There’s a newspaper birth announcement about Hong, but I can’t find anything more about him. Li-Jing shows up in a few newspaper articles about her son Qiang, who apparently is a few years older than Hong. His high school yearbook shows he played on the school’s baseball team and was also in the chess club, science club, and the National Honor Society. There’s no mention of Hong in any yearbook from that high school. According to a newspaper article, Qiang enlisted in the Air Force in 1998, shortly he graduated from high school. Li-Jing died in 2000 after a short illness. I can’t find any information about any of them after that date.”

We didn’t have to wait long for new developments. We had been enjoying a long stretch of good weather – pleasant temperatures with an occasional spring shower, but that night a storm front blew through. We had lightning, thunder, torrential rains, and strong winds. A few trees blew down, and the city was littered with branches, leaves, and storm-blown debris. Two days later Mike called. Hong had come by the day after the storm to see if he needed any clean-up in his yard. A tree limb had broken a picket in his privacy fence. Hong offered to clean up the debris and replace the picket for \$25. Mike was impressed by the results, especially so because he had never known Hong to do anything other than simple yard work. Later he looked at the nearby trees to see where the branch had come from, and he couldn’t find any signs of a broken branch. He knew this was a minor thing, but Robert had told him to call if anything unusual happened so he called. Robert told him we’d be right there.

Hong had done excellent work. The yard looked immaculate, and only the fact that one picket was slightly cleaner than the others showed there had been any work done to the fence. Like Mike, we could see no indication that a limb had broken off any of the nearby trees. Robert examined the new picket very carefully, occasionally thumping it or scraping the edge with his thumbnail.

"It's a composite board," Robert announced. "Plastic, not wood. Nothing wrong with that, it will actually last longer than the wood pickets on the rest of your fence, but I'm surprised Hong bought a composite picket because it costs more than a wooden one. It sounds a little different if you tap it about two-thirds of the way up," he rapped his knuckle on the picket as he said this, "than if you tap it on the top or the bottom." He rapped his knuckle at those points to show us the difference. "Almost sounds like it's hollow. There's also a slight lip where the facing on the far side of the picket is glued on, but only in the area that sounds hollow." He scraped his thumbnail along that edge to show us how it caught on the lip. "I'd think it was made that way, except there's no ridge on the rest of the picket. I'm wondering if someone cut the face off that side, hollowed out the picket, and then glued it back on."

Robert stood in silent thought for a moment. Then he spoke.

"When Hong offered to repair your fence, how long did it take him to get the materials?"

"Oh, I don't know," Mike answered. "Less than an hour, I think."

"And where's the nearest hardware store that might have a picket like this?"

"There's a Home Depot near the Good Samaritan Hospital," Mike said. "And the Ace Hardware on Alvarado Street *might* have fencing."

"So we're talking at least a dozen blocks from here. Probably more," Robert said. "I doubt that Hong could have walked that far, pulling his wagon, bought the materials, and gotten back here in less than an hour. Did he buy the picket beforehand? Did he wait for a good storm so he could sneak a branch into your yard at night, break a picket, and have an excuse to replace it?"

He asked Mike for a mirror. While Mike went into the house to get one, Robert dragged a patio chair over to the fence. He stood on the chair so he could look over the top of the fence and use the mirror to examine the surface of the other side of the fence.

"There are two small holes on the other side of the fence," he said as he stepped down off the chair. "They look natural, like insect holes, except they're perfectly round and there's no reason why insects would bore into a plastic fence. How much do you know about your neighbors?"

"Well, the Bensons live on one side of me," Mike answered. "They're a retired couple, and the Lasseignes live on the other side. They've got two kids living at home. . ."

"What about the house behind you," Robert interrupted, "on the other side of this fence? Who lives there?"

"I don't actually know," Mike replied. "I think it's a rental, because the people are always changing. For the last six months or so four men have been living there, but I couldn't swear it's been the same four men all the time."

Robert excused himself and walked around the corner of the house to make some calls. Mike and I talked about how the Dodgers were doing in spring training, and what their prospects were for the coming season until he returned.

“That house is owned by the Chinese embassy,” Robert announced when he returned. “I don’t like the fact that someone seems to have tampered with the fence that faces their property. I think we need to bring the police in on this. Because there’s a possible embassy involvement, I think we ought to notify the FBI as well. I wanted to give you a heads-up before I called because it will probably mean a lot of people will be tramping through your yard.” Mike immediately agreed.

I was amazed at how quickly everyone showed up. I guess anything that involves an embassy is a high priority. In addition to our friend Brent Hopkins from the FBI, there was a city police lieutenant, four uniformed police officers, and a bomb squad unit. The bomb squad showed up in a plain white van, with no “Bomb Squad” placards to alarm the public. They brought a portable X-Ray unit, and it wasn’t long until they showed us an X-Ray of the fence picket.

“Someone’s hollowed it out, all right,” the bomb technician said. “You can see there’s a circuit board, some electronics, and a large battery inside. I don’t see any explosives, though, and our portable sniffer didn’t detect any traces of explosives. My guess is it’s some sort of a monitoring device. Just to be safe, though, we need to evacuate the surrounding houses while we use a rope to pull it down from a safe distance.”

The uniformed policemen went door to door, asking people to temporarily walk to a safe location at the end of the block. They explained it was a routine precaution because an unknown person had left a package in the area. It was the middle of the day, so only the retired couple and two other neighbors were home. No one was in the embassy house, thankfully. The bomb squad was able to pull down the picket and their robot cracked it open with no problem. The police officers told the neighbors it was a false alarm. They went back to their houses, and Brent took the broken picket to the FBI lab. Before they left, the police asked Mike to give them a call immediately if Hong ever returned.

A few days later Brent called to give us an update. The electronics in the fence picket were a listening device. It aimed an ultraviolet laser at a window of the house and captured the reflection. When people talked inside the house, the sound waves made the window vibrate, and the laser detected these vibrations. The concept was not new, but the homemade electronic circuit that miniaturized it so that it would fit inside a fence picket, relay the captured sounds over a cellular link, and operate for months on a single battery was very impressive. Brent said he’d like to meet the guy who built it. He also said they had only been able to find a few details about Hong beyond what Robert had told them. Li-Jing came to the US with Qiang a few months before Hong was born. Qiang went AWOL about the time his mother died, but the Air Force never classified him as a deserter or filed any more serious charges. Other than that, they could find nothing about any of them.

Robert smiled as he hung up. “Things are beginning to make sense,” he said. Then he called his friend who ran the DNA test.

"You said the DNA sample I sent you matched the DNA of a Hong Yang," Robert said. "Do you know where the matching sample of Mr. Yang's DNA came from?"

There was a short pause while his friend checked the files. "It was from one of those ancestry services," was the reply. "TraceMyAncestors.com. Sites like that often share their data with us. That's how I was able to make a match even though Mr. Yang had no criminal record."

Robert chuckled as he hung up that call. Then he went into his room to do some serious research.

The next morning Robert's voice startled me as I staggered into the kitchen for my morning cup of coffee. "Do you want to join me in a video call with Qiang's former commander?" I looked at the clock on the microwave. 7:37 AM. Robert never got up that early. But he was sitting in his favorite chair in the living room with his laptop. Clean, freshly shaved, and wearing real clothes instead of his bathrobe. He must have been very excited about this call. I grunted an acceptance to his invitation.

"The call's not until eight," he said, looking at his watch. "So you've got time to get cleaned up."

I felt the stubble on my chin and shuffled off to get ready.

"The AWOL notification came from an Air Force tech school," Robert explained as he set up the call on his laptop. "It was a school for electronic security specialist. The school has a web page and I was able to find a list of former commanders in their archives. A Colonel Jim Talbot was in command when Qiang was at the school. The colonel's Linked-In page says he's a consultant, but it hasn't been updated in several years. I was able to contact him through that page, though, and set up this call."

The call went through and the smiling face of a man who looked to be around 60 filled the screen. He was trim, with short blond hair and a well-manicured beard.

"Good morning, Colonel," Robert said.

"Good morning, Mr. Borland," he said in reply. "Call me Jim. No one's called me colonel in a long time," he added, stroking his beard.

"I wanted to ask you about a former student of yours," Robert said. "A man by the name of Qiang Yang. Do you by any chance remember him?"

"I certainly do," Colonel Talbot replied. "He was an excellent student. I didn't teach any of the classes myself, mind you, but my instructors spoke very highly of him."

"He must have made quite an impression if you still remember him. I'm sure you had a lot of students go through your school."

"It wasn't that big of a school," Colonel Talbot said, "but I certainly don't remember all of the students. Qiang was special, though. He was very sharp, worked hard, and had an excellent attitude."

We were planning to send him to our advanced classes. I never said anything to him because I didn't want to get his hopes up, but I asked the Shirt to see if there were any bootstrap programs we could recommend him for so he could get a college degree and a commission."

"The Shirt?" Robert asked.

"The First Sergeant. Sometimes called the First Shirt. He's a senior NCO who advises the commander on morale and discipline issues with the enlisted troops. He's the commander's right hand man. He thought a lot of Qiang. I think Qiang would have had a bright future if he'd stayed with us."

"Any idea why he didn't stay?"

"Family issues," the Colonel answered. "His mother was diagnosed with an incurable cancer while Qiang was in our school. Qiang said he had a younger brother who was, well, when I was growing up we called it mentally retarded. I don't know what the politically correct term for it is now, but his brother wasn't capable of living on his own. He didn't pose a danger to anyone so he didn't need to be institutionalized, but he couldn't take care of himself. The Shirt verified all this through the Red Cross. That's standard procedure for situations like this. Anyway, Qiang was the only one who could take care of him. I don't know what happened to his father. I hated to see him go, but I understood. We pushed through a humanitarian discharge for him. Do you know Qiang? What's he doing now?"

"I've never met him," Robert said, "but I'm trying to locate him. The last known address for him was at your school. The FBI shows his status as 'AWOL,' but the Air Force doesn't seem to have taken any follow-up action. I thought maybe you could help me understand what happened."

"AWOL?! That shouldn't be." Colonel Talbot was clearly upset about this news. "His humanitarian discharge was approved. We let him go on emergency leave before the approval came through so he could see his mother before she died. He never came back to sign the discharge paperwork, but I thought we got that all cleared up with the Base Personnel Office. The Shirt asked around in the dormitory and learned that one of Qiang's buddies convinced him the Air Force would never approve his discharge because he knew too much about our security systems. There's always some 'barracks lawyer' who claims to know everything. Anyway, Qiang believed him and he was afraid if he came back he wouldn't be allowed to leave again. His mother died while he was on emergency leave and he and his brother apparently moved out of the apartment where she had been living, as the phone was disconnected and letters came back as 'undeliverable.' We explained all this to the personnel office, and I thought they took care of it."

"Maybe the FBI just never got the follow-up message saying he wasn't AWOL," Robert suggested. "I'll ask them to follow up on it."

"Thanks. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help clear it up. I'll be glad to explain what happened to anyone who needs to know. And if you do find Qiang, tell him I said hello."

"Will do," Robert promised. After a few closing pleasantries they hung up.

“That explains a lot,” Robert said after he hung up.

“It explains a lot about Qiang,” I said. “But I thought we were looking for Hong.”

Robert shook his head no. “Qiang was impersonating Hong. The dog picked up on it right away. That’s why the dog had to go. I’m guessing Qiang kidnapped the dog and planned to give him back later. He doesn’t sound like the kind of person who would hurt a dog. I was slow to realize what had happened because of the DNA test.”

“That test said Hong was the gardener. Is the DNA of his brother that similar? They’re not twins.”

“The DNA was Qiang’s,” Robert explained. “The match came from an ancestry DNA site, remember? Those sites don’t have any way to make a positive ID of the people who submit samples. They assume the people who send in samples are who they say they are. After all, the only purpose of the DNA is to trace their ancestors. The problem comes when they share their database with law enforcement, as those folks *need* a positive ID. When Qiang submitted his DNA sample to the ancestry site he must have told them he was Hong, probably because he was afraid if he used his own name they’d discover he was AWOL.”

“But why did he submit his DNA sample in the first place?” I asked.

“That’s an excellent question,” Robert replied. “I don’t know the answer to that. I also don’t know why he went to so much trouble to spy on the Chinese embassy house, although now we know where he learned at least some of the skills he needed for that. Are the two questions related?”

Robert leaned back and stared at the ceiling as he thought. Finally he spoke. “I can think of at least a dozen reasons to spy on the house, but none of them require a DNA test. Without more data, that speculation leads nowhere. As to why Qiang submitted a DNA sample, I can only think of three possibilities. One, he was interested in learning about his ancestry. Not very likely, since most of his ancestors would have been in China. Two, he wanted to find a relative in the US. Possible. But he wouldn’t have needed to use Hong’s name for that. He could have just made up a name. If he’d done that, we’d have no way to locate him. The third possibility is that he wanted a relative to contact him. Hong’s name would have worked as well as his for that. He’d have to leave a valid way for the relative to contact him, of course. Probably not a valid address, because he was afraid of being arrested for deserting the Air Force, but a phone number, email address, or other link. That could be useful. The question is, how can we get into that database to find the link. . .”

Several days later Robert asked me to go with him to meet Qiang. “I don’t anticipate any trouble,” he said. “Still, it’s best to have a witness and a back-up.”

“Of course I’ll go with you,” I said. “I’ve been puzzling over this case for days. I can’t make sense out of it. Maybe Qiang will explain a few things.”

"I've got a pretty good handle on what happened," Robert said. "I'm hoping he can tell my *why* it happened."

As we were driving to the meeting I asked Robert how he'd managed to contact Qiang. Robert chuckled.

"I worried about that for a few days," he said. "I knew if I went to the FBI they could formally request access to Qiang's record through the genealogy web site, but that would have been an official action, we would have to tie Qiang to a crime, and it would have put the FBI on his trail. I wasn't certain I wanted to do that, at least not until I had a better understanding of the situation. Then I tried to think of a way to fake a DNA sample, something I could submit to the web site that would link me to Qiang's page. I couldn't think of a reasonable way to do that. I toyed with the idea of hacking into their database to find the record I wanted. Then I looked at the site's home page and discovered they had a 15 Day Free Trial Membership. You don't submit a DNA sample so you can't search for your ancestors by DNA, but you can search by name. It only took me a few minutes to find my 'long lost cousin Hong,' which was the record Qiang created when he submitted his DNA sample. There was a contact email, and we got in touch. It took me a while to gain his confidence, of course, and he still doesn't fully trust me, but he agreed to meet me in a public park."

When we got to the park I could see why Qiang chose it. A small woods in the center of the park, crisscrossed by hiking trails, provided concealment. The woods were surrounded by ball fields, playgrounds, and other open areas that would provide ample warning of anyone who approached the woods. Robert and I parked the car and walked up a low grassy hill to the woods. We sat down on a park bench with our backs to the woods. After several minutes an Asian man walked out of the woods and approached us. He was wearing a gray T-shirt, blue jeans, and dark sneakers. Robert stood up to meet him.

"Are you Qiang?" Robert asked.

The man looked at him suspiciously. "Will you arrest me if I say yes?"

"No," Robert replied.

"Then I am not Qiang," the man replied. Without another word he turned and walked back into the woods.

A few minutes later another Asian man, wearing an identical outfit, walked out of the woods and approached Robert. "I am Qiang," he said.

They shook hands. "Please forgive my suspicions," the man continued. "I come from a country that does not always keep its word. Several of my friends are also suspicious. We all dressed the same so we could run in different directions if there was any trouble. The police would not know who to follow." He gave a wry smile. "It helps that we all look alike."

"I understand completely," Robert answered. "Please understand that I do not represent any government. I came here simply because I wanted to talk to you. I have some good news for you, and I was hoping you would answer some questions for me. This is not a deal or a negotiation. I will tell you the good news first, and then you are free to answer my questions or leave." Robert sat down and motioned for Qiang to sit down on a nearby bench. Qiang chose to remain standing.

"The good news is that the Air Force approved your humanitarian discharge a long time ago. You never returned from your emergency leave, so you probably didn't know it had been approved."

Qiang seemed to be relieved at this news, but he was still on guard.

"I spoke with your former commander, Colonel Talbot. He thought the Air Force processed your discharge many years ago, even though you never signed the paperwork. He's retired now, but he's working with the Air Force personnel system to make certain their records show that you were honorably discharged. He's also working with the FBI to remove all references to your being AWOL from their records. He asked me to say hello to you, by the way."

"He is a good man," Qiang said.

"Now I have some questions for you," Robert continued. "You came to this country as a young boy, correct? And your mother was pregnant with your younger brother Hong at the time?"

"Yes," Qiang said. The suspicion in his voice was obvious.

"This was during China's 'One Child Policy,' was it not?"

A jumble of emotions seemed to cross Qiang's face, and then he relaxed. He sat down on the bench opposite us. "My mother knew that if she stayed she would be forced to have an abortion, and perhaps be sterilized or killed. We were not Han, so there could be no exception to the one child policy. We were Christian, so we were considered an enemy of the Party. We fled to Hong Kong, and eventually made it to the US."

"When your mother discovered your brother had mental problems, why didn't she try to get help for him, or enroll him in a school for special needs children?"

"She was terrified the government would force him into an institution, and then he would disappear," Qiang said. "She said that's what would happen to him in China, and she was afraid it would happen here. 'Hong is a good boy,' she told me. 'We must always take care of him.'"

"And that's why you went AWOL from the Air Force?" Robert asked.

Qiang nodded yes. "I loved the Air Force," he said. "When I graduated from high school I couldn't afford to go to college, but the Air Force offered me training in a job I really enjoyed. I wanted to stay in

the Air Force, but Mom died and I had to take care of Hong. Before she died she made me promise I would never tell anyone in the government about Hong. She was still afraid they would take him away.”

“I imagine things were very difficult for you after your mother died,” Robert said.

Qiang shrugged. “We got by. I found odd jobs fixing computers. Fixing cell phones. And writing code for people who hired me over the Internet. Hong loved gardening, and he brought in some money mowing grass and taking care of gardens for people in whatever neighborhood we happened to be living in.”

“Several weeks ago you started impersonating Hong at Mr. Anderson’s house,” Robert continued. “Was that just so you could plant a bug in his fence?”

Qiang tensed and looked suspiciously at Robert. He said nothing.

“I know the house it was aimed at was owned by the Chinese embassy,” Robert said. “It was a very clever plan. I just want to know why you went to so much trouble to listen to them.”

Qiang stared at Robert a while longer, and then relaxed slightly. “My father helped my mother and me escape China by creating a diversion. They sent him to a reeducation camp for a long time. Many of my friends have relatives who are still in China. It is very dangerous for them to communicate with the US, but they found ways to let us know what was happening to my father. Eventually the government began ‘loaning’ him to factories where he worked as a slave. He managed to escape from a factory and was trying to escape China to join us. The men in that house watch for people who are considered criminals in China and try to prevent them from entering the US. I wanted to see if they were looking for my father.”

“It appears the FBI was able to remove the bug without the men who lived in the house ever knowing it was there,” Robert said. “It doesn’t seem to have caused any international incidents. I’m not even certain it was against the law, since you never entered their property or engaged in wiretapping. I don’t think the FBI is going to spend much time looking for whoever planted that bug. That is, of course, assuming that person never does any such thing again.”

Qiang smiled broadly. “My father is safe now,” he said. “They don’t need to worry about another bug.”

“They might even have a job for whoever created such a clever device,” Robert said. “After everything calms down, that is, and after the Air Force issue is fully resolved. I won’t try to track you down again, but you might want to reach out to me every now and then so I can let you know what’s happening.”

“I’ll do that,” Qiang said as he stood up.

Robert held up a finger to stop him from leaving. "There is one unresolved issue," he said. "Technically when you entered Mr. Anderson's yard at night you were trespassing. I don't think he wants to press charges on that, as long as he gets his dog back."

"That's why I was standing up," Qiang said. He gave a loud whistle and waved his hand over his head.

Another Asian man in a gray T-shirt and blue jeans walked out of the woods. This man had a small brown and white dog on a leash. When he got closer I was amazed by the family resemblance. Hong was a little heavier than Qiang, walked with a shambling gait, and had the friendliest smile I've ever seen.

"I take good care of dog," Hong said, speaking slowly and giving the dog a hug. "I love Freckles." He handed the leash to Robert. "Tell Mr. Anderson I am sorry," he said.

We said good-bye to Qiang and Hong and drove Freckles to Mike Anderson's house. It was hard to tell whether Mike or Freckles was more excited about the reunion.