THE DAILY BEAST

Snow Fall: The Plane Went Down With His Wife, His Kid… and a Secret

Tony Mink was an experienced pilot, but as he flew his family to a Rocky Mountain Christmas vacation, he may have cut one corner too many. And then the blizzard hit.

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9.4.17

"Tony, Tony, come around. Something's lost and can't be found."

- Prayer to Saint Anthony

Day 1

On Friday, Dec. 23, 1983, at 11:45 a.m., a single-engine V-tailed Beechcraft Bonanza rumbled down a runway at Pueblo, Colorado's municipal airport and took off into a storm.

At the controls was Tony Mink, a 36-year-old with dark hair, hazel eyes, and a long beard that he grew whenever he didn't feel like shaving. A second-generation pilot, Mink had earned his license at 18. Throughout his twenties, he made his living in the air, flying odd jobs and bank deliveries out of Utah and southern Idaho, where he'd grown up. Now, he ran an aircraft salvage business—buying used planes to be fixed up for resale—out of Florida, where he lived with his family.

They were with him in the Bonanza as the wheels left the runway. In the front passenger seat was his wife, Chi, short for Charlene; Tony had called her that since they were high school sweethearts. In the back seat was Brian, their only son, a 14-year-old introvert who gravitated toward computers. The plane swiftly rose into the clouds, its windows beaded with melted snow.

The Minks had left Fort Lauderdale the day before. They were en route to Salt Lake City, their former home, where they planned to attend a Christmas party with friends. Fort Lauderdale to Salt Lake City is a long haul—2,000 miles and about 12 hours. And Tony's four-seater was a small plane; once in the air, there was no walking, or standing—not even space for a bathroom. This was the family's version of a road trip: a cramped, uncomfortable, loud, but thrilling ride through the clouds.

The storm over Colorado was just one pocket of a freak weather system that had caught forecasters off guard. Fueled by arctic winds from the Yukon, a cold front was lashing the entire continent. Blizzards raged from the Great Lakes to the Rockies and down to New Mexico. Floods wreaked havoc in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Barges sat in 8 inches of ice on the Mississippi River, frozen till spring. Cattle were forced off the range in Texas. That morning, a SIGMET advisory was in effect, meaning significant meteorological conditions such as turbulence, winds, and strong up- and downdrafts.

But Tony was no stranger to hardcore flying. His father was the multiple-year winner of the "Idaho Safe Pilot award." His mother was a "pinch hitter," trained to control the plane from the right side in case anything happened to her husband mid-flight. "Another rotten afternoon in the mountains," Mink said to himself as snow whipped past the windshield and gusts above 100 mph buffeted the little Bonanza. Sliding around in the baggage compartment were the Minks' Christmas presents and luggage—including a heavy leather suitcase containing valuable contents that Tony was anxious to deliver to his lawyer in Salt Lake.

As Tony dipped below the high Rockies, the only things visible outside were the plane's wing lights, blinking in the fog. Instrument flying has a very conservative fuel requirement: You're supposed to land with enough fuel to still be able to fly to your alternate airport, plus 45

minutes. After takeoff, he'd switched to the small tanks on the wingtips, keeping the main tank full for landing.

Just as the plane passed over the sleepy northern New Mexico town of Tierra Amarilla, Tony noticed the needle twitching on his fuel flow gauge, indicating that the engine's fuel pump was sucking up air. He decided to switch from a near-empty tip tank to a full one.

Shortly before the trip, Tony had gotten new wing tanks installed, and the selector valve had been mounted backwards. In the thick of the moment—flying blind in heavy turbulence, close to the mountains—Tony forgot. Instead of switching to the full tank, he turned the dial to a position that disengaged the pump entirely. Starved of fuel, the engine sputtered to a stop.

Tony frantically tried to restart it. The Bonanza was now flying over the Tusas Mountains. Tony couldn't see the ridges, but he knew they were there. He made a 90-degree turn, then another, flying in a square to keep the plane in air clear of peaks, while the family descended at 8,800 feet per minute.

Ranchers Tony and Paul Esquibel were feeding their cattle when they spotted the wayward plane heading toward the northern ridge of Canjilon Mountain, where they grazed their herd in the summer months. "It's going to hit," one of them said.

Tony's feet worked the pedals hard as the altimeter spun counterclockwise. He re-opened the tank; next, he had to get air out of the hose, get fuel into the engine, and spark the starter. Beside him, Chi was motionless, eyes fixed forward.

Those 45 seconds seemed endless, suddenly quiet, drifting through the white—and then, the engine started again, spitting fire as it caught. Tony pulled back on the yoke and straightened out on a westerly course. The plane regained some speed and had begun to pull up when Chi yelled, "Trees!"

There was an earsplitting crack as the Bonanza collided with three giant Alberta spruces. The trees severed both wings, whipping the plane around. Tony saw the engine hurtle away first, then the propeller. The spruces, 150 feet tall, snapped like toothpicks. Glass, plastic, and metal sprayed everywhere. Suspended for a moment in the treetops, the fuselage tipped, then careened down through the branches and slammed nose-first into the snow.

Brian screamed, but no one heard him; his parents were both unconscious. The plane plowed through 7 feet of snow, carving a deep groove in the powder. Just yards shy of a hundred-foot drop, it collided with the base of a spruce and came to a halt. A nearby tree fell, crushing the roof.

Tony woke to the sound of Brian shouting. His eyes were sticky with blood, and he could feel his heartbeat in the gash on his forehead. He saw a gaping hole where the front of the plane used to be. Charlene was passed out, barely breathing—half her face shredded. Wind whistled through the cockpit, blowing snow into her hair.

Deep in shock, Tony charged out of the plane and sank into the powder. He picked up pieces of the broken craft and tried piecing it back together. "Help us!" he shouted. "She's dying!" Brian, clutching his arm in pain, crawled from the wrecked cabin and tried to calm his father. Together,

they stood on the nameless ridge, whipped by the wind. “It’s just us,” Brian told his father. “It’s just us.”

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Crash Site Photo (Greg Valdez)

I first encountered Tony Mink’s story when I stumbled across an old *Deseret News* article about the crash. A lot of things struck me about his saga, but none more than the image of a father lying on top of his shivering son on a cold Christmas in the mountains. I couldn’t get the picture out of my head, so I set out to learn more about the man. I flew from Los Angeles up to Portland to meet his brother, Ron, then to New Mexico, where I pored through old newspaper microfilm at the Santa Fe Public Library and spoke to volunteers and cops who’d searched for Tony Mink and his family. Finally, I drove nine hours across the desert to a remote corner of Utah to meet Mink’s best friend, Keven. We hiked together into rugged Grand Staircase National Park, where he reminisced about his old friend—and divulged a secret that he’d been hiding for over 30 years.

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At an apartment in Salt Lake City, a few hours after the Bonanza went down, Keven Peterson's Christmas party was well underway. The tequila was half gone, but one bottle was still full—the Bacardi Añejo, Tony's favorite. Keven, a short, squarely built 29-year-old with a beard even longer than Tony's, planned to split the bottle with his best friend when he got there.

Keven had gotten together most of their old crew tonight—the skydiving crew. That's how Keven and Tony met, 10 years back, when Tony was piloting skydiving sorties out of Cedar Valley Airport near Salt Lake City. Keven was afraid of heights, but a friend dragged him along to get Keven to stop griping about his boring job at the steel mill. When Keven saw the pilot, he was terrified. There was Tony, slumped in a chair on the runway, shirt hanging out of his shorts, eyes closed, cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other. "I wonder what all this shit is for?" Tony joked in his cockpit, waving at the plane's gauges. Then he flashed a smile back at Keven, who decided it was safer to jump than to land with this guy.

Tony Skydiving (Keven Peterson)

After that first leap, Keven became a full-blown adrenaline junky, joining Tony's crew and going up every chance he got. The guys screamed, "Eat! Fuck! Skydive!" when they jumped instead of "One! Two! Three!" They all craved the rush, but none more than Tony, who'd sneak in jumps between flights and promised a case of beer to any diver who could beat his plane to the ground—a bet he usually won. Keven loved Tony's adventurous spirit, and he owed his friend a lot. Tony had taught Keven how to fly, helped him negotiate a deal on his first plane, and land his current job, flying for a mining conglomerate—which made Keven Utah's only bush pilot.

Mingling around the Christmas tree in his living room were Keven's wife and her friends, a few of Chi's friends, and about eight skydiving buddies, including Tony's business partner and co-pilot, Adam Glover (not his real name), visiting from South Florida and staying with his parents in Provo for the holidays. A nervous man with curly black hair and glasses, Adam had been Tony's second choice as co-pilot and Tony was beginning to regret the decision, finding him too jumpy behind the controls and too volatile. Keven sensed a deep rift developing in the partnership. Tonight was supposed to be about forgetting all that and partying like the old days. But for that, they needed Tony.

By 3 a.m. they still hadn't heard from him. "If he crashed my plane and lived through it," said Adam—the Bonanza's registered owner—"I'll kill the son of a bitch myself." Solid priorities, Keven thought. But they were all worried. Most of the lightweights had gone home already, but Tony's core group of friends—Keven, Adam Glover, and a few of the other skydivers—had stuck around trying to figure out what could have happened. Keven hoped Tony had just gotten a hotel, but feared the worst. At 4 a.m., he called the FAA. "My friend's plane is overdue," he said.

Meanwhile, Adam was growing more agitated by the minute. He knew something Keven didn't: There was a quarter million dollars aboard that Bonanza.

Tony and Adam weren't salvagers. They were smugglers.

Day 2

That Saturday, FAA officials checked the agency's computerized database and found no flight plan for the missing Bonanza. But using the plane's registration number, logged by the tower at takeoff and landing, they discovered that the aircraft had departed from Pueblo airport the previous day. Radar operators at Albuquerque Center Radar Facility used the Bonanza's point and time of departure, last known radar pings, weather, and speed projections to isolate the spot where Mink made a strange hook pattern before disappearing just north of 10,922 foot Canjilon Mountain in northern New Mexico.

At 3 a.m. on Sunday, Christmas morning, New Mexico's Civil Air Patrol (CAP)—an all-volunteer auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force with units in all 50 states—initiated a search. At dawn, two CAP Cessnas took off from Tierra Amarilla airport and a third from Santa Fe airport. Their objective was to search a square on the map—known as a grid—over Canjilon Mountain. The volunteer pilots had checked the weather reports and knew another storm was fast approaching the area.

Working out of the back of a hand-me-down Air Force trailer at Santa Fe airport, CAP's mission coordinator wasn't getting a signal from an emergency locator transmitter (ELT), a small device that emits a distress signal upon impact. That meant his pilots would have to eyeball the wreck. It was rough, heavily wooded country. A plane had crashed in the same spot a year earlier and wasn't discovered until after the thaw, all four of its passengers dead.

En route to Canjilon, the CAP pilots lost visibility in the storm and had to turn back. With the mountain socked in, CAP grounded its aircraft and suspended the search.

In Salt Lake City, meanwhile, Keven Peterson and Adam Glover grew tired of waiting for help from the authorities. They organized their own search party, consisting of Keven and Adam, two of Tony's skydiving pals, and Tony's older brother, Ron. Adam reserved a turboprop airplane to

shuttle the group down to Santa Fe along with two helicopters from Albuquerque charter companies to search the area where Tony's Bonanza had disappeared from radar.

Ron, a 39-year-old acupuncturist and student of ESP, climbed aboard the turboprop as it powered up on a snowy runway at Salt Lake City airport. He believed he was spiritually connected with his brother, and if Tony was dead, he would have felt something. He'd already consulted his clairvoyant, who'd confirmed that Tony and his family were alive. Wearing his favorite cowboy hat, he took his seat and closed his eyes, quietly searching for Tony's energy and trying to send some to his little brother to keep him warm.

Keven thought all that psychic stuff was crap. He knew Tony was alive, too, but it was because his friend was the best pilot he'd ever seen, and if anyone could crash a plane and live through it, it was Tony.

Keven had led survival classes for BYU as a teen and used to devour the rescue stories in *Boys Life* magazine, but he'd never been on a search before, so he hadn't been sure what to pack. He'd grabbed a sleeping bag, two rifles, his favorite parachute, a pair of his wife's ski pants for Chi, and that bottle of Bacardi for Tony.

As their big turbo-prop passed over the Tusas Mountains, bucking in heavy turbulence through the storm, Keven asked the pilot to drop low and see if they could spot the Bonanza. He knew they were going too fast, but he was willing to try anything.

When they landed at Santa Fe airport on Sunday morning, Vern Mundt was waiting on the tarmac in a Jet Ranger helicopter. A pudgy, 47-year-old charter pilot with thinning red hair, Vern had cut his teeth flying missile retrieval for the Army. Adam Glover had promised Vern $400 an hour for as long as the search took. Vern understood the urgency and didn't ask for any money up front.

Keven and Ron climbed inside and Vern fired up the blades. It had been 45 hours since Tony's plane had disappeared from radar. CAP planes were still grounded. The Jet Ranger was the only machine in the sky. With a sketch of the last radar pings in hand, Vern and his charters headed north toward Canjilon Mountain.

Day 3

On Canjilon that Christmas morning, Tony and Brian woke up shivering in what was left of the cockpit.

Chi had died of her wounds a few hours after the crash. Tony and Brian, overcome with shock and despair, had rested her on the floor between the back and front seats, and covered her with a blanket. Her body now lay just a few feet behind them. It was horrifying. But Tony believed that he and his son could survive this.

Their injuries were painful but not life threatening. Brian had dislocated his left shoulder in the crash, and Tony had a broken rib, bruises, and deep cuts on his face.

To keep out the cold, they'd stuffed the Bonanza's ripped-open nose, shattered windows, missing baggage door, and gashed fuselage with suitcases, clothes, broken pieces of the plane, and paper towels. When a hole came unplugged, they'd crawl into the baggage compartment,

tear open a Christmas present, and use the wrapping paper and cardboard. Brian, a heavyset kid, had on nylon long underwear and a snowmobile suit; Tony wore a snowmobile suit and his leather jacket. Both had warm boots, but Tony's toes were numb from tramping around in the snow.

Tony, in his practical airman's mind, knew rescue could be a while. He hadn't filed a flight plan—due to the nature of his cargo—and he'd removed the plane's ELT back in Florida. The authorities, he realized, might not even knew they were missing yet. Still, surrounded by snowy wilderness, Tony knew the best plan was to stay put and wait for help.

They had a Coast Guard survival tin with a few biscuits, sucrose tablets, and two quarts of water—enough for one person for one day—and some Christmas jelly candies. The food wasn't much, but they could go a couple of weeks on empty bellies. Water was the issue.

The two quarts ran out fast, and Tony and his son were already dehydrated. They couldn't eat snow—that would lower their body temperature, inviting hypothermia—but they could melt some. Tony smelled gasoline fumes, so he didn't want to try his lighter inside. He pushed open the hatch and emerged into the clearing. Dark clouds loomed over the mountain, and the wind was strong, slamming against the wrecked Bonanza.

This wasn't Tony's first crash. Three years earlier, he and his co-pilot were flying a twin engine Aero Commander 690 over Bimini, when a hydraulic leak caused the flaps and wheels to sag, burning up gas. He flew low over the narrow island, looking for a road to set down on, but ran out of land. When the engine quit, the plane splashed down 200 yards from shore. Tony was uninjured, but his co-pilot broke his neck. Tony helped him out of the plane and paddled him to shore, saving his life.

Now, 10,400 feet above sea level in northern New Mexico, Tony tramped into the clearing, the wind stinging the cuts on his face. Blood from the cuts trickled onto the snow at his feet. Clear of the fumes, Tony sparked his lighter. The wind put it out. He turned around and used his back as a shield, but the flame was snuffed out again. Back in the Bonanza, Tony noticed beads of water forming on the crumpled ceiling—condensation from their breath. He wiped up the drops with a rag, then wrung it out into a can. The ceiling was covered in grease and muck, so the water was filthy. But it was all they had.

Day 4

That night, the storm unleashed another torrent of snow, felling tree branches, ripping power lines, and dropping three feet of fresh powder on Canjilon Mountain. Undeterred, 15 ground search volunteers gathered at Tony Esquibel's ranch at dawn on Monday morning, unloading their gear in front of his two-story brick house. Although Esquibel had watched the Bonanza descend toward Canjilon three days earlier, he hadn't reported the crash because he was a private man who didn't want government people tramping around his property. But when he learned that a family was in trouble, he'd agreed to allow his ranch to be used as search headquarters.

Leading the search was Gabe Valdez, one of only four state police officers assigned to Rio Arriba, New Mexico's vast northernmost county. As the county's Search and Rescue Initiator (one of his many duties), he had assembled the volunteers.

They included a four-man team from the Los Alamos Ski Patrol, all nuclear scientists at the National Laboratory, trained in first aid, high altitude bivouac, and map and compass reading. The Los Alamos Amateur Radio Club, retired radio geeks from the National Lab, would coordinate radio frequencies at search headquarters from the back of their converted World War II ambulance. There was also a little orange snowcat, on loan from the Los Alamos Fire Brigade, to ferry the ski patrollers up and the Mink family down.

Bobby and Al Unser—the world-famous racecar drivers—lived in side-by-side ranches up the road from Esquibel's. The brothers brought four Polaris snowmobiles to help with the search. Gabe had caught Bobby speeding years back, and in lieu of a ticket, he'd accepted Bobby's offer to soup up Gabe's patrol car. They'd been good friends ever since.

Vern Mundt (Mundt Family)

Gabe had often snowmobiled with the Unsers, but this snow was deeper than he was used to. Unlike the brothers, who'd once burned out four snowmobile transmissions competing to see who could get higher up a slope, Gabe was cautious by nature. But sometimes, when a man's friends have a higher tolerance for risk, he's willing to stray above his own.

The snowmobilers—Gabe, Al, Bobby, and Bobby's 28-year-old son—agreed to ride ahead of the snowcat and plough a path through the powder. The team headed east up the county road, past the Esquibel family's tiny Catholic chapel—dedicated to St. Anthony, patron saint of lost things. Then they turned onto a primitive cow trail that Esquibel had recommended, entering Carson National Forest. This is where Kit Carson, the forest's namesake, learned to hunt, and the Pueblo Indians fled the conquistadors. Terra Incognita, locals still call it. Unknown territory.

In his Jet Ranger helicopter, Vern was trying gallantly to get Keven and Ron up Canjilon, flying low through ravines and canyons. It's what pilots call scudrunning—weaving through a storm—

and it's a risky endeavor. Since arriving, they'd been pushed sideways twice, flown with an inch of a telephone wire, and almost crashed after spinning out of control in a crosswind. Desperate to find Tony, Keven and Ron scanned below for any strange shapes, movement, or colors. Once, Keven spotted a splotch of red on the snow and asked Vern to circle back. "Deer," Vern grunted. "Must've knicked barbed wire outrunning something."

Adam Glover rode in the group's second Jet Ranger, piloted by Mike Hopkins, the charismatic owner of WestJet helicopters, who was charging $450 per hour. Adam's willingness to handle all the expenses as well as the search logistics convinced Keven that Tony's misgivings about Adam had been misplaced: Adam was a loyal friend to Tony after all.

When visibility dropped to nil, Vern put down at the group's motel in the mountain town of Chama, 30 miles north of Canjilon. He'd arranged to park the two Jet Rangers in the front lot of the motel, a cozy mom-and-pop operation called the Trails End. Tony's parents, Gus and Vivian Mink, had driven down from Preston, Idaho, to help find their son. Vivian, a high-strung homemaker who shared Ron's affinity for spiritualism, had faith that her youngest was alive. Gus, a taciturn man who ran his town's Bell Telephone office, had participated in air searches in Idaho, so he knew the odds of rescue were low.

Gabe Valdez and Al Unser (Greg Valdez)

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Never troubled by the odds, the Unsers and Gabe were blasting up Canjilon Mountain in hundred-yard increments. One of them would accelerate to full speed, get stuck in the snow, and pull his snowmobile to the side. Then the next would come blazing by, carving out the next hundred yards. They called it "crow hopping." After the snowcat got stuck in a heavy drift, the ski patrollers, riding inside, strapped on their massive 3-foot snowshoes and teamed up with the snowmobile team. When the cow trail meandered into the trees, the patrollers took the lead,

tramping a path for the snowmobiles. It was exhausting work, especially for guys who spent most days cooped up in a laboratory. Their snowshoes sank deep into the powder, never touching firm ground—a sensation akin to walking in flippers in waist-deep water.

At first, the ski patrollers doubted the effectiveness of the snowmobiles—until they saw how well the Unsers handled the machines. “Worth the work just watching,” one patroller thought. Gabe Valdez was the weak link, a short man with a huge upper body, which threw off his balance on snowmobiles. But the state policeman made up for it in toughness. He’d been raised in a stark town just down the road, and he was respected across the county.

Come dusk, the searchers agreed to suspend the search until morning. The snowmobiles had lights but the terrain was too treacherous for night-riding. The ski patrollers had prepared to build a snow cave and camp overnight, but decided they could hike back up in their tracks easily enough, so they’d split a motel room in Chama instead. Gabe would return to his nearby home and the Unsers to their ranches, where Bobby wanted to tweak the snowmobiles’ skis to adjust for the snow depth. Following their tracks back to Esquibel Ranch took the group 30 minutes. Gabe estimated they’d covered about 2 miles.

Bobby Unser Sr. and Bobby Unser Jr. at Esquibel Ranch (Kevin Small)

Later that night, as lightning flashed over the nearby mountains and illuminated the two Jet Rangers in the Trails End parking lot, three Cuban men checked into the motel. They said they were Tony’s business associates from Florida, and their gold chains, pressed slacks, and pointy, crocodile shoes made them look sorely out of place in rugged Chama. Thirty-year-old Jorge Trujillo, Tony and Adam’s third business partner, was the leader of the group. He said he was good friends with Tony and he was here to help find him.

Keven had met Jorge a few times through Tony and didn't think he was stable enough to be involved in the search. Three months earlier, Jorge had been parking his Cessna at Florida's Tamiami airport when his wife exited the plane and walked into his still-spinning propeller, killing her instantly. Jorge had been hospitalized for shock and was still recovering. But he'd always been loyal to Tony, who'd given Jorge a job and named him a partner in their business, rescuing him from his boring life as an auto mechanic.

Even after seeing the storm close-up, Keven remained convinced that Tony and his family were still alive. He could see them. There was brainy Chi, his go-to gal for tax advice; and hefty Brian, with his dad's dry wit, always greeting Keven with an eye roll or a "you again"; and his best friend Tony. Tony was protective of Chi—he threw out a guest once just for insulting her housework—and he was great with Brian. Tony was a busy guy, always on the move, juggling projects, but his Brian time was sacred. Once, Keven had stopped by to party and found Tony sitting behind Brian, watching his son play computer games. "Beer's in the fridge," he told Keven. "I'm busy."

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As the darkness thickened over Canjilon, bringing with it subzero temperatures, Tony lay on top of Brian in the front seats to shield him from the cold and share body heat.

Above them, they could hear the dull thud of snow layering on top of the fuselage. It functioned like a blanket, Tony knew, further insulating the cabin. The same concept applies to a snow cave, which Tony had learned to build back in the Boy Scouts.

In front of them, the only thing still working on the Bonanza's dashboard was the thermometer. Tony had stopped looking at it. Never fond of cold weather, he'd planned to retire in the tropics soon, island-hopping on his sailboat with Chi and Brian. Brian would've taken some convincing, but Chi was always game for an adventure.

For Tony, the only relief from the cold and pain were those precious moments of sleep, when his mind drifted off to memories of Chi. She was 17 when they met, living in the train depot her father ran in Richmond, Utah—fed up with her boring town and overbearing mom. Tony, then a DJ for his local radio station, whose favorite genre was classical, would speed over the border from Idaho and whisk her away on late-night dates, despite her mom's objections. They were passionately in love and got married before graduation, even though they'd planned to wait till after. Chi was hiding a little bump under her wedding dress.

Tony tightened the blankets around his boy. What's the first thing we ought to order when we get out of here? Tony asked him.

Hot chocolate, Brian said.

Yeah, Tony agreed. Hot chocolate.

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A hundred miles south, a fax arrived for Major Neil Curran in the Santa Fe headquarters of the state police's Criminal Investigations Division. A tall, broad-shouldered 47-year-old with a voice that made listeners sit up straight, Curran had been following the search for the missing plane

on Canjilon. The fax, from Florida authorities, said the pilot of the Bonanza, Tony Mink, was a suspected air smuggler.

In Bimini, Mink's file explained, a Customs plane was hot on his tail when he crashed his Aerocommander offshore, on the island's shark-infested shoal. Tony had paddled his injured co-pilot to shore on a 50-pound bale of marijuana, and the Royal Bahamian Police discovered seven more bales on the sunken plane. They arrested Mink, but someone paid his bail and he never returned to the Bahamas.

Curran, who'd worked the State Police's air smuggling detail through the '70s, called his contact at Pueblo airport, where Tony Mink had departed. On the fringes of the runway, the contact said, two black cars had pulled up to the Bonanza, maybe to on- or offload items. Before anyone could inquire, Mink had taken off into the storm. For Curran, the signs were clear. There was the missing flight plan and absent ELT, typical of a pilot trying to stay off the radar. And there was the timing. As Curran knew from his own missed St. Patrick's Days and Superbowl Sundays, smugglers liked to fly over the holidays, when most cops are home with their families.

Helicopter pilot Mike Hopkins, also suspicious, called the DEA's Albuquerque office. A rookie agent answered; all the senior staff were out for the holidays. Hopkins said his charters had rented Albuquerque's only two helicopters and were waving around cash to find their business associate. The rookie agent made a few calls, found out about Mink's Bimini crash, and discovered Mink co-owned a Cessna with Jorge Trujillo, who was under indictment in the DEA's massive sting against Florida air smugglers, Operation Screamer.

Back in Santa Fe, Curran received a phone call from a Chama state police supervisor who said there was a rumor going around town of three suspicious Cuban visitors. One of them had called Tony Esquibel and offered to pay any price if Esquibel led his group up to the wreck. The men had also tried to rent snowmobiles from a local dealer, who'd told them he was all sold out.

Curran had a good read on this Tony Mink. He'd gotten to know a few air smugglers in his day, even bought a car off one. Most were white guys who lived in the suburbs, had families, and didn't carry a gun. They did it for the thrill, and Curran loved that part, too: chasing them through storms, flying dark, watching a DC-3's belly zoom right over his runway barricade. Air smugglers were smart, seat-of-the-pants pilots, difficult to outfox. "Generally, how we caught them was they'd crash the damned plane," Curran recalls. He still wanted to rescue the Mink family as quickly as possible. But now, with these Cuban men on the hunt, he wanted to make sure his people got to the wreck first.

Day 5

On Tuesday the Unser snowmobile team and ski patrollers followed their tracks back to the spot where they'd left off the previous day and resumed their arduous climb. Battling a blizzard, the searchers took until mid-afternoon to reach the ridge north of Canjilon—the area where the Bonanza had disappeared from radar. They were close now.

The terrain had become steeper and more treacherous the higher they climbed, fraught with rocky cliffs and deep arroyos filled with snow. Gabe Valdez—mounted on his snowmobile—was freezing. The ski patrol leader noticed the tough cop's movements slow down and his shivering stop—the telltale signs of hypothermia. "You can't keep going!" he yelled over the snowmobile's roar.

The group doubled back to a primitive cabin they'd passed just lower on the ridge. Inside, the ski patrollers heated water for Gabe and helped him swap his snow-soaked duds for dry clothes. Then the group sheltered for several hours, as the blizzard raged.

By the time they emerged, it was dark. Gabe, worn out and half-frozen, was disappointed, losing hope they'd find the Mink family alive. If you're injured in the wilderness in bad weather, Gabe knew, you usually have four to six hours. Without injuries, you might have 24. The Bonanza had disappeared 101 hours ago.

Forced to suspend the search yet again due to darkness, the group began their descent. They had no way of knowing they were just 400 yards from Tony's buried Bonanza.

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Pacing in his room at the Trails End, waiting for the blizzard over Canjilon to subside, Keven got a call from Tony's lawyer and close friend Brad Swaner, who'd been phoning Keven for daily updates on the search. "You remember that thing you had problems with in Bakersfield?" Swaner asked him.

Keven remembered. Police had found two concealed rifles in his car while he was driving to Bakersfield, where he and Tony co-owned a gold mining claim as a side gig. Swaner had helped Keven get the charges dropped. "Yeah," Keven said.

"Make sure you have one on you," Swaner said.

After a pause, Swaner explained: "Tony was flying with a leather suitcase with a quarter million in it, and Adam Glover might not let you get there first."

Keven felt a shiver run through him. "Thanks," he said, hanging up.

Keven knew Tony, Adam, and Jorge were smugglers. Tony had offered Keven the co-pilot seat first, prior to Adam. "It's like skydiving," Tony had said, "except the rush lasts 24 hours." Keven had declined the offer. "I don't think my heart could handle that," he'd said. Why hadn't Adam told him about the money that Tony was carrying this time? He was paranoid about something, Keven thought—maybe that I'd report the bag to the police, maybe that I'd snatch it for myself. But Keven, as Swaner knew, would never betray his best friend. Keven could walk a couple rooms over and clear things up with Adam right now. But when his daddy taught him about guns, he'd said, "Keven, never show a bad man your gun until you kill him."

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Weak from five days without food, Tony and Brian huddled together in the Bonanza's front seats, trying to sleep to conserve what little energy they had left.

The Bonanza now lay completely buried in snow, only its V-Tail emerging. To reach the surface, Tony had carved a narrow passageway through the snow from his cockpit hatch to the clearing. He'd been crawling up it, periodically, to wipe the snow off the V-Tail for search planes, even though he knew no pilot could ever fly in this kind of weather.

It was pitch-black inside the buried plane, and the stench of Chi's decomposing body filled the cabin. The guilt was agonizing for both father and son. Tony knew he should've waited out the storm. Brian thought he'd slammed into his mom's seat at impact and forced her face into the glass—because he was too fat.

To keep his boy's mind active, Tony had recruited him to help build a pair of snowshoes from broken-off parts of the plane and practice strapping them on with electrical wiring. It was just make-believe, Tony knew. The snow was too deep for the rickety things, and a few of Tony's toes had already turned black from frostbite.

The wind had died down, so Tony wanted to see if he could get a fire going outside to melt some snow. But he needed kindling. The wrapping paper and paper towels were in the cracks. He also had his checkbook and his aeronautical maps. And he had the suitcase filled with a quarter million dollars in cash. That used to sound like a lot to him, back when he'd started smuggling.

It was five years earlier. He was shuttling skydivers in big multi-engine planes when he got an offer to fly bales of marijuana up from Colombia for $50,000 a load. It suited Tony, who'd never had much regard for authority. He'd grown up non-Mormon in an all-Mormon town, watching his neighbors break their rigid rules as often as follow them. Chi worried about the risks but trusted his decision. She handled the family's finances, and started keeping track of money and product. The money was great, but after a few years, Tony got tired of the job. He and his partners—Adam and Jorge—had a string of failed runs, including a crash off St. Thomas and ditching the load in Haiti. And the law was closing in. The DEA had come to the airfield in Fort Lauderdale recently and searched the Bonanza. "We know what you're up to," they told him. Tony had decided he'd smuggle in one last big load of pot and retire for good.

In early 1982, he and his partners had brought in a load of pot worth $3 million—a million apiece. That was Tony's walking away number. They'd stored the cash at Tony's place while Brad Swaner figured out how to launder it. Then, one night, while Tony was out, three men broke into the house. They flashed badges and handcuffed Chi to a table and went right to the closet where everything was stashed. "Thanks, bitch," they said on the way out. Tony had an unlimited capacity for personal risk, but such a risk to his family was unacceptable. After the break-in, he became desperate to get out. But he'd resolved to do so in comfort. So he went back to doing what he did best.

He'd smuggled in a few successful loads since, and this quarter million was a portion of those earnings. He was bringing it to Salt Lake for Swaner to launder into the mining claim that Tony co-owned with Keven. In the Bonanza's baggage compartment, Tony had about $230,000 in the leather suitcase and a few stacks—about $19,000—that he'd stuffed in a duffel to keep handy for gas and incidentals on the flight out.

With his eyes nearly swollen shut and his toes frozen, Tony crawled up his tunnel to the clearing. The clouds still clung to the mountain; this storm just wouldn't let up. He scooped up some snow in a can, ripped a check from his checkbook, flicked open his lighter, then set the check on fire under the can, watching the lonely flame crawl slowly up the paper. When it comes to it, he decided, I'll burn the cash.

Day 6

At the Trails End motel the next morning, Ron got a call from his dad, Gus, who was staying in Santa Fe. “Weather’s getting worse,” Gus said.

Nationwide that Wednesday, the arctic storms were growing in size and strength. Hail the size of baseballs pelted Tallahassee. Twisters tore across the Texas panhandle. An Oregon farmer lit fires and held an overnight vigil to save his flock of lambs.

The Unsers’ snowmobile team led the ground team upward through two additional feet of powder, while CAP pilots, for the fourth straight day, were grounded.

Gus had been calling the Aviation Weather Center for forecasts. “No chance of flying today,” he said. Ron, through the window of his motel room, could see that his dad was right: The clouds were stuck to the ground. Frantic, he asked to talk to his mom and told her to call her spiritual group and get a prayer circle going immediately.

On Canjilon that morning, Brian needed to relieve himself, so he and his dad dragged themselves up their icy tunnel to the surface. Storm clouds still filled the sky, and the Bonanza’s V-Tail was covered in snow. Tony didn’t have the strength to wipe it today. Brian—lightheaded from a fever and weak from hunger—was too depleted to zip up his snowsuit.

Tony noticed it was colder this morning. He figured they had two more days left, maybe three. Tony was ready. He’d always seen life as an adventure, and with his soul mate gone, he’d be fine finishing up the adventure a little early. But there was Brian. Tony and Chi had lost their first child. He was born premature and died after one day—not long enough to know, but long enough to love, and to name: David. They weren’t religious people, but they prayed, in their own way, for another child. Three years later, Brian entered their lives. Tony, a college student at the time, would race home between classes and swing his little boy in the air, just like an airplane.

Maybe the snowshoes will work, Tony decided. He could head downhill, find a town or cabin, and fetch help for Brian. He would need to go soon, before all his strength was gone. One last adventure—this time, for his boy. He’d go today.

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A few hours later, to the north, the clouds lifted over Chama. Ron, Keven, and Vern watched excitedly from the Trails End’s parking lot. “A miracle,” thought Ron. “Lucky,” thought Keven. When the clouds reached 100 feet, Vern and Hopkins agreed there was enough room to take off and decided on a plan: They’d fly to the ground search headquarters, Esquibel Ranch, and wait to see if the clouds broke over Canjilon.

Adam Glover took off first in Hopkins’ helicopter, while Keven and Ron rode with Vern, Ron taking the front left, Keven the back right. Vern flew south toward Esquibel Ranch—over the Chama railroad crossing, Al and Bobby Unser’s ranches, and the little settlement of Tierra Amarilla. Then he turned east toward the mountains, flying low, with white below him and gray above.

Halfway to Esquibel’s, they spotted something unusual—what appeared to be a tunnel leading upward through the clouds, created by localized air currents over the mountainous terrain. “Let’s go!” they yelled. Vern jumped into the chute, wispy gray on all sides. As the Jet Ranger

climbed, the light grew brighter and brighter, and when they emerged at the top, they saw the sun.

Crash Site (Bobby Unser Sr.)

Above the clouds, they felt a wave of excitement. Below, they could see the tops of mountains, jutting out of the gray. To Ron, they looked like islands. Vern weighed the risk. If the cloud cover thickened over Canjilon, he'd be flying blind over the mountains. This was dangerous business. Vern was getting paid by the hour, but he was under no obligation to find the missing Mink family. Heroically, he pushed up on the left joystick and sped at 130 mph toward Canjilon Mountain.

View over Canjilon (Kevin Small)

Tony was half-asleep when he heard it—a dull thud through the Bonanza's snow-covered roof. Thrup-thrup-thrup-thrup. It sounded close, but Tony knew the pilot would never spot them hidden under the snow. He grabbed the instrument panel's broken-off glare shield, and crawled up his narrow tunnel. He pushed on the chunk of snow that he'd used to seal the tunnel entrance but it wouldn't budge, frozen shut. He pushed harder, ignoring the pain in his ribs, and finally dislodged it. Free now, he hurtled a few yards into the clearing, through snow up to his forehead. Overhead he could see the Jet Ranger, circling nearby like a tiny robotic bird. He waved the black glare shield frantically. The chopper looped farther away, then swooped back again. Tony waved the glare shield over his head. But the chopper flew away once more.

"This is the spot they went off radar," said Vern over the intercom. He was gridding quarter-mile-strips over Canjilon's northern ridge. They'd spent about 13 hours over three days in the air trying to reach this spot and studied it on the map together every night. Vern had it memorized. Below everything was white, even the trees—big white cones reaching up for the chopper. Ron stared into the white, trying to focus his energy. Keven searched the other direction for any movement, any sign of life. Then Keven spotted a dark square shadow on the snow. Most things in nature are rounded off, not square, he thought. "Circle to the right!" he shouted.

Vern made a steep bank right. Keven spotted a broken-off tree, missing its top third. "Let's go again!" yelled Keven, getting excited. Vern banked the helicopter, the rotor blades slicing through the stiff, cold air. He brought it around again, not even all the way, then saw something—a small black dot, like a drop of ink on a white sheet of paper. "Jesus Christ," said Vern. Keven gasped, "Oh my God." Ron stared out the front, speechless, with an unobstructed

view of his little brother… alive. Vern switched over to an official frequency and gave his helicopter number and coordinates. “We have found the downed plane,” he reported. “There’s one person. No, there’s two!” Out came Brian, his left arm limp at his side, joining his father.

At Esquibel Ranch, the ground volunteers erupted in joy. Up on the mountain, the snowshoe team could hear the helicopter, a half-mile away. Bobby and Al Unser’s snowmobile team was within a few hundred feet.

Vern circled around, looking for a place to bring the chopper down. Keven glanced at the square shadow again. It was from the V-tail, he realized, the only thing jutting out of the snow. The powder was too deep to land. Vern pulled the stick back into his lap and lowered the chopper’s nose, decelerating into a hover. Then he eased down, bit by bit.

Keven unbuckled his seatbelt, opened the door, and stepped onto the skid. With the prop blasting powder in every direction he couldn’t see a thing. Vern got it to a foot off the ground and Keven jumped. He sank into snow that was 11 feet deep, much higher than he’d expected. The prop wash was deafening. Ron jumped in next, disappearing into the snow behind Keven. Vern quickly flew off to give them visibility, and the swirling powder subsided. Thirty feet away, they could see Tony and Brian. Keven was unable to walk or run or jump with the ground so far beneath him. He fell flat on his belly, patting down the snow, then climbed up his imprint on hands and knees. Then repeated—and repeated. Ron followed in his path.

Keven caught sight of Tony’s face, crusted in dried blood. He realized that his friend had been through something horrific; they could never go back to how things were; those carefree, light-hearted skydiving days were gone for good. Finally, Keven reached them.

“For once, I’m glad to see you,” Brian yelled to Keven. Ron hugged his brother, then his nephew. They felt frail in his arms, and barely had the strength to hug him back.

“Is there room for us?” Tony yelled, motioning up to the chopper.

“What about Chi?” said Keven.

“No,” Tony said, shaking his head. “She’s in the plane.”

Keven paused. They stood together in the snow above the buried wreck. The clouds were gathering; they didn’t have long. “Let’s get you out of here!” Keven yelled.

They followed their tracks back into the clearing—Keven and Ron holding up Brian, Tony limping behind them. They patted down the snow so Vern could get the skid lower, and lifted Brian in first. Brian got his knee on the skid, and then, using his good arm, clawed his way inside. Next it was Tony’s turn. But Keven had to ask him something first. “Is there anything I need to pick up here?” he shouted, barely audible over the Jet Ranger’s roar. “Leave it!” Tony yelled. “We’ll come back for it!” Keven and Ron lifted Tony up, and he dragged himself into the Jet Ranger.

There was room for one more and Ron—as family—was the natural choice. But Keven begged him to stay, terrified of getting stranded up there with Chi’s body, alone. Ron had no intention of leaving him. Having been through hell and back, they’d finish this the way they started—together. They ducked and shielded their eyes from the tornado of powder as the Jet Ranger

lifted off. Tony and Brian rose from the nameless ridge, getting one last look down at the crippled Bonanza that saved their lives.

Aftermath

While retrieving Chi's body from the wreckage, Officer Gabe Valdez discovered the $19,200 in cash inside the duffel bag. Then he found out from his state police contacts that Tony was a suspected drug smuggler. He woke up his friend Bobby Unser, at his ranch, to share the news, and Bobby was furious. He suspected there'd be more money or drugs on board—a mother lode—and wanted the police to claim it before Tony's fellow drug lords could. He called the state police chief, an old friend, and asked to borrow a chopper.

The next morning was clearer, so a state police pilot picked Bobby and Gabe up on the highway and flew them up to the wreck. Rifling through the Bonanza, Bobby discovered the luggage sealing off the cracks. "Smart guy," he thought. Near the right wing, he discovered a small, Christmas-wrapped box with a baggie of cocaine inside, a personal use amount. But he found no mother lode.

After Tony's criminal record surfaced, his case became a national news story. Reporters clustered outside his hospital room, peppering him about his smuggling. Tony turned to his son. "You ready to get out of here?" he asked. "Yeah, Dad," Brian said.

Seven days after the rescue, Tony buried his wife in her hometown of Richmond, Utah, less than a mile from the old train depot. Keven, Adam, Ron, and Chi's three brothers served as pallbearers. Jorge Trujillo, still unhinged by the death of his own wife, plucked the carnation from his lapel and ate it. Brian stood with his arm in a sling, and cried softly. The rector read from Isaiah: "On this mountain, the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples… He will swallow up death forever."

The state police announced they would not pursue any charges. With no fingerprints on the bag of cocaine, there was no way to link it to any of the three passengers. Tony never claimed the $19,200—because he'd have to prove where he got it—so the money was forfeited to the federal government. The U.S. attorney's office for South Florida sued Tony for flying without a license, seeking $10,000 in penalties; he was also charged with contributing to the crash by bungling the fuel system. But when they tried to serve him with the papers, their letters to Tony's old address were returned undeliverable.

With Tony in no condition to work, and Jorge on the lam, Adam took over the smuggling operation, but soon retired and became a commercial airline pilot.

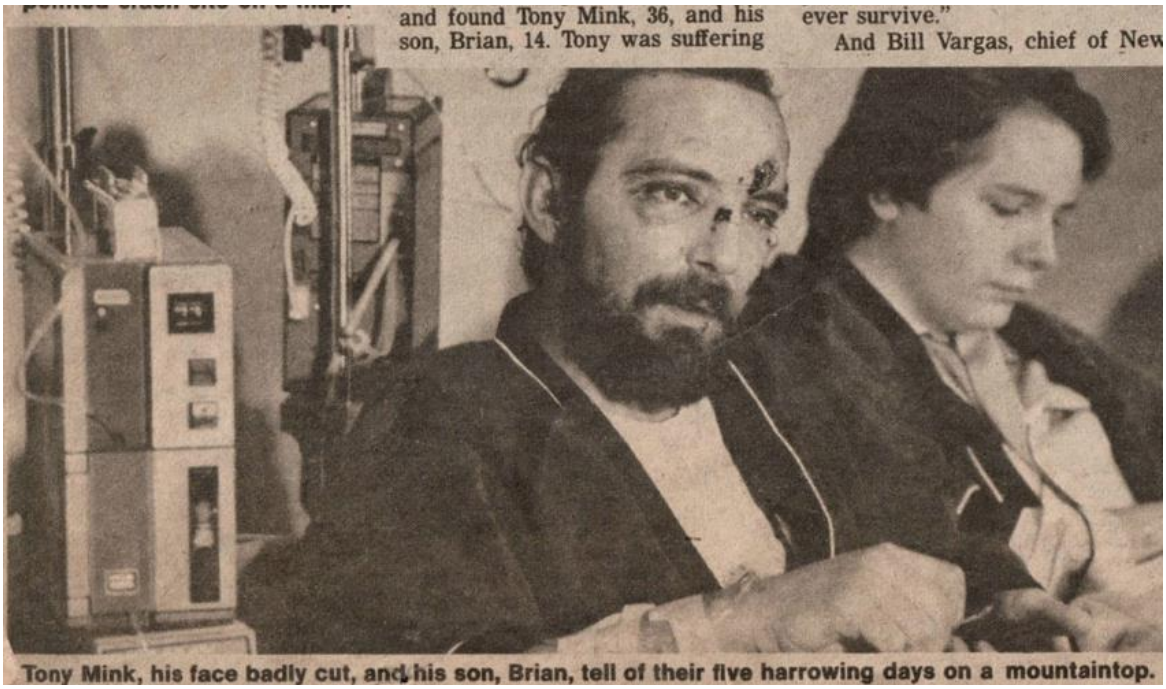
Gabe Valdez died in 2011. All of Rio Arriba turned up for the big-hearted cop's funeral, so many in fact that they had to move the service to a bigger church.

Vern received a letter of commendation from the Air Force for his successful search for the missing Bonanza. He'd participate in many searches over his long career, but considered those Christmas days over Canjilón his most harrowing.

Keven Peterson Congratulating Vern Mundt after the rescue (Rio Grande Sun)

After Keven's name popped up in newspapers as Tony's business associate, his boss let him go. His marriage, already on the rocks, finally ended, and he lost his Cessna in the divorce. But he never blamed his friend. He checked in on Tony and Brian in Fort Lauderdale a few times. Both father and son were severely depressed, staring at a TV that wasn't on. Keven helped Tony box up the porcelain trinkets that Chi so loved. Keven moved out to a small town in Utah, where he lives today, building and selling Indian drums and artistic waterwheels.

In January 1985, in northern Colombia, Tony crashed for the last time. The communist M-19 guerrilla group had been taking bribes from pilots in the area where Tony picked up his bales. Tony, who hated communists even more than bribe takers, probably told them to go fuck themselves. So right after his Convair took off, it was shot down over the jungle. Tony had a load of pot on board and a crew of three Colombians, including the son of a top official. All were killed. Brian, orphaned, went to live with Chi's younger brother in Arizona, where he lives today.


and found Tony Mink, 36, and his son, Brian, 14. Tony was suffering

ever survive."

And Bill Vargas, chief of New

Tony Mink, his face badly cut, and his son, Brian, tell of their five harrowing days on a mountaintop.

Tony and Brian Mink (National Enquirer)

Some 30 years later, around Chama, you'll still hear whispers about what else was on board Tony Mink's wrecked Bonanza. Some say Mink threw 15 pounds of coke from the plane before it hit the trees; others that he sprinkled it in the snow before the rescue. There's been talk of $150,000 unaccounted for and a buried stash near the crash site. Tony Esquibel's wife told me she used to get calls and visits from the town's shadier types, all wanting to know, "Where'd that plane crash again?"

The mother lode mystery lingered for three decades until I tracked down Keven. After the rescue, Keven told me, he sent Ron into the Bonanza to find Tony's bag of money. Forty-five minutes after their drop-off, Vern came back for them. During the flight down to Esquibel Ranch, Keven hid the bag of $230,000 under his jacket. Then, upon landing, he gave it to Adam. He didn't know what Adam planned to do with it but wanted no further involvement. Adam got the money to Tony's lawyer, Brad Swaner.

In the days that followed, DEA and state police tramped up to the wreck and dug out a home computer, video cassette recorder, camera equipment, wrapping paper, coat hangers, a pair of sunglasses missing a lens, Tony's .32 Walther pistol, and aeronautical maps of South America with Tony's handwritten notes—but that was all. Major Curran called off the search, and announced that the crash site was closed to the public until state police could return after the thaw. But, like Coronado's gold, the lure proved too strong. When insurance people hiked up to the wreck in the spring, they found the Bonanza torn to pieces. Someone had written on the side: "The coke is no longer here."