

Springtime

in

Sonora

a

Henry Wright Mystery

by

Bert Simonis

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Chapter 1

It was spring in the Sierra Nevada Foothills and Bob Sandman loved the change of the seasons. Not that he liked springtime that much; he didn't give a damn about the renewal of life, trees budding, birds hatching and all that crap. No, spring meant that summer was close at hand and spring meant an end to the rainy season. Bob hated the rainy season with a passion.

The Sierra Nevada Mountain range runs north and south through California and tilts up from the great Central Valley. It takes about eighty miles of distance to rise to ten thousand plus feet at which it only takes ten miles to drop down to the plateau that extends into Nevada. The western side of the range looks just like a trap door that has been propped open with its hinge at the edge of California's great Central Valley.

This mountainous wedge means that the giant storms that hit California as they come in from the Pacific Ocean drop their precipitation on the broad expanse of its Foothills. As the hills become mountains, the rain turns to snow as the elevation continues to rise. The rains generally start in November - January and February are the wettest - and slow down by the end of April and are virtually gone by the middle of May.

This year was an exception. It was still raining in the first week of May and it was this rain that Bob Sandman hated. Here at fifteen hundred feet above sea level, the precipitation almost always came down as

rain; it wasn't high enough or cold enough to snow. Rain that flooded fields and streets, clogged drains, washed out bridges, overflowed creeks and turned the red soil of the Sierra Nevada Foothills to clay that sticks to a man's boots, and made work in a gold mine impossible.

Once the rain ends, the ground starts to dry out, the grasses turn from green to brown and the dirt roads become navigable once again. This latter benefit was what Bob had been looking forward to for several months. Last summer he started working an old abandoned mine in Bald Mountain and it took a lot of work to get the place ready for actual prospecting. When the rains started last November he had to quit. The road that he took to the mine ran across some private property and the rain had turned part of the path into a creek. He was now anxious to get started again, the 1872 Mining Law said that if he discontinued work on the mine for six months, it would be considered abandoned. He'd worked too hard to get the mining rights to this property; he sure wasn't going to lose it on a timeout. Yet, Bob knew he only had a week or so left before that deadline.

His old Dodge pickup got stuck once on the road to the mine last fall after the rains started. The veterinarian that owned the land and boarded large animal patients for his customers had to pull him out with his John Deere. The vet was nice about it but had suggested to Bob that he might wait until spring before coming back. Bob did as he was asked. It was nice of the Doc to let him cross his property, Bob had only bought the mineral rights to the land, and strictly speaking he was trespassing just to get to the old mine. Besides, if the Doc had not pulled him out he probably would have been stuck in the truck until someone came to

find him, and that could be a long time. During the rainy season he thought of borrowing his wife Dottie's Bronco, knowing that the four wheel drive would probably get him through it but he knew she would have a fit if he got it muddy, she was pretty fussy about that damn car.

Bob spent the winter at home looking at his charts and maps from the geological survey. He researched several old claims and found that it looked as though this mine had yielded quite a bit of gold already. He did some shopping around and bought himself the newest, latest most powerful metal detector, a Fisher Gemini 5, for Christmas. He paid more than seven hundred dollars for it but it was guaranteed to find gold according to the brochure that came with it.

He bought Dottie a new toaster oven for thirty-five dollars at the Wal-Mart and had the girl scouts outside the store wrap it up real nice. He liked the job they did and made a small donation though the sign said he didn't need to, something he felt good about. Dottie seemed a little peeved when she unwrapped her toaster on Christmas morning and then saw what he bought himself. She stopped being angry with her when he promised her that he would take her on a cruise vacation with his first gold strike.

With his Fisher Gemini 5 he could find the vein that he knew ran inside that old mine on Bald Mountain. The glossy company brochure said it would penetrate two feet into the rock and locate metal. He couldn't wait to get started. He felt he was ready, he'd read the Fisher manual four or five times and was ready to try it in the mine. He'd dug a muddy hole in the backyard, buried a roll of pennies and the machine had beeped like crazy when he'd tried it out. He dug up the roll of

pennies, and tried to put Dottie's bulb garden back as best he could, and was happy that the machine seemed to work as advertised.

His truck was ready to head back up the mountain as well. He repaired the old compressor he had mounted on the pickup bed; it was a little hard finding parts for that museum piece. He had to make a throttle linkage for it, but it purred like a kitten now. The compressor would be used to power the air drills that he used to drill holes in the rock face.

He'd mounted a winch on the front bumper of the Dodge during the rainy season, this way if he did get stuck somewhere he should be able to pull himself out. The tires were in good shape and once he got past the wet muddy section of the trail up to the mine, the tires should have a lot of grip on the hard rocky part of the trail.

Bob decided he would try the road up to the mine tomorrow. Dottie was planning to go to visit her sister in the Bay Area for a long visit, said it was time to do some shopping in San Francisco and see her niece and nephew. He didn't mind, that should give him a good solid two weeks of work without her nagging him to fix things around the house.

That evening, the rain, which had already slowed to a drizzle, stopped completely. He watched the evening news with Dottie and the weather man said that the rest of the week would be dry and there was no rain in the satellite picture and it was probably going to be dry the rest of May. Dottie was working on a crossword puzzle in the living room and he told her that tomorrow was the day that he was going up the mountain to get the gold out of the ground. She looked

at him skeptically and told him that when he left for the mountain she would head for her sister's house. She said there was food in the freezer and she'd see him when she returned in two weeks.

Bob was excited and had a hard time sleeping that night. When he did fall asleep he dreamed of finding a huge piece of crystalline gold like they had on display at the Ironstone Winery in Murphys on the other side of the river. He'd been there many times and looked with awe and envy at the gold piece that was displayed in the vault and lit with little lights that made it sparkle and shine. That gold had come out of the big open pit right here in Jamestown and was bought by Mr. Kautz as a curiosity for his new winery.

Bob woke up early the next morning and looked out the window. The grasses on the hillsides were green, there wasn't a cloud in the sky and he started humming the song from Snow White where the dwarfs walk over to the diamond mine. He started making his lunch, packed his icebox with a bottle of water and a couple of sodas and put the box into the passenger side of the Dodge.

He went back into the bedroom, Dottie was already awake from all the noise that he'd made in the kitchen, he waved goodbye, said to say hello to the kids and went out to start his truck. The truck turned over slowly and after a few turns the engine caught. He waited a few minutes while it warmed up; he knew how to take care of the aging motor. After ten or so minutes, he eased the truck into gear and turned down the driveway.

He drove along a couple of miles of local roads, and then turned onto California's historic State highway

49. He stayed on the highway through Sonora and took the road heading north out of town. The highway started climbing and he eased the truck into a lower gear and continued up the slope.

To the right was the large animal veterinary hospital and he turned off the highway and down the drive. He stopped the Dodge behind the building, walked around to the front and looked in through the window and waved at young Suzanne, the doc's receptionist. He saw her moving around inside, he wasn't sure she'd seen him, she looked to be pretty busy. Bob had somewhat of a crush on Suzanne and he wasn't sure if the feelings were mutual but she usually did wave back.

He walked back over to where he'd left the truck running and opened the gate to the pasture. He pulled to Dodge in and got out to close the gate again. The doc didn't keep it locked but Bob didn't want a sick horse to get out on his account. Last summer a llama that had been there for treatment of an infection on its back had gotten out of the gate and gone running down State highway 49.

Bob grinned as he thought about the Sheriff Deputies chasing after the animal until its owner had come over and coaxed it into a horse trailer. The doc had been mad about that one, good thing Bob hadn't been there that morning, he didn't think that he was the one that left the gate open, but he was positive the doc would have blamed him for sure.

He climbed back into the pickup truck and used the granny gear to ease it down the gravel road. After the first turn, the road went down into a gully and then came up immediately after to a steep climb. This is

where he could get into trouble, the water was up to his hubcaps and that stretch was about four pickup lengths long. He had the Dodge take a little run at it and with a big splash he was out the other end and climbing up the hard rock grade. From here on the trail was slow going but dry. It continued to wind and twist up the hill on the hard rocky granite until he got to a small clearing where the entrance of the mine was.

He parked the Dodge with its back end close to the entrance, turned off the engine and got out to take a look. He'd traveled several miles on the trail, but he was only about a half mile from the veterinary hospital and the highway. He was about fifteen hundred feet above the building though, the trail had to wind that much to climb up to where he was now parked.

Bob went back to the truck, got out his bandana, tied it around his bald head and put his miner's helmet on top of it. He'd discovered long ago that the bandana kept the helmet from chafing his head, besides he liked the way it looked, he'd have to wear it when he said hello to Suzanne tomorrow. He opened one of the utility boxes on the side of the truck, pulled out his lamp and clipped it to the helmet. He fastened the battery pack around his waist with his belt and was set to take off into his mine.

He looked back in the truck, took his leather gloves off the seat and put them in his back pocket. The keys were still in the ignition, he pulled them out and put them in his pocket. He thought about rolling up the windows and locking the doors, but he felt it was safe here; no one was likely to come up here in the morning. From the trash he'd found here last summer he knew that kids sometimes came up in the evenings

to drink beer and make out. He didn't think they'd come by now, besides what kid would want to steal his old Dodge?

He saw the ice chest sitting on the floor of the truck and debated about bringing his lunch and water along with him. No, it would just get in the way right now, this first walk into the mine this season was just going to be exploratory to see how much water had seeped in and how many rockslides he would have to clear out. By the time he walked out again it would probably be time for lunch. For the same reason he decided to leave his Fisher Gemini 5 in the truck, though that was locked in the toolbox in the bed. If he had to clear out a rockslide, it would just get damaged and he didn't want to do that before he could use it.

He grabbed a small shovel, put a rock pick on his belt and walked over to the mine entrance. He dug into his pocket for his key ring and found the round key to the lock he had put on the gate last fall and unlocked the big thing and tied the gate open with a piece of wire he had put there for exactly that reason. He switched on the lamp on his helmet and walked the few steps into the mine.

From looking over the papers at County Records he knew that this particular mine had been started in the 1860's. There were initials and dates on the wall about twenty feet into the mine that had been drawn there by previous miners and their acetylene head lamps. Obviously his predecessors had followed a variety of gold veins, there were side tunnels that suddenly stopped and up ahead a few feet into the tunnel there was a hole that they had blasted but it was now filled with water. Bob took his time walking through the tunnel, even though he wasn't a tall man, he had to

duck in certain places in order to get by. “Never take out more rock than necessary” was an old miner’s adage. Whoever had worked this mine had certainly lived by that.

The air in the mine was cool and moist. That was one of the things he enjoyed about coming in here. Even in the summer time, when the temperature sign on Washington Street in Sonora said ninety-nine, it would be about fifty five in here. He moved his head around so that his lamp light caught the rock walls and he could see moisture on the rock in places, but everything was clean. Contrary to what a lot of people thought there were no bugs or critters this far into the tunnel and he only had to watch out that he didn’t slip on a wet rock.

By now, Bob figured he was about five hundred feet into the hillside. At this point, the going was slow, he had to watch his footing and while the water was still seeping into the tunnel from the long winter’s rains in the front of the tunnel, back here it was dry. There was a lot of rock above him and the water was absorbed before it could get down this deep. The first few feet of the tunnel would probably be wet for a few more weeks he figured, even though the rain had stopped, the ground above was saturated with a lot of water.

Up ahead the light of his lamp caught a small rockslide. As he got close to it, he realized that it wasn’t that bad, it would probably take him a day or two to muck it out. He’d have to carry the rocks out in five gallon buckets that he had in the back of the truck, there was no way he could lay tracks in here to get a cart in and get the rocks out. No, this was going to be a manual job. He moved enough of the rocks to squeeze by on his belly and continued further in.

He reached the end of the main tunnel, he was now about eight hundred feet into the hillside; here it split off into two side sections. One went off to the left; the other went almost vertically, he'd have to climb the rock wall to check it out. He decided he really needed his Fisher Gemini 5 here; he was curious which vein the previous miner that worked here had followed.

Suddenly he heard a loud noise followed by a rumbling sound. That sound was familiar, but it couldn't be. He turned around too fast and slipped on a rock. His light went off as he fell down and he was suddenly in total darkness. Come on, no need to be frightened, you've been in mines for a long time. Turn your light back on, get on your feet and find out what the heck is going on he thought to himself.

He got off the ground, and sat down on the rock floor to catch his breath and check to see if he was bruised or hurt. He felt up to his lamp and turned it on. The light came back on and he felt a lot more comfortable. He looked at his watch; it had been about ninety minutes since he had seen daylight. He thought back to the sound and realized that he had heard an explosion and rocks falling as the result. But that couldn't be what he'd heard. His dynamite was in the utility box in his truck, he hadn't placed any, he didn't even know where to blast to get the gold out. That couldn't have been a blast; it must have been something else.

Bob slowly got up and started walking back towards the mine entrance. He got to the rockslide and squeezed through on his belly now heading the other way. He kept walking the way he had come in and when he was about one hundred feet from the

entrance and daylight when he saw the rock wall ahead of him. It was huge.

The enormous mountain of boulders blocked the entire tunnel and had effectively sealed him in. He climbed up the slide towards the ceiling of the tunnel and realized there was no way that he could lift some of these boulders to clear them out. He would have to wait until someone missed him and came looking for him to get help. He had dynamite in the truck and they would probably be able to blow a hole in this to get him out.

Bob sat down on a large boulder and started thinking. Dottie would probably get worried when he didn't show up on time at home tonight and either come up and see what he was doing here or call the Sheriff. Damn, that Dottie. She was at her sister's house and probably wouldn't even call. Maybe Suzanne at the vet's office would realize that she saw him come up, but didn't see him come back. But she was busy when he waved at her, had she even seen him? He realized that he left his lunch in the truck, maybe that hadn't been such a good idea. Well, it was best to conserve his strength; he was going to be here a few hours, so maybe it was a good idea that he take a little nap.

Chapter 2

Henry Wright was lying on a towel atop a chaise lounge by the side of the pool at his home on Mel Avenue in Palm Springs. He just finished swimming his morning laps and was letting the sun dry the drops of water from his body. The early morning sunshine was warm, Palm Springs has a warm, dry desert climate and Henry enjoyed living here much more than Eagle River, Wisconsin.

He was the Chief of Police there until he retired a little more than three years ago. Moving here was one of the best things he had done recently. Even though it was only mid-May, he thought if he stayed out here much longer he was going to have to put on some sun screen. Like most retired folks in Palm Springs, Henry had an all-year tan, but he knew he could still burn if he stayed out too long.

His daydreaming was interrupted by Charles, his housemate, yelling from the kitchen doors that led onto the patio. Henry couldn't quite hear him so he wrapped the big towel he'd been sitting on around himself and walked towards the French doors that led into the kitchen.

Charles was a retired High School teacher from San Francisco who lost his long time partner to AIDS a few years ago. He moved to Palm Springs and met Henry at the Senior Center where they both enjoyed a game

of pool. He was looking for a place to live but couldn't find an apartment to rent that accepted dogs. Henry told him he could stay at his house on Mel Avenue until he found something.

After a couple of months, Charles just kind of stopped looking and he and Pierre had been here since. Henry didn't need the few hundred dollars in rent money Charles paid him; he liked the company that Charles and Pierre, his dog, provided. The arrangement suited both of them and they had become good friends as well as housemates.

"I said you have a phone call, you didn't bring the phone out to the pool with you." Charles met Henry halfway out the door and handed him the cordless phone.

Henry used his towel to make sure his ear was dry before putting the phone to it. "Hello?"

"Henry you old hound dog? How have you been? This is Bill Rustow up in Tuolumne County, do you remember me?" The voice on the other end of the phone was deep and sounded excited.

"Bill Rustow? No, I don't think I do. Oh, wait a minute; maybe I do remember - did we meet at the FBI profiling class in Quantico?" Henry wasn't sure if that was the right guy, but he did remember meeting a short, stout sheriff with a big bushy moustache from Tuolumne County at one of the FBI law enforcement training classes the Eagle River Police Department had sent him to about six years ago.

"Yeah, that's right. You were really good in that class I was amazed at how you were able to turn that profiling right around on itself and put yourself into the victim's head instead of the perpetrator's and figure out who the most likely killer was. So how are

you?” Bill was full of praise; Henry figured all the flattery must mean that he wanted something.

“I remember now, I’m doing well, I’m retired now, living in Palm Springs.” Henry wondered how Bill had managed to track him down. Maybe Henry hadn’t been the best profiler in that class.

“Yeah, I heard you were in California, I ran into Wayne Johnson last week at the police equipment convention in Vegas and he said you were there, retired and helping him out on the occasional case.” Bill’s tone of voice seemed to turn more serious. “Pure chance me running into him like that, asking about you and then hearing you were right here in our state and available to help out. Boy, I sure could use you right about now.” Now Bill sounded as if he was pleading with Henry.

“So you got my number from Wayne I take it?” Henry asked. Wayne Johnson was a Captain of police detectives in the Palm Springs police department. Wayne was an old friend and had been the one that suggested that Henry move to Palm Springs from Wisconsin when he retired a few months after Henry’s wife, Irma, unexpectedly passed away. He’d helped Wayne on a case with the murder of a UC Riverside geologist at Anza-Borrego Desert State park last year, and then last month he’d solved the murder of a local real estate agent.

“Yep, I talked with Wayne; he gave me your number, said you weren’t busy right now and could use an interesting project. I hope you don’t mind. You aren’t working on anything right now are you?” Now Bill sounded almost apologetic on the phone.

“No, I don’t mind, and I just finished a profiling case the Feds sent to me via email. Leave it to Wayne

to know what is good for me.” Henry chuckled. It was true; he’d been in a funk since solving the Thornbird killing. Even the occasional work that he did for the FBI helping them with profiling didn’t lift his spirits. He’d allowed himself to fall for a woman during the investigation and at the end it hadn’t worked out and Henry was a bit shell shocked.

Before that he had been happy, or so he had thought at the time. Meeting his friends for meals, shooting his weapons at the pistol range with Wayne, swimming laps in his pool and generally puttering around his house where he always seemed to have one project or another going. When he met Rosie he realized how lonely he had been for a woman’s company and how much he wanted the friendship she gave him for too short a time.

“Well, ok then, do you think you could help me out?” Bill’s voice in the receiver brought him back to the present.

“Sure, tell me what is going on, I’ll do some research and I’ll call you back to give you some ideas, hang on a second while I go to my desk.” Henry held the phone down at his side while he went inside the house to get a pad and paper to take some notes.

He walked over to the side of the house that had his office and his bedroom. The house was a big U shape with Henry’s room and office on one side, Charles’ room and a guest room was on the other side. In the middle of the U was a backyard with a nice pool, a small cabana, a tiny patch of lawn and a lot of tropical plants. In between the two wings were the front entry, the kitchen and living room. All of the rooms had French doors that opened directly onto the pool. Henry

thought the house was perfect for the outdoor living that the Palm Springs climate afforded.

He sat down at his desk and pulled a yellow legal pad towards him, opened up the pencil drawer and was ready to take notes. "Ok, Bill, tell me what happened up there."

"Well, actually, I was hoping you could come up here to help us out, you being in the same state and all." Bill was really pleading now.

Henry put the pencil down. "Come up there, that's a long way, do you think I need to do that?"

"Well, we'd all really appreciate it, we'd put you up, treat you real nice. It's gorgeous up here this time of year, the dogwoods are in bloom, the creeks are running full, the roads are clear and it's all out spring." Bill sounded hopeful.

"Bill you must be five hundred miles from Palm Springs, are you sure I need to be there?" Henry asked.

"Well look Henry; if you think you can't help, maybe I ought to call one of the other guys that were in the class to help me out." Bill paused for a moment. "Besides, if you drive, it's only four hundred ninety miles; I looked it up on the Internet." Bill was trying to use psychology on Henry now, and it was working.

"Ok, I'll come up. And you're going to put me up in a hotel - will I have some free time to look around?" Henry made a note on his yellow legal pad that said four hundred ninety miles from Palm Springs to Tuolumne County in Northern California. If he could get some free time, maybe he could do some sightseeing. He knew that Yosemite National Park was in Tuolumne County; he'd never been there and would like to visit.

“Yep, pack your hiking boots, and we’ll put you in the best hotel in town, the Sonora Best Western. We’ll pay for your gas and I’ll personally buy most of your meals – we’ll figure out the free time when you get here.” Bill sounded happy now that Henry had agreed to come up.

“Ok, tell me where I need to meet you, I can be there let’s say by late tomorrow afternoon.” Henry was ready to make more notes.

“Uh, well, ok. I think its best you come to the Tuolumne County Courthouse here in Sonora, then I’ll take you out to the crime scene and get you settled into the hotel.” Bill had a business tone in his voice now. “Do you need directions?”

Henry wrote down County Courthouse, Sonora Best Western below the four hundred ninety miles he had already written on his yellow pad. “No, I’ll look it up on the Internet. What kind of crime are we talking about here anyway?”

Bill was quiet on the other end of the phone, finally he said. “Henry, did you ever read any Edgar Allen Poe stories?”

“A long time ago, back when I was in college I think, I don’t remember you as the kind of guy to ready Poe - why?” Henry asked.

“Well you should read Poe’s The Cask of Amontillado, and then you’ll get a pretty good idea of what we’re up against.” Bill’s voice turned upbeat again.

“Sounds interesting, I’ll pack a bag and see you tomorrow.”

“Uh, Henry, is there any way you could make it today? I need to get someone on this case and all of my guys are busy. Eh, I’d really appreciate it.” Bill asked.

Henry looked at the digital waterproof watch that he wore for timing his lap swimming; it was almost nine-thirty. “Well, I guess I can leave here in an hour or so, which will be put me up there at what, maybe six o’clock?”

“Terrific, it might not take you that long, regardless I’ll be waiting for you. And Henry, there’s one more thing.” Bill’s voice was sounded urgent.

“Yes?” Henry asked.

“If you still have a weapon, bring it.” Bill’s tone had turned ominous.

“Ok, I will.” Henry pushed the off button on the phone set it on his desk and sat looking at it wondering what he had just agreed to do.

After his shower Henry pulled a bag out of his closet and started packing. He wasn’t sure what to bring so he walked over to his office and sat down in front of his computer to look up the average temperatures for late May in Tuolumne County. He was in Northern California last month and in April there was a thirty degree difference between when he left Palm Springs and landed at San Francisco International Airport.

Weather.com told him that daily highs were in the high seventies and lows in the low forties. That was quite a bit cooler there than in Palm Springs. He’d have to pack a sweater and his heavier jacket. He’d gotten rid of all his winter clothes after he moved from Wisconsin. Now he thought it was actually silly that he’d moved them all out to the California desert from Wisconsin instead of donating them to needy people there.

He’d learned though that the decisions he made right after Irma died suddenly on their trip out to Las Vegas shouldn’t be questioned. He’d been in a fog until he

landed here and Wayne and Eliot Johnson sort of grounded him.

While he was online, he also looked at Mapquest to see if he could get some driving tips from Mel Avenue to the courthouse in Sonora. Mapquest gave him straightforward directions; he printed them out and was a little surprised that he would be on Interstate 5 for three hundred miles. I-5 was the Interstate that bisected the state and ran through California's great Central Valley. Last month as he flew to San Francisco he had actually seen the road from the airplane and from thirty thousand feet it looked like a ribbon running along the landscape; there weren't any towns along its route, just a number of truck stops.

He grabbed the directions off the printer and went back to his bedroom to pack. He was almost finished when Pierre came walking in wagging his tail, followed closely by Charles.

"Knock, knock." Charles said while he was still in the hallway.

"Come in, come in. I need to ask you some questions." Henry put his toilet kit into his bag and zipped it shut.

"What's going on, you get a phone call and suddenly you're in a rush packing. I know it's not Wayne that needs your help now, that wasn't his voice on the phone." Charles leaned against the door frame.

"You're right my friend, sometimes I think you should be the detective, not I." Henry smiled as he picked up his brand new cell phone from his dresser turned it on and clipped it to his belt. It was a gift from someone he helped out during last month's murder investigation. He'd spent a week reading its manual and learning all about it. He'd downloaded several

different ring tones from the Internet; he hadn't really tried the thing out since doing that. This trip would really be the first chance to try out his new phone, he was glad that the gift included free service.

"Flattery will get you answers to whatever you need to know, fire away." Charles smiled.

"What do you know about Tuolumne County in Northern California?" Henry asked, looking in his wallet to make sure he had enough cash for the trip.

"Tuolumne County? Up in Northern California's historic Mother Lode? It's a fairly large county, is there a specific place you want to know about, like Yosemite, or the Sierra High Country, the gold or Sonora?" Charles was in his High School history teacher mode now.

"Start with Sonora, that's my first stop." Henry picked up his bag and together they walked to the kitchen.

"Well, let's see. It was a mining camp of course, all the towns in that elevation of the Sierra Foothills are. There is a large vein of gold that runs for a couple of hundred miles and the area is known as the Mother Lode, miners thinking it was the grandmamma of all the lodes of gold in the Sierra Nevada. I believe the town was founded early on by Mexican miners who came from the state of Sonora in Mexico. At one time it was the baddest, wildest, but richest town in the area. Now it's the county seat, it's pretty quiet and subsists mostly on lumber and tourism." Charles reached into the refrigerator for his special non-lactose milk and poured himself a glass.

"Are they still mining up there?" Henry pulled his jacket out of the coat closet and laid it on top of his bag.

“I’m not sure, I know they had a large mining operation going a few years ago, the school took a field trip up to Columbia, a state park devoted to the Gold Rush and the miners, and I think the bus went past an open pit on the way home but I don’t recall exactly.” Charles took a drink of his milk.

“Well, the guy that called, Bill Rustow, is the sheriff up there and he asked for my help. When I asked what kind of crime we were dealing with he asked me if I ever read Poe’s Cask of Amontillado. I don’t remember the story that well, but I figure it might have something to do with the mines.” Henry picked up his bag and started for the door that led from the kitchen to the garage.

“I remember Poe’s story, this sounds scary. A guy gets entombed into a cellar and can’t get out, he ends up dying in there.” Charles said. “Are you going to be armed?”

Henry came back into the house. “You know, I almost forgot to bring it, Bill specifically asked me to bring my weapon.”

“Your what?” Charles scrunched up his face.

“Weapon, that’s what cops call their guns.”

“Oh Henry, please be careful. This doesn’t sound good. Are you sure you couldn’t do some consulting over the phone?” Charles put his milk down on the counter and looked very concerned.

“I suggested that I do that, but Bill told me that I needed to be on-site. Thank you for your concern, but I’m sure I’ll be fine. I am going to get my weapons and put them into the trunk of the car.” Henry made his way back to his office and unlocked the drawer in the bookcase where he kept his new Glock 17. He also had an older Colt revolver that the Eagle River Police

Department had presented him when he retired, he took that as well. He grabbed an extra clip of ammo, a box of ammunition for each weapon and the small-of-back holster for the Glock.

He put everything into the trunk of the car but before he closed it he looked at the ice chest that he more or less permanently kept there. Maybe he should stop and get some sodas and a sandwich on the way out. That Interstate highway didn't look too hospitable from the airplane; there were probably only fast food places along the way, it would be nice to munch on something decent while driving.

Henry went back into the house, said goodbye to Charles, and took one last look around to make sure he didn't forget anything. He backed his big Mercury Grand Marquis out of the garage, waved at Charles who was standing in the garage and headed over to Jensen's, the supermarket on Sunrise Way. There he bought a six pack of Cokes, a turkey sandwich from the Deli, a couple of candy bars and a bag of ice. He put them in the ice chest and put the chest on the floor of the passenger seat.

He drove over to his favorite discount gas station on North Indian Canyon filled the car up with regular gas and then took Indian out to Interstate 10. Once he was on the highway, he accelerated the car up to seventy miles an hour and turned on the cruise control. It had been an hour and ten minutes since he hung up with Bill Rustow.