

Chapter 27

In Chapter 27, titled "The Disappeared," Joe meets with Steve Pollock, a disheveled former game warden, and Michael Williams, a tense DCI agent, in a diner. Pollock appears unkempt and intoxicated, while Williams seems anxious to leave. The conversation revolves around the mysterious disappearance of Kate Shelford-Longden, a case Williams investigated but was abruptly pulled from. Pollock claims he had no interaction with Kate or the Silver Creek Ranch, where she vanished, but hints at the ranch's unusual operations. Williams reveals his team felt surveilled during the investigation, suggesting a cover-up involving local authorities or powerful figures.

The discussion shifts to Pollock's sudden resignation from his job. He admits to accepting a \$175,000 bribe from Ted Panos, a man connected to Buckbrush, in exchange for quitting. Pollock, disillusioned by his failing marriage, stagnant career, and bureaucratic frustrations, saw the offer as an escape. Joe is shocked by Pollock's lack of professionalism but hides his disgust. Pollock's story raises questions about the motives behind the bribe and its connection to Kate's disappearance, though he provides no clear answers. The meeting underscores the pervasive corruption and pressure surrounding the case.

Williams warns Joe to stay vigilant, referencing his own humiliating removal from the investigation and drawing parallels to Joe's recent firing. Joe realizes his termination isn't yet public, but the conversation confirms his suspicions of a larger conspiracy. The chapter builds tension as the men exchange fragmented insights, hinting at a shadowy network of influence protecting the ranch and its secrets. Pollock's abrupt departure and Williams' urgency leave Joe with more questions than answers.

The chapter concludes with Joe pressing Pollock for details about Panos' demands, but the narrative cuts off before Pollock responds. The encounter leaves Joe grappling with the implications of Pollock's bribe and its potential ties to Kate's case. The atmosphere

of paranoia and betrayal lingers, emphasizing the dangers of digging deeper into the mystery. The chapter sets the stage for further revelations while highlighting the isolation and risks Joe faces in his pursuit of the truth.

