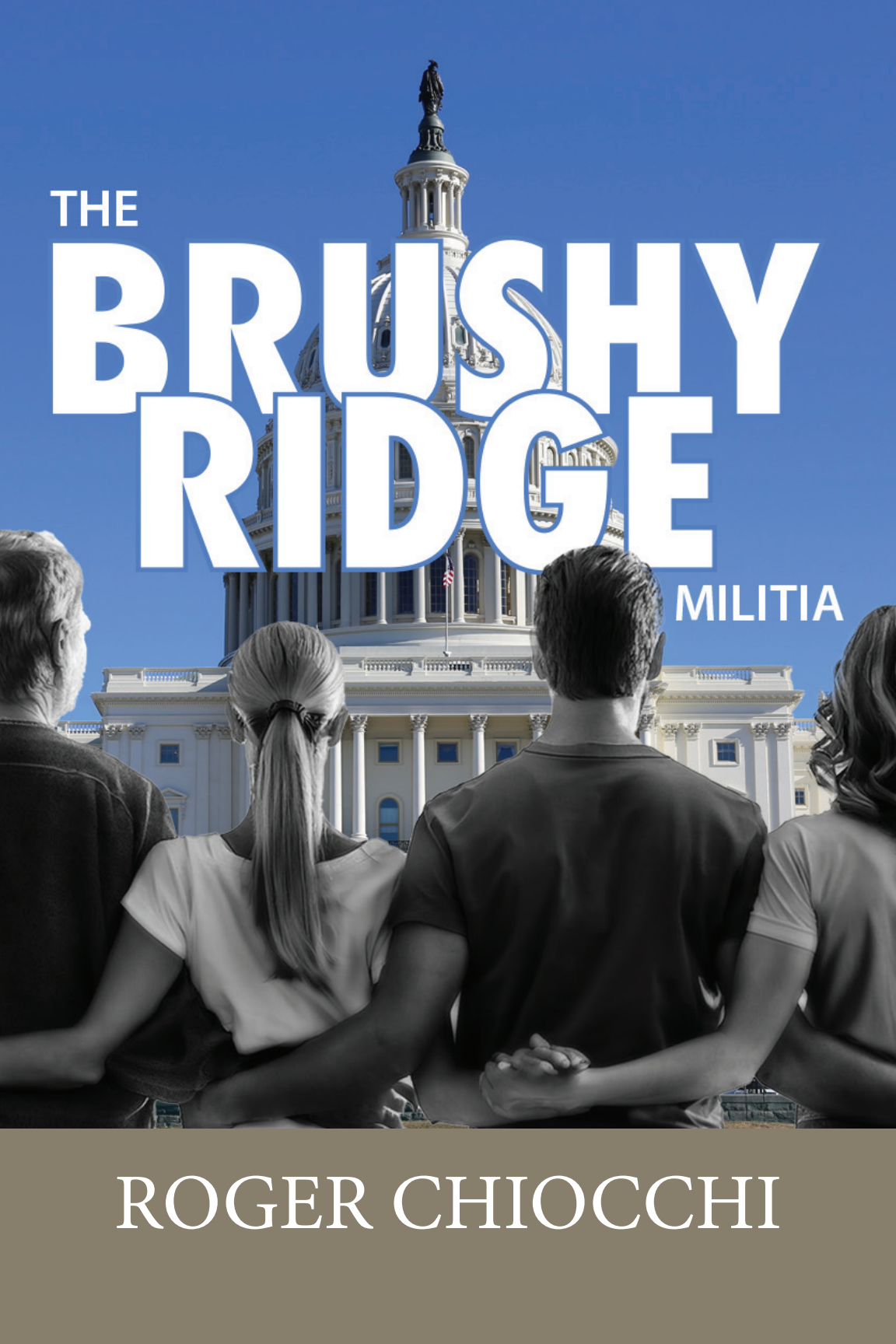




THE

BRUSHY RIDGE

MILITIA

ROGER CHIOCCHI

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They stood clamoring on the streets of DC, demonstrating with a deafening amplitude and accelerating fury.

“Guns must go!”

“Guns must go!”

“Guns must go!”

All over, government officials peered out their windows, attempting to get a fix on the crowd.

The protestors were resolute in their conviction, diverse as America and vehement in their battle cry.

“Guns must go!”

“Guns must go!”

“Guns must go!”

Everyone wondered:

Will this be the time? Will the ones in power actually do something? Take action? Listen?

Around Capitol Hill, Speaker of the House Fred Grantham was conceded as being brilliant in conducting the affairs of state, a master politician, but also a stubborn son of a bitch who would never waver from his most cherished convictions. Flexible on some issues—at the very least to maintain the *perception* of bipartisanship—there were some on which he wouldn't budge even an inch.

He had a demonic style of dealing with his minions—and to him they were *all* minions, even his adversaries and peers—that kept them continuously off guard and completely in check. Grantham was obstinately loyal to four sacred ideals: his God, his family, his wife and the United States of America.

When he unexpectedly received a text from one of his aides at the Capitol, he was pissed, to say the very least.

You're needed on the floor.

That was the last thing he wanted, with protestors surrounding the Longworth House Office Building, potentially obstructing his path to the Capitol.

"How'n the hell we gonna get out of here, Tony?" he barked to his bodyguard through his cell phone.

"Shit!" Luchesse exclaimed. "They just sent the only limo down here to get its brakes checked. I mean, we knew nothing about this..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Grantham snapped.

Immediately, he dialed his aide on the floor. "If this is some ceremonial piece of bullshit, tell 'em to fuck off."

"No, no, it's not. They need your signature."

Grantham hung up abruptly, then called Luchesse again.

"So what we gonna do, Tony?"

"I'm scoping things out, sir," Luchesse answered.

“Well, scope it out quickly.”

Grantham could see the protestors down below from his office window, close to a thousand of them, he estimated, with more reportedly coming. The last thing he wanted was to be confronted by a bunch of bleeding-heart anti-gun protestors as he crossed Independence Avenue on his way to the Capitol.

“Guns must go!”

“Guns must go!”

“Guns must go!”

Their placards told the story.

Columbine, 15 dead.

Parkland, 17 dead.

Sandy Hook, 26 dead.

Brushy Ridge, 12 dead.

The TV reporter stood nearby, the crowd in the background.

She spoke into the camera, uttering the same expected phrases:

“Thoughts and prayers.” “Disturbed young man.” “Semiautomatic weapon.”

The same words, the same pictures and, likely, the same outcomes.

Luchesse phoned Grantham. “Hey, sir. I think the path of least resistance is gonna be through the garage exit on South Capitol. Last check, none of them were there. I’ll call for a few more officers just in case.”

"If you say so," Grantham blurted.

Luchesse knew those words all too well. That innocent set of four little words—if *you say so*—meant *your fucking ass is on the line if you screw this up*. So far, so good for Luchesse. He had never screwed up to the extent that Grantham severely punished him. And, if so, Grantham would probably be hesitant to dish out anything way too harsh; Luchesse knew too much.

He picked up Grantham from his office and then escorted him down the hallway to the bank of elevators that went down to the South Capitol parking garage, where they were met by the three other officers. As they walked up the inclined driveway to the street, they were ambushed. They could hear the chants from right outside the garage. Quickly, Luchesse bounded up the driveway to check it out, leaving Grantham and the other officers behind in the basement.

*It was last September when the nervous young man knocked on the door of
the house in the woods.*

A grumpy old man answered.

"I-I'm here for the gun," the young man stuttered, shivering.

"Yeah," the old man responded. "You eighteen?"

The boy nodded.

"Got proof?"

Shaking, the young man fumbled for his wallet and handed over his license.

The old man held it up to the light and squinted.

He looked at the small picture on the card and then back at the boy.

"Yep, that's you," he said. "Be right back."

*An eternity passed in those ten minutes; the young man's shaking grew
worse.*

*"Here!" The old man shoved the long object wrapped in brown paper
toward the boy.*

"It's a fine weapon. Use it in good health."

Luchesse saw exactly what he didn't want to see. A group of protestors, about thirty of them, who had splintered off from their colleagues around the corner.

"Guns must go!"

"Guns must go!"

"Guns must go!"

"So . . . ?" Grantham asked as Luchesse came back down the driveway.

"Yeah, there's a few there."

"What are we gonna do?"

"Well, as far as I can tell, there are some of them at every exit. We just might have to grin and bear it."

Grantham grinned, all right. He gave Luchesse his patented cold hard stare. It was legendary and it was ugly: straight, bony nose; undulating ripples in his forehead; thin cracks in his brittle facial skin; and rubbery red protruding lips, oversized for a face so long and narrow. It could turn most staffers and junior representatives into wobbly bowls of Jell-O. Gaunt and very white, Grantham, a Kansan through and through, would feel at home right smack on the canvas of *American Gothic*, only much starker and foreboding.

"So you're saying we have no choice?"

Luchesse nodded.

"Then let's get it over with . . ."

Luchesse led Grantham up the inclined driveway to the street. When the protestors noticed him, they erupted.

"C'mon, Fred, do something!"

"Our schoolchildren have a right to live!"

"It's not worth it, Fred!"

Grantham just walked on by, his narrow face an intense shade of chalky white. His expression of solemn WASPY indifference did not intend to negate the apparent piety that he ably expressed during his regular attendance at Sunday services. Equally, though, he did not intend to concede any sympathy toward the protestors' cause, which, in his opinion, circumvented sacred rights sanctified and bestowed upon America by its forefathers.

His reaction infuriated them.

"Fred, Fred, listen to us!"

"Fred, blood is on your hands!"

"Murderer! You're a murderer, Fred!"

Their volume and fury rose to a fervent level, their chants becoming much more frontal.

"Fuck you, Fred!"

"You're an asshole, Fred!"

He continued to walk, ignoring them, Luchesse and the officers by his side.

"You're just a flunky for the gun lobby, Fred."

"Have some balls, Fred!"

Then something happened, either an attack or an obstruction.

A woman thrust herself out of the crowd and confronted him. Then she got down on her knees and shoved a poster in his face. The officers surrounded her.

He stopped out of necessity, not courtesy.

"See this girl, this beautiful girl?" The woman's eyes welled with tears. She struggled with the officers to hold up a poster with a picture of a girl.

Grantham couldn't help but see it, mere inches from his nose.

"That's my daughter."

He gritted his teeth and squared his jaw as if shielding himself in an odd sort of way.

"She was shot three years ago. By a young boy who never should have had a gun."

He was not about to say anything, even the obligatory *thoughts and prayers*. Doing so, in his opinion, would be conceding some sort of empathy.

Enraged by his lack of response, the woman screamed at the top of her lungs. *"Look at her. Look at that face, that precious, beautiful face. Look at her!"*

Sobbing, the woman shook the poster closer to Grantham, her extremities rattling.

"Come on, do something. You have the power to do something!" she screamed as she sobbed.

For a moment, he focused on the woman still struggling with the officers who were blocking her, the same bland expression across his

face: He could clearly see her skin's red complexion, her moistened eyes, the crevices carved in her cheeks. Then, silent, he turned his head the other way and, shielded by Luchesse, continued onward without any acknowledgment of her pain.

*Bullied unmercifully, the young man had been backed into a corner, with
no way out.*

Until he actually found one.

An ad for that AR-15. Private seller, no background check necessary.

*He took the semiautomatic with him to school one day. It was his
protection, his shield.*

By lunchtime, twelve bodies lay dead in the hallway.

The day was a grueling one for Grantham. After his visit to the floor, he did several TV interviews in the rotunda, met the California Republican contingent for lunch in a private dining room, made a dozen calls to donors back at his office—an act he purely despised—and at about four thirty, rode off to the ABC News bureau on Desales Street to record another interview.

Once the interview was complete, he rode back in a limousine with Luchesse at his side.

When they were dropped off at the South Capitol garage, he joined Luchesse in the bodyguard's silver Nissan Rogue.

Grantham had one more appointment that evening.

Corpses still warm, the forces snapped into action.

Pre-scripted talking points pervaded the airwaves.

"Guns don't kill people. People kill people."

"The kid was a monster."

*"We have to place some blame on the school authorities. They should have
seen it coming."*

*The powerful lobby placed calls to their loyalists on Capitol Hill: Toe the
line. Don't be
intimidated.*

As usual on most Tuesdays and Thursdays, Luchesse left Grantham at an apartment building on Connecticut and Ordway in the Cleveland Park section of DC and then parked his Rogue at a strip mall up the street. After that, Luchesse regularly popped into a restaurant and sports bar named Hugo's almost directly across from the apartment building.

Normally, between an hour and an hour and fifteen minutes later, Luchesse would receive a text from the Speaker, exit the restaurant and pull his car around to the apartment building where he would retrieve Grantham. He would return him to the garage at the Longworth Building from where, on most nights, Grantham would drive himself home in his tan Cadillac.

But on this night, Luchesse never received that text.

It could have been that he was preoccupied with the attractive blonde he had met at the bar, but later he would discover it was a result of his cell phone not working properly.

Not realizing his text was never received, Grantham left his appointment in apartment 1F and proceeded down the hallway. When he approached the inner door to the front vestibule, he saw a middle-aged woman in yoga pants shuffling through her mail while simultaneously chatting on her phone, as well as two nondescript-looking men in business attire—one white, one Black—at the mailboxes.

As the woman in yoga pants approached the door, still chatting on her phone, Grantham opened it for her. After she passed him, he walked briskly through the vestibule to meet Luchesse outside.

When he brushed by the two men at the mailboxes and grasped for the front door—

"Mr. Speaker?"

Grantham looked back. The two of them stepped toward him.

"I think you should come with us," the white guy said calmly.

They each opened a side of their jackets, revealing their weapons.

"What!" Grantham exclaimed.

Shocked, he had no choice but to comply with the two men. Flanked by one on each side, he silently marched with them out the

vestibule and down the building's front walkway toward a limousine parked on the street.

As the door slammed, the limo pulled off down Connecticut Avenue.

Typically, Grantham's self-confidence bordered on arrogance. For years, he'd held the upper hand in almost any exchange he was party to; he would be the one giving the commands, and everyone else had better listen or else they would be gone—or, worse yet, chastised insufferably. Instinctively, Grantham treated his captors no differently than he treated his staffers.

"If you're the damn KGB, you can tell your goddamned boss we'll hang his ass out to dry right in the middle of Red Square if he tries to fuck with us."

"We're not," the Black guy answered.

"So, let's get to it already. I don't have much time. What is it you want from me?"

"Not much, really," the white guy said.

"What?"

"We're not here to hurt you. We're not here to keep you for days or weeks or months, even. We're just here to talk to you."

"Talk to me about what?" Grantham snapped.

"When we tried, really tried—tried peacefully—you wouldn't give us the time of day."

"Oh?"

"But now we're going to make sure you give us all the time we need. For as little or as long as it takes."

"What the . . . Who the hell are you?" Grantham snapped again, his face reddening.

"We're the parents of the kids killed in Brushy Ridge. The ones who died because of stupid laws that allow any eighteen-year-old to buy a gun without a background check. We call ourselves the Brushy Ridge Militia."