

Chapter One

Jimmy Olson meets Las Vegas

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Jimmy Olson was singing so intently with the windows down in his 1985 Volkswagen Beetle that he did not notice the developing problem in the car's motor. "Woe, woe, woe, woe, woe, woe, woe, woe, woe," he sang, "do you know the way to Santa Fe ..." And then he trailed off because he did not know the rest of the words to the song made famous by Dionne Warwick in 1967, long before his time, and about a different city and state, San José, California. But at least he pronounced *Santa Fe* with a Spanish accent, not the way most *gringos* did, making it sound like *Santa* in *Santa Claus*. He had learned something in three semesters of Spanish, even if he did get only a C each semester. It was *SAHN*ta Fe and it meant Holy Faith and Santa Fe was where Olson was headed when his car broke down on Interstate 25 just north of Las Vegas, as in Las Vegas, New Mexico, not Nevada (which is called "Vegas" by most New Mexicans), about 65 miles from his destination.

He wanted to go to Santa Fe because that's where the culture was. The City Different! He knew it was a town unlike any other where someone with his writing talents (he told himself) would be welcomed immediately. Think of all the artists and writers who had resided/did reside in Santa Fe. He'd join them. He'd write the Great American Novel, maybe two or three, while he was there. In the meantime, he was certain that with his degree in English literature he could get a job as a book critic at the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, one of the few remaining independently owned newspapers in the United States. No matter that the editor had not replied to his letter of application; no matter that his phone messages had not been returned; no matter that he had not one day of newspaper experience; he'd just walk in the door and get hired on the spot. No problem.

First things first, though. He finally realized he had a problem with the car when he stepped on the gas and the car did not respond. In fact, it slowed down. He saw a sign for an exit one mile away and decided that was a good place to get off. As he headed slowly down the highway, he passed a junkyard to his right filled mostly with yellow school buses. One of them had WEST LAS VEGAS SCHOOLS in black lettering on the side. Most had no identification. He also passed some horses in a field and a cement factory.

Fortunately, no one was behind him and he was able to ease the car onto the ramp at Exit #345 and off the interstate. Even though the ramp was uphill, he coaxed the car into making the extra effort. "You

know you can, you know you can,” he said softly under his breath. He must have been the car’s umpteenth owner and it had something like 200,000 miles on it, but it had never failed him during his four years in college and he was confident it wouldn’t fail him now. No one was coming at the YIELD sign controlling the off ramp so he turned right without stopping and kept on going over a bridge above railroad tracks and a street and into the town of Las Vegas, the seat of San Miguel County, the state of New Mexico.

By some stroke of good fortune, it was downhill from there to the intersection where by even greater good fortune there was a service station with a sign saying MECHANIC ON DUTY, a sign you didn’t see that often.

Inside, Olson approached the man behind the counter, wondering if he was the mechanic or just an attendant. Since the gasoline pumps were self-service, it wouldn’t seem economical to have an attendant and a mechanic working. Probably the owner, Olson thought. When the man looked at him, Olson spoke:

“I’m having trouble with my car,” he said, pointing over his right shoulder with his thumb at the Volkswagen outside. “Seems to have lost power. I’m not sure what the problem is.”

The man behind the counter looked at him and said, “Probably just needs a new rubber band.”

It was an old joke but Olson chuckled along with the man behind the counter. After all, the man behind the counter was probably Olson’s savior and he wanted to humor him.

“Seriously,” the man said, “sounds like your fuel pump is going bad.”

“How soon can it be fixed?” Olson asked.

“Assuming it’s the fuel pump, I’ll probably have to get one from Santa Fe. Might be able to do that yet today. Might not. Maybe the junkyard up the street has an old V.W. with a good fuel pump in, but I doubt it. He mostly stores old school buses.”

Together, the two of them pushed Olson’s car into one of the service station’s two bays and the man behind the counter became, according to the name stitched on the overalls he put on, Ray (for Ramón) Salazar, mechanic. Olson later learned that Salazar was also the owner and a Navy veteran, which explained the poster at his service station showing an obviously Hispanic sailor with the words *EL NAVY. Haz frente a tu futuro* (Navy. Stand up for your future.)

Because his insurance did not allow non-employees in the service area, Salazar told Olson to wait at the counter. “Look at the tourist brochures,” he said. “Maybe you’ll like Las Vegas and want to stay.”

With no place to sit, Olson stood as he skimmed the only brochure he could find. He learned that Las Vegas had been started in 1823 and officially named *Nuestra Señora de Los Dolores de Las Vegas Grandes* (Our Lady of the Sorrows of the Great Meadows). The Atchison, Topeka

and Santa Fe Railroad, following the Santa Fe Trail, arrived in 1879, but did not extend quite to the original Las Vegas. As a result, the area around the railroad grew up to be East Las Vegas while the original Las Vegas across the *Rio Gallinas* (Gallinas River to the Anglos) became West Las Vegas or Old Town, and then beyond that was a place called Upper Town. The two Las Vegases were culturally and architecturally very different, with the Anglos dominating the East and the Hispanics the West. It was not until the 1970s that the two municipalities merged everything but the school districts. Each community also retained a post office, no doubt a decision made by some politician with an eye on the next election and with a sense for pleasing everyone. The brochure said that the economy was based on farming and ranching and tourism. It also helped to have New Mexico Highlands University, which was situated in East Las Vegas. Las Vegas has more than 900 buildings on the National Historic Register, according to the brochure, including a library named after its benefactor, Andrew Carnegie.

Before Olson could read more, Salazar reappeared to report that his assumption about the fuel pump had been correct. He was also able to call a garage in Santa Fe and connect with someone who would be coming to Las Vegas in three hours and could deliver a new fuel pump.

“You’re a lucky fellow. We’ll have you fixed up and ready to go by 5 o’clock,” Salazar said to Olson. “You’ll be in Santa Fe by 7. Maybe 8.” With nothing else to do, Olson decided to walk around Las Vegas.

“Where’s a good place to eat?” he asked Salazar.

“Estella’s up on Bridge Street. Can’t miss it. Good Mexican food.”

That’s what Olson wanted to hear. Good Mexican food. The only Mexican food he had ever eaten was in a franchise eatery in the town where he went to college. Thanks to his mother’s worldly views about food in general (she liked to cook any and every ethnic dish she came across in a recipe book) he occasionally wondered what real Mexican food was like. He also wondered what Las Vegas was like. It looked a little bit like his hometown.

Olson had grown up in a small town in eastern Pennsylvania once famous for Anthracite coal and a good work ethic. The mines, however, had been shut down for lack of business more than 50 years ago and the work ethic had to be applied elsewhere. The town was dying very slowly. He once wrote in a paper in one of his composition classes in college that said it was a “there was” town. You’d walk around the town with an old-timer, somebody in his 60s or 70s, and he’d point to a vacant lot and say: “There was the South Ward School” or “There was the *Evening Courier* newspaper office” or “There was the Victoria Theater” or “There was ‘Texas Pete’s’ (a hamburger and hot dog six-stool place run by three Greek immigrants). The only way Olson could fill in the blanks was to look at old photographs of the town in the public library, which had not been endowed by Andrew Carnegie.

Olson headed off in the direction the mechanic had pointed. “Just cross Grand Avenue, head up University, turn right on any street, then left on National. You’ll find Bridge Street. Estella’s. The Plaza.”

On his way, he walked past the home of Las Vegas Fire Department Co. #1, a two-story stone building with a two-story stone tower above that and with three arches in the front containing a window, a door and a garage door. Clearly the company had outgrown the building. Attached was a one-story brick addition that contained two pieces of fire equipment.

Along the way Olson realized that a panting dog was following him. The dog had a collar, so Olson knew it wasn’t a stray. The sun had not yet peaked, but it was still hot, and there seemed to be more humidity than one would expect in the Southwest. He passed The Soup Kitchen at the First Presbyterian Church and considered, but only for a moment, going in for the free lunch advertised on a sign by the door. He had scruples after all—and a credit card his parents had given him for the trip. It had a \$10,000 ceiling and was good for one year. His parents said they would pay his bills while he was off finding himself and, they hoped, a job.

He turned onto National Street and found himself walking through the campus of New Mexico Highlands University. He marveled at how green the grass was until he realized it was artificial. Given the sign he had seen in service station about water conservation, he thought artificial turf made more sense in New Mexico than in a football stadium. At the end of the campus he crossed a bridge over, well, he didn’t see any water, just lots of green things growing in the riverbed, but he knew from a sign that it was the Gallinas River (*Rio Gallinas*). On the other side, painted on a building was the fall schedule for three athletic teams at West Las Vegas High School, otherwise known as “The Dons.” The school’s campus was to the left and down the street, in part bordered by the *Rio Gallinas* and a park that included a trail along the river. Olson noted that the Dons played teams from Portales, Aztec, Farmington, Taos, Raton, Socorro, but not Santa Fe. (Actually, they did, but he was not aware that “St. Mike’s” was St. Michael’s, the Catholic school in Santa Fe.) Also on the schedule was Robertson, which certainly did not sound New Mexican to Olson.

Hanging on a street light nearby was a banner that said: WELCOME TO OLD TOWN (with a picture of a gazebo) HISTORIC LAS VEGAS. Across the street, carved in stone on the bridge, was notification that he was on the Old Santa Fe Trail. He really wanted to be in Santa Fe. Rather than cross the street, he continued on the left side on past the Kiva movie theater, looking for Bridge Street and Estella’s. He chuckled to himself when he saw the name of a bookstore across the street, “Tome on the Range.” He had been assigned to read enough tomes in college to get the joke. Shortly, he reached the Plaza and stopped for a moment next to a building that looked like it been a bank but was now the

administrative offices of the West Las Vegas School District. Good reuse of an old building, he thought to himself, remembering that in his “there was” town, they had torn down a magnificent school structure of a certain vintage and replaced it with a high-rise apartment building for senior citizens.

The Plaza was more of a circle than a square or rectangle as was the case in other New Mexican towns and it invited all who were hot and weary to enjoy the shade of at least 20 trees, all about 30 feet tall, that someone had wisely planted generations before. At a gazebo near the center—Olson recognized that it was the one shown on the welcome banner down the street—two men played musical instruments—an electric guitar and an electric mandolin. They weren’t playing for money, it seemed, but for the sheer joy of entertaining anyone who would listen. Five or six appreciative folks did listen, sitting on benches while their children played on the gazebo.

Olson walked around the Plaza, passing by the *Tapetes de Lana* weaving center, a lawyer’s office, a bookstore, a religious store, the Plaza Hotel (where he knew he could not afford to eat or stay), a photo store, an antiques store, a bar and a boarded-up building that had a sign on it saying NAVAJO TEXTILES. When he looked to his left to walk back down the street toward the bridge, he noticed that the two-story red brick building on the corner that housed Plaza Drugs had an inscription on top: ROMERO BLOCK 1919. He recalled that just down the block he had passed the E. ROMERO HOSE AND FIRE CO. but had written it off as a vacant building.

He could not find Bridge Street and wondered if perhaps it paralleled National. Near the bridge, he stopped an older man in a T-shirt, khaki shorts and pink socks and asked where Estella’s was. The man turned around and eagerly and helpfully pointed back up the street toward the Plaza.

“See that sign on the right that says CAFÉ?” Pink Socks replied. “That’s Estella’s. Good food, but it doesn’t open until 11. Good food, though. Worth the wait.” It was 10:55 and Olson headed toward the restaurant. He had not eaten breakfast. As he crossed the street, he saw a sign that said he was on Bridge Street and it was then that he realized that when he crossed the bridge, National became Bridge. Many decades later when he told his grandchildren about Las Vegas, he called his story “the tale of two cities.” Of course, they never understood the literary allusion. Who in the late 21st century read Dickens or even knew he had existed? He had become an author without an audience.

Estella’s was not what he expected, but better. It was an old-fashioned place that probably hadn’t changed since the day Estella opened more than half a century ago. Only when he looked closely at the neon CAFÉ sign did he see Estella’s name in smaller letters, impossible to notice from across the street where he had walked to the Plaza and

back. The restaurant was wide open with two rows of tables and chairs and no booths to block anyone's view. The room must have been 15 feet high and the ceiling was tin. To the right of the entrance was a counter and he sat in the first stool. Directly in front of him was a white hutch, about seven feet long and four feet high. He could see various knick-knacks through the glass doors of the hutch. Sitting on top were statues of religious figures and running along the edge of the top were Christmas lights and a sign that said "Peace on Earth." To his left on the wall where the hutch ended he saw a painting of a grey-haired woman and assumed it was Estella.

"What would you like to drink?" the waiter asked as he handed Olson a menu.

"Iced tea with lemon, please."

"Lime. We don't do lemon."

"I'm fine with lime," Olson said, proud of his rhyming response. The menu was as Pink Socks had promised: flautas, burritos, tamales, enchiladas, tostados, green chile stew. They all came with the usual refried beans, lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, chile and your choice of meat: beef, chicken or chicharrónes

He was going to order a chicharrónes burrito until he learned that it was salty fried pork. Instead, he chose chicken.

"Red or green," the waiter asked.

"What?"

"Chile," the waiter replied. "Red or green?" repeating what is jokingly referred to as New Mexico's state question.

Olson chose red. While he was waiting, he saw a plastic container shaped like a bear on the counter. He wasn't sure what was inside. He had no idea why it was there. He noticed one on every table. Then Olson saw that day's *Las Vegas Defender*, the local newspaper, in a metal wire rack on the counter next to him. Across the top of the page was a two-inch high headline in all capital letters: **D.A. DISAPPEARS**. Olson took a copy of the paper from the rack, not realizing that he was supposed to deposit 50 cents (any combination of nickels, dimes and quarters) in the cylindrical tube attached to the rack.

His cheese and chili chicken burrito in front of him, Olson began reading the story:

By Alissa Trujillo

Staff reporter

Domingo Roybal, who has been San Miguel County's district attorney since 1996, has not been heard from since about 2:30 p.m. Friday, when he called his wife, Sara, on his cellphone to tell her he was going to spend part of the weekend at the couple's remote cabin midway between Mora and Angel Fire. However, his white 2001 Oldsmobile Bravada was found in Raton, about 100 miles northeast of Las Vegas and 80 miles more or less east of Angel Fire, on Saturday evening parked near the train station.

Air and land searches were done over the weekend, and a tracking dog checked the parking lot where Roybal's car was found, according to Las Vegas Police Chief Christopher Sandoval.

Acknowledging that Roybal had not been headed for Raton, Sandoval said it appeared he had changed directions and "most likely cut over to the Interstate on Route 161 then drove on to Raton."

The FBI has been called to help with the investigation, along with officers from the state police, Raton, Angel Fire, Mora and Las Vegas. Police want to check with Amtrak to see if anyone boarded the train in Raton, but were unable to do that because the train had not yet arrived at its final destination, Chicago.

Mrs. Roybal said that her husband told her he needed some "quiet time" to prepare for a case, and when he didn't return as promised on Sunday, she and friends, according to First Assistant District Attorney Alfonso Abeyta, were holding out hope that he would show up for work Monday.

"We are just baffled by this," Abeyta said. "We expected him for a hearing at 9:30."

Mrs. Roybal spoke briefly at Monday's news conference, but would not take questions afterward. She referred questions to a family friend, the Rev. Thomas C. Jackson, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. Jackson said he had known the couple for more than a decade and considered them happily married. He said it was not unusual for Roybal to slip away by himself to prepare for a trial.

¡Hola! someone said loudly from behind him and Olson turned around to see two women walk into Estella's. They looked to their left, where the hello had come from, and realized it was someone talking on his cell phone, not someone greeting them.

¿Cómo estás? The man shouted into the phone. He was about 55 years old and had a nicely tanned skin. Olson listened to what was really a one-sided conversation just to see if he could understand what the man was saying.

¿Qué necesitas? the man continued. *Un perro. Sí. Sí. Necesito ir a Mora comprar el perro.* He paused. *Mañana. Mañana.* He laughed and hung up and Olson returned to the story about the missing district attorney.

Although family and friends hold out hope that Roybal left on his own volition and will return unhurt, Sandoval said police are considering a wide range of explanations for his disappearance.

"We have to look at all possibilities. That's what's making this case difficult," Sandoval said. "We can't focus on any one thing. There is no 'one thing.'"

Sandoval said there has been no subsequent activity on Roybal's credit cards, bank account or cell phone, which was found in his car. None of Roybal's belongings—such as clothing or a suitcase—are missing from the 59-year-old man's home.

"Right now, we have no logical explanation," Sandoval said.

Police said they have found no evidence of foul play. They said Roybal had no known personal, family or medical problems.

How the investigation into Roybal's disappearance will proceed will depend largely on what sort of tips come in, Sandoval said.

The last reported sighting was Saturday, when an employee at the strip mall near where Roybal's car was found said she might have seen him. Police were interviewing the employee more thoroughly.

Sandoval said investigators used a state police helicopter Monday to continue the search in Raton. Volunteers on horseback searched the woods around the Roybals' cabin.

The investigation into Roybal's disappearance has been similar to what would be done if any local resident was reported missing, Sandoval said.

"Even so, we have to look at things a little differently because of his position," Sandoval said. "In fact, because the district attorney is an officer of the court and because his car was found in another jurisdiction, the State Police may actually take over the investigation and we'll just assist as needed."

If Roybal does not return and is not heard from, pending cases that he is handling will be reassigned to the five assistant district attorneys who work under him, Abeyta said. Roybal's next scheduled trial, a homicide-by-vehicle case, is slated for next week. Abeyta could not say Monday whether that case will be rescheduled.

Olson kept on eating and reading, reading and eating. He didn't stop with the story about the D.A., either. The entire front page of the paper was all local news—a snapshot of Las Vegas. He found some national and international stories inside mixed with more local. He even glanced at the classified advertisements, which followed the sports pages, and one of them caught his eye:

Do you like to write?

The *Las Vegas Defender* needs a reporter to cover everything from City Council meetings to high school athletic events. Must be comfortable with writing on a computer and should be familiar with Quark so you can fill in for the make-up editor. Should have ability to take photographs with a digital camera. We'll supply the camera. Some night and weekend work. Knowledge of Spanish helpful.

Although Olson read the rest of the ad, which told people where to apply, it was the line about Spanish that caught his eye. He knew Spanish—¿*Cómo está, amigo?*—or thought he did, and he hadn't heard anything from the Santa Fe newspaper. The snobs. Right now a job, any job anywhere, would be good. He was in such a hurry to go to the newspaper office that he almost forgot to pay his restaurant bill. He was surprised to learn that he could not use his credit card, because the restaurant accepted cash only. What alien place am I in? Olson wondered. But on the spot, he decided that he was in a town rich with material for his first novel and Santa Fe could wait.

He collected his change, left a very modest tip, and headed down Bridge Street and beyond, to the office of the *Las Vegas Defender*.

Are you hooked? You may order *Extra! Extra! Read all about! Jimmy Olson saves Las Vegas* from amazon.com or barnesandnoble.com.