

The Cowboy's Campfire

Robert Borland Mystery #4

I've always enjoyed a good plate of scrambled eggs for breakfast, especially if they were doctored up with a little cheese and hot sauce. Toast, a side of hash browns, and bacon make it a complete breakfast. Somehow, though, it didn't seem that plain scrambled eggs with no sides made much of a dinner. Robert seemed to enjoy them. Of course, Robert seemed to enjoy anything for dinner. That is, if he took the time to notice. And if he took the time to eat. It was obvious that my efforts to get him to help more in the kitchen were falling flat. It wasn't that he was unwilling to help. He just never thought of it. And it wasn't that he couldn't cook. On rare occasions, he would get fired up to make some exotic recipe he'd found on the Internet and he'd do a pretty good job of it. He'd manage to dirty every single cooking utensil we owned in the process, but when he put his mind to it, he could cook.

When I was married, I always did my share of the cooking. My wife and I both worked, so it only seemed fair that I fixed dinner roughly every other night. When she fell ill I cooked every night. After she died and I moved in with Robert to cut expenses, I continued to fix dinner every night. At least for a while. Robert kept to his own schedule, and that didn't necessarily include eating every night. Sometimes the next morning I'd discover that the leftovers had disappeared during the night, and sometimes he apparently didn't eaten anything at all. Sometimes in the middle of the afternoon, about the time I was starting to think about what to make for dinner, he would help himself to whatever he could find in the kitchen and disappear into his room until the following day. Under these circumstances I soon lost the incentive to cook and began eating out regularly. So did he. Sometimes we went to a local bar or restaurant together, and sometimes we ate at different times of the day. It was an easy lifestyle, but neither our bank accounts nor our waistlines benefitted from eating out.

Several weeks previously I had convinced Robert that we needed to take better care of ourselves, and that included eating healthy meals at regular intervals. We agreed that we would each cook three nights a week, and would treat ourselves to a night out once a week. This worked splendidly for the better part of a week. Then more and more microwave meals began to turn up when it was Robert's turn to cook. Often I would have to remind him when it was time for him to start cooking, as dinner was the farthest thing from his mind. Tonight he simply grunted "uh-huh" when I suggested he start cooking. He then turned to the next page of his book. About an hour later I asked how dinner was coming and he gave me a puzzled look which suddenly turned to panic. He ran to the kitchen, found some eggs, and so we were having scrambled eggs for dinner.

By the time I finished my eggs I had worked myself into a state of high dudgeon over Robert's thoughtlessness and I really wasn't thinking clearly when he asked me if I'd like to spend a few days on a ranch in New Mexico.

"Do they have a cook?" was the only thing I could think of to say.

Robert seemed surprised by the question. "Oh, well, I really didn't think to ask" was his answer.

"I'm sorry" I answered, feeling ashamed of my thoughts. "I really don't know what I was thinking of." This wasn't entirely truthful, as I knew exactly what had prompted the question, but I didn't want to hurt Robert's feelings by complaining about his scrambled eggs. "A few days in New Mexico sounds interesting. What's the occasion?"

"My nephew invited us" Robert answered. "He wants to ask my advice on a few issues they're having with the ranch security system, but he also invited us to stay and enjoy a few days of sightseeing and horseback riding. It's a nice place. I went there a few times when my sister was there."

"I didn't know you had a nephew?" I said, surprised at this apparently new entry into his family tree.

"Well, I don't think he's really my nephew," Robert said. "I never paid much attention to genealogy, but if I remember correctly he was my sister's husband's brother. Or maybe he was his nephew. Anyway, he always calls me 'Uncle Robert' so I call him my nephew."

A few days later we flew into the Santa Fe airport. Robert's "nephew," Charles Robertson, met us at the airport. He was maybe fifteen years younger than Robert and I. Of medium height, he was slightly overweight and balding, with a suntanned face that lit up with delight when he saw Robert. "Welcome to New Mexico!" he exclaimed with outstretched arms. He hugged both of us in turn, and while his waistline might have looked a little soft there was nothing soft about his thick, muscular arms.

It was getting late by the time we retrieved our luggage so at Charles' suggestion we stopped for dinner at a bar and grill a few miles from the airport. I had a wonderful green chili cheeseburger accompanied by a pile of spicy fries so huge as to require a second pint of ale. Thus fortified, I sat in the back seat and drowsily watched a beautiful desert sunset as Charles and Robert caught up on family lore in the front seat. About two hours later I was vaguely aware that we were getting into hilly country with trees and bushes alongside the road. We turned off the main road and drove for a few miles along unpaved, rutted secondary roads. Charles then turned onto a surprisingly smooth dirt driveway that led to a large ranch house. "Welcome to Rancho Robertson!" he said.

"I thought you called it the Double-R Ranch," Robert said as we got our suitcases out of the trunk.

"It goes by either name," Charles answered. "My Great Grandfather, Ray Robertson, named it the Double-R Ranch. The locals called it Rancho Robertson, which coincidentally is a double-R name. When we started getting involved in leasing and other legal contracts we discovered there were lots of Double-R ranches, so we officially named it Rancho Robertson. Turns out there are several of those, too. It really doesn't matter. Most local folks now call it the Robertson ranch, and the legal documents include map coordinates so there's no confusion."

We carried the suitcases into the house and deposited them in bedrooms. After a quick nightcap in the living room we were all ready to call it a day.

The next morning I woke early, feeling totally refreshed. After a quick shower I dressed and headed for the kitchen. To my surprise Robert, who normally slept late, was already there. He and Charles were sitting at a table, discussing the affairs of the day over coffee. Charles introduced me to a man who brought me a cup of coffee. "This is Carlos," he said. "The best cook in the state of New Mexico. And probably anywhere else, for that matter."

Carlos smiled. "My mother is a better cook" he modestly assured us. "But I try." He walked back to the stove, where something smelled delicious.

Robert nodded in my direction. "Bill asked me if you had a cook, but I had no idea what to tell him."

"Mom always used to do the cooking," Charles explained. "But she died about ten years ago. We tried cooking for ourselves, but none of us knew which side of a frying pan was supposed to point up. Then we were lucky enough to find Carlos."

"Lucky is right" said a voice from the hallway that led to the kitchen. "I couldn't have faced another of your hot dog and bean omelets." A thin, slightly sallow-complexioned man with unruly black hair entered the kitchen. He was hobbling on crutches, with a cast on his right knee. Charles immediately got up to pull out a chair for him.

"This is my younger brother, Matthew." Charles announced. "Matthew, this is Bill Downing, and you've met Robert Borland before, although it's been a few years."

We both shook hands with Matthew, who then sat down. "It has been several years," Robert said. "I think the last time I came here you were living in New York City."

"I couldn't take that place." Matthew said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Too many people, and no open spaces. When it became possible to trade stocks over the Internet just as quickly as if you were standing in a broker's office, there was no reason to stay in New York. I moved back to the ranch and never looked back."

"What happened to your knee?" I asked.

"I tried to do the right thing." He chuckled. "Well, I suppose it *was* the right thing to do. It just didn't work out the way I expected. I was at a party in town and when it got late I decided it probably wasn't safe for me to drive home. So I took a cab. The cabbie wasn't happy about bringing a fare way out here. I had barely stepped out of the cab before his wheels were spinning in the gravel as he dashed back to town. I tripped walking up the porch steps in the dark and broke my knee."

"Dad and I were sound asleep when suddenly there was a howl of pain and a flood of profanity from the porch," Charles said. "He couldn't bend his leg, so we threw him in the back of the pickup. I sat in the back with him and Dad drove us to the hospital."

"Where is your dad?" Robert asked.

“He’s down in Phoenix” Charles said. “He flew in an air show yesterday and spent the night. He’ll be back this afternoon.”

“Still doing air shows at his age?” Robert asked with surprise. “He must be what, close to 70?”

“‘Bout that.” Said Matthew. “Sixty-nine, and to look at him you’d think he was just approaching middle age. I just hope I have half as much energy as he has when I’m that old.”

Carlos brought our food to the table and the conversation lagged while we feasted on the best scrambled eggs I’d ever tasted. I don’t know what Carlos put in those eggs, but they were fantastic. Served with both bacon and sausage, toasted homemade bread, and fresh orange juice. I was in heaven. The conversation picked up again after we had finally eaten our fill. I learned that, as I suspected, Matthew earned his living as a day trader. Charles had worked for many years as a lawyer, but at his father’s request he took an early retirement to take over management of the ranch. They no longer raised crops or livestock themselves, but they leased portions of the ranch to major agricultural companies. There were also ongoing negotiations concerning mineral explorations, and a recent proposal to lease land to a dude ranch. Managing the leases and negotiations while keeping up with the maintenance of the ranch house, stables, and various other outbuildings was more than enough to keep Charles busy.

Robert broached a new subject as we sat around the table drinking coffee after breakfast. “So, Charles. What’s the security system problem you wanted me to look into?”

“We had a minor break-in,” Charles answered, “and the security system never sounded an alarm. If you don’t mind, though, I’d rather wait until Dad gets here to go into the details. He takes care of part of the system, and I think if we describe the problem when everyone’s all together we’ll be less likely to overlook anything. Why don’t I take you on a tour of the house while we’re waiting for him? I know you’ve seen it before but Bill hasn’t,” he nodded toward me as he said this, “and I’ve learned about the history of the place since I started managing it.”

Robert and I nodded our agreement. Matthew excused himself, saying he’d seen this picture before. Charles led us into the bedroom area, where we’d spent the previous night.

“This is part of the original ranch house” he explained. My great grandfather Ray built it in 1886. He’d helped manage a ranch in Texas, and served as trail boss on several cattle drives. He married my great grandmother in Texas and wanted to settle down to a life that didn’t require long cattle drives. The railroad reached Santa Fe in 1880 and the government opened land to settlers. Grandpa spent his life’s savings on land, and borrowed money to buy cattle. They lived in a tent until Grandpa could free up enough time to build an adobe hut. He was pretty successful at raising cattle, especially with the railhead so near, and he was soon able to build a wooden ranch house. It’s been added to several times since then. At one point there were a dozen full-time ranch hands plus a cook living here. They didn’t live in the house, of course. There was a bunkhouse for the hired hands. Now some travel group wants to make that the centerpiece of a dude ranch.”

Charles led us into a large den, with an oak rolltop desk and an entire wall of books. "Originally this was the ranch office," he said. Grandpa Ray had two sons, Jacob and Matthew. They both went off to World War One, but only Matthew came back. Eventually he took over the ranch. My brother is named after him."

Robert was leafing through a book he'd plucked from the bookshelves. "Someone was interested in chemical warfare" he said.

"That was Grandpa Matt" Charles answered. "He was in the Chemical Corps during the war. Mostly self-taught, he was always fascinated by science and he wasn't afraid to try new things. Did you happen to notice these in your rooms last night?" He pointed to an ornate brass fixture on the wall. A decorative arm curled out from the wall and pointed up. In front of the point was a large glass dish that looked like a magnifying glass with concentric rings on it.

"It's a gaslight!" I said.

"I noticed one of those in my room last night," Robert commented. "But I've never seen a gaslight outside of a city. Surely there were no gas mains out here."

"Not in the conventional sense," Charles answered. "But Grandpa Matt was one of the first persons to suspect there might be oil reserves in New Mexico. He read up on it, bought some drilling equipment, and actually did find a little oil plus some natural gas. We're in the wrong part of the state to strike it rich, but he managed to make a profit off the oil he did find for about fifteen years. Back then they usually burned off natural gas, but Grandpa couldn't stand to see anything go to waste so he laid his own pipeline back to the ranch house. He lit the house with it for years, and we still use our own gas for cooking and heating."

He walked over to the window and tapped the radiator underneath it with his foot. "See this? As soon as they ran electricity out here in the late 1930's Grandpa installed a central heating system. That was pretty unusual for a ranch house back then. He also installed electric lights and ceiling fans. Oh, and he disconnected the gas main from the gas lights, so you don't need to worry about accidentally turning one on and suffocating during the night."

"I noticed a radiator in my room last night," Robert said. "It's unusual to see them nowadays. Most houses provide heat through the overhead air conditioning ducts, which is a less efficient way to do it."

"The air conditioning is new," Charles said with a smile. "Grandpa wouldn't hear of it. He was progressive about a lot of things, but he hated noise. Originally the central heating system was steam, but that sometimes made clanking noises so he replaced it with a hot water system in the 1950's. The heat came on last night, but I'll bet you never heard it. It's that quiet. Grandpa liked to sleep with his window open, winter and summer. He liked to listen to what he called the desert night sounds. He didn't mind a silent radiator providing a little heat in the winter, but he couldn't stand the noise of an air conditioner. As kids, we couldn't even have window air conditioners because Grandpa could hear them from his room. After he died, Dad installed central air conditioning. It's pretty quiet, but I'll have to

admit I sometimes find the noise irritating. I used to sleep with my window open, like Grandpa, but with everybody yapping about energy conservation I finally gave in and started closing it.”

After we toured the house, Charles showed us the stables with their riding horses. I don't know much about horses, but they looked magnificent to me.

“They are magnificent,” Charles said. “And they've got a fair bit of racing blood in them. We had one in particular that just loved to run. I had to hold him back in rough terrain, where it would be dangerous to run, but whenever we came to level ground I'd give him his head and he'd fly.” A shadow of sadness passed across his face. “He died about six weeks ago. It was strange. I'd ridden him a few days previously and everything was fine. That day started out normally. When I loosened the reins he took off at a gallop, and then dropped over dead. I was lucky I didn't break my neck when he fell.”

“Did you ever find out what killed him?” I asked.

Charles shrugged. “We had the vet do a post-mortem because we were afraid it might be something that would affect the other horses. The vet said he died of heart failure. Unusual, but not unheard of. He said there was some congestion in his lungs, which may have aggravated the condition. The rest of the horses checked out fine.”

As we continued the tour he explained that, much as they loved ranching, his father was smart enough to see that a small ranch couldn't compete with the big agricultural businesses so they leased out most of their grazing and croplands, only retaining enough pasture for their riding horses. There were large swaths of land on their ranch that weren't suitable for crops or grazing, and he promised to take us riding before we headed back to the city. He also showed us the empty bunkhouse, cookhouse, and workshop/blacksmith shop that used to support the active ranching operations. An addition to the workshop now served as a hangar for his father's airplane. As we were leaving the workshop we heard a roar above us. We looked up to see a small, brightly colored biplane flying low over a runway behind the hangar. The pilot did a snap roll over the runway, skimmed over the top of the scrub brush off the end of the runway. He then pulled almost straight up, did a wingover, and began his landing approach.

“Dad's back from Phoenix” Charles shouted over the noise of the airplane. He leaned closer to me and added “His name is Charles also. Officially I'm Charles Jr., but he hates being called Charles so he's Charlie and I'm Charles.”

In a few minutes Charlie had parked his airplane in the hangar and came out to meet us. He looked a lot like Charles, but without an extra ounce of weight or softness. Seeing them side by side I would have taken them for brothers but not father and son, as Charlie didn't look that much older than Charles. Like Charles, his entire face beamed with joy when he saw us.

“Robert! It's so great to see you again!” he exclaimed. “It's been far too long. And you must be Bill. So nice of you to come for a visit! Let's go in out of the sun and see what Carlos has made for lunch. I haven't eaten yet today and I'm famished.”

The lunchtime conversation primarily consisted of Robert and Charlie catching up on things that had happened since they last saw each other. Occasionally Charlie would turn to his two sons and tell them some anecdote from his recent air show, usually about various pilots whom they all seemed to know. After lunch we retired to the living room and sprawled in an assortment of overstuffed chairs and couches. "I guess this is as good a time as any to talk about our security system" Charles suggested.

"You said you had a break-in, but the alarm didn't go off," Robert commented.

"Yes" Charles answered. "Somebody jimmed the back door open with a crowbar."

"Are you sure the alarm was turned on?"

"It's automatic. It activates every night at 11:00, and turns off at 7:00 the next morning.

"Any chance the break-in occurred outside of those hours?"

Charles shook his head. "I check the doors every night before I go to bed, to make certain they're locked."

"I check them, too." Matthew said. "Just in case Charles forgets. We figure if we both check, there's very little chance we'll both forget on the same night. On that particular night I remember it was after midnight when I checked the system. My knee was bothering me so I sat up late watching some stupid movie on TV."

"And in the morning?" Robert asked.

"Carlos found the door had been broken into when he came to work at 6:00 the next morning." Charles said.

"Carlos comes to work while the security system is still active?"

"He has a key, and he knows the code to deactivate the door alarm," Charles said.

"Who else knows the code?"

"Just Martha, the cleaning lady. She comes in twice a week to clean the house," Charles said. "Oh, and Sam. He's sort of a do-all handyman who fixes minor problems around the house. You know, an electrical outlet that doesn't work, or a toilet that keeps running. That sort of thing. He also comes by periodically to check things out if we're all gone on vacation."

There was a slight pause, and Charlie spoke up. "I gave a key and the code to that guy from the air conditioning company who fixed our system last summer, while we were in Philly. I guess I ought to get it back from him," he added as an afterthought.

“So, lots of people have keys and know the code to deactivate the door alarm,” Robert said. “But of course the people who have keys wouldn’t need to jimmy the lock. Maybe someone overrode the schedule for that night. Could I see the event log?”

“Would that be on the computer that runs the system?” Charles asked.

“Yes” Robert answered. Charles walked over to what looked like a liquor cabinet built into a bookcase. He opened the doors, revealing a computer monitor, pulled out a little shelf with a keyboard and a mouse on it, and logged into the computer. Then he turned it over to Robert.

“I see you logged in with a user name of “admin,” Robert said. “Is that the only user name in this system?”

Charles shrugged. “That’s the way the guys who installed it set it up.”

“And the password?” Robert asked.

“It’s the same code we use on the keypads by the doors to turn the door alarms on and off,” Charles said. “That’s the way they set it up,” he added when Robert looked at him in disbelief.

Robert looked at a few screens on the computer and sighed. “Someone has turned off event and security camera logging” he said. “It’s possible it was never turned on, but I think it’s more likely that somebody turned it off. After a period of time, the logs are automatically deleted so they don’t fill up your hard disk. Now there’s no way to tell if someone overrode the schedule on your system.” He called Charles over to look at the screen. “See, when I click this box it turns on event log and security camera logging. The default is that events will be saved for 30 days. They don’t take up much space. Security camera footage will normally be saved for 24 hours, but if something trips an alarm the following hour’s footage will be saved for 30 days. Those are reasonable settings so I’ll click ‘accept.’ Now if somebody changes the settings we’ll have a record of it, and somebody breaks in we’ll have images from the security cameras.”

Robert sat back down on a couch. “So, you had a minor break-in and the security system didn’t alarm,” he said. “Was anything taken?”

“Nothing of value,” Charles said.

“Not of financial value,” Charlie added. “I was rather fond of that particular sketch.”

“You had artwork stolen?” Robert asked.

“One piece” Charlie answered. “Oddly enough, it was the least valuable piece in the collection. Here, I was going to show you the collection anyway.” He walked over to a decorative panel on an interior wall, pulled a curtain aside to reveal a keypad, and punched in a code. The panel slid open to reveal a moderate sized room filled with paintings and a few statues. I was impressed that before the

panel slid open I wouldn't have guessed it was a door, and after it opened the doorway looked like a perfectly normal passageway into an adjoining room. The room itself looked like a chic gallery in a high-end art museum.

"The insurance company says I have to keep most of these pieces in a vault," Charlie explained. "But I don't see any reason why a vault had to be dark and dingy. Grandpa Ray started the collection, but my dad picked up most of these pieces. He had a good eye for art, and he wasn't afraid to wheel and deal, selling or trading pieces he had for pieces he wanted. He also had an eye for rising artists, especially Native American artists. Several of these pieces are worth a lot more now than when he bought them simply because other collectors recognized the artistry that he saw early. The pottery on the shelving on the East wall holds several examples of pieces made by artists whose skill is now recognized around the world."

He stopped talking and gave us time to take in the art. I'd never been a particular fan of Western art, but these pieces really caught my eye. There were traditional Old West paintings – cowboys, roundups, wagon trains, and Indian war parties. There were also stunning landscapes and wildlife paintings, including some achingly beautiful winter scenes. Newer, somewhat abstract paintings seemed to capture the action and grandeur of the west with a minimum of brush strokes. I didn't know enough about sculpture, pottery, and traditional handcrafts to even guess their value, but I could easily see that the artistry was outstanding.

I lost all track of time while admiring the artwork, but eventually we followed Charlie and his sons back into the living room. Charlie locked the vault behind us.

"That was incredible," Robert said after Charlie sat down. "What was it we didn't see?"

"It was a charcoal sketch of five cowboys sitting around a campfire at night. Grandpa Ray saw it hanging on the wall of a saloon. He liked it so much he traded a repeating rifle for it. The saloon owner had no idea where it came from. It was hanging in the saloon when he bought the place. Grandpa called it 'The Cowboy's Campfire' but that was just his name for it. He had no idea who painted it or what the artist called it."

"Do you have any pictures of it?" Robert asked.

"It just so happens I do" Charlie replied. He stepped out of the room for a few minutes and returned with a large manila envelope. "I had the collection appraised recently and when the guy came out to appraise it he took a picture of every item." He slid a sheaf of papers out of the envelope and sorted through them to find the one he wanted. "It's not a particularly good picture because it's printed on plain paper, along with the appraisal, but you can see what the picture looked like." The picture showed a simple, yet somehow haunting sketch of cowboys sitting around a campfire. I don't know enough about art to know how an artist can "capture" light in a black and white sketch, but somehow I could tell the cowboys were illuminated by light from the campfire while the landscape behind them was bathed in moonlight.

“What made you decide to have the collection appraised?” Robert asked.

“My insurance company had been bugging me for years to have the collection appraised,” Charlie answered. “I kept putting it off, but the local agent I’d been working with retired and his replacement was very insistent upon it. Matthew found some guy in Santa Fe who could do it for a reasonable fee.”

“He wasn’t just ‘some guy,’ Dad.” Matthew interjected. “He was a certified art appraiser.”

“I’ll have to admit he did seem to know what he was talking about,” Charlie admitted. “He threw around names like Bierstadt, Shreyvogel, and Dye, all artists that my father admired. He thought the charcoal sketch was interesting, but since the artist was unknown and the sketch was undated he valued it at ‘under \$500.’”

“Hmmm.” Robert was deep in thought. “And you’re sure this sketch was the only thing the thief took?”

“Positive” Charlie answered. “The police asked us the same thing when we reported the break-in. We all three went through each room together, quizzing each other about what was there, and we couldn’t come up with anything else that was missing. With only \$500 worth of artwork missing, I don’t think the police spent much time looking for the thief. They didn’t take fingerprints or run any tests.”

“What about the company that installed the security system?”

“They sent a couple guys out to look at the system. They tested the switch on the door that was jimmied, found it was working, and said there was nothing wrong with the system. They said we must not have had the system turned on that night.”

“That’s certainly helpful,” Robert said with disgust. “I assume you have a contract with them to monitor the system and the cameras remotely?” Charlie and his sons nodded in agreement. “Then we have to add them to the long list of people who could have disabled your security system.”

“But even if someone disabled the security system, how could anyone break into the vault?” Charlie asked. “That’s not hooked up to a computer, there’s no remote access, and my sons and I are the only ones who know the combination.”

Robert walked back to the computer monitor. He searched through the security camera footage until he found the camera that watched the living room. He backed up to the point where Charlie opened the vault, zoomed in, and we could clearly see him enter the code on the keypad. The picture was too grainy to read the numbers, but since he pressed each button in turn with his index finger you could clearly see the position of every button he touched.

We all stared at the monitor in disbelief. Finally Charlie summed up the situation.

“Damn!” he said.

“It goes without saying that you need to make some changes to your security system,” Robert said. “First of all, change the security code for the outside doors, and change the password for computer access to the system so it’s not the same as the security code. I understand why the cook, the maid, and the handyman need the code for the doors, but I see no reason why they should access the computer. Create individual accounts and passwords for the people who do need to access the computer so when you look at the log to see what changes were made, you can tell *who* made the changes. Then delete the existing ‘Admin’ account. I think it’s good to have a camera in this room so you can see who goes in and out of the vault, but hold the curtain over your hand when you unlock the vault so the camera doesn’t film the keypad. And of course, change the access code for the vault.”

“Anything else?” Charlie asked.

“It would probably be a good idea to get a second appraisal of your collection, done by a different appraiser. Not that I don’t trust the first guy, but it’s always good to get a second opinion. Besides, it’s possible the thief replaced one of the valuable paintings with a forgery and stole the sketch as a diversion.” He paused and thought for a moment. “Would it be possible for me to get a copy of that first appraisal?”

“I think we’ve got a copier somewhere in the den, don’t we?” Charlie looked at Charles.

Charles nodded. “The printer is also a copier, Dad.”

“Then it’s no problem.” Charles handed the envelope with the appraisal to his son.

When I went down to breakfast the next morning, Charlie had already eaten and was impatient to get going on the day. Fortunately I beat Robert, Charles, and Matthew to the table, so I didn’t have to feel guilty that I was holding things up. After another excellent breakfast Charlie, Charles, Robert and I went to the stables to saddle up. Matthew, for obvious reasons, stayed at the ranch.

I’m certainly not an expert rider, but over the years I have ridden a few times. Robert had never been on a horse before. He paid close attention to the instructions Charlie gave him, and showed no fear as he mounted the massive beast. Charlie assured us we were going to ride an easy trail and led the way.

I’d never spent much time in the Southwest, and I wasn’t expecting the variety and rugged beauty of the landscape. We began by following a small stream, surrounded by cottonwood and lush greenery. We left the stream and traveled through more rugged ground, crossing seemingly innumerable dry gullies. Small juniper trees and evergreen bushes seemed to be scattered randomly, as were several long dead trees. The branches of the dead trees were twisted into fantastic shapes and bleached white by the sun, looking like the skeletons of strange prehistoric creatures. Here and there we passed large sandstone outcroppings, sometimes topped by wind-sculpted pillars and spires.

The trail rose still higher into an arid plain covered with brown grass and what I assumed was sagebrush. Dark evergreen bushes dotted the plain, and in the distance we could see rugged sandstone mountains. The red, brown, and tan layers of the mountains seemed to blend together in the reddish-brown base of the plain and the trail.

Despite the beautiful scenery, after a few hours I was becoming more and more uncomfortable. I realized the term “saddle sore” was more than just an idle phrase from western novels. It was not by any means a hot day, but the sun still blazed relentlessly from the clear blue sky. A dry wind irritated my face and seemed to suck the moisture from my body. We each had a canteen hanging from our saddle, but nobody else had touched theirs and I’d be damned if I was going to be the first. As the sun slowly arced across the sky I noted with satisfaction that we had been traveling in a large loop and were now headed back toward the ranch. When we crested a small hill overlooking a shallow basin Charlie stopped, turned his horse around, and spoke to Robert and me.

“You can clearly see the trail across this basin,” he said. “When you crest the hill at the other side you’ll be able to see the ranch not more than a quarter mile away. You two are new to riding and don’t have enough experience to ride fast. My son’s an experienced rider, though, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let him get to the ranch before I do.”

As soon as he finished this sentence Charles spurred his horse into a gallop. He got a small head start on Charlie, who had to turn his horse around before he could gallop, but by the time they reached the middle of the basin they were neck and neck. Charlie was at least two lengths ahead of his son when they crested the hill at the far side.

“I’ll bet they’ve been doing that for over forty years,” Robert said as we nudged our horses forward and began to walk across the basin.

Charlie and his son had finished rubbing down their horses by the time we got to the stables, and they showed us how to take care of our horses before turning them loose in the corral. The rest of the day passed pleasantly, and the next morning Charles drove us to the airport to catch our flight back to Los Angeles.

“I really enjoyed meeting those people,” I said after we’d reached our cruising altitude. “Seems like an awfully big house for just the three of them, though.”

“The house hasn’t always been that empty,” Robert said. “The last time I visited Charles his wife was living there, with two of their three children. I think Charlie’s wife was still living then, too.”

“What happened?”

“The kids grew up and moved out. I’m not certain what happened between Charlie and Linda. They split up shortly after their last kid graduated from college.”

“Was Matthew ever married?”

“For a few years, I think. I never met her. That was when he was living in New York.”

We sat in silence for a while, as I thought about how many of my friends had marriages that broke up for reasons I never understood. “I’m not certain we helped them much with their mystery,” I said.

“I haven’t begun to work on it,” Robert answered. “There are a lot of possibilities, but I’m not certain how many of them are probabilities. Occam’s Razor is often misinterpreted as ‘the simplest solution is usually correct,’ but there is an undeniable element of truth in that mistranslation. Unfortunately, I don’t yet have enough clues to know which solution is the simplest.”

“Do you suspect anyone in particular?”

“I have theories, but none that I’m ready to share. I’d rather you remain free to form your own theories, not influenced by me, so that at some point we can compare ideas and maybe forge a correct solution.”

Once we got home, however, I got engrossed in the various projects I’d been working on before our trip and spent no time forming theories about the Robertson’s stolen drawing. I was aware that Robert visited Joey, his paranoid friend who spent hours surfing the dark web. I also knew that he had visited several art experts, and he spent hours in his room searching the Internet for tidbits of information. Still, I was surprised when he asked me if I’d like to go back to Santa Fe for a few days, especially because it had barely been a week since we returned. I asked him if we might not be wearing out our welcome.

“I didn’t say we were going back to the ranch,” he said. “I thought we’d stay at a hotel in Santa Fe itself. I need to talk to some folks in the art world there, in person, and I thought you might like to take in some of the tourist sites. If I find the answers I expect to find, I’d like to bounce some theories off you, and if I wind up talking to the Robertson’s again I’d like to have you with me.”

“What tourist sites?” I asked.

Robert obviously hadn’t given any thought to tourist sites. “Oh, I don’t know,” he said. “You could rent a car and drive up to Los Alamos. They made the atomic bomb there.”

I was pretty certain I could find something more interesting than Los Alamos, especially when I looked on the Internet and discovered the lab where they built the bomb was not open to the public. It was obviously important to Robert that I go with him, though, so I soon found myself once again flying to Santa Fe. I spent a couple days checking out Santa Fe shops and museums, and visiting nearby ruins left by cliff dwellers. On the third morning, after breakfast, Robert said he wanted to bounce a theory off me.

“I can’t prove any of this,” he said, “but I think Matthew Robertson stole the sketch.”

“Why would Matthew steal a sketch that was worth less than \$500?” I asked.

“Because I think it’s worth a lot more than that. When I showed the photo to art experts in Los Angeles they said it looked to them like it *might* be an original Frederick Remington charcoal sketch. We’d have to have the original evaluated by experts that know a lot more about Remington than the people I talked to, but they said the style certainly looks like Remington. Apparently Remington painted many night scenes after he returned from the Spanish-American war. They thought this sketch resembled some of his earlier works too, so this may have been a preliminary work that led to his later night paintings. The story of how Charlie’s great grandfather obtained the sketch would roughly match that timeline. If the sketch is one of Remington’s early attempts at depicting night scenes, it’s probably worth a lot more than any other single piece in Charlie’s collection. But, without having our hands on the original, it’s impossible to prove.”

“Then why did the appraiser value it at less than \$500?” I asked.

“Because he was in cahoots with Matthew. Again, I can’t prove it, but it makes sense. Remember that Matthew was the one who found the appraiser. One of the reasons I asked for a copy of the appraisal was because I wanted to see who the appraiser was. Matthew was correct in that he is a certified appraiser, but he doesn’t have an active business. You won’t find his name if you search the Internet for an appraiser. One of the reasons I came back to Santa Fe was so I could talk in person to local appraisers. They told me he used to have a business but he closed it years ago. They said there were rumors that he deliberately undervalued select pieces and then had a confederate buy them at that low valuation. Supposedly he closed his business rather than face an investigation when a client complained to the Better Business Bureau. Again, no proof. But there are dozens of certified appraisers in Santa Fe, and many more in nearby art centers like Taos and Albuquerque. Why would Matthew hire someone with a bad reputation, someone without an active business, to appraise their collection?”

“Was Matthew that greedy?” I asked. “He seemed like a nice guy. Wouldn’t he inherit half of that collection in a few years anyway?”

“I suspect he owed money to some very shady characters, and he needed to pay it back now. Day trading is a very risky way to make money, and if you sell short or buy on margin you can lose a lot more than your initial investment. Joey couldn’t find any specifics on his trading, but he did discover that Matthew had drained his savings and maxed out his credit cards a long time ago. I suspected he was in financial trouble as soon as he told us he broke his knee when he tripped on the porch steps. While it’s possible to break your knee climbing wooden steps, it’s not very likely. It takes a lot of force to break a knee. It occasionally happens when people fall on level concrete, but going up stairs you don’t fall very far before your knee hits a higher step. And people stick out their arms to break their fall. You’re more likely to break an arm than a knee if you fall going up stairs.”

“So what do you think happened?”

“Breaking a kneecap is a classic mob ‘warning’ to debtors who don’t pay up. I think whoever Matthew owed money to broke his kneecap and dumped him in front of his house. Remember, his father and his brother just found him on the porch. No one saw him trip, and we only have his word that a cab brought him home.”

I sat in stunned silence for a moment, trying to take all this in. "So you think Matthew disabled the alarm system and stole the sketch?" I asked.

"I think that's the only logical explanation," Robert said. "I thought from the beginning that it was an inside job, most likely by Matthew, Charles, or Charlie. The household staff and the repairman all had access to the system, but it's very unlikely they knew that the door code was also the password to the security computer. And even if they had known, they probably wouldn't have known how to disable the system, let alone use the camera footage to find the code for the vault. You say yourself that Charles barely knew how the system worked. I cast suspicion on the monitoring company because I didn't want Charlie to be paranoid about his family and his employees, but I thought it was extremely unlikely that they were involved. Plus, why would any of those people have stolen an unsigned charcoal sketch rather than a signed painting by a famous artist? Only someone who knew or suspected that was really the most valuable piece in the collection would have stolen that. Breaking the door lock was just a ruse to make it look like an outsider had broken in. The fact that they sketch had such a low value guaranteed the police wouldn't spend much time on the investigation."

I had to admit that it all made sense.

"There's one more factor," Robert added. "Someone who wouldn't give his name called a few museums and high end appraisers, asking who they would recommend to authenticate a Frederick Remington sketch." He paused to let this sink in. "It's all theory and I can't prove any of it, but do you think this is convincing enough for me to share it with Charlie Robertson? I hate to tell a man that I think his son is a thief unless I'm pretty sure I'm right."

"You've convinced me," I said. "I think the evidence is strong enough that you'd be doing him a disservice if you didn't tell him, even if it is all circumstantial."

Robert made a call on his phone. When he hung up he said "Charlie is already in town for an appointment. He said he'll meet us at 1:00 pm at the Sunset Café."

Robert and I had lunch at the café and were drinking coffee when Charlie came in. He looked a little haggard. Not quite as energetic as he had been, and his face wasn't as ruddy. He ordered a cup of coffee and a glass of ice water.

"Are you feeling OK?" I asked.

"I'm fine," he insisted. "I woke up this morning feeling like crap. The doc says I've got a touch of walking pneumonia. He put me on antibiotics and said I'd feel fine in a day or two. I hope so. I've got another air show tomorrow."

Robert outlined his theory after the waitress brought Charlie his drinks. I was surprised that he didn't show any emotion or ask any questions. He just sat there with a look of resignation on his face and occasionally sipped his water. When Robert finished talking he sighed.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Charlie said. "I hate to talk bad about my own son, but Matthew has been in debt for as long as I can remember. I didn't know he'd borrowed from loan sharks, but he's borrowed from everyone else. We get letters and phone calls from people all the time, demanding he pay back the money he owes them. I've talked to him about it time after time, telling him he needed to quit day trading and get a real job, but he never quits. I think it's like a gambling addiction. A couple months ago I gave him an ultimatum, either get a job or get out. Yesterday he came to me with some new bills, begging me to bail him out. I gave him the money and told him he had two weeks to pack his bags and leave."

As he finished this last sentence he burst into a fit of uncontrolled coughing. He turned to the side and bent over, covering his mouth and nose with his hands. When the coughing subsided and he straightened up I could see tears in his eyes. "Damn!" he said as he took a sip of water. "I hope that antibiotic kicks in soon. When I first woke up I thought maybe it was an allergy, as I could swear I smelled fresh cut hay, but it's the wrong time of year for that."

Robert looked like he'd been stricken by lightning. "You need to go to the hospital immediately!" he said. "Don't exert yourself and don't even think of flying in that air show. I'm calling an ambulance now."

"What's wrong?" Charlie asked.

"I hope I'm wrong," Robert said. "But I think you've been poisoned by phosgene."

The rest of the day was a blur of activity. Robert rode in the ambulance with Charlie, while I followed in the rental car. Robert told the doctors to check for carbon monoxide in his blood, and chlorine in the fluid he coughed up. They found both. The police got Charlie's permission to search the ranch. When they found a gas mask and the chemicals to make phosgene in a locked root cellar under the abandoned cookhouse, Matthew confessed. He implicated the art appraiser, and they found the stolen sketch in his house.

Toward evening the doctors put Charlie on a mild sedative to help him sleep and put him in an oxygen tent. He was under constant monitoring, but they assured us the greatest threat was past and they expected Charlie to recover fully. Robert and I went back to our hotel.

"Phosgene was responsible for more deaths than any other chemical weapon used during World War One," Robert said as we drank a beer in the hotel bar. "It was particularly insidious because in low doses the victim might feel fine after exposure. Sometimes they would have a cough, like Charlie did. Phosgene breaks down into carbon monoxide and hydrochloric acid in the lungs. The carbon monoxide impedes the blood's ability to carry oxygen, and the acid damages the lungs so they fill with fluid, like pneumonia. Victims were known to unexpectedly drop dead as long as 48 hours after exposure, especially if they suddenly exerted themselves. In addition to the lack of oxygen, the strain of trying to breathe could cause heart failure. Stunt flying would certainly be an exertion. Matthew probably counted on his father having heart failure and crashing during the air show. A 70 year-old man having a heart attack doing aerobatics, who would suspect foul play?"

He stared at his beer for a while. "I should have seen it coming. You know how my mind always turns to nefarious thoughts when I see something unusual. As soon as I saw a gas light fixture in my bedroom I thought 'what a perfect way to gas someone!' But that was just a passing thought. Finding the books on gas warfare in the den should have been a dead giveaway, but it blew right past me. Maybe it's because I have books on gas warfare in my den. And even when Charles told us about the horse, I still couldn't connect the dots that were right in front of me!"

"The horse?" I asked.

"The seemingly healthy horse that dropped dead of heart failure when he tried to gallop," Robert said. "The vet even said it had fluid in its lungs. My guess is that Matthew probably got the idea of using phosgene as a murder weapon years ago, maybe even as a kid, from reading the WW1 gas books. It was a clever idea, but he had no reason to murder anyone. When his dad told him to get a job or leave, he got worried. There was no way he would be able to pay off his debts with a regular job, and there were people who would hurt him if he didn't pay them. Possibly they'd kill him. However, if his father died, he'd inherit enough money to pay them off. That's probably when he made the phosgene. He had to know if it would work, though. You only get one chance at a scheme like this. So, he poisoned a horse. That worked exactly as he hoped, and no one suspected a thing. I'm guessing it was about this time that his dad asked him to get the art collection appraised, and he saw a safer way to get the money he needed. So he set his murder plans aside and stole the sketch. It was taking longer than he'd expected to sell the sketch, though, and his father told to pack his bags and leave, so he poisoned his dad. I could have prevented that, if only I'd put the pieces together a little earlier."

"You saved his life!" I argued. "You should be congratulating yourself, not blaming yourself. I'll bet there aren't a dozen people on this planet who would recognize the symptoms of phosgene poisoning, let alone suspect that a New Mexico rancher's son would use it to poison his father. If you hadn't caught that he'd be a dead man walking now. And what if his plane crashed into a crowd at the air show? There's no telling how many lives you saved."

Robert nodded his head in agreement, but his expression showed he was still blaming himself. "It was his reference to new mown hay that did it," he muttered. "That's a classic symptom. The Army used to have posters that warned soldiers to seek medical help if they smelled new mown hay after a suspicious enemy attack."

He continued to frown at his beer and I knew he hadn't forgiven himself. Eventually his face relaxed a bit. "I suppose you're right," he said. "And we did get some pretty decent food out of these trips. What do you say we check out the cantina across the street for a late supper?"