

## At the Gate

“Dad, what are you doing here?” Cynthia Walker hadn’t expected to see her father at the airport. He was supposed to be home. She thought she heard the other man say something about “crazy.” She glared at her father, hands on hips, hoped the other man would disappear.

Manny smiled when he saw his daughter, walked toward her, arms wide. “Cynthia.”

“You promised to stay home,” she said, tried not to sound like a reprimanding parent.

“No, I didn’t,” her father said. “I promised to stay out of trouble.”

He pulled her into his arms, gave her a warm hug, pecked her cheek with a kiss.

“You were telling stories again.” Cynthia pushed out of his arms. “You’re not in the classroom anymore. You’ve got to stop this nonsense.”

Manny stepped back, held her hand. “You should’ve seen it. Never saw an audience so excited.” His eyes glowed, that old sparkle. Not there since her mother died two years ago.

Cynthia smiled, shook her head back and forth in consternation. “I did see it, at least the tail end. Daddy—”

He dropped her hand, turned around and walked toward the terminal window, arms outstretched. “See. The dust started, like I said it would. A lot sooner than I thought”

Cynthia followed him. “I know, Dad. Right after my flight landed. Now go home.”

He cocked his head to one side, continued to stare out the window. “You think I’m too old to travel?”

“I think you’re going to get into trouble again. I don’t want to see you hurt.”

Manny jerked around, the hard fury in his eyes made her jump back. “I can’t go home now, Cynthia. A lot of people will die soon.” His look changed to earnest pleading. “I’ve got to get to that conference. You can get me in.”

Cynthia held up her hand in an attempt to calm him. She couldn’t go through this again. “You got thrown out the last time you came as my guest. Embarrassed me.”

“This is no time to think about your career, too late for that. The planet’s almost here. You know what’s about to happen.” Crazy talk again.

“No, Dad, I don’t. Neither do you.” She paused to look around the terminal. People stared at them. She lowered her voice. “Calm down. You’re making a scene.”

She eyed the tall man in the frumpy collegiate-looking jacket who’d belittled her father. He stood very close, close enough to hear everything. He continued to stare at them. “This is a private conversation. Do you mind? Who are you?”

The man held out his hand, smiled. “David Mitchell, friend of your father’s.”

She saw her father do a double take.

Cynthia hesitated, shook David’s hand. “Don’t I know you?”

“Yep, just realized it.” He wore a cocky grin on his face. “We met at the conference last year.” She didn’t like the way he looked at her. “You must be Cynthia. I’ve read your papers on fracking and earthquake swarms.”

She dropped his hand. “What do you want?”

“No need to get testy. Your father can be my guest. Just about to tell him.”

She saw dad’s mouth drop open. He closed it, then smiled.

She glared at David. Wished he’d mind his own business. “No, my father is going home as soon as the dust stops.”

“Now, Cynthia.” Manny chuckled. “Don’t be rude. David and I had a nice conversation in the bar about what’s happening today. Smart boy.”

She turned away from David, saw a strange expression cross his face. She grabbed dad’s arm, marched him out of earshot. “Don’t do this. He’s not your friend. I saw how he spoke to you by the monitors. He wants something.”

“Yes, you.” Dad chuckled, his eyes twinkled with mischief. “Maybe you should pay attention. He’s not bad looking. Smart, and *not* a . . . volcanologist.”

Her hands trembled. How could he bring up Peter now? Didn’t he know thinking about him brought her pain? A year passed since her husband died. “What’s the matter with you? Stop it. I-I don’t like the way he talked to you. He called you a crazy old man.”

“I’ve been called worse. It doesn’t bother me as much as it does you. I’m sorry you heard that.” He looked away. “The dust stopped.”

“I’ve got to catch my limo. There’s a private jet waiting for me. Please go home.”

David called to them. “Come on, Manny, let’s go. I’ve got a ride waiting for us.”

Cynthia glared at David.

Dad removed her fingers from around his arm. “On my way,” he said to David. He still looked at Cynthia, determination in the stubborn set of his jaw.

She ground her teeth together. Nothing she could do. Only her mother could handle him when he got “in his mood.” She missed her mother, especially at times like this.

With reluctant steps, she followed dad who hurried after David. “Where’s your luggage?” Cynthia said to her father.

“Don’t need it. Can buy stuff in Washington.” He added in low voice, “If it’s still there.”

A long black limo idled outside the terminal. The driver held the door open. David and Cynthia both headed for the door at the same time. Bumped into one another. David fell against the door, dropped his suitcase.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Where are you going?”

“In this limo. I’m expected at a private hanger in a half hour.”

“So am I.”

Cynthia fingered her briefcase handle. “It appears we’re headed for the same plane.”

David’s smile infuriated her. Gorgeous. Nuts. “So it appears. After you.”

He stood back and let Cynthia crawl into the back of the limo. Manny followed then David, who sat across from them. Cynthia pulled down the hem of her skirt and crossed her legs. David’s eyes focused on them. Damn him.

They arrived at the private jet hanger. The driver unloaded Cynthia and David’s luggage. They tried to ignore each other when they walked into the lounge area. A man and a woman waited there, turned when the door opened. The woman ran to David, threw her arms around him, her “tighter-than-skin” dress out of place for travelling. Oh, god. Elena.

“David, my little Volcán. So nice to see you again.” She smothered him in her embrace, plied his face with kisses. Cynthia felt uncomfortable at how close Elena pressed herself against David. But that was Elena, the little volcano of sexuality. Why Peter? Was Elena better, warmer? Don’t go there, Cynthia reprimanded herself.

“What a surprise to see you, Elena.” David’s words sounded strained, his body stiff in Elena’s embrace. “It’s been a long time.”

Cynthia remembered the last time she saw Elena—Peter’s funeral. A few short years after their wedding. And during those years, together very little. Work kept them apart. “Have you two known each other long?” Cynthia said.

“We’re old friends. David and I dated in college,” Elena said. She wore a toothy grin. “He got me interested in studying volcanoes. We spent a *lot of time* on Mount St. Helens, didn’t we, my little Volcán ” No mistaking that look in Elena’s eyes, the emphasis on “a lot of time.”

Cynthia watched David squirm. Served him right. “How nice for you both.” Cynthia wondered how much Elena knew about volcanology. Professionalism did not exude from her. Something else did. Maybe she used her natural . . . charm to get her seat on the science advisory committee. Anything was possible. Cynthia busted her butt to get where she was today and Elena just wiggled hers. Life’s not fair.

Cynthia turned to the other man in the waiting room, extended her hand. “Dr. Cynthia Walker. You are?”

The man, John, flustered by the physical display of affection between Elena and David, smiled with hesitation. “John, ah . . . Dr. John Grady. Scripps.”

She squeezed his hand. “Nice to finally meet you, Dr. Grady.”

“John, please.”

“John. What do you think of our red dust?”

“Very unusual for this time of year.”

Cynthia laughed. “Aren’t you the funny one? It is unusual. You should talk to my father.” She turned to her father and pulled him closer. “Dad, I’d like you to meet Dr. Grady, He’s from Scripps Oceanography in San Diego. Dr. Grady, this is Manny Volynsky, my father.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” John said with a smile, shook dad’s hand.

“Likewise, young man. Let me tell you what’s going to happen after the red dust . . .”

Cynthia turned away from their conversation. She knew Dr. Grady was in for a treat.

She looked at Elena, who stood close enough to be David’s second skin. Those old feelings of jealousy rose up in her throat, choked her. What was it about Elena that made her skin crawl with envy? She could help but wonder how close...she and Peter...

Elena turned to Cynthia, still held tight to David. “Why took you so long to get to the limo? The driver waited forever. John said he saw you get off the flight from San Francisco a while ago.”

So John also arrived before the red dust started. “We got a little sidetracked,” Cynthia said. “I found dad by the bar. David invited him to be his guest at the conference.”

“Oh, Mr. Blackstone isn’t going to like that,” Elena said. She shook her head so that her straight black hair swished around her shoulders. Could she look any more seductive? “No. Not one little bit. “But then you know how to handle Mr. Blackstone, don’t you, Cindy.”

Cynthia clenched her fists at her sides, the old feelings in full force now. Keep it up. “I don’t care what Mr. Blackstone doesn’t like. Dad’s coming with us.” She stared at Elena.

Elena paused, turned to where John and dad stood, their conversation forgotten. “John, Cynthia’s husband and I worked together on the Colima volcano last year. A rock from the eruption killed him. Died in my arms. So sad.”

“Oh, my god.” Cynthia said. “You... bitch . . .” Did she say that out loud?

Manny grabbed Cynthia and held onto her. “Don’t let her upset you.”

Elena turned back to David. “I’ve missed you.” She squeezed his cheek. “You never call or email anymore. I found out last week that you won your prize from the Astronomical Society. I’m hurt that you didn’t tell me personally.”

“Elena,” David said, “Stop insisting we’re good friends. We have nothing in common. Our work together was just that—work, nothing more. You’re not even published.”

Cynthia felt herself calm a little at David’s words. Strange.

“I read you won another new grant. You’ll have to teach me how you do that.”

Elena’s face lit up. “Oh David, darling, you do follow my career. I always knew it.” She gave him another big smack on the lips. Cynthia gagged.

David tried to disengage himself from Elena’s hold, but she gripped him tight, babbled on. “Just got back from studying the Popocatepetl Volcano in Mexico, saw my family. We had a good time. You remember my sister, Luz, don’t you? She says hi. Always had a crush on you but that’s just because she likes the mysterious silent type. Isn’t that silly?”

Blah, blah, blah.

The captain came to the lounge area. “Sorry folks. Looks like we’re not going anywhere for a while. The FAA’s grounded all flights in the Western U.S.”

“Wait,” Cynthia said, rushed forward. “You’re a government chartered flight. We work for the federal government. We’ve got to get to Washington today. Can’t you call someone to get it cleared?”

“It’s this red dust, ma’am. Never seen anything like it. Worse than flying over an active volcano. I wouldn’t want to get caught in it.” The captain turned and walked away.

Cynthia pulled out her cell phone, called Mr. Blackstone. He’d arranged this conference. He could pull some strings. No luck.

“May I?” David said when he extracted his arms from Elena’s grip. That look crossed his face again, conceited jerk.

Tim Malone; Red Sky  
Contemporary Disaster Fiction

“May you what?”

“Get this flight cleared.”

“Oh, please. Knock yourself out.”

David pushed a button on his phone, stood there with that smug look. “Mr. Keys. We’re all here. You know about the FAA order. Uh-huh. Thank you.” David hung up. Said nothing.

“Well?” Cynthia said.

“Well what?”

“You arrogant...”

“Wait a minute.”

The captain reappeared in a few minutes. He walked to David, anger in his eyes, stopped close, put his face in David’s face. “Haven’t had a call like that since I flew for the CIA. Let’s hope your . . . friend can pull the same trick with the folks in the tower. The jet’s through that door. Get your stuff. Let’s go.”