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C. J. BOX

author of *Open Season*



SAVAGE RUN

A JOE PICKETT NOVEL

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OPEN SEASON

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Savage RUN

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To Jack and Faye Box, my parents

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A place called Saddlestring does exist, but it is a tiny post office located on a historic ranch, not a real Wyoming community. The fictional Saddlestring, Wyoming, is an amalgam of at least three different towns.

Savage Run

Part One.

No compromise in defense of Mother Earth. earth first!

Siargadee national forest,

June 10

ON THE THIRD DAY OF THEIR HONEYMOON, infamous environmental activist Stewie Woods and his new bride, Annabel Bellotti, were spiking trees in the forest when a cow exploded and blew them up. Until then, their marriage had been happy

They met by chance. Stewie Woods had been busy pouring bag after bag of sugar and sand into the gasoline tanks of a fleet of pickups in a newly graded parking lot that belonged to a natural gas exploration crew. The crew had left for the afternoon for the bars and hotel rooms of nearby Henry's Fork. One of the crew had returned

unexpectedly and caught Stewie as he was ripping the top off a bag of sugar with his teeth. The crew member pulled a 9mm semiautomatic from beneath the dashboard of his truck and fired several wild shots in Stewie's direction. Stewie dropped the bag and ran away, crashing through the timber like a bull elk.

Stewie had outrun and out juiced the man with the pistol when he literally tripped over Annabel as she sunbathed nude on the grass in an orange pool of late afternoon sun, who was unaware of his approach because she was listening to Melissa Ethridge on her Walkman. She looked good, he thought, strawberry blonde hair with a two-day Rocky Mountain fire-engine tan (two hours in the sun at 8,000 feet created a sunburn like a whole day at the beach), small ripe breasts, and a trimmed vector of pubic hair.

He had gathered her up and pulled her along through the timber, where they hid together in a dry spring wash until the man with the pistol gave up and went home. She had giggled while he held her--This was real adventure, she said--and he had used the opportunity to run his hands tentatively over her naked shoulders and hips and had found out, happily that she did not object. They made their way back to where she had been sunbathing and, while she dressed, they introduced themselves. She told him she liked the idea of meeting a famous environmental outlaw in the woods while she was naked, and he appreciated that. She said she had seen his picture before, maybe in Outside magazine, and admired his looks--tall and rawboned, with round rimless glasses, a short-cropped full beard, wearing his famous red bandana on his head.

Her story was that she had been camping alone in a dome tent, taking a few days off from a freewheeling cross-continent trip that had begun with her divorce from an anal-retentive investment banker named Nathan in her hometown of Pawtucket, Rhode Island. She was bound, eventually for Seattle.

"I'm falling in love with your mind," he lied.

"Already?" she asked.

He encouraged her to travel with him, and they took her vehicle since the lone crew member had disabled Stewie's Subaru with three bullets into the engine block. Stewie was astonished by his good fortune. Every time he looked over at her and she smiled back, he was pole axed with exuberance.

Keeping to dirt roads, they crossed into Montana. The next afternoon, in the backseat of her SUV during a thunderstorm that rocked the car and blew shroud like sheets of ram through the mountain passes, he asked her to marry him. Given the circumstances and the supercharged atmosphere, she accepted. When the ram stopped, they drove to Ennis, Montana, and asked around about who could marry them, fast. Stewie did not want to take the chance of letting her get away. She kept saying she couldn't believe she was doing this. He couldn't believe she was doing this either, and he loved her even more for it.

At the Sportsman Inn in Ennis, Montana, which was bustling with fly fishermen bound

for the trout-rich waters of the Madison River, the desk clerk gave them a name and they looked up Judge Ace Cooper (Ret.) in the telephone book.

Judge Cooper was a tired and rotund man who wore a stained white cowboy shirt and elk horn bolo tie with his collar open. He performed the wedding ceremony in a room adjacent to his living room that was bare except for a single filing cabinet, a desk and three chairs, and two framed photographs--one of the judge and President George H. W. Bush, who had once been up there fishing, and the other of the judge on a horse before the Cooper family lost their ranch in the 1980s.

The ceremony had taken eleven minutes, which was just about average for Judge Cooper, although he had once performed it in eight minutes for two American Indians.

"Do you, Allan Stewart Woods, take thee Annabeth to be your lawful wedded wife?" Judge Cooper asked, reading from the marriage application form.

"Annabel," Annabel corrected in her biting Rhode Island accent.

"I do," Stewie said. He was beside himself with pure joy.

Stewie twisted the ring off his finger and placed it on hers. It was unique; handmade gold mounted with sterling silver monkey wrenches. It was also three sizes too large. The Judge studied the ring.

"Monkey wrenches?" the Judge asked.

"It's symbolic," Stewie had said.

"I'm aware of the symbolism," the Judge said darkly before finishing the passage.

Annabel and Stewie beamed at each other. Annabel said that this was, like, the wildest vacation ever. They were Mr. and Mrs. Outlaw Couple. He was now her famous outlaw, as yet untamed. She said her father would be scandalized, and her mother would have to wear dark glasses at Newport. Only her Aunt Tildie, the one with the wild streak who had corresponded with, but never met, a Texas serial killer until he died from lethal injection, would understand.

Stewie had to borrow a hundred dollars from her to pay the judge, and she signed over a traveler's check.

After the couple left in the SUV with Rhode Island plates, Judge Ace Cooper went to his lone filing cabinet and found the file with the information he needed. He pulled a single piece of paper out and read it as he dialed the telephone. While he waited for the right man to come to the telephone, he stared at the framed photo of himself on his former ranch. The ranch, north of Yellowstone Park, had been subdivided by a Bozeman real estate company into over thirty fifty-acre "ranchettes." Famous Hollywood celebrities, including the one whose early career photos he had recently

seen in Penthouse, now lived there. Movies had been filmed there. There was even a crack house but it was rumored that the owner wintered in LA. The only cattle that existed were purely for visual effect, like landscaping that moved and crapped and looked good when the sun threatened to drop below the mountains.

The man he was waiting for came to the telephone.

"Stewie Woods was here," he said. "The man himself. I recognized him right off, and his ID proved it." There was a pause as the man on

the other end of the telephone asked Cooper something. "Yeah, I heard him say that just before they left. They're headed for the Bighorns in Wyoming. Somewhere near Saddlestring."

Annabel told Stewie that their honeymoon was quite unlike what she had imagined a honeymoon would be, and she contrasted it with her first one with Nathan. Nathan had been about sailing boats, champagne, and Barbados. Stewie was about spiking trees in stifling heat in a national forest in Wyoming. He even asked her to carry his pack.

Neither of them noticed the late-model black Ford pickup that trailed them up the mountain road and continued on when Stewie pulled over to park. Deep into the forest, Annabel watched as Stewie removed his shirt and tied the sleeves around his waist. A heavy bag of nails hung from his tool belt and tinkled as he strode through the undergrowth. There was a sheen of sweat on his bare chest as he straddled a three-foot thick Douglas fir and drove in spikes. He was obviously well practiced, and he got into a rhythm where he could bury the six-inch spikes into the soft wood with three blows from his sledgehammer, one tap to set the spike and two heavy blows to bury it beyond the nail head in the bark.

Stewie moved from tree to tree, but didn't spike all of them. He approached each tree using the same method: The first of the spikes went in at eye level. A quarter-turn around the trunk, he pounded in another a foot lower than the first. He continued pounding in spikes, spiraling them down the trunk nearly to the grass.

"Won't it hurt the trees?" Annabel asked, as she unloaded his pack and leaned it against a tree.

"Of course not," he said, moving as he spoke across the pine needle floor to another target. "I wouldn't be doing this if it hurt the trees. You've got a lot to learn about me, Annabel."

"Why do you put so many in?" she asked.

"Good question," he said, burying a spike deep in the tree as he spoke. "It used to be we could put in four right at knee level, at the compass points, where the trees are usually cut. But the lumber companies got wise to that and told their loggers to either go higher or lower. So now we fill up a four-foot radius."

"And what will happen if they try to cut it down?"

Stewie smiled, resting for a moment. "When a chainsaw blade hits a steel spike, the blade can snap and whip back. Busts the saw teeth That can take an eye or a nose right off."

"That's horrible," she said, wincing, wondering what she was getting into.

"I've never been responsible for any injuries," Stewie said quickly looking hard at her. "The purpose isn't to hurt anyone. The purpose is to save trees. After we're finished here, I'll call the local ranger station and tell them what we've done--although I won't say exactly where or how many trees we spiked. It should be enough to keep them out of here for decades, and that's the point."

"Have you ever been caught?" she asked.

"Once," Stewie said, and his face clouded. "A forest ranger caught me by Jackson Hole. He marched me into downtown Jackson at gunpoint during tourist season. Half of the tourists in town cheered and the other half started chanting, "Hang him high! Hang him high!" I was sent to the Wyoming State Penitentiary in Rawlins for seven months."

"Now that you mention it, I think I read about that," she mused.

"You probably did. The wire services picked it up. I was interviewed on "Nightline" and "60 Minutes." Outside magazine put me on the cover. Hayden Powell, who I've known since we were kids, wrote the cover story for them, and he coined the word 'ecoterrorist.'" This memory made Stewie feel bold. "There were reporters from all over the country at that trial," he said. "Even the New York Times. It was the first time most people had ever heard of One Globe, or knew I was the founder of it. After that, memberships started pouring in from all over the world."

Annabel nodded her head. One Globe. The ecological action group that used the logo of crossed monkey wrenches, in deference to late author Edward Abbey's The Monkey Wrench Gang. She recalled that One Globe had once dropped a shroud over Mount Rushmore right before the president was about to give a speech there. It had been on the nightly news.

"Stewie," she said happily "you are the real thing." Her eyes stayed on him as he drove in the spiral of spikes and moved to the next tree.

"When you are done with that tree, I want you," she said, her voice husky "Right here and right now, my sweet sweaty . . . husband."

Stewie turned and smiled at her. His face glistened and his muscles were bulging from swinging the sledgehammer. She slid her T-shirt over her head and stood waiting for him, her lips parted and her legs tense.

stewie slung His own PACK NOW and stopped spiking trees. Fat black thunderheads, pregnant with rain, nosed across the lateafternoon sky. They were hiking at a fast pace toward the peak, holding hands, with the hope of getting there and pitching camp before the ram started. Stewie said that after they hiked out of the forest tomorrow, they would get in the SUV and head southeast, toward the Bridger-Teton Forest.

When they walked into the herd of grazing cattle, Stewie felt a dark cloud of anger envelop him.

"Range maggots!" Stewie said, spitting. "If they're not letting the logging companies in to cut all the trees at taxpayer's expense, they're letting the local ranchers run their cows in here so they can eat all the grass and shit in all the streams."

"Can't we just go around them?" Annabel asked.

"It's not that, Annabel," he said patiently "Of course we can go around them. It's just the principle of the thing. Cows don't belong in the trees in the Bighorn Mountains--they're fouling up what is left of the natural ecosystem. You have so much to learn, darling."

"I know," she said, determined.

"These ranchers out here run their cows on public land--our land--at the expense of not only us taxpayers but of the wildlife as well. They pay something like four dollars an acre when they should be paying ten times that, even though it would be best if they were completely gone."

"But we need meat, don't we?" she asked. "You're not a vegetarian, are you?"

"Did you forget that cheeseburger I had for lunch in Cameron?" he said. "No, I'm not a vegetarian, although sometimes I -wish I had the will to be one."

"I tried it once and it made me lethargic," Annabel confessed.

"All these western cows produce only about five percent of the beef we eat in this whole country," Stewie said. "All the rest comes from down South, from Texas, Florida, and Louisiana, where there's plenty of grass and plenty of private land to graze them on."

Stewie picked up a pine cone threw it accurately through the trees, and struck a black baldy heifer on the snout. The cow bellowed in protest then turned and lumbered away. The rest of the small herd, about a dozen head, followed it. They moved loudly, clumsily cracking branches and throwing up fist-sized pieces of black earth from their hooves,

"I wish I could chase them right back to the ranch they belong on," Stewie said, watching "Right up the ass of the rancher -who has lease rights for this part of the

Bighorns."

One cow had not moved. It stood broadside and looked at them.

"What's wrong with that cow?" Stewie asked.

"Shoo!" Annabel shouted. "Shoo!"

Stewie stifled a smile at his new wife's shooing and slid out of his pack. The temperature had dropped about twenty degrees in the last ten minutes and ram was inevitable. The sky had darkened and black roiling clouds enveloped the peak. The sudden low pressure had

made the forest quieter, the sounds muffled and the smell of the cows stronger.

Stewie Woods walked straight toward the heifer, with Annabel several steps behind.

"Something's wrong with that cow;" Stewie said, trying to figure out what about it seemed amiss.

When Stewie was close enough he saw everything at once: the cow trying to run with the others but straining at the end of a tight nylon line; the heifer's wild white eyes; the misshapen profile of something strapped on its back that was large and square and didn't belong; the thin reed of an antenna that quivered from the package on the heifer's back.

"Annabel!" Stewie yelled, turning to reach out to her--but she had walked around him and was now squarely between Stewie and the cow

She absorbed the full, frontal blast when the heifer detonated, the explosion shattering the mountain stillness with the subtlety of a sledgehammer bludgeoning bone.

SOUR MILES AWAY, a fire lookout heard the guttural boom and ran to the railing of the lookout tower with binoculars. Over a red-rimmed plume of smoke and dirt, he could see a Douglas fir launch into the air like a rocket, where it turned, hung suspended for a moment, then crashed into the forest below

Shaking, he reached for his radio.

2

EiGHT MILES OUT OF SADDLE STRING Wyoming, Game Warden Joe Pickett was watching his wife, Marybeth, work their new Tobiano paint horse, Toby, when the call came from the Twelve Sleep County Sheriffs office.

It was early evening, the time when the setting sun ballooned and softened, defining the deep velvet folds and piercing tree-greens of Wolf Mountain. The normally dull and pastel colors of the weathered barn and the red-rock canyon behind the house suddenly looked as if they had been repainted in rich acrylics. Toby who was a big dark bay gelding swirled with brilliant white that ran over his haunches like thick paint that spilled upward, shone deep red in the evening light and looked especially striking. So did Marybeth, in Joe's opinion, in her worn Wranglers, sleeveless cotton shirt, her blonde hair in a

ponytail. There was no wind, and the only sound was the rhythmic thumping of Toby's hooves in the round pen as Marybeth waved the whip and encouraged the gelding to shift from a trot into a slow lope.

The Game and Fish Department considered the Saddlestring District a "two-horse district," meaning that the department would provide feed and tack for two mounts to be used for patrolling. Toby was their second horse.

Joe stood with his boot on the bottom rail of the fence and his arms folded over the top, his chin nestled between his forearms. He was still wearing his red cotton Game and Fish uniform shirt with the pronghorn antelope patch on the sleeve and his sweat-stained gray Stetson. He could feel the pounding of the earth as Toby passed in front of him, making a circle. He watched Marybeth stay in position in the center of the pen, shuffling her feet so she stayed on Toby's back flank. She talked to the horse in a soothing voice, urging him to gallop--something he clearly didn't want to do.

Marybeth stepped closer to Toby and commanded him to run. Marybeth still had a slight limp from when she had been shot nearly two years before, but she was nimble and quick. Toby pinned his ears back and twitched his tail but finally broke into a full-fledged gallop, raising the dust in the pen, his mane and tail snapping behind him like a flag in a stiff wind. After several rotations, Marybeth called "Whoa!" and Toby hit the brakes, skidding to a quick stop where he stood breathing hard, his muscles swelled, his back shiny with sweat, smacking and licking his lips as if he were eating peanut butter. Marybeth approached him and patted him down, telling him what a good boy he was, and blowing gently into his nostrils to soothe him.

"He's a stubborn guy A lazy guy" she told Joe over her shoulder as she continued to pat Toby down. "He did not want to lope fast. Did you notice how he pinned his ears back and threw his head around?"

Joe said yup.

"That's how he was telling me he was mad about it. When he does that it means he's either going to break out of the circle and do

whatever he wants or he's going to do what I'm asking him to do. In this case he did what he was supposed to and went into the fast lope. He's finally learning that things will go a lot easier on him when he does what I ask him."

Joe smiled. "I know it works for me."

Marybeth crinkled her nose at Joe, then turned her attention back to Toby "See how he licks his lips? That's a sign of obedience. He's conceding that I am the boss."

Joe fought the urge to theatrically lick his lips when she looked over at him.

"Why did you blow in his nose like that?" he asked.

"Horses in the herd do that to each other to show affection. It's another way they bond with each other" Marybeth paused. "I know it sounds hokey, but blowing in his nose is kind of like giving him a hug. A horse hug."

Joe was fascinated by what Marybeth was doing. He had been around horses most of his life, and by now he had taken his buckskin mare Lizzie over most of the mountains in the Twelve Sleep Range of the Bighorns. But what Marybeth was doing with Toby, what she was getting out of him, was a different kind of thing. Joe was duly impressed.

A shout behind him pulled Joe from his thoughts. He turned toward the sound, and saw ten-year-old Sheridan, five-year-old Lucy, and their eight-year-old foster daughter April stream through the backyard gate and across the field toward Joe and Marybeth. Sheridan held the cordless phone out in front of her like an Olympic torch, and the other two girls followed.

"Dad, it's for you," Sheridan yelled. "A man says it's very important."

Joe and Marybeth exchanged looks and Joe took the telephone. It was County Sheriff O. R. "Bud" Barnum.

There had been a big explosion in the Bighorn National Forest, Barnum told Joe. A fire lookout had called it in, and reported that through his binoculars he could see fat dark forms littered on the ground

throughout the trees. They suspected a "shitload" of animals were dead, which was why he was calling Joe. Dead game animals were Joe's concern. They assumed at this point that they were game animals, Barnum said, but they might be cows. A couple of local ranchers had grazing leases up there. Barnum asked if Joe could meet him at the Winchester exit off of the interstate in twenty minutes. That way they could get to the scene before it was completely dark.

Joe handed the telephone back to Sheridan and looked over his shoulder at Marybeth.

"When will you be back?" she asked.

"Late," Joe told her. "There was an explosion in the mountains."

"You mean like a plane crash?"

"He didn't say that. The explosion was a few miles off of the Hazel ton Road in the mountains, in elk country Barnum thinks there may be some game animals down."

She looked at Joe for further explanation. He shrugged to indicate that was all he knew

"I'll save you some dinner."

JOE met the SHERIFF and Deputy McLanahan at the exit to Winchester and followed them through the small town. The three vehicle fleet--two county GMC Blazers and Joe's dark green Game and Fish pickup--entered and exited the tiny town within minutes. Even though it was still early in the evening, the only establishments open were two bars with identical red neon Coors signs in their windows and a convenience store. Winchester's lone public artwork, located on the front lawn of the branch bank, was an outsized and gruesome metal sculpture of a wounded grizzly bear straining at the end of a thick chain, its metal leg encased in a massive saw toothed bear trap. Joe did not find the sculpture lovely, but it captured the mood, style, and inbred frontier culture of the area as well as anything else could have.

deputy mclanahan led the way through the timber in the direction where the explosion had been reported and Joe walked behind him alongside Sheriff Barnum. Joe and McLanahan had acknowledged each other with curt nods and said nothing. Their relationship had been rocky ever since McLanahan had sprayed an outfitter's camp with shotgun blasts two years before and Joe had received a wayward pellet under his eye. He still had a scar to show for it.

Barnum's hangdog face grimaced as he limped alongside Joe through the underbrush. He complained about his hip. He complained about the distance from the road to the crime scene. He complained about McLanahan, and said to Joe, sotto voce, that he should have fired the deputy years before and would have if he weren't his nephew. Joe suspected, however, that Barnum also kept McLanahan around because the deputy's quick-draw reputation had added--however untrue and unlikely--an air of toughness to the Sheriff's Department that didn't hurt at election time.

While they had been walking, the sun had dropped below the top of the mountains, the peaks now no more than craggy black silhouettes. The light dimmed in the forest, fusing treetops and branches that had been discernible just moments before into a shadowy muddle. Joe reached back on his belt to make sure he had his flashlight. As he did so, he let his arm brush his .357 Smith & Wesson revolver to confirm it was there. He didn't want Barnum to notice the movement since Barnum still chided

Joe about the time he lost his gun to a poacher he was arresting.

There was an unnatural silence in the woods, with the exception of Barnum's grumbling. The absence of normal woodland sounds--the chattering of squirrels sending a warning up the line, the panicked scrambling of deer, the airy winged drumbeat of flushed Spruce grouse--confirmed that something big had happened here. Something

so big it either cleared the wildlife out of the area or frightened them mute. Joe could feel that they were getting closer before he could see anything to confirm it. Whatever it was, it was just ahead.

McLanahan suddenly stopped and Joe heard the sharp intake of his breath.

"Holy shit," McLanahan whispered in awe. "Holy shit."

The still-smoking crater was fifteen yards across. It was three feet deep at its center. A half-dozen trees had been blown out of the ground, and their shallow root pans were exposed like black outstretched hands. Eight or nine black baldy cattle were dead and still, strewn among the trunks of trees. The earth below the thick turf rim of the crater was dark and wet. Several large white roots, the size of leg bones, were pulled up from the ground by the explosion and now pointed at the sky Cordite from the explosives, pine from broken branches, and upturned mulch had combined in the air to produce a sickeningly sweet and heavy smell.

What little daylight was left was quickly disappearing, and Joe clicked on his flashlight as they slowly circled the crater. Barnum and McLanahan followed suit, and the pools of light illuminated the twisted roots and lacy pale yellow undergrowth in the crater.

The rest of the herd, apparently unhurt, stood as silent shadows just beyond Joe's flashlight. He could see dark heavy shapes and hear the sound of chewing, and a pair of eyes reflected back blue as a cow raised its head to look at him. He approached the nearest cow and shined the flashlight on its haunch to see the brand. It was the letter V with a U underneath, divided by a single line--the Vee Bar U Ranch. These were Jim Finotta's cows.

McLanahan suddenly yelped in alarm, and Joe raised his flashlight to see the deputy in a wild, self-slapping panic, dancing away from the rim of the crater and ripping off his jacket as quickly as he could. He threw it violently to the ground in a heap and stood over it, staring.

"What in the hell is wrong with you" Barnum barked, annoyed.

"Something landed on my shoulder. Something heavy and wet," McLanahan said, his face contorted. "I thought it was somebody's hand grabbing me. It scared me half to death."

McLanahan had dropped his flashlight, so from across the crater, Joe lowered his light and focused a tight beam on the deputy's jacket. McLanahan bent down into the light and gingerly unfolded the jacket, poised to jump back if whatever had fallen on him was still in his clothing. He threw back a fold and cursed. Joe couldn't see for sure what McLanahan was looking at, but he could make out that the object was dark and moist.

"What is it?" Barum asked.

"It looks like ... well... it looks like a piece of meat." McLanahan looked up at Joe vacantly. The flashlight reflected in his eyes.

Slowly Joe raised his flashlight, sweeping upward over McLanahan and then up the trunk of a lodgepole pine and into the branches. What Joe saw, he knew he would never forget.

Part of it was simply the initial shock. Part of it was seeing it in the harsh beam of a flashlight that lit up the texture, colors, and shapes and threw misshapen shadows about in unnatural and unsettling ways. He was not expecting--and could never have imagined--what it would look like to see the whole of a half-ton creature exploded into a thousand shards of different lengths, hanging down from branches like icicles, as high as his flashlight's beam would reach. Entrails looped across the branches like popcorn strings on a Christmas tree.

He gagged as he swept the flashlight from tree to tree on McLanahan's side of the crater. McLanahan retrieved his own flashlight and started sweeping the trees with the beam as well.

"I want to go home and take a shower," McLanahan said. "The trees are covered with this shit."

"How about you go back to the Blazer and get the crime-scene tape and your camera instead," Barnum barked. Barnum's voice startled Joe. The sheriff had been so quiet that Joe had almost forgotten he was there. He looked over to where Barnum stood, several yards away, his

flashlight pointed down near his feet. "There's a pair of big-ass hiking boots sitting right here. The laces are popped open."

The sheriff paused and looked at Joe. "I think the poor dumb son-of-a-bitch who was wearing these got blown right out of them."

they weren't finished taping off the area until well after ten. The clouds that had covered the mountains and kept the sky closed like a lid on a kettle had dissipated, leaving a gauze of brilliant blue white stars, like a million pinpricks in a dark cloth. The moon was barely more than a thin slash in the sky, providing a scant amount of light to see, so McLanahan and Joe, their flashlights clamped under their arms,

fumbled clumsily through and around trees with rolls of the plastic band reading crime scene crime scene crime scene while Barnum tried in vain to maintain radio contact. Joe wondered how much evidence they were crushing or disturbing as they wound the plastic through the timber. He mentioned this to Barnum, but Barnum was busy trying to contact the Sheriffs Department dispatcher via his radio and just waved him off.

"We started with an explosion called in by the fire lookout and now we've got us a full-fledged murder investigation," Barnum growled into his handheld between ferocious bouts of static. "We need state forensics as fast as they can get here and we'll need the coroner and a photographer out here at dawn. We can't see a goddamn thing."

"Come again?" the dispatcher asked through more static.

"She can't hear a word I'm saying," Barnum declared angrily

"Why don't you wait and try her again from the radio in the Blazer?" McLanahan asked. Joe was thinking the same thing.

Barnum cursed and holstered his radio. "I need to take a leak and then let's get out of here." Barnum turned and limped away into the dark brush.

Joe tied off the tape on a tree trunk sticky with pine sap and took

his flashlight from where he had been holding it steady under his arm. He slided it on his boots. They -were slick with blood.

"Jesus Christ!" Barnum yelled from the darkness. "We've got a body Or at least half of one. It's a girl. A woman, I mean."

"Which half?" McLanahan asked stupidly

"Shut the fuck up." Barnum answered bluntly

Joe didn't want to look. He had seen enough for one night. The fact that Barnum was coming toward him, limping as quickly as he could around the crime scene tape, didn't even register with Joe until Barnum stopped two feet in front of him and waved his finger in Joe's face. Joe couldn't tell if the sheriff was really angry or he was watching another display of Barnum's famous bluster. Either way being this close reminded Joe of how formidable Barnum still was, even after twenty six years as Twelve Sleep County sheriff.

"Why is it, Game Warden Pickett, that we rarely if ever have any trouble in my county" the sheriffs voice rising as he spoke, "but every goddamned time we find dead bodies strewn about you seem to be standing there in the middle of them?"

Joe was taken aback by Barnum's sudden outrage. It was now obvious to Joe that Barnum had been harboring resentment for quite some time because Joe had solved the outfitter murders. Joe could not come up with a good response. He felt his cheeks

flush red in the dark.

"Sheriff, you called me to the scene, remember?"

Barnum sneered. "But I thought we had a bunch of dead elk."

Abruptly Barnum turned and began to limp in the direction of his Blazer. McLanahan dutifully fell in behind him after giving Joe a look of superior satisfaction. Joe wondered just what it was he had done to arouse Barnum. He guessed it was exactly what Barnum had said: that he was there was enough. The new game warden, two years in the Saddlestring District, still wet behind the ears, who was now right square in the middle of another homicide. Or suicide. Or something.

There had been few violent deaths in Twelve Sleep County in the past two years aside from the outfitter murders. The only one of note

was the rancher's wife who killed her husband by burying a hay hook into his skull, straight through his Stetson, pinning his hat to his head. In one version of the story that Joe had heard, the wife had gone home after the incident, mixed herself a pitcher of vodka martinis, and then called the sheriff to turn herself in. The pitcher was nearly empty when they arrived a short time later.

Before following the sheriff and his deputy, Joe stood quietly in the dark. He could hear the rest of the herd of cows grazing closer to the crater. In the distance, a squirrel chirred a message. The wildlife was cautiously moving back in. But there was something else.

A tremor quickly ran the length of his spine, and he felt the hairs prick on his forearms and neck. He looked straight up at the cold stars, then swept his eyes through the black pine branches. He knew that the fire lookout station was out of range. The black humps of the Bighorn Mountains did not show a single twinkling light of a cabin or a headlight. So why did he feel like someone or something was there with him, watching him?

driving back on the interstate toward Saddlestring, Joe watched the little screen on his cell phone until it indicated he was finally receiving a signal. As he had guessed, Marybeth was still awake and waiting to hear from him. He gave her a quick summary of what they had found.

She asked if the victim was someone local.

"We have no idea," Joe said. "At this point we don't even know if we've got one body or two. Or more."

She was silent for a long time.

"A cow exploded?" she finally asked, incredulous.

"That's what it looks like."

"So now we've got exploding cows to worry about?"

"Yup," Joe said, his voice gently teasing. "As if there weren't enough things to worry about with three little girls, now we need to keep

them away from cows. And they're everywhere, those cows. In all of the fields and in all of the pastures. It's like there are ten thousand ticking time bombs all around us just waiting to explode."

She told him he was not very funny

"It's been a bad night," he said. "Barnum asked me to notify the rancher who owns the cows tomorrow, which I'll do. He said that beyond that, he really doesn't need my help on the investigation. Hell, he was upset with me just because I was there. He's calling in the state crime boys tonight."

"Barnum just wants everything to go smoothly until he retires," Marybeth said. "He just wants to cruise on out of here without a ripple. And he especially doesn't want you to steal his thunder in the meantime."

"Maybe," Joe said, knowing she was probably right.

"Who's the rancher?" Marybeth asked.

"Jim Rnotta. All the cattle had his Vee Bar U brand."

Marybeth paused. "Jim Finotta, the trial lawyer?" she asked warily Joe knew her antennae were up.

"Yup."

"I haven't heard many good things about him," she said .

"Maybe so," Joe said. "But you know how people like to talk. I've never met the man."

It was almost as if Joe could hear Marybeth thinking. Then she abruptly changed the subject. "I saved some dinner for you," Marybeth said as the highway straightened out and Saddlestring came into view The town at night looked like a handful of jewels scattered through a river valley

"What did you have?" Joe asked.

Marybeth paused. "Hamburgers."

Joe forced a bitter smile. "I'll have to pass. I'll grab some chicken at the Burg-OPardner."

"I understand. Please hose yourself off in the front yard before you come in."

3

One HOUR AFTER THE TAILLIGHTS of the law enforcement vehicles vanished down Hazelton Road to return to Saddlestring, two men emerged from the darkness of the forest on the other side of the mountain. In silence, they approached a sleek black pickup that was parked deep in the trees, away from the rough logging road they had used to access the area. Using mini-Mag lights with the beams choked down to dim, they repacked their equipment and electronics gear--optics, radios, the long-range transmitter, and unused packages of C-4 explosives --into brushed aluminum cases in the bed of the truck.

"Too bad about that woman," the Old Man said.

"Collateral damage," Charlie grunted. "Except for her, everything worked perfectly"

Charlie snapped the fasteners shut on the optics case and looked up at the Old Man. "Tup."

THE OLD MAN had been stunned by the force of the explosion, even from the distance from which they had observed it. In rapid succession, he saw the flash as Charlie toggled the transmitter, felt a tremor surge through the ground, and heard the detonation as the sound rolled across the mountains. The booming rumble washed over them several times as it echoed like distant thunder.

The Old Man had lowered his binoculars and whistled. Charlie, who had been watching through his spotting scope as Stewie Woods and the woman worked their way up the mountain, clucked his tongue.

I hey HAD tracked Stewie Woods across three states, and Stewie had never known they were there. Even when he took up with the woman and switched vehicles, they had stayed close. He had been sloppy and more than a little preoccupied. When the judge in Ennis reported that they were headed to "somewhere near Saddlestring" in the Bighorn Mountains, Charlie had demonstrated to the Old Man, for the first time, why he was so good at what he did. When it came to hunting men, Charlie Tibbs was the best.

The national forest was huge, with dozens of access points. But Charlie anticipated exactly where Stewie Woods would end up, and they had beaten him there. From Charlie the Old Man learned that this part of the forest had been the subject of a dispute involving environmental groups, the U.S. Forest Service, and the local ranchers and loggers who had been leasing the area for years. The dispute had been used by the environmentalists as a test case, and they had thrown their best lawyers into it. They had wanted to end what they saw as sweetheart deals made to ranchers on public land. But, as Charlie explained to the Old Man, the ranchers and loggers won when the judge--once a rancher himself--ruled to continue the leases.

One Globe, Stewie Woods's organization, had been the most vocal in the dispute. Woods himself had been forcibly removed from the courtroom for acting out when the verdict was read. On the courthouse steps, in front of television cameras, Woods had proclaimed, "If we can't save the planet through the courts, we'll do it in the forests."

The tract that would lure Stewie Woods, Charlie guessed correctly, was the one most recently opened to both logging and grazing. The best access to the parcel was from a trailhead near Hazelton Road. From there, Charlie had determined, Woods would hike toward the peak where the trees to be logged would soon be marked. On the way Woods would undoubtedly run into the herd of cattle that had recently been moved into the high country. The Old Man wasn't sure what they would have done if Woods had skirted the herd of cows, especially with the tethered heifer that had been strapped with the explosives and the detonation receiver. But even if Woods had taken another route and evaded their trap, the Old Man had no doubt that Charlie would have quickly come up with another plan. The man was relentless.

As they opened THE DOORS of the pickup, the interior light came on. The Old Man looked at Charlie, and Charlie looked back. The harsh light emphasized their facial characteristics. They were both weathered, and aging. They shared a smile.

"Step one in winning back the west," the Old Man said.

Charlie drove while the Old Man stared through the windshield. Their tires ground on the gravel road.

When they hit the pavement, Charlie turned the pickup northwest. They were headed to Washington state.