

Chapter 26

Nate Romanowski, while traveling south to the Encampment lumber mill, detours to the Bucholz ranch, where he had once hidden from federal charges with Liv Brannon. The Bucholzes, despite being law-abiding citizens, had sheltered him at great personal risk. Nate recalls being forced into a deal with the feds to avoid prosecution, leaving him unable to properly thank the couple. Upon arrival, he finds the ranch abandoned, with a Buckbrush Power employee, Earl Wright, loading the Bucholzes' belongings into a truck to discard them. Nate confronts Wright at gunpoint, learning the ranch was sold under unclear circumstances, fueling his suspicion of coercion.

Nate's anger flares as Wright explains he was merely following orders to clear out the property, unaware of the Bucholzes' whereabouts. Wright, a former coal miner now working for the wind energy company Buckbrush, reveals his own resentment toward the job but admits financial necessity drove him to it. Nate deduces the Bucholzes likely faced pressure to sell, given the ranch's precarious finances. Though tempted to retaliate, Nate recognizes Wright isn't the true antagonist and lets him go, still troubled by the couple's sudden disappearance and the encroachment of corporate interests into the valley.

Later, Nate arrives at the Encampment lumber mill to meet Jeb Pryor, a rugged, no-nonsense man with decades of hard labor etched into his appearance. Pryor, initially wary, questions Nate's connection to game warden Joe Pickett, who sent Nate in his place. Their conversation is punctuated by Pryor's blunt demeanor and hearing impairment, leading to a tense but candid exchange. Pryor probes Nate's background, drawing parallels to tough Polish laborers he once knew, while Nate maintains a composed yet deliberate demeanor, hinting at his own formidable reputation.

The chapter underscores themes of displacement and corporate overreach, as Nate navigates the fallout of the Bucholzes' vanishing and the shifting economic landscape

of rural Wyoming. His interactions with Wright and Pryor reveal the human cost of industry transitions and the erosion of traditional livelihoods. Nate's simmering rage and determination to uncover the truth position him as a reluctant but relentless advocate for those pushed aside by powerful forces, setting the stage for further conflict.

