

HIGH FIVE

CHAPTER ONE

When I was a little girl I used to dress Barbie up without underpants. On the outside, she'd look like the perfect lady. Tasteful plastic heels, tailored suit. But underneath, she was naked. I'm a bail enforcement agent now -- also known as a fugitive apprehension agent, also known as a bounty hunter. I bring 'em back dead or alive. At least I try. And being a bail enforcement agent is sort of like being bare-bottom Barbie. It's about having a secret. And it's about wearing a lot of bravado on the outside when you're really operating without underpants. Okay, maybe it's not like that for all enforcement agents, but I frequently feel like my privates are alfresco. Figuratively speaking, of course.

At the moment I wasn't feeling nearly so vulnerable. What I was feeling at the moment was desperate. My rent was due, and Trenton had run out of scofflaws. I had my hands palms down on Connie Rosolli's desk, my feet planted wide, and hard as I tried, I couldn't keep my voice from sounding like it was coming out of Minnie Mouse. "What do you mean there are no FTAs? There are always FTAs."

"Sorry," Connie said. "We've got lots of bonds posted, but nobody's jumping. Must have something to do with the moon."

FTA is short for failure to appear for a court date. Going FTA is a definite no-no in the criminal justice system, but that doesn't usually stop people from doing it.

Connie slid a manila folder over to me. "This is the only FTA I've got, and it's not worth much."

Connie is the office manager for Vincent Plum Bail Bonds. She's a couple years older than me, which puts her in her early thirties. She wears her hair teased high. She takes grief from no one. And if breasts were money Connie'd be Bill Gates.

"Vinnie's overjoyed," Connie said. "He's making money by the fistful. No bounty hunters to pay. No forfeited bonds. Last time I saw Vinnie in a mood like this was when Madame Zaretsky was arrested for pandering and sodomy and put her trained dog up as collateral for her bond."

I cringed at the mental image this produced because not only is Vincent Plum my employer, he's also my cousin. I blackmailed him into taking me on as an apprehension agent at a low moment in my life and have come to sort of like the job ...most of the time. That doesn't mean I have any illusions about Vinnie. For the most part, Vinnie is an okay bondsman. But privately, Vinnie is a boil on the backside of my family tree.

As a bail bondsman Vinnie gives the court a cash bond as a securement that the accused will return for trial. If the accused takes a hike, Vinnie

forfeits his money. Since this isn't an appealing prospect to Vinnie, he sends me out to find the accused and drag him back into the system. My fee is ten percent of the bond, and I only collect it if I'm successful.

I flipped the folder open and read the bond agreement. "Randy Briggs. Arrested for carrying concealed. Failed to appear at his court hearing." The bond amount was seven hundred dollars. That meant I'd get seventy. Not a lot of money for risking my life by going after someone who was known to carry.

"I don't know," I said to Connie, "this guy carries a knife."

Connie looked at her copy of Briggs' arrest sheet. "It says here it was a small knife, and it wasn't sharp."

"How small?"

"Eight inches."

"That isn't small!"

"Nobody else will take this," Connie said. "Ranger doesn't take anything under ten grand." Ranger is my mentor and a world-class tracker. Ranger also never seems to be in dire need of rent money. Ranger has other sources of income.

I looked at the photo attached to Briggs' file. Briggs didn't look so bad. In his forties, narrow-faced and balding, Caucasian. Job description was listed as self-employed computer programmer.

I gave a sigh of resignation and stuffed the folder into my shoulder bag. "I'll go talk to him."

"Probably he just forgot," Connie said. "Probably this is a piece of cake."

I gave her my yeah, right look and left. It was Monday morning and traffic was humming past Vinnie's store front office. The October sky was as blue as sky gets in New Jersey, and the air felt crisp and lacking hydrocarbons. It was nice for a change, but it kind of took all the sport out of breathing.

A new red Firebird slid to curbside behind my '53 Buick. Lula got out of the car and stood hands on hips, shaking her head. "Girl, you still driving that pimp mobile?"

Lula did filing for Vinnie and knew all about pimp mobiles first hand since in a former life she'd been a 'ho. She's what is gently referred to as a big woman, weighing in at a little over 200 pounds, standing five-foot-five, looking like most of her weight's muscle. This week her hair was dyed orange and came off very autumn with her dark brown skin.

"This is a classic car," I told Lula. Like we both knew I really gave a fig about classic cars. I was driving The Beast because my Honda had caught fire and burned to a cinder, and I didn't have any money to replace it. So here I was, borrowing my Uncle Sandor's gas guzzling behemoth ...again.

"Problem is, you aren't living up to your earning potential," Lula said. "We only got chicken shit cases these days. What you need is to have a serial killer or a homicidal rapist jump bail. Those boys are worth something."

"Yeah, I'd sure like to get a case like that." Big fib. If Vinnie ever gave me

a homicidal rapist to chase down I'd quit and get a job selling shoes.

Lula marched into the office, and I slid behind the wheel and reread the Briggs file. Randy Briggs had given the same address for home and work. Cloverleaf Apartments on Grand Avenue. It wasn't far from the office. Maybe a mile. I pulled into traffic, made an illegal U-turn at the intersection, and followed Hamilton to Grand.

The Cloverleaf Apartments building was two blocks down Grand. It was red brick faced and strictly utilitarian. Three stories. A front and a back entrance. Small lot to the rear. No ornamentation. Aluminum-framed windows that were popular in the fifties and looked cheesy now.

I parked in the lot and walked into the small lobby. There was an elevator to one side and stairs to the other. The elevator looked claustrophobic and unreliable, so I took the stairs to the second floor. Briggs was 2B. I stood outside his door for a moment, listening. Nothing drifted out. No television. No talking. I pressed the doorbell and stood to the side, so I wasn't visible through the security peep hole.

Randy Briggs opened his door and stuck his head out. "Yeah?"

He looked exactly like his photo, with sandy blond hair that was neatly combed, cut short. He was unbearded, unblemished. Dressed in clean khakis and a button-down shirt. Just like I'd expected from his file ...except he was only three feet tall. Randy Briggs was vertically challenged.

"Oh shit," I said, looking down at him.

"What's the matter?" he said. "You never see a short person before?"

"Only on television."

"Guess this is your lucky day."

I handed him my business card. "I represent Vincent Plum Bail Bonds. You've missed your court date, and we'd appreciate it if you'd reschedule."

"No," Briggs said.

"Excuse me?"

"No. I'm not going to reschedule. No. I'm not going to court. It was a bogus arrest."

"The way our system works is that you're supposed to tell that to the judge."

"Fine. Go get the judge."

"The judge doesn't do house calls."

"Listen, I got a lot of work to do," Briggs said, closing his door. "I gotta go."

"Hold it!" I said. "You can't just ignore an order to appear in court."

"Watch me."

"You don't understand. I'm appointed by the court and Vincent Plum to bring you in."

"Oh yeah? How do you expect to do that? You going to shoot me? You can't shoot an unarmed man." He stuck his hands out. "You gonna cuff me? You think you can drag me out of my apartment and down the hall without

looking like an idiot? Big bad bounty hunter picking on a little person. And that's what we're called, Toots. Not midget, not dwarf, not a freaking Munchkin. Little person. Get it?"

My pager went off at my waist. I looked down to check the read-out and slam. Briggs closed and locked his door.

"Loser," he called from inside.

Well, that didn't go as smoothly as I'd hoped. I had a choice now. I could break down his door and beat the bejeezus out of him, or I could answer my mother's page. Neither was especially appealing, but I decided on my mother.

My parents live in a residential pocket of Trenton nicknamed the Burg. No one ever really leaves the Burg. You can relocate in Antarctica, but if you were born and raised in the Burg you're a Burger for life. Houses are small and obsessively neat. Televisions are large and loud. Lots are narrow. Families are extended. There are no pooper-scooper laws in the Burg. If your dog does his business on someone else's lawn, the next morning the doodoo will be on your front porch. Life is simple in the Burg.

I put the Buick into gear, rolled out of the apartment building lot, headed for Hamilton, and followed Hamilton to St. Francis Hospital. My parents live a couple blocks behind St. Francis on Roosevelt Street. Their house is a duplex built at a time when families needed only one bathroom and dishes were washed by hand.

My mother was at the door when I pulled to the curb. My grandmother Mazur stood elbow to elbow with my mother. They were short, slim women with facial features that suggested Mongol ancestors ...probably in the form of crazed marauders.

"Thank goodness you're here," my mother said, eyeing me as I got out of the car and walked toward her. "What are those shoes? They look like work boots."

"Betty Szajak and Emma Getz and me went to that male dancer place last week," Grandma said, "and they had some men parading around, looking like construction workers, wearing boots just like those. Then next thing you knew they ripped their clothes off and all they had left was those boots and these little silky black baggie things that their ding-dongs jiggled around in."

My mother pressed her lips together and made the sign of the cross. "You didn't tell me about this," she said to my grandmother.

"Guess it slipped my mind. Betty and Emma and me were going to Bingo at the church, but it turned out there wasn't any Bingo on account of the Knights of Columbus was holding some to-do there. So we decided to check out the men at that new club downtown." Grandma gave me an elbow. "I put a fiver right in one of those baggies!"

"Jesus H. Christ," my father said, rattling his paper in the living room.

Grandma Mazur came to live with my parents several years ago when my Grandpa Mazur went to the big poker game in the sky. My mother accepts

this as a daughter's obligation. My father has taken to reading Guns & Ammo.

"So what's up?" I asked. "Why did you page me?"

"We need a detective," Grandma said.

My mother rolled her eyes and ushered me in to the kitchen. "Have a cookie," she said, setting the cookie jar on the small Formica-topped kitchen table. "Can I get you a glass of milk? Some lunch?"

I lifted the lid on the cookie jar and looked inside. Chocolate chip. My favorite.

"Tell her," Grandma said to my mother, giving her a poke in the side.

"Wait until you hear this," she said to me. "This is a good one."

I raised my eyebrows at my mother.

"We have a family problem," my mother said. "Your Uncle Fred is missing. He went out to the store and hasn't come home yet."

"When did he go out?"

"Friday."

I paused with a cookie halfway to my mouth. "It's Monday!"

"Isn't this a pip?" Grandma said. "I bet he was beamed up by aliens."

Uncle Fred is married to my Grandma Mazur's first cousin Mabel. If I had to guess his age I'd have to say somewhere between seventy and infinity. Once people start to stoop and wrinkle they all look alike to me. Uncle Fred was someone I saw at weddings and funerals and once in awhile at Giovichinni's Meat Market, ordering a quarter pound of olive loaf. Eddie Such, the butcher, would have the olive loaf on the scale and Uncle Fred would say, "You've got the olive loaf on a piece of waxed paper. How much does that piece of waxed paper weigh? You're not gonna charge me for that waxed paper, are you? I want some money off for the waxed paper."

I shoved the cookie into my mouth. "Have you filed a missing persons report with the police?"

"Mabel did that first thing," my mother said.

"And?"

"And they haven't found him."

I went to the refrigerator and poured out a glass of milk for myself. "What about the car? Did they find the car?"

"The car was in the Grand Union parking lot. It was all locked up nice and neat."

"He was never right after that stroke he had in ninety-five," Grandma said. "I don't think his elevator went all the way to the top anymore, if you know what I mean. He could have just wandered off like one of those Alzheimer's people. Anybody think to check the cereal aisle in the supermarket? Maybe he's just standing there 'cause he can't make up his mind."

My father mumbled something from the living room about my grandmother's elevator, and my mother slid my father a dirty look through

the kitchen wall.

I thought it was too weird. Uncle Fred was missing. This sort of thing just didn't happen in our family. "Did anybody go out to look for him?"

"Ronald and Walter. They covered all the neighborhoods around the Grand Union, but nobody's seen him."

Ronald and Walter were Fred's sons. And probably they'd enlisted their kids to help, too.

"We figure you're just the person to take a crack at this," grandma said, "on account of that's what you do ...you find people."

"I find criminals."

"Your Aunt Mabel would be grateful if you'd look for Fred," my mother said. "Maybe you could just go over and talk to her and see what you think."

"She needs a detective," I said. "I'm not a detective."

"Mabel asked for you. She said she didn't want this going out of the family."

My internal radar dish started to hum. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"What's to tell," my mother said. "A man wandered off from his car." I drank my milk and rinsed the glass. "Okay, I'll go talk to Aunt Mabel. But I'm not promising anything."