

Chapter 1

Tunnel View

The mountains are calling and I must go.

—John Muir

The sharp scent of pine in the cool Sierra Nevada mountain air was bittersweet. Colby Muir Collins had waited a long time for this Yosemite homecoming. Too long.

He grasped the steering wheel tighter as he drove into the mouth of Wawona Tunnel. The dark hollow of the long, narrow passage still evoked in him the chilled feeling of being swallowed up by the mountain.

In headlamp-lit dimness, Colby drove beneath the jagged arch of the tunnel's walls, weeping rivulets of snowmelt, scarred with the bore marks of crude machinery that had hewn through its granite in the early 1930s. Unyielding and unchanging Yosemite granite.

As he neared the end of the tunnel, Colby felt his heart jolt with anticipation. Like the audience waiting for a Broadway curtain to rise, or the hush before the conductor's baton cued the first note, this damp tunnel was prelude to a glorious symphony of nature.

At last, the cool darkness gave way to an arch-framed blaze of sunlight. Colby turned off his headlights and pulled his truck and horse-trailer off the roadway at the Tunnel View turnout. He quickly got out of his truck and almost ran to the granite wall of the viewpoint.

The wondrous Yosemite Valley spread out below him, holy ground, unchanged after all his years of roaming.

The ancient rock monoliths still framed the valley, as they had for thousands of years. El Capitan, a gray pillar of stone on the left. On the right, Cathedral Rocks spilled the thin cascade of Bridalveil Falls. Cloud's Rest in the center. And just visible at the far end of the valley—keeping watch—rose the iconic Half Dome.

Colby drank in the scene greedily, like a man dying of thirst. Maybe he had been dying a little each year he'd been away, like a rainbow trout hooked in the lip, pulled out of

the water, flopping and gasping, its gills useless in the coarse sedge grasses.

Liz Anne never understood. She never felt the tug of this wild place in her soul. *Why couldn't you see it?* he whispered, looking down into the valley. But they were like two divergent species, neither one able to thrive in the other's natural habitat. Colby shook his head. None of it mattered now.

He'd grown up here in the Yosemite Valley. And it had been a dry, dusty, heart-rending journey back. What Colby needed now was healing. A mending of his ravaged soul that only this special place, carved by the hand of God, could do. He closed his eyes and sucked the crisp mountain air deep into his lungs. Home.

He'd been a mere 18 when he'd last breathed in this rarified air. Now a man of 47, he was over halfway through his life. Though still fit with an athletic build, he had changed. Colby Collins was no longer the idealistic and irrepressible boy who first beheld this awe-inspiring view. The awe was still there. And the reverence. A small glimmer of hope rose in his chest. Maybe he could come home again.

"Mr. Ranger?" A woman held out her digital camera. "Could you please take our picture?"

Jolted back to present, Colby became aware of the crunch of tires on gravel, the slamming of car doors, and the chattering of tourists about him, speaking a multitude of languages. Colby touched the brim of his tan, black-banded *Smokey the Bear* hat and reached out to take the camera. "Sure...be happy to."

This was just part of the job. He was a Yosemite National Park Ranger, a rough-and-tumble breed of men and women entrusted with the best duty in the world. His summers spent as a ranger in the Grand Canyon and Death Valley had been mere stepping stones to this...guardian of Yosemite's magnificent valley.

Though technically not on duty yet, his gold badge and forest green and tan uniform set him apart. He'd just handed the camera back and accepted the woman's thanks when a man wearing Bermuda shorts and dark-lensed wrap-around sunglasses thrust a map in

front of his face. "I've only got this one day to see Yosemite," the man said, unfolding the map. "Just driving through on my way to Reno. What should I do?" he asked.

Sit by a river and cry, Colby thought. One day wasn't nearly long enough to take the measure of this valley or of oneself in comparison. But he dutifully named several places to see the best waterfalls and views. The poor guy was missing paradise without even realizing it. "Excuse me, sir," Colby said, making his escape. "I've got to see to my horse."

Taking off his hat, he tossed it through the window and ran a hand in the short curls of his sun-streaked hair. He wiped the beads of sweat forming at his temples as he unlatched the horse-trailer window. His chestnut gelding, Major, poked his head out and gave a snort. "We're home, boy," Colby, said rubbing his hand down the white blaze on Major's nose. "Even though you've never been here before, ol' fella. We're home."

As he closed the trailer window and got into his truck, Colby took one last lingering look at the golden valley below, his hazel eyes growing soft.

"Yosemite." He whispered the word like a prayer.

Thanks to his early start, it was still mid-morning when Colby flung open the door to his assigned cabin at the edge of a grassy meadow. His eyes swept over the rough-hewn log walls and the worn pine board floor. A fading braided rug lay near the wood-frame bed. The old-fashioned paned windows were cranked open to the sweet pine and grass scented morning air. The modest furnishings included a desk, table and chairs, a utilitarian kitchen and bath. Electricity and indoor plumbing were the only nod to civility. Perfect.

He unpacked his luggage and secured his gear. Pulling his well-used Swiss Army knife out of his pocket, he used the screwdriver blade to fasten a drawer pull that was dangling loose. Colby threw a patchwork quilt on the bed and unloaded a few groceries into the cupboards. At the front, he stashed his favorite coffee mug. A hold-over from his childhood, the blue cup bore the image of a bear and the worn gold letters of the "Yosemite

National Park” logo. As a child he’d used the cup for cocoa topped with marshmallows. His transition to a more leaded brew hadn’t tarnished his attachment to the cheap souvenir.

He tossed Jake’s old sleeping bag behind the door. Didn’t know why he’d bothered to bring it along.

Colby ran a hand over his neatly trimmed moustache as he unpacked a framed photo of his family. He took a minute to study it. They were all smiling in the photo. His arm rested around his ex-wife Liz Anne’s shoulder as if his touch could keep her with them. His son, Jake, was happy then—grinning with an unabashed happiness that reminded Colby of his own boyhood.

Since the divorce over a year ago, he’d rarely seen his son. Jake blamed him. For all of it. He didn’t know how to counter Liz Anne’s lies. Didn’t want to reveal her betrayal or besmirch the image of the mother Jake adored. Didn’t want to pile on any more hurt. A teenager now, Jake chose to live with Liz in San Francisco.

Colby sighed as he placed the photo face down in the top drawer of his bedside table.

Three sharp raps on his cabin door drew him back to the present. The door whined on its hinges as he opened it. Colby looked up into a man’s lively green eyes shaded by a bushy crop of copper-colored eyebrows. An unruly thatch of hair of the same reddish hue sprouted out from beneath his *Smokey the Bear* hat.

“Colby...Colby Collins?” asked the lanky ranger who towered in the doorway.

“That’s me.”

“Howdy.” The man ducked under the doorframe and made his way inside. “I’m yer new partner, Gus...Gus Goodman.” He stuck out his hand.

Colby returned the firm handshake, noting the dry, calloused hand with fingernails gnawed to the quick. He couldn’t help smiling as Gus folded up his long legs and made himself at home, taking off his ranger hat and plopping down on Colby’s bed. The mattress sagged under his weight. At well over six foot, he seemed all arms and legs. Gus twirled his hat round his index finger. “Got any coffee?”

“Coffee maker’s still packed. Got some instant and a kettle.”

“That’ll do.”

Colby filled the tea kettle, lit the stove and tossed a spoonful of coffee crystals into a ceramic mug. He kept the old Yosemite one for himself.

“Got any family?” Gus asked, spying the extra sleeping bag. “They comin’ up to join you?”

“Nope. Well...maybe my son...if I can lure him to the wilderness.”

“How many kids you got?”

“Just my son. Jake’s 17...likes soccer and rock climbing.” Colby left out the part about his boy not speaking to him.

Gus chewed on a fingernail. “And your wife?”

“We’re divorced.”

“Oh...sorry.” Gus ran his hands over his bony knees. “Never married myself. Couldn’t find a woman who’d put up with me.”

Colby poured the boiling water and handed the steaming mug to Gus. Catching a whiff of cherry pipe tobacco and old sweat, Colby deduced a few reasons for Gus’ single status. “So...I’m glad to meet you, partner. How long have you been in the forest service?”

“Thirty years, come September. Ten here in Yosemite.” A grin split Gus’s angular face. “Best job in the world. Best park in the universe.”

“We’re agreed on that,” Colby said, pulling out a chair from the table.

Gus fished a folded paper out of his shirt pocket. He plucked a pair of dark- framed reading glasses from the other pocket, put them on, and scanned the computer sheet.

“According to the schedule, our patrol starts in a few hours,” he said. “Wanted to get the howdies out of the way first. Find out if I’d drawn a greenhorn.”

He tucked the glasses back in his pocket and refolded the schedule sheet.

“So...what’s your background, Ranger Colby?”

“Been a high school science teacher for 25 years, back East mostly. I’ve done forest service summer work for nearly that long. After the divorce, I quit teaching and tossed out all my neck-strangling ties. I’ve been working as a full-time ranger for the past

three years. Great Smokies, Grand Canyon, Death Valley—slowly working my way back home. I won the lottery the day I finally drew a full-time assignment in Yosemite. I'm one of the lucky ones who grew up here in the valley."

"No kiddin'. Born and bred here?"

"Yep."

"Colby, is it?" Gus ran his hands through his hair, upending the wiry red thatch. "Wait a minute... Why, you're **that** Colby, aren't ya? The Colby of legend. Birthed on the shore of Mirror Lake, announced by the cry of a redbill...the reincarnation of John Muir himself."

"Don't know about that reincarnation foolishness, but that's me. My birth caused quite a stir."

"Can't imagine it...born right here in Yosemite. Lucky son of a gun."

"Don't know why I ever left..."

Gus cocked his head, taking Colby's measure. "I'd wager it was a woman..."

Colby's mind fled to Liz Anne. Their meeting at Badger Pass all those years ago when they were just a couple of college kids. The warmth of her smile as he punched her ski lift ticket. The way her hair glowed in the winter light. She, the spoiled only daughter of a wealthy urban family on holiday. He, a backcountry local and aspiring naturalist working at the ski chalet during break from college. Mismatched from the get-go. He'd moved to New York to please her, and regretted it every day since. Now, even she had relocated back to the West Coast.

Gus cleared his throat, changing the subject. "Saw your horse. Nice lookin' chestnut."

"Thanks." Colby stowed his unwelcome thoughts away. Horses were a much safer topic. "Major's as trail-smart and steady as they come. Good with people too. So...what are you riding?"

"Got myself a lean roan mare. Quarter horse mostly. Ginger's a bit headstrong at times, but she's got the spunk to have gotten me out of more'n one dicey situation. Ain't afraid of nothin'... 'cept can't stand to be ridden by no fool yahoo. She's partial to apples

and a good rub behind the ears.”

“I’ll tote some apples along to make her acquaintance then,” said Colby. He noticed that Gus had sloshed his coffee, leaving a dark ring beneath his cup on the side table. He grabbed a napkin and mopped it up.

Gus barely noticed. “Brought along my pack mule, Rufus, too for those long backcountry patrols. Ol’ Rufus can sniff out a patch of thin ice or a lost camper like a bloodhound on scent.”

“A tracking mule?” Colby’s dark eyebrows rose in surprise. “I thought stubbornness was their strong suit.”

“Mules are smart.” Gus struggled up from the sagging bed. “You’ll see.”

Colby stood up as well. Their first briefing was in 20 minutes. “See you at the stables.” He looked at his own printed sheet sitting atop a neat pile on his desk.

“According to the schedule, we’re patrolling Upper and Lower Pines with a swing through Camp Curry.”

“Yep. And the Mirror Lake trail as well.” Gus ducked back out of the doorway.

“Thanks for coming by, Gus. I look forward to working with you.”

“Me too. Ridin’ patrol with the Colby ‘Muir’ Collins. Who’d of thought it?” Gus grinned as he set his hat back on his thatch of red hair. “I wager I’ll worm all those early Yosemite Valley secrets out of you by season’s end.”

“I’m sure you’ll try,” answered Colby with a chuckle. He liked Gus. But the real secrets of Yosemite lodged in the heart. Words could never express what the pine trees whispered in the night wind or capture the sacred moments when the very rocks cried out.

“Bear! Bear!”

Colby spurred his horse in the direction of the shouting. He arrived quickly at the edge of the Curry Village parking lot near Housekeeping Camp.

“My car! Will you just look at my car!” bemoaned a distraught man standing in a

pile of broken window glass. The passenger door of his red Honda was crumpled, peeled down to the door handle like the lid on a sardine can. A crowd was already gathering around the tattered remnants of a plastic cooler and the shredded sacks of potato chips and Oreo cookies.

“Where’s the bear?” Colby asked, urgently scanning the area. In the distance, he glimpsed the furry rump of a black bear as it hightailed into the trees. He dismounted and pulled out his notebook.

“That savage bear ran off when I yelled. Look what he did to my car!” The man’s face flushed red above his “Go Climb a Rock” T-shirt.

“I’m real sorry about that, sir,” Colby said in a polite voice.

A crowd had quickly gathered, stunned at the damage done by a mere bear. A few snapped pictures of the car carnage.

“Didn’t you read the brochure you got at the entrance kiosk?” a woman asked. “All those warnings about leaving food out or coolers visible in your car?”

“Or that sign,” remarked a young man, pointing to a nearby bear caution placard. “They tried to warn you.”

The man tuned them out. “Who’s going to pay for this?” demanded Mr. Climb a Rock.

“Hopefully your insurance will.” Colby struggled for a polite tone. He knew all too well that problem bears had to be euthanized. “Improper food storage, like leaving a cooler in plain sight in your car, kills bears. We try to keep ‘em alive ‘n’ wild.”

“Improper food storage?” Mr. Climb a Rock sputtered. “You allow packs of marauding bears in the park and you’re going to write **me** up?!”

Spittle flew through the air as the man’s voice rose in accusation. “I’m going to sue...you...the park.” He poked at the badge on Colby’s chest. “What kind of place are you running here?”

“A wild place.” Colby took a step back, standing a little taller. He spoke calmly as he wrote the license plate number in his notebook.

“Folks, the show’s over, best move along now.” Gus rode up on his mare,

Ginger, and helped move the crowd away from the car.

Colby took out his camera and snapped photos of the shredded cooler, the empty potato chip bag and cookie packaging, the six-pack of soda and the ruined car. All evidence of unlawful and ignorant bear baiting. Scrape marks evidenced where the bear had anchored his claws to get at the booty, ripping the door nearly off its hinges.

“Who’s going to pay for this?” the man repeated, touching a hand to the crumpled metal of his car’s door frame.

“You are,” Gus retorted, his patience with a certain breed of tourist frayed to the limit. “There’s quite a fine for baiting bears.” While most visitors were respectful of nature and awed by its beauty, some like this jerk, brought a big-city mentality and attitude with them. Gus had little sympathy for the man. As was usually the case, blatant rule-breaking had brought on this raid.

“A fine...Who do you think you are?”

Colby tried to ratchet down the emotions. “The bears were here first, sir,” he said, with a nod. He handed the man a citation and a sheet listing the numbers for the local garage and towing service. “Try to have a nice day, anyway.”

Colby tuned out the man’s rantings as he documented the event with a few more digital photos. He had a soft spot in his heart for bears.

Mounting his horse, Colby eased away from the car. The peeled car door was drawing a whole new round of curious folk who hopefully would learn from the other guy’s mistake.

“Can you tell us about the bears, Ranger?” a woman asked. Her children looked up at him expectantly, patting Major’s nose. “How much do they weigh? What do they eat in the wild?”

Colby was happy to oblige. The more people knew about the wildlife, the greater the respect and the safer and richer the camping experience. He leaned back in his saddle as he answered. “Black bears can weigh up to 400 pounds. In the wild, bears eat between 4,000 to 20,000 calories worth of grasses, berries, acorns, and grubs every day.”

“Then why would they break into that guy’s car?”

“Because they’re smart and resourceful. Bears quickly learn that it’s a lot easier to eat the thousands of calories of food conveniently stowed in an ice chest than to spend the day grazing on grasses. They also have excellent color vision and know an ice chest or grocery bag on sight.”

The young boy wearing a Spiderman backpack looked up. “Do they smell the food?”

“Sure...that’s why you want to keep it safely locked up. Bears have an incredible sense of smell. They can detect a dead deer carcass three miles away, or a package of beef jerky left in your tent.”

The boy squirmed a little. “I don’t have any jerky in my tent. Do bears like candy?”

“Sure do. But it’s much better for them to eat berries.”

“How many bears live around here?” asked the boy’s sister, her eyes wide.

“Well...we have between 300 and 500 bears in the park, but most of them live way back in the forest. You probably won’t even see one...if you don’t leave any food out.”

“We’ll be more careful from now on,” promised the woman, taking her kids by the hand. “Thank you for the information.”

As they left the parking lot, Colby overhead her asking her son in a whispered voice, “Do you have candy in your tent?”

“Just a little...”

Protecting people from the bears and the bears from people was a rocky road in the ongoing effort to manage Yosemite’s black bears. It was easy to kill problem bears...if you didn’t care about them. Harder to train visitors to stop attracting them with an easy meal.

As Colby and Gus left the scene with Mr. Climb a Rock’s unhappy tirade ringing in their ears, they purposefully edged away from the crowd. The two rangers rode their mounts through the old, abandoned apple orchard at the edge of Curry Village. Few people knew that this place so close to the camp’s flurry of activity was a great spot to see deer coming to nibble windfall apples in the evening.

“Bears...” said Gus. “You’ve got to love ’em. Crafty as a bandit raccoon and twice

as hungry.” He chewed on a fingernail. “I’ve known a bear to sniff out a stick of chewing gum in a pup tent. Sent the camper screamin’ and scamperin’ out of his tent and into the night.”

“A memorable lesson.” The leather creaked as Colby eased forward in his saddle. “Time was...we used to feed the bears in this valley. Fed ’em garbage.”

“What?”

“Hard to believe, but when I was growing up here it was an evening’s entertainment to go to the dump and watch the bears dig through the garbage. Electric lights were even strung up, the better to see the show. You’d just pull up in your car; it was better than watching a drive-in movie. Mama bears would bring in their cubs. They’d fight over pork’n’ bean cans and rotting vegetables. In those days we didn’t think about how bad a garbage diet might be for the poor bears.”

“Happened at all the parks back then,” said Gus. “Lots of traffic jams from folks feeding bears out of their car windows. Now we write up a camper for leaving out a greasy skillet.”

“Yep.”

Gus chewed on a fingernail. “I guess we’ve come a long way from those open garbage pits. Back then, folks used to store their food in little wood cupboards. Bear raids were just considered part of the fun. You’d scare ’em away from your grub by banging spoons on kettles.”

Colby nodded. “Small wonder bears got habituated to the campgrounds. The invention of bear-proof food storage lockers must have spoiled all of their fun.”

Gus lifted his hat to cool his hair, which stood up in copper tufts. “I heard tell bears used to raid the tent store up in the Tuolumne, too.”

“Yep. Loved the marshmallows.”

Gus guffawed. “Care to wager on the season’s final tally of peeled car doors?”

“Sure. You counting on smart bears or dumb people?”

“Both, I reckon.”

Colby did the mental calculations. “Well, Mr. Climb a Rock is our first parking lot

victim. Figure in all the cars left at trailheads and those picnickers just passing through. I'll wager it'll be 100 cars by the end of September."

"You are an optimist. I'm bettin' 150 door peels at least. Count those folks who can't or won't read the signs or flyers, don't believe our warnings, think the rules apply to someone else, and those yahoos who expect Yosemite to be Disneyland, only with more trees, and you've got yourself a bear goldmine."

Colby didn't quite share Gus' negative view of the valley visitors. "People love the bears," he stated.

"Sure they do. They'll stop right in the middle of the roadway to snap a picture. Walk right up to a protective 300 pound mama bear with cubs as if she were a darned Teddy bear."

"People do foolish things," Colby admitted. "But it's just because they've lost their connection to wilderness. They've forgotten how to respect what's wild."

The raucous scolding of a Stellar's Jay accompanied the bright blue flash of wings in the tree canopy.

"There's another moocher for you," remarked Gus, looking up at the bird as they entered Lower Pines. The woodsy smell of campfire smoke hung in the air. It was time to ride through the campground...look for any trouble...invite kids to the campfire program. "I'll start from this end," he suggested. "You take the upper loops and we'll meet up in the middle."

"Okay." Colby moved Major down a dirt road. Already, a bevy of excited children were running toward him. "What's your horse's name, Mr. Ranger? Can I pet him?"

Behind him, he heard Gus cautioning the kids. "Ginger doesn't care to be touched on the nose, young man. Best if you just patted her neck." Colby looked back to see Ginger side-stepping nervously.

Major chewed patiently on his bit as a group of children surrounded him. "Campfire program tonight," Colby reminded. "Any of you like to sing?"

"I do...I do." The children had goofy smiles and a dusting of dirt just above their socks, a tell-tale sign left from hiking the powdered mountain trails.

“Ask your parents to bring you to Camp Curry by 8:30. Bring a warm jacket and a flashlight.”

“Yeah!” The children scurried off to their campsites. In their bright eyes, Colby saw the enthusiasm and joy of another generation being won to wilderness.

The “green rain” of pine pollen drifted through the air, suspended in the smoke of a hundred campfires. Laughter rang out, and the occasional *thwack* of an axe cutting wood. The setting sun was just beginning to cast a golden glow on the granite face of Half Dome. Already he could feel himself relaxing, the knots loosening inside.

At the campground edge, the holler began. “El-mer...El-mer...”

Colby drew in a sharp breath. Until that moment, he’d almost forgotten the childhood game he’d shared with his son in a similar woods. How at campfire time he’d cup his hands to his mouth and sing out the camper’s call for some fictional character named Elmer to come join the circle. Jake would pick up the drawn out word of invitation, echoing his cry. “El-mer...El-mer.” Until the whole campground rang with silliness.

Back in their San Francisco home, far from any campfire, the word became their private code. A way of signaling the time to gather at nightfall into the warmth of hearth and home. He could almost hear Jake’s childish voice calling back like an echo. *El-mer...El-mer.*

As the sky darkened, the folksy call circled the campground amid the giggles of excited kids.

The call tore at his heart. He brought a hand to his chest, feeling keenly the loss of the affection of his own son. As he spurred Major into a trot, Colby cupped his hands to his mouth and called plaintively into the deepening twilight. *El-mer...El-mer...*