

"Things have gone dark up in Montana, but Matthew Redd has his hand on the switch. *Gone Dark* fans the flames of a wildfire of a series!"

— CRAIG JOHNSON —

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE WALT LONGMIRE SERIES

RYAN STECK GONE DARK

A WALT LONGMIRE NOVEL BY STEVEN LEE BENTLER



Praise for Ryan Steck

Ryan Steck is the real deal! *Gone Dark* powers forward, with each scene slamming into the next like colliding freight cars. Matthew Redd is my new favorite thriller hero.

ROBERT CRAIS, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Big Empty*

Things have *Gone Dark* up in Montana, but Mathew Redd has his hand on the switch and is about to shed some light on the subject. . . .The fourth in Ryan Steck's pulse-pounding novels, *Gone Dark* fans the flames of a wildfire of a series!

CRAIG JOHNSON, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Walt Longmire series

Gone Dark is wildly entertaining—Steck keeps raising the stakes, putting his characters into increasingly impossible situations, but Matthew Redd is a hero equal to every challenge. Vivid imagery, pulse-pounding suspense, and an all-time great dog—everything we read thrillers for.

JOSEPH FINDER, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Oligarch's Daughter*

Set in Montana's breathtaking Big Sky Country and packed with intense, hard-hitting action, *Out for Blood* reaffirms Ryan Steck's prowess in the thriller genre, demonstrating once again why his character, former Marine Raider Matthew Redd, is a force to be reckoned with. If you're looking for action, this one's coming in hot!

JACK CARR, former Navy SEAL sniper and #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the James Reece Terminal List series

Matthew Redd, introduced in Ryan Steck's debut novel *Fields of Fire*, is back and ready for trouble. Redd, a former Marine Raider turned Montana rancher, takes on a gang of outlaw bikers where the buffalo roam. The Wild West has never been wilder. Intense, brutal, and faster on the draw than a gunslinger; *Lethal Range* delivers a fresh take on your grandpa's Western.

NELSON DEMILLE, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Maze*

Intense, riveting, and ultimately wild escapist fun, *Lethal Range* is a powerful modern Western. It's *Sons of Anarchy* crashing into *Yellowstone*. Steck is a talented cinematic writer and has created a character in Matthew Redd that is both larger than life and remarkably relatable. Buy this book!

DON WINSLOW, #1 bestselling author of *The Force* and *The Border*

A white-knuckle ride from start to finish, *Lethal Range* takes off with one of the most intense scenes I've ever read, then builds to a thunderous crescendo. It's one of this summer's hottest thrillers. Like the best kind of roller coaster, the tension rises to an incredible climax.

T. J. NEWMAN, two-time *New York Times* bestselling author of *Falling* and *Drowning: The Rescue of Flight 1421*

Ryan Steck's latest *Lethal Range* is a high-stakes thriller that starts at a run and races faster with every flip of the page. The mix of spy tradecraft, gutsy action, and nonstop mayhem is what I love in a book. Pair that up with the return of Matthew Redd, a hero as ballsy as Jack Ryan and as street-smart as Jack Reacher, what's not to love? I can't wait to see what trouble Redd must tackle next!

JAMES ROLLINS, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Kingdom of Bones*

Matthew Redd is a hero many readers will find comfortingly familiar while refreshingly different, and Steck wields him with precision in *Lethal Range*—a spectacular follow-up to his stellar debut. If you're a skeptic who thinks Ryan Steck can only write *about* thrillers, you're missing out on one of the hottest new authors in the genre. You'll be far from disappointed in this installment and eager for more.

JACK STEWART, author of *Unknown Rider*

[*Lethal Range*] contains all the danger, treachery, and intrigue that a thriller reader could hope for. It's a gritty tale, with tangled threads, full of action and drama. More than enough angst and adventure to keep you reading long into the night.

STEVE BERRY, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last Kingdom*

Steck and Redd are back! Crisply written and beautifully researched, *Lethal Range* rips the reader from Majorca to Big Sky Country. Packed with twists and cliff-hangers, this classic thriller from world-class thriller expert The Real Book Spy roars like a beast.

GREGG HURWITZ, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last Orphan*

Full of fists and fury, Ryan Steck's *Lethal Range* is a masterfully plotted battle of good versus evil. With unforgettable characters, lightning pace, and a story frighteningly similar to today's headlines, this book entertains and educates. If you like C. J. Box or Vince Flynn, you will *love* this book!

LARRY LOFTIS, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Watchmaker's Daughter*

**RYAN
STECK
GONE
DARK**

A MATTHEW REDD THRILLER



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Prologue

Montana was on fire.

The Big Sky was full of smoke, and the country beneath it was full of flames.

And that, thought Trace Hazlett as he shuffled across the flight line in his high-collared Kevlar jumpsuit, lugging more than half his body weight in gear, was not such a bad thing.

For Trace, fire meant work. Work meant money, and money meant freedom. Freedom from the grinding poverty of the reservation. Freedom to live as he pleased.

No fires, no freedom.

Oh, to be sure, fire was an enemy—*the* enemy that he and his team would fight to the literal death, just as his Blackfeet ancestors had fought against Shoshone and Kootenai, and later against white settlers trying to take their territory. Warriors needed enemies. Without an enemy, how could a warrior demonstrate courage and win glory?

Freedom and glory. That was what fire meant to Trace Hazlett. It was why he had left the rez at eighteen, worked his way onto a hotshot crew, and then, four years later, attended smoke jumper school at Missoula Base. It was why he was humping eighty-five pounds of gear—heavy-duty jump jacket and pants,

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a helmet with a steel face cage, main and reserve parachutes, and a personal gear bag containing, among other things, about a gallon of water and an emergency fire shelter—up the boarding steps of an idling Forest Service De Havilland DHC-6 Twin Otter, for yet another one-way flight.

Once inside, he collapsed onto the jump seat and slid over until he was pressed up tight against the jumper who had boarded just ahead of him. A moment later, the last jumper in the “stick”—the technical term for the number of parachutists who would be going out the door on an overflight—squeezed in next to him, completing the human sandwich.

The cabin of the Twin Otter was cramped to begin with, and with all the gear they wore, jumpers quickly got used to the idea of being packed in like sardines on takeoff. The jumpsuit, which was essentially body armor to protect the jumper upon landing, was like a personal sauna under the best of conditions, and the close quarters didn't help. But these were minor inconveniences, quickly forgotten when the command came to line up, clip in, and exit the plane.

As the plane lurched and began moving, Trace glanced over, curious to see who he would be snuggling with for the duration of the short flight.

At the beginning of the season, things had been very precise and disciplined, the team assignments carved in stone. But as things ramped up and the calls started coming in fast and furious, operations became a lot more fluid, such that he didn't know who he would be jumping with until the roster was called.

On his right was Terry Collins, a fellow “Ned”—newcomer—whom Trace had gone through initial training with. Although they both had about a dozen actual fire jumps under their belts, they wouldn't shed the loathed nickname until the start of their second season.

When he looked to his left, he did a double take.

Who's this guy?

There were about eighty jumpers at Missoula Base, and while Trace didn't know all their names, he did know their faces. This guy definitely wasn't one of them. His most distinctive feature was his blond hair, shaved on the sides but long on top and pulled back in a ponytail. That and a wispy, slightly reddish beard made him look like a Viking.

Trace stared at the unfamiliar face in profile for a moment until the man, sensing his scrutiny, turned to face him. Smiling, he gave Trace a nod and awkwardly reached across with his left hand.

“Hey,” he said, almost shouting to be heard over the roar of the plane’s engines. “Name’s Josh. Josh Harris. I’m over from McCall.”

McCall was the name of a smoke jumper base in central Idaho. As fire season got into full swing and resources were needed in different places, it wasn’t at all unusual for teams to get moved around from base to base, and Trace supposed that, once in a while, that applied to individual jumpers as well. But that didn’t account for why this guy hadn’t been formally introduced to the team upon arrival. And although Trace had only been listening for his own name when the roster was announced, he was pretty sure he hadn’t heard the name Harris.

“I just got in like half an hour ago,” Harris went on. “I guess one of your guys got pulled out of the lineup at the last minute. I think his wife went into labor or something.”

The man shrugged then grinned again. “Nothing like being thrown into the deep end and told to start swimming. But that’s the job, am I right?”

Trace, feeling oddly relieved by this explanation, nodded back and accepted the handclasp. “Welcome aboard.”



Once they were aloft, Trace couldn’t resist the urge to look out at the vast landscape below. He was no longer awed by the thought of moving through the sky, nor even very anxious about what would come next. Once you realized that anything, literally *anything* could happen on a jump, you either found a way to deal with it or you went back to fighting fires on the ground.

No, what Trace was looking for was the smoke.

Typically, smoke jumpers were called out to stop new fires from turning into big fires. From the air, it was easy to spot those fires—usually the byproduct of a lightning strike—because of the long plume of whitish smoke rising out of the forest. This was, in fact, why smoke jumpers had been created in the first place. Teams of two or four could drop in on a fire that was miles away from the nearest road and use traditional firefighting methods to contain that fire before it got out of control. Those callouts typically didn’t last more than a day or two, with most of that time spent hiking out to different fire zones.

Sometimes, however, when an established fire threatened to move in a different direction beyond the reach of ground teams, a larger element of smoke jumpers was sent in to carve out a firebreak in the path of the conflagration and

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establish a landing zone so that additional manpower could be brought in by helicopter. Those jobs could stretch out for days—days of hard, hot, dangerous work.

Judging by the massive column of smoke dominating half the southern horizon, this callout was of the second variety.

The Twin Otter stayed to the right of the smoke, banking around it to approach the designated drop zone from the south. As the plane made an initial pass and the spotter threw out long bright-orange streamers to mark the DZ, Trace donned his helmet, took a deep breath, and said a short prayer. Then, at a signal from the jumpmaster, he and the others rose and began moving toward the open hatch.

When his turn came, Trace clipped his static line—a long yellow cord attached to his parachute—into a hard point inside the aircraft and sat down in the hatchway. His gloved hands gripped the doorframe. His lower legs, dangling out into space, were buffeted by the rush of air.

This was the part that never got old. The part that still took his breath away.

When he felt a tap on his shoulder, the jumpmaster telling him it was time to go, he leaned forward and gave himself to the sky.

He fell away from the aircraft, feeling the wind swirl around inside his face cage, and then felt a slight tug as the static line went taut and ripped open the deployment bag, releasing a small drogue chute. Trace felt his body being pulled into an upright position just as the trailing drogue pulled his main chute from the pack on his back.

This was the first moment when, if something was going to go wrong, it usually did. If the lines got fouled or, for whatever reason, the square DC-7 ram-air chute did not properly inflate, Trace would have to quickly cut away the main chute and deploy the reserve strapped to his chest.

Not today, though. The big orange-and-white canopy blossomed and inflated and, with a body-wrenching but oddly reassuring yank, arrested his free fall.

He quickly found the control toggles and began steering toward the line of square chutes descending ahead of him, turning like corkscrews as they drifted down to the drop zone. From the door of the Twin Otter to the ground was a journey of about ninety seconds. It was when he neared the ground that he realized just how close they would be to the burn.

Touchdown was the second chance for things to go wrong, though usually not disastrously so. Ideally, the spotter tried to situate the drop zone in a clearing,

but sometimes nature didn't cooperate and the jumpers had to come down in the woods. That was when the Kevlar jumpsuit and the wire face cage on the helmet justified their existence, deflecting tree branches that might otherwise pierce the body or gouge out an eye.

If the chute got snared by a tree, leaving the jumper hanging, a self-rescue would be required. That involved using the safety rope tucked in one of his leg pockets and, if necessary, a small folding saw to cut away the branches in order to recover the chute. At more than a thousand dollars apiece, smoke jumpers observed a strict *no chute left behind* policy. Rips could be mended and broken lines replaced, at least until the master rigger decided the chute had to be retired.

Of course, there were other hazards upon landing. Sprains and fractures were the most common. Or a gust of wind could catch the chute and drag you across the landscape like cheese across a grater. Usually these outcomes, while painful, were survivable.

Usually.

Today, the fates were kind. Trace flared his chute, getting that last little bit of uplift just as his boots made contact with the ground. Without the additional gear, his landing would probably have been featherlight. With it? Well, it was a little like jumping off the roof of a one-story building. A jolt to the system—especially the knees, ankles, and spine—but manageable. A quick glance around showed that the rest of the eight-man crew had all made it down safely, landing within a hundred-yard radius.

Trace gathered in his chute, hugging the now-shapeless mass to his chest and squeezing the air out of the cells. He then shrugged out of his harness and began the necessary process of shedding his jump gear, all of which went into a stuff sack along with the chute to be stashed for later retrieval after the fire was contained. From the moment his feet hit the ground, he ceased to be a smoke jumper and became just another firefighter.

Wildland firefighting, at least for the ground crews, wasn't like battling a structure fire. The goal wasn't to put the fire out by smothering it with water, but rather to clear an area in front of the fire, removing all vegetation it might use as fuel, thereby eliminating one side of the fire triangle. It was a laborious process of cutting down trees, clearing brush, and basically scraping the ground down until it was nothing but dirt. Trace had once heard a veteran smoke jumper accurately

describe the job as “extreme landscaping.” The only difference was that while they were cutting and digging, an inferno raged a stone’s throw away.

The plane made another low pass, dropping out several cardboard boxes attached to small parachutes. These contained firefighting tools—chain saws, shovels, and Pulaskis—along with enough food and water to sustain the crew for a couple days. The equipment drop was less precise than the smoke jumper insertion, so the first task after landing was to go out and collect all the boxes.

Once the equipment and supplies were gathered in the drop zone and the tools distributed, the supervisor for the drop—Jason Steen—began directing the crew to head out in teams of two and start establishing the break that would, hopefully, stop the fire in the event that the winds changed and began blowing it northeast toward Helena.

It was only as he was directing his crew to their designated work assignments that Steen realized a substitution had been made. Normally confident, the supervisor stared speechless at Harris for a moment before finally asking, “Who the hell are you? Where’s Denny?”

“Josh Harris, boss. I’m over from McCall. I guess Denny had to drop out last minute, so they sent me to sub in.”

“I’ll work with him,” Trace said, filling the awkward silence. Sometimes being the first to volunteer paid off later on.

Steen continued to stare at Harris, his face twisted into a look that said *this is definitely not okay*, but then he shook it off. Whatever irregularities had occurred back at Missoula Base, it didn’t change the fact that there was work to be done. “Yeah, okay. Harris, you’re with Ned. Go up about two hundred yards and start working back this way.”

“Got it,” said Trace, cocking his Pulaski onto one shoulder.

A hybrid of lumberman’s axe and stonemason’s adze, the Pulaski was the quintessential tool of wildland firefighting. Named for its inventor, assistant forest ranger Ed Pulaski, who was credited with saving forty-five members of a firefighting crew during the disastrous 1910 fire season, the Pulaski could be used to chop down trees and break up hard soil—the two most basic tasks of the firefighter. If they had to, any one of the smoke jumpers could do his job effectively with just a Pulaski, and quite often, that was exactly what they did.

Trace immediately started off in the direction Steen had indicated, moving at a jog. Although he still carried his personal gear bag, which weighed in at about

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twenty-five pounds, and a STIHL chain saw that added another fifteen pounds, without the jump equipment he felt like he was floating across the forest floor. The illusion faded as he neared the edge of the fire.

It was a thing more felt and heard than actually seen. Overhead, smoke partially blotted out the sun, plunging the woods into deep darkness, and even though the fire itself was probably still a quarter of a mile away, he could hear its freight-train roar and feel its heat on his face. Thankfully, a light wind was blowing from the north, slowing the fire's advance and carrying away the smoke that would have otherwise turned the air into a choking miasma.

When he had counted off a hundred and twenty steps—roughly two hundred yards—Trace took his Pulaski from his shoulder and brought the adze end down, hoeing it into the dry soil as if marking a spot on a map.

“This is as good a place to start as any,” he said, turning to Harris.

The blond man, who barely seemed winded after jogging through the forest, grinned. “You know, that’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Trace found the smile unsettling, but it wasn't until he saw Harris raise his Pulaski in preparation for a swing that it occurred to him something was very wrong about the situation.

But it was too late.

For the briefest of moments, Trace wondered what had actually happened to Denny.

A second later, his world faded to black.

ONE

STILLWATER COUNTY, MONTANA

The smoky haze, which did not quite erase but definitely obscured the mountains in every direction, gave the sky a yellow cast and transformed the late-morning sun into a red orb that could be looked upon with the naked eye without ill effect. In its light, the world looked like a vision of the apocalypse.

There were, at that very moment, twelve separate wildfires burning in the area designated by the Forest Service as Region 1—an area comprising all of Idaho, Montana, and the Dakotas. Five of the fires were in western Montana, and one of these, the Trask River Fire, which took its name from the site where it had first been reported, near the Trask River Trailhead in the Elkhorn Mountains, was of greatest concern because of its proximity to inhabited areas. If the wind blew north-northeast, it would push the fire toward the state capital, Helena. If it blew south-southeast, as it seemed to be doing, it would threaten Wellington, the county seat of Stillwater County, and the rural properties surrounding it.

There were no reports of lightning strikes—the second leading cause of wildfires—which meant the fire had probably been the result of the number one

cause. Human activity, either through carelessness or deliberate acts of arson, was responsible for nearly eighty percent of wildfires.

Determining the exact cause would be a job for fire investigators in days to come. The immediate priority of the Forest Service and cooperating state and county agencies was to bring the fire, which had been burning for three days and had already consumed over three thousand acres of forest, under control before it posed a threat to nearby homes and communities. Presently, the leading edge of the fire was about twenty miles north-northwest of Wellington and about eight miles from a property listed on the county registry as Thompson Ranch.

Matthew Redd just called it *home*.

That had not always been the case for Redd. He'd come to the ranch at the age of eleven after the overdose death of his mother—the only parent he knew. He met his biological father, a man named Gavin Kline, for the first time right before Gavin arranged for his young son to be adopted by an old Marine Corps buddy—a Montana rancher named Jim Bob Thompson—and so for the next eight years, the ranch became the only home that mattered.

Once he turned eighteen, however, Redd had followed in his father's footsteps—actually, both his fathers', though it would be some time before he would think of Kline that way—by enlisting in the Marines. From that moment forward, the Corps had been both home and family until, in short order, his military career had come to an unexpected end and Jim Bob had been murdered, leaving Redd the sole inheritor of Thompson Ranch and a mountain of debt.

It was a homecoming he could not have imagined in his wildest dreams.

And yet, little more than two years later, he felt like the luckiest man in the world. He'd reconnected with his childhood sweetheart, Emily, the love of his life, and together they were building a family. Their son, Matthew Jr., would soon have a sister—name yet to be determined. And they had moved into their new house, built to replace the old ranch house that had burned down—not the result of a wildfire but of a vicious act of terrorism.

Redd had known plenty of loss in his life and knew better than to get too attached to material things, but losing the house where he'd banked so many memories with his adoptive dad had hit hard. The idea of losing a second home to fire in less than a year's time was almost too much to handle, so when he heard about the Trask River Fire and the possibility that they might have to evacuate, Redd had set to work with chain saw and tractor to create a thirty-yard-wide

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firebreak around the new house and the barn. Then he had called his friend and nominal employer, Sheriff Stuart Blackwood, and asked what he could do to help.

“Right now,” the sheriff had told him, “the best thing you can do is see to your ranch. Leave wildfire fighting to the trained professionals.”

While Redd appreciated the sentiment, he did not at all like the idea of sitting around and waiting for someone else to save the day.

Then Emily had reminded him that this wasn't a situation Matthew Redd could control through grim determination and sheer muleheaded stubbornness. One more body on the front lines wouldn't matter at all if the wind shifted the wrong way and sent the fire toward his ranch. Better to stand by with a hose and shovel and defend his home if it came to it.

Emily was right, of course. She usually was.

But then the sheriff called back. “Still interested in helping out?”