

HOT SIX

CHAPTER ONE

Carol Zabo was standing on the outermost guardrail on the bridge spanning the Delaware between Trenton, New Jersey and Morrisville, Pennsylvania. She was holding a regulation size yellow fire brick in the palm of her right hand, with about four feet of clothesline stretched between the brick and her ankle. On the side of the bridge in big letters was the slogan "Trenton Makes and the World Takes." And Carol was apparently tired of the world taking whatever it was she was making, because she was getting ready to jump into the Delaware and let the brick do its work.

I was standing about ten feet from Carol, trying to talk her off the guardrail. Cars were rolling past us, some slowing up to gawk, and some cutting in and out of the gawkers, giving Carol the finger because she was disturbing the flow.

"Listen Carol," I said, "it's eight-thirty in the morning, and it's starting to snow. I'm freezing my ass off. Make up your mind about jumping, because I have to tinkle, and I need a cup of coffee."

Truth is, I didn't for a minute think she'd jump. For one thing, she was wearing a four-hundred-dollar jacket from Wilson Leather. You just don't jump off a bridge in a four-hundred-dollar jacket. It isn't done. The jacket would get ruined. Carol was from the Chambersburg section of Trenton, just like me, and in the Burg you gave the jacket to your sister, then you jumped off the bridge.

"Hey, you listen, Stephanie Plum," Carol said, teeth chattering. "Nobody sent you an engraved invitation to this party."

I'd gone to high school with Carol. She'd been a cheerleader, and I'd been a baton twirler. Now she was married to Lubie Zabo and wanted to kill herself. If I was married to Lubie I'd want to kill myself too, but that wasn't Carol's reason for standing on the guardrail, holding a brick on a rope. Carol had shoplifted some crotchless bikinis from the Fredericks of Hollywood store at the mall. It wasn't that Carol couldn't afford the panties, it was that she wanted them to spice up her love life and was too embarrassed to take them to the register. In her haste to make a getaway, she'd rear-ended Brian Simon's plainclothes cop car and had left the scene. Brian had been in the car at the time, and had chased her down and thrown her into the pokey.

My cousin Vinnie, president and sole proprietor of Vincent Plum Bail Bonds, had written Carol's get-out-of-jail ticket. If Carol didn't show up for her court date, Vinnie would forfeit the walking money unless he could retrieve Carol's body in a timely manner.

This is where I come in. I'm a bond enforcement agent, which is a fancy term for bounty hunter, and I retrieve bodies for Vinnie. Preferably live and

unharmred. Vinnie had spotted Carol on his way in to work this morning and had dispatched me to rescue her --or, if rescue wasn't possible to eyeball the precise spot she splashed down. Vinnie was worried if Carol jumped into the river, and the divers and cops with grappling hooks couldn't find her water-logged corpse, Vinnie might be out his bond money.

"This is really a bad way to do it," I said to Carol. "You're going to look awful when they find you. Think about it --your hair's gonna be a wreck."

She rolled her eyes up as if she could see on the top of her head. "Shit, I never thought of that," she said. "I just had it highlighted, too. I got it foiled."

The snow was coming down in big wet blobs. I was wearing hiking boots with thick vibram soles, but the cold was seeping through to my feet all the same. Carol was more dressy in funky ankle boots, a little black dress, and the excellent jacket. Somehow the brick seemed too casual for the rest of the outfit. And the dress reminded me of a dress I had hanging in my own closet. I'd only worn the dress for a matter of minutes before it had been dropped to the floor and kicked aside ... the opening statement in an exhaustive night with the man of my dreams. Well, one of the men, anyway. Funny how people see clothes differently. I wore the dress, hoping to get a man into my bed. And Carol chose it to jump off a bridge. Now in my opinion, jumping off a bridge in a dress is a bad decision. If I was going to jump off a bridge I'd wear slacks. Carol was going to look like an idiot with her skirt up around her ears and her pantyhose hanging out. "So what does Lubie think of the highlights?" I asked.

"Lubie likes the highlights," Carol said. "Only he wants me to grow it longer. He says long hair is the style now."

Personally, I wouldn't put a lot of stock in the fashion sense of a man who got his nickname by bragging about his sexual expertise with a greasegun. But hey, that's just me. "So tell me again why you're up here on the guardrail."

"Because I'd rather die than go to jail."

"I told you, you're not going to jail. And if you do, it won't be for very long."

"A day is too long! An hour is too long! They make you take off all your clothes, and then they make you bend over so they can look for smuggled weapons. And you have to go to the bathroom in front of everyone. There's no, you know, privacy. I saw a special on television."

Okay, so now I understood a little bit better. I'd kill myself before I'd do any of those things, too.

"Maybe you won't have to go to jail," I said. "I know Brian Simon. I could talk to him. Maybe I could get him to drop the charges."

Carol's face brightened. "Really. Would you do that for me?"

"Sure. I can't guarantee anything, but I can give it a shot."

"And if he won't drop the charges, I'll still have a chance to kill myself."

"Exactly."

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I packed Carol and the brick off in her car, and then I drove over to the 7-Eleven for coffee and a box of glazed chocolate doughnuts. I figured I deserved the doughnuts, since I'd done such a good job of saving Carol's life.

I took the doughnuts and coffee to Vinnie's storefront office on Hamilton Avenue. I didn't want to run the risk of eating all the doughnuts myself. And I was hoping Vinnie would have more work for me. As a bond enforcement agent I only get paid if I bring somebody in. And at the moment I was clean out of wayward bondees.

"Damn skippy," Lula said from behind the file cabinets. "Here come doughnuts walking through the door."

At five feet five inches weighing in at a little over two hundred pounds, Lula is something of a doughnut expert. She was in monochromatic mode this week, with hair, skin, and lipgloss all the color of cocoa. The skin color is permanent, but the hair changes weekly.

Lula does filing for Vinnie, and she helps me out when I need backup. Since I'm not the world's best bounty hunter, and Lula isn't the world's best backup, it's more often than not like the amateur-hour version of The Best of Cops Bloopers.

"Are those chocolate doughnuts?" Lula asked. "Connie and me were just thinking we needed some chocolate doughnuts, weren't we, Connie?"

Connie Rosolli is Vinnie's office manager. She was at her desk, in the middle of the room, examining her mustache in a mirror. "I'm thinking of having more electrolysis," she said. "What do you think?"

"I think it's a good thing," Lula told her, helping herself to a doughnut. "Because you're starting to look like Groucho Marx, again."

I sipped my coffee and fingered through some files Connie had on her desk. "Anything new come in?"

The door to Vinnie's inner office slammed open, and Vinnie stuck his head out. "Fuckin' A, we got something new ... and it's all yours."

Lula screwed her mouth up to the side. And Connie did a nose wrinkle.

I had a bad feeling in my stomach. Usually I had to beg for jobs and here Vinnie was, having saved something for me. "What's going on?" I asked.

"It's Ranger," Connie said. "He's in the wind. Won't respond to his pager."

"The schmuck didn't show up for his court date yesterday," Vinnie said. "He's FTA."

FTA is bounty-hunter-speak for "failure to appear". Usually I'm happy to hear someone has failed to appear, because it means I get to earn money by coaxing them back into the system. In this case, there was no money to be had, because if Ranger didn't want to be found, he wasn't going to be found. End of discussion.

Ranger is a bounty hunter, like me. Only Ranger is good. He's close to my

age, give or take a few years, he's Cuban-American, and I'm pretty sure he only kills bad guys. Two weeks ago some idiot rookie cop arrested Ranger on carrying concealed without a license. Every other cop in Trenton knows Ranger and knows he carries concealed and they're perfectly happy to have it that way. But no one told the new guy. So Ranger was busted and scheduled to go before the judge yesterday for a slap on the wrist. In the meantime, Vinnie sprung Ranger with a nice chunk of money, and now Vinnie was feeling lonely, high off the ground, out there on a limb all by himself. First Carol. Now Ranger. Not a good way to start a Tuesday.

"There's something wrong with this picture," I said. It made my heart feel leaden in my chest, because there were people out there who wouldn't mind seeing Ranger disappear forever. And his disappearance would make a very large hole in my life.

"It's not like Ranger to ignore his court date, or to ignore his page."

Lula and Connie exchanged glances.

"You know that big fire they had downtown on Sunday?" Connie said. "Turns out the building is owned by Alexander Ramos."

Alexander Ramos deals guns, regulating the flow of black market arms from his summer compound on the Jersey shore and his winter fortress in Athens. Two of his three adult sons live in the United States, one in Santa Barbara, the other in Hunterdon County. The third son lives in Rio. None of this is privileged information. The Ramos family has made the cover of Newsweek, four times. People have speculated for years that Ranger has ties to Ramos, but the exact nature of those ties has always been unknown. Ranger is a master of keeping things unknown.

"And?" I asked.

"And when they could finally go through the building yesterday they found Ramos' youngest son, Homer, barbecued in a third floor office. Besides being toasted, he also had a large bullet hole in his head."

"And?"

"And Ranger's wanted for questioning. The police were here just a few minutes ago, looking for him."

"Why do they want Ranger?"

Connie did a palms-up.

"Anyway, he's skipped," Vinnie said, "and you're gonna bring him in."

My voice involuntarily rose an octave. "What, are you crazy? I'm not going after Ranger!"

"That's the beauty of it," Vinnie said. "You don't have to go after him. He'll come to you. He's got a thing for you."