

WANTED

Bound & Cuffed 1

JENNY PENN

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Chapter One

Perched on an old metal trashcan buried in the shadows of an alley long overgrown by weeds and trees, Maryanne sat on the twisted lid and watched the house across the street. It was dark, not surprising given the lateness of the hour. That didn't mean everybody was asleep.

Maryanne smiled as she watched the men play their cloak and dagger games. They stuck to the shadows just like her as they surrounded the old, rotted wooden house. She knew they were having fun, and she'd let them have it. After all, she preferred to do things a little easier and wasn't above letting others do the hard work. Besides, she didn't want to get shot.

That was just the risk the men breaking into the house ran. They knew it, too. That was why they went in armed. As Maryanne waited, her ears cocked for the sound of gunfire, the only thing that floated out into the silent night were shouts instead. Shouts and the crash of furniture, which just went to prove that old Douggie was putting up a serious fight.

Douglas Harper was a wanted man. A despicable one. One that hunted children and one that had run from the charges the state had leveled against him. That made him not only total slime but worth

more than a pretty penny to whoever brought him in. Maryanne knew that was what motivated the men dragging Douggie out the front door.

Money was nice, but knowing that a pedophile was being taken off the streets was even better. That was what really motivated Maryanne. She wanted this one. She was going to take him. What Maryanne wanted, she took.

Smirking as she watched the other bounty hunters load her prey into their car, she couldn't help but admire the way they managed the scene with ease. Of course, that didn't mean they didn't make mistakes. Like most men, their arrogance would be their downfall. Their downfall would be her gain.

Hopping off the trashcan, Maryanne moved toward the small, black hatchback she'd parked deep within the shadows of the alley as the other hunters began to load up and move out. Maryanne did the same, though she didn't bother to turn on her headlights. Neither did she rush.

She knew exactly where they were taking Douggie, just as she knew that Jason and Collin, the hunters who had piled Douggie into their SUV, wouldn't be able to resist stopping by the convenience store to pick up a six-pack of their traditional celebratory beer.

They were creatures of habit. Habits were weaknesses Maryanne didn't indulge in. After all, she knew better than anybody else the danger of being predictable. That thought had her touching the scar on her neck. It was old and worn down but still there, right along with the memory of the man who had tried to abduct her when she'd been only eight.

He'd failed but had managed to mark her before Maryanne could escape. It was then, at that tender age, that she'd vowed never to be a victim. Worse, her eyes had been opened to the reality of just how many children weren't so lucky. It had been there and then that she'd sworn to make a difference, to do whatever she could to make this world a safer place for all children. It had also been the first time

she'd ever helped to bring a criminal to justice. Maryanne hadn't stopped there.

And she wasn't going to stop now.

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Jason Holmes whistled as he strutted down the aisle that led to the beer cooler at the back of the Sip 'N' Stop. The small convenience store was one of his favorites, mostly because of the hot dogs they sold. The big, thick, juicy wieners filled the small store with an aroma that had his stomach growling and Collin laughing.

"You hungry, man?" Collin smirked.

"Always."

That was just the truth. Jason worked out a half-hour every day, ran five miles every other one, and ate like an elephant coming off a fast. He liked to consider himself just as big and dangerous and softhearted as those soulful creatures. He also had a memory like one, not that it helped him avoid trouble. Of course it was hard to avoid something when he was always looking for more of it.

"You and me both." Collin turned down the next aisle as he called back to Jason. "I'll get the dogs."

"And don't forget the chili and the cheese," Jason shot back.

He liked his wieners covered in as much fat and flavor as could possibly be piled on. His cousin knew that. Collin should. They'd been working together for over ten years and celebrating with dogs and beers for every victory they claimed. They'd claimed a lot of them. They were that good.

Better than the rest, Jason assured himself as he pulled out a six-pack from the cooler and headed back up the cash register to check out. Collin joined him with two dogs snuggled into their buns and loaded up with nothing but goodness piled on top. Collin passed one over toward Jason after he'd finished paying, and the two toasted their

buns together before starting to chow down as they headed out the door.

Jason had polished off more than half of his hot dog by the time he popped the trunk on the SUV. His hand was halfway in to drop the six-pack down when he glanced up to take in the empty back seat. Douggie was gone. That revelation hit him, along with a volatile tide of fear, panic, and total outrage.

The son of a bitch!

“Where the fuck is Douggie?” Collin turned in a circle as he glanced around the parking lot, echoing the confusion and shock holding Jason still. “He was cuffed! How the fuck did he get out?”

That was a good question, and the answer was hanging from the bolt in the roof that they’d cuffed Douggie to. Jason didn’t even need to read it to recognize the handwriting.

“Maryanne!” He snarled her name like a blaspheme as he let go of the beer and reached all the way in to snatch the Post-it note she’d left for them. “That bitch!”

Maryanne Horton was another bounty hunter and a major pain in the ass. The damn woman was always underfoot and had a tendency to take their marks down just before he and Collin could reach them, but she’d never been this brazen before. This was over the top, even for her. If she thought Jason was just going to let her run off with his fifty-thousand-dollar reward, she was in for a rude surprise.

“Come on,” Jason snapped as he slammed down the trunk lid and started for the driver’s door. Collin mimicked his motion, slamming into the passenger seat and shooting Jason a hard look.

“Where are we going?” he asked as if the answer shouldn’t be obvious.

“To hunt the bitch down.” Jason jammed the key into the ignition, peeling out of the parking spot seconds later. “We’re getting Douggie back.”

...or not.

Jason broke every speed limit as he raced toward the local police station with every intention of busting Maryanne before she could get through the front door, but she wasn't there. Neither was that piece of shit she drove parked in the lot. She'd either been too fast for them or had hauled Douggie to another station.

That didn't mean Jason didn't know where to find her.

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Maryanne sang along to the pop song coming out of the radio, feeling a sense of exhilaration that she always got from bringing in another piece of trash. Douggie was that. He'd put up somewhat of a fight when she'd dragged him out of Jason and Collin's SUV. She'd had to break his jaw to get him to cooperate.

That hadn't made the cops too happy, not that anybody had a great deal of sympathy for Douggie, but it did complicate the paperwork. It didn't, however, change the fact that Douggie was now in custody and she was fifty thousand dollars richer. Not that Maryanne really cared about the money. Most of it would be donated to charities that helped kids who'd been abused.

As for her, she'd take enough to cover her bills to the next catch. That was just how she lived, always on the edge of going broke, even if she did make more money in a year than most would hope to make in ten. What did she really need the money for anyway?

Maryanne owned her house and car outright. She didn't carry debt of any variety thanks to the small inheritance her parents had left her. They'd left her the house, too. It might have been old and in a major state of disrepair, but it kept the rain off of her and assured she didn't freeze in the winter. That was all that she needed. Hell, it was more than some had.

That thought weighed down on her as she finally pulled into the busted and broken drive that led up to a garage she hadn't dared to go into for years. It was due to fall down. Hell, she should probably just

take it down, but a part of her couldn't bring herself to do it. After all, where would squirrels live?

They'd probably move to her attic, which would be a mistake. Mr. Snuggles, her eighteen-pound cat, didn't take kindly to intruders. That was kind of why Maryanne kept the big fluff ball around. That and he was so snuggly. She was due a good snuggle tonight.

That thought had her smirking as she climbed out of her car and headed up the back porch steps. The dim glow of the old gas lantern she'd converted into electric cast just enough glow across the worn and battered floorboards to allow her to find the key and slide it into its lock. She didn't get a chance to turn it, though, before a dark, dangerous drawl cut through the shadows, sending a thrill down her spine but no fear.

"You owe us money." Jason Holmes emerged from the darkened corner of the porch, looking more than pissed.

He also looked absolutely delicious. Tall, broad, and rippling with muscles, Jason was a walking wet dream with those chiseled features and bright blue eyes that sparkled even in the dull glow of the overhead bulb. Maryanne had dreamed about him more than once. Not just him.

Turning to find Collin, Jason's cousin and constant companion, lurking at the other end of the porch, Maryanne felt that wicked tickle racing up her spine grow more intense as she eyed the second Holmes' boy with a little more than just heated interest. Collin was just her type...physically, but when it came to sex, the rumors of his need to dominate were rampant, and Maryanne didn't allow any man to tell her what to do.

That was why she'd always kept her interest and her hormones under control whenever Jason and Collin came around. It would have been too dangerous to do anything else. Not that they looked interested in anything else. Not right then. Right then they looked pissed, and for some strange reason, that made Maryanne smile.

“Good evening, boys.” Maryanne batted her lashes up at them, knowing just how much she was irritating them both. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Yeah,” Jason shot back, stepping up to lord over her and drown Maryanne in his delicious scent. “Pay us back.”

That was never going to happen, but she didn’t bother to tell them that. Instead, Maryanne agitated them by pretending complete ignorance. “For?”

“Don’t play stupid,” Collin all but snarled. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Back at you,” Maryanne retorted. “Because you know you’re getting nothing from me. So what are you really doing here?”

“We came for our money,” Jason insisted, but she still wasn’t impressed by the growl in his tone.

“And you know you’re not getting it.” That was just that.

Collin, though, still objected. “*We* are the ones who risked our asses to catch Duggie.”

“And then you were the idiots who decided to make a pit stop before taking him in.” Maryanne shrugged. “That’s not my fault.”

“The car was locked. He was cuffed,” Jason spat. “You stole him!”

“It’s not the first time.” Sadly it wasn’t. They’d been playing this game for a while. Something was different tonight. “You never showed up here before. So what do you really want?”

Both men simmered, heating the air with an exciting sense of tension that left her wondering just what they planned to do next. Maryanne knew what she’d like them to do, but she wasn’t fool enough to make any of those moves. Instead, she simply waited, and sure enough, Jason broke first.

“Big Bob wants to see you.”

“Big Bob?” Now that did shock Maryanne.

Big Bob was the head of the Holmes clan and ran the family’s bonds business along with managing their bounty hunting activities.

He was also like his name indicated—big. Big and scary and Maryanne really didn't want to have to face off the Holmes family patriarch.

“I think I'll pass.” As if she could get away with that.

“It's not a request,” Collin informed her.

“Well, that sounds ominous.” Maryanne snorted, still not feeling the least bit threatened. Not by Collin or Jason. Big Bob, on the other hand, did kind of intimidate her.

“Tomorrow morning. Nine o'clock at Grits. Big Bob will be waiting,” Jason stated, his words carrying the weight of a challenge that assured Maryanne would show up.

At least, she was thinking about it.

“And if I don't show?” Maryanne asked, but neither man answered.

They just smiled and brushed past her as they headed down the stairs and disappeared back into the night. Maryanne watched them go, feeling a strange ache pain her slightly. She stood there wondering just what that was and why she cared at all.

That didn't change the fact that she kind of did.