C.J. BOX

STORM WATCH



An Aries Book

First published in the UK in 2023 by Head of Zeus,
part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Published by arrangement with G. P. Putnam's Sons, an imprint of
Penguin Publishing, a division of Penguin Random House LLC

Copyright © C.J. Box, 2023

The moral right of C.J. Box to be identified
as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior
permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events
portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously.

Book design by Katy Riegel

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781803283975
ISBN (XTPB): 9781803283982
ISBN (E): 9781803283951

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



Head of Zeus
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

STORM WATCH

In memory of Toby, our first horse,

and for Laurie, always



Wednesday, March 29

CHAPTER ONE

Late March in the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains wasn't yet spring by any means, but there were a growing number of days when spring could be dreamt of.

For Wyoming game warden Joe Pickett, this wasn't one of those days. This was a day that would both start and end with blood on the snow.

At midday, he climbed out of the cab of his replacement green Ford F-150 pickup and pulled on coveralls and a winter parka over his red uniform shirt and wool Filson vest. He'd had the foresight to layer up that morning before leaving his house, and he was also wearing merino wool long johns and thick wool socks. He buckled knee-high nylon gaiters over his lace-up Sorel pack boots, then placed his hat crown-down on the dashboard and replaced it with a thick wool rancher's cap with the earflaps down.

On the open tailgate of his vehicle, he filled a light

daypack with gear: water, snowshoes, camera, necropsy kit, extra ammo, ticket book, binoculars, sat phone. While he did so, he shot a glance at the storm cloud shrouding the mountains and muting the sun. A significant "weather event" had been predicted by the National Weather Service for southern Montana and northern Wyoming. Joe didn't question it. It *felt* like snow was coming, maybe a lot of it, and he needed to find an injured elk cow and put her out of her misery before the storm roared down from those mountains and engulfed him.

The interstate highway had closed an hour before, as it so often did because of heavy snowfall, high winds, and vehicle crashes. The winter, thus far, had been brutal. Storm after storm since Christmas, and very little melting. The snowpack in the mountains was one hundred and fifty percent of normal, which was a relief after several years of drought, but getting through it had been cruel. During his lifetime in the Rocky Mountains, Joe had rarely been bothered by long winters, but this year was different. He was getting tired of constant snow making everything he did more difficult.

He was located fifteen miles from Saddlestring on a paved but potholed county road that ran east to west, parallel to the foothills. It was on that road that morning that a young male driver en route to a Montana ski resort for spring break had taken a shortcut from the interstate highway. He'd apparently been looking at the navigation app on his smartphone screen when he plowed into a small herd of elk crossing the road.

The driver's car was totaled and had been towed away. The

driver himself was under observation at the Twelve Sleep County Medical Center for an injury sustained when he bounced his forehead off his steering wheel upon impact. Two elk had been killed in the collision. A third elk, the cow Joe was after, had been seen by a state trooper who had responded to the accident call. On three good legs, the elk had somehow leapt over the fence beside the road and had last been seen limping away toward the mountains.

Joe had heard about the incident over his radio while he'd been in another corner of his district looking for another problematic animal: a one-hundred-and-twenty-pound wolf that had gutted two yearling calves within sight of a rancher's home. By the time Joe had responded, the wolf had gone and the rancher was furious.

Joe had photographed the dead yearlings as well as the massive wolf tracks in the snow, and he'd opened up an official incident report that would be forwarded to his agency, who would forward it to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The two yearlings had had their throats ripped out and they'd been disemboweled. The scene looked as if someone had dropped balloons filled with blood from a great height and they'd exploded on the hard-packed snow.

It was the fifth verified wolf kill of the current winter, and that was becoming a problem. Especially since there weren't *supposed* to be wolves in the area at all.

Joe knew that assumption was incorrect. He'd personally seen a big black alpha male and other wolves in the pack during the last decade. He usually saw them at times of danger

or stress—so out of concern for the pack, he rarely mentioned seeing anything at all.

The rancher had crossed his arms across his chest and blamed Joe personally for the the wolves, since Joe worked for the state, which is to say the government, and it was the government that had introduced wolves back into Wyoming in the first place.

Joe had stood there and let the rancher blow off steam before speaking.

"You know that was the feds, right?" he'd asked the rancher. "Not us?"

"You're all the same," the rancher had said. "Bureaucrats paid with my tax money trying to ruin my way of life."

"Actually, we aren't. The feds reintroduced the wolves into Yellowstone Park. We're doing our best to deal with them now as they spread across the state."

The rancher pointed at his dead cattle. "And I must say you're doing a hell of a job." Then he chinned toward Joe and asked, "New truck?"

"Yup. My last one was totaled. I'm getting used to this one."

"You have to get used to a lot of new vehicles, don't you?" the rancher asked.

"Yup."

"Maybe if you wouldn't crash so many, it wouldn't be such a big deal."

"Maybe," Joe conceded. "You sound like my supervisor."

"I'm glad the state is rich enough to keep you in new trucks."

Joe was grateful when dispatch in Cheyenne called him

away from the ranch to try to put the wounded elk out of her misery.

It hadn't been difficult to find the crash site. There were tiny squares of broken glass glittering like sequins on the roadbed, as well as a few bloody hunks of elk hair. The two dead elk had been rolled off the pavement into the ditch and large ravens had already found them. Joe wondered if any enterprising locals would take advantage of a new law allowing the harvesting of road-killed meat, but no one had arrived as of yet. Maybe the coming snow and the winter storm watch had discouraged them.

Joe dug his cell phone out of his breast pocket and speed-dialed a man named Clay Hutmacher, who was the foreman of the Double Diamond Ranch on the other side of the barbed-wire fence. The "Double D," as it was called by locals, stretched out over twenty thousand acres and was adjoined by Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service holdings. Hutmacher was a longtime local who guided fly-fishers in the summer and hunters in the fall. His twenty-five-year-old son, Clay Junior, had recently been spending time with Joe and Marybeth's twenty-four-year-old daughter, Sheridan. Too *much* time, in Joe's opinion, even though Clay Junior had done nothing untoward. Yet.

Joe looked at every potential suitor of his three daughters with suspicion. It was up to the interloper to prove himself trustworthy. Several had not. One had physically abused his

middle girl, April, and had turned out to be rotten to the core, confirming Joe's first impressions.

"It's Joe Pickett," he said when Clay Senior answered his phone. "I'm out on the state highway just west of the ranch. I wanted to get permission to cross over onto your property and kill a wounded cow elk that got hit by a car."

Technically, all of the wild animals in the state were the property of the people of Wyoming. Nevertheless, it was required to obtain permission from local landowners to access private property.

"I heard about that," Hutmacher said. "Some guy from Florida looking at his phone. I hope he's in critical condition."

"Nope," Joe said. "I think he's okay."

"We ought to charge him for killing two elk and injuring a third one," Hutmacher said. Joe knew the man to be quite protective of the herd on the ranch, especially cows who could birth more animals to hunt.

"Hey, you know who I'm looking at right now?" Hutmacher asked.

"No."

"Sheridan Pickett. Clay Junior invited her out. She's a sweetie, Joe. You should be proud of her."

"We are," Joe said. But he was tight-lipped.

"Do you need to say anything to her while I've got you on the line?" Hutmacher asked.

"Not really."

"They're watching falconry videos on YouTube," the foreman said. "It's kind of cute," he sighed.

Joe rolled his eyes and was glad Hutmacher couldn't see him do it.

Sheridan worked for Nate Romanowski's bird abatement company and was close to becoming a master falconer herself. Joe knew Clay Junior had done a stint in the army and had been scheduled to graduate from an Ivy League university before the pandemic delayed all of his plans. As far as Joe knew, Clay Junior was unemployed at the moment, but he certainly had promise: local man, strong values, high school athlete, University of Wyoming graduate, military background. Still, Joe wanted to see more than promise before he softened his stance. Marybeth knew more about Clay Junior than Joe did, which was typical.

"Anyway, about that cow elk . . ." Joe said.

"Yeah, sorry. Go get her, Joe. Don't let her suffer even a minute longer than necessary."

"Thanks."

"Good luck. Shoot straight. And let me know if you can't find her."

"Will do."

"And for God's sake, Joe, get off the mountain before this storm hits."

"Come on, girl," he said to Daisy, his yellow Labrador. Daisy bounded out of the cab and immediately walked away stiff-legged to check out the smells that came from the dead elk in the ditch. As she did so, she started to tremble with

excitement. Daisy was getting old and chunky, but she delighted in being given a job to do—and when she got one, she became like a puppy again.

"You need to help me find one of those," he said to her. She was eager to go.

Joe slid a scoped Browning .338 Winchester Magnum rifle out from its case behind the seat of his pickup and checked the loads. It was a powerful cartridge, and he chose it because of its profound stopping power on big game. The trooper had said the wounded elk was a large female, which meant she could weigh four hundred to six hundred pounds. The last thing he wanted to do—ever—was to compound an already bad situation by further wounding an injured animal that might then elude him and die alone in misery. Or be finished off by a wolf.

He braced the rifle against a barbed-wire fence and then climbed over strand by strand. He didn't bolt a cartridge into the receiver until he was on the other side. Then he slung the weapon over his shoulder and started out.

Daisy's snout was already glued to the elk tracks in the loose snow.

March was also a very tough time to travel on foot in the mountains. Although some of the snow was frozen and crusted over well enough to walk on top of—especially if one possessed big Labrador paws—there were also huge soft piles

of it stacked into the arroyos and draws that he'd have to cross. That would require wading up to his thighs or putting on snowshoes. In the deep winter or higher up in elevation, it was much easier to progress because Joe could use his snowmobile.

Unfortunately in March and April, there were too many bare, wide patches of dirt and sagebrush where the snow had melted away or been blown clear by wind, so a snowmobile wouldn't work. Over these patches on foot, Joe could make decent progress. But it was hard work and he wasn't as young as he used to be. After thirty minutes of hiking over, through, and around snowdrifts, Joe could feel all of his fifty-one years.

As he trailed Daisy through snow and bare ground, Joe continuously glanced up to monitor the progress of the storm coming down from the mountain. Snow was falling hard up there in billowing waves and the front was moving fast. He gave himself an hour before it hit. He hoped the wounded elk was near.

Joe lost the elk tracks in the hard dirt as he climbed and summited a bald, boulder-strewn knob, but Daisy had not. He followed her and her metronome-like tail over the top, where he stopped to catch his breath. Daisy looked back at him over her shoulder with disappointment.

"Give me a second," he said to her. She looked away as if embarrassed by his lack of stamina.

The swale sloped below him was choked with snow for what looked like half a mile, and it stretched all the way until it reached a thick grove of aspen on the opposite hillside. The elk couldn't be seen. He hoped the creature had stopped to rest in the grove, so he could locate her.

"Okay," he said.

Daisy's tail started up again and she turned toward the swale. He followed and was pleased that the condition of the snow was similar to concrete. Only the top few inches of it were loose and grainy.

The tracks of the elk were obvious again on the surface, and he read them as he walked. A single print on the left, followed by two others behind it. Meaning the elk had lost the use of its right front leg. When he noticed small droplets of blood in the snow, he guessed that the creature's leg had sustained a compound fracture where the broken bone had pierced through the skin.

Although he knew of instances where a three-legged elk had survived the winter and even produced a calf in the spring, it was rare. An injury like that usually resulted in a long and painful death.

Joe paused again and dug out his binoculars. He could clearly see the snowy hillside up beyond the aspen grove all the way to the top of the next rise. Up through the middle of the snow a deep track was cut in. It looked more substantial than the elk track they were following, as if the animal had plowed through the snow instead of high-stepping across

it. Why had it changed its gait? Maybe the snow conditions were different going up the next rise? Maybe the pitch and angle of the light simply made it look bigger?

He sighed loudly. Tracking the elk would take more time than he had. Trekking into the teeth of a coming storm was the kind of thing he'd promised Marybeth he would no longer do.

Still . . .

If the wounded elk had bedded down on the other side of the hill just out of his sight he could be on her in five or ten minutes. That would be cutting it close. Beyond the next hill, the rise of the Bighorns truly began, and with it came heavy, dark timber that climbed all the way up the mountainside. If the elk went into the timber she'd be lost to him. Despite that, the thought of leaving her behind while he hightailed it back to his vehicle filled him with shame.

Joe glanced at his watch, then at the advancing storm.

If he picked up his pace, he figured, it should work out. And if the elk wasn't visible on the far side of the slope, well, he'd know that he'd done his best—even though it would leave him with a bad taste in his mouth.

As he approached the aspen grove, Joe noticed for the first time an old two-track road leading to it from the north across the face of the rise. The two straight lines of white through the sagebrush gave it away. The old road appeared to end at

the aspen grove itself. What surprised him was the fresh tire tracks on the road. He wondered who had been driving on the ranch that morning, and why Clay Hutmacher hadn't mentioned it to him.

Then he saw the glint of chrome within the trees. A vehicle was parked there, its engine shut off. He got closer and could see the outline of a late-model SUV. Tree branches blocked his view from seeing inside.

Joe knew from experience that things could sometimes get dicey out in the field if you walked up on a stranger unannounced. Especially when it was likely they were both armed.

He called out, "Hello? It's the game warden."

The result was one he hadn't expected. The cow elk he'd been tracking huffed from where she lay in the snow about twenty yards to his right. He'd nearly walked right past her. His shout had obviously roused her. Daisy tore after the elk out of instinct, but stopped when Joe shouted at her to come back.

The elk lurched to her three good legs and turned away from him, showing Joe her tawny-colored rump. Before he could get the rifle off his shoulder, she was running away, her front right leg flopping around. Blood from the compound fracture sprayed across the surface of the snow.

He thumbed the safety off and raised the rifle. Although she was moving away quickly, she was still so close that all he could see through the scope was dark brown hide.

Joe paused for a few seconds to let the injured elk get farther away, then trained the crosshairs at a spot just behind her front shoulder.

BOOM.

The cow took two more steps and lurched forward to a stop. Joe knew she was fatally hit. As he worked the bolt to load a fresh cartridge, the elk shuddered and pitched to the side. A last puff of condensation rose from her black snout. He was glad it had been a clean kill.

Although Joe knew he'd done the humane thing, he also felt instant regret. Normally, in better conditions, he'd set about field dressing and quartering the elk so he could deliver the meat to the senior center in town or the school district for lunches. He hated the idea of leaving it. But there was no way he could pack the meat out on foot—probably four trips back and forth—given the fury of the oncoming weather. More than a hundred pounds of elk meat would be left to scavengers.

Daisy loped over to the carcass to confirm that the animal she'd been tracking was dead. Then she held her head high and her tail went stiff to salute herself for a job well done.

His ears still ringing from the shot, Joe turned back to the SUV in the trees. He wondered if the people inside had witnessed this and been frightened. The echo of the gunshot washed over him.

He slung his weapon back on his shoulder and approached the vehicle. It was a maroon Toyota Land Cruiser and it appeared that no one was inside. Either that, or they'd dropped out of sight for cover because of the shot.

It wasn't a ranch vehicle, for sure. Ranchers and their hands drove pickups, usually battered ones. The SUV looked clean and new.

He neared it and squinted, looking for movement. There was none.

Joe circled the vehicle and peered inside. It was clean and neat and the only things out of place were a crumpled fast-food bag on the rear floor mat and an open topographical map on the front passenger seat. The Wyoming license plates revealed that the SUV was from county five: Albany County in southern Wyoming. A sticker in the left front corner of the windshield allowed access to a designated parking lot on the University of Wyoming campus in Laramie. UW was the only four-year college in the state.

He found the driver's-side door unlocked, then swung it open and leaned in. It was warmer inside, which meant the motor and heater had been turned off recently, probably within the hour. An electronic key fob poked out from a cup holder in the console.

While he didn't retrieve the topo map or even move it, he could see that someone had marked it with four X's with a black marker. The map itself encompassed the area where they were, so it suggested that the driver hadn't gotten lost, which had been Joe's first thought.

"No," Joe said to Daisy. "This guy didn't get lost. He planned to come here."

He stepped back and carefully surveyed the aspen grove. Deep boot tracks led from the SUV through the trees and in the direction of the next summit. Those were the tracks Joe had noticed as he walked down over the swale of snow. And because they were human and not elk tracks, they'd looked different.

Joe scratched Daisy's head and asked aloud, "What is going on? Who would drive out to the middle of nowhere and walk away into a snowstorm?"

He said, "Let's go find this fool before he dies out here."

Daisy looked back and sighed.

Large flakes were falling as Joe climbed up the hill toward the top. He stayed in the tracks made by the missing driver so he wouldn't have to cut his own. He called out several times, hoping for a response. Nothing.

As he climbed, he noticed that his ears were still ringing. He wondered if the loud concussion of the .338 Win Mag had damaged his eardrums. Then, as he neared the top of the rise, the whining got louder. It was high-pitched, and it wasn't coming from his ears. It sounded like the pitch you'd hear near high-capacity power lines.

Only, there weren't any power lines within view. And as far as Joe knew, there weren't any structures on this part of the Double D except crude open shelters for cattle to get out of the wind.

He was out of breath again when he got to the top. Daisy stayed on his heels. She was tired, too.

As he reached the summit, it was as if he'd walked into the beating heart of a snow cloud. Snowflakes swirled in a maelstrom of white. They clung to his parka and stuck to his face. The deep tracks he was following were already starting to fill up. He was eye level with the storm as it swept down the mountain.

The whine was louder now that he was on top, and he peered through the falling snow at the valley floor a half mile away. There was something down there—some kind of small metal building. It was the source of the sound. And it had been the destination of the SUV driver, because his tracks led right to it.

Joe raised his binoculars from around his neck and blew snowflakes from the lenses. He found the structure and sharpened the focus of his glasses.

The metal structure was about nine feet high and approximately thirty feet long. There was a closed door on the side of it, but no windows. On the back of the box, three long horizontal steel louvers opened out like rectangular wings. The openings below the metal awnings stretched across the width of the building. The whining sound was coming from inside.

Then he noticed a dark form protruding from the opening of the middle louver, like a black tongue hanging out of a grimacing mouth.

"Found him," Joe said aloud. "What are you doing down there?"

He tightened his elbows to his side so he could steady the binoculars.

The dark tongue turned out to be the lower half of a man. His top half was wedged into the opening of the louver.

The body was still.

He said, "Oh no."