

Chapter One

Lehigh fussed with his wide bolo tie and adjusted the fit of his black suit jacket while waiting at the front door 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 McBride's political career, the irony of the estate's symbolism was not lost on Lehigh.

A tiny 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 with a smile. "Please come in. The family is in the Great Room. 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. "Gracias, Consuela. It's good to see you again." The diminutive maid, a long-time employee of the McBrides, had been promoted to chief housekeeper after her predecessor, Francine, quit earlier that summer to become a full-time stay-at-home mom. Lehigh much preferred Consuela's genteel, motherly warmth over Francine's steely, suspicious nature. It didn't hurt matters, in Lehigh's mind, that Consuela's son Manuel ran one of the largest lumber mills in Mt. Hood County and had always been one of Lehigh's best customers in his forestry days. Those days seemed so remote to him now, only two months after accepting the interim appointment to fulfill the last several months of the term of former sheriff Buck Summers, now stewing in one of the same jail cells he once guarded.

"Piña colada, Mr. Carter?" Consuela asked. "Or your usual, scotch on the rocks?" She took his jacket and hat and pushed his 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 pointed to the double doors of the Great Room and disappeared down a side hallway.

Lehigh pushed open the double doors into the the aptly named 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 new bride, 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, revealing more than a hint of cleavage without being immodest. Her long black hair sat atop her head like an ebony crown, complete with embedded jewelry that sparkled 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, retiring Senator 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 the senator'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, you don’t think I’d miss a party like this, at my own house, do you? 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 the senator 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 going to clean 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 waved him off. “Forget it. It’s going to the cleaners anyway.” He grabbed Lehigh’s arm again and tugged.

“To the garbage, you mean,” Stacy said. “Why are you wearing this cheap polyester shirt anyway? What happened to the beautiful Egyptian cotton ones you always wear?”

“I hate fussing with those stupid cuff links,” McBride said. Lehigh tuned out 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.”

“We do business together,” McBride said. “Beyond that—well. I’d rather not speak ill of the dead. That’s *your* job, Mr. Bailey.” He pulled Lehigh and Stacy past the protesting newsman toward a trio of 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. “James McAvoy, First U.S. Bank. This is my wife, Stephanie.” McAvoy nodded toward a stout woman with short brown hair wearing a shimmering teal dress that matched her husband’s tie and handkerchief. She stood a half-foot taller than her husband and stared down her long Roman nose at Lehigh without speaking, then turned away.

“Pleasure, ma’am,” Lehigh said to her back. Stacy covered her amusement with a cough. Lehigh continued, “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.

"And this," McBride went on, "is my colleague in the senate, Ms. Margaret deVries." He kissed the hand of a woman whose puffed-up hair had somehow acquired a light blue hue. Heavy makeup almost covered deep wrinkles and age spots.

"Please, call me Molly." She took Lehigh's hand in both of hers and affixed a steady, blue-eyed stare on him. "Thank you for your service in protecting Oregonians from the unsavory elements of our society, Sheriff. You and your law enforcement colleagues have no better friend in the senate than I. And my husband and I will be more than generous to your re-election campaign." She did not introduce a quiet, elderly man to her right, a thin, retiring man Lehigh took to be her husband.

"Much obliged, Senator." He faked a smile, and she returned to her conversation with Stephanie McAvoy.

"And last but not least," McBride said, "County Commissioner Desmond Montgomery. 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 Montgomery 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 Montgomery's hand. "After all, we're kin, of sorts. I'm just an old tree farmer myself."

Montgomery 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,” Montgomery said with another laugh.

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

Montgomery 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 three big donors I lined up for you,” McBride said.

“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.

“Don’t you have a crying widow somewhere to exploit?” Stacy said.

“I don’t know. Does Downey have a secret life I should know about?” Bailey asked. He grinned and sipped his drink.

“No woman was ever crazy enough to marry Everett,” George said, pushing his way back into the mix. “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. Now, George, aren’t you and Everett Downey business partners? I understand you’re old pals.”

“Partners, yes. Old, definitely. Friends? Never.” George looked around, his lips tight, 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. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.”

“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. We got past it, made many other deals together. Some good, some bad. 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, writing you big checks. 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.

The following Wednesday, Lehigh parked his pickup truck in the dusty, broken-gravel parking lot alongside Downey’s Gentlemen’s Club, a seedy strip joint on the main highway leading into and out of Clarkesville, the seat of government for Mt. Hood County, Oregon. About half of the 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 Mountain in central Oregon. 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.

"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. Fabulous, as a term describing her, was an understatement.

“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 half-dozen 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. Stacy had worked at this very club in her early twenties as a waitress, not a dancer, but he could tell that the memory still scarred her. Best not to press it any further.

As if summoned by his thoughts, a waitress wearing just enough shiny, fur-lined fabric to cover her essentials greeted them. Everything about her, from the platinum wig and inch-long eyelashes to her excessively protruding, gravity-defying bustline screamed fake, 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 disappeared into the dimness. 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.” 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, his white hair reflecting 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, Sheriff.”

“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 answer 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." 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?" Stacy asked. "As far as we've heard, nobody else is running an active campaign."

Downey clipped the tip of the cigar and inspected his handiwork. "There's always a challenger with 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 said, "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 *cozones*, he had to grant that. “Sir,” he said, “I’m not here 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. “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.

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."