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in
Palm Springs

a

Henry Wright Mystery

by

Bert Simonis

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Chapter 1

Wednesday, April 12

He loved the feeling of acceleration as he guided the big English car into the turn onto Sunrise Way from Highway 111. The luscious Jaguar XJ12 and its velvety twelve cylinder engine purred as nicely as his mother's old sewing machine as he put his foot on the accelerator. He let the steering wheel roll through back through his hands as he finished turning, enjoying the feel of the smooth leather on his palms. He was really glad that he bought this model Jaguar before Ford Motor got their designer's hands on it and ruined the way the car felt.

The smooth acceleration and getting lost in the feelings that the car brought him made him exceed the speed limit ever so slightly after rounding the corner. He slowed it back down and settled back into the big overstuffed Lazy Boy like seat as he headed for his appointment in the older part of Palm Springs. Sunrise Way's straight four lanes stretched out in front of him, it was only mid-April but already he could see the shimmering heat waves rising off the asphalt in the distance from the mid-day heat.

He stopped at the traffic light at Ramon Road and motioned at two teenage boys to finish crossing the street as his light turned green. They must have been late for class at Palm Springs High. The packs on their backs bounced as they ran, one of them smiled and waved thanks to him. Ah, he wasn't sure who said it, but youth truly was wasted on the young.

He was brought out of his daydream when the car behind him honked and he accelerated slowly this time. The gas station at the corner had left the sprinklers running and the water flooded into the intersection. The Jag was clean, he had it washed

yesterday and he didn't want to splash the water on it, he wanted it to look good so that his customer would be impressed. Besides, he had plenty of time, in fact, he was a little early, but that would give him time to open the house up, turn on the air and the lights. A bright house looked larger and hopefully his client would think it was bigger than the little cracker box it actually was. Yes, sir, after six years in the real estate business, Rex Thornbird was at the top of his game. One of the most successful agents in the entire Palm Springs area, Rex had the nice, showcase house up on the hill that he just finished refurbishing, the big imported cars and he was the envy of everyone in the Coachella Real Estate office. If only his wife hadn't left two years ago with half of what he had then, he could have retired by now. Her greed slowed him down some, but after she took her half of the nest egg he carefully built up, and the divorce was final, he worked even harder to get it all back, and then some. This time, the houses, the cars, bank accounts and toys were his and his alone and he intended to keep it that way.

But, even with enough money and toys, Rex wasn't sure he wanted to retire. He was the top producing agent in his office, month after month. His picture was printed on For Sale signs on practically every block in this part of Palm Springs. Around town, he was known as the "mid-century specialist", a reputation that he enjoyed and quietly encouraged. He grinned as he thought of the allure the local real estate industry had created with these so-called mid-Century homes. Anywhere else in the country, these would be described as older houses built in the '50's, or "fixer-uppers" or "starter homes". But here in Palm Springs, that 50's style reigned supreme, and many buyers paid well to get to buy one of these houses. It was too bad that most of them were built quickly and cheaply and were certainly not up to today's standards.

He'd made a nice business of selling the little cracker boxes though; it was amazing what prospective buyers would overlook after he had his paint crew slap a fresh coat of white paint on the

walls covering up tacky outdated wallpaper, or years of grime. He also had a carpet cleaning crew that he used all the time, they worked wonders with worn out wall to wall. All of the houses he sold looked great, but their beauty was only skin deep. Their typical 50's style gently sloping roofs, covered with tar and gravel, didn't allow for the insulation that was required in the heat of the Sonoran Desert. His prospects didn't need to know that the air conditioner that they were going to install would run all day. Single pane windows in cheap aluminum frames did nothing to keep the desert heat out, or cool air in. The flimsy thin glass certainly wouldn't block out the noise of the ever increasing traffic at the Palm Springs Airport. Rex made it a point to never show houses to prospective buyers while American and Alaska airlines were flying their jets in and out of the little airport.

Yet, of all the properties he had ever sold, only a couple of buyers complained to him afterwards. The continuously rising price of real estate and their investment's quickly increasing value was a big part of that. Rex was convinced that some of these buyers were too embarrassed to come back and complain that they had received less than they paid for.

Four years ago he started selling locally well-known architect designed houses. There are a lot of homes in the Palm Springs area designed by famous architects such as Richard Neutra. Some of these homes were built as commissions for famous celebrities or business moguls; others were expressions in Modernism by the architects, built by them on pure speculation of a buyer coming along. Rex's first architectural listing was a small seventeen room motel on Farrell Street near the airport that was designed by another Modernist architect. He sold it to a young couple who wanted to turn it into a resort hotel.

After the hotel he sold a couple of Alexander tract homes, and got lucky when he listed a Richard Neutra designed estate. When Rex discovered the premium prices these designer homes commanded, he started getting creative with the architectural

attribution. He would casually mention an architect's name while showing a house to a potential buyer, and soon he knew that he could ask for a hundred thousand more than the true value of the house. His tactics paid off handsomely, but it couldn't last and it had run its course about the time his wife filed the divorce papers.

Then, about two years ago, when there was a small slump in sales, he discovered that many of his potential buyers were intrigued by Palm Springs' history as a getaway for entertainers and film stars and the legacy they left behind. Since the famous architect designed ruse was more or less passé, Rex moved quickly to make the most of his newfound marketing niche.

In its heyday, in the 1930's and '40's, Palm Springs was the place where many of the Hollywood movie stars slipped away to for rest, relaxation, drying out, cosmetic surgery or illicit affairs. Most of these celebrities wouldn't stay in a hotel with its public rooms and possibility of being recognized by vacationing fans. Instead, they bought a house, or borrowed one from one of their costars. These "celebrity homes" were now much sought after by older people wanting some of the luster of the golden age of Hollywood to rub off on them, or by the nouveau rich, who were trying to associate themselves with old money.

Earlier this year he sold a house that once belonged to Bette Davis to a young entrepreneur who had flown down from Silicon Valley with IPO cash and was a Bette Davis fanatic. The young man had obviously overpaid, the house was small, had the original kitchen, was on a busy corner and didn't even have a pool. Although, as Rex had pointed out to the kid with stars in his eyes, there was room to have a pool installed. He grinned as he thought about it; sure there was room for a pool, as long as you bought it in the toy section of Wal-Mart. Bette Davis had never ever owned that house. He'd made it up, he knew that Bette visited Palm Springs, but she certainly never even saw that little house. Stretching the truth to make a sale didn't matter to Rex

and the buyer took his word for it, anxious to have something that had belonged to his idol.

The house he was heading for now was rumored to have been owned by 1930's singer and movie star Rudy Vallee. Had Rudy ever owned it? He knew he hadn't, since he had been the one to start the rumor. Rex didn't even know if the late Rudy Vallee had even been to Palm Springs. It didn't matter though; Rex bought a small autographed photo of Rudy Vallee on eBay for eight dollars, picked up a cheap frame at Target over in Cathedral City and put it on the mantle of the house's fireplace. Then he added fifty thousand to the asking price and told one of the clerks in the title company office that he just listed Rudy Vallee's former house for sale.

He also mentioned the Rudy Vallee house to Rosie, the manager at the Coachella Real Estate office, he knew that she would spread that to all the other agents, at the Starbucks and all her friends at the gym. Sure enough, about three days after he "quietly" mentioned it to her, one of the associates in his office asked him how he got so lucky with listing celebrity homes. He smiled as he explained to the youngster who Rudy Vallee was, and he realized his reputation in the office had climbed another notch.

Rex made the left turn off of Sunrise onto Granvia Valmonte as he headed towards the mountains and Ruth Hardy Park. He loved the way the Mount San Jacinto rose straight from the desert floor and he never failed to be impressed by the mountains when he headed in this direction. He thought he could see the sun's reflection off the upper station of the Palm Springs tram line, he had seen the light from here at night. Yes, this was a great street in the older section, and there were some really nice homes on this street, some of which he had sold, some of which he would sell in the future.

He had a listing at the corner of Calle Rolph and Valmonte, but the owners still lived in the house and were hard to deal with, he'd had trouble selling that one. Perhaps when they returned to Alberta for the summer he would get in there and stage it for a quick sale while they were gone. He'd made the bulk of his money selling vacant homes for absentee owners; many of the homes were fully furnished including linens and silverware.

Six months ago he sold a house with all the furniture and a 1988 Lincoln Continental in the garage to a couple moving to Palm Springs from Minnesota. When the husband found out the car had only twelve thousand miles on it, it clinched the deal. He probably should have set the asking price higher, but who knew that the car would push the old man's button?

Rex rolled the big Jaguar further up Valmonte, across Caballeros and gracefully eased the car to the curb. There was plenty of space for parking, and he figured he would have enough time to get the house ready before his prospect arrived. This old lady was a bit strange; he hadn't met her yet which was unusual for one of his clients. Usually he spent a lot of time talking to them to see what their interests were before showing them a house. She called the main number in the office earlier in the week, asked for the "mid-century specialist" and the call was routed directly to his desk.

He hadn't been there at the time he was out showing someone else a property he had just listed in the Deep Well area of Palm Springs. She had talked with Rosie, the office manager, and when the message was relayed to him, the word was that she was a recent widow and wanted to move to Palm Springs to be closer to her sister who had bought a home from him earlier. Now that she was alone, she wanted to be closer to her only remaining relative. She was from somewhere out on the coast, he didn't remember exactly where. Apparently, she heard that he sold a lot of celebrity homes and wanted to look at something that had been owned by a thirties or forties movie star.

He thought the house with the Rudy Vallee pedigree would be perfect for her. The next time she called, she reached him on his cell phone, and he mentioned the house with the Rudy Vallee connection. She gushed and said she had a crush on Rudy as a schoolgirl. She insisted that he meet her at the house, she didn't want to come out to his office, said she was driving from Cambria, or wherever, Rex couldn't remember, and it was easier for her to go there directly.

He usually preferred meeting clients in the office out on Palm Canyon and driving them over to the property in his big Jaguar. First they were usually impressed with the car, and he felt that the Jaguar showed that he had class and could be trusted. Second and more importantly, when he drove, he controlled the route that they took to the house. His route was the most advantageous to showing off the neighborhood, not always the shortest way to the house. He also made a point of driving by all the for sale signs with his picture on them.

Rex looked in the Jag's rear view mirror, he checked to make sure his hair was still combed neatly. He turned off the ignition as the big seat slid back from its memorized forward driving position to let him out of the car. He loved that creature comfort feature, though he didn't really need it, he wasn't a very large man, his driver's license said he was five foot eight and weighed one-fifty-five, and both of those were generous. Rex opened the rear passenger door and carefully took his sports coat off its hanger and slipped it on. He was a little fussy about how his clothes looked and didn't like the wrinkled look a lot of the other agents had and always took his coat off when he drove. He brushed a bit of lint off the sleeves, checked his shoes for their shine and looked up over to the house. The gravel roof didn't look too good, but it would last another year or two in the desert climate that didn't see much rain.

Rex walked around his car and headed for the front door; he never parked in the driveway when visiting a house, always at the curb. He figured that parking on the driveway would mean that his client would have to walk around the car and that would make the space seem smaller. Rex noticed with approval that the gardeners were there in the morning as he requested. He knew how to show a house off to its best potential, making the yard look nice and freshly mowed and raked was important in the first impression a potential buyer had of the property.

He bent down to the lockbox to get the key to the front door, and saw that one of the other agents had been careless and left the box open. Rex never liked the combination lock boxes; he didn't think they were as secure as the older ones that required a key. Some places were using electronic lock boxes, but they were expensive and none of the real estate agencies in the Coachella Valley wanted to spend the money.

Joe, one of the agents in the office, told him he should be lucky that lockboxes were used. Joe said there were a lot of places in the country where you had to depend on the owner to provide the key to the house. Sometimes the only way to show a buyer a house was to get a key from the listing agent, a real pain. No, the lockbox system was better than no lockboxes at all, Rex reasoned, even if careless agents left the box unlocked.

He pulled the key out of the box and opened the front door, he walked in and laid the key on the kitchen counter, he'd put it back when he locked up as he was leaving. The house was dark, dusty and a little stuffy, it was a good thing he was early. He walked to the patio door, flipping on lights as he went. He pulled open the drapes and slid the big door open. The house didn't have any furniture in it; the owners were from out of town and after owning it for two years and never moving in, decided to sell. He checked the autographed picture of Rudy Vallee on the fireplace mantle, straightening it as he went by.

Rex walked into the hallway, switched on the light, looked at the thermostat and turned on the air conditioner. This house had been renovated in the early '80's and had air, though it couldn't keep up with the desert heat on the worst days. It wouldn't really cool off, especially with the patio door open, but maybe he could get rid of the stale smell before his buyer arrived. At that point, Rex realized that he didn't even know her name; just that she lived in Cambria, Carpinteria, Camarillo, or somewhere, on the coast.

Rex continued into the bedrooms and flipped on the ceiling lights. Walking into the kitchen, he turned on the fan above the stove; he figured anything to get some air moving through the house. He thought that she would be there by now. Maybe she got hung up in traffic on the way down. Perhaps she called the office to let him know that she was going to be late, perhaps it was a good idea to call in to see if there were any messages. His cell phone was out in the car, he never clipped it to his belt like the other agents, he had one of the older bulky ones and he just couldn't stand the bulge it left under his Armani sport coats.

Before he ran out to the car for his phone, he spotted the old fashioned wall phone above the counter, he remembered his parents had a clunker like that in their kitchen for years, he started dialing, yes, dialing his office, but there was no dial tone. Frustrated, he slammed the receiver back on the chrome hook and turned to head out to his car. What was that? He thought at the noise he heard coming from the utility closet in the hall. There must be something wrong with the aging air conditioner; it had to be ready to conk out, or maybe there was air in the cooling lines.

Maybe he should turn it off before it made noises with the widow in the house, a noisy air conditioner would be worse than one that was not on. He could always mention that the house had an air conditioner, but that he had not turned it on yet. Perhaps he should take a quick check on the compressor located outside, it

would probably be better if it was running when she was here, who knows, if he had working air, a picture of Rudy Vallee and a widow with cash in her bank account, he would surely close the sale on this place today.

As he opened the door to the garage and took a step into the darkness, he heard the noise again, before he had a chance to turn around, he felt something heavy hit the back of his head. He lost his footing and slipped back and fell onto the hard floor of the kitchen. Whoa, this isn't good, he thought, what will the widow think when she walks in and the mid-century specialist is on the floor instead of at the door?

He tried to get up off the floor but his legs didn't want to respond. He felt something warm and sticky running along his neck and onto the floor. Aw shoot, now I have to clean that up too before she gets here he thought as he kept trying to get up. Maybe he should rest for a minute, regain his breath and strength and then he could get his legs to do what he wanted them to do. He thought it looked like blood beneath his head, he hoped he could get it off the floor before the widow arrived, surely that would not make a good first impression.

Worrying about the pool of his blood and the mess it made on the floor and the impression it would leave on the buyer would be the last thoughts that Rex Thornbird, mid-century specialist and top real estate agent in the Coachella Valley would ever have.

Chapter 2

Monday, April 17

Henry Wright's wristwatch alarm started beeping. The sound signaled that it was forty-five minutes since he started swimming his daily laps in his backyard pool. He took a couple of cool down laps and then rolled over on his back to look up at the sky that was just turning pale blue. He floated in the middle of the pool, relaxing before climbing out. He liked swimming early in the morning, the air was still cool, the water felt good on his bare skin and it was a great way to wake up.

His lap swimming also resulted that he was in the best shape that he had ever been in his sixty-one years. He'd never had a problem with weight; he carried one hundred eighty pounds on his just over six foot frame as he had since college. But since he started swimming every day, it had redistributed. He was wearing a whole pants size smaller, but his shoulders and chest were larger and some of his old sport coats didn't fit as well as they used to.

Henry wrapped the big towel that he'd left on the chaise lounge around himself as he heard the phone ring. He looked at the open French doors to his bedroom, and at the doors to the kitchen and decided to head for the kitchen and pick the phone up there. He looked at his watch as he hurried through the doors, who could be calling this early?

"Hello" he said warily into the receiver.

"Good morning Mr. Wright, I didn't wake you did I?" The voice in the receiver said.

"No, no, not at all". Henry replied. "I was out in the pool."

“Can you meet me for breakfast, the usual place?”

“This isn’t Thursday, and you called me Mr. Wright - you must need help.” Henry replied. “Sure, I can be there in an hour.”

“Can you make it thirty minutes?”

“You must really need my help.” Henry said.

“Well yes, I do actually, but I was up early and haven’t had breakfast so I’m really hungry.”

“Ok, I’ll be there as quick as I can.” Henry said hanging up the phone. He rubbed some of the wetness that was still on his ear off the phone, and headed for the bathroom.

As he was standing in the shower, he thought about Wayne Johnson’s call. It did sound urgent; it wasn’t just the fact that Wayne was hungry. Wayne and Henry met every Thursday morning for breakfast, but today was Monday. The last time Wayne called and invited Henry out for a meal early in the morning outside of their weekly breakfasts, he needed help solving a particularly nasty death of a University of California Riverside geologist at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Henry was glad to help. He and Wayne made a good team, even though they never worked together officially, and it gave Henry something to do.

Wayne Johnson was captain of detectives at the Palm Springs police department. Henry met Wayne in Washington more than twenty years ago when they were sent there by their respective organizations to take a fingerprint forensics class at the FBI headquarters in Virginia. They hit it off then, and were casual friends until Henry retired to Palm Springs three years ago. Then they started target shooting at the pistol range and having breakfast together on a regular basis and Henry had been over to the Johnson’s for dinner numerous times.

Henry ran his hand over his hair, there was no need to comb it, he kept it cut very close to his head. He knew that he had gone gray years ago, but at this length, it wasn’t noticeable. Even

Mario the barber at the shop downtown called him “Mr. Number Two”, for the size of the clip on the electric clippers he used on him. He had an all over, all year tan, one of the benefits of living in the desert and having a house with a private pool. He picked up his razor and thought about Wayne’s request for his help, he didn’t remember reading in the newspaper about any particular case that Wayne was working on, but then he’d been busy the last couple of days.

Henry got out the can of shaving cream, he didn’t use electric razors, he preferred the modern three bladed manual razors. Henry enjoyed going over to the Johnson’s for dinner, even though the house was large it felt real homey. The Johnson’s children were grown and out of the house and now it was just Wayne and his wife, Elliot. The only thing he didn’t like was the drive home afterwards. After dinner at their house and seeing Wayne and Elliot interact, he always got melancholy and missed his wife Irma very much.

Irma Wright passed away suddenly three years ago while she and Henry were visiting Las Vegas. At the time, Henry Wright was three months away from retirement from the Eagle River, Wisconsin, police force where he had been chief of police for many years. With Henry’s retirement approaching quickly, he and Irma had discussed moving away from the snow of Eagle River to spend their retirement in a more comfortable climate. They discussed both coasts of Florida, “too humid and sticky” said Irma. They had talked about Phoenix and the Valley of the Sun, Henry had met a few cops from Arizona and thought it was a possibility; his colleagues seemed to like it there. Finally, they narrowed it down to Las Vegas, Nevada or Palm Springs, California.

Both had warm, arid climates, both had affordable homes, both had cop friends that Henry could look up. They decide to check out Las Vegas first. Henry was somewhat familiar with the city and made their plane reservations with Joanne, the only travel

agent in Eagle River and they planned to spend a week in Las Vegas. Henry was excited about the trip, after more than thirty years in Wisconsin, he was tired of the snow and wouldn't mind if he never saw another snowmobile in his life. Las Vegas seemed like the perfect place to retire.

When the day finally came, they got up very early in the morning, loaded their suitcases in the car and drove the 150 plus miles to the Green Bay airport. They parked the car in the long term lot and caught a 6 am Continental Airlines flight to Las Vegas with a change in planes at Detroit. With the stopover, it took them more than five hours to get to Las Vegas. Once they landed at McCarran, they picked up the rental car and drove out to the Strip. There, they checked into the Flamingo Hotel, unpacked their bags, and decided to have some lunch before seeing the sights at the new mega hotels along the Strip. Henry had refused the food the airline served; Irma had tried it, but quickly shared Henry's opinion that it wasn't fit for consumption.

Henry was in Vegas two decades ago for a law enforcement equipment convention and stayed at the Flamingo Hotel on the Strip. The Eagle River city council sent him to the gathering to look for winter equipment for the police department. Henry recalled that at the time it seemed a little odd that he headed for the Nevada desert in order to look for snow suits with weapon access amidst the palm trees of the country's largest warm weather destination. During that visit, he didn't have much time to see any of the sights within the city, but he and a colleague did drive out to Hoover Dam for a look at one of the greatest man made wonders of the modern world.

When they made their travel arrangements, Joanne, the lone travel agent in Eagle River, asked him if they had ever been to Las Vegas. Henry mentioned the business trip twenty years before, and Joanne said he would be surprised at the changes the desert city had undergone. Joanne told them to make sure and go out and see some of the big new hotels and not spend all their

time inside the casino gambling. Henry and Irma agreed to do as she suggested, they didn't want to let the folks in Eagle River know their retiring police chief was there looking for a new home, not a quick buck at the slot machines.

Henry was looking out their hotel room window waiting for Irma to put the last of her necessities away in the bathroom, he was hungry and wanted to get to the restaurant and then on to the Strip. On the drive to the hotel he saw that Las Vegas had indeed changed in the twenty years since he was here and he was looking forward to exploring it with Irma. Even though they had been married for thirty-six years, they held hands like a newly married couple, as they waited for the elevator from their room to the casino. They walked quickly through the noisy slot machine area and ordered their lunch at the hotel restaurant, and intended to go right out.

Having filled their stomachs on the tasty food, Henry had an Oriental chicken salad, and Irma had a tri-tip sandwich. They were ready to explore the Strip and walked towards the exit through the noisy casino with its clanging machines and flashing lights. When they were almost at the door, Irma stopped, said the lunch didn't agree with her and she said she wanted to go back to the room to lie down. Henry offered to go upstairs with her, but Irma insisted that he enjoy himself looking around the Casino, maybe he could drop a few quarters into one of those poker machines.

When he returned to the room after an hour to check to see how she was feeling, Irma was dead on the floor of their bathroom. The coroner told Henry later that Irma had suffered a massive heart attack and that she had been dead before she hit the floor.

The six months after Irma's death were a blur, Henry could barely remember them, as he dug for socks that matched in his dresser drawer. First, there was Irma's funeral; the suddenness of her death was a shock to everyone, not just Henry, but

especially to their daughter Claire. Within three months of the funeral was his retirement from the Eagle River police department and what should have been a happy occasion was very depressing for Henry. He woke up in their house in Eagle River alone every morning and had no place to go.

He decided to continue with the long planned sale of his and Irma's house. Henry couldn't stand to be in that house since everything in it reminded him of Irma. Henry also realized that he could never live in Las Vegas without thinking of poor Irma in that hotel bathroom. He would probably never visit Las Vegas again; he hadn't even been able to go into the Indian casinos since moving to Palm Springs.

At the invitation of his friend Wayne Johnson, Henry had moved here, over his daughter Claire's objections. Claire preferred that he stay in Wisconsin now that he was alone, she and her husband lived in Chicago, and she thought it would be better if he remained closer by.

Yes, those six months were a blur all right; he remembered how they went by in the blink of an eye. Irma's death and funeral, his retirement, the sale of their house and his move west happened one on top of the other. At this point, he was very happy to be here in Palm Springs with its desert climate. There was no snow here, no snowmobile riders getting lost in the woods, no police department to manage, and no bad guys to lock up. He glanced at the wedding ring he still wore, even though there was no Irma in Palm Springs, it was a lot better to be retired here than shoveling snow at their old house in Eagle River, Wisconsin.

He walked out of the kitchen door into the garage, got into his Mercury Grand Marquis, backed out, and headed towards Sherman's Deli on Tahquitz Canyon Drive. He liked the big car; it was similar to the Crown Victoria police cruisers he spent many years driving. This car was a little more upscale, with nice leather upholstery and a stereo system with a CD player and who

knows how many speakers. What he really liked was that the controls were very the same as the police specials and Henry hated looking for the light switch or the cruise control in an unfamiliar car.

He pulled into the parking lot at Sherman's Deli and Bakery and headed inside. Wayne was already at their usual table near the back as Henry walked into the restaurant, his coffee half gone, and what used to be a donut was now just crumbs and frosting that Wayne was carefully licking off his fingers.

"G'morning Duke, doesn't look real proper for the Chief to be licking his fingers like that." Henry said using Wayne's nickname. It seemed like cops always gave each other nicknames, what better moniker for a cop named Wayne Johnson than Duke?

"Captain, not Chief." Wayne said licking the last of the frosting off his thumb as he motioned for his friend to sit down. "I couldn't wait for you so I had a donut while I was sitting here and I put in our regular order." Wayne said as Henry slid into the booth. "Your usual, if you don't mind."

"No, I don't mind at all." Henry said. "Though one day I may surprise you and have something else, what will you do with all that smoked salmon once I order the chicken fried steak?" Henry always ordered the bagel with cream cheese and lox with extra capers. He had thought of getting something else, but Sherman's had great lox and he enjoyed eating something that he would never have thought of ordering in Eagle River.

"Good morning, I'm happy to see the two of you; do you guys know it isn't Thursday?" Millie said carrying their breakfast orders to the table.

"Hello, Millie, how's George?" Henry answered after Millie put his bagel in front of him.

"Ornery as ever, I sent him down to the senior center early this morning, couldn't deal with him." Millie and George had been married for over fifty years; Millie worked at Sherman's

to get away from George while George played pool at the senior center to get away from Millie. They were very happily married and Henry was envious.

“Ever hear of Rex Thornbird?” Wayne asked after Millie left them alone.

Henry put down his coffee cup, “The name sounds familiar, but I don’t think I know who that is.”

“Oh, you know of him all right, the top real estate agent in Coachella Valley, the mid-century specialist, the guy who sells all the old Alexander homes in your neighborhood.” Wayne continued while cutting his short stack into small pieces with his fork.

“Oh, yeah, I know who you mean.” Henry said, “I see his name and picture on For Sale signs around my neighborhood, it seems like he likes our area.”

“Liked, not likes.” Wayne said. “That is one guy who is not going to like anything anymore.”

“What happened?” Henry asked, carefully spearing a caper with his fork.

“Not sure, he’s dead as dead can get; I wanted to bounce some ideas off you so that’s why I’m buying breakfast.” Wayne replied, reaching for more syrup. “He was found very dead in an empty house yesterday afternoon after his car was tagged for being parked on the street too long.”

“What do you mean by parked on the street too long?” That had certainly not been a crime in his old jurisdiction in Eagle River.

“Apparently, one of the parking enforcement guys tagged it after a neighbor complained that it was parked on the street for three days.” Wayne continued. “The dispatcher ran a trace, found out it was registered to Thornbird, called his office and the receptionist told them that he had not been in for several days.”

Wayne took another sip of coffee and continued. “The officer checked the front door of the house which was locked, but when he went around the back, he found the patio door open. At

that point, he smelled that there was something wrong, went in and found Thornbird on the kitchen floor in a large pool of dried blood. From the smell and the way the body looked it seemed as though he had been there for almost a week." Wayne put the last of the pancake in his mouth. "No sign of a struggle, the front door was locked, the key was in a lockbox that the real estate agents use, but the patio door was open and all the lights in the house were on." He wiped a bit of syrup from his moustache and pushed the now empty plate away from him.

"How did he die?" Henry asked.

"It looks like a crime of opportunity," Wayne answered, "He was hit once on the back of the head with one of those old fashioned dial telephones. The murderer pulled it off the wall and beamed him with it; must have hit an artery or something, he went down on the spot. The coroner is doing the autopsy now, he may have hit his head on the kitchen counter on the way down, but it looks to me like he went down from the phone, then he bled to death as he laid unconscious on the kitchen floor." Wayne finished.

"Hmmm, so we're looking for someone strong - able to rip a phone out of the wall - and you said there was no indication of a struggle?"

"Nope, none whatsoever," Wayne replied, "Although it would have been hard to tell, the house was one of Thornbird's listings for sale, there was no furniture in the place, nothing at all - it would have been hard to see signs of struggle since there was nothing to upset and no lamps to knock over."

"Jealous wife, jilted girlfriend, upset lover?" Henry asked as he pushed his plate off to the side, and motioned Millie over for more coffee.

"Not sure," Wayne said, "He was divorced two years ago, according to his office manager, it wasn't very amicable, and the ex took him to the cleaners, to the point of asking for and getting half of his American Express card points."

“Hmmm, so was he broke as a result, did he have money troubles? Credit cards maxed out?”

“Everything ok fellas?” Millie refilled Henry’s cup.

“Everything is just as good as on Thursdays.” Henry answered.

Wayne held his coffee cup up for a refill as well and said, “No, in fact, after the divorce, he put in a lot more hours sold even more houses and earned even more money than before, and paid for most of his toys and things in cash.”

Henry carefully sipped the now hot coffee and said pensively, “Hmmm, so did the ex want even more than she already got, have you talked to her yet?”

Wayne put his cup down and said, “No, I don’t think it was her, she is dating a chiropractor who was in Las Vegas for a convention at the time, she says she was with him – we haven’t yet had the time to verify her alibi.”

“But you will, right?” asked Henry.

“Yeah, of course, we’ll check it out – but I doubt that she’s lying – she took Thornbird for everything she could, besides, her new guy seems to have a lot more money than Thornbird ever did – he’s working with the Nabisco Golf Championship here in town – seems all those golfers pay top dollar for their back adjustments.” Wayne finished as he wiped his mouth on his paper napkin.

“Hank, I’m afraid that we’re at a dead end.” Wayne said disgustedly as he put his cup down and leaned back in the booth. “No prints, no one with an apparent motive, no DNA evidence, nothing suspicious on his cell phone calls, if you could look into this in your spare time – it would certainly help me out. I eh... I need your profiling skills, if I call in the FBI right now; they’re just as likely to contact you. I figure I’m saving myself a lot of time and trouble by buying you breakfast instead.”

Henry smiled; it was true that he’d been doing a bit of freelance profiling for the Feds. He didn’t set out to do that after he retired,

but years earlier he'd scored a perfect score in the FBI profiling class he took at the Quantico Academy. About a year after his retirement, one of the instructors at the academy emailed him and asked for his assistance in a difficult case in Florida. Henry had done all the work from his home on his computer, and since then he had helped the Feds on several more cases. Henry approached the problem differently than the other profilers that the FBI had on staff, he put himself into the victim's shoes to try to figure who would want to kill him. That didn't always work, so he would revert to profiling the killer, just like the others, which wasn't as interesting as far as he was concerned. This case sounded interesting, he wasn't working on anything else at the moment, besides it was Wayne that was asking.

"The FBI doesn't call me in on every case you know, I think they throw the easy ones my way. The ones that can be solved from behind a computer terminal anyway, I've told them I don't want to travel all over the country. Sure, I'll help you out, I like these kinds of challenges, besides it's local." Henry grinned as he settled back in his seat. "Since I'll be out in the field, I suppose we'll operate under the same rules as last year with the body of the biologist they found at Anza-Borrego that turned out to be a murder?"

"Of course," Wayne replied, "You're a fully deputized member of my team, if anyone calls to verify that you are a cop, I'll vouch for you - I know your shooting is up to par - we are still going out to the range this week, right - and I take it your weapons permit is still good?"

"Yeah, I'm ok there," Henry replied, "though I doubt that I'm going to need it this time."

"Ok, let me know if you are going to need anything else," Wayne said as he waved Millie over for the check.

"Ok, I may need access to some records, like maybe the phone company, but I doubt that I'll run into any roadblocks." Henry said as Millie laid the check on the table in front of Wayne and refilled their coffee cups to their objections. "Hmmm, isn't it kind of funny that they keep raising the price of coffee, but once

you pay for it, they continue to give it to you until your bladder is ready to burst?" Henry said as they got up to go to the cash register.

Wayne looked at his friend Henry and shook his head wondering if observations like that were what made him such a good detective.