

# Chapter 1

## *A Visit with Jack*

Dan Silver wasn't surprised when he saw red and blue flashing lights in the rear mirror of his Prius. He'd been expecting to be stopped, and now that it had happened, it was almost a relief. Almost a relief, but mostly an annoyance. He'd come so close. It wasn't more than a half-hour on to Jack's place.

Hearing a sudden burst from the siren behind him, Silver slowed in the darkness and looked for a spot to pull off. Nothing promising. It was a country two-lane, winding through a forest in what had once been Pennsylvania. Silver stopped as far as he could off the asphalt. There was a crunch of twigs under his right front tire.

He waited, two hands on the wheel, facing ahead but sneaking a glance into the side mirror. A stout figure emerged from the black sedan and lumbered towards him. The trooper was silhouetted against the blinding headlights of his big police model Ford. Silver's eyes shifted toward the empty passenger seat beside him, empty that was, except for the large revolver.

Silver had just turned seventy. His hair was thinning, but what he had was tightly curled as ever. The naturally reddish-brown strands were getting harder to find among the gray. New furrows appeared regularly on his forehead and near the corners of his eyes. Looking in the mirror, he could still convince himself that these crevices were marks of character. His fear was that, in time, his face would resemble a pumpkin left too long after Halloween. He'd seen it happen to others.

In truth, Silver wasn't in bad shape for his age. He worked at it, forcing himself to exercise each morning before breakfast, and again in the evenings. Sometimes it did seem pointless. So much work to fight the decline that came with age, leading inexorably to the final insult of death. Still, what kept him faithful to the regimen was the possibility of sex. While his body might have taken on the

appearance of an ancient sea tortoise, his flesh was willing, and his libido more so. Silver wasn't worried about women judging his appearance. He sagged no more than they. No, keeping in shape for sex was a matter of self-respect.

The trooper rapped on the driver-side window and made a twirling motion with his forefinger. Silver touched the lever that lowered the pane. As he did so, the sound of crickets filled his ears.

Everything about the trooper was oversized, but what Silver noticed in particular was a head far too large for the wide-brimmed hat perched at its top.

The trooper leaned forward and looked around the inside of the Prius, the barrel of his AR-15 pointing wherever his gaze fell.

"Electric?" he asked, drawing out the beginning of the word as if to imply that electricity was an unwelcome invention.

"Hybrid."

The officer nodded. Silver kept an eye on the hat, waiting for it to topple. "Good thing for you," the trooper continued. "MidZone's been ripping out all the goddamned charging stations. If this thing was electric, you could sell it for scrap."

"Not electric," Silver repeated. It was news to him that the charging stations were being removed. Not very inviting for visitors from the electric zones, but that was probably the point.

"You know," the trooper went on, "if God wanted us to drive electric cars, he wouldn't have made gasoline."

"Makes sense," said Silver, wanting to be agreeable.

The trooper now turned his attention to the gun resting on the passenger seat. "Let me see that thing."

Silver thought it should have been enough to have the weapon in plain sight. He hadn't expected a request to examine it.

When Silver took the gun in his hand, it felt heavier than he'd remembered. He gave it to the trooper who looked at it and gave a

laugh.

“This thing work?”

Silver was silent for a moment, not sure how to respond. He opted for the truth.

“I don’t know.”

The trooper wasn’t paying attention to Silver’s response. He’d already pressed the release and was staring into the cylinder.

“Empty!”

Silver remained silent. Did the thing really need to be loaded? Bad enough to have to carry it around.

“I could write you up, you know.”

Silver wondered if the cop wanted money or just planned to deliver a lecture.

“Well,” the man went on, “just make sure you get some ammo first thing in the morning.”

Silver nodded. He didn’t want to signal that he was grateful, but he was.

The trooper shed his stern veneer, disarming Silver momentarily. “I’m not one of these people who gives foreigners a hard time, you know.” He put two beefy hands on the sill of the open window and leaned in. “I’ve got family in Metro,” he said quietly, as if offering a confession.

Silver nodded again, not quite knowing what to say. He might have asked if the man still visited his relatives in MetroZone, but didn’t want to prolong the conversation.

“Well,” the trooper said, lifting his hands from the sill, embarrassed now at his admission. “You drive careful. The deer are gonna be out now. And don’t forget the ammo.”

Silver exhaled as the Prius rolled back onto the two-lane. He watched the trooper’s headlights vanish in the darkness behind

him.