

FOUR TO SCORE

CHAPTER ONE

Living in Trenton in July is like living inside a big pizza oven. Hot, airless, aromatic.

Because I didn't want to miss any of the summer experience I had the sun roof open on my Honda CRX. My brown hair was pulled up into a wind snarled, curls-gone-to-frizz ponytail. The sun baked the top of my head, and sweat trickled under my black spandex sports bra. I was wearing matching spandex shorts and a sleeveless oversized Trenton Thunders baseball jersey. It was an excellent outfit except it gave me no place to stick my .38. Which meant I was going to have to borrow a gun to shoot my cousin, Vinnie.

I parked the CRX in front of Vinnie's store front bail bonds office, lunged out of the car, stalked across the sidewalk, and yanked the office door open. "Where is he? Where is that miserable little excuse for a human being?"

"Uh oh," Lula said from behind the file cabinet. "Rhino alert."

Lula is a retired hooker who helps clean up the filing and sometimes rides shotgun for me when I do my fugitive apprehension thing. If people were cars, Lula would be a big, black '53 Packard with a high gloss chrome grill, oversized headlights, and a growl like a junk yard dog. Lots of muscle. Never fit in a compact space.

Connie Rosolli, the office manager, pushed back at her desk when I entered. Connie's domain was this one front room where friends and relatives of miscreants came to beg money. And to the rear, in an inner office, my cousin, Vinnie, slapped Mr. Johnson around and conversed with his bookie.

"Hey," Connie said, "I know what you're bummed about, and this wasn't my decision. Personally, if I were you, I'd kick your cousin's pervert ass around the block."

I pushed a clump of hair that had strayed from the ponytail back from my face. "Kicking isn't good enough. I think I'll shoot him."

"Go for it!" Lula said.

"Yeah," Connie agreed. "Shoot him."

Lula checked out my clothes. "You need a gun? I don't see no gun bulges in that spandex." She hiked up her T-shirt, and pulled a Chief's Special out of her cut-off denim shorts. "You could use mine. Just be careful, it sights high."

"You don't want a little pea-shooter like that," Connie said, opening her desk drawer. "I've got a .45. You can make a nice big hole with a .45."

Lula went for her purse. "Hold on here. If that's what you want, let me give you the big stud. I've got a .44 magnum loaded up with hydroschocks. This baby'll do real damage, you know what I'm saying? You could drive a

Volkswagen through the hole this sweetheart makes."

"I was sort of kidding about shooting him," I told them.

"Too bad," Connie said.

Lula shoved her gun back in her shorts. "Yeah, that's damn disappointing."

"So where is he? Is he in?"

"Hey Vinnie!" Connie yelled. "Stephanie's here to see you!"

The door to the inner office opened and Vinnie poked his head out.

"What?"

Vinnie was 5'7", looked like a weasel, thought like a weasel, smelled like a French whore and was once in love with a duck.

"You know what!" I said, hands fisted on hips. "Joyce Barnhardt, that's what. My grandma was at the beauty parlor and heard you hired Joyce to do skip tracing."

"So what's the big deal? I hired Joyce Barnhardt."

"Joyce Barnhardt does make-overs at Macy's."

"And you used to sell ladies panties." "

That was entirely different. I blackmailed you into giving me this job."

"Exactly," Vinnie said. "So what's your point?"

"Fine!" I shouted. "Just keep her out of my way! I hate Joyce Barnhardt!"

And everybody knew why. At the tender age of twenty-four, after less than a year of marriage, I'd caught Joyce bare-assed on my dining room table, playing hide-the-salami with my husband. It was the only time she'd ever done me a favor. We'd gone through school together where she'd spread rumors, told fibs, ruined friendships and peeked under the stall doors in the girls bathroom to see peoples underpants.

She'd been a fat kid with a terrible overbite. The overbite had been minimalized by braces, and by the time Joyce was fifteen she'd trimmed down to look like Barbie on steroids. She had chemically enhanced red hair done up in big teased curls. Her nails were long and painted, her lips were high gloss, her eyes were rimmed in navy liquid liner, her lashes gunked-up with blue-black mascara. She was an inch shorter than me, five pounds heavier and had me beat by two cup sizes. She had three ex-husbands and no children. It was rumored she had sex with large dogs.

Joyce and Vinnie were a match made in heaven. Too bad Vinnie was already married to a perfectly nice woman whose father happened to be Harry the Hammer. Harry's job description read "expediter", and Harry spent a lot of his time in the presence of men who wore Fedoras and long black overcoats.

"Just do your job," Vinnie said. "Be a professional." He waved his hand at Connie. "Give her something. Give her that new skip we just got in."

Connie took a manila folder from her desk top. "Maxine Nowicki. Charged with stealing her former boyfriend's car. Posted bond with us and failed to show for her court appearance."

By securing a cash bond Nowicki had been free to leave the lock-up behind and return to society at large while awaiting trial. Now she'd failed to appear. Or in bounty-hunter speak, she was FTA. This lapse of judicial etiquette changed Nowicki's status to felon and had my cousin Vinnie worrying that the court might see fit to keep his bond money.

As a bond enforcement officer I was expected to find Nowicki and bring her back into the system. For performing this service in a timely manner I'd get ten percent of her bond amount. Pretty good money since this sounded like a domestic dispute, and I didn't think Maxine Nowicki would be interested in blowing the back of my head off with a .45 hollow tip.

I rifled through the paperwork which consisted of Nowicki's bond agreement, a photo, and a copy of the police report.

"Know what I'd do?" Lula said. "I'd talk to the boyfriend. Anybody pissed off enough to get his girlfriend arrested for stealing his car is pissed off enough to snitch on her. Probably he's just waiting to tell someone where to go find her."

It was my thought too. I read aloud from Nowicki's charge sheet. "Edward Kuntz. Single white male. Age 27. Residing at 17 Muffet Street. Says here he's a cook."

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I parked in front of Kuntz's house and wondered about the man inside. The house was white clapboard with aqua trim around the windows and tangerine paint on the door. It was half of a well-cared-for duplex with a minuscule front yard. A three foot tall statue of the Virgin Mary dressed in pale blue and white had been planted on the perfectly clipped patch of lawn. A carved wood heart with red lettering and little white daisies had been hung on the neighboring door, proclaiming that the Glicks lived there. The Kuntz side was free of ornamentation.

I followed the sidewalk to the porch which had been carpeted in green indoor-outdoor carpet and rang the Kuntz doorbell. The door opened and a sweaty, muscle-bulging, half-naked man looked out at me. "What?"

"Eddie Kuntz?"

"Yeah?"

I passed him my business card. "Stephanie Plum. I'm a bond enforcement officer, and I'm looking for Maxine Nowicki. I was hoping you could help me."

"You bet I can help you. She took my car. Can you believe it?" He jerked his stubbled chin toward the curb. "That's it right there. Lucky for her she didn't scratch it up. The cops picked her up driving through town in it, and they brought the car back to me."

I glanced back at the car. A white Chevy Blazer. Freshly washed. I almost was tempted to steal it myself.

"You were living together?"

"Well, yeah, for awhile. About four months. And then we had this

disagreement, and next thing I know, she's gone with my car. It wasn't that I wanted her arrested ...it was just that I wanted my car back. That was why I called the police. I wanted my car."

"Do you have any idea where she might be now?"

"No. I tried to get in touch with her to sort of patch things up, but I couldn't find her. She quit her job at the diner and nobody's seen her. I stopped around her apartment a couple times, and there was never anybody home. I tried calling her mother. I called a couple of her girl friends. No one seems to know anything. I guess they could have been lying to me, but I don't think so." He winked at me. "Women don't lie to me, you know what I mean?"

"No," I said. "I don't know what you mean."

"Well, I don't like to brag, but I have a way with women."

"Uh huh." Must be the pungent aroma they find so attractive. Or maybe the overdeveloped, steroid pumped muscles that made him look like he needed a bra. Or maybe it was the way he couldn't conduct a conversation without scratching his balls.

"So what can I do for you?" Kuntz asked.

Half an hour later I left with a list of Maxine's friends and relatives. I knew where Maxine banked, bought her booze, shopped for groceries, dry-cleaned her clothes and had her hair done. Kuntz promised to call me if he heard from Maxine, and I'd promised to reciprocate in kind if I turned up anything interesting. Of course, I'd had my fingers crossed when I'd made the promise. I suspected Eddie Kuntz's way with women was to make them run screaming in the opposite direction.

He stood on the porch and watched me angle into my car.

"Cute," he called. "I like when a chick drives a sporty little car."

I sent him a smile that felt a lot like a grimace and peeled away from the curb. I'd gotten the CRX in February, sucked in by a shiny new paint job and an odometer that read 12,000 miles. Cherry condition, the owner had said. Hardly ever driven. And that was partly true. It was hardly ever driven with the odometer cable connected. Not that it mattered. The price had been right, and I looked good in the driver's seat. I'd recently developed a dime sized lesion on my exhaust pipe, but if I played Metallica loud enough I could hardly hear the muffler noise. I might have thought twice about buying the car if I'd known Eddie Kuntz thought it was cute.

My first stop was the Silver Dollar Diner. Maxine had worked there for seven years and had listed no other source of income. The Silver Dollar was open twenty-four hours. It served good food in generous portions and was always packed with overweight people and penny pinching seniors. The families of fatties cleaned their plates, and the seniors took leftovers home in doggy bags ...butter pats, baskets of rolls, packets of sugar, half-eaten pieces of deep fried haddock, coleslaw, fruit cup, grease-logged french fries. A senior could eat for three days off one meal at the Silver Dollar.

The Silver Dollar was in Hamilton Township on a stretch of road that was clogged with discount stores and small strip malls. It was almost noon and diner patrons were scarfing down burgers and BLTs. I introduced myself to the woman behind the register and asked about Maxine.

"I can't believe she's in all this trouble," the woman said. "Maxine was responsible. Real dependable." She straightened a stack of menus. "And that business about the car!" She did some eye rolling. "Maxine drove it to work lots of times. He gave her the keys. And then all of a sudden she's arrested for stealing." She gave a grunt of disgust. "Men!"

I stepped back to allow a couple to pay their bill. When they'd pocketed their complimentary mints, matchbooks and toothpicks and exited the diner I turned back to the cashier. "Maxine failed to show for her court appearance. Did she give any indication that she might be leaving town?"

"She said she was going on vacation, and we all thought she was due. Been working here for seven years and never once took a vacation."

"Has anyone heard from her since she's left?"

"Not that I know of. Maybe Margie. Maxine and Margie always worked the same shift. Four to ten. If you want to talk to Margie you should come back around eight. We get real busy with the early bird specials at four, but then around eight it starts to slack off."

I thanked the woman and went back to my CRX. My next stop would be Nowicki's apartment. According to Kuntz, Nowicki had lived with her for four months but had never gotten around to moving out of her place. The apartment was a quarter mile from the diner, and Nowicki had stated on her bond agreement that she'd resided there for six years. All previous addresses were local. Maxine Nowicki was Trenton clear to the roots of her bleached blonde hair.

The apartment was in a complex of two story, blocky red brick buildings anchored in islands of parched grass, arranged around macadam parking lots. Nowicki was on the second floor with a first floor entrance. Inside private stairwell. Not good for window snooping. All second floor apartments had small balconies on the back side, but I'd need a ladder to get to the balcony. Probably a woman climbing up a ladder would look suspicious.

I decided to go with the obvious and knock on the door. If no one answered I'd ask the super to let me in. Many times the super was cooperative in this way, especially if he was confused as to the authenticity of my fake badge.

There were two front doors side-by-side. One was for upstairs and one was for downstairs. The name under the upstairs doorbell read, Nowicki. The name under the downstairs doorbell read, Pease.

I rang the upstairs doorbell and the downstairs door opened and an elderly woman looked out at me.

"She isn't home."

"Are you Mrs. Pease?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Are you sure Maxine isn't home?"

"Well, I guess I'd know. You can hear everything in this cheapskate apartment. If she was home I'd hear her TV. I'd hear her walking around. And besides, she'd stop in to tell me she was home and collect her mail."

Ah hah! The woman was collecting Maxine's mail. Maybe she also had Maxine's key.

"Yes, but suppose she came home late one night and didn't want to wake you?" I said. "And then suppose she had a stroke?"

"I never thought of that."

"She could be upstairs right now, gasping her last breath of air."

The woman rolled her eyes upward, as if she could see through walls. "Hmmm."

"Do you have a key?"

"Well, yes... "

"And what about her plants? Have you been watering her plants?"

"She didn't ask me to water her plants."

"Maybe we should go take a look. Make sure everything is okay."

"Are you a friend of Maxine's?"

I held two fingers up side-by-side. "Like this."

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt to check. I'll be right back with the key. I've got it in the kitchen."

Okay, so I fibbed a little. But it wasn't such a bad fib because it was for a good cause. And besides, she could be dead in her bed. And her plants could be dying of thirst.

"Here it is," Mrs. Pease said, brandishing the key.

She turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open.

"Hell-oo-o," she called in her warbling old ladies voice. "Anybody home?"

No one answered, so we crept up the stairs. We stood in the little entrance area and looked into the living room-dining room.

"Not much of a housekeeper," Mrs. Pease said.

Housekeeping had nothing to do with it. The apartment had been trashed. It wasn't a fight because nothing was smashed. And it wasn't clutter from a last minute scurry to leave. Cushions were pulled off the couch and flung onto the floor. Cupboard doors were open. Drawers were pulled from the hutch and turned upside down, contents spilled out. I did a quick walk-through and saw more of the same in the bedroom and bath. Someone had been looking for something. Money? Drugs? If it was robbery it had been very specific because the TV and VCR were untouched.

"Someone has ransacked this apartment," I said to Mrs. Pease. "I'm surprised you didn't hear the drawers being flung around."

"If I was home I would have heard it. It must have been when I was out to Bingo. I go to Bingo every Wednesday and Friday. I don't get home until eleven. Do you think we should report this to the police?"

"It wouldn't serve much purpose right now." Except to notify the police that I'd been in Maxine's apartment sort of illegally. "We don't know if anything's been taken. Probably we should wait for Maxine to come home and let her call the police."

We didn't see any plants to water, so we tippytoed back down the stairs and locked the door.

I gave Mrs. Pease my card and asked her to call me if she should see or hear anything suspicious.

She studied the card. "A bounty hunter," she said, her voice showing surprise.

"A woman's got to do what a woman's got to do," I said.

She looked up and nodded in agreement. "I suppose that's true."

I squinted into the lot. "According to my information Maxine owns an '84 Fairlane. I don't see it here."

"She took off in it," Mrs. Pease said. "Wasn't much of a car. Always something or other broken on it, but she loaded it up with her suitcase and took off."

"Did she say where she was going?"

"On vacation."

"That was it?"

"Yep," Mrs. Pease said, "that was it. Usually Maxine's real talkative, but she wasn't saying anything this time. She was in a hurry, and she wasn't saying anything."