C.J. BOX

THE CROSSROADS

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For Molly, Becky, and Roxanne,
and Laurie, always

I went down to the crossroads
Fell down on my knees
Down to the crossroads
Fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above for mercy,
"Take me, if you please"

—*Crossroads Blues*, Robert Johnson, 1936

CHAPTER ONE

November 15

For Marybeth Pickett, it was the call she'd dreaded for over twenty years.

At the time it came that mid-November morning, she was standing in front of a whiteboard in her director's office at the Twelve Sleep County Library, working on the annual budget presentation she was scheduled to give before the county commissioners.

Over the speaker of the phone on her desk, the front-desk librarian said, "Marybeth, someone from the sheriff's office says he needs to speak to you immediately. He says it's urgent."

Urgent.

Marybeth felt an unseen hand grip her stomach, and a bolt of cold fear shot down her legs. It was suddenly difficult to take a breath.

Marybeth looked at the phone's base, and the single plastic button that blinked spasmodically.

She tossed the dry-erase marker aside, sat down in her chair, and punched the button. As she did, dark, frightening images and possibilities flooded her mind: car accidents involving any of the three of her daughters, crimes committed where they were the victims, a plane crash, suicide, murder, kidnapping, rape . . .

"This is Marybeth Pickett," she said. Her mouth was dry and it was difficult to speak.

"Mrs. Pickett, this is Deputy Frank Carroll of the Twelve Sleep County Sheriff's Department. I'm sorry I didn't call you on your cell phone, but I'm in my vehicle, so I put it through dispatch."

She could hear Carroll's siren whooping in the the background, which made it difficult to hear what he was saying.

"Yes, Deputy," she said.

"First, is there any chance Joe is with you?"

"No, he's not here."

"Do you know where he was headed today?"

She tried to think. Her game warden husband rarely articulated his daily patrol routes to her in the morning before he set out in his Wyoming Game and Fish Department pickup. She was pretty sure that Joe often didn't have a plan, either. Only if he thought he might be out of cell phone range or radio contact did he say something. Or if he was involved in a case that might keep him out in the field well beyond nightfall.

"I don't remember him saying where he was going today," she confessed.

"So you don't know where he is right now?"

"No," she said. "I usually don't. His district is five thousand square miles, and he could be anywhere in it, since it's still hunting season. Why are you asking me all of this?"

She knew "Fearless" Frank Carroll well enough to know that he liked to talk and that it took him a while to get to the point. Marybeth was having none of that at the moment.

"Well, we got a report," Carroll said. "A hunter called it in a few minutes ago."

"Frank, what was the report?"

Deputy Carroll said, "I don't want to alarm you unnecessarily, Marybeth. I really don't. But this hunter said he came upon a Game and Fish vehicle parked out on Antler Creek Road. He said it was in the middle of the road just sitting there, so he checked it out."

"What are you saying, Deputy?" Marybeth asked, her voice rising.

"Well, keep in mind that none of this is confirmed yet. I'm headed out there now. But according to this hunter, the pickup is all shot up and there appears to be a body inside."

Marybeth closed her eyes and couldn't speak for a few seconds. Then she said, "A body?"

"Well, I should have said a 'victim,' I guess," Carroll said. "The hunter didn't check for a pulse or anything. He just said there was somebody inside the pickup and that the victim was unresponsive. He said there were bullet holes in the windshield and the glass was all cracked and it was hard to see inside very clearly."

Her heart raced. She asked, "How long ago did the report come in?"

"Like I said, just a few minutes ago. Of course, we don't know how long that pickup has been sitting out there. That place is a long way away from town, as you probably know."

"How soon will it be before you get there?"

"Ten, twelve minutes more, I reckon."

"Did you call dispatch in Cheyenne?" Marybeth asked. "They might know better about Joe's location. He's not the only person driving a Game and Fish vehicle in the county, you know. There are biologists, other game wardens, fisheries people . . ."

"Like I said, I don't know anything yet," Carroll said. "I was just hoping you'd be able to rule out that it was Joe."

"God, I wish I could," she said. Then: "Hold on."

Marybeth dug into her handbag for her cell phone and she speed-dialed Joe's phone and pressed it to her other ear. While she did, she noticed that the front-desk librarian who had transferred the call was now hovering outside her office door, looking into its wide window with a concerned expression. Marybeth could see her own reflection in the glass and she looked ridiculous holding phones up to both ears. But at the moment, she didn't care.

The call to Joe went straight to his voicemail.

"*This is game warden Joe Pickett. I can't take this call right now, but please leave your name and number and . . .* "

When it beeped, Marybeth shouted, "Joe, call me back right away."

"What's that?" Deputy Carroll asked over the handset.

"Never mind," she said. "I was trying Joe on his cell phone. He didn't pick up."

"Does he usually?"

She started to say yes, then she started to say he usually did, then she got honest and said, "At times. But he always calls back when he can."

She tried not to imagine her husband shot to death inside the

cab of his pickup. Or worse, bleeding out while waiting for someone to arrive.

"Where is this hunter who called it in?" she asked Carroll. "Did he just leave the scene and Joe?"

"First, we don't know it's Joe," Carroll said. "Second, I'm not sure where the reporting party is right now. I didn't get the initial call."

Marybeth reached up with her free left hand and rubbed her eyes. She tried not to take all her anger, fear, and frustration out on Deputy Carroll.

"Please call me the second you get there," she said, and slammed the receiver down onto the phone's base.

She sat back for a second, staring into space. Judith from the front desk was a stocky woman in her early sixties with close-cropped gray hair and oversized black-framed glasses who was partial to wearing Christmas sweaters any time of the year. When her worried face nearly pressed against the glass of the window, Marybeth growled and raised her voice again.

"Please, Judith, leave me be and get back to work."

Judith scurried away. Marybeth made a mental note to apologize to the poor woman later.

The dispatcher in Cheyenne identified herself as Monica Luce.

"This is Marybeth Pickett, Joe Pickett's wife," Marybeth said. "We're trying to locate Joe right now. Did he call in his location this morning?"

Luce chuckled. "Joe's a great guy, but he *never* calls in his location unless it's an emergency and he needs backup."

Which, as Marybeth knew intimately, was very rare. If a game warden requested backup in the field, it meant he was in serious trouble because backup could take hours to get there in the remote Bighorn Mountain country.

"Let me ask you another question," Marybeth said. "Did you take any calls today about violations or situations in Joe's district? Do you know if he was responding to anything?"

"I'm really not supposed to divulge that kind of information, I'm afraid," Luce said.

"I know that. But I just talked to a sheriff's deputy here. Someone called in a Game and Fish pickup that's all shot up. We don't know if it is Joe or someone else. Or if the whole situation is a false alarm."

"Oh my God," Luce said. "Why didn't you say that in the first place? No, we didn't send Joe out on anything this morning. I know that for sure because I've been here the entire shift. It's been quiet this morning. Oh, I hope he's okay."

"Thank you," Marybeth said. "I hope so, too."

Marybeth sat back in her chair and looked at the ancient clock above her door. It was 10:42 a.m.

She heard a siren outside and immediately recognized its distinctive whooping sound. It was the lone local EMT ambulance emerging from its bay next to the county building two blocks away from the library. She swiveled around in her chair in time to see the vehicle speed past her window, its flashers on.

It was headed west.

Antler Creek Road was also west.

When her cell phone burred, Marybeth nearly knocked it off her desktop lunging for it. But when she held the screen up, it didn't say Joe. The call was from Deputy Frank Carroll.

"It's Joe's pickup, Marybeth," Carroll said with emotion in his voice. "He's inside."

Marybeth gasped. "Is he . . . ?"

"I don't know yet. I called for the EMTs and they said they're on their way."

"What does he look like?"

After a pause, Carroll said, "There's a *lot* of blood."