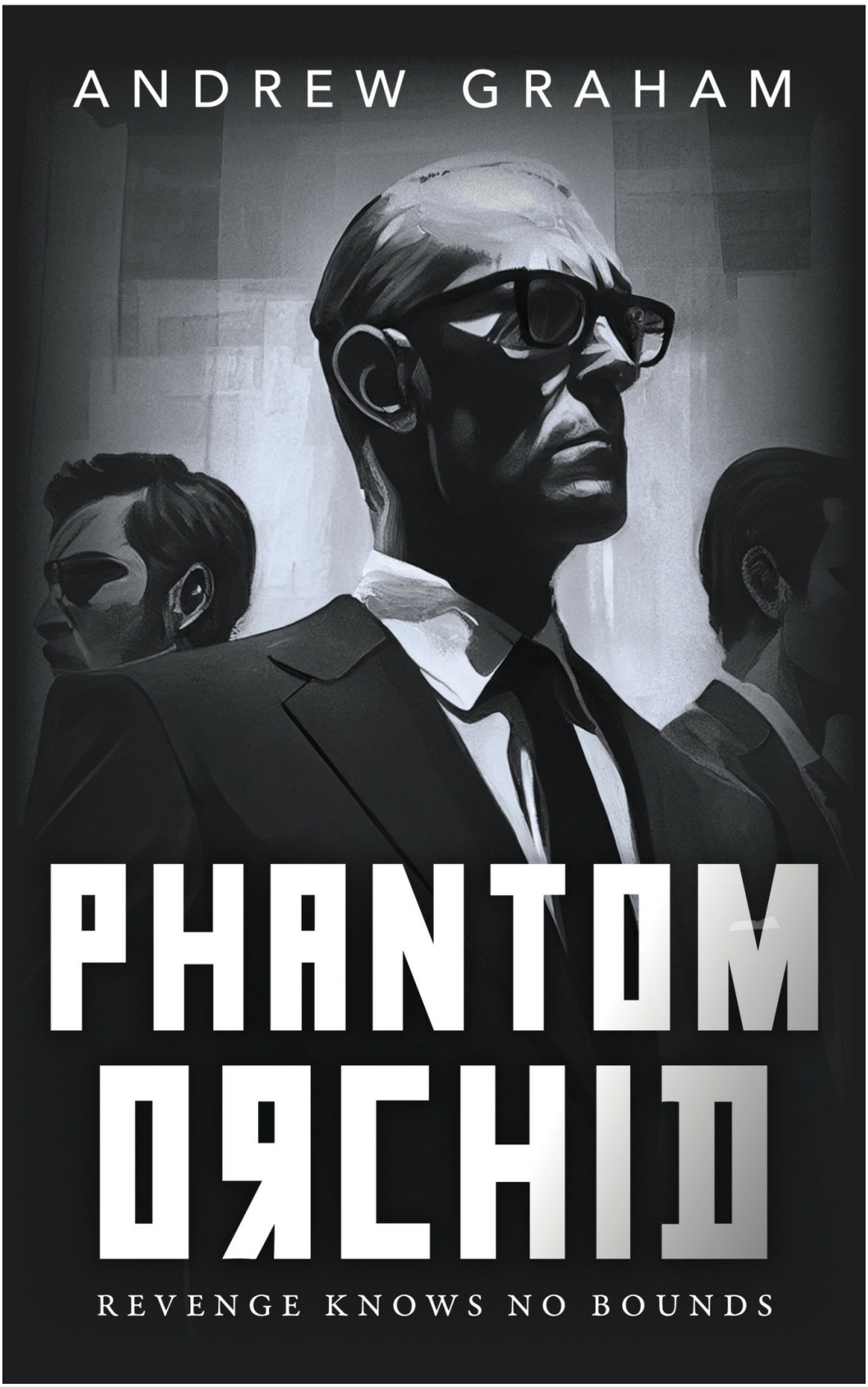
ANDREW GRAHAM



PHANTOM ORCHID

REVENGE KNOWS NO BOUNDS


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PHANTOM
ORCHID
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Phantom Orchid

Revenge knows no bounds

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To my family

The best solutions create the problems they solve.

Dmitry Listyev

Prologue: 1992, Vladivostok, Russia

The squeal of the parking lot's electric gate sent Rob McGentry racing for the exit. Still in a full sprint and with arm stretching for the door, a platform jack lurking below his flashlight beam caught Rob's ankle and put him airborne. Slamming into the doorjamb as he fell, the air left his lungs as the flashlight left his hand. Gasping for air in the darkness, and now trapped by the headlights illuminating the seam around the exit door, he knew the best he could do was hide. With a crab-like scoot across the oil-stained floor Rob wedged his body behind two large barrels and waited.

Willing his breath to slow down, Rob felt a bead of sweat tickled down his back as he listened to car doors close, Russian words spoken too quietly to decipher, and then the creaky protest of rusted hinges. Rob leaned forward to peer through a small gap between the barrels at the flashlight beams punching through the darkness of the small office and storage area. Knowing anything more than a cursory look would find him, Rob eased his sweaty hand to the Glock holstered at his side.

The flashlight beams completed a quick scan of the area, passing harmlessly by his hiding place. The weak illumination reflecting off the flashlights outlined two people, one a head taller than the other. Rob held his breath and heard whispered words, making out only the Russian word for "quiet." The flashlights shifted their attention to the car repair shop through the open double doors. Rob could just make out the shorter of the two asserting his authority by gesturing them into the repair shop. A moment later, they both disappeared from view.

The exit door's creaky hinges would alert the searchers, but Rob felt sure he could exit, round the building and get over the back fence before they navigated their way across the cluttered shop and out the door. He closed his eyes, said a silent prayer, and moved from his hiding place. Easing past the open double doors, he saw a flashlight beam sweeping under a car near the repair shop's far wall. With growing confidence and a deep, held breath, Rob yanked the door open and launched into a sprint.

The headlight beams from the waiting car hit Rob directly in the eyes. With spots dancing in his vision, he turned to his left and headed for the side of the building. He sensed an obstacle straight ahead of him, and as he started to sidestep, he felt a glancing blow connect with the left side of his head. Rob staggered but kept his feet. As he pivoted to square up to the threat, he sensed movement

coming directly at him. Anticipating another blow to the head, Rob ducked, lowered his shoulder, and launched into what he hoped was the mid-section of his attacker.

Instead of a soft underbelly, it felt like a tree trunk. Rob's feet went airborne in the grasp of a reverse bear hug, and he knew he was about to be pile-driven into the ground. He angled his head and shoulders to soften the impact and advance a roll back onto his feet, hoping to gain enough distance to grab his Glock. Rob saw the shop door fly open and flashlights emerge as he hit the ground. Rob scrambled to his feet and reached for his gun, as twin flashlight beams caught him square in the face, and he heard an angry voice say, "stoyte!" Once again blinded, Rob froze and, seeing no other choice, put his hands up.

A second, calmer, young-sounding male voice spoke briefly. Rob instinctively pretended not to understand and reacted with what he hoped looked like surprise when the hulking presence behind him patted him down. It was a rough but not especially thorough frisking that relieved him of his Glock, folding knife, and ID badge but missed the NAA 22s strapped to his calf.

Rob was directed inside with a grunt and a gun barrel push to the back. Facing away from his captors inside the dark building, Rob heard the youthful male voice issuing instructions to find the lights. With the click of a switch, the overhead lights illuminated the small office and storage area. Fully lit, his former hiding place seemed even smaller. The room consisted of a desk, a couple of folding metal chairs near the open double doors leading into the shop area, a metal file cabinet with rust showing at the corners, an elevated tire rack, various boxes of car parts, and several 55-gallon barrels of motor oil – including the two Rob had hidden behind.

A massive hand pulled back on Rob's right shoulder and turned him to face the room. The futility of resistance confronted him in the form of a massive Russian. The man was at least four inches taller than Rob and approached 300 pounds – none of it wasted. A shaved head topped the truck bumper-like shoulders, and a gray tank top exposed blurry tattoos covering his huge arms. He wore army-style camo pants over well-worn lace-up boots. Rob guessed he was in his early thirties, a military veteran – probably from the Afghanistan war and based on the dagger wrapped in barbed wire tattoo freshly inked on the side of his neck; he was a recently released convict.

The other two men approached, and Rob noted a somewhat smaller version of the first Russian: about the same age, same shaved head and neck tattoo, and dressed the same, except for a loose-fitting, long-sleeved black shirt open in the front and a standard military-issue Tokarev pistol held loosely at his side. Rob could detect no uncertainty or anxiety in either man, leaving the impression that hunting down, capturing, and detaining someone wasn't new territory for them.

The third Russian was the odd man out appearance-wise. He looked in his early twenties, much smaller than the other two, dressed in blue jeans, with a button-down, dark green silk shirt, opened at the neck to reveal a gold chain but no visible tattoos. In a choreograph-like move, the two other men slid into position behind Rob's shoulders as the younger man approached to stand directly in front of Rob. He stopped just beyond arm's reach and said, "American?"

Seeing no point in denying it, Rob nodded. The young man stared at Rob for thirty seconds as if weighing his options and then, in slightly accented but perfect English, said, "What were you doing in here?"

Rob was taken back but knew two things: first, he had screwed up by pursuing an iffy lead alone in the middle of the night into a building of unknown ownership, and second, the young man was in charge. He could see no point in lying. He hoped the fact that he was an American and technically a diplomat would bail him out. Looking directly at the young man, Rob responded, "I am Rob McGentry. I work for the U.S. Department of State and have diplomatic immunity."

The young man's face eased into a sneer as he translated Rob's response for his companions. Rob heard a grunted reply from behind him.

A half step closer, the young man said, "Again, what are you doing here?"

If Rob had followed protocol, he would have engaged local law enforcement, rather than break in on his own. The truth was no one from the consulate knew he was here. His boss was in D.C. for a briefing with the Deputy Secretary, his two fellow security agents were attending training in Berlin, and he hadn't told any of the diplomatic staff of his plans. The truth, minus this fact, seemed the best start to a weak negotiating position and he finally said, "I am investigating the theft of materials from the construction site for our new consulate building, and I received a tip they might be stored in this building."

"That's MDV's job. I want to know what *you* are doing in here?"

"Look, it isn't complicated. I am a diplomatic security agent, and part of my job is securing the construction site for our new consulate building." Rob heard the condescension in his words and took a deep breath to moderate his tone. "Over the last month, the contractor billed for $200,000 worth of materials that either didn't show up or were stolen after they were delivered. Earlier this week, one of our junior diplomats received an anonymous tip indicating this building had something to do with it. So, I came to check it out."

The young man's expression remained unchanged, but a slight coloring in his cheeks hinted at irritation as he nodded over Rob's right shoulder. Departing footsteps were followed by the sounds of metal clanging, and then two folding metal chairs arrived – one for Rob and one for the young

man. Positioned facing each other with knees almost touching, Rob smelled the young man's cologne. With barely a hint of whiskers on his smooth, unblemished skin, he appeared more youthful than Rob initially thought. The child-like hands holding Rob's government ID card were smooth with well-tended nails. From the silk, button-down shirt to his Levis and Nikes, his clothes were new and not easily procured in Russia. The incongruity of this well-groomed, well-spoken young man speaking perfect English in a far corner of Russia was disorienting.

After studying Rob's ID with its Department of State emblem and green border signifying his diplomatic status, he said, "Well, Mr. McGentry, here is what I think. I think it is complicated – at least for you. I will rephrase my question. I want to know why you came here, alone in the middle of the night, without telling anyone, and in violation of your employer's protocol?" He then looked at the man to Rob's right and nodded toward the door.

Rob watched the guard depart and then heard a car trunk slam shut. He struggled to align this trio with one of the many gangs running small-time criminal enterprises in post-Soviet Russia; he would probably already be dead if it was one of those. The young man's perceptiveness, diction, and undertone of a British accent hinted at formal education outside Russia. From his law enforcement training, Rob knew step one in hostage negotiations was connecting with the hostage-taker, and he said the first thing that came to mind. "Did you attend Eaton or St. Paul's?"

The young man stared expressionless at Rob, then said, "Abingdon."

"Good school. What are you doing here?'

The young man hesitated a moment and then, with a slight smile, said, "You first."

"As I said, I was following a…"

"Bollocks. I want to know the truth – all of it."

As if on cue, the big Russian returned from the parking lot carrying an electric drill and an old-style Soviet gas mask – the one with a long exhaust hose giving it the nickname, 'the elephant.' Rob watched the man place both items on the small desk near the double doors and sensed his interrogator watching him as the beginnings of panic formed in his gut.

Ten years earlier, as a newly minted Air Force Security Officer, Rob had gone through Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) training. SERE was two weeks of hell designed to train military personnel on what to expect and how to react if captured. He could still see the sadistic, envious look of the Army Captain instructing the class when he said of the Russians, "They take great pride in their technique and are very good at it." He explained 'the elephant' was the Russian version of waterboarding. By merely closing the air valve on the mask, their prisoner would feel the same slow suffocation as waterboarding without the mess.

Nothing about this made sense. Why was this well-educated teenager in the ass-end of Russia bossing around two ex-cons and certain there was more to Rob's story? And why was he so eager to jump to torture? So long as all three were in the room, he had no chance against them with the tiny NAA 22s strapped to his calf; its five-rounds of hollow-point 22 caliber shorts were only lethal at short range. For now, he would just keep talking

"There's no need for this. I'll tell you whatever you need to know."

"Maybe, but we will be sure."

"Look, the truth of the matter is you are partly right. I have no idea how you knew our protocol. But, yes I did violate it by coming here alone in the middle of the night. I should have gone to the local authorities and asked them to investigate – but I'm sure you know as well as I do that would have led nowhere."

"So, what part am I wrong about?"

"I left a note for the duty officer to open if I don't contact him by 8:00 AM – it tells him where I went and why. So, you were wrong when you said no one knows I'm here – they will."

"8:00 AM - that leaves plenty of time."

"Plenty of time for what? Torture? You know who I am. You know why I came. Look, I'll pretend I didn't come here and forget the whole thing."

The young man stared at Rob for a moment as if considering the suggestion. He then looked over his shoulder and spoke in Russian, instructing the man standing there to find an extension cord for the drill and something to tie up Rob. Refocusing on Rob, he said, "A moment ago, you asked me what I was doing here. You seemed puzzled by my British private school education. Do you think I am too good to be here in a Russian seaport? You work for the U.S. Government in a role with a prerequisite for understanding the country you are assigned, yet like all Westerners, you have no clue about what is happening in the new Russia. Your arrogance knows no bounds but is not surprising. I will not attempt to explain what you do not wish to understand, but I will answer your question by telling you I am here because this is my apprenticeship."

The answer made about as much sense as everything else at the moment, and Rob focused on what he could control. He heard one of the men opening and closing cabinet doors in the other room and knew he was quickly losing his window to act. Rob leaned forward slightly, feigning exasperation at the answer, then shifted in the chair and hoisted his left pant leg as if adjusting to a more comfortable position. He said, "You're right, I don't understand what you mean by your apprenticeship, and I don't understand why you are so sure I have more to tell - I don't."

The young Russian shrugged and said, "Then this will be good practice for me. But I think you do have more to tell; otherwise you wouldn't have come here. Given who you work for, you would certainly understand your diplomatic immunity won't protect you when you step out of your cage in the new Russia – and yet here you are. Your answer to why you came makes no sense. Your government has a history of spending thousands of dollars for a single toilet seat and hundreds for a cheap hammer, so what's the loss of a few hundred thousand of building materials? Surely you must know that is the price of doing business in the new Russia. So why did you come here? Why did you break in? There is certainly more to your story, and we will discover it. And you will find the bratva are not to be fucked with."

Rob had no interest in being a prop for this little shit's torture practice. The sounds from the shop area were more distant; it was time to act. He glanced at his left boot top and could see his pant leg was high enough to quickly hook his thumb under the hem and grasp the butt of the NAA 22s. He leaned forward as if fidgeting and rested his elbows on his knees but said nothing.

His eagerness palatable, the young man looked over Rob's left shoulder and asked in Russian what was taking so long. With an undecipherable grunted reply, his captors' attention remained on each other, and Rob reached down with his right hand as if scratching his leg but slid the NAA 22s out of its elastic strap instead. Neither Russian had seemed to notice. As his interrogator started to speak again, Rob lunged forward, buried the snub nose of the pistol in the soft tissue under his chin, and pulled the trigger. A muffled pop and the small hollow-point projectile exploded in the young man's brain, destroying all movement. Slumped in the chair, blank eyes and a small trickle of blood were the only visible evidence of what had just happened. Rob pivoted as the other Russian lunged toward him with one hand reaching for the Tokarev in his belt. Rob shot him twice in the face, and the man staggered a moment, then went down.

Rob sprinted toward the door. Passing the desk where the Russian had placed the drill and gas mask, he grabbed the drill. A yell and a mad scramble in the other room told him he only had seconds. Rob slammed shut the double doors leading into the shop area and quickly looped the drill cord around the handles in a makeshift lock but managed to drop the NAA 22s in the process. The small handgun bounced off his foot and skittered under the desk. A crash against the double doors convinced him to leave the gun and go.

Rob lunged out of the building and sprinted toward the back fence. Rounding the corner of the building, he heard the clang of the roll-up shop bay door opening. He scrambled over the chain-link fence, moved twenty feet back into thick brush, and squatted down.

Rob worked to control his breathing and stay quiet. He could not see the building or the lot through the thick underbrush but heard heavy, running footsteps on gravel. They stopped; Rob held his breath and heard labored breathing from across the fence. After a moment, the same heavy footsteps faded toward the front of the building. He exhaled and waited until his breathing was almost normal, then stood up and continued along the brush line, back toward the U.S. Consulate and his apartment.

The studio apartment was dark and quiet. Still keyed up, Rob poured himself a scotch as he replayed what had just happened. At least one person and maybe two dead from his hand, yet he felt nothing; that bothered him a little.

Present Day, Elkhorn Mountains, Oregon

The ready-mix concrete truck eased its way down the dirt track toward Forest Service Road 217, headed to County Road 7, and eventually Baker City. Manuel, the day laborer Rob McGentry had hired outside a 7-Eleven store in Baker City, was hitching a ride back to town with the truck driver, saving Rob the two-hour round trip.

As the dust cloud settled on to the willows shading Deer Creek, Rob wondered what Manual would do with the ninety dollars cash he had just paid him for a day's work - the going rate, but a pittance for the effort required. What kind of life belonged to a day laborer? Did he have a family with him? Would all his money go south of the border? The questions remained unasked, adding to the long list from a taciturn life. Like so many other days immersed with people from different cultures, today was a day of work, not talk.

At sixty two, Rob was finally living the dream. Looking at the freshly placed foundation, he could see the final result, the clean log walls, a porch begging for quiet thought, and the glow from a stone fireplace. The vision came easy; a constant companion since an adolescence weighed down by the suspicion of others had encouraged his fantasy of an anonymous life in the wilds of Alaska. With no resources to finance a fresh start, Rob had instead escaped his burden by enlisting in the Air Force on his eighteenth birthday.

While not the path or destination he expected, Rob felt deep satisfaction at his dream finally taking shape. Thoughts of this place, this cabin, this life had carried Rob through thirty years of work, travel, and heartache. It lulled him to sleep when nothing else would, it occupied his mind during pointless meetings, and in some ways, it sustained his family; he wasn't an easy person to love.

Rob shook his head with a silent admonishment to get back to work. The early September sun was intense enough for shirt sleeves and sweaty backs, but at this elevation, it would be twenty-five degrees by morning, and Rob needed to protect the still-wet concrete from freezing. Back on task, Rob's thoughts drifted to missed birthdays, ball games, and nights with Allie as the reflections of the anchor bolts disappeared under a thick layer of wheat straw. Today was a day of fulfillment, a fifty-year-old vision taking shape, a lifetime of planning finally paying off - so why the melancholy?

Movement along the creek trail caught Rob's eye. A slight smile appeared as he watched the lone rider on the paint mare. Allie, his childhood sweetheart, and wife of thirty-eight years was approaching from the direction of their ranch house. Rob kept working as she approached, only pausing when she came close enough to see her pale blue eyes.

Allie said, "You got some work done."

Rob hopped out of the excavation and smiled as he said, "Yep, it went well today."

"When do we start putting logs up?'

"Need to let the concrete cure a few days before I knock the forms off; then, I can frame up the floor joists and sub-flooring. Once that's done, we'll start placing the logs."

"Don't forget, you're planning to go to the public hearing tomorrow, and on Saturday, we are meeting Sara in Portland for a week before she heads back to London."

Despite knowing he needed the reminder, Rob let annoyance season his words as he said, "I know."

Belle, the six-year-old filly Rob had surprised Allie with when they bought their ranch last year, snorted and shook her head. Horses sense their humans' emotions, and Rob knew Belle's nervousness reflected the anxiety stirring in Allie from his terse response. He eased his hand to Belle's bridle, soothed her with gentle pats to the neck, and whispered reassurance. Belle settled, but Allie stayed in the saddle. Rob knew Allie had come to help him finish up for the day, but it seemed he had screwed that up.

Allie looked at Rob momentarily, then stood in the stirrups, swung her right leg over Belle's rump, and dismounted. Rob tied Belle's reigns to the pickup hitch while Allie walked toward the straw bales, again the bigger person.

Thirty minutes later, with the concrete covered and tools picked up, Allie broke the silence. "Robby would have been excited to see this finally happening."

Rob realized she had put her finger on the melancholy he had felt earlier, the rawness of loss hiding beneath twenty years of a continued life. With a nodded concurrence Rob added, "I can imagine him here helping."

Allie leaned in, kissed Rob on the cheek, then untied Belle and swung up into the saddle. She smiled at Rob and said, "Dinner will be ready in about thirty minutes." She chirruped to Belle and turned down the creek trail toward their ranch house. Rob watched her ride away. Easy in the saddle, the long, once blond now gray, braid down the middle of her back, she was more than he deserved; always had been.

Robby had died a week short of his twelfth birthday. Twenty years on, Rob carried the hurt of losing their son to leukemia in the dull ache of experiences missed. The location yet to be defined, the details of how *they* would build this cabin had provided the refuge of hope Rob would go to with his son on those long nights when Robby's pain and anxiety had kept sleep at bay. Robby had asked a thousand questions about how they would do things: the notching and shaping logs to fit, anchoring them to the foundation and each other, framing windows and doors, all the details had fascinated Robby. Rob's lengthy answers would slowly but surely ease the fear and lead to a question of his own: *You'll help me build it, right?* Often, the answer was a sleepy nod and tired smile.

Feeling more sadness than solace in the recollection, Rob sighed and headed for home.

* * *

Rob pulled his pickup into the side lot of the 7-Eleven and backed into a parking space next to a dark blue BMW. It was 8:30 AM, and the day laborers had either got work or gone home—no sign of Manuel. Rob wasn't hiring today; with no idea how long the public meeting might drag on, he was only here for coffee.

Having filled his coffee mug from the freshest looking of the three pots, Rob approached the check-out line. He waited third in the queue behind a forty-something woman in a professional-looking pants suit and a stylish purse over her shoulder. She held a sparkling water for purchase in one hand while she scrolled on her phone with the other. Upon his return to Baker County, Rob immediately fell into the hometown habit of making his first assessment: local or out of towner? In the woman's case, clearly from out of town. Unfortunately the man in front of her was not only a local but also his neighbor. Rob took a deep breath and exhaled slowly; Allie called this a 'cleansing breath' and was her advice for slowing his amygdala-driven reaction to Donny Lang.

Donny had paid and left without acknowledging Rob. A short reprieve since he was certain Donny would be at the public meeting. Stepping out of the store he spotted Donny's beat-up Dodge sitting unoccupied on the other side of the lot. A local boy who had never left, Donny was twenty years Rob's junior and the oldest sibling in his family, which is why Rob had not known Donny before departing to join the Air Force. He certainly knew him now and wasn't surprised to see all five foot nine and 250 pounds of Donny smoking a cigarette as he leaned against the front fender of Rob's pickup. Rob nodded as he approached and said, "Donny."

A dirty NRA logo baseball cap, ragged camo jacket, and Carhart work jeans were the same as always. Donny flicked the cigarette butt into the gutter and nodded his greeting. Rob wondered

again what possessed someone to invest in a neck tattoo, especially one of a middle finger. This meeting belonged to Donny, so besides acknowledging his presence, Rob made no effort to start a conversation and took out his keys as he stepped toward the driver's door.

Donny said, "Ya, headed to the high school?"

"Yep."

"Good. I expect you'll be get'n in line with the rest of us against it."

"And why would I do that, Donny?"

"Oh, come on. Even you don't want the feds shutting down those lands, right? I mean, if they call it all wilderness right up to our boundaries, we won't be able to graze on em, cut firewood, or nothing."

"I don't do that now, and I don't poach elk either."

Their first meeting had been over the carcass of a dead elk Donny had shot without permission and out of season on Rob's property. He and Allie had only been on their ranch a week, and to keep the peace with a new neighbor Rob had let it go rather than report it. In hindsight, he realized Donny had perceived his generosity as a weakness. A year later, Donny's poaching, firewood cutting, and grazing continued to drift onto their land despite the new boundary fence.

Donny's slight nod of the head indicated arrival at some new understanding, and he said, "I know you was a fed – I guess that explains it."

Rob's career with the Department of State was not a secret, but not something he often mentioned since returning to Baker County, and certainly not to Donny. Rob nodded his own understanding and said, "I see you've been asking around about me. I also did a little background check on you, something I should have done before buying the place. Better late than never, I guess at least I know now if I ever have granddaughters visit, I need to keep a close eye on them."

The statement made it clear that Rob was aware of his ex-con and sex offender registry status, and Donny visibly tensed at it. After staring at Rob for a few seconds, Donny turned to leave, only managing a "fuck you" in the process.

Rob slid into his pickup seat and headed toward the high school, wishing he had just walked away. But it was never that simple with Donny. Rob and Allie's 1600-acre ranch hadn't been occupied for over twenty years before they bought it; Donny had put the lack of occupancy to his full benefit by treating it as the better half of his hardscrabble operation. Rob later learned Donny had been desperately seeking financing or partners to buy it when Rob and Allie had, in Donny's mind, stolen it from him.

During a career bouncing from one foreign city to another, the anonymity of transient neighbors was the norm. But Rob had always imagined a different paradigm where, as a local and landowner, 'neighbor' equated to 'neighborly.' Instead, he shared a boundary with an ex-con, sex-offender, and bully who coveted his property. Allie's advice to avoid and ignore was something Rob found increasingly difficult. It wasn't only Donny's past and personality; it was the fact locals treated him as more mainstream than marginal. Rob knew this wasn't how it used to be here.

The high school parking lot was about a quarter full - mostly pickups, including several light green ones with the U.S. Forest Service logos on their doors. It was less of a turnout than Rob had expected. He parked, and as he walked toward the gym lobby, he noticed the dark blue BMW from the 7-Eleven parked near the front.

Just inside the gym lobby, a young man in a Forest Service uniform handed out informational packets and directed those who wished to speak toward the sign-in sheet. Rob passed on both. He had already read the information online and supported the wilderness designation but did not need to publicly express his opinion. Today was about satisfying his curiosity: seeing who showed up and how big of fools Donny and his buddies made of themselves.

Rob nodded to the young sheriff's deputy posted near the door as he stepped into the gym. Wooden bleachers extended from one wall, and a speaker's podium flanked by a folding table with three chairs faced the crowd. The bleachers were no more than a quarter full, mostly clustered in groups of three or four. Rob recognized a number of faces but chose an open spot near the top, nodding at several folks as he passed. As a middle-aged African American woman in a Forest Service uniform stepped up to the podium, he took his seat. Rob noticed the woman from the 7-Eleven sitting on the front bleacher with a half dozen other men and women in business attire.

The speaker identified herself as the Forest Supervisor for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest and reviewed the morning's agenda. Next came a presentation on the specifics of the proposal to expand the boundary of the Eagle Cap Wilderness area westerly up to the border with private land, the private land being Rob's, Donny's, and a half-dozen other landowners. Other than fidgeting and a few quiet conversations, the crowd was respectful of the speakers. With presentations over, the Forest Supervisor's offer to answer questions died quietly.

Something felt off to Rob. The chatter he had picked up at the coffee shop and hardware store had all been tinged with anger at another overreach by the feds. He had expected a big turnout and much angry push back.

Those wishing to speak came next. There were only four—all in support and all from environmental organizations. The last to speak was the 7-Eleven woman identified as the 'lead

council for the Sierra Club's local office in Portland' – as if Portland was local. When she finished extolling the necessity and value of expanding the wilderness area, the Forest Supervisor retook the microphone and extended the offer to speak one more time. No one in the audience budged, but loud voices turned heads toward the gym lobby.

Rob noticed the sheriff's deputy was no longer at his post. A moment later, Donny, followed by two dozen other men, marched into the gym. All with holstered sidearms and carrying assault rifles. The Forest Supervisor stepped back as Donny approached the podium. His cohort, each sporting the same tactical vest with *Hope's Militia* blazoned across the front, formed a semi-circle behind him as the crowd greeted them with applause.

He realized this is what Donny had wanted to tell him about outside the 7-Eleven. Rob couldn't decide if he was more disturbed by the unfolding spectacle or the fact its leader thought he would enjoy being in on the plan.

Donny unfolded a piece of paper, placed it on the podium, adjusted the microphone, then said, "For the few of you here who don't know me, my name is Donny Lang. I am a citizen, a landowner, and a member of a well-regulated militia, as is my Second Amendment right. We are here to tell the world that we, the people, will no longer stand back and stand by while the federal government tramples our lands, our rights, and our freedoms."

He waited for the applause to die, then Donny turned slightly to his right, looked directly at the Forest Supervisor, and continued, "*We, the people,* know you and your bosses in D.C. made this decision long ago. You coming here today is simply the façade the law requires. Nothing *we, the people,* can say will change the outcome. But, let it be known that, just as our Founding Fathers expected, *we, the people,* will protect our fellow citizens' rights and freedoms against a tyrannical government. We stand by, and we stand ready."

Applause erupted as Donny theatrically folded the paper he had read from and tucked it into his hip pocket as he turned away from the podium. Rob wondered whose words they were. Despite their Constitutional silliness, they were articulate beyond Donny's capability. As if to prove Rob's point, Donny pivoted back to the microphone, pointed toward the Forest Supervisor, and said, "We ain't letting you types invade our county. I warn you here and now, don't tread on us!"

Donny turned and marched out with his militia in tow, accompanied by more applause. Rob sat a moment, pondering what possessed anyone to look to Donny for leadership. Suspicion of the government was nothing new; it had been here when Rob was growing up. But the apparent unanimity of beliefs, the undertones of racism, and acceptance of someone like Donny as a spokesperson felt bizarre.

Rob stood to leave and noticed the Forest Supervisor talking on her phone while her staff and the out of towners lingered. Although Donny had not leveled a specific threat, Rob assumed she was calling for a security escort before leaving the building. Rob weaved his way through the small groups of militia members and locals talking in the lobby to the parking lot where Donny greeted him with a one-word question, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well – are you with us or against us?"

Donny had parked his girth in the center of the sidewalk. Rob could step onto the lawn bordering the sidewalk, move past him and ignore the question; instead, he approached close enough to be looking down at Donny as he answered, "I spent my career defending our country and Constitution in foreign lands. I will be God damned if I am going to come home and join a group that's trying to destroy it from within. I realize this little toy army you have assembled helps you compensate for your many shortcomings, but just like you, it's a fucking joke. So, the simple answer is no, I don't stand with you, and I never will."

He started to step past, but Donny grabbed his wrist, leaned in close enough for Rob to smell the bad breath, and said, "Be careful. You have no idea how big this is."

Rob jerked his arm down, breaking Donny's grip, and brought his other forearm hard to Donny's chest. Donny staggered sideways off the sidewalk, and Rob stepped past. Rob saw Donny's reinforcements hurriedly approaching but kept his unhurried pace toward his pickup. The two militia members stopped when they reached Donny. Rob started his pickup and purposefully circled past the sidewalk where Donny stood, giving a friendly wave as he passed, knowing that Donny would miss its sarcasm.

2

The sound of Deer Creek's heavy load of snow melt tumbling down the steep canyon drew Rob's eye across the front porch to the hint of green emerging on the aspen trees lining the creek bank. The cabin's location provided more than the geography of solitude inherent in Rob's long-held vision. Perched safely above any possible spring flood but close enough to hear the creek's music, it was guarded by a half-dozen massive ponderosa pines. Siblings of the numerous stumps dotting the remainder of the canyon, Rob would never know why long-ago loggers had left these six trees. He gave silent thanks for an oversight transforming a merely acceptable location into an ideal one.

Rob stepped off the front porch and through the empty door frame into the partially finished cabin. Blessed with the luck of a late-arriving winter, Rob had completed the walls and screwed down the last metal roofing sheet just hours before the heavy snows hit. The plastic sheeting he had tacked over the door and window openings had given way to winter storms and lay torn and flapping in the breeze. Snow had drifted in and melted, leaving neat semi-circle strand lines of pine needles below each window opening along the cabin's west side. Rob's eyes followed a trail of boot prints painted in dried mud as it crossed a splatter-line of bird droppings below the central beam and continued to the back window, where two cigarette butts joined the boot prints. Here, the plastic cut rather than wind-torn exposed the view of the Elkhorn Mountains.

The cold, dirty quiet of the empty log shell had the charm of a crime scene triggering Rob's memory bank of settings he hoped to forget. But like an uninvited relative sneaking into the wedding, a recollection of Bosnia-Herzegovina sidled into Rob's mind: *Recently reassigned from Russia to the landing team for the embassy taking shape in Sarajevo on the heals of the Dayton Accords, local authorities had asked Rob for assistance with a murder investigation possibly involving a U.S. Service member. He had accompanied the young police officer to the bomb-damaged building less than a kilometer from the NATO base. On that day, a dried boot print also accented early spring's cold, dusty quiet.*

A partially clothed young woman had lain in the corner amid the signs of struggle, assault, and strangulation. A combat boot print stamped neatly in the dust by a window, and an American brand cigarette butt found in the corner pointed toward the NATO base. Rob had coached the police officer through the

evidence collection protocols expected of a U.S. investigation and provided him a contact at the NATO base. He hadn't had the heart to tell the young, earnest officer not to expect much. Rob knew it far more likely local authorities would view the incident as a sad but acceptable price paid for a powerful alliance.

Rob chalked up the muddy boot prints, cut plastic, and cigarette butts as the sad price for having Donny Lang as a neighbor. He shook off the memory of Sarajevo; it was spring, the snow was gone, and it was time to finish the cabin. After cleaning up the accumulated pine needles and removing the remnants of plastic from the door and window frames, he would head to Baker City to pick up the custom-built wood windows and doors waiting for him at the building supply.

* * *

Rob signed on the 'Received by:' line and pushed the sales pad across a butcher block counter top worn into smooth undulations by thousands of such transactions. He recalled the grown-up feeling when his dad had sent him here on his own for the first time as an eight-year-old. He could no longer remember the specifics of his purchase, but he did remember the counter top, the *Baker Building Supply* sales pad, and the feeling of proudly pushing it back across the counter with his first official signature attached. The work-worn hands receiving it on that day were one generation removed from the current recipient. Rob said, "Thanks TJ; the windows and doors look great."

A gnarled finger wetted by a quick tap to the tongue peeled the white slip off the sales pad and pierced it onto the twenty-penny box nail pointing skyward from the half-inch thick piece of pine board. TJ handed the pink copy to Rob and said with a matter-of-fact nod, "Junior does good work."

At 11 AM on a Wednesday, Rob was the only customer in the store, and his lonely receipt impaled on the homemade invoice holder hinted he might be the first one of the day. TJ was a third-generation Baker County resident like Rob. But unlike Rob, who had departed for the Air Force immediately after high school graduation, TJ had gone to work at his dad's building supply store; he was still here and now making way for his son. Over the ensuing 45 years, Rob had traveled the world, fought in wars, met world leaders, witnessed their history-making debates, and quietly looked for the dirt needed to steer outcomes in favor of his Country. Yet here he was, back in the same place as TJ, the only difference being he was now an outsider.

Rob had paid a steep price for the experiences, the cell phone full of contacts, and the comfortable federal pension that let him retire at age 60. A career built around deception meant a family who would never know his whole truth or completely overcome the emotional distance left

in its wake. The demanding pretense of his job and the extended assignments abroad meant his family had far fewer memories with him than without him.

A notion about his move home filling a subconscious need for a do-over had once started to take hold, but Rob had aborted the thought before it could fully form – he despised self-reflection and the rehashing of the past it required. Looking back in any honest way necessitated a pointless embrace of guilt and regret, which he was unwilling to do. Besides, this was not the same community he grew up in; there was a new edge to people's beliefs, including a racially tinged harshness Rob did not recall from his youth. He suspected it had always been there but kept at bay by physical distance and social norms; barriers brought down by social media's anonymity. Even if he had wanted a do over, the place he remembered no longer existed.

Growing up, Rob was aware of TJ the way younger kids are of their elder schoolmates, but the two-year grade difference had barred any meaningful interaction, let alone friendship. Yet TJ had seemed to recognize Rob when their paths crossed years later. While others had given Rob 'the look' when the long-dormant suspicions from his youth came flooding back, TJ had not. He had always wanted to know where Rob had been, and to the extent, Rob could say who he had met. He then often added well-informed, if hard-line conservative, opinions on world affairs. Rob had been surprised at first but realized as they had talked that TJ's formal schooling might have ended in year 12, but he never stopped educating himself.

On his rare visits home over the last four decades, TJ was one of the people Rob always hoped to see. If he didn't bump into him during the obligatory stop at the Olney's Tavern, he would make an excuse to swing by the building supply and catch up with him there. All small communities have their pillars; the mayors, city council members, and Rotary Club presidents; that wasn't TJ. He was one of the folks who quietly kept their businesses going, went to church on Sundays, contributed to fundraisers, and lent a hand when needed. He was the type of citizen the pillars proudly claimed to represent.

When Rob and Allie had discussed where to retire, consideration of full-time residency in their hometown had brought the comfortable anticipation of being a local again. They would quickly connect the dots between new faces and family names long known. There would be friendly conversations with merchants who knew their names and they theirs. A drive-through town would come with casual waves from folks who recognized their pickup. They would not only know most of the patrons when they stepped into the tavern or cafe, but they would also know their parents, siblings, and kids. It had started that way, with most people not remembering or at least not dwelling on any lingering suspicions of Rob's involvement in a murder. A killing that Rob was questioned

about as a teenager but that was ultimately pinned on a migrant worker. Yet it seemed lately they had failed a test they never knew they had taken.

Rob tucked the pink copy of the receipt into his shirt pocket, then scrolled on his phone a moment while he said, "I got my turkey last week. He was almost 27 pounds." Rob handed TJ his phone with the picture of the wild turkey.

TJ glanced at the picture and handed the phone back to Rob without comment.

"I got him on the edge of our lower pasture. This morning I saw one that looked even bigger just up from the house, not far from where you got yours last year."

TJ acknowledged this statement with a nod but focused on the plumbing supply catalog he had pulled off the shelf and opened on the counter.

"If you want to come out, just let me know, and I'll point you in the right direction."

"Alright. Thanks."

The conversation had ended as one-sided as the rest of them he had attempted since the fall. Allie had the same experience. There had been no rudeness or refusal of service, nothing to antagonize, only the polite indifference normally afforded visitors. But in the end, he and Allie moved back to Baker County because this was where they had found their perfect ranch. It could have been Idaho, Wyoming, or Montana, but it had been here.

The belief their heritage would grandfather them into the locals' club had been a nice bonus but not the deciding factor, so Rob said "fuck it' to himself and pointed his pickup toward Olney's Tavern. It was almost noon, and his morning oatmeal had long worn off. For as long as Rob could remember, Olney's Tuesday night's dinner special was roast beef, making the Wednesday lunch special a hot roast beef sandwich. He reminded himself he didn't give a shit if it didn't come with a conversation.

Rob sat with his back to the wall – a long habit, like always backing his vehicle into the parking spot and not getting out until he took note of his surroundings. The waitress knew Rob; she was the daughter of one of his high school classmates and had dated his nephew for a while. The easy conversation typical of casual acquaintances unburdened by too much personal knowledge had occurred on previous visits. Today she took his order with mechanical politeness and delivered his roast beef sandwich with the enthusiasm of a dental visit.

Located just outside Baker City on Highway 30, Olney's Tavern had opened when Rob was a kid and had become the go-to place on weekends for those who were or could pass for over 21. Still here, limping along with a lunch rush filling no more than a fifth of the capacity, the signs of neglected maintenance and repairs became more evident with every visit.

Despite the signs of a struggling business, the food was still good. With his sandwich mostly gone, Rob had just completed a mental list of all the things he could see needing fixing when the beam of brightness from the entrance door drew his eye. The arrival was back lit too brightly to see a face, but Rob instinctively knew from the squat dimensions and bully strut the outline belonged to Donny Lang. He let the brief question of coincidence or phone call pass without a guess at the answer. Either way, this was the 'chance' encounter he had been hoping for, if not expecting, for a while.

Rob focused on his lunch and provided no reaction as Donny seized the booth's other bench seat.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Looks like that decision is already made." The words out before he could temper them, Rob reminded himself to relax – he wanted this conversation.

"How's the roast beef?"

"Same as always. What can I do for you, Donny."

Donny waited for the now friendly waitress to take his order, then turned to Rob and said, "Last fall, at the public meeting over at the high school, I think we might have got off on the wrong foot."

"Maybe."

The ball back in his court, Donny seemed unsure what to do with it for a moment. Rob sensed an earnestness he hadn't quite expected as Donny said, "I told you last fall you had no idea how big this is, but I imagine a former fed like you now does have an idea. I mean, I can't imagine you wouldn't have asked a few questions."

The waitress delivered Donny's lunch with a smile and offered further assistance if needed. As Rob watched Donny get started on his sandwich, he couldn't help but marvel at how this stocky, dirty-fingered, convicted sex offender had positioned himself as a pillar of the community. But these were the games Rob had played his entire career, and he knew silence was often the best interrogator of the slow-witted, so he waited.

Met with Rob's silence, Donny, through a mouthful of sandwich, said, "I think last fall I was just a little surprised you weren't supportive of trying to stop another land grab by the feds. But when it comes right down to it, I guess I ain't got any idea where you stand. I, uh, just wanted to clear the air with ya."

"About what?"

"Well, when we first met, I shouldn't a shot that elk on your property."

Rob noted he hadn't mentioned it being a month before the season started but let it go and encouraged Donny to go on with a nod of acknowledgment.

"It's also no secret I wanted to buy the ranch you bought, but I couldn't get the funds together, and then there's you being a former fed and all, and it just seemed like you and I weren't meant to see eye to eye."

"Maybe not, but we are neighbors, and I am not going anywhere, so if this is about calling a truce, I am all for that." A friendly breadcrumb to keep Donny on the right path.

"Well, there is that, but this is way bigger than just us get'n along. I guess I assumed, being a former fed, you must know what's going on, right?"

"Since I went to the public meeting last fall and heard your statement, I just figured this was the latest iteration of the 'Sagebrush Rebellion,' and we both know how that ended – right?"

Donny looked at Rob a moment, and a slight, dirty tooth smile eased his face as he said, "You don't even know, do ya?"

Rob took advantage of the simple fact that people self-conscious about how others perceive their intelligence can rarely avoid sharing the knowledge they do have and said, "What do you mean?"

"The Sagebrush Rebellion was noth'n but a fucked up mess. This is much bigger than that. Look, I don't know what you did as a fed, but I need to clear the air on something. There's lots of folks around here that still thinks you're the guy who killed my uncle. I know they hung it on that Mexican they caught with his truck, but since your old man was the only eyewitness putting him near where it happened, lots of folks still think it was you. I figure you know that, but just wanted to say I don't care if you did or didn't. That all happened before I was even born. Hell, I kinda think it probably was the Mexican – I mean, my uncle was knifed – that's kind of their thing, ain't it?"

It seemed Donny expected gratitude for his disclosure. Wanting the conversation to continue but unwilling to go there, Rob said, "You said *this* is a lot bigger than the Sagebrush Rebellion, and what's that mean?"

"That was just a bunch of county commissioners, sheriffs, and local judges pound'n their chests about how the feds own too much land and some or all of it should come back under local control. It was fuck'n stupid for them to think for one minute the feds and the court system led by federal judges were going to let that happen. So other than let'n a bunch of locals blow off some steam, nothing came out of it. A big waste of time is what it was."

From Rob's perspective, it was an accurate assessment, remarkable only in its source. The Sagebrush Rebellion moniker attached by the media painted a picture far grander than justified by the scattered, angry outbursts that had periodically flared up around the West over the better part of

the ’70s and ’80s to no real effect. Rob had written off Donny’s antics at the public meeting last fall as more of the same. Still, the encounter and the subsequent shunning of him and Allie had lingered. Over the restless winter months, the recollection had tempted the investigator in Rob to do what Donny suspected he had done; a few phone calls and internet searches, and he would have answers. But never only answers. Exposed threads would need pulling, questions would need asking, and leads would need pursuing. Retiree Rob had held on to ignorance over investigation through the winter.

Rob had built his career around the simple premise that knowledge is power and his instincts were finally chipping away his indifference. Whatever Donny was part of, it was more than the Sagebrush Rebellion, and a lack of knowledge left him, Allie, and their ranch at risk. So here he sat conversing amiably with the person he despised the most in the world. Settling aside his disdain was already paying dividends of new information.

Rob would play the game he had played with many desperate people, most much brighter than Donny, and he expected little resistance as he began laying a trail of breadcrumbs. “So, if it isn’t about getting federal land back, what is it about?”

“That time, there was no leadership, organization, or money. And no real clue about what needed to change or how to make it happen. It ain’t like that this time.”

Rob nodded in apparent appreciation for this statement, then hesitated a moment before saying, “Last fall, at the public meeting, I didn’t recognize most of the folks in your militia, and that surprised me a little.”

As intended, Donny seemed to take this statement as an apology for Rob rebuffing him after the public meeting and said, “Remember I warned ya that you had no idea how big this was? Well, there are millions of veterans in this country, and many thousands of them are disgusted when they see the Country they defended invaded by foreigners and our leaders doing nothing but get’n out of the way and let’n the fuckers bleed hardworking Americans dry.”

Rob nodded, encouraging Donny’s momentum to continue.

“There’s a lot of us out here who ain’t gonna accept be’n a minority in a socialist country. If we don’t stop it, that’s exactly where folks like us are gonna be -so I ask ya again, are you with us or against us?”

Rob let a hint of a smile warm his face, then said, “Depends.”

“On what?”

“I am still curious who the other militia members are?”

"I would'a thought a smart guy like you would'a figured it out. They're ex-military who ain't willing to give their Country away."

"I got that piece, but how did you get hooked up with them?"

Donny shook his head as he said, "I ain't sure that matters, but I'll tell ya anyway - I am a little surprised you don't already know. Look, I was get'n disgusted with all the crap go'n on and started to realize someone at some point was gonna need take a stand even if it was a last stand. So I did a little research online and found out there's a bunch of other folks out there like me. So I am start'n to get organized, and I bump into your brother, and he gave me a phone number for someone he thought I might want to call. So I call the number, and the next thing you know, I got former special forces guys offer'n to come out and equip and train my militia."

Rob set aside the many questions mention of his brother raised and said, "The public meeting last fall didn't have anything to do with immigration or socialism, so why show up there?"

"What do you call it when the feds grab more land? I call it socialism when it's just one more way they're taken our freedoms and try'n to control us. But, yeah, that wasn't really the point. We showed up for the press it would get."

"So it was a recruitment exercise?"

"You could call it that."

"Did it work?"

"Yeah. I had six local members then and now have 43."

Rob waited a moment while the waitress cleared away their plates, then said, "So what's next?"

Donny took the bait and said, "We grow, we equip, we train, and we stand by."

"Stand by for what?"

Donny hesitated a moment, then said, "Don't know exactly. None of us do, but we do know there will be an event, and when it happens, we need to be ready."

"What kind of an event?"

"It don't matter. We'll know when it happens, and when it does, we'll be ready."

He sensed Donny had reached the limit of what he intended to share or, more likely, what he knew. Rob suspected a subtle expression of doubt about the significance of Donny's efforts would get him talking again and said, "I don't see how one militia in a far corner of Oregon is going to make much difference."

Said with a reflective tone, hinting he was not quite convinced had the intended effect, and Donny said, "This deal ain't just us; pretty much every like-minded county in the Country is forming up."

"That must be expensive."

"Like I said, we get equipment and training for as many members as we can assemble. They gave us the documents we need to prove we're legal under the Second Amendment. We've been given expectations for readiness, just like the army reserves. None of that cost us anything."

Rob nodded his understanding but added doubt in his voice, "But, you don't know who 'they' are? Are you sure it isn't the government just setting you up?"

"That don't make no sense, so yeah, I am sure."

Rob nodded in acceptance of the answer but could hear the doubt in the defensiveness of Donny's response and said, "So what is it you're expected to do when this so-called 'event' happens?"

"We will operate as a well-regulated militia and protect the good citizens of Baker County from the government or other invaders."

Again Rob nodded as if it made sense, then said, "Sounds to me like you have enough soldiers in your militia, so what is it you want from me?"

Donny hesitated a moment, then said, "You can be a soldier if ya want but what we need to know is if, when the time comes, you'll help?"

"What exactly do you mean by help?"

"Maybe help organize, maybe use your contacts to help get information – don't know exactly, but we will when the time comes. I just need to know if you'll stand like the rest of us?"

Rob hesitated a moment, then said, "One thing the Foreign Service taught me was never to agree to an open-ended arrangement. That's what you seem to be asking me to do, so I will take a wait-and-see approach. For your part, a goodwill gesture would be to call off the shunning put on Allie and me after the public meeting last fall."

Donny stood to go and said, "You gotta talk with your brother about that."

Rob, caught off guard by Donny's response, took a moment to realize Donny had left his check unpaid. He tossed thirty dollars on the table and, as he turned to go, mumbled, "shit" under his breath – getting bested by a moron never felt good.