

A Walt Lincoln Mystery

A Wrong Turn at Albuquerque

by David M. H. Butler

While the engines idled in the early morning hours of February 19, 1955, the pilot completed his inspection tour. He ducked under the nose of his plane, inspecting the landing gear, wings and fuselage as most pilots had been doing for the last fifty years. On a modern airliner like his Martin 404 there wasn't much he could do except look for the most glaring of errors, but it was a ritual he'd done from his first day of flying school. He stuck his head up the wheel well looking at hoses and linkage points. He gave a tug on the starboard propeller and ran a hand along the underside of one of the wings. He pulled out a handkerchief and cleaned the smudge on the tips of his fingers.

The flight attendant welcomed the passengers as they climbed the rear stairway that was built into the back of the plane. It looked like a small flight; maybe 12 or 13 passengers. That would leave the plane less than half full. The last bags had been stowed and the airport crew was closing the baggage doors.

The chilly February winds tugged at his pants as he started up the steps. He stopped for a moment on the first step and looked around as another plane rumbled down the runway its running lights winking. He considered the weather: It was overcast with some thick clouds over the Sandia Mountains and the sun hadn't made it over the horizon, but it should be a good day for flying.

He reached the top of the steps and entered the cabin. The flight attendant began closing the stairway. He moved toward the front of the aircraft. He liked waiting for the passengers to be on board before walking down the aisle. They always smiled and gave him that feeling of importance that he loved. He'd tip his hat or shake the hand of some child who would beam back the most appreciative smile.

Reaching the cockpit, he nodded to his co-pilot who was going through the log book and recording, times, temperatures and quantities. He slid into his seat and pulled on his headphones. The propellers started up and they turned the plane, ready to take it onto the runway.

"Albuquerque tower. This is TWA 260 requesting clearance for take off."

The tower came back almost immediately. "ATC clears TWA 260 for approach at the Santa Fe airport via Victor 19 climb northbound on the back course of the ILS localizer."

"Roger that."

As they taxied to the head of the runway they got another set of instructions, "TWA 260, please report over the Alameda intersection." There was plenty to do and no reason to reply and they didn't.

From the tower of the Albuquerque airport, a supervisor looked up to watch the airplane take off. The plane was banking north in a fast but shallow climb. At about 3000 feet clouds obscured the plane. The supervisor went back to his duty roster.

Only a couple of minutes passed when an air traffic controller called out. "I think we have a problem."

The supervisor jumped up.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Your terminal acting up?"

"Worse than that. I think we lost that plane. It's dropped off the radar and they haven't reported in. I'm contacting Santa Fe to see if they have received any messages."

A few more minutes and the phones started ringing off the walls. Several Albuquerque residents were reporting a flash of light and smoke coming from somewhere near Sandia Crest.

"What the heck happened up there?" the supervisor growled.

"I can't say for certain but it looks to me like they may have deviated from their prescribed course, sir."

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Walt Lincoln shook his head. "Now what exactly does that mean?" he said as he got up to change the channel from the documentary he'd been watching.

The picture changed to a cartoon. Bugs Bunny was just popping his head above ground and looking around at the bleak surroundings.

"Er, I must a taken a wrong turn back at Albuquerque!"

Walt stood speechless.

Walt's mother Carol was standing in the living room door. She smiled at her tall blond son, frozen in front of the television in their California home.

"You've probably said that line a million times," she said with a smile. "Every time you or your father end up lost and unwilling to ask for directions."

"But..." Walt stammered. "This is incredible. I was just watching a program about a plane that crashed near Albuquerque about 20 years ago and the next thing I hear is Bugs Bunny saying he took a wrong turn at Albuquerque. In fact he kind of answered the question I was asking just as I changed the channels."

"Ah. So now you can have conversations with the television?" Carol Lincoln teased. "Solving that mystery up in Seattle last summer wasn't enough?"

Walt raised his eyebrows and gave his mother an "Oh please!" stare.

The phone rang and Carol picked up the phone.

"Oh, hi dear. How are you doing?" Walt listened to his mother's side of the conversation, vaguely wondering to whom she might be talking. His Dad was in the basement drawing up plans for an earthquake safety shelter or was it the volcano diving bell. Since their trip around the world in a three-masted schooner, his Dad had been looking for his next "big idea." Suddenly it struck Walt: It must be his girl friend, Jackie Bouchard! He jumped up and hurried over to his mother. She smiled at him and said into the phone, "I think he is too busy. He seems to be waving at me as if to say "Tell her I'm not here."

Walt howled. "MOM!" and grabbed for the phone.

“Well, I’ve gotta go,” Carol laughed. “I hope we see you soon.”

“Hey Jackie. What are you up to?”

“Oh, you know. Stuff,” she replied. Walt could picture her holding the phone with both hands the way she sometimes did. Her lips close to the receiver. Her dark hair and pretty brown eyes that sparkled so magnificently. His family lived near Los Angeles, she lived closer to San Francisco. These mental images of her had to serve him for weeks at a time.

“Actually I’m filling out some college applications and just needed to take a break. How about you; how was the dance your band played at?”

“Oh. I think we did pretty well. Gary was fantastic on the drums. Inspired. But our organist didn’t show up. His parents made him stay home and study for finals; so we had to leave out ‘Light my fire.’ The song just doesn’t seem right without the organ part. It’s too bad he couldn’t be there since it’s probably the last time ‘Standing Tall’ will officially play together.”

“I suppose with everyone’s schedules there’s not much chance you will play this summer,” Jackie agreed. “Did you get home late?”

“Not too bad. Sometime before midnight. There was a kind of crazy moment when some guys came right up on stage and asked if they could play our instruments. They were being really belligerent and I almost hauled off and popped this one guy, but the security guy came and took care of them.”

“That sounds pretty bizarre. But everything else went fine?”

“Yeah. It was cool.”

“I guess I should get back to this application, but I’ve been thinking: When you were here last week we were talking about taking a trip after graduation. Any thoughts about where we could go?”

“You know what? I just had the greatest idea for our trip.” As a matter of fact the idea had only come to him as she asked the question: “Let’s go to New Mexico.”

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At school the next day, Walt met up with his friend Gary Gable and Gary’s girlfriend Dawn just outside their homeroom class. Walt couldn’t wait to tell Gary about the trip that he and Jackie were planning. Before he had a chance to bring up the subject Gary dropped a bigger bombshell.

“Did you hear that Cheryl has disappeared?” Gary asked, leaning back against the gray lockers.

“Cheryl? Cheryl Modern?” Walt asked in astonishment. “I got a call from her just a few days ago. She’s in reform school. What do you mean she disappeared?”

“I mean she apparently snuck off the grounds and no one knows where she is.” Gary responded.

“Some of us think that she was able to get Mr. X to give her some money and she’s on a plane or train out of here,” Dawn added, shifting her books from one arm to the other.

Walt knew exactly what that meant. Mr. X had been Cheryl’s euphemism for the Xerox machine, the copy machine she had used to make counterfeit ten and twenty dollar bills.

It was the very reason she had ended up in reform school. It was also tied to the reason she and Walt had broken up a relationship that had started in the spring of their sophomore year and ended on a stormy October afternoon in their junior year of high-school.

“I hope not,” said Walt. “She needs someone to help her settle down.”

“Still have a crush on Cheryl, I see,” teased Gary.

“Oh, please! I just don’t want her to end up in prison or worse. Cheryl has a wild streak that seems very exciting at first. After a while you realize that she takes it way too far.”

“She’s probably hooked back up with Nest Egg,” Dawn speculated. She looked at Walt to see how he would re-act.

“Oh Man!” Walt groaned. “I’ve probably said this a dozen times, but that was probably the worst mistake that girl ever made. I’m positive he’s the one who taught Cheryl about making counterfeit bills. He should be in prison. Somehow he’s escaped any suspicion.”

Nest Egg’s real name was something like Danny Jones. He was a couple of years older than the high school seniors. He was a street musician living the most bohemian of lives. In a fit of youthful enthusiasm he had decided his name should be Nest Egg, and had even gotten it listed that way in the phone book. Cheryl had met him at a festival in Los Angeles and Walt started hearing his name crop up more and more. Walt had been feeling vaguely jealous only to have his worst fears confirmed when, in the heat of an argument over where Cheryl had gotten the money to buy a leather jacket, she announced that Nest Egg had bought it for her. To add insult to injury she said that Nest Egg didn’t mind if she wanted to go out with Walt and him at the same time. Walt stared at her in disbelief as she proclaimed, “I’ve matured Walter. I need more than a simple high school romance.” He turned and walked out of her house without a word, and it was only a week later that the police showed up and took her out of History class. Walt knew there wasn’t much he could have done, but he vaguely blamed himself for not putting two and two together and realizing how the name Nest Egg and Cheryl’s sudden wealth were connected.

By the time Walt had met Jackie in Seattle he had put Cheryl behind him. She called him occasionally, and in his spirit of wanting to help people he tried to be a friend and offer her support. But there was no comparison to Jackie, whose flair for adventure was based on a self-confidence and worldliness that, for all her bravado, Cheryl completely lacked. It didn’t hurt that Jackie had a kittenish side that Walt found irresistible.

The class bell rang. Walt hunched his shoulders and said, “Well, I’ve got my French final today. Et, il faut que j’y aille.”

Walt had a good ear for French and it was another thing that he liked about Jackie: Her father’s family was French and she was fluent in the language. It gave them something of a secret language they could use together.

“No one likes a show off,” Gary said, giving Walt’s shoulder a friendly whack with the backside of his hand. “It just so happens I’ve got a final in my Shakespeare class, so I shall hie meself hence to class.”

“Hey, I’ll see you at lunch. I wanted to tell you about the trip Jackie and I are going to take to Albuquerque.”

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There was a TV news camera crew in the parking lot outside the high school when Walt and Gary left the building. The reporter was interviewing Dawn and her friend Claudia.

“What the heck is that all about?” Gary asked. “Some kind of story about graduation?”

“Far more likely that it’s about Cheryl’s disappearance.” Walt replied.

“Oh. That’s right.” Gary winced at missing such an obvious connection. “Let’s go see what they are saying.”

As they reached the circle of kids milling around the news crew, they heard Claudia saying, “I was all like ‘no way’ and she goes like ‘Really. It’s no biggie.’ and then I...”

Dawn cut in. “But maybe Walt could answer your question. He use to go out with Cheryl.”

“Yeah, you oughta talk to Lincoln,” Claudia’s boyfriend, Jason, said pulling her away from the newsmen.

“Walt... Lincoln...” the reporter repeated slowly while pulling at scraps of his memory. The man looked in the direction that Dawn and Jason were pointing and, sure enough, there stood a tall blond kid. It all fell into place. This story was going to have even more news-appeal than he had hoped. “Walt Lincoln! You’re the boy who saved the life of the Mariner’s owner, Jack Royer and you helped solve that art smuggling mystery up in Seattle.”

Walt felt his face start to flush, but he felt his friends around him murmuring appreciatively, proud of the fame of their classmate and the sense of fame it brought them. The teenage need to be cool brought him back to his senses.

“Just in the right place at the right time.” he replied simply.

“So what can you tell me about Cheryl Modern?” the reporter asked. “Has your old girlfriend tried to contact you? Do you know why she ran away?”

“I only heard about Cheryl’s disappearance this morning. I don’t know if it truly was some sort of escape or if she was kidnapped. I think it’s important to explore all the possibilities when a mystery such as this presents itself.”

“I’ve been working this all day, kid,” the reporter shot back, with a tired sigh. “She flew the coup. A couple of stores at the Mid-town Mall have already reported getting taken by several counterfeit bills that had your girlfriend’s trademark written all over them.”

“Interesting,” Walt mused. “She’s not going to make her life any easier doing something like that.”

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A near pitch-black night surrounded the bulbous little Saab 96 as it raced along Interstate 40 in western New Mexico. The dark clouds that they had been watching on the far horizons had closed in on them as well. Rain and lightning burst from the sky. The headlights and windshield wipers fought valiantly to provide Walt with enough visibility to get them the last fifty-some miles to Albuquerque. Except for the interchanges and a strip at Gallup, there were no freeway lights. Only the small pool of light reflecting off the painted freeway lines and the red glare of a truck that had streamed past them several miles back gave them any sense of place or distance. Suddenly a lightning strike seemed to

hit the side of the highway a couple of hundred yards ahead and for a brief moment the silhouettes of the mesas and scrub became visible in the arc of light that connected earth and sky.

“Whoa!” exclaimed Walt and Jackie in almost perfect unison.

It broke the silence that had installed itself in the car for the last half-hour. Jackie reached over and touched Walt’s arm.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to start an argument, but I was just surprised you never told me about going out with that girl Cheryl. Sure. I know that it was over almost a year before we met. But...” Jackie paused trying to find the words she wanted to say that would put things right. “It’s just that the first time I heard you talk of her was on a TV news report. It kind of startled me. That’s all.”

“I’m sorry too, Jay-bird.” Walt glanced over her and smiled. “It’s not that I want to keep things from you, but it never really came up. I mean I did tell you that I had gone out with another girl. I just found it hard to talk about her cheating on me and then going to reform school for counterfeiting. When I’m with you I don’t want to think about that.”

“I guess I felt a little jealous. It was ridiculous. But there you were: on TV, saying her name, being linked to her by the reporter. When my friends at school asked, I just wanted to be able to say that I knew all about it, that we had no secrets.”

Walt reached out, took her hand and kissed it.

“And I don’t want us to have any secrets either. We’ve only known each other about nine months. We haven’t even been living in the same town. It may take awhile to divulge all the things we’ve done over the last 18 years.”

But Walt realized that this was a story he should have shared earlier. It had just seemed like there was plenty of time for it later. There hadn’t been any rush. But once Cheryl had run away there wasn’t any time left.

“She may have gotten mention on that one news report, but you and I are going to have a life they write books about.”

Jackie laughed and then with an impish poke to his side she said, “And chapter two will be about how Jackie learned Walt’s juiciest secret when she saw it on the six o’clock news.”

Illuminated by the meager light of the dashboard and reflections from the headlights on the wet pavement, the black shadows smiled at each other. The car surged onward through the deluge.

“Anyway,” Jackie said. “I’m really excited about this trip. The last couple of days have felt interminable. I was packed last Tuesday, I think!”

“By contrast, I spent the time putting in a new radiator and changing the brake shoes on the car.” Walt laughed. “I guess it was my way of keeping the excitement from driving me crazy.”

“I bought a road atlas and marked out the whole trip,” Jackie added. “Which is crazy since it’s a pretty straight shot on the freeway from LA to Albuquerque.”

Walt pointed ahead. “Look. There is a glow on the horizon. I think we are getting close now. I bet those are the lights of the city.”

Only a mile or two later they reached the edge the mesa where the highway starts down into the city. Walt had been right. Through the rain the yellow-orange lights of Albuquerque spread out for miles ending abruptly at the edges of the city. It was too dark to see anything but the broad field of lights flickering at the bottom of a huge bowl.

Their long and tiring journey was almost over.

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They got off the freeway at Central Avenue and followed it, looking for a motel. They were hoping to find something with a little character and found it when they turned into the entry of the Rose Flower Motel. A series of hacienda style cabins formed a U-shape around the drive. The office and an adobe wall topped by a brightly-lit sign provided a private but welcoming entrance. Walt nosed the Saab into a parking spot in front of the office and, running to escape the drizzle of rain, dashed into the office.

While Walt and Jackie had been planning their trip, their parents had talked to each other and to the two would-be travelers. They were naturally concerned about two eighteen year olds traveling together, but now that they were graduated and headed for college in the fall their parents realized that their best bet was to trust them. Walt and Jackie promised to be good. Among themselves, their parents simply hoped they would be careful.

As a gesture of being good, they rented a room with a double and single bed. They switched on the television, seeking out a news program to get a bit of local information. They snuggled up next to each other on the bed feeling a sense of freedom and responsibility. They had barely made it to the weather report when both had dropped off to sleep.

The next morning Walt and Jackie opened the door to a bright and sunny morning. A few high white clouds dotted an otherwise beautiful blue sky. Steam was rising off the pavement in places where the sun was shining. They stopped at the office and asked for a recommendation of where to get breakfast. It was a middle-aged Chinese woman named Mrs. Yee who greeted them. She was a small woman with tortoise-shell glasses and graying hair pulled tight against her head.

“Oh, you want to eat cheap, you try the ‘West-side diner.’ Real close. On Central,” she said in response to their question.

“Is it authentic New Mexican food?” Jackie asked, somewhat doubtful of the recommendation.

“Oh, you get good meal. No problem there.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Yee,” Walt said. “We’ll go check it out.”

Reaching the sidewalk they got their first good look at the Sandia Mountains that flanked the eastern edge of the town. The orange, red and brown rock was muted by the thinning haze than enveloped them, but it made a dramatic, and at the same time, harmonious backdrop with the predominantly one and two story adobe buildings. It was in just such a building that they found the West-side diner.

As they ate their huevos rancheros and drank their coffee, they had to admit Mrs. Yee hadn’t steered them wrong. Walt sat back and smiled at Jackie. She returned the smile, her beautiful dark eyes framed in the tumble of black hair that fell just past her shoulders.

“So far so good.” she said. “Nice little motel, a great breakfast and a sunny day.”

Walt nodded but didn't say anything right away. He had been thinking about what he had said the night before: About books being written about their life. He realized that he really did want their lives to be that entwined. He wanted to make sure she knew how deeply he felt that. He would propose to her. He just had to find the right place and the right time. Of course, then there was the small matter of finding a ring.

"I was thinking we could take it easy today," Walt finally said. "Do a little sightseeing perhaps, I wouldn't mind finding the library to look up more information on that old plane crash I heard about."

"If we are going to be doing any hiking, I'd like to get some good boots."

"Then let's go get the car and get started!"

Soon, armed with a small city map and more tips from Mrs. Yee, they were exploring the city; stopping at several parks, a shopping center, the library and just cruising up one boulevard and down another.

When they got back to the motel that evening, they were loaded down with snacks, maps, photocopied magazine articles, postcards, boots and a daypack. While Jackie was busy buying boots, Walt had stopped into a jewelry store.

Their travels had also resulted in a plan for the next day: They would take the tram to Sandia Crest.

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The evening weather report had promised another nice day and sure enough, the following morning arrived warmer and sunnier than the day before. Walt stood in the doorway looking out at the sky and breathing in the strange, new smells of New Mexico. He was itching to get started, but there was no rush. The tramway left every hour. Still he had packed their daypack and dropped it on the bed so that they would be able to leave at anytime.

Jackie got up from the little desk in the room where she had been writing postcards. She picked the little pile of cards up and tapped them against the table to align them, then placed them next to the daypack on the bed, where they promptly slid apart.

"Just let me brush my hair and I'll be ready to go," she said heading for the bathroom. She got as far as the door and then stopped and turned to look at Walt. She ran over to him, throwing her arms around his neck. "Isn't this wonderful! It's just like I had hoped," she beamed. "It's like our first little house. Just ours!"

They hugged in the open doorway, rocking ever so slightly back and forth; almost a slow dance without moving their feet. For Walt it was decided: today, on the tram, he would ask Jackie to marry him. They'd have to get through at least a year of college before setting a date, but Walt was determined to make it official sooner rather than later.

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The white gondola with orange and brown stripes slid to a stop at the base terminal. About a dozen people got off. Between the people getting off and those waiting to get on there seemed to be a predominance of two types. First, there were older couples, the man wearing a fedora hat, the woman a scarf and carrying a small instamatic camera. Second there were young to middle aged couples with kids, the man wearing a baseball cap

and sporting either a large 35-mm camera or binoculars, the woman hatless but carrying a daypack. Everyone was wearing dark glasses. There were two or three college age kids, but they were outnumbered by the other travelers.

Walt had heard that they would go right over the site of the TWA crash and as they got on he asked the gondola conductor which side of the gondola they should be on to see it.

“Oh, so you’ve heard about the plane that crashed at Santo Domingo Canyon. Best bet would be on the left-hand side. I’ll point it out as we go by the Dragon tooth.”

Walt nodded his appreciation and they found a spot toward the uphill side of the gondola. There were a couple seats on either side, but they left them open for any older passengers or kids and grabbed a couple of handholds.

Walt nudged Jackie. “Kind of makes me think of the day we met. You know: Riding that bus in Seattle.”

“And you were so gentlemanly and gave me your seat.”

“And that guy started asking me all those questions about my Dad’s boat and trip and everything and kept me from talking to you.”

“But as it turned out, that was how I found out who you were. We might never have met again if it hadn’t have been for his questions.”

The tram was starting up the cables heading for Sandia Crest. The conductor began describing the features of the ride: When it was installed, how many miles of cable, travel time to the crest. Walt was only half listening. He was fumbling in the daypack looking for the small ring box he had secretly stashed in the pack. Jackie seemed to be giving him a quizzical look but he couldn’t tell if she was looking at him or looking past him. His hand came to rest on the box.

“Jackie,” he started. “I’ve got something ... “

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder and he looked up to see a woman who was saying his name. It took him several seconds to realize that he knew the person.

“Cheryl?” He asked in astonishment, his hand still shoved into the daypack. “What in Heaven’s name are you doing here?”

“What took you so long to get here. I’ve been coming to the tramway for at least 3 days now, hoping to find you. You’ve got to help me.”

It was just like Cheryl to turn the attack back on someone rather than answer a question directly. Cheryl had straight, sandy brown hair that spilled out below a scarf she was wearing. She had bangs that fell to her eyebrows. She pulled off her dark glasses revealing blue eyes heavily accented with dark make-up. She was about the same size as Jackie. She was wearing a light blue work-shirt, blue jeans and dusty walking shoes.

Jackie was still standing with her quizzical look. Walt pulled his hand out of the daypack. He’d have to wait before doing any proposing today.

“Jackie, this is Cheryl Modern. Cheryl this is Jackie Bouchard, my...” Walt caught himself almost saying fiancé. That would be premature, but he was sorely tempted. “... my girlfriend.”

Cheryl just barely acknowledged Jackie's presence. Jackie appeared to have been wounded by Walt's pause before calling her his girlfriend, misreading the hesitation. Walt was picking up the signals but didn't know how to resolve everything.

"I need a place to stay for a few days. Can you put me up."

"Cheryl. You haven't told me anything about how you found us or why you ran off from the Girl's school and you are already asking for favors?"

"Look. I'm kind of in a bind here," she started but seeing that Walt was only getting more resolute, she threw up her hands, "but okay, okay. I called Claudia last week trying to see if she could talk to my parents. She told me about your trip to Albuquerque and mentioned your plan to hike up to that airplane site. I was up in Colorado at the time and hitchhiked down. I've been hanging out by the trailhead that starts right here from the parking lot of the tramway. You were just about to get on the tram when I saw you, so I bought a ticket." Cheryl put her hands on her hips, "Happy? Now can you put me up for a couple days?"

"You all alone?" Walt said, ignoring the question, "I figured your buddy Nest Egg would be taking care of you."

"Actually I snuck away from him up in Colorado. He's the reason I am in this mess. He stopped by the reform school one afternoon during visiting hours and asked if I wanted to sneak out for a couple hours. We'd done it once before, but this time he got me to pass some funny money and then before I realized what he was up to, we were off for Denver. He wanted me to help him print up money for some huge scam."

"So you were right!" Jackie interjected. "You told that reporter that you thought kidnaping was a possibility and he scoffed at you."

Walt shifted closer to Jackie and put his arm around her, happy that she was asserting herself into the conversation. "Huh? I did say that didn't I?" he said with a crooked smile.

Turning back to Cheryl, Walt asked, "so what made you come to Albuquerque? I mean, what do you think that I can do? Why not just go back to California?"

"Come on. I just need a place to ..." Cheryl changed her mind. "Okay. I figured Danny would expect me to go back to California. Maybe have some of his buddies waiting for me there. He would have no reason to look for me here. And after Friday, he should stop looking altogether."

"You feel like you need protection from that guy?" Jackie asked. "Is he dangerous?"

Before Cheryl could answer, the gondola conductor made an announcement. "For those who asked earlier, we are about to pass by the Dragon Tooth on our left. If you look carefully at the canyon below it, you might be able to see a section of the white tail fin of a TWA airliner that got off course and crashed here back in the mid-50's. Thirteen people lost their lives that day. Some families still journey to the site and consider it to be a shrine to their lost relatives."

Walt and Jackie pressed up against the window and swept the ground below with eager eyes. Down below seemed mainly like a jumble of reddish brown rock and gray green shrub-like trees. Even at its slow speed, the gondola was soon out of range.

"I think I saw something," said Walt. "Something white with what looked like a red stripe. I wonder if that was it?"

“I thought I saw it too,” replied Jackie. “But it almost looked like it rippled like cloth. I suppose that could be the movement of the tramway or something like that.”

They turned their attention back to Cheryl and found her looking up towards the Sandia summit in a distracted manner. Instinctively Walt checked his pockets to ensure his wallet and keys were still there. There was no telling what new talents she might have learned in reform school.

Walt couldn't help but wonder what her real aim was. He knew they weren't getting the full story. Maybe the whole thing was a fabrication, but he just couldn't put the pieces together. Being in Albuquerque was too much of a coincidence, so that made the story about learning of Walt's trip by talking to a friend back in California seem likely. Denver seemed like a plausible enough spot for them to have been staying to avoid the police, but for that matter, El Paso was also a possibility. Walt pondered that thought for a moment. El Paso was just across the Rio Grande from Mexico. Would laundering a huge amount of counterfeit money be easier to pull off across the border? And what about helping her? If some serious crooks were after her, she could be in real danger. He thought briefly about calling the police, but somehow that seemed unfair to Cheryl. On the other hand, if he didn't call, would that amount to aiding and abetting a felon?

As the gondola bumped to a stop at the summit terminal, Walt was sure of one thing: He wasn't going to have Cheryl staying at their motel. For the simple reason that he wasn't going to have her spoil his and Jackie's vacation.

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They were standing on a lookout platform by the tramway, looking down on the Rio Grande plain. A ridge of mountains obscured almost all trace of the city. A narrow green band rimmed each side of the river. A few grayish lines indicated roads crossing the valley floor, but otherwise it was a wide-open panorama with almost no sense of human habitation. Looking down, the drop appeared almost vertical, but Walt knew from his reading that there was a trail, the La Luz trail, which led from the peak back down to the parking lot where they had started. He turned to Cheryl.

“Look. I can't give you any money, at least not enough to get you anywhere. It just won't work to have you stay with us. You have to get back to the girl's school. You need to call your parents. Have them wire you some money and get a bus or a flight back to California.”

“You just don't understand!” Cheryl implored. “Nobody can know that I was here.”

Walt and Jackie looked at each other.

“And just what does that mean?” Walt asked.

“It means ... uh ... It doesn't mean anything,” Cheryl stammered. “Forget it. I thought I could count on you to help out an old friend. I was wrong. So just forget you saw me and I'll figure something else out.”

She spun around, her hair flipping to one side, and strode towards the tramway platform that was starting to load for the trip back down.

“Walt. We can't just let her go like that, can we?” Jackie asked. “We have that extra bed. And she is clearly not going back to her girl's school on her own.”

“But we should be calling the Police. Not helping an escaped counterfeiter.” Walt replied, but he realized it sounded like a cop out. He took a breath. “But then you are right. We can’t let her go, knowing that her only means of getting around is to basically rob people.”

“We’ll get through this,” Jackie assured him, then turning she called out, “Cheryl. Hold on. We can help you!”

Cheryl turned around. Even from a distance they could see her eyes shining as if she had been fighting back tears. That quickly changed to defiance.

“How are you going to help me?” she asked with a touch of scorn. “Call my parents? Drag me back to that ridiculous girls school?”

“Seems to me you don’t have a lot of other options,” Jackie shot back. “We can get you back safely and if you go back to the school on your own, it’s bound to work much better in your favor. The alternative is what?”

Cheryl didn’t reply. She just raised her hands and hunched her shoulders as a form of acceptance.

The trio walked through a meadow of low brush and rocks and ended up at a small stone building whose doors and windows were missing, and they sat on the shaded side of the building to eat the lunch that Walt and Jackie had packed. Even at ten thousand feet, the weather was very warm and the direct sun was not to be trifled with.

“Once we finish lunch, we are planning to walk back down to the car by way of the La Luz trail,” Walt informed Cheryl. “You’re wearing the right clothes and shoes for the hike. Are you up for it?”

“You’re planning to walk down?” she said in astonishment. “It’s like miles and there are snakes and poison ivy and ...”

Walt laughed. “It’s only 4 miles. It’s all down hill. It will be fine. Besides, I really want to get a chance to see that plane wreck before we go back to California.”

“Sounds like a real blast,” she replied sarcastically. “But what if I just take the tram down and meet you at your car. I’ve been hanging out this long. What are a couple more hours.”

“With a couple breaks and the stop at the crash site, I’m guessing that it will take us about four- maybe four and a half hours to get down. Are you sure you don’t want to tag along? We’re better company than a parking lot.”

“I’ll find some way to amuse myself. Don’t worry. If you lend me your keys, I can sit and read in the car.”

“Excuse me for not trusting you, but I think I will hang onto my keys,” Walt replied.

* * *

From the summit Jackie and Walt dropped down the rocky La Luz trail, winding its way from the alpine vegetation at the crest to the desert-like landscape at the bottom.

Walt kept his eyes peeled for the trail that would take them to the wreckage. He’d read that it might be easy to miss and he didn’t want to have that happen. They found the waterfall where the connecting trail started. There was only a hint of moisture on the face of the waterfall, mainly on the rocks that remained shaded; otherwise it was almost completely dry.

They scrambled up the rock face and found the trail that followed the watercourse up the canyon. The trail meandered back and forth across the empty streambed but was an easy walk. They reached a fork in the canyon and, following directions, took the left fork. Very quickly they came upon a rocky wall that appeared to have good handholds but was close to 25 feet high. There were signs that many had gone before them and they carefully climbed up the rocks. They'd been walking for almost two hours now and decided to take a break. The sun was no longer directly overhead and they found a shaded patch where they could sit.

A slight breeze came down the valley, bringing the sound of rustling leaves. An occasional bird twittered and a couple of rocks dislodged from the cliff face and skittered down to the base; presumably from the contraction of the rocks as they heated and cooled. Otherwise there was a sense of silence surrounding them.

"Cheryl was right about one thing," Jackie said, shifting her dark glasses to the top of her head. "I'm pretty sure that is poison ivy growing along the rocks over there. Let's steer clear of that. My brother was so allergic to poison ivy. Probably still is. It was terrible. When we were kids, he and I could be playing in the same field, doing all the same things and he would come back covered in poison ivy. Often I would have only just a small patch. It left me with a healthy respect for the plant and an indelible image of what it looks like."

"Speaking of Cheryl," Walt began as he opened their water bottle and took a drink, "I hope she has a good book or something. It looks like I miscalculated how long this was going to take. I think the crash site isn't too far away now, but even with a brief stay before heading back, we'll be at least another 3 hours before reaching the bottom."

Jackie took the offered water bottle and looked at her watch. "That still gets us down before 6 o'clock. And maybe we can make up some time once we get back to the regular trail."

After a couple of minutes of resting, Walt screwed the top back on the water bottle and turned to Jackie. "Shall we go?"

"Oui. Vas-y," she replied in French.

The trail climbed steeply from their resting spot. Soon they were almost directly under the tramway wires. They scanned the wires in both directions but neither of the trams was currently visible.

Suddenly they stopped short. An engine lay to the side of the path among the boulders. Over 20 years in the dry climate had made it almost an integral though bizarre part of the landscape. Some pieces of dirty white cowling were also visible.

Even more eerie sights awaited them: a tire leaning against a mangled piece of the fuselage, pieces of a wing, and the ghostly forward section of the fuselage, listing to its starboard side, windows broken out but basically intact. Skinny, twisted trees grew up and around the wreckage.

"Whoa," whistled Walt. "Now there's a sobering sight."

"Kind of makes you want to change your mind about learning to fly, doesn't it?"

Jackie knew that Walt had taken several flying lessons during the early spring and had really enjoyed flying the little Piper Cub. It was expensive and he'd had to stop so he could save money for college.

"I wouldn't go that far," Walt replied. "But this place does present a reminder that you have to be careful."

Walt looked around trying to get a picture of what they had been seeing from the tramway. They had seen something white with red. All the parts they were seeing were white with blue.

"The conductor did say that several families still visit the site and consider it a memorial. Maybe there's a flag around here." Jackie offered.

Following a faint trail up onto a ridge above the crash site, they came upon a tent made of white and red waterproof nylon. A gash on one side let them see inside the tent. The rip in the tent had been caused by a heavy branch that had fallen on it. Walt squatted down next to the hole. Inside there were some clothes and a book and a pair of boots.

"I'll bet this is what we saw from the tram," he said. "Looks like someone abandoned their equipment. It smells real musty, like it must have gotten wet the other night in that rain storm."

"Maybe the branch fell during the rain and caught him off guard. You know. Sort of spooked him. He left his stuff and headed for home."

"Possible. Though it seems like he would have grabbed some of this stuff; at least his boots. Heading for home would mean two or more hours of travel over very rough terrain. It would be smarter to stay put and wait out the storm." Walt stood up and shrugged. "Very mysterious. But I guess we'd better start back. There's not much more we can do here."

"Well at least we need to take a couple pictures," Jackie replied. She reached into the daypack to pull out the instamatic camera they had brought, but instead brought out the small black ring box that Walt had forgotten about after Cheryl had appeared. "What's this?" she asked.

Walt visibly lurched from the shock. He collected his wits and before she could open it, he had closed his hand over it and brought his other hand up to envelop her hands in his.

"It's for you Jay-bird," he said in a soft voice. "I wanted to give it to you earlier, in the gondola or on the crest, but things took kind of a crazy turn."

Jackie looked at Walt. She was speechless. Butterflies were beating their wings in her stomach.

"But you can't look at it until I've said something appropriate." he took the little box from her hands. "Jackie, I love you with all my heart. I am so glad I met you and I never want to imagine a life without you." he took a breath and opened the box. "Jackie Bouchard. Will you marry me?"

With gleaming eyes, Jackie threw her arms around Walt. He staggered back a step and almost lost the ring in the fierceness of the hug. He wrapped his hand around the ring and his arms around Jackie. He gave her a kiss on the temple.

"Oh, Walt! Of course I will." She let go and took a look at the ring. "Can I put it on?"

“Of course you can, silly. I hope it fits okay. I had to buy it while you were shopping for boots so I didn’t have much time.”

“Now just one stipulation,” Jackie said in a mock serious tone while holding out her hand to inspect the diamond. “You are not planning to stop off in Las Vegas for some sort of quickie wedding on the way home are you?”

“Oh no! Our parents would kill us! Besides, we’ve got a lot of years ahead of us. We don’t need to rush anything.” he replied happily. “Now let’s take those pictures and get out of here. In fact, give me the camera and I’ll see if my arms are long enough to get a shot of our first kiss as an engaged couple.”

* * *

There was one more surprise awaiting Walt and Jackie on their Sandia Mountains adventure.

They had reached the top of the 25-foot rock face that they had to climb back down. Walt was looking down trying to decide on the safest way. A shadowy but clearly white object in some bushes below caught his attention. It was well off the trail, which explained why they hadn’t seen it on the way in. Walt wondered if it was another part of the plane and almost decided to ignore it in favor of getting back to the car. But something intrigued him.

“Jackie. Do you see that white thing down there? What’s it look like to you?” he asked. She turned her attention in the direction that Walt was pointing.

“I think it could be a person,” she said uncertainly; almost as if she was trying to convince herself.

Suddenly concerns about finding the safest route fell by the wayside and they scrambled down the cliff, and worked their way over to the body, which indeed it turned out to be.

It was a young man, about their own age. Maybe a bit older. He seemed fairly tall, but it was hard to tell from his position. He was face down on the ground, his head turned so they could see the right side of his face. He had curly blond hair, a short squarish face with a goatee. He was wearing jeans, a white tee shirt and a pair of sneakers.

“Could this really be our run-away camper?” Walt mused.

Almost without thinking Walt put a hand to the man’s jugular to test for a pulse. He jerked his hand back almost immediately.

“What’s up?!” Jackie squeaked jumping back from Walt’s reaction. “Is he like really cold and creepy.”

“On the contrary. He feels warm. I don’t feel a pulse, but I think he died very recently. I don’t know anything about the rate a dead person cools down, but it has to be less than two hours.”

“And I doubt he was the camper or if he was, he must not know much about the outdoors,” Jackie said, pointing at the vegetation growing on that section of the rock face. “He was climbing in the poison ivy.”

“There is one other possibility. He wasn’t climbing when he fell. He was at the top and was pushed — or I suppose he might have slipped.”

“If he was pushed then there might be someone else around. Maybe someone is trying to protect the crash site, the memorial, and he attacks any visitors.”

“Let’s get pictures from as many angles as possible,” Walt said, “and get them to the police. I’d hate to leave and have someone hide the body and make us look like kooks.”

As Walt stepped around the body he noticed an envelope protruding from the man’s back pocket. The return address could be seen and it caught his attention. It was for the National Bank of El Paso. It mainly struck him as an interesting coincidence that, in his mistrust of Cheryl, he had thought about her being in El Paso.

“Come on Walt. If there is some vengeful camper out here, we’d better get back to the car,” Jackie said. “I’m even thinking that if we hurry, we’ll make up any time we’ve lost!”

* * *

“Okay. So now, where is Cheryl?” Walt asked perplexed.

They had been able to make up some time and were only 15 minutes later than they had planned, but Cheryl was no where in sight. They asked some other people who were eating a snack at one of the picnic tables, but they hadn’t seen her during the half-hour they’d been there. They asked in the tramway terminal, but their description of a sandy haired woman with a scarf and dark glasses matched half the women on the tram.

Walt turned to Jackie, “We don’t have time for her nonsense. We’ve got to get to the police.” Turning back to the tramway information woman, Walt continued, “We found a hiker who appears to have fallen and died up by the TWA crash site. Where is the nearest police station?”

“No need for you to go to them. I’ll call them and the park ranger service. They’ll want to get someone up there right away,” she replied. As she dialed the phone she asked, “Why didn’t you mention this sooner?”

Walt, not quite sure himself, shrugged, “It’s been a crazy day.”

The police arrived within minutes and a search and rescue team followed close behind. After getting Walt and Jackie’s description of the dead man, his location and their address, they told the two that they could go.

At the car, they looked around one more time wondering if Cheryl would show up. She was nowhere to be found. Walt went back to the Tramway information booth and left a message in case she did come back and ask for them.

A half-hour later they were back at the Rose Flower motel. As they unloaded their daypack Walt realized he hadn’t given the police the film from his camera.

“I’m going to run this over to the over-night photo shop by the restaurant.” Walt called to Jackie. “We can take the pictures to the police in the morning.”

“Why not pick up something to eat while you’re out,” Jackie said. “Other than taking a shower, I don’t think I have the energy to do anything else today!”

“How about a Hot fudge brownie delight from the Dairy Queen?”

“M’mmm. That sounds good. But maybe we should start with something that actually has some protein. Just a thought.”

“You got it, Babe! I’ll be right back.”

* * *

The Eleven o'clock news was led off with a teaser for the story of the dead climber. Jackie was sleeping with her head against Walt's chest. He nudged her to see if she was awake.

"Jackie. The news is on. Do you want to see it?"

She murmured something and shifted slightly, but she seemed to be too tired to wake up.

"Police are reporting a young man died in a climbing accident today," The woman co-anchor reported. "The body was discovered by a couple of hikers who reported it to the tramway authorities. The body has just been brought back down and we go now to Rick Sanchez, live at the scene. What can you tell us Rick."

"Well Anita, Search and Rescue workers tell me that the body was found at the base of a 25 foot rock face. It's a fairly easy climb, but they tell me he appears to have lost his footing and fell to his death. Now, the hikers who found the man also reported an abandoned campsite in the area. They were speculating that it might have been murder. The police said they inspected the campsite and have ruled out murder. They found a bottle of cold-tablets in the young man's pockets and speculate that he may have been drowsy and disoriented by them, and that's what caused him to fall." The reporter stopped briefly and looked off camera. "I've just been handed a note. The police have released the name of the dead man. It says here he was Daniel Jones, 21 years old from Los Angeles."

"Daniel Jones?" Jackie said shifting her head. "That name has a familiar ring to it."

"I thought you were asleep?"

"Just got my eyes closed." she stated sleepily. "I still say our boy, Danny, has a familiar name."

"Uh-huh. I was just thinking the same thing," replied Walt. "Danny Jones. That's the real name of Cheryl's boyfriend. The guy who calls himself Nest Egg. I know he was older than us, so the age is right, but could it really be him? If so, what was he doing up there. It has to be connected to why Cheryl is missing."

Jackie sat upright and rubbed her eyes.

"You'd never met Nest Egg? Never saw a photo?"

"Nope, and I have to say, I never had any desire to meet or see him."

"Do you think he killed Cheryl and was coming after us?"

"Or how about he and Cheryl were coming after us, he fell for some reason and she ran."

"But I thought Cheryl said that he wouldn't think to look for her here. How did he track her down?"

"Good question."

* * *

The young couple was up early the next morning. They grabbed a quick breakfast and picked up the photographs from the overnight photo store. While Walt poured over

the pictures they'd taken of Nest Egg, Jackie gravitated to the ones Walt had taken of them: One of them kissing and another with their faces pressed close together, grinning at the camera.

"You look very beautiful in that one," Walt said, glancing at the pictures she was holding.

"And happy!" She responded turning and kissing him on the cheek.

"Let's get these pictures of Danny over to the police station. I'm not sure they'll need them, but I sure don't want them."

"Do you mind dropping me off at the University?" Jackie asked. "I'm kind of interested to see if I can talk to anyone about their computer science program."

"Okay," agreed Walt. "But just don't go disappearing on me."

"Walt Lincoln. Don't you dare put me in the same category as Cheryl."

* * *

It only took a few minutes for Walt to get in and see Lieutenant Howard at the Police station. Walt had noted his name badge the day before and asked for him by name.

"How can I help you, son?" the police officer asked.

"I think you'll remember we were concerned that the death might have been a murder. And since the body felt warm, that made us worry that the murderer might return and try to hide the body. Anyway, so we took these pictures and thought you might want them."

Lieutenant Howard took the pictures and flipped through them.

"Interesting, but our team did get their own photos." The lieutenant looked up at Walt, "Why didn't you tell us about your pictures yesterday afternoon?"

"I guess in the excitement of..." Walt started.

"Excitement?"

"There was a lot happening," Walt soldiered on. "And that's another reason I'm here. I'm more than ever convinced that something happened to Danny Jones. That he didn't just slip. A friend of mine was supposed to meet us in the parking lot when we got back from hiking. Her name is Cheryl Modern and she escaped from a girl's reform school back in California. Danny Jones was her boyfriend and they had some falling out and she hitchhiked to Albuquerque to find me."

"Slow down, Lincoln. This story is getting pretty far-fetched. I did some checking myself and discovered you're a bit of a celebrity: Your Dad's trip around the world, all the hoop-la up in Seattle, you were even featured on a talk show last winter. Now you show up in Albuquerque, — what, three days ago? — and you discover the murdered boyfriend of a runaway schoolgirl? Adventure follows where ever you go, doesn't it?"

"But it's true. Cheryl was supposed to meet us, but she's vanished."

"Very convenient. But again why didn't you mention this yesterday?"

"As far as I could tell, there was no connection. Well, at least not until I learned the dead person's name on the news last night."

“And did it bother you that your name wasn’t mentioned? Is that it? First you propose this mysterious missing camper and now when that doesn’t work you try this new story.”

“Lieutenant. That is unfair. I brought you some photographs and what I thought was relevant information. That’s all. I’m sorry if you think that is some kind of grand-standing, publicity-seeking prank.”

Walt got up and headed for the door.

“Lincoln,” Lieutenant Howard called out. “Thanks for the pictures. If your friend really is in town and shows up, be sure to let us know.”

Walt turned and simply nodded his head. Whether it was a nod of agreement or simply a nod to say good day was not apparent.

* * *

Walt found Jackie talking with three male graduate students, just outside the building where he had left her. Two of them left when Jackie introduced Walt. The third, who Jackie introduced as Martin, remained. The man was at most 25 years old, tall and almost too thin, with a sandy-brown afro-style haircut and small round glasses.

“I was telling Jackie that my brother does a lot of rock climbing. He’s been up to the crash site several times and has told me about a guy that seems to live up there for days or weeks at a time.”

“I guess our conversation sort of steered away from computer science,” Jackie laughed. “Danny’s death is the biggest topic around.”

“Not at the police station,” Walt replied. “They weren’t interested in any of our ideas. Though I guess I have to admit, without Cheryl, they must sound a bit far-fetched.”

“It seems a little bit of a let down. All that adventure and mystery yesterday, now just back to being tourists.” Jackie sighed.

“Who says its over?” Walt asked. “Just because the police say it isn’t a murder doesn’t mean it isn’t. We need to find Cheryl and see what she knows, and I’d like to get back up to that campsite and see if I can meet the man who lives there.”

Walt turned to Martin. “Can you tell me more about the guy who lives up there?”

“My brother calls him the “Viejo,” that’s Spanish for ‘old man.’” Martin said with a chuckle. “From the sounds of it he is about 40 or so. He told my brother that he works occasionally doing odd jobs and such.”

“So it does seem possible that he had left his camp set up while he came into town for work or to get supplies,” Walt mused. “And while he was gone the branch fell and tore his tent. Just taking a wild chance, do you know what the guy looks like?”

“I’m afraid I don’t really know much in the way of details I remember my brother saying he had a few gray streaks in his hair and had a beard. Pretty sure he is Chicano.”

“Is your brother around? Maybe I could talk with him.”

“My brother is on a hiking trip, I think he said up on the Rio Chama. But the rain of a couple days ago may have brought that trip to a swift end. I can give you his number. He lives with his girlfriend off Eubank and Lomas.” He scribbled a number on a scrap of paper and handed it to Walt. “Just ask for Steve Todd, or Darcy.”

Walt looked around. There was a phone booth across the street.

“Well. Thanks for the information.” He took Jackie’s hand and they started for the phone booth.

Martin called after them, “Actually, I could just take you out there. It’s not all that far.”

“No. No,” Walt said. “That’s super, but we can call. No problem.”

* * *

“What made you take off in such a hurry?” Jackie asked as they squeezed into the phone booth. “He did try to get my phone number, but did you think he was going to ask if he could come live with us like Cheryl did?”

“No, but didn’t you notice a slight resemblance between Martin and the guy we found dead?” Walt asked.

“You mean Danny?”

“I mean I don’t know what Danny looks like. So that may have been him and it may not have been. I just had this sudden image of Martin’s bushy blond hair and the curly blond hair of the man we found.” Jackie didn’t seem convinced so Walt continued. “On top of that Martin’s brother is a hiker and a climber who has been away for a couple days. If we had gone over to the brother’s house and Martin found out that his brother was missing in the Sandias, I don’t think I could take the anguish.”

“Your mind sure has a way of working!” Jackie exclaimed. “Quick. Let’s call and see if he is there.”

A woman answered the phone.

“Is this Darcy?” Walt asked. Her answer was tentative and Walt rushed to keep her from hanging up. “Steve’s brother gave me your number. I was hoping to talk to Steve.”

“I’m afraid he’s not here. He’s due back this evening. I was just on my way out the door, so if you wouldn’t mind calling back then...”

“Can you tell me if Steve is hiking? And if so where?” Walt asked hurriedly.

“Yeah. He’s on a camping trip in the Sandias. He should be back by five or six. I’m afraid I really have to go. Goodbye.”

Walt thanked her, hung up the phone and looked at Jackie.

“I wish I knew someone who could tell me exactly what Danny “Nest Egg” Jones looks like.” Walt said. “Yesterday I kept trying to get rid of Cheryl. Now I wish I could find her. Not to mention that this morning I gave away every picture and negative of the dead man. I think my only hope for the moment is to get back up to that abandoned campsite and see if the Viejo has returned. Maybe he saw something that can help me.”

Jackie was staring into Walt’s face, worry creeping into her eyes.

“But we don’t know if it wasn’t the Viejo who murdered Danny or Steve or whoever that was!”

“Oh, you know me. I can take care of myself.” Walt said with a bit of a swagger to his voice. “But I do think it would be safer if I went alone.”

“Oh, no you don’t, Mister!” Jackie warned, shaking her finger at him. “I’m not missing out on this.”

“Well then! Let’s not waste any more time!” He grasped her by the shoulders and kissed her.

A rap nearby brought them back to the present. A woman was looking at them through the glass.

“I’d like to use the phone, if you don’t mind.”

* * *

Knowing the way made the hike back to the crash site and the camper’s tent faster, but the heat of the day still slowed them down until they got into the shadows of the canyon and trees. They headed straight to the tent. The branch still lay next to the rip in the tent. No attempt had been made to fix it or move the equipment inside.

“I’m going to open the tent and take a closer look,” said Walt. “Keep an eye peeled and let me know if anyone shows up.”

Walt crouched down and unzipped the opening to the tent. He knelt down on the ground cover and stuck his head inside. Everything he’d noticed the day before was there: The musty smell, the hiking boots and some clothes. From his new vantage point, he also saw a small brass cook stove and a plastic cup with a spoon balanced on it. A pack frame and some stuff sacks were hidden by the torn cloth of the tent.

“Looks to me like everything is here except maybe a sleeping bag. So what puzzles me is that if I was going to leave my stuff here and hike out, I would probably be wearing my hiking boots and I wouldn’t have bothered taking my sleeping bag. And if you were planning on returning wouldn’t you leave some form of note on the tent to keep nosey people, like me, from rifling through your stuff.”

Walt scanned the tent one more time and his eyes lit on a small plastic envelope tucked into a pocket sewn onto the side of the tent. He bent over and pulled it out. It protected a topographical map of the area.

“I have an idea,” Jackie said as Walt zipped the tent back up. “What if the camper got caught in that rain storm and just ran down to the fuselage of the plane. Maybe we can find some clue down there.”

“Great idea. Let’s take a look.”

The young sleuths walked carefully around the fuselage. They took the admonishments about the site being a memorial to the 17 dead flyers very seriously. It still seemed like one of the possible motives for a murder, so they didn’t want to anger anyone.

Once they reached the backside it was obvious that others had been here. The inside had been gutted by fire in the crash and now just ghostly shapes of walls, windows and struts remained. However among the ancient debris in a corner that would have been protected from rain they found the sleeping bag. Next to it a water bottle and a plastic bag with a few wrappers from some sort of granola bars but mostly packed with tissue.

“Looks like someone had a cold.” Walt said. “That certainly gives us a link between the person who slept here and the guy who died. Remember on that news report they mentioned he was carrying cold medicine.”

“So maybe the Viejo got soaked in the rain storm and caught a cold. Maybe he felt sick enough that once he felt better he went down to get some medicine. On his way back he fell, just like the police believe.”

“However the crazy thing is,” Walt mused, “the police identified him as Danny Jones. Danny had no reason to be camping up here. At least if we can believe Cheryl, he was off working on some counterfeiting scheme. Even if he came looking for Cheryl, the situation doesn’t jive. Would he really bring a whole bunch of camping gear and spend two or three days camped up here and waiting for her.”

“That’s right! And what about Martin’s brother Steve? How does he fit into this? Or does he?” Jackie added.

“Right. So we have potentially three people up here: Danny Jones, Steve Todd, and the man he called the Viejo.”

“Well. I think we can say one of them was Steve Todd,” Jackie interjected. She was kneeling down by the sleeping bag and holding the water bottle. “He’s written his name with a black marker on the side and cover of the bottle.”

“Okay then; we have a sick Steve Todd. By inference, a dead Steve Todd. But a dead Steve Todd who is carrying Danny Jones’ ID.” Walt ran through the scenarios in his head. “So either Steve Todd stole Danny’s wallet and came for a hike in the woods, or Danny killed Steve and swapped wallets with him for some crazy reason.”

“Couldn’t that be useful for someone on the run and planning some big scheme?” Jackie asked.

“Bingo!” exclaimed Walt. He motioned to Jackie and they started back out of the old section of fuselage. “Now if we could only figure out how the Viejo fits into all of this.”

Walt put an arm out to hold Jackie from moving and put his other hand to his lips. They were still hidden by the fuselage, but Walt had seen something moving. Some inner voice told him to wait before going on. Through one of the airplane windows they could see a man coming up the trail. They were in the shadows behind both the fuselage and brush and probably couldn’t be seen.

“The Viejo?” Jackie whispered into Walt’s ear.

Walt shrugged. The man seemed rugged enough to be the kind of person Walt imagined the Viejo to be. Muscular, medium height, a couple days growth of beard and probably 40-ish. He was coming up the trail slowly and looking around. Walt was just about set to put aside his concerns and step out when the man reached into his back pocket and pulled out a map. That didn’t exactly fit with the mysterious mountain man Walt had conjured up. The Viejo would not need a map here at the crash site. The man turned his head and looked straight at the fuselage and Walt’s blood froze. He recognized the man. It was the security guard from the dance where his band ‘Standing Tall’ had played, back in California before graduation. The one who had dealt with the hecklers trying to use the band’s instruments. Jackie felt Walt tighten his grip on her and they both held their breath.

“What the heck is he doing here?” Walt thought. Instinct told him to remain hiding.

After a few moments the man started up the trail to the empty campsite. They didn’t have much time before he’d be back; ten, maybe fifteen minutes at the most. Walt and Jackie

came out of their refuge and began a quiet but hurried hike back to the trailhead. At the top of the rock face, they stood for a moment looking down, wondering what had transpired the day before.

“It occurs to me that the most logical time for him to have lost his wallet, that is to have had it switched, would have been right down there after he died,” Walt mused. “That supposition would put Danny up here after all. It had to be murder. And based on my guess on the time of his death, that would put Danny on this very spot within an hour of when we were here. Maybe even while we were up at the crash site.”

As they continued their hurried pace down the trail, the confusion of people and events was all they could talk about.

“Maybe Danny caught Steve talking to Cheryl down in the parking lot and got jealous, so he followed him up here and in a fit of passion...” Jackie started and then finished, “No that sounds ridiculous.”

“But you’ve got something there. I’ve been forgetting about Cheryl and her disappearance as part of this equation. If he did find Cheryl down by our car and she mentioned that she had talked to us, he might have been on a very sinister mission. If Steve hadn’t shown up before we did...”

Jackie cut in, “My God! He really was planning to murder us!”

“But why would he leave and not finish what he was planning to do?” asked Walt.

“Maybe he thought Steve was you. When he found out it wasn’t you he panicked. Did he know what you looked like?”

“I don’t know, but I suppose it is a very good possibility that he didn’t,” Walt admitted. “And now how does that security guard figure into all of this? Is there any possibility he is the Viejo? Maybe he was hired by Danny’s family to investigate his supposed death. I suppose they could have flown him out here this morning.”

“Shouldn’t we tell someone about the switched identities? Maybe contact Steve Todd’s family?” Jackie asked. “I know: Let’s contact Martin. Even if the police don’t want to believe you, the family could identify the body and start straightening things out.”

“Martin didn’t give us his phone number, but we can call Steve’s girlfriend Darcy and see if she has Martin’s number.”

* * *

Walt and Jackie called from a phone outside a gas station on Lomas Boulevard. Darcy picked up the phone after only a couple rings.

“Hi,” Walt began. “I called for Steve earlier today.”

“He’s still not home. I guess he’s running late. If you give me your number, I can have him call you back.”

“Oh, I see.” Walt tried to remain casual. “Do you have his brother, Martin’s phone number?”

“Martin?” Darcy asked. “Are you sure you have the right number? Steve’s only brother is named Scott.”

Walt was stunned silent. Struggled for a second with this news.

“Is Scott a grad student at the University?” Walt asked tentatively. At the word Scott, Jackie looked questioningly at Walt.

“Not hardly,” Darcy replied. “He lives with his parents in Taos. He’s like, sixteen.”

“Let me ask one more question: Does Steve have curly blond hair and a goatee?”

“Yes he does. But now would you mind telling me what this is all about? Why are you trying to reach Steve?”

“Some guy named Martin, who claimed to be Steve’s brother gave me your phone number. I met him at the University, and he told me that Steve had met this guy he called the Viejo on one of his trips up in the Sandia Mountains. I was hoping to learn more about the guy.”

“Man. This story gets weirder by the second. This is Steve’s first camping trip in the Sandias. I’ve never heard any talk about this Viejo guy.”

“I think it is pretty important I call Steve’s folks. I don’t know what this Martin guy was up to, but I should call them.”

“Sorry. I don’t feel comfortable giving out their number,” Darcy replied. “I mean your story is pretty bizarre. I can call them and give them the message. Maybe give them your phone number?”

“Fair enough, I guess. We’re just visiting town, so we are staying at the Rose Flower Motel on Central Avenue. Have them ask for Walt Lincoln. Okay?”

Jackie could see that Walt was about to say good bye and she stopped him.

“You can’t just hang up.” She took the phone from him.

“Hi, Darcy? This is Walt’s girlfriend Jackie.”

“Uh, Hi.” she stammered.

“Did you hear the news story about that man who died in a climbing accident up in the Sandias yesterday? The news reported his name was Danny Jones.”

“Sure I heard about it. The story had me worried for a moment until I learned the name of the guy.”

“We were just up at the accident site and we are very concerned that the news report was wrong. Steve’s campsite, at least we are pretty sure it is his, was vacant for the last two days. All his camping stuff was there, we found a bottle with his name on it.”

“What are you saying?” Darcy gasped.

“I’m sorry, this is really hard, but I can’t just hang up the phone and leave you worrying about what is going on. Especially if Steve doesn’t show up later. I think this Danny Jones may have switched wallets with Steve to cover up some crime. We think it might have been Steve that we found.”

“You found? This is some sort of horrible joke. Right?” Darcy exclaimed.

“I hope we are wrong. I pray we are wrong. We tried to tell our story to the police but they don’t believe us.”

“Then maybe you are wrong. But you saw him? I... I...,” Darcy faltered. A confused rush of words came out as she tried to grapple with the awful possibility. “I’ve got to go. I mean, what am I suppose to do now? Call Steve’s parents? Just sit here and wait?”

“I know this has got to be tough, but if you want someone to talk to, you can call us at that number Walt gave you. We’ll help you. Really. In any way we can.” Jackie stammered.

Darcy choked out a thanks and hung up without another word. Jackie softly put the phone back on the cradle and looked at Walt. Tears were welling in her eyes. She slid her arms around him and put her head on his shoulder.

“You did good, Jay-bird,” Walt whispered.

* * *

“So who the heck was that guy Martin that we were talking to on the university campus? Was that Danny?” Walt asked that evening as they kept their eye on the TV news. It was probably the tenth time one of them had asked that question in one form or another.

“He seemed so nice and helpful. I was talking to those two other guys and he overheard me talking about being up at the crash site and what we thought at the time was a mysterious empty campsite. That’s when he joined the conversation. I was speculating whether the camper was someone protecting the crash site and maybe he killed Danny.”

“It sure sounds like he must have made up the story about the Viejo. Maybe right there on the spot, based on your speculation.” Walt mused. “But what motive did he have and how did he know Darcy.”

Walt’s voice dropped off as the image fell into place.

“Of course. He had Steve’s wallet. Who knows, there could have been a picture with her name on it. He could easily get Steve’s phone number. He might have even called and somehow found out her name that way.”

“But like you said, what was his motive? I mean, gee, he gave us information that led us straight to figuring out the switched identity.” Jackie stopped to mull this over.

“And how did he find you on the university campus? That can’t have been an accident. Somehow he must have been following us from the trail head.”

“Then do you think he knows where we are staying? Maybe he’s waiting outside right now.”

Walt got up and made sure the door was locked. As he walked back, the news reporter caught Walt’s eye.

“Say. There’s that Rick Sanchez who did the report last night. The police might not want to listen to our story, but a reporter might be very interested.”

* * *

“Please, call me Ricky,” the young reporter said after introductions had been made. “The station management thinks that sounds too undignified, but it’s what everyone calls me. So what’s this big story you are talking about.”

Ricky Sanchez had an infectious grin and a gleam in his eyes that said he knew how to stir things up.

Walt and Jackie ran through the pertinent details, telling him about Cheryl, their discovery of the body and subsequent discovery of its true identity and the appearance of Martin at the university, as well as the appearance of the security guard that Walt surmised might be here investigating for the family. Even before finishing, they could tell they had him hooked.

“Man, this could be quite the story: Counterfeiting, kidnapping, murder, swapping identities. About the only thing that’s missing is...” Ricky thought for a moment, then laughed. “Dang! There isn’t anything missing.”

Walt and Jackie laughed along with him and realized they hadn’t done much laughing for the last couple of days.

“Well one thing I can tell you right off: Danny Jones doesn’t have any family who would send an investigator. I did some research for a follow up story. He grew up in an orphanage in LA and spent the last two or three years living pretty much on the edge. Certainly no steady jobs. Street musician and pan-handler mostly. I wasn’t sure how he kept his head above water. Until now that is.”

“This is so bizarre,” Walt said, shaking his head. “We have Cheryl, Danny Jones and this bank security guard all showing up in Albuquerque at the same time.”

“What did you say?” Jackie asked. “A BANK security guard? I thought he was doing security for your dance.”

“Funny. It just slipped out. I had forgotten, but that’s right, the guy we hired to do security was someone that Claudia and Dawn knew about. He worked at some bank but was moonlighting to make a little extra money.”

“And,” Jackie interjected, “since Claudia and Dawn are good friends with Cheryl, that gives us a connection between him and Danny.”

“If Danny Jones knows a guy in bank security, that has some very interesting possibilities for a counterfeiter.” Ricky added. “Do you know what bank he worked for?”

“No. But I should be able to find out pretty quickly. That is, if either Dawn or Claudia is at home.” Walt responded.

* * *

“Dawn and Claudia both remembered his name as Bernard Gnorwell,” Walt said as he hung up the phone. “They said the name begins with a G. They said that he worked at a bank in Las Vegas. Dawn wasn’t sure, but thought the name of the bank was Bank of Las Vegas. At least she said she remembered that Las Vegas was part of the name.”

“That should be enough to work with,” Ricky replied. “Our research department has directories and cross-references that should get us the answer in no time at all. Follow me!”

As they walked down the corridor of the TV station, Ricky Sanchez asked them about their stay in Albuquerque and what they had done so far. Learning they had gotten side tracked by the mystery, he started listing off other attractions they should see, such as the hot air balloons and the old town market. Walt wondered if they would get to see any other sights. A sense of making things right was driving him to track down and expose Danny and his scheme. For college, he’d been accepted to a liberal arts college on a baseball scholarship, but it occurred to him that maybe he should look into a law degree or even more simply, law enforcement.

Reaching the research department, Ricky scanned the shelves and pulled a few books off of them. He handed one to Walt and another to Jackie.

“Here are the white and yellow pages for Las Vegas. One of you see if you can find Bernard in the white pages, the other look for banks. Once we have a few facts we can go from there. Meanwhile I’ll use the microfilm reader to look at Las Vegas newspapers.”

Walt leaned back against the end of a shelf and started flipping through the white pages. Jackie set the yellow pages on a table and opened to the Banks section.

“Yuck,” she said, looking up at the other two. “Just about every other bank has Las Vegas in the name: AmeriBank of Las Vegas, Citizen’s Bank of Las Vegas, Las Vegas Bank and Trust, National Bank of Las Vegas...”

Walt looked up from his phone directory.

“Hold on. Remember that envelope I saw in Steve Todd’s back pocket?” Walt asked. “The return address was National Bank of El Paso. That could be totally grasping at straws, but maybe there is a connection.”

“Well at least it gives us a first place to call and make an inquiry. If we strike out, we start at the beginning of the list and work our way through it.” Ricky said.

“And here is Bernard Gnorwell.” Walt said. He grabbed a pencil and paper and copied out the phone number and address. “Do we dare call his house? If he left Albuquerque, he could have gotten back by now.”

“Don’t forget,” Ricky said with a smile. “I’m a reporter. I can call just about anybody under the pretext of writing a story. I just need to find a local story about a bank — any bank — and say I’m looking for an expert opinion. You do have a point though: Calling him at the bank would make for a better cover.”

“What day is it?” Jackie asked. “I’ve lost all track of time. Will the banks even be open?”

“It’s Thursday,” Ricky answered. “I’m sure that all the banks will be open Monday to Friday.”

“Friday?” Walt considered the word for a few moments. “What was it that Cheryl said? Something about it wouldn’t matter after Friday. That makes it a pretty good bet that what ever is planned will happen tomorrow.”

Walt and Jackie watched over Ricky’s shoulder as he scanned through the microfilmed papers. He would scan the headlines of the first and second page and then jump to the next day and repeat the cycle.

“What about that,” Jackie said pointing at the reader screen. “Something about surveillance cameras being installed. That’s starting to be done in banks everywhere.”

“I think you have something. I can call and ask for a statement about their effectiveness. Las Vegas is such a cutting edge city; it makes sense that I am calling from a smaller city. And who better to call than someone in security?”

While Ricky picked up the phone and dialed, Walt continued scanning the headlines on the microfilm reader. Ricky watched him distractedly while waiting for someone to pick up.

“National Bank. How may I direct your call?” the bank operator asked.

"I'd like to speak to Bernard Gnorwell, in your security department. This is Rick Sanchez of Albuquerque's TV17 EyeWatch news."

"Thank you. I'll connect you."

Ricky turned to the others and gave a thumbs up and grinned.

"I'm sorry. Mr. Gnorwell is out of the building. Can I leave a message?"

"Strange. I was under the impression he would be there this morning." Ricky said stalling for some time.

"I'm sorry sir, but his office reports that he is on a convoy down to El Paso. He'll be back in on Monday."

"Okay. Thanks for your help. I'll call back then." Ricky hung up and turned to Walt and Jackie. "They said he is on a convoy; I'd guess that means of armored trucks, and is headed for El Paso."

"So are they going to switch their counterfeit money with the money that is on the armored cars?" Jackie asked. "That doesn't seem very smart. He'd get caught in a second."

They crowded around the microfilm reader and kept scanning the headlines. Occasionally remarking on one article or another.

"What about this," Walt said with a satisfied smile. He pointed to a general interest article in the financial section. The title read 'Old Bills Burned Weekly.' "It says here that the region's main incinerator in Denver is off line and they are shipping most of their currency down to El Paso."

"If they had a scheme to switch phony bills for real ones destined for the incinerator, that could be HUGE!" Ricky exclaimed. "The average counterfeiter usually can't expect more than a 20 or 30 percent return. You know, They have to buy something that they may or may not need, to turn the fake bills into legitimate cash. This scheme could give them a 100 percent return."

"But we don't know what route they are taking or have any right to stop them if we did." Jackie said.

"We don't need the route. We just need to know when they will reach their destination," Walt replied. "But you're right: A couple of eighteen year olds can't walk up to an armored car and arrest someone."

"That's true," Ricky said with a conspiratorial smile. "But I have a friend at the police station who can help with stopping them."

* * *

Howie Knipfing had straight blond hair that he wore a little long. He was tall and lanky with a boyish face that didn't quite fit with his police uniform. But his accent was the most startling of all. He had a thick New Jersey accent. He got up from the desk where he was filling out some paperwork and shook hands with everyone.

The way he said "How are you," came pretty close to how he might have pronounced "Hawaii."

"Howie and I worked together during college. Really menial labor on the loading dock at a department store over on Lomas and Pennsylvania." Ricky explained.

“Yeah, but we some fun slinging boxes of bikes and whatever off those trailer trucks and seeing if we could get one more cardboard box into the compactor.”

The two of them beamed at each other, remembering the good times.

“Walt Lincoln. Yeah. I’ve seen you,” Howie said, turning to Walt. “I’m a big Seattle Mariners fan. I was watching the game that day when they let you throw out the first pitch. That was pretty awesome. And the announcer is all like ‘and here’s the kid who saved some guy named Jack.’ That was perfect.”

“I heard that replayed several times on the TV while we were in Seattle. But hey, I pull this guy out of the water, and some reporter asks if I know his name. I’d heard his wife call him Jack just before he took the plunge off the boat deck. I didn’t know he was the owner of the Mariners.”

“That’s a kick. After the game the Dukes played last night people around here might prefer if you left their owner in the water. Naw, I’m just teasing,” Howie laughed. “So let’s get down to business. What’s cookin’, Ricky?”

“Okay. So I have a pretty juicy story that I want to lay out for you. Probably the most important point at the moment is that we believe that an armored truck heading to the currency incinerator in El Paso is carrying counterfeit bills, or they will be switched just before delivery.”

They laid out the story of Cheryl, her talk of something happening by Friday, the identity switching of Danny and Steve, Gnorwell’s connection with Danny and his sudden appearance at the crash site, only to be back in Las Vegas in time for a shipment.

“But I have to admit, it is mainly the incredible coincidence of all these people showing up in Albuquerque that makes me sure that we have got to investigate further,” Walt said.

“Well, there is no reason to take any chances. I’m going to call down to El Paso and see about getting the local police to shadow that armored truck and make sure the bills that get incinerated are real and not some funny money,” Howie replied. “But it sounds like there are a couple other things to set right. We need to find out if the dead hiker really is Steve Todd and have a closer examination to see if and how he was killed.”

“And we still need to find Cheryl and Danny,” Walt added. “I sort of doubt they will be in El Paso. If the switch has already been made, they could be anywhere.”

“I’ll see about getting some feelers out on that as well,” Howie replied. “But I’m pretty certain that once we have this fellow Gnorwell, the others will be easy to find. So for now, you guys ought to take a real vacation. I’ll let you know as soon as something happens.” He looked over at Ricky. “We’ll have to see if you can’t get some sort of exclusive story on this!”

“I’m heading back to the station now to see if I can get a cameraman, so I can be in El Paso with on the spot footage!” Ricky exclaimed. “But don’t worry, we’ll keep a low profile until the action starts. I don’t want to mess this up.”

Howie raised his eyebrows. “You still driving that low-rider, gas guzzling, noise machine? You might want to take a car that can pass a gas station without needing gas.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he replied with a mock hurt expression. Turning to Walt and

Jackie he added, "I'll take you back to the station and get a couple of interview shots with you two. I can't steal this mystery that the two of you have unraveled without making sure you get the credit you deserve."

"Maybe we should just stay out of it," Walt said, remembering the mocking comments of the police lieutenant the day before.

"But the two of you are what really make this a story: Teenage sleuths uncover counterfeiting plot," He swept a hand in the air before them, as if pointing out the headlines on the newspaper. "Anyway we have to hurry. The trip down to El Paso is going to take several hours and Howie wouldn't want me speeding."

* * *

When Walt and Jackie got back to their motel, there was a note pinned to their door. It was a message left by Mrs. Yee telling them that Darcy had called and was asking that they call her back.

It was just after dinner time. They had driven up to Santa Fe to take their minds off all the commotion of the last few days. Even the new sights and sounds that surrounded them as they had strolled around the old city plaza couldn't keep them from thinking about the mystery and wondering what was happening.

There wasn't a phone in their room, so they went to the office and used the pay phone just outside the door.

"I got a call from the Police," Darcy explained. "At least that's what they claimed. The man said they have new evidence and were asking for photos of Steve."

"That seems pretty likely," Walt interjected. "We found a friendly ear at the police station and he's looking into it."

"Well I'm still a bit nervous. The guy asked if you were over here. Which seemed very odd. I said no, but that I did have your phone number. The way he said 'give it to me' made me uneasy, so I said I could call you and give you a message. He got pretty angry and said it was official police business. But I held out. The angrier he got the more suspicious I became. So then he hung up. He had said he wanted a photo of Steve, but he never asked for MY address, or if he could come over."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about. If it was the man who called himself Martin, he doesn't have any grudge against you. He's probably just trying to find us. But I'll tell you what: We have an extra bed in our motel room if you want to play it safe."

"No. That's fine. I've got some friends I can go stay with."

* * *

Ricky Sanchez's face was the first thing you saw when the evening news started, followed almost immediately by a scene with Gnorwell being read his rights as he leaned against a police cruiser. There were shots of the phony bills, an El Paso police spokesman, and sure enough, Walt and Jackie being credited with solving the case and eligible for a ten thousand dollar reward offered by the bank.

Walt and Jackie looked at each other in amazement.

Ricky went into a somber note when they showed a picture of Steve Todd and he ex-

plained the switched identities. And finally there was a picture of Cheryl Modern and Danny “Nest Egg” Jones, with a request for anyone with information about them to contact the local police immediately.

“Sure enough,” exclaimed Jackie. “That’s Martin. That jaw and nose give him away. Though he must have been wearing a wig and glasses when we saw him at the school. Ricky and the research staff have really been doing their homework to get those pictures so fast.”

There was a knock on the door about ten minutes after the news report was finished. Walt got up to answer it.

“Mrs. Yee must have seen the report or else she got a phone call,” he laughed.

He swung open the door and before he could complete a full thought, he realized it was Danny Jones standing there, and he was pointing a gun straight at Walt’s chest. Walt recoiled back into the room and Danny stepped into the doorway.

“You stole our money,” he snarled at Walt. “Back up.” he commanded waving his gun.

Walt’s brain raced through the possibilities. If he could get in close enough, his Tai Kwan Do skills might have made him fast enough to disable Danny. Danny seemed to sense that and was keeping his distance.

“So how did you find us?” Walt asked.

“I’ve known since Tuesday night that you were somewhere out here on Central. That Saab of yours kind of sticks out like a sore thumb here in Albuquerque; so it didn’t take too long to narrow down where you were staying.”

“That was you at the University, calling yourself Martin.”

“Oh yeah. Your girlfriend told Cheryl she wanted to check out the University so I waited over by the main entrance until I saw you. I hoped we might exchange addresses once I had helped you out. But you took off like a shot. Then you must have been hiding somewhere, because my associate couldn’t find you up in the mountains.”

Danny was perspiring and his eyes had an evil, determined glint. Walt could tell he had to act fast.

“So you did send us on a wild goose chase back up the mountain, trying to catch us alone.” Jackie exclaimed from the bed where she was sitting. “You sent that guy out to murder us!”

Walt watched in horror as the gun swung momentarily away from him, pointed at Jackie and then back at him.

“Jackie, be cool.” Walt warned.

“It doesn’t matter, because it’s all going to end here. Right now.”

Walt heard the explosion of a gun and felt something hit him in the chest. He staggered back, hearing Jackie scream. He looked down and saw blood on his shirt, but he didn’t feel anything. For an instant he wondered if that was normal.

He looked up, and saw his confused stare mirrored by Danny. The gun held at a crooked

angle in hands that didn't seem to have any control. There was blood on Danny's shirt as well. As Danny crumpled to the ground, Walt realized that it was Danny who had been shot and that it must have been some piece of Danny and his blood that had hit Walt.

In the void left by Danny's fall stood Cheryl.

* * *

"I didn't kill him did I" Cheryl sobbed as she stumbled forward towards the door.

Walt heard the clatter of the door open and close over at the office and Mrs. Yee came hurrying out with a shotgun.

"You put down that gun right now!" she commanded.

Cheryl let the gun slip out of her hands and onto the front step. She dropped down next to Danny tugging on his shirt; imploring him to get up. Walt made a shrugging motion to Mrs. Yee.

"I think the excitement is over." He paused. "She saved my life." He was a little stunned as the truth of that sunk in.

"I'm going to call Howie Knipfing," Jackie said. She grabbed her wallet and pulled out his business card. "We should at least try to get someone who is sympathetic to our story."

"Be sure to call Ricky as well," Walt said still in somewhat of a haze.

Mrs. Yee looked a little suspicious, but she let Jackie by, then turned.

"You call police?" she asked.

Jackie nodded.

Walt knelt down beside Danny and tested for a pulse, listened for any sign of breathing. Cheryl was staring at him, willing him to say everything was okay. It wasn't. Danny was dead.

"He saw our picture on the news and he just went mad," Cheryl's voice started off softly, and rose as the emotions welled up. "We were almost ready to leave. This all would be over. Then he saw that news story tonight: First just about Gnorwell and then that picture of us. He was already on edge from killing that other guy, for three days it's been eating him up, but this drove him absolutely mad." Her voice softened again and she looked up at Walt, "I just wanted to stop him. That's all."

Walt helped Cheryl up and led her to a chair that he positioned to keep the view away from Danny. Mrs. Yee was standing like a sentinel in the doorway.

"So what happened to you, Cheryl? Did Danny find you at the tramway parking lot?"

"Huh?" Cheryl replied coming out of a reverie. "Yeah, he and his buddy Gnorwell had figured out where I was. I thought they were going to kill me. Gnorwell was a pretty scary guy, you know. This was a very serious project for him and he didn't want any mistakes. They had me locked up in a motel closet. It wasn't until Gnorwell flew back to Las Vegas that I was able to convince Danny that I wasn't a threat."

"How did you find us tonight? Or have you always known where we were staying?"

“After that newscast, Danny made me call the TV station. I said I was Jackie and that we had gotten separated. I said I was totally scared and couldn’t even remember the name of our motel.” She shrugged her shoulders. “It worked.”

“Cheryl. Don’t mess around. Call your parents and have them get you a lawyer. You saved my life and I’ll do what I can to help you.”

Howie Knipfing walked into the room with another officer. They looked around; their eyes going from Walt and Cheryl to the body to Mrs. Yee and back again in reverse order.

“Bag up those guns, Jim. Looks like we’re going to have to wake them up over at the coroner’s office and get them over here,” Howie said to the other officer. He looked at the shotgun in Mrs. Yee’s hands. “I’ll assume you have a permit for that. But you can put it away now.”

* * *

On the way back to California several days later, Walt and Jackie were still talking about the events that had engulfed them. They were stopped at a service station in Arizona, where a mechanic was investigating a leak in the radiator. As it turned out, Walt had forgotten to fully tighten one of the hose clamps. While the mechanic added anti-freeze they sat outside in a shady spot.

“I have to admit,” Jackie said, “it bothers me that it was Cheryl who saved your life and not me.”

“Oh, but Jackie, when I think of the time I spent with her compared to the time with you; you have saved my life.”

Their kiss was interrupted by the sound of fluttering papers. They looked up to see the mechanic holding his receipt book and smiling at the young couple.

“Can I help you?” Walt asked.

The End

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