

## TWELVE SHARP

### Chapter One

When I was twelve years old I accidentally substituted salt for sugar in a cake recipe. I baked the cake, iced the cake, and served it up. It looked like a cake, but as soon as you cut into it and took a taste, you knew something else was going on. People are like that too. Sometimes you just can't tell what's on the inside from looking at the outside. Sometimes people are a big surprise, just like the salt cake. Sometimes the surprise turns out to be good. And sometimes the surprise turns out to be bad. And sometimes the surprise is just friggin' confusing.

Joe Morelli is one of those good surprises. He's two years older than me, and for most of my school years, spending time with Morelli was like a visit to the dark side, alluring and frightening. He's a Trenton cop now, and he's my off-again, on-again boyfriend. He used to be the hair-raising part of my life, but my life has had a lot of changes, and now he's the normal part. He has a dog named Bob, and a nice little house, and a toaster. On the outside Morelli is still street tough and dangerously alluring. On the inside Morelli is now the guy with the toaster. Go figure.

I have a hamster named Rex, a utilitarian apartment, and my toaster is broken. My name is Stephanie Plum, and I work as a bond enforcement agent, AKA bounty hunter, for my cousin Vinnie. It's not a great job, but it has its moments, and if I mooch food off my parents the job almost pays enough to get me through the month. It would pay a lot more but the truth is, I'm not all that good at it.

Sometimes I moonlight for a guy named Ranger who's extremely bad in an incredibly good way. He's a security expert, and a bounty hunter, and he moves like smoke. Ranger is milk chocolate on the outside ...a delicious, tempting, forbidden pleasure. And no one knows what's on the inside. Ranger keeps his own counsel.

I work with two women I like a lot. Connie Rosolli is Vinnie's office manager and junk-yard dog. She's a little older than I am. A little smarter. A little tougher. A little more Italian. She's got a lot more chest, and she dresses like Betty Boop.

The other woman is my sometimes partner Lula. Lula was at this moment, parading around in the bail bonds office, showing Connie and me her new outfit. Lula is a way-beyond-voluptuous black woman who was currently squashed into four-inch spike heels and a sparkly gold spandex dress that had been constructed for a much smaller woman. The neckline was low, and the only thing keeping Lula's big boobs from popping out was the fact that the material was snagged on her nipples. The skirt was stretched tight across her ass and hung two inches below the full moon.

With Connie and Lula you get what you see.

Lula bent to take a look at the heel on her shoe, and Connie was treated to a view of the night sky.

"Crikey," Connie said. "You need to put some underwear on."

"I got underwear on," Lula said. "I'm wearing my best thong. Just 'cause I used to be a 'ho don't mean I'm cheap. Problem is that little thong stringy gets lost in all my derriere."

"Tell me again what you're doing in this get-up," Connie said.

"I'm gonna be a rock and roll singer. I got a gig singing with Sally Sweet's new band. You heard of The Who? Well, we're gonna be The What."

"You can't sing," Connie said. "I've heard you sing. You can't hold a tune to Happy Birthday."

"The hell I can't," Lula said. "I could sing your ass off. Besides, half those rock singers can't sing. They just open their big oversize mouth and yell. And you gotta admit, I look good in this here dress. Nobody gonna be paying attention to my singing when I'm wearing this dress."

"She's got a point," I said to Connie.

"No argument," Connie said.

"I'm under-realized," Lula said. "I gotta lot of untapped potential. Yesterday my horoscope said I gotta expand my horizons."

"You expand anymore in that dress, and you'll get yourself arrested," Connie said.

The bonds office is on Hamilton Avenue, a couple blocks from Saint Frances Hospital. Handy for bonding out guys who've been shot. It's a small store front office sandwiched between a beauty parlor and a used bookstore. There's an outer room with a scarred imitation leather couch, a couple folding chairs, Connie's desk and computer and a bank of files. Vinnie's office is located in a room behind Connie's desk.

When I started working for Vinnie he used his office to talk to his bookie and set up nooners with barnyard animals, but Vinnie has recently discovered the internet, and now Vinnie uses his office to surf porn sites and online casinos. Behind the bank of file cabinets is a storeroom filled with the nuts and bolts of the bailbonds business. Confiscated televisions, dvd players, ipods, computers, a velvet painting of Elvis, a set of cookware, blenders, kids bikes, engagement rings, a tricked out Hog, a bunch of George Forman grills, and God knows what else. Vinnie had some guns and ammo back there too. Plus a box of cuffs that he got on ebay. There's a small bathroom that Connie keeps spotless and a back door in case there's a need to sneak off.

"I hate to be a party pooper," Connie said, "but we're going to have to put the fashion show on hold because we have a problem." She slid a stack of folders across her desk at me. "These are all unresolved skips. If we don't find some of these guys we're going belly up."

Here's the way bailbonds works. If you're accused of a crime and you

don't want to sit and rot in jail while you're waiting for your trial to come up, you can give the court a wad of money. The court takes the money and lets you walk, and you get the money back when you show up on your trial date. If you don't have that money stashed under your mattress, a bail bondsman can give the court the money on your behalf. He'll charge you a percentage of the money (maybe ten percent), and he'll keep that percentage whether you're proven guilty or not. If the accused shows up for court, the court gives the bail bondsman his money back. If the accused doesn't show up, the court keeps the money until the bondsman finds the accused and drags his sorry butt back to jail.

So you see the problem, right? Too much money going out and not enough money going in, and Vinnie might have to refinance his house. Or worse, the insurance company that backs Vinnie could yank the plug.

"Lula and I can't keep up with the skips," I said to Connie. "There are too many of them."

"Yeah, and I'll tell you the problem," Lula said. "Ranger's not pulling his weight. Any more there's just Stephanie and me catching bad guys."

It was true. Ranger had moved most of his business toward the security side and only went into tracking mode when something came in that was over my head. There are some who might argue everything is over my head, but for practical purposes we've had to ignore that argument.

"I hate to say this," I told Connie, "but you need to hire another bond enforcement person."

"It's not that easy," Connie said. "Remember when we had Joyce Barnhardt working here? That was a disaster."

Joyce Barnhardt is my archenemy. I went all through school with her, and she was a misery. And before the ink was dry on my marriage license she was in bed with my husband who is now my ex-husband. Thank you Joyce.

"We could put a ad in the paper," Lula said. "That's how I got my filing job here. Look at how good that turned out."

Connie and I did eye rolls.

Lula was about the worst file clerk ever. Lula kept her job because no one else would tolerate Vinnie. The first time Vinnie made a grab at Lula she clocked him on the side of the head with a five-pound phone book and told him she'd staple his nuts to the wall if he didn't show respect. And that was the end of sexual harassment in the bail bonds office.

Connie read the names off the files on her desk. "Lonnie Johnson, Kevin Gallagher, Leon James, Dooby Biagi, Caroline Scarziolli, Melvin Pickle, Charles Chin, Bernard Brown, Mary Lee Truk, Luis Queen, John Santos. These are all current. You already have half of them. The rest came in last night. Plus we have nine outstanding that we've relegated to the "temporarily lost cause" file. Word's getting out that we're not enforcing the bond."

When someone doesn't show up for a court appearance we call them FTA. Failure To Appear. People fail to appear for a bunch of reasons. Hookers and

pushers can make more money on the street than they can in jail so they only show up in court when you finally stop bonding them out. All other people just don't want to go to jail.

Connie gave me the new files and a wave of nausea slid through my stomach. Lonnie Johnson was wanted for armed robbery. Leon James was suspected of arson and attempted murder. Kevin Gallagher was wanted for grand theft auto. Mary Lee Truk had inserted a carving knife into her husband's left buttock during a domestic disturbance. And Melvin Pickle was caught with his pants down in the third row of the multiplex.

Lula was looking over my shoulder, reading along with me.

"Melvin Pickle sounds like fun," she said. "I think we should start with Melvin."

"Maybe an ad in the paper isn't such a bad idea," I said to Connie.

"Yeah," Lula said, "just be careful how you word it. You probably want to fib a little. Like you don't want to say we're looking for some gun happy lunatic to take down a bunch of scum bags."

"I'll keep that in mind when I write it up," Connie said.

"I'm going down the street," I told Lula. "I need something to settle my stomach. We'll go to work when I get back."

"You going to the drugstore?" Lula wanted to know.

"No. The bakery."

"I wouldn't mind if you brought me back one of them cream filled doughnuts with the chocolate frosting," Lula said. "I could use to settle my stomach too."

At mid-morning the Garden State was heating up. Pavement was steaming under a cloudless sky, petrochemical plants were spewing to the north, and cars were emitting hydrocarbons statewide. By mid-afternoon I'd feel the toxic stew catch in the back of my throat, and I'd know it was truly summer in Jersey. For me, the stew is part of the Jersey experience. The stew has attitude. And it enhances the pull of Point Pleasant. How can you completely appreciate the Jersey shore if the air is safe to breath in the interior parts of the state?

I swung into the bakery and went straight to the doughnut case. Marjorie Lando was behind the counter, filling cannoli for a customer. Fine by me. I could wait my turn. The bakery was always a soothing experience. My heart rate slowed in the presence of massive quantities of sugar and lard. My mind floated over the acres of cookies and cakes and doughnuts and cream pies topped with rainbow sprinkles, chocolate frosting, whipped cream and meringue.

I was in my zone, patiently contemplating my doughnut selection when I sensed a familiar presence behind me. A hand brushed my hair back, and Ranger leaned into me and kissed me on the nape of my neck.

"I could get you to look at me like that if I had five minutes alone with you," Ranger said.

"I'll give you five minutes alone with me if you'll take over half my skips."

"Tempting," Ranger said, "but I'm on my way to the airport, and I'm not sure when I'll be back. Tank is in charge. Call him if you need help. And let him know if you decide to move into my apartment."

Not that long ago I needed a safe place to stay and sort of commandeered Ranger's apartment when he was out of town. Ranger had come home and found me sleeping in his bed like Goldilocks. He'd very graciously not thrown me out the seventh floor window. And in fact he'd allowed me to stay with a minimum of sexual harassment. Okay, maybe minimum isn't entirely accurate. Maybe it was a seven on a scale of ten, but he hadn't forced the issue.

"How did you know I was here?" I asked him.

"I stopped at the bonds office, and Lula told me you were on a doughnut mission."

"Where are you going?"

"Miami."

"Is this business or pleasure?"

"It's bad business."

Marjorie finished with her customer and made her way over to me. "What'll it be?" she wanted to know.

"A dozen Boston cream doughnuts."

"Babe," Ranger said.

"They're not all for me."

Ranger doesn't often smile. Mostly he thinks about smiling, and this was one of those thinking smile times. He wrapped his hand around my wrist, pulled me to him and kissed me. The kiss was warm and short. No tongue in front of the bakery lady, thank God. He turned and walked away. Tank was idling at the curb in a black SUV. Ranger got in and they drove off.

Marjorie was behind the counter with a cardboard box in her hand and her mouth dropped open. "Wow," she said.

That dragged a sigh out of me because she was right. Ranger was definitely a wow. He stood half a head taller than me. He was perfectly toned muscle, and he had classic Latino good looks. He always smelled great. He dressed only in black. His skin was dark. His eyes were dark. His hair was dark. His life was dark. Ranger had lots of secrets.

"It's a work relationship," I told Marjorie.

"If he was in here any longer the chocolate would have melted off the eclairs."