

Missing
from
Mel Avenue

a

Henry Wright Mystery

by

Bert Simonis

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Chapter 1

Henry was restless and tossed and turned in his bed. He was having trouble sleeping and didn't know why. He'd gone to bed relatively late last night; maybe he shouldn't have had that double cappuccino at Donatello's after dinner. It was rare that they went out for dinner with their friends Wayne and Elliot Johnson and they had all been in a celebratory mood. None of them had wanted the evening to end. Henry and Gloria's wedding was three weeks away and that time was promising to be busy. It was nice to have a quiet evening away with their best friends.

It was the last month of the year and he couldn't help but think about all the things that had happened to him this year. It was hard to believe that he met Gloria just a little over six months ago and now he was about to be married to her for the rest of his life. He reached over and touched her warm body next to his. She gave a small sigh and then continued her steady rhythmic breathing. He realized that he wasn't alive before he met her. Well, he was alive, but he wasn't living.

Three and a half years ago, Henry was about to retire from the Eagle River, Wisconsin police department. He'd been its chief for more than twenty years and was on the force for nearly thirty. He and his wife Irma went to Las Vegas to look for a house to live out their retirement when Irma died tragically of a heart attack in their hotel room. Henry returned to Eagle River and went through his retirement ceremony in a fog. He moved to Palm Springs at Wayne's invitation and ended up buying the house here on Mel Avenue.

Things started changing last May. He had breakfast with Wayne every Thursday at Sherman's Deli just up the road on Indian Canyon Drive. Wayne is a captain of detectives for the Palm Springs police and is one of Henry's oldest friends. At this particular meeting, Wayne asked him to help with the investigation of a real estate agent who was bludgeoned to death in one of the homes he was trying to sell. During the search for the killer, Henry met a woman who'd awaked something inside him that had been deeply buried. She made him realize that he'd been lonely since Irma passed - something that he didn't feel before. He could have fallen really hard for her; she was cute and very vivacious. But it wasn't meant to be.

Right after that case, an old classmate, Sheriff Bill Rustow, asked him for his help in solving a murder in Northern California. During his stay in Sonora, he met Gloria McCann. They spent quite a bit of time together; she even helped him with the case. Then she nursed him back to health when he got hurt. He'd solved the crime, came back home to Palm Springs and was lonely for the first time in a long time.

Then when Gloria came to visit him here for Independence Day, her short five day visit turned into a two month stay. He proposed to her over dinner one night and they were going to be married on Christmas Eve. Henry was happier than he had been in a long time.

He picked his watch up from the night stand and pushed the button to turn on its light. It was six thirty and still dark outside. He heard the garbage truck making its way up Via Miraleste, shortly they'd turn the corner onto Mel Avenue. He heard another noise and sat up. The neighbor's cat must be jumping up on the fence again, that animal was noisy.

He thought of getting up to swim his morning laps but he was enjoying the warmth of Gloria's body, her quiet breathing and the peacefulness of the early morning.

Except for that damn cat. There is was again. He was going to have to talk to Mrs. Morris about keeping her pet in her yard and out of his. Maybe she should keep the cat inside until the sun came up. That was probably unrealistic. Cats are nocturnal, that's why they sleep all day. There it was again. It sounds like the cat is tearing the fence down. He was really awake now; he might as well get up and make a pot of coffee and head for the pool.

He got up and picked his watch up from the night stand and strapped it on his wrist. He went into the bathroom pulled his towel from the bar and walked out the French doors that led from their bedroom to the home's inner courtyard. He didn't bother with a robe, even though it was the first week of December, the Coachella Valley climate was mild and he was very comfortable.

His house was built in the shape of a big U with Henry and Gloria's bedroom at the end of one of the wings. He had set the bedroom next to theirs up as an office; he did some freelance profiling work for the FBI on his computer. The kitchen and living room were in the middle of the U, while the house's two other bedrooms and their bathrooms were in the other wing.

Shortly after moving to Palm Springs, Henry met Charles Knightly III at the local senior center. Charles was looking for a place to live that would accept his little dog Pierre, and Henry had this big house, so Charles moved in. Gloria specifically asked Charles to stay once she moved in and the arrangement had worked well. Gloria and Henry had a second home in Northern California and Charles was the best house sitter anyone could want when they spent time there. He had the end bedroom across the courtyard from theirs and Pierre had the run of the house and yard. The

fourth bedroom in the house was set up for guests, and it too had French doors that opened to the courtyard pool.

Henry had spent a lot of time working on the space that surrounded the saltwater pool. He had the pool guys convert it to use a special system that extracts chlorine from salt. It made the water taste a little salty, but he didn't mind that, at least he didn't need to use harsh chemicals to keep it sparkling clean. He'd also worked with the gardeners to change out the plants and the courtyard now looked like a little tropical oasis. The three friends spent all but the hottest days of the summer living out there.

Henry dropped the towel on one of the chaise lounges and walked the length of the pool to the house's kitchen. He went back inside through its set of French doors and started grinding the coffee beans. He flipped on the television and caught some of the early morning news on the desert's news channel before turning it off when the maker starting percolating and the brown liquid starting pouring into the carafe. He walked back out while setting his watch for its timer function so that he could swim laps for his usual forty-five minutes.

He looked up as the sun was peeking above the horizon and started turning the sky pink. He noticed a wisp of smoke coming from next door, that was unusual. There were no wood stoves in Palm Springs, and fireplaces were mostly for show. He didn't think the neighbors had their fireplace going at sunrise on a warm morning.

He grabbed the towel as he walked past the chaise and wrapped it around his waist. Henry went around the end of the house past his own bedroom and definitely smelled smoke. Rounding the corner of the building he looked at the side yard near the fence between him and Mrs. Morris and realized that his own house was on fire.

“Gloria, Gloria, wake up, get out the house is on fire!” He screamed as he ran back to the bedroom’s doors. “Get out, Gloria, get out!”

She met him at the door, wrapping her robe around herself as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “What’s going on honey, you’re yelling as though there’s a fire.”

“There is Gloria, the house is on fire. Grab your purse, pull the cars out of the garage and park them next door. I’ll call nine one one and wake Charles.”

“I’m going. Get yourself a pair of shorts honey; it may be a while before you can get dressed.”

Henry realized that he was still holding his towel and ran inside the bedroom and pulled the shorts he had worn to dinner off the bedroom chair. Struggling to get into them he hopped across the courtyard and banged on Charles’ door. “Charles, wake up. The house is on fire. Grab Pierre and get out. Charles, wake up!”

A sleepy Charles in burgundy silk pajamas came to the door and saw the smoke over Henry’s shoulder. His mouth dropped open. “Henry, the house is on fire, do something. Call the fire department, Henry don’t just stand there.” Pierre had taken to barking and Charles picked him up and headed towards the kitchen.

Henry reached into his shorts pocket for his cell phone and was dialing the emergency number. “I need the fire department at eleven ten Mel Avenue. Yes, that’s in Palm Springs. My house is on fire. No, it’s not a business it’s my house. How can I tell? Well, the flames are above the roof. No, everyone is out. Will you just send the fire department? Please hurry.”

He ran out to the garage where Charles was backing his Explorer out. Gloria had already pulled her four wheel drive truck into the neighbor’s driveway and was moving Henry’s Mercury Marquis now. He pulled the fire extinguisher from the wall in the garage and headed back through the house into the courtyard to see if he could do anything to fight the flames. The smoke was thick now and the flames were above the roof. The sun wasn’t quite completely up yet and

the effect of the flames and the smoke and the sky was very dramatic, Henry would have admired the view if it wasn't his house that was on fire.

He heard the wail of sirens and decided to leave the fire fighting to the professionals. Dejected he walked through the house and set the fire extinguisher in the garage as he joined Gloria and Charles in the driveway. They watched the smoke billow into the pre-dawn sky as the fire engine rounded the corner at Mel and Indian Canyon Drive. They backed away giving the firefighters room as the engine pulled to a stop on the street its siren winding down, its red lights still flashing.

Three firemen jumped out of the truck and ran into the side yard of the house pulling a small red hose from a reel. The driver came over to their group and asked if they were the only occupants of the house. Henry nodded and the firemen spoke into a microphone clipped to his jacket.

A big Ford Expedition painted in the red and white of the Palm Springs Fire Department pulled up in front of the fire engine. An older man in a white shirt got out putting on a fire coat and helmet while he did. He came walking over to Henry, Gloria and Charles and held out his hand.

"Captain Peterson, Palm Springs fire, are you the homeowner?"

Henry shook the outstretched hand. "I'm Henry Wright, this is my fiancé Gloria, and our friend Charles. We all live here."

"Is there anyone else inside?" Peterson pulled a two-way radio off his belt.

"No, it's just the three of us, and little Pierre of course." Henry pointed at the little poodle who was quiet in Charles' arms.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I was awake, going outside for my morning exercise and I noticed the smell of smoke. When I went around to the side yard, I saw the flames." Henry explained.

“So you believe the fire started outside the house?” Captain Peterson pulled a note pad and pen from his shirt pocket and started making notes.

“Yes, it definitely started over there in the side yard outside our bedroom. The water heater is in the garage so that couldn’t have been the source of the fire. The kitchen is here in the front. There’s really nothing over there that might have caused a problem.”

They heard another siren coming up the street from the other direction. Wayne Johnson’s city owned civilian Ford Crown Victoria came into view and the driver’s side door was opened before the vehicle came to a full stop. Wayne jumped out and walked quickly over to the little group standing in the middle of the driveway.

“Hey Larry, how are you?” Wayne said to Captain Peterson and didn’t wait for an answer. “Henry, Gloria, are you all right? Charles? How is little Pierre? What happened Henry?” Wayne reached over and rubbed Pierre’s head.

“Captain Peterson and I were just talking about that. I’m not sure what happened, but –“

“Excuse me folks, I need to give a hand over here.” Captain Peterson put his notepad away and flipped the plastic shield on his helmet down over his face. He jogged over to the fire engine where he helped the driver hook a large hose that he had connected to the fire hydrant across the street to the truck. While they were watching them work, Henry noticed that a number of neighbors had gathered in various states of dress to watch what was going on.

Wayne pulled his cell phone from his belt and made a phone call to the dispatcher to send a patrol car out to help with traffic control. When he finished with the call he said. “I was on my way to work and heard the call to the fire department come over the car’s radio. I’m so glad that they decided to have the command staff share frequencies since nine eleven.”

"I'm glad you're here. I feel better with you helping us out." Gloria said.

"I was still on the interstate coming into the office when I recognized the address on the emergency call. I hit the lights and siren to get here after I radioed the office that I'd be late." Wayne explained.

"We really appreciate that." Henry said while Charles nodded in agreement.

"What happened anyway? Did one of you burn the toast?" Wayne asked.

"No, the fire started in the back of the house, near our master bedroom. I heard something back there; I thought it was the neighbor's cat climbing on the fence. Then after I went into the kitchen I saw the smoke and got everyone out." Henry explained.

"You thought you heard the neighbor's cat?"

"Yeah, there was something back there and Mrs. Morris's cat has been coming into our yard lately."

"Could it have been a person?"

"I suppose so, what are you getting at?"

"Wait here just a minute. Hey Larry!" Wayne called out as he walked towards the fire engine.

"What do you suppose he meant by that Henry?" Gloria asked.

"Does Wayne think that someone deliberately set our house on fire?" Charles had a frightened look on his face.

"Let's not jump to any conclusions here. I think it's a little too soon to say that this is arson. Look, I think they have this under control, the smoke has turned white."

Henry ruled out the possibility of arson to himself, besides he didn't want to alarm Charles and Gloria.

"Henry, we're supposed to get married in our backyard in three weeks. How are we going to be able to do that with half of our house burned to the ground?" Gloria grabbed his arm.

"Well, let's take our time about how to handle all of this. Half of the house isn't burned down, if anything we might have to move into the guest room for a little bit. Let's

wait for the firemen to finish their job and we'll see how bad the damage is. At nine, I'll call our insurance agent and we'll get a claim for the damage going as well."

Wayne and Captain Peterson were engaged in a conversation at the front of the engine while the four firemen were working at the back of the house. The smoke was gone and the men came walking back to the engine. Peterson walked over to help them stow their equipment but was soon talking to them and making notes on his pad.

Henry excused himself and walked over to the men. "Hey guys, thanks for getting here so quickly."

"No problem sir, it's a straight run down Indian Canyon from the fire station and this time of morning we're able to get here pretty quickly from our station in North Palm Springs." One of the firemen wiped the sweat and soot off his face as he talked to Henry.

"How much damage is there?" Henry asked anxiously.

"Well, it's not too bad. But you'll be remodeling your bedroom and that other room that looked like you had it set up as an office. There's water damage and the roof will need to be rebuilt. Your computer is a little wet, but it'll most likely still work. I'd say you're lucky that you were awake. This could have been a lot worse. You could have been seriously hurt."

"Well thanks again for your quick response, I really appreciate it." Henry shook all of their hands.

"Henry, can Larry, Captain Peterson that is, and I have a word with you? Privately?" Wayne asked when Henry had made the rounds thanking the guys.

"Sure, let's go into the garage, we can talk there." Henry said alternately looking at the two of them.

Once they were out of earshot of everyone else, Captain Peterson turned to Henry and said. "Mr. Wright, we found a considerable amount of accelerant back there, we're going to be turning the investigation into the cause of

this incident over to the Riverside County Arson Investigation Office.”

“Are you saying this was arson?” Henry shook his head.

Wayne put his hand on Henry’s shoulder. “Henry, someone is trying to kill you and Gloria.”

Chapter 2

“What? Who? Why would anyone want to hurt us? We don’t have any enemies, I don’t understand.” Henry stammered in disbelief. Someone was trying to kill them? Impossible.

“Henry, let’s have the arson investigation team do their job, I’ll work with them to see what we can track down. You’re going to be too busy the next three weeks with last minute wedding arrangements. Now you’ll need to work on getting a contractor in here as well.” Wayne tried to get Henry’s mind off someone setting fire to their house.

“Maybe I’ll put off repairs until after the wedding.” Henry shook his head at the thought of taking on additional tasks.

“Knowing you, I think that when you return from your European honeymoon, you’ll want to crawl into your own bed and sleep off the jet lag.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“You should at least get the repairs started before you leave. That way it will be done when you get back.”

“Good idea. They can do all the work when we’re away. I hate to burden Charles with overseeing contractors, but it will give him something to do.”

“There you go. In the meantime, let me work with Larry and the investigation team and we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“Thanks. I’m surprised you can handle an arson investigation given your case load. You’re usually the one asking me for help.” Henry smiled despite his predicament.

“Mr. Wright, we’re going to be here for a couple more hours. The fire did get into the attic space of your home and we want to make sure there aren’t any hot spots before we leave. The arson investigation team will be here around nine, so we’d prefer that you not enter the area until after they give you the all clear. I looked at the rooms where the fire was and there is a lot of smoke and water damage. I suggest that you go shopping this morning after you call your insurance agent, most of your clothes will probably not be usable.” Captain Peterson looked at his notes as he was talking to Henry. “I’m sorry about this; I hope you didn’t lose anything that isn’t replaceable.”

“It’s ok. We’ll take care of everything. I guess we may as well go on a trip to the mall this morning. I’m sure it will be the first of many shopping trips in the next few weeks.” Henry shook Peterson’s hand. “Thanks for your help; I’m sure we’ll be talking again.”

“I sure wish everyone we talk with in this kind of situation had your positive attitude.” Peterson offered.

“Thanks, I’d better go tell Charles and Gloria what is going on. Please don’t tell them its arson. I’ll tell them myself in my own way, in my own time.” Henry turned and walked back over to Charles and Gloria who were still standing in the spot that he’d left them at the end of the driveway.

“Henry, you’d better tell me what’s going on, I don’t like the look on your face.” Gloria held her arms out and gave him a big hug as he walked over.

“Well, our to-do list before the wedding just got longer.” Henry smiled at Gloria who had tears in her eyes.

“I’ll do as much as I can to help. How about we get started with some clothes for the two of you?” Charles wrapped his arms around the two of them in a group hug.

“We’ve been asked to stay out of the back of the house where the fire was.” Henry told them as they the separated.

“You better tell me what is going on Henry Wright. I can see on your face that there is more than just a lengthy to-do list.” Gloria looked sternly at her husband-to-be.

“Well, please don’t be too concerned, but Peterson and Wayne believe that the fire was set.” Henry held Gloria’s hand as they walked into the garage.

“I could have told you that, the whole place smells like a damn gas station.” Gloria stopped in her tracks and pulled Henry back outside.

“It does? I can’t smell anything except smoke.”

“I’m not surprised; most men can’t smell very well. I smelled gasoline as soon as I walked out of the bedroom.”

“Maybe you should tell Captain Peterson.”

“Ok, let’s go tell him.” She turned around still holding Henry’s hand. They walked over to the fire engine where Wayne and Peterson were chatting.

“Captain, Gloria wants to tell you something that she noticed.” Henry interrupted.

“Sure ma’am, how can I help you?” Peterson turned away from Wayne.

“Henry tells me that you suspect that this fire was deliberately set. I can confirm that. As soon as I walked out of our bedroom I could smell gasoline. I think you’ll find that it was used to start the fire.” Gloria explained.

Peterson looked at Henry; he obviously had not expected him to tell Gloria of their suspicions yet. Henry shrugged his shoulders; he couldn’t keep a secret from Gloria. “I’ll pass that information on to the arson investigator. You’re right though, we found a five gallon can of gasoline on the side of the house. Someone soaked the house with it before lighting it up.”

“We’re not talking about a couple of kids playing with matches are we?” Gloria asked.

“No, this is a little more serious than that. I suggest you folks be careful here. Make sure that you keep fresh batteries in your smoke detectors. The fellows found one beeping away in your bedroom by the way. If you hadn’t

already been awake, it probably would have saved your life.” Peterson put his notebook back in his pocket.

“Henry, maybe you should consider staying in a hotel for a few weeks. Your insurance company will probably cover it. It may wise to use a different name as well.” Wayne suggested.

“We’re not going to let some maniac run us out of our home Wayne. We’re going to move into the guest room and put fresh batteries in the smoke detectors like Captain Peterson suggested.” Gloria gave Wayne an indignant look.

“Gloria is right Wayne. I don’t know what is going on. I have a feeling that someone has the wrong house. There’s nobody that wants to hurt us.” Henry added.

“I hope you’re right Henry. I hope that there isn’t some ex-con that you put away while you were chief of police that now wants to get even with you. Or, some former lover of Gloria’s that’s jealous about the two of you getting married. Please be careful until we can find the arsonist.” Wayne told them.

“Wayne, you’re making me very paranoid. You might have a point though. Can you check to see where my ex-husband is? I think he doesn’t like the fact that I’m happy.” Gloria looked sheepishly at the ground.

“You’re serious aren’t you?”

“Can you just please check?”

“Sure. What was his name?”

“Dan Reeves. Last I knew he was living in San Diego.”

“That name sounds familiar.”

“There was a football coach with the same name. He used to take a lot of flack from his Navy buddies about it. Believe me, he’s no NFL coach.”

“Ok, I’ll check him out. San Diego is a two-and-a-half hour drive from here. I guess it’s possible that he could have done this. Does he know where you live?”

“No, we haven’t spoken in a number of years. He may know where I am from one of the kids though. My daughter Samantha is a professor at the University of Redlands. My son Dan is in the Navy somewhere in the Indian Ocean.

Dan Junior and I don't communicate much; he sort of took his Dad's side in the divorce."

"I'll let you know what I find out." Wayne took a couple of notes and put his pad back in his pocket.

"Come on, let's go inside and see if we can get some stuff to wear so that we can go to the mall and buy some clothes." Henry suggested.

"As soon as I know something, I'll phone you." Wayne called after them as they walked towards the house.

"You'd better call the house; my cell phone was in my office in the charger. I'm sure it will take a while to find it if it survived." Henry said over his shoulder.

Henry spoke with Dottie Chalmers, his insurance agent, who said she would take care of everything. She said he was wise when he took the full replacement policy out on his home. She suggested they go out and buy the clothes that they needed for the next week or so and then see how much of their stuff was salvageable. Dottie added that she would call a fire and water recovery crew who could come in and clean up when the fire department investigator was finished. She even recommended a general contractor to them who would do a good job rebuilding their bedroom and office.

At a quarter to ten they were on their way to the El Paseo shopping district in Palm Desert. Gloria was wearing a pair of shorts that were too big for her that Charles lent her. He also gave her a shirt that looked remarkably well, she joked with him that she was going to keep it. Henry still had his shorts and Charles lent him a polo shirt. Fortunately their pool slippers were near the front door, they were now wearing them out. They didn't exactly look like a wealthy couple heading out on a shopping trip; they were hoping to change that with this morning's purchases.

They were in Henry's Grand Marquis going down state highway one eleven when Gloria turned to him. "Henry, do you remember how you were worried about me

moving into your house and how you wanted me to make it my own?”

“Sure, I remember. I wanted you to feel at home, not like you were moving into mine.”

“You realize that this is our chance.”

“I guess so. There’s a silver lining in every cloud isn’t there?”

“Only if you look for it.” Gloria smiled. “You know, I never had a problem with moving into your home don’t you?”

“Yes, I know.”

“But it will be kind of cool to have a brand new bedroom. Have you decided yet what you want your office to look like?”

“No, I was more worried about what we were going to wear to the store.”

“I think you should design the office of your dreams and then we’ll have them build it.”

“Let’s see what kind of payment the insurance company comes up with first.”

“Honey, we have plenty of money, you can do anything you want.”

“That brings me to a question. Who knows that you have fifteen million dollars in investments?”

“You, Samantha and the investment advisors are the only ones. You don’t think anyone is after the money do you?”

“I don’t know. Who is the beneficiary of your will?”

“You are.”

“I am? When did you do that?”

“I met with my attorney when I went back to Sonora in September before you came up.”

“Right before we worked on solving the murder at the theater?”

“That’s right.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would it have made any difference?”

“No.”

“Would you have loved me more?”

“It’s impossible for me to love you more.”

“So it doesn’t make any difference does it?”

“No, I suppose not. I just thought we weren’t supposed to have any secrets from one another.”

“It wasn’t a secret. It just hasn’t come up before.”

“Does your ex-husband know about the money?”

“No. I didn’t have any money when he dumped me. This was my mother’s inheritance.”

“So he’s not after you for money. Why did you tell Wayne to check him out?”

“Dan would hate knowing that I’m happy. I think he would do just about anything to prevent that.”

“Even after all these years of being divorced?”

“I don’t know. Better safe than sorry I guess.”

“Let’s see what Wayne comes up with.”

“I hope it’s a dead end.”

“Me too.” Henry reached over and held Gloria’s hand until they turned onto El Paseo Drive in Palm Desert.

They found a parking spot right on the main drag about a half of block from Brooks Brothers when Henry stopped and looked at Gloria. “What do you need to buy anyway?”

“Everything Henry. I don’t even have any underwear.”

“You mean, right now you’re not –”

“That’s right.”

“It’s a good thing I didn’t know that when we left the house.”

“I thought that after this morning’s events that would have been the last thing on your mind.”

“Somehow you have a way of bringing me into focus.”

Gloria laughed so that her whole face lit up. “Come on, let’s go shopping.”

They walked into Brooks Brothers and Gloria helped Henry pick out several pairs of slacks, some shirts and a new blazer. Henry had planned to wear one of his suits for their backyard wedding on Christmas Eve so they chose a new lightweight suit for him as well. The suit and slacks had to be altered and when Henry explained their situation to the

sales staff they said everything but the suit would be ready right after lunch.

In the next block was a Banana Republic outlet and the couple went in. They both found shorts, the staple of their wardrobe, several casual shirts and sweaters. Gloria wore her new shorts and a new tank top out of the store instead of Charles's clothes and felt much better. They carried several shopping bags with their purchases out to the car and put them in the trunk.

“Honey, I still need to get some underthings.”

“Do you have to? I kind of like knowing that you're walking around this way. It's like my little secret. I know something that no one else does.” Henry put his arms around her and nuzzled her neck.

“Henry, you're incorrigible. There's a little boutique with some frilly stuff just back there. Do you mind if I go in alone?”

“No, you go ahead. I saw a cellular store around the corner. I'm going to go there and explain what happened to my old phone; maybe they'll give me a new one.”

“Ok, I think I need forty-five minutes, maybe an hour at the most. Let's meet back here at that time. I'm getting hungry for lunch; can you find a place to eat?”

“That sounds good. I don't think the cell phone store will take that long. I saw a restaurant on the way there; I'll stop in and see what the menu looks like.”

“I'm so hungry I don't even care what they're serving. I'll meet you here at the car as soon as I can.”

“Ok sweetie, buy yourself something sexy.”

“Of course. See you in a bit.” Gloria leaned over and kissed Henry on the lips and walked towards the little lingerie boutique across the street.

Henry watched her disappear into the little shop and smiled to himself. She may be fifty-five years old, he thought, but with her short black hair and her amazing figure she carried her age very well. Henry didn't look his age of sixty-two either; they'd been told that they made a very attractive

couple. He heard his stomach rumble and realized that the half of a bagel he had for breakfast wasn't holding him.

Henry walked towards the cell store and stopped by JC's Patio Café and asked them if they needed a reservation for lunch in an hour. He was told he didn't, but since he stopped by he could have a sidewalk table when he was ready. He thanked them and continued on his way to get a new phone.

At the cellular store he explained what happened to the clerk behind the counter who offered him a replacement phone for fifteen dollars. He could keep the same number, the clerk explained, but he would have to reprogram all his contacts into the phone. The clerk downloaded Henry's favorite ring tone, Elvis Presley's Blue Suede Shoes, into the phone for him and sent him on his way. Henry stepped back outside and looking at his watch realized that this had taken more than an hour. He hurried back to the car; Gloria was most likely already waiting for him.

As he rounded the corner and spotted the Marquis, he saw that she wasn't there yet and he breathed a sigh of relief and slowed his pace. When he reached the car, he saw the shopping bag lying on the hood on the driver's side. He smiled to himself when he saw the note on the bag. She must have returned early and gone off to buy something else. He picked up the note.

'You will never see Gloria alive again if you don't follow instructions. Do not involve the police. We will contact you later'

Henry's breath caught in his throat. He and Gloria liked kidding with one another, but she would never play a joke like this on him. He opened the shopping bag; it was filled with underwear and other lacy things. He put them back in the bag, unlocked the car and sat down in the driver's seat to breathe. There was only one thing to do. He pulled his new cell phone out of his pocket, fortunately Wayne Johnson's number was one of the few he memorized.

“Wayne, its Henry.” His own voice was hoarse.

“Henry, I don’t have anything new yet. I need a little more time.”

“Wayne, someone kidnapped Gloria.”

“What?”

“Wayne, we were shopping on El Paseo. She went into one of the stores on her own and now she’s not here where she’s supposed to meet me.”

“Henry, calm down. Are you sure she’s not in another store? You know how women are.”

“Wayne, Gloria is not like that. The stuff she bought is here in a bag on the car. Someone left a note telling me not to call the police.”

“You mean like a ransom note?”

“It’s not asking for money, but yeah, like that.”

“How long has she been missing?”

“I’m not sure. I last saw her a little over an hour ago. Wayne, I should have never left her alone. It’s my fault. At first I didn’t think the fire was arson either. Who would want to do this to us, to her? How could I be so dense?”

“Settle down Henry. Where exactly are you?”

“I’m just down from Brooks Brothers; do you know where it is?”

“I do. Give me twenty minutes and I’ll be there. Henry, don’t touch the note or anything else if you can help it.”

“Wayne, please hurry.”

“I will. We’ll find her Henry, I promise.”