

# **Pronghorns of the Third Reich**

**Bibliomysteries**

**by C. J. Box, 1958-**

**Published: 2012**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



As he did every morning, Paul Parker's deaf and blind old Labrador, Champ, signaled his need by burrowing his nose into Parker's neck and snuffling. If Parker didn't immediately throw back the covers and get up, Champ would woof until he did. So he got up. The dog used to bound downstairs in a manic rush and

skid across the hardwood floor of the landing to the back door, but now he felt his way down slowly, with his belly touching each step, grunting, his big nose serving as a kind of wall bumper. Champ steered himself, Parker thought, via echo navigation. Like a bat. It was sad. Parker followed and yawned and cinched his robe tight and wondered how many more mornings there were left in his dog.

Parker glanced at his reflection in a mirror in the stairwell. Six-foot-two, steel-gray hair, cold blue eyes, and a jaw line that was starting to sag into a dewlap. Parker hated the sight of the dewlap, and unconsciously raised his chin to flatten it. Something else: he looked tired. Worn and tired. He looked like someone's old man. Appearing in court used him up these days. Win or lose, the trials just took his energy out of him and it took longer and longer to recharge. As Champ struggled ahead of him, he wondered if his dog remembered *his* youth.

He passed through the kitchen. On the counter was the bourbon bottle he had forgotten to cap the night before, and the coffee maker he hadn't filled or set. He looked out the window over the sink. Still dark, overcast, spitting snow, a sharp wind quivering the bare branches of the trees. The cloud cover was pulled down like a window blind in front of the distant mountains.

Parker waited for Champ to get his bearings and find the back door. He took a deep breath and reached for the door handle, preparing himself for a blast of icy wind in his face.

Lyle and Juan stood flattened and hunched on either side of the back door of the lawyer's house on the edge of town. They wore balaclavas and coats and gloves. Lyle had his stained gray Stetson clamped on his head over the balaclava, even though Juan had told him he looked ridiculous.

They'd been there for an hour in the dark and cold and wind. They were used to conditions like this, even though Juan kept losing his focus, Lyle thought. In the half-light of dawn, Lyle could see Juan staring off into the backyard toward the mountains, squinting against the pinpricks of snow, as if pining for something, which was probably the warm weather of Chihuahua. Or a warm bed. More than once, Lyle had to lean across the back porch and cuff Juan on the back of his skull and tell him to get his head in the game.

"What game?" Juan said. His accent was heaviest when he was cold, for some reason, and sounded like, "*Wha' gaaaame?*"

Lyle started to reach over and shut Juan up when a light clicked on inside the house. Lyle hissed, "Here he comes. Get ready. *Focus*. Remember what we talked about."

To prove that he heard Lyle, Juan scrunched his eyes together and nodded.

Lyle reached behind him and grasped the Colt .45 1911 ACP with his gloved right hand. He'd already racked in a round so there was no need to work the slide. He cocked it and held it alongside his thigh.

Across the porch, Juan drew a .357 Magnum revolver from the belly pocket of the Carat hoodie he wore.

The back door opened and the large blocky head of a dog poked out looking straight ahead. The dog grunted as it stepped down onto the porch and waddled straight away, although Juan had his pistol trained on the back of its head. It was Juan's job to watch the dog and shoot it dead if necessary.

Lyle reached up and grasped the outside door handle and jerked it back hard.

Paul Parker tumbled outside in a heap, robe flying, blue-white bare legs exposed. He scrambled over on his hands and knees in the snow-covered grass and said, "Jesus Christ!"

"No," Lyle said, aiming the pistol at a spot on Parker's forehead. "Just us."

"What do you want?"

"What's coming to me," Lyle said. "What I deserve and you took away."

A mix of recognition and horror passed over Parker's face. Lyle could see the fear in the lawyer's eyes. It was a good look as far as Lyle was concerned. Parker said, "Lyle? Is that you?"

What could Lyle want, Parker thought. There was little of significant value in the house. Not like Angler's place out in the country, that book collection of Western Americana. But Lyle? He was a warped version of Western Americana...

"Get up and shut the hell up," Lyle said, motioning with the Colt. "Let's go in the house where it's warm."

Next to Parker, Champ squatted and his urine steamed in the grass.

"He don't even know we're here," Juan said. "Some watch dog. I ought to put it out of its misery." *Meeserie*.

"Please don't," Parker said, standing up. "He's my bird dog and he's been a great dog over the years. He doesn't even know you're here." Lyle noticed Parker had dried grass stuck to his bare knees.

"You don't look like such a hotshot now without your lawyer suit," Lyle said.

"I hope you got some hot coffee, mister," Juan said to Parker.

"I'll make some."

"Is your wife inside?" Lyle asked.

"No."

Lyle grinned beneath his mask, "She left you, huh?"

"Nothing like that," Parker lied. "She's visiting her sister in Sheridan."

"Anybody inside?"

"No."

"Don't be lying to me."

"I'm not. Look, whatever it is..."

"Shut up," Lyle said, gesturing with his Colt, "Go inside slowly and try not to do something stupid."

Parker cautiously climbed the step and reached out for the door Lyle held. Lyle followed. The warmth of the house enveloped him, even through his coat and balaclava.

Behind them, Juan said, "What about the dog?"

"Shoot it," Lyle said.

"Jesus God," Parker said, his voice tripping.

A few seconds later there was a heavy boom and simultaneous yelp from the back yard, and Juan came in.

Paul Parker sat in the passenger seat of the pickup and Lyle sat just behind him in the crew cab with the muzzle of his Colt kissing the nape of his neck. Juan drove. They left the highway and took a two-track across the sagebrush foothills eighteen miles from town. They were shadowed by a herd of thirty to forty pronghorn antelope. It was late October, almost November, the grass

was brown and snow from the night before pooled in the squat shadows of the sagebrush. The landscape was harsh and bleak and the antelope had been designed perfectly for it: their brown and white coloring melded with the terrain and at times it was as if they were absorbed within it. And if the herd didn't feel comfortable about something—like the intrusion of a 1995 beat-up Ford pickup pulling a rattletrap empty stock trailer behind it—they simply flowed away over the hills like molten lava.

"Here they come again," Juan said to Lyle. It was his truck and they'd borrowed the stock trailer from an outfitter who got a new one. "They got so many antelopes out here."

"Focus," Lyle said. He'd long since taken off the mask—no need for it now—and stuffed it in his coat pocket.

Parker stared straight ahead. They'd let him put on pajamas and slippers and a heavy lined winter topcoat and that was all. Lyle had ordered him to bring his keys but leave his wallet and everything else. He felt humiliated and scared. That Lyle Peebles and Juan Martinez had taken off their masks meant that they no longer cared if he could identify them, and that was a very bad thing. He was sick about Champ.

Lyle was close enough to Parker in the cab that he could smell the lawyer's fear and his morning breath. Up close, Lyle noticed, the lawyer had bad skin. He'd never noticed in the courtroom.

"So you know where we're going," Lyle said.

"The Angler Place," Parker said.

"That's right. And do you know what we're going to do there?"

After a long pause, Parker said, "No, Lyle, I don't."

"I think you do."

"Really, I..."

"Shut up," Lyle said to Parker. To Juan, he said, "There's a gate up ahead. When you stop at it I'll get Paul here to come and help me open it. You drive through and we'll close it behind us. If you see him try anything hinky, do the same thing to him you did to that dog."

"Champ," Parker said woodenly.

"*Ho-kay*," Lyle said.

Juan Martinez was a mystery to Parker. He'd never seen nor heard of him before that morning. Martinez was stocky and solid with thick blue/black hair and he wore a wispy gunfighter's mustache that made his face look unclean. He had piercing black eyes that revealed nothing. He was younger than Lyle, and obviously deferred to him. The two men seemed comfortable with each other and their easy camaraderie suggested long days and nights in each other's company. Juan seemed to Parker to be a blunt object; simple, hard, without remorse.

Lyle Peebles was dark and of medium height and build and he appeared older than his 57 years, Parker thought. Lyle had a hard narrow pinched face, leathery dark skin that looked permanently sun and wind-burned, the spackled sunken cheeks of a drinker, and a thin white scar that practically halved his face from his upper lip to his scalp. He had eyes that were both sorrowful and imperious at the same time, and teeth stained by nicotine that were long and narrow like horse's teeth. His voice was deep with a hint of country twang and the corners of his

mouth pulled up when he spoke but it wasn't a smile. He had a certain kind of coiled menace about him, Parker thought. Lyle was the kind of man one shied away from if he was coming down the sidewalk or standing in the aisle of a hardware store because there was a dark instability about him that suggested he might start shouting or lashing out or complaining and not stop until security was called. He was a man who acted and dressed like a cowpoke but he had grievances inside him that burned hot.

Parker had hoped that when the trial was over he'd never see Lyle Peebles again for the rest of his life.

Parker stood aside with his bare hands jammed into the pockets of his coat. He felt the wind bite his bare ankles above his slippers and burn his neck and face with cold. He knew Juan was watching him closely so he tried not to make any suspicious moves or reveal what he was thinking.

He had no weapons except for his hands and fists and the ball of keys he'd been ordered to bring along. He'd never been in a fist-fight in his life, but he could fit the keys between his fingers and start swinging.

He looked around him without moving his head much. The prairie spread out in all directions. They were far enough away from town there were no other vehicles to be seen anywhere, no buildings or power lines.

"Look at that," Lyle said, nodding toward the north and west. Parker turned to see lead-colored clouds rolling straight at them, pushing gauzy walls of snow.

"Hell of a storm coming," Lyle said.

"Maybe we should turn back?" Parker offered.

Lyle snorted with derision.

Parker thought about simply breaking and running, but there was nowhere to run.

It was a standard barbed-wire ranch gate, stiff from disuse. Wire loops from the ancient fence post secured the top and bottom of the gate rail. A heavy chain and padlock mottled with rust stretched between the two. "You got the keys," Lyle said, gesturing with his Colt.

Parker dug the key ring out of his pocket and bent over the old lock. He wasn't sure which key fit it, or whether the rusty hasp would unsnap. While he struggled with the lock, a beach-ball-sized tumbleweed was dislodged from a sagebrush by the wind and it hit him in the back of his thighs, making him jump. Lyle laughed.

Finally, he found the right key and felt the mechanism inside give. Parker jerked hard on the lock and the chain dropped away on both sides.

"Stand aside," Lyle said, and shot him a warning look before he put his pistol in his pocket and leaned against the gate. The way to open these tight old ranch gates was to brace oneself on the gate side, thread one's arms through the strands until the shoulder was against the gate rail and reach out to the solid post and pull. The move left Lyle vulnerable.

Parker thought if he was prepared to do something and fight back, this was the moment. He could attack Lyle before Juan could get out of the pickup. He felt his chest tighten and his toes curl and grip within his slippers.

Lyle struggled with it. "Don't just stand there," red-faced Lyle said to Parker through gritted teeth, "Help me get this goddamned thing open."

Parker leaned forward on the balls of his feet. He considered hurtling himself like a missile toward Lyle, then slashing at the man's face and eyes with the keys. He could tear Lyle's gun away, shoot Lyle, and then use it on Juan. That's what a man of action would do. That's what someone in a movie or on television would do.

Instead, the lawyer bent over so he was shoulder-to-shoulder with Lyle and his added bulk against the gatepost was enough that Lyle could reach up and pop the wire over the top and open it.

Back inside the pickup, they drove into the maw of the storm. It had enveloped them so quickly it was astonishing. Pellets of snow rained across the hood of the pickup and bounced against the cracked windshield. The heater blew hot air that smelled like radiator fluid inside the cab. Parker's teeth finally stopped chattering but his stomach ached from fear and his hands and feet were cold and stiff.

Juan leaned forward and squinted over the wheel, as if it would help him see better.

"This is the kind of stuff we live with every day," Lyle said to Parker. "Me and Juan are out in this shit day after day. We don't sit in plush offices taking calls and sending bills. This is the way it is out here."

Parker nodded, not sure what to say.

"The road forks," Juan said to Lyle in the backseat, "Which way do we go?"

"Left," Lyle said.

"Are you sure?"

"Goddamit, Juan, how many years did I spend out here on these roads?"

Juan shrugged and eased the pickup to the left. They couldn't see more than fifty feet in any direction. The wind swirled the heavy snow and it buffeted the left side of the pickup truck, rocking the vehicle on its springs when it gusted.

Parker said, "When this is over and you've got whatever it is you want, what then?"

Lyle said, "I'm still weighing that one, counselor. But for now just let me concentrate on getting to the house."

"It would be helpful to know what you've got in mind," Parker said, clearing his throat. Trying to sound conversational. "I mean, since I'm playing a role in this I can be of better service if I know your intentions."

Lyle backhanded the lawyer with his free hand, hitting him hard on the ear. Parker winced.

"Just shut up until we get there," Lyle said. "I heard enough talking from you in that courtroom to last the rest of my pea-pickin' life. So just shut up or I'll put a bullet into the back of your head."

Juan appeared to grimace, but Parker determined it was a bitter kind of smile.

Lyle said to Parker, "You got the keys to that secret room old Angler has, right? The one he never let anybody into? The one with the books?"

"How far?" Juan asked. They were traveling less than five miles an hour. The snow was so thick, Parker thought, it was like being inside a cloud. Tall sagebrush just a few feet from the road on either side looked like gray commas. Beyond the brush, everything was two-tone white and light blue.

"What's in the road?" Juan asked, tapping on the brake to slow them down even further.

Parker looked ahead. Six or seven oblong shadows emerged from the whiteout. They appeared suspended in the air. They looked like small coffins on stilts.

The pickup inched forward. The forms sharpened in detail. Pronghorn antelope—part of the same herd or from another herd. A buck and his does. They stood braced into the storm, oblivious to the truck. Juan drove so close to them Parker could see snow packed into the bristles of their hide and their goatlike faces and black eyes. The buck had long eyelashes and flakes of snow caught in them. His horns were tall and splayed, the hooked-back tips ivory colored.

“Fucking antelope,” Lyle said. “Push ‘em out of the way or run right over them.”

Instead, Juan tapped the horn on the steering wheel. The sound was distant and tinny against the wind, but the pronghorns reacted; haunches bunching, heads ducking, and they shot away from the road as if they’d never been there.

Parker wished he could run like that.

“Few miles,” Lyle said. “We’ll pass under an archway. I helped build that arch, you know.”

“I didn’t know that,” Juan said.

“Me and Juan,” Lyle said to Parker, “We’ve worked together for the past what, twelve years?”

Juan said, “Twelve, yes. Twelve.”

“Some of the shittiest places you could imagine,” Lyle said. “All over the states of Wyoming and Montana. A couple in Idaho. One in South Dakota. Most of those places had absentee owners with pricks for ranch foremen. They’re the worst, those pricks. They don’t actually own the places so for them it’s all about power. You give pricks like that a little authority and they treat the workingman like shit. Ain’t that right, Juan?”

“Eees right.”

Parker thought: *It’s like we’re the only humans on earth.* The world that had been out there just that morning—the world of vistas and mountains and people and cars and offices and meetings—had been reduced for him to just this. Three men in the cab of a pickup driving achingly slow through a whiteout where the entire world had closed in around them. Inside the cab there were smells and weapons and fear. Outside the glass was furious white rage.

There was a kind of forced intimacy that was not welcome, Parker thought. He’d been reduced to the same level as these two no-account ranch hands who between them didn’t have a nickel to rub together. They had guns and the advantage, Parker thought, but they were smart in the way coyotes or other predators were smart in that they knew innately how to survive but didn’t have a clue how to rise up beyond that. He knew that from listening to Lyle testify in court in halting sentences filled with poorly chosen words. And when Lyle’s broken down ninety-eight-year-old grandfather took the stand it was all over. Parker had flayed the old man with whips made of words until there was no flesh left on his ancient bones.

Lyle likely couldn’t be reasoned with—he knew that already. No more than a coyote or a raven could be reasoned with. Coyotes would never become dogs. Likewise, ravens couldn’t be songbirds. Lyle Peebles would never be a reasonable man. He was a man whose very existence was based on grievance.

“This is getting bad,” Juan said, leaning forward in his seat as if getting six inches closer to the windshield would improve his vision. *Thees.*

Parker gripped the dashboard. The tires had become sluggish beneath the pickup as the snow accumulated. Juan was driving more by feel than by vision, and a few times Parker felt the tires leave the two-track and Juan had to jerk the wheel to find the ruts of the road again.

"We picked a bad day for this," Juan said. *Thees*.

"Keep going," Lyle said. "We been in worse than this before. Remember that time in the Pryor Mountains?"

"Si. That was as bad as this."

"That was *worse*," Lyle said definitively.

There was a metallic clang and Parker heard something scrape shrilly beneath the undercarriage of the truck.

"What the hell was that?" Lyle asked Juan.

"A T-post, I think."

"Least that means we're still on the road," Lyle said.

"*Ay-yi-yi*," Juan whistled.

"We could turn around," Parker said.

"We could," Juan agreed. "At least I could follow our tracks back out. As it is, I can't see where we're going."

"We're fine, Goddammit," Lyle said. "I know where we are. Keep going. We'll be seeing that old house any time now."

Parker looked out his passenger window. Snow was sticking to it and covering the glass. Through a fist-sized opening in the snow, he could see absolutely nothing.

He realized Lyle was talking to him. "What did you say?"

"I said I bet you didn't expect you'd be doing this today, did you?"

"No."

"You're the type of guy who thinks once a judge says something it's true, ain't you?"

Parker shrugged.

"You thought after you made a fool of my grandpa you were done with this, didn't you?"

"Look," Parker said, "we all have jobs to do. I did mine. It wasn't personal."

Parker waited for an argument. Instead, he felt a sharp blow to his left ear and he saw spangles where a moment ago there had been only snow. The voice that cried out had been his.

He turned in the seat cupping his ear in his hand.

Lyle grinned back. Parker noticed the small flap of skin on the front sight of the Colt. And his fingers were hot and sticky with his blood.

"You say it ain't personal, lawyer," Lyle said. "But look at me. Look at me. What do you see?"

Parker squinted against the pain and shook his head slowly as if he didn't know how to answer.

"What you see, lawyer, is a third-generation loser. That's what you see, and don't try to claim otherwise or I'll beat you bloody. I'll ask you again: what do you see?"



Parker found that his voice was tremulous. He said, "I see a working man, Lyle. A good-hearted working man who gets paid for a hard day's work. I don't see what's so wrong with that."

"Nice try," Lyle said, feinting with the muzzle toward Parker's face like the flick of a tongue from a snake. Parker recoiled, and Lyle grinned again.

"That man fucked over my grandpa and set this all in motion," Lyle said. "He cheated him and walked away and hid behind his money and his lawyers for the rest of his life. Can you imagine what my grandpa's life would have been like if he hadn't been fucked over? Can you imagine what my life would have been like? Not like this, I can tell you. Why should that man get away with a crime like that? Don't you see a crime like that isn't a one-shot deal? That it sets things in motion for generations?"

"I'm just a lawyer," Parker said.

"And I'm just a no-account working man," Lyle said. "And the reason is because of people like you."

"Look," Parker said, taking his hand away from his ear and feeling a long tongue of blood course down his neck into his collar, "maybe we can go back to the judge with new information. But we need new information. It can't just be your grandfather's word and his theories about Nazis and..."

"They weren't just theories!" Lyle said, getting agitated. "It was the truth."

"It was so long ago," Parker said.

"That doesn't make it less true!" Lyle shouted.

"There was no proof. Give me some proof and I'll represent you instead of the estate."

Parker shot a glance at the rearview mirror to find Lyle deep in thought for a moment. Lyle said, "That's interesting. I've seen plenty of whores, but not many in a suit."

"Lyle," Juan said sadly, "I think we are lost."

The hearing had lasted less than two days. Paul Parker was the lawyer for the Fritz Angler estate, which was emerging from probate after the old man finally died and left no heirs except a disagreeable out-of-wedlock daughter who lived in Houston. From nowhere, Benny Peebles and his grandson Lyle made a claim for the majority of the Angler estate holdings. Benny claimed he'd been cheated out of ownership of the ranch generations ago and he wanted justice. He testified it had happened this way:

Benny Peebles and Fritz Angler, both in their early twenties, owned a Ryan monoplane together. The business model for Peebles/Peebles Aviation was to hire out their piloting skills and aircraft to ranchers in Northern Wyoming for the purpose of spotting cattle, delivering goods, and transporting medicine and cargo. They also had contracts with the federal and state government for mail delivery and predator control. Although young and in the midst of the Depression, they were two of the most successful entrepreneurs the town of Cody had seen. Still, the income from the plane barely covered payments and overhead and both partners lived hand-to-mouth.

Peebles testified that in 1936 they were hired by a rancher named Wendell Oaks to help round up his scattered cattle. This was an unusual request, and they

learned Oaks had been left high-and-dry by all of his ranch-hands because he hadn't paid them for two months. Oaks had lost his fortune in the crash and the only assets he had left before the bank foreclosed on his 16,000-acre spread were his Hereford cattle. He'd need to sell them all to raise \$20,000 to save his place, and in order to sell them he'd need to gather them up. The payments to Peebles/Peebles would come out of the proceeds, he assured them.

Benny said Fritz was enamored with the Oaks Ranch—the grass, the miles of river, the timber, and the magnificent Victorian ranch house that cost Oaks a fortune to build. He told Benny, “This man is living on my ranch but he just doesn't know it yet.”

Benny didn't know what Fritz meant at the time, although his partner, he said, always had “illusions of grandiosity,” as Benny put it.

Fritz sent Benny north to Billings to buy fence to build a massive temporary corral for the cattle. While he was gone, Fritz said, he'd fly the ranch and figure out where all the cattle were.

Benny returned to Cody four days later followed by a truck laden with rolls of fence and bundles of steel posts. But Fritz was gone, and so was the Ryan. Wendell Oaks was fit to be tied. Bankers were driving out to his place from Cody to take measurements.

Three days later, while Benny and some locals he'd hired on a day-rate were building the corral, he heard the buzz of an airplane motor. He recognized the sound and looked up to see Fritz Angler landing the Ryan in a hay meadow.

Before Benny could confront his partner, Fritz buttonholed one of the bankers and they drove off together into town. Benny inspected their monoplane and saw where Fritz had removed the co-pilot seat and broken out the interior divides of the cargo area to make more space. The floor of the aircraft was covered in white bristles of hair and animal feces. It smelled dank and unpleasant.

The next thing Benny knew, sheriff's deputies descended on the place and evicted Wendell Oaks. Then they ordered Benny and his laborers off the property by order of the sheriff and the bank and new owner of the ranch, Fritz Angler, who had paid off the outstanding loan balance and now owned the paper for the Oaks Ranch.

The arch appeared out of the snow and Juan drove beneath it. Parker was relieved to discover how close they were to the ranch house, and just as frightened to anticipate what might come next.

Lyle was wound up. “That mean old German son-of-a-bitch never even apologized,” he said heatedly from the backseat. “He used the airplane my Grandpa owned half of to swindle our family out of this place, and he never even said sorry. If nothing else, we should have owned half of all this. Instead, it turned my family to a bunch of two-bit losers. It broke my Grandpa and ruined my dad and now it's up to me to get what I can out of it. What choice do I have since you cheated us again in that court?”

“I didn't cheat you,” Parker said softly, not wanting to argue with Lyle in his agitated state. “There was no proof...”

“Grandpa told you what happened!” Lyle said.

“But that story you told...”

“He don’t lie. Are you saying he lied?”

“No,” Parker said patiently. “But I mean, come on. Who is going to believe that Fritz Angler trapped a hundred antelope fawns and flew them around the country and sold them to zoos? That he sold some to Adolf Hitler and flew that plane all the way to Lakehurst, New Jersey and loaded a half-dozen animals on the Hindenburg to be taken to the Berlin Zoo? I mean, come on, Lyle.”

“It happened!” Lyle shouted. “If Grandpa said it happened, it fucking happened.”

Parker recalled the skeptical but patient demeanor of the judge as old Benny Peebles droned on at the witness stand. There were a few snickers from the small gallery during the tale.

Juan shook his head and said to Parker, “I hear this story before. Many times about the plane and the antelopes.”

Parker decided to keep quiet. There was no point in arguing. Lyle spoke with the deranged fervor of a true believer, despite the outlandishness of the tale.

Lyle said, “Look around you. There are thousands of antelope on this ranch, just like there were in 1936. Angler used the plane to herd antelope into a box canyon, where he bound them up. Grandpa showed me where he done it. Angler loaded them into the Ryan and started east, selling them all along the way. He had connections with Hitler because he was German! His family was still over there. They were a bunch of fucking Nazis just like Angler. He knew who to call.

“He sold those fawns for \$100 to \$200 each because they were so rare outside Wyoming at the time. He could load up to 40 in the plane for each trip. He made enough cash money to buy airplane fuel all the way to New Jersey and back and still had enough to pay off Wendell Oaks’ loan. He did the whole thing in a plane co-owned by my Grandpa but never cut him in on a damned thing!

“Then he started buying other ranches,” Lyle said, speaking fast, spittle forming at the corners of his mouth, “then they found that damned oil. Angler was rich enough to spend thousands on lawyers and thugs to keep my Grandpa and my dad away from him all those years. Our last shot was contesting that old Nazi’s estate—and *you* shut us out.”

Parker sighed and closed his eyes. He’d grown up in Cody. He despised men who blamed their current circumstances on past events as if their lives were preordained. Didn’t Lyle know that in the West you simply reinvented yourself? That family legacies meant next to nothing?

“I can’t take this ranch with me,” Lyle said. “I can’t take enough cattle or vehicles or sagebrush to make things right. But I sure as hell can take that damned book collection of his. I’ve heard it’s worth hundreds of thousands. Ain’t that right, Parker?”

“I don’t know,” Parker said. “I’m not a collector.”

“But you’ve seen it, right? You’ve been in that secret room of his?”

“Once.” Parker recalled the big dark room with floor-to-ceiling oak bookshelves that smelled of paper and age. Fritz liked to sit in a red-leather chair under the soft yellow light of a Tiffany lamp and read, careful not to fully open or damage the books in any way. It had taken him sixty years to amass his collection of mostly leather-bound first editions. The collection was comprised primarily of books about the American West and the Third Reich in original German. While Parker

browsed the shelves he had noted both volumes of *Mein Kampf* with alarm but had said nothing to the old man.

"And what was in there?" Lyle said. "Did you see some of the books I've heard about? Lewis and Clark's original journals? Catlin's books about Indians? A first edition of Irwin Wister?"

"Owen Wister," Parker corrected. "*The Virginian*. Yes, I saw them."

"Ha!" Lyle said with triumph. "I heard Angler brag that the Indian book was worth a half million."

Parker realized two things at once. They were close enough to the imposing old ranch house they could see its Gothic outline emerge from the white. And Juan had stopped the pickup.

"Books!" Juan said, biting off the word. "*We're here for fucking books? You said we would be getting his treasure.*"

"Juan," Lyle said, "his books are his treasure. That's why we brought the stock trailer."

"I don't want no books!" Juan growled, "I thought it was jewelry or guns. You know, rare things. I don't know nothing about old books."

"It'll all work out," Lyle said, patting Juan on the shoulder. "Trust me. People spend a fortune collecting them."

"Then they're fools," Juan said, shaking his head.

"Drive right across the lawn," Lyle instructed Juan. "Pull the trailer up as close as you can get to the front doors so we don't have to walk so far."

"*So we can fill it with shitty old books,*" Juan said, showing his teeth.

"Calm down, amigo," Lyle said to Juan. "Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"About a thousand times, amigo."

Lyle huffed a laugh, and Parker watched Juan carefully. He didn't seem to be playing along.

Lyle said, "Keep an eye on the lawyer while I open the front door." To Parker, he said, "Give me those keys."

Parker handed them over and he watched Lyle fight the blizzard on his way up the porch steps. The wind was ferocious and Lyle kept one hand clamped down on his hat. A gust nearly drove him off the porch. If anything, it was snowing even harder.

"*Books,*" Juan said under his breath. "He tricked me."

The massive double front doors to the Angler home filled a gabled stone archway and were eight feet high and studded with iron bolt heads. Angler had a passion for security, and Parker remembered noting the thickness of the open door when he'd visited. They were over two inches thick. He watched Lyle brush snow away from the keyhole and fumble with the key ring with gloved fingers.

"Books are not treasure," Juan said.

Parker sensed an opening. "No, they're not. You'll have to somehow find rich collectors who will overlook the fact that they've been stolen. Lyle doesn't realize each one of those books has an ex libris mark."

When Juan looked over, puzzled, Parker said, "It's a stamp of ownership. Fritz didn't collect so he could sell the books. He collected because he loved them. They'll be harder than hell to sell on the open market. Book collectors are a small world."

Juan cursed.

Parker said, "It's just like his crazy story about the antelope and the Hindenburg. He doesn't know what he's talking about."

"He's *crazy*."

"I'm afraid so," Parker said. "And he sucked you into this."

"I didn't kill your dog."

"*What?*"

"I didn't kill it. I shot by his head and he yelped. I couldn't shoot an old dog like that. I like dogs if they don't want to bite me."

"Thank you, Juan." Parker hoped the storm wasn't as violent in town and that Champ would find a place to get out of it.

They both watched Lyle try to get the door open. The side of his coat was already covered with snow.

"A man could die just being outside in a storm like this," Parker said. Then he took a long breath and held it.

"Lyle, he's crazy," Juan said. "He wants to fix his family. He don't know how to move on."

"Well said. There's no reason why you should be in trouble for Lyle's craziness," Parker said.

"Mister, I know what you're doing."

"But that doesn't mean I'm wrong."

Juan said nothing.

"My wife..." Parker said. "We're having some problems. I need to talk to her and set things right. I can't imagine never talking to her again. For Christ's Sake, my last words to her were, *Don't let the door hit you on the way out.*"

Juan snorted.

"Please..."

"He wants you to help him," Juan said, chinning toward the windshield. Beyond it, Lyle was gesticulating at them on the porch.

"We can just back away," Parker said. "We can go home."

"You mean just leave him here?"

"Yes," Parker said. "I'll never breathe a word about this to anyone. I swear it."

Juan seemed to be thinking about it. On the porch, Lyle was getting angrier and more frantic. Horizontal snow and wind made his coat sleeves and pant legs flap. A gust whipped his hat off, and Lyle flailed in the air for it but it was gone.

"Go," Juan said.

"But I thought..."

"Go now," he said, showing the pistol.

Parker was stunned by the fury of the storm. Snow stung his face and he tried to duck his head beneath his upraised arm to shield it. The wind was so cold it felt hot on his exposed bare skin.

"Help me get this goddamned door open!" Lyle yelled. "I can't get the key to work." He handed Parker the keys.

"I don't know which one it is any more than you do," Parker yelled back.

"Just fucking try it, counselor!" Lyle said, jabbing at him with the Colt.

Parker leaned into the door much as Lyle had. He wanted to block the wind with his back so he could see the lock and the keys and have room to work. He tried

several keys and none of them turned. Only one seemed to fit well. He went back to it. He could barely feel his fingers and feet.

He realized Lyle was shouting again.

“Juan! Juan! What the hell are you doing?”

Parker glanced up. Lyle was on the steps, his back to him, shouting and waving his arms at the pickup and trailer that vanished into the snow. Faint pink tail lights blinked out.

At that moment, Parker pulled up on the iron door handle with his left hand while he turned the key with his right. The ancient lock gave way.

Parker slammed his shoulder into the door and stepped inside the dark house and pushed the door shut behind him and rammed the bolt home.

Lyle cursed at him and screamed for Parker to open the door.

Instead, Parker stepped aside with his back against the cold stone interior wall as Lyle emptied his .45 Colt at the door, making eight dime-sized holes in the wood that streamed thin beams of white light to the slate-rock floor.

He hugged himself and shivered and condensation clouds from his breath haloed his head.

Parker roamed through Angler’s library, hugging himself in an attempt to keep warm and to keep his blood flowing. There were no lights and the phone had been shut off months before. Muted light filtered through gaps in the thick curtains. Outside, the blizzard howled and threw itself against the old home but couldn’t get in any more than Lyle could get in. Snow covered the single window in the library except for one palm-sized opening, and Parker used it to look around outside for Lyle or Lyle’s body but he couldn’t see either. It had been twenty minutes since he’d locked Lyle out.

At one point he thought he heard a cry, but when he stopped pacing and listened all he could hear was the wind thundering against the windows.

He started a fire in the fireplace using old books as kindling and had fed it with broken furniture and a few decorative logs he’d found in the great room downstairs. Orange light from the flames danced on the spines of the old books.

He wanted a fire to end all fires that would not only warm him but also act as his shield against the storm and the coming darkness outside.

After midnight Parker ran out of wood and he kept the fire going with Angler’s books. Mainly the German language volumes. The storm outside seemed to have eased a bit.

As he reached up on the shelves for more fuel, his fingers avoided touching the copies of *Mein Kampf*. The act of actually touching the books terrified Parker in a way he couldn’t explain.

Then he reasoned that if books were to be burned, *Mein Kampf* should be one of them. As he tossed the volumes into the flames, a loose square of paper fluttered out of the pages onto the floor.

Parker bent over to retrieve it to flick it into the fire when he realized it was an old photograph. The image in the firelight made him gasp.

Parker ran down the stairs in the dark to the front door and threw back the bolt. The force of the wind opened both the doors inward and he squinted against the snow and tried to see into the black and white maelstrom.

“Lyle!” he shouted to no effect. “Lyle!”

### **Author’s Note**

The story is fiction but the photograph is not.

In 1936, in one of the odder episodes of the modern American West, Wyoming rancher and noted photographer Charles Belden did indeed catch pronghorn antelope fawns on his ranch and deliver them to zoos across the nation in his Ryan monoplane, including a delivery to the German passenger airship LZ 129 *Hindenburg* in Lakehurst, New Jersey, bound for the Berlin Zoo.

I can find no information on the fate of the pronghorn antelope. They would have arrived shortly after the conclusion of Adolf Hitler’s ’36 Olympics.

—CJB, 2011

