

Chapter 9

Joe Pickett arrives at the Hotel Wolf in Saratoga, Wyoming, stomping snow off his boots before entering the rustic establishment. The hotel exudes old-world charm, with a dining room, lobby, and bar adorned with wildlife mounts and historical photos. Joe interacts with the bartender, Kim Miller, who checks him into Room 9 for a week-long stay. Their exchange reveals Joe's role as a temporary game warden and his intention to visit his daughter, Sheridan, who works nearby. The bartender's witty remarks and the hotel's quaint details, like a ledger instead of digital records, add to the small-town atmosphere.

The chapter highlights Joe's appreciation for the hotel's timeless ambiance, from its antique furnishings to the lack of modern amenities like in-room phones. Kim Miller's friendly yet no-nonsense demeanor makes an impression, as does her mention of the previous game warden's mysterious disappearance. Joe's brief interactions with the bar patrons, including an old man who seems to recognize him, hint at underlying local gossip. The setting—a snowy January in a quiet town—emphasizes isolation and the close-knit nature of the community, where everyone knows each other's business.

After settling into his room, Joe texts Sheridan to arrange a meeting in the bar. Their exchange, punctuated by her enthusiastic emojis and his reserved response, underscores their generational differences. Joe freshens up and returns downstairs, where his Saddle Bronc beer awaits. The bar's cozy, nostalgic vibe, with its sawdust-covered floors and hunting trophies, contrasts with the modern flat-screen TVs, blending past and present. The hipster patron has left, but the old man remains, adding to the sense of lingering scrutiny.

The chapter sets the stage for Joe's temporary assignment in Saratoga, weaving in themes of community, family, and mystery. The Hotel Wolf serves as a microcosm of the town, where history and personal connections intersect. Joe's understated

demeanor and observational nature position him as an outsider yet one who is keenly aware of his surroundings. The disappearance of the previous game warden looms in the background, foreshadowing potential conflicts or revelations as Joe begins his stay.

