

Chapter 13

The chapter opens with Ted Panos arriving at a restaurant in freezing weather, emphasizing the harsh cold through vivid descriptions of the icy river and biting wind. He meets Gaylan Kessel, a intimidating figure who exudes authority, in a secluded booth. Their interaction is terse, revealing a hierarchical relationship where Panos is clearly subordinate. The waitress's small talk about the cold contrasts with the tense atmosphere between the two men, hinting at underlying unease.

Panos delivers a file to Kessel, who scrutinizes it without acknowledgment. Their conversation reveals a recent incident where Panos failed a task, leading to Kessel's silent fury. Panos reflects on Kessel's physical dominance and violent potential, noting scars and a mercenary background. To protect himself, Panos secretly carries a derringer, prepared to use it if Kessel turns on him. This underscores the dangerous dynamic between them, where Panos lives in fear of his boss's wrath.

Kessel's background is explored through Panos's observations: a hardened veteran of Desert Storm and private military work, unfazed by the cold and radiating menace. Panos, meanwhile, recalls his own past as a correctional officer in New Mexico, where he lost his job after a brutal incident involving an inmate. His bitterness over his downfall and subsequent struggles paint him as a man clinging to his identity in law enforcement, despite his fall from grace.

The chapter concludes with Panos reflecting on how Kessel recruited him, valuing his ruthless tendencies rather than seeing them as a liability. This mutual recognition of each other's brutality binds them together, though Panos remains wary of Kessel's volatility. The tension between them simmers beneath the surface, setting the stage for potential conflict in their shadowy, morally ambiguous partnership.