

Mystery
on the
Palm Springs
Tramway

a

Henry Wright Mystery

by

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Chapter 1

Wayne Johnson was frustrated. He kicked at a rock in the gravel parking lot and muttered a curse under his breath. Damn it, how did this happen? The murder rate in the Coachella Valley was relatively low, and it was practically non-existent in Palm Springs. Wayne figured the criminals took a break during the hot weather and didn't bother getting sweaty by killing anyone. The temperature in the Sonoran Desert was well over one hundred at the end of June. Though as everyone always said, "It's a dry heat!" He kicked at another rock and sent it flying back towards the desert that surrounded him.

Dry heat indeed, anytime that the temperature gets to be over one hundred degrees - it is hot - regardless of how low the humidity is here in the desert. The temperature today had the thermometer registering one hundred and two degrees Fahrenheit at Palm Springs International Airport. In the Coachella Valley the breeze comes up in the late afternoon from the west and the distant Pacific Ocean and cools the air off to make the outdoors a little more comfortable.

The convection of the cooler air coming into the valley from the inland area to the west was pleasant and predictable. So predictable that enterprising entrepreneurs constructed windmills that used the breeze to generate electricity at the entrance to the valley. The windfarms, as they were called, next to the

Interstate announced to visitors coming to the valley from the West that they had arrived.

Those same breezes made it pleasant outside and Wayne and his wife Elliot generally sat on their patio after dinner. At this time of the evening, when the sun had been down for several hours, they usually retired with a glass of milk and some cookies to the table next to the pool at their home in Indio talking about their day before heading to bed. This night, the married couple was enjoying some quiet conversation over a glass of iced tea when the cell phone that was always clipped to Wayne's belt disrupted them with its annoying electronic chirp. It was his boss at the police department, Jim Fegosi, who told him to head out to the Palm Springs tramway where a body had been found in the tram car by the janitor. Some poor unfortunate soul took a ride and ended up with a bullet hole.

Wayne exchanged his shorts for long pants, changed his shirt and grabbed a sweater, since it was always thirty degrees cooler at the top of the tram, and kissed Elliot goodnight. He got into his city issued, unmarked Ford Crown Victoria and headed for the tramway. There was no time for a leisurely drive up to Palm Springs on Highway 111 tonight. He took the Interstate, I-10, north to the Date Palm exit. He'd thought of using lights and siren as he was heading west, but it was late, traffic was light and he was able to make good time. Wayne took the exit and jogged over to Vista Chino and drove west on it back to Palm Canyon Drive and headed up Tramway Road to the base of the tram.

Wayne was captain of detectives on the Palm Springs police force. He spent most of his time investigating

burglaries, car theft, and the occasional vice problem in one of the hotels downtown. He didn't often investigate murders and didn't like doing it, though that was what he was trained to do. When he called, Fegosi didn't have any details on what had happened, he only said to get over to the tramway, pronto, there was a corpse with a hole in his head in the tram.

Wayne parked the Crown Vic in the parking lot next to the coroner's van who had managed to beat him there from Perris. There were a number of black and whites and several unmarked, but obviously police vehicles, in the parking lot. One of the uniformed officers was unreeling crime scene tape from a large roll and sealing off the building where the base station of the tram was located.

The Palm Springs Tramway was a great tourist attraction. Its two gondolas carry up to eighty people at a time through the Chino Canyon up to the top of Mount San Jacinto at over ten thousand feet from the Coachella Valley floor. The tramway was an engineering marvel when it was first constructed in the early 1960's and even today was still awe inspiring. The terrain was so rugged and impassible that four of the five towers were built with helicopters, an unusual construction technique more than forty years ago.

Wayne had now been here for a couple of hours and while he learned a lot since getting here, there were still a lot of unanswered questions. Well, kicking at rocks out here wasn't going to get any of them answered so he started walking back to the station from the parking lot and pulled his notepad out of his shirt pocket and checked what he had learned so far. George Margolis, the tramway's chief of engineering, had been very helpful, answering all of his questions.

Since the victim was found in the closed gondola, and the only way to operate the tram was from inside the car, it seemed like the killer had to be in the car with him when it happened, except only the victim was on the tram when it came to a stop at the Valley Station.

George was obviously proud of the tramway, he told Wayne that a couple of years ago the entire system was refurbished. The cars were replaced; they were now the largest rotating tram cars in the world. The cars made two slow revolutions as they ascended and descended to give the tourists a view of the Coachella Valley and the ruggedness of San Jacinto Mountain. At the same time as it was modernized, the tramway was designated a civil engineering historical site. What that meant wasn't clear to Wayne, but the chief of engineering obviously thought it was important for him to know.

Wayne continued his interview with Margolis, and the kid that found the body, they both said that everything appeared routine with the tram until the kid opened the door to the gondola at the station once it came to a stop. After he talked with the two men, Wayne had an initial look at the rather messy murder scene; after which he had to get some air and he headed for the parking lot where he was now. Now matter how much blood and gore he had seen in his career, nothing could prepare him for the bits of skull, brain and blood of what had once been a human being splattered inside that small space.

His eyes followed the tramway's cables in the moonlight up the canyon; they appeared as gossamer strands of a large spider's web as they made their way up the steep mountainside. He looked up towards the mountain as though the answer to his frustration

could be found there. It was impossible to see the upper station from here despite the moon which was nearly full tonight. The top of the tram was just too high and the mountains too jagged. He was going to have to come back in the morning, in fact he would probably spend all day here tomorrow interviewing additional employees and having a closer look at how the tram worked in the daylight to see if he could work out this strange puzzle.

Wayne walked back towards the scene of the crime - such as it was. They had established the official crime scene at the Valley Station of the tram. It wasn't really where the crime occurred; it was where the crime was discovered. The actual murder had taken place somewhere between Mountain Station at the top of Mount San Jacinto and here. Over two-and-a-half miles, George Margolis told Wayne, nearly thirteen thousand feet of tram travel. All of it except the five hundred feet or so closest to the Valley Station inaccessible - except by a bird.

Terrance Quinn was the superintendent of maintenance of the tramway and one of his responsibilities was riding down the mountain on the last tram of the day, that had been about nine forty-five this evening. That last ride took the trash and anything else that needed to come down from Mountain Station at the top, to Valley Station on the valley floor. This particular ride was not only the last tram trip of the day, it was the last trip that Terrance Quinn would ever take.

The victim was shot by a powerful hand gun at close range. There was no entry hole for a bullet anywhere in the tram car's sheet metal or through the windows. So he had to be shot from inside the gondola. When

the car came to a stop and the janitor opened the door, the only one inside was Quinn. How had someone managed to get in the car, shoot the victim, and then get out again before it arrived at the station? If Wayne could find that out, he would be a long ways toward figuring out who did this.

The young janitor was waiting at the station for the car to come to a stop in order to help his boss empty the trash bags from the car. When he opened the door he saw that there was a large pool of fresh blood that covered the entire floor of the tram car. In the midst of all the black plastic garbage bags was the body of Terrance Quinn with a large bullet hole in the middle of his forehead.

Wayne walked around the lab crew from the Riverside County Sheriff's office that was busy photographing and dusting for prints, he looked for the kid who had discovered Quinn's body. Wayne warned him not to leave yet, where did he go? What was his name again? Wayne pulled his pad out of his pocket again to check his notes, Todd Gregory. Wayne put the pad back in his shirt pocket. Todd was over near the maintenance area talking with George Margolis.

As Wayne walked over, he could see that Todd was still upset, the skinny kid in the oversized overalls was practically crying as he talked with George. Margolis was patting the younger man on the shoulder in an attempt to console him without much effect. Gregory had called Margolis first when he discovered the body; it was Margolis who had called 911 from his cell phone on his way over to the tramway. When he first interviewed Gregory, Wayne had grilled him to see why he hadn't called the cops first, but the young man had been so distraught that he said that when he saw all

the blood and realized it was Quinn that he panicked and didn't know what to do.

Wayne stepped up to the two men and told Todd Gregory to go home and come back for his shift tomorrow. He didn't consider Gregory a suspect, but all the same, he cautioned him about not leaving town. At this point he didn't have any suspects, he wanted to talk with all of the tramway employees, and certainly he would want to talk with Gregory in more detail. The young man nodded at Wayne, said good night to George, wiped his nose on the sleeve of his overalls and walked off to the parking lot.

Wayne then asked Margolis if it was possible to shut down the tramway the following day so that the crime lab could finish processing the car. Margolis explained that there were a number of people at the upper campground with no way down if the tram was shut down.

Margolis told Wayne that the tramway was used by campers and hikers to get to Tamarack and Round Valleys at the top some of who probably needed to be brought down. After going back and forth discussing the difficulties of closing down and stranding the campers or disappointing tourists who wanted to ride the attraction up the next day, Margolis agreed to phone the general manager of tramway operations to see if they could barricade the parking lot at the Valley Station. That would in effect keep the day tourists from going up and down, but they could run a tram in the afternoon in case they needed to bring the campers down the mountain.

Wayne even thought of asking the Riverside Sheriff's Department to send their helicopter up to Mountain

Station if they had to, but he didn't mention it to Margolis and thought he could keep that as his hole card for the time being.

Margolis walked off to make his call and Wayne could see him standing in the parking lot talking on his cell phone a few minutes later. The guys from the coroner's office were standing near the souvenir shop chatting, one of them smoking a cigarette. Obviously the lab crew had not released the body yet. He walked back over to the tram car and found the crime lab crew supervisor. Wayne asked him if he had any preliminary results and how much longer he and his crew were going to take.

He got a lecture that this was a murder scene, not a television show and there was no way to process everything in an hour or so. The supervisor did tell him that there were no powder burns on the victim's hands or overalls, and it looked as though the gun was fired from six or seven feet away. He said based on that, and since there was no weapon in the gondola, he had to rule out suicide. As far as the rest was concerned, he wouldn't be able to tell Wayne any more information until tomorrow at the earliest.

Wayne considered calling Fegosi on his cell phone, but it was well after midnight and he didn't really need to ask permission to go home. He felt that he couldn't do much at the tramway anymore, he decided to leave and come back early in the morning. He talked with the senior uniform officer on duty and gave him his card and cell phone number and asked him to call right away if anything new came up.

Wayne walked back to the parking lot where he had taken a break from the gore just a few minutes before

when Margolis stopped him. He said he'd checked with the general manager, who apologized for not being there but he was at a nephew's wedding in San Diego. Margolis said while his G.M. was concerned about his dead employee, he reluctantly agreed that they would shut down for a day. Margolis said he would personally put up barricades and a sign that the tram was closed for maintenance and would call the campground host at the upper station and explain the situation to him. He said goodnight to Wayne who started his car and headed for the exit of the parking lot.

As he turned the Crown Vic back onto Tramway Road to head down to the valley floor, he stopped after a turn around the rock face to admire the view. The station was several hundred feet higher than the Coachella Valley floor and the view of Palm Springs and the surrounding cities was beautiful from here. The lights from Palm Springs and its grid of streets was nearest to him, off in the distance he could see Cathedral City, Rancho Mirage and Palm Desert.

There was a break in the grid of lights directly in front of him which had to be the airport. Beyond it he could see the Interstate, even at this time of night there was a fast flowing river of headlights that were heading towards Los Angeles two hours west. Paralleling the white river was a red ribbon of taillights driving to Arizona, two hours east.

Wayne sighed as he eased off the brake and headed back towards the Interstate and home to Indio where Elliot was sound asleep. It was after two when he finally rolled into bed, she patted him in her slumber and he was asleep within minutes.

Wayne was back at the tramway at eight-thirty the next morning. He'd stopped at the Starbucks on Palm Canyon Drive on the way in and picked up the largest cappuccino they made. He figured he was going to need it; he didn't get very much sleep, and this was going to be a long morning. He drove around the barricades and tape and an official looking sign that said the tramway was temporarily closed due to maintenance.

The parking lot was not nearly as full as it had been last night. The crime scene lab crew had a van parked there, the coroner's van was gone and there were two black and whites, officers guarding the area. Wayne parked the car, pulled his cappuccino from the cup holder and walked towards the station. Today was going to be another warm one, despite the early hour the temperature was just over ninety. On this side of the Valley, the sun had worked its wonders for almost three hours already and the pavement was already radiating its heat.

He walked up to the tram gondola, there were different crime scene people working away in the car than last night. The gondola was now covered with fingerprint dust; there were black smudges of the powder everywhere and Wayne thought it looked like the end of a finger-painting session at a day care center. He asked the technician for the supervisor and was told that he had gone to the bathroom to wash up. As he turned around to head that way, the supervisor came walking up and to Wayne's surprise it was the same guy that he had left here last night.

Despite freshening up, the guy looked haggard. He told Wayne that they confirmed that the victim's fingerprints had been found on the control panel and mechanism inside the car, on the outside and inside of the door handle, and although they were having some difficulty lifting clear prints off the trash bags, it looked as though those prints would also belong to the victim. Todd Gregory's prints were found on the outside of the door, they were consistent with his story of opening the door when the car arrived at the Valley Station.

There were a lot of other fingerprints around the car, but it looked as though they belonged to tourists who had ridden during the day, they were found on the glass, but not near the controls or the door handle. Wayne asked if they could check the top of the car, just in case the murderer rode up there before committing the crime. The supervisor raised an eyebrow, he said that this was starting to sound like something out of a James Bond movie, but he agreed to check. His crew was finishing up with processing the scene and he thought they would be done by ten, eleven at the latest.

George Margolis came over to find Wayne; he wanted to know if they could open the tramway to the public after the crime scene crew had cleared out. He thought he could have his people clean the gondola in a couple of hours; he wanted to open up the tramway by early afternoon. Wayne agreed to release the crime scene once the lab guys were done and told Margolis to expect a lot of sicko thrill seekers. People who would want to ride the tram just because it had been the scene of a murder. The tramway slaying was the lead story on the morning news; he expected this

afternoon's Desert Sun newspaper would have front page coverage as well.

George also told Wayne that a man who identified himself as Robert Silverstein had called this morning. He was concerned since Terrance didn't come home last night. George was surprised, he thought Terrance Quinn was single and at first refused to give him any information. George said the man was insistent and then told him that he was Terrance's partner. George took it upon himself to tell him what had happened to Terrance, at which point Robert Silverstein lost control of his emotions and hung up the phone. Wayne asked if that was the only next of kin that needed to be notified and George said as far as he knew it was. George Margolis said he was actually surprised about the phone call from Silverstein, since Quinn kept to himself and rarely socialized or talked about his life outside of work, Margolis said he had just assumed that he lived alone.

Wayne asked George if he could see Terrance Quinn's personnel records, he wanted to go and talk with Silverstein on his own. George said he'd take care of talking with Nancy in the office and would bring the file out to Wayne.

He wondered where Todd Gregory was this morning and George told him that Todd worked the afternoon shift; he didn't come in until two and worked until ten-thirty at night. The last car of the night came down off the mountain at nine-thirty and usually Todd and Terrance Quinn would need an extra hour to clean up for the next morning. Margolis walked off to the office to get the personnel file for Wayne. He made a note on his pad to talk to Nancy in the office; he wanted Todd Gregory's address and home phone number as well.

Margolis came walking back with a manila folder that he handed to Wayne. He told him it was the only copy of Quinn's file so Nancy wanted it returned. Wayne told him he'd make a copy of it at the station and that he wanted to talk with Nancy later so that he could get the names, addresses and phone numbers for Todd and in fact for everyone that worked at the tramway, including the campground host at the top. George picked a walkie-talkie off his belt and radioed the request directly to Nancy. He told Wayne that he would have a spreadsheet with all the contact information within an hour.

Wayne spent several more hours talking with everyone connected to the tram's operation and then he and George drove out to the cableway's first tower and had a look around. Wayne marveled at the size of the tower, it reached more than two hundred fifty feet into the desert sky. But other than being fascinated by the forty year old technology, he didn't spot anything that would lead him to solve this crime. On their drive back to the Valley Station he asked George to give him a ride in the tram up to Mountain Station.

The crime scene crew finished up at ten-thirty and George had several of his staff come in and clean out the fingerprint dust and the large bloodstain from the car. Shortly after one o'clock, Wayne and George rode up the mountain, mid-way they passed the other car coming down, it was empty. Wayne looked out the windows, George used the mechanic's override on the controls to slow down and stop the car from rotating. The trip up which normally took twenty minutes lasted just about forty-five. Wayne ignored the scenery and looked at how close the tram came to the support

towers to see if there was any way someone could have entered the car, committed murder and escaped.

When the car came to a gentle stop at Mountain Station at the end of the cable, it was considerably cooler than in the valley. He met the Round Valley campground host at the bottom floor of the three level station. Warren Evans told Wayne that after he waved goodbye at Quinn on that last ride, he hiked back to the campground. Wayne asked him if he was sure that it was Quinn that he saw and Evans said there was no doubt about it. Upon returning to his post at the campground it had been still and except for a group that sang around a campfire right up until quiet time, nothing unusual had happened.

The ride down was less pleasant; George and Wayne shared the car with a number of overnight campers who had been waiting all day to come down the mountain. They had obviously not been near a shower for some time and the car, which had seemed spacious and bright on the way up suddenly seemed confining and stifling with the odor of too many bodies in too much heat closing in like a large concrete door that was swinging shut in a bank vault. Wayne stood near George who was operating the car and looked out at the spectacular scenery without talking.

There was a large group of tourists at the bottom waiting to go up, many of them ambulance chasers, or the equivalent when a coroner's van was involved, as Wayne had predicted. Nancy was waiting at the car when it stopped and handed Wayne a piece of paper with the staff's contact information. Wayne said goodbye to Margolis, and told him that he would be in touch.

All the signs of last night's and this morning's activities were gone and when Wayne walked out of the station to his car, the tramway looked like it did on any other summer day with tourists milling about, and the sun glinting off one of the gondolas as it made its way along the cable. He got into his car and looked at the stack of paper that he had collected on the passenger seat and headed down the hill towards the police station to try and make sense of this mystery.

Chapter 2

Henry Wright looked in his bathroom mirror and ran his hand over the stubble on his head. He'd always worn his hair short, but since retiring and moving to this warm desert climate, he'd gone even shorter on the clippers. He found that it was a lot easier to take care of with his daily swims this way. He supposed that if he ever let it grow out it would be salt and pepper colored, there was a lot more grey these days than the dark brown that his driver's license said he had. He put down his toothbrush and turned the light off as he walked out of the bathroom and headed outside.

There was some faint light on the Eastern horizon, but the stars were still visible when Henry walked out of his bedroom's French doors. He turned on the underwater pool light so that he could follow the line of tile on the bottom of the pool while he swam and crossed the small lawn over to the pool at his house on Mel Avenue in the Ruth Hardy Park section of Palm Springs.

He took the towel from around his waist, he never bothered wearing a swimsuit, the backyard was very private and the only other person here was Charles, his housemate, who usually slept late. He tossed the towel on a chaise lounge, strapped on his digital watch, put his swim goggles on top of his head and jumped into the water. It was warm, but nowhere near

as warm as his bed had been. The water felt good against his bare skin and the sleepy grogginess that he felt before getting in was gone.

Henry pulled his goggles down, pushed the buttons to start the stopwatch and started swimming laps. He enjoyed the exercise and usually used the time in the pool to solve problems or think about the issues he was dealing with. Before he retired, when he was still the police chief in Eagle River, Wisconsin, he never swam. Of course he knew how, you cannot grow up in that part of Wisconsin and not know how to swim. The area was literally dotted with lakes and he had learned how to swim as a young boy in the early fifties.

As he got older and joined the police force and later became chief of police he occasionally would take a dip in Eagle Lake to cool off, but he didn't swim for exercise as he liked to do now. The exercise helped him keep in shape as well. As an adult, it seemed like he had always weighed the same one hundred eighty pounds, which on his just over six foot frame made him look slender. Since moving to Palm Springs and starting his swimming routine he hadn't lost any weight, but he was wearing a smaller size pants than he did while he was on the police force. At sixty-one he felt that he was in the best shape of his life.

Henry made another kick turn at the end of the pool and kept swimming. He found that when he didn't have something to resolve, like one of the profiling cases that he helped the FBI with, his mind wandered while he was swimming. He thought about his journey to Palm Springs and how he really ended up here as a fluke. At this point he wouldn't live anywhere else, but his journey here had been by chance.

Just over three years ago, Henry was living and working in Wisconsin and was three months away from retiring from the Eagle River police force when he and his wife Irma took a flight out to Las Vegas to look for a place where they could live out their retirement. Henry was at the point where he hated the snow and cold and didn't want to deal any more with beer laden snow mobilers racing through town on cold February days. They had talked about retiring to a warmer climate, and after long discussions, they had narrowed their choices to Las Vegas, Nevada; Palm Springs, California or Phoenix, Arizona.

They flew to Las Vegas first, the folks in Eagle River thought he and Irma were on a well deserved vacation to do a little gambling at the slot machines. The long time Eagle River residents didn't want to let on to the folks at home that their beloved chief was leaving town after retiring and used the vacation excuse with their friends and travel agent. In the meantime, they had quietly lined up an appointment with a Las Vegas realtor to look at homes in which to live out their lives quietly. After checking in at the hotel and having some lunch, Irma decided to go back upstairs by herself to lie down when she didn't feel well, thinking that the food hadn't agree with her.

An hour later when Henry went back up to the hotel room to check on Irma, she was dead on the bathroom floor. The coroner told him later that she had a massive heart attack and had died before she hit the floor and never felt a thing. Henry flew back to Wisconsin with Irma's body and buried her there. The following few months were difficult for Henry and he didn't remember much of them now.

Still in a fog, three months after Irma's funeral Henry retired from the police force, he now wanted to leave Wisconsin more than ever but he couldn't bear moving to Las Vegas. The city would always be a memory of Irma and the hotel room bathroom. His old colleague from an FBI crime class that they attended together, Wayne Johnson, called him and invited him to come to Palm Springs for a visit and a look around. That was how he ended up here, in his little oasis on Mel Avenue.

Henry made yet another kick turn in the pool and headed back towards the other end. He'd stayed with Wayne and Elliot in their beautiful home on a golf course in Indio for a couple of weeks. Then after looking around briefly, he bought the house here on Mel in the older part of Palm Springs. The place was too large for one person, but Henry thought the layout of the home was perfect and he loved living here.

The house was in the shape of a U with the front door, living room and kitchen in the middle. At each end of the U were two bedrooms each with their own bathroom. All the bedrooms had double French doors leading to the inner courtyard which was the inside of the U with its pool, cabana and tiny strip of lawn. Henry set up one wing of the house with his bedroom and an office. The other wing was set up with two guest rooms, until he met Charles.

Charles Knightly III was a retired high school history teacher who played pool at the local senior center where Henry spent a lot of time after he moved into the house. Charles was one of the few people who could beat Henry at eight ball, and they struck up an immediate friendship. Charles had moved to Palm Springs recently after caring for his life partner in San

Francisco who passed away from AIDS. He had a hard time finding an apartment to rent, not many places were willing to let Charles bring in his little dog, a toy poodle named Pierre, that he couldn't part with.

Henry offered him one of the two guest rooms while he was hunting for a permanent place and Charles and Pierre moved in. After a few months, Henry suggested that Charles stop looking for a new place to live, and the two of them had been housemates for a couple of years now. The arrangement worked well for both of them. Henry didn't really need the couple of hundred dollars that Charles insisted on paying in rent every month, but Henry thought Charles would feel better if he didn't provide charity. Henry liked having someone to talk with, Charles' history teacher experience had come in handy and Pierre was no trouble at all, Henry liked having the well behaved little dog around.

Shortly after Henry moved into the house, he talked with a grief counselor about Irma's unexpected death. He told the counselor about the fog that he was in for several months and the unexpected lonely retirement life that he had found himself living. Talking with the counselor helped somewhat, but he had a hard time socializing with women until he helped his old friend Wayne out with solving the murder of a local real estate agent a few months ago.

He met a woman while he was investigating that incident, and while things didn't work out with her, he realized that he missed loving someone. He'd come out of his shell at that time and had finally taken off his wedding ring which was now in the desk drawer in his office.

Then, almost two months ago, he met Gloria McCann while helping a Northern California sheriff solve a mysterious murder in a gold mine. Henry smiled underwater as he thought of Gloria and felt a stirring that he had not felt in a long time. Gloria lived in a beautiful home on a hilltop just outside of Sonora in Northern California's Gold Country, and she had promised to come and visit him during the upcoming Fourth of July holiday.

They talked several times a week on the phone since he left Sonora in May and they were both looking forward to her visit. Gloria's daughter, Samantha, was a professor at the University of Redlands and had been begging Gloria to visit once school was out for the summer. So Gloria decided to combine a stay with Sam in Redlands, less than an hour from Palm Springs, with a stay at Henry's house. They hadn't spoken since she arrived in Redlands last week; she wanted to devote the time to be with Samantha.

Gloria was finishing up her stay in Redlands now and would be here in two days. TWO DAYS! Henry had a momentary panic, lost a stroke and almost swallowed some water, but quickly recovered as he realized that he had everything under control. He had put a schedule of tasks that needed to be done before her visit on the refrigerator that had driven Charles mad, but he had stuck to it closely and was confident that everything would be ready.

He had a lot to do before Gloria arrived in Palm Springs, and he wanted the house to look great and he hoped that she would be as comfortable here as he was at her house when he was recuperating in May. If he remembered his to-do list correctly, today he would go out shopping for new sheets for the guest room bed.

Henry had washed the linens on the bed twice already, but decided he wanted Gloria to have the best experience she could possibly have. He talked Charles into going to the outlet mall with him today in Cabazon to look for a luxurious set of bed linens for the guest room bed.

Tomorrow the landscapers were coming; he wanted the grounds to look nice and had done a bit of pruning himself. He hoped that Gloria would like his backyard and its tropical feel as much as he did. The garden was planted in the mid-fifties and the palm trees and shrubbery were mature and lush. The yard with its pool looked like a miniature tropical resort and despite the continual summer desert heat; the foliage was fresh and the colors vibrant. When they first talked about her visit, Gloria had said that she had no problem visiting him in July as long as he had a pool. He made a mental note to make sure that he put fresh pool towels on the guest room bed. There was a brand new terry cloth robe in the closet; he purchased it specifically for her.

Gloria was supposed to arrive on the third of July around lunchtime. He'd asked Juanita, his housekeeper; to come early that morning so that the inside of the house sparkled as well. Charles thought he was a little obsessive with all this preparation and was impressed that Henry was going all out to try and impress his "woman friend" as Charles called her. Charles had already figured out that Gloria was very special to Henry.

Henry's train of thought was broken when his watch started beeping; he had been swimming for forty-five minutes. He climbed out of the pool and picked up his towel and after drying off sat down on the chaise

lounge for a few minutes. The sun had come up, the sky was bright blue and there were no clouds to be seen anywhere. Today was going to be another beautiful warm day, and he could hear that the world outside was starting to wake up. Over on the next block he heard a garbage truck making its rounds, in his own yard there were more pleasant sounds as there was a bird singing in one of the trees.

As he looked towards the house, he spotted a hummingbird visiting his large hibiscus; he never tired of watching the little birds. His garden looked really good, it wasn't the grandiose view that Gloria's house had of canyons, a reservoir and a far off town, but this semi-tropical oasis that he watched over was very pleasant. He sure hoped that Gloria would like it.

He sighed and looked at his watch, it was time to shower and get dressed for the day. Thursday was his regular day for meeting Wayne at Sherman's Deli for breakfast. He got up and wrapped the towel around himself and headed for the French doors that led directly into the kitchen to start the coffee pot.

Ninety minutes later he parked his Mercury Grand Marquis in Sherman's parking lot next to the nearly identical looking Ford Crown Victoria. It looked as though Wayne was already here. Henry bought the Mercury three years ago after he moved to Palm Springs because he liked the big cars. The Eagle River Police Department had four of the Fords, in the Crown Victoria rendition, and Henry had spent a lot of time cruising in the large automobiles. Lately, he had been thinking of getting something with better gas mileage though, especially if he was going to keep making trips to Northern California to visit Gloria.

Henry walked into the restaurant and spotted his friend already sitting in their usual booth in the back. As he arrived at the table so did Millie, their favorite waitress, coffee pot in hand.

“So did you solve the tramway slaying mystery yet?” Henry asked, sliding into the booth.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Wayne said grumpily.

“The newspaper is beating you guys up, says the crime has Palm Springs finest stymied for the past week. I think that was the word they used.” Henry held his cup up to allow Millie to fill it with coffee.

“Your old usual, or your new usual, what will it be?” Millie asked Henry.

He smiled at Millie’s question, he used to eat the bagel and lox every Thursday, Sherman’s did a great job with it. A few months ago he switched to bran cereal and fruit and found that he enjoyed it more. “The new usual please, and I’d like blueberries if you have them.”

“We do, I swear we get them just for you, no one else seems to like the damn things. You take low-fat milk on your cereal right?” Millie made some scratches on her order pad.

“Yes, please.” Henry turned back towards Wayne who already put in his order for breakfast.

“You’re in a good mood, is she arriving today?” Wayne asked.

“No, I’m not ready today. She’s arriving the day after tomorrow. Then I’ll be ready.” Henry smiled and took a sip of coffee. He was in a good mood and nothing was going to change that.

“So instead of ribbing me, do you have some time in the next couple of days to help me? Besides, the paper is wrong, it hasn’t been a week, only five

days.” Wayne looked at Henry as Millie set his order of pancakes down in front of him.

“Not really, I have to go to the outlet mall today, I’m going grocery shopping tomorrow, I want to do a little more pruning in the yard, I really don’t have much time. What do you need?”

“Well, the paper is somewhat correct. I’m a bit baffled by this tramway thing, do you mind if I bounce some ideas off of you?” Wayne started in on his pancakes.

“I thought you didn’t want to talk about it?” Henry kidded him.

“Yeah, I don’t, but I need to. The profiling work that you do and your way of getting into the victim’s head might really be helpful. I need to get on the right track in this investigation. I know I said I don’t want to discuss it, but I’m frustrated and need to bounce some facts off someone.”

“All right, let’s hear it.”

“Obviously you’ve read the paper, what they’ve said is fairly accurate. We don’t have a murder weapon, we don’t have a motive, and we don’t even know how the crime was committed. I haven’t seen Spiderman hanging around Palm Springs.” Wayne had to chuckle at his own joke. Henry could tell he was frustrated and didn’t know where else to look.

“Yesterday’s edition of the Desert Sun says that the kid that works at the tramway and found the victim is missing.” Henry took a sip of his coffee as Millie set his cereal in front of him.

“Todd Gregory, yeah, he never showed up for work the afternoon after he found the body. We have an APB out for him, we’ll find him.” Wayne shook his head. “Funny thing is, I don’t think he did it. The lab crew tested his hand and overalls for gunpowder

residue and none was found. Besides, if he did it, why did he do it?"

"If he didn't do it, why did he run?" Henry asked.

"I interviewed him the night of the murder. He's a kid; he was scared and crying, nearly hysterical that night, I'll admit, it was a pretty gruesome scene. When he found the body, he didn't even call us first; he called one of the managers from the tramway." Wayne shook his head; he had a hard time visualizing Todd Gregory killing Terrance Quinn.

"How old is he?" Henry emptied his coffee cup and tried to catch Millie's eye.

"He's nineteen." Wayne answered. "Why?"

"Did you check his mom's house?"

"No, why do you say that, do you think he might be there?"

"If I was nineteen, and my supervisor was killed on the job and I thought I was a suspect and I didn't know where to go, I'd go home." Henry answered as Millie refilled his coffee cup.

"Ok, I'll find out who his parents are and where they live and pay them a visit. Do you have any other ideas?" Wayne held his cup out for a refill from Millie as well.

"You don't have a murder weapon, right?" Henry asked.

"No, Quinn was shot once with a .38 caliber pistol, the bullet entered just above his left eyebrow and came out the back and was actually found just kind of lying in the collar of his overalls. It caused quite a bit of bleeding, but death was instantaneous according to the coroner. The bullet was fired from inside the tram gondola, or through an open window or door, there are no entry marks in the glass or sheet metal of the car."

“Did the bullet match anything in your files?” Henry knew there was a national database of bullet markings and any bullet and its unique rifling marks that the gun’s barrel left could be traced if it had been entered into the system.

“No, this gun had never been used in a crime before; you know there are millions of .38 caliber weapons out there. Who knows who it belonged to?” Wayne shook his head; he had already thought of all these questions and had not arrived at any answers.

“Did Quinn own a gun?” Henry asked.

“Are you suggesting suicide? What, like he shot himself and then disposed of the weapon while he had a hole in his forehead and most of the back of his head was missing? No, he didn’t. We talked to his partner Robert Silverstein; according to him Quinn didn’t own a gun of any kind.”

“Partner? Quinn was gay? That wasn’t in the newspaper.” Henry put his spoon down and furrowed his brow.

“This is Palm Springs Henry, why are you surprised. Your housemate is gay; you think gay men aren’t murder victims?” Wayne looked a little astonished; he was surprised at his friend’s reaction. “We didn’t pass it along to the news media because it has no bearing on the case and we didn’t want to sensationalize this aspect of the crime.”

“No, no, no, that’s not what I meant at all. It’s just that it throws a different wrinkle into possible motives, what with death benefits, rules of survivorship, inheritance issues and all that.” Henry replied. “Actually, I wasn’t even thinking suicide either, but the gun had to come from somewhere and since you don’t know where to start, I just thought of starting with Quinn.”

“Good idea, but we already covered that. Quinn and his partner led a very quiet life; they were together for fifteen years and didn’t party or participate in any of the alternative scenes in town. They were registered with the State of California as domestic partners and seemed like a happy couple. Robert Silverstein has been ill for quite a long time and is now in shock and is not taking this well. We’re not considering him a suspect at this time.”

Wayne was a little mystified by Henry’s reaction. Obviously Henry didn’t have an issue with alternate lifestyles; he lived with Charles after all. Did Quinn’s sexual orientation have something to do with this crime? Wayne was so quick to dismiss that issue, that he never considered it a motive for murder. Henry sure had a way of making him think about his investigations, no wonder he was so good at solving these unsolvable crimes, it wasn’t just his diligence or perseverance, Henry just had a different approach to problem solving.

Henry fished the last of the blueberries from his cereal with his spoon. “I’ll tell you what. Get me the names of all the people that Quinn worked with and I’ll see what I can do in the next couple of days before Gloria gets here.”

Wayne reached into his shirt pocket and gave Henry a copy of the spreadsheet that Nancy at the tramway provided him. “Here you go, everyone is on there.”

“It looks like you were ready for me to agree to help you.” Henry couldn’t help but smile.

“I know you like a good puzzle, and this one certainly has a lot of missing pieces.” Wayne smiled as well.

“I don’t know how much time I’ll have over the next couple of days; I really want everything at the house to be perfect for Gloria’s visit. I’ll do what I can though.” Henry put the paper with the tramway employees’ names in his pocket.

“Henry, Gloria is coming down here to visit you, not to visit your house.” Wayne shook his head.

“Yeah, I know. Charles has told me that numerous times. Her house is gorgeous though, with wonderful views that I don’t have. I just don’t want her to think that I live in a little dump.”

“Henry, you have four bedrooms, four bathrooms, and a wonderful backyard that looks like an oasis with a beautiful swimming pool! You live in a great neighborhood, I hardly think your place is a dump and I’m sure that Gloria will love it.” Wayne was laughing at his friend. He wasn’t this nervous when his daughter Claire came out for a visit a couple of years ago.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I’m surprised at how I feel myself. It’s almost like I’m back in high school and I’m getting ready for a first date with the homecoming queen. Not that I ever dated the homecoming queen when I was in high school of course. I was kind of a geek back then.” Henry remembered his high school days and was glad they were long gone.

“You are still bringing her over for our Fourth of July barbecue at the house, right? Elliot and I can’t wait to meet her.” Wayne waved Millie over to get the check for their breakfast.

“Yes, I spoke to her on the phone last week before she left for her daughter’s house. She said she was looking forward to meeting my friends. Can we bring anything?” Henry reached into his pocket for

cash as Millie laid the check down on the table and refilled their coffees one more time.

“Let me get this one, since you’re going to help me on this tramway slaying it’s the least I can do.” Wayne took the check off the table. They normally split the check; the last time that Wayne had paid was when Rex Thornbird, the real estate agent, was murdered and he requested Henry’s assistance.

“Ok, I’ll let you buy me breakfast, but I’ll tell you right now that looking into your case is a lower priority than my social life in the next couple of days.” Henry took a last sip of his coffee and put an extra dollar on the table for Millie before following Wayne to the register.

“I understand and am not complaining. Anything you can do to help me get a better understanding of why this happened will speed up solving this mystery.” Wayne paid the check and turned to head out the door that Henry was holding open. “And before I forget, yes, you can bring something on the Fourth, how about a bottle of wine? You pick whatever kind you like, I trust your taste.”

“That sounds good. I’ll pick up something decent at Jensen’s tomorrow while I’m getting food for the week.”

“What do you mean food for the week? I hope you don’t plan to spend the entire week locked up at home. You should be taking her out to see some of the sights in the Coachella Valley. You could maybe even take her for a ride up the tramway.” Wayne enjoyed kidding his friend, but hoped at the same time that Henry would take the time for a tram ride, he would probably come up with other ideas on how this murder was committed for Wayne to look into.

“No, no, of course we’re going out. I want to take her to some of my favorite places to eat. I do want to show her around, she’s never been here before. I don’t think she’s afraid of heights, maybe I will take her up in the tram.” Henry pushed the button on the Mercury’s key fob to unlock his car and waved goodbye to Wayne who got into his city issued Ford. They turned out of the parking lot right behind one another, Wayne headed back to the police station, while Henry headed home to see if Charles was ready to go shopping.