

The Inspector's Daughter

Robert Borland mystery #2

It was a fine June morning in California. I had slept late, enjoyed a leisurely breakfast, and was now sipping a second cup of coffee as I read the paper. According to the paper, it was Tuesday. I felt a small sense of satisfaction when I noticed that. Once upon a time Tuesday would have meant a buzzing alarm clock, a semi-conscious shower, and a solitary slice of toast to be eaten unnoticed during a rush hour commute. Now that I was retired, every day was Saturday.

My roommate had slept even later than I, which was not unusual. I heard clattering in the kitchen as he grabbed a cup of coffee before shuffling back to his bedroom, which also served as his study and laboratory. I was reading an account of the latest Dodgers tragedy when I heard the crash of breaking glass, accompanied by a hissed "Damn!" In an instant my roommate appeared in the living room, hastily tying the belt on his bathrobe while throwing open the windows. "I think perhaps this would be a good time to enjoy the weather outdoors" he said.

I was about to ask "why," when I got a faint whiff of bleach. I sniffed again, and it was so overpowering it made my eyes water. Coughing furiously, I followed Robert outdoors. He was standing with his face to the morning breeze, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I am not by nature a clumsy person," he said between coughs, "but it seems that it is a bad idea to perform chemical experiments while wearing a robe. The dangling sleeves catch on the glassware."

"What was it?" I choked.

"Chlorine" he replied. "Well, mostly chlorine. There was a trace of diphenylaminechloroarsine to induce nausea and cause the enemy troops to take off their gas masks, but I don't think we got enough of that to do us any harm."

"Why?" I asked.

"It was that notebook written by Fritz Haber's assistant." Robert replied, as if that were sufficient. When I continued to stare at him he expanded his explanation. "I thought it would be prudent to learn more about arsenical smokes, as I was concerned they might be used by terrorists. Deadly, dramatic, able to penetrate many types of gas masks, and not overly difficult to create. They are somewhat tricky to work with, though, so I thought I ought to practice on some simpler agents before moving on to the smokes."

"So you picked a simpler agent that merely drove us out of the house, coughing up our lungs."

"If we just give it time to dissipate the house will be as good as new, with a fresh, clean scent like bleached laundry."

"And the neighbors?" I asked.

"Oh it's far to dilute to cause them any concern. No different than if we bleached the siding of our house." He paused and thought for a moment. "You don't have any clothes with brass buttons in your closet, do you? Because if you do, they'll probably turn green."

"I sent all my martinet uniforms to the cleaners yesterday" I replied.

“Good” he said, nodding in agreement. Robert was an expert in a great many things, but simple human sentiments like sarcasm often totally escaped him.

It soon became obvious that it would take more than a few minutes for the house to clear. We had some lawn chairs on the back patio but there was more shade in the front yard so I carried a couple of chairs around to the front. I had unconsciously kept the newspaper clutched in my hand when I staggered outdoors, so I sat down and continued to read. Robert sat and fidgeted in his chair. He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair, examined his cuticles, stared at the clouds overhead, and conducted a thorough examination of a piece of lint he found in his robe pocket. I was still mad at him for nearly asphyxiating us, but I took pity on him and handed him a section of the newspaper. He accepted it without a word of thanks and began reading.

“I hope your attempt to put us both into an early grave was not a total failure,” I said with some resentment. “Did you learn anything this morning?”

“I always learn something from my experiments,” he said without looking up from the paper. “That’s what keeps them from being a failure.” He continued to read.

When it became apparent he was not going to say anything more I probed a little deeper. “And what did you learn this morning?” I asked.

“I learned to put my phone or a small book in my pocket before beginning any experiment with noxious vapors.” He continued to read and I gave up on fishing for an apology. I turned my attention back to my newspaper. We were both reading when Agent Martin drove up.

“Good morning, gentlemen?” he said as he got out of his car. He gave us a curious look. I, at least, was wearing trousers, although with an undershirt, bedroom slippers, and no socks. Robert was barefoot and clad only in a white terrycloth robe with the name of a hotel emblazoned over his heart.

“Good morning, Phil” Robert said cheerily. “We’re just enjoying the morning sun. Care to join us?”

“Not right now” Phil replied. “Could we talk privately?” He inclined his head toward the house as he said this.

“I’m afraid the house is temporarily uninhabitable” Robert said matter-of-factly. “We could go round back to the patio, if that will make you more comfortable.”

“Don’t ever tell Brent about this conversation” Phil said as we sat in a close circle on the patio. “He’d be upset with me for prying into his personal affairs, but I can’t just sit back and watch him worry himself into a heart attack. It’s about his daughter Kristin. She’s seeing a guy Brent can’t stand. Brent loves sports, this guy watches soap operas. Brent’s a conservative, this guy’s a little to the left of Karl Marx. Most of all, this guy’s a loser. He has no ambition. He’s enrolled in a community college, but he only takes entry level courses like English composition and music appreciation, and he doesn’t even do well in those. Brent was doing his best to tolerate the guy, hoping he’d soon fade from the scene, but now they’re talking about getting married.”

“How old is Kristin?” Robert asked.

“Eighteen.”

“Then it seems to me she has the right to marry whomever she chooses.”

“I know, I know.” Phil sighed. “Brent knows it too. But it’s killing him to think of her spending her life shackled to a man who will be lucky to get a job shoveling fries at a fast food joint. You know his wife died about ten years ago. Kristin means everything to him. They got along great until she turned into a rebellious teen-ager. Now he doesn’t know how to handle her. Hell, when my teen-agers act up I just tell them to shape up or leave, but I got two others and a wife to back me up. Brent’s got nobody.”

“She’s going to leave some day” Robert observed.

“Yes, but he wants her to finish college first. Find someone who won’t be dragging her into poverty. Someone she can love forever, with a big house, and kids who want to visit their granddad every weekend. You know, the whole ‘Leave it to Beaver’ thing.”

“I think his best bet is to keep his feelings to himself and trust that she’ll see through this guy on her own” I suggested.

“Yeah, that’s what I told Brent.” Phil shook his head sadly. “Unfortunately, that was after he’d already ordered her to stop seeing him. He said if she married that guy he’d cut her off without a cent and she could forget about college.”

I shook my head and stared at the ground. Phil seemed to be staring at the same patch of grass.

“It’s been my observation” Robert declared, “that commands like that are rarely effective. For some reason they seem to inspire the recipient to do exactly what the other person does not want them to do. Then that person is left having to decide whether to back down or to follow through with a threat that will only make things worse.”

We both stared at Robert like he was the last kid to learn the truth about Santa Claus. Deep down, though, I was impressed that Robert had arrived at the correct analysis through his own scientific methods. Most of us understand basic human emotions because we *are* human. All we have to do is think about how we would have reacted to a threat like that, and we can anticipate how Kristin would react. Robert isn’t wired like that. If his father had threatened him, he would have analyzed the situation, examined his fathers’ motivation, considered his alternatives and the probable consequences of each, and selected the alternative that offered the best chance of success. In this case, I’m sure he would have dumped the loser and continued his college education. To his credit, however, he realized that most people do not act upon reason alone, and through careful observation he could predict how other people would react.

“So,” Robert continued. “Why are you telling us this?”

“I was hoping you could do a little background research on this guy,” Phil answered. “Find out who he is. What makes him tick.”

“You want me to spy on an innocent kid who has done nothing wrong except to irritate his girlfriend’s father?” Robert asked.

“Not spy” Phil answered. “Just look at publicly available records. You know, Facebook, blogs, the things you do so well. Nothing illegal. No Company assets. Maybe he’s got some virtues we don’t know about. Maybe you can set Brent’s mind at ease about him.”

Robert stared icily at Phil for a moment. Then I saw his expression soften. “All right” he said. “I’ll do it for Brent. If I was in his situation, I’d be worried too. I assume this kid has a name?”

“Brian Jansen” Phil said, flipping open a small notebook. “He lives at 3204 Court Street. Here’s what little I know about him.” He tore out the sheet and handed it to Robert. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to the office before Brent misses me.”

I saw little of Robert for the next couple of days, but that was normal when he was researching a case. On Thursday morning he joined me in the living room as I was sipping my after-breakfast coffee and reading the paper. I assumed that meant he had finished his research, but the only thing he said was “Phil’s on his way over” as picked up the sections I had finished and began to read. A few minutes later, Phil was at the door.

“Good morning, Phil” Robert said as he ushered him in and waved him to a chair. “I finished my research on Brian Jansen. I think he’s got a little more backbone than Brent gave him credit for.” He sat down on the couch and began flipping through a small notepad. “Brian Jansen. Age, 21. His father ran off when he was six, and his mother raised him as a single parent for five years. Then she was killed in a car accident. She was driving Brian to a Boy Scout meeting, apparently got distracted trying to tune in a radio station, crossed the centerline, and hit a truck. She was killed instantly, and he was badly injured, with a broken hip among other things. It was six months before he could walk again, and he’s had a slight limp ever since. That may be why he has no interest in sports.”

Phil nodded and gave a slight grunt of acknowledgement. Robert continued. “He had no close family, so he grew up in a series of foster homes. Nonetheless, he did passably well in school, made Eagle Scout when he was 18, and is a fairly accomplished piano player. That’s pretty amazing, when you consider that most of the homes he lived in didn’t have a piano. He practiced on the pianos at school, over lunch and staying after class. After he graduated from high school he got a job loading trucks at a factory, moved into an apartment, and took a second job working at a fast food restaurant to help make ends meet. Given all that, I think it’s amazing that he’s even trying to go to college. I’m not surprised that he’s not their top scholar.”

Phil looked thoughtful for a long time. “He’s still a flaming liberal” he said finally.

“He didn’t used to be” Robert replied. “He seems to have met someone named ‘Richard’ about a year ago who’s had a big influence on him. There was almost no mention of politics on his Facebook page before that, and the few references he did make were somewhat conservative. He apparently enjoyed shooting at Boy Scout summer camp enough to mention it several years later. He agreed with the NRA, but didn’t want to spend the money to join. Then he began to make references about how politicians were sucking up to businesses that made obscene profits, and how CEO’s were given way more money than the people who actually made the products. He quotes Richard a lot in these writings, but I haven’t been able to find out who Richard is. Brian took part in a couple of ‘Occupy Wall Street’ rallies, but he didn’t get involved in any sit-ins or civil disobedience.

“That group was a bunch of losers!” Phil muttered.

Robert set down his notepad. “I found a lot more” he said, “but that’s the gist of it. Kids today don’t worry about privacy. Every party, every joke, and every thought gets posted on the Internet. I assume Brent’s never looked at his daughter’s Facebook page. There are things there a father wouldn’t want to see. Anyway, my suggestion is that he learn to come to terms with Brian. He’s a good kid who’s had a hard life but he’s making the best of it. He works hard, and he’s got some promise. I’m not a psychiatrist, but my guess is he’s looking for a father figure and he’s searching for the home life he’s never had. That’s why he watches soap operas. And that’s why he’s easily influenced by men like Richard. I think if Brent would lighten up a little this kid might try to emulate him and actually make something of his life.”

“How am I supposed to tell him that?” Phil asked.

Robert looked Phil in the eye. “You didn’t really come here without first talking to Brent, did you? A god cop doesn’t do that to his partner.”

Phil looked a little sheepish. “It was Brent’s idea to ask you to look into this” he said. “But he didn’t know how to ask. I told him I’d pretend I was doing it on the sly.”

“I suspected that from the beginning” Robert answered. “Otherwise I never would have agreed to do it.”

Phil thanked Robert for the information and left to fill Brent in on what he’d learned. The Dodgers were playing a day game, and since neither Robert nor I had to punch a time clock we headed for the ballpark to enjoy the game while our employed brethren were furtively trying to catch score updates in their offices.

By the following Saturday I had almost forgotten about Brent’s daughter, so I was a little surprised when Phil arrived at our door to fill us in on the latest developments. “Brent never got a chance to talk to Brian after I filled him in on what you’d found” he told us. “Brian and Kristin eloped this morning.”

“What!??” I asked in disbelief.

Phil chuckled. “Yep” he answered. “Brent played golf this morning, and when he got back to the house he found a note from Kristin. She’d packed her bag and left while he was on the course.”

“They’d probably been planning this since Brent told her to stop seeing him.” Robert suggested.

“Could be,” Phil answered. “But she’ll be back soon. She left her purse on the kitchen table. Took the suitcase, but left her purse. She must have been in one helluva hurry.”

Robert remained silent for a long time while he considered this information. “Something’s not right” he said.

“Just because she forgot her purse?” Phil asked. “Surely even you forget things sometimes.”

"I'm not a woman," Robert answered. "And I don't carry a purse. It's been my observation that a woman never forgets her purse. They start carrying them when they're two or three years old, and it becomes an integral part of them. Has she ever forgotten her purse before?"

"Well, I don't know" Phil said thoughtfully. "I haven't been around her that much. But my wife forgot her purse one time when we were going to the beach."

"And how far did you get before she remembered it?" Robert asked.

"About half a block" Phil admitted. "Then she insisted I turn the car around and go back for it."

"Kristin's been gone for, what? Several hours? If they planned this in advance they probably left shortly after Brent left the house to play golf. They would have had plenty of time to go back for it before he returned."

Phil stood in silence while he considered this. The silence was broken by the theme from "Hawaii Five-O" blaring from his pocket. "Brent's calling" he announced. He spoke to Brent for a few minutes and then put the phone back in his pocket. "That's strange," he said almost to himself. "Brent said his laptop computer is missing. Kristin doesn't use a laptop. She says they're old fashioned. She has an iPad."

"I think we'd better visit Brent at his home" Robert announced. "Something's not adding up."

Brent lived in a moderately new subdivision with ranch-style homes and well-kept lawns. Robert insisted that Phil stop short of Brent's driveway. He got out of the car and began carefully inspecting the driveway, lawn, and street in front of the house. He was bending down to peer under Brent's car when Brent stepped outside to see what was going on.

"I didn't run over anybody, if that's what you're looking for" he joked. "I'm mad at Kristin and Brian, but not that mad."

"Just looking to see if your car drips oil" Robert answered. "Does Brian drive an old car?"

"I'd guess it's about 10 or 15 years old" Brent replied. "I think it's a Honda or something."

"He parked on the street" Robert declared as he walked across the lawn to the street. "There are a couple of fresh oil drips on the pavement. The grass is too short to leave clear tracks, but it looks like someone pulled a two-wheeled suitcase through here. Does Brian smoke?"

"I don't think so" Brent answered. "Kristin hates cigarettes. I can't imagine she'd give him the time of day if he smoked."

"He had a friend with him who smoked" Robert announced. "Rather impatient, from the looks of it."

"How can you tell an impatient smoker from a patient smoker?" Phil asked skeptically.

Robert pointed to the curb. "There are two crushed cigarettes in the gutter. Neither one was smoked more than half way. If a smoker is patiently enjoying a cigarette, he finishes it. If he only

smokes half before he throws it down and crushes it, he's either in a hurry, he got called away, or he's impatiently killing time. One cigarette could be any of the three. Two cigarettes mean he's trying to find something to do while he waits."

"What does all this have to do with my daughter or my laptop?" Brent asked, displaying his own impatience.

"You never know" Robert said as he walked to the door. He stopped for a moment to examine the doormat and then walked into the house.

"Here's the note" Brent said, pointing to a piece of notepaper on the kitchen table. "Her purse is on the counter next to the door. That's where she always puts it when she comes into the kitchen."

Robert sat down and examined the note. "Lovely handwriting," he said almost to himself. "Feminine, strong, none of that cutesy stuff like little hearts over the i's. The note isn't overtly defiant, but she still gets her point across. 'I understand your feelings, but please try to understand mine.' Doesn't look rushed or nervous." Robert looked up at Brent. "I'd say this note was written by someone who loves you but is determined to live her own life. She's calm, rational, and independent. I think it would be best if you accepted the fact that Brian is going to be a part of your family. What bothers me is that it doesn't look like a note written by a woman who was so nervous or so excited she'd rush off without her purse, let alone by someone who wouldn't realize her mistake and come back for it."

Brent stood by the kitchen door, deeply absorbed in thought. After a minute or two, Robert broke the silence. "Where was the laptop?" he asked.

"In my study" Brent answered. He led us out of the kitchen, across the entrance foyer, and into his study. It was exactly the type of room I would have imagined Brent would use as a study. It was dark and cool, a contrast to the sunshine filled foyer with its gleaming hardwood floor. Heavy curtains were drawn back from the windows, but half-closed Venetian blinds let only a filtered light into the room. A massive dark oak desk dominated the room, and the black leather chair behind it matched a leather couch between the windows. The wall behind the desk was a floor to ceiling bookcase filled with a mixture of hardback and paperback books. There was a green shaded banker's lamp on the desk, and a large wooden ceiling fan turned slowly overhead. The floor was covered in a thick, dark blue carpet. "I kept the laptop in a case next to my desk" Brent said pointing. Robert wasn't looking at the room or the spot where Brent pointed, however. He was down on his hands and knees examining the carpet. At one point he bent over and sniffed thoughtfully.

"Is he part bloodhound?" Phil asked in surprise.

Robert stood up. "The friend who waited by the car was in here" he announced. "Odds are, he's the one who took the laptop."

"You could smell his trail?" Phil asked suspiciously.

"No," Robert answered with a smile. "I could see a smudge of ashes from his cigarette. I smelled them to make certain, but they were pretty distinctive. Especially as there were two flakes of tobacco with them."

“However did you notice that?” I asked, thinking about how I had looked at everything except the doorway when we walked into the room.

“I found it because I was looking for it” Robert replied. “When a man snuffs out a cigarette, he tends to use the toe of his shoe. Often the front part of the toe curls up a bit and doesn’t rub the ground unless you’re running or tiptoeing. The grass had me worried, but it was pretty short and it was a short path to the sidewalk. The doormat had a short nap and there was no sign of ashes on the mat. This carpet is a different story. It’s thick, soft, and well padded. I knew there would be an excellent chance he’d leave some ashes on the carpet.”

“Very impressive,” Brent said. “But it still doesn’t help me find my daughter.”

“What kind of a laptop did you have?” Robert asked

“Pretty standard” Brent answered. “Black, Dell, in a black leather case.”

“Any important files on it?”

“Not really. I’d only had it a few weeks. I’d used it to check my personal e-mail and surf the web. I did pay some bills online this month, but I was careful not to save my password on the computer.”

“So it was a new computer. Do you still have the paperwork with the serial number?”

“It wasn’t new, but I have the serial number. I bought it from our IT department at work. They issue us new laptops every three years. They used to destroy the old ones for security purposes, but somebody complained about how much money that wasted so now they just wipe the hard drive clean and sell them to employees.”

“The computer you’ve loaned me has a big ‘FBI Property’ sticker on it” Robert commented. “Did this computer have that?”

“Yes,” Brent replied. “They’re supposed to peel that off before they sell it, but they’re stuck on so well that they usually have to scrape it off and that gouges the case as well as leaving a big sticky mess. I’ve got a friend in the IT department and I talked him into leaving the sticker on mine. Plus, I think it looks kind of cool.” He looked a little sheepish as he said this last part.

Robert considered this information carefully. “The browser cache will show what bank you used to pay the bills, and the account number might be in the cache, but I don’t think there’s any hidden cache that would have your account password.”

“I don’t think they’ll ever get that far” Brent chuckled. “I had my friend in IT encrypt the hard drive. I don’t think any of their back doors are going to work. Without my password they’re not going to get anything.”

“Interesting” Robert mused. “I don’t think the thief came here to steal your laptop. He wouldn’t have stood outdoors smoking, in broad daylight, if he came here to steal. For whatever reason, I think Brian just wanted him along. Maybe to be the best man? He’s cooling his heels by the car while Kristin and Brian are packing her things, writing the note, probably giggling nervously because they’re going to elope. He comes in here to see what’s taking so long, and wanders into your study. He sees your laptop

case, but why would that interest him? He's not a thief. This is where I have to resort to conjecture, and the only motive I can think of is that he knows you're an FBI agent. He opens the case and sees the FBI sticker. A three year old laptop isn't worth much, but an FBI laptop might be of great interest to certain people. So he takes the laptop out to the car. Kristin sees it, maybe when she carries her suitcase to the car, and raises a squawk. So he forces her into the car and drives off."

"And where was Brian in all this?" Brent asked.

"I don't know. Maybe he was an accomplice. Maybe the thief had a gun. Maybe Brian's just one of those people who react slowly, and he was so surprised he didn't know what to do so the thief just told him to get into the car. Whatever happened, I think you need to call the police. We're not just dealing with the theft of your laptop. I think there's been a kidnapping.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hopkins, but I just don't see any evidence of a kidnapping." The police detective kept his eyes on his notepad as he talked, not willing to look Brent in the eye as he said this. Brent was clearly seething. "All the evidence points to the fact that your daughter eloped with this Mr. Jansen. I realize that's very unsettling to you, but it's hardly a kidnapping. She's of legal age, and the note proves she left of her own free will."

"But what about her purse?" Robert demanded.

"Yes, I know. She left without her purse" the detective said condescendingly. "She was clearly a little nervous, but that's not surprising. After all, she was eloping against her father's wishes." He finally looked up and faced Brent. "If you'll take my advice, you'll just settle down and wait for her to return to get her purse. Maybe she'll come back tonight. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe they'll take a short honeymoon first. But she'll be back. If she's not back in ten days, you can come down to the station and file a missing person's report. You can file it sooner, but no one's going to take it seriously until she's been gone for at least ten days."

Phil came in through the front door as the detective was saying this. He shook his head sadly. "None of the neighbors saw the abduction" he said. "One lady did see her carry a suitcase to the car, but she said Kristin was smiling and happy as she did that."

"There, you see Mr. Hopkins?" the detective asked. "She was smiling and happy. She'll be back."

"And my laptop?" Brent said icily.

"Well, I can fill out a stolen property report if you're willing to press charges, but that's hardly a good way to begin a relationship with your new son-in-law."

"Brent didn't take that laptop!" Robert insisted. There was a third person involved."

"Oh yes, the mysterious smoker." The condescending note had returned to the detective's voice. "The one who may have left a smudge on the carpet, unless of course Mr. Jansen smokes which none of you knows for certain. Even if there was a third person, you said yourself he might have been the best man for their wedding. Do you want to press theft charges against the best man at your daughter's wedding?"

“Get out,” Brent said, barely controlling his rage.

“I was just leaving” the detective replied. “I’ve seen everything there is to see here. Give me a call if there are any new developments.” He held out a business card. When Brent didn’t take it he shrugged, placed it on the table, and walked out of the house.

“Idiot!” Brent slammed his fist on the table.

“He’s trying to do his job, but he has no imagination.” Robert spoke calmly, trying to settle Brent down. “He looked at the note, decided no crime had been committed, and saw a way to make all the facts fit that explanation. After all, the only thing that doesn’t fit his theory is my conviction that no woman ever forgets about her purse for more than a few minutes. Maybe he’s seen cases where women have forgotten their purses.”

“And the laptop?” Brent asked suspiciously.

“My theory there is 90% conjecture. All we know for certain is that the laptop is missing and the smoker did walk into that room.”

“Thanks for trying to reassure me” Brent said with a hint of a smile. “But I’ll take your conjectures over that idiot’s facts any day of the week.”

Robert changed the subject. “If this isn’t a police matter, there’s no harm in our examining the contents of Kristin’s purse.”

Brent picked up his daughter’s purse and emptied it on the kitchen table. There was a jumble of lipsticks and other makeup items, keys, tissues, old theater tickets, and Kristin’s iPhone.

“Now I know why she didn’t answer when I called” Brent said sadly. “I also know for certain she didn’t leave willingly. She *might* have forgotten her purse, but she’d never forget her phone. She never goes five minutes without calling or texting someone.”

“Do you know her password?” Robert asked as he turned the phone on. Brent shook his head. “Do you mind if I take it back to the house? I think I can hack it, but I’ll need to do some research on the Internet. There might be something in here that would let us identify the smoker.”

There wasn’t much else we could do at Brent’s so Phil drove us back to our house. The sun was setting as we drove back, filling the sky with one of the most brilliant displays of red and orange that I’ve ever seen. Robert glanced up and grunted once when I tried to point it out to him, but he kept his eyes glued to the iPhone as we drove, trying to guess the password. When we got to our house he walked straight to his room and closed the door. I was famished, so I opened a can of hash and fried it with eggs and cheese. I carried a plate to Robert’s room and knocked on the door but just got a curt “No Thanks” in reply.

It was the middle of the next day before Robert emerged from his room. “I think maybe our smoker is the mysterious ‘Richard’ who’s been filling Brent’s head with all the left-wing politics” he said excitedly. “Kristin doesn’t seem to know much about him, but it’s obvious from her texts to her friends that she’s not very fond of him. I think in part she’s jealous of the influence he has over Brian. She’s never mentioned his last name, but that’s not too unusual because she only uses first names for all her

friends. What's a little more unusual is that he almost never shows up in photographs. She'll complain to her friends that Brian brought Richard along when they went to the zoo and she'll send them dozens of pictures of Brian and herself at the zoo, but none of them include Richard. Richard probably takes the pictures of the two of them, but that might in part be an excuse to make certain he's not in the picture. There is one picture, though, that she took shortly after Brian met Richard."

Robert shoved a printout of a photograph into my lap. Two men were sitting on a rock at the shore, looking out to sea. You couldn't see either man's face, but the taller man was clearly smoking a cigarette. He looked taller, thinner, and considerably older than the other man.

"The short man is Brian" Robert explained. "Kristin didn't name the other man, but based on texts she sent to her friends that day I'm pretty sure it's Richard. He's looking the other way so he didn't know she took this picture. And that's not all I found. Look at this!"

He showed me a map that was crisscrossed with lines and dots that were crossed out. "This is her GPS log" he said. "The dots are where she used an app that invoked the GPS, and the lines connect the dots in chronological order. That way I could tell a destination from a place where she used an app en route. If a line doubles back on itself, it means the dot at the end was a destination, as she went there and went back. I compared her most frequent destinations with her address book, the addresses of Starbucks, hair salons, etc. and was able to cross out all the destinations but one." He pointed to a dot in a residential area. "My guess is, that's Richard's house."

I stared at the incomprehensible collection of dots and lines. There were many other dots that weren't crossed out, but I assumed those were places she hadn't gone to very often. "It could just be a friend who's not in the address book" I suggested.

"Maybe," Robert said thoughtfully. "But she's not a girl who keeps many secrets. I'm betting that's Richard's house. In any event, it's worth checking out." He jumped up and headed for his room. "Call Brent and Phil" he said over his shoulder. "Tell them to meet us at 1437 N Stemmons Avenue."

"You might want to shave first" I called after him. "And a shower wouldn't hurt, either."

North Stemmons Avenue was in an island of small bungalows surrounded by industrial development and freeways. Most of the houses had been built in the 1940s, when this was a refuge from the city. Now the city had engulfed it. The houses were showing their age, but were still moderately well maintained. The area had not yet deteriorated to the point where all renovation plans begin with a bulldozer.

The house at 1437 North Stemmons was typical of the neighborhood. One story, tan, a tiny yard with a scraggly orange tree and a few ornamental bushes, surrounded by a masonry privacy wall. The afternoon was giving way to evening by the time we got there. It had rained earlier, but the clouds were breaking up and water still glistened on the leaves and dripped from the eaves. The setting sun peeked through a hole in the clouds and bathed the house in a golden light. We parked on the street, and as soon as Phil and Brent arrived we walked to the front door and rang the doorbell. There was no answer. The curtains were open so we could look in to the living room through the window by the door. A shabby collection of mismatched furniture made a rough semicircle around an entertainment center which had no TV or stereo gear. "Look at the dust on the entertainment center" Robert commented. "See the clean spots? That's where the TV and other electronics used to be. Richard has flown the coop. Quite recently, it appears."

We walked around the house and peered in other windows. Everything pointed to a hasty departure. A bare bed had been stripped of its bedding, an open closed door revealed empty hangars, bureau drawers were left open, and the open doors of kitchen cabinets showed they were partially filled with a jumble of boxes. Someone had hurriedly grabbed what they wanted and left the rest behind.

"The leaking car has been here" Robert called from the driveway. He pointed to a fresh oil spot on the pavement. "The pavement is dry where it was parked. We didn't miss them by much."

"Lots of cars leak oil" Phil suggested. "Maybe Richard had one too."

"This wasn't from Richard's car, if he even has one." Robert stated. "If it was his car there would be lots of oil stains because he would have parked it here every day. A single spot indicates a visitor. It might not be the same car, but the coincidence is singular."

"What next?" Brent asked as we walked back to our cars.

"I'll check the county records to find the owner of this house" Robert answered. "I'm guessing it's a rental. If it is, maybe the landlord can tell us something about his mysterious tenant."

"I wouldn't count on getting much from a landlord" Phil cautioned. "Unless you've got a warrant, those guys clam up pretty fast."

"It all depends on how you ask the questions" Robert said.

The next morning Robert was up early and left to check the county real estate records. He returned a few hours later, proudly displaying a house key. "I never dreamed I'd be this successful" he grinned. "Care to check out the house with me?"

"How on earth did you get the key?" I asked.

"It's all in how you ask the question" he said. "The house was indeed a rental. I found the name and address of the landlord and went to visit him. I asked him if he'd like to hire me to find the renter who'd skipped out on the North Stemmons house. He was apoplectic. Turns out Richard was already three months behind in the rent. He gave me copies of cancelled checks for past rent and the references Richard had provided when he rented the house. He had an appointment to show another house this afternoon so he gave me the key and his authorization to search the house for anything else that would help us track him down. If we find him, I get \$200."

We immediately drove to the house and started sifting through the debris left behind. There wasn't much of interest, but Robert found a handful of mail in the trash and I found a grade report from a local community college. There was a small storage space in the attic which Robert investigated while I went into the basement to see what I could find.

There was a single light bulb in the basement which flashed briefly and then went dark when I switched on the lights. There was a little daylight filtering through some garden window wells and I had a flashlight app on my phone so I gingerly picked my way through the empty boxes and garden tools which littered the floor. I tripped over a rake and swore, and after I made noise I heard a pounding from a laundry room off to the side. Inside that room a young man lay on the floor, bound and gagged with duct tape, frantically kicking the washing machine. I immediately began to peel off the tape.

“Richard’s crazy!” he said as soon as I removed the gag. “He pulled a gun on us, drove us here, and tied me up. I don’t know where Kristin is.”

“We’re trying to find her” I said as I helped him to his feet. “Brent’s going to be glad to see you!”

There was a sudden blow to the side of my face. I staggered backwards, half-dazed by the blow. It took me a moment to realize Brian had slugged me, and by that time he was gone. I heard running footsteps up the stairs and the slam of a door. I followed somewhat more slowly, as I was still disoriented by the blow.

“Now you know everything we know” Robert said to Phil and Brent back at our apartment.

“I think you underestimated Brian when you said he was weak” I said, struggling to enunciate the words as I held an ice bag to the side of my face. “What made Brian slug me and run off?”

Brent looked a little sheepish. “Well, he may have misinterpreted a text message I sent him before he ran off with Kristin.”

“What did you tell him?” Robert asked.

“I think I may have suggested that if he touched my daughter I’d beat his ass to a bloody pulp and then throw him in big boy prison where a man named Bubba would beat his ass in a different way.” Brent looked down at his shoes as he said this. Phil tried unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh.

“I was trying to protect Kristin” Brent said defensively. “She’s everything to me. And that was before you told me what Robert had found about Brian.”

“It really doesn’t matter why you spooked him” Robert said sadly. “The fact is, he’s gone and he’s not about to come back and help us. We’ve lost a valuable source of information on Richard, and the only witness who could convince the police that Kristin was kidnapped. Let me see what I can pull together with the information we found at the house. Brent, I know this isn’t an official case, but if you could get me an FBI laptop with access to your databases, it would be a great help.”

“I’ve got one in the car” Brent said. “I thought you’d need it sooner or later.” He brought in the laptop before leaving with Phil. Robert disappeared into his room, and I was left nursing a sore jaw.

It was two days before I saw Robert again. He looked a little haggard as he walked out of his room and collapsed in a chair across from me. “Richard did a pretty good job hiding his past” he said. “It took me a long time to find a connection. When I did, I understood why he hid his past. He’s a pretty tough cookie, and something of an anachronism. He’s one of the last dyed-in-the-wool communists left in this country.”

“His real name is Ricard Kalivac. His parents were associated with the Symbionese Liberation Army, which became famous for the Patty Hearst kidnapping, although they joined long after that event. The SLA had pretty much broken into splinter groups by then, and although they planned a number of revolutionary activities none of them ever came to fruition. They also teamed up with some former Weather Underground members, also with no success. Eventually they were both arrested in connection with a botched kidnapping attempt in which the victim died as a result of the impure

chloroform they used. Ricard's father was sentenced to life imprisonment for that crime. His mother received a lesser sentence because she played only a minor role in the kidnapping. That sentence was suspended so she could raise Ricard, who was three at the time. He grew up idolizing his father, whom his mother considered to be a political prisoner and a martyr."

"At the age of 13 Ricard was convicted and sent to juvenile detention. The court records are sealed, but it must have been pretty serious because he wasn't released until he turned 18. He drifted in and out of trouble with the law for several years, trying to create new revolutionary groups and being frustrated by the fact that the country had moved on and had no interest in staging a communist revolution. It appears he spent at least some time in Nicaragua and perhaps in Cuba as well, studying communism and probably undergoing revolutionary army training. He's been arrested for armed robbery twice, both times for bank robberies that netted very little cash. He jumped bail both times, the second time because the authorities didn't penetrate his alias of "Richard Kalvak" until after he'd skipped. He disappeared from sight for over ten years, apparently keeping out of trouble, but popped up recently as an agitator in the 'Occupy Wall Street' movement."

"That's quite a comedown, isn't it?" I asked. "From the Symbionese Liberation Army to Occupy Wall Street? Those people didn't strike me as being very revolutionary. The contrasts they drew between the salaries paid to top CEOs to the wages earned by hourly employees struck a responsive chord in a lot of people."

"It is quite a contrast" Richard answered. "But it also seems to be the way of the world. Look at the contrast between the salaries earned by major league ball players and minor league wannabes, to say nothing of the thousands of ball players who never even make it to the minors. The same is true in the theater. Compare the salaries of Hollywood stars to local community theater actors. Or compare rock stars to street musicians. The difference is, when people look at an All-Star ball player or a rock star they can see their talent, and they realize they could never do that job. They also understand that these stars are paid high salaries because they bring in even more money for the people who hire them. They don't see the talent of a top CEO, and they don't appreciate his impact on the company's earnings. They think lots of people could do his job, so they declare his salary to be obscene. You're quite right about Occupy Wall Street not being much of a revolutionary movement, though. That's what Ricard was trying to change."

"Do you think there's much danger of that?" I asked.

"Did you ever read 'The Anatomy of a Revolution'?" Robert asked. "Revolutions aren't started by the poorest classes. Those folks are too busy working to put food on the table. Revolutions are started by the middle class, people who are trying to take power from the upper class. They are aided by a few firebrands who stir the masses to revolution. The firebrands are men like Lenin, Robespierre, Sam Adams, and Fidel Castro. Ricard Kalivac imagines himself to be a firebrand. In answer to your question I don't think there's much danger that he'll succeed, but a frustrated revolutionary is a dangerous man. He will stop at nothing, and will justify any act of violence as being 'necessary'."

"How will we track him down?"

"I'm already working on that. In his view, the FBI is an enemy of the people. He dreams that the computer he stole is filled with secrets which he can expose to the world and topple the government. I misjudged him when I thought he stole it because he thought it was worth a lot of money. He doesn't want to sell it, he wants to hack it so he can learn its secrets. Brent had the hard drive encrypted, and I

suspect it's a pretty sophisticated encryption. Probably something Ricard and his small circle of friends can't crack. His next step will be to reach out to professional hackers. I've spun my web around the blogs and other sites they use to communicate. If he touches a thread I'll feel the vibration."

We didn't have to wait long. Two days later there was a thread that "WeatherMan" was looking for a "magician" (that blog's code for a hacker) to help "open my Uncle's piñata." I thought maybe Robert could trace the thread back to Ricard, but he explained that Ricard was using proxy servers and "onion routing" (bouncing messages around the world through many layers of routers) which made it almost impossible to trace a single thread. Instead, he replied through a similar tangle of routers that he, AliBaba, would be happy to surprise Uncle, although there would be some expenses involved. This elaborate courting ritual of code phrases involved dozens of messages over the next day and a half. What Robert was trying to do was to get Ricard to put the FBI computer online so he could connect to it remotely, allegedly to try various methods of bypassing the encryption. His real motive was to keep it online long enough so the FBI could run a trace route through the hundreds of servers involved and find the laptop's location. Brent had pulled some strings with his friends in the FBI's computer crime section, and they were ready to start the trace as soon as Robert connected. Finally, early one morning, WeatherMan and AliBaba came to an agreement. Ricard connected the laptop to the Internet and Robert began trying to hack it. Actually, one of the FBI computer specialists was sitting at Robert's computer and doing the hacking, just in case Ricard knew enough about computers to tell a professional hacker from an amateur. Robert was exchanging messages with Ricard through this operation, with the FBI specialist giving him the proper words to describe the situation. Ricard was getting increasingly nervous, and after 23 minutes of this he said "You're through!" and disconnected. Fortunately, this was just after the FBI completed the trace.

"They've got the address!" Brent shouted after he got the call from the FBI office. "And they're raiding the place now! I had to call in a lot of favors, but I convinced them that because this guy thought he was hacking an FBI computer they could consider it a crime in progress. The computer guys vectored them in on the location while they were tracing it. The lawyers will raise a bloody ruckus afterward, but I'll have my daughter back and we can slam the guy for kidnapping!"

"Wait a minute!" Robert interjected. "Ricard wouldn't have risked making that connection from the place where he was staying. Besides, how would he even *get* an Internet connection? He's on the run, remember? Have you ever tried to get the phone company or the cable company to install a line in a hurry? He wouldn't risk a cellular connection because that leaves a trail. My guess is that he's pirating someone else's WiFi. Millions of homeowner's use unprotected WiFi, or they protect it with default passwords like 'password'. He's tapped into a neighbor's service."

Brent stared at Robert in horror. "Damn!" he shouted. He frantically made a call on his cell phone. I could tell from the sound of his voice that the news was not good. He repeatedly said he was sorry and tried to convince whoever was on the other end that the culprit had to be in the vicinity, but it was obvious that he was getting nowhere. Finally he completed the call and turned to us.

"My supervisor is personally apologizing to the people who own the house they raided. Apparently it's a retired couple, in their 70's. Their son set up their WiFi service for them, and now they're terrified that they were somehow breaking the law by using it."

I have never seen a man look as beaten and dejected as Brent looked. In seconds he had gone from thinking he had rescued his daughter to realizing the raid was a total failure. His career was probably on the line, too, as he bent a lot of rules and convinced his co-workers to bend even more. The net outcome of all this was a humiliating failure for the FBI and the potential for subsequent lawsuits.

“It’s only a minor setback” Robert said reassuringly. “We know your daughter’s near that house. Let’s go check it out.”

At Robert’s insistence, we parked in a supermarket parking lot on a small hill overlooking the neighborhood. “He probably saw the FBI raid and got spooked” he said. “He won’t want to make any move in daylight because he’s afraid we’re watching him. He’s keeping a sharp lookout, though. If we go prowling around the neighborhood now he’ll know we’re on to him and there’s no telling what he’ll do. If he tries to leave we can see him from here and follow him. In the meantime, let’s just lay low and give him time to calm down.”

Robert spent some time searching the web on his phone. Then he looked out at the neighborhood. “My guess is it’s that house” he said, pointing to a two story Colonial house. It’s the only two story house in the neighborhood, which would make it easy for him to intercept a WiFi connection. Better still, it was repossessed in a bank foreclosure and it’s empty now.”

After the debacle of the afternoon raid we couldn’t take any chances, so we agreed to stay put and watch the house for any sign of life. After it got dark we could walk down for a closer look. If we were very lucky, we might see Brian’s car in the parking lot. Only then, if we were sure they were there, would we call to report trespassers in an empty house. That wasn’t much of a crime, but if we also reported that the trespasser was believed to be Ricard Kalivac, wanted for two armed robberies, there was a good chance we’d get a response. In the meantime we waited.

The hours crept by slowly as we sat in Phil’s car. At dusk, Brent suddenly straightened up and craned his neck for a better view. “I think I see a light” he said.

“I noticed that a few minutes ago” Robert answered. “It’s from an inside room on the first floor. It’s low enough that the neighbors can’t see it because of the privacy wall, but we can see over the wall from here.”

“I thought the house was repossessed.” Phil said. “Why is there electricity?”

“The bank keeps it on” Robert explained. “Without air conditioning the house would mildew and they’d never be able to sell it.”

By 10:00 PM it was pitch black. “Let’s go” Robert said. We walked casually down the sidewalk toward the house. We talked and gestured to act natural, but were careful not to make so much noise that we attracted attention. Phil was sipping a Coke. We relaxed a little when we got to the house itself, as the privacy wall screened us from the windows. There were no lights visible on the second floor. When we turned the corner at the back side of the house we could see a car parked in the driveway.

“I think that’s Brian’s car” Phil whispered. “The primer spots on the rear fender look familiar.”

“Give me your Coke” Robert whispered to Phil. “Be careful as we cross the driveway, as they can see us there.”

We continued to amble past the house. When we got behind the car Robert dropped the Coke and bent down to pick it up. Once we got to the shelter of the privacy fence on the other side we stopped. “It was pretty dark, but I think I saw an oil spot under the car” Robert whispered. “That’s enough for me. Make the call, Brent.”

Brent took his phone out of his pocket, but stopped when we heard a door open in the front of the house. We crouched in the dark shadow next to the wall and inched back toward the driveway. A tiny bit of light from a distant streetlight was filtering through the trees, and we could just make out a tall man escorting a woman toward the car.

“That’s Kristin!” Brent whispered. He pulled out his gun and started to straighten up, but Robert put his hand on Brent’s shoulder to stop him. “He’s holding a gun on her” he whispered. “See how he’s got his right hand behind her back? Wait till he puts her in the car and walks around to the driver’s seat.”

Before they got to the car, however, the car door opened and a man stepped out in front of them. He was holding a baseball bat.

“That’s Brian!” Brent hissed.

“Let her go, Richard” Brian commanded.

Richard pulled the gun from behind Kristin and leveled it at Brian. “Don’t try to stop me” he said.

“Are you going to commit murder in a quiet neighborhood? In front of a witness? How far do you think you’ll get? I disabled the car.”

Richard stood still, trying to make up his mind what to do.

“Let her go and I’ll fix the car. Then you can drive wherever you want. I won’t tell a soul. I don’t care about you. I just want you to let Kristin go.”

Richard hesitated for a minute, then raised the gun to Kristin’s head. “Fix it now” he said.

“Not until you let her go.” He inched forward as he said this and I realized he could now reach Richard with the baseball bat.

“I’m not kidding!” Richard almost screeched these words. There was fear in his voice.

Brian’s only response was to raise the bat over his right shoulder and say “Let her go.” It was a quiet command that carried more weight than a scream.

“I’ll count to three!” Richard screamed. “One!”

Brian didn’t flinch.

“Two!”

Brian pulled the bat back for a better swing.

There was a cry of pain in the darkness as Richard's hand was wrenched behind his back. I had been so absorbed by the drama I hadn't seen Brent creep up behind Richard. He quickly twisted the gun out of Richard's hand. Richard pulled his fist back to launch a haymaker at Brent.

Unless you're a martial arts expert, don't ever take a swing at an FBI agent. Especially not after you've just threatened to kill his daughter. Brent was so fast I couldn't tell how many blows hit home. On the other hand, Richard crumpled pretty quickly so Brent didn't have time to hit him very many times. It was all over in an instant. Richard lay unconscious on the ground while Brent hunched over him, hoping he'd try to get up. Then Kristin threw her arms around her father.

"Oh daddy!" she cried. "I was so scared!"

The anger instantly left Brent's face as he hugged his daughter. "It's all right now" he repeated over and over. "It's all right."

Brian dropped the baseball bat and almost collapsed as he staggered backward and leaned against the car. He was breathing hard, and sweating profusely now that the danger had passed. Eventually Brent and his daughter relaxed enough to walk over to him.

"That was a mighty brave thing you did, Son" Brent said. "Stupid, but brave."

"I would have given in if I hadn't seen you creeping up behind him." Brian gasped. "I was praying you knew what you were doing."

"I was saying the same prayer" Brent answered. "How'd you find him?"

"Before all this happened he used to rant about how unfair it was that there were homeless people sleeping in the streets while the banks had hundreds of vacant houses. Sometimes he'd drive me by one to point out how many people it could shelter. When I got free, I started checking out all the houses he'd shown me. It took a couple days to find him, but I've had this place staked out for three days now."

At this point a patrol car with its lights blazing screeched to a halt in front of the driveway. Two more cars followed it. Phil had crept around the corner and called them while Brent sneaked up on Richard. We spent several hours explaining the situation and giving witness statements. When things quieted down a bit Robert pulled Brent off to the side.

"That was a pretty neat trick you pulled to take the gun away from him." He told Brent.

"Yeah, we learned that in FBI training. If you grab an automatic from the top and push the slide back as you grab it, the slide blocks the hammer so it can't fire."

"I've read about that, but I never saw anyone actually do it." Robert said.

"First time I've ever done it" Brent confessed. "For real, that is."

"I took a look at the gun while it was lying on the ground. The hammer was forward. That means he pulled the trigger, and your pushing the slide back is the only thing that kept it from firing."

“Might have happened when I twisted it out of his hand” Brent suggested.

“Or maybe you saved your daughter’s life with that move.”

“Maybe the stupid bastard didn’t have enough sense to cock it in the first place” Brent said with a grin.

Finally the police finished their reports, packed Richard into the back of a patrol car, and drove off. Brian, Kristin, and Brent drove off in Brian’s car, which it turned out was not disabled. Robert, Phil, and I began walking up the hill to Phil’s car.

“I’m hungry” Robert announced. “I could go for one of O’Malley’s corned beef sandwiches and a pint of his Irish ale. Any of the rest of you hungry? My treat.”

“What made you turn so generous?” I kidded.

“There’s a landlord who owes me two hundred bucks!” Robert announced with pride.

“I don’t think he’s going to collect his back rent” I cautioned.

“That was never part of the deal” Robert said indignantly.