C.J. BOX

THREE-INCH TEETH



An Aries Book

First published in the UK in 2024 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

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

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

ISBN (HB): 9781803284026
ISBN (XTPB): 9781803284033
ISBN (E): 9781803284002

Section photograph by COULANGES/Shutterstock.com

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



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

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For Parker
and Laurie, always

THREE-INCH TEETH

OCTOBER 14



A man screaming is not a dancing bear.

—Aimé Césaire,

Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, 1939

CHAPTER ONE

Double Diamond Ranch

Clay Hutmacher Jr., twenty-five, stood knee-high in the Twelve Sleep River, casting for trout with a determined look on his face and an engagement ring in his pocket. He was twelve miles from the town of Saddlestring on the ranch his father managed and that, he hoped, he would take over someday.

It was fall in the mountains of Wyoming, and a day away from the opening of most of the local elk hunting season. Opening day was rife with anticipation throughout Twelve Sleep County, as out-of-state hunters loaded up on groceries and alcohol and gear in town, and locals told their bosses they wouldn't be in to work the next day. In the mountain campgrounds and trailheads, orange-clad hunters were setting up their elk camps and scouting the meadows and timber. For many in the area, tonight would be without sleep.

Clay Junior, meanwhile, had spent the day patrolling the ranch's entrance roads to chase off trespassers. He'd exchanged words with three Missouri hunters, who had refused to move their camp from private to public land, but finally relented when he threatened to call the sheriff and have them arrested. The fact that his GPS proved that they were in the wrong convinced them to pack up. The ten-millimeter Glock semiautomatic handgun on his hip probably helped as well.

It was the longest and most pleasant fall he could remember since returning to the ranch after a stint in the military and three years in college. Unlike many years, when "fall" was a hard freeze that came out of nowhere and instantly killed all the deciduous greenery, this one had brought out colors he didn't know existed outside of New England. Yellow leaves crunched underfoot and seams of crimson ran up every mountain draw.

The late-afternoon sun dappled the water and ignited the river cottonwoods and buckbrush along the bank with intense golds and reds. It almost hurt his eyes. A slight breeze rattled through the drying leaves and hundreds of them had detached upriver and now floated like a tiny yellow armada on the surface of the water. Above him, a bald eagle in a thermal current glided in a lazy circle.

The leaves on the water made it difficult to see his indicator bobbing along, so Clay Junior retrieved his fly line, clipped off the nymphs he'd been using, and replaced them with a heavy articulated streamer.

A boulder the size of a pickup truck stuck out of the water near the opposite shoreline, and he knew there was a deep pool directly downstream from it. In the summer, he'd seen massive brown and rainbow trout rise from the depths of the pool like pistons and eat trico flies floating along the surface. Clay Junior wanted to catch one of those big fish. Maybe two.

He was outfitted in chest-high waders, a waterproof Simms jacket with a mesh fly-fishing vest over it, and a Stormy Kromer rancher's cap. A lanyard loaded with scissors, spools of tippet, and forceps hung from his neck. A fishing net was attached to the collar of his vest and a wading staff undulated in the strong current from where it was tied off on his belt.

The back of his vest sagged from the weight of the Glock in the rear pocket. The weapon held fifteen rounds and had enough stopping power to take down the biggest of wild-game species. Clay never went anywhere without it.

The wonderful thing about fly-fishing, he'd discovered, was that it was all-consuming. The tactics, the gear, reading the water, the choice of flies, keeping his balance on smooth round river rocks—all of that fully occupied his mind and pushed out other concerns.

Fly-fishing was like sex in that way.

After he'd returned to the ranch headquarters that afternoon, Clay Junior had thrown his rod and gear into an open Polaris Ranger and drove it straight through the hayfield to the bend in the river.

He particularly wanted to take his mind off dinner that night with Sheridan Pickett. That was when she would see the engagement ring for the very first time.

The ring had been in his pocket for a week. He'd just been looking for the right moment. In his mind, they were already engaged.

Should he ask Sheridan's father, Joe, for permission first? Clay Junior had debated it several times. In the end, he'd decided not to. Joe Pickett was the local game warden, a friend of his dad's, and the father of three daughters. Sheridan was the oldest, and she and Joe clearly had a special bond. Clay Junior wasn't sure her dad liked him all that much, and why risk the remote possibility that the man would discourage him? If nothing else, Clay Junior had confidence in himself.

Star high school athlete; army veteran; conventionally handsome, with broad shoulders, blue eyes, and a square jaw; a future as the foreman of a twenty-thousand-acre ranch that was one of the largest in north-central Wyoming. He had a lot going for him. Why wouldn't he be confident?

Besides, Sheridan had a mind of her own. Too much so at times, he thought. She wouldn't let her father's reservations about him influence her.

Would she?

He cast the big streamer upstream from the boulder, a perfect shot. It *ploop*ed on the surface and sunk fast, and he fed line out so the fly would drift naturally along the side of the rock, look-

ing like a wounded minnow, and go deep by the time it entered the pool. Clay Junior held the rod with his right hand and grasped the line with his left and got ready.

When the line straightened out suddenly, he strip-set the hook by jerking back on the line and raising his rod tip. A fish had taken it, and it felt big. He reveled in the electric connection.

But he gacked it by pulling too hard, and the line went slack. He figured the trout had either thrown the hook or wrapped the line around a submerged branch or rock, but when he reeled in, he saw that the fly was gone and the end of the tippet was curled up like a pig's tail. That meant he'd likely tied a poor knot and that big trout was streaking down the river with a fly hanging out of its mouth.

He cursed and began to attach a heavier leader and tippet, to try again. There had to be more than one big fish in there.

While he stood tying, leaning slightly against the powerful current with his hip, Clay Junior heard a crashing in the trees on the opposite hillside.

He paused and looked up.

Another branch snapped, and he noticed that the top of a spindly aspen jerked and shed dead leaves as something hit it at its base.

At first, he thought it was a rockslide. They happened on the steep canyon wall, and sometimes they gathered so much momentum, they snapped off trees as they tore down the mountain.

He looked over his shoulder at the bank, where he'd parked the Polaris Ranger. He wasn't sure he could navigate across the slick stones fast enough before a jumble of large rocks came his way.

Then a large doe mule deer crashed out of the brush and plunged headlong into the water twenty yards upriver from him. The deer paid no attention to him and he recalled Joe telling him that prey animals didn't fear anything in the water because they knew predators came from the land.

In fact, the doe had her head turned at something behind her. *Fearing* something behind her. As she got to the middle of the river, she struggled for a few seconds, then she began to swim, keeping her head above the surface, bobbing it front to back like a chicken.

The current brought her closer to Clay Junior and he wondered for a second if she'd knock him off his feet. Switching his rod to his left hand, he reached behind him with his right for the back pocket of his vest and the Glock. A shot in the air might make her change course.

And that was when a massive tan bear with a dark brown hump on its back emerged from the trees, roared, and threw itself into the river in pursuit of the deer, hitting the water with a loud splash.

Not a rockslide, Clay Junior thought, but a grizzly bear *more than twice his size.*

The doe regained her footing as the river shallowed and she was able to scramble toward the shoreline just a few feet above

Clay Junior. She was close enough that droplets of water from her thrashing sprayed across his face.

But when she was gone the bear was still there in the middle of the river and moving remarkably fast. Instead of pursuing the deer, the grizzly was coming straight at him. *Swimming* straight at him. It had small, close-set eyes centered in a massive round head. The bear was so large that it produced a wake in the water until it, too, found the floor of the river.

The grizzly closed the distance and rose onto its back legs and towered over him, blotting out the light. He could see its thick coat shimmer as river water sluiced out of it. Long claws were curved like yellow scythes, and the bear was close enough he could smell it. The stink was like wet dog, only twenty times worse. The bear roared at him, and Clay Junior felt his anus instinctively pucker and his limbs go weak. He'd never heard a sound that affected him in such a primal, visceral way.

Scrambling, he stepped back and his boot sole slipped on the top of a round river rock. Losing his balance, he fell back and to the side, and fumbled the Glock into the river. The weapon thumped on the side of his thigh through the waders, then slipped beneath the surface, out of sight. At the same time, the bear dropped to all fours and charged.

Clay Junior wanted to shout, "What the fuck have I done to deserve this?"

His last look at the bear before he went under was its tiny black eyes, gaping mouth, and long, sharp, scimitar-like teeth.

The grizzly lunged on top of him and pinned him flat on his

back to the rocks on the floor of the river, a foot and a half beneath the surface. As the jaws closed around his head, the last sound Clay Junior heard was the awful crunch of those teeth through his skull.

His last thought was:

Would she have said yes?