

The Mountain Man's Badge

(Excerpt)

Gary Corbin

Chapter One

Lehigh fussed with his wide bolo tie and adjusted the fit of his black suit jacket, sweating in the intense July evening heat. He rang the bell and turned to take in the view of the McBride estate, a sprawling mansion at the peak of fifty acres of gently sloping mixed terrain. A manicured four-acre front lawn lay behind him, bisected by a meandering paved driveway and dotted with flower beds, shrubs, and standalone old growth fir trees. On each side of the stadium-sized lawn, thick clumps of mixed tree stands created a castle-wall-like effect, as if staving off attacks by hordes of savage enemies. Given the embattled state of retiring Senator George McBride's political career, the irony of the estate's symbolism was not lost on Lehigh.

A smiling woman answered the door, wearing a traditional black and white maid's uniform. The top of the dark bun on her head could not have reached five feet, even in heels. "Hola, Señor Carter!" she said. "Please come in."

"Gracias, Consuela. It's good to see you again." He extended his hand to her. She brushed it aside and crushed him in a tight hug, then stepped back. "The family is in the Great Room. Would you like to freshen up before joining the party? Or perhaps a drink first? I just made fresh piña coladas." Her broad grin exposed dazzling white teeth, surrounded by bright red lipstick offsetting her milk chocolate skin.

Lehigh took off his sheriff's hat, allowing his long brown pony tail to fall onto his back, and stepped inside. The foyer was a good ten degrees cooler

than the mid-80s temperature still clinging to the evening air outdoors. "If I could enjoy one in the senator's den while I cool off, that'd be ideal," he said.

"You go in. I'll be there momento." She disappeared around a corner, and Lehigh slipped into the silent office alone.

The room reeked of the senator's privilege and success. Framed photos of George with various politicians and celebrities covered most of the fir-paneled walls not occupied by bookshelves, with one exception. Behind the senator's huge desk, the head of an elk leered at intruders, its snout hanging over a gun rack sporting three antique rifles. Sharpshooting trophies on shelves below the rack reflected the dim light from the overhead fixture. More photos sprinkled throughout demonstrated the senator's firm support of the second amendment and his support of gun groups.

A burst of energy from the doorway startled him. "I have missed you!" Consuela said, handing him a drink. "You don't come by so much anymore. This new job, it keeps you too busy!"

Lehigh accepted the drink and laughed. "You're right, Consuela. And I've missed you. How is Manuel?"

"My boy says his mill misses your excellent lumber," Consuela said. "When I told him this party was to raise money for your re-election, he nearly fainted!"

"I take it he didn't make a contribution, then," Lehigh said with a grin. He took a long sip of the ice-cold piña colada. Perfect.

Consuela shook her head and adjusted his tie. "I'm teasing you. He would donate if he could, but he is still rebuilding his business. Three months he was in jail with no trial. It nearly ruined him." She teared up and hugged him again. "I never properly thanked you for releasing him."

"It was the right thing to do," Lehigh said, but a lump rose in his throat. Manuel's case was one of many messes he'd had to clean up in the first weeks of taking office. Ex-Sheriff Buck Summers' enemies suffered as much as his friends had benefited from the corruption he'd overseen in his twelve years in office. Unfortunately, Lehigh had only just begun fixing those problems.

"I'd better let you get in there," Consuela said. "Can I get you another piña colada? Or your usual, scotch on the rocks?" She took his jacket and hat and pulled him by the elbow toward the Great Room.

"If the senator will part with it," he said with a grin. "Otherwise, a cold, crisp lager beer will do just fine."

"Scotch rocks it is." She dragged back into the hallway and pointed to the double doors of the Great Room.

Lehigh nodded to the two buzz-cut men standing guard outside the double doors of the ballroom. He recognized them as off-duty deputies and fought to remember their names, failed, and hoped that a smile in their direction would suffice. They nodded back, but didn't return his smile.

He took a deep breath and pushed open the doors to the aptly named Great Room, a spacious expanse with high ceilings and luxurious decor. Over a dozen crystal chandeliers cast bright natural-hued light on an equal number of marble floor-to-ceiling Roman-style pillars. Two dozen round tables, each capable of seating eight for dinner, surrounded a circular expanse suitable for dancing or mixing. A four-piece jazz band occupied a small elevated stage in one corner. Lehigh's high school prom had taken less space and hosted fewer people.

"Darling!" Lehigh's bride of two months, Stacy Lynn McBride Carter, appeared out of nowhere in a knee-length dress that made his eyes pop. Burgundy in hue, the silk fabric both hugged her slender form and showed off her amazing curves. Her long black hair sat atop her head like an ebony crown, complete with embedded jewelry that sparked in the room's abundant light. She kissed him, a deep, passionate expression of love and longing, but only for a few moments—enough to titillate, but not enflame. "Thank God you made it," she said. "If I had to endure one more minute these politicians alone, I'd—"

"There you are! Our guest of honor!" A rumbling baritone behind them betrayed the presence of Stacy's father, George McBride. Moments later his rotund frame stumbled into view. A broad smile split his white-capped, ruddy face. It didn't take a detective to realize the senator had enjoyed more than a

few shots of his favorite Scotch before dinner. Lehigh wondered if any remained and resigned himself to drinking lager.

"I wasn't sure you were here," Lehigh said, shaking his father-in-law's hand. "I didn't see your New Yorker parked outside."

"My mechanic is working on it. Something about being out of alignment and needing new tires," George said, stepping between the happy couple and hooking their arms in his. "Anyway, as your campaign chairman, I could hardly miss a party like this! Now, my boy, I need to introduce you to some people. It is, after all, a fund-raiser, and we're starting your campaign late, very late!" He pulled them through the crowded room, causing several collisions, spilled drinks and mumbled apologies. "But not to worry. You're the talk of the town these days, Lehigh. The talk of the town!"

"Folks must be awfully bored if they're wasting conversation on the likes of me," Lehigh said, but it didn't appear that George heard or paid attention. "What-all would make people give a whoop about what I'm up to?"

"Don't be modest, darling," Stacy said. "People love a hero, especially a rogue like you who's finally cleaning up the dirty politics of this county. Dwayne Latner doesn't stand a chance of beating you!"

"Will you be charging Latner with any crimes, as we've been hearing?" A tall, handsome man with a made-for-TV smile and haircut stepped in front of them, a half-empty martini glass held between loose fingers. Bruce Bailey, an investigative reporter for the town's only local network TV affiliate, somehow managed to block the path of Senator McBride and both of his prisoners with his athletic frame. Bailey's dark blue suit made him look larger and even more fit than in his many TV appearances.

"Nobody gets charged with anything unless we have solid evidence," Lehigh said, scowling at Bailey. "And anytime we do, we'll share our findings with the press at the appropriate time and place." He narrowed his eyes and planted a palm in Bailey's chest, pushing him backward. "And this ain't it."

"I expect an invit—hey, watch it, Sheriff! You're spilling my drink! I'm sorry, Senator." Bailey stepped aside and dabbed at his own suit, then George's, with a napkin.

McBride pulled his arm away from Bailey. "Forget it. I'll send it to the cleaners." His expression turned to a scowl. "Damn it, Bailey, you've knocked off one of my cuff links. Keep an eye out, everyone! If it gets stepped on, it's a goner." He grabbed Lehigh's arm again and tugged.

"You should go change," Stacy said. "You can't introduce him to donors looking like this!"

"No time," McBride said. "It's almost time for the main event. It looks fine, anyway."

Lehigh tuned out the rest of their argument. Stacy's preoccupation with clothes paled only in comparison to George's fanatical obsession over politics. Lehigh hated both.

"Now come on, Sheriff," Bailey said, trailing behind them. "Do you have news on the Buck Summers and Paul van Paten cases? Is Latner implicated?"

"No comment for the press," Lehigh said. "And that goes double for you, Bruce."

"Lehigh, my boy," McBride said, turning back toward him with a grin, "I believe we've finally found something on which we can agree. The less said about that skunky rat Downey, the better."

"Is that so?" Bailey finished drying off his suit and dropped the napkin on the tray of a passing waiter. "I thought you and Ev Downey were old pals."

"Nonsense," McBride said. "You need to stick to the facts and ignore those ugly rumor mills, Mr. Bailey." He pulled Lehigh and Stacy past the protesting newsman toward a cluster of well-dressed couples whose gray hair and wrinkled skin hid beneath layers of makeup, hair coloring and plastic surgery. "These are the people I want you to meet," McBride said.

"Daddy, I've known these people since I was four," Stacy said.

“Not you, my dear. Your husband.” McBride pushed Lehigh toward the group, who parted to create an opening for the inbound trio. “Ladies and gentlemen. Have you met my new son-in-law, our new county sheriff?”

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.” The shortest of the men, a bespectacled, round-shouldered man with thinning gray hair combed back over his scalp, extended a handshake and mumbled his name.

“Pleasure to meet you, sir,” Lehigh said. He’d have to ask his name again later. “And this is my new bride, Stacy—”

“I remember Stacy very well,” the banker said with an oily smile. “Didn’t you once have short red hair?”

Stacy’s face darkened and her eyes caught fire. “No, sir,” she said, her voice icy. “Always black, and always at least to my shoulders.” She slid around behind her father and grabbed Lehigh’s arm, squeezing tight. Her fingernails dug into Lehigh’s skin, even through his lightweight summer suit jacket.

“What the heck is that about?” Lehigh asked Stacy in between handshakes with more donors. “Short red hair?”

“This isn’t the time nor place for that conversation,” Stacy said through a frozen smile.

“And last but not least,” McBride said after what seemed like a hundred more introductions, “County Commissioner Desmond Mitchell. But I believe you two have met?”

The group parted and a slender, light-skinned African-American man leaned his six-foot-four frame forward, his right hand outstretched. “Indeed we have,” Commissioner Mitchell said. “I appreciate your work, Sheriff. Just don’t forget about us poor farmers up in the northern part of the county.”

“Not a chance,” Lehigh said with a grin, shaking Mitchell’s hand. “After all, we’re kin, of sorts. I’m just an old tree farmer myself.”

Mitchell laughed, an eruption of noise that drew attention from half the room. “Indeed we are, Mr. Carter. Indeed we are. Honey, did you hear that? Tree farmers is kin to us! Hah!” He tapped the shoulder of a much shorter, very talkative woman with straight, jet-black hair wearing a light pink backless

gown, but she waved him off without turning. "Ah, well, once she starts talking about saving animals, there's no stopping her," Mitchell said with another laugh.

"Just my kind of gal!" Stacy said. "I knew there was a reason I liked her."

Mitchell nodded. "And likewise, Mrs. Carter. Now, you keep up the good work, Sheriff." He shook Lehigh's hand and returned to his wife's side.

"That's five big donors I've lined up for you," McBride said. "Your war chest is off to a huge start tonight, my boy!"

"I don't want big donors," Lehigh said. "Stacy, didn't you tell him...?"

"Tell me what?" George glanced at each one in turn. "Wait, don't even tell me," he said. "You didn't—"

"We've decided to limit contributions to one hundred dollars," Stacy said, reddening. Her gaze fell to the floor.

"A hundred bucks? That won't even cover the cost of their drinks!" McBride said in a hiss. "Are you crazy?"

"Most folks seem to think so," Lehigh said. "That never slowed me down none."

"Well of all the stupid—! Argh. Unbelievable. I wish you'd have told me this sooner." He fumed and drained his drink. "Well, we'll figure something else out. A super-PAC or something. Anyway, these are important people to your re-election bid. Be nice to them."

"I'm nice to everyone," Lehigh said, and then it was Stacy's turn to belly-laugh.

"Even Paul van Paten, your wife's ex-fiancee?" Bruce Bailey popped up again in Lehigh's view, his martini glass refilled. "I heard he was going to file suit about the conditions in the jail cell you're keeping him in."

"Don't you have a crying baby somewhere to exploit?" Stacy said.

"I don't know. Does your father have a secret life I should know about?" Bailey asked. "Mistresses, or former female staffers with stories to tell?" He grinned and sipped his drink.

"You must be thinking of Ev Downey again," George said, pushing his way back into the mix. "No woman was ever crazy enough to marry Everett. Even his closest associates know he's a liar and a cheat, and they are all men. If you ever see him with a woman, you know she's bought and paid for."

Stacy grabbed her father's and Lehigh's arms and tugged them toward another elderly couple. "I think we should mingle."

"I think we are mingling," Bailey said. "We're having a delightful conversation about George's old pal, Everett. Is he here tonight?"

"Everett's old, but I wouldn't call him a friend," George said, looking around as if searching for someplace to spit. "I can't trust that man out of my sight. Unfortunately, I also can't stand the sight of him. So, no, Mr. Downey wasn't invited."

"Really? Didn't you sell him some property a few years back—the old McGowan farm, the one that the state bought for the new prison property?" Bailey asked, stirring his drink with his finger. "I understand Mr. Downey made quite a profit off that sale. Did you benefit at all from that deal, Senator?"

"Not a dime!" McBride pushed to within inches of Bailey's smirking face. "I lost a fortune on that deal, in fact. Downey swindled me!"

"Angry, aren't we?" Bailey said. "How interesting. Maybe I should follow up with Mr. Downey."

"Now, don't you go making something out of nothing," McBride said. "That was years ago. I'm over it. You win a few, lose a lot, I always say."

"Of course you do," Bailey said. "Well, would you look at that. My drink's almost gone. I guess I better go refresh." Bailey sauntered off toward the bar, draining the last dregs from his glass.

"Whatever you do, keep an eye on that son of a bitch," McBride said in a low voice to Lehigh. "He's nothing but a cheap muckraker."

"I know Bruce well," Lehigh said. "But thank you. I will."

"Come on up to the stage," Stacy said, grabbing his other arm. "It's time to give your speech."

"What?" Lehigh said. "I didn't prepare any speech! What am I going to do?"

“Don’t worry, I wrote one for you,” George said, handing him a few folded-up sheets of paper. “Standard crap. Just try to sound genuine, would you? Make them happy they’re here. Don’t forget to ask them to write you a check for a hundred dollars. A hundred dollars—what were you thinking? Go on now.”

Lehigh stumbled toward the dais, studying the pages George had handed him. The text read like a stock political speech, full of meaningless sound bites. Crap. He hated speeches like this. The donors would hate it, too. And the press would eat him alive.

Speaking of which. He glanced around to try to locate Bailey again, but he had disappeared. Just great. The one moment he needed the TV reporter to show up and he was probably puking in the restroom.

Oh, well. Maybe that would limit the damage.

Or, as it turned out, not.

Chapter Two

The following Wednesday, Lehigh parked his pickup truck in the dusty, broken-gravel parking lot alongside Montgomery's, Everett Downey's most upscale strip joint, located on the main highway leading into and out of Clarkesville. About half of the central Oregon county's five thousand residents called Clarkesville home, yet somehow the club managed to fill its official capacity of 112 patrons most Friday and Saturday nights. Lehigh had never set foot inside, but his new bride, Stacy, had once worked there as a waitress, much to the chagrin of her conservative and once-politically powerful father.

Lehigh stepped out of the vehicle, into the dry July heat of the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. It wasn't even 11:30 a.m., but already the day had turned into a scorcher. No shade, no breeze, no clouds, just the constant blaze of a white hot sun overhead. He wiped his brow, then turned when the crunch of tires on gravel sounded behind him.

He spotted the green Volvo wagon and smiled. Stacy had promised to make the meeting if she could, but had warned that her caseload at the Cascade Animal Clinic looked heavy that morning, and dying or suffering animals always took precedence over politics. She parked in a shady spot, managing to block a "Latner for Sheriff" sign. Lehigh grimaced. Her father hadn't even had signs printed yet.

"I'm so glad you're here," he said when she got out of the car, and he gave her a massive hug and kiss.

"I'm not," she said, hugging him back. "I mean, I'm always happy to help you out, but I hate it here."

"Me too." He led her by the hand to the front door. "I'm not even sure why we're here."

"Protocol," she said. "I know it's distasteful, but just trust me. Stick to the plan, and we'll be fine. And fix your collar." She faced him, adjusted his tie, and dusted off the beige shirt of his sheriff's uniform. "You look fabulous."

"So do you." He gazed down at her, over a half-foot shorter than his wiry, six-one frame, astonished still that this smart, beautiful woman had exchanged vows with him six weeks before. Her long black hair tumbled around her shoulders, her summer tan exposed by the blue sleeveless dress that finished off just below the knees of her strong, toned legs. But as beautiful as she looked, he appreciated her political savvy even more. If even she said he needed to meet with Downey, it had to be true. "Thank you for arranging this. I'd have never..."

"Let's get this over with." She took a deep breath and forced a smile. Lehigh pushed open the door to the bar. A wave of cold air, reeking of stale tobacco, whiskey, and cheap perfume, pushed back at them. Stacy scooted through, Lehigh following. He blinked against the smoky air and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light of the small foyer. Then he held open the second set of doors for Stacy to glide through.

"So much for a smoke-free workplace," Lehigh said. "That's one law he's breaking already."

"Sh," Stacy said. "We have bigger fish to fry today."

The interior of Downey's club looked exactly as Lehigh expected: dimly lit by flashing neon signs promoting cheap beer or outlining suggestive, if not outrageous, poses by long-legged, overly busty women, illuminating small round tables topped with dark wood and crowded with chairs all facing the same direction. A woman wearing a purple wig, black fishnets and a smile gyrated around a floor-to-ceiling chrome-colored pole in the center of a small stage to the incessant beat of some timeless disco-like Europop song. A

handful of middle-aged men scattered around the bar nursed straw-colored beers in undersized pint glasses and pretended not to care what happened on stage, except to toss the occasional crumpled greenbacks into the spotlight whenever the purple-haired woman slithered by to scoop the bills into her fishnets.

“Don’t they have to wear G-strings or anything?” he asked Stacy.

She shook her head. “Not in Oregon. That’s considered ‘free speech’ here.” She grimaced at the stage. Lehigh could tell that the memory of her past employment still scarred her. Best not to press it any further.

As if summoned by his thoughts, a woman wearing just enough shiny, fur-lined fabric to cover her essentials greeted them. Everything about her screamed fake, from the platinum wig and inch-long eyelashes to her excessively protruding, gravity-defying bustline, but her voice was deep and gentle. “Two for lunch?” she asked with a sweet smile.

“We’re here to see Mr. Downey,” Lehigh said around a nervous cough. “He’s expecting us.”

She nodded and pointed a two-inch-long multi-colored fingernail toward the far corner of the room, away from the bar. “Can I bring you a drink? On the house, Sheriff.”

Stacy shook her head. Lehigh smiled, tempted. “Just coffee, thanks.”

“Shot of Bailey’s in it for you?” she asked.

“Not while I’m on duty.” He tapped the badge on his chest, and she shrugged. “Election season, I get it. You’re the second one today. Don’t worry, I’m not taking any pictures or talking to the press. Company policy.” She disappeared into the dimness.

“I guess you’re right,” Lehigh said to Stacy. “Everyone needs Downey’s support, but nobody wants to admit it. I wonder who else was in here? Maybe Dwayne Latner?”

“Could be anyone,” Stacy said. “Half the County Commission is up for re-election, plus all the statewide offices. Come on, let’s get this over with.”

Lehigh and Stacy wended their way amidst the tables to Downey as the music ended and the purple-haired dancer scooped up the last of her cash, accepting some additional contributions from the hands of appreciative patrons. A new song began, much like the one before it, and a new dancer wearing a blue wig and a gauzy blue gown over a mini-bikini and high heels took her place.

“Doesn't anyone here have their own hair?” he asked Stacy.

She shook her head. “Wigs serve everybody's interests. The women maintain some sense of anonymity, the guys get their bizarre fantasies fulfilled, and this way, each dancer can perform several acts, each time as a different character. It's weird, but it works.”

“Is that why that banker at the party asked about your short red hair?” he asked.

“Waitresses wear wigs, too,” she said, nodding. “Those who want careers afterwards, anyway.” She arrived at Downey's table a step ahead of Lehigh and extended her hand to her former boss, who stood to greet them.

“Stacy, my dear.” Downey's bloated figure blocked a considerable fraction of the flashing neon light, but the tonic coating his thick white hair reflected the reds, blues, and purples blinking all around them. A toothy smile revealed multiple gaps between uneven teeth, which appeared stained even in the dim light of the bar, and his ruddy face gleamed with a fine layer of perspiration. He bowed from the vicinity of where his waist should have been and kissed her hand. “So lovely to see you. And Sheriff, I don't believe we've met before in person.” He extended a clammy hand, and Lehigh shook it. A moment later he resisted the urge to wipe his hands on his trousers.

“Please, sit. Enjoy the show.” He grinned again, expelling a burst of air reeking of tobacco, garlic, and gin. Lehigh's belly kicked him from inside. The urge to run nearly overwhelmed him. But, following Stacy's lead, he sat.

“I've been following your career,” Downey said once their coffees arrived. “You have quite the future in politics, Mr. Carter.”

“I hope not,” Lehigh said.

Stacy cleared her throat. "What Lehigh means," she said, her face flushing red, "is that for him, it's not about winning elections. It's about making sure justice is served here in Mt. Hood County."

"Can't get it done without winning, though, can you?" Downey laughed, his mouth wide, and his pink, snakelike tongue floated inside his mouth. Lehigh wondered if he'd evolved from a different species of man.

"Gotta win for the right reasons, though." A waitress drifted by, her perfume preceding her. He held his breath until she passed by.

"Of course, of course. That's exactly why I wanted to meet with you." Downey reached into his suit jacket and produced a cigar, offered it to them. Lehigh shook his head. Stacy waved it away. Downey rolled the tip in his mouth, then held it while he spoke. "I don't ever recall seeing you in my club before, Sheriff."

Lehigh shook his head again. "Not my thing."

"Do you oppose it? The presence of establishments like mine." Downey gestured with the cigar at the newest dancer, a young woman with orange hair, matching lipstick, tiger-striped high heels, and strategically placed body paint. Or tattoos, Lehigh realized, wincing.

Lehigh glanced at Stacy, whose intense gaze surprised him. He wondered how she would have answered the question, given her past. He met Downey's stare, cleared his throat. "Your business is legal. My job is to enforce the law, not write them. So, do I support you? Not with my hard-earned money. But, so long as you obey the laws," and he paused a moment to stare at the unlit cigar, "I'm not aiming to shut you down, if that's what you're asking." He glanced again at Stacy, who winked, and her lips turned up at the corners.

"Good answer," Downey said. "And, not the one I got from your opponent, I might add. *Or* the district attorney's office." He pulled out a cigar cutter from his pocket and placed the unlicked tip into the notch, a quarter-inch from the end.

"Which opponent?" Lehigh asked. "As far as we've heard, the only one running an active campaign is Dwayne Latner. After his involvement with Buck Summers, his chances are slim to none, and Slim just left town."

Downey smiled, clipped the tip of the cigar, and inspected his handiwork. "One must always take a challenger seriously when we have a weak incumbent. No offense," he said, picking up a silver lighter from the table. "But you were appointed to fill in the unexpired term of a disgraced three-term office holder. There's always someone who feels the job should have been theirs." He put the cigar in his mouth, inhaled it, unlit. Lehigh stared at the tip and at the lighter in Downey's hand. Surely he wouldn't be so bold—

"No matter. I've always worked well with the McBrides," Downey went on, "and, my boy, you're a McBride now."

"Reckon I've been called worse," Lehigh said in a low voice, still watching the lighter. Stacy kicked him under the table and accompanied it with a muffled harrumph.

"Well, Sheriff, I'm a busy man," Downey said. "I'll get down to brass tacks. I can give you five thousand. Will that suffice?" He lowered his head, keeping his eyes on Lehigh, and brought the lighter, now aflame, to the tip of the cigar. He inhaled, and the tip of the cigar glowed bright red.

Lehigh, aghast, stared at the man, then coughed into his fist. The guy had *cojones*, he had to grant that. "Sir," he said, "I'm here to discuss issues of concern to you. I'm not seeking financial support—"

"Baloney." Downey enveloped them all in a thick cloud of blue smoke. "Campaigns cost money, son. And I want you to win. But I have limits. So, if this is a game to elicit even more from me—"

"Of course not," Stacy said. "What Lehigh means is—"

"What I mean is, put your checkbook away," Lehigh said, his temper flaring. "I don't want your money. I ain't taking big checks from anyone. Nobody's gonna own me. I'd rather lose the election than my integrity." He stood and glanced at the untouched cup on the table. "Thanks for the coffee. And Mr. Downey, in case you need reminding...smoking's been banned indoors

in this state. So *if* you want to remain open, you'd do well to obey that law...and all the others." He gestured toward the dancers. "Keep 'em onstage, shall we, Everett?"

The two men glared at each other, the cigar dangling from Downey's mouth, for several long moments. "You're not threatening me, are you, Sheriff?" he said at last in an even tone. "Because I'm certain Dwayne Latner won't be turning down my money."

Stacy slid her chair closer to Downey's. "Nobody's threatening or bribing anyone," she said. "In fact, I happen to know how much the county appreciates your support of our educational system, Mr. Downey. And since you have some money to spend, might I suggest you donate it to the campaign for the school levy that will also be on the ballot this fall? It's a cause we all adore, and they're fighting an uphill battle. Wouldn't you like to show your support for the sheriff's reelection in a symbolic way, by supporting the county's schools?"

Downey scowled and pointed at the orange-haired dancer. "Do my employees look like they need a better education?" He sucked on his cigar and exhaled again. "Thinkers make lousy dancers."

"Mr. Downey," Stacy said. "You supported me years ago when I needed money for my education. It made all the difference in the world to me. Didn't that work out well?"

Downey shrugged. "For whom?"

"For me," Stacy said. "And today, for you. Consider it your expression of support for Lehigh—and the McBrides. Please?"

"Or," Lehigh said after a long silence, "we can ask the health department to look into *alleged* reports of indoor smoking on these premises," Lehigh said. "Maybe the liquor board, too. And who knows what else we'll find, once we start digging?"

Downey glared at him, puffed at his cigar again, then stubbed it out in the ashtray. Finally, he looked away.

"Send the information to my secretary," he said. "And get the hell out of here."

Chapter Three

Lehigh slammed shut the lower left drawer of the ancient county-provided wooden desk, sending an echoing boom down the hallway and into the office space of his uniformed assistant, Deputy Ted Roscoe. He winced, knowing the loud noise would stir up a reaction among the sworn officers and civilian employees—whispers of concern about his temper, perhaps, or with his growing frustration with this job. Even though he only slammed the drawer because it had stuck. Again. For the fourteenth time in a week.

Still, the whispers would be justified. He *had* lost his patience more than once with the amazingly frustrating bureaucracy of Mt. Hood County government, the decrepit conditions of the building in which he worked, and the resistance to change exhibited by almost every employee under his supervision. Everyone knew his appointment expired soon after election day in November, just a few months away. Most figured they could wait him out until a “real” sheriff would be elected. Until then, foot-dragging on changes he’d tried to implement seemed the only principle unifying the work of his department.

“Everything okay, Sheriff?” Ted Roscoe, a clean-shaven, twenty-something man of slightly below-average height and a little too much belly, poked his head in the door separating their two offices. His auburn hair, short on the sides but longer and combed back in front, flaked dandruff onto the sleeves of his beige uniform, which he never seemed able to either prevent or remedy.

Lehigh grimaced and waved Ted in. "All's okay, Ted. Sorry to slam things. This old desk just drives me bonkers sometimes."

"You want me to requisition you a new one?" Roscoe asked. "That one's been here since before Buck first became sheriff, I think."

Lehigh shook his head. "It ain't in the budget. I'll make do." Plus, he didn't need the headache. Ordering a new, expensive piece of furniture would create the appearance, if not the reality, of extravagance and reinforce the impression already circulating that he expected to remain in this job for life.

He just might, but not in the way his detractors expected. This job might just kill him long before the election.

"I'll get someone from facilities to come by with some wax," Ted said. "Maybe that'll make it shut easier." He disappeared.

Moments later, Lehigh's desk phone rang. "Sheriff? Jim Wadsworth. I've got some bad news."

Lehigh groaned. When his best detective said he had bad news, any bad day was about to get far worse. "Of course you do. It's been that kind of day. What have you got? More cost overruns? Another deputy quitting? Or has the *Clarkesville Tribune* skewered me on the op-ed page again?"

A breathy sigh came over the line. "Nothing as easy as all that, Lehigh. This one's really bad."

Lehigh's ears perked up and he sat up straight in his chair. "How bad?"

"Real, bad, Lehigh." The line went quiet a moment, then: "There's been a murder."

Lehigh arrived at the murder scene an hour later, a lovely patch of cleared forest a little larger than a football field, situated a half-mile hike from Brady Mountain Road. Forensics teams had marked off the area with yellow police tape, and the inside was crawling with deputies, well-dressed lawyers from the District Attorney's office swearing at the mud on their shoes, and a couple of frumpy detectives from his own office. He waved at his favorite, Detective "Gentleman Jim" Wadsworth, dressed as always in a wrinkled gray suit and a

tie that advertised where he last had lunch. At 5'10" tall and just over two hundred pounds, Wadsworth's stride lacked grace even in a meeting room, and he looked doubly awkward picking his way over to Lehigh through the underbrush.

"You in charge of this scene?" Lehigh asked him.

Wadsworth shook his head. "Just helping out Clayton." He pointed to a shorter, wire-framed man with a salt-and-pepper buzz cut and sun-weathered skin, conversing with a small team of deputies on the edge of the clearing. "We're out in force today."

"Anyone from the district attorney's office here yet?" Lehigh asked.

"Ray Ferguson's on his way," Wadsworth said. "Apparently he was up in Wyee Falls this week with his family."

"Wow. They're bringing out the big guns, too." Lehigh shielded his eyes from the sun, glaring over the treetops to the east. "What do you know so far?"

"Looks like Mr. Downey may have stepped in front of somebody's hunting rifle," Wadsworth said, coughing into his sleeve. "And whoever pulled the trigger was a damned good shot."

"Might it have been an accident?" Lehigh asked.

"Maybe, but I'm guessing not," Wadsworth said, coughing again. "You don't often see accidental shots at point blank range to the chest."

"Point blank? I thought you said—"

"The first shot hit him in the leg," Wadsworth said, "guessing by all the blood. Looks like it must've hit a major artery. He might've bled out if not for the second shot." Wadsworth pointed at a path wending its way across the clearing. "We found footprints matching these that weren't the victim's, over behind that patch of brush. Must be 150 yards. A *damned* good shot."

"When did it happen?" Lehigh asked.

"Herman tentatively put the time of death at between eight p.m. and midnight last night." Wadsworth wagged his chin toward the coroner, Herman Doskey, a slouching, gray-haired man in glasses, supervising a team preparing to move the body. Lehigh had spotted a county hearse at the trail head parking

lot when he arrived. "We'll know more after the autopsy," Wadsworth went on, "but it looked like a high-calibre rifle shot, at first glance."

"How can you tell?" Lehigh asked.

"The distance, and the exit wound," Wadsworth said. "The likelihood of hitting someone with a single pistol shot at that distance is pretty low. Plus, bullets shot from a rifle leave a cleaner exit wound due to their speed. And that," he said with a smile, "is as much as I remember about the subject. Anything more, you gotta talk to Herman."

"And the shooter wasn't after deer, or elk?"

Wadsworth scoffed. "With ammo like that, they could have brought down a bear. But it ain't bear, or deer, or *anything* season right now."

"Another reason to believe it's not an accident, then." Lehigh shook his head. "Who'd want to shoot Ev Downey? And why here?"

Wadsworth coughed again, and this time didn't stop for several seconds. "Damned summer colds," he said at last. He cleared his throat and swallowed. "Downey had even more enemies than you do," he said in a raspy voice, then grimaced. "Sorry."

"No offense taken."

"And as for why here—well, secrecy, I imagine. Downey sure wasn't here to hunt."

"You're sure of that? He didn't strike me as a man who'd worry about rules and permits."

"Yeah," Wadsworth said, exploding into a new round of coughing, "but even Everett Downey wouldn't go hunting in a Brooks Brothers suit."

"No, he wouldn't," Lehigh said, more to himself than to Wadsworth. "What *would* he be doing here, then?"

"It's ironic, in a way, that he died here," Wadsworth said. "It's supposedly sacred burial ground for one of the tribes. I don't imagine he'll be put to rest here, though."

As if on cue, the coroner's team hefted the silent body onto a stretcher. Moments later they disappeared onto the half-mile trail through the woods.

And with him, Lehigh realized, went all of his secrets, to the grave.

Soft hands interrupted Lehigh's focused stare at the computer screen. He recognized those hands immediately as those of his bride and he sank back into them. She kneaded the tight cables of muscles holding his head upright in its rigid pose, causing blissful sensations of relief to flow down his neck and back. Soft lips pressed against the tiny bald spot forming at the top of his head.

"Dinner's ready, my love," she said, continuing to massage his neck and shoulders. "Come on, hit 'Save' and close up. You've worked enough for today."

He leaned back into her and a tiny groan escaped from somewhere deep within him. "No fair with the mixed messages," he said, grinning up at her. "Part of me wants to jump out of this chair and go eat, but the rest of me doesn't want to move. Ever." He patted her hands, then reached behind her to pull her in close. "You're a temptress."

"I've got an even better temptation waiting for you after dinner." She spun his chair 180 degrees and sat in his lap. Her long black locks cascaded over his shoulders and the scent of his favorite perfume emanated from her deep plunging V-neck dress. She planted a lingering kiss on his lips and resumed the neck massage.

"Let's just skip dinner, then," he said, wrapping her up in a tight embrace.

"Aren't you hungry? I made your favorite: Italian sausage lasagna."

"Starved," he said, "in so many ways. And lasagna is great cold." He slid his hand up her thigh.

She slapped it away. "But it's much better warm, and I spent an hour and a half slaving over it. Come on, before the dogs eat it all." She jumped off his lap and led him by the hand from his makeshift home office into the kitchen of their split-level ranch. Sure enough, Lucky and Diamond, their adopted three-year-old Lab-hound mix and eight-month-old border collie puppy, respectively, dropped their front paws from the counter and slunk away in guilty crawls out of the kitchen.

"I don't suppose they were after the salad," he said with a grin.

They filled their plates with lasagna, fresh greens, and Parmesan-crusting garlic bread fresh from the oven and plopped down together on the living room sofa in front of the TV. An ad for Dwayne Latner ended with a soft-focus image of the candidate looking resolute, with his slogan, "Experienced and Professional," plastered across the screen. Lehigh groaned. "Change the channel, please," he said.

Stacy picked up the remote and skimmed through channels while sipping wine. "I wouldn't worry about his TV ads," she said. "I knocked on a lot of doors today and made dozens of calls. Most people who know you, love you."

"Most people who know me don't vote," he said, scooping lasagna into his mouth.

The local news came on, and the anchor, a forgettably adorable bleached blonde reading a teleprompter, introduced a breaking story.

"With more on the Everett Downey murder," she said, "here's KMTH's Bruce Bailey."

Stacy groaned. "Shall I turn the station again?"

"No, let's watch," Lehigh said with his mouth full. "I'm curious about what he considers 'breaking news.' What does he know that I don't?"

"Nothing," Stacy said around a mouthful of salad, but she turned up the volume.

"Thanks, Amanda." Bruce Bailey stood with his back to the taped-off murder scene off Brady Mountain Road. A few out-of-focus people in dark uniforms or suits moved around in the meadow behind him. "Mt. Hood County Assistant District Attorney Raymond Ferguson led an investigative team today looking into the apparent murder of local businessman Everett Downey here in a secluded area on the outskirts of Clarkesville best known as a favorite site for elk and deer hunters," Bailey said. "But it appears that this time, the prey was human."

"How melodramatic," Stacy said.

"At least he's not making stuff up, for a change," Lehigh said, scooping up red sauce with a chunk of buttery bread.

The camera panned back, and the bald, fit figure of “Reverend” Ray Ferguson towered over Bailey, with his name and title captioned at the bottom of the screen. “The victim died of multiple gunshot wounds late last night,” Ferguson said. “While we can’t rule out accidental death, all signs at this time point to foul play.” The Reverend scowled at the conclusion of his remarks, his bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows curled above his eyes like bicycle handlebars.

“What a gold-bricker,” Lehigh said. “Last one on the scene, first one on TV.” Stacy giggled, half-choking on her garlic bread.

“Any suspects yet?” Bailey asked Ferguson.

The Reverend’s scowl deepened. “Unfortunately not,” he said. “We’ll be working cooperatively with the Sheriff’s Department to analyze available evidence. We fully intend to apprehend the culprit and prosecute him—or her—to the full extent of the law.”

“Any timeline on that yet?” Bailey asked.

“Not at this time.”

The camera shifted so that only Bailey’s face occupied the screen, wearing a grim expression. “The investigation is hampered, some officials say, by the inadvertent contamination of the crime scene by first responders from the Sheriff’s office,” he said.

“What?” Stacy said with a gasp.

“Baloney!” Lehigh shouted, nearly spitting out a mouthful of pasta.

“Incompetence of this kind has been a frequent complaint aimed at the Sheriff’s office since the rise to power of Lehigh Carter, who took office with little to no background in law enforcement,” Bailey said. “Only this time, the impacts were fatal. Back to you, Amanda.”

Lehigh’s shoe struck the “off” button on the TV with amazing precision, having left his foot only a moment earlier from six feet away. The screen went blank. “What a crock of pig manure!” Lehigh said, followed by a string of colorful curses.

Stacy winced and edged away from him. "I'm sorry, honey," she said, resting a hand on his knee. "Bruce Bailey's nothing but a muckraker. He's been filing baseless reports like this against my father for years."

"Bailey's an idiot, but he's not who I'm worried about." Lehigh shoved another chunk of garlic bread into his mouth and chewed with angry vigor. After washing it down with a gulp of red table wine, he went on. "Someone filled his ears with that 'compromised crime scene' nonsense. That's who I'm mad at. And I have a damn strong feeling the man responsible goes by the nickname 'Reverend.'"