

The Phantom Assassin

Robert Borland mystery #3

Saturday morning. Before I retired I thought retirement would mean every day was a Saturday, but I was wrong. When I first retired, I was disappointed in Saturdays. There was heavy traffic in the middle of the day, the stores were crowded, and there just seemed to be too many people in the world. Then I adjusted my schedule. I realized I didn't have to go to the hardware store on Saturday, I could do it in the middle of the week. The same with grocery shopping, haircuts, and all the other minor errands that used to fill my weekends. Weekends were now a time to sit back and relax. Let the rest of the world run their errands, mow their lawns, and shuttle their kids to soccer games. I could stretch out in my recliner and enjoy peace and quiet at home. Especially on Saturday mornings. My roommate, Robert Borland, was the type of person who stayed up late working on whatever project currently interested him and slept in late as a result. I preferred to get up early, make coffee, and read the paper while Robert snoozed. I must confess that being the first one up gave me a sort of smug satisfaction. I never felt guilty about going to bed while Robert worked, but I did feel virtuous about getting up while he slept.

I especially appreciated the peace and quiet on this particular Saturday morning. For the past week Robert had been fussing with a new home automation system. Just why we needed an automation system to turn lights on and off, start the coffee, or do any of the other tasks he was programming into the system was beyond me. I was quite capable of doing those things myself, but Robert was like a kid with a new toy. To make it more irritating, it was a voice activated system and for some reason Robert christened the system "Lucille," probably in honor of B. B. King.

"Lucille! The coffee!" he would bellow as I tried to read. Then, when the system turned off my reading light instead of turning on the coffee he would mutter to himself and recheck the addresses of the remotely controlled outlets. The fact that he triumphantly brought me a cup of coffee when he finally got it to work didn't make up for all the shouting and flashing lights. This morning, however, he was sleeping while I was enjoying a cup of coffee I had made without the help of Lucille. Or at least I thought he was sleeping. I was surprised to see him walk into the living room, fully dressed, at a quarter to nine.

"What are you doing up?" I asked.

"Brent and Philip are on their way here to ask for our help in a difficult case" he replied. Then he looked somewhat critically at my bathrobe and pajamas. "You might want to get dressed first" he suggested. "They'll be here any minute."

I muttered a few unkind remarks about how it would have been nice if he'd told me earlier that he was expecting company and rushed to get ready. I showered as quickly as I could, but I heard the doorbell ring as I was getting dressed. My hair was still wet and my chin was unshaven as I walked back into the room. Robert was handing mugs of coffee to the FBI agents as I entered. "Ah. Here's Bill" he said. "Now we can get started."

Brent Hopkins was the first to speak. "Let's begin by clearing our phones." We all removed the batteries from our cell phones. Then Brent continued. "This conversation needs to be kept in the strictest confidence. You two are cleared to consult with the FBI, but the Secret Service is in charge of this case and they're paranoid. They're chasing down their leads, but I have an uneasy feeling they're

overlooking something. There are a couple of things that just don't make sense to me, and I wanted you to take a look at them. You know about the Lieutenant Governor's assassination?"

Robert and I nodded in agreement. "A tragic loss" I said. "And puzzling, as everyone seemed to like him."

"Very puzzling indeed," Phil Martin agreed. "He was the great conciliator. An older politician, who ran as an independent and was re-elected to the legislature year after year because he was one of the few people who could get things done at the statehouse. The Governor made no secret of the fact that he asked him to be his running mate because supporters of both parties liked him. As far as we know, he had no enemies."

"The Secret Service thinks the assassin was aiming at the Vice President, missed, and shot the Lt. Governor by mistake." Brent added.

"The Vice President had no shortage of enemies" I said.

"That's for sure" Brent said. "Big business, big labor, the environmentalists . . . at one time or another he fought every one of them. Moderates loved him, but extremists on all sides carried a grudge against him. I don't know that any of them hated him enough to try to assassinate him, but whoever it was picked a mighty unusual weapon." He pulled a handful of photographs out of his brief case and spread them out on the coffee table. They showed what looked like a mangled bullet, brass shell casing and all. The nose of the bullet was mushroomed and fragmented and the shell casing was twisted and crushed, but they were still together.

"This bullet hasn't been fired" I said.

"It looks like a bullet, but it's really a rocket" Brent replied. "See the four holes in the bottom of the casing, around the primer? Those are the nozzles. The casing was filled with solid propellant rocket fuel and the holes are angled so they spun the bullet as it shot forward. This is the projectile that killed the Lieutenant Governor."

I stared at the photos in amazement. "It's like a miniature Congreve Rocket!" I said.

"A what?" asked Brent.

"A Congreve Rocket. You know, from the War of 1812? 'The rockets' red glare' in the Star Spangled Banner?"

"Actually, it's more like a Hale Rocket" Robert interjected. "The Congreve Rocket used a guide stick to stabilize it, like a giant Fourth of July bottle rocket. The Hale Rocket was an improvement on the Congreve and used the exhaust to spin the rocket for better stability." Phil and Brent stared at him with a look usually reserved for the show-off student who gives the teacher a more complete answer than was asked for. Robert seemed oblivious to their stare. He looked back at the photos and continued. "A more recent antecedent for this would be the rocket guns of the 1960s. I believe they were called 'Gyro-Jets.' Fiction writers liked the idea and they showed up in stories like 'The Man From U.N.C.L.E.' but the guns themselves were a flop. They weren't accurate and the range was limited." He paused in his lecture while he studied the photographs more closely. "This isn't a Gyro-Jet projectile, though. They looked like a 45 ACP round. I think they were actually a little bigger, though. Closer to 50 caliber."

"You're absolutely correct," Brent said. "This one is roughly 30 caliber. We think it was made from a 30-06 round."

Robert continued to stare at the pictures. "Probably a modern, improved implementation of a Gyro-Jet" he said, deep in thought. "I think one of the biggest drawbacks to the Gyro-Jet was that the rocket was traveling too slowly when it left the barrel. A conventional bullet is at its maximum velocity when it leaves the barrel, but a rocket starts slowly and accelerates as it goes. The Gyro-jet just wasn't traveling or spinning fast enough to be stable when it left the barrel, and by the time it built up enough speed to be stable it had drifted off the target line. A smaller bullet would accelerate faster, and of course there are more powerful propellants available now than in the 60's. . . But still. Why put so much effort into updating a failed technology? Why not just use a conventional bullet?"

"The Secret Service thinks the assassin used it because it was silent" Brent answered.

"Only if it was subsonic" Robert countered. "A supersonic round would have made a loud 'crack.' Essentially a miniature sonic boom."

"That's not the only puzzle" Phil said. "The projectile was travelling downward when it struck the Lt. Governor, and slightly left to right. The only tall building in that direction was over a mile away."

"I assume the Secret Service checked out that building before the Vice President's speech" Robert said.

"Thoroughly" Phil replied. "And they had people stationed on the roof and around the building during the speech. No one saw or heard anything."

"That's why they think the assassin used a silent weapon" Brent added.

"But only if it was subsonic" Robert repeated. "If it was supersonic they would have heard the crack. And if it was subsonic . . . do you have any idea how far above the target the sniper would have had to aim? I don't even know if it's possible to hit a target a mile away with a subsonic round."

"A rocket is going to have a different trajectory than a bullet" Brent suggested.

"Which would make it more difficult to calculate the drop" Robert countered. "Yet somehow the sniper managed to calculate the proper correction for elevation before he fired, but he had the azimuth off by, how far was the Lt Governor from the Vice President when he was hit?"

"About fifteen feet" said Phil.

"OK" said Robert. "The sniper had the elevation dead on but the azimuth was off by fifteen feet. Using a type of weapon that was horribly inaccurate in the past. Something just doesn't add up."

"That's why we came to see you" Brent said. He held out a thumb drive. "Here are photos, interviews, videos people shot during the speech, and what little other data we have. Could you take a look at it and let us know what you think? Don't copy anything to your computer, of course, and don't connect to a network while the thumb drive is in your computer."

"I'll do what I can" Robert said. "But it doesn't sound like there's much to go on."

Robert disappeared into his room for the next few days, which was typical when he was working on a case. He would burst from his room at unpredictable intervals, grab whatever food was handy from the kitchen, and haul it back to his lair. On one occasion, shortly after we met, our pantry was low and I saw him carry a frozen TV dinner into his room. Since then I have tried to always keep some bread, cold meat, and various cheeses on hand just in case. On previous cases he would sometimes emerge to ask me a question that couldn't be answered by the Internet, such as "Does this smell like bitter almonds to you?" Sometimes he'd even bounce ideas off me, describing various theories he had and asking for my thoughts. On this case, however, he kept his thoughts to himself. On Wednesday afternoon he casually strolled into the living room and told me he'd invited Brent and Phil back to tell them the theory he'd developed. I suggested he shower, shave, and put on clean clothes before they arrived.

By the time the two FBI agents arrived Robert looked sharp and, more importantly, he no longer scented the air with the aroma of one who has slept in the same outfit for the past five days. He immediately launched into his analysis of the case.

"The bullet could not have been fired from the building" he pronounced.

"We suspected that before," said Brent. "But we had no proof. The Secret Service is convinced the fatal shot came from that building. What can we tell them to prove that it wasn't?"

"Tell them to do the calculations" Robert said. "If the rocket motor kept the bullet just below the speed of sound, the bullet would have dropped roughly 400 feet before it reached the stage. That's a hell of a lot of elevation to adjust for, and of course the building isn't 400 feet high so the gun would had to have been aimed upward, launching the bullet into an arc which would have resulted in a longer flight and even greater drop. It's also highly unlikely that the rocket motor would have kept burning throughout the five second flight. I would be surprised if the burn time even lasted one second, which means the bullet would have started slowing down as soon as the rocket burned out, resulting in an even longer flight and a greater drop. And unless the shooter knew exactly how long the rocket would burn, he couldn't have calculated how far above the target to aim. In short, it would have been impossible for the assassin to hit a specific target on that stage with a single subsonic projectile."

Robert paused for a moment while Phil and Brent considered this. Then he continued. "If the projectile had been supersonic the drop would have been much less and the calculations might have been manageable, but the projectile would have made a crack as it flew through the air. Not one of the witnesses reported hearing a crack, including the Secret Service agents on the building. And if the assassin was going to make noise, why would he have used a rocket gun? He could have used a conventional sniper rifle with a silencer and a flash suppressor. The aiming corrections would have been simpler to calculate, and he wouldn't have had to develop a new type of projectile. Since it would have been virtually impossible to hit the target with a subsonic rocket fired from the building, and there are multiple reasons to rule out a supersonic rocket, we're left with the conclusion that the rocket wasn't fired from the building."

"Then where was it fired from?" Phil asked.

"A drone" Robert answered.

"But there were no drones in the area" Brent protested.

“Correction” said Robert. “Nobody reported seeing or hearing a drone. That doesn’t mean there wasn’t one.”

“A silent, invisible drone?” Brent asked sarcastically.

“It was neither silent nor invisible” Robert countered. “It was very quiet, though, and it didn’t look like a conventional drone. Hear me out. The most unusual aspect of this case is the projectile. Why would anyone go to the trouble of developing a new rocket projectile if they were going to fire it from a gun? It offers no advantages over a conventional bullet. That’s why the original Gyro-Jet failed. But it’s the perfect weapon for a drone. There’s no explosion so it doesn’t need a heavy steel barrel. It could be launched from a thin aluminum guide tube. The kickback from a conventional bullet would tear a small drone apart, but there’s no kickback from a rocket. And as long as the projectile was subsonic, it would be extremely quiet.”

Phil and Brent pondered this information. “Why didn’t anyone see it?” Brent asked.

“I think they did” Robert answered. “In fact, I think one of the people attending that speech captured it on video.” He opened his laptop and launched a video. “This is one of the videos you gave me. It was taken by someone in the crowd, attending the speech.” The video was centered on the Vice President, speaking from behind a podium. At the far left of the screen, the Lt. Governor could be seen sitting in a chair, listening to the Vice President. Suddenly, the Lt. Governor stiffened and toppled forward. The people sitting immediately beside him rushed to help him, but because the fatal shot was silent it took a moment for others to notice his predicament and for the Vice President to stop speaking. When the Vice President stopped, the person making the video realized something was wrong. The camera pointed up to the sky for a moment, presumably while the operator tried to figure out what was going on, and then the focus moved to the crowd of people around the Lt. Governor. During the time when the camera was pointed at the sky a dark blur shot across a corner of the screen.

“There!” Robert exclaimed. “There’s the drone.” He backed the video up and advanced it frame by frame.

“It’s a bird!” Brent said.

“It looks like a bird, but I think it’s a drone” said Robert.

“It’s flapping its wings!” Brent argued.

“It’s an ornithopter” Robert declared. “A machine that flies by flapping its wings.”

“I thought people dropped that idea when the Wright Brothers invented the airplane.” I interjected.

“As a means of practical transportation, yes.” Robert answered. “But as with any unusual technology, a few people continued to tinker with the idea. They argued that since small birds migrate for thousands of miles, flapping wings must be a more efficient way to fly. Eventually they succeeded in making ornithopters that actually flew, although I don’t know that they were any more efficient than a conventional airplane. They became a toy for hobbyists. Now you can buy radio controlled ornithopter drones on Amazon. Some of them are even designed to look like birds, although I seriously doubt our assassin bought his drone on the Internet. His was a very sophisticated, highly specialized drone.”

Brent and Phil thought about what Robert had said. Phil finally broke the silence. "That's a pretty wild theory, Robert."

"Unorthodox, perhaps, but it's the only theory I can devise that accounts for the angle of entrance and for the unusual choice of projectile" Robert answered. "I assume the Secret Service has already checked out all of the aircraft that were in the vicinity. And any aircraft that approached closely enough to hit the Lt. Governor with a rocket gun would have been close enough to be seen and heard by everyone. I dare say it would have been so close it would have caused mass panic, with people running in all directions. A bird, on the other hand, could have flown within 20 or 30 yards of the stage without being noticed by anyone."

Brent stared at the grainy image on Robert's computer. "You can't tell from that picture whether it's a bird or a drone."

"No," admitted Robert. "I can't swear that's a picture of the drone. But it seems too much of a coincidence for it to not be the drone. How often do you see a bird flying low over a huge crowd of people, especially in an open field with no trees or other cover nearby? Unless there's food involved, such as people throwing popcorn into the air, birds tend to avoid large crowds of people."

"You know the Secret Service monitors radio traffic around any public appearance by anyone under their protection, searching for any kind of remote control signal. It's possible they could miss a carefully concealed signal, but they're pretty good at it."

"I read that in the reports you gave me" Robert answered. "And any assassin who tried to remotely control a weapon would have to know his controller is essentially sending out a beacon that shouts 'Here I am!' to the Secret Service. That's why I don't think this drone was remotely controlled. I think its flight was pre-programmed."

"Satellite navigation?" asked Phil. Robert nodded in agreement.

"How did the assassin aim and fire it?" asked Brent.

"Facial recognition software" Robert replied.

"That's one hell of a sophisticated drone!" Brent said.

"Sophisticated, yes, but by no means impossible. There are dozens of countries and hundreds of companies that could develop a drone like this. The ornithopter technology is commonplace. There are dozens of phone apps that perform satellite navigation, and a handful of apps that do facial recognition. The rocket propelled bullet would take some dedicated development, but again, there are dozens of government and private labs that could do it. I don't think this drone was developed by a country or a large corporation, though. I suspect this one was developed by an extremely talented individual, or at most by a small team."

"What makes you think that?" Phil asked.

"The fact that they targeted the Lt. Governor" Robert answered.

"You don't think they were aiming at the Vice President and missed?"

“I don’t think a drone this sophisticated would miss by fifteen feet when firing at close range” Robert said. “I think whoever did this was sending a signal to the world. ‘I can take out anyone I want, and all the King’s horses and all the King’s men can’t stop me.’ Having proved the weapon works, he will now sell it to anyone willing to meet his price. He wouldn’t have wanted to demonstrate it by taking out the Vice President because the VP might be a target that would lead to a sale.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence while the full impact of Robert’s prediction sank in. Finally Brent spoke. “That’s a very scary prospect, Robert.”

“If he uses it again maybe we can follow the drone back to his location” Phil suggested.

“I doubt he will ever try to retrieve it, for that very reason” said Robert. “It’s probably programmed to fly out to sea, or to crash in some remote location.”

“Or self-destruct” I suggested. “Part of the effectiveness of this device is that the victims don’t know what to look for. If it set itself on fire before it crashed, it might not look like a bird anymore.”

“Good thought” said Robert. “Although I suspect it has some sort of a metal framework for the wings, and a system of gears and levers that would survive a fire and give it away as an ornithopter.”

I thought about this for a moment. “Could that be made out of magnesium?” I asked.

For once, Robert looked impressed. “Very possibly,” he said. “Magnesium is strong and lightweight, and it dissolves into dust when it burns. It also gives us something to look for.” He turned to Phil and Brent. “If this drone was made of magnesium and if it did self-destruct, it would burn brightly and leave a large trail of white smoke as it plunged to earth. There’s a good chance someone would have seen that and reported it. You might check with the local police, fire departments, UFO trackers, and anyone else you can think of who might receive a report like that. It’s a long shot, but it’s something to work on.”

“Anything else we should investigate?” Brent asked.

“Keep your ears tuned to anything from any of your sources that might indicate an unusual weapon for sale. You might touch base with the NSA to make certain they’re scanning phone calls and other communications for weapons sales, ornithopters, rocket guns, and the like. I doubt that anyone talented enough to make a drone like this would be communicating in the clear, but maybe a potential customer will get careless. In the meantime, I’ll be making a few inquiries on my own. I know you two won’t follow me, but please try to keep the Secret Service and all the other agencies off my tail. The people I’ll be talking to will clam up like a rock if they think I have any connection to the government.”

Once again, Robert disappeared into his room for a few days, but this time the seclusion was not continuous. Whatever inquiries he was making apparently involved a good deal of waiting, as he would periodically wander out of his room. During these wanderings he was distracted and easily irritated, so I made it a point to steer clear of him. Occasionally he would go for a walk, and once he took a cab somewhere, but he was never gone for long. I was surprised when he joined me at the kitchen table for lunch on Friday and cheerfully announced that he had two tickets for that afternoon’s baseball game. I knew better than to ask him about the case so we chatted about baseball, who was going to be on the

mound that afternoon, the Dodgers' chance of winning the Division, and other inconsequential topics during the taxi ride to the stadium. When we got there Robert surprised me by pulling a note out his pocket and holding it up to me. The note said "Shhh. Give me your phone." I quietly handed him my phone, and he gave both our phones to the cabbie along with the fare and some other papers. As soon as the cab left I started to ask him about this but he stared off in the distance, as if he hadn't heard me, and whispered "Not now."

We entered the stadium and found our seats, but before we sat down Robert said "Let's get something to eat." We walked back up the aisle to the mezzanine, then walked to several concession stands. At each stand Robert would briefly look at the menu and then turn and walk to a different stand. I soon realized that what he was really doing was creating a plausible reason to turn around unexpectedly and walk back the way we had come, to see if anyone was following us. When he was satisfied that we were not being followed he hustled down a stairway and exited the stadium, where a different cab was waiting for us. Once we were underway, Robert spoke.

"Sorry about the charade of going to the ball game, but I wanted you to come with me while I met with an informant and I needed to make certain we weren't being followed. I trust Brent and Phil, but they can't control everyone in every federal agency that might have an interest in this case. More importantly, I don't know who our opponent is and I have no idea what resources he has to track us. If someone was tailing us, we shook them. I gave the cabbie a ticket to the game along with our phones, so if someone is tracking our phones they'll see that they're at the ball game where we're supposed to be. If they activate one of the microphones on our phones, and yes they can do that remotely, they'll hear the roar of the crowd. The cabbie is enjoying the game and a healthy tip, and will bring the phones back to the house after the game. In the meantime we have several hours of freedom from outside surveillance."

The cab dropped us off in an industrial section of the city. Mostly warehouses, with an occasional small business such as a heating supply company or a welding shop. The area didn't look run down, but there was surprisingly little traffic for a Friday afternoon. When we were well away from any doorway Robert stopped and explained our mission.

"We're about to meet Joey," he said. "Joey is a small time arms dealer. He's no saint, but I think most of his deals are legal. He sells enough guns to stay in business, but his main concern is to stay clear of the government. He's paranoid about all government agencies – state, federal, and local. He thinks they're all working with a secret international 'one world government' cabal that is using the NSA and other intelligence agencies to spy on the public. He's hired a lawyer to take care of his taxes, business license, and other mandatory government interactions, but he himself stays off the grid. No credit card, no driver's license, no phone number, no e-mail account, nothing. He spends most of his time on the dark web, looking for evidence of government spying and sharing conspiracy theories with similar hermits. Because he's an arms dealer, though, and because he spends so much time prowling the dark web, he's sometimes aware of current threats and plots. He also has a number of useful contacts."

"If he stays off the grid, how can you contact him?" I asked.

"I use a blogcom" Robert replied. "I post a seemingly innocuous comment on a discussion blog that Joey monitors. What I say doesn't matter, but the fact that I posted means I want to meet with him. If he's willing to meet, he'll post a comment or a couple of comments that tell me when he'll see me. For example, he might say 'Mondays suck!' That tells me he wants to meet on a Monday. In a later post he

might say 'I didn't eat lunch until 1:30' to tell me what time to meet him on Monday. If you've read the drivel that people post on blogs nowadays – especially Twitter – you'll realize posts like these blend right in and don't raise anyone's suspicions."

"If he's so paranoid, why is he willing to meet with you?" I asked.

"Joey and I go back a long way" Robert answered. "It began when the FBI arrested him for supplying guns to a terrorist group. In that particular case he had been duped by an intermediary and had not knowingly done anything illegal. I found the evidence that exonerated him, and he began to trust me. The next time he was suspicious of a new customer he asked me to check him out, and we've gotten along fine ever since. I help him avoid getting sucked into illegal deals, and he lets me know if he hears of anything nefarious."

Robert stopped walking for a moment, and looked directly at me. "Be on your guard" he said. "Joey comes across as a friendly guy, but he's not entirely stable. His mood can change in an instant. That's why I didn't want to go see him alone. He'll be on his best behavior if there's a potential witness in the room, and if things do turn sour it will be two against one."

We turned down a narrow street, walked past a couple of warehouses, and stopped at a small side door on the next warehouse. A sign over the doorbell read "Dunrip Enterprises." The street was called "Dunrip Avenue," so this was a suitably innocuous name for a business. Robert rang the doorbell. "Who's there?" an electronically altered voice demanded.

"Who uses a voice changer on an intercom?" I wondered.

"Robert Borland" Robert answered.

There was a slight pause, and then the sound of an electric bolt sliding back. "Come in" the voice commanded.

We stepped through the door into a dimly lit warehouse. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the change from the bright sunshine outdoors. The air inside was cool but slightly musty.

"Robert, my man!" The booming voice came from a giant who was lumbering toward us. He wasn't much taller than Robert, but he was at least twice as wide. A little of his girth was fat, but he was a big man overall. A barrel-sized chest stretched his black T-shirt to the breaking point, and arms the size of hams spilled out of his sleeves. His work jeans looked big enough to hold two men, and the untied tennis shoes on his feet looked like two loaves of Italian bread. He had a face like Santa Claus, but with a jet black beard and a shiny bald head. He engulfed Robert in a giant bear hug.

"This is my friend, Bill Downing." Robert said. I was smothered by a similar hug.

"Come into the office, and let's talk" Joey said. He led us through the mostly empty warehouse. I saw some long, low wooden crates which I assumed held rifles of some kind, as well as cube-shaped crates which I assumed held ammunition. Joey walked with the wide, swinging gait of the clinically obese, although my overall impression was still that he was a powerful man. The area close to his office looked like a grocery store warehouse, with cases of corned beef hash, canned ham, and other canned meats as well as canned fruits and vegetables. Joey obviously didn't go out much. The office itself looked like it had originally held several office workers, but now there was only a single desk with a rack

of computer equipment next to it. The space where the other desks had been was now occupied by a bed, a refrigerator, and a small stove. A couch, a couple of overstuffed chairs, and a big screen TV completed the furnishings. Joey waved us into the chairs while he dominated the couch. "What can I do for you, Robert?" he asked.

Robert gave him a brief description of the weapon we thought might be on the market, without divulging more details than was necessary. He said it was an autonomous drone armed with a rocket gun, designed specifically for assassinations. He didn't say that it had already been used to murder the Lt. Governor, and he didn't say that it flew by flapping its wings. He did say that it blended into the background to the point where it was almost invisible, and that he was worried because terrorists or a government agency could use it to assassinate anyone at will. Joey's initial reaction surprised me.

"A rocket gun?" he asked, incredulously. "Why in the hell would anyone use a rocket gun? Man, I haven't seen one of those in years! Actually, I don't think I've ever really *seen* one. I've just seen pictures of them in ads for gun auctions. They look sort of cool, in a tacky 60's kinda way, but they shoot like crap. If you're standing too close to your target the bullet will just bounce off of him because it's not moving fast enough. Too far away and your chances of hitting him are zilch. And any more, the ammunition is almost as expensive as the gun. And it's crappy, too. Misfires and slow fires. That's not a terrorist weapon. The terrorist would probably be in more danger than the target. Now if it's rockets you want, I can get you some RPGs that will . . ."

"No thank you, Joey." Robert interrupted him. "We haven't got a license for RPG's, actually."

"I could get you a license" Joey countered. "I've got a friend who . . ."

"We're not looking for RPGs." Robert was very firm when he made this statement. "We're looking for a drone that fires rockets. And not the crappy rockets they used in the 1960's. This is a modern, newly designed rocket gun. And take my word for it, it's effective."

"You mean they can really kill somebody with this drone that nobody sees coming?" Joey asked.

"They not only can kill somebody, they have killed somebody. And they can take out anybody they want. They don't even need to be there. They just feed a picture of the target into this drone and it does the rest."

Joey thought about this for a while. "A thing like that could put me out of business" he said.

"Permanently" said Robert. "What if the FBI hadn't bothered to arrest you the day we met. What if they just fed your picture into this machine?"

Joey thought a while longer. "So you just want me to keep an eye out for this killer drone? You think somebody's trying to sell it?"

"They may be trying to sell drones. They may be trying to sell the design. Or they may be in the murder for hire business. We don't know. We just know they're extremely dangerous, and we need to stop them." He stared intently at Joey.

"I'm in." Joey said finally. "I'll poke around and see what I can find. No promises, but if I find anything I'll let you know."

A week went by with no word from Joey, or from any of the other informants Robert had contacted. He sat restlessly on the couch, picking at a loose thread on the arm. "There's really nothing more we can do, Bill" he said. "The web is spun. We're just waiting for an insect to land." I looked up because the comment was addressed to me, but he continued to focus on the loose thread. I suspect he might have said the same thing if I had been in San Francisco. Since he never looked up, and I couldn't think of anything to say in response, I turned my attention back to my book. A few minutes later the doorbell rang.

"That will be Brent and Phil" Robert announced, still picking at the thread and making no move to answer the door.

"I didn't know they were coming" I said as I got up to answer the door. I was a little peeved that he hadn't told me he expected them, and irritated that he just sat on the couch and expected me to answer the door.

The two FBI agents had come to show Robert some photos. "We took your advice and checked to see if anyone had reported a UFO or meteor near murder site" Brent said. "No one had called 911 or any emergency response agencies. Then we thought to check with the astronomy department at the university. Three people had called to report a meteorite falling into Silver Lake. One of them was able to show us exactly where it hit, and our divers found this." He laid several photos of what looked like a charred circuit board on the coffee table. What was left of the board was twisted and curled almost into a ball. A few components were still attached, but there wasn't much left of it.

"Our electronics wizards are still checking it out" Phil said. "But they don't expect to find any clues as to who made it or even where it was made. Apparently the technology is pretty commonplace. There were no fingerprints on it, of course. Those white flakes stuck to the melted globs of circuit board are magnesium oxide. I thought that might interest you."

"It does indeed" said Robert. "Until now, the only real evidence we had was the bullet. Everything else was conjecture. Informed conjecture, but it was like a house of cards. Each theory depended upon the preceding theory for support. If one failed they all failed. Now we have evidence that we were on the right track."

He set down the photo and sighed. "But we're still no closer to catching the assassin" he said. "We know how he committed the crime, but we don't know why he did it, or who he is. The theory that this was a demonstration of a weapon or a service he was trying to sell is just that – a theory. I have a dozen informants looking for indications that he's trying to sell it, but no one's heard a whisper. One of them is so paranoid that Bill and I had to visit him in person to recruit him, but with no luck. Maybe it's already been sold and the purchaser shot the Lieutenant Governor as a trial run. Maybe it really was developed by a foreign government and has never been for sale, although most governments would be reluctant to develop a weapon that could so easily be turned against them. Or maybe we're dealing with a wacko, and his next target will be equally baffling." He raised his hand to his forehead and rubbed his temples. "So many theories." He was almost whispering. "No way to test them."

The doorbell rang again. I looked at Robert, but he looked up at me in surprise. "I wasn't expecting anyone else" he said. "Were you?" I shook my head "no" and to my surprise Robert got up to answer

the door. He talked to someone outside for a few moments, closed the door, and walked back to the couch. He carried a manila envelope in his hand, and his eyes sparkled with excitement.

“That was Joey’s lawyer” he said. “He was acting as a courier.” He turned to the two FBI agents. “Joey is the paranoid informant I mentioned. His lawyer was very specific about the fact that I could not give these papers to any authorities, but he didn’t say I couldn’t let you see them.” He opened the envelope and slid a few sheets of computer paper onto the coffee table. The first was a printout of what appeared to be a harmless blog conversation except for one entry which Joey had highlighted with a yellow marker:

“Polecat: The Lt Gov’s assassination does not need to be unique. 94.23.27.164 cx12”

“Looks like this is the assassin’s way of advertising” Robert said. “The numbers are a web address, but it’s probably encrypted. Otherwise he’d be broadcasting a link that could maybe be traced back to him. I’m guessing the term ‘cx12’ tells readers what algorithm to use to decrypt the address, but you’ve probably got to be deep into the dark web to understand the code and to have the algorithm. He’s not interested in advertising to law abiding citizens.” Robert paused for a minute. “Joey might have the code” he added.

He picked up the next sheet of paper. “Ah, yes” he said. “This must be what Joey found at that address.”

“Note d&t. Lt Gov will B kild aprx 2 hr. Real kilr will never B caught. (Dont B fooled if govt picks fall guy like Oswald.) Rply if need similar. \$5M USD min.”

Underneath, in a different font, was a web address, ID, and password and the words “expires Wednesday.” Robert chuckled when he pointed out the different font. “Joey is giving us the key to replying to this ad” he said. “But he didn’t want to hand write it because that would be traceable. So he typed it underneath a screen capture of the ad.”

“That ad looks like it was written by a kid” I said.

“I’m afraid spelling and punctuation doesn’t count for as much as it did when we were in school” Robert chuckled. “Most people now are kids by our standards. I suspect whoever wrote this is significantly younger than we are, and probably spends a lot of time texting or posting on blogs. ‘Kild’ and ‘aprx’ are perfectly acceptable on those forums, and using ‘d&t’ to refer to the date and time the entry was posted is standard.” Robert studied the ad for a moment longer. “Using abbreviations probably also helps avoid triggering NSA algorithms, which are more likely to look for ‘killer’ than ‘kilr.’ The grammar is basically correct. ‘Will be’ and ‘Will never be’ for example. The writer is fluent in English. I’m guessing he’s American based on the reference to Lee Harvey Oswald.”

“Not much of an ad, for a five million dollar device” I said, still not convinced this actually had any connection to the high tech killing machine we were trying to stop.

“Joey found it, and he understood its meaning” Robert countered. “And that means other weapons dealers and their customers have seen it. Whoever posted this ad announced the assassination two hours before it actually happened. And he’s inviting anyone who wants a similar assassination to contact him. Since he’s asking for a fixed price and not calling for the highest bidder, it’s probably a murder for hire scheme. He doesn’t want to sell a drone or the design, he wants a continuing income.”

“Our forensic IT folks might be able to trace the web address” Brent said.

“I promised Joey’s lawyer I wouldn’t give you these papers” Robert said. “And I’d prefer you not copy any of the information, either. Technically that wouldn’t violate the promise, but I know Joey wouldn’t like it. He’s nervous enough about trusting me.”

“We can’t ignore information like this!” Brent insisted. “We’re investigating the murder of a high state official and we’re trying to prevent the assassin from committing more murders. And you want us to ignore a crucial lead because you don’t want to offend an informant?”

“Just what do you think your IT folks would find?” Robert asked. “That it’s a heavily encrypted web site in a dingy room in a foreign country, possibly China or Russia? That an automatic defense mechanism wiped the server clean at the first sign of trouble? That the operators made it a point to know nothing about their customer except that he paid in advance using bitcoins?”

Phil and Brent looked at each other uneasily.

“You know that’s what would happen” Robert continued. “The killer would be spooked into going even deeper underground, you’d still be clueless, and if Joey ever got wind of this he’d never trust me again. I want to catch this bastard, not just shoo him away for a few weeks. Let me reply to his ad. You can trace the communications. If we’re lucky, you can find out where he is. If not, maybe we can lure him into a trap.”

“That might work” said Phil.

“I’ll need a fake identity” said Robert. “One with a lot of back-up, a plausible reason to hire an assassin, and a bank account that makes five million dollars look like chump change. I suspect he’ll check me out pretty thoroughly. When the time comes to contact him, I’ll need a secure network connection. Preferably one that bounces around the world several times. I don’t want him tracing the connection back to me, and in any event he’ll get suspicious if the connection isn’t highly obfuscated.”

“We can do that” Brent said. “It will take some time, but we can do that.”

“You’ve got until Wednesday” Robert said. “The secure login that Joey gave us expires on Wednesday.”

Phil and Brent returned on Tuesday night, looking tired and haggard.

“It’s tough enough to get the FBI brass to agree to something like this on short notice” Brent said. “But it’s even harder when the Secret Service is involved. But we got you an identity and set up a secure network. You’re Brandon Clark, of Nashua New Hampshire. Inherited a large fortune, strong supporter of several extreme left wing groups, including several that promote violence. Suspected ties to international revolutionary movements. Driver’s license number, bank account information, etc. are all in this folder.” Brent handed a folder to Robert.

Robert glanced through the folder. “Doesn’t sound like the type to hire an assassin” he said.

“Wasn’t enough time to create a more elaborate cover” Brent said. “He’s going to check you out electronically so we need to base the identity on cooperative organizations that will let us insert bogus records into their databases.”

“Or less cooperative organizations with weak security?” Robert asked.

Phil chose to ignore the question. “The bank only exists on an FBI server, but it’s got a lovely web site, including photos of the fall colors around their Nashau branch office. You can find it on Google Earth, too. The building you see at that address isn’t actually the fictitious bank, but you can’t tell that from the photos. We’ve planted reviews and enough other substantiating evidence to make it look real. A few of the other references he’s likely to check only exist on FBI servers, and we’ve deluged Google with enough search requests to make certain he’ll find the links we want him to follow. It’s easier to trace an intruder when he’s hacking your own server.” He handed Robert another sheet of paper. “Here’s a web address and login information for the secure network connection. Once you’re logged in you can go to any web address you want, and your signal will be bounced around the world through hundreds of servers. Our IT folks will be tracking it, though, and they should be able to track any replies.”

Phil had also brought an FBI laptop, which could be securely connected to the FBI network he had just described. Robert entered the web address which Joey had given him. Once he logged in to that site we saw the page with the ad Joey had sent us the screen capture of. As soon as Robert clicked on the reply box a new screen appeared, with a banner at the top which read “Note new web address. Use this for any future communications.” The banner also provided a new user ID and password with a warning “Expires Sunday.” Below it was the same ad:

“Note d&t. Lt Gov will B kild aprx 2 hr. Real kilr will never B caught. (Dont B fooled if govt picks fall guy like Oswald.) Rply if need similar. \$5M USD min.”

“He’s switched us to a new session” Robert said. “That prevents us from seeing any replies others may have made to his ad.”

“I have similar need” Robert typed.

We waited for a long time. “This is a blog, not a text message” Robert said, as much to himself as to the rest of us. “He may only check it once a day. Still, for five million dollars I would think he would have it notify him immediately when he gets a reply.”

More time passed. We were about to call it quits for the night when a new message silently appeared:

“Who R U?”

“Prefer to remain anonymous” Robert replied.

Once again we waited a long time for a reply, much longer than it would have taken the assassin to type one of his abbreviated messages. Finally some new text appeared:

“I don’t give a sht about ur name. I need ur bank acct.”

“Why should I trust you?” Robert typed. Another long delay followed.

“U R not in charge. I M. U want what Ive got, U play by my rules.”

Robert seemed to be taken aback by this last note. “Well,” he said to no one in particular. “I’ll knock a couple of stars off his Customer Service rating for that reply.” Then he typed in the bank account information Brent had given him. After another long delay the final message of the night appeared:

“CIL”

“What the hell is ‘CIL?’” Brent asked.

“Check In Later” Robert replied. “Can you leave the computer here and keep the network active for as long as we need it? I’ll check the web site periodically, but I suspect it will take him a few days to check me out. He’ll start with the bank account. That will give him my name and address, or I should say Brandon Clark’s name and address. Then he’ll start looking for more info about Brandon Clark. I hope you guys created a convincing identity.”

“It’ll do.” Brent said confidently.

Two days later Brent and Phil returned, with long faces.

“We almost had him” Phil said.

“We weren’t able to trace the blog entries” Brent explained. “They were too short, and he logged off after every message. He used a different round-the-world network of servers for each message. Early yesterday morning, though, he began hacking into the fake bank account. That kept him online long enough that our IT geeks could untangle the web of server redirections and locate the source of the signal. It was a house in Corona, of all places. We got a SWAT team together yesterday afternoon and raided the place. There was nobody in the house but an elderly retired couple, and it didn’t take them long to convince us they didn’t know anything about computers or drones.”

“They had a wireless network in their house” Phil added. “They thought it was secure. The username was ‘Admin’ and the password was ‘1234.’”

“We think the killer hacked into their network and that’s why the messages we saw were coming from that house” Brent said. “He was probably sitting in a car parked next to their house all morning. We’ve got uniforms canvassing the neighborhood now, in case anyone got a license number.”

“He may have used a drone” Robert said. “Sitting in a car outside the house is pretty risky. People get suspicious about someone sitting in a parked car for hours. He could have landed a drone on the roof and had it relay the signal to a less risky site, miles away. I hope the raid and the door-to-door search didn’t spook him. He may also be using drones for aerial reconnaissance.”

Whether he was spooked by the raid or didn’t like something he found while researching “Brandon Clark,” he never replied to Robert’s messages. The login expired on Sunday and the trail went cold.

“Idiots!!” Robert screamed at the newspaper. He jumped up from the couch and shoved the paper in my face. “Look at this!” he yelled.

I took the paper from his trembling hands. Robert seldom showed emotion, but he was shaking so much with rage that I couldn’t read a word while he held the paper. I smoothed the crumpled page and quickly scanned the article that had enraged him:

“Lieutenant Governor Killed by Drone: Unnamed sources told a reporter . . . new kind of drone . . . rocket bullet . . . no group has claimed responsibility . . . authorities have no clue . . . State Department is quietly notifying other governments . . . “

“Any chance we may have had of catching the killer is gone now” Robert seethed. “He probably fled the country the minute that story hit the newsstands. Now he’s in some country where the police don’t go spilling their guts to the newspapers, quietly selling his services to the highest bidder.”

A few hours later Brent and Phil were at the house, trying to square things with Robert.

“Give us a break, Robert” Phil argued. “We didn’t leak that story. We had no reason to. It only makes our job harder. I doubt that the Secret Service leaked it, either. It only makes their job harder, too. But they did tell the State Department about it. What did you expect them to do? There’s an unknown assassin on the loose, with a new kind of weapon, and he’s selling his services to the highest bidder. What if his next target is the British Prime Minister? Or the President of France? Or the Pope? Do you think we should keep quiet about it until somebody else is assassinated? And then say ‘Oh we knew somebody was likely to get shot by a drone that looked like a bird, but we didn’t want to say anything.’ The story never should have been leaked to the press, and I hope they catch whoever leaked it and lock him up, but we couldn’t sit on the information, either.”

Robert was still smoldering, but I could see Phil’s words were hitting home. There was no way the FBI or the Secret Service could have kept this information to themselves, and the more people who knew about it the less likely it would be kept a secret. Finally Robert spoke.

“Maybe it’s better this way” he said. “The most important thing is to prevent any more assassinations. Now everyone knows to watch out for a bird. People will panic whenever a real bird flies over a crowd, and after a while people will get complacent and another assassination will occur, but it won’t be a world changing, head of state assassination. The real professionals, the Secret Service and their counterparts, won’t get complacent.”

A hint of a smile played across Robert’s lips. “If nothing else, we’ve diminished the value of this weapon” he said. “A major part of its effectiveness was its stealth. Now that everybody knows to watch out for a bird, the assassin won’t be getting five million dollars a pop for his services. I would have rather caught the bastard and fried him, but this is better than nothing.”

After some more discussion we saw our guests to the door and bid them a relatively cordial “good night.” As soon as they’d left Robert’s expression turned deadly serious. “It might be a good idea if you kept your Glock handy” he told me. I don’t think there’s any way the assassin could trace those messages back to this house, but it’s best to be prepared.” I assured him that ever since our first adventure together I did not go anywhere unarmed.

I didn't limit my precautions to carrying a pistol. Robert spent hours playing with a new helicopter drone he'd bought, but I double-checked every component of our home security system. Door switches, window switches, motion detectors, video cameras, in-house alarm and wireless call-out. Everything was in perfect working order. I convinced Robert that even when we were in the house we should activate the perimeter door and window switches. It was a pain to deactivate them before we opened the front door and then reactivate them once we were outside, but he put up with it. Only later did we discover there was a camera drone on a roof across the street, watching us enter our code on the keypad.

Several evenings later Robert and I were sitting in the living room after dinner. I got up to get a glass of water and as I stepped into the darkened dining room I was shocked to find myself staring down the barrel of a very large pistol carried by an evil looking man in dark clothing. I let out an involuntary cry which caught Robert's attention, but the intruder had me at point blank range so there was nothing Robert could do. I slowly backed into the living room and stood next to Robert as the man directed.

"So, Mr. Borland" the man said. "Perhaps you'd like to tell me who you're working with, and how much you know about my business. Or would you prefer I call you Brandon?"

"I don't know what you're talking about" Robert answered.

"That was a pretty good ID" the man continued. "Brandon Clark even had an excellent credit rating on Credi-Fax, going back to 1996. Only the Credi-Fax files that were hacked six months ago showed no evidence that Brandon Clark even existed back then. Then the FBI began poking around one of my network access points, and the newspapers started blabbing about my business. Two can play the detective game. I've got friends in countries who can backtrace the most convoluted network traffic. It wasn't cheap, but I learned you connected to my site from this house. Now I want you to tell me who you are, what you know about my business, and how you came to know it. Otherwise I'll start by shooting your friend in the kneecap, and I'll move upward from there."

"My name is Robert Borland" Robert said. "My friend is Bill Downing. We live here with my sister Lucille."

At the mention of her name, I saw blue lights flicker on Robert's home automation system.

"Photos!" Robert said clearly. A half dozen cameras flashed from bookcases and other concealed spots around the room.

"What the . . ." The intruder blinked in astonishment.

"I've just sent your photo to the police" Robert announced. "More importantly, my drone now knows what you look like." I heard the whirr of his helicopter drone from the darkened dining room. It's red and blue lights blinked ominously near the ceiling. The intruder spun around and fired at the lights.

As soon as I realized his gun was no longer pointing at me I reached for my pistol. Before I had it half-way out, though, I heard an explosion as Robert fired. The intruder dropped his gun and collapsed

on the floor, clutching the shattered remnants of his right shoulder with his left hand. Robert kicked the intruder's gun away, never taking his eyes or his aim off the intruder.

"Sorry about that shot, Bill" he said. "I know they teach us always shoot to kill, never shoot to wound, but there are so many questions the FBI wants to ask this man. I thought it would be better to take him alive. Now, if you would be so good as to call 911 we can bring this visit to a close."

It took hours for the police to wrap up their investigation of the "crime scene." (I had never before considered our living room to be a crime scene.) I was disappointed to learn that Robert's trap hadn't actually taken pictures of the intruder, it just flashed LEDs he'd pried from several old phones and cameras. ("I hope you weren't too attached to your old flip phone in the kitchen junk drawer" he told me afterward.) Even without the photographs, the police didn't question our version of the event, and the fact that the FBI was able to match the intruder's fingerprint to a previous unsolved extortion case gave further proof of our innocence. Even so, it was early the next morning before the police took their last photograph, collected their last specimen, and left our house. I collapsed in my favorite chair, and Robert sprawled on the couch.

"I assume that drone wasn't really a threat" I said.

"No, it was just a drone from the hobby shop" Robert replied. "But I knew the assassin couldn't afford to take that chance. I was counting on it to create a diversion if anyone broke into our house."

"Smart thinking" I said.

"I find it's always best to have a backup plan" Robert said. "We've got a good home security system, but a smart crook will expect that and will find a way around it. I like to be prepared with something they don't expect."

"Do you often set traps like this?" I asked, suddenly feeling uneasy.

"I usually have one or two tricks up my sleeve" he answered. "Sometimes when I'm working on an unusual case I can tailor it to the type of intruder I expect. Sometimes it's a more general trap."

"Are they the kinds of traps that could injure someone?" I asked, remembering the time I locked myself out and climbed in through the dining room window.

"Oh, no. Not really" he said dismissively. Then his brow furrowed as though he was thinking about his answer. "At least, not recently."