



## South Fork Kings

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AS CHIEF OF EMERGENCY SERVICES, ROD JENKS HAD INCIDENT REPORTS to complete, a set of water-rescue safety guidelines to review, dozens of emails to write, and a ringing phone to answer. But he was standing idly at his office window, struggling for motivation. Immediately outside, under the awning, an extended family squabbled in Hindi. Behind them, in the small visitor center parking lot, an F-350 struggled to execute a U-turn while a line of cars stretched back to the highway. Across the lot, the concrete square in front of the restaurant was as crowded as an airport terminal. Families waiting for tables sat on the flowerbeds and the split-rail fence. There was a line to get into the gift shop.

Since joining the Park service as a ranger twenty years earlier, Rod had grown increasingly disappointed in people. They littered, ignored signs, flew drones, trampled meadows, started fires, discharged weapons, graffitied granite, climbed gates, waded into raging rivers, got lost, fell from cliffs. Some, like his soon-to-be ex-wife, Jennifer, and his former friend, Helicopter Pilot Steve Newburg, betrayed his trust and broke his heart.

He answered the phone.

“Hey, Rod. It’s Judy down at Ash Mountain. I just got a call from a woman in Long Beach. Apparently, her daughter and the daughter’s boyfriend are a day overdue.”

“Terrific. Do we have an itinerary?”

“Yes. Backpacking trip. Rae Lakes Loop. Four nights. They were supposed to

be out on the 19<sup>th</sup>. I talked to the kid on duty at Road's End and he has a permit on file."

"Sounds good."

"Did you want to call down there?"

"I probably should."

"Would you like the number for the mother?"

"Sure. Why not?"

After standing with his eyes closed for a solid minute, Rod slapped himself in the face.

He reached the ranger cadet at Road's End, learned that the permit included a plate number and asked for a sweep of the overnight and day lots. The cadet called back twenty minutes later. "It's here. Black Altima."

"How's it look?"

"Dusty. Lots of pine needles on the hood. Tire tracks walked over."

Rod's goal with the first call to parents was to get some history and a sense of the missing party's personality. How much wilderness experience? Previous trips to SEKI or Yosemite? Carrying the right gear? Careful and responsible? Knucklehead?

The mother's name was Hanh Pham. The daughter, Emily, was a 25-year-old nursing student. The boyfriend, Brandon, 26, was taking night classes at Long Beach State to earn an MBA. He worked part-time at a Men's Warehouse. Emily and Brandon had been on one previous trip together, an overnigher above Big Bear Lake.

Rod remembered an incident that had occurred years earlier in Joshua Tree. A young couple, about the same ages as Brandon and Emily, with about the same levels of experience, went on a day hike. The trail was a four-mile loop over sparse, rocky terrain, fairly well marked. When the search started, two days later, the couple's car was still at the trailhead. After three more days, their bodies were found among boulders, locked in an embrace. Their water bottles were empty, Cliff Bars eaten. An autopsy determined that the female had been strangled. The male had slashed his wrists.

The official report concluded that they had gotten lost and walked themselves in circles. Once they started experiencing the terror of extreme thirst, they became irrational. The male had killed the female to put her out of her misery and then done the same for himself. But Rod had his doubts. He won-

dered if the male hadn't had a secret plan all along.

He asked Mrs. Pham questions designed to sound innocuous. "How'd they seem before they left?" "They run into any trouble planning the trip?" "Any calls from the road?" After a series of short answers in the negative, he got direct. "Is there any chance Brandon would hurt your daughter?"

Mrs. Pham took a moment to answer. "No. He good person. I don't think so. You found something?"

"No, ma'am. Standard procedure. We haven't started looking."

After another pause, Mrs. Pham said, "He bossy. He like to be in control."

"Has he ever hit her?"

"No. But one night he make her cry. She talking to another boy."

Rod jotted a note.

"You think he kill her?"

"We're just gathering information."

Brandon's mother, Susan, was either getting over a cold or a heavy smoker. She was not aware that Brandon and Emily had gone backpacking. "We talk but...you know. He's an adult. He's got his own life."

When Rod got direct, Susan bristled. "What are you trying to say about my son? He wouldn't hurt anybody. He had a butterfly collection as a kid. Does that sound like a murderer?"

Had she not seen *The Silence of the Lambs*? "Just trying to cover the bases. I understand he's a control freak. Would you agree with that?"

"No. He's very neat and organized but he's not a *control freak*. And he wouldn't hurt Emily. He worships her. Even though she's Chinese or whatever."

The first time Rod met Steve Newburg they were standing around a picnic table looking at a map of the Ionian Basin. A solo hiker attempting to ascend Goddard Creek Canyon and then work cross-country to Evolution Valley had gone missing and Rod was drawing likely off-trail routes. Steve was younger by ten years or so, not yet thirty, but he was right-and-tight. Buzzcut, aviators, the forearms of an ironworker. He only talked when he had something to say. Otherwise, he assessed, nodded. When it was time to gear up and fly, he stepped lively. When Steve and his spotter found the hiker, Rod heard the call over the radio. Steve was so calm he sounded sleepy. "Subject located due south of Mt. McGhee. Signaling but appears immobile. Preparing for longline

insertion.” That first encounter led to drinks at the bar at Wuksachi, fly-fishing on the Kaweah, an overnight trip to Moose Lake. “I want to get you guys down for dinner,” Steve said. “Meet the missus.” He reached into his wallet for a snapshot. “Tara. Love of my life.”

Tara was *Playboy* quality: swirling blond hair, golden skin, a smile from a toothpaste commercial. “Well done,” Rod said. He forced his eyes away. “Cute.”

When he brought the invitation back to Jennifer, she squinched her nose. “All the way down the mountain for dinner?”

“We’ll make a day of it. Do some shopping. Catch a movie.”

“And listen to rescue stories.”

“No work talk. Promise.”

Steve and Tara’s house was a big stucco job in a private development north of Fresno. Steve gave the tour, showed off his gun collection and the certificates he’d earned in the academy. The *Bee* had covered his graduation and he’d had the article framed. The backyard had a built-in barbecue and a pool. When Tara finally emerged, her hair was not so blond, her skin not so golden. In a skirt, tank-top and bare feet, she looked cheap. She offered a half-smile and a limp handshake.

Steve poured wine and made small talk. Tara dumped olives and cheese onto a plastic platter and spent ten minutes scrolling her phone.

“Hey, hon? That cheese plate about ready?”

“Yeah. Take it.” She didn’t look up.

She sat with the group through dinner, fake smiling, moving asparagus around with her fork.

“So where’d you two meet?” Jennifer asked. Rod knew she was intrigued by the discord and wanted answers. The drive back to Grant Grove would be a ninety-minute *Dateline* on the troubled marriage of Steve and Tara.

Steve grimaced. “High school. Ninth grade, if you can believe it.”

“Looong time ago,” Tara said. She reached for her phone and did more scrolling.

“Hon,” Steve said. He covered the phone with his hand. “We have guests.”

“Was that around here?” Jennifer asked.

“Clovis West.”

“Go Eagles!” Tara fake cheered, shaking imaginary pom-poms.

Steve admitted he'd been the captain of the football team. "We went undefeated my senior year."

"Wow," Jennifer said. "Impressive."

His eyes barely open, Rod drove through the freezing pre-dawn holding the steering wheel with one hand and a travel mug of black coffee with the other. He'd made the trip to Road's End too often, nearly always because something bad had happened. He drove without urgency, without purpose, drove because it was his duty to drive. A few miles after Grant Grove, the terrain opened. The sky was bright with stars, the ridgelines in silhouette. Familiar beauty that left him unmoved. Starting the switchbacking descent to South Fork Kings, his headlights scraped native-stone guardrails and towering road cuts. When he reached the overnight lot at Road's End, shards of sunlight were turning treetops into flames. Two emergency services deputies and a ranger had already arrived. He opened his tailgate, the closest thing he'd have to a desk until this was over, and unfolded his map.

Christina Sanchez, who owned a kennel and training service in Visalia, arrived with her teenaged daughter and two German Shepherds. The SAR teams drove in from the surrounding counties, spilled out of Denalis and Foresters. They were off-duty cops, trail-crew kids, members of various outdoor groups, all of them trained and certified. SAR volunteers were the kind of people willing to drop everything at a moment's notice, load gear and walk hours through rain or hang from cliffs, all for some cookies and a thank-you card, but Rod found some of them pious and arrogant. A few were a little too happy.

The chopper came thwacking up the gorge, circled and landed. Steve let the rotors spin down and stepped out. The other rangers and several of the volunteers shook his hand and slapped his shoulder. Rod kept his hands in his pockets and stared at gravel.

When the love-fest was over, Rod handed out flyers. His secretary had pulled Brandon's and Emily's physical data from the DMV database and downloaded images from Facebook and Instagram. Emily's photo showed her in a cap and gown at her college graduation. She had long black hair and dimples. Brandon's had him in a shirt and tie—clothes from the new job. Along the bottom, the flyer listed the information Brandon had included on the permit—trail itinerary, the make and color of packs and tent. Rod held his map face-out

against his chest and drew with a finger. “As most of you know, the Rae Lakes Loop is a lollipop—straight east for four miles, a thirty-mile circle, then back. The lakes are here, at ten and change. Very popular places to camp.” He shared his view that, because the route was on well-maintained trail, mostly through high-walled river canyons, it was tough to get lost. He suspected injury or a drowning. He mentioned the possibility of a domestic incident.

After some discussion, a plan was formed. Six searchers and the dog team would work up the trail according to the itinerary, canvassing other hikers and handing out flyers. Four would do the loop in reverse. One of the volunteers would look through the permits for other parties with similar itineraries and call any who had already exited the trail. Steve would fly the route with a spotter.

After the radios were handed out, Rod Slim-Jimmed the Altima. Emily had left a pair of sneakers, Brandon a T-shirt. Christina and her daughter split the items between the dogs. They barked and yipped, strained against leashes.

When Rod heard about the separation, he invited Steve up for dinner. Jennifer roasted a chicken and made a pie from scratch. The moment she got a look at Steve, she went into nurse mode. She put him on the couch, brought him a drink, invited him to take off his shoes. She wanted to hear the whole story. When Steve faded in the telling, she touched his wrist and told him it was okay.

In the morning, the three of them took a hike up to Alta Peak.

After a couple more dinners, Steve seemed back to his old self.

That December, Jennifer was down in Fresno for the day. She was supposed to be shopping for Christmas gifts and groceries. She called a little after six to say she had a migraine and didn’t feel like driving up the mountain in the dark. “I’ll just get a hotel room. I’ll be home in the morning.”

She’d stayed down before—the drive was 70 miles, most of it on winding mountain road—but Rod heard something strange in her tone. “Sure,” he said. “Call the office when you get in.”

He resisted his suspicions for two hours before checking the credit card accounts for recent transactions. He waited another half an hour and checked again. He called her cell.

“Everything okay?” she asked. There was an echo over the phone.

“Yeah. All good. I forgot to ask if you’d pick up some of that jerky I like?”

“Sure. No problem. Anything else?”

“No. That’s it. You get all settled in?”

“Yeah. I just had a shower. Gonna lie down.”

“Okay. I hope you feel better.”

“I will. Just need some sleep, I think.”

When Rod saw that there was still no hotel charge, he called a friend on the Fresno city force. “My wife’s car broke down near you and I’m having a hard time getting through to the tow company. Would you spin over and see if it’s still there? I’ll give you the address and the plate number.”

The friend called back ten minutes later. He’d found the car.

When Jennifer arrived home the next morning, Rod was on the couch, staring at the wall.

“Aren’t you working today?” she asked.

“You spent the night with Steve.”

Her face twitched. She smiled like a crazy person. “What are you talking about?”

He glared until her cheeks flushed and her eyes dropped tears.

“Rod,” she pleaded.

“One-time thing or...?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

By noon, the volunteer working the phone was able to confirm two sightings. A father who’d done the loop with his sons had seen Brandon and Emily coming up the Bubbs Creek Trail. He’d passed them somewhere between the campsites at Charlotte Dome and the switchbacks leading down to the junction with South Fork Kings. They were spread out, Brandon maybe a hundred yards ahead. Neither looked too happy. “The guy seemed to be in a particularly bad mood.” Two women reported a similar encounter. When they nodded at Brandon, he looked right through them. When they came upon Emily, five minutes later, she asked how long it had been since they’d passed her boyfriend. “They were so far apart, we were surprised they were hiking together. Awfully poor trail behavior, if you ask us.”

By mid-afternoon, the volunteer had reached a total of eighteen parties. None recalled seeing Brandon and Emily at Rae Lakes.

Rod radioed the information forward. "Once we get passed those switchbacks, lets really take our time. They're somewhere between the switchbacks and the lakes."

"I'll circle around and work that stretch nice and low," Steve radioed back.

Rod pretended he hadn't heard him.

Steve repeated his call.

"Sure," Rod said.

A black Tesla veered into the turnout and parked in the No Parking area in front of the bear-proof cans. Hanh Pham wore unflattering pants and had the haircut of a third-grade boy. Her husband was a small man in a pleated leather jacket, slacks and loafers. He clicked his remote to alarm the car.

They looked around stunned, ashen. As was often the case with city people, they'd left home picturing their child lost in a gentle forest, sitting on a log waiting to be found. But now, standing at the bottom of a 5,000-foot gorge, staring up at lonely granite walls, they understood.

Rod introduced himself. "No news since we spoke but it's early yet." He shared the flyer and listed the resources that had been deployed. "They're young, in good shape. They probably took a wrong turn. But we'll find them."

"What do we do?"

"Sit tight. No cell service down here, so it's better if you stay close by."

They stood near the car, not touching, scanning distant peaks.

Susan, Brandon's mother, followed two hours later in a beat-up Honda Civic. She emerged in dark sunglasses and new high-top sneakers, hair in disarray. She threw an angry look in Hanh's direction and approached Rod. "You the guy I talked to?"

"I am he."

After Rod gave the same spiel he'd given the Phams, Susan produced a lighter and a pack of Lucky Strikes.

"Uh, you can't.... Nevermind. Just don't start a fire."

She rolled her eyes. "I never understood the attraction to all this." She gestured at the trees and cliffs. "Maybe this'll teach him a lesson."

"Well, that's one possible outcome."

As evening approached, Rod radioed Grant Grove and asked the visitor center for help booking accommodations for the parents. "I'll have your room numbers. If I hear anything, I'll call."



He got on the radio for any updates. The forward team on the Bubbs Creek leg had reached Junction Meadow. “No sign, I’m afraid.” Christina’s dogs were registering alerts here and there, but the scent was as much as six days old, trod upon by dozens of other hikers. There were still no reports of anyone seeing Brandon and Emily at Rae Lakes.

As darkness fell, Rod opened his incident log and recorded the bivouac location for each team. He suggested everyone get some shut eye and stood at the tailgate, studying his map by penlight.

Back at the cabin, he needed three swigs of rum and an Ativan to fall asleep. He woke at four with a start, dressed and drove.

If he had to guess, Brandon and Emily were dead. If it wasn’t a murder-suicide, then they’d tried to cross Bubbs Creek and gotten swept away. Their gear hadn’t been found because they were still wearing it.

When he reached Road’s End, the Phams were in the Tesla, silently drinking coffee. Susan was nowhere in sight.

“Weather’s cooperating,” Rod said. “I’m liking our chances today.”

The Phams stared straight ahead.

At noon, the South Fork team reached the Rae Lakes area. They were walking shorelines, speaking with other hikers. When Rod checked in again at four, they’d found nothing. The dog team had all but lost the scent. The Bubbs Creek team was still working the trail above the switchbacks, still coming up empty. Steve had flown the whole route a dozen times. He was calling it a day.

Rod was back at the cabin, deep in alcohol-induced sleep, when the landline rang.

“Hey, Rod. We got a guy who says he found your couple.” The caller was a Tulare County sheriff’s deputy. “Apparently he walked into the Cedar Lodge about an hour ago.”

“What time is it?”

“I’ve got zero-two-thirty.”

Rod called the Cedar Lodge and spoke to the manager.

“The guy came in shivering, skin purple from the cold. He had scrapes and cuts everywhere, shirt torn up. He said the couple was near the summit of Mt. Brewer. Broken bones, concussions. He said to send a helicopter.”

“Mt. Brewer? What the hell? Can you put him on?”

“I gave him a blanket and told him to sit tight by the heater. When I got off

the phone he was gone. The blanket is still on the chair.”

Rod sensed something sinister. If not violence, then an ugly prank. “Did he seem serious to you?”

“Very. He looked half dead. I think he hiked down Brewer in the dark.”

“That’s sixteen miles. A bunch of them off-trail.”

“From his condition, I would have guessed a hundred.”

Rod still had his doubts but he called the CHP barracks in Fresno and requested the chopper at first light. The dispatcher put Medivac on standby. The helipad at Road’s End was only large enough for one chopper, so if the sighting was credible and the rescue chopper could get Brandon and Emily off the mountain, they’d be transferred to Medivac at Grant Grove and flown down to Community Regional.

Rod called Wuksachi, where the parents had been given rooms, and shared the report with Hanh. He told her to drive to Grant Grove.

Hanh relayed the news to her husband in Vietnamese. Rod heard him in the background, shouting and weeping. “Okay,” Hanh said. “We leave now.”

Susan didn’t pick up until the ninth or tenth ring. “Huh?” she asked, over and over.

“Wake up and drive to Grant Grove!” Rod shouted.

As he descended into the canyon, the eastern ridgelines were edged with silver dawn. At the overnight lot, the air was cold and still. He got on the radio, woke the various teams and gave the update. There was a brief discussion about the plausibility of the report. Everyone thought it sounded credible.

Rod asked the two senior Tulare SAR volunteers who’d been working the South Fork route to prep for extraction. The plan was to have them flown over to Brewer and dropped by longline.

His calls made, Rod sat drinking coffee, staring into darkness. Down in the valley, Steve would be waking to a call and kissing Jennifer goodbye. In summer, she always slept in the nude. Rod pictured her freckled skin, the strands of hair that hung in her eyes. He imagined her squeezing Steve’s hand, telling him to be careful.

As the sky filled with light, cars arrived. People in beanies emerged holding thermoses of coffee. Word had gotten around at Cedar Lodge and they were here to watch the show.

“CHP Rescue One to Incident Command. Over,” Steve said.

Rod glared at the radio before picking it up. "Incident Command. Go ahead."

"Just letting you know I'm inbound. ETA is ten minutes."

"Great. Can't wait."

Rod guided Steve down, squinted against the flying grit and pine needles and hunch-walked to the window. He pointed to Steve's map and shouted. "Extraction team."

Steve confirmed radio contact with the extraction team and asked them to stand by.

Rod pointed again. "Hikers."

Steve offered a thumbs up.

Once the helicopter lifted off, the crowd coalesced near Rod's truck. People traded rumors, pointed toward ridgelines at nothing. They were already casting judgment, calling the lost hikers stupid, reckless. A grey-eyed business type wearing workout leggings and a FitBit demanded that Rod tell him what was going on.

"Absolutely," Rod said. "I'm in the middle of commanding a rescue operation that has nothing to do with you. If you bother me again, I'll have you removed from the park, by force if necessary, and banned for life." He smiled.

The crowd grumbled, took a few steps back.

Over the radio, Rod heard Steve confirm that he'd loaded the extraction team and was heading for Brewer. Though the volunteers were maintaining radio silence, Rod could feel them listening.

"CHP Rescue One to Incident Command. I have a visual on two subjects. One is conscious and signaling. The second appears immobile."

"I'll be damned," Rod said.

Someone in the crowd overheard the call. "They found them!"

People whooped and clapped.

Steve flew Brandon off first, returned for Emily, and made a third trip to collect their gear. It would be Rod's job to hold the gear for the Tulare County Sheriff. Until the incident was confirmed to be simple wilderness misadventure, it was evidence.

The main action over, the crowd lost interest. They went hiking, headed back to the lodge for breakfast.

When the chopper returned, basket hanging, Rod guided it down. Inaudible

under the thunder of the rotors, he spoke in a monotone. “Lower, dickhead. Lower.” He unloaded the basket, gave a thumbs up and Steve flew off.

Rod heaved the packs into the bed of his truck, crawled into the cab to await the return of the search teams, and fell asleep.

Three days later, when he walked into Community Regional to conduct his interview, a nurse led him down a dismal corridor to Emily’s room. Her parents stood and hugged him. Hanh clapped. “You save her.”

Rod’s smile was that of a man with a toothache.

Emily had casts on an arm and the lower half of a leg. The left side of her face was a spill of yellows and purples. She used her good hand to squeeze Rod’s fingers.

Brandon was on a different floor in a medically induced coma. He’d required surgery to reduce the swelling in his cranium. The doctors were hopeful that, after physical therapy, he would speak and walk normally again.

The nurse ushered Emily’s parents out of the room.

Rod pulled up a chair. “So, quite the adventure.”

“Yeah. That’s one way to describe it.”

“Let’s start from the beginning.”

Over the years, Rod had heard many different versions of *The Headstrong Boyfriend Prone to Terrible Decisions*. The beginning of Emily’s version sounded quite familiar. Brandon was in a bad mood from the time they left Long Beach. On the way up, they hit traffic. The Altima kept flashing the “check engine” light but nobody at any of the repair shops seemed to care that they were on vacation and needed the work done immediately. Once they started hiking, the trail was too crowded for Brandon’s liking. He was appalled by the amount of horse poop—apparently, he had some sensitivity to it. Somewhere above the switchbacks, they found a place to camp—from Emily’s description, likely the sites beneath Charlotte Dome. For an hour or so, they had the place to themselves. The sun was setting, the creek was rushing nearby, and everything was lovely. Then a group of rock climbers stumbled in. They were loud and wouldn’t shut up. They had their food in a bear locker with a clanking chain and squealing hinges and they opened it every five minutes. When Brandon asked them for the third time to be quiet, words were exchanged.

In the morning, Emily woke to find him sitting with the map.

He announced a change of plans. They were going to leave the main trail and head south. He'd found a lake that looked more secluded—East Lake, at the foot of Brewer. From there, they'd take an off-trail shortcut back to the car. But the shortcut turned out to be a mistake. The higher they climbed, the clearer it was that they were in trouble. But they couldn't bear the thought of undoing all the miles they'd hiked and all the elevation they'd gained. So they pressed on, laboring up steep talus, navigating snow, scraping fingers and banging shins. The terrain became so steep, they had to tie their packs off with a rope, climb a pitch, then pull the packs up. On the third or fourth pitch, Brandon slipped. To balance himself, he grabbed Emily's arm. They went down together.

From that point, Rod found the story more interesting. When Emily came to, her ankle was shattered and her wrist was broken. She had blood in her eyes from a laceration on her scalp. She knew from the lack of pain that she was in shock. Brandon was a few feet above her, unconscious, wedged between boulders. She managed to get to him and determine that he was still breathing. She clawed her way up to his pack and brought it down. It contained his bag and the tent and a little food. Her own pack was somewhere below them, perhaps hundreds of feet down. She got Brandon into the bag and wrapped herself in the tent. She gathered snow in a water bottle and set it in the sun. The nights were below freezing, the pain from her broken bones unbearable. For three days, she sat watching dust swirl off the peak above her. Then she heard a boulder shift. For a moment she feared it was an avalanche. But when she called out, a man's voice answered.

"Tell me about him."

"He said his name was Henry. He was alone. Short gray hair, maybe sixty. He seemed sad."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. It was just a feeling I got from him. Like, he had a lot on his mind. When he told me his name, his voice caught. The other weird thing was his backpack. His shorts and boots were new, modern, but his backpack was really old—like a satchel from a cowboy movie. Anyway, after he checked on Brandon and assessed the situation, he jumped into action. He climbed down and got my pack and set up the stove and melted snow. He cradled Brandon's head and made him drink, and then dug out my sleeping bag and helped me get inside. He'd left his headlamp at the lake and asked if he could take mine.

He promised that when the sun came up there would be a helicopter in the sky. And then he left. I saw that he'd forgotten his satchel and called after him. But he was gone."

As Rod drove back up the mountain, he remembered the morning, twenty years earlier, when he and Jennifer left Sacramento for Kings Canyon and the ranger cadet job. He'd been taking classes and working at an REI. She'd been substitute teaching. They'd spent the previous two days packing up their studio apartment. He came through the door after carrying some boxes to his truck and found her at the kitchen table in tears. When he asked what was wrong, she shook her head. "I'm fine." She wiped her eyes. "Just feeling nostalgic."

"About *this* place?"

"Yeah. A little. I'm all right. But I was happy here. I *am* happy here."

In Rod's view, it was too late for second thoughts. He had spent eighteen months finishing his criminal justice degree and earning his CPR and first-responder certificates. He and Jennifer had both quit their jobs. The topic of the move was closed to discussion. "I'm going to keep packing," he said. "I want to be on the road by noon."

Jennifer forced a smile. "Ten-four."

All the way down Highway 99, they sat in silence, staring out the windshield toward their future. When they turned east and began climbing the mountain, the sun was low in the sky behind them. The trees cast long shadows and the temperature dropped. Rod didn't realize how cold it was until Jennifer reached over and turned on the heater.

Back in his office, he poured a drink and sat staring at nothing. Outside, car doors slammed. A delivery truck beeped its way backward. Stellar's jays kept up their noisy racket. He pictured Jennifer in Steve's kitchen, the sun setting through the west-facing windows. Was she thinking about what to cook for dinner or were they eating out tonight? Maybe they were on the patio, sharing a bottle of wine. Unobscured by high peaks, the sunlight lasted longer down there.

After he finished his drink, he unlocked the storage room where he was keeping the two packs. The extraction team had loaded them in a hurry, shoving in the tent and bags without bothering to roll them up. Emily's pack was badly abraded, the frame bent. On her bag and the tent, moisture had mixed with

dried blood, leaving sticky brown smears. Rod unzipped the lid on Brandon's pack and found the satchel. The canvas was soft with age, the leather straps stiff. When he undid the buckles, he found a hardback book and an ivory-handled .45 revolver.

The yellowing of the ivory and the pitting on the barrel indicated the weapon was an antique. If it had been manufactured prior to 1900, it wasn't required to be registered and wouldn't likely help ID the mysterious Henry. Four chambers of the cylinder were empty, the other two held live rounds. Everything appeared fully functional. Rod balanced the gun in his hand, turned it this way and that. He pointed it out the window toward the parking lot.

The book was *Up And Down California*, William Brewer's journal entries from his time on Josiah Whitney's 1860s expedition to assay California's mining riches and measure its mountains. Rod had read it years before. Brewer, still in his thirties, was an established naturalist and professor in the east when he lost his wife and newborn son. He'd joined the expedition hoping a few years in the west would help him get over his grief. "Dear Henry," a handwritten inscription read. "A little something for inspiration and enjoyment. But please stay safe up there. Merry Christmas. Carol."

A small Ziplock baggie slipped out. It contained a note: "Dear Carol. In the end, the pain won. The best thing you can do is forget about me. I wish I had more to say. I love you. Henry."

Rod read the note several times.

He imagined Henry racing down the mountain in the dark, navigating long slopes of loose talus, pushing through underbrush. In the higher sections, he would have cliffed-out dozens of times, each dead-end forcing him to turn back up the mountain, traverse and descend again. Rod pictured him driving home, bloody and exhausted, thinking about what he'd done. What he hadn't done. News agencies had already posted articles about the rescue, so he'd have ample opportunity to learn the outcome of his actions. Rod wondered if it would be enough to carry on.