

The Mountain Man's Dog
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Approx. 67,000 words

Chapter 1

Lehigh slowed down around the S-curves on Brady Mountain Road even before the speed limit sign told him to. The fog rolled in thicker here due to the nearby lakes, intensifying the dark and making the night seem much later than it was. A guy never knew what the night fog might throw out of the woods in Oregon's Cascade Mountains, especially in late September. He didn't want adventure on a Thursday night. He just needed some groceries, stuff that old man Patterson's market didn't carry, and anyways, he closed at five o'clock. So, as much as he hated doing it, Lehigh had to drive down the mountain into town.

Just go to the A&P, get some groceries, and leave. No distractions.

He braked just in time not to kill a coyote darting across the highway. It startled him and sweat rolled down his back in spite of the chill. He shook his head and took a heavy breath. Focus on driving, dumb-ass. Don't get all riled up.

He kept his speed down below forty. Good thing, as it enabled him to brake in time once again, this time to avoid hitting a yellow hound dog limping across the road. Well, normally he'd call it a good thing. In coming years, Lehigh often argued it was anything but. He wasn't much of a dog person, ever since Uncle Ted's German Shepherd near tore his hand off as a kid. Or so he remembered. The injury grew with every retelling.

Lehigh didn't so much fear dogs as loathe them. Dogs were nothing but a nuisance: noisy,

smelly, always needing attention and cleaning up after. Kind of like a kid that never grows up. Still a committed bachelor at thirty-seven, his position on kids was pretty clear.

He came to a full stop for the yellow hound. It limped so badly, it hardly moved, really. Its brown eyes reflected the glare of the truck's headlights, making them shine red like the indicator lights on his dashboard. The dog froze in his tracks as Lehigh waited. Then it lay right down across the center stripe, its bleeding belly exposed and vulnerable.

Dumb-assed dog. He could get killed like that. Of course, that might well have been the dog's intention. Dogs, his uncle used to say, can smell their own death, and will go take care of it when the time comes. Maybe the dog wanted him to run it over.

Hmm. Tempting.

He shook his head. Nope. Can't do it. Dogs may be mean, stupid little bastards, but he couldn't just up and kill one of 'em. Maybe Uncle Ted's nasty old shepherd, but not one that hadn't done anything to him first.

He left the old Ford running, tucked his shaggy brown hair into the Dodgers hat he kept on the seat and stepped out into the fog. The dog looked up at him, stared a second, then lay his head back down on the pavement. Lehigh approached him, taking small steps, still wary, twenty-nine years after feeling that shepherd dog's teeth on his fingers. He could just move the pup aside a bit. Move him and be on his way.

He fetched the wide aluminum shovel out of the back of his truck, just in case he had to prod the old hound to move. The dog looked friendly, but one never knows what a dog's going to do. What if he's rabid, like Uncle Ted's dog? You just never know. Those shots hurt like hell for days and days. He had no desire to go through that again.

The lazy flap of the dog's snakelike tail against the damp black pavement told him rabies were probably not an issue. Its pink tongue flickered between furry lips, anticipating rescue. The

dog's brown irises and black pupils filled the top hemisphere of its eye sockets in a steady, whimpering stare. Its bleeding belly and forlorn face melted Lehigh's apprehension. Dogs may be a nuisance, he reckoned, but this one was just hurting.

He set the shovel down and held his hand out, palm down, in front of the dog's nose, the way Uncle Ted had taught him. Wet, gentle lapping on his knuckles confirmed the dog's friendliness – or at least, its trust. “Let me take a look at you, boy,” he said in as soothing a voice as he could muster. He used the handle of the shovel to lift the dog's hind leg, exposing more of its belly and crotch.

“Huh. I guess I shouldn't call you boy no more,” he said, a little embarrassed. She licked his hand again. He looked closer at the cut. She'd somehow sliced herself across the belly, maybe jumping over a freshly-pruned hedge, or a barbed-wire fence, or maybe a cat or raccoon had clawed her. The ragged cut caused her skin to gape an inch or so apart. It would need stitches, probably several.

“Well, you ain't gonna walk into a vet's office all on your own,” he said. “But the sheriff's office is on the way to town. Maybe he'll get you there. Which means, I've got to get you to him. C'mere, girl.”

The dog found his eyes with her own, and lay her head back down on the pavement. He nudged her backside with his foot. “C'mon girl, get up.” She stayed put and glanced at him sideways, panting just a little. Moisture from the dog's breath danced in the beam of his truck's headlights.

“You gonna make me pick you up and carry you?” She didn't look heavy. But to pick her up, he'd have to risk putting at least one hand near her head. Near her open mouth.

Pain. Fingers. Bleeding...

He shook his head. This dog knew more about pain and bleeding than he ever would. Come on, Lehigh. Do what you gotta do here.

He crossed around the dog and slid the edge of his shovel under her furry back. At first she

remained dead weight, a passenger in the next step of her journey. He pried her body up from the pavement, using the shovel as a lever and his foot as a fulcrum. He grunted under the awkward exertion. Six-one, one-ninety-five, he ought to be able to lift this skinny mutt with ease, but he not from this position.

Just before he let go to start over, the dog responded. With a herky-jerky motion she stumbled to her feet and sauntered to the open door of his pickup's cab, panting, a hopeful and grateful dog-smile painted on her weary face.

"Wait," Lehigh said. To his surprise, the dog obeyed. He scratched the stubble on his chin. "You been around people." That changed his strategy a bit. He had intended to put her in the bed of the pickup, but he discarded that thought like an empty carcass. Instead he spread a small tarp onto the passenger's side of the seat. The dog put her front paws on the truck's sidestep and convulsed in a pathetic attempt to climb further. Fresh blood trickled down her hind leg. Lehigh winced. Careful not to touch the wound, he pressed the flat blade of the shovel against the dog's hindquarters and pushed her onto the floor of the truck, then guided her onto the tarp.

"I don't reckon you've done anything wrong," he said after climbing in next to her, "but I think it's time you and Sheriff Summers got acquainted."

The dog responded only with a quick lick of her lips, heavy panting, and a low, prolonged whine.

Mt. Hood County Sheriff Dallas "Buck" Summers hated being interrupted. Especially this close to completing the daily paper's WordFind puzzle – a rare accomplishment on Thursdays. For some reason Thursday's puzzles seemed harder than the other days. But Buck had only three more words to find. Then he could unscramble the leftover, uncircled letters to answer the Indiana Jones trivia question on the comics page. He was scanning the grid for the word "snakepit" when a jangle

of bells from the doorway in the foyer announced his visitor.

“Please just be someone needing directions, or a phone, or something,” he muttered. He pressed his pencil on the start of row seven to mark his place, just in case. Directions, a map, even a jump of a dead battery – easy things like that, he knew Dwayne Latner, his deputy, could handle. Not much else, but surely that.

No such luck.

“Someone here to see you, Sheriff,” Dwayne said a moment later. Summers, having progressed only one more row of letters, penciled an “8” in the white space next to the grid. He craned his neck to see over his feet, propped comfortably on his desk. Dwayne’s lanky frame leaned against the open door, one hand scratching the salt-and-pepper stubble on his leathery face. Summers wondered how a man’s beard could grow so fast and thick while the hair on his head grew only thinner, if at all.

“What’s he want?” He took his feet off the desk, set the newspaper in his bottom drawer and slid it shut. He stood, tucked his shirt into his slacks and loosened the belt straining over his bulging belly, then checked his watch. Almost dinnertime.

“It’s Lee Carter. Says he found a hurt dog in the road, up a mile or so his way.”

“So? What’s he want me to do about it?”

“I dunno. I guess he wants to jaw a bit with you about it.”

Summers regarded his hapless Deputy a moment, hoping yet to find a way to pawn this problem off and get back to his puzzle, but he knew he would just be delaying the inevitable. “Fine, then. Show him in.”

“Will do, Sheriff.”

Lehigh strode through the doorway a few seconds later. “Thanks for seeing me, Buck. Did Dwayne tell you why I’m here?”

“Sure did. But why the hell’d you bring it here? You know we don’t got no facilities here to take care of a dog.”

Lehigh corkscrewed his face into a deep frown. “I know, Sheriff. But I figured you folks would know what to do and where to bring her, and you could get her there faster in a squad car than I could in my pickup. Flash a few lights, sound a siren. Know what I’m saying?”

Summers hissed in irritation and shook his head. “Nothing doing, Carter. We ain’t running no animal am-boo-lance service. He’s all yours. How bad off is the dumb mutt, anyhow?”

“She’s bleeding. Her gut’s cut somehow. Probably needs stitches and a few shots. C’mon, Buck. Help me out here.”

“Sorry. We’re short-staffed, just me and Dwayne tonight. I send him off on this little joyride and then I got nobody to send out if a call comes in. All I can do is tell you where to take him. You familiar with Clarkesville Animal Hospital?”

Lehigh’s eyes narrowed. “Course I am. Isn’t there anyplace else?”

“No place open now. Why? What’s wrong with them? Anyway, they’d be operating on the dog, not on you.”

“You know damn well what’s wrong.”

“Do I?” He snuck a peek at his bottom drawer. Just three more words to go on that puzzle...

Lehigh crossed his arms. “I’d just as soon drop this damned dog back on the highway as set foot in that place. And I’m sure the feeling is mutual.”

“Aw, come on, Lehigh. She’s not still mad at you.”

“She hasn’t exactly kept me on her Christmas card list.”

“That was a long time ago. What, ten, twelve years? Nobody could stay mad that long.”

“Stacy could. And does. So, unless you want a dead dog on your conscience—”

“Whoa, whoa. Stop right there. This dog ain’t gonna become my problem. In fact, you’d

better get going if you're gonna make it before they close." He stole another peek at the bottom drawer, then wagged a hand toward the door.

"I tell you, I ain't going there."

Summers's face darkened. "Look here, son. You better get that dog down to Clarkesville, pronto, or I will march you into that jail cell just the other side of that wall on a charge of cruelty to animals. Are we clear?" He punctuated each word with a jabbing finger, each jab closer to Lehigh's nose than the last.

Lehigh glowered back at him a moment, then shrugged. "All right, Buck. If you put it that way." He tipped his baseball hat in a mock salute. "Thanks for your... help."

"Say hi to Ms. McBride and her daddy for me," Summers called after him. He smirked and listened for the telltale jangle of bells to confirm Lehigh's departure from the station. "Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Snakepit."

The hound stayed quiet on the ride into town, whimpering only when Lehigh hit the deeper potholes. She lay with her belly facing forward and her tail by the door, so that her moist exhalations dampened the right leg of Lehigh's jeans. The thick grey tarp absorbed the blood seeping from her wound. "No doubt my upholstery's stained," he said. The dog apologized with a doleful stare. "Aw, it don't matter. It's all full of coffee and Dr. Pepper anyhow." She lifted her head and craned her neck to look at him. Then, like a wounded soldier certain of his death, she lay her head on his thigh for comfort. The touch of the dog's head startled him and he jerked his leg upwards, thumping her snout into his rib cage, and she retreated into a curl on the tarp, tail tucked between her legs as if to absorb her lost blood.

"I'm sorry, girl," Lehigh said. "This is as fast as I can go. Stupid Sheriff." He held his hand hung in midair over the dog's head, unsure of whether to pet her, scratch her ear, or leave her alone.

She broke his indecision by lifting her head up until her brow grazed his fingertips, then dipped and rose again, coaxing his hand into contact: touch me, comfort me. He rested his hand on her head and stroked her scalp. With each stroke, she lowered her head a smidge until, minutes later, it rested on his lap.

“I feel like I’m giving aid and comfort to the enemy,” he said. The dog opened her eyes and gazed upward, delivering an unspoken message: We are not enemies. I trust you. “You shouldn’t,” he said. The vet would probably put her to sleep, he reckoned. A stray dog with no collar, bleeding for who knows how long, with nowhere to go and no one to pay for its care, might have been better off left alone. At least then it could die its own way.

It. So much easier to say “it” than “she”. “She” implied some knowledge of the beast; “it” made the dog seem like more of a stranger. That’s best, he knew. We should stay strangers. Or enemies. Like dogs always have been.

Clarksville Animal Hospital, a mostly-volunteer clinic, was clear on the northeast side of town, exactly opposite the part of town he’d intended to go. That meant an extra twenty minutes of driving. Luckily, there was a Safeway nearby. That’d do for groceries, even though it cost more. Damned Sheriff.

He checked the dog’s cut when he stopped for a red light in mid-town. The dog’s bleeding had slowed. That’s either good in that the wound was clotting up, or bad in that she’d already lost too much blood.

It. *It* had lost too much blood.

He took his hand off the dog’s head and put it back on the steering wheel. She rewarded him with a dull, brown-eyed stare, unaccusing, unsuspecting, accepting. Okay, she seemed to be saying, I know you need both hands to drive.

It. *It* seemed to be saying.

After about five minutes, he rested his hand on the dog's side, and left it there until he pulled into the clinic's tiny lot.

Shutting off the motor, he kicked open the driver's side door, stopping its rebound with an extended toe, and leaned over to scoop the dog, tarp and all, into his arms. The dog had yet to indicate a tendency to bite – she hadn't emitted so much as a growl during the bumpy 45-minute ride – but no point in taking chances now. She weighed less than he expected – 40 pounds when 60 would do – but he struggled to pull her out of the truck at that angle without jostling her and aggravating the wound.

The clinic, a one-story converted ranch house, sat on a double lot just off the four-lane main drag in Clarkesville. Built in the 1960's or so, its decorative shutters and thin horizontal siding needed painting, and moss filled the open tabs of the composite shingle roof. But they'd paved and striped the parking lot sometime in the past fifteen years, and not a speck of trash littered the grounds. The heavy front door sported a sign boasting of new late Thursday hours.

"Just my luck," Lehigh said. He managed the lever-style handle, pushed the door open, and carried his burden inside. Soft-focus pictures of beautiful pets needing homes adorned the white walls of the waiting room. The gray linoleum tile smelled of fresh disinfectant. He set the stoic animal on the broad Formica counter, pinged the service bell and waited.

"I'll just be a moment," a woman's voice called from down the hall. Lehigh nodded to nobody and bent over, his face level with the dog's.

"Now don't you worry," he said to the dog's sad brown eyes. "The folks here'll know just what to do. They'll fix ya up and find someone to take care of you."

"Lee?" the woman's voice called. "Lehigh Carter, is that you?"

Moments later, Stacy Lynn McBride, daughter of State Senator George Lindsay McBride, appeared behind the counter. She'd aged twelve years since he'd last seen her, but she showed almost

none of it. Long black hair pulled back into a pony tail framed the smooth skin of her face, tanned a deeper shade of copper by the summer sun. Ten pounds heavier (five of which she'd needed anyway) and a couple of laugh lines later, her clear blue eyes still sparked fire in his gut. She remained the only woman ever to tell him those three magic words, and to hear them from him: "I love you." She'd stolen his virginity, taught him which liquors could mix, and even, one time, convinced him to try smoking pot. In countless ways, she'd changed his life.

Then, in one big way, she changed it all again. Suddenly she wouldn't take his calls for a week. Then she hand-delivered a letter to his mailbox that began: "Dear Lee, I hope you will someday understand..."

That same woman now stood, mouth agape, not six feet from him, as unnaturally still as the statue of Captain William Clark in the center of town – and as still as his own heart for the beat's length it took to absorb the fact that she actually seemed happy to see him.

"Hey, Stacy," he whispered.

She blinked once, noticed the dog, and the surprise on her face doubled. She walked through the Dutch door next to the counter into the waiting area. Their hug lasted maybe a second and a half. "I can't believe you're here."

"I found this dog," he said. "I tried bringing her to the Sheriff's, but—"

"Let me look at her." She examined the dog's belly, made a face. "It doesn't look infected. She'll need stitches and a rabies shot. Probably some fluids, too. Poor thing must be starved." She met Lee's eyes again. "You did the right thing, bringing her here."

"Thanks. Buck suggested it. Anyway, it seemed right. But I didn't know —"

"I'll need you to fill out some forms." She returned to the business side of the counter and pushed a clipboard at him, her eyes focused on a spot somewhere on the counter between them.

Pet's name, the first line read.

“Hell, I don’t know anything about this dog. I just picked her up off the street so it wouldn’t die on the highway. Can’t ya’ll just—”

“We can’t treat her without some information. Just tell us what you can.” She scooped the dog off the tarp and disappeared down the hallway.

He struggled with the forms. They asked more about him than the dog. “That don’t make no sense,” he muttered. “All’s I’m doing is dropping the dog off. She ain’t mine.” But he filled it in anyway. At least this way, they could call and let him know what happens to it.

“We’ll have to keep her overnight,” Stacy said, re-entering a few moments later. She managed to look him in the eyes now. “You can pick her up in the morning. Since it’s a rescue, we can pay the majority of the bill from the charity account. You can pay the rest by check or cash.”

“Whoa! Wait a minute. She’s not my dog. I just—”

“Lehigh Carter. Don’t you pretend for one minute that you are abandoning this dog here tonight.” Stacy’s pale blue eyes narrowed and her face reflected foreboding anger for a moment before softening into a gentle smile. “Besides, there’s a great place for breakfast around the corner. My treat for the hero who rescued this lucky little dog.”

Standing outside, hat in hand, Lehigh felt a churning in his gut that he hadn’t felt in a long time.

Twelve years, to be exact.

“The trouble is, I can’t pick that dog up tomorrow morning.” He practiced his speech to Stacy as he searched Safeway’s aisles for the groceries on his list. He needed to go back to the clinic and tell her that, and tell her that he couldn’t meet her for breakfast, either, even if she was buying. Which a woman shouldn’t do, anyway, even as a reward for something. Which he shouldn’t get, besides, because he wasn’t rescuing the dog, not in the sense of taking it home and adopting it.

So, that was one reason. He couldn't adopt a dog right now. Not now, or any time. He didn't like dogs. Worse, they didn't like him. She would be disappointed, sure, but she'd understand. She'd have to. This must happen all the time. She'd have a dozen names in a file somewhere, and she'd call one or two, and the dog would be adopted by dinner time tomorrow, making a houseful of kids happy.

So long as they don't get their fingers bit. But he wouldn't say anything about that. That, she probably wouldn't understand. Or, maybe she'd understand, but she'd give him that dismissive scoff of hers and change the subject.

Come to think of it, she probably wouldn't understand much of any of it. Understanding was not among her finer traits, at least not twelve years ago.

Which raised the second point. He couldn't meet her for breakfast. First off, he had to work. Second, he wouldn't be picking up the dog – he'd have already explained all this. And third, he just couldn't meet her there anyway. Just forget it.

"Excuse me?" A gray-haired woman in a print knee-length dress stared at him with a strained look on her face, the kind that makes you think the person has just tasted something awful.

"Ma'am?"

"Were you talking to me?" Her knuckles shone white against the red bar on the shopping cart. Her eyes narrowed, accusing.

"No, ma'am. I didn't even mean to be talking out loud." He grabbed a box of corn meal off the shelf, dropped it into his cart, and moved past her, just catching sight of her head wagging in impatient disapproval.

Damn. He didn't even need corn meal.

So, third, or whatever the heck number he was on, it wasn't a good idea to be meeting up with Stacy again. It smacked of a date, and hadn't she'd gotten married some time back? No longer

Stacy McBride, she was now Stacy – what? He couldn't remember. But no matter. He couldn't be meeting a married woman for breakfast, nor lunch, dinner, anything. Not tomorrow, not any day.

And no dog.

He rubbed his fingers as he looked over the various offerings of coffee. Everything's different here at Safeway compared to A&P.

He shivered. Everything's different.