

**GOING
ROGUE**

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Stephanie Plum. I'm a bail bonds enforcement agent, working for my cousin Vinnie, and I'm currently locked out of the bail bonds office. It's nine in the morning in Trenton, New Jersey. It's October. It's Monday. Everything is good in my world except the office is closed and the lights are off. This is a first because the office manager, Connie Rosolli, is always at her desk by now.

A red Firebird pulled to the curb behind my blue Honda CR-V. Lula got out of the Firebird and walked over to me. Lula is a former hooker who now works for Vinnie doing whatever the heck she wants. At five feet five inches she's two inches shorter than I am. She's a smidgeon younger, her skin is a lot darker, and she's a bunch of pounds heavier. Her hair was yellow today, with braided extensions that hung halfway down her back. She was

wearing a black sweater that was two sizes too small and fuchsia spandex tights.

I was wearing jeans, and a sweatshirt over a T-shirt, and because I was wearing sneakers and Lula was wearing six-inch stiletto heels, she had me by a couple inches.

“What the heck?” Lula asked.

“The office is locked,” I said, “and Connie’s car isn’t here.”

“Did you check the lot in the back?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, this is just wrong,” Lula said. “She’s supposed to be here. She brings the doughnuts. What am I supposed to do without my doughnuts?”

Connie is in her midthirties and lives with her widowed mother. The living arrangement isn’t ideal for Connie, but she’s a good Italian Catholic girl and family takes care of family. I called Connie’s cell phone and didn’t get an answer, so I called her house phone.

Mama Rosolli answered on the second ring. “Who’s this?” she asked.

“It’s Stephanie Plum,” I said. “Is Connie there?”

“She’s at work. She left extra early today so she could get gas and some lottery tickets. I was still in my robe and nightgown when she was going out the door.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks.”

“And?” Lula asked when I hung up.

“She’s not home. Her mother said she left early to get gas and lottery tickets.”

I dialed Vinnie.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Connie isn’t here. Have you heard from her?”

“No. She’s supposed to be there. She’s always there.”

“Not today,” I said. “The office is locked, and the lights are off.”

“You’re calling me, why?”

“I thought you might want to open the office for us.”

“You thought wrong. I’m in Atlantic City with Big Datucci and Mickey Maroney. We’re waiting on Harry.”

Harry the Hammer is Vinnie’s father-in-law. He owns the agency, and he owns Vinnie.

“Go to the back door,” Vinnie said. “There’s a key under the brick by the dumpster.”

The bail bonds office is a one-story storefront on Hamilton Avenue. It’s squashed between a dry cleaner and a mystery bookshop, and it’s across the street from the Burg. I grew up in the Burg, and my parents still live there. Houses are small. Cars and televisions are large. Most of the residents are hardworking, overfed, and underpaid. They’re staunch believers in the First and Second Amendments, the sanctity of football and baseball, a first-class funeral, homemade marinara, stuffed cabbage, white bread, grilled anything, and cannoli from Italian Peoples Bakery.

Lula and I walked around the block to the alley behind the bonds office. We found the key under the brick, opened the back door, and entered the storeroom.

For the most part, bail bonds are secured by real estate, vehicles, bank accounts, and pawnable items like weapons, electronics, and jewelry. Vinnie has been known to accept other items of questionable value that appeal to his own personal

interests—such as unusual sex toys, high-quality pot, whips of any sort, desirable seats for the Mets or the Rangers, and nooners from fancy ladies, and he once took possession of an aging racehorse. All these odds and ends find their temporary homes in the storeroom. Small items are kept in multi-drawer metal cabinets. Medium-sized items are tagged and crammed onto rows of shelves. The racehorse was kept in Vinnie's backyard until the neighbors complained.

Lula walked through the storeroom to the small alcove that served as a kitchenette.

"There's no coffee brewing," she said. "I'm not supposed to start my day like this. I got a routine. My morning has expectations, if you see what I'm saying."

I was more concerned about the storeroom than the coffee machine. Some of the cabinet drawers weren't completely closed and the items stashed on the shelves had been shoved around.

"Were you looking for something in the storeroom over the weekend?" I asked Lula.

"Nuh-uh, not me," Lula said. "I only was here for a couple hours on Saturday."

I told myself that Connie was probably in a rush to find something, but I only halfway believed it. It wasn't normal behavior for Connie to leave the storeroom like this.

"I know the gas station Connie uses," I said to Lula. "You stay here and man the desk, and I'll see if I can track her down."

"Get doughnuts on your way back," Lula said. "Make sure you get a Boston cream for me."

Connie lives on the outskirts of the Burg and gets gas on State Street. I took Hamilton to State and turned left. I pulled into the

gas station, bypassed the pumps, and parked in front of the gas station minimart. I didn't see Connie's car, so I went inside and asked the cashier if she'd seen Connie.

"A couple inches shorter than me," I said to the cashier. "Lots of dark brown hair, lots of eyebrows, lots of mascara, about my age. She was going to get lottery tickets this morning."

"Yeah, she was here," the cashier said. "She's chesty, right?"

"Right. I was supposed to meet her, but she didn't show up," I said. "Did she say anything about where she was going?"

"No. She got her lottery tickets and left."

I drove to the bakery, got a box of doughnuts, and returned to the office.

"Did you find her?" Lula asked.

"No." I set the doughnut box on Connie's desk. "She got lottery tickets at the gas station. And I found out that she got doughnuts at the bakery."

"What? She got doughnuts? I don't see no Connie's doughnuts. I don't even see no fresh powdered sugar or chocolate icing smudges anywhere on her desk. Where'd she go with my doughnut after she left the bakery? There's something wrong here." Lula looked in the box I had just put in front of her. "There's no Boston cream."

"They were sold out."

"Damn."

We hung out in the office eating doughnuts and drinking coffee. An hour went by and there was still no Connie.

"Maybe you should check her email," I said to Lula.

"Why me?" Lula asked.

"You're sitting in her chair."

“Okay, I guess that makes sense, but how am I going to do that? She’s got a password.”

“She keeps all her passwords in a notebook in the bottom drawer with her office gun.”

Lula opened the drawer and pulled the book out. “She’s got a lot of passwords,” Lula said, paging through. “I could see where her life is unnecessarily complicated. I only have one password. I use it for everything, so I don’t need a book like this.”

“That’s frowned on in the world of cybersecurity.”

Lula blew out a raspberry. “That’s what I think of cybersecurity.” She found the password, typed it in, and the computer came alive. She opened email and scrolled through a bunch of messages. “Here’s a court report,” she said. “It looks like three idiots failed to appear for their hearings on Friday. I’ll print them out for you.”

The deal is that when someone is arrested and doesn’t want to sit around in a cell until his court date, he’s required to post a cash bond. If he doesn’t have the money, he gets it from a bail bondsman like Vinnie. If he fails to appear when his hearing is scheduled, Vinnie is out big bucks unless I can find the FTA and bring him back into the system.

I took the printouts from Lula and paged through them. Brad Winter was a no-show on a blackmail charge. It carried a high bond. Carpenter Beedle tried to rob an armored truck and accidentally shot himself in the foot. Also a high bond. Bellissima Morelli was charged with arson, resisting arrest, and assaulting a police officer.

“Holy cow,” I said. “This last one is Joe’s grandmother.”

Lula leaned forward to get a better look at the file. “Say what? I wasn’t paying that close attention.”

When I was five years old and Joe Morelli was six, we played choo-choo in his father’s garage. This wasn’t an entirely rewarding experience because I was always the tunnel and I wanted to be the train. When I was seventeen, I volunteered my virginity to Morelli in a moment of passion and prurient curiosity. The outcome was only marginally better than choo-choo, and Morelli walked away from it without so much as a follow-up phone call. Two years later I saw him strolling down the sidewalk in Trenton. I jumped the curb and clipped him with my father’s Buick, relieved that I finally had a satisfying encounter with the jerk. Our relationship has improved since then. He’s a Trenton cop now, working plainclothes in crimes against persons. He’s a good cop, he’s become a good friend, and he’s made a lot of progress on the choo-choo game. I suppose you could say that he’s my boyfriend, although the term seems insufficient for our relationship.

“Isn’t Bella the one who dresses in black like an extra in a Mafia movie about Sicily?” Lula asked.

“Yes.”

“And she puts *the eye* on people and makes their teeth fall out and they poop their pants?”

“Yes.”

“Well good thing I’m working the desk this morning and you’re the bounty hunter,” Lula said. “I wouldn’t want to be the one who has to haul her bony ass back to jail. She creeps me out.”

I left Lula at the office, and I drove to my parents' house. The easiest and most reliable way for me to get information on anyone in the Burg is to talk to my Grandma Mazur. She shops at Giovichinni's Deli and the Italian Peoples and Tasty Pastry bakeries. She goes to bingo twice a week, and she regularly attends Mass at the Catholic Church and viewings at Stiva's Funeral Home. The Burg gossip mill is in full force at all these gatherings. Several years ago, Grandpa Mazur succumbed to a full-fat diet and two packs of Lucky Strikes a day, so Grandma moved in with my parents. My father survives this invasion by spending a lot of time at his lodge, and my mom has developed a relationship with Jack Daniel's.

My parents still live in my childhood home. It's a small duplex that's attached to another duplex. The inside of the house is packed with comfortable, overstuffed furniture and a lot of memories. Three tiny bedrooms and one bath upstairs; living room, dining room, kitchen downstairs. The front door opens to a small foyer that leads to the living room. There's a back door in the kitchen, and beyond the back door is a small, rarely used backyard and a single-car garage.

It was midmorning, and I knew I would find my mom and Grandma in the kitchen. I look a lot like my mom, but my brown hair is longer and curlier than hers, my blue eyes are a shade deeper, and my body is a little slimmer. Grandma looks like my mom and me, but gravity has taken its toll on Grandma. It's as if she was partially melted and then got frozen into a new semi-gelatinous shape where things like breasts and cheeks hang a lot lower than they used to.

My mom was mixing something in a big bowl, and Grandma

was at the little kitchen table, doing the day's Jumble. I looked in the bowl and grimaced.

"Meatloaf," my mom said. "Turkey, sirloin, and pork. Giovichinni ground it up for me fresh this morning."

"It's mostly turkey," Grandma said, "on account of your father's cholesterol is high. He had to cut back on either beef or full-fat ice cream, and he didn't want to give up the ice cream." She leaned to the left in her seat and looked behind me. "Where's your sidekick, Lula?"

"Connie isn't in the office this morning, so Lula's manning the desk." I dropped my messenger bag on the floor and sat at the table with Grandma. "Remember when Manny Tortolli's garage burned down last month?"

"Yeah, it was a beauty of a fire," Grandma said. "I was watching TV and I heard the trucks go past our house, so I went out to look. You could see the flames shooting up into the sky."

"Morelli's Grandma Bella was charged with arson for that fire," I said.

"She was standing on the sidewalk holding an empty one-gallon metal can that used to have kerosene in it. And she was yelling, 'Burn, baby, burn!' at the garage," Grandma said. "I got it all straight from Emily Mizner. Her boy was one of the first cops to get there. He tried to calm crazy Bella down, and she hit him with the empty can and gave him *the eye*. Now he's got boils all over him, even on his private parts."

"Vinnie posted Bella's bail bond, and she didn't show up for her court appearance on Friday," I said. "The failure-to-appear notice came into the office this morning."

My mother stopped mixing and stared at me. "Don't even

think about going after her. She's a lunatic. Let Joseph bring her in."

My mom is the only one on the planet who calls Morelli by his first name. Sometimes I call him Joe, but never Joseph.

"It's hard to believe she could give someone boils just by pulling her lower eyelid down and glaring at him," I said to my mom.

"Emily told me they weren't ordinary boils," Grandma said. "According to Emily, they're huge. *Gigantic* and oozing pus. She called them the Devil's boils."

"Forget the boils," my mother said to me. "Crazy Bella set fire to Manny Tortolli's garage! She's dangerous. You don't want to get anywhere near her."

Truth is, I've gone after people who were a lot more dangerous than Bella. I've taken down killers, rapists, and serial mooners. Not that I wanted to trivialize Bella. I mean, who's to say if she's for real? What I knew was that I didn't want to have to tackle my boyfriend's grandmother and wrestle her to the ground so I could cuff her, and I didn't want boils on my private parts.

"That Bella is a mean one," Grandma said. "She thinks she owns the Burg. If you have any problems with her, let me know. I'm not afraid of her. She's just a big bag of wind with no fashion sense. She's been wearing that same dumpy black dress for twenty years. Who else are you looking for? Anybody interesting?"

"Brad Winter. Lives in North Trenton. And Carpenter Beedle."

"I read about Carpenter Beedle. He's the one who shot himself while he was trying to rob an armored truck. I wouldn't mind seeing what he's about."

"Are you staying for lunch?" my mom asked.

I stood up. "No. Gotta go. Work to do."

“If you’re leaving now, you can give me a ride,” Grandma said. “Your mother’s up to her elbows in meatloaf and I need shampoo. I like the kind they sell at the hair salon. I just need to get my purse and a jacket.”

Three minutes later we were in my car.

“Okay,” Grandma said. “I’m all set. I say we go after Beedle first. It’s not like he can outrun us since his foot got shot up.”

“I thought you needed shampoo.”

“That was a ruse to get out of the house. You’re missing your wingman, so I’m gonna fill in.”

Just when you think your day can’t get any worse, there it is, yet another disaster. Not of the magnitude of Connie going missing, but a disaster all the same.