

## LEAN MEAN THIRTEEN

### Chapter One

For the past five minutes I've been parked outside my cousin Vinnie's bail bonds office in my crapolla car, debating whether to continue on with my day, or to return to my apartment and crawl back into bed. My name is Stephanie Plum, and Sensible Stephanie wanted to go back to bed. Loco Stephanie was thinking she should get on with it.

I was about to do something I knew I shouldn't do. The signs were all there in front of me. Sick stomach. Feeling of impending disaster. Knowledge that it was illegal. And yet, I was going to forge ahead with the plan. Not that this was especially unusual. Truth is, I've been dealing with impending doom for as long as I can remember. Heck, when I was six years old I sprinkled sugar on my head, convinced myself it was pixie dust, wished myself invisible, and walked into the boy's bathroom at school. I mean you don't know the water's over your head until you jump in, right?

The door to the bond's office opened, and Lula stuck her head out and yelled at me. "Are you gonna sit there all day, or what?"

Lula is a black woman with a Rubenesque body and a Vegas wardrobe that's four sizes too small. She was a former 'ho, currently working as a file clerk for the office and a wheelman for me... when the mood struck. Today she was wearing big fake-fur Sasquatch boots, and her ass was packed into poison green spandex pants. Her pink sweatshirt had BITE ME spelled out in sequins across her boobs. My wardrobe runs a lot more casual than Lula's. I was wearing jeans and a long sleeved knit shirt from the Gap. My feet were stuffed into knock-off Ugg boots, and I was bundled into a big quilted jacket. I have naturally curly brown hair that looks okay when I wear it shoulder length. When it's short the best you can say is that it has energy. I'd swiped on some extra mascara today hoping to boost my bravado. I had a favor to perform that I suspected was going to come back to haunt me. I grabbed my bag, wrenched the driver side door open and angled myself out of the car.

It was the end of February, and there was gloom as far as the eye could see. It was almost ten AM, but the streetlights were on, and visibility in the swirling snow was about six inches. A truck chugged past, throwing slush halfway up my leg, soaking my jeans, bringing out my trash mouth. Winter wonderland Jersey style.

Connie Rosolli looked around her computer at me when I walked into the office. Connie is Vinnie's office manager and his first line of defense against the stream of pissed off bondees, bookies, hookers, various bill collectors and stiffed smut peddlers hoping to reach Vinnie's inner sanctum. Connie was a couple years older than me, a couple pounds heavier, a couple inches

shorter, a couple cups bigger, and her hair was a couple inches higher than mine. Connie was pretty in a kick ass, central Jersey, third generation Italian kind of way.

"I have three new skips," Connie said. "One of them is Simon Diggery again."

Skips are people who fail to show for a court appearance after Vinnie has bonded them out of jail. Vinnie loses money when bondees fail to appear, so that's where I come in. I work for Vinnie as a fugitive apprehension agent, better known as bounty hunter, and my job is to find the skips and drag them back into the system.

"Don't look to me to help you out with Simon Diggery," Lula said, plunking herself down on the brown Naugahyde couch, picking up her copy of STAR magazine.

"Been there, done that. Not doing it again. No way."

"He's an easy catch," I said. "We know exactly where to find him."

"There's no 'we' gonna happen. You're on your own. I'm not freezing my sweet Jesus, sitting in some bone orchard in the dead of night, waiting for Simon Diggery to show up."

Diggery was, among other things, a professional grave robber, relieving the recently deceased of rings, watches and the occasional Brooks Brothers suit if it was Diggery's size. Last time Diggery was in violation of his bond, Lula and I caught him hack-sawing a cocktail ring off Miriam Lukach. We chased him all over the cemetery before I tackled him in front of the crematorium.

I took the three new files from Connie and shoved them into my shoulder bag.

"I'm off."

"Where you going?" Lula wanted to know. "It's almost lunch time. I don't suppose you're gonna be passing by some place I could get a meatball sub. I could use a meatball sub on a nasty day like this."

"I'm going downtown," I told her. "I need to talk to Dickie."

"Say what?" Lula was up on her feet. "Did I hear you right? Is this the Dickie that called the police on you last time you were in his office? Is this the Dickie you told to go fuck hisself? Is this the Dickie you were married to for fifteen minutes in another life?"

"Yep. That's the Dickie."

Lula grabbed her coat and scarf from the chair. "I'll ride with you. I gotta see this. Hell, I don't even care about the meatball sub any more."

"Okay, but we're not making a scene," I said to Lula. "I need to talk to Dickie about a legal issue. This is going to be non-confrontational."

"I know that. Non-confrontational. Like two civilized people."

"Hold on. I'm going too," Connie said, getting her purse from her bottom desk drawer. "I don't want to miss this. I'll close the office for a couple hours for this one."

"I'm not making a scene," I told her.

"Sure, but I'm packin', just in case it gets ugly," Connie said.

"Me too," Lula said. "It isn't diamonds that's a girl's best friend. It's a .9mm Glock."

Connie and Lula looked at me.

"What are you carrying?" Connie asked.

"A brand new can of hairspray and this lip gloss I've got on."

"It's a pretty good lip gloss," Lula said, "but it wouldn't hurt to have a piece as a backup."

Connie stuffed herself into her coat. "I can't imagine what legal problem you'd want to discuss with Dickie, but it must be a bitch to get you out in this weather."

"It's sort of personal," I said, relying on the one really decent bounty hunter skill I possessed... the ability to fib. "It dates back to when we were married. It has to do with... taxes."

We all went head-down into the cold. Connie locked the office door, and we got into Lula's red Firebird. Lula cranked the engine over, hip-hop blasted out of the CD player, and Lula motored off.

"Is Dickie still downtown?" Lula wanted to know.

"Yes, but he's in a new office. 3240 Brian Place. His firm is Petiak, Smullen, Gorvich and Orr."

Lula cruised down Hamilton and turned onto North Broad. The wind had cut back, and it was no longer snowing, but there was still a thick cloud cover overhead. At best, the weather could now be described as grim. I was silently rehearsing my fake speech about how I needed information for an audit. And I was making promises to myself as performance incentive. I was seeing macaroni and cheese in my near future. Butterscotch Tastykakes. Onion rings. Snickers bars. Okay, so this had all the makings of a cluster fuck, but there was a Dairy Queen Oreo Cheesecake Blizzard waiting for me somewhere.

Lula took a left at Brian and found a parking place half a block from Dickie's office building.

"I'm gonna smack you on the head if you don't stop cracking your knuckles," Lula said to me. "You gotta chill. You need some tax information, and he's gotta give it to you." Lula cut her eyes to me. "That's all there is to it, right?"

"Pretty much."

"Uh oh," Lula said. "There's more, isn't there?"

We all got out of the Firebird and stood huddled against the cold.

"Actually I have to plant a couple bugs on him for Ranger," I told Lula. There it was, out in the open, swinging in the breeze... the favor from hell. Carlos Manoso goes by the street name Ranger. He's my friend, my bounty hunter mentor, and in this case... my partner in crime. He's Cuban-American with dark skin and dark eyes and dark brown hair recently cut short. He's

half a head taller than I am, and two months older. I've seen him naked and when I say every part of him is perfect you can take it to the bank. He was Special Forces, and while he's no longer military, he's still got the skills and the muscle. He owns Rangeman Security now. Plus he does the high bond skips for Vinnie. He's a hot guy, and there are strong feelings between us, but I try to keep some distance. Ranger plays by his own set of rules, and I don't have a complete copy.

"I knew it!" Lula said. "I knew this would be good."

"You need something better than taxes," Connie said. "You're going to need a diversion if you want to plant bugs."

"Yeah," Lula said. "You need us to go along with you. You need some hustle and bustle."

"How about if we say we want to start a business together," Connie said. "And we need advice on permits and partnership agreements."

"What kind of business we got?" Lula asked. "I gotta know what I'm getting into with you."

"It's not a real business," Connie said. "We're just pretending."

"I still gotta know," Lula said. "I'm not putting my good name on just any old thing."

"For crissake," Connie said, flapping her arms and stamping her feet to keep warm. "It could be anything. We could cater parties."

"Yeah, that's believable," Lula said. "On account of we're all such gourmet cooks. The only time I turn my oven on is to heat up my apartment. And Stephanie probably don't even know where her oven is."

"Okay, how about a dry cleaner or chauffeured limos or dog walking or we could buy a shrimp boat?"

"I like the limo idea," Lula said. "We could buy a Lincoln and dress up in bad-ass uniforms. Something with some bling."

"It's okay with me," Connie said.

I nodded and pulled my scarf up over my nose. "Me too. Let's go inside. I'm freezing."

"Wait," Lula said. "We need a name. You can't have a limo company without a name."

"Lucky Limos," Connie said.

"The hell," Lula said. "I'm not joining up with a limo company's got a lame ass name like that."

"Then you name it," Connie said to Lula. "I don't give a shit what the friggin' company is called. My feet are numb."

"It should be something that reflects on us," Lula said. "Like The Bitches Limos."

"That's a stupid name. No one's going to hire a limo from a company with a name like that," Connie said.

"I know some people," Lula said.

"Lovely Limos, Lonely Limos, Loser Limos, Lumpy Limos, Looney Limos, La

De Da Limos, Limos for Liars, Lampshade Limos, Landfill Limos, Leaky Limos, Lemon Limos, Long Limos, Large Limos, Lazy Limos, Loosey Goosey Limos," I said.

Connie looked at me and grimaced.

"Maybe it should be called Lula's Limos," I said.

"Yeah, that got a ring to it," Lula said.

"Then it's a deal. Lula's Limos."

"Deal," Connie said. "Get out of my way, so I can get inside and defrost."

We all pushed through the front door to Dickie's building and stood in the foyer, sopping up the sudden blast of heat. The foyer opened to a reception area, and I was relieved to see an unfamiliar face behind the desk. If anyone had recognized me from my last visit they would have immediately called for security.

"Let me do the talking," I said to Lula.

"Sure," Lula said. "I'll be quiet as a mouse. I'll zip my lip."

I approached the desk and made an attempt at demure. "We'd like to see Mr. Orr," I told the woman.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No," I said. "I'm terribly sorry to drop in like this, but we're starting a new business, and we need some legal advice. We were down the street looking at real estate and thought we'd take a chance that Mr. Orr might have a moment for us."

"Of course," the woman said. "Let me see if he's available. The name?"

"Capital City Limo."

"Hunh," Lula said behind me.

The woman buzzed Dickie and relayed our information. She got off the phone and smiled. "He has a few minutes between appointments. You can take the elevator to your left. Second floor."

We all moved into the elevator, and I pushed the button for the second floor.

"What was that?" Lula wanted to know. "Capital City Limo?"

"It just popped out, but it sounds classy, right?"

"Not as classy as Lula's Limos," Lula said. "I'd call Lula's Limos any day of the week over Capital City Limos. Capital City Limos sounds like it got a stick up its ass, but you'd be in for a good time in Lula's Limo." The door opened, and we spilled out of the elevator into another reception room with another new face at the desk.

"Mr. Orr is expecting you," the woman said. "His office is at the end of the corridor."

I led the parade in a sedate march to Dickie's office. I got to his open door and rapped lightly. I peeked in and smiled. Friendly. Non-threatening. Dickie looked up and gasped.

