

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JANET

EVANOVICH

A STEPHANIE PLUM NOVEL

GOING

ROGUE

RISE AND SHINE TWENTY-NINE

Thank you for downloading this Simon & Schuster ebook.

Get a FREE ebook when you join our mailing list. Plus, get updates on new releases, deals, recommended reads, and more from Simon & Schuster. Click below to sign up and see terms and conditions.

[CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP](#)

Already a subscriber? Provide your email again so we can register this ebook and send you more of what you like to read. You will continue to receive exclusive offers in your inbox.

GOING ROGUE



RISE AND SHINE TWENTY-NINE

A STEPHANIE PLUM NOVEL

JANET EVANOVICH

ATRIA BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Stephanie Plum. I'm a bail bonds enforcement agent, working for my cousin Vinnie, and I'm currently locked out of the bail bonds office. It's nine in the morning in Trenton, New Jersey. It's October. It's Monday. Everything is good in my world except the office is closed and the lights are off. This is a first because the office manager, Connie Rosolli, is always at her desk by now.

A red Firebird pulled to the curb behind my blue Honda CR-V. Lula got out of the Firebird and walked over to me. Lula is a former hooker who now works for Vinnie doing whatever the heck she wants. At five feet five inches she's two inches shorter than I am. She's a smidgeon younger, her skin is a lot darker, and she's a bunch of pounds heavier. Her hair was yellow today, with braided extensions that hung halfway down her back. She was wearing a black sweater that was two sizes too small and fuchsia spandex tights.

I was wearing jeans, and a sweatshirt over a T-shirt, and because I was wearing sneakers and Lula was wearing six-inch stiletto heels, she had me by a couple inches.

"What the heck?" Lula asked.

"The office is locked," I said, "and Connie's car isn't here."

"Did you check the lot in the back?"

"Yeah."

"Well, this is just wrong," Lula said. "She's supposed to be here. She brings the doughnuts. What am I supposed to do without my doughnuts?"

Connie is in her midthirties and lives with her widowed mother. The living arrangement isn't ideal for Connie, but she's a good Italian Catholic girl and family takes care of family. I called Connie's cell phone and didn't get an answer, so I called her house phone.

Mama Rosolli answered on the second ring. "Who's this?" she asked.

"It's Stephanie Plum," I said. "Is Connie there?"

“She’s at work. She left extra early today so she could get gas and some lottery tickets. I was still in my robe and nightgown when she was going out the door.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks.”

“And?” Lula asked when I hung up.

“She’s not home. Her mother said she left early to get gas and lottery tickets.”

I dialed Vinnie.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Connie isn’t here. Have you heard from her?”

“No. She’s supposed to be there. She’s always there.”

“Not today,” I said. “The office is locked, and the lights are off.”

“You’re calling me, why?”

“I thought you might want to open the office for us.”

“You thought wrong. I’m in Atlantic City with Big Datucci and Mickey Maroney. We’re waiting on Harry.”

Harry the Hammer is Vinnie’s father-in-law. He owns the agency, and he owns Vinnie.

“Go to the back door,” Vinnie said. “There’s a key under the brick by the dumpster.”

The bail bonds office is a one-story storefront on Hamilton Avenue. It’s squashed between a dry cleaner and a mystery bookshop, and it’s across the street from the Burg. I grew up in the Burg, and my parents still live there. Houses are small. Cars and televisions are large. Most of the residents are hardworking, overfed, and underpaid. They’re staunch believers in the First and Second Amendments, the sanctity of football and baseball, a first-class funeral, homemade marinara, stuffed cabbage, white bread, grilled anything, and cannoli from Italian Peoples Bakery.

Lula and I walked around the block to the alley behind the bonds office. We found the key under the brick, opened the back door, and entered the storeroom.

For the most part, bail bonds are secured by real estate, vehicles, bank accounts, and pawnable items like weapons, electronics, and jewelry. Vinnie has been known to accept other items of questionable value that appeal to his own personal interests—such as unusual sex toys, high-quality pot, whips of

any sort, desirable seats for the Mets or the Rangers, and nooners from fancy ladies, and he once took possession of an aging racehorse. All these odds and ends find their temporary homes in the storeroom. Small items are kept in multi-drawer metal cabinets. Medium-sized items are tagged and crammed onto rows of shelves. The racehorse was kept in Vinnie's backyard until the neighbors complained.

Lula walked through the storeroom to the small alcove that served as a kitchenette.

"There's no coffee brewing," she said. "I'm not supposed to start my day like this. I got a routine. My morning has expectations, if you see what I'm saying."

I was more concerned about the storeroom than the coffee machine. Some of the cabinet drawers weren't completely closed and the items stashed on the shelves had been shoved around.

"Were you looking for something in the storeroom over the weekend?" I asked Lula.

"Nuh-uh, not me," Lula said. "I only was here for a couple hours on Saturday."

I told myself that Connie was probably in a rush to find something, but I only halfway believed it. It wasn't normal behavior for Connie to leave the storeroom like this.

"I know the gas station Connie uses," I said to Lula. "You stay here and man the desk, and I'll see if I can track her down."

"Get doughnuts on your way back," Lula said. "Make sure you get a Boston cream for me."

Connie lives on the outskirts of the Burg and gets gas on State Street. I took Hamilton to State and turned left. I pulled into the gas station, bypassed the pumps, and parked in front of the gas station minimart. I didn't see Connie's car, so I went inside and asked the cashier if she'd seen Connie.

"A couple inches shorter than me," I said to the cashier. "Lots of dark brown hair, lots of eyebrows, lots of mascara, about my age. She was going to get lottery tickets this morning."

"Yeah, she was here," the cashier said. "She's chesty, right?"

"Right. I was supposed to meet her, but she didn't show up," I said. "Did she say anything about where she was going?"

“No. She got her lottery tickets and left.”

I drove to the bakery, got a box of doughnuts, and returned to the office.

“Did you find her?” Lula asked.

“No.” I set the doughnut box on Connie’s desk. “She got lottery tickets at the gas station. And I found out that she got doughnuts at the bakery.”

“What? She got doughnuts? I don’t see no Connie’s doughnuts. I don’t even see no fresh powdered sugar or chocolate icing smudges anywhere on her desk. Where’d she go with my doughnut after she left the bakery? There’s something wrong here.” Lula looked in the box I had just put in front of her. “There’s no Boston cream.”

“They were sold out.”

“Damn.”

We hung out in the office eating doughnuts and drinking coffee. An hour went by and there was still no Connie.

“Maybe you should check her email,” I said to Lula.

“Why me?” Lula asked.

“You’re sitting in her chair.”

“Okay, I guess that makes sense, but how am I going to do that? She’s got a password.”

“She keeps all her passwords in a notebook in the bottom drawer with her office gun.”

Lula opened the drawer and pulled the book out. “She’s got a lot of passwords,” Lula said, paging through. “I could see where her life is unnecessarily complicated. I only have one password. I use it for everything, so I don’t need a book like this.”

“That’s frowned on in the world of cybersecurity.”

Lula blew out a raspberry. “That’s what I think of cybersecurity.” She found the password, typed it in, and the computer came alive. She opened email and scrolled through a bunch of messages. “Here’s a court report,” she said. “It looks like three idiots failed to appear for their hearings on Friday. I’ll print them out for you.”

The deal is that when someone is arrested and doesn’t want to sit around in a cell until his court date, he’s required to post a cash bond. If he doesn’t have the money, he gets it from a bail bondsman like Vinnie. If he fails to appear

when his hearing is scheduled, Vinnie is out big bucks unless I can find the FTA and bring him back into the system.

I took the printouts from Lula and paged through them. Brad Winter was a no-show on a blackmail charge. It carried a high bond. Carpenter Beedle tried to rob an armored truck and accidentally shot himself in the foot. Also a high bond. Bellissima Morelli was charged with arson, resisting arrest, and assaulting a police officer.

“Holy cow,” I said. “This last one is Joe’s grandmother.”

Lula leaned forward to get a better look at the file. “Say what? I wasn’t paying that close attention.”

When I was five years old and Joe Morelli was six, we played choo-choo in his father’s garage. This wasn’t an entirely rewarding experience because I was always the tunnel and I wanted to be the train. When I was seventeen, I volunteered my virginity to Morelli in a moment of passion and prurient curiosity. The outcome was only marginally better than choo-choo, and Morelli walked away from it without so much as a follow-up phone call. Two years later I saw him strolling down the sidewalk in Trenton. I jumped the curb and clipped him with my father’s Buick, relieved that I finally had a satisfying encounter with the jerk. Our relationship has improved since then. He’s a Trenton cop now, working plainclothes in crimes against persons. He’s a good cop, he’s become a good friend, and he’s made a lot of progress on the choo-choo game. I suppose you could say that he’s my boyfriend, although the term seems insufficient for our relationship.

“Isn’t Bella the one who dresses in black like an extra in a Mafia movie about Sicily?” Lula asked.

“Yes.”

“And she puts *the eye* on people and makes their teeth fall out and they poop their pants?”

“Yes.”

“Well good thing I’m working the desk this morning and you’re the bounty hunter,” Lula said. “I wouldn’t want to be the one who has to haul her bony ass back to jail. She creeps me out.”

I left Lula at the office, and I drove to my parents' house. The easiest and most reliable way for me to get information on anyone in the Burg is to talk to my Grandma Mazur. She shops at Giovichinni's Deli and the Italian Peoples and Tasty Pastry bakeries. She goes to bingo twice a week, and she regularly attends Mass at the Catholic Church and viewings at Stiva's Funeral Home. The Burg gossip mill is in full force at all these gatherings. Several years ago, Grandpa Mazur succumbed to a full-fat diet and two packs of Lucky Strikes a day, so Grandma moved in with my parents. My father survives this invasion by spending a lot of time at his lodge, and my mom has developed a relationship with Jack Daniel's.

My parents still live in my childhood home. It's a small duplex that's attached to another duplex. The inside of the house is packed with comfortable, overstuffed furniture and a lot of memories. Three tiny bedrooms and one bath upstairs; living room, dining room, kitchen downstairs. The front door opens to a small foyer that leads to the living room. There's a back door in the kitchen, and beyond the back door is a small, rarely used backyard and a single-car garage.

It was midmorning, and I knew I would find my mom and Grandma in the kitchen. I look a lot like my mom, but my brown hair is longer and curlier than hers, my blue eyes are a shade deeper, and my body is a little slimmer. Grandma looks like my mom and me, but gravity has taken its toll on Grandma. It's as if she was partially melted and then got frozen into a new semi-gelatinous shape where things like breasts and cheeks hang a lot lower than they used to.

My mom was mixing something in a big bowl, and Grandma was at the little kitchen table, doing the day's Jumble. I looked in the bowl and grimaced.

"Meatloaf," my mom said. "Turkey, sirloin, and pork. Giovichinni ground it up for me fresh this morning."

"It's mostly turkey," Grandma said, "on account of your father's cholesterol is high. He had to cut back on either beef or full-fat ice cream, and he didn't want to give up the ice cream." She leaned to the left in her seat and looked behind me. "Where's your sidekick, Lula?"

"Connie isn't in the office this morning, so Lula's manning the desk." I dropped my messenger bag on the floor and sat at the table with Grandma. "Remember when Manny Tortoli's garage burned down last month?"

“Yeah, it was a beauty of a fire,” Grandma said. “I was watching TV and I heard the trucks go past our house, so I went out to look. You could see the flames shooting up into the sky.”

“Morelli’s Grandma Bella was charged with arson for that fire,” I said.

“She was standing on the sidewalk holding an empty one-gallon metal can that used to have kerosene in it. And she was yelling, ‘Burn, baby, burn!’ at the garage,” Grandma said. “I got it all straight from Emily Mizner. Her boy was one of the first cops to get there. He tried to calm crazy Bella down, and she hit him with the empty can and gave him *the eye*. Now he’s got boils all over him, even on his private parts.”

“Vinnie posted Bella’s bail bond, and she didn’t show up for her court appearance on Friday,” I said. “The failure-to-appear notice came into the office this morning.”

My mother stopped mixing and stared at me. “Don’t even *think* about going after her. She’s a lunatic. Let Joseph bring her in.”

My mom is the only one on the planet who calls Morelli by his first name. Sometimes I call him Joe, but never Joseph.

“It’s hard to believe she could give someone boils just by pulling her lower eyelid down and glaring at him,” I said to my mom.

“Emily told me they weren’t ordinary boils,” Grandma said. “According to Emily, they’re huge. *Gigantic* and oozing pus. She called them the Devil’s boils.”

“Forget the boils,” my mother said to me. “Crazy Bella set fire to Manny Tortolli’s garage! She’s dangerous. You don’t want to get anywhere near her.”

Truth is, I’ve gone after people who were a lot more dangerous than Bella. I’ve taken down killers, rapists, and serial mooners. Not that I wanted to trivialize Bella. I mean, who’s to say if she’s for real? What I knew was that I didn’t want to have to tackle my boyfriend’s grandmother and wrestle her to the ground so I could cuff her, and I didn’t want boils on my private parts.

“That Bella is a mean one,” Grandma said. “She thinks she owns the Burg. If you have any problems with her, let me know. I’m not afraid of her. She’s just a big bag of wind with no fashion sense. She’s been wearing that same dumpy black dress for twenty years. Who else are you looking for? Anybody interesting?”

“Brad Winter. Lives in North Trenton. And Carpenter Beetle.”

“I read about Carpenter Beedle. He’s the one who shot himself while he was trying to rob an armored truck. I wouldn’t mind seeing what he’s about.”

“Are you staying for lunch?” my mom asked.

I stood up. “No. Gotta go. Work to do.”

“If you’re leaving now, you can give me a ride,” Grandma said. “Your mother’s up to her elbows in meatloaf and I need shampoo. I like the kind they sell at the hair salon. I just need to get my purse and a jacket.”

Three minutes later we were in my car.

“Okay,” Grandma said. “I’m all set. I say we go after Beedle first. It’s not like he can outrun us since his foot got shot up.”

“I thought you needed shampoo.”

“That was a ruse to get out of the house. You’re missing your wingman, so I’m gonna fill in.”

Just when you think your day can’t get any worse, there it is, yet another disaster. Not of the magnitude of Connie going missing, but a disaster all the same.

CHAPTER TWO

I like Grandma a lot but having her ride shotgun doesn't have a lot of appeal. It's hard to be taken seriously as a bounty hunter when you're partnered with your grandmother. Not to mention, my mother would have a cow if she knew.

"Mom isn't going to be happy about this," I said.

"Yeah, she'll be nuts, so you better get a move on before she figures it out." She searched my messenger bag. "Here's Beedle's file," she said. "He's thirty-one years old and he lives at Ninety-Three Brill Street."

I looked over at Grandma. I could stun gun her and leave her on the front lawn, but my mom wouldn't like that either.

"Okay," I said, "but I get to do all the talking and you have to leave your gun in the car."

"What gun?"

"The gun you've got in your purse. The gun you're not supposed to have."

"There's a crime wave going on," Grandma said. "A woman has to protect herself. Besides, I'm a responsible gun owner. And anyways, someone on this team has to have a gun, and we all know it's not going to be you."

"I don't need a gun."

Grandma hefted her purse. "Plus, there's an added advantage to packing. My forty-five gives me the right amount of weight in case I have to smack someone in the face with my handbag."

I couldn't argue with that one. I pulled away from the curb, made a U-turn, and headed for Hamilton Avenue. I wanted to drive by the office and check to see if Connie's car was there.

"I never heard of Brill Street," Grandma said. "You're gonna have to GPS it."

I turned onto Hamilton and parked across the street from the office. I could see Lula at the desk. No Connie. No Connie's car at the curb. I called Lula.

"Have you heard from Connie?" I asked.

“No. Nothing. Nada. And I got a empty bakery box. I had to compensate for not getting the Boston cream by eating all the other lame-ass doughnuts. And now I’m getting acid reflux from drinking so much coffee without nothing more to soak it up.”

“Anything else going on?”

“A moron phoned in on account of he wanted to be bonded out. I told him he was gonna have to keep his ass in jail or find some other sucker to fork over the money. I mean it’s not like I can just jump up and run off to the courthouse to bail him out. Who’s gonna sit at the desk if I go to the courthouse?”

“Not to mention, we aren’t authorized to write a bail bond.”

“Say what?”

“Vinnie and Connie are the only ones who are authorized to write a bond.”

“Hunh,” Lula said. “I bet I could if I wanted to.”

“Gotta go,” I said. “Call me if you hear from Connie.”

I tapped 93 Brill Street into my iPhone map app, and it took me to a sketchy area by the train station. The street was narrow and lined with two- and three-story grimy brick row houses. I suspected most of them had been converted into multifamily units. I was able to park a couple houses down from Beedle’s address.

“This is just the sort of place you’d expect an armored-car robber to live,” Grandma said. “I bet this neighborhood is filled with criminals.”

It looked to me like it was filled with people who couldn’t afford to live anywhere else. If they were criminals, they weren’t very good ones.

There were three buzzers alongside the door to number 93. The names on the buzzers were Goldwink, Thomas, Warnick. No Beedle. I tried the door. Locked. I pushed the buzzer for Goldwink. No answer. No answer for Thomas. Warnick opened his connection with static.

“What?” Warnick yelled when the static died down.

“I’m looking for Carpenter Beedle,” I said.

“He’s not here,” Warnick said. “He moved back with his mother.” The connection cut out.

Grandma and I returned to my car, and I paged through Beedle’s file.

“We’re in luck,” I said. “His mother signed for his bond. She secured it with her car. She lives on Maymount Street.”

“That’s off Chambers,” Grandma said. “Your cousin Gloria used to live there when she was married to husband number one. He turned out to be a real stinker.”

I cut back to State Street and got a hollow feeling in my stomach when I drove past Connie’s gas station. No word from Lula. No text message or phone call from Connie. I took Chambers to Maymount and parked in front of the Beedle house. I called Connie and didn’t get an answer. Her voice mail didn’t kick in.

“If she was in an accident and was in the hospital we would have heard by now, so I don’t think that’s it,” Grandma said. “There’s been a lot of aneurisms going around lately, but we would have heard about that too. That leaves two possibilities. The first is that she got fed up with everything and she’s on her way to Hawaii. The second is that she got taken to the mother ship by aliens. I just saw a special on UFOs, and it was real convincing.”

My possibilities were just as irrational, and I hoped just as unlikely. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something bad had gone down and Connie was in the middle of it.

The Beedle house was a small, pale yellow bungalow with a red front door. A rusted Nissan Sentra was parked in the driveway. Grandma and I went to the red door, and I rang the bell.

“Should I draw my gun?” Grandma asked. “How’s this gonna happen?”

“No gun,” I said. “We’re going to politely request that Carpenter goes with us to get rebonded.”

“What if he doesn’t want to go?”

“I’ll try to persuade him.”

“Is that when I get to draw my gun?”

“No! No gun.”

A woman in her midfifties opened the door and looked out at us.

“Mrs. Beedle?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I gave her my nonthreatening, casually pleasant bounty hunter smile. “I’m looking for your son, Carpenter. I work for his bail bonds agent.”

“Such a nice man,” she said. “He was so helpful. He personally came to the police station to see that Carpenter was released. He walked him out the door

and made sure we safely got into our car.” She stepped aside. “Come in. Carpenter is in the kitchen. He’s getting ready to go to work. He’s a bum.”

“Panhandler,” Carpenter yelled from the kitchen. “It’s the second-oldest profession.”

Carpenter was at the kitchen table. His brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and he had a three-day-old beard. He was wearing a wrinkled, washed-out flannel shirt and baggy sweatpants. He had a filthy sneaker on one foot and an orthopedic sandal on the other. He clutched a coffee mug in his right hand.

Grandma looked down at the orthopedic-sandaled foot. “I read where you shot yourself in the foot,” Grandma said. “Where’d the bullet go in? Did you lose any toes?”

“No,” Carpenter said. “I took a chunk out of the side and broke a bone.”

“At least it’s not your gas pedal foot,” Grandma said.

“I told him over and over not to carry a gun,” Mrs. Beedle said. “Does he listen to me? No. So, this is what happens.”

“It was an accident,” Carpenter said. “It could have happened to anybody.”

“*Anybody* doesn’t try to hold up an armored car,” Mrs. Beedle said.

“Yeah, I didn’t think that one through,” Carpenter said. “It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. I saw them unloading all that money and I thought, there I was on the corner panhandling for spare change when I could be robbing an armored car.”

“Why don’t you have a job?” Grandma asked.

“I have a job,” Carpenter said. “I panhandle. I was doing okay at it until I got shot in the foot. This will be my first day back at my corner.”

“You don’t just panhandle,” his mother said. “You pick people’s pockets. You’re a disgrace.”

“I only do that on lean days,” Carpenter said. “And I’m selective. I don’t go after senior citizens.”

“He’s a CPA,” Mrs. Beedle said. “He had a good job downtown. He was moving up in the company.”

“I hated that job,” Carpenter said. “It gave me eczema. I spent all day in a cubicle, staring at numbers. Panhandling is better. I’m my own boss and I’m out in the fresh air all day.”

“Good for you for figuring that out,” Grandma said.

“You’re a bum,” his mother said. “And now you’re an armored-car robber.”

“Technically I’m not an armored-car robber,” he said. “I only *attempted* to rob it.”

“How’d you shoot yourself in the foot?” Grandma asked.

“The guard handed me a bag of money, and it was heavier than I thought it would be. I dropped it on my foot and when I went to pick it up, I guess I squeezed the trigger on the gun.”

“I could see that happening,” Grandma said. “You don’t look like you’ve got a lot of muscle. You should work out when you get sent to the big house.”

“While we’re on the subject,” I said. “You missed your court date. You need to come with us to get rebonded.”

“He never used to miss a date,” Mrs. Beedle said. “He kept a calendar, and he always knew everyone’s birthday. And he was right on time with filing taxes.”

“I’m a new man now,” Carpenter said. “I don’t pay taxes. I don’t make enough money. I lead a simple life.”

“His wife left him, and he snapped,” Mrs. Beedle said.

“Good riddance,” Carpenter said. “She was just one more encumbrance.”

“You might like prison,” Grandma said. “I don’t think you got a lot of encumbrances there as long as you don’t mind being locked up.”

Carpenter pushed back from the table. “This won’t take long, will it?” he asked me. “I don’t want to miss the lunch crowd. I have some regulars at lunchtime.”

“No problem,” I said.

So, here’s the thing about being a bounty hunter. You do a lot of fibbing. Especially to first-time offenders who don’t know anything about the system. If you told them the truth, they might not cooperate. The truth in this case wasn’t good. Carpenter was going to have to sit in jail until Vinnie got back in town. An alternative was to find another bail bondsman. And even worse news, his mother would have to guarantee a new bond and she probably didn’t have a second car.

I left Grandma in the car and walked Carpenter into the municipal building that housed the police department. I handed him over to the desk lieutenant

and told him I would have Vinnie get in touch as soon as he got back in town. I left the building and ran into Morelli in the parking lot. On a good day, Morelli is six feet of lean muscle and Italian charm dressed up in a button-down shirt, jeans, and running shoes. This morning he was six feet of bad attitude. His wavy black hair was soaking wet and slicked back. The rest of him was equally wet and splattered with mud. His shirt was in tatters. His face looked like it had been clawed by a panther. His right eye was almost swollen shut.

“Omigod,” I said. “What happened to you? Are you okay?”

“Road rage incident on the Stark Street bridge. I was stuck in traffic, two cars back from the scene. Two women, out of their cars, beating the crap out of each other. I got between them, and they both attacked me. A second motorist came to help, we got the women separated, and one of them jumped off the bridge.”

“So, you jumped in after her?”

“It was more like I dangled and dropped. It was close to the bank on the Trenton side. I grabbed her and dragged her out.”

“Was she all right?”

“She broke her leg. The water was only about ten feet deep. She’s lucky she didn’t go off headfirst.”

“Is there something I can do? You’re bleeding and your eye is swelling. Do you want to see a doctor?”

“I’m okay. I’m going in to collect some things and then I’m headed home. What brings you here?”

“I dropped off Carpenter Beetle. FTA. He’s the guy who tried to rob the armored car and ended up shooting himself in the foot.”

I wanted to talk to Morelli about his grandmother and about Connie, but he was dripping river water and the scratches were still oozing blood.

“I need to talk to you when you’re dry and not bleeding,” I said. “How about dinner? I’ll get takeout.”

“Sounds good.”

I crossed the lot to my car and slid behind the wheel.

“Was that Morelli you were talking to?” Grandma asked. “I could hardly recognize him with his hair slicked back.”

“He hauled a woman out of the Delaware.”

“He’s such a hero,” Grandma said. “And he looks good even when he’s wet.”

This was all true.

“Now what?” Grandma asked.

“I’m going to the office to see how Lula is managing.”

Lula was at Connie’s desk when Grandma and I walked in.

“It took me a couple hours to figure it out, but this is where I belong,” Lula said. “There’s almost nothing to do. All I have to do is sit here and look important. And I got a lot of authority now that I’m behind Connie’s computer. I already ordered some new magazine subscriptions. And I’m thinking about getting a new couch.”

“Connie’s only been gone for a couple of hours,” I said. “It’s not as if she’s not coming back.”

“Sure, I know that,” Lula said, “but I figure I should put myself to good use while I’m here. I’m a born organizer. I’m one of those take-charge people. And I look excellent behind a desk.”

“You do look pretty good,” Grandma said. “And the yellow braids brighten up the room and give a good contrast to your skin.”

“It’s like I’m an M&M,” Lula said. “Chocolate on the inside and a splash of color on the outside.”

“Have you heard from Connie or Vinnie?” I asked Lula.

“Nothing,” Lula said. “I’ve been listening to the police calls, but no one’s mentioned Connie, and I don’t want to hear from Vinnie. I don’t see where we even need him. I got everything under control here. I’m so organized I’ve got my lunch ordered already. And it’s getting delivered so I don’t have to leave my desk. Turns out this desk comes with petty cash.”

“We’re doing good, too,” Grandma said. “We already made a recovery. Carpenter Beetle.”

“How’s his foot?” Lula asked.

“It’s okay,” Grandma said. “He has it in one of those orthopedic-sandal things.”

“Pull up Connie’s calendar on her computer,” I said to Lula. “See if she has anything on there for today.”

“I already did that,” Lula said. “There’s nothing for today, but she has a dentist appointment tomorrow at four o’clock.”

“Maybe it got switched to this morning at the last minute,” Grandma said. “Maybe she’s at the dentist.”

“I guess that could be it,” Lula said.

I nodded.

No one said anything. Grandma fidgeted with her purse and Lula stared blank-faced at the computer screen. No one believed Connie was at the dentist. Connie would have told us that she wouldn’t be in until later.

“Bummer,” Grandma finally said.

I nodded again.

My mother called me. “Where are you?” she asked. “Is your grandmother still with you? Are you coming home for lunch?”

“I’m at the office,” I said. “Grandma’s with me, and we’ll be home for lunch.”

I hung up and Grandma started for the door. “Let’s not waste a lot of time on lunch. We still got two more felons to catch.”

“There’s no rush,” I said. “I’m not going to go after Bella until I talk to Morelli.”

“Well, I want to be there when you do the takedown. That woman’s been a thorn in my side for as long as I can remember. And she thinks she owns the funeral home. She scuttles around, threatening to give everybody the eye if they get in her way. People are afraid to take a cookie when she comes over to the refreshment table.”

“How about you?” Lula asked. “Are you afraid to take a cookie?”

“Heck no,” Grandma said. “I know the cookies she likes. She goes after the pignoli. So, if I see her at a viewing, I shove all the pignoli into my purse before she can get to them.”

CHAPTER THREE

My mom was setting the kitchen table when we walked in. “I made minestrone soup this morning and we have bread from Italian Peoples,” she said.

Butter and the bread slices were already on the table.

“It’s a good day for soup,” Grandma said. “There’s a chill in the air.”

“Did you get your shampoo?” my mom asked Grandma.

“They were all out,” Grandma said. “Stephanie’s going to take me to the mall after lunch.”

My mother looked at me. Slitty-eyed. “I’m holding you responsible,” she said. “Don’t let her shoot anybody and keep her out of the strip clubs.”

I nodded. “Understood.”

“I don’t hardly ever go to strip clubs,” Grandma said. “Although I do like to look at the men dancers. Some of them have real good moves.”

I saw my mother’s eyes cut to the over-the-counter cabinet alongside the sink where she keeps her whiskey stash. No doubt debating if it was too early to have a nip.

Grandma took a bowl of soup to the table and checked email on her smartphone while she ate.

“Look at this,” she said. “Len Leoni died. Margie Wisneski says they think he threw a clot. He’s having a viewing on Wednesday. That’s going to be a good one. He was a big deal in the Knights of Columbus.” Grandma took a piece of bread and dunked it into her soup. “Crazy Bella will be there. The Morellis and the Leonis are neighbors. And one of the Leoni girls married into the Morelli family. A second cousin, I think. You should go to the viewing with me, and we’ll take Bella down at the cookie table.”

My mother sucked in some air. “You wouldn’t!”

“Of course not,” I said.

“I’d do it in a heartbeat,” Grandma said.