

# Chapter 24

Gaylan Kessel and Ted Panos arrive at the Memorial Hospital of Carbon County in Rawlins late at night, parking in a dimly lit area of the lot. Panos, dressed uncharacteristically in business casual attire, is uneasy about the mysterious envelope on the seat and the unusual instructions. To calm his nerves, he takes bootleg Percocet, which quickly dulls his anxiety. Kessel, meanwhile, remains focused and authoritative, directing Panos toward the hospital entrance and emphasizing the need to appear confident and avoid suspicion. The tension between them is palpable as Panos struggles to maintain composure under the influence of the drugs.

Kessel briefs Panos on his mission: to locate Carol Schmidt in the critical care unit and ensure she does not wake up from her medically induced coma. Schmidt, a "tough old bird," survived a car accident and may have information damaging to Kessel. Panos, still under the calming effects of Percocet, half-listens as Kessel drills him on the details, including a fabricated cover story about being a pharmaceutical rep retrieving a file. Kessel provides a fake hospital badge with Panos's photo, further deepening the sense of conspiracy. Panos's slurred speech and detached demeanor hint at his impaired state, but Kessel dismisses his concerns, insisting on the urgency of the task.

Kessel instructs Panos to make Schmidt's death appear natural, suggesting methods like disconnecting machines or using a pillow. He stresses the importance of avoiding detection and warns Panos not to deviate from the plan. Panos, though unnerved, agrees but questions why he's the one assigned to the job. Kessel explains that his own high profile makes him recognizable, while Panos can operate anonymously. The exchange reveals Kessel's manipulative nature as he justifies the act as "for the greater good," implying Schmidt's knowledge could jeopardize undisclosed interests. Panos, numbed by the drugs, reluctantly accepts the explanation, though his moral discomfort lingers.

As Panos prepares to enter the hospital, he hesitates, asking about compensation for the risky task. Kessel promises a reward but offers no specifics, leaving Panos skeptical. Despite his doubts, Panos steps out of the truck, propelled by the Percocet's artificial calm. The chapter ends with Panos on the brink of committing a morally reprehensible act, his judgment clouded by drugs and coercion. The scene underscores themes of manipulation, desperation, and the erosion of personal agency under pressure.

