

# Chapter 12

The chapter opens with Joe Pickett meeting Nate Romanowski and Jeff Wasson at the Saratoga Hot Springs Resort. Wasson, a falconer, has accompanied Nate to discuss an unspecified but pressing matter with Joe. Nate's cryptic demeanor and Wasson's urgency set the tone for the conversation. Joe, wary of Nate's tendency to withhold information, is skeptical but listens as Wasson begins to explain his background as a licensed golden eagle falconer. The setting—a near-empty restaurant with a rustic, Western vibe—adds to the tension, while Joe's fatigue from a restless night hints at unresolved events from the previous day.

Wasson reveals his expertise in falconry, particularly with golden eagles, and compares their hunting prowess to advanced military technology. He emphasizes the untapped potential of using eagles for larger game, a practice common in Mongolia but unexplored in the U.S. Nate interjects to steer Wasson toward the core issue, hinting at a deeper conflict. Joe, though preoccupied with another investigation, listens as Wasson delves into the legal and ecological complexities surrounding eagle protection laws, which have unintended consequences for ranchers and wildlife.

The discussion shifts to the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, which Wasson critiques for its bureaucratic overreach. He explains how the law's amendments in 1972 penalized ranchers for retaliating against eagles preying on livestock, while allowing falconers to obtain eagles involved in such conflicts. Wasson's frustration with regulatory hurdles becomes clear as he connects eagle predation to broader ecological issues, including the decline of sage grouse—a politically charged topic in Wyoming. Joe's interest spikes at the mention of sage grouse, recalling their significance in past controversies.

Wasson's narrative underscores the clash between conservation efforts and practical wildlife management. His passion for falconry and disdain for bureaucratic interference

reflect the broader tensions between enthusiasts and policymakers. The chapter ends with Wasson poised to reveal more, leaving Joe—and the reader—anticipating the full scope of his concerns. The dialogue captures the eccentricity of falconers, the complexity of wildlife laws, and Joe’s role as a mediator in Wyoming’s rugged, contentious landscape.

