

## HARD EIGHT

### Chapter One

Lately, I've been spending a lot of time rolling on the ground with men who think a stiffy represents personal growth. The rolling around has nothing to do with my sex life. The rolling around is what happens when a bust goes crapolla and there's a last ditch effort to hog tie a big, dumb bad guy possessing a congenitally defective frontal lobe.

My name is Stephanie Plum, and I'm in the fugitive apprehension business ...bond enforcement, to be exact, working for my cousin Vincent Plum. It wouldn't be such a bad job except the direct result of bond enforcement is usually incarceration ?and fugitives tend to not like this. Go figure. To encourage fugitive cooperation on the way back to the pokey I usually persuade the guys I capture to wear handcuffs and leg shackles. This works pretty good most of the time. And if done right, cuts back on the rolling around on the ground stuff.

Unfortunately, today wasn't most of the time. Martin Paulson, weighing in at 350 pounds and standing 5'8" tall, was arrested for credit card fraud and for being a genuinely obnoxious person. He failed to show for his court appearance last week, and this put Martin on my Most Wanted List. Since Martin is not too bright, he hadn't been too hard to find. Martin had, in fact, been at home engaged in what he does best ...stealing merchandise off the internet. I'd managed to get Martin into cuffs and leg shackles and into my car. I'd even managed to drive Martin to the police station on North Clinton Avenue. Unfortunately, when I attempted to get Martin out of my car he'd tipped over and was now rolling around on his belly, trussed up like a Christmas goose, unable to right himself.

We were in the parking lot adjacent to the municipal building. The back door leading to the docket lieutenant was less than fifty feet away. I could call for help, but I'd be the brunt of cop humor for days. I could unlock the cuffs or ankle shackles, but I didn't trust Paulson. He was royally pissed-off, red-faced and swearing, making obscene threats and horrifying animal sounds.

I was standing there, watching Paulson struggle, wondering what the hell I was going to do, because anything short of a fork-lift wasn't going to get Paulson up off the pavement. And just then, Joe Juniak pulled into the lot. Juniak is a former police chief and is now mayor of Trenton. He's a couple years older than me and about a foot taller. Juniak's second cousin, Ziggy, is married to my cousin-in-law Gloria Jean. So we're sort of family ...in a remote way.

The driver side window slid down, and Juniak grinned at me, cutting his eyes to Paulson. "Is he yours?"

"Yep."

"He's illegally parked. His ass is over the white line."

I toed Paulson, causing him to start rocking again. "He's stuck."

Juniak got out of his car and hauled Paulson up by his armpits. "You don't mind if I embellish this story when I spread it all over town, do you?"

"I do mind! Remember, I voted for you," I said. "And we're almost related."

"Not gonna help you, cutie. Cops live for stuff like this."

"You're not a cop anymore."

"Once a cop, always a cop."

Paulson and I watched Juniak get back into his car and drive away.

"I can't walk in these things," Paulson said, looking down at the shackles. "I'm gonna fall over again. I haven't got a good sense of balance."

"Have you ever heard the bounty hunter slogan bring 'em back --dead or alive?"

"Sure."

"Don't tempt me."

Actually, bringing someone back dead is a big no-no, but this seemed like a good time to make an empty threat. It was late afternoon. It was spring. And I wanted to get on with my life. Spending another hour coaxing Paulson to walk across the parking lot wasn't high on my list of favored things to do.

I wanted to be on a beach somewhere with the sun blistering my skin until I looked like a fried pork rind. Okay, truth is at this time of year that might have to be Cancun, and Cancun didn't figure into my budget. Still the point was, I didn't want to be here in this stupid parking lot with Paulson.

"You probably don't even have a gun," Paulson said.

"Hey give me a break. I haven't got all day for this. I have other things to do."

"Like what?"

"None of your business."

"Hah! You haven't got anything better to do."

I was wearing jeans and a T-shirt and black Caterpillar boots, and I had a real urge to kick him in the back of his leg with my size seven Cat.

"Tell me," he said.

"I promised my parents I'd be home for dinner at six."

Paulson burst out laughing. "That's pathetic. That's fucking pathetic." The laughter turned into a coughing fit, Paulson leaned forward, wobbled side to side and fell over. I reached for him, but it was too late. He was back on his belly, doing his beached whale imitation.

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My parents live in a narrow duplex in a chunk of Trenton called the Burg. If the Burg was a food, it would be pasta --penne rigate, ziti, fettuccine, spaghetti, and elbow macaroni, swimming in marinara, cheese sauce or mayo. Good, dependable, all-occasion food that puts a smile on your face and fat on your butt. The Burg is a solid neighborhood where people buy

houses and live in them until death kicks them out. Backyards are used to run a clothesline, store the garbage can and give the dog a place to poop. No fancy backyard decks and gazebos for Burgers. Burgers sit on their small front porches and cement stoops. The better to see the world go by.

I rolled in just as my mother was pulling the roast chicken out of the oven. My father was already in his seat at the head of the table. He stared straight ahead, eyes glazed, thoughts in limbo, knife and fork in hand. My sister Valerie, who had recently moved back home after leaving her husband, was at work whipping potatoes in the kitchen. When we were kids Valerie was the perfect daughter. And I was the daughter who stepped in dog poo, sat on gum, and constantly fell off the garage roof in an attempt to fly. As a last ditch effort to preserve her marriage, Valerie had traded in her Italian-Hungarian genes and turned herself into Meg Ryan. The marriage failed, but the blond Meg shag persists.

Valerie's kids were at the table with my dad. The nine year old, Angie, was sitting primly with her hands folded, resigned to enduring the meal, an almost perfect clone of Valerie at that age. The seven year old, Mary Alice, the kid from hell, had two sticks poked into her brown hair.

"What's with the sticks?" I asked.

"They not sticks. They're antlers. I'm a reindeer."

This was a surprise because usually she's a horse.

"How was your day?" Grandma asked me, setting a bowl of green beans on the table. "Did you shoot anybody? Did you capture any bad guys?"

Grandma Mazur moved in with my parents shortly after my Grandpa Mazur took his fat clogged arteries to the all-you-can-eat buffet in the sky. Grandma's in her mid-seventies and doesn't look a day over ninety. Her body is aging, but her mind seems to be going in the opposite direction. She was wearing white tennis shoes and a lavender polyester warm-up suit. Her steel gray hair was cut short and permed to within an inch of its life. Her nails were painted lavender to match the suit.

"I didn't shoot anybody today," I said, "but I brought in a guy wanted for credit card fraud."

There was a knock at the front door, and Mabel Markowitz stuck her head in and called, "Yoohoo".

My parents live in a two family duplex. They own the south half, and Mabel Markowitz owns the north half, the house divided by a common wall and years of disagreement over house paint. Out of necessity, Mabel's made thrift a religious experience, getting by on social security and government surplus peanut butter. Her husband, Izzy, was a good man but drank himself into an early grave. Mabel's only daughter died of uterine cancer a year ago. The son-in-law died a month later in a car crash.

All forward progress stopped at the table, and everyone looked to the front door, because in all the years Mabel had lived next door, she'd never once yoohooed while we were eating.

"I hate to disturb your meal," Mabel said. "I just wanted to ask Stephanie if she'd have a minute to stop over, later. I have a question about this bond business. It's for a friend."

"Sure," I said. "I'll be over after dinner." I imagined it would be a short conversation since everything I knew about bond could be said in two sentences.

Mabel left and Grandma leaned forward, elbows on the table. "I bet that's a lot of hooley about wanting advice for a friend. I bet Mabel's been busted."

Everyone simultaneously rolled their eyes at Grandma.

"Okay then," she said. "Maybe she wants a job. Maybe she wants to be a bounty hunter. You know how she's always squeaking by."

My father shoveled food into his mouth, keeping his head down. He reached for the potatoes and spooned seconds onto his plate. "Christ," he mumbled.

"If there's anyone in that family who would need a bail bond, it would be Mabel's ex-grandson-in-law," my mother said. "He's mixed up with some bad people these days. Evelyn was smart to divorce him."

"Yeah, and that divorce was real nasty," Grandma said to me. "Almost as nasty as yours."

"I set a high standard."

"You were a pip," Grandma said.

My mother did another eye roll. "It was a disgrace."

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Mabel Markowitz lives in a museum. She married in 1943 and still has her first table lamp, her first pot, her first chrome and Formica kitchen table. Her living room was newly wallpapered in 1957. The flowers have faded but the paste has held. The carpet is dark oriental. The upholstered pieces sag slightly in the middle, imprinted with asses that have since moved on ...either to God or Hamilton Township.

Certainly the furniture doesn't bear the imprint of Mabel's ass as Mabel is a walking skeleton who never sits. Mabel bakes and cleans and paces while she talks on the phone. Her eyes are bright, and she laughs easily, slapping her thigh, wiping her hands on her apron. Her hair is thin and grey, cut short and curled. Her face is powdered first thing in the morning to a chalky white. Her lipstick is pink and applied hourly, feathering out into the deep crevices that line her mouth.

"Stephanie," she said, "how nice to see you. Come in. I have a coffee cake."

Mrs. Markowitz always has a coffee cake. That's the way it is in the Burg. Windows are clean, cars are big and there's always a coffee cake.

I took a seat at the kitchen table. "The truth is, I don't know very much about bond. My cousin Vinnie is the bond expert."

"It's not so much about bond," Mabel said. "It's more about finding someone. And I fibbed about it being for a friend. I was embarrassed. I just

don't know how to even begin telling you this."

Mabel's eyes filled with tears. She cut a piece of coffee cake and shoved it into her mouth. Angry. Mabel wasn't the sort of woman to comfortably fall victim to emotion. She washed the coffee cake down with coffee that was strong enough to dissolve a spoon if you let it sit in the cup too long. Never accept coffee from Mrs. Markowitz.

"I guess you know Evelyn's marriage didn't work out. She and Steven got a divorce awhile back, and it was pretty bitter," Mabel finally said.

Evelyn is Mabel's granddaughter. I've known Evelyn all my life, but we were never close friends. She lived several blocks away, and she went to Catholic school. Our paths only intersected on Sundays when she'd come to dinner at Mabel's house. Valerie and I called her The Giggler because she giggled at everything. She'd come over to play board games in her Sunday clothes, and she'd giggle when she rolled the dice, giggle when she moved her piece, giggle when she lost. She giggled so much she got dimples. And when she got older, she was one of those girls that boys love. Evelyn was all round softness and dimples and vivacious energy.

I hardly ever saw Evelyn any more, but when I did there wasn't much vivacious energy left in her.

Mabel pressed her thin lips together. "There was so much arguing and hard feelings over the divorce that the judge made Evelyn take out one of these new child custody bonds. I guess he was afraid Evelyn wouldn't let Steven see Annie. Anyway, Evelyn didn't have any money to put up for the bond. Steven took the money that Evelyn got when my daughter died, and he never gave Evelyn anything. Evelyn was like a prisoner in that house on Key Street. I'm almost the only relative left for Evelyn and Annie now, so I put my house here up for collateral. Evelyn wouldn't have gotten custody if I didn't do that."

This was all new to me. I'd never heard of a custody bond. The people I tracked down were in violation of a bail bond.

Mabel wiped the table clean of crumbs and dumped the crumbs in the sink. Mabel wasn't good at sitting. "It was all just fine until last week when I got a note from Evelyn, saying she and Annie were going away for awhile. I didn't think much of it, but all of a sudden everyone is looking for Annie. Steven came to my house a couple days ago, raising his voice and saying terrible things about Evelyn. He said she had no business taking Annie off like she did, taking her away from him and taking her out of first grade. And he said he was invoking the custody bond. And then this morning I got a phone call from the bond company telling me they were going to take my house if I didn't help them get Annie back."

Mabel looked around her kitchen. "I don't know what I'd do without the house. Can they really take it from me?"

"I don't know," I told Mabel. "I've never been involved in anything like this."

"And now they all got me worried. How do I know if Evelyn and Annie are okay? I don't have any way of getting in touch. And it was just a note. It wasn't even like I talked to Evelyn."

Mabel's eyes filled up again, and I was really hoping she wasn't going to flat-out cry because I wasn't great with big displays of emotion. My mother and I expressed affection through veiled compliments about gravy.

"I feel just terrible," Mabel said. "I don't know what to do. I thought maybe you could find Evelyn and talk to her ...make sure her and Annie are all right. I could put up with losing the house, but I don't want to lose Evelyn and Annie. I've got some money set aside. I don't know how much you charge for this sort of thing."

"I don't charge anything. I'm not a private investigator. I don't take on private cases like this." Hell, I'm not even a very good bounty hunter!

Mabel picked at her apron, tears rolling down her cheeks, now. "I don't know who else to ask."

Oh man, I don't believe this. Mabel Markowitz, crying! This was at about the same comfort level as getting a gyno exam in the middle of Main Street at high noon.

"Okay," I said. "I'll see what I can do ...as a neighbor."