

Chapter 21

After a chaotic confrontation at McKnight's cabin, Joe Pickett and his team return to town, where McKnight is hospitalized with serious injuries. Joe attempts to inform Hanlon, the governor's aide, that their lead was a dead end—literally a blow-up doll, not Kate as initially suspected. The call goes to voicemail, sparing Joe an immediate confrontation. Nate and Sheridan react to the awkward phrasing of Joe's message, while the damaged truck and icy wind underscore the night's tension. Meanwhile, reporter Billy Bloodworth capitalizes on the absurdity of the scene, snapping photos and gathering quotes, ensuring the incident will soon become public.

Sheriff Neal struggles to maintain order as the bizarre situation unfolds, with the blow-up doll becoming an unintentional focal point. Bloodworth's aggressive reporting hints at impending media scrutiny, leaving Joe aware of the fallout to come. Sheridan, though shaken, remains convinced Kate is alive, offering Joe a glimmer of hope before parting ways. Nate, however, hints at a deeper conspiracy, urging Joe to follow him for further revelations. The chapter's tone shifts between dark humor and looming dread as the characters grapple with the consequences of their failed investigation.

The tension escalates when Hanlon finally calls back, furious over the botched operation and its potential to embarrass the governor. Hanlon coldly informs Joe he's being fired, effectively erasing him from the administration's priorities. Joe's attempts to defend himself fall on deaf ears, and Hanlon pivots to damage control, planning to scapegoat Joe during the press conference. The call ends abruptly, leaving Joe reeling from the sudden loss of his job and the implications for his family.

In the chapter's closing moments, Joe's anger flares as he demands answers about Pollock's disappearance and the governor's motives, but Hanlon shuts him down. The abrupt termination of the call leaves Joe isolated, with Nate's conspiracy theory as his only remaining lead. The chapter sets the stage for a deeper unraveling of the

mystery, blending personal stakes with political intrigue as Joe faces an uncertain future.

