

Chapter 4

On the Road

Silver was anticipating the joys of the open road as he left Jack and Mary's place, heading for Eden. But, tamping down his exuberance was Jack's voice, like some specter haunting his brain, warning him to pay attention. He'd been careful enough during the two hours it took to reach the turnpike entrance, but when Silver merged onto the highway, his elation was palpable. He had the sense that Eden lay just ahead.

Silver found it a chore to strap-on the heavy revolver each time he took a break to pee or needed coffee, but he dutifully put in the effort, not wanting to risk another encounter with the law. Jack had been right, of course, something smaller and lighter would have been more practical. Most people he saw at the rest stops carried the sort of disposable plastic pistol that the salesman at the gun shop had recommended. These were cheap, lightweight, and met the letter of the law. Silver wondered about the need he always felt to do things his own way. Once in the Prius and back on the highway, however, his attention returned to the oldies station on the XM radio and his thoughts drifted again to Eden.

In his younger days, he might have driven straight through the night, but by six, the more mature Silver was both hungry and tired. He stopped at a Best Western just off the highway. The room wasn't anything special, but it had a comforting familiarity. He flopped on the bed and shut his eyes for a moment. His body felt as if it was still rolling down the road. When he opened his eyes, he found himself gazing at the painting on the opposite wall. No, he hadn't seen this particular work before, an abstract, but he thought he recognized the hand of the artist. He imagined the man, or perhaps the woman, turning out canvas after canvas, working frantically to fill a void of vacant motel walls.

He breathed deeply, his fingers interlaced behind his head, resting

on the thick pillow. The roomed smelled of nothing, and that was exactly how Silver liked it. No cigarettes, no stale beer, not even the smell of disinfectant, an odor he particularly disliked.

Normally, Silver might have looked for a local diner after checking in, but the thought of having to carry the heavy gun dissuaded him. He called room service to order up to the room. The fried clams sounded good but were probably a mistake so far from the ocean.

Hanging up, Silver kicked off his sneakers, snatched the remote from where it lay on the counter, and rested his back against the headboard of the king bed. He clicked through more than a dozen stations before landing on the soothing voice of Katheryn Parks of the Newshour.

“And now our reporter Leslie Banks brings you the latest on the conflict in northern PacZone.”

“Thanks, Katheryn,” said the woman. Silver moved to the foot of the bed where he could see the picture more clearly. His son lived in the PacZone, but far to the south near Los Angeles. Still, he was concerned. The reporter wore a helmet and flack jacket. Silver thought it showy until a blast nearby caused the reporter to reflexively raise her shoulders, looking like a turtle retracting its head into its shell.

“As you can see behind me,” she went on, making an effort to appear nonplussed by the explosion, “PacZone militia have been shelling rebel positions in Baker City.”

The militia was no amateur force. It was a professional army financed partly by PacZone taxpayers but mostly by powerful west coast business interests. In fact, it was these businesses that made the zone tick. There was general agreement that the scheme worked well. The PacZone’s GDP was second only to China.

“I spoke with one of the rebel fighters earlier today,” said the reporter, as the image shifted to a scruffily bearded man in camouflage garb.

“Ain’t fair,” he told the reporter. “Everybody around here has BadLands blood in ‘em but our lives are ruled by a bunch of PacZone libs. We didn’t ask to be on the wrong side of the border. Nobody here’s a PacZoner, nobody here thinks like them people. And we sure as hell ain’t puttin’ up with it no more. Ain’t nobody going to tell me that my home’s not in the BadLands just because of some line on a map.”

The reporter nodded, not giving any indication that she thought the man unhinged. “How long do you think you can hold out against the PacZone militia?”

“They ain’t got enough rockets to kill us all. Every man, woman, and child in the BadLands is headed here to Baker City. BadLands folks all know we’re brothers and sisters and they ain’t going to let us down. We got a few thousand come here already and more’s on the way every day. That’s what the BadLands is all about, freedom. Ain’t nobody gonna bind us to laws, exceptin’ God.”

Silver could stand it no longer. He began yelling at the screen. “Just move to the BadLands, you stupid fuck!”

It was as if the reporter had heard Silver through the television ether. She asked, “If you feel so strongly about it, why not move to the BadLands?”

The man was primed for the question. He leaned towards the reporter, perhaps a bit threateningly, “Because this is my home, and nobody’s makin’ me leave the place where I been all my life. Everybody around here’s gonna tell you the same thing. We ain’t movin’. We’re standin’ our ground until Baker City is part of the BadLands.”

“Moron!” screamed Silver. “Just move the forty goddamned miles to the BadLands. It’s everything you fucking want!”

It was at this moment that he heard a knock. Silver remembered the fried clams he’d ordered. He muted the TV and opened the door.

Silver guessed that the girl with the tray was still in high school, likely making some extra money working evenings at the motel. She wore a white blouse, black vest embroidered with the name of the hotel, black pants, and a black leather shoulder holster. The gun itself, or at least the part that Silver could see sticking out of the holster, didn't match the rest of the outfit. The weapon was made of brightly colored plastic, molded in the shape of what looked to Silver like a Disney princess. He had no idea which one.

He held the door open for her as she set the tray on a round glass-topped table near the window. She pushed a small clipboard in his direction. He took the pen she offered, but instead of signing the bill, he held the pen aloft for a moment.

He pointed the tip towards her holstered gun. "Who is that?" Silver told himself that he wasn't flirting, just being friendly.

She smiled, drew the gun from its holster, and pointed it not exactly in Silver's direction. "Princess of Death. When you get to the tip line, most people leave twenty percent, but feel free to round up."

Silver nodded and signed, telling himself that he hadn't been intimidated.