

The Tamarisk Hunter

by Paolo Bacigalupi

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Mr. Bacigalupi says that after this story appeared in the June 26, 2006 issue of HCN, it sparked a discussion of just how a deep drought might affect water rights in the West. Water managers and law experts were brought in, but nobody could produce anything more than wild guesses—of which this story was considered as good as any. And we think you'll agree it's a good yarn, too.

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Lolo stands on the edge of a canyon, Maggie the camel his only companion. He stares down into the deeps. It's an hour's scramble to the bottom. He ties Maggie to a juniper and starts down, boot-skiing a gully. A few blades of green grass sprout neon around him, piercing juniper-tagged snow clods. In the late winter, there is just a beginning surge of water down in the deeps; the ice is off the river edges. Up high, the mountains still wear their ragged snow mantles. Lolo smears through mud and hits a channel of scree, sliding and scattering rocks. His jugs of tamarisk poison gurgle and slosh on his back. His shovel and rockbar snag on occasional junipers as he skids by. It will be a long hike out. But then, that's what makes this patch so perfect. It's a long way down, and the riverbanks are largely hidden.

It's a living; where other people have dried out and blown off, he has remained: a tamarisk hunter, a water tick, a stubborn bit of weed. Everyone else has been blown off the land as surely as dandelion seeds, set free to fly south or east, or most of all north where watersheds sometimes still run deep and where even if there are no more lush ferns or deep cold fish runs, at least there is still water for people.

Eventually, Lolo reaches the canyon bottom. Down in the cold shadows, his breath steams.

He pulls out a digital camera and starts shooting his proof. The Bureau of Reclamation has gotten uptight about proof. They want different angles on the offending tamarisk, they want each one photographed before and after, the whole

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He pulls out a digital camera and starts shooting his proof. The Bureau of Reclamation has gotten uptight about proof. They want different angles on the offending tamarisk, they want each one photographed before and after, the whole process documented, GPS'd, and uploaded directly by the camera. They want it done on-site. And then they still

sometimes come out to spot-check before they calibrate his headgate for water bounty.

But all their due diligence can't protect them from the likes of Lolo. Lolo has found the secret to eternal life as a tamarisk hunter. Unknown to the Interior Department and its BuRec subsidiary, he has been seeding new patches of tamarisk, encouraging vigorous brushy groves in previously cleared areas. He has hauled and planted healthy root balls up and down the river system in strategically hidden and inaccessible corridors, all in a bid for security against the swarms of other tamarisk hunters that scour these same tributaries.

Lolo is crafty. Stands like this one, a quarter-mile long and thick with salt-laden tamarisk, are his insurance policy. Documentation finished, he unstraps a folding saw, along with his rockbar and shovel, and sets his poison jugs on the dead salt bank. He starts cutting, slicing into the roots of the tamarisk, pausing every thirty seconds to spread Garlon 4 on the cuts, poisoning the tamarisk wounds faster than they can heal. But some of the best tamarisk, the most vigorous, he uproots and sets aside, for later use. Two dollars eighty-eight cents a day, plus water bounty.

* * * *

It takes Maggie's rolling, bleating camel

stride a week to make it back to Lolo's homestead. They follow the river, occasionally climbing above it onto cold mesas or wandering off into the open desert in a bid to avoid the skeleton sprawl of emptied towns. Guardie choppers buzz up and down the river like swarms of angry yellow jackets, hunting for porto-pumpers and wild-cat diversions. They rush overhead in a wash of beaten air and gleaming National Guard logos. Lolo remembers a time when the guardies traded potshots with people down on the riverbanks, tracer-fire and machine-gun chatter echoing in the canyons. He remembers the glorious hiss and arc of a Stinger missile as it flashed across redrock

desert and blue sky and burned a chopper where it hovered. But that's long in the past. Now, guardie patrols skim up the river unmolested. Lolo tops another mesa and stares down at the familiar landscape of an eviscerated town, its curving streets and subdivision cul-de-sacs all sitting silent in the sun. At the very edge of the empty town, one-acre ranchettes and snazzy five-thousand-square-foot houses with dead-stick trees and dust-hill landscaping fringe a brown tumbleweed golf course. The sandtraps don't even show anymore. When California put its first calls on the river, no one really worried. A couple towns went begging for water. Some idiot newcomers with bad water rights

stopped grazing their horses, and that was it. A few years later, people started showering real fast. And a few after that, they showered once a week. And then people started using the buckets. By then, everyone had stopped joking about how “hot” it was. It didn’t really matter how “hot” it was. The problem wasn’t lack of water or an excess of heat, not really. The problem was that 4.4 million acre-feet of water were supposed to go down the river to California. There was water; they just couldn’t touch it. They were supposed to stand there like dumb monkeys and watch it flow on by.

“Lolo?”

The voice catches him by surprise.

Maggie startles and groans and lunges for the mesa edge before Lolo can rein her around. The camel's great padded feet scuffle dust and Lolo flails for his shotgun where it nestles in a scabbard at the camel's side. He forces Maggie to turn, shotgun half-drawn, holding barely to his seat and swearing.

A familiar face, tucked amongst juniper tangle.

“Goddamnit!” Lolo lets the shotgun drop back into its scabbard. “Jesus Christ, Travis. You scared the hell out of me.”

Travis grins. He emerges from amongst the junipers' silver bark rags, one hand on his gray fedora, the other on the reins

as he guides his mule out of the trees.

“Surprised?”

“I could’ve shot you!”

“Don’t be so jittery. There’s no one out here ‘cept us water ticks.”

“That’s what I thought the last time I went shopping down there. I had a whole set of new dishes for Annie and I broke them all when I ran into an ultralight parked right in the middle of the main drag.”

“Meth flyers?”

“Beats the hell out of me, I didn’t stick

around to ask.”

“Shit. I’ll bet they were as surprised as you were.”

“They almost killed me.”

“I guess they didn’t.”

Lolo shakes his head and swears again, this time without anger. Despite the ambush, he’s happy to run into Travis. It’s lonely country, and Lolo’s been out long enough to notice the silence of talking to Maggie. They trade ritual sips of water from their canteens and make camp together. They swap stories about BuRec and avoid discussing where they’ve been ripping tamarisk and enjoy

the view of the empty town far below, with its serpentine streets and quiet houses and shining untouched river.

It isn't until the sun is setting and they've finished roasting a magpie that Lolo finally asks the question that's been on his mind ever since Travis's sun-baked face came out of the tangle. It goes against etiquette, but he can't help himself. He picks magpie out of his teeth and says, "I thought you were working downriver."

Travis glances sidelong at Lolo and in that one suspicious uncertain look, Lolo sees that Travis has hit a lean patch. He's not smart like Lolo. He hasn't been reseeding. He's got no insurance. He

hasn't been thinking ahead about all the competition, and what the tamarisk endgame looks like, and now he's feeling the pinch. Lolo feels a twinge of pity. He likes Travis. A part of him wants to tell Travis the secret, but he stifles the urge. The stakes are too high. Water crimes are serious now, so serious Lolo hasn't even told his wife Annie, for fear of what she'll say. Like all of the most shameful crimes, water theft is a private business, and at the scale Lolo works, forced labor on the Straw is the best punishment he can hope for. Travis gets his hackles down over Lolo's invasion of his privacy and says, "I had a couple cows I was running up here, but I lost 'em. I think something got

‘em.”

“Long way to graze cows.”

“Yeah, well, down my way even the sagebrush is dead. Big Daddy Drought’s doing a real number on my patch.” He pinches his lip, thoughtful. “Wish I could find those cows.”

“They probably went down to the river.”

Travis sighs. “Then the guardies probably got ‘em.”

“Probably shot ‘em from a chopper and roasted ‘em.”

“Californians.”

They both spit at the word. The sun continues to sink. Shadows fall across the town's silent structures. The rooftops gleam red, a ruby cluster decorating the blue river necklace.

“You think there's any stands worth pulling down there?” Travis asks.

“You can go down and look. But I think I got it all last year. And someone had already been through before me, so I doubt much is coming up.”

“Shit. Well, maybe I'll go shopping. Might as well get something out of this trip.”

“There sure isn't anyone to stop you.”

As if to emphasize the fact, the thud-thwap of a guardie chopper breaks the evening silence. The black-fly dot of its movement barely shows against the darkening sky. Soon it's out of sight and cricket chirps swallow the last evidence of its passing.

Travis laughs. "Remember when the guardies said they'd keep out looters? I saw them on TV with all their choppers and Humvees and them all saying they were going to protect everything until the situation improved." He laughs again. "You remember that? All of them driving up and down the streets?"

"I remember."

“Sometimes I wonder if we shouldn’t have fought them more.”

“Annie was in Lake Havasu City when they fought there. You saw what happened.” Lolo shivers. “Anyway, there’s not much to fight for once they blow up your water treatment plant. If nothing’s coming out of your faucet, you might as well move on.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes I think you still got to fight. Even if it’s just for pride.”

Travis gestures at the town below, a shadow movement. “I remember when all that land down there was selling like hotcakes and they were building shit as fast as they could ship in the lumber.

Shopping malls and parking lots and subdivisions, anywhere they could scrape a flat spot.”

“We weren’t calling it Big Daddy Drought, back then.”

“Forty-five thousand people. And none of us had a clue. And I was a real-estate agent.” Travis laughs, a self-mocking sound that ends quickly. It sounds too much like self-pity for Lolo’s taste. They’re quiet again, looking down at the town wreckage.

“I think I might be heading north,” Travis says finally.

Lolo glances over, surprised. Again he

has the urge to let Travis in on his secret, but he stifles it. “And do what?”

“Pick fruit, maybe. Maybe something else. Anyway, there’s water up there.”

Lolo points down at the river. “There’s water.”

“Not for us.” He pauses. “I got to level with you, Lolo. I went down to the Straw.”

For a second, Lolo is confused by the non sequitur. The statement is too outrageous. And yet Travis’s face is serious. “The Straw? No kidding? All the way there?”

“All the way there.” He shrugs defensively. “I wasn’t finding any tamarisk, anyway. And it didn’t actually take that long. It’s a lot closer than it used to be. A week out to the train tracks, and then I hopped a coal train, and rode it right to the Interstate, and then I hitched.”

“What’s it like out there?”

“Empty. A trucker told me that California and the Interior Department drew up all these plans to decide which cities they’d turn off when.” He looks at Lolo significantly. “That was after Lake Havasu. They figured out they had to do it slow. They worked out some kind of formula: how many cities, how many

people they could evaporate at a time without making too much unrest. Got advice from the Chinese, from when they were shutting down their old Communist industries. Anyway, it looks like they're pretty much done with it. There's nothing moving out there except highway trucks and coal trains and a couple truck stops."

"And you saw the Straw?"

"Oh sure, I saw it. Out toward the border. Big old mother. So big you couldn't climb on top of it, flopped out on the desert like a damn silver snake. All the way to California." He spits reflexively. "They're spraying with

concrete to keep water from seeping into the ground and they've got some kind of carbon fiber stuff over the top to stop the evaporation. And the river just disappears inside. Nothing but an empty canyon below it. Bone dry. And choppers and Humvees everywhere, like a damn hornet's nest. They wouldn't let me get any closer than a half mile on account of the eco-crazies trying to blow it up. They weren't nice about it, either."

"What did you expect?"

"I dunno. It sure depressed me though: they work us out here and toss us a little water bounty and then all that water next year goes right down into that big old pipe. Some Californian's probably

filling his swimming pool with last year's water bounty right now."

Cricket-song pulses in the darkness. Off in the distance, a pack of coyotes starts yipping. The two of them are quiet for a while. Finally, Lolo chucks his friend on the shoulder. "Hell, Travis, it's probably for the best. A desert's a stupid place to put a river anyway."

* * * *

Lolo's homestead runs across a couple acres of semi-alkaline soil, conveniently close to the river's edge. Annie is out in the field when he crests the low hills that overlook his patch. She waves, but keeps digging, planting for whatever

water he can collect in bounty.

Lolo pauses, watching Annie work. Hot wind kicks up, carrying with it the scents of sage and clay. A dust devil swirls around Annie, whipping her bandana off her head. Lolo smiles as she snags it; she sees him still watching her and waves at him to quit loafing.

He grins to himself and starts Maggie down the hill, but he doesn't stop watching Annie work. He's grateful for her. Grateful that every time he comes back from tamarisk hunting she is still here. She's steady. Steadier than the people like Travis who give up when times get dry. Steadier than anyone Lolo knows, really. And if she has nightmares

sometimes, and can't stand being in towns or crowds and wakes up in the middle of the night calling out for family she'll never see again, well, then it's all the more reason to seed more tamarisk and make sure they never get pushed off their patch like she was pushed.

Lolo gets Maggie to kneel down so he can dismount, then leads her over to a water trough, half-full of slime and water skippers. He gets a bucket and heads for the river while Maggie groans and complains behind him. The patch used to have a well and running water, but like everyone else, they lost their pumping rights and BuRec stuffed the well with Quickcrete when the water

table dropped below the Minimum Allowable Reserve. Now he and Annie steal buckets from the river, or, when the Interior Department isn't watching, they jump up and down on a footpump and dump water into a hidden underground cistern he built when the Resource Conservation and Allowable Use Guidelines went into effect. Annie calls the guidelines "RaCAUG" and it sounds like she's hawking spit when she says it, but even with their filled-in well, they're lucky. They aren't like Spanish Oaks or Antelope Valley or River Reaches: expensive places that had rotten water rights and turned to dust, money or no, when Vegas and L.A. put in their calls. And they didn't have to bail out of

Phoenix Metro when the Central Arizona Project got turned off and then had its aqueducts blown to smithereens when Arizona wouldn't stop pumping out of Lake Havasu.

Pouring water into Maggie's water trough, and looking around at his dusty patch with Annie out in the fields, Lolo reminds himself how lucky he is. He hasn't blown away. He and Annie are dug in. Calies may call them water ticks, but screw them. If it weren't for people like him and Annie, they'd dry up and blow away the same as everyone else. And if Lolo moves a little bit of tamarisk around, well the Calies deserve it, considering what they've done to

everyone else. Finished with Maggie, Lolo goes into the house and gets a drink of his own out of the filter urn. The water is cool in the shadows of the adobe house. Juniper beams hang low overhead. He sits down and connects his BuRec camera to the solar panel they've got scabbed onto the roof. Its charge light blinks amber. Lolo goes and gets some more water. He's used to being thirsty, but for some reason he can't get enough today. Big Daddy Drought's got his hands around Lolo's neck today.

Annie comes in, wiping her forehead with a tanned arm. "Don't drink too much water," she says. "I haven't been able to pump. Bunch of guardies

around.”

“What the hell are they doing around? We haven’t even opened our headgates yet.”

“They said they were looking for you.”

Lolo almost drops his cup.

They know.

They know about his tamarisk reseeding. They know he’s been splitting and planting root-clusters. That he’s been dragging big healthy chunks of tamarisk up and down the river. A week ago he uploaded his claim on the canyon tamarisk—his biggest stand yet—almost

worth an acre-foot in itself in water bounty. And now the guardies are knocking on his door.

Lolo forces his hand not to shake as he puts his cup down. “They say what they want?” He’s surprised his voice doesn’t crack.

“Just that they wanted to talk to you.” She pauses. “They had one of those Humvees. With the guns.”

Lolo closes his eyes. Forces himself to take a deep breath. “They’ve always got guns. It’s probably nothing.”

“It reminded me of Lake Havasu. When they cleared us out. When they shut

down the water treatment plant and everyone tried to burn down the BLM office.”

“It’s probably nothing.” Suddenly he’s glad he never told her about his tamarisk hijinks. They can’t punish her the same. How many acre-feet is he liable for? It must be hundreds. They’ll want him, all right. Put him on a Straw work crew and make him work for life, repay his water debt forever. He’s replanted hundreds, maybe thousands of tamarisk, shuffling them around like a card shark on a poker table, moving them from one bank to another, killing them again and again and again, and always happily sending in his “evidence.”

“It’s probably nothing,” he says again.

“That’s what people said in Havasu.”

Lolo waves out at their newly tilled patch. The sun shines down hot and hard on the small plot. “We’re not worth that kind of effort.” He forces a grin. “It probably has to do with those enviro crazies who tried to blow up the Straw. Some of them supposedly ran this way. It’s probably that.”

Annie shakes her head, unconvinced. “I don’t know. They could have asked me the same as you.”

“Yeah, but I cover a lot of ground. See a lot of things. I’ll bet that’s why they want

to talk to me. They're just looking for eco-freaks."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. It's probably that." She nods slowly, trying to make herself believe. "Those enviros, they don't make any sense at all. Not enough water for people, and they want to give the river to a bunch of fish and birds."

Lolo nods emphatically and grins wider. "Yeah. Stupid." But suddenly he views the eco-crazies with something approaching brotherly affection. The Californians are after him, too.

* * * *

Lolo doesn't sleep all night. His

instincts tell him to run, but he doesn't have the heart to tell Annie, or to leave her. He goes out in the morning hunting tamarisk and fails at that as well. He doesn't cut a single stand all day. He considers shooting himself with his shotgun, but chickens out when he gets the barrels in his mouth. Better alive and on the run than dead. Finally, as he stares into the twin barrels, he knows that he has to tell Annie, tell her he's been a water thief for years and that he's got to run north. Maybe she'll come with him. Maybe she'll see reason. They'll run together. At least they have that. For sure, he's not going to let those bastards take him off to a labor camp for the rest of his life.

But the guardies are already waiting when Lolo gets back. They're squatting in the shade of their Humvee, talking. When Lolo comes over the crest of the hill, one of them taps the other and points. They both stand. Annie is out in the field again, turning over dirt, unaware of what's about to happen. Lolo reins in and studies the guardies. They lean against their Humvee and watch him come back. Suddenly Lolo sees his future. It plays out in his mind the way it does in a movie, as clear as the blue sky above. He puts his hand on his shotgun. Where it sits on Maggie's far side, the guardies can't see it. He keeps Maggie angled away from them and lets the camel start down the hill.

The guardies saunter toward him. They've got their Humvee with a .50 caliber on the back and they've both got M-16s but they're slung over their shoulders. They're in full bulletproof gear and they look flushed and hot. Lolo rides down slowly. He'll have to hit them both in the face. Sweat trickles between his shoulder blades. His hand is slick on the shotgun's stock.

The guardies are playing it cool. They've still got their rifles slung, and they let Lolo keep approaching. One of them has a wide smile. He's maybe forty years old, and tanned. He's been out for a while, picking up a tan like that. The other raises a hand and says, "Hey there,

Lolo.”

Lolo’s so surprised he takes his hand off his shotgun. “Hale?” He recognizes the guardie. He grew up with him. They played football together a million years ago, when football fields still had green grass and sprinklers sprayed their water straight into the air. Hale. Hale Perkins. Lolo scowls. He can’t shoot Hale. Hale says, “You’re still out here, huh?”

“What the hell are you doing in that uniform? You with the Calies now?”

Hale grimaces and points to his uniform patches: Utah National Guard. Lolo scowls. Utah National Guard. Colorado National Guard. Arizona National

Guard. They're all the same. There's hardly a single member of the

“National Guard” that isn't an out-of-state mercenary. Most of the local guardies quit a long time ago, sick to death of goose-stepping family and friends off their properties and sick to death of trading potshots with people who just wanted to stay in their homes. So even if there's still a Colorado National Guard, or an Arizona or a Utah, inside those uniforms with all their expensive nightsight gear and their brand-new choppers flying the river bends, it's pure California. And then there are a few like Hale.

Lolo remembers Hale as being an okay

guy. Remembers stealing a keg of beer from behind the Elks Club one night with him. Lolo eyes him. “How you liking that Supplementary Assistance Program?” He glances at the other guardie. “That working real well for you? The Calies a big help?”

Hale’s eyes plead for understanding. “Come on, Lolo. I’m not like you. I got a family to look after. If I do another year of duty, they let Shannon and the kids base out of California.”

“They give you a swimming pool in your backyard, too?”

“You know it’s not like that. Water’s scarce there, too.”

Lolo wants to taunt him, but his heart isn't in it. A part of him wonders if Hale is just smart. At first, when California started winning its water lawsuits and shutting off cities, the displaced people just followed the water—right to California. It took a little while before the bureaucrats realized what was going on, but finally someone with a sharp pencil did the math and realized that taking in people along with their water didn't solve a water shortage. So the immigration fences went up. But people like Hale can still get in.

“So what do you two want?” Inside, Lolo's wondering why they haven't already pulled him off Maggie and

hauled him away, but he's willing to play this out. The other guardie grins. "Maybe we're just out here seeing how the water ticks live."

Lolo eyes him. This one, he could shoot. He lets his hand fall to his shotgun again. "BuRec sets my headgate. No reason for you to be out here."

The Calie says, "There were some marks on it. Big ones."

Lolo smiles tightly. He knows which marks the Calie is talking about. He made them with five different wrenches when he tried to dismember the entire headgate apparatus in a fit of obsession. Finally he gave up trying to open the

bolts and just beat on the thing, banging the steel of the gate, smashing at it, while on the other side he had plants withering. After that, he gave up and just carried buckets of water to his plants and left it at that. But the dents and nicks are still there, reminding him of a period of madness. “It still works, don’t it?”

Hale holds up a hand to his partner, quieting him. “Yeah, it still works. That’s not why we’re here.”

“So what do you two want? You didn’t drive all the way out here with your machine gun just to talk about dents in my headgate.”

Hale sighs, put-upon, trying to be

reasonable. “You mind getting down off that damn camel so we can talk?”

Lolo studies the two guardies, figuring his chances on the ground. “Shit.” He spits. “Yeah, okay. You got me.” He urges Maggie to kneel and climbs off her hump. “Annie didn’t know anything about this. Don’t get her involved. It was all me.”

Hale’s brow wrinkles, puzzled. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re not arresting me?”

The Calie with Hale laughs. “Why? ‘Cause you take a couple buckets of water from the river? ‘Cause you

probably got an illegal cistern around here somewhere?”

He laughs again. “You ticks are all the same. You think we don’t know about all that crap?”

Hale scowls at the Calie, then turns back to Lolo. “No, we’re not here to arrest you. You know about the Straw?”

“Yeah.” Lolo says it slowly, but inside, he’s grinning. A great weight is suddenly off him. They don’t know. They don’t know jack. It was a good plan when he started it, and it’s a good plan still. Lolo schools his face to keep the glee off, and tries to listen to what Hale’s saying, but he can’t, he’s jumping up and down and

jibbering like a monkey. They don't know—

“Wait.” Lolo holds up his hand. “What did you just say?”

Hale repeats himself. “California’s ending the water bounty. They’ve got enough Straw sections built up now that they don’t need the program. They’ve got half the river enclosed. They got an agreement from the Department of Interior to focus their budget on seep and evaporation control. That’s where all the big benefits are. They’re shutting down the water bounty payout program.” He pauses. “I’m sorry, Lolo.”

Lolo frowns. “But a tamarisk is still a

tamarisk. Why should one of those damn plants get the water? If I knock out a tamarisk, even if Cali doesn't want the water, I could still take it. Lots of people could use the water."

Hale looks pityingly at Lolo. "We don't make the regulations, we just enforce them. I'm supposed to tell you that your headgate won't get opened next year. If you keep hunting tamarisk, it won't do any good." He looks around the patch, then shrugs. "Anyway, in another couple years they were going to pipe this whole stretch. There won't be any tamarisk at all after that."

"What am I supposed to do, then?"

“California and BuRec is offering early buyout money.” Hale pulls a booklet out of his bulletproof vest and flips it open. “Sort of to soften the blow.” The pages of the booklet flap in the hot breeze. Hale pins the pages with a thumb and pulls a pen out of another vest pocket. He marks something on the booklet, then tears off a perforated check. “It’s not a bad deal.”

Lolo takes the check. Stares at it. “Five hundred dollars?”

Hale shrugs sadly. “It’s what they’re offering. That’s just the paper codes. You confirm it on-line. Use your BuRec camera phone, and they’ll deposit it in whatever bank you want. Or they can

hold it in trust until you get into a town and want to withdraw it. Any place with a BLM office, you can do that. But you need to confirm before April 15. Then BuRec'll send out a guy to shut down your headgate before this season gets going."

"Five hundred dollars?"

"It's enough to get you north. That's more than they're offering next year."

"But this is my patch."

"Not as long as we've got Big Daddy Drought. I'm sorry, Lolo."

"The drought could break any time. Why

can't they give us a couple more years? It could break any time." But even as he says it, Lolo doesn't believe. Ten years ago, he might have. But not now. Big Daddy Drought's here to stay. He clutches the check and its keycodes to his chest.

A hundred yards away, the river flows on to California.