

Chapter 18

Sheriff Neal and his team, accompanied by Joe, Nate, and Sheridan, assemble a convoy to investigate a remote cabin in the Snowy Range after receiving a tip from Eli Jarrett, a known local troublemaker. Jarrett, while collecting elk antlers, stumbled upon the cabin and photographed a blonde woman in the window—potentially linked to the disappearance of Kate. The group prepares to traverse the snow-blocked road, with Neal renting snowmobiles to navigate the deep accumulation. The urgency is palpable as they aim to reach the cabin before nightfall, with Joe noting the sheriff's grudging acknowledgment that Joe's knack for trouble might finally be useful.

The cabin belongs to Les McKnight, a reclusive trapper who had previously been expelled from Silver Creek Ranch for unauthorized trapping. Sheridan recalls McKnight's presence at the ranch around the time Kate vanished, adding credibility to the theory that he may be involved. Neal reveals that Jarrett sold the photos to Billy Bloodworth, a British reporter, who published them online, complicating the investigation. Joe contacts the ranch manager to confirm McKnight's timeline, while the group sets off toward the mountains, aware that the media is already circling.

As the convoy passes through Saratoga, Sheridan notes the inevitable gossip their high-profile procession will spark. The terrain shifts to snow-covered wilderness, and Joe spots Billy Bloodworth and Sophie, Kate's sister, tailing them. Neal expresses frustration at Bloodworth's interference, criticizing the media's practice of paying for tips. Joe warns that the reporter will demand access to the investigation, but Neal dismisses the idea. Meanwhile, Nate remains unusually quiet, admitting that the new evidence undermines his broader conspiracy theory about Kate's disappearance.

The group arrives at a plowed turnaround at the end of the highway, where they prepare to unload the snowmobiles for the final leg of the journey. The tension builds as they gear up to confront McKnight, with the possibility of finding Kate—or answers

about her fate—looming. The chapter ends on a note of anticipation, with the team poised to venture into the treacherous snowbound landscape, their mission fraught with both hope and uncertainty.

