

Power Problems

in

Palm Springs

a

Henry Wright Mystery

by

Bert Simonis

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Chapter 1

The old Toyota pickup groaned in protest when he pulled off the highway and engaged the four wheel drive lever before continuing slowly on the desert sand. Dusk was coming on as the sun set behind the high façade of San Jacinto Mountain.

The truck bounced and his foot jarred the gas pedal as he hit an old tire rut worn into the crust of the sand, causing his head to bounce against the rear window. Damn, he muttered, taking his hand off the shift lever to rub the back of his head. He knew that this wasn't going to be an easy assignment when he volunteered, but he didn't expect to get hurt before getting to his goal.

He continued, slower this time, being careful of the rocks, bumps and ruts that were getting harder to see by the minute. He thought of turning on the little pickup's headlights but didn't want to risk becoming more visible just in case someone was out here at this time of day. He spotted the six foot cyclone fence topped with three strands of barbed wire ahead and turned to run parallel to it. He kept the fence to his right as he slowly bumped along the dirt track that must have been made by the maintenance vehicles.

Looking at the barbed wire made him smile. Did management really think that three strands of barbed wire would keep anyone out? It may have worked fine when it was invented to fence in the West and keep the cows from roaming, but here it certainly didn't do anything to keep someone like him out. He supposed it was there as a visual

deterrent to the amateurs, he hadn't considered himself an amateur for a long time.

Franz Mueller, the chief operations officer at the center had asked for a volunteer to undertake this dangerous assignment. He wasn't sure why Mueller asked for someone, he was the only one at the center that was qualified to undertake this mission. Mueller should have known that and should have come directly to him, there was no need to make a bunch of these do-gooder wannabees think about even trying what he was about to do. What was Mueller thinking?

Did he actually think that someone else had more experience than he did? Was this Mueller's way of knocking him down a peg? Was Mueller jealous of his dinner with Sandra last week? Everyone knew that she was Mueller's girlfriend, no matter how hard they tried to hide it. He even thought that Sandra had gone out with him to cover up her relationship with Mueller.

Sandra Sorenson was beautiful and intelligent, there's no question that he'd enjoyed her companionship during dinner. It seemed like heads had turned at the Blue Coyote that night when he walked in with the blond on his arm. Statuesque, that would be the best way to describe her. She was not aware of her appearance; she cared more about the center. It was obvious that she was into Mueller, and he was probably into her. Fine, let them go and make Arian babies. He liked shorter women anyway.

He was content to do these kinds of jobs for the center; he didn't need to go there for a social life. So why had Mueller asked for volunteers for this operation? It was obvious to the rest of the workers at the center that he was the only person that could be considered as qualified for this assignment.

Mueller was an odd one. Even though he had been in this country a long time, he still didn't quite fit in. There was

something cold and unapproachable in his Teutonic appearance that made him difficult to like. The center ought to get someone else to do their fund raising, he thought. When Mueller went out to ask for money, it almost seemed like a demand. If you didn't give - the black shirts were going to come in and smash your windows. After he finished this little operation, his name would be known everywhere. He might have to do a little jail time for trespassing, but he would be the one forever associated with the cause. He could be the fund raiser and go to all the museum parties and drink martinis with the rich old ladies.

Thinking about the task ahead made him take his eyes off the trail and look in the pickup bed behind him at his kit. He was a little rusty with the climbing gear, but a couple of trips to Joshua Trees National Park and its rock formations made him feel a lot better. He'd planned to undertake this task next week, but the enormous power outage in the Coachella Valley made the timing for tonight fortuitous.

The power had gone out inexplicably just a little after lunchtime. The news station on his truck radio later reported that it began in a substation in north Palm Springs, not too far from where he was now bumping along this dirt track. Within fifteen minutes, other sub-stations had tripped their breakers and the entire Coachella Valley was without electricity. Newscasters reported that power company management was at a loss as to why this massive cascading outage occurred. They couldn't estimate when the electricity would be restored and asked the public for cooperation and understanding.

That's what had prompted Mueller to contact him and get him out here now. He was nearly finished with all of his preparations anyway and was going to go in ten days, but this afternoon was fine. The center would claim responsibility for the power outage when he was in position and he called Mueller from his cell phone.

Mueller was handwriting a press release for the radio station by the light of an old Coleman lantern when he walked out. Originally they had hoped his stunt would get a story on page three of the paper, but with this massive outage the center would probably make the national news. National news, the thought of it was exciting and that would certainly advance their cause. Mueller was certainly clever about using this event to their advantage.

He'd been in the bathroom at the office when the power went out. He had a hard time finding his way out, there were no windows in the room, but he'd managed to walk down the dark hallway to his office where he opened his shades to let the natural light in. He sat at his desk in front of a darkened screen for about ten minutes when the boss came around and told them all to go home for the day. His cell phone rang as he climbed into his Toyota in the parking lot; it was Mueller asking him to come into the center.

As the outage trickled across the Valley like a set of dominoes falling in a stage set, Palm Springs and the surrounding communities broke out in chaos. Traffic lights stopped working and drivers seemed to forget the rules of the road. The airport operated on emergency power and planes were able to land, but flights taking off were grounded as the computers keeping track of the reservations went silent. Passengers' tempers started to rise in the terminal along with the heat as the air conditioning no longer kept everything and everyone cool.

Even the misters that pumped moisture into the dry desert air along the sidewalks of Palm Canyon Drive stopped spraying their relieving mist. Without them the sun continued to heat up the city without regard for the comfort of the people stuck in the desert without electricity. It's actually kind of interesting, he thought as he got closer to the tower he was looking for. Palm Springs was founded as an oasis from the desert heat years before air conditioning and now it became unbearable without it.

He stopped the truck next to one of the towers and looked up through the windshield. The blades were turning slowly in the early evening breeze and made a wooshing sound as they went by. There was no chance of getting close to them unless he did something stupid. After all, he was here to make a point about those very blades, not to get hurt.

He first found out about the trouble the windmills caused when he was headed home one night along Indian Avenue. He saw something in his headlights that was moving in the desert sand close to the pavement. When he first pulled over he thought it was a small child who was hit by a car.

As he walked closer, he saw that it was a bird. A red tailed hawk. It was beautiful even with its broken wing. He went back to the truck, got a blanket and carefully wrapped the big bird in it and put it on the floor of the truck next to him.

He drove out to the Palm Springs Animal Shelter just off Ramon Road, but they were already closed. A sign on the door suggested various places to take animals after hours, the center was the one listed for birds of prey. He pulled in there twenty minutes later and the bird had stopped moving.

He carried it in and one of the volunteers took it from him while another asked him for information. He described where he found it which was met with a lot of nodding from the volunteer. That's when he found out about the windmills and the damage they do to these beautiful creatures.

He learned a lot that evening. The three largest wind farms in the world are all in California and the one here in Palm Springs was the third largest. The hot air from the desert in the Coachella Valley forces the cooler air from the coast through the narrow San Geronio Pass between the San Bernardino and San Jacinto Mountains. On this seventy square mile area, entrepreneurs had installed about four

thousand wind turbines to capture the wind and turn it into electricity.

The volunteer told him that the towers that the windmills were placed on made perfect perches for birds of prey, like the red-tailed hawk that he brought in. Apparently the birds sat on the towers and when they spotted a squirrel or snake on the ground they swooped down only to get hit by one of the speeding blades.

The staffer that had taken his bird in came into the reception area and told him that his hawk had a broken wing and would recover. He might not fly again, they wouldn't know for a few months. They were going to set its wing and sedate it overnight.

The following afternoon on his way home he stopped in at the center. The red-tail hawk was doing well; he watched one of the volunteers feed it. He stopped by again two days later and before long he was stopping by daily and started volunteering his time around the center to repair things.

Three months after the night that he dropped his bird off, he took it to the Living Desert zoo in Palm Desert with Mueller. The bird took up residence there, though it was free to go any time it wanted. Its wing had healed up well, though he could see that his hawk didn't trust it yet and was not yet flying the way that it had before the accident.

On the drive back Mueller talked to him about becoming more involved in educating the public on the plight of these birds and the dangers that they faced with the windmills. A week later he chained himself to the fence surrounding the wind farm with six other volunteers including Sandra. Mueller organized the awareness campaign and KPSP, the local television station, had done a piece on the six o'clock news.

Since then he did a few other civil disobedience activities that saw him arrested for misdemeanors, trespassing

mostly. As a result, the center had received quite a lot of publicity and the donations had come pouring in. Nothing he had done in the past compared with what he was about to do though, as he stopped the little truck at the base of one of the towers.

He shut the engine off and climbed out of the truck and looked up at the tower. The blades of the large turbine were making their rhythmic woosh as they spun around making electricity. He'd studied numerous photographs and manufacturers drawings before deciding that this model offered the most space on top for him to sit.

He picked the cell phone up from the seat before he closed the door. He smiled to himself, it would have been ironic to climb to the top and then realize that he'd left the darn thing down here. Before he started his climb, he was going to check and recheck everything to make sure that he had it with him.

The gear was in the back and he started strapping on his climbing harness. The first thirty feet of the tower were going to be the most difficult, that part was wider than the rest. Near the top, the tower tapered and climbing was going to be easier. Years ago he worked for the phone company and he learned there how to climb poles. This was just like that he figured, except it was made out of steel and had those huge carbon windmill blades whipping by.

Checking his equipment, he swung his rucksack onto his back. He took some water bottles from the center's refrigerator and bought some military meals at a surplus store. He had a blanket and a down parka; he knew it was going to be cold up there overnight. With the light of morning, there ought to be a news crew with cameras right here next to his truck. He hoped the banner that he planned to unfurl would be visible to the television viewers.

He started climbing and after he was about ten feet up, he realized it was easier than he expected. At the first taper,

the tower was narrower and he shortened his climbing rope a little to make up for it. At seventy-five feet he reached the turbine assembly, he could hear it hum. He swung a leg up on it and pulled himself up so that he sat on the housing. Despite the darkness, the view from his perch was unbelievable. The moon had come up and even though the power was out in the valley; he could make out quite a few things.

Over there was Interstate ten, it looked like a river of headlights, its traffic, like water, flowing endlessly. Palm Canyon Drive still had a number of cars on it; the only spot with lights over there had to be Desert Hospital. They must be on an emergency power generator; it would run forever, he knew it was powered by natural gas.

There were a few car lights along Indian Road heading either to town or to the Interstate. Even the airport was dark, its alternating white green beacon was not lighting up the sky.

One of the larger homes on the hillside had power; it was lit up as though it was Christmas. Obviously some rich person had planned ahead. He wondered what it would be like to have enough money to tell the builder of your house that you wanted a generator thrown in. He figured he'd never know.

The blades were still going by in their rhythmic, almost hypnotic movement. He could feel the gears in the housing he was sitting on, they generated a low volume hum and he felt it more than he heard it, it was almost soothing.

He thought he heard a car coming nearer, it couldn't be - this place was deserted at night. He looked down and through the forest of support towers for the wind turbines he couldn't see anything. It seemed like it was darker directly below him than it was in the distance.

There it was again, it was definitely the noise an engine made, it had to be a car driving along the desert as he had a little over an hour ago. He looked down but still didn't see anything. He had to be imagining things.

Pulling his parka out of his rucksack he put it on and then dug his cell phone out of his pocket. He dialed Mueller's direct line at the center and it rang until his voice mail answered. Not wanting to leave a message, he shut off the phone and put it back in his pocket.

He listened again and other than the windmill blades didn't hear the engine noise anymore. Laughing at himself, he thought he was going crazy up here on his perch seventy-five feet above the ground. He was going crazy, somebody was calling his name. Had their careful plans been compromised? He warned that too many people at the center knew what they were planning. He wanted to keep this a secret. Someone looking for him was the last thing they needed right now.

He looked over the side and thought he saw some light reflecting off of metal. Then there was a flash. He felt the bullet tear into his right shoulder and scrambled back onto the housing holding on. The second shot went wide; the third followed it in rapid succession and struck the turbine housing. As he was trying to get away from whoever was trying to kill him he overcompensated and slipped off the other side of the housing. The last thought he had was that he was glad that he missed the spinning blades as he crashed into the ground.

Chapter 2

The first indication Henry Wright had that there was something wrong was when the garage door wouldn't open when he came home. He punched the button on the opener several times and the door refused to budge. At first he thought it was the battery, but then he walked into the house where Gloria had opened all the doors and windows. The air conditioner was not on and after he set the bag from the hardware store on the counter, he found Gloria floating in the pool.

He met Gloria a year ago and they were married right here in their backyard surrounded by friends and family last Christmas. Before meeting her he'd been a widower. His first wife, Irma, died tragically in Las Vegas four years ago. Gloria was living in the Sierra Nevada foothills in Northern California when they met while he was there solving a murder case.

Henry is a retired police chief from a small town in northern Wisconsin, Eagle River. He'd been living in Palm Springs for about three years enjoying his retirement and the little oasis he had here on Mel Avenue. He helped the FBI profile murder victims; he'd discovered a special talent for that during a class he took at their Quantico, Virginia, training center while he was still a cop. Most of his work for the Feds was on the Internet, he never had to travel.

He had regular breakfast meetings with his friend Wayne Johnson, who was a captain of detectives at the Palm Springs police department. During one of those meetings last year, Wayne asked for his help in figuring out a difficult

murder case right here in town. Henry solved it, but he thought it was more luck than anything he had done. Right after that he received a call from Sheriff Bill Rustow in Tuolumne County in Northern California. Rustow had requested his assistance in a case there, that's where he met Gloria.

Now, she waved at him from the pool. He waved back, walked out and leaned over the side of the pool to give her a kiss. She lifted herself onto the edge and met his lips; hers tasted salty of the pool water.

"The power is out, it's been out for about almost the entire time you were gone" She said wiping the moisture off his lips with her wet hand.

"That's why all the windows are open and the garage door opener doesn't work." Henry replied smiling, she was making his face even more wet with her efforts.

"I'm surprised you didn't notice on the way in. The radio says most of the Coachella Valley electricity is out. The traffic lights are dark everywhere. They said the roads are a mess."

"I came down Indian, there are no traffic lights between here and the Interstate."

"It's terrible out there. It's hot in the house, so I decided to strip down and cool off in here."

"That you did," Henry looked down at her appreciatively. "And I don't blame you. Do you want to get out, or would you like me to join you?"

"Hmmm, join me. I don't have to be anywhere and am in no rush to get out." Gloria smiled and raised her arms over her head and fell back into the water.

"I'll be right there." Henry turned and crossed the small patch of lawn and entered their bedroom through the open French doors. He quickly took off his clothes, pulled a towel from the bathroom and walked back out to join Gloria.

An hour later they were sitting on their chaise lounges watching the sun set. Henry had set up the portable radio

on the small table between them and they were listening to the news. The blackout covered Palm Springs from the very north all the way down to Indio. There were stories of people that were stuck in the Palm Springs Tramway. Others of guests stuck in the elevator at the Hyatt hotel on Palm Canyon Drive. Interviews with irate passengers at the airport were entertaining; they were looking for someone to blame when there was no one. Not yet.

“Henry, the news people said that we should keep our freezers closed as long as possible. I took some chicken out earlier; I figured we could barbecue it. Do you think that the rest of the frozen stuff will be ok?”

“I think we’ll be alright. You know when the power goes out like this; you forget what you can’t do without electricity. Earlier, I was thinking of microwaving us some popcorn, but we can’t. Then I thought about watching the news on TV before I got out the radio. The little machine that makes chlorine out of salt for the pool isn’t working and neither is the pump or the filter. I just hope we’ll be able to make a pot of coffee in the morning.”

“The radio says that the crews will be out all night. I certainly hope they’ll be able to fix it. What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure its something mechanical somewhere. That big power outage on the East Coast a couple of years ago showed us that this system needs to be modernized.”

“Henry, you don’t think it’s a terror attack do you?”

“No, that would have been all over the news.”

“I thought we had modern electrical power here in the valley?”

“Are you referring to the windmills in the pass out there?”

“Yes, they look clean and efficient; I figured they were the most modern thing going.”

“They are, the problem is that they connect up to an electrical system that is old and worn out.”

“It’s kind of like putting a brand new engine in an old car?”

“It’s kind of like that. I’ll start the barbecue, are we having anything with the chicken?”

“I have some corn, but I’ll have to open the refrigerator again.”

“Get the wine out while you’re in there. We may as well enjoy ourselves this evening.”

Henry woke up the next morning and on his way out to the pool to swim his daily laps noticed that their alarm clock was blinking red numerals. Diving in to the water, he saw that the pump was on and clean water and chemicals were making the pool sparkling once again.

Obviously the power had come back on some time while they were asleep. Last night he and Gloria sat out on the patio by the pool with a couple of candles until ten. They went for another swim in the dark and went to bed without watching television or reading. It was actually kind of nice.

He set the timer on his watch for forty-five minutes and started swimming laps. His exercise regimen had made him in the best shape that he had ever been in his sixty-one years. He’d always weighed about the same and at just over six feet he was well built at one hundred eighty pounds. Since he started swimming he’d gone down one pant size and up a jacket size as his body adjusted to the daily laps in the pool.

When his watch started beeping, he turned over and floated on his back. He pulled off his goggles and enjoyed the colors the rising sun made in the desert sky. He waded over to the side of the pool where he’d left his towel as Gloria came walking over carrying two mugs of steaming coffee. She set them down on the table and held his towel up for him. As he stepped into her embrace, she wrapped the towel around him and dried him off.

“The power is back on honey, I was able to make your coffee.”

“Good thing too. I don’t know what we were going to do this morning without electricity. I saw that the power was on when I got up. I guess I’ll be busy this morning resetting all of our clocks.”

Wrapping the towel around his waist, Henry sat down in the chair under the umbrella. He sipped his coffee slowly, savoring the first few drops like the caffeine addict that he was. “I’ll bet we’ll hear from Wayne this morning.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s normal. The power is out, it’s hot out, people end up with short tempers and they start hurting each other.”

“Do cops know that there are problems with hot weather?”

“Yep, when the temperature goes between ninety and one hundred, the murder rate goes up.”

“What happens when it goes over one hundred like it does here in the summer?”

“Interestingly, the murder rate goes back down. It’s too hot to bother at that point.”

“Did someone do a study on this?”

“Psychologists at the FBI. They found a definite relationship between temperature and aggression.”

“So the crime rate in Eagle River must have been pretty low in the winter.”

“Violent crime, yes. But I can’t tell you how many drunken snowmobile drivers I have arrested.”

“Aren’t you glad you don’t have to do that anymore?”

“When I left Eagle River I vowed never to shovel snow again in my life.”

“It’s a good thing we’re not at our house in Sonora in the winter time.”

“That’s why we’re not.” Henry smiled.

They were having breakfast at the kitchen counter when the phone rang.

“It’s for you.” Gloria said after she answered the phone while she mouthed the word ‘WAYNE’.

“Good morning Wayne, how are you?”

“Busy Henry as you might have guessed.”

“We were just talking about you.”

“That power outage spiked the crime rate, sorry for the pun.”

“That’s all right. Up to it in alligators eh?”

“You could say that. Are you available to help out with an interesting one?”

“Sure. Do you want me to meet you for breakfast at Sherman’s Deli?”

“Do you mind if I come over? I’d like to talk with both of you together.”

“Come on by, the coffee is hot.”

“See you in a few minutes then.” Wayne said, hanging up the phone.

Wayne and his wife Elliot, were Henry oldest friends. He met Wayne in one of the many law enforcement classes he took while he was still Chief of police. Wayne had worked for the Palm Springs police department his entire career and was the one to get Henry to come out to the desert after Irma passed away. Henry stayed with the Johnsons for the first few weeks in their beautiful home in Indio before buying this home in the older part of Palm Springs.

“Wayne’s on his way over.” Henry told Gloria, picking up the coffee thermos to make sure there was enough.

“Was it as bad yesterday as you suspected?” Gloria asked.

“He didn’t say, he said he wants to talk with both of us.”

“Do you think he needs our help solving a murder?” She seemed almost excited at the thought of working on another case with Henry.

“Well, he did say that he needed help with an interesting one, in his words. I can only surmise what that means.”

“I’m glad I showered and dressed early, I’m ready for an adventure.”

“You always are sweetie, that’s one of the many things I love about you.” Henry put the thermos down and smiled at his wife.

One of the great things about Palm Springs is that even though it is very spread out, everything is nearby. The police station is near the airport and is central to nearly everything. Wayne was at Henry and Gloria’s house on Mel Avenue within fifteen minutes of hanging up the phone on his desk.

“Wayne, it’s good to see you. Oh, are you ok?” Gloria threw her arms around him as she opened the door. Wayne Johnson was rumpled and wrinkled and it looked as though he had not slept all night.

“I will be after one of your cups of coffee.” Wayne grumbled.

“You look like you’ve been up all night, or at least like you slept in your clothes.” Henry poured him a cup of the hot coffee and thrust it into Wayne’s eager hand.

“I have, I didn’t.” Wayne sipped at the coffee.

“Do you want to tell us what happened?” Gloria sat on one of the stools at the kitchen counter.

“What didn’t happen is probably a shorter story.” Wayne sat down on a stool next to Gloria.

“I knew it was going to be bad, I had no idea it was going to be like this.” Henry said looking at his tired friend.

“There was looting downtown; a near riot at the airport; a serious injury car accident at Ramon Road near the Lowe’s store; a virtual orgy at the Hyatt Regency after a midnight swim went a little too far; and a murder at the wind farm.”

“Well, you’re not here to talk to us about what happened at the Hyatt. Tell us about the wind farm.” Gloria studied Wayne who looked worn out from the night’s activities.

“Odd thing really. I don’t have an explanation for it yet. We found Richard Reynolds dead at the base of one of the towers.”

“There must be more.”

“Of course. His little pickup truck was parked nearby, he was dressed in a full climbing harness, and he was wearing a parka it looked like he was planning to be up there for a while. This morning the crew from the windfarm found a backpack of sorts on top of the windmill containing some provisions, a blanket and a banner.”

“He climbed up and fell off obviously. What’s with the banner was he a protestor of some sort?” Gloria guessed.

“Hang on, there’s more. The investigation team unfurled the sign and it reads ‘*Stop killing the innocent for power*’.

“That doesn’t sound like an anti-abortionist type of protest. Any clue what it means?”

“He had some flyers in his bag from the Coachella Valley Raptor Rescue Center.”

“Now there’s a mouthful, what is it?”

“It’s a group that rescues birds that are hurt by the windmills out in the pass, according to their mission statement.”

“That’s a noble effort - wait a minute are they the same ones that padlocked themselves to the fence out there last year?” Henry scratched his head; he seemed to remember something in the news about this group.

“I remember reading about them when we visited the Living Desert Zoo last time. They take rescued birds there to finish recuperating.” Gloria poured Wayne some more coffee.

“Reynolds had several misdemeanor arrests; it seems he was an activist for the group.”

“Climbing to the top was a publicity stunt then?”

“It does appear that way. One of my detectives went out to the Center this morning and found a press release that they prepared announcing that they were taking

responsibility for yesterday's power outage. It claims they had caused it to make the public aware of the plight of the hunting birds."

"Did they really shut down the power system?" Gloria had a look of disbelief.

"No, we don't think so. We talked with the utility folks, they said a relay in a sub-station was worn out and tripped. It caused a temporary overload and everything shut itself down in order to protect the system."

"All of this was caused by a worn out relay?"

"Yes, a twenty dollar part caused this massive outage. The Coachella Valley lost millions of dollars yesterday afternoon and evening, all because of a twenty dollar part." Wayne shook his head in disbelief.

"So this bird rescue place tried to capitalize on the power blackout and take credit for it." Henry said. "Clever, even if their ruse only lasted for an hour, they would have been on the national news."

"That was apparently their plan."

"So if Reynolds hadn't slipped, with the banner and him sitting up there, they would have received a lot of publicity. TV crews would have been swarming all over the place." Henry surmised.

"I'm sure it would also generate a lot of subsequent donations to their cause." Gloria added.

"Except that Reynolds didn't quite slip off the top of the windmill." Wayne said.

"What do you mean, he didn't quite slip?"

"When we found him at the bottom, he had a bullet in his chest."



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