

The
Mountain Man's
Bride

*The Mountain Man Mysteries:
Book Two*

Gary Corbin

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To Renée

PART 1

Fallen Hero

CHAPTER 1

Lehigh squinted into the headlights of the oncoming car through the muddy mist on the windshield of his old pickup and navigated the tight curve of the old mountain road. Some part of his brain became aware of the fact that his beautiful fiancée, Stacy Lynn McBride, had just said something important, which he had missed, for the two hundredth time too many. And that was only this week.

“Sorry, hon.” He adjusted his baseball cap, which didn’t really need adjusting, but it gave him something to do while he thought of something smart to say. Which, unfortunately, didn’t happen. As usual. “Say again?”

She crossed her arms and put on her I’m-being-patient-with-you voice. “I *said*, because of those stupid stores and their Byzantine sale policies, we’re going to have to go back to some of those same shops tomorrow. I can’t believe they wouldn’t extend their sale prices one day early. Why, if someone came into the clinic with a sick cat or dog, and we had a special—”

“All the way back to Portland? Tomorrow?” Lehigh nearly drove off the road. Damned switchbacks. “Stacy, I can’t. Not on a Monday. I have too much to do, and—well, I just can’t.”

“I see.” She found something fascinating to stare at out the passenger side window. “I understand. I mean, there must be dozens of things more important than our wedding. How does one compare the health of a sapling against the mere union of our lives? Thinning a stand of fir, versus expressing the foreverness of our love? The—”

“Okay, okay, I’ll go.” He sighed. “I was hoping to get some work done. You know, to actually pay for all this wedding stuff? March is the busy season in the forestry world, and I—”

“Watch out for the deer!”

Lehigh slammed on his brakes and swerved in time to allow the doe to leap across the twin lanes of the highway to wooded safety.

“Maybe we should take this road a bit slower,” Stacy said. “Unless you hate shopping so much that you can’t wait to get away from it.”

Lehigh bit back a snotty reply when a playful grin split her pretty face, framed by long black hair tumbling down around her shoulders. She sure knew how to push his buttons—good and bad.

“You know, I don’t really mind the shopping,” he said, “other than the driving, parking, expense, long lines, rude city people, the wandering around aisle after aisle of stuff I don’t want to buy and can’t afford, fakey-fake sales people pretending to be my friend, elevator music...”

“Other than that, it’s your favorite contact sport.” Her grin widened. She rested her hand on his knee, then slid it along his inner thigh, northbound.

“Second favorite.” He clamped his hand over hers to arrest its progress. “But the first I can’t do while driving, or *that* will become a contact sport.”

“Prude.” Her lips pressed together into a mischievous smile, her dark eyes sparkling. She leaned over and kissed his stubbly cheek. “You need a shave.” She rested her head on his shoulder and took a breath. “Whew! And a shower, mountain “Hey, I took a bath last week.” He grinned and pulled her close, his fingers nestling in between her ribs. Still thin at thirty-seven, Stacy could pass for ten years younger, and still got ID’d in bars outside of Clarkesville. He could wrap one arm all the way around her if she stood in front of him, and her tiny waist had added to her frustration over the futile search for a wedding dress that fit right. The diet she’d started the day after he proposed had succeeded—too well, actually.

But he knew where to find soft flesh. He slid his hand further inside—

“Now look who’s risking full contact driving!” She laughed and pushed his hand up to her shoulder. “And watch your speed. You’re going ten miles over—oh, crap.”

Flashing red and blue lights reflected in the pickup’s rearview mirror. Lucky, their three year old yellow hound, sat up in the jump seat behind Stacy, growling. Diamond, a four month old Lab-Border Collie mix, sat up in the seat behind Lehigh and joined the chorus moments later.

“Down, dogs,” Lehigh said. Lucky quieted first, followed by Diamond, as always.

Lehigh braked and steered the truck to the side of the highway. “Damn. Another ten minutes and we’d have been home.” He fished in his wallet for his license.

“Just be polite, and maybe they’ll let you off with a warning,” Stacy said. Lehigh looked away. Being nice to cops wasn’t his strong suit. Then again, they weren’t often nice to him, either. He tucked his long brown ponytail inside of his hat. At least he’d shaved that morning.

The sheriff’s cruiser, a blue Crown Victoria, pulled in behind his truck. A moment later a tall, athletic figure in a beige uniform emerged from the driver’s side.

“Omigod,” Stacy said. “It’s Jared.” She slunk down in the seat.

“Barkley?” Lehigh squinted in the rearview mirror. “What’s he doing out on patrol?” He lowered the window, and a moment later, Barkley stepped into view.

“Evening, Sheriff. Dogs, be quiet.” They stopped growling again in the back seat.

“Still Deputy, Mr. Carter. Do you know why I pulled you over tonight?”

Lehigh shrugged. “Because you recognized my car?”

Barkley scowled and shone his flashlight in Lehigh’s face. “Speed limit’s thirty-five here, Mr. Carter. You were going fifteen over the limit. That’s a three hundred dollar ticket.”

“Hey, Jared.” Stacy sat up in the seat and flashed her

trademark wide, toothy smile, the one that always melted Lehigh's heart. Flashed it, though, at Jared *frigging* Barkley.

Barkley shone the light on Stacy and his expression softened. He even smiled, for a change. "Evening, Ms. McBride. Is that Lucky and Diamond back there?" A puff of fog followed the words from his mouth.

"Sure is. Good memory!" She broadened her smile. Lehigh fought his impulse to block their view of each other. Stacy leaned closer. "Now, why is the Acting Sheriff of all of Mt. Hood County working traffic on a Saturday night?"

"Duty calls, Sta—uh, ma'am." Barkley cleared his throat, all official again. "Might I see your license, insurance, and registration, Mr. Carter?"

Lehigh groaned and handed his driver's license through the window. "Registration's in the glove box. Mind getting it for me, please, Stace?"

Stacy smiled past him and handed the registration card to the deputy. "Make sure to thank your Momma for that strawberry cake recipe, Jared," she said. "You should swing by and try some on your day off. If you ever take one."

Barkley emitted a small cough. "Mighty kind of you to offer, but with Sheriff Summers' situation...well, don't let it go bad waiting on me." He smiled at Stacy, thought a moment, nodded once to Lehigh, then handed him back his license and paperwork. "Careful with your speed coming 'round these turns at night, Mr. Carter. That black ice'll get you this time of year." He tipped his hat and stepped back toward his car.

"Thank you!" Stacy waved out the back window, then turned to face Lehigh. "Well, that was mighty nice of him." She squeezed Lehigh's arm.

He wiggled away and rolled up the window. "*Awfully* nice. Next time you ought to make him dinner. Maybe then he'd let us *rob* a damned wedding store, and we'd be done with all this blasted shopping." He started the engine.

Her jaw dropped. "Lehigh, I'm surprised at you. Here you go acting all jealous when all I did was save you a three hundred dollar ticket."

Lehigh hesitated before putting the truck in gear. He couldn't put a finger on it, but something felt wrong about the way she'd interacted with Barkley. It seemed a little too...familiar. And Jared had seemed almost embarrassed once Stacy had made her presence known. Almost as if...

He gunned the engine and sped the truck back onto the highway. Gravel spewed from his rear wheels onto the front grill of the deputy's still-parked car.

"Slow down!" she said. "Are you trying to convince him to change his mind and write you a ticket anyway?"

They drove the rest of the way home in heated silence.

Stacy stayed put in the passenger seat long after Lehigh parked his truck beside her car at the end of her hundred-foot gravel drive. Her modest two-bedroom bungalow needed painting and probably a new roof, projects she'd asked him to finish this year—and the source of too many arguments. "I have an entire house to rebuild," he'd pointed out the last time. "Or don't you remember how your last fiancé and his friends felt about me coming back into your life last fall?"

That cheap shot had earned him a night on the couch. Since then, he'd kept his thoughts about the relative priority of his and her house repairs to himself. And a lot of other thoughts, she reckoned. That had to change.

They sat in silence for several minutes, seat belts still buckled, his hands on the wheel, her arms crossed, both staring straight ahead into the misty darkness of the evergreens that bordered her two-acre property. A few times, she drew in a breath to speak, but no words came.

Finally Lehigh dropped his arms from the steering wheel to his lap and turned to face her. "Look, I'm sorry. This whole wedding thing...I don't know."

She faced him too. Took a deep breath. "Are you...having buyer's remorse?"

"What do you mean?"

She took a moment, choosing her words with care. "I

mean, are you sorry you came up with this whole marriage idea?"

"I came up with the idea?" He sat flat against the seat and blew noisy air between his teeth. "I seem to recall a certain someone once cutting me out of her life for *not* asking."

"Oh, for heaven's sake. That was twelve years ago. What's next? Complaints about how I ignored you in high school?" Her dark hair whipped around her face as she turned away from him. Dammit. She'd gone and snapped at him—exactly what she'd tried *not* to do.

He sighed. "So much for trying to apologize."

"It just seems that ever since we started making plans to actually get married, you've been a total grump." She drooped her head and recrossed her arms, trying to keep the fear out of her voice. "It's as if you're...I don't know. Changing your mind."

"I'm *not*." He rubbed the stubble on his cheeks. "But I'll admit, this is becoming a much bigger deal than I ever wanted it to be."

"Getting married is a big deal."

"Yeah, but does the wedding have to be? Why can't we just get a couple of friends together, go to a Justice of the Peace..."

She bolted upright in her seat. "My father would kill you, that's why. And my mother would roast you alive first."

"Ain't that the truth." The first etchings of a smile crossed his lips. "I just thought that your dad might want a lower key event, now that he's dropped out of the governor's race."

She frowned. "Was *forced* out. By us."

"By his own bad choices." Lehigh looked away from her. "One of the many ways you don't take after him, thank God."

Stacy sighed. Her dad's role in ruining Lehigh's life six months before remained a serious bone of contention between them. One of many. Only, in the twisted way Senator George McBride told the story, it was Lehigh who'd ruined the other man's life. Taking ownership of mistakes was not in her father's toolbag.

"Still," she said, "it means a lot to him, and that means a lot

to me.” She took his hand. “I kind of hoped it meant something to you, too.”

“Course it does. I just like things simple, is all.” He squeezed her hand.

She leaned against him, rubbing his thumb with her much smaller, delicate fingers. “Maybe it can be, a little bit. Do you think, if we did something small, we could get your Pappy and Maw to come?”

Lehigh winced and dropped his chin to his chest. “Not even if we held the ceremony in their backyard, I reckon.”

“Sorry, sweetie. Sore subject, I know.” Stacy held him tighter, kissed his cheek. They sat in silence for several moments.

In the back seat, one of the dogs stretched and whimpered, followed by the other. Lehigh reached back with an expert hand and popped open the rear driver's side door. The dogs bounded out into the darkness, Diamond always two awkward puppy hops behind Lucky's lazy loping gait. Lehigh shut the door behind them. He reached around Stacy and pulled her close again. “What say we sit here a bit?”

She giggled. “It'd be warmer inside.”

He hugged her tighter. “Yeah, but it's cozier in here. Besides, we'll be warm enough in a minute.”

She slid her hand inside his shirt, onto the bare skin of his muscular chest. “You got a point there, cowboy.” She leaned forward for a kiss. His hand slipped inside her suddenly unbuttoned blouse, and she wondered if they'd ever make it inside the house.

CHAPTER 2

Lehigh loosened his bolo tie and tugged at the collar of his starched, pressed dress shirt. The white cotton stuck to his neck, clammy in spite of the late winter chill, and he repressed a resurgent gag reflex for the tenth time that evening. But the uncomfortable clothes couldn't take all the blame for that. At least half the credit belonged to the stuffy dining room, paneled floor to ceiling in tobacco darkened walnut imported from the East Coast. For all of his local-yokel politics, Senator McBride's patrician past seemed to matter more than supporting the Oregon economy when it came to surrounding himself with luxurious creature comforts.

Stacy sidled up next to Lehigh and rested her hand against the small of his back. "You look wonderful," she said in a soft voice. "You should wear fitted shirts more often."

"Not if you want me to survive until our wedding day," he said. "But you look amazing. That dress—"

"Has cut off all circulation below my rib cage," she said. "But I'm glad you like it. It's Daddy's favorite too." She pecked him on the cheek. "I appreciate you coming tonight. I know being around politicians isn't your idea of fun."

"Speaking of your old man—"

"Shh!" She shook her head, a quick vibration back and forth, as if to hide the action. "He hates being called 'old.'"

"Okay, then. The esteemed senator. Where the heck is he?"

"Mom said he's in his—oh, here they come now." She

sipped from a glass of pinot grigio in her left hand. Lehigh drained the last of the melted ice from his own glass, now devoid of her father's prized eighteen-year-old Scotch. Best not let the senator see what his wife had so freely offered a half hour before. Bad enough that old George found Lehigh beneath contempt without him also knowing how much he'd had of his favorite liquor.

Catherine McBride, Stacy's mother, led the senator into the room. Despite her small stature—probably a full foot shorter than Lehigh's six foot, one-inch frame, if she kicked off her three-inch heels—her regal bearing and teased hairdo elevated her presence in the room. She wore a flowing, ankle-length dress that seemed to thin her matronly, if not stout, figure. She strode into the room with confidence and greeted them for the second time that night with hugs and smiles.

The senator, by contrast, seemed old and stooped, a half foot shorter than he'd appeared a few months before when the race to become Oregon's next governor seemed his to lose. His full shock of white hair lay flat against his scalp, and age spots dotted his bronze, wrinkled face. He mumbled a quick hello to Lehigh, kissed his daughter on the cheek, and shuffled over to the liquor cabinet to refill his glass.

"Dinner will be served in a few moments." Catherine took Lehigh by the arm. "And not a moment too soon, by the look of you. Stacy, don't you feed my future son-in-law?"

"I wouldn't want to spoil his appetite for your legendary dinners," Stacy said with a grin.

"That'll never happen," Lehigh said. "Who's the chef this week?"

"A new fellow from the culinary school in Portland. His name is Antonio. He's amazing—he has no sous-chef. He does everything himself." Catherine escorted him to his seat. She sat to Lehigh's right, and Stacy sat across from him. The senator took his customary position at the head of the long table.

Lehigh's stomach growled. Early dinners meant skipping lunch, and at that moment, he could have eaten one of the senator's retired show horses, medium rare.

Almost on cue, a short, chubby man with tufts of curly hair protruding from either side of a white ruffled chef's hat, dressed in kitchen whites and sporting a food-stained apron, whisked into the room. With nervous dispatch, he set a heaping salad plate in front of each guest, ground two twists of fresh pepper on top of the greens, and disappeared back into the kitchen, neither he nor the four diners having uttered a word.

Lehigh grabbed a fork and had nearly reached his quarry—baby green spinach leaves topped with thin slices of red onion, chunks of bright red strawberries, crumbled feta cheese, and crushed walnuts, all tossed in a vinaigrette redolent of chocolate and orange—when a sharp pain pierced his ankle. Catherine glared at him, her hands crossed in prayer. His stomach growled again, but he set down his fork, bowed his head, and folded his hands.

“Bless us, oh Lord, for these, thy gifts...” Catherine recited the prayer as if making it up for the first time, every word an intense plea for God's attention. Which made the damned thing take twice as long as it should. But he couldn't complain—it took four times as long when his Pappy meandered through it on Sunday mornings. “Amen,” they said in unison at the end, and perhaps Lehigh said it a bit too forcefully, because Catherine kicked him again.

“I have an announcement to make.” The senator stood, a laborious effort. Lehigh chewed the delicious greens and shoved more in. The guy wanted to talk, fine. *Some* people came to eat.

“Is it about the case?” Stacy asked.

“Only indirectly.” The old man's face darkened, and he swallowed with some effort. Lehigh had already polished off half of his salad and would have offered half his kingdom for a crust of bread. Hell, a crouton.

The senator cleared his throat. “More to the point, it concerns your wedding plans.”

Lehigh, about to shove a forkful of salad into his mouth, caught the warning in Stacy's eyes, and with great reluctance

put down his fork.

"Because of my recent legal difficulties," McBride said, "largely due to your activities, I might add..." He gestured with his wine glass toward Lehigh.

Stacy pushed her chair back from the table, her face and neck muscles tight, her color drawn. "So that's your take on this?" She stood and pointed a finger at her father. "Well, it's not Lehigh's fault that you and Paul van Paten took cash bribes from corporate donors, broke into my veterinary clinic, poisoned animals, burned down Lehigh's house—"

The senator's face turned crimson. "How dare you accuse me of such outrageous—"

"Enough!" Catherine slapped the table with both hands, rattling glasses, plates, and silverware. She stood, her hazel eyes blazing. "There shall be no further discussion of this at my dinner table."

"But Mother—"

"Dammit, Catherine, it's *my* house, and—"

"Not one word!" Catherine pointed her fork at Stacy, then at her husband. "If we cannot discuss the matter civilly, we simply shall not discuss it. Nor anything else remotely related to it."

George glared at Lehigh and slammed his fist on the table. A chunk of walnut flew across the table onto Lehigh's half-empty plate. Lehigh suppressed the urge to scoop it into his mouth.

George waited for Stacy to sit, then continued. "Be that as it may, the legal fees incurred in my successful settlement of those scurrilous charges have drained my cash reserves. As a result, our ability to contribute to defraying the costs of your wedding has been seriously diminished."

Stacy covered her mouth with one hand, shock and worry clouding her eyes.

Lehigh chewed his salad, swallowed, and shrugged. "Understandable, sir. I know firsthand how quickly those legal expenses add up."

"Rubbish," Catherine said, setting down her fork. "We have

plenty of resources to draw on.”

“I apologize to my wife for not briefing her on our financial condition prior to tonight’s dinner.” The senator glowered at his wife, and she responded with her own angry stare. He turned to Stacy. “I’m sorry, Pumpkin. I had hoped to be able to give you the big wedding you deserve. But,” and he glanced at Lehigh, distaste evident, “my circumstances no longer permit it.”

“It’s...it’s okay, Daddy.” Stacy’s eyes grew moist. “We’ve been thinking a smaller wedding might be a better idea anyway. Haven’t we, Lehigh?”

Lehigh hurried to chew and swallow the last bite of his salad. For once, the smile he put on at the McBrides’ home reflected genuine pleasure over something other than the food. “We don’t need a big party,” he said, “and we’re plenty able to put on a modest celebration on our own for family and close friends. I’d kind of prefer it, actually.”

“I don’t think George is saying that we can’t help at all,” Catherine said with a hesitant smile. “Surely we could provide flowers and perhaps Stacy’s dress, maybe some—”

“I’m afraid even that is out of the question.” George frowned at his wife. “While criminal charges have been dropped, details of my settlement are still in negotiation. I may be facing stiff fines, which, while preferable to incarceration or the loss of my Senate seat, may leave us close to penniless, from a cash perspective.”

“Baloney,” Catherine said. “We have investments—”

“Non-liquid—”

“Trust funds—”

“Untouchable!”

“Dammit, George, I’ll sell the damned horses if I have to!” Catherine said, her voice reaching top volume. “I’m buying my daughter’s wedding dress, and that’s final!”

McBride froze for a moment, then gave her a slight bow. “Very well. But that, I fear, may be all we can offer. Unless...”

“Unless what?” Stacy’s voice betrayed a sharp edge of nervousness. Lehigh’s ears perked up. Perhaps she knew

something that he didn't?

George stared into his wine glass. "If the wedding could be, ah, postponed—"

"I knew it!" Stacy stood and threw her napkin onto her salad plate, knocking oily greens all over the pristine tablecloth. "This is all about trying to stop the wedding!"

"Pumpkin, how could you say such—"

"Don't you 'pumpkin' me. You've been against this marriage from the start!"

"On the contrary. I was very excited to hear of your engagement last summer. Wasn't I, Catherine?"

Stacy's jaw dropped open. "I wasn't engaged to Lehigh last summer!"

"Of course you were engaged then," George said with a wave of his hand. "I distinctly recall discussing the timing of it with you, so as not to interfere with the campaign."

"No, George," Catherine said in a low voice. "That was Paul, dear."

Lehigh scooped salad dressing from his plate with the edge of his fork. If he could crawl under the plate and hide, he would have.

Stacy gripped the edge of the table with both hands. "Ah, ha. I see what's going on here. Tell me, Daddy. If Paul van Paten were sitting here instead of Lehigh—"

"Stacy," Lehigh said, "please don't—"

"You'd find the money, now, wouldn't you?" Stacy leaned toward her father, her lower lip quivering.

George held up his hands. "Now, Stacy. If you were still engaged to Paul, we wouldn't be in this situ—"

"*I was never engaged to Paul!*" Stacy's voice echoed off the walls.

The door to the kitchen, which had edged open a moment before, fell shut again. Lehigh groaned. He could put up with family quarrels, but not on an empty stomach.

"Paul disagrees," George said in a quiet voice. "And I knew him well. He would not lie."

"Of course he's lying! For heaven's sake!" Stacy raised her

eyes and hands to the heavens, pleading. "Oh, Daddy. Don't you think I'd know if I had ever been engaged to a man?"

"I'm just saying, my dear," George said, his voice still maddeningly calm, "that had the events of the last several months not transpired, we would not be having this conversation." He wiped his lips with a napkin, sat down, and took a tiny sip of wine.

Stacy glared at him. "I see. So. This is how it's going to be, then. Well, I don't need your money, and I don't need your blessing. I'm marrying the man I love, and that's Lehigh—with or without your support. Come on, Lehigh. We're leaving."

Lehigh's heart sank. He could smell bread, imagined a plateful of aged cheeses and salted meats, envisioned fresh pasta with spicy red sauce and melted cheese, and more—all behind that kitchen door. That now closed kitchen door. The limitless supplies of delicious food, with plenty of leftovers to take home, enough to live on for a week. He checked his fiancée's face, and found no sign of compromise there. He sighed. He had one last hope, and played it, making eye contact and a sad face in the direction of his future mother-in-law.

Catherine stood and reached across the table toward Stacy. "Dear, please don't—"

"I'm sorry, Mother. I can't dine with a man who so disrespects me and my life choices that he can't put aside his petty grievances for one minute—"

"Petty? Why, you little—"

"George! Shut up for one second!" Catherine glared at him.

Stacy grabbed Lehigh's arm. "Let's go, honey. We're done here."

Lehigh cast one last glance at the kitchen door, now propped open by Antonio, holding a tray loaded with steaming lasagna, the aromas of garlic and spicy tomato sauce wafting into the dining room. His stomach rumbled, and his eyes, fixed on the tray, watered in anticipation.

But one final glance at Stacy, and he knew he would taste no lasagna that night.

CHAPTER 3

Blue smoke rose from the mouths and nostrils of three of the four men seated around the low maple table in the center of the well-appointed library of the wealthiest and most influential man in Mt. Hood County. The owner of the space, a bloated, white-haired figure with a ruddy complexion, prided himself on his ability to wield the levers of power from behind the scenes, without the taint of having ever run for or held political office. Scowling, Everett Downey set out an array of shallow clay ashtrays, hand-crafted by locals whose tribal affiliations claimed the namesakes of his several casinos, each of which earned almost as much as his chain of “gentlemen’s clubs” dotting small-town highway exits around the county. The ashtrays, however, went unheeded and unused, other than the one closest to Downey himself.

“So, where are we?” He waved a pudgy hand in the air to part the blue cloud hanging over their heads.

“We’re in a world of hurt, that’s where.” The handsome, dark-haired thirty-something man, a Portland lawyer, and the only one of the group not indulging in the expensive Cuban treats, coughed into his fist. “We’ve lost control to a bunch of yahoos who couldn’t find their own asses in a house of mirrors.”

“Can we please forbear from the jailhouse vulgarity?” A slender man a few years’ Downey’s senior with a shiny pate, dressed in his customary black suit, pointed the lit end of his cigar at the younger man. “Unless you’d prefer to rejoin your

colleagues behind bars...which I can easily arrange.”

“Sorry, sorry,” the Portland man said. So far as the people of Mt. Hood County knew, he still occupied one of their rustic jail cells, and he’d just as soon not give truth to that particular popular belief. “But the people around here view us as the bad guys in all of this. And until we can retake control of the sheriff’s office, that message isn’t going to change.”

“Are you blaming me? Because that ain’t my fault!” said the fourth man of the group, a middle-aged man with a bulbous nose and a salt-and-pepper crew cut. Alone among the four, he had never been to college, much less law school, and until recently had never been on the wrong side of the black bars in the county jail. “If you hadn’t gone rogue—”

“Let’s not start pointing fingers,” Downey said.

“Exactly,” Portland said. “We don’t need blame. We need action. And a plan.”

“And the first step is to get the right people back in charge of the sheriff’s office,” said the man with the crew cut. Dressed in khakis from shoulders to ankles, he gave the appearance of a man who never felt comfortable out of uniform.

“Agreed,” said the bald man. “But how? Your successor—”

“Interim successor,” Crewcut said.

“—Jared Barkley,” the bald man continued, “is as popular with the voters as our esteemed senator once was. And why not? He’s young, smart, handsome, courageous—”

“Who the hell’s side are you on, dammit?” Portland said.

“Language! Please!”

“Aw, stuff it, Reverend!”

“*Don’t you call me that, ever!*” The bald man stood, his entire head turning bright crimson except for his bushy white eyebrows. “Show some respect! Why, I’ve been locking up criminals since before you were born!”

“Easy, easy.” Downey stood between them, arms extended. “Let’s stay focused on solving the problem. Which is, how to restore control of this county’s law enforcement to its rightful, traditional, responsible defenders. On this, we are all agreed. Correct?” He took a deep taste of his cigar.

The younger man glared at the other three. After taking several deep breaths through his nose, he nodded. "We'll need help. From the inside, and—well, from a lot of people."

Crewcut raised a hand. "I still have friends on the inside. They owe me. I think they'll help."

"You think," Portland said, "or you know?"

"I—I know. I think."

Exasperated, the Portland lawyer turned to their host. "We'll need some strings pulled."

Downey nodded. "Already in motion."

"Are we talking about the same man? *And* his daughter?" asked the bald man.

"You mean the man against whom *you* have filed charges? Against him *and* me?" Portland pointed a finger in his face. "Or has he been...*forgiven*?"

The man who hated being called Reverend gritted his teeth. "In terms of active support, no. But...I think he can be brought into play. And, with your help," he said with a nod to the Portland man, "the girl's opposition can be, shall we say, *neutralized*."

"Assuming," Downey said, "we play our cards right and follow the plan."

All four heads nodded. Crewcut cleared his throat. "How, uh, far are we prepared to go?"

The Portland man furrowed his brow. "Perhaps it's best if you and I took up the operational aspects of this conversation in private."

"Great idea," the Reverend said, and Downey nodded his assent.

"And the girl?" Crewcut wiped sweat from his upper lip. "Your former fiancée?"

"Before we're done," Portland said with a crooked smile, "she'll be our biggest cheerleader."

Lehigh shut the snaps on his boxy old suitcase, a hand-me-down from when he had gone off to college at Oregon State.

Since that day almost twenty years ago, he'd only used it a handful of times—mostly, like this occasion, on quick overnight or weekend trips to Portland.

"I'll be back on Sunday," he said to Stacy, who was applying make-up in front of an oval mirror in the bedroom. "Pappy and Maw invited us over for brunch, remember?"

"I'll be at Momma and Daddy's all day Sunday." She drew a perfect dark line over her left eye.

He paused, mouth open. "I thought you weren't speaking to them. After, you know—"

"Daddy came by the clinic yesterday and apologized. Didn't I tell you? Mom made him. They're also buying my dress, like Mom said. He's so full of bluster sometimes." She laughed and shook her head.

Lehigh shrugged, shook his head, and set the suitcase on the floor. "And he never does anything without a reason. What's up on Sunday? I take it, since I wasn't invited, it's something political."

"Yes, Daddy's having some people over—politicians, I mean—for the first time since the campaign ended. There's some talk about him running for the County Board."

"Already?" Lehigh shook his head. "His case hasn't been settled yet, has it? And I thought he already had a job lined up with the Oregon Lumber Council." He stood behind her and rubbed her shoulders.

"You can rub harder if you want." She slid back on the seat, closer to him. "Daddy would be bored if he wasn't involved in politics. And you know people around here. Him against the Feds—that practically makes him a local hero. As a recent victim of a police witch hunt, I'm sure you can appreciate that sentiment. Wow, that feels good." She melted back against him.

He squeezed her shoulders an extra long moment, then wrapped his arms around her and pressed his lips into her silky hair. "Give your Mom a kiss for me. And if there's any leftovers..."

"You're incorrigible. But I'll tell her."

“Tell her it’s for the dogs. If you tell her it’s for me, she won’t include any prime rib.”

Stacy laughed. “Who are you kidding? Mom loves you more than she loves me. Hell, you’ll probably eat better than I will, knowing her care packages.”

“I’m counting on it.” He kissed the top of her head again. “I’d better go. My first meeting’s at noon.”

She tsk’d. “Most people *quit* working at noon on Fridays.”

“You’ve been around government types too long.” He breathed in the soft scent of her skin. “See you Sunday night.”

“I can’t wait.” She pulled him closer. “Remember, take it easy around those curves, and don’t drive tired. I want you back in one piece...and the sooner the better.”

“Keep the dogs off the bed,” he said on the way out. He pretended not to hear her uproarious laughter after he shut the door.

The drive took a little over two hours, thirty minutes of which he spent going practically nowhere on Portland’s clogged city streets. Those media types could say what they wanted about how easy drivers could get around the city, but compared to Clarkesville, trafficwise, Portland might as well be New York.

Still, that gave him two hours to wait before his noon appointment with the lumber exporters from Astoria. He checked into his motel, ate an early lunch, and stopped by a big box store by the airport to restock on office supplies. Not paper, though—he bought paper only from Oregon mills.

The meetings filled Friday’s daylight hours but left his evening free. He took in a second-run Matt Damon movie in one of Portland’s renowned brewpub theaters and went to bed early, with the same plan for Saturday. But then, plans never seemed to make much difference in how his days went anymore.

“Where is he now?” the Boss Man asked.

“In his motel room. Looks like he’s staying the night.” The

stocky, blond-haired man limped around his car to get a better view of the door to Lehigh's room. His leg still hurt from the gunshot wound he'd received at the hands of the very man who, once again, issued all the orders and did very little of the work. The man, that is, on the other end of the phone.

"Keep an eye on him. Let me know if he goes out, even if it's just for a cigarette."

"I don't think he smokes," the blond man said.

The Boss Man's voice dripped with contempt. "Just call me if anything happens." The line went dead.

The weekend in Portland passed in a blur. Lehigh skipped most of the dull workshops and panels that drew many to the conference and instead jammed his schedule full of meetings with buyers, bankers, and a few potential clients interested in having Lehigh manage their holdings. When Saturday night's social hour and banquet rolled around, exhaustion and a general discomfort with schmoozing led to a discreet exit—after a couple of quick passes through the buffet, of course.

He walked to his cheap motel a few blocks from the Convention Center and stopped at the front desk. A girl with ramrod straight, shoulder-length, blue-streaked black hair with light brown roots greeted him with a smile that failed to light up her hooded gray eyes. Her nose ring matched the one in her lip, and blue ink peeked out of the neckline of her blouse. Even at five foot six, she couldn't have weighed a hundred pounds.

"Help you?" she asked.

"I'd like to get an early start back home tomorrow," Lehigh said. "Okay if I check out in advance?"

She squinted at him, a disdainful look, and spoke in a monotone. "Just leave the key in your room. We have your credit card on file. We'll, like, email you the receipt."

"Thanks. Anyone open for breakfast before six around here?"

Another condescending stare. "I have no idea. I'm never up

that early.”

He thanked her and returned to his room. He showered and packed, then lay in bed for half an hour, but couldn't sleep. He flicked on the TV. A Jennifer Aniston movie had just started. He'd seen it with Stacy once, a dumb romantic thing, but full of eye candy. Perfect for falling asleep.

Two hours later, an equally dumb Brad Pitt movie filled the screen, followed by a so-called 1950s classic he'd never heard of. He clicked it off, tossed and turned for another half hour, then gave up. He hated to admit it, but he couldn't sleep without the trio of comforts home represented to him: a familiar bed, snoring dogs, and Stacy.

He got out of bed, dressed, and loaded up the truck. He hit the highway about one a.m. He could make it home by three a.m. if traffic cooperated.

By one-thirty, though, his eyes grew heavy. The normally beautiful drive through the Cascades did him no good in the dark. He'd never last another hour. He should have left right after dinner.

Oh, well. Too late now. He pulled over onto the broad shoulder of the US highway at a place where truckers often stopped to rest or put chains on their massive wheels. He'd rest a bit, then head on.

Just a brief rest.

He closed his eyes.

“He stopped.”

The Boss Man hissed into the phone loud enough to make the blond man's ears hurt. “Explain, please.”

“He pulled over on the side of the highway. Looks like he's taking a snooze.”

“Where are you?” The Boss Man sounded upbeat. Pleased, even.

“About a half mile past him, parked at a trailhead. If he goes by me, I'll see him. Where's the girl?”

After a long silence, The Boss Man spit out his reply.

“Don't crowd that pitiful brain of yours with unnecessary information. Just let me know when something changes.”

This time, the blond man hung up first. And punched the dashboard.

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