

Breaking Point

A JOE PICKETT NOVEL

BY C.J. BOX

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For Mike and Chantelle Sackett

And Laurie, always...

Banality of evil: A phrase coined by philosopher Hannah Arendt which describes the thesis that the great evils in history generally were not executed by fanatics or sociopaths, but rather by ordinary people who accepted the premises of their state and therefore participated with the view that their actions were normal.

*You can still get gas in Heaven,
and a drink in Kingdom Come
In the meantime,
I'm cleaning my gun
--Mark Knopfler, 2009*

Day One

Chapter One

ON AN early morning in mid-August, EPA Special Agents Tim Singewald and Lenox Baker left the Region 8 Environmental Protection Agency building at 1595 Wynkoop Street in downtown Denver in a Chevrolet Malibu SA Hybrid Sedan they'd checked out from the motor pool. Singewald was at the wheel, and he maneuvered through shadows cast by tall buildings while Baker fired up the dash-mounted GPS.

"Acquiring satellites," Baker said, repeating the voice command from the unit.

"Wait until we get out of downtown," Singewald said. "The buildings block the satellite feed. There'll be plenty of time to program the address. Besides, I know where we're going. I've been there, remember?"

"Yeah," Baker said, settling back in his seat. "I know. I was just wondering how long it would take."

"Forever," Singewald sighed, taking the turn on Speer that would lead them to I-25 North. "Wyoming is a big-ass state."

The GPS chirped that it had connected with the sky. Baker punched in an address and waited for a moment and said with a groan, "Four hundred and twenty-two miles," Six hours, twenty-seven minutes. Jesus."

Said Singewald, "Not counting the guy we need to pick up along the way in Cheyenne. Still, we ought to make it before five, easy."

"Where are we staying? Do they have any good places to eat up there?"

Singewald emitted a single harsh bark and shook his head. "The Holiday Inn has a government rate but the bar sucks. There are a couple good bars in town, though, if you don't mind country music."

"I hate it."

"Six and a half hours," Baker said as Singewald eased the Chevy onto the on-ramp and joined the flow of traffic north.

IT WAS a clear summer morning in mid-August. The mountains to the west shimmered through early-hour smog that would lift and dissipate when the temperature rose into the seventies. Both men wore ties and sport coats and in the backseat was a valise containing the legal documents

they were to deliver. Both had packed a single change of clothing for the drive back the next day.

Tim Singewald had thin sandy hair, small eyes, a sallow complexion marred by long-ago adolescent acne, and a translucent mustache. Lenox Baker was fifteen years younger. Singewald didn't know him well at all, although his impression of his colleague was that he was over-eager. Baker was dark and compact and exhibited nervous energy and a wide-eyed expression he displayed when talking with a senior staffer that said, *"keep me in mind when promotions or transfers come along."*

Singewald noticed that Baker wore a wedding band but he'd never heard the wife's name. Singewald had been divorced for six years.

All he knew about Baker was, like thousands of others across the country, he was new to the agency and he was gung-ho to get into some kind of action.

Baker was an EPA Special Agent (Grade 12), one of 350-plus and growing. He pulled in \$93,539 a year in salary plus benefits and hoped to move up to Grade 15, where Singewald resided. Singewald made \$154,615 per year, plus benefits.

As they cleared Metro Denver into Broomfield, Singewald reached up with his left hand and loosened the

knot on his tie and then pulled it free and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. When Baker saw him do it he reached up and did the same.

"Ties stand out where we're going," Singewald said.

"What do they wear? Clip-ons? String ties?"

"They don't wear ties," Singewald said. "They wear jeans with belts that say 'Hoss.'"

Baker laughed. Then: "Who is this guy we have to pick up in Cheyenne?"

"Somebody with the U.S. Corp of Engineers," Singewald said, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't know him."

"Why is he coming along?"

"I don't know," Singewald said. "I don't ask."

"The secret to a long career," Baker said.

"You got it."

"Are there other secrets?" Baker asked, grinning a schoolboy grin.

"Yes," Singewald said, and said no more.

THE AGENTS drove another hour north and crossed the border into Wyoming. Instantly, the car was buffeted by gusts of wind.

"Where are the trees?" Baker asked.

"They blew away," Singewald said.

As SINGEWALD wheeled into the parking lot of the Federal Building in Cheyenne, he saw an older man in a windbreaker and sunglasses standing near the vestibule entrance. The man was conspicuously checking his watch and glancing toward them as they found an empty spot.

"Gotta be him," Singewald said.

"What was his name again?"

"Love. That's all I know about him."

The man who might be Love pushed himself off the brick wall and walked slowly to their car. Singewald powered down his window.

"You EPA?" the man asked.

"Agents Singewald and Baker."

"I'm Kim Love," the man said. "I guess we're going to the same place today."

Singewald chinned toward the backseat. "Do you have anything you need to put in the trunk before we leave?"

Love rocked back on his heels and hooked his thumbs through his belt loops. He shook his head.

"I'll follow you up," Love said. "I've got my own car."

"Sure you don't want to come with us?" Singewald asked Love.

"I'm sure."

"Suit yourself. Do you know where we're going?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

Singewald didn't react. Instead, he reached inside his jacket pocket and handed Love an official EPA business card.

"My cell phone number is on there. Give me a call when we get going so I have yours, so we can keep in touch if we get separated."

Love sighed and shook his head. "What, you think you're entering No Man's Land?"

"Yes," Baker whispered, sotto voce.

"Maybe we can stop in Casper for lunch," Love said. "I know a place there."

"We'll follow you," Singewald said with a shrug.

When Love walked away to climb into his own sedan with U.S. Government plates, Baker said to Singewald, "What's his problem?"

Singewald shrugged. "Don't know and don't care," he said. "He's just another working stiff. Just like us."

BAKER WAS practically sputtering two and a half hours later when the brake lights of Love's sedan flashed and the

Corps of Engineers car took the Second Street Exit in Casper and turned in at a truck stop.

"He's yanking our chain," Baker said, leaning forward in his seat to look around. A long line of side-by-side tractor trailers idled into a cacophony on the south side of the huge parking lot. A trucker emerged from the restaurant and convenience store doors holding a half-gallon Big Gulp container of a soft drink poised in front of him to take back to his truck cab.

"Maybe this Love knows something," Singewald said. "Maybe this place is, you know, a jewel in the rough."

"It's a *truck stop*."

"We might as well be friendly since we're stuck with him," Singewald said, and turned off the motor.

Baker sighed. "Maybe I'll just stay in here. I can feel my arteries clogging up just looking at this place and the people coming out of it."

"You don't have to come in," Singewald said, handing Baker the keys. "If you want to listen to the radio or something."

Baker waved him off. "Believe me, there's probably nothing worth listening to here. I'm not a big fan of Buck Owens or Travis Tritt."

Singewald pocketed the keys.

"Oh, all right," Baker groaned, opening his door to get out.

THEY SAT around a Formica table in a high-backed booth; Kim Love on one side and Singewald and Baker on the other. All of the other tables and booths were occupied by truck drivers and rough-looking locals who appeared as if they'd driven into town from building sites or oil rigs. Even with their ties removed, Singewald thought the three of them stood out. Singewald thought Love seemed distant, and maybe a little hostile to them. He chalked it up to inter-agency rivalry and didn't let it bother him. There was no reason to make friends, he thought. He'd never met Love before and after their joint operation later that afternoon, he doubted he'd ever see him again.

Beside him, Lenox Baker studied the plastic menu and sighed.

"Do you recommend anything in particular?" Baker asked Love.

"The chicken-fried steak sandwich," Love said without even looking at his menu. "Best in Central Wyoming. I'm from Texas and I'm particular about chicken-fried steak. They do it right here: no pre-breaded bullshit."

Baker cringed.

Singewald ordered the sandwich as well, and Baker asked the waitress if any preservatives were sprayed on the lettuce of the chef salad. Without a smile and with a quick glance toward her other busy tables, she said, "I wouldn't know that, hon."

"Can you ask the chef?"

"We don't have a chef. I'll ask the *cook*," she said, and spun on her heels toward the kitchen.

"Those chemicals they spray on lettuce give me diarrhea," Baker explained to Singewald.

"Can't have that," he replied.

AFTER THEY pushed their empty plates away and sat back — Baker had picked at his salad and claimed he was full — Love looked squarely at Singewald and said, "I can't say I like what we're doing today."

Singewald shrugged. "We're just the messengers."

"Still."

"We didn't make the decision," Singewald said, "We're just delivering the verdict."

"Yeah," Love said, shaking his head and taking a swipe at his balled-up paper napkin like a bear cub, "I read it. In fact, I read it twice and didn't like it any better the second time."

"I don't read 'em," Singewald said, looking over Baker's head in an attempt to signal the waitress. "I just deliver 'em. Reading 'em is above my pay grade."

"I hear he's a hard-headed man," Love said.

Singewald nodded.

"I get the impression he's not going to just roll over."

Baker interjected, and opened his jacket. "That's why we carry these," he said, indicating the butt of his holstered semi-automatic .40 Sig Sauer.

Love's mouth dropped open and he turned to Singewald. "You guys carry *guns*?"

"We're trained and authorized," Singewald said softly.

"You should see what we have in the trunk," Baker said. Singewald thought of the combat shotguns and scoped semi-automatic rifles nestled in their cases.

Love's eyebrows arched when he said, "So you're prepared to shoot it out with him if necessary?"

"If necessary," Baker said, narrowing his eyes.

"I try not to predict these things," Singewald said, almost apologetically. He didn't want to continue this conversation. He wished Baker wasn't so overtly gung-ho. Then he raised his hand and waved at the waitress. He began to think she was ignoring him.

"Have you met this guy we're serving the order on," Love asked Singewald.

"Nope," Singewald said, wondering if he should snap his fingers to get her attention. "I wasn't there the first time he was given the word. From what I understand he was confused, mainly. I don't think he's the sharpest knife in the drawer, so to speak."

"But he sure as hell understands now," Love said, shaking his head. "Things like this... it makes me wonder just what the hell we're doing. It isn't the kind of thing I signed up for, that's for sure."

"What's the problem?" Baker said suddenly to Love, his tone incredulous. "The guy obviously screwed up big-time or we wouldn't be going up there. I don't understand what you're talking about."

Love leaned forward on the table and balled his fists together. "Do you know him?"

"Of course not," Baker said, defensive.

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Just his address."

"Did you even read the documents we're taking up there?"

"No," Baker said, looking away from Love to Singewald.

The waitress intervened and slapped the bill down on the table as she rushed by.

"Ma'am," Singewald said.

She turned toward him.

"We'll need separate checks. One for him and me," he said, gesturing to Baker, "and one for him," he nodded toward Love. "And receipts, please."

"Separate checks and receipts," she repeated with a dead-eye stare.

"Yes."

"It'll be a minute," she said through gritted teeth.

"It's okay," Singewald said, sliding out of the booth. "I can get it taken care of at the front counter."

Baker was right behind him as he walked up to the cashier pulling his U.S. Government Visa card. When he glanced back, Kim Love was still sitting in the booth.

AN HOUR later, 67 miles north of Casper, Love caught up with them near Kaycee, Wyoming. Singewald looked up and saw the Corps sedan in his rearview mirror.

Baker saw him do it and turned his head toward the back. "Oh good," he said. "Our buddy."

Singewald grunted.

"What is his problem, anyway?"

"I guess he doesn't like what we're doing."

"Why does he even care?"

"You'd have to ask him."

"I think you should mention this in our report," Baker said.

THE TERRAIN changed as they drove north. Blue hump-back mountains had emerged from the prairie to the west. Lines of high white snow veined down from the summits and melded into dark timber.

Baker pointed at a cluster of vivid brown-and-white dots placed on the slow-waving high grass out his window.

"Are those pronghorns?"

Singewald said they were.

"And they just stand there like that? There must be a hundred of them."

"I've heard there are more pronghorn antelope than people in this part of the state," Singewald said.

"Well at least there's something good about it," Baker said.

"THE TETONS?" Baker asked, pointing toward the mountains.

"Bighorns," Singewald said. "Those are the Bighorns."

"So that's where we're going," Baker said, looking at the GPS display, and then his watch.

"We should be able to get this done in time to check in to the hotel by five," Baker said. "We won't even have to do any overtime."

"That's the plan," Singewald said.

"I hope we can find someplace decent to eat," Baker said. "I'm starving."

"First things first," Singewald said as they took the first exit near the Town of Saddlestring. The bypass would link them up with a two-lane state highway into the mountains, toward Aspen Highlands, a sub-division near Dull Knife Reservoir.

When he checked his mirror, Love's sedan was no longer there.

"Call Love and see what's happened to him," Singewald said, handing Baker his cell phone.

Baker scrolled through Recent Calls and pressed send. After a moment, he said, "This is Agent Baker and we're on our way up the mountain. We were kind of wondering if you planned to join us."

When he punched off, he said, "Straight to voicemail. Either we lost him or he decided to go into town and check in to his hotel," Baker said when he looked back.

Singewald hadn't noticed whether Love had continued on I-25.

"I guess we'll do this ourselves," he said.

"That asshole," Baker said. "For sure, this will go into your report, right?"

AN HOUR later, Tim Singewald writhed in the grass on his back, choking on his blood. Although his legs were convulsing, causing his heels to thump against the ground uncontrollably, he couldn't feel them. He was able to roll clumsily to his right side.

Lenox Baker was also on his back just a few feet away. Baker's eyes were open as if he were staring at the late afternoon clouds. A bullet hole, like a third eye, looked out from his left eyebrow. He wasn't breathing.

Singewald knew he wouldn't last much longer, either. The first two bullets, he suspected, had collapsed his lungs. He couldn't draw breath no matter how hard he tried, and he was drowning in his own blood. He gurgled when he tried to speak.

Baker's weapon lay in the dirt between them. Singewald hadn't drawn his before he was cut down.

In the distance, he heard shouting. Then a tractor started up.

