ONE

My name is Stephanie Plum and I’ve got a strange man in my kitchen. He appeared out of nowhere. One minute I was sipping coffee, mentally planning out my day. And then the next minute . . . poof, there he was.

He was over six feet, with wavy blond hair pulled into a ponytail, deep-set brown eyes, and an athlete’s body. He looked to be late twenties, maybe thirty. He was dressed in jeans, boots, a grungy white thermal shirt hanging loose over the jeans, and a beat-up black leather jacket hanging on broad shoulders. He was sporting two days of beard growth, and he didn’t look happy.

“Well, isn’t this perfect,” he said, clearly disgusted, hands on hips, taking me in.
My heart was tap-dancing in my chest. I was at a total loss. I didn’t know what to think or what to say. I didn’t know who he was or how he got into my kitchen. He was frightening, but even more than that he had me flustered. It was like going to a birthday party and arriving a day early. It was like . . . what the heck’s going on?


“Hey, don’t ask me, lady,” he said. “I’m as surprised as you are.”

“How’d you get into my apartment?”

“Sweet cakes, you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

He moved to the refrigerator, opened the door, and helped himself to a beer. He cracked the beer open, took a long pull, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “You know how people get beamed down on Star Trek? It’s sort of like that.”

Okay, so I’ve got a big slob of a guy drinking beer in my kitchen, and I think he might be crazy. The only other possibility I can come up with is that I’m hallucinating and he isn’t real. I smoked some pot in college but that was about it. Don’t think I’d get a flashback from wacky tobacky. There were mushrooms on the pizza last night. Could that be it?

Fortunately, I work in bail bond enforcement, and I’m sort of used to scary guys showing up in closets and
under beds. I inched my way across the kitchen, stuck my hand into my brown bear cookie jar, and pulled out my .38 five-shot Smith & Wesson.

“Cripes,” he said, “what are you gonna do, shoot me? Like that would change anything.” He looked more closely at the gun and shook his head in another wave of disgust. “Honey, there aren’t any bullets in that gun.”

“There might be one,” I said. “I might have one chambered.”

“Yeah, right.” He finished the beer and sauntered out of the kitchen, into the living room. He looked around and moved to the bedroom.

“Hey,” I yelled. “Where do you think you’re going?”

He didn’t stop.

“That’s it,” I told him. “I’m calling the police.”

“Give me a break,” he said. “I’m having a really shitty day.” He kicked his boots off and flopped onto my bed, scoping out the room from his prone position. “Where’s the television?”

“In the living room.”

“Oh man, you don’t even have a television in your bedroom. How crapola is this?”

I cautiously moved closer to the bed, and I reached out and touched him.

“Yeah, I’m real,” he said. “Sort of. And all my equipment works.” He smiled for the first time. It was a
knock-your-socks-off smile. Dazzling white teeth and
good-humored eyes that crinkled at the corners. “In
case you’re interested.”

The smile was good. The news was bad. I didn’t know
what sort of real meant. And I wasn’t sure I liked the
idea that his equipment worked. All in all, it didn’t do
a lot to help my heart rate. Truth is, I’m pretty much
a chicken-shit bounty hunter. Still, while I’m not the
world’s bravest person, I can bluff with the best of
them, so I did an eye roll. “Get a grip.”

“You’ll come around,” he said. “They always do.”

“They?”

“Women. Women love me,” he said.

Good thing I didn’t have a bullet chambered as
threatened because I’d definitely shoot this guy. “Do
you have a name?”

“Diesel.”

“Is that your first name or your last name?”

“That’s my whole name. Who are you?”

“Stephanie Plum.”

“You live here alone?”

“No.”

“That’s a big fib,” he said. “You have living alone
written all over you.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Excuse me?”

“You’re not exactly a sex goddess,” he said. “Hair
from hell. Baggy sweatpants. No makeup. Lousy personality. Not that there isn’t some potential. You have an okay shape. What are you, 34B? And you’ve got a good mouth. Nice pouty lips.” He threw me another smile. “A guy could get ideas looking at those lips.”

Great. The nutcase who somehow got into my apartment was getting ideas about my lips. Thoughts of serial rapists and sex killings went racing through my mind. My mother’s warnings echoed in my ears. Watch out for strangers. Keep your door locked. Yes, but it’s not my fault, I reasoned. My door was locked. What’s with that?

I took his boots, carried them to the front door, and threw them into the hall. “Your boots are in the hall,” I yelled. “If you don’t come get them, I’m pitching them down the trash chute.”

My neighbor, Mr. Wolesky, stepped out of the elevator. He was holding a small white bakery bag in his hand. “Look at this,” he said, “I’m starting the day with a doughnut. That’s what Christmas does to me. It makes me crazy and then I need a doughnut. Four days to Christmas and the stores are picked clean,” he said. “And they all say everything’s on sale but I know they jack up the prices. They always gotta gouge you at Christmas. There should be a law. Somebody should look into it.”
Mr. Wolesky unlocked his door, lurched inside, and slammed the door after himself. The door lock clicked into place, and I heard Mr. Wolesky’s television go on.

Diesel elbowed me aside, went into the hall, and retrieved his boots. “You know, you have a real attitude problem,” he said.

“Attitude this,” I told him, closing my door, locking him out of the apartment.

The bolt shot back, the lock tumbled, and Diesel opened the door, walked to the couch, and sat down to put his boots on.

Hard to pick an emotion here. Confused and astounded would be high on the list. Scared bonkers wasn’t far behind. “How’d you do that?” I said, squeaky-voiced and breathless. “How’d you unlock my door?”

“I don’t know. It’s just one of those things we can do.”

Goosebumps prickled on my forearms. “Now I’m really creeped out.”

“Relax. I’m not going to hurt you. Hell, I’m supposed to make your life better.” He gave a snort and another bark of laughter at that. “Yeah, right,” he said.

Deep breath, Stephanie. Not a terrific time to hyperventilate. If I passed out from lack of oxygen God knows what would happen. Suppose he was from outer space, and he conducted an anal probe while I was un-

He slouched back onto the couch and zapped the television on. “You’re in the ballpark.”

I was at a loss. How do you get rid of someone who can unlock locks? You can’t even have him arrested by the police. And even if I decided to call the police, what would I say? I have a sort-of-real guy in my apartment?

“Suppose I cuffed you and chained you to something. What then?”

He was channel surfing, concentrating on the television. “I could get loose.”

“Suppose I shot you?”

“I’d be pissed off. And it’s not smart to piss me off.”

“But could I kill you? Could I hurt you?”

“What is this, twenty questions? I’m looking for a game here. What time is it, anyway? And where am I?”

“You’re in Trenton, New Jersey. It’s eight o’clock in the morning. And you didn’t answer my question.”

He flipped the television off. “Crud. Trenton. I should have guessed. Eight in the morning. I have a whole day to look forward to. Wonderful. And the answer to your question is . . . a qualified no. It wouldn’t be easy to kill me, but I suppose if you put your mind to it you could come up with something.”
I went to the kitchen and phoned my next-door neighbor, Mrs. Karwatt. “I was wondering if you could come over for just a second,” I said. “There’s something I’d like to show you.” A moment later, I ushered Mrs. Karwatt into my living room. “What do you see?” I asked her. “Is there anyone sitting on my couch?”

“There’s a man on your couch,” Mrs. Karwatt said. “He’s big, and he has a blond ponytail. Is that the right answer?”

“Just checking,” I said to Mrs. Karwatt. “Thanks.”

Mrs. Karwatt left but Diesel remained.

“She could see you,” I said to him.

“Well, duh.”

He’d been in my apartment for almost a half hour now, and he hadn’t done a full head rotation or tried to wrestle me down to the ground. That was a good sign, right? My mother’s voice returned. *It means nothing. Don’t let your guard down. He could be a maniac!* Problem was, the maniac thoughts were banging up against a gut feeling that he was an okay guy. Pushy and arrogant and generally obnoxious, but not criminally insane. Of course, it’s possible my instincts were swayed by the fact that he was incredibly sexy-looking. And he smelled wonderful.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him, curiosity beginning to override panic.
He stood and stretched and scratched his stomach. “How about if I’m the friggin’ Spirit of Christmas.”


“Not my call, Gracie. Personally, I hate Christmas. And I’d prefer to be sitting under a palm tree right now, but hey, here I am. So let’s get on with it.”

“My name’s not Gracie.”

“Whatever.” He looked around. “Where’s your tree? You’re supposed to have a stupid Christmas tree.”

“I haven’t had time to buy a tree. There’s this guy I’m trying to find. Sandy Claws. He’s wanted for burglary, and now he’s failed to appear for his court appearance, so he’s in violation of his bond agreement.”

“Hah! Good one. That’s a prizewinning excuse for not having a Christmas tree. Let me see if I’ve got the details right. You’re a bounty hunter?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t look like a bounty hunter.”

“What’s a bounty hunter supposed to look like?”

“Dressed in black, six-shooter strapped to your leg, a cheroot clenched between your teeth.”
I did another eye roll.

“And you’re after Santa Claus because he skipped.”

“Not Santa Claus,” I said. “Sandy Claws. S-a-n-d-y C-l-a-w-s.”

“Sandy Claws. Cripes, how would you like to have that name? What’d he steal, kitty litter?”

This was coming from a guy named for a train engine. “First, I have a legitimate job. I work for Vincent Plum Bail Bonds as a bond enforcement agent. Second, Claws isn’t such a weird name. It was probably Klaus and got screwed up at Ellis Island. It happened a lot. Third, I don’t know why I’m explaining this to you. Probably I had a stroke and fell down and hit my head and I’m actually in ICU right now, hallucinating all this.”

“You see, this is typical of the problem. Nobody believes in the mystical anymore. Nobody believes in miracles. As it happens, I’m a little supernatural. Why can’t you just accept that and go with it? I bet you don’t believe in Santa Claus either. Maybe Sandy Claws didn’t have his name changed from Klaus. Maybe he had his name changed from Santa Claus. Maybe the old guy got tired of the toys-for-kids routine and just wanted to go hide out somewhere.”

“So you think Santa Claus might be living in Trenton under an assumed name?”
Diesel shrugged. “It’s possible. Santa’s a pretty shifty guy. He has a dark side, you know.”
“I didn’t know that.”
“Not many people know that. So if you could catch this Claws guy, you’d get a Christmas tree?”
“Probably not. I haven’t got money for a tree. And I haven’t got any ornaments.”
“Oh man, I’m stuck with a whiner. No time, no money, no ornaments. Yada, yada, yada.”
“Hey, it’s my life and I don’t have to have a Christmas tree if I don’t want one.”
Actually, I really did want a Christmas tree. I wanted a big fat tree with bright colored lights and an angel on top. I wanted a wreath on my front door. I wanted red candlesticks on my dining room table. I wanted my closet filled with beautifully wrapped presents for my family. I wanted Christmas music playing on my stereo. And I wanted a fruitcake in my refrigerator. It was what every red-blooded Plum was supposed to have at Christmas, right?
I wanted to wake up in the morning and feel happy and filled with good cheer and peace on earth and good will toward men. And I wanted to have a partridge in my pear tree.
Well, guess what? I didn’t have any of those things.
No tree? no wreath, no candlesticks, no presents, no freaking fruitcake, and no goddamn partridge.

Every year I chased after the perfect Christmas and every year Christmas barely happened. My Christmases were always a mess of badly wrapped last-minute presents, a chunk of fruitcake sent home in a doggy bag from my parents’ house, and for the last couple years I haven’t had a tree. I just couldn’t seem to get to Christmas.

“What do you mean, you don’t want a Christmas tree?” Diesel said. “Everyone wants a Christmas tree. If you had a Christmas tree, Santa would bring you stuff... like hair curlers and slut shoes.”

A sigh escaped. “I appreciate your insight into Christmas, but you’re going to have to leave now. I have things to do. I have to work on the Claws case and then later I promised my mother I’d be over to bake Christmas cookies.”

“Not a good plan. Baking cookies doesn’t do a lot for me. I have a better plan. How about we find Claws and then we shop for a tree? And on the way home from the tree shopping we can see if the Titans are playing tonight. Maybe we can catch a hockey game.”

“How do you know about the Titans?”

“I know everything.”

I did yet another eye roll and brushed past him. I
was doing so many eye rolls, they were giving me a headache.

“Okay, so I’ve been to Trenton before,” he said. “You’ve got to stop doing those eye rolls. You’re going to shake something loose in there.”

I’d planned to take a shower, but there was no way I was getting into the shower with a strange man sitting in my living room. “I’m changing my clothes, and then I’m going to work. You aren’t going to pop into my bedroom, are you?”

“Do you want me to?”

“No!”

“Your loss.” He returned to the couch and television. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

An hour later we were in my Honda CRV. Me and Supernatural Man. I hadn’t invited him to ride along with me. He’d simply unlocked the door and gotten into the car.

“Admit it, you’re getting to like me, right?” he asked.

“Wrong. I don’t like you. But, for some unfathomable reason, I’m not totally freaked out.”

“It’s because I’m charming.”

“You are not charming. You’re a jerk.”

He flashed another one of the killer smiles at me. “Yeah, but I’m a charming jerk.”

I was driving and Diesel was riding shotgun, flipping
through my folder on Claws. “So what do we do here, go to his house and drag him out?”

“He’s living with his sister, Elaine Gluck. I stopped by their house yesterday, and his sister said he’d disappeared. I think she knows where he is so I’m going back today to put some pressure on her.”

“Seventy-six years old, and this guy broke into Kreider’s Hardware at two in the morning and stole fifteen hundred dollars worth of power tools and a gallon of Morning Glory yellow paint,” Diesel read. “Got caught on a security camera. What an idiot. Everybody knows you’ve got to wear a ski mask when you pull a job like that. Doesn’t he watch television? Doesn’t he go to the movies?” Diesel pulled out a file photo. “Hold the phone. Is this the guy?”

“Yes.”

Diesel’s face brightened and the smile returned. “And you stopped by his house yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“Are you any good at what you do? Are you good at tracking down people?”

“No. But I’m lucky.”

“Even better,” he said.

“You look like you’ve had a revelation.”

“Big time. The pieces are beginning to fit together.”

“And?”
“Sorry,” he said. “It was one of those personal revelations.”

Sandy Claws and his sister, Elaine Gluck, lived in North Trenton in a neighborhood of small houses, big televisions, and American-made cars. Holiday spirit ran high in Sandy’s neighborhood. Porches were trimmed in colored lights. Electric candles glowed in windows. Postage-stamp front yards were crammed with reindeer, Frosties, and Santas. Sandy Claws’ house was the best, or the worst, depending on your point of view. The house was blanketed in red, green, yellow, and blue Christmas lights, interspersed with waterfalls of tiny white twinkle lights. A lighted sign on the roof blinked the message PEACE ON EARTH. A large plastic Santa and his sleigh were stuffed into the minuscule front yard. And three plastic, five-foot-tall Dickens-era carolers huddled together on the front porch.

“Now this is spirit,” Diesel said. “Nice touch with the blinking lights on the roof.”

“At the risk of being cynical, probably he stole the lights.”

“Not my problem,” Diesel said, opening the car door. “Hold it. Close the door,” I said. “You stay here while I talk to Elaine.”
“And miss out on all the fun? No way.” He angled out of the CRV, and he stood, hands in pockets, on the sidewalk, waiting for me.

“Okay. Fine. Just don’t say anything. Just stand behind me and try to look respectable.”

“You think I don’t look respectable?”

“You have gravy stains on your shirt.”

He looked down at himself. “This is my favorite shirt. It’s real comfy. And they’re not gravy stains. They’re grease stains. I used to work on my bike in this shirt.”

“What kind of bike?”

“Customized Harley. I had a big old cruiser with Python pipes.” He smiled, remembering. “It was sweet.”

“What happened to it?”

“Crashed it.”

“Is that how you got the way you are now? Dead, or something?”

“No. The only thing that died was the bike.”

It was midmorning and the sun was lost behind cloud cover that was the color and texture of bean curd. I was wearing wool socks, thick-soled CAT boots, black jeans, a red plaid flannel shirt over a T-shirt, and a black leather biker jacket. I looked pretty damn tough, in a very cool way . . . and I was freezing my ass off. Diesel was wearing his jacket unzipped and didn’t look the least bit cold.

I crossed the street and rang the doorbell.
Elaine opened the door wide and smiled out at me. She was a couple inches shorter than me and almost as wide as she was tall. She was maybe seventy years old. Her hair was snow white, cut short and curled. She had apple cheeks and bright blue eyes. And she smelled like gingerbread cookies. “Hello, dear,” she said, “how nice to see you again.” She looked to the side where Diesel was lurking and gasped. “Oh my,” she said, red scald rising from her neck to her cheek. “You startled me. I didn’t see you standing there at first.”

“I’m with Ms. Plum,” Diesel said. “I’m her . . . assistant.”

“Goodness.”

“Is Sandy at home?” I asked.

“I’m afraid not,” she said. “He’s very busy at this time of year. Sometimes I don’t see him for days on end. He owns a toy store, you know. And toy stores are very busy at Christmas.”

I knew the toy store. It was a shabby little store in a strip mall in Hamilton Township. “I stopped by the store yesterday,” I said. “It was closed.”

“Sandy must have been busy running errands. Sometimes he closes down to run errands.”

“Elaine, you used this house as collateral to bond out your brother. If Sandy doesn’t appear in court, my employer will seize this house.”
Elaine continued to smile. “I’m sure your employer wouldn’t do a mean thing like that. Sandy and I just moved here, but already we love this house. We wallpapered the bathroom last week. It looks lovely.”

Oh boy. This was going to be a disaster. If I don’t bring Claws in, I don’t get paid and I look like a big failure. If I threaten and intimidate Elaine into ratting on her brother, I feel like a jerk. Better to be after a crazed killer who’s hated by everyone, including his mother. Of course, crazed killers tend to shoot at bounty hunters, and getting shot at isn’t high on my list of favorite activities.

“I smell gingerbread,” Diesel said to Elaine. “I bet you’re baking cookies.”

“I bake cookies every day,” she told him. “Yesterday I made sugar cookies with colored sprinkles and today I’m making gingerbread.”

“I love gingerbread,” Diesel said. He slid past Elaine and found his way to her kitchen. He selected a cookie from a plate heaped with cookies, took a bite, and smiled. “I bet you add vinegar to your cookie dough.”

“It’s my secret ingredient,” Elaine said.

“So where is the old guy?” Diesel asked. “Where’s Sandy?”

“He’s probably at his workshop. He makes a lot of his own toys, you know.”
Diesel wandered to the back door and looked out.
“And where’s the workshop?”
“There’s a small workshop behind the store. And then there’s the main workshop. I don’t know exactly where the main workshop is. I’ve never been there. I’m always too busy with the cookies.”
“Is it in Trenton?” Diesel asked.
Elaine looked thoughtful. “Isn’t that something?” she said. “I don’t know. Sandy talks about the toys and about the labor problem, but I can’t remember him ever talking about the workshop.”
Diesel took a cookie for the road, thanked Elaine, and we left.
“Want some of my cookie?” Diesel asked, the cookie held between perfect white teeth while he clicked the seat belt into place.
“I do not.”
He had a nice voice. Slightly husky and hinting of a smile. His eyes fit the voice. I really hated that I liked the voice and the eyes. My life is already complicated by two men. One is my mentor and tormentor, a Cuban-American bounty hunter/businessman named Ranger. He was currently out of town. No one knew where he was or when he’d return. This was normal. The other man in my life is a Trenton cop named Joe Morelli. When I was a kid, Morelli lured me into his
father’s garage and taught me how to play choochoo. I was the tunnel and Morelli was the train, if you get the picture. When I was a teen working at Tasty Pastry Bakery, Morelli sweet-talked me onto the floor after hours and performed a more adult version of choochoo behind the éclair case. We’ve both grown up some since then. The attraction is still there. It’s been enhanced by genuine affection . . . maybe even love. We haven’t totally mastered trust and the ability to commit. I really didn’t need a third potentially nonhuman guy in my life.

“I bet you’re worried about the way those jeans are fitting, right?” Diesel asked. “Afraid to add cookie calories?”

“Wrong! My jeans fit just fine.” I didn’t want a cookie with Diesel spit on it. I mean, what do I know about him? And okay, so my jeans actually were a little tight. Yeesh.

He bit off the gingerbread man’s head. “What’s next? Does Claws have kids we can interrogate? I think I’m getting the hang of this.”

“No kids. I ran a check on him, and he has no relatives in the area. Same with Elaine. She’s widowed with no children.”

“That must be hard on Elaine. A woman gets those urges, you know.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Urges?”
“Who are you?”
“That’s a good question,” Diesel said. “I’m not sure I fully know the answer to that. Do any of us truly know who we are?”

Great. Now he’s a philosopher.
“Don’t you have maternal urges?” he asked. “Don’t you hear that biological clock ticking? Tick, tick, tick,” he said, smiling again, having some fun with it.
“I have a hamster.”
“Hey, you couldn’t ask for more than that. Hamsters are cool. Personally, I think kids are overrated.”

I was getting an eye twitch. I put my finger to my eye to stop the fluttering. “I’d rather not get into this right now.”

Diesel held his hands up. “No problemo. Don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

Yeah, right.
“Back to the big manhunt. Have you got a plan here?” he asked.
“I’m going back to the store. I didn’t realize there was a workshop attached.”

Twenty minutes later we stood at the front door to the store, staring at the small, handwritten cardboard sign in the window. CLOSED. Diesel put his hand to the doorknob and the locks tumbled open.
“Pretty impressive, hunh?” he said.
“Pretty illegal.”
He pushed the door open. “You’re a real spoilsport, you know that?”
We both squinted into the dark. The only windows were the small panes of glass in the door. The shop was about the size of a two-car garage. Diesel closed the door behind us and flipped a light switch. Two overhead fluorescent fixtures buzzed on and threw a dim, flickering light across the interior.
“Boy, this is cheery,” Diesel said. “This would make me want to buy toys. Right after I poked my eye out and slit my throat.”
The walls were lined with shelves, but the shelves were empty, and train sets, board games, dolls, action figures, and stuffed animals were all jumbled together on the floor.
“This is strange,” I said. “Why are the toys on the floor?”
Diesel looked around the room. “Maybe someone had a temper tantrum.” An ancient cash register sat on a small counter. Diesel punched a key and the register opened. “Seven dollars and fifty cents,” he said. “Don’t think Sandy does much business.” He walked the length of the store and tested the back door. The door was unlocked. He opened the door and we both peeked into the
back room. “Not much to see here, either,” Diesel said.

There were a couple of long, metal folding tables and several metal folding chairs. Crude wood toys in various stages of completion cluttered the tables. Most were clunky carved animals and even clunkier carved trains. The train cars were connected by large hooks and eyes.

“Look around for something that might have the address of the other workshop,” I said. “It might be printed on a shipping label or box. Or maybe there’s a scrap of paper with a phone number.”

We worked both rooms, but we didn’t find an address or phone number. The only item in the trash was a crumpled bakery bag from Baldanno’s. Sandy Claws had a sweet tooth. The store didn’t have a phone. None had been listed on the bond agreement and we didn’t see any on site. The bond agreement also didn’t list a cell phone. That didn’t guarantee that one didn’t exist.

We left the store, locking the front door behind us. We stood beside my CRV in the parking lot and looked back. “Do you notice anything odd about this store?” I asked Diesel.

“No name,” Diesel said. “There’s just a door with a small cutout of a wooden soldier on it.”

“What kind of a toy store doesn’t have a name?”

“If you look closely you can see where the sign was torn off,” Diesel said. “It used to hang above the door.”
“Probably this is a front for a numbers operation.”

Diesel shook his head. “It would have phones. It would probably have a computer. There’d be ashtrays and cigarette butts.”

I raised my eyebrows at him.

“I watch television,” he said.


“Boy, that really hurts. You don’t want me to meet your parents.”

“It’s not like we’re going steady.”

“My assignment is to bring you some Christmas cheer, and I take my job very seriously.”

I gave him disgusted. “You do not take your job seriously. You told me you don’t even like Christmas.”

“I was caught by surprise. It’s not usually my gig. But I’m starting to get into it. Can’t you tell? Don’t I look more cheery?”

“I’m not going to get rid of you, am I?”

He rocked back on his heels, hands in jacket pockets, a large grin firmly in place. “No.”

I blew out a sigh, put the car into gear, and pulled out of the lot. It wasn’t a far ride to my parents’ house in the Burg. The Burg is short for Chambersburg, a small residential community that sits on the edge of
Trenton proper. I was born and raised in the Burg and I’ll be a Burger for life. I’ve tried moving away, but I can’t seem to get far enough.

Like most houses in the Burg, my parents’ house is a small two-story clapboard built on a small, narrow lot. And like many houses in the Burg, the house shares a common wall with an identical house. Mabel Markowitz owns the house that adjoins my parents’ house. She lives there alone, now that her husband has passed on. She keeps her windows clean, she plays bingo twice a week at the senior center, and she squeezes thirteen cents out of every dime.

I parked at the curb and Diesel looked at the two houses. Mrs. Markowitz’s house was painted a bilious green. She had a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary in her tiny front yard and she’d put a pot of plastic red poinsettias next to the Virgin. A lone candle had been placed in her front window. My parents’ house was painted yellow and brown and was decorated with a string of colored lights across the front of the house. A big old plastic Santa, his red suit sun-bleached to pale pink, had been set up in my parents’ front yard, in direct competition with Mrs. Markowitz’s Virgin. My mother had electric candles in all the windows and a wreath on the front door.

“Holy crap,” Diesel said. “This is a car crash.”
I had to agree with him. The houses were fascinating in their awfulness. Even worse, they were a comfort. They’d looked exactly like this for as long as I could remember. I couldn’t imagine them looking any other way. When I was fourteen Mrs. Markowitz’s Virgin had gotten beaned with a baseball and some of her head had chipped away, but that didn’t stop the Virgin from blessing the house. She stood stalwart through wind and rain and sleet and storm with a chipped head. Just as Santa faded and dented but returned each year.

Grandma Mazur was behind my parents’ glass storm door, looking out at us. Grandma Mazur lives with my parents now that Grampa Mazur’s eating pork rinds and deep-fried peanut butter sandwiches with Elvis. Grandma Mazur’s mostly spindle bone and slack skin. She keeps her gray hair curled tight to her head and carries a .45 long barrel in her purse. The concept of growing old gracefully has never taken hold with Grandma.

Grandma opened the door when I approached with Diesel. “Who’s this?” she asked, eyeballing Diesel. “I didn’t know you were bringing a new man over. Look at me. I’m not even dressed up. And what about Joseph? What happened to him?”

“Who’s Joseph?” Diesel wanted to know.

“He’s her boyfriend,” Grandma Mazur said. “Joseph
Morelli. He’s a Trenton cop. He’s supposed to be coming over later for dinner on account of it’s Sunday.”

Diesel grinned down at me. “You didn’t tell me you had a boyfriend.”

I introduced Diesel to my mom, Grandma Mazur, and my dad.

“What’s with men and ponytails?” my father said. “Girls are supposed to have long hair. Men are supposed to have short hair.”

“What about Jesus?” Grandma asked. “He had long hair.”

“This guy isn’t Jesus,” my father said. He stuck his hand out to Diesel. “Nice to meet you. What are you, one of them wrestlers or something?”

“No sir, I’m not a wrestler,” Diesel said, smiling.

“They’re sports entertainers,” Grandma said. “Only some of them are real good at wrestling, like Kurt Angle and Lance Storm.”

“Lance Storm?” my father said. “What kind of a name is that?”

“It’s one of those Canadian names,” Grandma said. “He’s a cutie, too.”

Diesel looked at me and the smile widened. “I love your family.”