

Chapter 14

A Side Trip

Silver watched as Gwendolyn checked her phone again. She'd been doing this all morning.

"Problem?" he asked.

"No, not really."

They were making good time. They'd reached Ogalalla and were nearly out of the CornBelt.

"I'm thinking that we should just stay on 80," she said. "Take the northern route through Salt Lake."

He looked over at her, surprised at the suggestion. "That's kind of out of the way, isn't it? I wanted to stop in Denver to buy pot. And you can replace your stuff."

"You don't want to swim in the Salt Lake?"

"Not really. 80 takes us through the BadLands. Not sure I want to drive through the BadLands."

What Silver meant was that he definitely did not want to set foot in the BadLands, a place where lawlessness was celebrated.

"Come on, don't you want to see what it's like?"

"Thought you wanted to get to Eden."

"Sure, but it'd be fun to drive through the BadLands."

Silver shook his head. She looked again at the phone.

"Tell you what," she said, "take 80 and I'll give you a freebee. No charge."

"No charge like last night?"

"No, no charge like absolutely free. I'm serious. And, tell you what, you get the keys to the back door. My ass is all yours if you take

route 80. And you're going to like it."

They passed a huge overhead sign announcing that the highway would split in two miles.

"Great offer," he said, "but there's no way I'm driving through the BadLands."

"Come on, Dan. Let yourself go."

"You want to tell me what this is about?"

She held the phone screen towards him. He snuck a peek and saw a map.

"It's the FindMy app. Been tracking my bags. I'm going to kill that son-of-a-bitch when I catch up with him."

Jack's voice was screaming in Silver's brain. The answer was no, definitely no.

"Forget the bags. We'll replace your stuff in Denver. I'm not going to the BadLands."

That's when he looked over and saw her iShot Model-2 pointed directly at him.

"Oh, are you fucking serious?"

"You know the answer to that question, baby, but I can give you a demonstration if you want." She pointed the gun at the radio.

"It's okay," he said, "I believe you."

He took the north fork just past Big Springs to stay on 80.

Gwendolyn put the gun away.

Silver thought it was a shame. He liked her, but this was too much. He'd have to cut her loose, when he could, if he could.

It wasn't long before they passed a large sign erected on the median. "Welcome to the BadLands. No laws."

On the other side of the highway, Silver saw a long line of traffic backed up at the border crossing into the CornBelt. On his own side

of the road, there was no barrier. There was little point in preventing people from entering a place with no laws. Still, traffic slowed as the road beyond was rutted and broken. Silver found himself dodging huge potholes.

Consulting her phone once more, Gwendolyn announced that they'd be taking the Cheyenne exit. From there, she directed Silver to Route 25 north, and then Central Avenue west. Silver found it an odd landscape, a mix of the usual strip malls and fast-food joints with post-apocalyptic ruins. Traffic lights were dark and abandoned cars were everywhere, most with tires removed and some blackened by fires. Armed guards were posted outside storefronts.

"Fucking mess," noted Gwendolyn.

Silver thought of the man with the yard sale near Jack and Mary's place. He imagined a guy like that not wanting have anything to do with a city like Cheyenne. He'd be off on some plot of prairie far from civilization, sitting on his front porch, surveying miles of nothing. He guessed that people in the BadLands didn't much care about cities like Cheyenne.

"BadLands might be a mess," Silver agreed, "but lots of people have been heading here."

Gwendolyn wasn't listening. Her eyes were fixed on the iPhone.

"Hey, pull in over there." She pointed to the parking lot of an Arby's. It was about three in the afternoon and the lot was empty except for a black Lexus with heavily tinted windows.

Gwendolyn was out of the car as soon as Silver pulled into a space.

She strode quickly towards the Lexus. Silver wasn't sure whether he should stay in the Prius. She'd said nothing about it. After a few seconds, he decided to follow.

Gwendolyn pulled open the driver door of the Lexus. The man inside had been about to take a bite of his roast beef sandwich. The surprise on his face was evident.

He lowered the sandwich. “Hey, Gwen. I looked all over for you. Didn’t know where you went.”

“Can the bullshit.” She was holding the iShot to his temple.

“Okay, okay, just take the stuff. Take my half too if you want. Just don’t fucking kill me.”

“You know where we are?” she asked him, the gun still pointed at his brain.

“The BadLands.”

“And do you know what happens to me if I kill you?”

He didn’t answer.

She pushed the muzzle against the side of his skull.

“What happens?” she repeated.

“Nothing.”

“Right.”

She stood for a while this way. The man was about her age, or maybe a few years older, with a mustache, muscles, and plenty of straw-colored hair peeking out from below a big white cowboy hat. He wore an embroidered shirt and string tie.

“Now, very slowly, pop the trunk.”

The man reached for a place under the dash, and an instant later the trunk flew open.

“Hey, Dan,” she called out to Silver. “Do me a favor? There are some suitcases in back there. Can you grab them and put them in our car?”

He thought it presumptuous that she referred to the Prius as ‘our car’, but he did as she asked.

She spoke again to the man in the cowboy hat. “Don’t move a muscle. Understand? Not one muscle.”

It wasn’t easy getting four more bags into the Prius. When he was

done, the trunk was full and the back seat was piled high. He walked back to where Gwendolyn stood by the Lexus.

The man in the cowboy hat was looking straight ahead. He didn't want to provoke the woman pointing a gun at his head.

"Excuse me," said Silver to Gwendolyn. He said it quietly. He didn't want to startle her when she had a finger on the trigger.

"What?" she asked, without taking her eyes off the man.

Silver spoke close to her ear, not wanting to be overheard. "I'm not sure what your plans are, but I'd prefer if you didn't kill the guy."

"Are you kidding? He fucking stole my shit."

"I didn't steal it, honey," the man said, being careful not to move his head, "I left, and the stuff was in the car."

"Same fucking thing," she replied, pressing the muzzle more firmly against his temple. "If you got any last words, this is the time."

"Come on, honey."

Gwendolyn pulled the gun away from the man's head and turned it slightly before pulling the trigger. The weapon made absolutely no noise, but the windshield exploded.

"Oh, come on, baby," pleaded the man.

The gun was pressed again to his temple. "Let's hear those last words."

The man said nothing. He seemed paralyzed.

"Listen, Gwendolyn," Silver whispered. "If you kill him I'm pretty sure I won't be able to have sex with you. I just don't think I could get past it."

"You sure, Dan, baby? It might be a turn-on."

"No, it would definitely be a problem. I'm sure."

She directed her attention back to the man in the car. "Give me the fucking keys and don't try anything."

He leaned back in the seat, reached into his trouser pocket, and fished out an electronic key fob.

“Drop it on the ground.”

He did. She pointed the gun and put a bullet through the fob where it lay on the asphalt.

“Oh, shit,” said the man.

She raised the gun to his head once more. “Scumbag!”

The man’s eyes were closed.

“Please,” said Silver, “I’m really going to have a hard time dealing with this.”

She waited a few seconds, shot out what remained of the windshield, and then put a bullet in each tire.

“You should thank my friend here,” she said to the man in the cowboy hat. “He fucking saved you.”

“Thanks,” the man said to Silver, barely able to choke out the word. “She’s really fucking crazy.”