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TWO

A STEPHANIE PLUM NOVEL

FOR THE

DOUGH

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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 tones 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 x 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," Rangersaid.

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 naivete.

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 a round 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 unpleasantries."

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 some 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 walking 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.

Probably I was right about it being too late for Kenny to show, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to hang out a little longer and make sure. I snapped the top on the Jeep so I wouldn't be so visible, and slouched back to wait. It wasn't nearly as good a vantage point as the hydrangea bush, but it was okay for my purposes. If Kenny appeared, I'd call Ranger on my cellular phone. I wasn't anxious to do a single-handed capture of a guy going down for grievous wounding.

After ten minutes a small hatchback passed by the Cenetta house. I slunk down in my seat and the car continued on. A few minutes later, it reappeared. It stopped in front of the Cape Cod. The driver beeped the horn. Julia Cenetta ran out and jumped into the passenger seat.

I rolled my engine over when they were half a block away, but waited for them to turn the corner before I hit the lights. We were on the edge of the burg, in a residential pocket of moderately priced single-family houses. There was no traffic, making it easier to spot a tail, so I stayed far behind. The hatchback connected with Hamilton and headed east. I hung tight, closing the gap now that the road was more traveled. I held this position until Julia and friend pulled into a mall lot and parked on the dark fringe.

The lot was empty at this time of night. No place for a nosy bounty hunter to hide. I cut my lights and eased into a parking place at the opposite end. I retrieved binoculars from the backseat and trained them on the car.

I almost jumped out of my shoes when someone rapped on my driver-side door.

It was Joe Morelli, enjoying the fact that he'd been able to catch me by surprise and scare the heck out of me.

"You need a night scope," he said affably. "You're not going to see anything at this distance in the dark."

"I haven't got a night scope, and what are you doing here anyway?"

"I followed you. Figured you'd watch for Kenny a while longer. You're not very good at this law enforcement stuff, but you're freaking lucky, and you've got the temperament of a pit bull with a soup bone when you're on a case."

Not a flattering assessment, but dead accurate. "You on good terms with Kenny?"

Morelli shrugged. "Don't know him all that well."

"So you wouldn't want to drive over there and say hello."

"Hate to ruin Julia's good time if it isn't Kenny."

We were both staring at the truck, and even without a night scope we could see it had begun to rock. Rhythmic grunting sounds and whimpers carried across the empty lot.

I resisted the urge to squirm in my seat.

"Damn," Morelli said. "If they don't pace themselves they're going to kill the shocks on that little car."

The car stopped rocking, the motor caught, and the lights flashed on.

"Jeez," I said. "That didn't take long."

Morelli hustled around to the passenger seat. "Must have gotten a head start on the way over. Wait until he hits the road before you use your lights."

"That's a great idea, but I can't see without my lights."

"You're in a parking lot. What's to see besides three acres of unobstructed m acadam?"

I crept forward a little.

"You're losing him," Morelli said. "Step on it."

I pushed it up to 20, squinting into the darkness, swearing at Morelli that I couldn't see jackshit.

He made chicken sounds, and I mashed the gas pedal to the floor.

There was a loud wump, and the Wrangler bucked out of control. I slammed my foot to the brake and the car came to a sudden stop with the left side tilted at a 30 degree angle.

Morelli got out to take a look. "You're hung up on a safety island," he said.

"Back up, and you should be okay."

I eased off the island and rolled several feet. The car pulled hard to the left.

Morelli did the take-a-look thing again while I thrashed around in the driver's seat, sputtering and fuming and berating myself for listening to Morelli.

"Tough break," Morelli said, leaning into the open window. "You bent your rim when you hit the curb. You got road service?"

"You did this on purpose. You didn't want me to catch your rotten cousin."

"Hey, cupcake, don't blame me just because you made some bad driving decisions."

"You're scum, Morelli. Scum."