

Chapter One

WYOMING GAME warden Joe Pickett stood on the edge of the tarmac with his hands thrust into the pockets of his parka and his gray Stetson clamped on tight against the cold wind. It was a week until his birthday and his leg hurt and the brisk chill made him feel all of his fifty-one years on the planet.

His first glimpse of the \$65 million Gulfstream G650 ER private jet was of a gleaming white speck high above the rounded and snow-capped peaks of the Bighorn Mountains to the west.

It was a cloudless mid-October morning but it had snowed an inch during the night and the ten-mile-an-hour breeze cleared the concrete of the runway, rolling thin smoky waves of flakes across the pavement of the Saddlestring Municipal Airport. The timbered mountains had received three to five inches that would likely melt away in the high-altitude sun, but the treeless summits looked like the white crowns of so many bald eagles standing shoulder-to-shoulder against the clear blue sky.

"Cold this morning," Brock Boedecker said.

"Yup."

Boedecker was a fourth-generation rancher whose land reached up from the breakland plateau into the mid-point of Battle Mountain. He had a classic western look about him: narrow, thin, with deep-set eyes and a bushy black mustache, its

tips that extended to his jawline. It was the kind of weathered look, Joe thought, that had once convinced the marketing team at Marlboro to hire for their ad shoot the local Wyoming cowboy who brought them their horses rather than the male models they'd flown out from Hollywood.

"Not quite ready for snow yet," Boedecker said while tucking his chin into the collar of his jacket.

"Nope."

"About a month early for these temps."

"Yup."

"It's supposed to warm up a little later this week."

"Yup."

Boedecker paused. "Are you sure this is something we want to do?"

"Not really."

"Damn. I feel the same way. Is there any way we can get out of it?"

"Nope."

"I could do it without you," the rancher said. "Hell, I do this all the time."

"I know you could. But I wouldn't feel right letting you down at the last minute. I'm the one that got you into this, remember?"

"How's your leg?" Boedecker asked.

"Getting better all the time."

It was true. The gunshot Joe had sustained was healing on schedule due to months of rehabilitation and physical therapy but he still walked with a limp. On cold mornings like this he could feel it where the rifle round had punched through his thigh. There was a line of deadness rimmed by pangs of sharp pain when he moved.

Boedecker sighed. It seemed like there was something he wanted to say, so Joe waited. Finally: "Well, them horses you ordered are all trailered up and ready. I'll wait for you inside, I think."

Joe nodded. He turned to watch Boedecker make his way toward the glass doors of the old terminal. The rancher wore a weathered black hat, a canvas barn coat stained with oil, and a magenta silk scarf wrapped around his neck. His back was broad. The scarf reminded Joe that cowboys, even the crustiest of them, always displayed a little flash in their dress.

"Thanks for helping me out with this, Brock," Joe called out after him.

"You bet, Joe," he answered with a wave of his hand. He paused at the door and looked over his shoulder. "I wasn't sure I'd get here on time this morning. Did you know the sheriff has a roadblock set up so only authorized people can get to the airport?"

Joe said, "I heard about that."

"I guess they were worried about a mob scene. That's what the deputy told me. This guy is some bigshot, huh?"

"That's what they say."

"I can't say I support what we're doing," the rancher said. "I wish you we weren't doing it."

"I know," Joe said. Then: "It's supposed to be a big secret, so I'd appreciate you keeping it between us."

"Word's already out," Boedecker said.

"I don't know how," Joe said, shaking his head. The only reason he'd told Boedecker what he was about to do was because he needed to rent horses and tack from the rancher.

"I'm just not feeling too good about this guy," Boedecker said with a glance toward the oncoming plane.

Joe nodded his understanding. Up until the week before, he'd been in the same boat. His wife Marybeth had needed to explain to him who the man was, even though everyone – especially their three daughters – seemed to know all about him.

"Are you still convinced we'll have 'em all back down by the time the cattle trucks show up? The horses, I mean?"

"Absolutely," Joe said. "We'll be back down by Friday."

"Good, 'cause I loaded up my best mounts. Nothing but the best, you said."

"Thank you," Joe said with a sigh of relief. "Did you remember to stop by our place and load Toby?"

"Yup."

Toby was Marybeth's oldest and most seasoned mount. He was a tall tobiano paint gelding who still displayed boyish enthusiasm, especially when he was taken away from the barn and corral and shown mountain trails.

"Any of these dudes ever been on a horse before?"

"They claim they have."

"Those types always claim they have," Boedecker said. He shook his head as he went inside.

Joe turned back to the west. The Gulfstream was now in profile streaking left to right across the sky in order to make the turn and descent to line up with the north/south runway.

He rocked back on his bootheels and tried to conjure a sense of anticipation. Joe reached deep to kindle up the feeling of excitement he used to feel as a boy and younger man just before setting out into the mountains on an adventure. It had been palpable at one time. He'd toss and turn in bed the night before and be up hours ahead of dawn to get ready, filled him with a kind of primal joy.

Joe dug deep but he couldn't find it now.

HE WAS dressed as he always was for a day in the field in his red uniform shirt with the Wyoming game and fish department pronghorn antelope patch on the sleeve and his J. PICKETT name badge over his breast pocket. Under his uniform shirt and Wranglers were lightweight wool long underwear and socks. He wore a dark green wool Filson vest under the olive-green uniform parka.

He'd been instructed not to wear his holster and .40 Glock semi-auto weapon, or to have on his person his belt containing handcuffs and bear spray. The lack of weight under his parka made him feel airy and incomplete.

He squinted against the reflection of the morning sun on the perfect white skin of the Gulfstream as it taxied toward the terminal building. The twin tail-mounted jet engines emitted a high-pitched whine that hurt his ears.

The pilot of the jet did a graceful turn so the passenger door lined up with the entrance of the terminal before he cut the power to the engines. The turbines wound down into silence and the only sound was the light wind. Joe could see the profiles of several people inside moving about.

A moment later, the door opened and a stairway unfolded to the surface of the tarmac.

And there, not quite filling the opening, was a gangly pale man with a boyish face and wispy ginger hair. He waved as if there were a crowd to greet him and not just Joe.

This was Joe's first glimpse of thirty-two-year-old Steven "Steve-2" Price, the Silicon Valley billionaire and CEO of Aloft Industries and principal behind ConFab, the social media site.

Joe's job was to take him elk hunting.

PRICE WAS dressed in state-of-the-art high-tech outdoor hunting clothing, but despite that he hugged himself against the cold as he descended the stairs. When he reached the pavement he paused and looked up and around him, theatrically taking in the wide-open sky and the mountain ranges on three sides.

Price opened his arms as if to embrace it all and he cried, "*Nature!*"

Joe stifled a smile.

Behind Price, another man emerged: a fidgety overweight man, bald on top with tufts of black hair above his ears. He came down the stairs so quickly Joe thought he might tumble to the concrete. The man quickly shouldered past Price and strode toward Joe until Price called to him.

"Tim!"

The man called Tim stopped dead in his tracks and turned around. Joe had spent the past week exchanging scores of emails

with Price's point man, whose name was Timothy Joannides. Joe assumed this was him.

"Did you get that?" Price asked Joannides.

"Did I get what?"

Price fixed a look of disdain on Tim. "My first reaction?"

"No," Joannides said. "I was behind you and..."

"Tim, your job is to document this experience. We talked about that, didn't we? Do I have to explain it again?"

"No."

Tim seemed to Joe to want to say more but he didn't.

"Are you ready now?" Price asked.

"Yes, sir."

Price waited impatiently until Tim found his phone and raised it to eye level.

Price held up his camo glove for a moment, then climbed the stairs of the plane and re-enacted his actions from a minute before.

"Nature!" he called out again with his arms spread. Then he froze in mid-pose.

"Got it?" Price asked Tim.

"Got it."

"Make sure you get a panorama on the mountains," Price directed. "Then cut that in before we post it."

"I'm on it," Tim said as he stepped out of Price's way and raised up his phone to video the surroundings. Tim spun around slowly as he did so.

Joe was so preoccupied with the interplay between Price and Joannides that he hadn't seen a third man exit the plane until the newcomer was headed straight toward him. The man was heavy, squared-off, and built low to the ground. His stride was smooth and purposeful, almost a jog, and his shoulders and head were bent forward. His arms were held out away from his body in a way that gave Joe the brief impression that he was about to be tackled.

The man didn't stop until he was inches away from Joe.

"I need to pat you down for weapons." He had a deep bass voice and he spoke with a blunt East European accent.

"I left 'em in my truck," Joe said, feeling both angry and violated. The man was just too close. "Isn't that what I was supposed to do?"

"Sorry, it's my job," the man said without real apology and Joe found himself being expertly patted down all the way down to the top of his lace-up hunting boots. When the man was done, he stepped back.

"You're clear," the man said.

"I already told you that."

Joe and the bodyguard stared at one another for several beats. The man didn't blink. He had a wide Slavic face, close-cropped black hair, a downturned mouth, and a square jaw not quite as wide as his thick neck. Joe could only guess the man was armed because of the bulges and protrusions beneath his black matte-colored tactical coat.

"Please forgive Zsolt," Price said with an embarrassed grin as he joined the two. He pronounced the name 'Zolt.' "He kind of overdoes it sometimes but he's a good man to have around."

"I'm law enforcement," Joe said through gritted teeth.

Price arched his eyebrows. "I thought you were a game warden."

"Game wardens are law enforcement," Joe said to Price.

"If you say so," Price said obviously unconvinced.

Joe didn't move. Inside, he seethed. Price sensed it as he offered his hand to Joe.

"And you must be Joe," Price said with a grin. "*Good old Joe, I've been saying.*"

Before Joe could confirm it, Price chinned toward the jet. "Is the wrangler waiting for us somewhere?"

"His name is Brock," Joe said. "Yup, he's waiting inside for us."

"**YOU CAN** call me Steve-2," Price said. He pronounced it *SteveTwo* as if it were one two-syllable word. Instead of grasping Joe's hand in return, he offered an elbow bump. It was an obvious holdover from the pandemic the year before. Either that, or Price was a germaphobe, Joe thought.

"That's Tim out there with the camera," Price said. "He's my personal assistant. You've met Zsolt Rummy. As you probably guessed he oversees security."

Rummy nodded at the sound of his name. Joe nodded back.

Price sidled up close, man-to-man. "I know you're probably asking yourself why a dude like me needs security."

"Not really."

"I sometimes wonder myself," Price said.

One of the crew of the jet had opened the cargo hold door and Joe could see what looked like dozens of large duffel bags, gear boxes, and backpacks inside.

Joe narrowed his eyes. "I'm sure Tim told you we're taking horses."

"He did. I'm really looking forward to it."

"We may need to winnow down some of your stuff if it's too much."

"Are you saying we don't have pack animals?" Price asked with a look of genuine concern. "My understanding is we'd have pack animals to transport everything we need."

"We've got horses and panniers," Joe said. "They're waiting for us in the parking lot. But we need to limit the weight on each animal to no more than thirty percent of its body weight. We've got five pack horses in addition to the horses we'll ride."

Price frowned. "How much does a horse weigh?"

"Depends on the horse."

Price closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then slowly reopened them. "I was under the assumption all of this was already sorted out in advance."

Joe said, "I told Tim to limit your baggage to five hundred pounds."

Price glared at him. "You know, *good old Joe*, I can do math in my head. In fact, I'm quite good at it. I'm a coder and a programmer and I've designed world-class proprietary algorithms. Are you telling me that your pack horses can only handle a hundred pounds each? I find that hard to believe since most human riders weigh well above that."

"They do," Joe said. "But we need to plan for the weight of hauling elk back down the mountain."

"Oh."

"We'll get it figured out," Joe offered in an attempt to be conciliatory. As he said it, Joannides approached the group.

Price turned to his assistant. "If we need to leave things behind, they'll be yours."

Joannides looked quickly away. "Yes, boss."

Joe felt embarrassed for the man, something which Price seemed to pick up on.

"I hope that's not the first of many misunderstandings," Price said. "Sometimes I think Tim tells me what he thinks I want to hear rather than what I need to hear."

Joe was glad Joannides was out of earshot.

"Since you've been communicating with Tim," Price continued, "It's important that you know I'm not some kind of prima donna. I take what we're about to do very seriously and it's extremely valuable to me. I appreciate you and the wrangler taking your time to do this."

Joe nodded.

"As I hope Tim conveyed to you, I only want to participate in an authentic, fair-chase hunt. Pretend I'm just a normal person who hires you to guide him."

Joe started to say that he didn't usually guide hunters at all, but Price was on a roll.

"I've had hundreds of opportunities to just to shoot an animal, if that's what I wanted to do. I'm talking absolute trophies. But that was on land owned by friends and colleagues, or worse: game farms. That is the last thing I want to do.

"I want real," Price said. "I want the actual experience. Did Tim communicate this to you clearly?"

Joe was torn how to answer without throwing Joannides under the bus.

"I get it," Joe said.

"Wonderful," Price said. "Now do you think you can go get the wrangler and help us unload all of that gear? And be very careful. Some of it is really delicate."

Joe turned and pushed through the double doors into the terminal. He found Boedecker sitting on a plastic chair reading the *Saddlestring Roundup*.

The rancher looked up as Joe approached. He said, "Are you sure we can't get out of this?"

"I'm pretty sure."

Boedecker put the paper aside and looked around to make sure no one could overhear what he was about to say. His eyes were unblinking.

"You can go," the man said. "No hard feelings on my part. In fact..."

Joe cocked his head as he waited for more.

"I'd really advise you to go home," Boedecker said finally. "I can do this without you."

Joe was puzzled. "I signed on for this."

Before Boedecker could continue, Joannides stuck his head in the door. He was frantic.

"We need to get this show on the road, gentlemen," he said.

Boedecker gave Joe a long look that Joe supposed was designed to tell him something. Then he stood up and the two of them walked through the tiny terminal toward the waiting plane.

Joe looked up from the tarmac. A procession of dark clouds scudded across the sky from the north. Soon, it looked like, they'd envelop Battle Mountain.