

**STRANGE MEN IN THE MOUNTAINS:  
THE STORY BEHIND  
*NOWHERE TO RUN***

**By C.J. Box**

**TWO AND A** half years before the publication of the tenth Joe Pickett novel, *Nowhere to Run*, I was having breakfast with Wyoming warden Mark Nelson in Cheyenne, Wyoming. I'd met Nelson after my first Joe Pickett novel *Open Season* had been accepted by Putnam but was yet to be published. I was researching what would later become *Savage Run*, and I wanted to ride along with a game warden and ask a long list of questions. Nelson was suggested because he covered the local area. While we were bouncing down a two-track near Iron Mountain in country once frequented by infamous "stock detective" Tom Horn, I told Nelson a little about my

fictional game warden, including the anecdote from *Open Season* where Joe arrests the Governor of Wyoming for fishing without a license. The anecdote was based on a true story from several years before, where, as incredible as it may sound, the *director* of the Game and Fish Department was arrested for the same offense.

Mark nodded, as if somewhat familiar with the story.

A year later, I read an article in the local paper referring back to the incident (the real one) and mentioning that the arresting officer had been game warden Mark Nelson.

Anyone else would have told me on the spot to burnish his reputation. Not Mark.

Since that initial ride-along, I've gone on several more with him. I usually have a long list of questions about procedure, issues, the life and duties of a game warden, wildlife and natural resource issues, bureaucracy, the plausibility of scenarios I'd cooked up. His answers are always thoughtful and well-informed. And if he didn't have an immediate answer, he follows up later to provide the correct information. Nelson became my conduit to the

game wardens of Wyoming, and vice-versa. In 2005, they awarded me with the certificate of appreciation that still hangs on my wall.

We've become friends. We exchange books, and for the last few years we've prided ourselves to be among the first to get in a raft and run a particular river in Wyoming not long after the ice has come off. We've caught some big trout and we've practically frozen to death. Two years ago, we finished up the day in a raging blizzard.

In addition to providing insight and background, Nelson has been gracious enough to read each manuscript in its raw form, and offer suggestions, criticisms, and edits when they pertain to Joe's duties. He's saved me from some embarrassing mistakes over the years, and provided gems of information that I think give the novels a spicy dose of realism.

At that breakfast, after we went over the manuscript for *Blood Trail*, Nelson told me a personal story that chilled me to the core. A story I couldn't shake. A story that provided the basis for *Nowhere to Run*.

**WYOMING GAME** wardens often leave their districts for a while and help out other wardens. In late July of 2007, Nelson headed north to assist Brian Nesvik, the game warden in charge of the South Pinedale district. South Pinedale encompasses thousands of square miles of high country, including the western slope of the Wind River Mountain Range. Most residents consider the Winds the most spectacular mountain range in a state full of them. It's big and wild country, and the mountains are dotted with hundreds of small lakes and cirques.

Nesvik (who as of this writing is serving in Kuwait as Lieutenant Col., Commander, 2-300th Field Artillery Battalion in the Wyoming National Guard) and Nelson mounted up their riding and pack horses and set out into the mountains on a six-day trip to check fishermen for licenses and limits. Nelson told me they set up a camp well off the beaten trails. The next day, fifteen miles from the wilderness base camp and well beyond the day-hike range of casual hikers, they spotted a lone fisherman on a small alpine lake. My description of him in *Nowhere to Run* is a transcription of what Nelson described to me that morning:

...the fisherman wasn't dressed or equipped like a modern angler. The man – who at the distance looked very tall and rangy – was wading in filthy denim jeans, an oversized red plaid shirt with big checks, and a white slouch hat pulled low over his eyes. No waders, no fishing vest, no net. And no horse, tent, or camp, from what Joe could see. In these days of high-tech gear and clothing that wicked away moisture and weighed practically nothing, it was extremely unusual to see such a throw-back outfit.

Nelson shot a photo of Nesvik as he approached the angler through the ears of his horse. Nesvik tried to engage the angler in conversation, and Nelson observed as the fisherman...

...lowered his fishing rod and slowly turned around. He had close-set dark eyes, a tiny pinched mouth glistening with fish blood and a stubbled chin sequined with scales, and a long thin nose sun-burned so badly that the skin was mottled gray and had peeled away revealing the place where chalk-white bone joined yellow cartilage. Joe's stomach clenched and he felt his toes curl in his boots.

**AS IN** the novel, Nesvik and Nelson found a small day pack the fisherman had with him, containing a bizarre collection of items including a Palm pilot and a journal. While Nesvik and the fisherman talked, Nelson got permission to look through the journal. He was astonished to find entries from the past few months, indicating that this man – and another name referred to throughout the journal – had been in the rugged Wind River Mountains for months.

One thing the fisherman didn't have with him, however, was a license to fish. Under questioning, the fisherman said he had one back at his camp. The game wardens said they'd follow him.

The fisherman started striding up a mountain, the game wardens on their horses struggling to keep up.

Joe could smell the camp before he could see it. It smelled like rotten garbage and burnt flesh..

The camp was a shambles. Clothing, wrappers, empty cans and food containers, bones, and bits of hide littered the ground. Their tent was a tiny Boy Scout pup tent and he could see two stained and crumpled

sleeping bags extending out past the door flap. He wondered how the two tall men managed to sleep there together -- and why they'd want to..

For a moment, Joe thought he was hallucinating. How could [the fisherman] have made it into the camp so much before him that he'd had the time to sit on a log and stretch out his long legs and read the Bible and wait for him to arrive? Then he realized the man on the log was identical in every way including his clothing, slouch hat, and deformed nose..  
Twins. Joe felt his palms go dry and his heart race.

**AS STRANGE** as it was to find twin brothers living along in the Wyoming wilderness, there were additional bizarre twists that "weirded out" both game wardens, according to Nelson. The possessions of the brothers didn't fit the scenario: the Palm Pilot, thirty cans of green beans, virtually no identification, and hardest all to describe: an off-putting, dangerous vibe put out from both of them.

There are plenty of stories told by game wardens and men of the mountains about people who live as hermits or recluses. But generally, the people in question are marginally well-equipped and set up for long stays. These

brothers seemed to have no more than their dirty clothes, ragged camp equipment, and a steely resolve to be left alone.

According to Nelson, the second brother was much chattier and more confrontational than the first. He said they'd come from Idaho via Leadville, Colorado. He complained about the lack of fish in the mountains and blamed it on game and fish department management. Whatever they were doing up there – or seeking – wasn't clear.

Nelson said the game wardens wrote tickets to the brother for fishing without a license and keeping too many fish. That would pose a dilemma for the brothers, they thought, since the fine would need to be paid in a town or contested in court. The brothers would have to come out of the mountains.

And then, another surprise. The second brother stood up and pulled a big roll of cash out of his pocket and peeled off enough \$20's to pay the fine.

Both Nesvik and Nelson rode away, both feeling they'd learned only a sliver of the real story, that there were

things going on with those twin brothers in that camp they'd likely never know. Or want to know.

**THE ENCOUNTER** haunted me, and later I wrote a short story about it featuring Joe Pickett. I gave the brothers fictional names, i.e. Caleb and Camish Grimm. The story was called "Perfectly Grimm." The short story served as the foundation for *Nowhere to Run*.

Questions remain, and not many answers.

Why were they up there? Where did they come from? Where did they go? What other things were they into?

When I met recently with Mark Nelson, I asked if he knew of any additional encounters with the twin brothers. He shook his head.

**WHENEVER I** hear about a disappearance of a hiker, a runner, a hunter in the mountains, or read of game animals found butchered or cabins or cars broken into, I think of them.

One could say they disappeared. More likely, though, they're still up there.