

THREE TO GET DEADLY

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS JANUARY in Trenton. The sky was gunmetal gray, and the air sat dead cold on cars and sidewalks. Inside the offices of Vincent Plum, bail bond agent, the atmosphere was no less grim, and I was sweating not from heat but from panic.

"I can't do this," I said to my cousin, Vinnie. "I've never refused a case before, but I can't pick this guy up. Give the paperwork to Ranger. Give it to Barnes."

"I'm not giving this two-bit Failure to Appear to Ranger," Vinnie said. "It's the kind of penny-ante stuff you do. For chrissake, be a professional. You're a bounty hunter. You've been a bounty hunter for five fucking months. What's the big deal?"

"This is Uncle Mo!" I said. "I can't apprehend Uncle Mo. Everyone will hate me. My mother will hate me. My best friend will hate me."

Vinnie slumped his slim, boneless body into the chair behind his desk and rested his head on the padded leather back. "Mo jumped bail. That makes him a slimeball. That's all that counts."

I rolled my eyes so far into the top of my head I almost fell over backward.

Moses Bedemier, better known as Uncle Mo, started selling ice cream and penny candy on June 5, 1958, and has been at it ever since. His store is set on the edge of the burg, a comfy residential chunk of Trenton where houses and minds are proud to be narrow and hearts are generously wide open. I was born and raised in the burg and while my current apartment is approximately a mile outside the burg boundary I'm still tethered by an invisible umbilical. I've been hacking away at the damn thing for years but have never been able to completely sever it. Moses Bedemier is a solid burg citizen. Over time, Mo and his linoleum have aged, so that both have some pieces chipped at the corners now, and the original colors have blurred from thirty-odd years under fluorescent lights. The yellow brick facade and overhead sheet metal sign advertising the store are dated and weatherbeaten. The chrome and Formica on the stools and countertop have lost their

luster. And none of this matters, because in the burg Uncle Mo's is as close as we come to a historic treasure.

And I, Stephanie Plum, 125 pounds, five feet, seven inches, brown-haired, blue-eyed bounty hunter at large, have just been assigned the task of hauling Uncle Mo's revered ass off to jail.

"So what did he do?" I asked Vinnie. "Why was he arrested in the first place?"

"Got caught doing thirty-five in a twenty-five-mile-per-hour zone by Officer Picky . . . better known as Officer Benny Gaspick, fresh out of police academy and so wet behind the ears he doesn't know enough to take Mo's get-out-of-jail-free PBA card and forget the whole thing."

"Bond isn't required on a traffic ticket."

Vinnie planted a pointy-toed patent leather shoe on the corner of his desk. Vinnie was a sexual lunatic, especially enamored with dark-skinned young men wearing nipple rings and pointy-breasted women who owned fourteenth-century torture tools. He was a bail bondsman, which meant he loaned people money to post the bond set by the court. The bond's purpose was to make it economically unpleasant for the suspect to skip town. Once the bond was posted the incarcerated suspect was set free, enabling him to sleep in his own bed while awaiting trial. The price for using Vinnie's service was fifteen percent of the bond and was nonrefundable no matter what the outcome of the charges. If the bailee failed to appear for his court appearance, the court kept Vinnie's money. Not just the fifteen percent profit. The court kept the whole ball of wax, the entire bail bond amount. This never made Vinnie happy.

And that's where I came in. I found the bailee, who was at that point officially a felon, and brought him back into the system. If I found the Failure to Appear, better known as an FTA, in a timely fashion, the court gave Vinnie his cash back. For this fugitive apprehension I received ten percent of the bond amount, and Vinnie was left with a five percent profit.

I'd originally taken the job out of desperation when I'd been laid off (through no fault of my own) as lingerie buyer for E. E. Martin. The alternative to unemployment had been overseeing the boxing machine at the tampon factory. A worthy task, but not something that got me orgasmic.

I wasn't sure why I was still working for Vinnie. I suspected it had something to do with the title. Bounty hunter. It held a certain cachet. Even better, the job didn't require panty hose.

Vinnie smiled his oily smile, enjoying the story he was telling me. "In his misplaced zeal to be Most Hated Cop of the Year, Gaspick delivers a little lecture to Mo on road safety, and while Gaspick is lecturing, Mo squirms in his seat, and Gaspick catches a glimpse of a forty-five stuck in Mo's jacket pocket."

"And Mo got busted for carrying concealed," I said.

"Bingo."

Carrying concealed was frowned upon in Trenton. Permits were issued sparingly to a few jewelers, and judges and couriers. Getting caught carrying concealed illegally was considered unlawful possession of a firearm and was an indictable offense. The weapon was confiscated, bail was set and the bearer of the weapon was shit out of luck. Of course, this didn't stop a sizable percentage of the population of Jersey from carrying concealed. Guns were bought at Bubba's Gun Shop, inherited from relatives, passed off among neighbors and friends and purchased second-, third- and fourthhand from and by citizens who were fuzzy on the details of gun control. Logic dictated that if the government issued a license to own a gun then it must be okay to put it in your purse. I mean, why else would a person want a gun if not to carry it in her purse? And if it wasn't okay to carry a gun in your purse, then the law was stupid. And no one in Jersey was going to put up with a stupid law.

I was even known, on occasion, to carry concealed. At this very moment I could see Vinnie's ankle holster causing a bulge at the cuff line of his polyester slacks. Not only was he carrying concealed but I'd lay odds his gun wasn't registered.

"This is not a big-time offense," I said to Vinnie. "Not something worth going Failure to Appear."

"Probably Mo forgot he had a court date," Vinnie said.

"Probably all you have to do is go remind him."

Hold that thought, I told myself. This might not be such a disaster after all. It was ten o'clock. I could mosey on over to the candy store and talk to Mo. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I realized my panic had been ungrounded. Mo had no reason to go FTA.

I closed the door on my way out of Vinnie's office, and sidestepped around Connie Rosolli. Connie was the office manager and Vinnie's guard dog. She held Vinnie in the same high esteem one would reserve for slug slime, but she'd worked for Vinnie for a lot of years, and had come to accept that even slug slime was part of God's great scheme.

Connie was wearing fuchsia lipstick, matching nail enamel and a white blouse with big black polka dots. The nail enamel was very cool, but the blouse wasn't a good choice for someone who carried sixty percent of her body weight on her chest. Good thing the fashion police didn't do too many tours of Trenton.

"You aren't going to do it, are you?" she asked. The tone implying that only a dog turd would cause Uncle Mo a moment of grief.

No offense taken. I knew where she lived. We had the same mental zip code. "You mean am I going to talk to Mo? Yeah, I'm going to talk to Mo."

Connie's black eyebrows fused into a straight line of righteous indignation. "That cop had no business arresting Uncle Mo. Everyone knows Uncle Mo would never do anything wrong."

"He was carrying concealed."

"As if that was a crime," Connie said.

"That *is* a crime!"

Lula's head came up from her filing. "What's all the deal about this Uncle Mo, anyway?"

Lula was a former hooker turned file clerk. She'd just recently embarked on a makeover program that included dyeing her hair blond and then straightening it and recurling it into ringlets. The transformation had her looking like a 230-pound black kick-ass Shirley Temple.

"Moses Bedemier," I said. "He runs a candy store on Ferris Street. Very popular person."

"Uh-oh," she said. "I think I know him. He about in his early sixties? Going bald on top? Lotta liver spots? Got a nose looks like a penis?"

"Um, I never really noticed his nose."

Vinnie had given me Uncle Mo's file, which consisted of stapled-together copies of his arrest sheet, his signed bond agreement and a photo. I turned to the photo and stared at Uncle Mo.

Lula stared over my shoulder. "Yup," she said.

"That's him all right. That's Old Penis Nose."

Connie was out of her chair. "Are you telling me Uncle Mo was a client? I don't believe that for a second!"

Lula narrowed her eyes and stuck her lip out. "Yo momma."

"Nothing personal," Connie said.

"Hunh," Lula replied, hand on hip.

I zipped my jacket and wrapped my scarf around my neck. "You sure about knowing Uncle Mo?" I asked Lula.

She took one last look at the picture. "Hard to say. You know how all them old white men look alike. Maybe I should come with you to check this dude out in person."

"No!" I shook my head. "Not a good idea."

"You think I can't do this bounty hunter shit?"

Lula hadn't yet embarked on the language makeover.

"Well, of course you can do it," I said. "It's just that this situation is sort of . . . delicate."

"Hell," she said, stuffing herself into her jacket. "I can delicate your ass off."

"Yes, but . . ."

"Anyway, you might need some help here. Suppose he don't want to come peaceful. You might need a big, fullfigure woman like me to do some persuading."

Lula and I had crossed paths while I was on my first felon hunt. She'd been a streetwalker, and I'd been streetstupid. I'd unwittingly involved her in the case I was working on, and as a result, one morning I found her battered and bloody on my fire escape.

Lula credited me with saving her life, and I blamed myself for endangering it. I was in favor of wiping the slate clean, but Lula formed a sort of attachment to me. I wouldn't go so far as to say it was hero worship. It was more like one of those Chinese things where if you save a person's life they belong to you . . . even if you don't want them.

"We're not doing any persuading," I said. "This is Uncle Mo. He sells candy to kids."

Lula had her pocketbook looped over her arm. "I can dig it," she said, following me out the door. "You still driving that old Buick?"

"Yeah. My Lotus is in the shop."

Actually, my Lotus was in my dreams. A couple months ago my Jeep got stolen, and my mother, in a burst

of misguided good intentions, strong-armed me into the driver's seat of my uncle Sandor's '53 Buick. Strained finances and lack of backbone had me still peering over the mile-long powder-blue hood, wondering at the terrible acts I must have committed to deserve such a car.

A gust of wind rattled the Fiorello's Deli sign next to Vinnie's office. I pulled my collar up and searched in my pocket for gloves.

"At least the Buick's in good shape," I told Lula.

"That's what counts, right?"

"Hunh," Lula said. "Only people who don't have a cool car say things like that. How about the radio? It got a bad radio? It got Dolby?"

"No Dolby."

"Hold on," she said. "You don't expect me to ride around with no Dolby. I need some hot music to get me in the mood to bust ass."

I unlocked the doors to the Buick. "*We are not busting ass. We're going to talk to Uncle Mo.*"

"Sure," Lula said, settling herself in, giving a disgusted glare to the radio. "I know that."

I drove one block down Hamilton and turned left onto Rose into the burg. There was little to brighten the neighborhood in January. The blinking twinkle lights and red plastic Santas of Christmas were packed away, and spring was still far in the future. Hydrangea bushes were nothing more than mean brown sticks, lawns were frost-robbled of color and streets were empty of kids, cats, car washers and blaring radios. Windows and doors were shut tight against the cold and gloom.

Even Uncle Mo's felt sterile and unwelcoming as I slowed to a stop in front of the store.

Lula squinted through my side window. "I don't want to rain on your parade," she said, "but I think this sucker's closed."

I parked at the curb. "That's impossible. Uncle Mo never closes. Uncle Mo hasn't been closed a day since he opened in nineteen fifty-eight."

"Well guess what? I'm telling you he's closed now."

I hopped out of Big Blue and walked to Mo's door and looked inside. No lights were on, and Uncle Mo was no where to be seen. I tried the door. Locked. I knocked on the door good and loud. Nothing. Damn.

"He must be sick," I said to Lula.

The candy store sat on a corner, facing Ferris Street, with the side of the store running down King. A long line of neat duplexes stretched the length of Ferris, pushing their way to the heart of the burg. King, on the other hand, had fallen on hard times, with most of its duplexes converted to multiple families. The tidy white sheers and starched Martha Washington curtains of the burg weren't in evidence on King. Privacy on King came by way of tacked-up sheets and tattered shades, and from an unpleasant sense that this was no longer a desired community.

"Some scary old lady's looking at us out of the window of that house next door," Lula said.

I looked one house down on Ferris and shivered.

"That's Mrs. Steeger. She was my teacher when I was in the third grade."

"Bet that was fun."

"Longest year of my life."