

TWO FOR THE DOUGH

CHAPTER ONE

I knew Ranger was beside me because I could see his earring gleaming in the moonlight. Everything else about him—his T-shirt, his flack vest, his slicked-back hair, and 9-mm Glock—was as black as the night. Even his skin tone seemed to darken in shade. Ricardo Carlos Manoso, the Cuban-American chameleon.

I, on the other hand, was the blue-eyed, fair-skinned product of a Hungarian-Italian union and was not nearly so cleverly camouflaged for clandestine evening activities.

It was late October, and Trenton was enjoying the death throes of Indian summer. Ranger and I were squatting behind a hydrangea bush at the corner of Paterson and Wycliff, and we weren't enjoying Indian summer, each other's company, or much of anything else. We'd been squatting there for three hours, and squatting was taking its toll on our good humor.

We were watching the small clapboard Cape Cod at 5023 Paterson, following a tip that Kenny Mancuso was scheduled to visit his girlfriend, Julia Cenetta. Kenny Mancuso had recently been charged with shooting a gas station attendant (who also happened to be his former best friend) in the knee.

Mancuso had posted a bail bond via the Vincent Plum Bonding Company, insuring his release from jail and returning him to the bosom of polite society. After his release he'd promptly disappeared and three days later failed to show face at a preliminary hearing. This did not make Vincent Plum happy.

Since Vincent Plum's losses were my windfalls, I saw Mancuso's disappearance from a more opportunistic perspective. Vincent Plum is my cousin and my employer. I work for Vinnie as a bounty hunter, dragging felons who are beyond the long arm of the law back into the system. Dragging Kenny back was going to net me ten percent of his \$50,000 bond. A portion of that would go to Ranger for assisting with the takedown, and the rest would pay off my car loan.

Ranger and I had a sort of loose partnership. Ranger

was a genuine, cool-ass, numero-uno bounty hunter. I asked him to help me because I was still learning the trade and needed all the help I could get. His participation was in the ballpark of a pity fuck.

"Don't think this is gonna happen," Ranger said. I'd done the intel and was feeling defensive that maybe I'd had my chain yanked. "I spoke to Julia this morning. Explained to her that she could be considered an accessory."

"And that made her decide to cooperate?"

"Not exactly. She decided to cooperate when I told her how before the shooting Kenny had been sometimes seeing Denise Barkolowski."

Ranger was smiling in the dark. "You lie about Denise?"

"Yeah."

"Proud of you, babe."

I didn't feel bad about the lie since Kenny was a scumbag felon, and Julia should be setting her sights higher anyway.

"Looks like maybe she thought twice about reaping the rewards of revenge and waved Kenny away. You find out where he's living?"

"He's moving around. Julia doesn't have a phone number for him. She says he's being careful."

"He a first-time offender?"

"Yeah."

"Probably nervous about checking into the big house. Heard all those stories about date rape."

We turned silent as a pickup approached. It was a new Toyota 4 °— 4 fresh off the showroom floor. Dark color. Temporary plates. Extra antennae for a car phone. The Toyota eased up at the Cape Cod and pulled into the driveway. The driver got out and walked to the front door. His back was to us and the lighting was poor.

"What do you think?" Ranger asked. "Is that Mancuso?"

I couldn't tell from this distance. The man was the right height and weight. Mancuso was twenty-one years old, six feet tall, 175 pounds, dark brown hair. He'd been discharged from the army four months ago, and he was in good shape. I had several pictures that were obtained when the bond had been posted, but they didn't do me any good from this angle.

"Could be him, but I can't swear to it without seeing

his face," I said.

The front door of the house opened and the man disappeared inside. The door closed shut.

"We could go knock on the door nice and polite and ask if he's the man," Ranger said.

I nodded in agreement. "That might work."

We stood and adjusted our gun belts.

I was dressed in dark jeans, long-sleeved black turtleneck, navy Kevlar vest, and red Keds. I had my curly, shoulder-length brown hair tied in a ponytail, tucked under a navy ball cap. I wore my five-shot .38 Smith & Wesson Chief's Special in a black nylon webbed hip holster with cuffs and a defense spray wedged into the back of the belt.

We walked across the lawn and Ranger rapped on the front door to the house with a flashlight that was eighteen inches long and eight inches round at the reflector. It gave good light, and Ranger said it was excellent for making serious head dents. Fortunately, I've never had to witness any bludgeoning. I'd fainted flat out watching *Reservoir Dogs* and had no illusions about my blood-and-guts comfort level. If Ranger ever had to use the flashlight to crack skulls while I was around, I intended to close my eyes . . . and then maybe I'd take up another profession.

When no one answered I stepped to the side and unholstered my revolver. Standard procedure for the backup partner. In my case, it was more or less an empty gesture. I religiously went to the range to practice, but truth is I'm hopelessly unmechanical. I harbor an irrational fear of guns, and most of the time keep my little S & W empty of bullets so I won't accidentally blast the toes off my foot. On the one occasion I'd had to shoot somebody I'd been so flustered I'd forgotten to take my gun out of my pocketbook before pulling the trigger. I wasn't eager to repeat the performance.

Ranger rapped again, with more force. "Fugitive apprehension agent," he called out. "Open the door."

This drew a response, and the door was opened, not by Julia Cenetta or Kenny Mancuso, but by Joe Morelli, a Trenton Police Department plainclothesman.

We all stood silent for a moment, everyone surprised to see everyone else.

"That your truck in the driveway?" Ranger finally

asked Morelli.

"Yeah," Morelli said. "Just got it."

Ranger nodded. "Good-looking vehicle."

Morelli and I were both from the Burg, a blue-collar chunk of Trenton where dysfunctional drunks were still called bums and only pansies went to Jiffy Lube for an oil change. Morelli had a long history of taking advantage of my naïveté. I'd recently had the opportunity to even the score, and now we were in a period of reevaluation, both of us jockeying around for position.

Julia peeked at us from behind Morelli.

"So what happened?" I said to Julia. "I thought Kenny was supposed to stop around tonight?"

"Yeah, right," she said. "Like he ever does anything he says."

"Did he call?"

"Nothing. No call. Nothing. He's probably with Denise Barkolowski. Why don't you go knock on her stupid door?"

Ranger stayed stoic, but I knew he was smiling inside.

"I'm out of here," he said. "Don't like to get involved in these domestic unpleasanties."

Morelli had been watching me. "What happened to your hair?" he asked.

"It's under my hat."

He had his hands shoved into his jeans pockets.

"Very sexy."

Morelli thought everything was sexy.

"It's late," Julia said. "I gotta go to work tomorrow."

I looked at my watch. It was ten-thirty. "You'll let me know if you hear from Kenny?"

"Yeah, sure."

Morelli followed me out. We walked to his truck and stared at it in silence for a while, thinking our own thoughts. His last car had been a Jeep Cherokee. It had been bombed and blown to smithereens. Fortunately for Morelli, he hadn't been in the car at the time.

"What are you doing here?" I finally asked.

"Same as you. Looking for Kenny."

"I didn't think you were in the bond enforcement business."

"Mancuso's mother was a Morelli, and the family asked if I'd look for Kenny and talk to him before he got himself into any more trouble."

"Jesus. Are you telling me you're related to Kenny Mancuso?"

"I'm related to everyone."

"You're not related to me."

"You have any leads besides Julia?"

"Nothing exciting."

He gave that same thought. "We could work together on this."

I raised an eyebrow. Last time I worked with Morelli I'd gotten shot in the ass. "What would you contribute to the cause?"

"Family."

Kenny might be dumb enough to turn to family.

"How do I know you won't cut me out at the end?" As he was sometimes prone to do.

His face was all hard planes. The sort of face that started off handsome and gained character as it aged. A paper-thin scar sliced through his left eyebrow. Mute testimony to a life lived outside the normal range of caution. He was thirty-two. Two years older than me. He was single. And he was a good cop. The jury was still out on its assessment of him as a human being. "Guess you'll just have to trust me," he said, grinning, rocking back on his heels.

"Oh boy."

He opened the door to the Toyota and new-car aroma washed over us. He hitched himself up behind the wheel and cranked the engine over. "Don't suppose Kenny will show up this late," he said.

"Not likely. Julia lives with her mother. Her mother's a nurse on the night shift at St. Francis. She'll be home in half an hour, and I can't picture Kenny waltzing in when Momma's here."

Morelli nodded agreement and drove off. When his taillights disappeared in the distance I walked to the far corner of the block where I'd parked my Jeep Wrangler. I'd gotten the Wrangler secondhand from Skoogie Krienski. Skoogie had used it to deliver pizza from Pino's Pizzeria, and when the car got warm it smelled like baking bread and marinara sauce. It was the Sahara model, painted camouflage beige. Very handy in case I wanted to join an army convoy.