

Chapter 20

The Movies

Silver woke in the huge round bed sometime after 11AM. Sunlight streamed into the bedroom of Tam's apartment as the naked and tattooed Gwendolyn pulled the curtain aside from the picture window, revealing a sweeping view of downtown Denver and the snowcapped mountains beyond. Tam was nowhere to be seen.

Silver made no move to rise but closed his eyes against the intrusive sunlight. He wanted to remain in the sensual world of the previous night, to feel the touch of flesh, to experience the rush of orgasm. The reality of morning could wait.

Gwendolyn returned to the bed and lay next to him. Silver inhaled the wet odor of sex and sweat that clung to her body. His eyes slowly opened. His mouth welcomed her kiss.

"So?" she asked, looking into his face when their lips parted.

Silver smiled. "Fucking amazing. Absolutely fucking amazing."

Looking around, he saw that the cameras had retreated to their places along the walls. The monitor on which Silver had observed himself the previous night now displayed a large image of van Gogh's *Starry Night* complete with an ornate frame. A second monitor displayed an image of Tahitian women by Gauguin.

"And it gets even better," she assured him. "You just have to trust me, Dan honey. I know all about this shit."

It was clear to Silver that she did. He remembered a threesome he'd had in college so many years ago. It was a fumbling affair with none of the participants really understanding the mechanics, although all three had been quite proud of having done it. Silver thought it interesting, rules that applied to everything else didn't apply to sex. If you want to get your car fixed right, you go to a mechanic. If you want to sue someone, you find a lawyer. If you want any kind of job done right, you go to a professional— except in the case of sex,

where amateurism was celebrated. Really, thought Silver, what sense did it make to trust something as important as sex to amateurs? It was just another example of sex not being given the respect it deserved.

But now, of course, there was a place where sex was given its due. That was Eden, a zone made for people like Silver who believed that sex lay at the very core of human existence, who understood that orgasm was the sole truly transcendent experience within reach of anyone.

“I need coffee,” he said, leaning back on his hands to prop himself on a pile of pillows. He glanced down at Lance shriveled between his legs.

“I’ll make some,” said Gwendolyn, sliding off the bed.

“Where’s your friend?”

“Locked in her office. She doesn’t like to be bothered when she’s working. Best to leave her alone.”

Silver wasn’t quite sure what kind of work Tam was doing but his need for coffee tempered his curiosity.

Gwendolyn, still naked, left the room. Silver thought about rising, but when he moved, his back muscles rebelled. “Jesus,” he said aloud as he leaned back again. He flexed his spine a few times and decided that he’d be fine if he popped a few Aleve. And his thighs burned. He rubbed the side of his jaw. That hurt too. He tried to remember what exactly he’d been doing.

It was not until Gwendolyn returned with mugs of steaming coffee that Silver made a serious attempt to sit up.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.” He sat on the edge of the bed sucking down the coffee. He felt better once the caffeine hit his veins.

“You did a good job last night, baby. You sure you’re okay?”

“Fine,” he insisted. He stood and tested both legs. Then arched his

back. “Yeah,” he said, “fine.”

“Why don’t you get cleaned up?” Gwendolyn motioned towards the open bathroom door. “We can drive up into the mountains.”

He looked at her. “I thought we were going to Eden.”

“Plenty of time for that,” she assured him, but then read the doubt on his face. “Listen, honey, we’re not done here. Just take it easy. We’ll get to Eden. Anyway, you’ll want to see what Tam’s cooking up.”

A half hour later the two headed down to the parking garage where they’d left the Prius.

“Like waffles?” she asked.

He nodded. It occurred to him that waffles were exactly what he wanted. He conjured the sweet buttery smell of batter on the griddle.

The Waffle House wasn’t far, and Gwendolyn knew the way.

“I’ve stayed with Tam a bunch of times before,” Gwendolyn explained. “The woman’s fucking brilliant. A little friction when I brought Tex here last time. Those two were oil and water.”

“Yeah,” said Silver, “I can picture that.”

Gwendolyn told Silver to go slow and then pointed to a parking spot along the street where Silver pulled in.

“I’ve got a craving for waffles,” she told him. “You know how that is, right?”

Silver smiled at her. “Yeah, I know how that is.” Silver was a creature of cravings. Coffee, Cadbury Bars, grilled Swiss and tomato sandwiches, pot, sex, and— waffles. Everything except alcohol and cigarettes. He hated cigarettes. Both his parents had been smokers. He went to school with clothes reeking of cigarettes. Hated it. Never once touched a cigarette. Never wanted to. His antipathy was so strong that he wouldn’t have sex with a woman who smoked, at least if he was aware that she did.

Silver held the door open for Gwendolyn. The wonderful smell of the waffles hit him even before he followed her in. The place had a smell so thick you could swallow it.

They took a table near the back.

The waitress delivered a couple of menus. Silver spent some time deciding whether he wanted his waffles topped by blueberries or strawberries. He'd heard that blueberries were healthier, but he liked strawberries.

When the waitress came back, Silver made a quick decision and went with strawberries. Gwendolyn ordered a waffle with scoop of vanilla ice cream. Both ordered coffee. The woman scribbled on her pad and departed.

"So," Gwendolyn laid a hand on Silver's wrist, "you were okay with last night? It was pretty good, right?"

"I told you, it was the best."

He looked at her across the table. Her face told the story. It hadn't hardened, exactly, but her expression meant business. He'd forgotten. Totally forgotten the economic nature of their relationship. He didn't feel bad so much as he felt foolish.

"I'm really glad you liked it, Dan, honey."

"How much?" he asked, smiling a bit sheepishly.

"A grand."

Silver looked surprised. He'd expected to be charged more than last time.

"I told you I was going to be fair with you. I don't know why you have so much trouble believing me."

"Actually," said Silver, "on balance, I do believe you. So far, your track record's not bad."

"So, you're okay?"

He looked at her. "Yeah, I'm great. No complaints."

They held up their phones. Apps on the two devices shook hands invisibly across the ether and a grand passed between them.

She looked at him. “Gotta question.”

“Sure,” he said, “shoot.”

“You think it’s important to be liked?”

“Liked by who?”

“Liked in general. To be a likable person.”

Silver considered this. The question was unexpected.

“No,” he replied, “low on the list of important things. Why?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Somebody said I wasn’t likable.”

“Who?”

“Doesn’t matter. Someone. I know I’m not nice to people. I’ve thought about trying to be nicer, but I just don’t want to. I don’t feel it.”

“Well, you can’t go around trying to please people. You’ll lose yourself.”

“Yeah, I know, but sometimes I think I should change.” She looked at him across the table.

“A lot of who we are comes out of our childhood. I’m sure you had your share of shit growing up.” Silver took a moment to reflect. “*I* certainly did.” Silver didn’t particularly like thinking about it. His parents had been deeply unhappy people trapped in a bad relationship. Growing up, he had been the principal target of their dissatisfactions. It had taken Silver years to understand this and many more years to move beyond it.

Gwendolyn considered. “Not really. My folks were great when I was a kid, still are. Gave me whatever I wanted. Always encouraged me.” She leaned across the table. “It’s just that I’ve got a nasty streak. I know I’ve got it. I can feel it. I can’t help it. No idea where it comes from. But I think it puts people off.”

Silver gave a half-laugh. "I really wouldn't worry about it." Then he considered a moment longer. "I wonder if it serves some purpose," he suggested. "Maybe you see a benefit in keeping people at a distance."

She looked at him, a big surprised. The suggestion made sense.

"An artist might need the space," he went on. "Or maybe it's something else."

Gwendolyn brightened. She'd told Silver that she was an artist, but hadn't thought that he really believed her.

He looked at her across the table. "It's taken me a lifetime to figure out why I do some of the things I do. And I'm still not sure I understand."

"Thanks," she said, appearing reassured.

"And, if it matters, I like you."

"Do you? And you don't mind that I'm charging you for sex?"

Silver laughed. He was thinking about his two marriages and a long string of relationships.

"To tell you the truth, I've always paid for sex one way or another. Paying in cash simplifies things."

She looked at him, a bit surprised. "You know, Dan baby, that's pretty cynical."

"It is, isn't it?" he agreed. "Turns out that I've got a cynical streak, one of those things I've learned about myself, but someone with a nasty streak ought to be able to handle that."

She reached out a hand across the table and laid it on top of Silver's. It was a hand alive with wriggling Rousseau snakes. "I like you too, baby."

After breakfast, the two headed back out to the Prius and drove through the wide busy streets of what had once been a cattle town but was now a busy metropolis. They headed north, past the old

state capitol building. Silver slowed to take a look. It was big granite building with tiered columns, topped by a dome, a contrast with the new zonal authority building that had been built a block away. The new structure was a tall glass prism that soared into the sky. Its name, HighLands Zonal Authority, was projected holographically in front of the building at about the level of the 50th story. Lasers created the illusion of huge metallic letters thirty feet high simply hanging in the air. The building had become an instant tourist attraction when it opened.

The old statehouse wasn't exactly a museum. It was still populated by representatives of the people. These elected officials continued to pass laws, but nothing of consequence. All matters related to money were handled by the zonal authority, a division of the HighLands Corporation. That left few decisions to be made by the state assembly.

Not that anyone in the assembly cared. They were being paid to maintain the appearance that the Colorado state government still functioned and still mattered. They were much like the actors at Colonial Williamsburg, providing a living demonstration of how things had once been. Anyone with an inclination to power stayed as far from the Statehouse as possible.

Power lay in the in the crystal prism that rose skyward on the next block. That's where people of ambition competed for positions in the Highlands Corporation. Gone was the corruption and incompetence that resulted from selecting officials by means of elections that were generally no more than beauty contests or measures of party loyalty.

And it was clear that the HighLands was thriving under corporate stewardship. The HighLands Zonal Authority was a model of efficiency. Few were nostalgic for the deadlock that had once gripped state government, assuring that nothing useful ever got done.

Silver drove past the Convention Center, Union Station, Larimer

Square, and Coors Park. They could have taken the highway north, but Silver wanted to see the city. He'd had enough of highways for a while. Gwendolyn got them out to Lyons, northwest of the city, and from there Silver followed route 36 out to the mountains.

Silver wasn't a stranger to the territory. He'd skied there back when the HighLands was still Colorado, but he'd always come in winter. Silver drove back and forth across dizzying mountain switchbacks, each turn taking them higher into the Rockies and offering ever more spectacular views. They drove through thick pine forests, surrounded by trees that grew more gnarled and stunted as the Prius climbed, and finally the car emerged above the tree line into sunlight so bright that Silver had to squint until his eyes accommodated.

Silver pulled into the parking area of a scenic overlook advertised by a wooden sign along the road. While driving, he'd only been able to catch glimpses of the mountain scenery. Now he wanted to take in the view and to stretch his legs which still ached a bit from the activities of the previous night. The two left the Prius and walked along a winding dirt trail that led to the overlook. While Denver had been warm, the air at this altitude had a chill.

Gwendolyn knelt to look at the tiny alpine flowers that lined the path, colorful species that grew only in the rarified air above the tree line. Their bright reds, blues, and yellows matched closely the colors of the Rousseau flowers of Gwendolyn's tattoos, but their petals were tiny compared to those of the jungle flowers imprinted on Gwendolyn's body.

The two stood behind a low wall that kept visitors from falling down the steep cliff. Below them were lush pine forests covering the foothills. Looking outward, into the distance, they could see mountains like the one on which they stood, many with snow capped peaks, even in summer.

Silver removed a small plastic packet from the pocket of his jeans. They'd stopped at a pot shop on the way through Denver. Silver had

never gotten used to the idea of buying pot in a store. To him, pot would always be something you got from some sleazy dealer who was a friend of a friend. Most of the time, the Panama Red or the Maui Wowie turned out to be a bunch of twigs.

It was a different world now. The place they'd stopped was bright and shiny as an Apple store. He'd marveled at the gleaming displays in glass cases. Here, buds and flowers were exactly what they claimed to be. You could vape it, smoke it, eat it, drink it, whatever you wanted. Whenever Silver worried that America had slipped totally down the drain, he reminded himself about the weed stores. That was progress.

Silver lit the fat pre-rolled joint, took a deep drag, and passed it to Gwendolyn.

And what weed stores had done for pot, Eden had done for sex. Sure, a few zones had legalized prostitution and licensed brothels, but only in Eden was sex celebrated as it should be, or at least that's what Silver had heard.

Silver saw the existence of Eden as a further sign of progress. Silver had been wary, at first, of zone-ism, but now that he could see its fruits, he'd stopped worrying. Zone-ism put people exactly where they wanted to be, doing the things they wanted to do. Sure, it created places like the BadLands, but Silver knew that he had no business being in the BadLands. He remembered the man from the yard sale. That guy was sitting on a porch somewhere in the BadLands, happy as a clam. He was living the life it always wanted. And that was the idea.

Silver thought of the old America as a place of irreconcilable divisions. Like tectonic plates under pressure and ripe for earthquake, fractures in the nation had threatened to blow the country apart. Zones had acted as escape valves, putting like-minded people together in places where they could live without friction. Except, of course, for people who liked friction, and they could find that too.

Silver took the joint from Gwendolyn as they both stood looking out across the vista of mountain peaks. It was midsummer, but here the air was pleasantly cool. He breathed deeply, making the tip of the joint glow bright orange.

“I could live in a place like this.”

“It’s nice,” said Gwendolyn, “but all the work’s in Eden.” She looked at him. “And I think you’d get bored pretty quick.” She took a big hit herself.

Silver nodded. He supposed that was true.

“You know,” he said, “you’re really fucking beautiful.”

“And you’re really stoned, Dan baby.”

Silver held both her tattooed shoulders. He stared into her clear brown eyes, and then examined, for a moment, the small gold ring that hung from her nose. He thought she was beautiful, young and beautiful, even if she had a nasty streak and he was a cynic. She smiled at him. He drew her against his body and the two kissed in the rarified air. It was a long kiss, and in that moment, Silver had the sense that everything was perfect.

“Come on, baby,” she said finally. “We should get going. Tam’s going to be waiting.”

They got back to Tam’s around seven. She’d called them on the road to pick up Chinese food. Gwendolyn had a key to the apartment now and just let herself in.

“Just wrapping up,” called Tam out the open door of her office. “You’re going to like it, darlings. You’re definitely going to like it.”

Silver began to open the boxes of take-out they’d set down on the kitchen table. Gwendolyn got plates and found beer in the fridge.

Tam came into the kitchen and took one of the seats around the small table. “Okay, we’re all set. It’s up on the server.” She pressed a button on a screen fixed to the wall. A green light blinked on. She tapped a few keys on a flat stylish keyboard that sat on the table.

The monitor filled with color.

Silver had worked in software before he'd retired, but his condo hadn't been so filled with screens and keyboards. In Gwendolyn's apartment it all seemed a part of the stark decor.

Tam spooned rice from one of the containers onto her plate. "Haven't eaten all day, darlings."

The title, in a playful font, read 'Age Before Beauties'. Silver glanced across the table at Gwendolyn, who smiled back. The usual FBI copyright warnings scrolled into view to a backing soundtrack of Vivaldi. Then Silver's face filled the screen from top to bottom. It bore a faraway look of dreamy ecstasy.

The camera panned back, ever so slowly, revealing a kneeling Gwendolyn, her head bobbing in a languid rhythm between Silver's naked thighs. Her long hair seemed to float behind her. A moment later, the perspective shifted to the side, as another camera panned in to observe Lance sliding between Gwendolyn's lips at a pace that suggested the stopping of time. Silver understood that Tam had quite artfully slowed down the action. It was subtle, but the effect was that everything floated. A full-screen shot of Silver's face showed him reacting to each deliberate passage of Gwendolyn's lips over the fleshy shaft. His expression was a shifting tableau of ecstasy, so plastic that Silver could hardly recognize himself.

"Faces are so important," said Tam. She'd said this to Silver, but Silver didn't look away from the screen.

Then a slender arm appeared in the picture. A hand, Tam's hand, reached snakelike between Silver's legs and closed around his scrotum. Silver's groans could be heard over the Vivaldi.

It was so strange. Silver hadn't remembered making any noise. How could he not remember making noise?

Tam knelt behind Silver. A camera followed Tam's hand as a glob of lubricant was dispensed from a tube and landed in the palm of Tam's hand. The camera moved in close, as a slender finger made

its way towards the small opening in Silver's behind. More groans from Silver as Tam gently massaged, her finger tracing circles as if dancing around a fire, and then a sudden grunt of pleasure from Silver as Tam's slender finger plunged inside, all to a Vivaldi crescendo, and all captured in high definition.

Silver was mesmerized. The events he watched on the screen had happened, of course, but this was an outsider's view, captured by six distinct eyes and sewn together so as to create an entirely different reality from what Silver had experienced. What Silver remembered, fondly, was flesh and sweat. What Tam had produced was art.

Silver didn't touch the food in front of him, and he said nothing. His eyes remained focused on the screen until the final frames, a slow-motion closeup of creamy ejaculate sliding down Gwendolyn's eyelids.

"Just beautiful." Silver looked at Tam as if waking from a dream. "I mean it."

"Thank you, Dan darling." She smiled at him, valuing his praise.

"But, you know what's strange," said Silver, "I have no memory at all of making noise."

"You made noise," said Gwendolyn. "It's in the video."

Silver shook his head. "I just don't remember."

"But, you know, darling," said Tam. "You were really quite good. Very expressive. You gave me a lot to work with."

"Thanks— really," Silver was over the moon. He leaned towards Tam. "You know, I always wanted to do this, to be in a movie. And now I've done it. I can't fucking believe it really happened. Thank you."

"You're welcome," said Gwendolyn.