

The Victrola

Robert Borland Mystery #5

George Swanson was disappointed as he looked through the records being offered for sale. The auction house had advertised “Antique Victrola with dozens of very old records.” What he found when he previewed the items were three record albums, each of which was designed to hold 10 records. Some of the sleeves were empty, and the rest contained records from the 40s and 50s. Not bad music, but of no interest to George. George collected jazz and dance music from the 1920s. Even the record albums themselves were too modern for his tastes. Their thick, padded, imitation white leather covers showed they were from the 1950s.



The phonograph itself interested George more than he expected. Short, squat, and boxy it was a Victrola model 4-7, one of the smallest floor model Victrolas ever made. It was one of Victor’s “Orthophonic” Victrolas made in the late 1920s, which actually sounded better than most electric record players made until the “Hi-Fi” revolution in the 1950s. Someone had recently refinished the cabinet of this Victrola, but still it could hardly be described as beautiful. A fellow collector had once described the Victrola 4-7 as “an ugly little spud.” George didn’t need this phonograph for his collection, but it occurred to him that it might be an ideal first phonograph for his grandson Mark. Most of his grandchildren had liked his Victrolas when they were little. They thought it was fun to wind up the motor, set the needle down on a record, and dance wildly at whatever music emerged. They soon outgrew Victrolas though, as iPods, earbuds, and the latest songs from the Internet captured their attention. Mark was different. He had all the latest electronic gizmos and enjoyed modern music with his friends, but he never lost his appreciation for the music of the past. He always asked George to play 20s jazz when he came to visit, and he was genuinely interested in discussing different arrangements and styles. The kid showed promise. George decided to stick around for the auction and buy it as a birthday present for Mark if he could get it at a reasonable price.

As it turned out, there wasn’t much competition for this phonograph. The auctioneer didn’t help matters much when he picked a warped copy of Doris Day singing “Ain’t We Got Fun?” to demonstrate it. Not only was the record in terrible condition, it sounded like the needle hadn’t been changed since the Eisenhower administration. You’d think an auctioneer selling antiques would know that you were supposed to use a new steel needle for every record. Nevertheless, the wavering, scratchy wails produced by the warped record told George that the phonograph itself was in good working condition, with good volume and a strong motor. A man whom George recognized as the owner of a local antique store opened the bidding at \$50, but he soon dropped out and George bought the phonograph for \$65.

George hadn’t come prepared to buy a phonograph. He could fit it in the back of his SUV, but he hadn’t brought any blankets to protect the cabinet or rags to protect the movable parts. Fortunately, this wasn’t the first time he’d bought something at this auction house. The auctioneer recognized him

as a “regular” and generously loaned him some ratty blankets and rags to pack everything for the drive home. It was dark by the time he got home, so he decided to wait to unload the phonograph until the next day, when he hoped his neighbor could help him.

For a small phonograph, the Model 4-7 was remarkably heavy. George’s neighbor Ken didn’t mind helping George carry it inside, but he did razz him good-naturedly about it – especially when George said he wanted to carry it to his basement workshop. “Why can’t you just listen to music on an iPod, like everyone else?” Ken asked as they struggled to carry the phonograph down the stairs. “Or if that’s too modern for you, I’ll give you one of my old transistor radios.”

Despite his kidding, Ken seemed intrigued by the phonograph. “Where do you plug it in?” he asked after they set it down on the workshop floor. He was searching for a cord behind the machine.

“You don’t plug it in,” George answered. It’s purely mechanical. It’s got a spring motor to turn the record, and a big horn to make the sound.”

“Really?” Ken asked. “It makes music without electricity?”

George ignored the records that came with the machine and selected a copy of “Static Strut” from his collection. He also grabbed a package of new needles from one of his other phonographs. He wound up the mainspring and played the record for Ken.

“Wow! That actually sounds pretty good!” Ken said as trumpet and clarinet riffs ornamented the jazz classic. “And that comes from a wind-up motor? I don’t see the horn, though. It sounds like the music is coming from that speaker behind the doors.”

“That’s not a speaker,” George said. “That is the horn. Early phonographs had a big horn above the record. Later they put the horn underneath the record, inside the cabinet. It’s hidden behind that cloth grille.”

“Pretty cool,” Ken said. He looked the machine over as he listened to the rest of the record. “How much did this thing set you back?” he asked.

“I got it for \$65,” George answered.

“Is that all?” Ken asked in surprise. “Don’t want to sell it, do you?”

“No, I bought this on for my grandson.”

Ken nodded that he understood. “Let me know if he doesn’t want it. It might be kinda fun to have something like this.”

The next day George took the motor out of the phonograph to clean and oil it. Whoever refinished the cabinet obviously wasn’t a phonograph collector. The motor was caked with dried-up grease, and

the cabinet was missing the empty needle cup, the knob on one of the doors, and one of the four screws that held the wooden bedplate with the motor assembly to the case. Those parts were readily availability from Internet specialty shops, but the refinisher apparently didn't know that.

When he had finished working on the motor he reassembled everything. The padding on the 1950s record albums made them a tight fit in the storage shelves built into the cabinet so he moved the records to some spare 1920s albums and slid those into the shelves. He tossed the padded albums into his box of spare albums. That night he ordered the missing parts and called his daughter to make certain she wouldn't object if he gave this phonograph to his grandson.

George's satisfaction about rejuvenating the phonograph was short lived. The next day he received a letter informing him the State of California had audited his tax return. At least, that's what he thought the letter said. Between all the legalese, paragraphs informing him of his rights, and dire warnings about what would happen if he ignored the letter he got the impression that he had failed to submit some required form or document.

George had never paid much attention to taxes. His wife took care of the finances so he could focus on his business. Every year he would sit down with her and go through the tax return in excruciating detail, but it all seemed like medieval alchemy to him. She would chant magic spells about Amortization, Depreciation, and Earned Income Tax Credits, gaze into the mystic computer, and tell him where to sign. Since she died he been forced to do the taxes himself, but he never felt comfortable about it. The letter included a number to call "for further information." He decided to call.

After suffering through a series of automated menus, being disconnected twice, and forwarded three times George was on hold, listening to crappy music while the person he hoped could answer his question finished a previous call. Then his doorbell rang.

"Yes?" he said after opening the door, still holding the phone to his ear. A dark-haired man with an absurd pencil moustache stood on his doorstep. The man was wearing a dark gray business suit and sunglasses.

"You George Swanson?" the man asked.

George nodded yes, still listening to his phone.

"You don't know me," the man said, "but I got a friend who is very interested in the record player you bought at the auction. He asked me. . ."

George cut him off. "How the hell do you know about that?" he demanded.

“My friend, he’s a collector, and he sees this auction advertised online. He didn’t see it until after the auction, though, and he asks me to track it down. The auctioneer told me who bought it. My friend needs it to complete his collection. He wants me to buy it.”

“It’s not for sale,” George said. “It’s a present for my grandson. It’s not a rare model. Tell him to look on eBay.” He started to close the door.

“My friend lives in Canada,” the man said, rushing to get the words out before George closed the door. “He says it costs too much to ship it there. I’m gonna visit him and can take it with me.” He thrust his hand through the open door, holding a business card with the name Mike Thompson on it. Just then the woman George was waiting for picked up the phone.

George grabbed the card and gave the mustached man a wave that said both “good bye” and “begone!” He closed the door and began talking on the phone. He walked into his den as he talked, sat down, and tossed the business card onto his desk. The call turned out to be a short one. The woman didn’t want to discuss his case over the phone. She told him what form he needed to submit and gave him a web address to download the blank form. George promised to fill it out and send it in.

Things got hectic at work and George didn’t get a chance to work on his taxes. Several nights his entire office worked late, sending out for pizza or burgers. Finally they got caught up and George was able to leave the office at a reasonable hour. When he got home he dug through his freezer and picked out a frozen entrée. Before he could put it in the microwave, the doorbell rang. Grumbling, he shoved the entrée back in the freezer and answered the door. A pretty young Asian woman wearing a college t-shirt was standing on his doorstep, holding a calendar.

“Hello,” she said brightly. “I’m Sue Lin and I’m selling calendars to support the Chinese – American Campus Friendship Association. We’re raising money to improve the understanding of our respective cultures. Can you help us reach our goal?”

His immediate reaction was to say “No,” but she was looking at him with a beautiful smile, so full of optimism, that he hated to disappoint her. Based on her accent, he guessed she had not been born in this country. He didn’t want to be rude to a foreign visitor and give her a bad impression of Americans.

“Well, uh, how much are they?” he asked, mostly as a way to buy time to soften the blow.

Before she could answer her face lit up with an expression of surprise and delight.

“Oh! You have a phonograph!”

Without thinking she walked into his living room to admire an antique phonograph with a beautiful mahogany horn.

“My Uncle Chen collected phonographs,” she said. “But he didn’t have any that were as beautiful as this one!” She gazed at the phonograph in admiration.

“This is a Victor Six,” George told her. “It was their top of the line model. They started making them in 1904, but this particular machine was made in 1907.”

“My uncle’s phonographs had the horn built into the cabinet,” Sue said. “He had one with a big metal horn, but it played tube things.” She cupped her hands together in a tube shape, trying to indicate what it looked like.

“Cylinder records,” George said. “Those were the earliest records to be made, although Edison’s original patent covered disk records as well. I have a couple Edison cylinder phonographs.”

She eagerly plied him with questions about phonographs. She had taken a course in music history at the university, but was disappointed that it didn’t cover anything about phonographs. She told him her Uncle Chen also collected records, and was particularly interested in jazz records from the 1920s. Her questions led him to give her a brief history of recorded sound, using his collection to demonstrate cylinder machines, disk machines, the Edison Diamond Disc phonograph, and finally the Orthophonic phonograph. At her request he played “Rhapsody In Blue” on the massive “Credenza” Orthophonic phonograph that dominated his family room. She seemed genuinely delighted by every phonograph he showed her.

“My Uncle Chen had a phonograph that was sort of like this,” she said as she looked at the Credenza model, “only it was much smaller.” She gestured with her hands to show how big it was.

“I might have the same kind he had,” George said. He led her into the basement and showed her the phonograph he was restoring for his grandson. She clapped her hands together in delight when she saw it.

“That’s just like Uncle Chen’s!” she said. She gazed at it admiringly. “How much is a phonograph like this worth?” she asked.

“These typically sell for, I don’t know, maybe \$150 to \$200. I was lucky. I bought this at an auction for \$65.”

“That is all?” she said in surprise. “I thought they would cost much more.” She thought for a moment and then asked him “Do you want to sell this one?”

“No,” George answered. “I bought this one for my grandson.”

She looked longingly at the phonograph. “He is a lucky boy,” she said. Then she glanced at her watch. “Oh! I did not know it was so late. I have taken so much of your time. I am sorry.”

George assured her he had enjoyed showing her his collection as they walked back upstairs. He bought a calendar, and she left. Then he finally got to eat his dinner.

Things were back to normal at the office the next day. In some ways it was almost disappointing. George hated it when clients made unreasonable demands. The whole office would jump through hoops, dropping everything to create whatever document or report the client wanted, but it was exciting. There was a thrill of satisfaction when they finished, and a letdown when they went back to their normal routine. Sort of like the letdown he'd felt after the Senior Class Play in high school. Months of rehearsal, the thrill of the performance, and then a return to Geometry and English Literature. He picked up some fried chicken on his way home from work and sat down to read the paper while he ate dinner. Then the doorbell rang.

"What the hell is this?" he thought as he got up to answer the door. He seldom got more than one visitor a month, and then it was usually a salesman or a religious zealot. This was the third visitor in little more than a week. When he opened the door there was once again a man in a business suit. This was a different man, though, and he had the courtesy to take off his sunglasses when George answered the door. This man was wearing a dark blue business suit, and he didn't have a moustache.

"Yes," George said warily.

"My name is Eric Brennan," the man said. "I'm a private investigator working for a client who wishes to remain nameless. My client had some items stolen which we believe were hidden in a phonograph which you recently purchased at an auction. We do not suspect you of having anything to do with the theft. We believe you bought the phonograph in good faith. I would like to purchase the phonograph for my client, or make arrangements to search the phonograph in your presence."

"Look," George said. "I don't know anything about stolen items in phonographs, and I'm not interested in dealing with nameless clients. What makes you think I even have the phonograph you're looking for?"

"We traced the phonograph to a local auction house, and the auctioneer told us you were the buyer."

George made a mental note to talk to the auctioneer about giving out personal information. Then he spoke. "You can tell your client that I disassembled the phonograph to restore it, and there was absolutely nothing hidden inside it."

The man held out a business card. "Please, take my card and let me know if you do find anything unusual in the phonograph. You can check with the police. They'll tell you I'm legit. My client will pay a reward if you find anything. I should also warn you that the stolen items can be easily traced, and if you attempt to sell them you will be guilty of a felony."

George took the card and assured the man he'd give him a call if anything turned up. Then he returned to his dinner, tossing the card on his desk as he went. Still fuming about the auctioneer giving out his name and address, he realized he'd never taken back the blanket and packing the auctioneer had loaned him to bring the phonograph home. He'd take them back tomorrow, and give the auctioneer a piece of his mind.

When he got to the auction house, the front door was propped open and a large industrial fan was blowing into the building. He stepped through the door and saw more fans, and a jumble of furniture. This was the “preview” room, where potential bidders could examine items to be auctioned on Saturday night. Furniture was usually lined up in neat rows, with aisles in between so every item was accessible. Today things seemed to be piled at random. Oriental rugs were draped over chairs and miscellaneous furniture.

“We’re not open for business now,” the auctioneer called from across the room. Then he recognized George and added “Oh, hello George.”

“I brought your blankets back,” George said, raising his arm so the auctioneer could see them. “Did you have a flood?”

“A fire,” the auctioneer answered, picking his way through the jumbled furniture as he walked toward George. “Somebody broke into the office at night. They jimmied open my desk, probably trying to find the combination to the safe. Papers were strewn all over. I don’t keep the combination there, but it wouldn’t have done them any good anyway. I don’t leave valuables in the safe overnight. The police think the thieves started a fire to try to cover up the burglary. Fortunately the sprinkler system put out the fire, but it made a mess of the place. Thanks for bringing back the blankets.” He took back the blankets as he spoke.

“Thanks for loaning them to me,” George said, still surveying the chaos. “Sorry to hear about the fire.”

“The damage will be covered by insurance, but I still want to do everything I can to save as much as possible. Afraid it will be a few weeks before I can hold my regular Saturday night auction.”

George suddenly remembered his beef with the auctioneer. It didn’t seem so important now. “By the way, Nick” he said as nonchalantly as possible. “Did you give my name and address to a couple of guys asking about that phonograph I bought?”

“Just one guy,” Nick answered. “A private eye looking for stolen goods. I’m very careful not to have anything to do with stolen goods. Can’t abide a thief. Wanted to help him out. I would have given you a call, but. . .” he gestured toward the office, where George could see burned flooring. “I couldn’t have given him your phone number or address if I’d wanted to. My records were all burned or soaked. Took me a moment, but I remembered your name. Why, was that a problem?”

“No problem,” George answered. “Just checking out his story.”

The next day George received the screws and other parts he’d ordered to replace the missing pieces in the phonograph. After dinner he went down to the basement to install them. The knob for the cabinet door matched the one on the other door perfectly, and the needle cup slipped neatly into place, but the bedplate screw perplexed him. There were holes for four screws holding the wooden bedplate to the cabinet, one in each corner. He had removed the bedplate when he serviced the motor, as the

motor was mounted to the underside of the bedplate. He was pretty sure that when he reassembled the phonograph he'd put the two rear screws in first, as he knew it would be harder to get to them after he reassembled everything else. He'd put the remaining screw in the left front, leaving the right front hole to be filled by the replacement screw he'd ordered. He remembered doing that because the right front was the easiest to get to, and he wanted to make it easy to install the new screw. What perplexed him was that there already was a screw in the right front corner. It was the left rear corner that was missing a screw.

Was he mistaken about which screw he'd left out? Or had someone else taken the phonograph apart? It seemed inconceivable that someone would have broken into his house, taken the bedplate out, and then put it back in. He must have misremembered which holes he had put the three screws into. But the memory seemed so clear.

Then he noticed black smudges on the concrete floor beside the phonograph. They looked like the grease marks that would have been made if someone had set the bedplate, with the spring motor underneath it, on the floor beside the phonograph. He knew that all too well, as he had once caught hell from his wife for setting a bedplate on their living room carpet while he worked on a phonograph. It had taken him hours to clean the carpet after that mistake. In that instance the bedplate had left globs of grease on the carpet, and now there were greasy smear marks on the concrete. He glanced at the wastebasket near the phonograph and saw several paper towels, smeared with black grease. Someone had taken the bedplate out of the phonograph, left grease marks on the floor, and then tried to clean them up with the paper towels he kept on his workbench.

His first instinct was to call the police and report a break-in, but he realized how ridiculous that would sound. "Someone broke into my house, moved a screw in my Victrola, and left a black smudge on the floor!" As near as he could tell they hadn't taken anything. He hadn't seen any damage to doors or windows to indicate a break-in. He didn't even know what day the break-in had occurred. Telling the police that a private investigator had come to his door and warned him that something valuable might be hidden in the Victrola would just make him sound paranoid. Or the victim of an elaborate prank. Still, he was convinced that someone had broken into his house, and that thought unnerved him. He had trouble sleeping that night. The next day was Saturday. In the morning he bought a wireless home security system, complete with video cameras, and he spent the rest of the day installing it.

On Sunday he finally had time to download the tax form he needed. He had to spend several hours digging through old bank statements and receipts to find the information he needed to fill it out, but he was able to mail it on his way to work Monday morning. He used his phone to check his home security system several times that day, but everything was OK. When he got home at night he immediately went into the basement to check on the Victrola, and it was always just as he left it. In the days that followed he checked his security system periodically, but everything always looked OK. Eventually he stopped checking.

The following week he received a letter from the State telling him they'd received his form and everything was OK. Relieved, he popped open a beer, and stretched out in his recliner. When he finished his beer he went into the basement to play a tune on his "new" phonograph. It was gone. He

checked his security system. It showed he had activated it when he left the house that morning, deactivated it when he returned, and there were no alarms. He fast forwarded through the videos taken by his security cameras. He had pointed one camera directly at the phonograph. The phonograph just sat there, doing nothing, and then the video ended. Several days' worth of video had been deleted. This time he called the police.

The police officer who came to investigate showed more interest in the theft than George had expected. She examined the doors and windows for signs of forced entry, but found none. She took detailed notes while he described the phonograph and the two men who had come to the door asking about it. She took photographs of their business cards. She was amazed when she watched the video from his security camera. And she left him with some candid advice.

"I'll file a report on this," she said, "but there's not much to go on. The men at the door, the breach of the security system, and the deletion of the camera footage makes me suspect there's much more at stake here than just the theft of a \$65 phonograph. Unless I can tie it to an ongoing investigation of something bigger, though, it's not going to be a very high priority for my department. I'm going to talk to my lieutenant about it. He's worked with the FBI on some unusual cases, and I think he said there was a retired guy in the area who takes an interest in this sort of thing. If he has any suggestions I'll give you a call."

A few phone calls later, George found himself in the living room of a Mr. Robert Borland and his friend, Bill Downing. Before he could explain why he had come, Mr. Borland insisted he turn off his phone and put it in another room. He apologized if it seemed overly paranoid, but said it was a precaution he'd learned when he worked for the government. George then told them how he bought the phonograph at auction, that two men had showed up at his door trying to buy it, his suspicion that someone had broken into his house and disassembled it, and how his security system had been disabled when someone stole it. He also showed them the business cards the two men had given him.

"Who knew you had this phonograph?" Robert asked.

"Well, anyone who was at the auction. These two men, obviously. My neighbor Ken helped me carry it into the house. I told my daughter about it because I wanted to make certain it was OK for me to give it to my grandson. The company I bought the parts from knew I had a phonograph, but they didn't know where I got it. Oh, and the Chinese girl selling calendars."

"Chinese girl?"

George told them about Sue Lin's visit.

"Unusual interest for a woman her age," Robert mused, "but possibly true. If she did have an uncle who was a collector she may very well have developed an interest, just like your grandson did. She didn't pressure you when you said it wasn't for sale?"

George shook his head no.

“And did she give you any way to contact her if you changed your mind?”

Again George answered no.

“So not a serious attempt to buy it.” Robert thought about this, then changed to a different tack.

“These two men got your name from the auctioneer?” Robert asked.

“Yes,” George answered. “Well, one of them did. The private eye. I talked to the auctioneer when I took back the packing blankets he loaned me, and he said he only gave my name to one man.”

“And did he have any idea how the other man got your name?” Robert asked.

“No, but I didn’t press him about it,” George said. “He was busy cleaning up after the fire.”

“The fire?” Robert asked with surprise.

“Yes. Burglars broke into his office one night and rifled his desk trying to find the combination to the safe. Then they set fire to the place trying to cover their tracks. His sprinkler system saved the building, but it made a mess inside.”

“Was this before or after you bought the phonograph?” Robert asked.

“I think it was after,” George said. “Yes, it must have been. He said he wouldn’t be able to hold auctions for several weeks because of the damage.”

“Interesting,” Robert said. Then he turned to Bill. “Do you have any questions for Mr. Swanson?”

“Yes. What was the make and model of the security system you installed?”

“Excellent question!” Robert said.

“I don’t remember for certain,” George said, “but I’ve still got the boxes and the instructions at home. I can email the information to you if it’s important.”

“It is indeed important,” Robert assured him. “You said you checked the system on your phone. If it’s connected to the Internet or a phone network, it can be hacked. The question is, how hard is it to hack? Some systems are difficult, some are simple. Knowing how difficult it is will give us a clue as to how sophisticated the burglars were.”

Robert thought about this for a moment. “That brings up another question. You installed this system after the first break-in, but before the second. Who knew you had installed it?”

“Well, the people at the hardware store where I bought it probably assumed I installed it,” George said. “And I called my daughter to tell her because she’s been bugging me to get a security system. I don’t think anyone else knew about it.”

“Your daughter also knew you had the phonograph,” Robert said, “but I really don’t think she’s a suspect. Let me spend a few days looking into this, and then I’d like to come by your house and see the place for myself. I’d like to make copies of those business cards, if I might, and please send me information about the security system. You said the phonograph came with records, didn’t you?”

George nodded yes.

“Do you by any chance have a list of the records?”

“Actually, I do. I keep an inventory of all my records so I don’t buy duplicates. Do you want me to send you a list of them? None of them were very valuable.”

“Please do,” Robert said. “As a collector, I’m sure you have a much better idea of their value than I do, but I’d like to see the list just in case there’s anything unusual about it. I’ll be honest with you. We really don’t have much to go on. The phonograph’s gone, so the thieves probably already have what they were looking for. They were much more sophisticated than common burglars, so whatever was in the phonograph must have been very valuable. I doubt they left anything behind that will let us track them down. You’ll probably never hear from them again. The danger is that if they didn’t find what they were looking for, they may think you found it before they stole the phonograph. If that’s the case, they’ll be back. You need to be on guard. Keep your doors and windows locked, and don’t let any strangers in. And change the password on that security system.”

Two days later Robert and Bill again met with George, this time at his house. Again Robert insisted they turn off their phones and set them aside. He then examined the door locks and walked around the house, looking at the windows and other possible entry points.

“Are you sure all the doors and windows were locked when they broke in?” he asked.

“Yes,” said George. “At least during the second break-in. I might have left one of the windows in the back slightly open the first time. I always lock them at night, but I open one just a crack in the morning because I like fresh air. I usually close it before I leave the house, but I couldn’t swear that I closed it that day. I’ve been careful to lock it ever since.”

“So they had to pick the lock at least once,” Robert said. “You’ve got decent locks. They can be picked, of course, but only by someone who knows what they’re doing. They didn’t leave any scratches, so they were careful.”

Next they went inside and looked at the black smudge on the floor. George showed them where the phonograph had been sitting. Robert squatted down.

“So the intruder probably squatted here to work on the phonograph. He had to stand up to get the paper towels, and he probably squatted here to wipe up the grease marks.” Robert moved over a little. “He might have tossed the towels into the waste basket, or he might have tipped it toward him with one hand so he could stuff the towels in with the other. Have you touched the waste basket since then?”

George shook his head no.

“So there might be fingerprints on it. Something to check, anyway.” Robert reached toward the worktable to steady himself as he stood up. Then he stopped, turned on his phone’s flashlight, and looked at the underside of the table top.

“Well look at that!” he exclaimed. “The intruder did the same thing. There’s a greasy thumbprint on the underside of the table.” He took a picture of it with his phone, then stood up without touching the table.

“Don’t touch anything in here until I have it dusted for prints,” he said. “There are a few folks in law enforcement who owe me favors. I think I can interest them in this case.”

They went upstairs and sat in George’s living room. Bill Downing spoke first.

“You’ve got a pretty decent security system,” he said. “It would be difficult to hack. Of course, the easiest way to hack into any system is to know the login and password. You did change them from the factory defaults, didn’t you?”

“Absolutely!” said George. “I’m not a computer expert, but I know enough not to use the defaults. I changed the password again after you told me to, but I set my own login and password when I set it up.”

“And you were right about the records,” Robert said. “There was nothing unusual or valuable about them. And the phonograph itself isn’t particularly valuable, either. Whatever these people were looking for, it wasn’t the phonograph or the records.”

“But I took it apart to clean it right after I bought it,” George said. “There was nothing in it.”

“You weren’t searching for anything,” Robert said. “It might have been something very small, like diamonds or a rare postage stamp. And it must have been hard to find, because whoever broke in and took it apart couldn’t find it. That’s why they had to come back later to steal it.”

“Why didn’t they just steal it the first time?” George asked.

“Hard to say,” Robert answered. “They probably came during the day to take it apart. Few people are home during the day anymore, and strangers don’t attract much attention. The thieves could have posed as a meter reader, a landscaper, a lawn sprinkler repairman – lots of workmen would have a reason to go in your back yard during the day. All it takes is a pickup truck with a stick-on sign and no one would give them a second glance. Once they were in your back yard your privacy fence

hid them from view. They'd have all the time they needed to break in and search while you were at work, and they didn't think you'd ever notice they'd been there."

"Stealing the phonograph is a different matter," he continued. "It would take two people to carry it out and load it into a truck. That looks like a theft, and the neighbors might become suspicious and call the police. They'd probably pull off a theft in the dark of night."

"But I'm home at night!" George protested, suddenly feeling uneasy.

"We're obviously dealing with pros," Robert said. "They were quick, they were quiet, and they were probably prepared to deal with you if you interfered."

George thought about this for a while. "There's no reason for them to come back, is there?"

"Probably not," Robert said. "They've got the phonograph, and you said the records were in the phonograph so they've got them too. The only thing that worries me is, what if the valuables weren't in the phonograph after all? These people certainly think there was something valuable in it. If they didn't find what they were looking for, they may think you have it."

"So how do we convince them I haven't got it?" George asked.

"They wouldn't believe us if we told them that," Robert answered, "so if you want to make certain they don't suspect you, I think you need to call the guy that came to your door, Mike Thompson, and tell him you've got something he wants. If they've already got what they're looking for, they won't believe you. They probably won't even answer your call. If they don't have what they want, they'll be interested in your call and we can lure them into a trap."

George thought about that for a while. "Sounds pretty risky," he said.

Robert nodded in agreement. "There definitely is an element of risk," he said. "Chances are they already have what they want and they'll ignore your call. If they haven't found it, though, your call will strengthen the suspicions they already have."

"And if they haven't found it," Bill added, "they'll probably come looking for it whether or not you call. They've already broken into your house twice, searching for it. They next time they may come looking for you, and expect you to tell them where it is."

"You don't need to make a decision right now," Robert said. "There's a little more research we can do. I couldn't find out anything about Mike Thompson. The name on his card may be fictitious, and the phone number may be to a burner phone."

"Burner phone?" George asked.

“A cheap, prepaid cellular phone,” Bill explained. “Sometimes criminals get them using fake IDs. That way the call can’t be traced to them, and when they’re through with it they can just burn the phone to destroy the evidence.”

“I was able to find information about Eric Brennan, the guy who claimed to be a private eye,” Robert continued. “Turns out he was telling the truth. He’s been in business for several years, he has an excellent record with the Better Business Bureau, and the local police speak highly of him. I suggest we give him a call before we do anything else, and maybe he can tell us why so many people were interested in that phonograph.”

George was in complete agreement. They called Eric, and when they told him they had some information about the property that was stolen from his client he said he’d be over within the hour. When he arrived Robert relieved him of his phone and gave him a brief overview of what had happened to date. His face showed how disappointed he was when they told him the phonograph had been stolen. Then Robert asked Eric if he could tell them anything about what the thieves were after.

“I wish I could,” Eric said, “but my client does not want me to reveal any information about him or the missing items. I can assure you that he has legitimate reasons for keeping that information private, and he is not breaking any laws by not disclosing it.”

“Let me tell you what I know, what I suspect, and what our interest is in this case,” Robert replied. “I’ve already told you about the two burglaries and the stolen phonograph. The auctioneer who gave you George’s name also suffered a burglary. The burglars went through his desk and set fire to his auction house. I suspect they did that to find out who bought the phonograph. We’re dealing with dangerous people. The fact that your client is anonymous tells me his loss was never reported to the police, as that would have made it public record. The loss also must not have been reported to an insurance company, as that would have required a police report. So, I suspect the stolen items were not insured. Most private owners have insurance, so that leads me to believe your client is a public or a non-profit institution. Probably one that depends upon donations, as that would give a reason to not report the theft. Public scandal over thefts tend to discourage donations. So, maybe a museum or a library? Whatever was stolen was small enough to hide in a phonograph and not rattle or make noises when the phonograph was moved. Jewels? Artwork? Rare documents?”

Robert continued. “With this background, I looked at public and non-profit institutions within a reasonable distance of your office. Organizations that might hire you to try to recover the items without going public. No thefts or scandals had been reported by any of these organizations, which is not surprising, but there was one unusual circumstance. The DuPriest library recently lost their archivist, a Mr. Ricardo Pennington. The poor man died unexpectedly a few months ago. The library is in the process of hiring a new archivist, and they commissioned an audit of their collection, which is standard when a new archivist takes over. For some reason, though, they postponed the starting date for the audit. There is no announced date for it to resume. They have an extensive rare book collection dating from the 15th century, including books illustrated with the earliest known maps of Pacific coast, Spanish drawings of early Mesoamerican art, original 19th century photographs of native Americans,

correspondence from Isaac Newton, and many other valuable documents. Is it possible they're looking for something that isn't where it should be?"

Eric fidgeted uncomfortably while Robert told of his suspicions. Then Robert described his interest in the case.

"My primary interest is in protecting Mr. Swanson. If the thieves found the stolen items in the phonograph they no longer pose a threat to Mr. Swanson. They have what they want. If, on the other hand, they didn't find what they wanted, they may think he has the items. We can't afford to assume they have what they want, and I can't protect him without getting the police involved. I can try to do it without compromising your client's anonymity, but I can't make any promises. His safety comes first. Protecting Mr. Swanson would be much easier if I knew what this whole thing was about. You and your client have a choice to make. You can help us protect Mr. Swanson, and possibly catch the thieves in the process, or you can sit back and do nothing."

Eric excused himself to call his client. He stepped into the room where Robert had set his phone. In a few minutes he came back, ready to talk.

"Here's the situation," he said. "We don't yet know exactly what was taken. Shortly before Mr. Pennington became ill the library loaned some documents and books to a university that was testing a new, non-destructive method of dating papers and inks. Mr. Pennington objected strongly to the loan, for reasons that didn't make much sense. The testing showed that some of the documents and pages were forgeries, but so expertly done that they never would have been detected during a routine inventory or a simple visual inspection. The books were particularly telling. It's not unusual for some pages in rare old books to break free of their bindings. Loose pages that contained only text were authentic. Some of the loose pages that contained illustrations were forgeries, but the torn edges fitted almost perfectly to the portion of the page that was still bound to the book. The forgers must have had access to the originals when they made the copies, which were then substituted for the originals."

"Access to these books was strictly controlled, which made Mr. Pennington a suspect. By the time the forgeries were discovered he was in the hospital and in no condition to be questioned. That's when the library hired me to discretely look into the case and see if I could link him to the forgeries. I soon became convinced that no one but him could have stolen the documents, but I couldn't find anything that would link him to criminals who would deal in stolen documents. No financial transactions, no phone records, and no indication that he ever met with anyone other than friends, family, and public businesses that had nothing to do with the document trade. He did have some foreign business investments that seemed to be doing remarkably well, but I couldn't prove there was anything nefarious because I could find almost nothing about those businesses. I did find, almost by accident, that he had recently developed a hobby of buying antique furniture at junk shops, refinishing it, and selling it on consignment through local auction houses. The money he earned doing this was insignificant, but auctioneers liked to sell his stuff because they told me they always fetched higher prices than they'd expected. The names of the buyers varied, but they always paid in cash so the auctioneers had no reason to verify identification. It occurred to me that he might be hiding stolen documents in the furniture and telling black market dealers which items to buy."

Eric paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. "It took me a while to realize the furniture auctions might be a conduit. By that time Mr. Pennington had died and his ex-wife, who lived in Colorado, had already sold his house and all his furniture. Included in that sale was a Victrola, which had been his last refinishing project. When I began tracking it down I only had a suspicion that it might contain stolen documents, but the things you've told me about the break-ins and the fire at the auction house have convinced me that it did."

"Do you have any idea what documents were in the phonograph?" Robert asked.

"Not exactly," Eric said. "The library is doing an inventory with people they already have on staff, people they trust to be discreet, but it involves going through every document, every photograph, and every book page by page and comparing it to the last inventory to see what's missing. They're also looking for forged replacements as they go, so it's a slow process. When we find a forged document we assume the original is already lost, as the thieves couldn't have made the forgery unless they already had the original. The missing documents might be on their way to being forged, so they may have been in the phonograph. Right now we know we're missing three letters and four illustrated pages, but there may be more."

"How much would they be worth?" Robert asked.

"On the black market? Hard to say. The letters and two of the illustrations are one of a kind. Based on recent legitimate sales of similar documents I'd say between \$400,000 and \$600,000. If there were more stolen documents in the phonograph, and I suspect there were, it could easily run into millions."

"So I'm not being paranoid when I say there may be a danger to Mr. Swanson if the thieves haven't found the documents?" Robert asked.

"Not at all," Eric replied.

Robert thought for a while. "I hate to say it, but I hope they've got what they want. If they have, they will have no further interest in Mr. Swanson. We can't afford to take that chance, though. Thank you very much for giving us all this information, and please pass my thanks on to your client. I'll do everything I can to respect their privacy."

"Thank you," said Eric. "Is there anything else I can do to help protect Mr. Swanson?"

Robert thought for a moment. "Could you let me borrow one of the forged documents?" he asked. "Something that's not too distinctive so the thieves won't recognize it as something they've seen before. I may be able to use it as bait."

After Eric left, Robert and Bill had a conference with George. "These are much bigger stakes than I thought," Robert said. He looked at George. "If it's OK with you, I think either Bill or I ought to stay with you until we resolve this. Maybe both of us should stay at night." George nodded his assent.

"Is that OK with you, Bill?" Robert asked. Bill immediately gave his OK.

"I need to talk to some folks in the FBI," Robert said. "If this is part of a bigger operation, they may know about it. They owe me a few favors so maybe I can get them to help us catch these guys." He drove off while Bill stayed with George.

The following afternoon Robert told George everything was ready for him to set up the meeting. George dialed the number on Mike Thompson's business card. His hands trembled a bit as he dialed. Part of him hoped the number had been disconnected, or that he'd leave a message and no one would call back. That would indicate the thieves had the stolen goods and were no longer interested in him. On the other hand, he wanted to catch the thieves and recover the museum's stolen documents. The phone rang twice, then someone answered.

"Yeah?" It sounded like whoever answered the phone was irritated or suspicious.

"Mr. Mike Thompson?" George asked.

"Who wants to know?"

"This is George Swanson. You came to my house a week or two ago to ask about an antique phonograph. I no longer have the phonograph, but I found something in it that might interest you." Robert had coached him on what to say.

"What'd ya find?"

"I'd rather not talk about it over the phone," George said. "Come by the house and we'll discuss it in detail."

There was a long silence. George suspected the man had muted his phone and was discussing it with someone else. Then the voice returned.

"When?"

"I'm ready now," George answered.

"Twenty minutes." The man hung up.

Robert spent the next twenty minutes preparing George for the meeting and calming his nerves. When the doorbell rang, Robert stood just out of sight while George answered it. Mike Thompson, or at least the man who called himself that, was standing outside, wearing the same suit and sunglasses as he had the first time he came to George's house. George opened the door wider and invited him in.

"Who's this?" Mike asked as soon as he saw Robert.

"This is Robert Borland, a friend of mine who's acting as my business partner," George said.

"We don't need him," Mike growled. "I just want to talk to you."

"He's my business partner," George repeated. "He stays or we don't talk."

"How do I know he's not a cop?" Mike asked.

"How do we know you're not a cop?" Robert stepped in to answer for George. "We've got something you want, and we'd like to make a deal for it. We're going to have to trust each other or we'll never get anywhere."

Mike glared at Robert for a moment but then resigned himself to the situation. "OK," he said. "Show me what ya got."

"We're not stupid enough to keep everything here," Robert said. "You've already burgled this house once. We have it where we can get it. Let's work out a deal, and then we can arrange the transfer."

"No good," Mike said. "I gotta trust you but you don't trust me. If we're gonna make a deal, I gotta see what ya got."

"Are you an expert in evaluating rare documents?" Robert asked.

Mike thought for a moment before answering. "I know people who are," he said. "I seen enough of 'em to be a fair judge of what's real. They can tell what they're worth."

"I brought a sample," Robert said. He opened the drawer of an end table and took out a pair of white cotton gloves. After putting on the gloves he carefully pulled a folder out of the drawer. "I have more gloves if you need to examine it closely," he said. "But I warn you, it's extremely fragile. Neither we nor your friends would be happy if you damaged it." He opened the folder and displayed the forged document Eric had loaned him. George stepped into the kitchen and brought back a can of Coke for each of them while Mike inspected the document.

"I don't need to touch it," Mike said after he'd satisfied himself that the document looked genuine. "I'll take this to my friend and let him look at it."

"Did you bring a \$10,000 deposit?" Robert asked. Mike stared at him in disbelief. "I thought not," Robert continued. "Your friend can examine the documents here, one document per visit. We won't risk more than one document at a time and we won't let them out of our control until we have a deal."

"How many documents do you have," Mike asked.

"Everything that Mr. Pennington hid in the phonograph," Robert answered as he put the folder back in the drawer. "I assumed you already knew what he had. If you like, I can make a list of all the documents."

"I'll need that," Mike said. "How much do you want for them?"

"I don't think \$100,000 would be an unreasonable sum," Robert said. "They're worth much more than that to a collector, but we don't want to be greedy. I assume you've already got a buyer lined up, so George and I will be happy to simply be a link in the supply chain."

"That's a lotta money," Mike said. "I'll need to talk to my friend about that."

"But of course," Robert said. "We didn't expect to conclude this at one sitting. In the meantime, you know where to find us, and here's my number." He handed a business card to Mike who tucked it in his shirt pocket.

"To a mutually profitable deal," Robert said, raising his can of Coke in a toast. George and Mike raised their cans and took a drink. Then Mike set his can on an end table.

"I gotta be going," he said.

George and Robert stood up. "I hope to see you soon," Robert said, gesturing toward the front door. Mike opened the door and left. As soon as he had driven away Bill Downing stepped out from the side yard with Brent Hopkins, an FBI agent whom he and Robert had worked with in the past. Brent was on his phone, making certain the agents he had assigned to tail Mike had seen him leave.

"While he was inside we got photos of the car, the plates, and we photographed the VIN number through the windshield," Bill told George.

"They're following him," Brent said as he put his phone back in his pocket. "My guess is that he'll lead us straight to his boss. Probably the guy who's fencing the stolen documents. We've suspected for a long time that stolen artwork was being smuggled out of Los Angeles, but this is our first solid lead."

"He touched the doorknob on his way out," Robert warned everyone. "Don't anyone else touch it."

"I've got a couple of investigators on their way," Brent said. "They'll check that and the soda can for prints. We might even get some DNA off the can." Brent smiled as he mentioned the DNA. Then he continued.

"They didn't find any prints on the windows this morning. I'm guessing whoever broke in the first time wore gloves. They must have taken them off to disassemble the phonograph, though. We found prints on the wastebasket, and that print you found on the underside of the workbench was beautiful. If those prints match the prints this guy left, we can tie him to the burglaries. And that should be good enough to get a search warrant for wherever he leads us."

The next morning Brent called to say they had caught the thieves. Mike had driven straight to *Art Classique*, a fine art dealer and estate auction house with an impeccable reputation. The evidence from George's house did let them get a search warrant, and they found one of the DuPriest documents in the establishment. They also found records of several overseas shipments which could not be linked to sales in the company's business records. Brent thanked George for his help in stopping an overseas smuggling ring.

As soon as Brent's call ended, George enthusiastically shook hands with Bill and Robert. "I can't thank you enough for helping me," he said. "I had no idea what to do after the break-ins, and it never even occurred to me that the thieves might still think I had something they wanted."

"I'm just glad we could help," Robert said. "It was a long shot, but the fact that they fell for the bait showed they were still interested in you. Now that they're locked up, you're safe. And that's what matters most."

As he spoke he was writing on a notepad. He set the note on the table so George could read it.

"Put your phone on the table."

Holding a finger to his lips, Robert placed his own phone on the table. Puzzled, George took his phone out of his pocket and placed it beside Robert's. Then he followed Robert outside.

Well after midnight, the woman George knew as Sue Linn expertly picked the lock on his door and let herself into his house. She had already disabled the security alarm, and she wore a ski mask for protection against hidden cameras. The house was absolutely silent as she crept up the stairs, holding a 9mm Glock in her right hand. She knew from the light she'd seen in the bedroom window that George was still up. The absence of television noise meant he was probably reading. It was late enough that he might have dozed off and left the light on.

She gently turned the knob on his bedroom door to make certain it wasn't locked, then flung herself into the room with her gun leveled at the startled figure sitting in the bed.

"Where are the documents?" she demanded.

"I don't know!" came the frightened reply.

"I do not believe you!" she hissed. "You said you had found them. Tell me where they are. Now!" She raised the gun slightly to sight it at the center of his chest.

"Drop the gun!" commanded a voice from the bathroom door on the opposite side of the room. FBI agent Brent Hopkins stepped forward slightly so she could see he was aiming a gun at her. She quickly

glanced at him, and when she looked back she saw the man in the bed had raised his right arm under the sheet. The outline of a gun was clearly visible.

“There’s a sniper on the roof across the street,” agent Hopkins said. “You don’t stand a chance. Drop your gun. Now.”

The woman hesitated for a moment, then fired at the figure in bed and twisted to face agent Hopkins. Two shots rang out from within the room and almost simultaneously the window shattered as the sniper’s bullet found its mark. The gun fell from her hand as she winced in pain. Then she collapsed in a heap on the floor.

“Are you OK?” Brent shouted as he kicked the gun on the floor away from the body.

“I’m OK,” Robert gasped. “I feel like I’ve been kicked by a mule, though. Glad I was wearing a vest.”

“I didn’t think she’d be stupid enough to shoot,” Brent said, straightening out the body on the floor. “Call 911 for an ambulance.” Satisfied that the woman was unconscious, he holstered his weapon and began to administer first aid. The ambulance arrived in remarkably good time, but it was too late. The three bullets had done their job.

It was several days before Brent was able to get together with them to give them an update.

“Sorry for the wait,” he said. “A lot of loose threads to chase down on this one. Her real name is Li Zhu. We’ve had our eye on her for a while, but we never saw her do anything illegal. She came over on a student visa, like thousands of other students. Smart girl. She got her degree in 3 years, and her Master’s in one. She was hired by a research lab and got her green card through them. Again, nothing unusual or illegal about that, but she always seemed to be working on projects that would be of interest to the Chinese government. Nothing classified, but often unclassified research that supported classified projects. Always cutting edge technology. She also became active in politics. Volunteered to work on campaign staffs for local candidates who appeared to have a bright future. She went out of her way to get close to the candidates personally. Again, nothing illegal, but classic groundwork for future influence pedaling, inside information, or blackmail. One candidate thought she got a little too personal, and he contacted us. That’s what brought her to our attention. She seemed to have ties to high ranking CCP officials and also to Chinese Intelligence, but nothing we could pin down.”

“How’d she get into the stolen document business?” Robert asked.

“We’re still trying to decipher the files we found on her laptop, but we think one of the CCP officials she worked with was a collector. He was buying through the art gallery we busted the other day, and when the promised batch of rare documents went astray he probably asked Li to find them.”

“So the Chinese government is stealing art?” George asked in surprise.

“Not necessarily,” Brent answered. “When government officials have enormous power and no public accountability it’s hard to say when they’re acting for the government and when they’re acting for themselves. When Goering and his buddies used the German Army to loot artwork in Europe for their personal collections, was the German government committing a crime? Or were the individuals committing a crime? To the victim, it hardly matters. Either way, they’d been robbed.”

George turned to Robert. “I thought it was all over when we caught the guys from the art gallery,” he said. “I couldn’t believe it when you had me leave my phone inside and told me there was still someone else to worry about. How’d you know?”

“I suspected there were two groups involved from the beginning,” Robert answered, “because there were two different levels of sophistication at work. The attempt to buy the phonograph for ‘a friend in Canada’ was clumsy. All that did was made you suspicious. But the way Li Zhu got you to conduct a tour of your house, show her where you kept the phonograph, and give her an opportunity to look for alarm systems, that was brilliant.”

“So this spy was the same woman who was so interested in my phonographs?” George asked in amazement.

“Oh absolutely,” Robert answered. “I thought you knew that. She was casing the joint and she saw that you didn’t have a security system. She may even have noticed that you kept a window open. Searching the phonograph to try to recover the documents without you knowing anyone had been there wasn’t a bad move. But taking off the gloves and leaving fingerprints was clumsy. Disabling the security system, stealing the phonograph, and hiding the theft from the video camera – that showed sophistication. More importantly, how did they know you had a security system? You didn’t have one when Li Zhu inspected your house. You didn’t have one when they broke in and searched your phonograph. Smart work on your part to notice they had done that, by the way. They never dreamed you’d know they had broken in, so why would they suspect you had installed a security system? The only logical conclusion I could come to was that they were monitoring your phone when you told your daughter about it. That told me we were dealing with a very sophisticated and dangerous opponent.”

“They were also sophisticated enough to disable my security system,” George added.

“Maybe,” Robert said. “But not necessarily. How did you activate the system?”

“I activated it through my pho. . . Oh. I see.” George said.

“It doesn’t take a high level of sophistication to disable an alarm when you know the login and password,” Robert said. “But in any event, I was convinced we were dealing with two sets of thieves, possibly working together, one of whom was much more sophisticated than the other. When we caught the unsophisticated one, I asked Brent to tell you about it over your phone. I wanted the sophisticated thief to think we were convinced it was all over, and that we would let down our guard. I didn’t want to put you in danger, so with the help of a bit of make-up and hair dye, and a bedside lamp that was arranged to keep my face in shadows, I sat in your bed and waited for them to make their move.”

The room fell silent for a moment after he said this. Then Brent turned to George and said "I've got your phonograph out in the van. Or at least the pieces of it. We found it when we searched Li's house. I'm afraid she tore it apart looking for the missing documents. I thought maybe you'd at least want some parts off it. We don't need it as evidence."

They walked out to the driveway. Brent opened the back of his van and showed George the pieces.

"Actually, it's not too bad," George said after he'd examined it. "It mostly came apart at the joints. It needs regluing and a bit of veneer work, but I think my grandson will still like it."

"I'm afraid she wasn't too gentle with the records, either." Brent pointed to the three record albums. Pieces of a record fell out when George picked up one of the albums.

"No great loss," George said. "The records weren't worth much."

"Were there just these three albums when you bought it?" Robert asked.

"Yes," George answered. "Just these three. Actually not these three. There were three God-awful padded albums from the 50's when I bought it. They didn't fit the phonograph so I put the records in these albums." He was suddenly aware that Robert, Bill, and Brent were staring at him.

"Do you still have the padded albums?" Robert asked.

George led them into his basement, dug through his box of empty record albums, and pulled out the three padded ones. Robert carefully peeled one edge of the artificial leather cover away from one album. Underneath, behind the cotton padding, they could see several yellowing documents.

"I think we'd better call Eric and tell him we've found his missing documents," Robert said.