



THE LAST SEASON

Randy Morgenson was legendary
for finding people missing in
the High Sierra....

Then one day he
went missing
himself.

**ERIC
BLEHM**

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CHAPTER ONE

MISSING

I shall go on some last wilderness trip, to a place I have known and loved. I shall not return.

—*Everett Ruess, 1931*

The least I owe these mountains is a body.

—*Randy Morgenson, McClure Meadow, 1994*

THE BENCH LAKE RANGER STATION in Kings Canyon National Park was still in shadow when Randy Morgenson awoke on July 21, 1996. As the sun painted the craggy granite ridgelines surrounding this High Sierra basin, a hermit thrush broke the alpine silence, bringing to life the nearby creek that had muted into white noise over the course of the night.

A glance at his makeshift thermometer, a galvanized steel bucket filled with spring water, told him it hadn't dropped below freezing overnight. But it was still cold enough at 10,800 feet to warrant hovering close to the two-burner Coleman stove that was slow to boil a morning cup of coffee. If he had followed his normal routine, Randy had slept in the open, having spread out his sleeping bag on a gravelly flat spot speckled with black obsidian flakes a few steps from the outpost. Hardly the log cabin vision that the words "ranger station" evoke,

the primitive residence was little more than a 12-by-15-foot canvas tent set up on a plywood platform. A few steel bear-proof storage lockers and a picnic table completed what was really a base camp from which to strike out into the roughly 50 square miles of wilderness that was Randy's patrol area.

Before, or more likely after, the hermit thrush's performance—assuming he followed his custom before a long hike—Randy ate a hearty “gut bomb” breakfast of thick buckwheat pancakes with slabs of butter and maple syrup. Then began the ritual of loading his Dana Design backpack for an extended patrol. Methodically, he stuffed his sleeping bag into the bottom, followed by a small dented pot—blackened on the bottom—that held a lightweight backpacker stove wedged in place by a sponge so it wouldn't rattle. A “bivy” sack was emergency shelter. A single 22-ounce fuel bottle, a beefed-up first aid kit, a headlamp, food—each item was a necessity with a preordained spot in his pack.

He locked his treasured camera equipment, six books, and a diary inside a heavy-duty “rat-proof” steel footlocker that was “pretty good at keeping rodents out too,” he'd been known to say. His only source for contacting the outside world—a new Motorola HT1000 radio, along with freshly charged batteries—was zipped into the easily accessible uppermost compartment of his pack. This was the second radio he'd been issued that season; the first one had lasted only eight days before it stopped working on July 8. On July 10 he'd hiked over Pinchot Pass to the trail-crew camp at the White Fork of the Kings River, the location he'd arranged in advance with his supervisor if his radio conked out. A backcountry ranger named Rick Sanger had met him there with the replacement Motorola he now carried.

The least-used item in his pack was a Sequoia and Kings Canyon topographic map. He reportedly referenced it only while trying to orient lost or confused backpackers, or during a search-and-rescue operation. As longtime friend and former supervisor, retired Sierra Crest Subdistrict Ranger Alden Nash, says, “Randy knew the country better than the map did.”

For nearly three decades, when someone went missing in Sequoia

and Kings Canyon National Parks, standard operating procedure had included at least a radio call to Randy, the parks' most dependable source of high-country knowledge.

"Randy was so in sync with the mountains," says Nash, "that he could look at a missing person's last known whereabouts on a topographic map, consider the terrain and 'how it pulls at a person,' and make a judgment call with astounding results.

"One time, a Boy Scout hiking in the park got separated from his troop and couldn't be found before nightfall. Randy looked at a map for a few minutes, traced his thumb over a few lines, and then tapped his finger on a meadow. 'Go land a helicopter in that meadow tomorrow morning,' he said. 'That's where he'll be.'

"Sure enough, the Boy Scout came running out of the woods after the helicopter landed in that meadow. He'd taken a wrong turn at a confusing trail intersection and hadn't realized his mistake until it was almost dark and too late to retrace his footprints. The Scout was scared after a night alone, but he was fine.

"Randy," says Nash, "had figured that out by looking at a map. He told me where to go over the radio. John Muir himself couldn't have done that. But then, Muir didn't spend as much time in the Sierra as Randy."

A bold statement, but true. At 54, Randy had spent most of his life in the Sierra. This included twenty-eight full summers as a backcountry ranger and the better part of a dozen winters in the high country as a Nordic ski ranger, snow surveyor, and backcountry winter ranger. Add to that an enviable childhood spent growing up in Yosemite Valley—where his father worked for that park's benchmark concessionaire, Yosemite Park and Curry Company—and Randy had literally been bred for the storied life he would lead as a ranger.

His backpack loaded, one of the last things he would have done was tuck into his chest pocket a notepad, a pencil, and a hand lens that had been his father's.

At some point, Randy tore a page from a spiral notebook and wrote: "June 21: Ranger on patrol for 3–4 days. There is no radio inside the

"SUSPENSEFUL."

—SEATTLE TIMES

"Blehm recounts the search for Morgenson with a thriller's pacing. . . . A POTENT TESTAMENT TO THE ENDURING POWER AND ALLURE OF WILD SPACES." —MEN'S JOURNAL

Destined to become a classic of adventure literature, *The Last Season* examines the extraordinary life of legendary backcountry ranger Randy Morgenson and his mysterious disappearance in California's unforgiving Sierra Nevada—mountains as perilous as they are beautiful. Eric Blehm's masterful work is a gripping detective story interwoven with the riveting biography of a complicated, original, and wholly fascinating man.

"As Jon Krakauer did with *Into the Wild*, Blehm turns a missing-man riddle into an insightful meditation on wilderness and the personal demons and angels that propel us into it alone." —OUTSIDE

"Just try to put down *The Last Season*. We couldn't." —BACKPACKER



ERIC BLEHM is the former editor of *Transworld SNOWboarding*, author of *Agents of Change: The Story of DC Shoes and Its Athletes*, and coauthor of *P3: Pipes, Parks, and Powder*. *The Last Season* was a Book Sense bestseller and a Barnes & Noble Discover selection. He lives in southern California with his wife and son.

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