



ALBERT SIMON

For Sale in
Palm Springs

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a Henry Wright Mystery

by

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This book is for Berlynn

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 one-eleven. 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 back through his hands as he finished turning. He enjoyed 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 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. 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, -past tense - 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 Thorbird'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 you're a local, I won't have to go anywhere." 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.

Chapter 3

While Wayne walked up to the register to pay for breakfast, Henry dug into his pocket for a couple of bills to leave as a tip. His daughter, Claire, worked as a restaurant hostess and waitress while she was in college and ever since then Henry always left a larger gratuity for the people who waited on him. He knew that Millie didn't really need the money, but it was the principle that was important. He caught up with Wayne at the cash register as he was helping himself to several of the free toothpicks from the dispenser on the counter.

"I take it you'll want to see the crime scene first?" Wayne asked as he jammed one of the toothpicks in his mouth while carefully putting the remainder in his shirt pocket. "Yep, if you have the time, I'd like to go now." Henry said, pulling the Mercury's key fob out of his pocket.

"I figured as much and didn't schedule anything else this morning." Wayne replied pushing open the door to the restaurant.

As Wayne and Henry walked out the door of the restaurant to their cars, the temperature was already well into 90's even though it was not even nine-thirty. "Looks like it's going to be another hot one," Wayne said as he reached for his car keys. "Aren't they all?" Henry replied, "That's why I'm here and not in Wisconsin!" he grinned pushing the unlock button on the little key fob. "It's a lot easier to cool off than to get warm." Henry continued, getting into his car. "Can I follow you to the house?" He asked Wayne before starting the car and its air conditioner. "Yeah, just follow me over; I won't drive too fast this time."

The tan city owned Ford Crown Victoria that Wayne was driving headed back down Tahquitz Canyon Way for the house on Granvia Valmonte, as Henry swung in behind. He rolled up the window as the air conditioner kicked in, he had the car's climate control system set for 82 degrees, he found that setting was comfortable for him. Henry was enjoying the heat of Palms Springs in late April as opposed to the cold of Eagle River, Wisconsin where this time of year it would barely be thawing.

Wayne came to a stop at the curb of the house on Granvia Valmonte and Henry pulled in right behind. The lawn needed mowing, and there were several throwaway newspapers on the driveway. Ironically, Rex Thornbird's face was still smiling at Henry from the prominent for sale sign that had been planted in the lawn.

"Good looking guy!" Henry said, as he and Wayne walked up to the front door that was sealed off with crime tape. "Oh, you mean the sign?" Wayne replied, removing the tape and pushing the door open while tearing the crime scene crew's "Do Not Enter" sticker. "Yeah, he didn't look like that when I saw him." Wayne replied as he stepped into the house. "He was a little more bloated and a lot paler when he was in a drawer at the Riverside County morgue over in Perris."

They stepped inside the house and Henry got his first look around. "Pretty bare, nothing in here but dust." He said as he walked over to the patio doors. "It looks like your crime scene fingerprint crew has been here." He said, noting the smudges of powder left on the glass doors. "Find anything significant?" "No, it looks as though Thornbird walked through the house opening doors and turning on lights." Wayne replied as he stepped into the kitchen where a giant blood stain on the floor showed where Rex Thornbird had spent his last few minutes. "Here's where the murder weapon hung on the wall." Wayne pointed to the blank telephone outlet on the wall with his ballpoint pen. Even though the crew had already dusted for prints, Wayne and Henry from force of habit made sure that they didn't touch anything.

Henry looked at the collection of business cards on the kitchen counter and raised an eyebrow at Wayne. “When other realtors come over to show a house to a potential buyer, they use the lockbox at the front of the house to let themselves in. The lockbox contains the keys to the house. When they leave, they usually toss their business card somewhere on a counter or table as a courtesy to the listing agent.” Wayne explained. “What is a listing agent?” Henry asked looking through the pile of cards. “A listing agent is the real estate agent representing the seller of the house, they are the agent that “takes the listing”” Wayne said, not paying much attention to Henry’s examination of the cards.

“Can I have these? They may lead to something interesting. Of course I’ll return them.” Henry said. “Sure, we’ve made an inventory of all the agents that were here – I don’t think you’ll find anything other than a bunch of agents parading through the same set of houses.”

“Have a look at where the phone was pulled off the wall and tell me what you think.” Wayne said, motioning his friend closer to the blood stain. “It looks like a standard wall telephone outlet.” Henry said, reaching into his pocket for his reading glasses. “It’s one of those modular kind, not the plastic ones, but one of the older metal types, probably installed in the seventies.” Wayne pointed out. “I thought you said we had to look for someone strong that could rip an old fashioned telephone right off the wall.” Henry asked Wayne, looking at the wall mount closely with his reading glasses perched at the end of his nose.

“Actually my friend, you said that we needed to look for someone strong when I told you that the phone had been pulled off the wall, I figured you’d change your mind once you saw it.”

“Heck, my Irma could have pulled this phone out.” Said Henry. “Not that she ever would need to do that of course.” He added quickly, taking his glasses off and carefully putting them back in their case and into his pocket.

“So he got hit by the phone, fell down on the floor and bled to death?” Henry asked looking at the huge rusty red blood stain that showed that something obviously traumatic had happened in this kitchen. “Basically, that’s it, though if you look at the counter right here, we think he hit his head on the way down.” Wayne said. “And he didn’t call anyone from the phone – did you dust it for prints?” Henry looked at the counter and around the rest of the empty kitchen.

“The only prints on the telephone were on the handset, and those were Thornbird’s.” Wayne replied. “Nothing else was on the phone itself, though it might have been wiped.” “Hmmm, wiped eh?” Henry said, furrowing his brow. “What makes you think it “might” have been wiped?” Henry asked.

“Well, everything around here is pretty dusty as you can see, and the phone didn’t have any dust on it.” Wayne said. “Besides, the phone wasn’t on; service was cut off several months ago according to the phone company.” “All these real estate agents carry cell phones don’t they?” Henry asked. “Did you check his phone, did he make any calls before he died, was it in his pocket?” Henry asked his mind working quickly and asking the questions as fast as he thought of them.

“Slow down a second, apparently Thornbird didn’t carry a cell phone on him.” Wayne said, fishing another toothpick out of his pocket. “I know realtors stay in touch with cell phones so I specifically looked for it on his body when I first came here, no phone, no empty belt clip – we finally found his phone in the glove compartment of his car, it was turned off.”

“Ok, so I don’t need to bother getting records from the wireless company then.” Henry said.

“We’ve already requested them, but I don’t think we’ll find anything significant.” Wayne said putting the fresh toothpick in his mouth and pulling the chewed up one out. “Excuse me a second, will you?” He asked heading for the front door to toss the tooth marked piece of wood into the house’s landscape.

“Give me a couple of minutes to look around the house.” Henry said as he headed for the back bedrooms. Henry walked slowly through the house, looking around at the non-descript hallway with its fingerprint powdered thermostat as he went into the back bedroom. It was larger than the others and obviously the master bedroom with a small adjoining bathroom. The bathroom had an ugly pink tile that was obviously popular and modern when the house was built but now looked garish and dated. The pink even extended to the sink and toilet and was a shocking contrast to the fresh white paint.

The bedroom was brightly lit with two casement windows in what was obviously the back corner of the house. Henry tried the windows, but either they were locked tight or painted shut. Probably painted shut, Henry thought, it looks like a blow and go paint crew went through here right before the house went up for sale.

The second bedroom was smaller, but had a very spacious closet that stretched the length of one wall. It too had a large window, it too was painted shut. The third bedroom was about the same size as the second; its closet was a bit smaller but still very spacious in comparison to a lot of houses that were currently being built. Henry knew what he would find at the window, but he checked it anyway. Of course it had been painted shut as well.

Henry fished into his pocket for his handkerchief to wipe the dust off his hands. Since it had been a while since anyone did any housekeeping, in addition to the fingerprint dust that was around an accumulation of regular dust was all over the window sills. He opened the last door in the hallway it was a utility closet that was pretty small; it only contained the home’s forced air heater and an old broom. He walked back into the living room to look for anything that the crime scene crew or one of Wayne’s detectives might have overlooked. The empty room didn’t show anything obvious.

“Duke, did your guys check out the chimney flu?” He asked Wayne who had stepped back through the door. “You mean for hidden weapons or tools?” Wayne replied, pulling the toothpick out of his mouth and waving it around to imitate someone hiding something up the chimney. “We looked, the flu was open, but a lot of people do that for a little extra air circulation in the summer time. There was nothing there, and it looked as though it was cleaned earlier this year.” “They probably cleaned it whenever the house was painted.” Henry said as he got on his knees to have a look up the chimney anyway. “Looks clean” Henry said, brushing off his pants as he got up.

“But what left the clean mark here in the dust on the mantle?” Henry asked standing up in front of the fireplace. “Hmmm, I didn’t notice that before.” Wayne replied studying the mark that had been left in the dust. Henry put his reading glasses back on and looked at the mark closely “It looks like it was here quite a while, notice it left a clean spot in the dust all around it. It’s about the size of a picture frame, or a small easel of some type.” Henry observed. “You know, I bet it is one of those frames that realtors use to put the sheets of paper in that describe the house, you know, the flyers with the description of how many bedrooms and bathrooms a place has, how much it costs and what not.” Wayne said. “On the mantle is an obvious spot for it, everyone coming through the front door would notice it right away.”

“Hmmm, you’re probably right. I want to go to Thornbird’s office to find out a little more about how these realtors operate and perhaps I can pick up one of these frames to check it out.” Henry said, wiping his hands on his handkerchief one more time. “Meanwhile, do you think you could have one of your crew come out here and take measurements of this imprint in the dust?”

Wayne reached for his cell phone as he replied, "Sure, I'll call right now and have them take some picture of it as well. I'll be damned, I don't know how we overlooked that, but I'm sure it will amount to nothing after you check in at Thornbird's office about those flyers." Henry raised an eyebrow and said, "I don't know Duke, your "amount to nothings" are adding up." "Yeah, they are," Wayne chuckled, "But that's why I'm counting on you to help me with my math."

They stepped back out into the sunshine and Wayne pulled the door shut behind them. "Phew, I didn't realize how stuffy it was in there." Henry said, pulling out his handkerchief once again, this time to blow his nose. "Really, you'd think an empty house with all the doors and windows closed would keep the dust out." Wayne replied pulling a new crime scene tag out of his inside coat pocket. He sealed the tag over the crack in the door and said, "Did you want to see anything else?"

Henry noticed the realtor's lockbox still around the hose bib near the entry and said, "You know, since there were no signs of doors being jimmied or forced, I think I need to learn a little bit more about this lockbox system, I'm going to go over to the Coachella Real Estate office right now to see if they can fill me in." "I knew that you'd want to talk with them, I called them this morning and gave the office manager a heads up." Wayne said walking down the path towards his car. "I'm going to head back to the station, give me a call if you need anything and let me know as soon as you find something."

"I'll do that!" Henry replied, "Are we still on tomorrow morning at the range for our weekly practice?" "Wouldn't miss it!" Wayne replied getting into his car and starting the engine and it's all important air conditioner while leaving the door open to let the hot air out. "See you tomorrow" he said closing the door and slowly making a U-turn to head back down Granvia and towards the Palm Springs police station.

Henry turned back at his car to take one more look at the house as he thought about his weekly practice matches with Wayne at the Palm Springs Gun Club's pistol range out in the desert. For years he'd carried a big heavy Colt revolver as a police officer in Eagle River, but when he became police chief the weapon was mostly in his desk drawer.

He did enjoy shooting the weapons at the range and shortly after he moved to Palm Springs he bought a new Glock 17 which was the choice of most police officers these days. He still had the Colt, the city of Eagle River had presented it to him when he retired, and usually brought it to the range, but he decided that now that he was a bit older, he enjoyed shooting the lighter Glock much more.

Rex Thornbird's smiling face was on the For Sale sign in the lawn as Henry looked over the property one last time. The house wasn't much to look at from the outside, he thought, nearly flat roof, neutral paint job that made it blend in with the other houses on the block, and very non-descript landscaping that looked like it needed mowing. It was a shame that a wealthy real estate agent was found in something that he probably wouldn't have been caught dead in while he was alive. He got in his car and made the same U-turn as Wayne had moments earlier and headed for Thornbird's office.

Chapter 4

Henry took Sunrise Way as the quickest way back over to East Palm Canyon drive where Thornbird's real estate office was located. He found the office building quickly near the Palapas Garden Nursery on Palm Canyon close to the new condominiums that had just been built. The big sign out front had the Coachella Real Estate logo on it with large arrow and an "enter here." There was plenty of parking, the building was constructed in the parking lot of a shopping center and he found a shady spot under a Palo Verde tree and locked the car and headed for the front door.

The heavily tinted glass door opened onto a tiny lobby filled with several leather upholstered chairs that had seen a lot of use and a table with "Homes" magazines. The interior was filled with a maze of cubicle walls and aisles, and several people popped their heads out above the cube walls as Henry walked in. It reminded Henry somewhat of the prairie dogs checking their environment for predators that he saw on a Discovery channel show once. Obviously Henry was no predator or threat to anyone and as quickly as they popped their heads up, they were down again back at doing whatever it was that they did in their little domains.

The smallest desk Henry had ever seen was off to the left, on its accompanying chair was a bored teenage girl with terrible acne who was reading a magazine and filing her nails while she was talking on the phone.

"Gotta go, someone's here." She said as she hung up the phone, slammed the magazine shut and put the fingernail file in the pencil drawer in one smooth motion that Henry figured she probably practiced numerous times throughout the day. She looked up at Henry and said "Welcome to Coachella Real Estate, how can I help you?" with a grin that showed that someone in her family could obviously afford the payments on the silver braces that lined her teeth.

"Good morning, I'm Henry Wright and I'm here to see your office manager" Henry said pleasantly, feeling somewhat sorry for the girl stuck in this little spot. "Oh, is Mrs. Murphy expecting you?" She asked picking up the phone. "Well, she's been told that I would be coming to talk with her so she's sort of expecting me, but I didn't make an appointment" Henry said. "Hold on, I'll let her know you're here. You said Mr. Wright, correct?" "Yes, that's right, Henry Wright." Henry said, heading for one of the chairs to wait for the office manager's arrival.

Shortly after the homely teenager at the little desk had hung up the phone, a small middle aged woman with bright curly strawberry blond hair wearing a dark green pantsuit which complimented her deep green eyes came bounding around the corner of the cubicle wall holding her hand out.

"Mr. Wright, I'm Rosie Murphy, the office manager here at Coachella Real Estate." Henry got up from the plastic chair and took the offered hand and said "It's nice to meet you, do you have a few moments so that I can talk with you about Mr. Thornbird?" Mrs. Murphy had a firm handshake which Henry appreciated; he didn't care for the limp fish shake, especially in business people.

Henry let her hand go and stepped back as she started waving her hands and talking very animatedly, "Oh yes, poor Rex, I mean Mr. Thornbird, of course. Mr. Johnson from the police department said you'd be interested in talking with me, even though I told those other detectives everything I know. Which isn't much by the way – say can I get you something to drink, coffee or ice water or something like that – Tiffany, have you offered Mr. Wright anything yet?"

The girl, Tiffany, shook her head while Henry took a breath on Mrs. Murphy's behalf; it was amazing how this short petite woman could manage such a stream of words and activity without seeming to pause in-between for a

breath. “What would you like?” Tiffany, the teenager at the desk smiled her silvery smile. “Coffee, black, please.” Henry smiled back at the girl, he felt as though he was going to need an infusion of caffeine to keep up with Mrs. Murphy. “Bring it in to the conference room Tiffany” Mrs. Murphy said to the girl as she turned on her heel and started walking rapidly, almost jogging towards the back of the office. “This way, Mr. Wright.” She said over her shoulder as she turned down an aisle into the maze of cubicles.

Henry was amazed at how someone that short, she had to be all of five feet tall, even with those high heels she was wearing, could cover so much ground so quickly. Henry took several quick large steps across the carpet to catch up with her. She walked down several aisles in the maze of cubicles with desks built in and stacks of papers and files on every desk. Phones were ringing noisily and the office seemed to be a beehive of activity. He caught up with Mrs. Murphy just as she disappeared through a conference room door.

Henry stepped into the conference room and sat down into one of the large leather chairs that surrounded a huge cherry wood conference table. The room was not real large; the table filled it and didn’t leave much space to walk around. The beautiful table and the big black chairs gave the room an elegant, plush feeling. The walls of the room were lined with professional photographs of large estates in the Palm Springs area. The picture directly behind Henry was Bob Hope’s futuristic looking space ship house that was perched on a hilltop not too far from the real estate office.

Mrs. Murphy noticed Henry looking around and said, “The pictures are some of the homes and estates where our office has been involved in the transaction.” “Oh, very impressive!” Henry said, “I didn’t realize the Hope estate had been sold.” Mrs. Murphy looked a little uncomfortable at Henry’s question and said “Well, it really hasn’t, but we’re hoping that now that the great man is gone – God rest his soul – that the Hope family will consider our office when they decide what to do with the place – and I think it does make for a neat addition to our picture wall doesn’t it. Oh, where is that Tiffany with your drink – I’d better check on her.”

As Mrs. Murphy picked up the phone, there was a knock on the door and Tiffany opened it to place a large white ceramic mug with the Coachella Real Estate logo on it filled with hot black coffee on the table. “Thank you dear, that’s all.” Mrs. Murphy said, as she waved her hand dismissing the teenager and sentencing her back to the front desk with her phone, magazine and nail file.

“Now, Mr. Wright, you are here to ask me about Rex, Mr. Thornbird I mean, though I cannot possibly imagine what I can tell you that isn’t already in the report that the other detectives took, why they had a tape recorder and everything, they were very interested in what I had to say – though I must say I don’t know a soul who would want to harm Rrr, Rrr, Mr. Thornbird. He’s the best agent this office has ever had, and the nicest man as well.”

Henry picked up his coffee cup, took a slow sip of the hot coffee and asked, “Can I call you Rosie, Mrs. Murphy?” “Well of course Mr. Wright, everyone in the office calls me Rosie, my real name is Rosalyn, but that is so old-fashioned don’t you agree, Rosie suits me much better, that’s why my hair is this color as well, this isn’t my natural color you see, there is a sweet old lady in a small shop on Indian Canyon that orders this color especially for me, and I had her promise me not to use it on anyone else”

She stopped the stream of words when Henry held his hand up to silence her for a moment. “Please call me Henry, and though I would really like to hear about your hairdresser some other time, I’d like to spend a few minutes with you talking about Mr. Thornbird. Please tell me how long you have known him and what your relationship with him was like and also some of his past deals – especially what he was currently working on.”

Henry was a little annoyed as he caught himself doing the same thing as the woman sitting across the table from him by blurting out all the questions he wanted to ask at once. He set his coffee cup down on the table a little too hard

and some of the coffee sloshed out onto the cherry table top. He took a deep breath to get his control back as he reached into his pocket for his handkerchief to wipe the coffee up before it penetrated the beautiful wood of the table. “Rosie, let’s take this slowly, ok?” He said folding his handkerchief back up. “How long have you known Mr. Thornbird?”

The small woman with the bright red hair was obviously startled when Henry put his coffee cup on the table and looked at him with her large bright green eyes and said “I met Mr. Thornbird when I came to work here at the office as a receptionist four years ago.” “Thank you,” Henry said, standing up slightly to put his handkerchief back in his pocket. “How well did Mr. Thornbird get along with everyone here in the office?” Henry asked settling back into the large black leather chair.

“Well, everyone looked up to him of course” Rosie answered, fidgeting with her brightly colored finger nails while she had her hands clasped together in front of her. “Mr. Thornbird sold more properties than most of the agents put together, and his clients were always pleased. Almost always anyway.” She continued, glancing up at Henry. “A few years ago, when that terrible woman he was married to took him for nearly everything he had, he took it in stride and came into the office every day. He was even here on Saturdays and Sundays, he worked so hard and so many hours that soon he had everything back and more than she took.” She said looking up at Henry with sad eyes. “I came into the office once on a Sunday morning and found him asleep here in the conference room, he’d been working so hard.”

She shuddered at the memory, and continued “I felt sorry for him, but he was determined to regain everything that he had worked so hard for and was very dedicated to his work and making his clients happy.”

The coffee was cooling down a bit and Henry took another sip. It was strong and good, the office obviously had some kind of service and Henry made a mental note to ask Rosie what brand they used here. It seemed as though strong coffee was an important element in the real estate business. “What made Mr. Thornbird so successful?” He asked setting his coffee cup down.

Rosie sat back from the table and thought about her answer, “Well, I think Rex had the ability to spot a trend in the property purchasing business and capitalize on it.” She said. “What do you mean by trend” Henry asked. “Well, for example, a number of years ago, architect properties were very much in fashion here, and Rex listed and sold more than his share of them. These are houses and estates that were designed by well known ’50’s architects like Albert Frey and Richard Dutra here in Palm Springs. Rex sought out all of their work and marketed them and they sold for a nice premium over what other properties were commanding at the time.” Rosie said not without a bit of pride about what the late Rex Thornbird had done to make money for himself and the Coachella Real Estate office.

“Then when he had sold more architectural houses than anyone knew existed, he turned his attention to celebrity homes, which were becoming all the rage.” Rosie continued. “You know he has this uncanny ability to discover which movie stars and celebrities used to come right here to Palm Springs to dry out or recover from plastic surgery or even have illicit affairs.” She suppressed a nervous giggle at this last part.

“Interestingly, his first celebrity property was a double whammy in that it was also designed by Albert Frey, the well known Modernist architect.” She brightened up and leaned towards Henry on the other side of the table as she remembered that transaction. She lowered her voice, “It was a small run-down hotel out near the Palm Springs Racquet Club known as the Legent. The rumor was that Marilyn Monroe used to stay in one of the rooms – it has a back door that can be used to get away quietly, she met politicians there for her illicit affairs. Rex showed me the room before he sold the property.”

She leaned back again, seemingly quite in awe of the Monroe legacy and having been in the same hotel room as the

late star. “A nice young couple from Chicago bought it, they were going to renovate it and turn it into a modern resort – though I don’t know how they would do that and not ruin the Frey character the place had. I’ve not been back to look at it since.” Rosie finished.

Henry felt that they were getting off track a little bit, but wanted to keep her talking about Thornbird’s past deals. Thornbird must have had enemies, and the most likely place to look was in a deal gone bad, a jilted lover, or amongst a jealous co-worker. “Is that when he switched to his concentration on celebrity homes?” Henry asked picking up his now quickly cooling coffee. “Yes, shortly after selling the hotel property Rex got a listing for a house that was once owned by Robert Goulet, you know he has such a nice voice, and it demanded quite a premium over what other properties were going for in the neighborhood at the time.” Rosie recounted.

“Then, like he had a Midas touch, other former celebrity homes started coming his way. He sold a place that Bette Davis once owned to a young man from Northern California, an older couple from Minnesota bought a property that had a swimming pool that was designed for Veronica Lake, and even the property where he was found had a Hollywood connection.” She choked up when she spoke her last sentence, reached for a tissue on the credenza behind her, “I’m sorry, I still have a hard time dealing with the fact that he is gone, this office is going to have a hard time dealing with that.”

Henry nodded his understanding, he was sure that this office losing a valued member and its best salesperson was not just an emotional scar that needed to be healed but a financial scar as well, he wondered if Rosie was at all concerned about the monetary impact, he hoped not.

“You said the house on Granvia Valmonte had a celebrity connection as well, are you sure?” Henry asked. “Oh yes” Rosie replied, “It was rumored that the house was once owned by the famous Rudy Vallee. You know, the fellow that sang through a megaphone.” “Oh sure, I remember him.” Henry said, draining the last of his coffee from his cup and setting it gently on the table. “You know, I don’t know how he finds these things out, Rex, I mean. He has a real talent for discovering these celebrity places. Had, I mean, sorry.” She said as she blew her nose in her tissue and reached for a new one behind her. “Can you help me with a list of Mr. Thornbird’s property sales for the past few years?” Henry asked.

“Of course, but it will take me a while to get such a report together.” Rosie smiled as she answered Henry. She was still wiping her nose with the tissues, but was not nearly as nervous as when Henry first walked in the door. Henry figured that perhaps talking to someone about Thornbird’s demise allowed her to process that finality and helped settle her down to the point where she was no longer talking so much that Henry was afraid she was going to turn blue from not breathing.

“Let’s say mid-day tomorrow?” Rosie asked. “That will give me enough time to pull all the records from the computer system and you can take the report with you.” “That sounds good.” Henry said, “Last question, I promise, what can you tell me about lock boxes?”

“Lock boxes?” Rosie asked. “You mean regular key lock boxes?” “Yes, the kind that are outside all the homes that are for sale.” Henry asked. “Well, there’s not much to them.” Rosie said. “When a home is listed for sale, the key to the door is put inside the box. The box is locked with a combination and it is attached somewhere near the door. We still use the older kind with a combination here in the Coachella Valley; other places in the real estate business have switched over to electronic ones.”

“I saw one attached to a hose bib at the house on Granvia Valmonte” Henry said. “Yes, faucets, a porch railing, the gas pipe, sometimes it is on the door knob.” Rosie explained. “So, who has the combination?” Henry asked. “Well every real estate agent needs to get in, so they all know the combination.” Rosie said. “That doesn’t seem like a

secure system.” Henry said, “How many agents are there in your office?” “Well our office has about forty agents, and there are about thirty real estate offices in the Coachella Valley.” Rosie answered. “So all the lockboxes from all the offices have the same combination?” Henry asked, “If all the offices are the same size as yours, that means over 1,200 people have access to all the homes that are for sale.” “Well we are one of the larger offices, but yes, there are a lot of people that have access to the combination.” Rosie agreed. “Do you change the combinations on a regular basis?” Henry asked. “No, no, no, it’s a big headache, you know there are a lot of boxes, they’re attached to homes all over the Valley, so we only change them once a year or so. But you know Henry we’ve never had a problem with a break-in or a crime or anything.” Rosie replied.

“Until Rex Thornbird had his little problem that is.” Henry said, getting up to leave. “You don’t think someone opened the lockbox and got in to kill Rex - do you?” Rosie said as she too got up out of her chair. “Are we done, you don’t have any more questions for me?” Henry ignored her first question; he wasn’t ready to share what he was thinking with anyone. “No, I think you’ve told me everything I need to know at this point, thank you for the coffee.” Henry answered, reaching for the door. “Ok, if you’re satisfied, then I guess that is ok. The other detectives were here a lot longer and asked a lot more questions. You didn’t even take any notes!” Rosie seemed a little indignant that Henry was ready to go when she felt that he had not spent enough time interviewing her. Henry smiled at her and said, “I kind of work without notes, believe me, you’ve been very helpful and if I have any other questions, I’ll see you tomorrow.” “Ok,” Rosie smiled, “say 12:30, that’s when I should have everything ready for you.” “Great” Henry replied as he stepped out of the conference room. “Say, you wouldn’t mind walking me back to the front door would you?” He asked, “I think I’d get lost in this maze here.” Rosie laughed and her eyes sparkled as she went past him and said, “Of course Henry, please come this way.”

Back at the reception area, Tiffany quickly repeated her earlier smooth and well practiced motion of putting down the phone, hiding the magazine and dropping the nail file in the drawer as she saw Rosie and Henry approaching. Rosie turned, held out her hand and said, “See you tomorrow Mr. Wright.” Henry, a little startled by the return to the more formal greeting, shook her hand and said “I did think of one more thing, can you get me one of the frames that you put the handout sheets for the houses in. You know the sheets where you have the picture and the little blurb about the house that prospective buyers take.”

Rosie got a puzzled look on her face as she took her hand back. “I think I know what you mean Mr. Wright, but we don’t really have anything like that. Our flyers are usually outside in a plastic box attached to the For Sale sign. Sometimes some of the agents will put some extra flyers on the kitchen counter or somewhere, but we don’t really have any frames or holders other than the ones on the signs.” “Oh, ok, my mistake I guess.” Henry said, reaching for the front door. “See you tomorrow, around lunch time.”

“Ok, Mr. Wright, until then.” Rosie answered already turning back towards the maze of cubicles in the building.

The heat of a late April Palm Springs day was at its height with the temperature well over 100 as Henry walked back to his car thinking that he needed to take a look at the For Sale signs that were planted in the front yards. He didn’t really notice the heat, just as he never noticed the boxes on the signs that Rosie was talking about. He wondered what had left the imprint in the dust on the mantle of the house on Granvia. Wayne was probably right that it didn’t mean anything, but Henry couldn’t help but think about what had been there and now wasn’t.

Henry started the car and rolled the windows down as the air conditioner did its best to cool the car down to the 82 that Henry preferred. Even under the shade of the tree the car had heated up so that the inside seemed more like a dry heat sauna. Once it cooled off a bit he rolled up the windows and turned the car north on Palm Canyon and made a right turn on Sunset Way heading for home. Surely there had to be a Coachella Real Estate sign along the way to his house. He knew they were as ubiquitous as palm trees in this part of Palm Springs. He’d stop and have a look at one on the way.

Chapter 5

Henry pushed the button on the Mercury's built in garage door opener and pulled into the large garage at his home on Mel Avenue. He pushed the button again and the door closed behind him. He got out of the car and headed for the door that led directly into his kitchen when he smelled the unmistakable odor of onions and garlic. "Heeeey, you were gone early this morning!" Henry's housemate Charles greeted him while cooking an omelet at the kitchen stove. "Yeah, I met Wayne for breakfast and then ran over to the Coachella Real Estate office." Henry replied looking at Charles' creation in the large skillet and realizing that it was nearly two o'clock and he had not eaten since his bagel breakfast with Wayne early that morning. "There's plenty here for you if you want some." Charles said. "Sure, that sounds good. I'll grab a couple of plates." Henry said, making his way to the kitchen cabinet.

Henry bought the house on Mel Avenue, a small street of older homes between Indian Canyon and Via Miraleste two blocks north of the hospital, shortly after moving to Palm Springs. The house was a single story on a large lot and was more or less a large U shape with a pool in the middle. There were two master bedroom suites, one in each wing, in addition to two other bedrooms, each with their own bathroom.

The layout of the place suited Henry perfectly; all of the bedrooms had French doors that opened up to the backyard pool, lawn area, the barbecue and a small pool cabana. Henry knew that the house was much larger than what he needed when he first saw it, but he liked it, so he used the money that he had from the sale of the home that he and Irma had shared for so many years in Eagle River and some of her life insurance to pay cash for it.

Henry set one of the bedrooms up as his office. There was a comfortable chair and a good lamp for reading, a large desk with Henry's computer which he used to pay his bills and do his research on the Internet, and a bookcase that reached to the ceiling with a locked drawer where he kept his weapons and their ammunition. Even though there were no children in the house, he kept his guns unloaded and locked up. There was no need to expose them to potential accidents. There were also some things that he wanted to keep private from his housekeeper Juanita. Not that she would have a problem with the weapons, Henry thought, but he didn't want her to think that he was a violent person, which he wasn't. In Henry's way of thinking, once a cop always a cop and he thought of his Colt and the Glock the same way a carpenter would think of a favorite hammer and a nail puller.

Right after Henry moved into the house, he met Charles at the Senior Center where Henry had been going to meet people and socialize since he arrived in Palm Springs. He ran into Charles while playing pool at one of the center's tables on afternoon. Charles Knightly III, was a fairly good pool player and they hit it off right away. Henry discovered that Charles' long time partner Jonathan passed away of AIDS a few months before and Charles moved to Palm Springs from Northern California after his death.

Charles was a retired High School teacher from San Francisco and had spent a year caring for Jonathan full-time before he died. After moving down to Palm Springs with his dog he couldn't find a place to rent that allowed pets. Henry had this huge house and empty rooms so he offered Charles the other master suite. The layout of the house was perfect for their arrangement; Henry had a master suite and a separate office on one side of the house with direct access to the pool. Charles and Pierre, his dog, had moved into the master bedroom on the other side of the house. The fourth bedroom was set up for guests and had only been used once when Henry's daughter Claire came out for a brief visit a year ago.

Two months after he moved in, Charles sort of stopped looking for another place to live and he had been Henry's housemate for the past two and a half years. He paid Henry a few hundred dollars a month in rent, and they split most of the utilities. Henry liked having someone around to talk with, didn't mind the dog and it had suited them both well.

Henry pulled the plates out of the kitchen cabinet and set them on the dining room table. He walked back into the kitchen to grab some silverware for the two of them, and set them down next to the plates. “What would you like to drink?” Henry asked Charles, reaching for the refrigerator. “I’ll just have a glass of milk.” Charles replied, “Make sure it is my lactose free kind.” “Of course, Henry said, “I wouldn’t try to poison you!” “Speaking of poison, since you went out to have breakfast with Wayne, and it is not Thursday, he must need your help again, has someone been offed?” Charles asked deftly flipping over the omelet in the pan on the stove. “Offed?” Henry asked, “Well, someone has been killed and Wayne requested my help.” Henry continued, pouring Charles’ milk into a glass on the counter. “I know that cops say “offed”, I saw it in a movie! So is it anyone famous or that I should know?” Charles asked, watching the omelet carefully to make sure the cheese didn’t run out into the skillet. “Yes, you’ve seen him around.” Henry said carrying Charles’ milk to the table and reaching for a bottle of water for himself. “Ok, ok, stop making me guess, who is it?” Charles asked now sliding the omelet onto a platter.

“Rex Thornbird.” Henry said, “Do you know who that is?” “Rex Thornbird? Sure, he’s the mid-century specialist; his face is on every block here in this part of town – that’s terrible, he’s a nice man – what happened?” Charles asked turning the stove off. “Well, I can’t tell you too much of course, but he was found dead inside the kitchen of one of the houses he was trying to sell not too far from here actually.”

“Hmmm, so Rex Thornbird is dead, eh? - bacon?” Charles asked. “Sounds good.” Henry said, “I smell it, is it in the microwave?” “Yes,” Charles replied, “Do you mind getting it out?” “I got it,” Henry replied reaching for the oven mitt to take the hot tray with the bacon slices out of the microwave and he put it on the table. “How do you know Thornbird?” Henry asked Charles who was grabbing some napkins from the cabinet and making his way to the table with the platter with the omelet. “First of all, his picture is everywhere; it seems as though he has the For Sale market cornered in Palm Springs, you’ve seen the signs around here haven’t you?” Charles set the platter with the omelet down on the table and cut the omelet deftly in half with his knife. He slid half on Henry’s plate and the other half on his own.

“Secondly he was here at the house about a month or so ago, wanting to know if we wanted to sell the house. I told him I wasn’t the owner, but that you probably weren’t interested in selling anyway. Then from the car he was driving and the way he was dressed, I thought he was interested in me, and I asked him if he wanted to meet for coffee later, but he turned me down.” Charles related, taking a sip of his special milk. “Oh for goodness sake Charles, Thornbird was married up until a few years ago, how could you be hitting on him?” Henry asked putting his fork down and looking with wonderment at his roommate.

“Heeeey, my gaydar isn’t that far off.” Charles said defensively, “He’s one of the family.” “Well, I don’t think so, it doesn’t matter though does it, he’s dead, and we don’t know who did it, nor do we have a motive.” Henry said picking up a slice of bacon. “Well I think you should look into his customers.” Charles said. “When he was here, he told me about all these movie star owned homes that he sold in this area, and there’s no way that there are that many places in this neighborhood that were owned by celebrities – if you ask me.” Charles said in between bites.

“Hmm, maybe.” Henry said, “Or maybe you’re just jealous of him since he didn’t want to join you for coffee.” Henry said with a smile as he put the last of his omelet in his mouth. “You’ve outdone yourself on this omelet as usual. How do you know that there are a lot of celebrity owned homes in Palm Springs?”

Charles took a deep breath and started his story. “Well, Jonathan – rest his soul – and I have been coming to Palm Springs on vacation for many years. We started in the late seventies when we heard then President Ford was coming here to relax. We figured if presidents came here, why shouldn’t we” Charles recounted. “It’s not a bad drive from San Francisco, we would spend weekends at the Ballantines Hotel, that was before the gay resorts were all over the place like they are today. Anyway, Palm Springs became popular with the Hollywood crowd during the Great

Depression.” Charles continued. “This place was the perfect hideaway, far enough away from the gossip columnists like Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper in Hollywood, and they came here to play tennis just down the street at the Palm Springs Racquet Club, or attend a party or two, and unless things got too wild, they were pretty safe here.”

“You know, I knew there was a celebrity connection,” Henry said, “But I had no idea that it was this extensive.” “Oh yeah,” Charles continued, “The El Mirador Hotel used to be the place where they all hung out, Gable, Lombard – a lot of them stayed there, but some of them had homes here as well. Anyway, the Army came in at the start of World War II and took over the El Mirador and turned it into Torney General Hospital.”

Charles finished the last of his omelet and put his fork down on the plate while he grabbed the last piece of bacon with a questioning look at Henry who nodded his approval. “Torney General Hospital?” Henry said, “That must be long gone, I don’t recognize that name.” “No, this is the desert, nothing ever disappears, it just gets reinvented.” Charles said. “We now call it Desert Regional Medical Center, it’s the hospital right behind us here on Indian Canyon.”

“Wow!” Henry said, “I didn’t know that, our very own hospital? You’re right; this place has really undergone some transformations. So I know about Liberace, Dinah Shore, Elvis and Lawrence Welk, who else used to visit here?” Charles picked up his and Henry’s now empty plates and carried them to the sink. He started rinsing them off and said. “Well, I mentioned Gerald Ford, who still lives here and you probably already know about Bob Hope who was actually appointed Honorary Mayor.”

Charles walked back over to the table to get the microwave plate that held the bacon. “And everyone tends to forget Sonny Bono, who was the mayor here before he was elected to the U.S. Congress where he represented the district before his unfortunate skiing accident. But I’ll bet you didn’t know the Gabor sisters had homes here and Frank Sinatra had a house built close by on Alejo Road, Kirk Douglas had a place in Las Palmas. Oh yeah, Harpo Marx lived over next to the Tamarisk Country Club near what is now Rancho Mirage. And somebody mentioned to me that Marilyn Monroe had a rendezvous in a small hotel on Racquet Club Road while Kennedy was in town in 1962.”

“Yeah, I’ve already heard the story about Monroe’s affairs at a hotel, but I didn’t know about the Kennedy part.” Henry answered. “So all these celebrity homes that Thornbird was selling, it could be that they are all genuine.” Henry said as Charles put the last of the dishes into the dishwasher.

“Well, as I said, I just don’t think so.” Charles said as he poured the dishwashing liquid into the machine. “You know, Palm Springs had already lost its luster while Jonathan and I were vacationing here in the late seventies, and a lot of celebrities had moved to more upscale places like Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage and Indian Wells. Plus, it seems like a lot of the houses that Thornbird was selling in this area were small and probably originally intended for winter homes for the Los Angeles middle class. You probably ought to read up on Alexander homes on the Internet.”

“I remember hearing about Alexander homes when I was looking for this place.” Henry said, “I’ll do a search to see what I can find. But thanks, you’ve been a big help in getting me into the right direction on my research.” “Heeey, no problem, always glad to help. Now I’m going to take Pierre out to the park for a walk” Charles said, grabbing Pierre’s leash and going into the backyard to get the dog from under one of the large bougainvillea bushes where it usually took an afternoon nap. “Ok, see you in a bit.” Henry said heading for his office, “I’m going to log onto the Internet to see what I can find out about Mr. Thornbird and Alexander homes.”

Henry walked into his office and pulled the chair out as he sat down at his desk. He moved the mouse on its pad and

the flat panel screen flickered to life. Henry was proud of his computer station, there were a lot of people his age that either didn't know, or refused to use the machines. When he was still working, Henry had insisted that the Eagle River police department take advantage of the new technology and his force was one of the first in Wisconsin to have terminals in their police cruisers.

He had continued this professional philosophy to his personal use and started using a computer at home to pay his bills, write letters and surf the Internet quite a few years ago. Shortly after moving into this house, he bought the machine and had the high speed Internet connection installed so that he could be as well informed as possible. When he started working for the FBI as a profiler, he realized that he couldn't do it without the machine and the fast connection.

Now, he brought up his browser and surfed over to realtor.com. He used the website when shopping for his own house and knew that he could use it to see all the homes that Rex Thornbird had been trying to sell before his unfortunate demise in the house on Granvia Valmonte.

By typing in the zip code for Palm Springs and doing a search of the properties for sale, Henry quickly had a full list of every home that was offered by numerous realtors and agencies in the neighborhood. Sure enough, of all the listings within this zip code, it looked as though Thornbird and Coachella Real Estate had over eighty percent of them. He looked up the house on Granvia Valmonte where he had been that morning with Wayne and found in the description that it was owned by Rudy Vallee as Rosie had mentioned.

Many of the homes that were listed by Thornbird contained references to ownership or occupancy by celebrities. Some of them seemed a little far fetched, like a home on Tacheva that had been owned by Patsy Cline. Henry wasn't sure that Patsy Cline had ever been to California, much less Palm Springs, but the décor in the house was described in the listing as very western, so he supposed it could be possible.

After looking through the various descriptions, he thought he heard Charles and Pierre return from their walk, but he wasn't through reading everything about the various homes. By the time he got up, he realized that it was getting dark outside and Charles had left a note on the refrigerator that he had gone out and wouldn't be back until later.

It had cooled off considerably outdoors, where the temperature was a very comfortable 74 degrees and Henry opened up the doors from the dining room to the pool. While he had already swam his laps in the morning, he decided to relax in the pool before dinner and headed to his bedroom to get his towel. He turned the stereo on and flipped the switch so that he could listen to the speakers outside. He loved the pool, it was one of the nicest things about the desert climate, he certainly would not have bothered with one in Wisconsin.

It was about eight o'clock that evening when Henry finally ate dinner. He had been to Jensen's supermarket on Sunrise Way the day before and bought salad makings at their extensive salad bar. He had quite a bit left over and it was in a container at the bottom of the refrigerator. He took it out, arranged it on a plate, poured on some dressing and grabbed a bottle of California white wine from the refrigerator. He sat at the dining room table, ate his salad and drank his glass of wine thinking that Charles was right about looking into Thornbird's past customers. Even Rosie had said that not all of them were satisfied.

He finished his salad, drank the last of his wine and brought his plate and glass to the sink. He rinsed them and put them in the dishwasher with the dishes from the omelet lunch that he and Charles shared earlier in the day. He dried off his hands and remembered that he left the flyer that he picked up on the way home from Coachella Real Estate in the car. He went out to the garage and picked the paper up from the big Mercury's passenger seat. He headed for his bedroom and closed the door and switched on his television. He sat down on the bed and looked at the flyer. He'd picked it up from in front of a home on Via Miraleste, just around the corner. It was from Coachella Real Estate and

had a small copy of Rex Thornbird's picture on it. It featured a three bedroom, two bathroom house and had a description on the flyer:

Rex Thornbird, the mid-century specialist and Coachella Real Estate are proud to feature this newly renovated home in the desirable Ruth Hardy Park neighborhood. Enjoy this exquisite home with practical layout and charm from a bygone era when gas was cheap and homes were constructed with quality. The kitchen is renovated and features modern appliances and new countertops. The backyard is professionally landscaped; the pool was recently re-plastered and is ready for your use. This home is in move in condition and will not last long at this amazing price. Call Rex Thornbird today to arrange a personal tour of this beautiful executive home.

Geez, they really pour on the hyperbole, Henry thought, and counting his picture, Thornbird was featured three times on the 8 ½ by 11 flyer. It almost seemed as though he was selling himself as opposed to the house. The flyer had indeed been in a plastic box that was attached to the For Sale sign as Rosie had mentioned.

Thinking of Rosie Murphy, he wondered exactly what the relationship was between her and Thornbird. He hoped it wasn't anything improper and that Mr. Murphy wasn't the jealous type. The petite woman with her bright hair and green eyes had impressed him; he didn't want her to be involved in what Charles thought was Thornbird's exaggeration and liberties in describing the properties he was selling. Although, the flyer he had in his hand didn't seem improper at all, no mention of any celebrity connection with this house.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized that the connection between celebrities and these homes was shaky. Certainly there wasn't a plaque on the wall announcing "Bing Crosby slept here" and no mark left behind if a celebrity had indeed owned the home. Of course, some famous people's properties were very obvious. Bob Hope's flying saucer estate was known by everyone in the valley, and most folks also knew about Liberace's compound near downtown Palm Springs.

Charles had certainly opened his eyes to the celebrity connection that Palm Springs had earlier. Charles was very knowledgeable about Palm Springs' past, but then what else could you expect from a retired High School history teacher? Henry doubted that the average home buyer or Palm Springs visitor knew which movie stars had lived here or even stopped at the El Mirador for a drink. If someone who seemed knowledgeable told them that a home was owned by a celebrity, how would they find out otherwise?

Had Thornbird embellished the lineage of these properties in order to get a premium sales price? A higher sales price meant a higher commission for Thornbird. Henry didn't doubt there was some fiction writing at this point; he remembered the picture of the Bob Hope estate that was on the wall of the conference room at Coachella Real Estate. It hung amongst the other pictures of estates and homes that the office claimed they had handled. If they played fast and loose with the facts in the office, what did Thornbird do when trying to convince people to buy a house from him?

Was this a big conspiracy to defraud buyers? How many people were in on it? How many buyers had been taken by this embellishment? Was one of them so angry at being duped that they decided to make Rex Thornbird pay the ultimate price? He decided that the report of Thornbird's past deals that Rosie was working on was becoming very important.

Maybe he'd probe her a little to see what she knew of the conspiracy, if it was indeed a conspiracy. He doubted she was in on it, but she may have been aware of what was going on. Maybe he could get her to relax enough tomorrow to open up a little bit on Thornbird's way of doing business. Perhaps a few more details on her relationship with Thornbird would be forthcoming as well. But he really needed the report that she was working on for him. He'd take that list and make arrangements to talk to everyone beginning with those that had purchased these so-called celebrity

owned homes from Thornbird.

Chapter 6

Tuesday, April 18

A few minutes before nine the next morning, Henry walked to his car with the Colt and Glock in their cases while Charles was taking his turn at swimming laps. Pierre was running along beside him at the edge of the pool occasionally barking some encouragement. Henry put the gun cases in the trunk of the car; he didn't like having a weapon in the passenger compartment unless he had it strapped to his waist. He backed the car out of the garage and went down Mel to Avenida Caballeros where he turned right. He drove to Ramon Road, turned left and settled back for the long drive out to the Gun Club.

After a while he passed over the Interstate, and took a left on Varner Road. Out here, the area was mostly industrial or nothing but desert, depending on which checkerboard square of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation you were on. The Indians charged a lease to building owners for use of their property, so out here in the desert outside of town, the undeveloped squares were Reservation. Building owners just didn't want to risk the unknown of not owning the property under their investment. Over in the more developed part of Palm Springs, the checkerboard reservation continued, though you could hardly tell what Indian land was and what was not. The only difference was that some people had title to the land their house was on, and others paid the Indians a lease for their property.

But out here in the desert, it was more apparent, and developers tended to shy away from leased land for structures such as the Express package delivery building Henry just passed, or even the auto wreckers. Right across the road from those establishments was an empty, obviously Agua Caliente, square of land. The Palm Springs Gun Club was on one of these undeveloped squares of land. For the Club, the empty piece of desert was a perfect place for their pistol and rifle range.

Ordinarily, the range was not open to the public, but Wayne was the law enforcement liaison to the Club and as such had a key to the gate. The club didn't have many facilities, the bathroom was a portable outhouse, and refreshments were in the ice chest in the trunk of Henry's car. But there was plenty of space, there was no charge other than the Club's membership's dues, and on a weekday morning once a month, he and Wayne had the place to themselves. Most of the Club's activities were on weekends when they had match shootouts and something called a Western shootout, which Henry had not really figured out.

A couple of more turns took Henry onto an unpaved road, and within a couple of hundred yards, he was at the gate to the Gun Club's range which Wayne had already opened. The Crown Victoria with its exempt license plates was already parked up ahead, and Henry pulled his nearly twin Mercury Grand Marquis next to it. Wayne was setting up their targets and Henry got out of the car and walked back to the gate to close it.

He waved at Wayne as he walked back and yelled, "You never called me yesterday afternoon." "You're right, and it's not because I forgot." Wayne smiled, putting the staple gun that he had used to attach the targets down at the pistol station. "I figured it was because whatever you found out was inconsequential." Henry smiled unlocking his trunk and grabbing his gun cases and a couple of boxes of ammunition.

"Well, you may not think so, but it doesn't amount to much." Wayne said, opening the passenger door to his car and pulling out his hearing protectors. "That's what you keep saying." Henry smiled, "What did you find out?" "The lab tells me that the measurements of the mark are consistent with a picture frame with an eight inch side." Wayne said, "We didn't see it yesterday, but there was a second mark probably made by a support rest of some sort."

“So like an 8 by 10 frame set up in portrait format, for example?” Henry asked setting his gun cases down on the shooting rest. “The lab guys say it could be an 8 by 10, but it could be an 8 by 8 as well, it’s hard to tell exactly what size it was.” Wayne explained. “But the mark is definitely not the right size for holding flyers, which are printed on 8 ½ by 11 paper.” Henry said, unlocking the Glock’s case and taking out the clips so that he could load the 9 mm ammunition into them. “No, it’s too small for a standard piece of paper, like they use for flyers.” Wayne said, pulling his own Glock out of his shoulder holster and checking the clip in it, which was already loaded.

“So why would an empty house, no furniture, no decorations of any kind have a picture frame on the mantle and what is inside that picture frame?” Henry asked, pushing one of the loaded clips into his Glock. “Good questions, the big question you didn’t ask is, “Where is that picture frame now?”” Wayne said putting his protective glasses on, and taking aim at the target down range. “Range is hot – commence firing!” He yelled before pulling the trigger on his weapon. “Find the picture, find the murderer if you ask me.” Henry yelled over the noise of Wayne’s weapon, as he fired his own pistol at the target that Wayne put up down range.

After an hour and a half of shooting the Glock and his slower and heavier Colt, Henry was on his way home for a quick shower and a change of clothes before meeting Rosie at the Coachella Real Estate office.

It was just about 12:30 when he showed up at the office and walked through the front door. Tiffany, the receptionist, went through her phone, nail file, magazine routine and seemed to remember him. “Hi Mr. Wright, Mrs. Murphy is expecting you, and she’ll be right out.” “Thank you, I’ll wait right here.” Henry turned to look out the windows preferring to stand instead of sitting in one of the well worn lobby chairs.

“Mr. Wright, I made reservations for lunch, I do hope that you have not eaten that you’ll join me?” Rosie Murphy came walking her brisk walk out from the cubicle maze, her strawberry blond curls bouncing, wearing a green blouse with black pants with a small black sweater over her shoulders. She had black high heeled shoes on and carried a thick manila folder in one hand and a small black purse in the other.

“Eh, no I haven’t, sure I’d like that.” Henry answered her questions while pushing open the door.

“Call my cell phone if you need anything.” Rosie yelled over her shoulder at Tiffany as the door closed. “I can drive, I hope you don’t mind.” “No, not at all.” Henry was getting to like this small woman’s spunk. He hoped that she had invited him to lunch that perhaps she was interested in talking about more than just business. He thought it strange that he wanted to know about more than business with her; he usually didn’t get personally involved with the cases he was investigating. This time he thought, it is different. “I’m parked right over here, Henry.” Rosie waved at a red Volkswagen new beetle and pulled the car’s key fob out of her small purse and opened both doors with a click and a beep.

Henry wasn’t sure why he smiled inwardly when he saw the little red Volkswagen and realized that it fit Rosie well. He was happy that Rosie had returned to addressing him as Henry as opposed to the more formal Mr. Wright that she used in the office in front of Tiffany. He folded his six foot frame into the front seat of the small car while Rosie tossed her purse and the big manila folder onto the back seat before getting into the car herself. She held her door open while she started the car and got the air going. Closing the door she turned to Henry with a smile, “I hope you like Mexican food, I made a reservation at the Blue Coyote Grill.”

“I do and know it well; it’s not too far from my house.” Henry smiled back. “Good, I’m hungry; I told them we’d be there at 12:45.” As she put the car in gear and pulled out of the parking lot and onto South Palm Canyon Drive.

Hmmm, he hadn't noticed all the little freckles she had on her nose; he guessed they were more noticeable in the sunlight outside. He was wondering why he was noticing all these things about her; he hadn't noticed things about women for a long, long time.

She deftly steered the little car through the traffic and they arrived at the parking lot behind the Blue Coyote with minutes to spare. They were seated right away and Rosie ordered a margarita for herself and Henry ordered a cup of coffee. The staff at the Blue Coyote seemed to be familiar with Rosie and Henry wondered how many times she had been here with Thornbird plotting to rip off unknowing home buyers. As quickly as that thought came into his head, he pushed it out of his mind, he didn't want to think of Rosie that way, but he knew he needed to remain objective towards her. At the same time, he didn't consider her a suspect, her grief at Thornbird's death had seemed too genuine, and there was really no motive for her to kill her office's cash cow.

"I really like the enchiladas here." She smiled, putting down her menu. "I agree, the enchiladas are good; but I think I'll have the fish tacos today." Henry said putting his menu on the table as well. The waiter arrived with their drinks and they gave him their order. He picked up the menus and disappeared into the back of the restaurant leaving them alone at their table.

Henry felt a little awkward, but he wanted to know more about Rosie's relationship with Thornbird outside of the office, he thought about how to ask his question, but decided there was really no easy way to get around it and he wanted to be direct. "Rex and I used to come here for lunch after realtor tours." Rosie said carefully picking up her margarita and licking some of the salt off the rim. "Ah, it seemed as though the waiters and staff recognized you." Henry was relieved that Rosie had brought up Rex without him having to ask why the staff seemed to know her. "Did you see Thornbird often outside of the office, other than these realtor tours – and can you tell me what those tours are?" Henry took another sip of his coffee, it was not as good here as at Rosie's office.

"We socialized occasionally, but it wasn't a serious thing, if that is what you mean," Rosie took a sip of her margarita. "We met here once every two weeks after the realtor tours. A tour is where all the agents drive around and look at all the new houses on the market. Since there were usually too many houses, we split them up and then compared notes afterwards over lunch. Usually we met here, sometimes at the La Taqueria near the Plaza."

"So during a tour you drive over to every new home on the market, look at it and take the flyers? I picked up a bunch of realtors' business cards yesterday from the house on Granvia Valmonte where Thornbird died; they must be from the tour?" Henry looked at Rosie and was fascinated at how she kept licking the salt from her glass before taking small sips from her margarita.

"Generally whenever a realtor goes into a house, either on the tour, or with a prospective buyer, they will leave their card behind as a courtesy to the listing agent." Rosie answered. "That's what Wayne Johnson, the police captain who called you to let you know that I was coming to see you, mentioned to me as well." Henry picked up his coffee again, and looked directly into Rosie's bright green eyes. "You told me yesterday that Mr. Thornbird had a penchant for finding and selling celebrity owned homes, can you tell me a little bit more about how he did that?"

Rosie took another sip of margarita, "Did I tell you yesterday that he sold an Albert Frey designed hotel that had a Marilyn Monroe connection to a young couple from Chicago?" "Yes, you did mention that. And my housemate Charles mentioned to me that there was a small hotel near the Racquet Club where Marilyn Monroe was rumored to have met President Kennedy in 1962, I think it was." Henry moved his coffee cup aside as the waiter brought their plates. "Housemate? I'm sorry; I assumed that you were married. You wear a wedding ring." Rosie said with a flustered tone in her voice as the waiter set her enchilada plate in front of her.

"Will there be anything else folks? Would you like a refill on that margarita, Ma'am?" The waiter asked having set the hot plates on the table. "I normally don't, but I think that this time I need another one." Rosie nodded to the

waiter. Henry pushed the refried beans around on his plate and looked down at his left hand where his wedding ring was still around his finger. "My wife Irma died suddenly about three years ago." He said quietly, "I haven't felt a reason to take it off. It was just before my retirement from the police force, things were kind of hectic and I just have had a hard time letting her go, so I guess that's why I didn't take my ring off."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Rosie put her fork down, she too was quiet. "I know what you must feel like; I lost my husband in a plane crash five years ago. One minute he was whistling a tune as he walked out the door on the way to the airport, the next thing I knew the Highway Patrol was on the phone with me to let me know that his small plane crashed while he was trying to land. He was such a good pilot too."

Henry looked up at Rosie, whose eyes seemed misty at the thought of her dead husband. "I'm sorry for your loss as well." Henry finally said. "You know, you're not the first person I have ever met who lost his wife and then became gay." Rosie put a forkful of enchilada in her mouth.

"Gay, what do you mean?" Henry asked incredulously. Rosie finished chewing, "You know, you lost your wife, your life with her was obviously very happy since you still wear your ring, you couldn't imagine yourself with another woman, so now you live with Charles."

Henry couldn't help but chuckle, "Well you're partially right, Irma and I were very happy, but Charles rents a room from me, we don't have any relationship beyond friendship and as far as other women, I haven't really given them any thought after Irma died." Until now, Henry thought to himself taking another look at the lively woman across the table from him.

Rosie put her fork down, "I'm so, so, sorry for making the wrong assumption." Her face turned nearly the color of her hair. "Yesterday I saw your wedding ring, I assumed you were married, and then just a moment ago, I thought you were happy in your relationship with Charles, I don't know how to apologize, can I buy you a margarita?" "Is everything ok here folks" the waiter appeared as though summoned. "I've decided to have a margarita as well." Henry was still laughing, "Better make it a large one, frozen with salt please." "Yes, sir! One large frozen margarita with salt coming right up." The waiter disappeared again.

Henry attacked his fish tacos with renewed interest. It seemed as though something had been cleared up between Rosie and himself. He had not enjoyed lunch with a woman in a long time; he was certainly beginning to enjoy this lunch and this woman. "I'm glad we've resolved that, yesterday I was wondering if your husband was jealous of your relationship with Thornbird."

Rosie licked the salt off her margarita glass and took a much larger sip than earlier. "When my husband died, he didn't have any life insurance or anything, so I had to go to work to support myself. I started as a receptionist, just like Tiffany, at Coachella Real Estate and eventually worked my way up to office manager."

The waiter set Henry's margarita in front of him and brought Rosie's fresh margarita as well. Henry picked up his glass and held it in front of him as Rosie lifted her glass to his and clinked it. "Here's to communication without assumptions." Henry said as Rosie nodded. "I'll drink to that as well." Henry took a drink from his margarita, and set it down on the table. "Let's get back to telling me about the hotel that Thornbird sold to the couple from Chicago."

Rosie took her own drink. "Well as I mentioned, it was the first property that Rex sold with a celebrity connection. The hotel seemed to be what the couple wanted but the Monroe story certainly helped seal the deal." "Did the property sell for a premium price?" Henry poked his fork into his fish tacos which had cooled off considerably during their little misunderstanding. "No, I think that was before Rex realized that a celebrity tie-in would make a property more valuable." Rosie said as she put another forkful of enchilada in her mouth. "The next house, the Robert Goulet place, did get fifty thousand more than similar houses in the same neighborhood. I've included both of those places in the report that is in my car."

"Do you have any idea how he researched the celebrity lineage of these homes?" Henry finished the last of his

tacos; he didn't really feel like eating the cold refried beans or the rice. "All realtors have access to the county records of home ownership of course." Rosie took the last bite of her enchilada. "Rex was very computer savvy and certainly would have been able to look up which homes were owned by celebrities; from there it would be a simple matter of trying to get the current owners to put them up for sale."

Henry pushed his plate aside and leaned on the table looking Rosie right in the eyes, "Do you think he went through all that trouble?" Rosie met his gaze, "No." "Somehow, I didn't think so either." Henry sat back in his chair, here was a question he didn't want to ask, but he had just told her, no assumptions. "Did you know what was going on?" Rosie sat back also, she looked down at the napkin in her lap, "You know, I had my suspicions, but it all seemed very plausible, given the Hollywood connection that this town has."

The waiter came over and cleared their plates, "Can I get you folks anything else?" "Do you want anything?" Henry asked as Rosie shook her head no. "We're set, we'll just finish our drinks and you can bring the check whenever you'd like." Henry wasn't real anxious for lunch to end, he was enjoying himself, and he took a very small sip from his margarita. "Did Thornbird ever have a problem with any of his ex clients once they found out that perhaps the home they just bought wasn't what he said it was?" "No, hardly anyone ever complained. You know, it's actually pretty difficult to discover that a celebrity didn't own, or didn't stay in a house. All of the buyers wanted to believe that they had a piece of Hollywood glamour, so I don't think they ever thought of researching the true house lineage or complaining for that matter."

Henry noticed that Rosie had stopped drinking her margarita all together. He sort of hoped it was because she didn't want their lunch to end either. It could be that she is full, or maybe she has had enough to drink he thought. "I'm having a really good time; I don't really want to go back to the office." Rosie interrupted his thoughts. "How about seeing a movie down the street?" Henry asked.

Rosie appeared to be thinking about it as the waiter set their check on the table. She reached for the bill, "I invited you, so I'm buying. A movie? No, I'm sorry; I can't take the whole afternoon off, how about a walk around the block to work off some of this lunch?"

Henry was surprised that he felt a little disappointed. "That sounds great; you'll have to walk slower so that I can keep up. And I'll let you pay for lunch if you'll agree to let me pay for dinner later in the week." "Deal!" Rosie dug cash out of her purse, Henry noticed with satisfaction that she was a more generous tipper than Wayne and they got up and walked out the front door.

Palm Canyon Drive was fairly busy after lunch and the temperature was in the low nineties, certainly bearable for a walk. They walked next to each other towards the Hyatt Regency Suites hotel. Rosie had indeed slowed her walk; Henry had no trouble keeping up with her. They must have appeared an awkward couple though; Rosie was barely over five feet in her heels while Henry was just over six feet tall in his loafers. No one paid any attention to them, and they didn't pay attention to anyone else on the street.

"So after I started at the real estate office, Rex was very nice to me and suggested that I take some computer classes at College of the Desert." Rosie explained. "I did and started working on entering the properties into the Multiple Listing Service that all the agencies across the country use." "You mean the realtor.com website that I used to find my house here is connected to your Multiple Listing Service?" Henry asked. "That's right, there's a regular update, but MLS has been around a long time before the Internet and has been used by agents across the country for decades."

They reached the Hyatt hotel and without discussing it, turned around and headed back towards the Blue Coyote and Rosie's car. "You know, you might be able to find out a lot more about some of his past customers if you could look at Rex's computer." Rosie suggested. "That's not a bad idea; I suppose Wayne's team has already checked his place out pretty thoroughly." Henry thought of all the things that Wayne told him didn't amount to much and decided that he should probably head for Thornbird's home that afternoon. "Rex carried a set of keys with him and he had a spare set in his office. But I'm sure your friend Wayne can get them to you; if not..." Rosie suggested. Henry looked down at Rosie appreciatively. "You know, you and I could make a good team at this detective stuff." "You flatter

me.” Rosie’s face turned the color of her hair. “I do hope you find out which one of his former customers were that upset with Rex as to do this to him.”

They had walked back to her car while talking and got in to drive back to Rosie’s office. Henry leaned into the back seat for the manila folder and started looking through Thornbird’s past real estate sales. Rosie pulled her car in next to Henry’s in the parking lot and turned to Henry, “You know, this morning I thought we were going to have a standard business lunch, but I want you to know that I had a really nice time being with you.” This time it was Henry’s turn to blush the color of her hair. “Me too, you’ve helped me a lot and not just with my investigation.” She held out her hand which Henry took into his own. “Can I call you for dinner later this week?” He smiled at her. “I’d like that, I’ll be expecting your call.” She smiled as she got out of the car. “See you then.” She waved to him as he got into his own car and she walked up the steps and disappeared into the real estate office.

I’ll be darned, Henry thought, of all the things I expected to find while investigating this murder; I certainly didn’t expect to find this. He started his car and headed for the police station to see if he could get the keys to Thornbird’s house from Wayne Johnson.

Chapter 7

Henry took the four stair steps up to the police station in two long strides. He pushed open the door and signed in at the front desk. The reserve officer behind the bullet proof glass asked him who he was there to see and pushed a visitor badge through the slot under the glass. Henry took the badge, peeled off the backing and stuck it to his shirt. Before September 11, if he wanted to see Wayne, he basically walked in and waved at the officer at the desk. That the world had changed that day was apparent - here was one more sign.

He wondered if after the tragedy they had made any changes at the Eagle River police station. Of course, it wasn't as large as the building here in Palm Springs; Eagle River looked more like the sheriff's office in Mayberry than this large multi-storied building.

Wayne came down the stairs and escorted him up to his office. "Did you find out something?" He asked as they were walking back up the stairs together. "No, not really, I came by to see if I could get the keys to Thornbird's house." Henry replied. "Sure, why not, the lab crew has been there, I don't think they found anything." Wayne replied, "Let's call the property room from my desk, they should have the keys." "Maybe they didn't know what to look for." Henry sat down at the visitor's chair next to Wayne's desk. "Perhaps, and you think you do?" Wayne smiled as he dialed the extension for the property room from his desk phone.

"Lunch gave me some interesting ideas." Henry answered. "This morning you were saying that you were going to lunch with the office manager from Coachella Real Estate, did that turn out to be enlightening?" Wayne hung up the phone. "The property room said they would bring the keys to my desk, they need to run up here for something else anyway." "Lunch was certainly enlightening." He didn't say it, but Henry thought it had enlightened him in ways that had nothing to do with the Thornbird investigation.

"Apparently Thornbird was selling properties with questionable celebrity connections to unsuspecting buyers who paid a premium for these places. It inflated his commission and he made a tidy profit." "So you think one of his past clients got mad at him and did it?" Wayne asked. "Most likely, the question is which one?" Henry picked up a pencil from Wayne desk and started idly doodling on Wayne's memo pad. He found himself drawing little houses with trees and streets connecting them.

"You guys looking for a set of keys?" An overweight sergeant who obviously was no longer on patrol but probably sat in the property room behind a computer screen was standing next to Wayne's desk. "Yeah, are these Thornbird's?" Wayne took the keys from the sergeant. "That's what the tag says." The sergeant shook his head as he walked away, how did these guys get to be detectives anyway?

"Ok Hank, here you go, let me know if you find something interesting." Wayne dropped the keys into Henry's hand. "I just need one more thing." Henry put the keys in his pocket. "Anything you want is yours my friend." Wayne smiled. "An address, I don't even know where Thornbird's house is." Henry smiled as well.

Henry parked his car at the curb of Thornbird's house on West Chino Canyon Road. The homes in this part of Palm

Springs were much different than Henry's house on Mel Avenue, he felt as though his house was a cracker box compared to some of the structures that had been built here. He was on the north side of Palm Canyon Drive, up against the base of the San Jacinto Mountains. The view of the Coachella Valley from here was spectacular; it was as though Palm Springs was at his feet.

Thornbird's house appeared to be as spectacular as its setting. The driveway swooped down the hill to a large garage that was partially under the house. It was a signature Palm Spring fifties Modernist design where the roof angled up and windows soared from the floor to the roofline. Obviously the real estate business had treated Thornbird better than the police business had treated Henry. Henry walked up to the large front door and used the key to open it. When he stepped into the foyer, the two-story view was straight to the back wall which was made of large glass panels. It looked as though the pool was part of the living room while at the same time it disappeared into the hillside on the other side.

The foyer had a railing from which Henry looked down onto the living room and what had to be the kitchen on the right side. There were stairs on the right side of the balcony going down to the lower level and hallways to either side which probably led to the bedrooms. The front door closed behind Henry and he walked down the stairs to the lower level while he took his time looking all around the room. The living room was sparsely furnished, but Henry recognized the quality of the tables, chairs and lamps. Thornbird had not made any trips to Ikea for this stuff.

He walked around the house, going down the hallway to the right to find a large open kitchen. Obviously the kitchen was remodeled recently; there was a lot of stainless steel and stone here. The stove was a large affair with at least six burners, but as Henry looked a little closer, it didn't appear as though it had seen a lot of use. He opened the refrigerator which had some milk, eggs and not much else. The freezer was filled with single serving pizzas and frozen rice bowls. On the front of the refrigerator was a magnet from Rocky's Pizza and the take out phone number was prominently displayed in large type. On top of the fridge, Henry found a folder from waiters-to-go. So it was either a microwave meal or pizza delivery for Thornbird, somehow, though Henry was also single, he didn't live that way.

He opened the door that led into the garage; the light switch was one of those lit up little red things, he flicked it on and fluorescent tubes lit up the entire space. The garage was completely finished with white walls and matching cabinets. It was spotless and other than a broom and a garbage can in one corner virtually empty except for a brand new Land Rover that still had paper license plates. Henry tried the door to the car, but it was locked. He looked through the tinted windows but couldn't really see anything inside. He thought of looking for the keys to the car, but didn't think searching it would produce anything. It would be nice to sit in that big leather seat and look at the burl wood dash and smell that new car smell though. Oh well, he'd just have to buy his own Land Rover one day – fat chance he thought - Henry walked back into the kitchen, flipping off the garage lights on the way back in.

He crossed the living room and took the stairs back up to the entry foyer and went down the hallway at the other side of the house. There were two bedrooms here; the master bedroom was simply furnished with just a bed and a dresser. The room had high ceilings but it was surprisingly small for the overall size of the house. The adjoining bathroom had obviously been remodeled and had a large soaking tub as well as a steam shower. Henry realized that the bedroom was small because space had been taken away from it to make the bathroom larger during the remodel. Just as in the kitchen, there was a lot of beautiful stone here and the room was bright and functional. Henry was getting to like Thornbird's style; the man certainly had not scrimped on quality when it came to furnishing his home, or buying his cars.

He opened the medicine cabinet behind the beveled mirror in the bathroom. On its shelves was the usual stuff: Toothpaste, deodorant, a can of shaving cream, some athlete's foot powder, a couple of toothbrushes, and a tube of lipstick. Henry picked up the lipstick, examined it and dropped it into his pocket. So, Charles had been wrong. Thornbird did like women; he obviously had one as a guest here at some point. Unless, Henry suddenly thought, what if Charles was right and Thornbird liked to cross dress. He closed the medicine cabinet and walked back into

the bedroom and opened the closet door. Nothing in here but slacks, shirts, sport coats and a couple of suits and a great collection of Hawaiian Aloha shirts. Henry looked at the back of the closet to see if anything was hidden and there was nothing unusual.

He closed the closet door and went back out into the hallway. The second bedroom was obviously set up as a guest room and looked as though it had never been used. It was very similar to the guest room in Henry's house; it had a bed, nightstand, and an armoire that looked as though it contained a television. Thornbird had obviously taken care of his guests, even though it didn't look like anyone had ever stayed here. Like Henry's house, this guest room had its own attached bathroom, while it didn't have the steam shower or soaking tub, Thornbird had not spared any money here and his guests would have been very comfortable.

Henry crossed back over the foyer balcony to check out the rooms on the other side of the house. He opened the first door to the most well equipped home gym he had ever seen. One wall was covered with mirrors which seemingly reflected every workout machine that had ever been built. Henry could not even identify some of them, he recognized a Nordic Track, a rowing machine, a treadmill, there was a machine with some kind of springs that he had seen on TV, and other machines that gleamed and glowed. There were flat screen televisions on every wall; this gym must have cost Thornbird a pretty penny.

Henry shook his head at the lavishness, closed the door and walked down the hall to the next door. This room was noticeably smaller than the others and very intimate covered in wood paneling, with thick oriental rugs on the hardwood floor; it had a very masculine clubby feeling. A large desk sat under the window, a comfortable black leather desk chair was behind it. It was obvious that this was the room that Thornbird had spent the most time in. The back wall had an aerial photograph of Palm Springs in the forties; it was lit from behind and almost looked three dimensional. Finally Henry thought he had found something that would help him when he spotted a computer sitting under the desk.

Henry sat down in Thornbird's big cushy executive chair, reached for the computer and turned it on. He waited for it to boot up and checked out the computer station. He admired Thornbird's choice in equipment, a new Canon scanner sat on a shelf above an HP photo printer. The machine itself was a Dell similar to Henry's but it looked like it was a newer model. The DSL modem was on a separate shelf, and it looked like there was a wireless router next to it. Henry looked around to see if he could find a laptop, he didn't see one; maybe it was still in Thornbird's car. He could certainly imagine Thornbird sitting in one of the lounges next to the pool researching homes or looking for celebrities names that he could use in his little scam.

The machine was done with its startup routine and waiting for someone to tell it what to do. Henry grabbed the mouse – it was wireless, he liked that – and brought up the Internet browser so that he could see what kind of stuff Thornbird was looking at. His home page came up as the Coachella Real Estate page, and other than a picture of the office, a picture of Mr. Thornbird, and a weather banner, nothing there was interesting.

Henry clicked on the Favorites button to see what Thornbird had bookmarked on the machine. There was nothing unusual here, The Palm Springs National Bank, The Desert Sun newspaper site, Realtor.com, Google, eBay, The Robb Report, an article on the Palm Springs Living site and Travelocity. Henry looked at the list; this looked a lot like his own Favorites list at home. Maybe he should look in his My Documents folder to see if he kept a file of homes, or maybe a spreadsheet with some information in it.

He thought back to the report that Rosie had given him; it was on the front seat of his car, he was going to go over it carefully tonight. Hopefully it would tell him which homes had references to celebrities and who the buyers of these homes were. Henry figured Thornbird had to keep his own list of properties and their descriptions; after all he didn't want to make any mistakes. Henry didn't think it would work if Thornbird sold three different homes that were all supposedly owned by Robert Goulet within the same year.

Henry checked the My Documents folder, there were numerous letters, and a spreadsheet with Thornbird's stock portfolio, Henry opened the spreadsheet and wished he was doing as well with his investments, but there was nothing in there that would lead him to a killer. He opened about twenty or so documents, they were letters to buyers thanking them for purchasing a home from Thornbird. They were standard form letters and made no references to price, previous ownership or any details about the home.

Henry was starting to wonder if the laptop that had to be around somewhere – why else would Thornbird have this Wireless Access Point – had some critical information on it. Maybe he should call Wayne and ask him if the property room had the machine. Perhaps he should look for it in the closet or somewhere here in the house. It could be in the Land Rover in the garage, he wondered if the keys to the car were around here somewhere. If Henry had a laptop, he would keep it in its bag right near the door. What good was such a machine if you didn't keep it mobile, ready to go.

Henry was frustrated that he couldn't find anything. He went back to reading Thornbird's Favorites list and went through it one more time. He clicked on the article at the Palm Springs Living website and started reading. Palm Springs Living was a glossy magazine that was more advertising than content in Henry's opinion. He'd read a few issues and acknowledged that every once in a while they did print an interesting story. It looked as though Thornbird bookmarked a story that the magazine published a little while ago, this one was about Alexander homes. Henry started reading:

Robert and George Alexander, a father and son developer team, teamed up with noted Palm Springs architect William Krisel and started building tracts of homes in Palm Springs for a decade starting in 1947 that were based on a single interior design and varied exterior designs that made them look different from the street. The homes were all approximately 1,600 square feet but were designed to look larger since the roofline continued to the carport.

The homes turned their backs to the street, with the three bedrooms on the street side. This made the kitchens and living rooms face the backyards in order to emphasize the outdoor living that the Coachella Valley climate allowed. Most of these "Alexander" homes were also built with swimming pools and appealed to the upper middle class Los Angeles families in the mid-fifties who wanted a second home away from the big city.

The article continued to talk about where the Alexander tracts could be found within the city. It pointed out that these homes were simply constructed, did not have much storage space and now needed expensive repairs and refurbishment from their new owners.

Obviously Thornbird had used a lot of this information as background in his business. There was no mention in the article of any of these homes being popular with movie stars; it looked as though Thornbird had come up with that on his own. This was interesting, but it merely confirmed that Rex came up with the celebrity tie-in in order to boost the prices and desirability of what appeared to be small homes that didn't meet the standards of today.

Henry leaned back in Thornbird's chair and looked at the computer screen. He was missing something and didn't know what it was. He looked around the room as he thought about it. His own office certainly didn't look like this. There was beautiful real wood paneling on the walls, there was a watercolor painting above the desk that was real, not a knockoff print. There was a vase on a shelf in the corner of the room from a recognizable glass artist with an unpronounceable last name. Real estate had definitely been good to Rex Thornbird, but it had also killed him, and Henry was trying to find out whom.

Henry looked back at the screen. Suddenly it struck him - with all these beautiful things in this house and in this room, what was Thornbird doing surfing on eBay? Wasn't it a little odd that he had a bargain auction site bookmarked? Henry clicked the mouse on the browser and clicked again on eBay in the Favorites list. The site came up with Thornbird's eBay name already filled in and requested his password.

Henry looked around the computer; usually there was a little sticky note with passwords on every monitor. Not in this case. The cursor was blinking at Henry in the password space; Henry sat back in the chair, thinking of what Rex Thornbird would have used for a password. The cursor continued blinking at him as though egging him on, even teasing him. Henry leaned forward in the chair, put his hands on the keyboard and slowly typed in the word J-A-G-U-A-R. The screen went blank and came back up and said "Welcome back, Rex."

Henry was quite satisfied with himself and clicked on the My eBay icon. There it was, on the list of "Items I Have Won", was an 8 by 10 autographed picture of Rudy Vallee. Thornbird had paid eight dollars for it. Not a bad return, Henry thought, an eight dollar photograph, a five dollar picture frame and the price of a house is bumped up by fifty thousand dollars. Thornbird's commission on just the fifty K was at least four grand. There were other photographs that Thornbird had bid on and won an 8 by 10 of Bette Davis, a "personally autographed" picture of Robert Goulet, a "colorized" photo of Veronica Lake, and a 5 by 7 picture of Lawrence Welk.

Under the "Items You Didn't Win" category was an autographed picture of Peter Lawford. Thornbird had bid five dollars and it was sold for seven. The date it was sold was the day after Thornbird died. Henry could not remember seeing a Peter Lawford reference in any homes that were listed on Realtor.com, maybe this was Thornbird's next house listing with a celebrity tie-in. If so it didn't matter that he didn't win it, Thornbird wasn't going to pull that scam again. That was one home that would be sold solely on its own merits.

Interesting, Thornbird could have bought practically anything on eBay, he certainly could afford it. But he allowed himself to be outbid for a photograph of Peter Lawford by a couple of bucks. People are curious at times, Henry thought, here was a guy making thousands in commissions as a result of inflated home prices and he was going on the cheap on a photograph.

Henry got up from the chair and walked out of the room. Back in the hallway, there was another bathroom next to the office. This one was on the small side and while it was appointed with the same quality fixtures as the other rooms, its small size struck Henry. Why didn't Thornbird borrow some space from the office during his remodel and make this room a little larger like he had done in the master bedroom? Wait a minute, he thought, there was no room to borrow, the office was already small.

He retraced his steps and looked inside the office again. The wall adjoining the bathroom was the one with the aerial photograph he admired earlier. He walked over to the picture and lifted it up to see where the wiring for the backlight was coming from. As he did, the picture quietly rose up by an electric motor and a track in the paneling that wasn't noticeable if you didn't know it was there, to reveal a flat plasma television screen. On a ledge under the plasma screen was a large remote control with a touch screen. Henry picked it up and looked at the choices. Television, DVD, VCR1, VCR2 and Vault. Henry pushed the button on the screen that corresponded to Vault. The sides of the paneled wall swung in to reveal racks with two VCR's a carousel DVD player and hundreds of videos. DVD's on one side, VCR tapes on the other. Some were labeled professionally; most had typed or handwritten labels on them. Henry pushed the power button on the plasma screen and on the DVD player and hit the "Play" button. The screen flickered to life and the images that Henry saw made him bolt from the room, he barely made it to the small bathroom where he threw up in the toilet.

After emptying the contents of his stomach, he realized he was still holding the remote control. He walked back into the office where the images were still playing on the fancy screen. He pushed the stop button and thankfully the screen darkened. Examining some of the titles of the tapes and DVD's he realized that Rex Thornbird, mid-century

specialist, top producing real estate agent in the Coachella Valley had a dirty little secret. Thornbird was a pedophile who liked high school aged boys.

Several hours later Henry walked back into his kitchen carrying the manila folder that Rosie had given him and the Chinese food that he picked up at Lam's Garden on the way home. There was another note from Charles on the refrigerator that he was going to be late at the Palm Springs AIDS hospice where he volunteered once a week.

He put the folder on the dining room table while he grabbed a plate from the cupboard. He emptied the Chinese take out from the little white containers onto the plate and sat down at the dining room table and pulled the folder towards him. Rosie had arranged Thornbird's past deals in reverse chronological order with the Albert Frey architected hotel on Racquet Club Drive on top. The list included the original description that the listing service had on the property, the sales price as well as the names of the buyers and sellers. He looked through the list while he ate his dinner.

When he finished his plate, Henry went to his office and called Wayne Johnson on his cell phone. "Duke, it's Henry, can you talk?" "Yeah Hank, I'm on my way home. What's up?" "Did you know about Thornbird's little fetish, is that why none of your guys wanted to work on this case?"

"Hank, I heard a rumor, and yeah, nobody on the staff wanted this assignment, there are a lot of cops who are secretly glad that he is dead." "I found his collection of videos." Henry said. There was silence on the other end of the phone. "Wayne, I said I found his perverted collection, the man was disgusting, we need to have that crap destroyed."

"I... I... I'm really sorry Henry. I didn't know about that we searched the house but didn't find anything. Like I said, I heard rumors, but I had no idea that he had a collection of stuff." Wayne sounded very apologetic. "I believe you Duke." "Hank, I'd have never asked you to get involved if I had known to what extent Thornbird was into this shit. Do you want to quit?"

This time Henry was quiet. "Henry?" Wayne used Henry's proper name to get his attention. "Yeah, I'm here, no, I'll continue looking into it. I'd like to nail whoever he got this stuff from as well."

"You'll have plenty of help from my department doing that. Let me know what you find out. Are you mad at me?" "No, Duke, no, I'm not mad at you. You didn't know, right?" "I didn't know, honestly. I'll get a crew up to his house to impound everything. Where is it?" "It's in his office; I left the picture it was hidden behind raised up so that you can impound it." "Alright Hank, I'll get a crew over there in the morning. I'm really sorry you had to find it, but I'm glad you did."

"Ok Duke. I'll talk with you later." Henry hung up the phone. He had to get back to investigating who might have killed Thornbird, he wondered if the discovery of Thornbird's illegal activities might have motivated the murder. It didn't seem that way. Thornbird had kept his desires well concealed. He decided to continue following the real estate trail, at least for now.

Henry picked up a yellow legal pad and pencil and went back to the kitchen table, opened his fortune cookie while he made his own list of all the properties with celebrity connections, and the names of the new owners, he could look up their phone numbers later. First on his list were Tim and MarieAnne Miller, the owners of the former Laguna hotel, which they had renamed the Solé Hotel.

His fortune read: *News from a stranger will soon enlighten your life.*

Chapter 8

Wednesday, April 19

The next morning, Henry finished getting dressed early; he'd made a ten o'clock appointment with Tim Miller at the Solé Hotel on the phone last night. Tim was gregarious on the phone; he read about Thornbird's death and was very accommodating to Henry's request for an interview. Tim asked Henry if he needed directions to the hotel, Henry said he could find it. Tim warned Henry that the hotel was located in a residential area, and it was hard to spot, Henry told him it was ok, he had seen a picture of the place on the listing from Rosie. He told Henry that they didn't have a lot of guests that morning and there would be no problem parking in the lot right in front of the hotel's office.

A lot of the listings on the paper that Rosie gave him had phone numbers of the new owners, others simply had their names. Henry looked through the list and had also called the Wadowicz family who purchased a Veronica Lake owned house from Thornbird, they agreed to talk to Henry to help him solve the murder of that "awfully nice man" as they put it. He'd stop by there after finishing up at the Solé Hotel.

Henry walked into the kitchen with his folder and several yellow pieces of paper from his legal pad where Charles was having breakfast. "Hey, good morning stranger, I didn't see you yesterday." Henry grabbed a cup from the cupboard and poured himself a cup from the maker. "Yeah, I had a busy day. I was at the pistol range with Wayne; I had lunch with the Coachella Real Estate office manager and spent the afternoon at Thornbird's house. Man, what a gorgeous place that guy had." "Yeah, by the time I got back here last night, I saw the Chinese takeout containers in the trash, but all the lights were already out." Charles said, "I wanted to talk to you about this whole Thornbird thing."

"Did you think of something that would help" Henry asked sitting down at the kitchen table across from Charles. "Well, perhaps. I think you ought to take a look to see if Thornbird provided some kind of evidence to the property buyers that these homes were actually owned by celebrities." Charles put down his fork and reached for a paper napkin to wipe his mouth. "You mean like an autographed photo in a cheap frame that Thornbird could put somewhere in the house?" Henry smiled. "Exactly, heey, it sounds like you're already onto something along those lines." Charles frowned. "Yeah, I was on Thornbird's computer yesterday and found that he's been buying pictures on eBay." Henry admitted. "Was there a picture in the house on Granvia Valmonte?" Charles crumpled up his napkin and threw it towards the trash can, barely missing it. "No, there wasn't, but there should have been." Henry said. "Find the picture, and you'll have your killer." Charles got up and picked up the napkin and put it in the can. "Yeah, that's what I told Wayne yesterday. The problem is locating the picture."

"Did you find out anything else yesterday?" Charles came back to the table to get his dishes. Henry wasn't sure if he should tell Charles about Thornbird's pedophile activities just yet. He decided not to. "I learned a lot. And something interesting happened at lunch that involves you." Henry smiled at the memory of lunch with Rosie. "Me, what happened that involves me?" Charles rinsed his dishes at the sink. "I had lunch with the Coachella Real Estate office manager, Rosie, yesterday and she thought you and I were more than housemates, she thought we were lovers." Henry grinned. "And that surprises you?" Charles looked over at him. "Well, yes. Doesn't that seem sort of absurd?" Henry was now no longer grinning.

"For goodness sake Henry, think about it. This is Palm Springs, you know that there are a lot of gay couples here, I've made no secret of my preferences and we live together. What do you think people are going to think?" Charles said in his History teacher tone. "But I'm still wearing my and Irma's wedding ring." Henry looked at the finger on his left hand.

“That doesn’t mean much you know, a lot of gay men wear wedding rings, especially silver ones like yours. You wouldn’t be the first older man that has been married a long time that finally figured out that life is better on this side of the street.” Charles finished with his educator tone and put his dishes into the dishwasher. “It’s platinum, not silver. Well I really don’t care what people think, but I did clear up Rosie’s misimpression right away.” Henry got up to get more coffee for himself.

“Rosie, eh? Charles raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think you’ve had lunch with a woman since I’ve known you.” “Oh sure I have, what about last year when I was investigating the Anza-Borrego murder I had lunch with that woman that owned the nursery on Sunset?” Henry defended himself. “Clarissa, the large woman with the huge sun hat that wore the flannel shirt and sensible shoes, you mean her?” Charles laughed, “She doesn’t count, she has more male hormones in her than half of the men in Palm Springs.” “Well, all right, maybe my social life hasn’t been the greatest for a while.” Henry admitted.

“A while? Henry, after I met you, I didn’t know if you were attracted to men, women or trees for the longest time.” Charles said. “I’m glad that you are finally coming out of the shell that you crawled into when your Irma passed away.” “Well, I don’t know that I was in a shell, but I will admit that I haven’t been very interested in women - until yesterday that is.” Henry got up to take his coffee cup to the sink. “I’ve got an appointment with one of Thornbird’s clients, I’ve got to run – but let’s talk more later.” “Ok, I’ll be here.” Charles shook his head as he watched Henry walk to the garage with his folder of stuff. Henry was the nicest guy in the world and would do anything for his friends, but sometimes Henry could be so naïve.

It took Henry barely five minutes to drive the two miles to the Solé Hotel from his home. He parked out front, the parking lot was indeed fairly empty as Tim had predicted and rang the bell at the front gate. The gate was opened by a man of medium build and an excellent tan whose dark hair was wet and he had a large towel wrapped around his waist.

“You must be Henry Wright, welcome to the Solé Hotel, I’m Tim Miller.” Tim held out his hand, “Please come on in.” Henry shook Tim’s offered hand, “Good to meet you, did I get you out of your shower?” “Shower, no not at all.” Tim answered with a quizzical look on his face as they walked in through the gate as Tim closed it carefully behind him. “You’re careful with the gate; do you have a security problem?” Tim laughed, “Not really, but we don’t want everyone just walking in here, I guess you don’t know what kind of hotel we are do you?” “No, I guess I never really thought about what kind of hotel you run; I didn’t realize there were different kinds.” Henry answered. “Please have a seat,” Tim motioned to a set of chairs set around an outdoor table next to a large pool in the hotel’s courtyard, while he remained standing. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No thanks, but I appreciate the offer.” Henry sat down in one of the chairs at the table as a large man carrying a coffee cup and wearing sunglasses, slippers and nothing else walked past the table towards the hotel’s office. “Good morning Tim.” The man said as he walked past. Henry raised an eyebrow and looked quizzically at Tim. “Good morning Ramon.” Tim replied as he turned to Henry, “I owe you an explanation. We are a clothing optional resort. In fact, we are the most popular resort of its kind in Palm Springs. People come here to relax au natural and get an all over tan.” Tim took the towel from his waist; he was dressed as though he stepped right out of the shower, and spread it on the chair before sitting down.

“Ok, that explains a lot.” Henry said. “I usually swim my laps at home without a swimsuit, it’s very private, but I never really thought of going someplace special to do that with a bunch of other people I don’t know.” “Well there are a lot of people that can’t do what you do at home, so they come to a place like ours.” Tim explained. “We actually have the highest occupancy rate of any hotel this size in the entire Coachella Valley.” “I didn’t realize this lifestyle was that popular. Although I’m sure our climate has something to do with that.” Henry said looking up at

the bright blue sky overhead. “Certainly the climate draws a lot of people but the clothing optional lifestyle is very popular with a lot of people from all walks of life, in fact...” Tim started to explain before Henry cut him off. “I’m sure it is popular, can we talk about your interaction with Rex Thornbird?” Henry smiled as he said it, he wanted to know about Thornbird, it seemed as though Tim was prepared to talk for hours about his decision to live his life without clothes. “Sorry, I tend to get on my soapbox about this.” Tim said, “Let me ask my wife MarieAnne to join us, her memory about our dealings with Mr. Rex Thornbird is probably a lot better than mine.” “That would be great.” Henry watched Tim get up as he left his towel behind and walked to the hotel office. After a minute or two he came out followed by a short, attractive woman with long black hair also wearing only a pair of slippers and carrying a towel, she was as dark as Tim and had no tan lines either. Henry stood up as the couple stopped at the table where he had been seated.

“This is my wife, MarieAnne Miller.” Tim said as MarieAnne shook Henry’s hand. “Good to meet you, Mrs. Miller.” Henry said as they all sat down. “Oh please, call me MarieAnne.” She said waving her hand down to point out her state of undress. “As you can see, we don’t stand on formalities here.” “Um... yes, I’ve realized that.” Henry said, blushing slightly. “Would it make you more comfortable if I got a cover-up?” MarieAnne asked. “No, no, please.” Henry protested. “This is your place, you should dress – or not – as you please. I really appreciate you taking the time to answer some of my questions.” MarieAnne smiled, “We just want all our guests to be comfortable here.” “I’m fine, really.” Henry said, “Can you tell me about your interactions with Rex Thornbird? When did you meet him?”

“We came out here from Chicago about four years ago looking for just the right property to start a clothing optional hotel.” MarieAnne recalled. “We looked for quite a while, and finally drove past this place and saw the For Sale sign out front from Coachella Real Estate. We called the office and found that Rex Thornbird was the listing agent for this property” “Did you meet him here, or at his office?” Henry asked. “You know, if your offer of something to drink is still good, I would like a water.” “Be right back.” Tim jumped up and headed to the hotel office. “MarieAnne, please continue while I’m gone.” “Ok,” MarieAnne smiled as she watched Tim walk off. “We met Rex Thornbird at his office; he drove us here in that big car of his and walked us through the place. He told us that it was designed by Albert Frey, a well known Palm Springs architect who was a leader in the post-modernism architecture world that became popular here.”

“Was that important to you?” Henry asked. “Heck, we had no idea who Albert Frey was at that time, of course we’ve learned quite a bit more about him since buying this place, he was born in Switzerland you know – we’d like to think that as a European he would have approved of the current use of this property.” MarieAnne explained. “So you weren’t willing to pay extra for the famous architect connection?” Henry asked.

“No, we didn’t care; we were looking for the right features in a place. We wanted a hotel with fewer than twenty rooms, and we wanted to make it enclosed and private without spending a lot of money on construction, and as you can see this place is perfect.” MarieAnne turned to watch Tim walk back to the table with Henry’s bottle of water.

As MarieAnne turned, Henry noticed that she had a mole or birthmark just below her right eye. It twitched every time she blinked her eyes. He wondered if she could see it. Henry thought that if he had something sitting on his cheek, his eye would constantly focus on it, just as the time when he had some stitches just below his eye when he had a hard time subduing a suspect as a young officer. The emergency room doctor that had sewn him up had done a nice job, he had a real small little scar and unless you knew it was there, you didn’t notice it. Compared to his scar, MarieAnne’s birthmark looked like a boulder sitting on her cheek.

“Ice cold, straight from the refrigerator, sorry it took so long, I answered the phone and took another booking.” Tim sat down, straightening the towel on his chair before he did so. “The Mooreheads are coming down next month from Toronto. Did you get a chance to tell Henry about Marilyn Monroe staying here?” “No, I was just about to get to that, it’ll be nice to see the Mooreheads again.” MarieAnne smiled. “Yes, please tell me about Marilyn Monroe staying here.” Henry twisted the cap off the bottle and took a long drink of the water. It tasted good.

“One of our rooms has a back door that exits into the alley that runs next to the hotel.” MarieAnne explained. “It is the only room, including our owner’s suite, that doesn’t require that you come in or out via the courtyard. Supposedly, Marilyn Monroe used to request that room when this was the Legend Hotel.” “Did Thornbird tell you the Monroe story?” Henry asked. “Yes, in fact he did.” MarieAnne recalled. “In fact, now that I think about it, he mentioned it about a day or so after he showed us the place and we failed to be impressed with Albert Frey being the architect of the property. Rex told us that Marilyn stayed here several times. The last was in 1962 and she met a famous politician here.”

Henry noticed MarieAnne’s mole twitching. Why had she never had that removed? Then he wondered why he was so fascinated by her twitching mole. It wasn’t every day that he sat across the table from a totally nude woman; did he focus on her mole so that he wouldn’t look at anything else? Was he focusing on it because he didn’t want to look at her, she was attractive enough, he wondered what she looked like with clothes on. There, her mole twitched again, he had to stop staring at it, she probably knew that he was, he should look at all of her. He didn’t have a problem with her being undressed, in fact he had hardly noticed it, perhaps because she was so matter of fact about it – he did keep staring at that thing on her cheek though.

“We call it the Monroe Suite – it’s very much in demand with a lot of our guests. MarieAnne bought a Marilyn Monroe poster and I hung it in the bathroom, we’ve even thought of buying an autographed picture of Marilyn to add to the room.” Tim added. “Did the fact that Marilyn Monroe stayed here make you want to buy this place?” Henry set his water bottle on the table. “We’d already decided to buy the place by that time.” MarieAnne answered. “Look around, the place is perfect for our needs, we managed to make it very private without a lot of changes, and we didn’t want to mess up the architecture at all after we learned about Frey. We found the story interesting though, and we’ve certainly retold it a number of times and our guests really love the mystery that surrounds a famous movie star staying here.”

“Did you look at any other places with Thornbird?” Henry took another drink of the water. “Yes, we looked at a hotel over on the strip, on Palm Canyon I mean.” MarieAnne waved her arm in the general direction of Palm Canyon Drive. “It needed too much renovation work, and with eight rooms was just a little too small for what we wanted.” “Did it have a celebrity tie-in?”

“No, Mr. Thornbird never mentioned anything; he sold it a little later to a gay couple who turned it into a small resort, it has a large rainbow flag out front.” “I think I’ve seen it when I drove by there.” Henry put the cap back on the water bottle and set it down on the table. “Are you talking with all of the people who bought properties from Mr. Thornbird?” Tim asked. “Well, not all of them, he sold a lot of places here in town; it looks as though he was pretty successful.” Henry leaned back in his chair.

“You know he was quite the salesman, he told us a lot of stuff, but we had a very definite idea of what we wanted.” MarieAnne’s mole was nearly jumping off her cheek as the sun reflected directly into her eyes and she squinted to look at Henry. She picked up her chair and moved it several feet to get out of the light. “I suppose there might be other buyers who were taken in by his pitch, but I cannot see how anyone could have killed him. He was a nice guy, and maybe he wasn’t totally above board with the descriptions of what he was selling, but as you can see, this is a great place.” MarieAnne waved her arm around as though she was a television hostess showing a prize to a game show contestant.

Henry looked around the hotel’s courtyard; the large man, he thought Tim had called him Ramon, with the coffee cup, was sitting on a chaise lounge next to the pool enjoying his morning newspaper while a woman – probably his wife – was putting a large amount of suntan lotion all over herself. Someone else was swimming laps in the pool while birds were singing in the palm trees and a large fat cat was sitting on the lawn watching them with lazy eyes.

MarieAnne was right, this was quite an idyllic spot, and it was hard to imagine that there was a busy city right outside the hotel gate.

“You’re right, this is a great place, and it looks as though you are taking really good care of it. Thank you for your candidness and thank you for the water.” Henry said, getting up to leave. “I really appreciate the time you took, and wish you well with the business.”

Tim and MarieAnne stood up as well and they shook hands with Henry and Tim said, “Henry, we have day guests here as well, if you ever want to bring your wife here and spend the day, you’d be our guests, totally complimentary of course.” “Well, I appreciate the offer, but my wife...” Henry looked down at the wedding ring on his left hand. “...my wife wouldn’t be as comfortable here as I am.” “Most people are uncomfortable for the first few minutes, and then it passes.” Tim opened the gate, “We hope to see you again soon, once you figure out who did this to Rex Thornbird, he was a nice man.” “Well, ok.” Henry said, “I’ll be in touch, thanks again for your help.”

Chapter 9

Henry got into his car and picked up his handwritten list of houses and owners. He thought about what he had just learned he found it interesting that Thornbird mentioned the Marilyn Monroe connection only after he had shown the hotel to the Miller family. Perhaps Thornbird had not thought about or learned of Marilyn's stay at the hotel until after the Frey connection did not make any impact on Tim and MarieAnne. Had Marilyn Monroe ever stayed at this place? It was certainly difficult to find out, and Henry wasn't sure that it mattered to his investigation.

He couldn't really consider them suspects. Henry felt that the Millers had no reason to harm Thornbird, their business was thriving, he was sure the hotel property had increased in value considerably since they bought it. An interesting business Tim and MarieAnne had here, he never would have guessed that there was money to be made by allowing people to swim and sunbathe in the altogether. The idea didn't bother him at all though; after all, he swam nude every day and usually just carried his towel out to the pool. Maybe he would take them up on their offer of a day visit some time in the future. He looked down at his left hand again; he realized that this was the second time in 24 hours that his ring caused someone to have a mistaken impression about him.

He started the car, waited for the air conditioner to make an impact on the heat and headed for the Wadowicz house. It was a few blocks away, over in the Movie Colony section of Palm Springs. The house didn't appear like much from the street, but that wasn't unusual for a lot of the homes here. He remembered reading the description about Alexander homes on Thornbird's computer and while he didn't think this was an Alexander built home, it had some similarities to them. Henry parked on the driveway, walked up the path and knocked on the door. A large Hispanic woman opened the door and without saying anything, let him in and waved at him to follow her to the back of the house. They walked out of open French doors to the backyard where Mr. and Mrs. Wadowicz were having a late breakfast or early lunch under the patio cover.

Whereas the front of the house was plain, the backyard was the total opposite. There was a large black bottomed pool, and a built in spa on one side that continuously spilled its water back into the pool. Lush tropical plants everywhere, large palm trees and a pool house with chaise lounges covered with thick fluffy white towels. It was hard to see a fence and impossible to know where this yard ended and the neighbor's began. In one corner of the yard he noticed a small creek with a little waterfall and he couldn't quite see it from here, perhaps a small pond. The garden furniture was made of expensive plantation grown hardwood covered in thick cushions; Henry had seen this stuff in a catalog once and guessed that each piece was an average person's house payment.

Mr. Wadowicz pushed his chair back and said "Gracias, Rosa." At which the woman who escorted him back here, smiled and did a little half bow before she disappeared into the house. "Good to meet you Mr. Wright, I'm Fred Wadowicz, pull up a chair, we hope you haven't had lunch." "No, I haven't, thank you for your hospitality and please call me Henry." Henry pulled the chair out and took Mrs. Wadowicz offered hand.

"I'm Georgia, please just call me Georgia, and we're happy to help." She waved Henry to sit down.

Henry pulled up the chair and sat down; there was a place setting for him as though they knew that he would join them. The table was set with a linen tablecloth, there was a plate of fresh fruit on the table, a platter of crepes, a bowl of scrambled eggs, a basket with a stack of fresh croissants, a bowl with large strawberries and champagne flutes.

"Champagne, Henry, or are you on duty?" Fred pulled a bottle of Moet Chandon from an ice filled wine cooler next to his chair. "Uh, yes please, perhaps just a little." Henry picked up his champagne flute and held it out for Fred to fill. "I'm not really on duty; I'm sort of a freelance consultant for the Palm Springs Police Department."

As he looked over this array of food, Georgia said, "If you want something else, Rosa will be happy to make it for you." "Oh no, this is great." Henry took a sip of the champagne; it was very good, and reached for a croissant and the bowl of eggs. "I had not expected this and really appreciate you inviting me to brunch. Can you tell me about how you met Rex Thornbird?" Henry asked, slicing open his croissant.

"Well, we lived in Michigan, we had some friends that have lived here a long time and we had been out to visit them several times. They own a house in Little Tuscany and we stayed with them – their place is quite a bit larger than this one – when we visited. We liked it here, so we decided to look for a winter place and our friends referred us to Rex Thornbird." Fred explained. "Since then, I've retired and now we live here almost all year around."

"We came out here to hunt for a home; our friends were at their place in Palm Beach in Florida, so we stayed at the Hyatt Regency downtown. Rex picked us up in that big car of his to go house touring." Georgia explained. "Rex is very knowledgeable, was, I mean, about Palm Springs history and which movie stars lived in the various homes here, he showed us a lot of places in different areas, both here in Palm Springs and in Palm Desert." Fred continued.

Just as any couple who had been together a long time, they finished each other's sentences and thoughts. "We referred several other friends to him since then." Georgia picked up the coffee pot and poured Henry a cup. "He spent a lot of time with us, explaining different neighborhoods, architectural styles, the influence of modern architects, he was very knowledgeable." Fred held his coffee cup up for a refill from Georgia. He set his full cup down, picked up the champagne bottle and refilled everyone's glass.

"We looked at dozens of homes, but none of them seemed quite right. Finally, after several weeks of looking around, we bought this one; this pool was designed for Veronica Lake when she lived here." Georgia filled Fred's cup and set the pot back on the table. "Did Thornbird tell you that, or did you find out some other way?" Henry finished his croissant and took another forkful of eggs from his plate. "Oh, no, Rex was very explicit about who had lived in the houses that he showed us, he said we were lucky with this house." Fred told him. "We paid more than comparable homes in the neighborhood, because Veronica Lake lived here." "You seem like a smart business man, did you verify that Veronica Lake actually owned this property?" Henry finished the last of his eggs.

Fred gave a knowing smile. "You know, I made a lot of money when I sold my companies in Michigan. We have a home in Deer Park, a condo in Kauai and this place here. Our children do not have to work a day in their lives if they don't want to, we're very comfortable." Henry smiled as well; he was starting to understand Fred Wadowicz.

"We knew that Rex was stretching the truth somewhat, but he spent so much time with us, this home is exactly what we wanted, we considered the "celebrity premium" fair in return for what we got." Georgia explained. "More coffee?" "No thank you." Henry wiped his mouth off with his napkin. "More champagne?" Fred pulled the bottle out of the ice bucket. "No thank you, this was wonderful, really. I feel quite spoiled. Henry set his napkin down on the table. "Once again, I really appreciate you taking the time for me, and this brunch was an unexpected pleasure." "Anything we can do to help you find Rex Thornbird's murderer is the least that we owe him." Georgia smiled. All three of them got up as Henry got ready to leave. "I think you've answered all of my questions, but I'll call you if I think of something." "Let me walk you out," Fred motioned Henry towards the house. "Really, if we can do something to help you in any way, just let us know."

As Henry got back into his car, he realized two things. The first was that he hit another dead end. Fred and Georgia Wadowicz knew that the truth was being stretched a bit when Thornbird billed this house as once owned by Veronica Lake, but just like the Millers, they got what they wanted and didn't seem to mind paying a premium. Henry started wondering if he was chasing up a blind alley by talking with the owners. The second thing he realized was that he wasn't used to drinking champagne during the middle of the day.

He thought about making another call on Rosie to talk to her about the relationship Thornbird had with the other realtors might be in order. He'd go back to his house and call her from there to set up an appointment.

On his way home, Henry drove past one of the other properties on the list. This was the home that had supposedly been owned by Bette Davis. It was on the corner of Hermosa Drive and Alejo Road. Henry parked the Mercury at the curb, behind a contractor's truck. He walked up to the front door which was open. He knocked anyway and stuck his head inside. "Hello!" "Back here in the kitchen." The yelling voice had an echo as though it was coming from inside a sports stadium. Henry carefully walked around piles of lumber, sheets of plywood and other construction materials; the house looked more like a construction zone than a residence as he made his way to the back of the house. "You must be Amit Anchula"

"Not hardly!" A tall, older man wearing a Dodgers baseball cap was bent over a sawhorse with architectural drawings. He looked up as Henry walked into what must have at one time been the home's kitchen. "Howard James, general contractor. Anchula is the owner, but he ain't here." "Henry Wright, I'm an investigator looking into the murder of a real estate agent." Henry held out his hand and shook Howard's large callused hand.

"Anchula is out of town, he works in the San Francisco Bay Area for some high tech company doing something with computers." Howard explained. "I'm just the general doing all the modifications to this place so that Mr. Anchula will be happy when he decides to come and visit here."

"It looks like there is some extensive remodeling going on here." Henry looked around the room which was down to its stud walls, there were wires everywhere, and the floor was bare concrete. "Yeah, this place was remodeled in the late seventies, but Anchula didn't like it. So we're now working on his third redesign of the place. The little prick thinks he's an architect." Howard shook his head looking around the room and waving his hand at the drawings in front of him.

"It sounds like you and he have a few, eh, disagreements." Henry said taking a look over Howard's shoulder at the drawings. "You could say that, he wants everything done his way and he's a cheap little..." Howard said in frustration. "I get the picture." Henry interrupted.

"Look, Mr. ..." "Just call me Henry." "Look Henry, I don't know anything about a real estate agent. I got this job through a friend of mine who was too busy to take it. By the time I got involved Anchula had owned this place for about six months, and he wanted to renovate, that's when I met him. The spoiled little shit is going to have a pool put in the backyard once we finish in here, can you believe it – it's going to be the size of a kiddie pool. Anchula dealt with the realtor long before I came into the picture, why don't you call him?"

"I think I'll do that, do you know how to get hold of him?" Henry asked. "Yeah, last week when he was here, he gave me his home and cell phone numbers, but the guy never answers, you'll have to leave a message, hopefully he'll call back." Howard picked a pencil up from the sawhorses and dug a business card out of his overalls. "Here's his numbers, good luck."

"You say he was here last week?" Henry took the business card and put it in his shirt pocket. "Yeah, he flew in last week and left on Tuesday or maybe Wednesday afternoon I think, I'm not sure. He left in a big hurry; I never did get him to tell me what to do about the ceiling lights that are supposed to go in here." Howard bent back over the drawings. "Good luck getting a hold of him, he's a tough one." "Thanks for your help, good luck with your project." Henry turned to walk out "Yeah, thanks." Howard was already studying the drawings again and paid no attention to Henry as he walked out the front door.

Henry got to the front door and turned back to Howard who was now examining some of the wires dangling from the living room ceiling. "Howard, one last question, do you know if Bette Davis ever owned this home?" "Bette Davis? Are you kidding? I did some work on her house once in the sixties and she wouldn't have been caught dead in a little place like this in this neighborhood." He answered. "You know, I told Anchula the same thing about a month ago. Funny you should ask, is that connected to the murder you're asking about?"

“Thanks, no, it’s probably just a coincidence. You’ve been a lot of help.” Henry walked out of the house and to his car. He looked back at the house; it was small, on a corner, not very impressive in appearance, certainly nothing that a star the magnitude of Davis would have considered home. He wondered how Thornbird had gotten away with it, unless like the other owners he spoke with that morning Anchula didn’t care who owned it and he wanted to buy this particular home. A call to Anchula was certainly in order, especially if what Howard said was true, Amit Anchula was in Palm Springs the day that Rex Thornbird was murdered.

Henry walked into his home office and called Rosie at Coachella Real Estate. After about six rings Tiffany answered – Henry could picture her hanging up the other line, putting the magazine and nail file in the drawer before picking up his call – she said that Rosie was out to lunch and would be back around 2:30. He left a message for Rosie to call him at his house when she returned. He picked up his handwritten yellow pieces of paper and the folder that Rosie gave him and started looking through it again. He thought the answer was in there somewhere amongst Thornbird’s former customers, but after this morning’s interviews he couldn’t be sure. Although Anchula’s presence in Palm Springs was suspicious, it certainly didn’t mean that he did it.

He took the card out of his shirt pocket and picked up the phone. The first call to Anchula’s home resulted in Henry leaving a message on his answering machine. The second call to Anchula’s cell phone had the same result. He was probably in the office; Henry thought he would try again after dinner. Anchula had to check his messages some time, Henry grabbed another piece of paper and started to make a list of questions to ask Anchula. This one was going to be different than the Millers and the Wadowicz’s, he just knew it, he had the feeling that Anchula was not one of Rex Thornbird’s satisfied customers willing to overlook a premium added to a sales price.

Perhaps the stranger and the enlightenment his fortune cookie the other night had referred to was Howard James’ news. He sat back in his chair to think about how this might have played out.

Chapter 10

Henry was startled when the phone rang. He must have dozed off.

“Hello?” “Henry, its Rosie returning your call, how have you been?” The familiar voice said in his ear. “I’m good, well, thank you for returning my call. What time is it?” Henry found himself fumbling for his watch that he had put on the desk. “It’s a quarter after three, I’m sorry, did I wake you?” Rosie sounded concerned. “No, no, not at all, I’m not a napper.” Henry felt that he wasn’t really, though the warm Palm Springs weather certainly made afternoon siestas easy. It must have been the alcohol during brunch that was having this effect on him.

“What can I do for you?” Rosie’s voice sounded as smooth as the morning’s champagne. “Well, I sort of want to talk to you a little bit more about Rex Thornbird’s relationship with the other agents in your office and perhaps agents in other offices as well.” “You don’t think someone in our office did it?” Rosie asked with alarm in her voice. “No, no, not at all. But I do want to get a better understanding of who might have thought of him as a rival or maybe who didn’t get along with him.” Henry explained.

“Ok, I understand.” She said tentatively, she didn’t sound as though she understood. “I have a busy afternoon, today was the day for real estate tours and I have a lot of notes to transcribe. How about dinner tonight, say around seven?” “That sounds great!” Henry had to be careful to control the enthusiasm in his voice. “Where would you like to meet?” He asked with a little less excitement. “Well, we sort of had a Mexican lunch the other day. Do you like Chinese?” He could hear Rosie thinking on the other side of the line. “Sure, do you want to go to Lam’s? Henry remembered his take out from last night. “No, I was thinking of something a little nicer. Have you ever been to P.F. Chang’s Bistro in Rancho Mirage?” He heard Rosie flipping pages in the background. “Is that the place that always has a line outside in The River shopping center?” Henry thought he had seen it when he drove out to Palm Desert on Route one-eleven. “Yes, that’s the one, I’ll make a reservation for seven, is that ok?” Rosie asked. “I’ll see you there.” Henry answered once again trying to keep his voice calm. “Ok, until then. Oh, Henry?” Rosie’s voice was hesitant as she started asking Henry a question.

“Yes, what is it?” Henry hesitated as well. “Dinner doesn’t need to be totally about business does it? I think I’d like to get know you a little better.” Rosie asked quietly. “No, no it certainly doesn’t, I’d like that. See you at seven.” Henry answered. “Good, until then.” Rosie hung up the phone. “Until then.” Henry said to a now quiet phone as he hung up slowly.

He couldn’t believe what was happening. He had not been interested in any women since getting engaged to Irma over thirty-five years ago. Maybe what Charles had said was true, he had been hiding from his emotions since Irma’s death. But why now, and why did he feel this way about Rosie Murphy? He couldn’t figure that out. Was he cheating on Irma by seeing Rosie for dinner, it was more than business; he couldn’t deny that, he wanted it to be more than business as well. He could certainly talk to other people in the Coachella Real Estate office about Thornbird and his interactions with the other employees there.

He had a feeling that for the price of a large latte at Starbucks that Tiffany would tell him anything he wanted to know. So why didn’t he call Tiffany? There was something about Rosie Murphy that touched a chord deep within Henry; he was determined to pursue what that was. He wasn’t really cheating on Irma, they had had a great marriage, and sure it had its ups and downs, what relationship doesn’t?

He looked down at the wedding ring on his left hand and wondered what Irma would have wanted? He was sure that she would have liked to see him happy. Would a relationship with Rosie make him happy? Would Irma have approved? Was Rosie interested in a relationship with him? He thought so; otherwise she would not have mentioned that they didn’t need to talk just about business tonight. He looked out the window and decided to go and swim his

laps now; he hadn't had a chance to do that this morning. Perhaps exercise would clear his head and make him see what he should do.

About an hour later, he climbed out of the pool and grabbed his towel. The swim felt good and usually he had more energy afterwards but not today. Thinking while he was doing his laps didn't do anything to help him figure out what to do. He decided to lay out on the chaise lounge and get some sun, what good was living in Palm Springs if you didn't take advantage of the weather.

He looked at the wedding ring on his left hand again, slipped it off and looked at it closely. It was odd; he suddenly had a hard time remembering Irma's face. He tried to remember the day, now nearly forty years ago, when she had first slipped it on his finger. It was difficult. Frustrated, he laid it on the table next to the chaise. His skin was white underneath, and even without the ring, it was obvious that he had been wearing one. His hand felt a little funny the little piece of metal not in its usual place as he laid down on the chaise lounge and enjoyed the late afternoon sunshine. Soon he fell asleep for the second time that afternoon.

Henry woke with a chill. The sun had set behind the San Jacinto Mountains. He looked at the pool clock and noticed that it was 5:30. He was supposed to meet Rosie at 7. He jumped up, grabbed his towel and swimming goggles and ran inside to shower and get ready. He couldn't believe that he had napped for almost an hour. It was a good thing that he had an all year tan; otherwise he probably would have sunburn to deal with as well. The sun was not at full strength in April, but here in the desert, most palefaces got sunburned pretty quickly.

After his shower he shaved for the second time that day, and dug around in the back of his medicine cabinet for some aftershave that he knew his daughter had sent him a Christmas or two ago. He found it, splashed some on and went looking in his closet for something nice to wear to go out. He picked out a pair of khaki slacks, a white shirt and he had a blue blazer in the coat closet by the front door. He didn't want to look too dressed up, so he decided to go sock less in his loafers.

At 6:30 he grabbed his blazer, and then remembered that he wanted to try Anchula one more time. He walked back to his office and called Anchula's house and cell phone and left messages in both places. On his way out to the garage he wrote a message for Charles on the refrigerator that he would be home late. He wasn't sure of that, but he certainly hoped he would be.

He took Sunrise Way back to Route one-eleven and made his way to the River Shopping Center where parking was nearly impossible. He finally found a spot but was a little late as he arrived at the restaurant and checked in at the front desk to see if Mrs. Murphy was seated already. The hostess told him she wasn't there yet, she gave him one of those vibrating beeper things that he dropped into the pocket of his coat, she said she'd buzz him if Mrs. Murphy showed up or as soon as their table became available.

He couldn't decide if he should wait outside where there were a lot of other people standing around or in the bar. He decided to wait in the bar. Maybe a drink wasn't such a bad idea. He couldn't believe he was nervous. He had been a chief of police for many years; he was used to interviewing people; he'd met hundreds if not thousands of people while he was investigating crimes, yet he felt like he was back in High School waiting for his date at her parent's house.

"What'll it be buddy?" The bartender startled him out of his daydream. "Gin and tonic please." Henry wondered if he should order Rosie a margarita. She enjoyed hers at lunch yesterday; he liked watching her lick the salt of the rim with her tongue. "Hi Henry, been waiting long?" Rosie was at his side as the restaurant's beeper started vibrating in his pocket. "Here you go pal, that'll be four fifty." The bartender put the gin and tonic down in front of him. He didn't know what to do first; he bent down to take the vibrating beeper out of his pocket, laid it on the bar, and

reached into his pants pocket to get his money out to pay for the drink as Rosie stood on the tips of her toes to plant a kiss on his cheek. “Eh, no I just got here, would you like something to drink?” He was surprised by her greeting, but at the same time, the nervous feeling in his stomach was gone instantaneously. “A cosmopolitan please.” She said to the bartender as she squeezed Henry’s arm. “You look very nice tonight.” Her green eyes were sparkling. “Thank you, so do you.” Henry laid a twenty on the bar as the bartender went off to make Rosie’s drink. She certainly hadn’t dressed like this in the office. She was wearing heels again, but she had on a black skirt, not too short, but Henry did notice that she had nice legs. A simple white silk blouse and a small black sweater that she had draped over her shoulders made her look very elegant.

“Sorry I’m late; I would have been here on time but I didn’t expect parking to be so difficult, I couldn’t find a single space and then the movie must have let out and suddenly a wholly bunch of people left and a space opened up; I guess our table is ready, your thing is buzzing; Geez, you smell nice tonight; where is that bartender with my drink?” Rosie seemed to be as nervous as Henry had been until she showed up. “You’re doing it again.” Henry laughed as the bartender set the cosmopolitan down on the bar in front of them. “Take a deep breath, take a sip of your drink, and let’s take it easy – we have all evening. Unless you need to be somewhere after we eat?”

Rosie picked up the drink and took a small sip, “No, I don’t need to be anywhere at all. You can ask me about Rex Thornbird all evening long, though I hope you won’t.” “Not to worry, I want to find out a little bit more about Rosie Murphy tonight.” Henry took his change from the bartender. “Are you ready to sit down or would you like to stay here and finish our drinks?” “Well, since we’re not in a hurry, let’s stay in the bar and when we finish our drinks, we can ask them to take us to our table, let me go tell the hostess.” Rosie set her drink down on the bar, gave Henry’s arm another squeeze and walked over to the hostess stand. Henry took a sip of his own drink and left a generous tip on the bar for the bartender. Bartenders work as hard, and often harder, than waitresses he felt.

Rosie came back in and climbed on the bar stool next to his. She demurely straightened her skirt after getting settled, though it did nothing to hide her shapely legs, and picked up her drink. “Well, Mr. Wright, what sort of designs do you have on a girl like me, just exactly where is that wedding ring that you have been wearing?”

Henry blushed slightly as he looked at his left hand, where his ring had been there was now a slight pinkish stripe on his skin. “Oh no, I left it on the table next to the chaise lounge by the pool. I didn’t mean to take it off, really, I took it off after my swim, put it on the table and must have forgotten it there – and my intentions are quite honorable – really – actually I don’t really know what my intentions are, sorry.” “Now you’re doing it.” Rosie smiled, “Relax, take a breath, take a sip of your drink. We’re both adults and do not need to answer to anyone. I’m glad you’re not wearing it actually, I think you’re making a transition in your life, and if I’ve contributed to you moving forward, then I’m glad.”

“Actually I had not really consciously thought about that.” Henry sipped his gin and tonic. “Moving forward in my life, I mean.”

Rosie picked up her cosmopolitan and looked off into the distance. “You know, I’ve been there. You’ve experienced this loss, you pick up the pieces, you go forward with your life, but you really just exist, you’re not living – do you know what I mean?” “Yes, I know what you mean; I guess I just had not thought of it that way. I thought I was pretty happy with my life.” Until I met you Henry thought, but he didn’t say it. Could this petite woman who was so full of energy and so unlike Irma make him happy?

She drained her drink, licked the last of the alcohol off her lips and set the glass on the bar. “Come on, let’s go eat. I’m positively starving. The calamari appetizer here is great, wait until you try it.” She literally jumped off the bar stool and grabbed Henry’s arm who barely had enough time to finish his drink and set it down. He laughed as he let her drag him up to the hostess stand. “I’m hungry too, I had an early lunch, or a late breakfast and haven’t had anything since.”

They were seated at a table for two by the window. The restaurant was noisy and busy, but at the same time the commotion provided them a lot of privacy. They couldn’t hear what the people at the next table were saying, nor

could they be heard. After they ordered the calamari appetizer – Rosie was the first to speak. “So tell me about your day, did my list of properties that Rex sold help you?”

“I think so. First, there were a lot of them. He was quite a salesman.” “Yes, that he was. More than you know.” Rosie looked down at her hands. “What do you mean by that?” Henry looked directly at her. “Well, as you must know by now, he embellished the properties he was selling with stories of famous architects that designed them, movie stars who had lived there, anything to sell the place.” Rosie looked up at Henry. “He suggested that I become an agent, I took the test, I have the license, but I couldn’t do it. Be part of his scam I mean.”

“I was wondering why someone as intelligent as you weren’t an agent.” Henry picked up her hand. She smiled at the compliment. “Rex said the same thing many times. There is no shame in being an office manager, and I’m very good at my job. I think I actually prefer working in the background.”

“Please don’t take what I said the wrong way, I know that an office cannot run without someone like you holding things together, but I just thought that you were smart enough and were more ambitious.” Henry held on to her hand across the table. She let him hold her hand and said. “Thank you for the compliment. You know Rex was very encouraging to everyone in the office, and certainly he supported my efforts at educating myself, especially the time that I took my real estate agent exam. But I never sold any houses, I just couldn’t do what he was doing, he would tell a buyer whatever they wanted to hear in order to close a deal. You know, nothing that Rex did was illegal, but it was certainly unethical, and I just couldn’t be any part of it. It was bad enough that I ended up turning my head to it.”

The waiter set their calamari appetizer down in front of them as Henry let go of her hand. “Is there anything else I can get for you folks?” “Yes, there is.” Henry answered. “Would you like some wine Rosie?” “Please, you order anything you like as long as it is white.” “Do you have any St. Jean Chardonnay, I don’t care what year.” Henry asked the waiter. “That will be coming right up sir.” The waiter disappeared towards the bar.

They started in on the appetizer, it was indeed very good. Different, it had coarse salt and black pepper that he dipped the calamari in following Rosie’s example and Henry enjoyed it very much. “I had a busy morning, I spoke with Tim and MarieAnne Miller at the Solé Hotel, the Wadowicz family, and a contractor who was working on a house that Thornbird sold as having been owned by Bette Davis. I have been trying to contact the owner of that house, but he lives up near San Francisco and he is not returning my calls.”

“I remember that guy; he had a foreign sounding name. I think by the time that deal closed he suspected that he had bought more than he got, I think you should talk with him.” Rosie put her fork down. “Well, if he suspected it then, his contractor confirmed it for him last month. Interestingly, according to the contractor, he was in town the day that Thornbird was killed, and now I can’t reach him.” Henry put his fork down as well as the waiter showed up with the bottle of wine and showed it to him. Henry nodded as the waiter opened the wine and poured some for him to taste. Henry approved and the waiter poured them both a glass of wine. They ordered their entrees, the waiter wrote them down on his pad after telling them their choices were excellent and he disappeared again.

“That sounds suspicious; do you think he did it?” Rosie picked up her glass. “Here’s to new beginnings.” “That sounds good, here’s to new beginnings. I don’t know if he did it or not. I’d sure like to talk with him.” Henry tasted the wine, this was one of his favorites and it was always good.

“Did you go out to the hotel, what did you say it was called? Did they ruin the style with the remodeling?” Rosie set her wine down. “The Solé Hotel, I don’t think you could tell that anything has been done to the place really. To me it looks like the only modification they made was enclosing the courtyard with a fence and a gate. The place looks pretty prosperous, and Tim and MarieAnne are interesting people.” Henry didn’t feel comfortable telling her what kind of hotel it was, at least not yet. He popped another piece of calamari into his mouth.

“Then I had brunch with the Wadowicz family who bought a house in the Movie Colony that had been owned by Veronica Lake.” “Are they the older couple from Michigan?” Rosie asked. “Yes, that’s right, they sort of knew that Thornbird was embellishing the truth but didn’t seem to mind.” Henry took another sip of wine. “Rex spent a lot of time with them, at one point he was busy with closing another deal and I showed them several properties.”

The waiter showed up with their entrees and took away the empty appetizer plate. Henry refilled their wine glasses and Rosie started on her Cantonese Scallops. “Hmmm, this is good.” Henry had ordered the Mango Chicken; he decided his was good as well.

The rest of their dinner proceeded at a leisurely pace, they talked about their backgrounds, their passed on spouses and the reasons that each of them ended up in Palm Springs. Henry told her about Claire and how proud he was of her as a successful accountant in Chicago. Rosie lamented that she had never been able to have children, now that she was getting older, she missed it even more. They finished the wine and had coffee as they shared the Banana Spring Rolls for dessert. As they finished their coffee and Henry paid the check he decided that tonight had really been more a date than an interview in a criminal investigation.

It was ten thirty as he slowly walked Rosie through the shopping center and out to the parking lot to her car and said good night. This time he bent down and gave her a kiss on the cheek as he asked if he could see her again, socially. She happily agreed and got into the little red Volkswagen and drove off. Henry watched until he could no longer see her taillights and headed for home himself. He was happy for the first time in a long time.

Chapter 11

Thursday, April 20

Henry pushed open the door to Sherman's Deli the next morning for his usual Thursday morning breakfast with Wayne Johnson. He expected Wayne to be in their booth in the back but he wasn't there yet. "Hi Henry, Wayne called from his cell phone, said he'd be a few minutes late." Millie said as Henry stood at the hostess stand. "Have a seat; I'll bring you a coffee." He sat down in the booth and thought about the previous evening. He'd enjoyed himself, he hoped that he could be long term friends with Rosie; it would be nice to have some female companionship. This was the first time in a very long time that he realized that he had been lonely without Irma. Well, not really lonely, there was Charles and Wayne, but he was lonely for a woman.

"A penny for your thoughts." Wayne said as he slid into the booth. "Huh? Oh, this case has me puzzled." Henry said, he didn't want to let Wayne know about his new social life just yet. After all, there wasn't really anything to tell, was there? "We're no closer to anything, how did you do?" Wayne waved Millie over to get a cup of coffee. "There's a guy in the San Francisco Bay Area that bought a house that had once been owned by Bette Davis from Thornbird.

"Thornbird specialized in celebrity homes didn't he?" Wayne said as Millie put coffee down in front of him. "Do you guys want your usual?" She asked, pulling a pad out of her apron and a pencil from behind her ear. "Yeah, that's fine." Wayne answered. "No, I'd like something healthy. Can you get me a bran cereal with a banana or some other type of fruit?" Henry asked. Millie raised an eyebrow and looked at Wayne. "Sure, Henry, we have fresh blueberries, is that all right?" "Yes, that will be great..." Henry had missed the look between Wayne and Millie as he put down his coffee cup. "...and a refill on the coffee please. Thornbird specialized in celebrity homes, but the connections were loose and not real verifiable – if you know what I mean." Henry explained. "Some of his customers knew that he was embellishing a little, the Bette Davis house buyer suspected something but apparently didn't really know that it wasn't true until the contractor working for him told him about a month ago."

"Have you talked with him?" "Not yet. I left him several messages yesterday, and again this morning before I came here. He's not returning my calls." Henry looked at Wayne, "He was down here the day that Thornbird was killed. Do you think we could have the cops in the Bay Area have a talk with him?" "I don't know. What are the Bay Area cops going to do? Pick the guy up and ask him if he knew that his house was owned by Bette Davis? I don't think that will work. You should go up there and talk to him."

"To San Francisco? That's a long way but I guess I can do that. Help me find out where this guy works and lives and I can go up. Will Palm Springs PD pay for a plane ticket or should I drive?" "We should be able to afford to fly you up there, I can make a couple of phone calls and get you all of the suspect's address information, why don't you call the airline and make a reservation? You should be able to go up and back in one day." Wayne pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and started dialing his office. "Give me the phone numbers you have for him, I should be able to get addresses and everything you need from them."

"Yeah, I guess I can go today, I think Alaska Airlines has flights directly to SFO from here. His numbers are on the back of this card." Millie brought their breakfasts and Henry started in on his cereal. Millie gave Wayne another questioning look before heading to another table.

Wayne folded up his cell phone and started in on his pancakes. "They'll call me back in a few minutes with his home and work address. I asked them to look up what kind of car he drives as well." "Ok, sounds good. I'll go home grab a few things and call the airline." Henry said. "You know, we really need to get you a cell phone." Wayne said

in-between bites of his pancakes. "I'll call them for you from here and get you a reservation." He pulled his cell phone from his pocket again and called information, within moments he was connected to the airline and started making Henry's travel arrangements. "My daughter Claire tells me the same thing, but I'm retired and don't feel like being called by everyone all the time." Henry snagged a blueberry with his spoon. He had the feeling that Wayne was not paying any attention to him at all.

"Ok, you're set. I couldn't get you out this morning; the earliest non-stop was at three something this afternoon. You'll have to spend the night courtesy of the Palm Springs PD. Your flight back is tomorrow, you should be back in time to swim your laps. I booked you a car at the San Francisco Airport, but since I don't know where your guy lives yet, I didn't get you a hotel, you probably want to stay somewhere between his house and office." During the entire time that Wayne was on the phone, he was eating pancakes. He managed not to get a single drop of syrup or butter on his cell phone.

"Hmmm, I hadn't counted on spending the night. What the heck, that's ok I guess." Henry finished the last of the milk in his bowl of cereal. "Yeah, like where do you need to be that you can't enjoy an evening away in the Bay Area?" Wayne asked looking at his friend suspiciously.

"Nowhere, I said it was fine." Henry looked at his watch and decided that he had plenty of time before heading out to the airport. "If I think Anchula did it after talking with him, do you want me to have the local cops pick him up?" "That's probably the best idea; otherwise, one of us would have to fly up to get him. Just in case, why don't you bring your handcuffs and your Glock?" Wayne waved Millie over to get a refill on his coffee. Henry waived off the offer of more coffee. "I'll bring the cuffs, but airport security will give me a lot of grief if I bring the Glock. I don't have a badge anymore remember?" "Ok, then please be careful. If you think you might have difficulty with this Anchovy guy, please call the locals in to help you." Wayne sipped his coffee. "Anchula, the guy's name is Amit Anchula." Henry explained.

Just then Wayne's cell phone rang. He looked at its display before answering. "Yeah." He said flipping the phone open. "Ok, wait a second." Wayne pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket and pulled a paper napkin out of the dispenser on the table. "Go ahead." He spent several minutes writing down information that someone on the other end of the phone was reading to him. He finished and folded his phone up and put his pen back. He pushed the napkin towards Henry. "Anchula lives in Los Altos, I think that is somewhere south of San Francisco, and he works at Xalaxy a company in Mountain View. I'm not sure where that is, but I doubt that those two towns are very far apart. He drives a Mercedes ML320, that is one of those little SUV's, looks like he has a few bucks."

"Yeah, I think you're right about the money. Did you get a color on the car? I'll pick up a map at the Southern California Auto Club office on the way to the airport." Henry said. "I guess I'll get a hotel room when I get there and figure out the lay of the land." "Why don't you give me a call once you land, maybe my office can help you out with something while you're in the air?" Wayne picked up the check that Millie had dropped on the table and got up to head for the cashier.

"Yeah, I can do that." Henry reached in his pocket to get a couple of bucks for the tip. He was thinking if he needed to let Rosie know that he was going out of town. He wanted to, but there was really no reason to call her. They had left it fairly casual last night; he was to call her when he was ready to see her again. Maybe he should call her at her office and ask her out on Saturday night and then he could casually mention that he would be gone tonight. Yeah, that's what he could do, that way she would know, but at the same time it wasn't as though he was calling specifically to tell her that he was going to be out of town.

Henry walked into his house and first wrote a message to Charles on the refrigerator's white board to say he was flying out and would be gone until tomorrow. Then he grabbed a bag from his closet and packed his toiletries, a clean shirt, underwear and an extra pair of socks. He threw his handcuffs into the bag and picked up the paperback that he'd been reading from his nightstand as well. Just then he heard Charles come home.

"Heeeey, do you want a ride?" Charles poked his head around Henry's bedroom door. "Where are you going

anyway?" "I'm flying to San Francisco this afternoon, picking up a rental car and then driving to Mountain View, you ought to be familiar with that area." Henry zipped his bag shut. "Sort of, I never went down the Peninsula much, there's nothing there." Charles leaned against the door frame.

"Well, there's a potential suspect there, he's not returning my calls and so Wayne asked me to go up and talk to him." Henry picked his bag up from the bed and started for the door as Charles stepped aside. "So the guy lives in Mountain View?" Charles followed Henry into the kitchen. "No, he actually lives in Los Altos, but the company he works for is in Mountain View, so I'm hoping to find him at one of those two places." Henry set his bag on the kitchen table and pulled his wallet out to see how much cash he had.

"Well, I believe they're right next to each other, but I have a Bay Area map in my room, let me get it for you." Charles walked off to his room at the other side of the house. "I'll take the ride to the airport if that offer is still good." Henry yelled after him. "Ok, I can take you right now." Charles yelled back. "Are you ready? By the way, you should bring a jacket; it's usually a lot colder up there!" He said in a normal tone of voice as he walked back into the kitchen waving the map.

"All right, let's go now then, thanks for this." Henry took the map and put it in the side pocket of his bag. He opened the hall closet and took a windbreaker off its hanger and opened his bag and laid it on top. He picked up the bag and walked out to the garage with Charles close behind.

One of the benefits of the small town atmosphere that Palm Springs has retained is that the airport is easily reachable from most areas of the city. Henry's house was no exception and within fifteen minutes he was walking into the terminal looking for the Alaska Airlines ticket counter. He stood in a relatively short line and got to the ticket agent who welcomed him as Deputy Wright.

Obviously Wayne's phone calls had made some impact with the airline. However, the agent at the counter told him that the only difference it made was that he would not have to go through the extra security check that someone who bought a last minute ticket at the counter normally had to go through since he was "traveling on official police business."

Henry got his boarding pass and headed out to the terminal. He went through the security checkpoint, and indeed there was no problem. He bought a bottle of water at the snack bar; he thought it was amazing what airport stores charged for a simple bottle of water. He sat down near the gate to wait for the boarding announcement. The Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 arrived, let out a large number of passengers and within twenty minutes after it pulled up to the gate Henry was walking down the plane's aisle looking for his seat number. He put his bag in the overhead and sat down just behind the wing in a window seat. He normally preferred aisle seats, he liked stretching his long legs out, but the ticket agent told him that he was lucky that he didn't have to sit in the middle.

The jet took off; Henry looked out of the window to see if he could see his house, but they gained altitude quickly and Henry couldn't spot anything that looked familiar except the wind farms that helped produce electrical energy for Palm Springs' air conditioners. He settled back in his seat and realized that he forgot to call Rosie. Maybe he could call her tonight from the hotel. The plane reached its cruising altitude and Henry reached for the magazine from the seat pocket. He browsed through it as he thought again about confronting Amit Anchula. The stewardess, Henry couldn't get used to calling them attendants, interrupted his thoughts and asked him if he wanted a drink. He had black coffee and some kind of sesame crackers they were handing out, they weren't very good.

The captain came on the intercom and announced that they were approaching San Francisco International Airport where it was sixty-five degrees. Chilly compared to the ninety-five he had left behind. By the time the plane pulled up to the gate Henry was ready to go. He stood up and grabbed his bag, pulled his jacket out of it and put it on. As

he was waiting in the aisle to get off the plane he thought he'd call Wayne to see if he had arranged a hotel room for him before heading off to get the rental car.

This must be one of the older terminals at the San Francisco Airport; he had a hard time finding a public phone. Everyone had cell phones these days, maybe he did have to get one; it would come in handy now. There was a bank of phones next to the security checkpoint, he found one that wasn't being used and called Wayne's cell phone. "Henry, is that you?" Wayne answered. "Yes, how did you know?" Henry was curious.

"I have caller id on my cell phone, I recognized the area code." Wayne had a tone in his voice that this was obvious and Henry should have realized that. "Oh yeah. I'm on the ground, I'm going to get my rental car, did you reserve a hotel room for me?" Henry asked. "Aw shoot, sorry buddy, I totally forgot, I got busy with this murder suicide we're helping out on in Cathedral City." Wayne said, "Hang on, I'll get you something right now, I'll..." "Naw, never mind, I'll find something on my own. I'll call you again when I get settled." Henry hung up the phone.

Henry took the airport people mover train out to the rental car office. They gave him a Ford Taurus, a map and some confusing instructions on pre-paying for a tank of gasoline. He headed out, found the freeway and was soon speeding south at sixty-five. After about twenty minutes all four lanes of the freeway came to a crawl. He forgot what rush hour on a major highway could be like, Eagle River, Wisconsin didn't have any traffic and he hardly ever used the Ten as the Interstate was known in the Coachella Valley.

Along with thousands of other cars, he idled the remaining five miles towards Los Altos. By now it was close to six and he figured the best place to catch Anchula was at his home. He took the freeway exit for Los Altos and pulled over into a gas station to look at the map Charles gave him. He pulled the napkin from Wayne from his pocket, checked the map and it looked as though he was about five miles east of Anchula's house. He headed west towards the mountains crossed over a large street that he'd heard of before, El Camino Real, and after a few more traffic lights and turns he was parked three houses down from Anchula's home.

There were no cars on Anchula's driveway, and the house looked like most of the others in the neighborhood. He got out of his Taurus quietly and walked over to the house and knocked on the door. There was no answer. He looked through the window next to the door, he was looking into the home's kitchen and it looked spotless. Either Anchula didn't use it much or he was a neat freak. He decided to check out the back. He pushed open the gate at the side of the house, there were some garbage cans there, he picked up the lid on one, there were some paper bags and cups from McDonald's and nothing else. He put the lid back and continued around the back. The patio had only one chair, nothing else, not even the obligatory barbecue that everyone in California had. There was a sliding glass door that led into what appeared to be the living room; there was a beanbag chair in front of a large television and no other furniture. A look through the other windows revealed a bedroom without any furniture and what had to be the master bedroom with what appeared to be a brand new bedroom set with a king sized bed. It looked as though Anchula furnished the home with the bedroom, but had not yet gotten around to buying anything else.

He walked back past the garbage cans and opened the gate when he was startled by an older man with a large dog on the driveway. It was either a lab or a mutt; Henry wasn't too good at recognizing dogs other than their size and this one definitely qualified as large. "Can I help you?" The man said while the dog watched him carefully, it looked as though it couldn't decide whether to growl or wag its tail. "I'm looking for Amit, I'm his Uncle, I'm in town for a convention and decided to stop by to say hello."

Henry kept the gate between him and the dog. "Hmmm, you don't look like him, but whatever. It's only six thirty; you'll probably still find him at work. I'm Amit's neighbor, Bob Thomas." The dog started wagging his tail. "Good to meet you, he's my wife's nephew, that's why we don't look alike. If he's still at work at this hour that's probably why he hasn't been answering the phone." Henry now stepped out past the gate and closed it behind him.

“Hmmm, I guess. He works for one of those high tech companies over here in Mountain View, but I don’t know exactly which one. I can tell him you came by, Mr.....” Bob Thomas walked to the curb with Henry.

“I have the address, I think I’ll drive over and surprise him right now.” Henry turned towards Bob to shake his hand. “I appreciate you looking after Amit’s place while he’s working. I’ll be sure to tell his aunt.” “Sure, glad to help out. Tell her that kid works too hard.” Bob and his dog turned around to walk back to his house. “I’ll do that. Thanks again for your help.” Henry watched Bob go into the house next door before walking back to his car. He got in, sat down behind the wheel and breathed a sigh of relief. That was a close call, the dog could have caused quite a scene, he was glad he was able to convince Bob that he didn’t mean Anchula any harm. He pulled out his map, figured out how to get to Xalaxy and started the car.

Chapter 12

It was completely dark out by the time he got to the Xalaxy building on a frontage road close to the freeway. Despite the ten foot muddy colored brick sound wall, Henry could hear the trucks and cars going by heading south and back in the direction of his beloved Palm Springs. Henry thought there were too many people in this part of California. If someone had told him that he was in the middle of Los Angeles, he'd of believed them.

He parked across the street from the building with a canvas banner on it that said Xalaxy in front of a similar looking building that just had "Building C" painted on the side. The entire frontage road was full of similar buildings, all concrete wall tilt up construction, and he was convinced these would all fall down like stacked cards in the next big Northern California earthquake. He was surprised at how many cars were still in the Xalaxy parking lot.

Henry spotted at least two of the Mercedes SUV's similar to what Wayne said Anchula drove. He sat there and watched the building for about thirty minutes and every once in a while, someone would walk out and get into their car and drive away. Right after a tall woman carrying a briefcase walked out and climbed into one of the Mercedes SUV's, Henry decided not to wait any longer and got out of his car and walked across the street.

The front door was unlocked and Henry walked right in and stood just inside the door. The building was filled with cubicles and didn't look that much different from Rosie's office. Except here there were inflatable pool toy animals hung from the ceiling, Christmas lights strung in an arch over an aisle way, he could hear at least three different stereos playing various kinds of music, there was the clattering noise from what sounded like a pinball machine from the back of the space and a rhythmic droning that sounded suspiciously like a dribbling basketball. What was obviously the reception desk right in front of him had a telephone and laptop computer with a slide show going with pictures of a small child and a large fluffy white cat.

Henry walked through the maze of little hallways orienting himself on the pool toys and Christmas lights so that he wouldn't get lost as he had at Rosie's office. Hmmm, why did he keep thinking about her? Once he arranged a hotel room for himself, he was determined that he was going to call her to ask her out for Saturday night. Maybe she'd enjoy a movie, he was probably too forward when he asked her during lunch the other day. Or should he ask her over to the house so that he could throw something on the grill for the two of them. That sounded better, he hoped she would come over, it was much easier to talk at home than during a movie and he did like talking with her. He could ask Charles to go visit one of his many friends and stay away.

He kept looking at the little name tags on the cubicle walls and saw a lot of names that he couldn't pronounce but not Anchula's. There was a glass door to what looked like a conference room that had a bunch of people in it looking studiously at what a short heavy set guy with long black hair tied in a ponytail was writing on a white board. Henry opened the door and poked his head in; "I'm looking for Amit Anchula; can any of you help me find him?"

The long haired man that was standing in front of the white board looked at him with wide eyes, threw the marker that he had been using at Henry and leaped for the other door in the conference room that headed directly outside. Henry left the general commotion of the others in the room behind as he took off after what was obviously Anchula running through the door. He pushed past the people in the room and went through the door just a few seconds behind Anchula. He was outside now in a little courtyard that had a bunch of chairs and a low wall surrounding it. Anchula was climbing over the wall but he was not as fast as his pursuer and Henry caught up to him just as he jumped down on the other side and started running across the lawn. Henry leapt at him, caught him around the mid-section and tumbled on the grass holding onto Anchula.

"Goddamn man, get the hell off of me. What the fuck do you want from me anyway?" Anchula was breathing hard

and swearing worse. “Why are you running?” Henry was sitting on top of the sturdy man and reached inside his jacket for his handcuffs. “Well, shit don’t shoot me for chrissakes.” Anchula obviously mistook Henry reaching for his cuffs as him reaching for a weapon. “Put your hands behind your back, I’m going to cuff you.” Henry pulled the cuffs out and showed them to Anchula. “Did they send you all the way from fucking Palm Springs to pick me up and bring me back? Ouch, shithead, you’re hurting me!” Henry put the cuffs on Anchula’s wrists and patted him down for weapons. The only thing he found were Anchula’s wallet and keys which he put in his own jacket pocket. “Quit your complaining and answer my question, why are you running?” Henry stood Anchula upright as a lot of his coworkers were yelling at them across the low wall. “I’ll be all right you guys, go back to work. I’ll be back in an hour.” Anchula yelled at them, at which they went back inside the conference room.

“Let’s go over to my car and talk, I still want to know why you started running.” Henry led Anchula around the side of the building and back across the street to his car. He opened up the rear passenger door and helped Anchula inside. It was obvious that Henry had helped a lot of suspects into the backs of cars, and Anchula went in without any trouble. Henry flipped the small child safety lock on the back door to prevent Anchula from getting out before climbing into the front passenger seat of the Taurus. He turned around and looked at Anchula, raised an eyebrow and said “Well?”

“Look asshole, I got scared ok. I thought you were someone else, who the fuck are you anyway?” Anchula had settled down somewhat, Henry figured he probably always talked like that. “You’re partially right, I am from Palm Springs. My name is Henry Wright and I’m on assignment to the Palm Springs Police Department, I want to talk to you about the murder of Rex Thornbird.” Henry explained. “So you’re not with the goddamn Immigration Service?” Anchula seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

“Immigration? No, of course not. Whatever gave you that idea?” Henry was puzzled. “And the Palm Springs fucking Police didn’t send you up here to get me deported?” Anchula looked questioningly at Henry. “Is that why you started running, you’re afraid of getting deported?” Henry asked. “Yeah, long fucking story. So you want to know about the fucking real estate guy’s body in the goddamn house, right?” Anchula asked.

“Yes, I want to know about the body. I want to know everything that you know. And at some point I want to know why you’re worried about being deported as well. I have all night.” Henry looked straight at him. “Oh fuck whatever. You gotta know that I didn’t do it. I’m actually glad to get this whole fucking thing off my chest, it’s been hanging over me since it happened. Not here though, let’s go someplace, I’ll buy you dinner and I’ll tell you the whole fucking bit. But you have to take these goddamn cuffs off.” Anchula leaned forward to take his weight off his handcuffed hands.

“Ok, for some stupid reason I believe you. I’ll take the handcuffs off at the restaurant. I don’t want you taking off again – besides, you know I can catch you.” “Shit, ok man, whatever. As long as you’re not with Immigration, I got no fucking reason to run.” Anchula settled back in the seat.

Henry slid over to the driver’s seat and started the car. He went east for a few blocks and Anchula gave him directions to a combination beer brewery and restaurant near downtown Mountain View. Henry parked the car in a gravel lot behind the restaurant and helped Anchula out of the car. He unlocked the cuffs put them in the pocket of his jacket and handed Anchula his wallet. “If you’re going to pay for dinner, you’ll need this, but I’m going to keep your keys so that you can’t take off on me.” “Yeah, thanks.” Anchula stuck the wallet back into his pants and rubbed his wrists where the cuffs had been. “We can go in the back way.” He walked to a hidden door between some outdoor tables and umbrellas. They walked past the brew house part of the restaurant up to the hostess stand.

“Hey Amit, what’s happening?” A young kid at the stand greeted them. “Dude, how’s it hanging? A table near the windows, ok?” Anchula said. “Sure man, right this way.” The kid picked up a couple of menus and led them to a table for two next to a window at the front of the restaurant. “This is fine, thanks.” Anchula waved the kid away and sat down, he motioned with his head at the departing youngster. “That kid is a decent programmer, he worked at a startup I was involved with, they went broke, now he works here. Tough fucking break.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Let’s hear your story.” Henry picked up the menu. “Oh shit man, I was in that empty house and that dead guy scared the piss out of me.” Anchula started fiddling with the silverware that was rolled up in a napkin. “I just wanted to fucking talk to him and he’s laying there in the largest goddamn blood puddle I’ve ever seen.” “Let’s take this from the top.” Henry said. “We should start with what brought you to Palm Springs, how you met Rex Thornbird and why you’re worried about being deported.” “Ok, ok, I’ll tell you the whole damn thing.” Anchula put the silverware down.

“I came over to this country nine years ago to go to Stanford. I had a student visa that was good for five years. I got a B.S. in software engineering at Stanford and four years ago I went to work for a small startup company. We worked our asses off, and about a year and a half ago, the company went public. We all got a shitload of money.”

“Do you need a little more time, or can I get you started with one of our homebrews?” A waiter interrupted Anchula’s story. “Do you drink beer Henry? They make a good pale ale here.” Anchula looked over at Henry. “That’s fine.” “Two pale ales, we’ll let you know when were ready to order.” Anchula told the waiter. “Where was I?” He asked Henry. “You got a boatload of money when your company went public.” Henry reminded him.

“Boatload, oh yeah. Well, we all had a lot of cash, and some of us took some time off work. Like I took a fucking year off and traveled around the Southwest, I originally wanted to go home to see my parents, but I couldn’t leave the country.” Anchula continued as the waiter set their beers down in front of them. “You see, my goddamn student visa expired, the startup wouldn’t sponsor me since they didn’t have the money at that time, once I had the money myself I didn’t have the time to deal with the attorneys, so I’m kind of here illegally. ”

“So basically you’re an illegal alien.” Henry took a sip of his beer. “You’re right, this is good.” “Not basically, I am an illegal alien; the Immigration guys can deport me without as much as a fucking hearing. Anyway, one of the places I traveled to during my time off was goddamn Palm Springs. That time I fell in love with the place, now I wish I’d never stopped there. When I found out that a lot of movie stars had vacationed there, I decided to buy a movie star house. I remember Bette Davis from the movies I went to when I was a kid at home, so when Rex Thornbird told me that he had her home for sale, I fucking snapped it up. I was shocked at what a shithole she had lived in but I figured hey, she’s a fucking movie star and they’re eccentric, right?” “Yeah, I suppose so.” Henry answered.

“So anyway, I decide to take a job at Xalaxy at about the same time I decide to spruce up this shithole house. So I hire this asshole, know nothing contractor with two first names who can’t read a drawing to save his ass.” “Howard James?” Henry interrupted. “Yeah, that’s right. James. Anyway, I hired him and I came back up here to see if I can get another IPO under my belt.” “IPO, Initial Public Offering?” Henry interrupted again. “Yeah, when you take a fucking company public and get shitloads of money for all the goombahs who have been working their asses off for nothing. Are you hungry?” Anchula asked.

Henry looked at his watch, it was eight thirty. “Yes, I think I’ll have the fish and chips. I know what an IPO is, I never looked at it that way though.” “I said I was buying, you can have fucking steak,” Anchula waved at the waiter who came over right away. “Two steak dinners, make mine rare, his is?” “Medium.” Henry answered. “And an extra side of French fries.” Anchula told the waiter who was writing as he walked off towards the kitchen.

“So after I hired this James guy, he told me that he worked on Bette Davis’ real goddamn house while she lived there sometime during the sixties. So I figured Thornbird snookered me for some fucking cash and I wanted to talk to him about it. Anyway, he didn’t call me back and I figured I couldn’t do a damn thing about it.” Anchula stopped talking long enough to take a sip of his beer.

“So anyway, last week I flew down to Palm Springs to check on this James asshole and wouldn’t you know it, I’m driving back from downtown towards my house and I saw Rex Thornbird’s car parked on the street in front of one of the houses he had for sale.” “Go on, what did you do?” Henry encouraged Anchula. “Well, I wanted to give him a

piece of my mind, tell him I was on to his little scam, so I parked behind his car, the front door of the house was open so I walked in to talk with him.” Anchula shook at the memory. “That son-of-a-bitch was lying face down in the biggest fucking puddle of blood that I have ever seen. I was grossed out and scared. I figured if I called the cops, they would find out that I’m an illegal and would deport me.”

The waiter arrived with their steaks and the extra basket of French fries. He set them on the table and walked off without a word. “I ran out of the house and came back up here a day earlier than I had planned hoping that you guys would never find out that I was even there. When I saw you poke your head into the conference room, I knew that you were from Palm Springs, and I knew that you were going to deport my ass, and that’s why I ran.”

“How did you know I was from Palm Springs?” “Well, you look like a cop and the tan gave it away. Cops up here don’t have tans like you do.” Did you touch anything in the house?” Henry started cutting his steak. “Fuck no man, I watch that show on TV, you know those CSI guys can get fingerprints off a candle flame. My prints are on file with the Immigration guys.” Anchula started in on the French fries.

“Did you close the door on the way out?” Henry asked. “Well, not directly, no. I ran into it as I was running out, it bounced off the wall behind the door and it slammed shut behind me. It scared the shit out of me as I was running for my car. I thought the killer was still in the house and was coming after me.” Anchula cut off a big piece of his steak and started chewing on it. “I got the hell out of there.”

“What day was that?” Henry asked. “Day, day? Shit, I flew down on Wednesday, so this had to be Thursday morning.” Anchula answered. “You know, as odd as it sounds, I believe you.” Henry said putting his fork down. “Hey look man; I want to stay in this country. I don’t want to be deported, there’s no fucking way I’d kill a guy, even for the few grand that I overpaid for that little cracker box house there.” Anchula grabbed some more French fries, “Hey I got these to share you know.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that, but the steak is plenty for me.” Henry drank some more of his beer. “Amit, what are you worth?”

“Shit, I don’t know man. Ten maybe twenty?” Anchula shrugged. “Twenty million dollars?” Henry asked, pausing his fork midway between his plate and his mouth. “Yeah, something like that, north of that I think.” Anchula finished his beer.

“So why don’t you hire an Immigration attorney and get rid of this sword of Damocles hanging over your head? The government likes immigrants with large bank accounts. You should be able to get a permanent visa based on your bank account alone. It’s not going to take you any more time than one phone call.” Henry put his steak into his mouth. “You think so? Will the government overlook the time that I was here without a visa?” This time it was Anchula who paused his fork midway between his plate and his mouth. “Yeah, you might have to pay a fine or something but I think you should definitely make a couple of calls to attorneys who specialize in immigration law.” Henry said. “Wow man, if that is so, that is certainly worth the price of a fucking dinner!” Anchula raised his glass to salute Henry. “Money talks!” Henry raised his glass to Anchula’s.

Chapter 13

Henry gave Amit Anchula a ride home that night; he wanted to check some things with Wayne before giving him back his keys and full mobility. He told Anchula about his encounter with his neighbor and the large dog and was told that Lucky, the dog, probably would have licked him to death.

On Anchula's recommendation Henry went to the Hilton Garden Inn on El Camino Real where they had plenty of rooms available. It was very late and he was tired when he threw his bag down on one of the beds and sat down on the other and called Wayne's cell phone.

"Henry?" Wayne answered on the third ring. "Yeah, couldn't you tell it was me from your phone?" "You must be in a different area code than earlier, I wasn't sure." "I'm in a hotel in Mountain View; I need you to check on something for me." Henry took off his shoes and lay down on the bed.

"How did it go with Anchula?" Wayne asked. "Long story, but he was in the house the morning after Thornbird was killed." Henry explained. "So he didn't do it? Are you sure?" Wayne sounded unsure. "It's easy enough to verify, but he says he flew down the afternoon of the day that Thornbird was murdered, but to be sure there is something that I need you to look at for me." Henry reached for the television remote on the nightstand; he could watch the late news before going to sleep.

"Ok, shoot. What do you need?" Wayne asked. "Anchula claims that the front door was open when he got there, Thornbird was dead in a pool of blood and when he saw the body he spooked and as he ran out he kicked the door on the way and it slammed shut. Can you have someone go out to the house and look for scuff marks or something on the door to corroborate his story?" Henry surfed through the channels on the television while talking with Wayne.

"You know what, I'll go out personally and have a look around to see what I can find." Wayne sounded tired as well. "I can call you back at this number in the morning. Anything else?"

"No, just let me know what you find. Talk to you in the morning." Henry hung up the phone and lay back on the bed. He should call Rosie and ask her about Saturday, where did he put her phone number?

He awoke in the same position as the daylight was trying to come in through the blackout curtains, and some way too cheerful young woman was talking about the local traffic on the television. He didn't mean to fall asleep in his clothes; he was just tired after a long day. He was in the shower when the phone rang.

Fortunately the Hilton had the foresight to install a phone in the bathroom. Henry picked it up with one of the big fluffy towels wrapped around him so that he didn't drip all over the bathroom floor. "Wayne?" "Yeah, how'd you know it was me, do you have caller id in the hotel?" Wayne's voice was cheerful on the other end. "No there's no caller id at the hotel but you're the only one that knows I'm here." Henry started drying off his hair.

"Well, I'm calling you from the house on Granvia Valmonte where Thornbird was murdered. The front door has one of those springy doorstep things on it to keep the door from banging into the wall. Do you know what I'm talking about?" "What time is it anyway?" Henry asked. "It's almost nine; anyway, there is a large dimple in the wall where the door stop hit it kind of hard. It was definitely made after the place was painted." Wayne explained, "The paint is flexed inward, so it was still soft when it happened."

"So Anchula was right. That means the real killer left the front door open Wayne." Henry reached for his shaving

gear in his toilet bag. “That’s right.” Wayne said, “But the key to the house was in the lock box, so did the killer put it there, or did Thornbird put it back before going in?” “I don’t know, will finding that out lead us to the killer?” Henry asked.

“True, I’m not sure it is relevant.” Wayne was thinking on the other end of the phone line. “Are you done there, are you coming home?” “Yeah, I have to go pick up Anchula and give him his keys and give him a ride back to his car. Then I’ll head back out to the airport.” Henry couldn’t find his shaving cream in his toilet bag; did he forget to pack it? “There must be a story behind why you need to do that. You’ll have to tell me tonight – you are still coming over to the house for dinner aren’t you?” “Oh yeah, I’ll be there.” Henry had completely forgotten about the invitation from Wayne’s wife Elliot. “Ok, have a safe flight, I’ll see you tonight.” Wayne hung up the phone. “Ok, until tonight.” Henry found the tube of shaving cream; it was at the bottom of his kit, under the deodorant and bottle of ibuprofen.

He finished shaving and started getting dressed when he called Rosie’s office. He was surprised when Tiffany didn’t answer the phone but Rosie picked up directly. “Good morning Rosie, it’s Henry, I’m happy to be talking directly to you.” “Hello Henry, either we have a bad connection or you sound like you’re not in town. Tiffany is not in yet, I’m the first one here in the office.” He hadn’t realized how much he missed her voice until he heard her.

“I’m up north by San Francisco, talking to a suspect in the Thornbird murder. I’ll be back tonight, I wonder if you’d like to have dinner with me on Saturday.” Henry took the handcuffs out of his pocket and tossed them into the bag, he didn’t think he’d need those again. “Oh, sure, where would you like to meet? Did you find the guy that did it?” Rosie sounded surprised. “How about you come to my house, let’s say four o’clock, I’ll give you the address. No, I didn’t find the guy that did it, just another dead end.” Henry buckled his belt and reached into his bag for his clean shirt.

“Four o’clock is perfect; I have a weight training class at the gym at one. You’re on Mel Avenue, right?” Rosie asked. “Yes, how did you know?” Henry pulled his shirt over his head. “Henry, I’m in the real estate business, your house has a two car garage, four bedrooms, a swimming pool with a cabana, and you bought it two years ago from Eric Wilson...” “Ok, ok, you’re in the real estate business, I guess you know where people live.” Henry was laughing.

“Well, only people that I’m interested in.” Rosie answered. “By the way, I thought of something last night that might help you. A couple of weeks ago, there was an older woman, a widow I believe, who called the office for Rex, she bought a house from him about a year ago and is now looking at a house for her sister who was moving to Palm Springs. I don’t remember her name offhand but I’m sure it is in the list of previous sales I gave you, you might want to talk with her.”

“Thanks Rosie, you’ve been very helpful with all this, I really appreciate it.” Henry said. “I’m happy to help Henry; can I bring anything on Saturday?” Rosie’s voice sounded wistful on the phone. “Just make sure you have your appetite.” Henry answered cheerfully, “See you at four!” “I’m looking forward to it. See you then Henry.” He liked the way her voice sounded and he slowly hung up the phone.

He finished getting dressed, packed his bag, checked out of the hotel and made his way over to Anchula’s house without having to refer back to his map. When he pulled up in the driveway, Anchula’s neighbor Bob Thomas was walking Lucky the dog. Bob waved to Henry as he got out of the car and went to the front door.

The big man opened the door with a smile and invited him in. “Come in “Uncle” Henry!” Anchula yelled, waving at

Bob Thomas and his dog. "Here are your keys." Henry held out his hand with the keys to the house and Mercedes. "Your story checks out." "That's just cool dude, I knew it would. I told you, I wouldn't kill the bastard, I kind of admire the amazing little scam he had going." Anchula took the keys and dropped them into his pocket. "You were right man, I talked to an immigration attorney this morning and they think that within six months I'll be legit! What a relief!" "It's amazing what ten or so million dollars in a bank account can do with the government." Henry smiled.

Henry gave Anchula a ride to his office and asked if he could come in to use the phone. He wanted to call the airline to see if there was an earlier flight and also to ask Charles if he could pick him up.

"Man, what is wrong with your cell phone?" Anchula asked. "Actually, I don't have one, though I think this trip might convince me to get one." Henry shrugged his shoulders. "Well shit man, come on in. If you want, I'll have the receptionist help you out, or we can get you into a conference room and you can make all the calls you want." "The conference room and a phone are fine for me." Henry said turning off the engine.

Anchula jumped out of the car and Henry followed him into the building. A girl, who could have been Tiffany's twin sister in Palm Springs, was now sitting at the reception desk in the lobby; she waved at Anchula as he walked in. Anchula directed Henry into a small conference room and pointed him to the phone. "I'll be back in a few minutes Henry, if you need me before then, let Wendy out front know." Anchula waved in the general direction of the receptionist desk and walked off into the maze of cubicles.

Henry called Alaska Airlines and after waiting on the phone for a long time, they told him that the next flight to Palm Springs was the one he was already on. Then he called his house and had to leave a message since Charles wasn't home. He got up and went looking for Anchula and unlike last night, he found his cube without a problem. Anchula was looking intently at a computer screen and didn't notice Henry walk up.

"I'm going to take off now, I'm sorry about tackling you last night and embarrassing you in front of your colleagues." Henry held out his hand. "Hey forget about it, you have helped me out so much; I really want to thank you. If the attorney is right - think about it in six months, I'll be able to go home, visit my family and come back into the U.S. like a real person." Anchula shook Henry's hand enthusiastically. "If there is anything I can do for you, please let me know." "You letting me use the phone was a big favor, thanks a lot." Henry said. "Next time you're in Palm Springs, give me a call. I'm curious how your remodel will turn out." "Sure as shit, have a safe flight, can you find your way out?" Anchula started turning back to his computer screen. "Yep, I'm getting good at negotiating cube mazes, right at the alligator and left at the Christmas lights." Henry laughed; by the time he turned around to walk out Anchula was busy typing away on his computer.

Henry had a couple of hours to kill so he started driving around the neighborhood. He thought it was pretty cool that he was in the middle of Silicon Valley where so much technology history was made. He drove past the old Netscape buildings in Mountain View, and tried to find the garage on Addison in Palo Alto where Hewlett-Packard was started but couldn't. As a computer user he was intrigued by the companies in the buildings he drove past, some names he recognized, most he did not. After an hour and a half of looking around he realized that he'd better quit playing tourist and get back to the San Francisco International Airport, he didn't want to miss the flight.

Henry got back on the freeway, drove north and returned his car to the rental car center. At the Alaska Airlines security checkpoint he did have to go through the more intensive security process, apparently the San Francisco security people were not impressed with his "Deputy" status. He had a few extra minutes, so he bought a newspaper and sat down in the gate area to read. He couldn't concentrate on the newspaper; he kept trying to think of who would have wanted to kill Thornbird.

Even Anchula admitted being upset with Thornbird at having been cheated with the Bette Davis house, but told him that it wasn't worth murder. Actually all of Thornbird's former customers didn't seem to mind paying a few extra

bucks to get their dream home in Palm Springs. The Millers were happy, their hotel was prosperous. Mr. and Mrs. Wadowicz suspected what Thornbird was up to and didn't mind compensating him for the time he spent with them. It hadn't been to Anchula. What did drive someone to kill another person Henry wondered?

He'd interviewed several killers in his career, and he was shocked at the pettiness of their reasons for resorting to murder. Maybe that was the problem; he was looking for people who he felt had real reason to want Thornbird dead. He needed to open his mind, broaden his horizon, think outside the box, whatever you wanted to call it, he decided to do a little more basic research when he got home, maybe that would lead him to the killer.

His flight landed in Palm Springs exactly as scheduled. By the time he got out of the terminal, he was carrying his jacket and his housemate Charles was waiting at the curb.

"Heeey, stranger. Good to see you. Did you get cold while you were up there? Hey, it looks like you played on the grass." Charles greeted Henry as he opened the door to Charles' SUV. Henry looked down at his knees, indeed his pants had grass stains from his encounter with Anchula and the lawn he hadn't even noticed them until now. "I had to convince someone to talk with me." Henry explained, "It was probably thirty degrees colder up there than here. Mind you, it's nothing like Wisconsin this time of year, but it is amazing the difference." "That's why we live here." Charles laughed as he pulled the Explorer away from the curb and towards home.

"So, you've hit another dead end?" Charles asked. "Yeah, how did you know?" Henry futilely tried to wipe the stains off his pants. "My friend, you're making this too hard on yourself." Charles said, "Something tells me it's a lot more basic than what you're chasing." "Yeah, I hear you." Said Henry. "But I just don't know where to look."

"Maybe because you're not seeing what you should." Charles replied. "You're mysterious today Charles." Henry said, "But I was thinking along the same lines while I was waiting for my flight. I think I'm going to go talk with Jerrie to see what he knows." "I still think Thornbird was gay, maybe you should check out that angle." Charles pulled the car into the driveway on Mel Avenue. "Perhaps, except that I wouldn't know where to start." Henry said getting out of the car. He still wasn't sure what to tell Charles about his discovery at Thornbird's house. "Hmmm, maybe I can help." Charles turned off the car and followed Henry inside. "Let me know what you find out." Henry decided that he would let Charles do some checking. Depending on what he found, then he would tell him about Thornbird's illegal activities.

After he showered again and changed into clean clothes, Henry drove to the Pac and Ship on Sunrise Way. He didn't need to ship or copy anything; Jerrie Mungo who manages the place is a bit of an information broker. Some places would have called Jerrie a snitch, or a stoolie; he wasn't any of those in Henry's mind. It seemed as though at some point everyone in Palm Springs came through Jerrie's store. As a result, Jerrie knew more about what was going on, who was doing what and who was involved with whom than anyone else.

"Hi Jerrie, can I buy you a cup?" said Henry as he walked into the store. "Henry, you old copper, how have you been? I haven't seen you in a while. Of course you can buy me a cup." Jerrie came from behind the counter of the store. "Tess, can you keep an eye on things for a few minutes?" Jerrie asked his wife who was in the back section of the store wrapping up a box with brown paper. She waved at Henry and nodded at Jerrie.

They walked out of the Pac and Ship together and around the corner to Jensen's. The large supermarket had a full deli as well as a coffee stand. Henry and Jerrie walked in and Jerrie ordered a double latte and Henry had a cappuccino. While they were waiting for their coffees, they sat at one of the small picnic tables the store had set out for their customers.

"So you must be helping Palm Springs PD again." Jerrie started, "I'll bet it is the murder suicide in Cathedral City – am I right?" Henry wasn't sure how much to tell Jerrie; he knew that whatever he learned from Jerrie, Jerrie would also learn from him. "No, I've heard of it, but no one has asked me about it. I'm looking into the murder of Rex

Thornbird, the real estate agent.” “Ah yes, the mid-century specialist, the seller of architectural gems, the purveyor of celebrity homes, the man whose smiling face lit up this area of Palm Springs. I heard about his death. Did an unsatisfied customer finally get the better of him?” Jerrie smiled.

Henry got up to get their drinks which were ready at the little coffee stand. He brought the coffees back to their table and set one down in front of Jerrie. “You know, that’s what I thought when I got started, but the more of his former customers I speak with, the less I think that one of them did it.”

“That’s surprising. You know, the rumor is that not every home he sold was owned by a celebrity or designed by a famous architect.” Jerrie said taking the cover off his latte. “Sometimes I think he was a little liberal with claiming who lived some place. In fact, he bought stuff, probably online, he had a box here and we received a number of packages for him. I think what he bought were photographs for these homes. Some of the packages he received were flat and marked “Do Not Bend. He also belonged to a video club of some kind, a lot of plain brown envelopes; do you know what I mean?”

Henry licked some of the foam off his cappuccino, “When was the last time that you received a package for Thornbird?” “Probably about a month ago now, I guess. Things have been pretty quiet for quite some time. He hasn’t been here since he picked it up. ‘Course he’s not coming back either.” Jerrie smiled a wry smile. “No, I suppose he isn’t.” Henry smiled as well.

“You know, all joking aside, Thornbird worked really hard, especially after that nasty divorce of his, he sold a lot of homes, probably made a lot of money, and I’m not sure that he really hurt anyone.” Jerrie looked down into his coffee cup, “I sort of admired the guy.”

You wouldn’t if you knew what I know, thought Henry, and his nasty habit hurt plenty of people. “What about that divorce, I’ve heard before that it was messy. Do you know anything about it?” “You know, there was a rumor that Mrs. Thornbird felt that she wasn’t getting the attention she deserved from Mr. Thornbird. That’s why she went after him with a vengeance during the divorce.” Jerrie gave Henry a knowing smile.

Henry furrowed his brow, “I’m not sure I follow you.” “Well, let’s just say that Thornbird spent a lot of time at his job, time with his co-workers and time with his male friends.” “Ok, so you’re saying he was interested in men and his wife was jealous?” Henry asked. “Well, I think that his marriage was a sham, I don’t know that he was gay exactly, but he didn’t have any time for Mrs. Thornbird other than at public functions where he needed an escort.” Jerrie finished his latte. “I better get back to the store; I’m going to get a latte for Tess.” “Well thanks; you’ve given me something to look into.” Henry got up as well.

Jerrie was back at the coffee stand already, “You know you might want to talk with that cute petite middle aged woman with the nice legs he used to run around with a lot, I think they worked in the same office together.” “The one with the reddish hair?” Henry asked? “Yes, that’s the one. She should be able to tell you volumes on Thornbird. She seems like she would be pleasant company as well. Don’t wait so long before stopping by again.” Jerrie waved at him as Henry walked out the door. “Yeah, I guess I’ll talk with her.” Henry said more to himself than to Jerrie Mungo.

Chapter 14

Friday, April 21

Charles was out when Henry got back to the house. He debated leaving Charles a note on the refrigerator, Charles said he would help look into Thornbird's "extracurricular" activities. He knew that a lot of people in Charles' world were very discreet and he wasn't sure if Charles could find out anything at all, especially if Thornbird was as secretive as he suspected with his illegal activities. He thought that Jerrie Mungo's information would help narrow Charles' investigation; perhaps Charles could find out who Rex had been involved with, he certainly didn't find any evidence on his home computer on how he had obtained all of his porn. There were no websites bookmarked, no suspicious emails. He wondered about the other computer that he suspected was around somewhere. It would be nice to have a look at it. It had to be a laptop; why else did Thornbird have the wireless setup in his house? Henry didn't know how to leave all of that in a note to Charles, he felt that it was better that he talk to him in person.

The folder with the list of properties that Thornbird had sold that Rosie had given him was still on the dining room table. He pulled his yellow sheets of paper with his handwritten list of new owners of celebrity owned properties out of the folder and started looking for purchases within the past six months to a year. Rosie had mentioned a widow that had called Thornbird in order to help her sister find a house, but he didn't find any women's names on his list. He decided to call three couples, to see if any of the women were perhaps recently widowed. All had purchased homes from Thornbird in the past year.

His second phone call paid off. Janet Ickelbee mentioned that her husband Harrison had died about nine months ago, shortly after they moved into their new house. She had a neighbor over and was busy getting her dinner ready and couldn't talk, but invited Henry over for coffee the next morning. Janet said she remembered Thornbird well and could tell Henry everything that had happened with the purchase of their home. She mentioned that she thought the stress of house hunting had probably killed her husband, though that was not what his doctor had said. Janet said she was looking forward to meeting and chatting with Henry, she had no other plans for her Saturday morning anyway.

Thinking about dinner, he realized that it was time to head out. He looked through the kitchen cabinet for a bottle of wine that he could bring tonight to the Johnson's and found a nice Merlot that he'd been saving for a special occasion. He grabbed it and headed for the garage. He took Vista Chino all the way out to Date Palm and then headed south on Interstate 10 to Indio. He took the one-eleven turnoff and headed towards the Indian Palms Country Club.

The Johnson's had a beautiful spacious Spanish style house overlooking the ninth green. It was a lot more house than a Palm Springs police detective could afford, but Wayne and Elliot had inherited the house from her parents. Elliot's father, Eugene, was the developer of the country club and the homes that surrounded it. When he died, Elliot's mother moved into a retirement home in La Quinta and Wayne and Elliot moved into the home on the golf course. They'd been there now for fourteen years; Elliot's mother passed away peacefully last year. The Johnson's son and daughter were both grown; William was an architect in Indian Wells with his own family. Lenore was a nurse at the Palm Desert hospital; she was engaged to a medical student at UC Riverside.

Henry pulled his car into the driveway; the Johnson's parked both of their cars in the garage. Henry believed it might have been a rule for their development, there were no cars parked on the street or on any driveway in neighborhood. It made the development look somewhat sterile and impersonal. All the homes were painted a similar color, a standard palette, Henry knew they called it. Perhaps his own neighborhood on Mel wasn't as neat and proper, but Henry felt it had a lot more character.

Henry walked up the walkway to the large carved double wooden doors. Before he could ring the bell, Elliot opened one of the doors. “Hi traveler, you’ve had a busy couple of days! How have you been? Wayne is out on the patio lighting the grill, I’m just finishing up the chicken in the kitchen. Come in, come in!” She held out her arms and Henry got a big hug and a kiss on both cheeks. He handed her the bottle of wine.

If we’re having chicken, you can save this Merlot for another occasion. Geez, it’s nice to be here, I’ve missed you.” Once inside, Wayne and Elliot’s home had a real homey, comfortable feeling. He’d felt at ease here back when he came to Palm Springs looking for a house and stayed with them for the first time. Since then, he always looked forward to and enjoyed their regular dinners. He’d had the Johnson’s over to his house, but those dinners usually turned into outside affairs at the grill and the table by the pool. He stepped through the patio doors where Wayne was just closing the lid to the barbecue.

“Hey Henry, before you tell me about anything else, I want you to know we’ve impounded all the stuff you found in Thornbird’s house. We’ve cataloged it and it’s off to be destroyed.” Wayne wiped his hands off as if he was done with the matter instead of getting the grill grease off them.

I’m glad of that; I’ll have to fill you in on what I’ve found out. Perhaps I should come into the office and meet with your vice guys.” Henry suggested. “No need to talk about this stuff in the house, Elliot gets upset with that part of the job.” Wayne opened the patio door. “So tell me all about your visit up north partner.” Elliot was busy in the open kitchen pounding on several chicken breasts while a mixing bowl of marinade was on the counter next to her work area ready to receive the end results of her labors.

Henry sat down on one of the bar stools on the other side of the counter that opened to the kitchen while Elliot slipped the chicken into the bowl and dug into the refrigerator for salad fixings. He told them both the whole story of his encounter with Amit Anchula, not leaving out anything including the encounter with the neighbor and the dog, the tackle on the lawn and the dinner at the brewery.

Wayne interrupted him when Henry told them of the conversation about Anchula’s illegal status in the United States. “Wait a minute, this Anchula guy is worth somewhere between ten and twenty million dollars?” “Yeah, he said he’s not really sure since he has it invested with three different financial advisors and he hasn’t had the time to reconcile the statements.” Henry explained.

Even Elliot stopped working at the salad, “And you say that by the time you interrupted him in the conference room at the office, it was eight thirty in the evening?” “It was about eight thirty, that’s right.” Henry said, “Do you guys have any wine, my throat is getting dry from all this talking.” “Wayne, you’re a poor host, pour the man a glass of wine.” Elliot jokingly chastised her husband.

“Me? I’m up to my elbows in grease from the grill, why didn’t you give him a glass of wine when you let him in?” Wayne was laughing, he and Elliot often bantered back and forth like this, that is one of the reasons Henry enjoyed their company, it was very similar to what his relationship with Irma had been like.

“Oh, all right, here Henry, we have an Australian chardonnay tonight, we like it and the price is right.” Elliot grabbed a glass from a cupboard, the bottle of wine from the refrigerator and poured some for Henry. She set the bottle down on the counter next to Henry.

“Great, thanks – where was I?” Henry picked up the wine.

“I want to know why Anchula was at work at eight thirty at night when he is worth ten million bucks or more.” Wayne stirred the chicken around in the bowl with the marinade and rinsed his hands in the sink. “You know, we talked a little bit about that and believe it or not, it’s not the money that drives these guys. They’re thrilled by the idea of taking nothing and creating something that has value.” Henry explained how Anchula was working on his third startup company, hoping to take it public. “His big fear though, was that the police would end up deporting him if he reported the body in the house on Granvia Valmonte and that’s why he ran.”

“You know, it seems like a lot of people think that we’re a lot more tightly integrated with the federal government immigration guys than we are.” Wayne said, pouring himself a glass of wine as well. “Yeah, I suppose that if everything was working properly, if you pulled someone over for a traffic violation on the streets of Palm Springs, the government’s computer would let you know that they were in the country illegally, and instead of hauling them in for a busted taillight, you’d end up deporting them.” Henry mused.

“We’re a long way from being that well organized. There are too many budgets, too many bureaucrats protecting their own turf and too many politicians in the way of that much common sense.” Wayne said. “What else is going on with you?” “Me? Nothing much else.” Henry looked into his glass of wine. “No? Someone saw you at the Blue Coyote Grill having lunch with a woman.” Wayne said as Elliot stopped working on the salad and turned to see what Henry would say. “Then yesterday at breakfast you ordered bran cereal with fruit. Are you on some kind of health kick suddenly?”

“Well, yes, I did have lunch with a woman, but it was purely professional.” Henry explained. “But then we had dinner a couple of days later, and I must confess, that was not totally professional.” “Henry, that’s wonderful!” Elliot clapped her hands together. Wayne smiled, “So who is she, how did you meet her?” “Well, I guess in a strange sort of way I can thank Rex Thornbird for introducing me to Rosie. She is the office manager at Coachella Real Estate and worked with Thornbird. We met as part of the investigation I’m doing. I don’t know why, but we hit it off, she is coming to the house tomorrow for a barbecue.”

“Henry, you’re moving rather fast don’t you think, is that a good idea?” Elliot asked. “I also noticed you’re not wearing your wedding ring anymore either.” Henry looked down at his hand. “Oh, my ring? That was a total accident and not related to Rosie at all. I took it off the other day before I went swimming and then left it on the table when I went in to get dressed to go out and I was in a hurry – anyway, it’s really not related with what is going on.”

“What do you mean moving fast dear?” Wayne gently rebuked Elliot. “For goodness sake, he’s been without Irma for a long time; he’s been without anyone for a long time. Isn’t it about time the man had some company, otherwise people will start to talk about him and Charles. Rosie the little red haired gal from the real estate office? We interviewed her, she seems like she’s really on the ball. Not bad looking either.”

“Watch it Wayne. All right, all right, he’s not moving too fast. By the way, Henry, don’t listen to what people say. Charles is a nice man, I really like him. So her name is Rosie, eh? That’s a nice name, is it short for Rosalynn? When do we get to meet her? Will you bring her over for dinner next month or can we meet her before then?” Elliot was obviously excited at Henry’s news. “I hope I’ll like her, it will be so much fun to do things as two couples, not that you’re not fun alone Henry, of course I’ll like her, you like her!”

“I’m not going to make any plans for next month, I want to take this a day at a time, this is all very new to me you know.” Henry was a little embarrassed by all the questions. “I’m not sure where this is going and I don’t want to put any pressure on her, or me for that matter. I’m just happy being friends; I enjoy spending time with her. I think I need a refill on my wine.”

Fortunately it was time to grill the chicken and the rest of the evening’s conversation was related to an update on the Johnson’s children and their activities. Henry admitted that he had not heard from Claire, his daughter in Chicago, for a number of weeks and didn’t really have any news from her. He decided that when he was done with this Thornbird investigation to at least give her a call, maybe even fly out to Chicago for a couple of days for a visit. Maybe he could invite Rosie along, he wanted Claire to meet her.

At the end of the evening, they said their goodbyes and Henry decided to take the slower way home, all the way up

one-eleven with all of its traffic lights. He realized it really wasn't all that different from last night when he had driven on El Camino Real up north in the Bay Area. Maybe Palm Springs wasn't a small town anymore after all.

This time driving home from the Johnson house, he didn't feel as melancholy as usual. Wayne and Elliot are a great couple and they were still in love after many years of marriage and raising their children. A lot about how they related to each other was very similar to how his and Irma's relationship had worked. It was interesting to listen to them talk and interact. Perhaps he would be in a similar relationship soon. He didn't realize how much he had missed it until now when he seemed to be close to possibly having it again.

It was almost midnight when he pulled his car into the garage next to Charles' Explorer. He walked into the kitchen and saw the living room light on and heard the television. Charles was stretched out on the couch quietly snoring with Pierre comfortably napping on his lap.

The television had a talk show on; guests were lined up on a couch, it was either Letterman or Leno, Henry wasn't sure which. As he reached for the remote to turn the TV off, Charles woke up. "I've been staying awake waiting for you." "Well my friend, you weren't awake now, you were sound asleep!" Henry laughed as he put the remote control back on the coffee table.

"I was right about your Mr. Thornbird." Charles said proudly now fully awake. "You were, eh? Interestingly, I heard something from Jerrie Mungo at the Pac and Ship this afternoon that I wanted to tell you but you weren't here and it was too complicated to leave a note on the refrigerator." "You wanna go first or want me to go first?" Charles asked soothing Pierre who had sort of woken up, and was protesting and wanted to go back to sleep. "Well I want to hear what you dug up, so you can go first. Do you want anything to drink?" Henry said getting up and walking to the kitchen.

"Just a bottle of water please, thanks. Well, ok, it turns out your Mr. Thornbird had a double life that he kept very, very private." Charles was sitting straight up on the couch now and had put Pierre down on the ground. The little dog wasn't happy and went off towards the back of the house to find another place to continue his interrupted nap.

"Ok, tell me everything and I think its time that I tell you what I know." Henry returned to the living room with a bottle of water for Charles and a glass of milk for himself. "Well, word is that Rex Thornbird's marriage to Mrs. Thornbird was purely a business relationship. In order for Rex to be successful in the real estate business, actually more like in his little niche of the real estate business, he had to have a wife that he could show off, talk about and take to functions." Charles twisted the cap off the bottle and muted the television at the same time. "Seems most of the buyers for the kind of properties he was pushing are retired couples and they were much more comfortable with a married heterosexual Rex Thornbird taking them around than the real Rex Thornbird." Charles bristled a bit at his own explanation, obviously Rex Thornbird's need for a double life was a requirement he would never understand.

"So what did Thornbird do after the divorce?" Henry sat down on the armrest of the recliner across from Charles. "I knew you would ask." Charles smiled like the Cheshire cat. "For the longest time, Thornbird pretended that he was still married. He had his wife's picture on his desk, carried it in his wallet, talked about her to his clients, all of that stuff. Eventually though, he had to go to the opening of a new exhibition at the Desert Museum where a lot of his past customers and prospects were present and he needed an escort." Charles took a long drink from the water bottle.

"Let me guess." Henry interrupted before Charles put the bottle down. "He brought Rosie." "You got it." Charles said. "Apparently, they were more than just co-workers; she escorted him to events where he needed to be seen with a female partner. They spent quite a bit of time together." "What do you mean; they were more than just co-workers?" Henry felt his heart sink through his stomach. "Are you saying they were a couple? Were they lovers? What you're describing sounds very, very platonic." Charles smiled again. "You're really hoping that she has fallen for you, and that she wasn't romantically involved with Thornbird right?" "I didn't know it was that obvious, but

yeah.”

“Relax, what I’m about to tell you is not to leave the confines of this room, ok? I also need to tell you that there is a sub-culture here in Palm Springs that most people don’t know about, and I want you to know as well that while I just learned about it, I certainly don’t condone it. Understood?”

“This is about Thornbird being a gay pedophile isn’t it?” Henry looked straight at Charles who wasn’t surprised that Henry knew and nodded. “Thornbird was a member of Sons of Dionysus, a very private, very exclusive all male club that zealously protects its members. They trade porn and are rumored to even traffic in adolescent boys between members. It’s all kept very quiet and hush-hush to protect their members. Most of their members are men who need to give the appearance of leading a life that is acceptable to society at large.” Charles explained.

“Sons of Dionysus? I’ve never heard of anything like that. How do you know about this?” Henry shook his head in amazement.

“Let me explain. First of all, Dionysus was the Greek god of sensuality and rebellion. He was androgynous, neither male nor female. Secondly, this organization exists all around the world, and you would be amazed of who is rumored to belong, including men in high government positions. Naturally you’ve never heard anything of it; this is a very secret organization and as I said this conversation needs to stay between you and me. I just hear things, let’s face it, you and I do travel in different circles. Personally I find this disgusting and immoral and if you and Wayne can bust this organization, at least locally, Palm Springs will be better off for it.” Charles once again sounded like the High School history teacher he had once been.

“Wow, I thought it was just his dirty little secret and that he was on his own. I had no idea that it was this established, with a secret organization and all.” Henry shook his head in amazement at Charles’ revelations. “So you think that Thornbird and Rosie’s relationship was strictly platonic?”

“Henry, I think every relationship Thornbird ever had with any woman was platonic, including his ex-wife, I tell you Thornbird liked boys. Young teenage boys. My gaydar wasn’t off; I was just forty years too old for him.”

“More like fifty, but whatever. So this Sons of Dionysus club or organization or whatever, is that where Thornbird socialized?” Henry wondered how he was going to get more information about this group. “Well, it’s not like the Kiwanis or the Freemasons or that sort of social club, they don’t meet at Marie Callender’s for lunch once a month. It’s more a network of individuals who have a common interest and help one another out by being extremely discreet, a lot of plain brown envelopes if you know what I mean. Does that make sense?” Charles said.

Henry breathed a sigh of relief. “Yeah, I think so. I asked her over for dinner tomorrow afternoon you know.” “Who, Rosie?” Charles asked surprised. “Yes, I want to barbecue something for the two of us and talk to her about perhaps establishing a more permanent social relationship.” Henry settled back in the recliner, he thought for a second and said. “Perhaps I need to look into the Sons of Dionysus for Thornbird’s murderer. That’s probably going to be difficult; I may need your help.”

“You want to discuss a potential social relationship? Henry, why don’t you just let things kind of happen? It’s not like you’re going to discuss a business merger or something.” Charles shook his head at his friend. “Besides, you’re on your own investigating the Sons of Dionysus; I’ve gone out on a limb telling you as much as I have. Remember, these people are very protective and have big secrets to keep. You should probably look at Thornbird’s computer to see if there is anything related to his activities.”

“That protectiveness is exactly the motive for murder. And, I’ve already looked at Thornbird’s computer, there’s nothing there. Now I’m thinking there’s another machine that he used, but I can’t find it” Henry answered. “I’m already planning on going over to talk with another of Thornbird’s former clients Mrs. Icklebee tomorrow morning, but I don’t have much hope, so far his past customers have turned up nothing. Beginning Monday, I’m going to poke into this whole secret society business to see what I can uncover.”

“You’re going to be on dangerous territory my friend. You’d better update your will and make sure I get the house.” Charles had a wry smile as he turned off the television and headed for bed.

Chapter 15

Saturday, April 22

Saturday morning began with a little light overcast over Palm Springs. Henry was listening to the television weather report; apparently they were seeing the remnants of a tropical storm over Baja California, the clouds drifted all the way up to the Coachella Valley. The weather forecasters said the skies would be clear by late morning or midday. Henry was relieved; he wanted everything to be perfect for his barbecue with Rosie this afternoon. He had time this morning to go talk with Janet Icklebee, do some shopping and get everything ready for this afternoon.

He was glad that the housekeeper, Juanita, was coming on her regular Saturday morning cleaning. That meant that his place would sparkle and shine in the afternoon. He hoped Rosie would be impressed, though he was a little uncomfortable that she knew as much about him and his house as she already did. He figured she looked it up somewhere; probably the Riverside County title records where the deed to the house was registered or the real estate Multiple Listing Service. He shrugged his shoulders as he thought about it, if he had still been on the police force, he probably would have run her license plates through the Department of Motor Vehicles and he would know a lot about Mrs. Rosie Murphy. More than she knew about him – all she really knew was how many rooms his house had or how much he had paid for it.

Charles was swimming laps in the pool with Pierre, who obviously had forgotten all about having his nap interrupted last night, keeping pace and barking encouragement. He waved at them and left the house to head for Janet Icklebee's place over on Calle Rolph, only about four blocks from the house where Thornbird was murdered. He purposely drove there by way of the house on Granvia Valmonte. With the crime scene tape and door stickers gone, it looked just as peaceful as the other homes on the block. He noticed that someone had taken down the "for sale" sign as well; he supposed there was a bit of cleaning up to do inside before it went back on the market.

It didn't take him very long to get to the Icklebee residence and he parked on the street in front of a well kept little house and walked up to the door. Before he could knock the door opened and a woman who he estimated to be about ninety smiled and stuck out her hand.

"You must be Henry Wright, please come in." Janet Icklebee had obviously seen some sun in her life; her brown face looked more like a leather purse than anything Henry had ever seen. Her tan face made her teeth look extremely white as she gave him a big smile and her bright blue eyes looked at him with intensity and it felt as though she was looking right through Henry.

Mrs. Icklebee was wearing a pale blue housecoat that wasn't quit buttoned all the way up and her feet were in plastic slippers with white fur and little silver heels. Her gray hair was swept up in a sixties kind of style and she had glasses on a chain around her neck. Her eyes made him feel a little uncomfortable, but he returned her firm handshake with his own.

"It's good to meet you Mrs. Icklebee; I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me." Henry stepped inside the door. "Please, call me Janet. No matter how old I get, when I hear someone say Mrs. Icklebee I start looking around for my mother-in-law, rest her soul." She led the way to the living room, but as Henry closed the front door behind him, he stopped in his tracks in the entry. Covering the entire wall were black and white pictures of celebrities and movie stars, all of them in identical silver frames. It almost looked like something that you might see in a restaurant frequented by celebrities.

“That’s quite a collection you have there.” Henry said looking closely at some of the pictures. “Yes, isn’t it?” Janet was already in the living room of the house, and turned around. “You must have thirty or so faces that I recognize.” Henry noted that most of the photos were standard studio publicity shots and most of them had signatures and personal inscriptions to “Harrison”. “Oh, yes, there are a lot of famous people on that wall, I’m surprised you don’t recognize all of them, but then maybe you are too young to remember some of these folks.” She walked back over to the hallway and looked at the photos with Henry.

“Come into the living room and have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?” She led the way into the living room that was packed with furniture that looked as though it was all bought at the same time in the mid-sixties. Henry had been in houses like this before; it looked as though Mrs. Icklebee had downsized her house, but not her furniture collection. There was no problem finding a place to sit, there were two sofas, four matching chairs and little tables taking up nearly every square foot of space in the living room. Even though everything was very dated, just as the outside of the house, it was very clean and neat.

“Do you have coffee? I take it black.” Henry said, finally choosing to sit down on a blue velvet sofa with little white cotton doilies for headrest covers. “Sure, I made a fresh pot a little while ago.” Mrs. Icklebee walked into the kitchen and came back with two mugs filled with coffee. She carried the cups that were filled to the brim as though it was nothing and she did it every day. He guessed that she was over ninety, but she didn’t move like it. “Where did you get all those pictures?” He asked setting the coffee mug on a little green crochet doily on the coffee table that had a number of doilies all different colors.

“How long have you been here in Palm Springs young man?” Mrs. Icklebee sat down in a Queen Anne chair that had obviously seen better days, but seemed to fit her like an old glove. “I’ve been here just about three years or so.” Henry wasn’t used to being the interviewee and her eyes still made him uncomfortable. “Then you wouldn’t remember the Willow Springs restaurant, would you?” Mrs. Icklebee set her coffee down on a blue crocheted doily.

“I’ve heard of it, it was a fancy place on South Palm Canyon Drive wasn’t it?” Henry could not get used to thinking of her as Janet. She was easily one of the oldest people he had ever interviewed in a murder case. But she didn’t act as if she was that old and he knew she wasn’t frail; he had been surprised at her strength when he shook her hand. “That’s right; it was a beautiful building, designed by one of Palm Springs’ well known modernist architects.”

She had this look in her eyes as though she could remember the building in its heyday. “Sadly even the building is gone now, everyone wants Jack-in-the-Box style architecture, no one cares about a nice building and a great atmosphere to enjoy a meal anymore. Eating has been turned into a biological function, not an enjoyable event.”

“Did you buy these pictures from the restaurant when it closed down?” Henry picked his coffee up; he was a lot more comfortable when he was the one asking the questions. “Oh no, we didn’t buy them, they were given to us by our customers. Harrison, that was my husband, that’s him right there.” She pointed at a large picture on the end table that showed a tall handsome man in a tuxedo and a much younger but still very tan Janet Icklebee in a formal gown. “Anyway, Harrison and I owned the Willow Springs for many years, and Harrison was the manager; all those people whose picture you see in the hallway were in our restaurant for dinner.”

“So you’ve been collecting these for a long time then.” Henry asked. “Well, we stopped getting them when the restaurant closed down, so what we have there is all that we have left. We gave some away over the years.” She waved her hand in the direction of the entry. “They actually looked a lot better in the old house; we had a lot more space there. When we moved here, the entry was the only place we could hang them. But I like the way it looks there, it reminds me of Willow Springs.”

“Did you ever buy any or get any photographs after the restaurant closed?” Henry was sure there was a connection with these photographs and Thornbird. “Buy these pictures? My dear, these are cheap black and white publicity shots that the stars gave away by the dozens. I wouldn’t buy one of these, what are valuable about the pictures is the person and the memory of the time that our customers gave them to us, other than that, they have no value. I’d never buy one.” Mrs. Icklebee had an indignant tone in her voice. “You ask as many questions about these pictures as that realtor Mr. Thornbird that you’re here to talk with me about.”

“Oh, did Mr. Thornbird ask you about the photos as well?” Henry was curious, maybe this was the connection he was hoping to find. “Why he was so curious, he spent about an hour looking at all of them and asking Harrison which stars had lived here in Palm Springs, and who had owned homes, and which of them dined with us and all of this stuff. Why when Harrison finally gave him a picture of Sammy Davis Jr. you’d of thought he had given him ten thousand dollars!” She shook her head at the memory.

Well, Harrison Icklebee probably gave Thornbird about fifty thousand dollars with that one photograph Henry thought. That would be about how much Thornbird would increase the price of a house. He’d have to go back home to check his list to see which property Thornbird had sold as Sammy Davis Jr.’s house. “Tell me more about how the dealings you had with Mr. Thornbird.”

“Well, about a year and a half ago Harrison decided that our old house was too big and it was getting to be too much with the stairs and all and he wanted to move. I told him I didn’t think it was necessary, but he insisted. I think he knew that he was not going to be with us much longer and he didn’t want me in the big house by myself.” She wiped her eye, though Henry didn’t see any tears at all.

“So is that when you met Rex Thornbird?” Henry picked up his coffee and took another drink. “We called Thornbird and he came right over and looked at our house. That’s when he asked all about the photographs, and said he thought he could probably find a buyer for our place. He asked us what we were looking for and we told him a much smaller house, no stairs and down here in the flat part of Palm Springs.” She took a sip of her own coffee as well.

“Is that when he showed you this house?” Henry asked. “No, he showed us a lot of other houses first and none of them impressed us. Our old house up on the hill was very nice and spacious with wonderful views and we were kind of disappointed at what we were looking at down here in this area. You’d have liked our old place, much grander than this.” She looked up towards the San Jacinto Mountain. “You know in the early fifties one of the local architects was having some hard times, not everyone liked these modern buildings he was designing. Anyway, we traded meals at the restaurant for the house plans and then had it built. He ended up doing ok with his business afterwards, and our house ended up really nice.” Mrs. Icklebee got up and headed towards the kitchen. “If you’re ready for more coffee, I’ll bring out the pot.”

“Ok, I’d love some more, you make very good coffee.” Henry smiled. “Listen, you don’t spend as many years in the restaurant business as I did without learning how to make decent pot of coffee.” Mrs. Icklebee came back carrying a large silver carafe and she filled Henry’s cup back up to the brim. “What finally convinced us to buy this house was that Rock Hudson lived here in this very house right after he finished filming Giant. He was such a nice man, it’s really a shame that he passed away so young. His picture is there in the entry, he wrote the nicest dedication to Harrison on it.”

“Did Mr. Thornbird tell you that Rock Hudson lived herein this house?” Henry took a small sip of the hot coffee. “Yes, that’s right. Mr. Hudson came to the restaurant a bunch of times when he was here, that’s how we knew that he lived here in Palm Springs, we just didn’t know where until Mr. Thornbird told us.” Mrs. Icklebee got that same look in her eyes as though she was reliving the days that she was seating Rock Hudson at his favorite table.

“And you never went to Rock Hudson’s house during all of the time he was coming to the restaurant?” Henry didn’t think Hudson had owned this house, but he wanted to know if Mrs. Icklebee knew. “No, no of course we didn’t. He was our customer; we never went to any of our customer’s homes. Funny that you should ask if we had ever gone to his house, Mr. Thornbird asked us the same thing, we gave him the same answer I just gave you.” Mrs. Icklebee smiled at the recollection.

“Did you call Mr. Thornbird recently to have him help you find a house for your sister?” Henry asked. Mrs. Icklebee’s eyes welled up with tears and started sobbing at that question and she got up to get a box of tissues from the bathroom. “I’m sorry.” She walked back in with the tissues and said in between sobs. “My sister just passed away a week and a half ago, I came back from the funeral yesterday, I thought I was all right, but it suddenly hit me that I won’t talk to her ever again.”

“I’m terribly sorry for your loss.” Henry started getting up to comfort the woman who was suddenly showing her age. “No, please, I apologize; I don’t know why this suddenly affects me like this, I was doing so well.” Mrs. Icklebee blew her nose on one of the tissues and pulled another out of the box to dry her eyes. Her body shook with crying and she had a hard time talking. “My sister’s husband passed away earlier this year right after Harrison died. After a few months of living alone she decided to sell her house in Carpinteria, up near Santa Barbara over on the coast, and come and live here near me in Palm Springs.”

“So you called Rex Thornbird so that he could show her some houses here?” Henry tried to be as delicate as possible, but he felt as though he was getting somewhere. “I called his office, but Mr. Thornbird wasn’t in. I talked to the office manager, I don’t remember her name but she was very nice, she said she would get the message to Mr. Thornbird.” She dabbed another tear from her eye and blew her nose again.

“Rosie? Yes, she is very nice. Please continue.” Henry smiled. “Well apparently, one of them called my sister and told her that there was a house that she would like. It’s only a couple of blocks from here and was also owned by a celebrity – I don’t remember who. So she was going to drive down to meet him at the house before coming here to see me.” She started sobbing quietly again. “Are you all right? Can I get you some water?” Henry was concerned about how she was dealing with all of this, losing her husband and then her sister within a very short span of time.

“The morning that she was going to meet him at the place, she got in a terrible accident on I-10 coming through Riverside. They said she had a stroke and was dead before she hit the overpass. It totaled her car you know. They said she didn’t suffer at all, she was in no pain.” At this, she broke down sobbing again and Henry got up to get a glass of water from the kitchen. “I’m so, so, sorry.” Henry tried to get her to take a small sip from the glass of water. “I sat here and waited for her, I got worried since I didn’t hear from her – she had a cell phone you know.

Finally the California Highway Patrol called me in the late afternoon and told me what happened.” She took a small sip of water and was able to hold the glass in her hand. “I felt terrible.” Mrs. Icklebee said between sips. “You shouldn’t blame yourself you know, there’s nothing you could have done.” Henry said soothingly. “No, I feel terrible because I never even called Mr. Thornbird’s office to cancel the appointment.” She sobbed.

“Well, that’s the least thing you should worry about.” Henry realized that Mrs. Icklebee was out of town at her sister’s funeral and did not even know that Thornbird was dead. He decided that he wasn’t going to be the one to tell her. Not now. He was worried that she was going to be all right. “Is there someone that can come over right now and stay with you?” He asked.

“No, there isn’t anyone really. Maybe I’ll go over to the neighbor’s house for a little while, they’re about your age, and they’ve sort of adopted me as their mother.” She smiled through her tears. “I’ll be ninety-five next week you know.” “That’s wonderful, you certainly don’t look it.” Henry complimented her.

He put his arm around her and gently guided her out the front door and down the sidewalk to the house next door. He knocked and the door was answered by a nice looking man that was indeed close to his age, probably a little younger, Henry thought. The man opened his arms and Mrs. Icklebee stepped into them to get a big hug. The man shushed her and led her inside. He started closing the door, but Henry wanted to ask Mrs. Icklebee one more question.

“Janet, could you tell me, where was your old house?” He tried to ask as gently as possible. “Up on West Chino Canyon Road, why do you ask?” Mrs. Icklebee answered. “Just curious, thank you – I’ll check in on you next week.” Henry held his hand up to the man who nodded at Henry as he closed the door.

So Thornbird had really taken advantage of Harrison and Janet Icklebee. He sold them a house that Rock Hudson had probably never even driven by, much less seen, and he bought their old place up on West Chino Canyon, most likely for a song. If Janet Icklebee knew that she had been doubly cheated by Thornbird he had no doubt that she had the strength to kill him - that was one tough old lady. When he saw the wall of photographs he thought that he had the murderer – find the picture, find the murderer – he remembered telling Wayne at the pistol range. Now he realized he wasn’t talking to a murderer, but to a nice old lady that was living with memories of another, happier time.

Though he looked closely at all the pictures in the entry, there was no Rudy Vallee in the collection. He wasn’t sure what he would have done if he had seen it there. At the very least he would have borrowed the picture to see if it matched the dust mark on the mantle at the house on Granvia Valmonte. But he didn’t know if he could have had Janet Icklebee arrested for murder.

He’d hit another dead end today, obviously he had some more investigating to do, but it could wait until Monday. This afternoon he was going to enjoy his barbecue with Rosie and tomorrow, well, he had no plans for tomorrow yet, depending on how this afternoon went, maybe he and Rosie could spend Sunday together. Looking into the Sons of Dionysus could wait until Monday. A secret society of pedophile porn traffickers sounded very cliché and also like something out of a mystery novel, but Henry couldn’t take it lightly.

Chapter 16

Henry decided that he had plenty of time before he had to go shopping and before Rosie would arrive. He drove home and parked the car in the garage next to an empty space. There was a note from Charles on the refrigerator to enjoy his afternoon and that he would be spending the night with a friend. The note also said there was a surprise in the refrigerator. He opened the door and saw two bottles of the Australian Chardonnay that he had at Wayne's house last night. The note on them said "In good health and good luck" and was signed by Wayne and Elliot. He took the note and went towards his office. There were some things he wanted to research on the Internet before he went to the store. He thought he had enough time to do that.

He spent several hours looking up a variety of topics on the Internet. He couldn't find much on the Sons of Dionysus; perhaps he was looking in the wrong place. Finally he looked at his watch and decided to go to Jensen's for some groceries. He came back with several bags of all kinds of goodies, put them away and headed for the shower.

He was thinking about Mrs. Icklebee while he was in the shower and her poor sister who had come started to come down from Carpinteria to start a new life. He realized that the sister probably would have been the one that would find Thornbird's body if she had made it to Palm Springs. Janet Icklebee and her sister had to be close in age; he sure didn't wish the sight of Thornbird lying in a giant pool of blood on anyone, especially not someone that old. Amit Anchula had been freaked out enough to run out of the house. Henry himself saw the huge blood stain on the kitchen floor, which was bad enough; he was glad that he didn't see the body lying in the middle of it.

He stepped out of the shower and decided to stop thinking about all of this morbid stuff and focus on a more pleasant afternoon coming up with Rosie instead.

Henry decided to dress very casually since it was an afternoon barbecue and not dinner as it had been earlier in the week. He put on a clean pair of shorts, sandals and a Hawaiian Aloha shirt. He looked in the mirror and remembered all the Hawaiian shirts hanging in Thornbird's closet and took it off and hung it back on its hanger. He found a golf shirt from the Indian Palms Country Club and put that on instead. Now, satisfied with his appearance he went outside by the pool and checked on the barbecue. Charles used it last and as with most things that Charles touched, it was left sparkling clean and ready to go. He really liked having Charles as a housemate, if anything ever developed between he and Rosie, he would hate to ask Charles to leave.

He couldn't see having Charles live with them though; it probably wouldn't work out at all. Though he didn't have any problems at all with Charles' way of life and his circle of friends, he could imagine that Rosie might, even if she didn't, it would most likely be awkward. He was putting the cart before the horse he realized. He thought back that he had met Rosie just last Tuesday, now it was Saturday and he was already thinking ahead to living with her!

He took one last look at his backyard, it looked great. The weather had indeed cleared up, the morning's clouds were gone and the sky was beautiful. The bright sun made the pool sparkle. He rearranged the chaise lounges and found his wedding ring still sitting on the little table where he had left it the other day. He picked it up, looked at it, looked at his ring finger on his left hand where the mark and the white band that the ring had left was pretty much gone and dropped the ring into the pocket of his shorts. Rosie made a toast to new beginnings the other night; certainly this afternoon was a new beginning for Henry Wright, retired police chief from Eagle River, currently residing in Palm Springs, he thought, feeling good himself and the future and at the same time he was unsure about how things were going to unfold. One thing though, he thought as he felt the ring settle into the bottom of his pocket, he was not going to go back to being lonely.

He went back inside to start preparing the vegetables. He wanted to grill the steaks on the barbecue. He would serve grilled zucchini, eggplant and peppers and a salad with it. He liked the way that those vegetables tasted after grilling them, especially when he charred the peppers; he hoped Rosie liked them too. He chopped up the vegetables and put them in a bowl in the refrigerator. He took out the wine so that it wouldn't be so cold and took the steaks out of the refrigerator and took them out of the butcher's paper. He prepared the steaks with seasoning and put them on a plate that he covered with plastic wrap. He grabbed the bag of chips, opened them and poured them into a bowl that he set out on the counter.

He had just washed his hands for the umpteenth time and was standing in the middle of the kitchen admiring all of his preparations when the doorbell rang. His heart leaped into his throat, he hung the hand towel up and went to the rarely used front door.

“Hi Henry, wow, your house is gorgeous, you look great, I hope I'm dressed ok, the description of your place on the Multiple Listing Service doesn't do it justice, geez, you smell good, what's for dinner – I haven't had lunch – oh, I hope I'm not being rude – aren't you going to invite me in?” Rosie was obviously as nervous as Henry was; she was talking a mile a minute.

“Hi, you look wonderful.” Henry said and meant it. She had on impossibly high heels, her white shorts showed off her tanned legs and a black blouse. She had what seemed to be a trademark sweater thrown over her shoulder; it was pale green and looked great with her hair. Her legs were either really long for such a short person, or her shorts were short, or it could have been both. It didn't matter to Henry, she looked terrific.

He bent down to give her a hug and she kissed his cheek again. He returned her kiss and invited her inside. “You know, that you're doing it again.” She turned around and smiled a big smile. “I know, I'm sorry, I kept saying in the car don't be nervous Rosie, don't get excited Rosie, you're not a school girl Rosie, but since I met you Henry, I'm excited about my future. I hope that maybe my future includes you. Oh, this house is beautiful!” She paused in front of the French doors that led from the living room into the backyard pool. “That pool looks gorgeous. The one at my condo complex always has little kids in it. I never use it.”

“Well maybe we can go for a swim in a little while.” Henry said, “Would you like to set down your purse, take off your sweater, and have a glass of wine?” “Yes to all three.” Rosie said setting her purse on the couch and laying her sweater over it. “Where is your housemate?” “Charles went out to visit a friend.” Henry couldn't help but look at her back, her blouse was designed so that the back was open and he noticed that she wasn't wearing anything under it. She had the same freckles on her back that he noticed on her nose the other day and he was fascinated. He wondered what it was like to count the freckles on her back. Suddenly, he realized he was staring at her and he quickly went to the counter to open a bottle of the chardonnay.

“Oh too bad, I was looking forward to meeting him. What time will he be home?” Rosie leaned on the counter. “I don't know - I actually don't expect him back until tomorrow.” Henry put the corkscrew into the bottle of wine. “Too bad, I guess I can meet him next time.” She said, “Can I do anything to help?”

Henry was glad that she also felt that there was going to be a next time. “I bought some chips, I don't know what your preference is, but since you like Mexican food, I thought tortilla chips were safe.” He put the bowl of chips on the counter in front of her. “These are yummy; did you get these at Jensen's?” She delicately picked up a chip and put it in her mouth.

Henry liked the way she did that, she ate the chip without messing up her lipstick, she was very dainty. “Try this wine, it's from Australia, my friends introduced me to it.” “To new beginnings, I really mean it.” Rosie lifted her glass to Henry's. “You said that the other night, I agree, to new beginnings.” Henry toasted her. “I think we're going to have a wonderful evening, I hope you like steak and grilled vegetables.” “Sounds great! I'm glad to be here Henry; I agree, I think we are going to have a wonderful evening.” She took another sip of wine. “This is good, I

like it a lot. Come on, it's a beautiful afternoon, let's go sit outside."

Henry picked up the bowl of tortilla chips and they walked outside with their wine glasses. They sat down at the table under the umbrella and Rosie kicked off her shoes. She had the littlest feet Henry had ever seen on a grown woman. "Do you mind if I ask you one more question about Rex Thornbird and then I'll drop the subject for the rest of the evening?" He asked. "No of course not, I feel that Rex brought us together so how can I refuse?"

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but did you see Thornbird socially?" He looked right at Rosie to get her reaction. She was quiet for a moment and looked down into her glass of wine, she glanced up at Henry. "Well, yes sort of. After his divorce I sometimes went with him to social engagements where he needed a date. It was strictly business though, I was an escort for the evening, you know. Nothing ever happened between us Henry, really." Her bright green eyes looked straight at Henry. "It doesn't matter now though does it? He's gone and you and I are here to enjoy this wonderful day."

"So you had a how should I say this, platonic relationship?" Henry asked setting his wine down. "Henry, Rex Thornbird was only interested in his work. After his divorce he had no social life, at least not that any of us that worked with him knew about. He never got any calls at the office other than work calls; that man spent twelve to fourteen hours a day working; he went on vacation only once in all the time that I knew him, all by himself to Puerto Vallarta for five days, though he may have met someone there, I don't know; he was very driven and a workaholic." Her eyes were full of fire and Henry could tell she was upset. She took a long drink from the wine glass and when she looked up again she had regained her composure.

"I'm sorry to bring up his memory, but I needed to know." Henry got up from his chair. "Let me go in and get the bottle to get you a refill." "No, I'm the one who should apologize. I lost my cool; Rex Thornbird was a very frustrating person to deal with." Rosie put her empty wine glass on the table.

When Henry came out with the bottle of wine in a terra cotta cooler that he dug out of the cabinet Rosie was sitting on the edge of the pool with her legs in the water. She looked right up at Henry with her sparkling eyes. "Let's go for a swim Henry."

He refilled her glass with the wine and set the bottle into the cooler on the table. "Ok, you can change in the guest room, let me show you where." He held his hand out and helped her up, they walked back inside where she picked her purse up off the couch and he showed her where the guest bedroom and bathroom were at the other end of the house. "When you are done, the doors in the guest room lead directly back to the pool, no need to walk through the house if you don't want to." "Thanks Henry, I'll see you in the pool in a few minutes." Rosie squeezed his arm.

Henry closed the guest room door behind him and walked back through the kitchen to the other side of the house and his bedroom to change. He thought he had obviously upset her by asking about her relationship with Thornbird but he was satisfied that there was nothing between the two of them other than she helped out Thornbird for appearance sake. He remembered what Charles said about Thornbird's relationship with women and wondered why he had even bothered asking her. He felt that he needed to hear from Rosie that there was nothing between her and Thornbird. He was satisfied.

He got to his room, dug through his dresser drawer for a pair of swimming trunks and pulled them on after hanging his clothes on a couple of hangers on the doorknob.

Henry walked back through the kitchen on the way out to the pool and picked up the bag of chips from the counter

so that he could refill the bowl outside. When he got back outside Rosie was already in the water splashing and kicking her legs. She had set her wine glass on the edge of the pool; it reminded Henry that he really needed to get some nice plastic wine glasses for use outside around the pool. He set the bowl on the table and dove into the water to join her. When he came up above the water, she was swimming over to join him and put her arms around him. As soon as she held him he realized she wasn't wearing a swim suit and he immediately felt silly for wearing his.

"I hope you don't mind." She said, squeezing her arms around him and giving him a big hug. He felt a strange longing that he had not felt in a long time and was glad he was wearing his swimsuit lest he embarrass himself. "Of course I don't mind, you should have told me what you were planning. I thought you had a swimsuit in your purse." "I do, but I decided your place is so private that I don't need to wear one, so I took a chance hoping that you wouldn't think I was being too forward." She let go of him and swam towards her wine glass. "No, you're not being too forward, but I don't know where this is going and you need to know that I haven't been with anyone in a long time." Henry swam over to join her at the side of the pool.

"Henry, we have all afternoon, you're too worried about where "this" is going. We're both old enough to understand what is going on, let's just enjoy our afternoon together and let's see what tonight brings." Rosie kissed him straight on the lips, took a long drink of her wine, pushed off the side of the pool and said, "Bet you can't catch me!"

They played in the pool for the next half hour, hugging, talking and sometimes kissing and having a good time in the water until Henry felt it was time to get out and get the barbecue ready. He was still wearing his suit when he walked directly into his bedroom from the pool. While he certainly saw and felt enough of her in the water, he didn't want to watch Rosie climb out of the pool and make it obvious that he was enjoying looking at her. While he was in his room toweeling off, he heard her get out of the water and go into the guest room on the other side of the house. He was in the kitchen when she came out dressed with her makeup refreshed carrying her glass of wine.

"Are you sure I can't help with something?" Rosie asked. "Actually you can, would you make the salad, and I'll go clean up the towels and throw them in the laundry, we may want to use them again after dinner." Henry asked her. "You'll find everything in the bottom of the refrigerator; I put the bowl on the counter already." "Sure not a problem, glad to do it." She started humming a song that he'd heard on the radio while she dug around in the bottom of the refrigerator.

Henry started a habit right after he moved into the house where when he used the pool he threw the just used towels into the dryer. Typically, he liked going back into the pool to relax after dinner and he was hoping to go back into the water later that evening when the landscape around the pool was lit up and the setting was more romantic than this afternoon. Warm dry towels would be nice in the evening air.

He went into the guest bathroom and picked the towel up off the floor where Rosie had left them. She had left her lipstick on the vanity and he picked it up to give back to her. He looked at it in his hand, suddenly dropped the towels on the floor and walked quickly out the guest room French doors and crossed directly across the yard to his own bedroom doors. He found the pants he was wearing the other day in the closet and dug around in the pocket until he found what he was looking for. He stood in his bedroom looking down at his hand and instantly knew what he was looking at, but didn't quite know what to do.

A few minutes later he walked back into the kitchen where Rosie was now tossing the salad in the bowl. She looked up when she saw him and said, "I hope you don't mind that I dug around in your drawers but I needed some tongs."

Henry didn't say anything but held out his open hand with the two matching lipsticks in it. "Oh, did I leave that in the bathroom, silly me – where did you get the other one?" Rosie suppressed a nervous smile when she saw the look

on Henry's face. "Rex Thornbird's bathroom medicine cabinet. What were you doing in his house? You killed him didn't you Rosie? Why did you do it?" Henry looked straight at her; his face had a disappointed look.

"Do it, what do you mean why did I do it?" Rosie's lip started trembling. "You're the only one that knew that Thornbird was going to be at the house on Granvia Valmonte that morning, you knew the combination to the lock box, obviously you were closer to him than just an escort on business occasions since this lipstick was in his bathroom at his house, you never reported Thornbird missing and why are you trying to sell the photograph of Rudy Vallee online?" Henry closed his hand around the two lipsticks.

Rosie's face slowly changed from upset to anger. There was fire in her green eyes as she slammed the salad tongs down on the counter. "That son-of-a-bitch never realized how good a team we could be. I was ready to stay behind the scenes and let him take all the credit. Who do you think came up with the idea of putting the celebrity photos in the house? That idiot could not have figured that out, that little touch was mine. Maybe it was his picture on all those signs around this neighborhood, I didn't care about that at first, I was the one behind the scenes making him rich. All I wanted was to share some of what he reaped with him. Sure, I wanted to be the next Mrs. Thornbird, and maybe I was in love with him. But that cold hearted little twit didn't care at all about my feelings, no matter how hard I tried to seduce him he couldn't or wouldn't respond to me."

Henry was worried that she was so angry that she was going to use something as a weapon and either hurt him or herself. He moved so that he was between her and the knife block on the counter. She was so angry she didn't seem to notice the knives and continued her tirade.

"Then just the other night I saw that little bastard taking home some pretty little young boy that he'd picked up at the golf course. It was just a kid who didn't even shave yet, goddammit, barely even in High School. Oh, he thought he was subtle and that no one noticed. But I noticed. That prick had his arm around that boy's waist as they walked into his big house on the hill. They kissed when he opened the door. I was disgusted. Those two probably did it in the bed that was supposed to be mine, in the room that was supposed to be mine, in the house that was supposed to be mine. Thornbird was a fool. Yes, I set him up, yes I lured him out to that house, I hid in that dirty little closet, yes I did it, and I'm glad I did it. Henry, don't you see I had to get rid of him. I can do what he did, I can sell houses, and I'll be the Queen of Mid-Century real estate - that will be my face on all those for sale signs all over town."

Rosie was breathing hard and drained the last of her wine. She was quiet for a moment, then looked up at him with tears in her eyes and continued in a much lower tone of voice.

"You know Henry, you and I make a much better team than Thornbird and I ever did. You like me; you respond to my touch, don't deny it, I felt that in the pool just now, he never did. Why don't you call your police detective friend and tell him that you are stuck with your investigation and you'll never know who killed Thornbird. You know, I didn't leave behind any fingerprints or anything at the scene, there is no evidence and no way that a jury will convict me, not after I tell them what a disgusting pervert Thornbird was. Let's you and I enjoy one another and live the rest of our lives enjoying the pool and each other like we did just now - you did enjoy my body didn't you Henry?"

Henry didn't respond but continued looking at the lipsticks in his hand, never looking up at Rosie. "I can make you a happy man Henry Wright, I really can. Admit it, you like me, I touched you in ways that other women haven't." She tossed her head with pride as she reached for the wine bottle to pour herself a refill.

Henry didn't answer her right away, he considered what she said. Finally he laid the two lipsticks on the kitchen counter and looked straight into her flashing green eyes. "You're right Rosie. I'll call my friend Wayne right now." He picked the cordless phone up from the kitchen counter, dialed Wayne's cell phone number and when he answered said, "Wayne, come on over to the house, I'm holding Thornbird's killer for you."

He looked over at Rosie as he hung up and she started crying.

Chapter 17

Wayne was there within ten minutes and led Rosie away in handcuffs. He gave Henry a sad look as he put Rosie into the back of his Crown Victoria and told him he'd come by on Monday morning. Henry turned to go back inside and put the dinner makings back inside the refrigerator. He wasn't hungry anymore. He collected the glasses and went out to the pool to get the bowl of chips from the table. He looked at the pool where just an hour ago his life had a new beginning or so he thought.

He grabbed the unopened bottle of wine, got into his car and drove over to Mrs. Icklebee's house on Calle Rolph, knocked on the door and went inside for a late afternoon drink. She was doing well and he spent a few hours talking with her about the loss of loved ones and getting on with life.

Sunday was a wasted day. Henry swam laps, though when he first walked out of his room and looked at the pool, he thought he would never go in it again, but he did. He got on his computer to see if he could buy a photograph of Rudy Vallee on eBay. Rosie had touched him in a way that no other woman had since Irma. He had to admit that she changed his life, and while he didn't have any pictures of her, he thought a photo of Rudy Vallee would be a memento he could live with. He didn't bid on the one that was being offered by "Big Red" in Riverside County, California. He'd seen that one for sale yesterday afternoon before he went grocery shopping. He bid on one from a guy out in the U.K. who was selling it for ten British Pounds, he bid twenty five, he was determined not to be outbid like Thornbird.

Wayne called in the afternoon to see if he was doing ok. He told Henry that Rosie had signed a confession and had asked for a psychiatrist and would probably plead insanity. Wayne said he would come by at ten on Monday; he wanted to hear how Henry had figured everything out.

Charles came back late Sunday afternoon and Henry briefly told him that it hadn't worked out between Rosie and him. Henry also said that Wayne and the vice squad were going to investigate the Sons of Dionysus, Charles said he would help them in any way that he could. Henry suggested that Charles sit in when Wayne was there Monday morning, that way he could tell both of them everything that happened. They took Saturday's steaks and vegetables out of the refrigerator and the two friends ate a quiet meal by the side of the pool.

He was about to go to bed, when he emptied out the pockets of his shorts. He found his wedding ring and remembered picking it up from the table by the pool and dropping it into his shorts pocket on Saturday afternoon before Rosie came over. He looked at it, looked at his finger and started putting it back on. As it started to go over his knuckle, he slipped it off again and walked over to his office and put it in the pencil drawer of his desk. He closed the drawer and said "to new beginnings" to himself.

Henry was up before the sun on Monday. He swam laps, showered and went to his office, where there was an email from the Feds asking for help profiling a case in Oregon. A couple of kids were murdered while they slept in their tent. He did some research, but what he was reading wouldn't stick and after a while he gave up and made a fresh pot of coffee.

Wayne showed up at ten o'clock, smelled the fresh pot and poured himself a cup of coffee. Charles had been pacing around since eight, he'd heard a little bit from Henry yesterday but he was dying to hear the entire story. They took their coffees and sat down outside in the shade of the large umbrella by the pool.

“So how did you know?” Wayne started the conversation off asking. “Well, of course I didn’t for a long time, but a bunch of coincidences fell into place all at once.” Henry smiled. “Like what?” Charles leaned forward in his chair not wanting to miss anything. “From the very beginning, when I heard how hard Rex Thornbird worked and how many hours he put in every day I wondered why his office had not called the police when he didn’t show up for three days.” Henry began.

“Obviously it would have been Rosie who would have called and she couldn’t without giving everything away.” Charles smiled at having figured that out. “Exactly, she expected Janet Icklebee’s sister to find the body, when she didn’t because of her unfortunate car accident, Rosie couldn’t exactly call the police to report a body in a house on Granvia Valmonte.” Henry explained. “Then I heard from Jerrie Mungo that Thornbird had been seen around town with her, and I didn’t want to believe myself, for selfish reasons, that they were a couple.”

Wayne added, “In her confession she said that Thornbird rejected her, apparently she knew about his extracurricular activities as well. You didn’t want to believe that Rosie and Thornbird were together because you had a giant crush on her.”

“I don’t know about a giant crush, but I will admit that I had some, well, feelings for her. When I found his gay kiddie porn collection at his house – relax Wayne, Charles knows all about it – I knew that Thornbird had an elaborate façade and Rosie was part of it. I suspected then that there was no romance between Rosie and Thornbird; he wasn’t interested in her in that way at all. I started thinking then that they were in on the real estate scam together, but I didn’t really want to believe it. I confronted her with it during dinner and she denied it. I feel like an idiot, I was really duped by her.” Henry shook his head at what he considered his own stupidity.

“So when you found the lipstick in Thornbird’s place, that’s when you knew she did it?” Charles was at the edge of his seat again. “No, I didn’t, not yet. At that point I had heard that maybe Thornbird didn’t like women, so I thought that perhaps he was a cross dresser and I actually thought it was his. I think my first clue was finding a Rudy Vallee picture for sale on eBay when I was on the Internet on Saturday morning. But even then I didn’t put it all together, not until I found Rosie’s matching lipstick in my guest bathroom yesterday did I know for sure.” Henry took a sip of coffee.

“Did you suspect Janet Icklebee at all?” Wayne asked. “You know, I did for a few moments. She had all those pictures; they’re all about the same size as what we think was at the house. She was small enough to hide in the utility closet in the house. Thornbird screwed her when bought the house that she and her husband had built and I thought she blamed Thornbird for her husband’s heart attack. Janet certainly is strong enough, even for an old lady, but she couldn’t have done it. She’s a nice woman who has experienced a lot of loss in a short span of time. I spent the afternoon with her on Saturday and this morning I called the grief counselor that helped me out when I first moved here, he is going to go over to see her this afternoon.” Henry said.

Wayne shook his head. “You know we searched Rosie’s condo and found a laptop computer that belonged to Thornbird. From a first look it has a lot of information in it on Thornbird’s illegal activities. The lab guys have it for analysis and the vice guys say it will be very helpful in their investigation.”

“You know, I was surprised when I found his secret stash of videos, but it does explain a lot, including his split from his original wife and why he was so secretive about his lifestyle, I mean being gay in Palm Springs is just not a big deal. I also knew he had to have a laptop around somewhere, I just didn’t know where it was.”

Just then the doorbell rang. Charles jumped up to get it. “Don’t say anything more until I get back, and by the way, being gay anywhere shouldn’t be a big deal.” He yelled over his shoulder as he walked into the house.

“The other thing we found during our search of her place was the photograph of Rudy Vallee that was in the house. There was still dust on the top of the frame.” Wayne told Henry.

Henry nodded. “Yeah I’m not surprised; I thought you might find it there. Saturday morning before Rosie came over, I was looking around on the Internet for information on Thornbird’s extra curricular activities and on a lark I went to eBay and searched for a Rudy Vallee photograph. There was one being offered by a “Big Red” in Riverside County. Like I said, I should have picked up on it right away, but I was still denying to myself that she could be involved.”

“When she confessed, we asked her about the picture, and she said selling it was the only way that she was going to get back some of the money that Thornbird owed her.” Wayne explained.

“That seems kind of odd, that picture is only worth about ten bucks or so, but then people do odd things.” Henry shook his head again.

Charles came walking back to the pool with a box. “It’s addressed to you Henry; it’s from Mountain View, California.” Henry looked puzzled at the package. “I’m not expecting anything.” “Oh for goodness sake, let’s open it.” Charles said setting the box on the table. He pulled the tape off the outside and there was another box inside with a note on top. He handed Henry the letter and started opening the second box.

“To one American from another – please stay in touch.” Henry read out loud. “Look, it’s a brand new cell phone!” Charles exclaimed. “It’s from Amit Anchula that certainly was very nice of him.” Henry looked at the note. “And this is cool; the invoice says that the monthly service bills are going to go to Anchula’s accountant – no charge to you!”

“Well Henry, welcome to the modern world and here’s to new beginnings!” Wayne raised his coffee cup in a toast. “Yes, to new beginnings.” Henry lifted his cup and touched it to Wayne’s.

Albert Simon has been writing most of his life, creating and illustrating his first book in his native Dutch at the age of seven. Since then he has written technical papers related to the function of distributed databases and numerous short stories. His essays have been published in the local newspaper, but he finally found his voice in the Henry Wright Mystery series that he is now producing. He is a member of the California Writer's Club and the Mystery Writers of America. Simon and his wife, Berlynn, have four daughters and live in the Sierra Nevada foothill town of Tuolumne when not vacationing in Palm Springs. For more information on the Henry Wright Mystery series, please visit <http://www.desertdreaming.com>.