

ONE FOR THE MONEY

CHAPTER ONE

THERE ARE SOME men who enter a woman's life and screw it up forever. Joseph Morelli did this to me—not forever, but periodically.

Morelli and I were both born and raised in a blue-collar chunk of Trenton called the Burg. Houses were attached and narrow. Yards were small. Cars were American. The people were mostly of Italian descent, with enough Hungarians and Germans thrown in to offset inbreeding. It was a good place to buy calzone or play the numbers. And, if you had to live in Trenton anyway, it was an okay place to raise a family.

When I was a kid I didn't ordinarily play with Joseph Morelli. He lived two blocks over and was two years older.

"Stay away from those Morelli boys," my mother had warned me. "They're wild. I hear stories about the things they do to girls when they get them alone."

"What kind of things?" I'd eagerly asked.

"You don't want to know," my mother had answered.

"Terrible things. Things that aren't nice."

From that moment on, I viewed Joseph Morelli with a combination of terror and prurient curiosity that bordered on awe. Two weeks later, at the age of six, with quaking knees and a squishy stomach, I followed Morelli into his father's garage on the promise of learning a new game. The Morelli garage hunkered detached and snubbed at the edge of their lot. It was a sorry affair, lit by a single shaft of light filtering through a grime-coated window. Its air was stagnant, smelling of corner must, discarded tires, and jugs of used motor oil. Never destined to house the Morelli cars, the garage served other purposes. Old Man Morelli used the garage to take his belt to his sons, his sons used the garage to take their hands to themselves, and Joseph Morelli took me, Stephanie Plum, to the garage to play train.

"What's the name of this game?" I'd asked Joseph Morelli.

"Choo-choo," he'd said, down on his hands and knees, crawling between my legs, his head trapped under my short pink skirt. "You're the tunnel, and I'm the train."

I suppose this tells something about my personality.

That I'm not especially good at taking advice. Or that I was born with an overload of curiosity. Or maybe it's about rebellion or boredom or fate. At any rate, it was a one-shot deal and darn disappointing, since I'd only gotten to be the tunnel, and I'd really wanted to be the train.

Ten years later, Joe Morelli was still living two blocks over. He'd grown up big and bad, with eyes like black fire one minute and melt-in-your-mouth chocolate the next. He had an eagle tattooed on his chest, a tight-assed, narrow-hipped swagger, and a reputation for having fast hands and clever fingers.

My best friend, Mary Lou Molnar, said she heard Morelli had a tongue like a lizard.

"Holy cow," I'd answered, "what's that supposed to mean?"

"Just don't let him get you alone or you'll find out. Once he gets you alone . . . that's it. You're done for."

I hadn't seen much of Morelli since the train episode. I supposed he'd enlarged his repertoire of sexual exploitation. I opened my eyes wide and leaned closer to Mary Lou, hoping for the worst. "You aren't talking about rape, are you?"

"I'm talking about lust! If he wants you, you're doomed. The guy is irresistible."

Aside from being fingered at the age of six by you-knowwho, I was untouched. I was saving myself for marriage, or at least for college. "I'm a virgin," I said, as if this was news. "I'm sure he doesn't mess with virgins."

"He specializes in virgins! The brush of his fingertips turns virgins into slobbering mush."

Two weeks later, Joe Morelli came into the bakery where I worked every day after school, Tasty Pastry, on Hamilton. He bought a chocolate-chip cannoli, told me he'd joined the navy, and charmed the pants off me four minutes after closing, on the floor of Tasty Pastry, behind the case filled with chocolate éclairs.

The next time I saw him, I was three years older. I was on my way to the mall, driving my father's Buick, when I spotted Morelli standing in front of Giovichinni's Meat Market. I gunned the big V-8 engine, jumped the curb, and clipped Morelli from behind, bouncing him off the front right fender. I stopped the car and got out to assess the damage. "Anything broken?"

He was sprawled on the pavement, looking up my skirt.
"My leg."

"Good," I said. Then I turned on my heel, got into the Buick, and drove to the mall.

I attribute the incident to temporary insanity, and in my own defense, I'd like to say I haven't run over anyone since.

During winter months, wind ripped up Hamilton Avenue, whining past plate-glass windows, banking trash against curbs and storefronts. During summer months, the air sat still and gauzy, leaden with humidity, saturated with hydrocarbons. It shimmered over hot cement and melted road tar. Cicadas buzzed, Dumpsters reeked, and a dusty haze hung in perpetuity over softball fields statewide. I figured it was all part of the great adventure of living in New Jersey.

This afternoon I'd decided to ignore the August buildup of ozone catching me in the back of my throat and go, convertible top down, in my Mazda Miata. The air conditioner was blasting flat out, I was singing along with Paul Simon, my shoulder-length brown hair was whipping around my face in a frenzy of frizz and snarls, my ever-vigilant blue eyes were coolly hidden behind my Oakleys, and my foot rested heavy on the gas pedal.

It was Sunday, and I had a date with a pot roast at my parents' house. I stopped for a light and checked my rearview mirror, swearing when I saw Lenny Gruber two car lengths back in a tan sedan. I thumped my forehead on the steering wheel. "Damn." I'd gone to high school with Gruber. He was a maggot then, and he was a maggot now. Unfortunately, he was a maggot with a just cause. I was behind on my Miata payments, and Gruber worked for the repo company.

Six months ago, when I'd bought the car, I'd been looking good, with a nice apartment and season tickets to the Rangers. And then *bam!* I got laid off. No money. No more A-1 credit rating.

I rechecked the mirror, set my teeth, and yanked up the emergency brake. Lenny was like smoke. When you tried to grab him, he evaporated, so I wasn't about to waste this one last opportunity to bargain. I hauled myself out of my car, apologized to the man caught between us, and stalked back to Gruber.

"Stephanie Plum," Gruber said, full of joy and faux surprise.

"What a treat."

I leaned two hands on the roof and looked through the open window at him. "Lenny, I'm going to my parents' house for dinner. You wouldn't snatch my car while I was at my parents' house, would you? I mean, that would be really low, Lenny."

"I'm a pretty low guy, Steph. That's why I've got this neat job. I'm capable of most anything."

The light changed, and the driver behind Gruber leaned on his horn.

"Maybe we can make a deal," I said to Gruber.

"Does this deal involve you getting naked?"

I had a vision of grabbing his nose and twisting it Three Stooges style until he squealed like a pig. Problem was, it'd involve touching him. Better to go with a more restrained approach. "Let me keep the car tonight, and I'll drive it to the lot first thing tomorrow morning."

"No way," Gruber said. "You're damn sneaky. I've been chasing after this car for five days."

"So, one more won't matter."

"I'd expect you to be grateful, you know what I mean?"

I almost gagged. "Forget it. Take the car. In fact, you could take it right now. I'll walk to my parents'."

Gruber's eyes were locked halfway down my chest. I'm a 36B. Respectable but far from overwhelming on my 5' 7" frame. I was wearing black spandex shorts and an oversized hockey jersey. Not what you would call a seductive outfit, but Lenny was ogling anyway.

His smile widened enough to show he was missing a molar.

"I guess I could wait for tomorrow. After all, we *did* go to high school together."

"Uh huh." It was the best I could do.

Five minutes later I turned off Hamilton onto Roosevelt.

Two blocks to my parents' house, and I could feel familial obligation sucking at me, pulling me into the heart of the Burg. This was a community of extended families. There was safety here, along with love, and stability, and the comfort of ritual. The clock on the dash told me I was seven minutes late, and the urge to scream told me I was home.

I parked at the curb and looked at the narrow two-story duplex with its jalousied front porch and aluminum awnings. The Plum half was yellow, just as it had been for forty years, with a brown shingle roof. Snowball bushes flanked either side of the cement stoop, and red geraniums

had been evenly spaced the length of the porch. It was basically a flat. Living room in front, dining room in the middle, kitchen at the rear. Three bedrooms and bath upstairs. It was a small, tidy house crammed with kitchen smells and too much furniture, comfortable with its lot in life. Next door, Mrs. Markowitz, who was living on social security and could only afford closeout paint colors, had painted her side lime green.

My mother was at the open screen door. "Stephanie," she called. "What are you doing sitting out there in your car? You're late for dinner. You know how your father hates to eat late. The potatoes are getting cold. The pot roast will be dry."

Food is important in the Burg. The moon revolves around the earth, the earth revolves around the sun, and the Burg revolves around pot roast. For as long as I can remember, my parents' lives have been controlled by five-pound pieces of rolled rump, done to perfection at six o'clock.

Grandma Mazur stood two feet back from my mother. "I gotta get me a pair of those," she said, eyeballing my shorts. "I've still got pretty good legs, you know." She raised her skirt and looked down at her knees. "What do you think? You think I'd look good in them biker things?" Grandma Mazur had knees like doorknobs. She'd been a beauty in her time, but the years had turned her slackskinned and spindle-boned. Still, if she wanted to wear biker shorts, I thought she should go for it. The way I saw it, that was one of the many advantages to living in New Jersey—even old ladies were allowed to look outlandish. My father gave a grunt of disgust from the kitchen, where he was carving up the meat. "Biker's shorts," he muttered, slapping his palm against his forehead. "Unh!" Two years ago, when Grandpa Mazur's fat-clogged arteries sent him to the big pork roast in the sky, Grandma Mazur had moved in with my parents and had never moved out. My father accepted this with a combination of Old World stoicism and tactless mutterings.

I remember him telling me about a dog he'd had as a kid. The story goes that this dog was the ugliest, oldest, most pea-brained dog ever. The dog was incontinent, dribbling urine wherever it went. Its teeth were rotted in its mouth, its hips were fused solid with arthritis, and huge fatty tumors lumped under its hide. One day my Grandpa

Plum took the dog out behind the garage and shot it. I suspected there were times when my father fantasized a similar ending for my Grandma Mazur.

"You should wear a dress," my mother said to me, bringing green beans and creamed pearl onions to the table.

"Thirty years old and you're still dressing in those teenybopper outfits. How will you ever catch a nice man like that?"

"I don't want a man. I had one, and I didn't like it."

"That's because your husband was a horse's behind," Grandma Mazur said.

I agreed. My ex-husband had been a horse's behind. Especially when I'd caught him flagrante delicto on the dining room table with Joyce Barnhardt.

"I hear Loretta Buzick's boy is separated from his wife," my mother said. "You remember him? Ronald Buzick?"

I knew where she was heading, and I didn't want to go there. "I'm not going out with Ronald Buzick," I told her.

"Don't even think about it."

"So what's wrong with Ronald Buzick?"

Ronald Buzick was a butcher. He was balding, and he was fat, and I suppose I was being a snob about the whole thing, but I found it hard to think in romantic terms about a man who spent his days stuffing giblets up chicken butts.

My mother plunged on. "All right, then how about Bernie Kuntz? I saw Bernie Kuntz in the dry cleaners, and he made a point about asking for you. I think he's interested. I could invite him over for coffee and cake."

With the way my luck was running, probably my mother had already invited Bernie, and at this very moment he was circling the block, popping Tic Tacs. "I don't want to talk about Bernie," I said. "There's something I need to tell you. I have some bad news. . . ."

I'd been dreading this and had put it off for as long as possible.

My mother clapped a hand to her mouth. "You found a lump in your breast!"

No one in our family had ever found a lump in their breast, but my mother was ever watchful. "My breast is fine. The problem is with my job."