

Chapter 6

A Side of Corn

“Hey babe,” Silver sang along with the XM radio, “take a walk on the wild side. And the colored girls go Doo do doo do doo do do doo...”

Silver felt more relaxed now. It was late afternoon on his third day out, and he was smack in the middle of the CornBelt. He no longer had to carry the heavy revolver with him every time he exited the Prius. There was no mandatory carry law in the CornBelt. Such a regulation would be unnecessary. All CornBelters carried. Foreigners could do as they pleased.

The zone had a simple business model, growing corn. Since morning, Silver had seen nothing but tall stalks on both sides of the highway. Occasionally the view was broken by a silo or a farmhouse.

What could be simpler? Farmers grew and harvested corn. The corn was processed into syrup, fuel, and fodder. Other zones paid good money for these products, and demand never flagged. CornBelters believed in God, the provider of corn, and regularly attended church. Laws were enforced. Theft was punished by prison time and killing by execution. Legislators proposing unnecessary laws were voted out of office. If a woman wanted an abortion, that was nobody’s business but her own. The job of legislators was to support the zone’s agribusiness economy and they stuck to that task.

Silver passed billboards every few miles advertising a place called ‘Mom’s New Truck City’, largest diner in the CornBelt. He loved a good diner. MetroZone had plenty of restaurants but Silver thought the zone lacked good old American diners.

A further sign declared ‘Biggest Restrooms in the CornBelt, next exit’. The claim was irresistible.

Silver cruised the mammoth parking lot a few minutes before finding a spot half a football field from the entrance. He walked with some urgency towards the low building of sparkling aluminum. Atop the structure were huge letters identifying the place as “Mom’s”.

Wide plate glass doors slid silently open as he neared the entrance. Silver walked purposefully inside and headed straight for the men’s room. Entering, he didn’t doubt the billboard’s claim. He was met by rows of sparkling stalls, urinals, sinks, and mirrors that converged in the distance like an art lesson on perspective. Hand dryers, sounding like jet engines, blasted tornadoes of superheated air. Silver took in the display of brilliant white enamel and reflective glass.

So popular was Mom’s that the dozens of urinals lining the wall were insufficient to meet the demand. Silver had to wait. But when he stepped up and began to pee, his sense of relief bordered on orgasmic. Silver allowed himself to feel the ecstasy. He was on his way to Eden. He was on top of the world.

Silver zipped up, washed, and slipped his hands into one of the drying machines. Only then did he realize how hungry he was and how long it had been since he’d eaten. He stepped out into a crowded corridor, his nose following the steamy aroma of diner food.

The dining area was no less busy than the restrooms. Hungry travelers queued for tables, but Silver spotted a vacant stool at the counter. He preferred that anyway.

A glass of ice water landed in front of him, much of its contents spilling onto the countertop. A thick laminated menu fell into the cold puddle.

Silver picked up the menu but didn’t give it his full attention. He was looking out the corner of his eye at the woman on the next stool.

“Like the tats?” she asked, clearly not unhappy about being

observed.

He put down the menu, turned to her, and shook his head. “To tell the truth, I was admiring the abs.”

The woman was wearing a stretchy pink halter top and frayed denim short-shorts. She was young. Silver wasn’t sure how young, nowadays everyone looked young, but he guessed no more than twenty-five.

“Thanks.” She sliced a piece of the rib-eye on her plate. “Doesn’t come easy, you know. Takes dedication.”

“I know.” Silver had worked on his abs for years. He could never get that kind of definition. But maybe she was right. Maybe he hadn’t given it his all.

Even sitting, he could see that she was a couple of inches taller than he was and gym-rat slender. Long purple hair fell down her back with lipstick to match, and she was wearing pink heels. Much of her exposed skin was covered with colorful tattoos. She had the advertising space, and she wasn’t about to waste a single square inch.

Silver liked tattoos, but not on himself. A tattoo was a commitment; something that Silver had avoided since his second divorce.

“Gwendolyn,” she said, extending her hand. The naked arm was bright with jungle animals.

“Dan.” He felt the firmness of her grip.

The waitress was standing, pen in one hand and order pad in the other. “What’ll it be?”

Silver turned his attention to the menu, flipping a few thick pages.

“Need a minute?”

“No, I got it.” He was afraid that if the waitress disappeared, she’d never be back. “Eggplant parm dinner.”

She scribbled on the pad.

“French, thousand island, or balsamic?”

“Thousand island. And a side of corn.”

She held her pen in the air. “No corn. Parm comes with fries.”

“Fries are good, but I want a side of corn.”

Now, the waitress looked at him, something she hadn’t done until this moment. She tucked the pen and pad into the big pocket of her apron.

“No corn on the menu.” The woman was annoyed. She was middle aged, tired of the work, and thinking about getting on the road herself

“It’s a craving,” he explained.

“Listen asshole,” she said, speaking to him in a whisper loud enough to be heard by all, “you can’t have corn because corn isn’t on the menu. We don’t have corn.”

But Silver couldn’t let it go. “How can you not have corn? I’ve been driving through corn for the past day and a half. Nothing out there but corn.”

The woman was dumbstruck. “You think you can eat that shit?!”

“Could you just check with the kitchen?”

That was it. The woman lost it. She reached for the automatic tucked in her apron.

She wasn’t fast enough. The muzzle of Gwendolyn’s pistol pressed against her cleavage.

“Get him a side of okra,” Gwendolyn told the waitress.

The woman gave the purple-haired Gwendolyn a withering look, but put the gun back in her apron pocket. She turned and called out the order.

“Okra?” asked Silver when the waitress had disappeared.

“Very healthy,” she told him. “A superfood.”

Silver nodded. “Can I see that?” He gestured towards the gun she’d just holstered.

Gwendolyn smiled. “Sure, it’s new. iShot 2. Fucking amazing.” She handed it to him. “You should get one.”

Silver examined the weapon, turning the object over in his hands. The finish was reflective as a mirror, the rounded edges pure elegance. He looked puzzled. “How do you load it?”

Gwendolyn took the gun from him. She touched a spot at the bottom of the grip. The magazine silently slid downward.

“Whole new technology. Magnetic propulsion. Totally silent. Amazing shit.”

Having been an engineer, Silver couldn’t help admiring the design. In its own way it was elegant as his own six-shooter.

“Model-1 sucked. Way underpowered. But this one’s all battery. And they added fingerprint recognition. Great fucking product.”

The waitress dropped two heavy plates on the counter and quickly disappeared.

“Where you headed?” Gwendolyn asked.

Silver smiled. He enjoyed saying it. “Eden.”

“Me too. I’ll catch a ride with you.”

It wasn’t what he was expecting.

“I don’t understand. How did you get here without a ride?”

“Boyfriend. Asshole took off on me. We made a pit stop here and he just disappeared. Car was gone with all my shit. Who does a thing like that? Taking off without a word. Real fucking scumbag.”

Once again, Silver heard the whisper of Jack’s voice. It suggested that the boyfriend might have had his reasons.

“Doesn’t matter,” she went on. “He was an asshole, and you and me are going to have a great time.”

Silver was still readjusting his brain. She looked at him.

“You need to think about this? You’re heading for Eden. What’s there to think about?”

He supposed she was right.

“Look at me,” she said, sliding off the stool and posing a bit to show off her body. “I’m your fucking dream.”

She was. The tats, the abs, the hair. Maybe not everybody’s dream, but definitely Silver’s. She was exactly why he was headed for Eden.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she offered.

He looked at her, wondering if she did.

“It’s the money, isn’t it? You been saving for Eden and you’re afraid I’m gonna lighten your funds.”

He didn’t have to say anything. She’d guessed right.

“Listen,” said Gwendolyn, “I get it, but you don’t want to be thinking about money now.” She rotated on the stool, leaned towards him, and whispered in his ear. “You’re going to die. Maybe tomorrow, maybe in ten years, but it’s going to happen. You really want to leave anything on the table?”

It was exactly the conversation he’d had so often with himself. The woman might as well have been eavesdropping on his brain. He’d had a good career, loved his kids, was on good terms with both his ex’s, had friendships he valued, and old girlfriends who occasionally popped back into his life. It wasn’t bad at all, but he wanted more. He wanted it all. Because there would be a time when it would end and what followed was absolutely nothing. So what could he possibly be afraid of?

Silver watched as a long pink tongue emerged slowly from Gwendolyn’s mouth revealing the line of pearls riveted to its surface.

“Check,” he called out.

The waitress ripped two pages from the pad and dropped them on the counter. Gwendolyn handed hers to Silver.

“Just one thing,” she said. “No politics. I’ve had it up to here with politics.”