

Chapter 2

Not a Joke

“Hey, Danny Boy!” Jack Welsh had come out to the Prius to greet his old friend. He’d let the screen door slam behind him as he descended several steps to the gravel driveway. Moths and gnats flitted around the bright yellow bulb that lit his way.

Welsh was a few inches taller than Silver and had the powerful arms of a man who spent a good deal of time swinging a hammer. That was for fun. His real work had been software, but only a month earlier, he’d retired.

Welsh’s boots were planted firmly on the gravel as he watched Silver slowly extricate himself from the Prius.

“You’re late.”

Silver shot his friend a nasty look. “I’m late because it took me two fucking hours to cross the border, then another hour at the gun shop, and then a cop stopped me just before I got here.” Silver paused. “Wanted to see my gun.”

Welsh looked puzzled. “You had one, right?”

“Yeah, but he gave me a hard time because it wasn’t loaded.”

Welsh chuckled.

Silver grew sullen. “I didn’t plan on using the damned thing.”

“Well, they should have told you at the gun shop. Wasn’t your fault.” Welsh could see that it had been a hard day for Silver. “What kind of gun? I might have ammo.”

Silver smiled. “Six-shooter.”

Welsh grinned. “Let me see it.” He thought his friend was joking.

Silver reached back into the Prius and handed the weapon to Welsh, who issued an appreciative whistle.

“I figured you’d buy one of those throwaway jobs. What’d you pay for this?”

Silver didn’t answer. He was sure he’d paid too much.

Welsh looked at his friend in the way he did when he wasn’t kidding. “What made you buy this one?”

Silver thought for a moment. “It’s a cowboy gun.”

Welsh nodded, expecting his friend to go on. “And?”

“That’s it. It’s a cowboy gun. I saw it. I wanted it. I bought it.”

Jack Welsh understood. He’d known Silver since they shared a basement office when they were in grad school together. Both men appreciated beauty. Tools, for example. Who could look at a Snap-On wrench and fail to see the elegance?

Welsh smiled broadly, examining the fine etching on the barrel. Yeah, nice.” He paused for a moment, his eyes narrowing as he interrogated his friend. “Know anything about these things?” Welsh had never seen him with a gun in all the years they’d known one another, in fact, Silver had been vocal about people he viewed as gun nuts.

“Yeah, of course I do,” said Silver, mildly offended. “I used to shoot twenty-twos at summer camp.” He rubbed his chin. “I was pretty good. Of course, that was a while ago.”

“Well, I’ll give you a refresher tomorrow. This thing’s no twenty-two.”

Welsh had a gun collection. He rarely fired any of the weapons, but displayed them in the poker room, cleaned and oiled. Same with the thousands of other items he collected. And it wasn’t just him. His wife Mary had at least as much. He had glass insulators, beer steins, wood clamps, bar signs; she had Ball jars, needlepoint, butter molds, depression glass.

“You really think that’s necessary?”

Welsh gave his friend one of those looks. “It’s no joke, Dan. This

isn't Metro. If you're in a carry zone, you need to know how to use this thing."

Silver wasn't in a mood to think about it. Thinking was work, and he was tired from the driving. He slapped at his bare arm. "Getting bitten-up out here." Removing a small bag from the trunk of the Prius, he followed Jack into the house. There were a couple of larger suitcases, but he left those.

Jack and Mary's place was a sprawling Victorian, the largest dwelling in Grangeville, located at the main intersection. Jack had grown up in a more modest home outside of town but moved into successively larger places as his career progressed. He commuted a considerable distance each day in order to remain in Grangeville.

Silver didn't have the same connection to places as his friend. He'd moved with the jobs, often choosing to rent rather than buy. Buying was a commitment, and Silver wasn't fond of commitments, although he'd stayed on good terms with both of his ex's. The job changes had taken him all over the country, and occasionally outside the country. There were years in which the two friends had hardly seen each other but when they reunited, the gaps dissolved like sugar cubes in hot coffee.

When the big Victorian went on the market, Jack didn't hesitate. He'd had his eye on it for years. And now that he'd retired, he could give the place the attention it deserved. The two friends entered through the side door that opened into the kitchen. Silver had never been through the front door and couldn't recall it ever being used.

Once inside the house, Silver knew exactly where he was. He was in America. Mary's kitchen was the distilled essence of America. He was grateful that the place still existed. So much of America seemed to have vanished by that summer of 2041.

The refrigerator door told the story of Jack and Mary's lives together; photos on top of faded photos. On one wall, Jack's family tree was displayed in an antique frame. But the kitchen held more than the couple's personal history, it resembled an annex of the

Smithsonian, with butter molds, an ice cream churn, hurricane lamps, brass buckets, and old washboards. There was even a treadle sewing machine that ended up in the kitchen when no room remained in the den.

“Hey stranger,” said Mary, wrapping her arms around Silver’s shoulders. The big retriever, Woolsey, slobbered on the visitor’s hand. After a moment, Silver held Mary at arm’s length to take a look. She was born for denim overalls and work boots, but she could do heels when the occasion called for it. Silver didn’t think she looked so very different than when he was best man at their wedding all those years ago. If she’d put on any weight since then, Silver didn’t see it.

The top of Mary’s head came only to Jack’s chin, but when the two went toe to toe, and Silver had seen it happen, she was a bulldog. A few strands of gray now appeared in her shoulder-length brown hair, but nothing dramatic. Her face was colored by hours in the gardens she designed and tended. Her hands and arms were strong from the work.

“Smells good,” Silver said, releasing her. The kitchen always smelled good. Fresh fruits and vegetables lay scattered on every surface, except for the kitchen table which was covered by piles of papers and envelopes, notebooks, two laptop computers, and everything else needed to run a gardening business. Jack might have retired but Mary could never abandon the gardens she’d so lovingly designed and tended for her clients. The clutter of the business was permanent. Eating was relegated to the kitchen counter where Silver seated himself on a tall stool.

“Hungry?” Mary asked as she stirred a pot on the stove using a long wooden spoon. “Made that bean chili you liked last time, and I’ve got biscuits in the oven.”

“Starving,” replied Silver. He’d snacked in the car but hadn’t eaten anything substantial since breakfast.

“Here, try this,” Jack interrupted, taking a growler from the fridge

and pouring a glass. He waited a moment for the foam to settle, and then poured again. “This stuff’s the best. Real find. Place is two hours away. Hole-in-the-wall brew pub.”

Silver looked at the glass that Jack had set before him. He knew it would taste like all the other beers Jack gave him, heavy with a flavor that made him think of grapefruit.

Jack watched Silver’s face as his friend drank. Silver’s lack of enthusiasm for the brew was all too evident.

“Sorry,” Silver offered, “too many flowers. Don’t like the flowers.”

“Hops,” said Jack. “It’s hops. I’ll get you a Heineken.”

“No, I’ll drink it. I don’t care.”

“You should care,” but Jack knew that Silver didn’t care. Silver was the only guy he knew who could drink exactly half a glass of beer.

Mary set plates on the counter. She and Jack sat on stools across from their friend. Bean chili, biscuits, and a big salad. The vegetables were fresh from the garden next to the house.

“Kids doing okay?” asked Mary, as the three loaded their plates.

“Freddie’s fine. Loves it out in PacZone.” The Pacific Zone included the entire west coast, what had been California, Oregon, and Washington State. PacZone was the first of the zones, created only months after passage of the amendment.

“Mike’s still living with Marla in Metro.” The Metro Zone stretched from Massachusetts to Maryland and was the most populous of the zones. It had been established soon after the formation of the PacZone. Marla was Silver’s second ex and Mike was their younger son.

“Been rough for him. The amendment really tanked theater work. Not enough tourists to fill the seats. Who’s going to travel between zones just to go on vacation?”

Silver looked over at Jack. “What about Frankie?”

“Started a new job a couple of months ago. Long haul trucking. Pay’s great, but he’s on the road all the time. Don’t know how long he’ll be able to handle it.”

Silver turned to Mary. “Chili’s great.” It felt so good to be back in this place with its steamy kitchen smells and foods pulled from the ground. And yet, he knew that he was a visitor. It was a way of life that he admired but could never be a part of. He was too restless, too unsettled.

“So, what’ve you been up to?” she asked.

Silver put down his chili-soaked biscuit. “Sold the condo.”

“Really?” Jack replied before Mary could say a word.

“Told you I was thinking about it.”

“Thinking’s different from doing. Don’t like life in Metro?”

“Not that. Just that I’m not getting any younger.”

Jack didn’t see the connection.

“Don’t know how much time I’ve got. Time to seize the day.”

Jack smiled. He should have known. Silver was going to Eden. Eden was the new name for what had been Nevada. Nevada was one of a few states that didn’t partner to form a zone. Others wanted in, of course, but Nevada wasn’t giving anything away. Eden was a moneymaker, especially with all the religious types gone.

Silver knew that Jack would understand about Eden, but he wasn’t so sure about Mary.

“Well,” she said, “I’ve heard some wild things.” This didn’t seem to Silver like outright disapproval. “You sure you don’t want to move here to MidZone, Dan? Plenty of single women. I could introduce you.”

Silver made a show of a deep sigh. “Been married twice, Mary, and not going for three.”

“A girlfriend,” she suggested, “just a girlfriend. You’ve got money, and women like you. You don’t need to go to Eden.”

“He doesn’t need to,” Jack explained, “he wants to.”

“I’m too old for real relationships,” Silver went on. “I haven’t got the energy, or the interest. It’s a lot of work. And to be honest, nowadays, I don’t take criticism well.”

“Not to mention,” Jack added, “he’s got a short attention span.”

That was true. In recent years Silver’s tolerance for togetherness was no more than an hour or two.

“I’m pretty sure I’ll find what I’m looking for in Eden.”

Mary frowned. She wasn’t judging. She just didn’t think that Silver would find anything worthwhile, but she also knew that she might be wrong. Mary was certain of one thing, Dan would drop a lot of money in Eden. She hoped he could afford it.

“The amendment isn’t all bad,” Silver went on. “Shook things up. Changed things. The truth is that people aren’t all alike. Why not live in a place where you can express who you are?”

Jack laughed. “Back then you thought it was a shit idea.”

“I know. But I’ve been thinking. It’s how America got started, isn’t it? A bunch of colonies without much in common, allying against the motherland, each colony wanting to preserve its distinct identity. I mean, Jack, I grew up thinking of America as a country, but maybe it never was.”

“Well,” said Mary, “I love it around here, always have, but I’m not a fan of the changes. Hunting season used to be bad enough with people shooting anything that moved. Now you’ve got to worry about every shopper at Walmart.”

“But that’s the point,” insisted Silver, “if you don’t like the laws in MidZone, you can move to Metro.”

Silver knew right away that he’d said something stupid. Just looking around the kitchen, it was clear that a move was out of the

question. There was simply too much stuff. And, of course, there was Mary's gardening business.

"Some people can't move," Mary said. "Some people are attached to where they are."

Silver thought it could be worth pulling up stakes to live a better life. That's what his great great grandfather had done, bringing the whole family from a small town in Austria-Hungary to America, saving them from pogroms and, later, Nazi death camps. Silver owed his existence to this ancestor.

Of course, it wasn't exactly the same situation. Jack and Mary were in no real danger. Sure, bullets flew when someone got drunk or angry, but the crime rate in MidZone was low. Who'd be crazy enough to commit a robbery or even shoplift? With every citizen carrying a loaded gun, that would be suicide.

Ask any MidZoner what they liked about the place and you'd probably be told 'sensible living'. Most attended church with some regularity, but they weren't crazy evangelicals. They valued education but kept it voluntary and privatized. Public assistance had been eliminated, but MidZoners were good-hearted people. Churches and civic organizations stepped in to pick up the slack.

The result of these 'sensible living' policies was low taxes, low enough to attract people from MetroZone who were tired of handing the government all their money. Of course, MidZone didn't take all comers. Those seeking entry had to demonstrate employability and a minimum bank balance. There might have been more immigrants if it hadn't been for the mandatory-carry law. That was a line that some people just couldn't cross. It required commitment. MidZoners wanted it that way. They wanted people who would look out for their neighbors.

"I know you guys aren't going anywhere," said Silver, "but a lot of folks are."

That was the truth. It had been a windfall for realtors, and stock in houseswap.com had gone through the roof. The roads were jammed

with U-hauls. Everyone was on the move.