

Chapter 3

Preparations

“Hey,” Jack pounded on the guest room door. “Let’s go.”

The room reminded Silver of a country bed and breakfast. Mary had stenciled the walls herself. Quilts were piled high on a cedar chest, ready for winter when they might be needed.

Silver wanted more sleep, but what he needed was coffee.

“Go where?” Silver replied, his eyes still closed.

“It’s Saturday.”

Jack was addicted to yard sales. He’d show up early for the finds, and then show up again in late afternoon to collect the bargains.

Soon, the two men were sitting in the double cab of Jack’s F-150 with Woolsey stretched out across the back bench seat.

“Soooo,” said Jack, scanning the roadside for hand-drawn signs, “going to Eden.”

“Yep,” echoed Silver, “going to Eden.” Then he turned to his friend, “Think it’s a mistake?”

“No. Of course not. Makes perfect sense, but you can’t expect Mary to like the idea. And you need to be careful.”

“I’m careful,” Silver assured his friend, but the truth was that Silver wasn’t careful. He didn’t pay attention. His mind was occupied with thoughts that flew around his head like ghosts in an attic.

Silver was relieved that Jack didn’t think Eden a bad idea. He valued Jack’s advice, although he often ignored it.

And Silver knew no one more honest than Jack. His friend could be blunt, with Mary sometimes stepping in to smooth things over when he ruffled feathers, but Silver counted on this. He didn’t need someone who cared about feelings. He needed someone to tell him the truth.

“You’re not careful,” said Jack. “You need to be careful.”

“Okay, okay.”

“For example, you didn’t buy ammo for the gun.”

“I told you, I didn’t know it had to be loaded.”

Jack took his eyes from the road to look at his friend. “You knew.”

“Maybe,” muttered Silver. At that moment Jack slowed and stopped behind a line of vehicles, mostly pickups, parked at the side of the road. Jack wasn’t the only one trying to snag the bargains before they got snatched up.

The house, set back a good distance from the road, looked like it might have begun as a mobile home, but then grew appendages as more space was needed. The entire contents had been moved outside, furniture and all. A gray bearded man in a hunting outfit sat at a card table, presiding over the sale.

“Anything in particular you boys lookin’ for?”

“Yeah,” replied Jack, pointing a thumb towards Silver. “He needs a holster.”

That got the man’s attention. “For what?”

Silver held out the gun.

“Shit,” said the man appreciatively, “nice firearm. A couple in the carton over there, but nothin’ big enough for that. Anything else?”

“Vinyl,” said Jack.

“Siding?”

“Records.”

“Sure, three boxes over there.” He pointed to another table. “Have a look. Or, you can take ‘em all for ten bucks.”

Jack had a collection of vinyl. It was a museum. Mary said she’d leave him if he brought home another box, so now he carried with him a list of missing titles. He walked quickly over to the nearby

table.

Silver didn't follow. He was curious about the man's plans. "Where you moving to?"

The bearded gentleman was happy to be asked the question, and his face took on a faraway look. "BadLands."

"Really?" Silver knew plenty of people who were moving, but none to the BadLands.

"Lived here all my life, but it sure as hell isn't where I belong. Making the move. Tired of people telling me what I can and can't do. Don't need that."

The BadLands was the largest of the zones geographically and the least densely populated. The zone encompassed the old states of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Its charter was unambiguous. No laws, no taxes, no legislature, no governor. Not even a capitol. Some thought of this as no government, but BadLanders saw it as government by the people.

If a road was needed, someone would build it and charge for its use. Private fire and police departments sprang up. It was a model that worked well in the early days of the American west, and there was no reason to think it wouldn't work now. It wasn't the absence of taxes that drew people to the BadLands, it was the promise of liberty without compromise.

The bearded man went on, "You go your whole life wanting freedom and being pissed-off that you can't get it. And then one day you wake up and everything's changed. Now there's a place for me." He shook his head. "Not easy pulling up roots, but I'm not lookin' back."

The BadLands wouldn't have been Silver's first choice, but he didn't imagine that the bearded man would be comfortable in Eden. Silver had noticed that, since passage of the amendment, people were doing a lot more talking about what they really wanted from life. He didn't think it was his imagination, and it didn't strike him as a bad

thing.

Silver didn't tell the man that he was heading for Eden.

A moment later Jack returned with a couple of albums, one of which he waved in Silver's face.

"Kink's fourth album, the one with Lola."

"You don't have that?"

"Look at it, Dan". Silver examined the record jacket. He saw a remaindered record album. It even had a price tag.

"You don't see anything special?"

Silver shook his head slowly, wary of a trick.

"Sealed in the original cellophane."

"Oh, yeah." Silver didn't see the big deal but was reluctant to admit it.

"See, that's what I mean, Dan. If you're going to Eden, you've got to pay attention to things. You've got to be aware."

Silver was about to protest, but stopped himself.

"I'll pay more attention."

"I wouldn't say it if we were talking about MetroZone, but Eden's another story."

"I hope so," replied Silver, a sly smile crossing his face.

There'd been a time when Jack Welsh would spend Friday evenings going through the local paper looking for yard sales. He'd map out locations, trying to come up with the most efficient route from one to the next. Now, with everyone on the move, this wasn't necessary. You couldn't drive five houses in any direction without seeing a 'for sale' or a 'yard sale' sign.

"Somebody'll have a holster," Jack assured his friend. Silver wasn't at all concerned.

By late morning, after more than a half-dozen stops, Jack was

feeling defeated. “Alright, let’s go to Davies’.”

J.M. Davies was a four-story brick building near the railroad tracks. It housed every imaginable piece of junk that human beings might want, but the true value of the place lay in J.M., the owner, knowing exactly where every item was. The place was packed with stuff, on shelves, in bins, hanging from hooks, or heaped on the floor.

“Sure,” said J.M., examining the gun. His office was a small room, more like a closet, with a Dutch door that let him view arriving customers. The office appeared even smaller than it was, with tall stacks of papers leaning against the walls. An ancient TV sat on a shelf within J.M.’s view, playing a pornographic movie from a Betamax on the shelf below.

J.M. took a photocopied map from a stack on his desk. He sketched a few lines and then made an ‘X’. “Third floor, fifth aisle on your right as you come in from the stairway. About two-thirds of the way down the aisle, one shelf up from the bottom. Just below the roller skates.”

The two men trekked up the rickety wooden stairway and found a bin full of leather holsters, some with belts. It wasn’t a difficult choice. One stood apart from the others. Not only was it big enough, but it was exquisitely tooled, depicting a shapely woman, naked except for a cowboy hat and the gun belt around her middle. Long curly hair hung down to hide her breasts.

“Just curious,” asked Silver, “but why didn’t we come here in the first place?”

“Because J.M.’s a fucking shark. If we found the holster at a sale, you might’ve paid a few bucks. J.M.’s going to get whatever he can from you.”

But when they returned to the downstairs office, Silver didn’t think the price was so bad, although it struck him as an odd amount, one-hundred thirteen dollars and forty cents.

“Eighty dollars for the belt and holster,” explained J.M., “and

thirty-three forty to cover what I lost at your friend's poker game last week." J.M. nodded in Jack's direction.

"J.M.'s a regular," Jack told Silver. "Shitty player but keeps coming back for more. Of course, if he won, I wouldn't invite him."

"But you're coming out way ahead," J.M. assured Silver. "You know what you'd pay for a thing like this new?"

Silver had no idea but could imagine it being a valuable item. The naked cowgirl was a unique piece of leatherwork. Silver strapped the belt around his middle and eased the six-gun into its new home. It could not have fit more perfectly.

"Looks good," announced Jack. "Let's let J.M. get back to playing with himself, and we'll grab some lunch. Then we can head over to the gun range."

Silver considered weaseling out of the shooting lesson, but he knew Jack wouldn't let him off the hook. Besides, he might enjoy firing the thing.

By late afternoon, the two men were back at Jack's place, relaxing in the poker room that Jack had built over the garage. The place was saturated with the odor of cigars even when no one was smoking. Its centerpiece was a felt-topped poker table seating seven. There were three large flat-screen TVs mounted on the walls, a bar, a refrigerator, a vintage slot machine, a humidor, and a variety of other items associated with manly pleasure. The chairs arranged around the poker table swiveled, so one could watch golf one minute and turn to watch football the next.

Silver had already lost several games of backgammon. He'd hoped to win just one, but it wasn't happening. He wasn't good at games, not caring enough about the outcome. Silver lit a joint. He was still nursing his first beer. Jack Welsh was finishing his third.

"You know that drives me crazy," said Welsh, never understanding how anyone could drink so slowly.

"Yeah," Silver held the nearly full bottle up to the light. "That's why

I do it.”

“Happy with the gun?”

Silver didn’t need time to consider. “Selling it when I get to Eden.”

Jack was surprised. “You handled it okay.”

“Hurt my shoulder. Wasn’t expecting the kick. I don’t need any more orthopedic problems.”

“Why don’t you get something more sensible. Maybe a small automatic.”

Silver shook his head. “Won’t need it in Eden.”

“Probably not,” Jack agreed. “When are you flying out?”

Silver looked up. “Driving.”

“No you’re not!”

“Why not?”

“You know how many zones you’d have to drive through?”

Silver started thinking about it, but it was good pot, and he couldn’t quite work out the answer. “How many?”

“I don’t know,” said Jack, after taking a moment to think about it.

“A fucking bluff!” Silver was convulsed. “You didn’t have a clue.”

“That’s not the point,” said Jack. “The point is that you have to cross a bunch of zones to get to Eden. Every zone’s got different rules and they’re changing every day.”

“It’s mostly highway.”

“You’ll have to get off to pee. Just fly. It’s easy. You can ship your crap out there when you find a place.”

Silver looked at his friend. “You think I’m getting on a fucking airplane?”

Jack knew it was a good point. The FAA had been dissolved. The agency’s functions were now performed locally within each zone,

except, of course, for the BadLands. No commercial flights stopped in the BadLands. No one had yet stepped up to operate the airports or staff air traffic control. There were, however, lots of small planes available for hire.

“Fucking disaster waiting to happen,” said Silver. “That’s one way I don’t want to go, falling out of the sky.”

“You might be right,” an unusual admission from Welsh.

“Besides, I’ll need a car in Eden.”

“Yeah,” said Jack slowly, as if still considering, “I suppose it’ll be okay. How long you going out for?”

Silver looked at his friend, squinting, which caused the creases around his eyes to deepen. “I’m going to live out there, Jack.”

The reality seeped in. The two might never see each other again. Jack hated traveling. He and Mary wouldn’t be coming out to Eden anytime soon. Silver was six years older than Jack. It was entirely possible that he might not be coming back east. Or, maybe it was just the beer. Beer was the god of maudlin thoughts.

Jack wasn’t considering only Silver’s mortality, but also his own. With the flick of a churchkey, Jack decapitated another beer. Death seemed like a problem that someone ought to solve.