

Chapter 16

Precious Cargo

“Did you think I was going to kill him?”

The two had been riding in silence. Silver was focused on navigating the broken road. Gwendolyn surveyed the ruins around them. Smoke rose from trash cans, stores were boarded up, and those that remained open were heavily guarded. Armed groups of young men roamed the streets. Residents emerged furtively from apartments to buy necessities and return to their homes. Cheyenne looked like a city under siege. Gwendolyn’s phone recited directions that would take them out of this wasteland and on to Denver.

“Of course I thought you were going to kill him. You said you were going to kill him.” Silver sounded annoyed.

She looked at him. “Come on, Dan, baby, you really think I’m that kind of person?”

Silver looked straight ahead, watching for potholes. “I haven’t a clue what kind of person you are. How could I possibly know that?”

She smiled. “Come on, baby. I like you.” Her hand fell into his lap.

“I need to concentrate. This fucking road’s a mess.”

She let her fingers play on the denim folds. “I’m serious. I like you. You’re a nice guy. I always end up with such shits.”

“Like Tex, there, in the Lexus?”

“Yeah, like Tex. He seemed like a good guy. We made a few movies together. I was hoping it would work out.”

“Well, I just can’t do this, Gwendolyn. I don’t do well with stress. It makes me physically ill. I’m going to have to leave you in Denver. I’ll drop you at the airport.”

There was silence, and then the sound of sniffing. Silver didn’t look. Jack was shouting at him from that place in the back of his

brain.

“Really,” she said, “how many times can one person be abandoned?”

Although he didn’t look, he could imagine the tears rolling down her cheeks. He reminded himself that she was a performance artist.

She took her hand from his lap and used the palm to wipe her face. “I thought it would work out for us.”

When he said nothing, she tried a different tack.

“I’ve got a friend we can stay with in Denver.”

“A friend like Tex.”

“Not like Tex. Old girlfriend. Absolutely beautiful. Tam’s truly a wonder. Inside and out.”

Silver turned onto Route 25 south as they reached the outskirts of Cheyenne. He continued to drive slowly as he dodged the ever-present potholes. It seemed to him that these roads in the BadLands would be impassable after a few more years of inattention. He imagined that the BadLanders didn’t care. In fact, he thought these people might be happier having a natural barrier against visitors. Silver, himself, didn’t much care as it wasn’t far to the border where they would cross into the HighLands.

The HighLands was one of a handful of zones that, like Eden, had been formed from a single state, in this case, Colorado. The name was a playful reference to both the state’s mountains and its reputation for recreational drug use.

“And you know what, baby?” Gwendolyn waited a moment for a response that didn’t come, “I bet she’ll be up for a threesome. I’m sure she will. That would be something special, Dan baby. With Tam, believe me, that would be special.”

Silver felt himself weakening. She hadn’t actually shot Tex, and fucking at the Ramada had been just as amazing as she’d promised.

It was a mistake not to cut her loose. He knew it was a mistake. She

was crazy trouble, and yet he'd already decided that he wasn't going to drop her at the airport.

"You know," she said, "I'm serious about taking you on as a project. As an artist, I feel an obligation."

He remained steadfastly quiet.

"Come on, Dan baby, don't play games. You're looking for something, and you know that I can take you there."

Silver looked over at her. "Yeah, what am I looking for?"

"Sex."

"It just so happens," he said, a bit defensively, "that I've had plenty of sex."

She laughed. "We're not talking about quantity, baby. We're talking about quality. We're talking about depth of experience. You know what I'm talking about."

"Think so?" he said, acting as if she hadn't nailed it.

"Yeah. Some people want money, some want power, or enlightenment. I know what you want, and you're worried that you're going to die before you get it."

"I'm only seventy," he said defensively. Silver had lost perspective on exactly how old that was. It wasn't as if he was going to die tomorrow.

"Fine," she said. "Pretend you've got all the time in the world. But I can feel how much you want it. I can smell it oozing out your pores."

Silver suppressed an urge to lift a forearm to his nose and take a whiff.

"You're going to Eden, aren't you?" she said.

Silver had to concede that this was a pretty good argument.

Gwendolyn turned towards him, watching his eyes dart from one to

the other of the potholes ahead. “Listen, Dan honey, people like you and me need each other. It’s called symbiosis.”

Silver said nothing. He wasn’t really listening. His brain had moved on to thoughts of the threesome with Tam and Gwendolyn, whoever Tam was.

“Shit,” said Silver, slowing to a stop. The road ahead was backed-up as far as he could see. Clearly, they’d reached the border. A long trail of brake lights glowed in the twilight.

Gwendolyn slid her seat back and put her feet up on the dash. She turned up the music. “Got any more of that pot?”

Silver shook his head. “Out. We can pick up some in Denver.”

Gwendolyn sighed. The Prius crept ahead.

The question just popped into Silver’s head. “Why did you take his stuff?”

Gwendolyn thought for a moment. “Tex?”

Silver nodded.

“He told me to.”

“You were pointing a gun at him.”

She smiled, recalling this. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Anything in those bags going to get us in trouble.”

“No,” she replied quickly; too quickly. “Relax, babe, it’s all good.”

Out the corner of his eye, he watched her fingers snap and her body gyrate. She’d cranked up the XM radio. “Girls,” she sang, “just want to have fun.”

There was nothing to do now anyway. They were stuck in the line of cars. There was no way out.

“Hey,” Gwendolyn turned to Silver, raising her voice to be heard over the radio, “what does it actually feel like to be old? Just curious.” The question sounded entirely sincere. He didn’t take

offense.

“Well, physically, it sucks. Things go wrong. You fix one thing and something else goes. Got two titanium hips. But mentally, it’s a different story. I’m twenty-seven in my head.”

The age he’d named was so specific that she was inclined to believe the claim.

“You think it’s like that for everybody?”

He was surprised at her question. It was his experience that younger people had little interest in the topic.

“Haven’t done a survey, but who you are jells somewhere in your twenties.”

She mulled the idea.

“In my case, twenty-seven,” he went on. “You just need to ignore the shell.”

“So, the other night I was fucking a twenty-seven year old guy?”

He laughed at that. “No, of course not. I keep in shape, but there are limits. I’m saying that if our brains fucked, you’d think mine was twenty-seven.”

“That a thing? Brain fucking.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

Up ahead the traffic separated into a half-dozen lanes. It looked like the sort of place where tolls had once been collected, but such places had long ago disappeared. Silver slowed, choosing what he thought was the shortest line. It would make no difference. The cars were creeping.

Gwendolyn turned to kneel on her seat, reaching for one of the bags lying in back. Slipping a hand inside, she grabbed her zone ID. Silver was already clutching his.

The federal government had tried once to mandate a national identity card but the Supreme Court had quickly struck that down.

Instead, cards were issued by the Zone Consortium, a private organization funded cooperatively by the zones. Carrying the ID wasn't required, but one couldn't cross from one zone to another without it. The card was embossed with a holographic image of its owner. The BadLands didn't participate in the consortium, of course, but BadLanders were permitted to purchase an ID from the consortium if they wanted to travel.

"What bullshit," Gwendolyn complained.

The officers standing outside on both sides of the car, a woman on the driver side and a man on the passenger side, didn't look like police. They wore matching light blue polo shirts embroidered in white with the acronym 'ZEA', zonal enforcement officer. They did, however, carry holstered pistols. Silver pushed a lever that rolled down the windows.

The officers were not government workers. Zones were corporations. The 'officers' were privately employed security guards charged with controlling access to the property of the corporation.

The female officer took a picture of each ID with her smartphone. It took only a few seconds for the app to flash green. The officer's male colleague was looking around in the back of the Prius. The two conferred for a moment.

"What's in the bags, Miss?" the female officer asked Gwendolyn, pointing to the back seat.

"Just my stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

Silver was beginning to worry.

"Mostly costumes," she told the officer, "I act."

"No chance you're carrying chips?"

"Chips?" Gwendolyn looked bewildered.

"Electronic components," the other officer explained.

She shook her head. "Take a look if you want."

The female officer opened the back door of the Prius, leaned in, and unzipped one of the bags. Inside, folded neatly, was a nurse's uniform, under that, a plaid school uniform, and beneath that, a maid's outfit, complete with feather duster and pleated white cap.

Silver was relieved. They wouldn't get in trouble for the costumes.

The officer looked at Gwendolyn, who shrugged. "I told you, I act."

Horns sounded behind them. People were growing impatient. The officer appeared to accept the explanation, closed the bag, not bothering to latch it, and handed back the IDs. Silver didn't lose any time driving on from the checkpoint.

"Hate these fucking borders!" he complained.

"I thought you said you weren't political."

"Was that political? I didn't mean it to be. Anyway," he continued, "you probably don't know much about it, but these chips they're looking for are the new diamonds. Can't make a thing without them, and since the Taiwan reunification deal, China's sitting on the world's supply."

"In that case," said Gwendolyn, "I'll buy you dinner when we get to Denver."

He looked at her, not quite understanding.

"The bags are loaded with processors. Totally the latest stuff. Help me get rid of 'em and I'll cut you in."

Silver was silent. He was thinking about how close they'd come to being in real trouble.

"Took 'em as payment for our last movie. Fucking backers ran out of cash but they offered us the chips. Don't think it'll be hard to turn them over. I'm serious. Help me get rid of these babies and I'll cut you in big."

Silver didn't reply, but at least now he knew why Gwendolyn had

taken Tex's bags. It was just dumb luck that she hadn't gotten both of them locked up. He thought again about dropping her at the airport.

Neither of them spoke for a couple of minutes.

"Fucking awesome!" Gwendolyn broke the silence. She pointed out her window.

Silver looked. For days he'd been driving through corn country and prairie. Now mountains filled the view to the west, peaks rising everywhere in the distance.

Gwendolyn was right. It was awe inspiring. Silver felt himself being dragged from his funk. "Beautiful," he said.

"Stick with me, and I'll show you plenty of beautiful."

Silver looked to his left at the plains that lay to the east, and then again to the right where snow-capped mountains filled the sky. It was a boundary between worlds and Silver was riding on the edge. Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing to stop worrying so much.

"I'll let Tam know we're coming." Gwendolyn searched her contacts and made the call. Silver listened to the ring. Gwendolyn had the phone on speaker.

"Gwen, darling," the voice answered. The word actually sounded like 'dahlink'. Silver thought Asian but wasn't sure which Asian.

"Yeah, how you doing, beautiful?" Gwendolyn replied.

There was a whispery laugh on the other end. "I been missing you, darling."

"Miss me no more. I'm heading your way. Still at the same place?"

"Same, baby, 1012 Alameda."

"I'm bringing a friend."

There was silence. "Not that asshole cowboy." Her lilting voice gave the word 'asshole' a certain delicate quality. "You can't bring him. That guy's got the fucking worst karma."

“No, baby, I told Tex to walk. Dan’s a nice guy, you’ll like him.”

“So, what’s he doing with you, darling?”

Gwendolyn looked over at Silver before she replied, “I’m helping him achieve his potential.”

A low laugh came through the speaker.

“Be there in a couple of hours, baby,” Gwendolyn went on. “Just passed Fort Collins.”

“Ciao,” said the woman.

“Ciao,” replied Gwendolyn, ending the call.

She turned to Silver. “You’re going to like her.”

Silver had no reason to doubt it.