

Chapter Two

(HOOD RIVER, OREGON)

Later that morning, Carole left for home, for Chicago. After dropping her off at PDX, I drove the 65 miles back up the Gorge to Hood River mulling over Joey's call.

The sun burned through the early morning clouds and the day promised to warm considerably. The first true warm spring day. A day for shorts and T's with a fuzzy top to break the early chill.

Massive ice age floods carved the Gorge only a few thousand years ago. In a couple days, the equivalent of one and a half times today's North American rivers funneled through the Gorge, a narrow mountain gap in the Cascade Range. With walls now rising some 4000 feet in places, the days are an endless joy of shape and change, light and dark.

Twenty years ago, I'd taken my part of the biz and bought a dive bar in Breckenridge, Colorado. With the gentrification of the town, the loss of the true ski bum to the entrepreneur seeking business opportunity, I'd sold. And did very OK.

After a couple months of traveling, I found Hood River on the dryer end of the Columbia River Gorge. For over 100 years the valley produced

fine apples and pears. In the early 80's, the tales of wild summer winds started leaking out to the windsurfing world. To the east, the Great Basin desert bakes in the summer, often creating a 50-degree differential with the ocean beaches only 200 miles away. In an effort to equalize, the cool maritime air rushes toward the hot air. All summer the winds blow 40 or better. The influx of sailors built to a torrent. Hood River became the summer windsurfing capital of the world. And they all leave on the first of September.

The town combines orchards, tourism and athletics in a single setting. With the sports--windsurfing, white water kayaking, climbing, skiing on Mt. Hood--the town carries the closeness of a familiar mountain town. The hundreds of acres of long standing orchards give the town an underlying stability. And the Hispanic pickers add a dose of salsa to what otherwise would be any other white bread yuppie resort town.

Turning off the freeway, I crossed the bridge over the railroad tracks and into the center of town. Two blocks up the hill, I turned right into a narrow alley and parked, squeezing the Trooper between a dumpster and a brick wall with the remnants of a painted Coca Cola sign barely visible. Tossing the last of my coffee and the cup into the dumpster, I walked into the back of the Grill.

The building originally served as a fruit warehouse. Ten years ago or so, the escalating paper value of real estate in downtown Hood River theoretically no longer made industrial use the best and highest use. The packing company built a new warehouse and packing plant up in Odell, in the middle of the orchards, and divided the old space downtown for commercial "opportunities".

For some reason, timing, wrong tenants, bad weather, the project never took off. When I found Hood River, I also found the old Alvik Warehouse empty and for sale. I bought it and, not knowing what else to do, took one end and cobbled together a bar. In the next year or so the rest of the space filled out as the Grill started drawing customers.

The ceilings are 15 feet with open industrial metal web trusses. The

river side has large industrial-style metal mullioned windows with chicken-wire glass. On a clear day, you feel like you'll land in the river if you fall out a window. The snowy bulk of Mt. Adams lies an apple's toss away.

After buying the building, I wandered around the Northwest looking for furnishings and a bar back. The chairs and tables caught my eye at different times and places. None come close to matching.

The bar back is another story, a true classic. Mahogany, 10 foot and a bit high, with mirrors, glass door below-counter beer coolers and booze racks on each side of the mirror. Originally a fixture in Baker City bar, to the east, it sat disassembled collecting dust and chicken droppings in a barn for years, maybe 20 years. I was having a beer in the Geiser Grand Hotel and mentioned, "I'd like a bar like that."

The bartender, an old timer, said, "I know one. Only it's quite a bit bigger. And in a barn. In pieces."

A couple phone calls later and a short ride out of town, I was looking at what I knew would work perfectly. Work perfectly with a bit of restorative work, that is.

The bar itself is a single wide mahogany plank spliced down the middle of its 40 foot length. Maple butterflies secured the splice. A mix of equally old bar stools sit screwed to the floor along its length.

Walking in, I nodded at John leaning on the back bar coolers in his normal, languid manner. Growing-up on an orchard at the foot of Mt. Hood, John carried the attentive relaxed manner of a long-time mountain kid. Seasons matter, the rest of it will fall in place, you simply let it ride a little. After ski racing on the Hood River High School team, for the University of Colorado on a scholarship, he'd been tagged for the U.S. Ski Team Development squad. After graduating, in a fit of post-September 11th redneck patriotism, he joined the Army and shipped off to Iraq. He was a slender, deceptive six-four, with a huge mustache. The ponytail he grew after getting out of the Army just got longer. Coming and going in style, his hair remained pulled straight back through the years.

At one of the middle tables, toward the front, two men argued. One, standing, wore a satin purple muscle shirt and a pair of wild brush stroked jams. With his cropped hair and short sculptured broad build, he looked like a miniature Arnold Schwarzenegger. The other, leaning back in his chair, looked tall even sitting down.

As the guy standing ranted, punctuating every phrase with arm motions, the one seated casually looked at his fingernails, carefully not paying attention to the growing tirade from Muscle Beach. In a yellow polo shirt and white tennis shorts, he sat with the air of a New England blue blood. No doubt, for generations his family shopped the same stores and vacationed in the same house on Martha's Vineyard.

The two men, so totally engrossed in their own scene, didn't notice I entered. Staying in front of the bar, I passed John and moved toward the street, closer to the action.

"The case, man. Give me back the fucking case. The party's over, asshole. You guys like the shit, right? You won't pay, so give it up." The purple shirted muscle man pounded the table.

Shaking his head, the preppie inspected his cuticles. A leather brief case sat under his chair. Softly he said, "Make your call. You've got yours. Check it out." He looked at the little guy, "The case is mine now."

As the one standing straightened up, I heard him say, "Shit," under his breath. He switched personas. He became calm. Reaching into the waistband of his jams, he pulled out a small blued automatic pistol.

Very evenly, coldly, he spoke again to the man sitting, "OK. Now, real slow, reach under your chair and give me back my fucking case."

The lanky one paid close attention now. Slowly with deliberation, he picked the case from between his legs under the table. As he came up with the case, he exploded into the table pushing it up, and into, the surprised muscle man. With a last twist of a flying table leg, the tall guy set the table directly on top of the smaller man as he fell on his back to the floor.

Leather case in hand, the Prep headed for the door in a full sprint.

John no longer leaned against the coolers stroking his mustache.

Squirring from under the table, the Junior Terminator put one round into my corrugated tin ceiling. Dropping the case with the shot, the Prep continued at an even faster sprint toward the seeming safety of the open door.

Once free of the table, the little guy stood, feet apart, both hands on his weapon, swinging to aim at the fleeing man, now without the brief case, just reaching the door to the street.

Without thinking, I picked up a chair and swung across his outstretched arms. The gun, knocked from his hands, skittered across the floor stopping short of the brick wall on the far side of the room.

He followed and reached down for it.

Right behind him, I grabbed his shoulder, pulling him back, "No."

He glanced over his shoulder at me and came up with a right round-house.

I ducked inside, stood back up against a left into his solar plexus. He gave a sharp gasp with the loss of air. I put a right and a left jab into his jaw. The first one was square on his chin, slowing him. With the second, I connected below his ear, snapping his head sharply back to the right. His knees gave and he dropped against the wall.

There was a time, long ago time, I reveled in such encounters. A time long ago. No more. Picking his gun off the floor, I pulled a chair up, flipped it around in front of the little Terminator and sat in it backwards, my arms resting on the back.

I was pissed. Adrenaline made it difficult to steady the gun in my hand. My breath was sharp and deep.

Shaking his head to clear himself, he came out enough to realize I'd pulled up the chair and his gun was loosely pointed at his nose from a few feet away. I flicked the safety on, then off with my thumb. The soft clicks finished pulling him out of his haze.

"Hey, asshole, customers popping customers is not a good way to build business. I don't get off on it. OK?"

“I’m with the government.”

“Sure.” I held out my hand. “ID?”

“Shit, I don’t have it on me. Do you think I’m stupid?”

I looked at him sitting against the wall with his legs out straight, “You don’t really want me to answer that, do you?”

John resumed his familiar relaxed, bemused pose against the back bar. Glancing back at him, “John, go pick up that brief case and let’s see what these guys were arguing about.”

John walked to the brief case lying on its side, almost at the door, hefted it, smiled and walked back with it.

“Want to open it?”

“Go ahead. You take the honors.”

He set it on the table next to my chair and tried the clasp.

“It’s locked, but I may have the key behind the bar. Just a sec.”

Reaching over the bar he picked up the large chef’s knife for cutting drink garnishments. He moved in a mock Errol Flynn sword dance, “This ought to work.”

Slicing the leather just above the clasp, he opened the case and pulled out three packages wrapped plain brown waxed butcher paper. All the same, the size and shape of a medium sized bag of rice, he laid them in a row on the table. He looked at me, raising his eyebrows.

With some reservation, “Go ahead. Let’s see what we get for our birthday this year.”

The size of the packages. The look. The neatly folded corners to create a tight wrap. The even rectangular shape with all the edges rounded. Everything was right to be completely wrong. I wanted to know what was in the packages. At the same time, I knew what they held. I hoped I was wrong.

As John started to open one of the packages, the Muscle Man silently watched from the floor. Slowly, he moved one leg back, seeking to get a purchase for moving away from the wall and out of his rather immobile awkward situation.

“Move that leg any more and I’ll put a round right in your cap. Understand?” I pointed his gun at his knee. “Any questions? Legs out straight. Back flat against the wall.” He hesitated. “Now!”

The man returned to his former resting position and John went back to opening the package. The paper covered a plastic bag stretched full by a white powder. Coke. Two-kilo packages of cocaine.

John popped the corner of the bag with the knife and loaded the tip. Taking a very small pinch, he dropped it on his tongue and rolled it around his mouth.

“Whoa.” He shook his head in dis-belief and offered me the knife tip.

I took the taste and as it hit my tongue knew instinctively from the sticky texture, it was not coke. It was China White. Heroin. Smack. The new hot drug of choice in so many upper society circles. The sweetness spread across my tongue and onto the roof of my mouth as my tongue moved, spreading the taste around. So sweet.

In the years since my final foray into Nam, a full year after the official withdrawal, I consciously and studiously avoided any taint of my loose days before. I set that trip as a hard divider.

The three bags sitting on the table in The Grill breached the dam creating a flood of memories. Good. Bad. Distant and yet completely immediate.

I wanted to be rid of this guy and not have him return. Ever. And I wanted it done now.

Old drug.

New drug.

I wanted none of it back in my life.

None of it at The Grill.

While finished, I could not afford to have it appear near me. Even as a bust bystander. And in this case, tagged a participant. My bar. My turf. I was physically involved. The carefully created distance remained significant, but not enough to risk the questions brought about by six keys of China White surfacing in the waters around my life.

“John, call the cops.” I paused, “And call Andy, down at the News. Tell him we got a live one and he ought to run over with his camera. Give him a couple minutes’ head start, then call the cops. Pack this shit up and toss it in my office. I don’t want any hint of it being around with the cops or the papers.”

I turned to the guy on the floor, “You can be the front page tomorrow. ‘Tourist beef-cake shoots up Hood River bar.’ Part of your fifteen minutes of fame.”

“Wait a sec. . . You want to make a deal?” He sounded worried. “I’m really with the government.” He nodded his head.

“No, you wait. There’s no outside dope investigation going on in town. The chief’s a good friend of mine. We had dinner last night and there’s no one but locals working town right now. He ought to be real happy to have a little chat with you on your activities leading up to the last few minutes. Mentioning the dope will only get you in way deeper than you already are. I’d let it drop if I were you.”

He studied the wide board pine flooring between his legs. I looked at his gun. It was a well balanced Italian 9mm. A Berretta. Smoothed from being carried, he’d had this weapon for a while. Turning it over in my hands, I noticed the numbers were missing.

“Nice piece. Nice it has no numbers. The cops will just eat that up”

I looked over to the bar. John still hadn’t moved, amused.

“John, make those calls. I’m tired of holding this guy’s pop gun.”

“Sure.” John started down the bar.

“Wait,” brow furrowed, he spoke looking at the floor. “I got a number you can call to confirm I’m with a government agency, OK?”

John stopped and leaned against the wall next to the phone.

I thought for a second, then turned to John. “You know how to use one of these, don’t you?”

John walked over, smiling, and took the pistol from my hand.

“Let’s see if I can remember from those far away days across the ocean. I pull this little dealy and the bullets come out the pointy end. Right?”

He grinned at me, then at the muscle man on the floor. Pointing the automatic at the guy he said, "Cool." He flicked the safety on and off to get the feel.

"He's yours for a bit. If he tries anything, shoot a leg or a foot, then hit something very final. No more questions. OK?"

John slid onto the chair as I stood, "Not a problem."

I walked to the bar returning with a napkin and a pen.

"OK, let's have your numbers."

"Call 703...542...14..40."

"And who do I ask for?"

"Mr. Anderson."

"And who are you?"

"Dean."

"I just got a brilliant idea."

From the front of the bar, I picked up a leash lying on the windowsill, "Let's tie Dean up and toss him in the walk-in. I'll feel better with a couple of extra steps between us while I call for his confirmation."

John smiled and nodded.

Dean slowly extended his wrists toward me.

"No way, on your belly, dude." He reluctantly rolled belly down on the floor and put his wrists behind his back. I looped the leash around his wrists and finished up tightening it at his elbows.

Lifting, John and I, a hand under each arm, brought him to his feet. Keeping our hands on his arms, we walked him back to the walk-in cooler and settled him against a tall stack of Full Sail cases.

In the open door, I turned to John. "Same goes here. Pull up a chair in the hall. If he tries anything, nail him."

To Dean, trying to get comfortable in the cold and against the beer, "I'll tell you what's going to happen. Your Mr. Anderson will be out, busy or something. If I leave a number, he'll get back to me as soon as possible. I won't leave a phone number. I will leave the number of a couple of old friends back in the same area code and my old ID number. Mr.

Anderson can call and find out a little about me. Not a lot. There isn't a lot immediately available. I'll mention I have you hog tied in a cooler dressed for a beachwear fashion show in Santa Cruz to put some immediacy in their situation. Don't expect the cavalry, I won't give them a lot of time to make the call or to make up their mind."

Dean looked at me with a growing mixture of disbelief and surprise. "Huh?"

"You don't think I ended up with your piece and you ended up keeping a bunch of beer company because I mix a decent margarita, do you?"

Closing the door, leaving Dean in the dark, I walked to the office to make the call. I started to dial the number on the napkin and stopped, hanging up after the second three-digit group. Leaving the napkin on the desk, I ran to my Trooper, pulled the cigarette lighter charger out of my cell phone and returned to the office dialing as I walked down the hall.

"Fourteen forty." The evenly modulated female voice answered on the second ring.

I paused a second before answering. "Hi. I have Dean, who says I can call this number, ask for Mr. Anderson and everything will be OK. Is Anderson around?"

"Mr. Anderson is out of the office at this time. Can I take your number and have him return you call?"

"No thanks. You have Mr. Anderson call to verify me, just to make this interesting, OK? Phone number to verify is 703...453...1237. ID Number 327...2...550. He just has to ask for Control. I'm sure he knows the routine. You might also tell Mr. Anderson his buddy Dean is dressed for a day on the beach and I have him hog tied in a freezer for safekeeping. Dean's fairly anxious about his situation. In fifteen minutes from now, I'll call back and expect to talk to Mr. Anderson. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. If you could hang on. . ."

"The number you're trying to trace is an ID blocked cell phone from the 503 Portland, Oregon exchange. Not easily traceable. Understand?"

Fifteen minutes.” I hung up.

Sitting at the desk, I decided to call an old friend in Washington, D. C..

“Boyd Mitchell, please.” An even modulated male voice this time.

“May I tell Mr. Mitchell who’s calling?”

”Charles Stone, an old friend.”

“Just a minute, Mr. Stone.”

I waited with D.C. pabulum music force fed into my ear hoping Boyd was in and I could get through to him.

“Charlie,” Boyd came on the phone laughing. “How you doing? Where are you? And what do you need?”

“I’m doing great. I’m in Hood River and I need some information.”

“What sort of information?”

“A quick fix on a couple of guys.”

“Well, if it’s not deep, no problem.”

“Got a pen?”

“Sure.”

“Write this number down. 703...542...1440. I need to know about the number, a Mr. Anderson and a guy working for him going by Dean.”

“The first is easy. That’s a switchboard at Langley. It’s an operations division. You know, covert stuff. The other will take a couple of minutes. I’ll get Joyce on it and be back with you in a sec.”

The wretched music returned while I waited for Boyd to come back on the line.

“So, Charlie, what are you doing? This is a real switch from what the rumor mill has you doing.”

“I am very retired. I sold the bar in Breckenridge a little over 15 years ago and, not knowing anything else legit, started another in Hood River. I pull beers. That’s it.”

“As I remember, just after we got back, in ‘70 or so, you bought a condo in Breckenridge. Still have it?”

“Yeah. I get out for a few weeks skiing every year, to stay in touch with the Rockies.”

“Get to Chicago much?”

“Some. A lot of friends there. I go back once in a while for special events. Parties, Bears games and so on.”

“Here’s Joyce. Let’s see. Mr. Anderson is an old Asia hand with some experience in Central America. In the late 90’s he became involved with Afghanistan and then with Iraq, of course. Has been attached to the DEA a couple of times, so he must have foothold in that area. Recently, it looks like he’s been doing something back in Afghanistan or Pakistan from the people on his list of contacts. Nothing on your Dean fellow.”

“That’s interesting.”

“What’s up?”

“Well, this guy Dean’s trussed up in my cooler right now keeping the beer company. He got pissed at a guy and was about to take some pot shots at him when I took him out. The guy leaving dropped a briefcase six keys of very pure China White.

“After a song and dance, he said call Mr. Anderson before I called the local paper and the cops. I got the standard routine. Anderson’s out, leave a number. For kicks, I left our old control number and my number. I thought I’d give you a ring to give you a heads up. What’s the CIA doing in Hood River? Isn’t that a little out of bounds? And what’s the dope doing here? Domestic investigations?”

“Way out of bounds. This information is all without ringing bells. Want me to go deeper over the next couple of days?”

“Don’t bother. I’ll work out a fast and clean hand off. Something with leverage in case they come back at me. You coming skiing this next winter? Or are you still begging off?”

“I’m too old.”

“Get serious.” I laughed. “I have a friend you’d hit it off with. She’s a red head and a ski instructor. A good friend. I’ll set you up. You’d get along great. Both of you old enough to be sensible, but neither passed out of childhood. Actually, she’s coming off a divorce and strictly into having a good time.”

“I may take you up on it.”

“Just do it.”

“Easier said. Gotta go. Good luck with Dean. Let me know if I can do anything more. Stay in touch, OK?”

“Thanks. I will.”

Before getting up, I thought about the two of us. We'd seen tough times. Boyd lived for getting out of each foray and back to Susie, even when they weren't getting along.

In the early 70's, in Cambodia, he got malaria. Thinking of Susie kept him alive for the time it took us to get the word out and a med-evac in. His divorce from Susie had done him in for a couple of years. Maybe still.

Since the days overseas, we talked every year or so, a couple of times managing to meet halfway in Chicago for a long weekend and a Bears game.

He'd threatened to visit Breckenridge ever since I bought the condo, but never made the plane. I had to remember to push this time.

Push hard.