

SEVEN UP

Chapter One

I knew something bad was going to happen when Vinnie called me into his private office. Vinnie is my boss and my cousin. I read on a bathroom stall door once that Vinnie humps like a ferret. I'm not sure what that means, but it seems reasonable since Vinnie looks like a ferret. His ruby pinky ring reminded me of treasures found in Seaside Park arcade claw-machines. He was wearing a black shirt and black tie, his receding black hair was slicked back, casino pit boss style. His facial expression was tuned to not happy.

I looked across the desk at him and tried not to grimace. "Now what?"

"I got a job for you," Vinnie said. "I want you to find that ratfink Eddie DeChooch, and I want you to drag his boney ass back here. He got tagged smuggling a truckload of bootleg cigarettes up from Virginia and he missed his court date."

I rolled my eyes so far into the top of my head I could see hair growing. "I'm not going after Eddie DeChooch. He's old, and he kills people, and he's dating my grandmother."

"He hardly ever kills people anymore," Vinnie said. "He has cataracts. Last time he tried to shoot someone he emptied a clip into an ironing board."

Vinnie owns and operates Vincent Plum Bail Bonds in Trenton, New Jersey. When someone is accused of a crime, Vinnie gives the court a cash bond, the court releases the accused until trial, and Vinnie hopes to God the accused shows up for court. If the accused decides to forgo the pleasure of his court date, Vinnie is out a lot of money unless I can find the accused and bring him back into the system. My name is Stephanie Plum and I'm a bond enforcement officer ... aka bounty hunter. I took the job when times were lean and not even the fact that I graduated in the top ninety-eight percent of my college class could get me a better position. The economy has since improved and there's no good reason why I'm still tracking down bad guys except that it annoys my mother and I don't have to wear panty hose to work.

"I'd give this to Ranger, but he's out of the country," Vinnie said. "So that leaves you."

Ranger is a soldier of fortune kind of guy who sometimes works as a bounty hunter. He's very good ... at everything. And he's scary as hell. "What's Ranger doing out of the country? And what do you mean by out of the country? Asia? South America? Miami?"

"He's making a pickup for me in Puerto Rico." Vinnie shoved a file folder across his desk. "Here's the bond agreement on DeChooch and your authorization to capture. He's worth fifty thousand to me ... five thousand to you. Go over to DeChooch's house and find out why he pulled a no-show on

his hearing yesterday. Connie called and there was no answer. Christ, he could be dead on his kitchen floor. Going out with your grandma's enough to kill anyone."

Vinnie's office is on Hamilton, which at first glance might not seem like the best location for a bail bonds office. Most bail bonds offices are across from the jail. The difference with Vinnie is that many of the people he bonds out are either relatives or neighbors and live just off Hamilton in the Burg. I grew up in the Burg and my parents still live there. It's really a very safe neighborhood as Burg criminals are always careful to do their crimes elsewhere. Well okay, Jimmy Curtains once walked Two Toes Garibaldi out of his house in his pajamas and drove him to the landfill ... but still, the actual whacking didn't take place in the Burg. And the guys they found buried in the basement of the candy store on Ferris Street weren't from the Burg so you can't really count them as a statistic.

Connie Rosolli looked up when I came out of Vinnie's office. Connie is the office manager. Connie keeps things running while Vinnie is off springing miscreants and/or fornicating with barnyard animals.

Connie had her hair teased up to about three times the size of her head. She was wearing a pink V-neck sweater that molded to boobs that belonged on a much larger woman and a short black knit skirt that would have fit a much smaller woman.

Connie's been with Vinnie since he first started the business. She's stuck it out this long because she puts up with nothing and on exceptionally bad days she helps herself to combat pay from the petty cash.

She did a face scrunch when she saw I had a file in my hand. "You aren't actually going out after Eddie DeChooch, are you?"

"I'm hoping he's dead."

Lula was slouched on the faux leather couch that had been shoved against a wall and served as the holding pen for bondees and their unfortunate relatives. Lula and the couch were almost identical shades of brown with the exception of Lula's hair which happened to be cherry red today.

I always feel sort of anemic when I stand next to Lula. I'm a third generation American of Italian-Hungarian heritage. I have my mother's pale skin and blue eyes and good metabolism which allows me to eat birthday cake and still (almost always) button the top snap on my Levi's. From my father's side of the family I've inherited a lot of unmanageable brown hair and a penchant for Italian hand gestures. On my own, on a good day with a ton of mascara and four-inch heels, I can attract some attention. Next to Lula I'm wallpaper.

"I'd offer to help drag his behind back to jail," Lula said. "You could probably use the help of a plus-size woman like me. But too bad I don't like when they're dead. Dead creeps me out."

"Well, I don't actually know if he's dead," I said.

"Good enough for me," Lula said. "Sign me up. If he's alive I get to kick

some sorry-ass butt, and if he's dead ... I'm outta there."

Lula talks tough, but the truth is we're both pretty wimpy when it comes to actual butt kicking. Lula was a ho in a former life and is now doing filing for Vinnie. Lula was as good at ho'ing as she is at filing ... and she's not much good at filing.

"Maybe we should wear vests," I said.

Lula took her purse from a bottom file drawer. "Suit yourself, but I'm not wearing no Kevlar vest. We don't got one big enough and besides it'd ruin my fashion statement."

I was wearing jeans and a T-shirt and didn't have much of a fashion statement to make so I took a vest from the back room.

"Hold on," Lula said when we got to the curb, "what's this?"

"I bought a new car."

"Well dang, girl, you did good. This here's an excellent car."

It was a black Honda CR-V and the payments were killing me. I'd had to make a choice between eating and looking cool and looking cool had won out. Well hell, there's a price for everything, right?

"Where we going?" Lula asked, settling in next to me. "Where's this dude live?"

"We're going to the Burg. Eddie DeChooch lives three blocks from my parents' house."

"He really dating your grandma?"

"She ran into him at a viewing two weeks ago at Stiva's Funeral Home and they went out for pizza after."

"Think they did the nasty?"

I almost ran the car up on the sidewalk. "No! Yuck!"

"Just asking," Lula said.

DeChooch lives in a small brick duplex. Seventy-something Angela Marguchi and her ninety-something mother live in one half of the house and DeChooch lives in the other. I parked in front of the DeChooch half and Lula and I walked to the door. I was wearing the vest and Lula was wearing a stretchy animal-print top and yellow stretch pants. Lula is a big woman and tends to test the limits of Lycra.

"You go ahead and see if he's dead," Lula said. "And then if it turns out he's not dead you let me know and I'll come kick his ass."

"Yeah, right."

"Hunh," she said, lower lip stuck out. "You think I couldn't kick his ass?"

"You might want to stand to the side of the door," I said. "Just in case."

"Good idea," Lula said, stepping aside, "I'm not afraid or anything, but I'd hate to get blood stains on this top."

I rang the bell and waited for an answer. I rang a second time. "Mr. DeChooch?" I yelled.

Angela Marguchi stuck her head out her door. She was half a foot shorter than me, white-haired and bird-boned, a cigarette rammed between thin

lips, eyes narrowed from smoke and age. "What's all this racket?"

"I'm looking for Eddie."

She looked more closely and her mood brightened when she recognized me. "Stephanie Plum. Goodness, haven't seen you in a while. I heard you were pregnant by that vice cop, Joe Morelli."

"A vicious rumor."

"What about DeChooch," Lula asked Angela. "He been around?"

"He's in his house," Angela said. "He never goes anywhere anymore. He's depressed. Won't talk or nothing."

"He's not answering his door."

"He don't answer his phone either. Just go in. He leaves the door unlocked. Says he's waiting for someone to come shoot him and put him out of his misery."

"Well that isn't us," Lula said. "'Course if he was willing to pay for it I might know someone ... "