

Finger Lickin' Fifteen

Chapter One

Part Two of Chapter One Page 10

Chapter Two Page 19

Part Two of Chapter Two Page 25

When I was a kid I was afraid of spiders and vegetables. As an adult I've eliminated vegetables from my fright-o-meter, but I've added a whole bunch of other stuff. Homicidal maniacs, serial rapists, cellulite, Joe Morelli's Grandma Bella, rabid bats and any form of organized exercise.

My name is Stephanie Plum, and I work as a bond enforcement officer for Vincent Plum Bail Bonds. It's not a great job, but it allows me to avoid organized exercise, and I hardly ever encounter rabid bats. The remaining fright-o-meter items lurk in the dark shadows of my daily life. Fortunately there are also good things in those shadows. Joe Morelli without his Grandma Bella, fellow bounty hunter Ranger without his clothes, my crazy family, my hamster Rex ...and Lula. Lula actually fits somewhere between the rabid bats and the good stuff. She's a former 'ho, now working as the office file clerk and apprentice bounty hunter. Lula's got a plus-size personality and body, and a petite sized wardrobe. She's got brown skin, blond hair, and last week she had tiny rhinestones pasted onto her eyelids.

It was Monday morning, Connie the office manager and I were in the bonds office enjoying our morning coffee, and Lula slid her red Firebird to a stop at the curb. We watched Lula through the big plate glass window in the front of the small office, and we did a joint grimace. Lula was in a state. She lurched out of the Firebird, beeped it locked and burst into the office, her eyes wild, rolling around in their sockets, her hands waving in the air.

“I saw it all,” she said. “It was terrible. It was horrible. I couldn’t believe it was happening. And right in front of me.” She looked around. “What do we got? Do we got doughnuts? ‘Cause I need a doughnut. I need a whole bag. And maybe I need one of them breakfast sandwiches with the egg and cheese and bacon and grease. I got a big grease craving.”

I knew it would be a huge mistake to ask Lula what she saw, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“What was terrible and horrible?” I asked.

Connie leaned forward, elbows on her desk, already knowing the telling of the story would be a car crash. Connie is a couple years older than me, and while my heritage is half Hungarian and half Italian, Connie is Italian through and through. Her hair is jet black, her lipstick is fire engine red, her body is va va voom.

Lula paced in front of Connie’s desk. “First off, I hardly had time for anything this morning. I had a big date last night, and by the time I booted his butt out of my bed I already missed a lot of my beauty sleep. Anyways I got up late, and then I couldn’t decide what

to wear. One day it's hot out and next thing it's cold. And then I had to decide if I needed to wear shoes that kicked ass or were good for ass kicking, on account of there's a difference, you know."

"Jeez Louise," Connie said. "Could you get to it?"

"The point bein' I was late," Lula said. "I was tryin' to put make-up on and drive, and I missed a turn, and before I knew it I was someplace I didn't want to be. So I pulled over to look around and figure things out, and when I did that my make-up case rolled off the seat next to me, and everything went all over the floor. So I was bent over to get my make-up, and I guess it looked like there was no one in the car, because when I came back up there were two big hairy morons standing right in front of my Firebird, and they were removing a head from some guy's body."

"Excuse me?"

"This one moron had a real big knife, like a machete. And the other moron had a hold of this man in a suit. And whack! No head. The head popped off its neck and bounced down the street."

"And then what happened?"

"Then they saw me," Lula said. "They looked real surprised. And I know I looked real surprised. And then I laid down about two inches of rubber and took off."

"Do you know who they were?"

"No."

"Did you know the guy in the suit?"

"No, but it was a real nice suit. And he had a nice striped tie, too."

“Did you go to the police?” Connie asked.

“No. I came straight here. It’s not like the police were gonna put Humpty Dumpty back together again,” Lula said. “Didn’t seem like there was a big rush, and I needed a doughnut. Holy cow. Holy shit. I really need a doughnut.”

“You need to call the police,” Connie told Lula.

“I hate the police. They give me the willies. Except for Stephanie’s Morelli. He’s a hottie.”

Joe Morelli is a Trenton plainclothes cop, and Lula is right about Morelli being a hottie, but Lula is wrong about Morelli belonging to me. Morelli and I have had an off and on relationship for as long as I can remember, and we are currently off. Two weeks ago we had a disagreement over peanut butter that turned into a disagreement over everything under the sun, and we haven’t seen each other since.

Connie dialed into the police band, and we listened for a couple minutes to see if we picked up anything to do with decapitation.

“Where did this happen?” Connie asked.

“The three hundred block of Ramsey Street. It was right in front of the Sunshine Hotel.”

The Sunshine Hotel is a roach farm that rents rooms by the hour. No one coming or going from the Sunshine Hotel would ever report anything to anyone.

“I seen lots of stuff,” Lula said, “but this was disgustin’. Blood shot out like one of them oil gushers. And when the head hit the ground I swear the eyes were lookin’ at me. I guess I need to tell the police, but

I only want Morelli.” Lula fixed on me. “You gotta call Morelli.”

“No way. I’m not talking to him. You can call him.”

“I don’t know him like you know him.”

“I don’t know him that way any more. I’m done with him. He’s a jerk.”

“All men are jerks,” Lula said. “That don’t mean they aren’t good for some things. And Morelli’s a hot jerk. He could be a movie star or a underwear model if he wasn’t a cop. He got all that wavy black hair and dreamy brown bedroom eyes. He’s kind of puny compared to some men I know, but he’s hot all the same.”

Morelli was actually six-foot tall and solid muscle, but Lula used to be engaged to a guy who was a cross between an Army tank and Sasquatch, so I suppose by comparison Morelli might measure up short.

“I’ll call Morelli,” Connie said. “He’s a cop, for crying out loud. You don’t need a complicated relationship to call a cop.”

I was halfway to the door. “I’m leaving. Things to do. And I don’t want to see Morelli.”

“Oh no,” Lula said. “You get your boney ass back here. We’re in this together. Through thick and through thin.”

“Since when?”

“Since now. And before that, too. Remember when I rescued you from that big snake in the mobile

home? And what about when we were lost in the Pine Barrens?”

“You ran screaming like a little girl when you thought you saw the snake. And Ranger found us in the Pine Barrens.”

“Yeah, but if he hadn’t found us I would have got us out.”

“You were up to your armpits in a cranberry bog.”

“I don’t never want to see another cranberry neither,” Lula said.

Twenty minutes later Morelli sauntered in to the bonds office. He was dressed in jeans and running shoes, a blue button down shirt that was open at the neck, and a navy blazer. He looked entirely edible and a little wary.

“What’s up?” Morelli asked, eyes on me.

Okay, so I was no longer interested in Morelli. At least I was pretty sure I wasn’t interested. Still, I was wishing I’d spent more time on my hair and make-up this morning, so he felt really rotten about what he was missing. I have naturally curly shoulder length brown hair that was currently pulled back into a ponytail. I have blue eyes that look a lot better when they have a swipe of liner and mascara, an okay mouth that so far hasn’t needed artificial plumping, and a little nose that I consider my best feature. Morelli always thought my best feature was located considerably lower on my body.

“It was horrible! It was terrible!” Lula said. “I almost fainted.”

Morelli shifted his attention to Lula. He didn't say anything, but he looked over at her and raised his eyebrows a little.

"I never saw nothing like it," Lula told him. "One minute I was having a day like any other, and then whack and this guy didn't have no head. And blood came out of him like he was a fountain. And when his head hit the ground his eyes were lookin' at me. And I think the head might have smiled at me too, but I'm not sure of that."

Morelli was back on his heels, thumbs hooked into his jeans pockets. "Is this for real?"

"Hell yeah," Lula said. "Who makes up shit like that? Don't I look traumatized? I'm practically turned white. I think my hand might even be shaking. Look at my hand. Is it shaking?"

Morelli's eyes cut back to me. "Were you with her?"

"Nope."

"Did anyone call 911?"

"Nope."

Lula was hands on hips, starting to look pissed. "We called you," she said to Morelli.

Morelli did a fast office scan. "You don't have the head here, do you?"

"So far as I know the head and everything else is still in front of the Sunshine Hotel," Lula told him. "And I'm not sure I like your attitude. I'm not sure you're takin' this seriously."

Morelli stared down at his shoe. Hard to tell if he was trying hard not to laugh or if he was getting a migraine. After a five-count he took his cell phone out, called dispatch and sent a uniform to the Sunshine Hotel.

“Okay ladies,” Morelli said when he got off the phone. “Let’s take a field trip.”

I made a big show of looking at my watch. “Gee, I’ve got to run. Things to do.”

“No way,” Lula said. “I need someone with me in case I get faint or something.”

“You’ll have him,” I said.

“He’s a fine man, but he’s the cop representative here, and I need someone from my posse, you see what I’m saying. I need a BFF.”

“It’s not gonna be me,” Connie said. “Vinnie is picking up a skip in Atlanta, and I have to run the office.”

Morelli cut his eyes to me and gave his head a small shake, like he didn’t believe any of this. Like I was a huge, unfathomable pain in the ass, and in fact maybe that was how he felt about women in general right now.

I understood Morelli’s point of view because it was precisely my current feeling about men.

“Terrific,” I said on a sigh. “Let’s get on with it.”

Lula and I followed Morelli in my ten-year old Ford Escort that used to be blue. We didn’t take the Escort because we liked riding in it. We took it because Lula thought she might be too over-wrought to drive her Firebird, and she suspected she would need a bacon

cheeseburger after visiting the scene of the crime, and Morelli might not be inclined to find a drive-thru for her.

Part Two of Chapter One

There were already two cruisers angled in to the curb in front of the Sunshine Hotel when Lula and I arrived. I parked, and Lula and I got out and stood next to Morelli and a couple uniforms. We all looked down at a red splotch that sprayed out over about a four foot diameter. A couple smaller splotches trailed off the big splotch, and I assumed that was where the head hit the pavement. I felt a wave of nausea slide through my stomach, and I started to sweat.

“This here’s the spot,” Lula said. “You can see it’s just like I told you. There was a big gusher of blood when they whacked the head off. It was like Old Faithful going off, only it was blood. And then the head rolled down the sidewalk. It was like the head was a bowlin’ ball with eyes. And the eyes were like big googly eyes kinda popping out of the head and lookin’ at me. And I think I might have heard the head laughin’, or maybe it was the guys who did the whackin’ who were laughin’.”

The uniforms all did a grimace, Morelli was impassive, and I threw up. Everyone jumped away from me, I gagged one last time and did some deep breathing.

“Sorry,” I said.

“No problem,” Morelli told me. “I feel like throwing up a lot on this job.”

One of the uniforms brought me some paper towels and a bottle of water, and Lula stood a good distance away.

“You got lots of room for lunch now that you’re empty,” she yelled at me. “I could get a early start with one of them extra crispy bird burgers they’re servin’ at Cluck-in-a-Bucket. Have you heard about them? They got some new secret sauce.”

I wasn’t interested in secret sauce. I wanted to go home and go to bed and not get up until it was a new day. I was done with this one.

“We got a couple footprints heading south,” a uniform said. “One of these guys had real big feet. Looks like a size fourteen. And there’s some skid marks where they dragged the body to the curb. Imagine they dumped it into a car and took off.”

“You need to come downtown and give me some information,” Morelli said to Lula.

“No way. Un ah. I got a allergic reaction to police stations. I get irritable bowel and hives and the hebejebes.”

“You witnessed a murder.”

“Yeah, but there’s extenuating circumstances here. I got a medical condition. I got a extreme sensitivity to cops.”

Morelli looked like he wanted to pull his gun out of its holster and shoot himself.

“I’ll get you some cheese burgers and a side of onion rings,” he said to Lula.

Lula stood hands on hips. “You think I could be bought for some lame ass burgers? What kinda woman you think I am?”

“I’ll throw in a bucket of chicken and an ice cream cake from Carvel,” Morelli said. “That’s my final offer.”

“Deal,” Lula told him. “We goin’ in your car? On account of I’m not riding in a cop car, and I hate to say this but Stephanie don’t smell too good.”

Twenty minutes later I parked in the lot to my apartment building. My building straddles the line between Trenton proper and Trenton improper. It’s a three-story utilitarian brick box filled with tenants who are struggling to make ends meet. Frequently I have a gap between my ends, resulting in a lot of dinners mooched from my parents who live ten minutes away in a blue-collar chunk of Trenton called The Burg.

My apartment is on the second floor and my windows look out at the parking lot. My only roommate is a hamster named Rex. I manage to keep a good supply of hamster food in my fridge and in my cupboard. People food is spotty. I own a fry pan and a pot. Perfectly adequate since I mostly eat peanut butter sandwiches. Peanut butter and banana, peanut butter and jelly, peanut butter and potato chips, peanut butter and olives, and peanut butter and marshmallow goo. So sue me, I like peanut butter. The rest of the apartment consists of dining alcove, living room with television, one bedroom and bath.

I hustled from my car to my apartment, stripped and jumped into the shower. I was approaching boiled

lobster skin tone when I finally emerged and wrapped myself in a towel. I stepped out of the bathroom and spotted Ranger lounging in the club chair across from my bed. I gave a startled yelp and jumped back into the bathroom.

“Babe,” Ranger said.

I stuck my head out and looked at him. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“You could have called. Or how about ringing my doorbell?”

Ranger looked like he was thinking about smiling. His attention focused on the top of my towel and slowly moved to the bottom hem that hung a half-inch below my doodah. His brown eyes dilated black, and I took a stronger grip on my towel.

Ranger was the second biggest complication in my life, and now that Morelli is out of the picture, I suppose Ranger is elevated to numero uno. He’s close to six foot, one way or the other, is Latino with medium brown skin and dark brown hair cut short. His teeth are white and even, and he has a killer smile that is only seen on special occasions. He dresses in black, and today he was wearing black T-shirt and black cargo pants. His given name is Carlos Manoso. His street name, Ranger, is a holdover from time spent in Special Forces. These days he does the occasional high-risk bond enforcement job, and is the managing partner of a security firm located in a stealth building in center city. I’ve seen him naked, and you can take it to the bank

when I tell you he's all hard muscle and perfect in every possible way. And I mean every possible way.

Ranger and I have three things in common. We're the same age. We're both single. And we both were previously married for about ten seconds. That's where the common ground ends. I'm an open book with a lot of blank pages. His book is filled with life experience but written in disappearing ink. I have three locks on my front door plus a sliding bolt, and I'm sure they were all in place. Somehow this never stops Ranger. He's a man of mysterious talents.

Ranger crooked his finger at me. "Come here."

"No way."

"Afraid?"

"Cautious."

"That's no fun," Ranger said.

"I didn't know you were interested in fun."

There was a very slight curve to the corners of his mouth. "I have my moments."

I had a big, cuddly pink robe in my closet, but I had to cross in front of Ranger to get to it. I wasn't worried Ranger would jump me. My fear was that if I got too close, I'd get sucked into his force field, and I'd jump him. And jumping Ranger was a dangerous deal. He'd made it clear that his emotional involvement would always have limitations. Plus, there was Morelli. Morelli was currently out of the picture, but he'd been out before, and he'd always slid back in. Getting naked with Ranger would make a reconciliation with Morelli much

more difficult. Of course that wasn't currently an issue because I wasn't in a mood to reconcile anything.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" I asked him.

"Three of my clients have been robbed in the last two months. All three had state of the art security systems. And in all three cases the systems were shut down for exactly fifteen minutes and then reactivated. My clients weren't home at the time. There was no sign of physical tampering."

"I see them using gizmos in the movies that can figure out codes."

"This isn't a movie. This is real life."

"Someone hacked into your system?"

"No."

"That leaves an unpleasant possibility," I said to Ranger.

"In theory there are only a few people in my organization who have access to the codes, and I can't imagine any of those men being involved in this. For that matter everyone I employ is rigorously screened. Plus, the entire building, with the exception of private living spaces, is monitored 24 hours."

"Have you changed the codes?"

"I changed them after each break-in."

"Wow."

"Yeah," Ranger said. "Someone on the inside is beating my system."

"Why are you telling this to me?"

“I need you to come in and snoop around without raising suspicion. I can’t trust anyone already inside.”

“Even Tank?”

“Even Tank.”

Tank is exactly what his name would imply. He’s big and solid inside and out. He’s second in command at Rangeman, and he’s the guy who watches Ranger’s back.

“You’ve worked for me before doing computer searches, and that’s where I’d like to put you again. Ramon has been doing the searches, but he’d like to get out of the cubby and back on the street. You’d be working on the fifth floor in the control room, but you’d have total access within the building. Every man in my organization knows you and understands that you’re my personal property, so they’re not going to talk freely when you’re around, but they’re also not going to think I hired you to snoop. They’ll assume I gave you the job to have you close to me.”

“Personal property?”

“Babe, you’re the only one who would question it.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I am not personal property. A car is personal property. A shirt is personal property. A human being is not personal property.”

“In my building we share cars and shirts. We don’t share women. In my building you’re my personal property. Deal with it.”

At a later time, when I was alone and gave it some thought I'd probably find the flaw in that reasoning, but oddly enough it made sense at the moment.

"What about my cases at the bond office?" I asked him.

"I'll help you."

This was a really good deal because I was a crappy bounty hunter and Ranger was the best. Not to mention I'd be drawing salary from Rangeman. All I had to do was keep my hands off Ranger and everything would be peachy.

"Okay," I said. "When do you want me to start?"

"Now. Do you have uniforms left from the last time you worked for me?"

"I have a couple T-shirts, and I have some black jeans."

"Good enough. I'll have Ella order some more."

Ella and her husband Louis serve as live-in property managers for Rangeman. They keep the building clean and running efficiently, and they keep the men fed and clothed.

"I assume you still have your key fob?" Ranger asked.

"Yep."

The key fob got me into the high security Rangeman building, and it also got me into Ranger's private 7th floor apartment. In the past I'd used the apartment when I felt I was in danger. It wasn't a move I made lightly because I had to weigh the danger at hand against the danger of living with Ranger.

Ranger's cell phone buzzed, and he looked at the screen. "I have to go," he said. "Tank and Ramon are expecting you. Ramon will bring you up to speed and then you should be able to take over. You know the drill." His eyes moved from my face to the towel and then back to my face. "Tempting," he said. And he left.

Chapter Two

I dried my hair and put on makeup that stopped just short of slut. I dressed in black jeans and one of the black, v-neck, stretchy girl-type t-shirts I had left from my last stint at Rangeman. The shirt had Rangeman embroidered in black on the short sleeve and over my left breast. I topped the t-shirt with a black Rangeman hooded sweatshirt, grabbed my bag and headed out.

I stopped at the bond's office on my way to Rangeman. Connie was alone when I walked in.

"Oh crap," Connie said, eyeballing my outfit. "You aren't quitting again, are you?"

"No. The Rangeman job is temporary."

"What about the stack of skips I gave you last week?"

"Ranger is going to help me."

"My lucky day," Connie said.

"Have you heard anything from Lula?"

"She called to say she was on her way back to the office, and she had a bucket of chicken."

That was worth the wait. I could get lunch at Rangeman, but it would be tuna salad on multi-grain bread, and it would be made with fat-free mayo. And for dessert I could score an apple. Ranger encouraged healthy eating. Truth is, Ranger was a tyrant. If you worked at Rangeman, you had to be physically strong, mentally tough, loyal without question, and survive random drug tests. I was exempt from all those things, and that was a good deal because the only one I could fly through was the drug test.

I saw Morelli's green SUV pull to the curb and make a Lula drop. Lula slammed the passenger side door closed and waved Morelli off as best she could considering her arms were filled with fast food buckets and bags and drink holders. She used her ass to push the door to the bond's office open and crossed to Connie's desk to dump her food.

"I got that done and over," Lula said. "And it wasn't so bad as I expected on account of while I was there the head came in, so that speeded up a lot of stuff."

Connie leaned forward a little. "The head came in?"

"Yeah. One of the camera dudes at the television station went outside to smoke and when he opened the back door he saw a head sitting by the Dumpster. And here's the best part. This guy recognized the head right off. Turns out the head belongs to Stanley Chipotle."

"The celebrity chef?"

“Yep. He’s on the food channel all the time. I don’t know why I didn’t recognize him. Guess I’m used to seeing him in his chef’s clothes. You know how he wears that puffy chef hat and lately he’s always got on the red apron advertising his barbecue sauce. Anyway they brought the head in, and I identified it, and then Morelli said I could go home.” Lula opened the bucket of chicken and dug in. “Help yourself,” she said. “There’s plenty.”

Connie poked around in the bucket, looking for a recognizable chicken part. “What was Chipotle doing in Trenton? Did anyone know?”

“The camera dude said Chipotle was supposed to be in a big deal national barbecue cook-off that’s gonna be held in the Bank Arena. He was gonna be talking about it on the station’s cooking show this afternoon, but since only his head showed up they got someone from Dawn Diner to make rice pudding instead.”

“Chipotle’s famous for his barbecue sauce,” Connie said.

I polished off a mystery chicken part and selected another. I was out of the loop. I never watched the food channel, and I didn’t do a lot of cooking. Mostly I mooched food from my parents.

“What are you doing dressed up like Rangegirl?” Lula asked me.

“I’m temporarily filling in on a desk job.” I glanced at my watch. “I need to run. Ramon is waiting for me.”

Rangeman is housed in a seven-story townhouse on a side street in center city Trenton. The inside has

been renovated into a high-tech, self-contained, secure corporate Batcave that operates 24/7. Ranger's private apartment occupies the top floor. Ella and her husband live on the sixth floor. The control room, dining area, and assorted offices are located on the fifth floor. And the remaining space is given over to efficiency apartments made available to some of the Rangeman employees, a gym, a gun range, meeting rooms and more offices. The exterior façade of the building is non-descript with only a small brass nameplate beside the front door to tell the world this is Rangeman.

I used my key fob to access the underground garage. I parked and fobbed my way into the elevator and up to the fifth floor. There were three uniformed men in the control room, watching monitors, and four men were in the kitchen area. All eyebrows raised when I stepped out of the elevator. I smiled and gave everyone a small wave and went directly to Ramon's cubicle.

"Hallelujah," Ramon said when he saw me. "I'm going back out into the land of the living. I hate this cubicle. The sun doesn't shine in here. There isn't even a window. After a half hour at this desk I've got a cramp in my ass."

"How did you get the job in the first place? I thought you were a lock expert."

"I got a speeding ticket, and Ranger stuck me here. This is like the dunce desk. I was lucky I didn't get fired."

Great. I was working the dunce desk.

“What did you do to deserve this?” Ramon asked me.

“I needed extra money, and this is what Ranger had available.”

“Gotta pay the bills,” Ramon said. “Let me show you what I’ve got on my desktop.”

An hour later I was on my own. By five o’clock I had a cramp in my ass. I put my computer to sleep and walked the short distance down the hall to Ranger’s office.

“Knock, knock,” I said.

Ranger looked up at me. “Babe.”

“I have a cramp in my ass.”

“I could kiss it and make it better.”

“I was thinking more along the line of a new chair,” I told him.

“Tell Louis. He’ll get you whatever you want. Do you have plans for tonight?”

“No.”

“Hang out for another hour. I want to talk to you, but I need to go through this paperwork first.”

A little after six Ranger ambled into my cubicle and collected me.

“Ella has dinner ready upstairs,” he said. “We can eat and talk.”

There was a time, not too long ago, when Ranger’s address was a vacant lot. It turns out besides being a very tough guy, he’s also a very smart businessman, and he now lives in an extremely upscale one-bedroom

inner sanctum of civilized calm. The apartment was tastefully decorated by a professional, and is now maintained by Ella. The furniture is comfortable contemporary. Leather, chrome, dark woods, with earth tone accents. It's clearly masculine but not overpowering. The apartment feels surprisingly warm in spite of the fact that there are no personal touches. No family photographs. No favorite books stacked at bedside. No clutter. I've spent a reasonable amount of time in Ranger's apartment, and I've always thought it was a place where he slept but didn't live. I've never been able to find the place he would call home. Maybe it doesn't exist. Maybe he carries it inside him. Or maybe it's a place he hasn't yet discovered.

Part Two of Chapter Two

We were silent in the elevator and small foyer that preceded Ranger's apartment. He fobbed his door open, and I stepped into the hall with its subdued lighting and plush carpet. Ranger dropped his keys onto a small silver tray on the sideboard and followed me to the kitchen. His appliances were top of the line stainless. His counter tops were granite. Ella kept everything immaculate. I lifted the lid to the blue Le Creuset casserole dish on the stovetop. Chicken, rice, spicy sausage and vegetables.

"This smells wonderful," I said to Ranger. "You're lucky to have Ella."

"If I can't stop these break-ins I'm not going to have Ella or anyone else."

"What about security cameras? Weren't any of the thefts caught on tape?"

"All the burglaries were residential with no cameras in place." Ranger poured out two glasses of wine and handed one to me. "Without going into detail I can tell you there are a lot of safeguards in the system to prevent this from happening."

"But it happened anyway."

"Three times."

"Is there anyone you especially want me to watch?"

"Martin Beam is the newest man in the building. He's been with me for seven months. Chester Rodriguez and Victor Zullick were on deck for all three

break-ins. There are four men who rotate shifts monitoring the code computer. Beyond that I have nothing.”

“You’ve done recent background checks?”

“So far as I can tell, none of my men are in trouble, financial or otherwise.”

I ladled the stew onto plates, Ranger cut into a loaf of bread set out on a breadboard, and we took our wine and plates of food to the table where Ella had laid out placemats and silverware.

“Do you think this is someone needing money?” I asked Ranger. “Or do you think it’s someone trying to ruin you?”

“Hard to tell, but if I had to chose I’d go with trying to ruin me.”

“That’s ugly.”

Ranger selected a slice of bread. “The men I hire aren’t stupid. They have to know stealing the codes will end badly, and the items and cash taken can’t compensate them for the risk. They’d be better off stealing from an ATM.”

“Was there a pattern to the break-ins?”

Ranger refilled my wine glass. “Only that they all happened at night.”

I’ve never known Ranger to have more than one glass of wine or beer. And usually he didn’t finish his first glass. Ranger never placed himself in a position of weakness. He sat with his back to the wall, and he was always sober. I, on the other hand, from time to time

slipped into dangerous waters and counted on Ranger to scoop me out.

“So,” I said to him. “If I drink this second glass of wine will you drive me home?”

“Babe, you have no alcohol tolerance. If you drink a second glass of wine you won’t want to go home.”

I blew out a sigh and pushed the glass away. He was right. “I have five open cases that need immediate attention,” I told him. “You said you would help me.”

“Do you have the files with you?”

I went to the kitchen and retrieved my bag from the counter, handed the five files over to Ranger and returned to my place at the table.

Ranger paged through the files while he ate.

“You have two armed robberies, one exhibitionist a mid-level drug dealer, and an arsonist,” he said. “The dealer is a no-brainer. Kenny Hatcher. Better known as Marbles. I know where he works. He deals from the six hundred block of Stark Street.”

“I’ve been checking. He isn’t there.”

“He’s there. You just aren’t seeing him.”

I stared down at my dinner plate and wine glass. Empty. Damn. “Someone drank my wine,” I said to Ranger.

“That would be you.”

I looked around. “Do we have dessert?”

“No.”

Big surprise. Ranger never had dessert.

“Why can’t I see my drug dealer?” I asked him.

Ranger leaned back in his chair and watched me. The lion assessing his prey. “He’s using a runner,” Ranger said. “If you want to find Hatcher, you have to follow the runner.”

“How do I recognize the runner?”

“You pay attention.”

“Okay, I’ll give it another shot,” I said, pushing away from the table, taking the files from Ranger. “I’m going to Stark Street.”

I started to leave and Ranger snagged me by the back of my shirt and dragged me up against him.

“Let me get this straight,” he said. “You’re going to Stark Street now?”

“Yeah.”

“Alone?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

Ranger smiled down at me. I was amusing him.

“I can think of at least a half dozen reasons,” he said. “Not the least of which is you’ll be the only one on Stark Street not carrying a gun. It’ll be like open season on tasty pastry.”

“I can take care of myself,” I told him.

“Maybe, but I can take care of you better.”

No argument there.

* * *

A half-hour later Ranger and I were parked on the six hundred block of Stark Street. Stark Street starts down by the river, cuts through the center of the city and runs straight to hell. Storefronts are grimy, decorated with gang graffiti and the accumulated grit of day-to-day life in the breakdown lane. Hookers stake out corners, knots of kids strut the street going nowhere, men chain smoke in doorways, and pushers work the sidewalks 24/7.

Ranger was behind the wheel of a shiny black Cadillac Escalade with tinted windows and fancy chrome wheel covers. No one could see us sitting in the SUV, and we were left unmolested as a sign of respect by the general population of Stark Street who assumed the car belonged to contract killers, gangsta rappers, or high-level drug dealers.

The sun had set but there was ambient light from streetlights and headlights and doors opening into bars. Enough light to determine that Marbles wasn't on the street.

"I don't see anyone who looks like a runner," I said to Ranger.

"The kid in the over-sized sweatshirt, white t-shirt and homeboy jeans."

"How do you know?"

"He's making deals."

"And?"

"And this block belongs to Marbles. The kid would be dead if he wasn't working for Marbles. Marbles isn't a charitable kind of guy."

“Maybe Marbles sold his real estate and left town.”

“Not his style. He’s in one of these buildings, conducting business. Besides owning drugs on the six hundred-block, he also manages a couple hookers. Marbles read the memo on diversification. I ran into him two years ago and he was operating an all-night dog grooming and cock fighting operation.”

“I hate the idea of cock fighting. It’s horribly mean to the chickens.”

“There weren’t any chickens involved in these cock fights.”

Eeek!

I was debating asking about the rules and regulations of cock fighting, but just then the kid in the sweatshirt ambled into a building halfway down the block.

“He’s going back to the mother ship,” Ranger said.

ON SALE JUNE 23, 2009

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