[Joe Pickett 18] • The Disappeared

In *The Disappeared*, Wyoming game warden **Joe Pickett** is drawn into a high-stakes mystery when a British **CEO’s daughter**, **Kate Shelford-Longden**, vanishes from an exclusive **guest ranch** near **Saratoga**. Tasked with investigating by Governor **Colter Allen**, Joe uncovers a web of secrets involving:

- A **vanished ranch employee** with a violent past
- A **ruthless Silicon Valley investor** with ties to the ranch
- A **local journalist** digging too deep

Meanwhile, Joe’s friend **Nate Romanowski** faces his own crisis when his falconry business is targeted by a shadowy group. As both investigations collide, Joe must navigate political pressure, corporate cover-ups, and Wyoming’s unforgiving wilderness to find the truth—before more people *disappear*.

Box delivers a masterclass in modern Western noir, blending **gritty procedural detail** with **heart-pounding suspense**.

Chapter 1

Wylie Frye, a rugged mill worker in Encampment, Wyoming, is accustomed to the pervasive smell of wood smoke that clings to him after long nights tending the sawdust burner. Despite the discomfort it causes others, he finds solace in the warmth of the burner shack, a stark contrast to his past hardships, including frostbite injuries from working on a North Dakota fracking rig. As he waits anxiously for a late-night visitor, the roaring fire and oppressive heat amplify his tension, compounded by the acidic aftertaste of a recent meal. The chapter establishes Wylie as a man marked by

physical labor and a looming sense of unease.

The wigwam burner, a towering steel structure, dominates the night with its fiery intensity, designed to operate when the town sleeps to avoid complaints. Its flames reach extreme temperatures, glowing red and spewing sparks like shooting stars. This setting underscores the industrial grit of Wylie's world, where the mill's operations are both a source of livelihood and a backdrop for clandestine activities. The burner's relentless noise and heat create an isolating environment, heightening Wylie's anticipation as he watches for headlights through a smoke-filmed window.

Wylie's plan hinges on a narrow window of time between 2:15 and 3:30 AM, when the town's bars have emptied and the local cop, Jalen Spanks, begins his routine patrol. The chapter paints Encampment as a tight-knit, rough-around-the-edges community, where drunks and workers coexist in a rhythm dictated by the harsh environment. Wylie's disdain for Jalen's self-important demeanor adds tension, as their encounters are polite but strained. The stakes rise as Wylie's accomplices delay, risking exposure during Jalen's inevitable arrival.

The chapter hints at Wylie's involvement in a shady scheme, though the details remain vague. His instructions are clear: avoid witnessing the men's actions at the burner, preserving plausible deniability. The backdrop of the town's economic struggles—highlighted by the pine beetle infestation and federal logging policies—adds depth to Wylie's motivations. As he steps into the brutal cold to avoid seeing the arriving vehicle, the chapter closes with a sense of impending consequence, leaving readers curious about the nature of his criminality and the mill's role in it.

Chapter 2

The chapter introduces Carol Schmidt, a 69-year-old widow living a quiet life in Encampment with her three-legged dog, Bridger. A hardworking and community-oriented woman, Carol spends her evenings waiting for Bridger to finish his nightly routine in the snow-covered backyard. The dog, a rescue brought home by her late husband Paul, is her sole companion since Paul's tragic death in a logging accident two years prior. Carol reflects on her grief, recalling Paul's final moments in the hospital, where his last word was Bridger's name, a detail she accepts without resentment.

As Carol waits for Bridger, she wears Paul's old coat, which still carries his scent, and reminisces about their life together. The cold night air brings an unfamiliar, unpleasant odor that triggers a repressed childhood memory, unsettling her. Her attention shifts when she notices a suspicious gray pickup truck with a camper shell driving erratically near the mill across the road. The truck's unusual behavior—moving without headlights and stopping abruptly—alarms her, especially when it hits a neighbor's dog and speeds away without helping.

Carol witnesses the incident clearly, noting the truck's license plate ends in "600" and overhearing the driver's harsh commands to leave the injured dog. The encounter leaves her shaken, her hands trembling as she tends to Bridger, who finally returns inside. The chapter builds tension as Carol, now disturbed by what she's seen, decides to call her neighbor, hinting at a deeper mystery or conflict tied to the suspicious men in the truck.

The chapter blends Carol's personal grief with a growing sense of unease, as the mundane routines of her life are interrupted by an ominous event. Her observations of the pickup and its occupants suggest a looming threat, while her emotional connection to Bridger and memories of Paul ground the narrative in her vulnerability. The juxtaposition of her quiet resilience and the sudden intrusion of danger sets the stage

for further developments in the story.

Chapter 3

Game warden Joe Pickett waits alone at the nearly abandoned Saddlestring Municipal Airport for Governor Colter Allen’s arrival. The airport, once bustling with commercial flights, now serves only private aircraft after a carrier withdrew due to financial and regulatory issues. Joe observes the faded remnants of its past, including celebrity photos and an abandoned Prius, while interacting with Monte Stokes, a disgruntled airport employee embroiled in a legal dispute. Stokes reveals the governor’s plane, now nicknamed "Air Allen," is minutes away, but notes the lack of a formal reception, hinting at Joe’s unexplained significance to the visit.

Joe reflects on his strained relationship with Governor Allen, contrasting him with the previous governor, Spencer Rulon, who often enlisted Joe for unofficial investigations. Allen, a wealthy rancher and Yale graduate, has cultivated a rugged public image, though rumors suggest financial troubles and shady benefactors. Joe dismisses these as unverified gossip but acknowledges their two prior interactions were contentious. Stokes probes Joe about his role in the governor’s unscheduled stop, but Joe remains evasive, emphasizing his detachment from Allen’s inner circle.

The narrative shifts to the previous night, when Joe received a call from the governor’s office during his daughter Lucy’s high school play. Despite his wife Marybeth’s annoyance, Joe checks the call, recognizing its importance. He is moved by Lucy’s performance, drawing a parallel to his childhood admiration for actress Ann-Margret. At intermission, Joe steps outside to return the call, connecting with Allen’s chief of staff, Connor Hanlon, setting the stage for the impending meeting with the governor.

The chapter blends Joe’s personal reflections with the political intrigue surrounding Governor Allen. His introspection about family and past relationships contrasts with the mysterious circumstances of Allen’s arrival, hinting at unresolved tensions. The deserted airport serves as a metaphor for Joe’s isolation, both professionally and

personally, as he navigates the complexities of his role and the governor’s unpredictable agenda. The stage is set for a confrontation that could reveal more about Allen’s motives and Joe’s place in the unfolding drama.

Chapter 4

Joe Pickett, still agitated after a tense meeting with Governor Allen, drives through Saddlestring on a harsh winter day, accompanied by his dog Daisy and a file labeled "Kate Shelford-Longden." The bleak weather mirrors his mood as he arrives at the Twelve Sleep County Library, where his wife Marybeth works. The couple’s recent struggles weigh heavily on him, including the loss of their home to arson and the emotional toll of rebuilding their lives. Their temporary living situation in a rented condo, along with the challenges of boarding Marybeth’s horses and adjusting to a smaller space, adds to their stress.

Marybeth and Joe discuss Joe’s new assignment, which feels more like an ultimatum than an opportunity. The timing is poor, given their unstable living conditions and the lingering trauma of losing their home and possessions, including irreplaceable family mementos. Marybeth’s concern is palpable, especially as Joe’s past assignments have strained their marriage. The conversation shifts to their daughter Sheridan, who works at Silver Creek Ranch and has been vague about her future plans. Marybeth suspects Sheridan may be involved with someone, a possibility that unsettles Joe, who has always been protective of his daughters.

The chapter delves into the family’s strained dynamics, particularly with Marybeth’s mother, Missy, who has long disapproved of Joe and actively undermines their marriage. Missy’s manipulative behavior and wealth contrast sharply with Joe’s modest career as a game warden, reinforcing his feelings of inadequacy. Despite this, Marybeth remains steadfast in her support for Joe, though the tension with her mother lingers in the background. The family’s resilience is tested as they navigate these personal and professional challenges.

Joe’s work-related conflicts extend to their temporary home, where a neighbor complains about the animal carcasses in his truck, forcing him to compromise by

covering them. Amid these frustrations, the chapter highlights small moments of relief, such as the return of their dog Tube after the fire, dubbed "The Resurrection of the Tube." Yet, the overarching sense of instability and unresolved tensions—both within the family and with external forces—leaves Joe and Marybeth grappling with an uncertain future. The chapter closes with Joe preparing for his assignment in Saratoga, where he hopes to reconnect with Sheridan and gain clarity on her life choices.

Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, "The Disappeared," Joe Pickett settles into his temporary office at the Department of Transportation building, a cramped space he shares uneasily with highway department staff due to interagency tensions. Despite the logistical challenges, Joe sets up his workspace with borrowed furniture and personal supplies, reflecting the bureaucratic hurdles of state agencies. His focus shifts to the case of Kate Shelford-Longden, a missing British woman, as he begins reviewing a thick file containing incident reports, interviews, and media clippings. Joe deliberately avoids the official DCI report initially, opting instead to piece together Kate’s story independently.

Joe organizes the file into four categories: correspondence, statements, photos, and newspaper clippings, creating a timeline of Kate’s last known activities. The oldest document is a detailed guest manifest from Silver Creek Ranch, where Kate stayed in July. The manifest reveals her personal details, preferences, and humorous remarks, painting her as a well-traveled, affluent professional seeking a fresh start. Joe notes her British terminology and the exclusive resorts she’s visited, highlighting her global lifestyle. The document also lists staff liaisons, including cryptic initials that intrigue Joe, particularly "SP2," which he suspects might refer to his daughter Sheridan.

The newspaper clippings, mostly from UK outlets, provide a vivid contrast to American journalism with their lively tone and dramatic headlines. The first article, from the Daily Mail, reports Kate’s disappearance after she failed to return from her Wyoming vacation. It reveals her prominence as the managing director of a successful PR firm and notes the concern of her colleagues when she missed her flight home. The article hints at her professional and personal background, including her ex-husband’s role in their company, Athena, setting the stage for deeper investigation into her life and the circumstances of her disappearance.

As Joe delves deeper, he pieces together Kate’s personality through her witty responses on the ranch manifest and the media’s portrayal of her. Her request to "meet a real cowboy" and her celebration of a "New Lease on Life" suggest she was seeking adventure or reinvention. Joe’s methodical approach—avoiding preconceptions from the DCI report—underscores his dedication to uncovering the truth. The chapter ends with Joe poised to cross-reference his findings, hinting at a complex case that intertwines Kate’s high-profile life with the rugged setting of Wyoming.

Chapter 6

The chapter opens with Sheridan Pickett, a 23-year-old wrangler at Silver Creek Ranch, performing her winter duties. Driving a pickup truck through snow-covered terrain, she leads horses to the frozen North Platte River, where she breaks ice to provide them access to water. The serene yet harsh winter landscape is vividly described, with wildlife like bald eagles and pronghorn antelope adding to the scene. Sheridan's routine involves meticulous care for the horses, ensuring they remain disciplined and hydrated despite the challenging conditions. Her work contrasts sharply with the bustling summer season, offering a glimpse into the ranch's seasonal rhythms.

During the summer, Sheridan and her fellow wranglers—mostly young women—work tirelessly to accommodate wealthy guests. The ranch operates like a high-end hospitality business, with wranglers guiding horseback rides, lessons, and trail adventures. Sheridan reflects on the dynamics of the job, noting how male guests often respond better to female wranglers. The days are long, starting at dawn and ending late, with constant attention to horse care and guest satisfaction. Despite the grueling schedule, Sheridan gains valuable experience in both horsemanship and customer service, though she remains unsure if this career path suits her long-term.

The chapter delves into the diverse clientele of the ranch, ranging from tech moguls to supermodels, many of whom are experiencing ranch life for the first time. Sheridan observes that wealth doesn't equate to intelligence or harmony, as families exhibit familiar patterns of conflict and bonding. Surprisingly, many guests find the ranch a rare opportunity to reconnect with loved ones, often inviting staff to join them for meals. Sheridan particularly enjoys working with preteen girls, who form deep bonds with the horses and look up to her as a role model. These interactions highlight the ranch's unique ability to foster meaningful connections.

The chapter concludes with Sheridan reflecting on the social dynamics among the staff, which mirror the intensity of high school cliques. Romantic relationships and breakups unfold rapidly in the close-knit environment, adding another layer of complexity to the job. Despite the challenges, Sheridan appreciates the lessons learned about hospitality, horsemanship, and human nature. The chapter paints a vivid picture of life at Silver Creek Ranch, balancing the tranquility of winter with the chaos of summer, and Sheridan’s personal growth amid it all.

Chapter 7

Wylie Frye seeks solace in a mineral hot springs pool, braving the intense contrast between the freezing air and scalding water. He finds comfort in his usual spot, "Wylie’s Corner," where the heat is just right. As the water soothes his body, he reflects on his improved financial situation, which has eased tensions with his ex-wife and allowed him to upgrade his workshop. Despite his contentment, a lingering odor of burning hair and roast chicken haunts him, stirring guilt he can’t shake—a feeling tied to his past and his Catholic upbringing.

The hot springs offer Wylie sensory immersion, sharpening his hearing as he listens to the river, ducks, and distant voices. He prefers the solitude of late-night visits, avoiding the crowds of tourists and locals. The pool becomes a sanctuary where he can escape reminders of aging, like his mother’s retirement village. Wylie’s routine includes a precise twenty-minute soak, which warms him enough to endure the cold walk to his truck, his body radiating heat like a "hot water inner tube."

At times, Wylie ventures into the adjacent North Platte River, seeking the thrill of geothermal plumes amid icy currents. These moments of adventure contrast with his usual routine, adding variety to his life. However, his tranquility is disrupted when two men arrive, their guttural voices familiar—one from a troubling phone call. Wylie remains hidden in the steam, eavesdropping as the men discuss the pool’s heat and a mysterious, "mind-blowing" project involving significant money. Their conversation shifts to a waitress, but Wylie is left curious about the unnamed venture.

The chapter closes with Wylie’s unease as he overhears the men’s plans for the next day, hinting at looming conflict or intrigue. His attempt to relax is overshadowed by the guilt and mystery that cling to him, suggesting his peaceful routine may soon be upended. The hot springs, once a refuge, now feel like a stage for something darker, leaving Wylie—and the reader—anticipating what comes next.

Chapter 8

Joe Pickett embarks on a 300-mile winter drive from Saddlestring to Saratoga, leaving his family behind with a sense of unease. He packs the Kate case file, a mystery he's been tasked to investigate, and bids farewell to his dog Daisy, aware his absence will be longer than she understands. The frigid morning landscape, with its frozen tires and snow-covered streets, mirrors the cold uncertainty of his mission. As he drives, Joe reflects on the gaps in the Kate disappearance case, particularly intrigued by what his daughter Sheridan might know, given her past horseback rides with Kate.

Three key concerns weigh on Joe's mind as he travels. First, the abrupt removal of Michael Williams and the DCI from the case by Governor Allen raises suspicions, as the official explanation of budget cuts feels inadequate. Second, Joe questions why he was chosen for the assignment, given Allen's apparent distrust of him and the availability of other law enforcement resources. Third, the unexplained disappearance of Saratoga game warden Steve Pollock adds another layer of mystery, especially since Pollock's absence hasn't been addressed within the agency, despite the desirability of his district.

The chapter delves into the intricacies of game warden politics, highlighting the unusual silence surrounding Pollock's departure. Joe speculates that Director Linda Greene-Dempsey's precarious position under Governor Allen may explain the lack of transparency. The absence of official notices about the open Saratoga district fuels Joe's curiosity, as he wonders if Pollock's exit is connected to the Kate case or merely coincidental. The bureaucratic tension underscores the challenges Joe faces in uncovering the truth.

During his treacherous winter drive, Joe encounters a reckless truck driver, a momentary hazard that underscores the perilous conditions of Wyoming winters. The incident briefly distracts him from his mission, but he quickly refocuses, embracing the

harsh environment as a reminder of his own resilience. The chapter closes with Joe’s determination to press forward, despite the physical and metaphorical storms ahead, as he seeks answers in the enigmatic Kate case and the puzzling circumstances surrounding Pollock’s disappearance.

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.

Chapter 10

In Chapter 10, "The Disappeared," Joe Pickett reflects on his first impressions of Lance Ramsey, his daughter Sheridan's new romantic interest, during a phone call with his wife, Marybeth. Despite his usual skepticism toward men pursuing his daughters, Joe admits Ramsey—a cowboy who defended Sheridan in a bar—seems respectable. However, his discomfort resurfaces when he witnesses Sheridan kissing Ramsey goodbye outside his hotel. Marybeth reassures him, but Joe struggles with the reality of his grown daughter's independence, juxtaposed with memories of her as a child.

Meanwhile, Joe receives a puzzling call from Casey Scales about the mysterious disappearance of keys to a game warden house in Saratoga. Scales reveals the keys were sent to the governor’s office without explanation, leaving Joe suspicious and determined to investigate further. This subplot hints at larger bureaucratic intrigue, adding tension to Joe’s already complicated assignment in the area.

Later, Joe reviews the case file of Kate, a missing British woman, focusing on the Youngberg brothers, who had earlier harassed Sheridan. He speculates whether their aggressive behavior could link them to Kate’s disappearance. This connection deepens the mystery and underscores Joe’s role as both a protective father and a determined investigator.

The chapter closes with Joe noticing a mysterious couple at the bar, dressed in black and speaking in hushed British accents. Their out-of-place appearance and secretive demeanor pique Joe’s curiosity, suggesting they may be connected to Kate’s case. The bartender’s mocking imitation of their accents hints at local skepticism, setting the stage for further confrontation or revelation in the unfolding investigation.

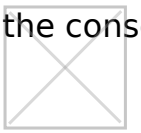
Chapter 11

Carol Schmidt, a diligent employee at Valley Foods, is working the late shift, mopping the store after closing time. She prefers this shift despite its challenges, as she has few personal obligations beyond caring for her dog, Bridger. As she cleans, she reflects on the typical late-night customers—lonely men and intoxicated teenagers—who often leave the floors messy. When she hears unexpected footsteps in the store, she assumes it might be a liquor store customer who wandered in through an unlocked connecting door. Her initial annoyance shifts to unease as she spots a running pickup truck outside with a familiar license plate.

Schmidt attempts to assert authority by identifying herself as the night manager, hoping to escort the intruder out. However, her confidence wavers when she recognizes the man’s voice from a past incident where he callously ran over a neighbor’s dog. The man, a large, imposing figure with white hair, approaches her register with an odd assortment of items. Schmidt’s fear grows as she recalls his face from a local newspaper photo, though she struggles to remember his name or significance. The tension escalates when she confronts him about the dog incident, revealing her resentment toward his cruelty and her frustration at not being taken seriously by authorities.

The man’s demeanor shifts from amused to threatening as he subtly acknowledges her previous complaints about him. Schmidt’s fear intensifies when she suddenly remembers his connection to a disturbing incident involving the local mill burner. Trapped behind the counter, she realizes her vulnerability—her purse with a .38 is out of reach, and the store’s alarm system is disabled. The man’s mocking tone and physical intimidation, including gripping her hand, make it clear he is toying with her. Schmidt’s attempts to deflect him by claiming the register is closed only provoke him further, exposing her lies and heightening the danger.

The chapter ends on a chilling note as the man whispers a veiled threat, urging Schmidt to “mind her own business” and stop reporting issues to the authorities. His menacing presence and cryptic warning suggest he is involved in darker activities, possibly linked to the mill’s suspicious smell. Schmidt’s terror is palpable as she realizes she is powerless against him, leaving the reader with a sense of impending danger and unresolved tension. The encounter underscores themes of vulnerability, intimidation, and the consequences of speaking out against powerful figures in a small town.



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.

Chapter 13

The chapter opens with Ted Panos arriving at a restaurant in freezing weather, emphasizing the harsh cold through vivid descriptions of the icy river and biting wind. He meets Gaylan Kessel, a intimidating figure who exudes authority, in a secluded booth. Their interaction is terse, revealing a hierarchical relationship where Panos is clearly subordinate. The waitress's small talk about the cold contrasts with the tense atmosphere between the two men, hinting at underlying unease.

Panos delivers a file to Kessel, who scrutinizes it without acknowledgment. Their conversation reveals a recent incident where Panos failed a task, leading to Kessel's silent fury. Panos reflects on Kessel's physical dominance and violent potential, noting scars and a mercenary background. To protect himself, Panos secretly carries a derringer, prepared to use it if Kessel turns on him. This underscores the dangerous dynamic between them, where Panos lives in fear of his boss's wrath.

Kessel's background is explored through Panos's observations: a hardened veteran of Desert Storm and private military work, unfazed by the cold and radiating menace. Panos, meanwhile, recalls his own past as a correctional officer in New Mexico, where he lost his job after a brutal incident involving an inmate. His bitterness over his downfall and subsequent struggles paint him as a man clinging to his identity in law enforcement, despite his fall from grace.

The chapter concludes with Panos reflecting on how Kessel recruited him, valuing his ruthless tendencies rather than seeing them as a liability. This mutual recognition of each other's brutality binds them together, though Panos remains wary of Kessel's volatility. The tension between them simmers beneath the surface, setting the stage for potential conflict in their shadowy, morally ambiguous partnership.

Chapter 14

In Chapter 14, "The Disappeared," Joe investigates the mysterious absence of Steve Pollock, a former state game warden, by visiting Pollock's house. After navigating a snowdrift, Joe attempts to enter the locked garage and house, opting to force his way in discreetly to avoid bureaucratic delays. He questions his own motives, wondering if Pollock's disappearance could be linked to Kate Shelford-Longden's case, though the connection seems tenuous. Joe's actions reflect his determination to uncover the truth, even as he acknowledges the lack of clear justification for his investigation.

Inside Pollock's truck, Joe notes its unusually neat condition, contrasting it with the typical clutter of game warden vehicles. He searches for clues, reviewing Pollock's citation book but finding only routine violations. The absence of personal and professional materials puzzles Joe, suggesting someone may have tampered with the truck. This discovery deepens the mystery, leaving Joe to wonder whether Pollock cleaned it out himself or if someone else had been there before him.

Entering the house, Joe observes signs of a hasty departure, such as empty dresser drawers and spoiled food in the fridge. The home's sparse and orderly state aligns with Pollock's solitary lifestyle, but the missing agency-issued weapons and selective packing raise red flags. Joe methodically searches each room, noting details that imply Pollock left unexpectedly, possibly under duress or with a specific purpose in mind. The chapter builds tension as Joe pieces together fragments of Pollock's life, searching for answers.

The chapter underscores Joe's growing suspicion that Pollock's disappearance is more than a simple resignation or personal decision. The lack of evidence linking Pollock to Kate's case frustrates Joe, yet he remains compelled to explore every angle. His unauthorized investigation risks backlash from his superiors, but his instincts drive him forward. The chapter ends with Joe's unresolved questions, setting the stage for

further revelations about Pollock’s fate and its potential connection to the larger mystery.

Chapter 15

In Chapter 15, "The Disappeared," Joe, the protagonist, visits Silver Creek Ranch to investigate the mysterious disappearance of a guest named Kate. He meets Mark Gordon, the ranch's general manager, who expresses frustration over the unresolved case but cooperates despite his busy schedule. Gordon’s office, though modest, is part of a sprawling, luxurious ranch designed to blend seamlessly into the rugged Wyoming landscape. The ranch boasts high-end amenities like an indoor riding arena and shooting range, catering to an elite clientele. Despite its grandeur, the ranch faces logistical challenges due to its remote location and harsh winter weather.

Gordon, a seasoned hospitality professional, emphasizes the ranch’s unique appeal to the ultra-wealthy, offering a "cowboy fantasy" with luxury accommodations. He highlights the meticulous attention to guest preferences, including extensive pre-arrival questionnaires and strict privacy measures like nondisclosure agreements for staff. The ranch employs over 200 staff for just 90 guests, ensuring unparalleled service. Gordon proudly mentions hosting celebrities and political figures, underscoring the ranch’s exclusivity. However, the disappearance of Kate has cast a shadow over the ranch’s reputation, complicating its otherwise flawless operation.

The chapter reveals tensions between Joe and Gordon, particularly when Joe learns that Governor Allen’s chief of staff, Hanlon, had previously contacted Gordon about Kate’s case—a detail Hanlon had withheld from Joe. This raises suspicions about the governor’s involvement. Gordon also mentions the ranch’s significant economic impact on the local community, including charitable initiatives like hosting inner-city kids. Despite these positives, the unresolved disappearance remains a pressing concern, disrupting the ranch’s carefully curated image.

Joe’s investigation uncovers the ranch’s dual nature: a world-class retreat grappling with the challenges of its remote setting and the fallout from Kate’s vanishing.

Gordon’s pride in the ranch’s success is tempered by his anxiety over the unresolved mystery. The chapter ends with Gordon hinting at the broader implications of the case, leaving Joe—and the reader—eager to uncover the truth behind Kate’s disappearance and its connection to the ranch’s powerful patrons.

Chapter 16

Nate Romanowski encounters two striking sights after leaving Saratoga: the Teubner Fish Hatchery and the massive Buckbrush Wind Energy Project. The wind farm, with its hundreds of towering turbines, dominates the landscape, stretching across thousands of acres. Nate is awed by the scale of the construction, noting its potential to power a million homes in California. However, he is critical of the project's reliance on government mandates and tax incentives rather than market demand, highlighting the disconnect between energy consumers and the environmental impact of such facilities.

As Nate approaches the wind farm, he experiences physical discomfort from the turbines' subsonic hum and altered air pressure. He is stopped by a security guard who questions his presence. Nate reveals his falconry background, hinting at the turbines' threat to birds, but the guard dismisses his concerns. The encounter reinforces Nate's frustration with the project's unchecked expansion and the lack of awareness among those who benefit from it. His anger grows as he realizes how the wind farm aligns with his broader conspiracy theories about environmental and governmental overreach.

After being denied direct access to the fish hatchery, Nate spends hours navigating around the wind farm's perimeter. The sight of transmission lines stretching toward California deepens his resentment. He reflects on the irony of "green" energy displacing wildlife corridors and wishes policymakers and consumers could witness the project's true scale and consequences. Nate's disdain for the industrialization of natural spaces is palpable, though he acknowledges the futility of his anger, given his lack of authority to change the situation.

The chapter concludes with Nate arriving at the Teubner Fish Hatchery, puzzled by its remote location far from any natural water source. This final observation underscores the theme of human intervention disrupting natural order, mirroring his earlier critique

of the wind farm. Nate’s journey serves as a vehicle for exploring tensions between progress and preservation, leaving readers to ponder the costs of renewable energy infrastructure in wild landscapes.

Chapter 17

In Chapter 17, titled "The Disappeared," Joe observes his daughter Sheridan expertly riding a sorrel gelding in the indoor arena of a guest ranch. Impressed by her skill and fluid movements, he notes her ability to guide the horse with subtle leg pressure rather than relying on the reins. The cold environment contrasts with the heated arena, and Sheridan’s dedication to training the horses is evident as she prepares to finish her workday. Their warm exchange highlights Sheridan’s pride in her role, though she admits feeling occasional guilt that her mother and sister would envy her job.

Joe visits Sheridan’s small but tidy apartment above the arena, where she prepares a simple meal of tomato soup and grilled cheese. The setting reflects her independence, and Joe muses about the role reversal, recalling how he once cooked for her. The apartment’s personal touches, like family photos, evoke nostalgia. Joe’s brief inspection of the bathroom reveals his protective fatherly instincts, as he avoids snooping but wonders about Sheridan’s personal life, particularly whether any men’s items might be present.

Over lunch, Sheridan shares details about her life at the ranch, explaining her preference for the solitude of her apartment compared to the shared dormitories for most staff. The conversation shifts to her relationship with Lance Ramsey, the head wrangler, causing her to blush when Joe brings him up. Joe then steers the discussion toward Kate, a guest at the ranch, whom Sheridan describes as a reserved but passionate rider who cherished the ranch’s freedom and natural beauty.

Sheridan recounts how Kate struggled with the transition from her high-pressure life in England to the ranch’s slower pace, eventually embracing the disconnect from technology. Kate expressed a deep reluctance to return home, hinting at unresolved troubles. Joe probes for more details, asking if Kate mentioned any conflicts with staff

or guests, but Sheridan recalls only Kate’s discomfort with the Youngbergs during a horseshoeing session. The chapter ends with Joe piecing together clues about Kate’s mysterious disappearance, while Sheridan’s observations provide subtle insights into the ranch’s dynamics.

Chapter 18

Sheriff Neal and his team, accompanied by Joe, Nate, and Sheridan, assemble a convoy to investigate a remote cabin in the Snowy Range after receiving a tip from Eli Jarrett, a known local troublemaker. Jarrett, while collecting elk antlers, stumbled upon the cabin and photographed a blonde woman in the window—potentially linked to the disappearance of Kate. The group prepares to traverse the snow-blocked road, with Neal renting snowmobiles to navigate the deep accumulation. The urgency is palpable as they aim to reach the cabin before nightfall, with Joe noting the sheriff's grudging acknowledgment that Joe's knack for trouble might finally be useful.

The cabin belongs to Les McKnight, a reclusive trapper who had previously been expelled from Silver Creek Ranch for unauthorized trapping. Sheridan recalls McKnight's presence at the ranch around the time Kate vanished, adding credibility to the theory that he may be involved. Neal reveals that Jarrett sold the photos to Billy Bloodworth, a British reporter, who published them online, complicating the investigation. Joe contacts the ranch manager to confirm McKnight's timeline, while the group sets off toward the mountains, aware that the media is already circling.

As the convoy passes through Saratoga, Sheridan notes the inevitable gossip their high-profile procession will spark. The terrain shifts to snow-covered wilderness, and Joe spots Billy Bloodworth and Sophie, Kate's sister, tailing them. Neal expresses frustration at Bloodworth's interference, criticizing the media's practice of paying for tips. Joe warns that the reporter will demand access to the investigation, but Neal dismisses the idea. Meanwhile, Nate remains unusually quiet, admitting that the new evidence undermines his broader conspiracy theory about Kate's disappearance.

The group arrives at a plowed turnaround at the end of the highway, where they prepare to unload the snowmobiles for the final leg of the journey. The tension builds as they gear up to confront McKnight, with the possibility of finding Kate—or answers

about her fate—looming. The chapter ends on a note of anticipation, with the team poised to venture into the treacherous snowbound landscape, their mission fraught with both hope and uncertainty.

Chapter 19

Wylie Frye arrives at the Encampment lumber mill for his overnight shift in freezing temperatures, dressed for the cold. He ignores repeated calls from an unknown number before finally answering, only to be confronted by a gruff, familiar voice instructing him to obtain disposable "burner" phones to avoid traceable communication. The caller emphasizes secrecy, demanding Wylie reformat his current phone and prepare for another delivery run the following night. Wylie’s attempt to negotiate higher pay is swiftly dismissed, leaving him uneasy about the escalating demands and the caller’s ominous tone.

During the call, Wylie’s ulterior motive is revealed: he wants extra money to purchase an expensive long-range rifle, the HAMR, which he obsesses over. The caller, however, refuses to renegotiate their agreement and insists on strict compliance with his instructions. Wylie’s nervousness grows as the caller orders him to erase all traces of their communication and leave his old phone behind for inspection. The conversation ends abruptly, leaving Wylie sweating and anxious, sensing the danger of his involvement in whatever clandestine operation is unfolding.

After the call, Wylie is startled by the sudden appearance of Jeb Pryor, the mill owner, who overhears part of the conversation. Pryor confronts Wylie, demanding an explanation for the suspicious activity taking place at his mill. Wylie, caught off guard, denies any wrongdoing but is visibly shaken, his face flushed and body tense. Pryor’s stern demeanor suggests he suspects Wylie is involved in something illicit, setting the stage for a tense confrontation.

The chapter underscores Wylie’s precarious position as he balances his desire for personal gain with the growing risks of his secret dealings. His carelessness during the call and Pryor’s unexpected appearance heighten the tension, foreshadowing potential consequences for Wylie’s actions. The mysterious caller’s authoritarian commands and

Pryor’s suspicion create a sense of impending conflict, leaving Wylie trapped between two threatening forces. The chapter effectively builds suspense, hinting at darker developments ahead.

Chapter 20

The chapter opens with Joe and his team, including Eli Jarrett and Sheriff Neal, racing on snowmobiles through a snowy meadow toward a dense forest as daylight fades. Jarrett leads aggressively, leaving the others struggling to keep up. Joe and Nate follow closely, navigating the treacherous terrain by staying in Jarrett's pre-groomed track. One deputy veers off and gets stuck in deep snow, forcing another to stop and assist. Joe suspects Jarrett may be deliberately trying to lose the group, but the sheriff had warned of this possibility earlier. The forest becomes increasingly claustrophobic, with trees so tightly packed that maneuvering off the path seems impossible.

As the group enters the forest, Jarrett suddenly slows, and Joe nearly collides with him. They stop near a clearing, where Jarrett points toward a hidden cabin in the distance. Joe detects the faint scent of wood smoke, suggesting someone might be inside. He advises waiting for Sheriff Neal, who arrives shortly with the rest of the team. Neal organizes a plan to approach the cabin cautiously, emphasizing safety and avoiding a confrontation unless necessary. He assigns roles, including positioning a deputy at the rear to prevent escape, and warns Jarrett not to flee. The team prepares their weapons, tension mounting as they gear up for a potential confrontation.

Neal orders the group to advance, with Joe now leading the charge since Jarrett is ordered to stay behind. The snowmobiles roar through the forest, their headlights illuminating the narrow path. Nate confirms the team is still together as they approach the cabin. The structure suddenly comes into view—a small, dark building surrounded by a moonlit clearing. The scene is tense, with the team poised for action, though the cabin's interior remains shrouded in mystery.

The chapter builds toward a climactic moment as the team prepares to confront whoever may be inside the cabin. The sheriff's careful planning contrasts with the deputies' eagerness for a confrontation, highlighting the stakes of the mission. Joe's

anxiety is palpable, his dry mouth reflecting the gravity of the situation. The abrupt ending leaves readers anticipating the next chapter, where the team’s approach to the cabin will likely unfold into a dramatic encounter. The atmosphere is thick with suspense, blending the harsh winter setting with the urgency of their mission.

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.

Chapter 22

Joe Pickett and Nate Romanowski drive through snowy terrain toward a vast wind energy project, their journey marked by Nate’s deliberate law-breaking as he dismantles a fence to access the area. Joe, still reeling from being fired by Hanlon, is passive and confused, while Nate remains cryptic about their destination. The tension between them is palpable, with Nate hinting at Joe’s obliviousness to the political machinations surrounding his dismissal. Their conversation reveals Nate’s skepticism about Joe’s naivety in government matters, setting the stage for a deeper revelation.

Upon reaching the summit, they witness the sprawling Buckbrush Wind Energy Project, its blinking red lights dominating the landscape. Nate critiques the project as a wasteful, taxpayer-funded endeavor designed to appease distant urban consumers while masking its environmental impact. His disdain for the project is clear, but his real purpose for bringing Joe there remains unexplained. Joe, though amused by Nate’s bluntness, is overwhelmed by the scale of the construction and puzzled by Nate’s focus on a distant truck below.

Nate’s theory begins to unfold as he shifts the conversation to Governor Allen’s political backers, suggesting Allen’s financial troubles forced him to seek shadowy supporters who now control him. He implies Joe’s assignment to Saratoga was a setup to ensure his failure, orchestrated to remove him as a holdover from the previous administration. Joe starts connecting the dots, recalling the suspicious disappearance of Pollock, the stolen case files, and the rushed press conference—all pointing to a deliberate effort to undermine him.

The chapter ends with Joe grappling with the implications of Nate’s revelations, realizing his firing was part of a larger political game. Nate’s cryptic behavior and the ominous wind energy project symbolize the hidden forces at play, leaving Joe to confront the unsettling truth about his role in the governor’s agenda. The scene sets

up a deeper investigation into the corruption and power dynamics shaping Joe’s fate.

Chapter 23

In this chapter, Joe arrives at the Wolf and learns that Nate has secured a room. Bartender Kim Miller offers him a beer, hinting she knows about his rough day, though Joe initially fears she's referring to his firing. The conversation shifts to a scandalous article by Billy Bloodworth, which mocks the sheriff's office and features a photo of Joe's daughter, Sheridan, during a raid. The article omits critical context, painting the law enforcement operation as farcical. Joe is furious, especially at the exploitation of his daughter's image, but realizes Bloodworth and Sophie have already left for Denver, evading immediate confrontation.

Joe's anger drives him to retaliate by reporting Bloodworth and Sophie to Colorado authorities for fraud, exploiting his remaining law enforcement connections. Meanwhile, Kim reveals an anonymous call from someone she believes is Steve Pollock, adding another layer of mystery. The call's secrecy suggests Pollock may be avoiding direct contact, raising questions about his motives. Joe's frustration mounts as he grapples with the fallout of the article and the looming threat to his career, feeling powerless yet determined to push forward despite the odds.

Later, Joe updates Marybeth on the day's events, including Nate's theory that Missy, Marybeth's mother, orchestrated the conspiracy against him. Marybeth reacts with uncharacteristic fury, vowing to cut ties with her manipulative mother. The couple discusses their precarious financial situation and Joe's impending termination, though he clings to the slim hope of bureaucratic recourse. Marybeth, pragmatic yet supportive, questions whether continuing the investigation is worth the risk, but Joe resolves to persevere, driven by his sense of duty and stubbornness.

The chapter underscores Joe's resilience in the face of professional and personal crises. His determination to uphold justice, even as his career crumbles, contrasts with the media's sensationalism and political machinations. Marybeth's unwavering support

highlights their partnership, while the unresolved threads—Pollock’s call, Missy’s scheming, and Bloodworth’s escape—set the stage for further conflict. Joe’s internal struggle between duty and survival encapsulates the chapter’s tension, leaving readers anticipating his next move.

Chapter 24

Gaylan Kessel and Ted Panos arrive at the Memorial Hospital of Carbon County in Rawlins late at night, parking in a dimly lit area of the lot. Panos, dressed uncharacteristically in business casual attire, is uneasy about the mysterious envelope on the seat and the unusual instructions. To calm his nerves, he takes bootleg Percocet, which quickly dulls his anxiety. Kessel, meanwhile, remains focused and authoritative, directing Panos toward the hospital entrance and emphasizing the need to appear confident and avoid suspicion. The tension between them is palpable as Panos struggles to maintain composure under the influence of the drugs.

Kessel briefs Panos on his mission: to locate Carol Schmidt in the critical care unit and ensure she does not wake up from her medically induced coma. Schmidt, a "tough old bird," survived a car accident and may have information damaging to Kessel. Panos, still under the calming effects of Percocet, half-listens as Kessel drills him on the details, including a fabricated cover story about being a pharmaceutical rep retrieving a file. Kessel provides a fake hospital badge with Panos’s photo, further deepening the sense of conspiracy. Panos’s slurred speech and detached demeanor hint at his impaired state, but Kessel dismisses his concerns, insisting on the urgency of the task.

Kessel instructs Panos to make Schmidt’s death appear natural, suggesting methods like disconnecting machines or using a pillow. He stresses the importance of avoiding detection and warns Panos not to deviate from the plan. Panos, though unnerved, agrees but questions why he’s the one assigned to the job. Kessel explains that his own high profile makes him recognizable, while Panos can operate anonymously. The exchange reveals Kessel’s manipulative nature as he justifies the act as "for the greater good," implying Schmidt’s knowledge could jeopardize undisclosed interests. Panos, numbed by the drugs, reluctantly accepts the explanation, though his moral discomfort lingers.

As Panos prepares to enter the hospital, he hesitates, asking about compensation for the risky task. Kessel promises a reward but offers no specifics, leaving Panos skeptical. Despite his doubts, Panos steps out of the truck, propelled by the Percocet’s artificial calm. The chapter ends with Panos on the brink of committing a morally reprehensible act, his judgment clouded by drugs and coercion. The scene underscores themes of manipulation, desperation, and the erosion of personal agency under pressure.

Chapter 25

Sheriff Neal expresses frustration over a newspaper photo depicting him with a blow-up sex doll, which has made him and his department appear foolish. Joe Pickett and Nate Romanowski, present in Neal's office, are eager to leave after giving their statements. Neal discusses the legal fallout involving Les McKnight, who was injured by Joe’s daughter during a raid. McKnight may sue the department, but Neal hopes to negotiate a settlement by dropping assault charges in exchange for dismissing the lawsuit. Joe remains wary of the messy legal proceedings, recognizing McKnight’s plausible self-defense claim.

Outside Neal’s office, Joe notices a line of men waiting for construction jobs at the Buckbrush wind farm headquarters. Neal explains the economic benefits of the project, though Nate scoffs at the idea. Joe shifts the conversation to Kate’s disappearance, but Neal dismisses the topic, suggesting Joe should also move on. Meanwhile, Joe reflects on the recent surge in hospital admissions, including McKnight, Joshua Teubner (who suffered a gunshot wound), and an elderly woman injured in a car accident, reinforcing the idea that trouble seems to follow him.

Joe receives a call from Jeb Pryor, the owner of a local lumber mill, who hints at having important information. Before Pryor can elaborate, the call drops. Shortly after, Steve Pollock, a former game warden, reaches out, agreeing to meet Joe in Cheyenne to discuss undisclosed events in Saratoga. Pollock is hesitant but agrees to a private conversation at a pub, insisting Joe come alone. Nate, wary of Cheyenne due to his past experiences, offers to investigate Pryor’s concerns and keep an eye on Joe’s daughter, Sheridan, while Joe is away.

Joe and Nate part ways, with Nate heading to the Wolf to switch vehicles and pursue his own leads, possibly related to Kate’s case or his conspiracy theories. Joe warns Nate against further violent interrogations, but Nate’s noncommittal response

suggests he may not comply. The chapter ends with Joe preparing to drive to Cheyenne, uncertain of what Pollock will reveal but determined to uncover the truth behind the chaos in Saratoga.

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.

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.

Chapter 28

Sheridan Pickett grows increasingly worried when Lance Ramsey, her coworker and secret romantic interest, fails to arrive at Silver Creek Ranch after a weekend at his remote cabin. With no cell service in the area, she imagines dire scenarios—mechanical failures, avalanches, or illness—while searching for his truck and snowmobile trailer. Her anxiety is compounded by her desire to share news of her recent involvement in a high-profile raid, which had garnered media attention. Despite her concern, she hesitates to report Lance’s absence to their manager, Mark Gordon, fearing repercussions for him.

Sheridan’s unease deepens as she reflects on her feelings for Lance, admitting how much she misses his presence on the lonely ranch. She considers borrowing a snowmobile to search for him herself, since her father and brother are unavailable. When she finally informs Gordon, he agrees to her plan, providing a satellite phone and subtly acknowledging their relationship. Sheridan is relieved he doesn’t lecture her about workplace fraternization, though she remains focused on finding Lance before it’s too late.

As Sheridan prepares for her search, she encounters the Youngberg farriers, Ben and Brady, who mock her with nicknames like "Little Miss" and taunt her about the raid photo. Their jeering escalates when they reference Lance as "Lance Romance" and imply she relies on her father and Lance for protection. Ignoring their provocations, Sheridan retreats to the storage garage to gather supplies and a snowmobile, determined to avoid further confrontation.

Despite her efforts to leave discreetly, the Youngbergs block her path, standing outside the garage door as it opens. Their presence threatens to delay her mission, adding tension to her already urgent task. Sheridan’s resolve to find Lance remains unwavering, but the encounter with the farriers underscores the challenges she

faces—both in her search and in navigating the complexities of her relationships at the ranch.

Chapter 29

The chapter opens with Nate and Pryor arriving at Wylie Frye’s home in Encampment, a small town surrounded by the Sierra Madre range. The setting is vividly described, with snow-covered streets and wood smoke hanging in the air. Pryor knocks on the front door while Nate circles to the back, observing Frye’s garage, which doubles as a workshop and man-cave filled with hunting trophies and unfinished projects. The tension builds as Nate unzips his parka to access his weapon, anticipating a confrontation.

Frye exits the back door, and Nate immediately confronts him at gunpoint, forcing him back inside. The interior of the house is messy, reflecting Frye’s solitary life after his family left. Pryor joins them, and Nate orders Frye to disarm, discovering an expensive pistol and two cell phones—one of which is a burner phone. The discovery of a cryptic text message—“He knows”—hints at Frye’s involvement in something clandestine, raising suspicions about his loyalty and activities.

Nate’s interrogation intensifies as he presses Frye about the text and his connections to unknown individuals. Frye’s fear is palpable as he reveals that “these guys” scare him, implying involvement with a dangerous group. Nate’s ruthless tactics escalate when he retrieves a frozen trout from his SUV and uses it to strike Frye, demonstrating his willingness to employ brutal methods to extract information. Pryor watches uncomfortably, distancing himself from Nate’s violence.

The chapter concludes with Nate forcing Frye to send a misleading text to his associates, claiming the delivery is back on. Frye, injured and terrified, complies but expresses doubt about whether his contacts will believe him. Nate’s cold demeanor and threats underscore his role as an unrelenting enforcer, leaving Frye at his mercy and setting the stage for further conflict. The scene highlights themes of betrayal, coercion, and the harsh realities of their world.

Chapter 30

Sheridan drives her truck and snowmobile trailer into the snowy mountains, following a remote road to find Lance, whose recent tracks suggest he’s at his cabin. The ominous weather hints at an approaching storm, adding urgency to her mission. Along the way, she encounters a moose blocking her path, a fleeting but memorable interruption. Sheridan reflects on her father’s similar experiences in the wilderness, reinforcing her determination. The isolated setting and Lance’s absence raise questions about his whereabouts, especially after her colleagues’ cryptic remark about "Lance Romance," leaving her uneasy but resolved to continue.

Upon arriving at Lance’s truck, Sheridan finds it unlocked with his snowmobile missing, confirming he’s likely at his cabin. She prepares for the final leg of her journey, donning ill-fitting gear and securing a rifle to her snowmobile. The packed trail reassures her Lance has been there recently, but the oversized helmet and unfamiliar winter route slow her progress. When she finally spots smoke from the cabin’s chimney and his parked snowmobile, relief washes over her—until she notices the trampled snow and wonders why he hasn’t emerged to greet her.

Sheridan approaches the cabin cautiously, calling out for Lance but receiving no response. The door suddenly swings open, revealing Kate, a British woman who claims Lance is severely injured from a fall. Sheridan’s shock turns to fury as she notices the cabin’s uncharacteristically domestic touches, suggesting Kate has been living there. Lance lies unconscious with a broken leg, feverish and in critical condition. Sheridan’s anger flares at the situation, but she focuses on getting him to safety, though Kate’s presence and explanations only deepen her suspicion and rage.

Despite her burning questions, Sheridan prioritizes Lance’s medical needs, binding his wound with Kate’s help. The two women load him onto the snowmobile, but the noise prevents conversation. Sheridan’s resentment simmers as she forces Kate to

accompany them, determined to uncover the truth later. The chapter ends with their tense departure, leaving readers to wonder about Lance and Kate’s relationship and whether Sheridan’s intervention will save him—or lead to further confrontation.

Chapter 31

Joe Pickett, a game warden, drives to the hospital in Rawlins to confirm the identity of Kate Shelford-Longden, a woman whose disappearance had caused widespread concern. Furious over his daughter Sheridan's heartbreak at the hands of Lance Ramsey, Joe struggles to contain his anger. Meanwhile, Marybeth expresses worry for Sheridan, who is grappling with her first serious romantic betrayal. Joe plans to send proof of Kate's survival to Governor Allen, anticipating the political spin that will follow. The tension is palpable as Joe prepares to confront the fallout of Kate's reappearance.

At the hospital, Joe finds Sheridan, Mark Gordon, and Kate in a tense standoff. Sheridan is visibly upset, while Kate remains aloof, seemingly indifferent to the chaos she's caused. Joe takes photos of Kate to send to the governor, emphasizing her safety. Gordon reveals Lance is in surgery, crediting Sheridan for saving his life, though she feels conflicted about it. Kate's defensive remarks about her lack of medical training further irritate the group, and Gordon chastises her for her lack of gratitude. The animosity between Kate and the others underscores the emotional toll of her disappearance.

Sheridan confides in Joe about her plan to publicly shame Kate on social media, revealing Kate's fear of viral backlash. Joe is taken aback but recognizes his daughter's pain and resolve. As he leaves, he reflects on the challenges of supporting adult children through heartbreak, wishing Marybeth were there to help. Meanwhile, Sheridan stays behind, determined to witness Kate's comeuppance. The chapter highlights Sheridan's resilience and the complex dynamics of family loyalty and revenge.

As Joe exits the hospital, he overhears Carol Schmidt, a patient, demanding to speak to law enforcement. She accuses Gaylan Kessel, a local windmill operator, of intentionally running her off the road. Intrigued, Joe steps in to hear her statement, hinting at a

larger conflict tied to the Encampment mill. This abrupt shift introduces a new mystery, suggesting Joe’s work is far from over. The chapter ends with a sense of unresolved tension, setting the stage for further investigation.

Chapter 32

In Chapter 32, titled *The Disappeared*, Joe meets Nate, Jeb Pryor, and a disheveled man named Wylie Frye in Pryor’s mill office. The group discusses the discovery of Kate, who had been hiding at Lance Ramsey’s cabin and was found by Joe’s daughter, Sheridan. Nate reveals a disturbing find—a leg band from a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service eagle, suggesting illegal activity involving the burning of eagles. The tension escalates as Nate hints at a larger conspiracy, while Pryor admits his mistaken theory that Kate had run off with a game warden. The scene sets the stage for an impending confrontation.

Meanwhile, Ted Panos and Gaylan Kessel drive toward Encampment, with Panos visibly shaken after a botched assassination attempt on the wrong elderly woman. Kessel berates Panos for his incompetence and drug use, threatening dire consequences if he fails again. Panos nervously cleans eagle feathers and blood from his sleeves, revealing their involvement in illegal wildlife activities. Kessel’s volatile behavior and Panos’s fear underscore the dangerous stakes as they prepare for another mission, with Kessel ominously instructing Wylie Frye to “hit the bricks.”

In a parallel scene, Encampment officer Jalen Spanks observes erratic driving from a truck on the highway, suspecting the driver is drunk. The brief interlude adds tension, hinting at the impending convergence of the storylines. Spanks’s distraction with pornography contrasts with the gravity of the unfolding events, emphasizing the unpredictability of the night. The chapter’s pacing quickens as the narrative threads begin to intertwine.

Back at the mill, Joe waits in his freezing truck, armed and ready for action. Nate’s text—“Get ready”—signals the approaching climax. Sheriff Neal’s delayed response to Joe’s earlier message adds urgency, as the characters brace for a confrontation. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, leaving readers anticipating the next move in the high-

stakes conflict involving illegal wildlife trade, mistaken identities, and impending violence.