

Chapter 3

Game warden Joe Pickett waits alone at the nearly abandoned Saddlestring Municipal Airport for Governor Colter Allen's arrival. The airport, once bustling with commercial flights, now serves only private aircraft after a carrier withdrew due to financial and regulatory issues. Joe observes the faded remnants of its past, including celebrity photos and an abandoned Prius, while interacting with Monte Stokes, a disgruntled airport employee embroiled in a legal dispute. Stokes reveals the governor's plane, now nicknamed "Air Allen," is minutes away, but notes the lack of a formal reception, hinting at Joe's unexplained significance to the visit.

Joe reflects on his strained relationship with Governor Allen, contrasting him with the previous governor, Spencer Rulon, who often enlisted Joe for unofficial investigations. Allen, a wealthy rancher and Yale graduate, has cultivated a rugged public image, though rumors suggest financial troubles and shady benefactors. Joe dismisses these as unverified gossip but acknowledges their two prior interactions were contentious. Stokes probes Joe about his role in the governor's unscheduled stop, but Joe remains evasive, emphasizing his detachment from Allen's inner circle.

The narrative shifts to the previous night, when Joe received a call from the governor's office during his daughter Lucy's high school play. Despite his wife Marybeth's annoyance, Joe checks the call, recognizing its importance. He is moved by Lucy's performance, drawing a parallel to his childhood admiration for actress Ann-Margret. At intermission, Joe steps outside to return the call, connecting with Allen's chief of staff, Connor Hanlon, setting the stage for the impending meeting with the governor.

The chapter blends Joe's personal reflections with the political intrigue surrounding Governor Allen. His introspection about family and past relationships contrasts with the mysterious circumstances of Allen's arrival, hinting at unresolved tensions. The deserted airport serves as a metaphor for Joe's isolation, both professionally and

personally, as he navigates the complexities of his role and the governor's unpredictable agenda. The stage is set for a confrontation that could reveal more about Allen's motives and Joe's place in the unfolding drama.

