

Back of Beyond

A NOVEL

BY C.J. BOX

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For The Gauntlet (Jeff, Brian, Ken)
...and Laurie, always

*Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed*

Canto 56

Alfred Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, 1850.

PART ONE

MONTANA

One

THE NIGHT BEFORE Cody Hoyt shot the county coroner, he was driving without a purpose in his county Ford Expedition as he often did these days. He was agitated and restless, chain smoking cigarettes until his throat was raw and sore. He drove right by the rural bars he used to frequent, not going in. Then the call came from dispatch on his cell phone: hikers claimed they found a burned out cabin in the Big Belt Mountains to the northeast with maybe a dead body inside.

Even though it was the end of June the weather was unseasonably cold and it had rained in the valley for three straight days. That evening, before the clouds finally lifted and the sun died, he'd seen a dusting of snow on the tops of the Big Belts to the north and the Elkhorn Mountains to the south. *Snow.*

"Patrol has been sent up there," Edna the dispatcher said. He liked Edna even though she'd decided she was his surrogate mother and gave him pies and casseroles and tried

to fix him up with Helena divorcees. She said, "My list says you're the one on call tonight."

"Yeah," he said. Cody was a Lewis and Clark County Sheriff's Department Investigator. Detectives were automatically called to investigate any "unattended death," meaning accidents, suicides, or in the rare instance, homicides.

"Because you have nothing else to do," she said, mock joking.

"Not a damned thing," he said, deadly serious.

"Are you at home?"

"Yeah," he lied. "Watching the game on TV. Just a second, let me grab something to write on." He knew if Edna wanted to she could fire up the tracking screen in the dispatch center and find the location of his vehicle out in the county because of the GPS unit mounted under the front bumper. Or she could have at one time, before he dismantled it the month before because he didn't want anyone knowing where he'd been going or that he spent his other nights driving, driving, driving.

He pulled to the side of the road into the rough parking area in front of the Gem State Bar, the tires popping on the wet gravel. A single mercury vapor light on a pole threw dark shadows across the parking area. Pools

of standing water from the recent rain reflected the light and the few stars that had appeared between night thunderheads. There were five other parked vehicles in front of the bar, all pickups. His pen was somewhere in the ashtray, which was spilling over with butts. As he pulled it out he noted the plastic barrel of the pen was rough with burn marks.

"Okay," he said.

"The cabin is located past Vigilante Canyon on Highway 280, eight miles up Trout Creek on County Road 124. The map shows it's in the Helena National Forest, but maybe there's a private place up there."

He lowered the phone and sat back and closed his eyes without writing anything down. Outside his drivers side window, two men wearing dirty jeans and hoodies and ballcaps pushed their way out the door of the bar. He recognized them as sapphire miners. Sapphire mining was a small industry in the county, and there were scores of one and two man claims that had been worked for years and still produced. The miner in the gray hoodie was practically as wide as was tall. The one in the yellow hoodie was gaunt and skeletal with eyes sunk deep in their sockets. They were laughing and shoving each other. Yellow Hoodie had a twelve-pack of Coors Light under his arm for the road and

he'd no doubt leave a trail of empties all the way up into the Big Belts to his little one-man mine. They looked up and saw him parked but didn't straighten up or try to act sober. He was just a guy in a muddy SUV to them because the vehicle was unmarked. Even the plates didn't give him away because they were skip plates. If anyone ran a check on them, they'd come back to a fictitious address and company name.

"Cody?" Edna asked.

"I'm here."

"Did you get that?"

"Yeah."

"The complainants called from the York Bar. They agreed to stay there until they met the officer so they could guide him to where the cabin is. Officer Dougherty was dispatched to the scene and he is there with them now taking their statement. Should I ask them to stay until you get there?"

"Not necessary," he said, "I know the cabin. Tell Dougherty to proceed - I'll meet him there. What did they say about a body?"

"Not much really. They said they thought it was an old place by the look of it and they poked around inside a little. They said that think there's a body there because

of the smell and what looked like a human hand, but they didn't actually see the body. They said it was raining hard and getting dark and they just wanted to get out of there."

"Male or female body?"

"They don't know. They said the hand might have been a glove or the arm from a dummy because it didn't look real."

He nodded to himself. Fire turned human bodies into sexless grotesques. He'd been on the scene where the fire was so hot the dead muscles of the arms and legs cooked and contracted and roasted the body into a fighters stance: arms curled against the chest and knees bent, like a boxer in the ring. And the smell, like charred pork...

Outside in the parking lot, the two miners put the twelve-pack on the hood of a pickup and pulled out two cans and opened them. The spray from a can hit Fat Gray Hoodie in the face and he bellowed a laugh as he took the beer.

"Okay," Cody said to Edna.

He said, "Edna, call Larry. Tell him I need him."

Larry Olson, the only other detective in the five-man Criminal Investigations Division whom Cody thought was worth a damn. Olson was short, solid, and shaved bald; a flesh-colored fire hydrant who entered a room like a quiet

exclamation point. Larry Olson was a Montana legend. He'd solved crimes by careful observation and exhaustive investigation. He wore suspects down. He wore his fellow detectives down. When an unsolved crime went on too long anywhere in the state, the call went out to "borrow" Larry Olson. The word was the only reason he stayed in Helena instead of going state or federal was that he wanted to be there for his three boys who lived with their mother in town.

Edna said, "Larry's not on call tonight."

She waited for him to acknowledge, but he didn't.

Finally, she said, "Cody?"

He held the phone out away from him at arms length and made a gargling sound in his throat that resembled static. He said, "I'm losing the signal right now. Call Larry. I'll call back when I get a better signal," and closed the phone and dropped it to the seat. Overwhelmed with a wave of nausea and needing air, he pushed open the door and stepped outside, his boots splashing in a deep puddle.

"Good one," Skinny Yellow Hoodie said, laughing.

"Right in the hole."

Cody ignored them as he bent forward, grasping his knees with his hands. He breathed in the moist mountain air, filling his lungs with it. Mixing it with the smoke.

His eyes watered and he stood and wiped at them. Cold water poured in over the top of his low boots, filling his socks. He wished he'd worn his cowboy boots instead.

"You okay?" Yellow Hoodie asked.

"Fine."

"Want another beer? You could probably use one now."

"No," he said. They assumed he'd been drinking. Or, he thought, they recognized him from when he haunted the bars.

"This fucking rain, eh? Day after day. My Dad said never curse the rain in Montana, and I never have. But this is motherfucking crazy. El Niño or some such thing. I heard the weatherman call it 'The summer without a summer.'"

Cody grunted.

"Want a hit?" Fat Gray Hoodie said in a voice indicating he was holding his breath in, and Cody realized the man was holding a joint between his fingers. Cody's face must have cracked the miner up because he coughed and expelled the marijuana smoke in a cloud.

"Jesus Christ," the skinny miner said to Cody, "Don't mind him."

"Just being friendly," the second miner said, bringing the joint back up to his mouth.

Cody Hoyt was 38 years old but often mistaken for being in his late forties. He had unkempt sandy hair, a square jaw, high cheekbones, a broken nose, brown eyes flecked with either gold or red depending on the circumstances and often described as either "mean" or "dead," and a mouth that twisted naturally into a cop smirk even when he didn't want it to. He wore jeans, boots, and a loose long-sleeved fishing shirt. Detectives didn't wear uniforms and dressed to blend into the community. He reached down and pulled the hem of the shirt up so they could see the seven-point gold sheriff's department badge on his belt.

"I got a card for this," the smoking miner said quickly, nodding to the joint.

Practically every sapphire miner in the county had a card signed by a doctor for medical marijuana use, Cody had found. And many of them grew plants in quantities and potency well beyond simple home use. It wasn't a coincidence that the miners used most of the same instruments – scales, small tools, hundreds of small Zip-Lok bags -- dope merchants used.

Cody raised his .40 Sig Sauer in a shooters grip.

"Really," Fat Gray Hoodie said, stepping back and dropping the joint, which extinguished with a hiss between

his feet in the mud, "Really, I got a card. I'll show you. Shit, I know I'm not supposed to smoke in a public place, but damn, my back started hurting..."

"Give me the rest of the beer," Cody said.

Both miners froze, then shot glances at each other.

"You want the beer? You can have it," Yellow Hoodie said. "Why the hell you want my beer? What kind of cop wants my fucking *beer*?"

"I don't," Cody said with a twisted smile. He holstered his weapon and climbed back into his Ford. He roared away, thinking he wanted that beer *so goddamned bad right now he would have killed them both for it.*

HE'D HEARD a couple of maxims from Larry after they'd danced around each other for three months. Larry had stopped by his desk one afternoon when no one else was in the office, paused, leaned over until his mouth was an inch from Cody's ear, and said:

"I know you were a hotshot detective in Colorado and I also know your rep as a drunk and a screwup. I've heard about some of the things you used to do when you grew up here, and your crazy homicidal white-trash family. I've personally arrested two of your uncles and I sent one to Deer Lodge prison. I was shocked as hell when you moved

back here, and even more shocked when the Sheriff hired you on. I can only speculate that you've got something on him so big and nasty he didn't have a choice."

Cody said nothing, but locked in Larry with his best cop deadeye and refused to blink.

Said Larry, "If so, good for you. More power to you, brother. But since we have to work together, I called a couple of your old partners in Denver. They said you were crazy, violent, and unpredictable. They said you were a loose cannon and you were all over the place like a fart on a hot skillet. But they also said you were a fucking fantastic cop and you went at every case like a bulldog on steroids who wouldn't let go. That you nailed a child-porn king and a sitting Federal District Judge in one fell swoop. But they said they didn't really want to ever work with you again because they wanted to keep their jobs and not spend half their fucking time defending themselves and you to Internal Affairs and the mayor's office.

"Me," Larry said, "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. But don't ever screw me, and don't ever put me in a position I don't want to be in. Just do the job and show me what you've got, and you'll find out you can trust me. But you need to *earn* my trust because you brought a lot of baggage back with you to Montana."

Cody said nothing.

Larry continued, "There are four things you need to know about this place. One, we only get a homicide about once a year. But that's not good, it's bad. It's bad because most of these jamokes around here," he nodded toward the door to indicate the rest of the sheriff's department as well as the municipal police department across the hall, "never get enough experience to work a murder investigation smoothly. If the homicide is hinky and not a straightforward domestic or bar brawl, it's always the first time for most of 'em. They've grown up watching CSI and cop shows and they turn into actors they've seen on the screen instead of remembering their training.

"Second, the most important topic of every day is where to go to lunch. You'll find yourself discussing that particular dilemma more than anything else.

"Third, bad things always happen on a Friday, almost always after you're off duty. So if you're off-duty but on call, you better not hit the bottle like I've heard you do.

"Fourth, and most important, take every possible fucking opportunity you can to eat and take a shit, because this county is 3,500 square miles, a third of it roadless."

With that, Larry Olson stormed out of the room.

CODY THOUGHT of the third and fourth maxim as he drove up into the mountains. The rain had started again, and heavy-bellied drops smacked against the windshield as if they were committing suicide. The two-lane highway was dark and slick. Canyon Ferry Lake – so named because they'd built a dam to hold back the Missouri and submerge the historic river crossing – simmered like a stew on slow boil because of the rain. The dark wooded canyon wall rose to his left. He realized he was hungry because he hadn't had dinner. His vague plan had been to go to York and have a burger, but a burger without a beer seemed an impossible mission.

And he could use a toilet as well. There were outhouses at Two Camps Vista and another at Devils Elbow. He hated outhouses because he could never not look down into the pit – sometimes using his flashlight -- to see what was floating around down there. It reminded him of too many things.

THE POSSIBLE body in the cabin beyond Vigilante Campground made Cody's heart pound and his hands go cold on the steering wheel. His mind raced and scenarios formed. He immediately assumed the worst.

He dug out his cell phone and called Edna at dispatch.

"Is Larry coming?" he asked.

"He's not happy about it."

"I don't blame him."

"Quit pretending you're losing your cell phone signal when you aren't."

He sighed. "Okay."

After a beat, she said, "Should I call the Scooter?"

The county coroner, Scooter Kerley, enjoyed his job a little too much and was considered a pain in the ass to work with ever since he found out he was the only elected official with the authority to arrest the sheriff. Plus, elections were five months away and he wanted to keep a high profile in the local press. Nothing could be done with a body until the coroner arrived. He owned all bodies in Lewis & Clark County and they couldn't be touched or removed without his authority.

"Naw, I'll call him if we have to," Cody said. "I'll confirm it's a body first. The hikers could have seen anything. Lots of things look like hands."

"So I should ignore the call I just got from a drunken miner saying a sheriff's department employee tried to steal his beer outside a bar?"

"Yeah, you should ignore that," Cody said.

HE DROVE just under control, taking the switchbacks hard, crossing the faded double center line with each turn. There wasn't a light bar on the Ford so he'd toggled on the switch that turned his headlights into strobes that flashed psychedelically on the wet canyon walls and pine trees. And froze two cow elk in their progress across the highway.

Cody cursed and swerved to the left, his tires dropping off the pavement into the muddy ditch, but he wasn't fast enough. One of the elk inexplicably bounded in front of him and turned her head toward him and their eyes locked a split second before he hit her solidly in the shoulder with the right front fender of the truck. The impact made the Ford fishtail. If it weren't for the front right tire still gripping the pavement, he would have hurtled left into the bank of trees. He jerked the wheel and the Ford bounced up out of the ditch.

He stopped in the middle of the highway, breathing hard, knowing if his brakes hadn't bitten he would have gone straight off the edge of the mountain into Canyon Ferry Lake. Rain drummed on the roof. A single headlight pointed out into the dark, lighting only the rain that slashed through the beam. He checked his side mirrors. In the red glow of his taillights he could see the other elk

bound up the canyon wall but the one he'd hit was down, it's legs churning, head writhing.

"Shit!"

His boot eased off the brake and he began to roll forward again, making sure he could still go forward. The Ford went a few feet before it stopped again. He needed to assess the damage. And he couldn't leave her suffering like that.

Chanting "*Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit...*" he got out and walked back along the wet asphalt in the rain and drew his Sig Sauer and shot her in the head. Her thrashing went manic until it stopped altogether. He couldn't shed the after-image of her eyes boring into him before he hit her, even when she closed them now. It took five minutes to pull her off the roadway. She was heavy, wet, and smelled of musk and hot blood.

He took a quick look at his bumper. His right headlight was out and thatches of elk hair were caught in the grille. There was a six-inch gap between the frame and the hood. He could smell the sharp odor of burning hair and meat on the hot surfaces of the motor. There was a couple of thousand dollars in damage and years of jokes from the county maintenance shop guys and fellow cops ahead of him. But the Ford still ran.

"Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit..."

For his next trick, he climbed into the cab of the Ford to locate a dead body in a burned out cabin.

"Shit-shit-shit-shit-shit..."

A body that, in all probability, belonged to someone he knew and trusted and admired and who had kept him tethered to normalcy the past few months by a single fraying thread. And he could feel the thread unraveling.