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JANET
EVANOVICH

A **STEPHANIE PLUM** NOVEL

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THIRTY-ONE ON THE RUN



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THIRTY-ONE ON THE RUN

A STEPHANIE PLUM NOVEL

JANET EVANOVICH

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CHAPTER ONE

I parked my blue Chevy Trailblazer in front of the bail bonds office and sat for a long moment. My name is Stephanie Plum and I'm a fugitive-apprehension agent working for my cousin Vinnie's bail bonds business in Trenton, New Jersey. I have my BA from Rutgers University and an advanced degree in doing dumb things, destroying cars, and finding love in too many places. It's the last specialty that's keeping me in my car right now. I've very recently gotten engaged to two men. Okay, so this would also fall under my first specialty of doing dumb things. In my defense, I would like to say that it wasn't entirely my fault. It was circumstances. Still, here I was in this dilemma. And I was going to have to explain the dilemma to my two coworkers who were sitting in the office, looking at me through the large plate glass window.

I gave up a sigh and grabbed the messenger bag that was on the seat next to me. Might as well go in and get it all out there. Just spew out the whole hot mess. Now or never, right? The phrase was cringe. It was the line of thinking that had pushed me into the two engagements.

Connie Rosolli, the office manager, held up a sheet of paper with a big question mark on it. The question mark had been written with a thick black marker. And it had an exclamation point after it. I did an internal eye-roll, wrenched the car door open, and went into the office.

"We're dying here," Lula said. "Last we saw, you were engaged to Mr. Dark and Dangerous. And then Mr. Hot and Handsome showed up. That was two days ago. We gotta know details."

Lula is a former ho who is now the office file clerk. Since almost all the files are digital and don't need filing, Lula just does whatever she wants. She's a little shorter and a little younger than me. She's also several skin shades darker than me, has a lot more boob and booty than me, and has a much more extensive and exotic wardrobe.

"Where's the ring?" Lula asked. "I gotta see the ring."

"I don't have a ring," I said. "I didn't think there was a big rush to get a ring."

“Uh-oh,” Lula said. “We thought you might even be married by now, but no ring don’t sound good.”

“Ranger had to go out of town for a couple days.”

Ranger is Mr. Dark and Dangerous. Former Special Forces, former bounty hunter. Currently owns a high-tech security company in a stealth building in downtown Trenton.

“Well, when’s he coming back?” Lula asked. “Is he back?”

“Not yet,” I said.

“And what about Mr. Hot and Handsome? How’s he taking the news?”

Mr. Hot and Handsome is Joe Morelli. Former bad boy, now a Trenton PD detective working crimes against persons. Has a nice little house and a big orange dog.

“He doesn’t exactly know,” I said. “There’s a bit of a hitch.”

“A hitch?” Lula asked. “What kind of hitch?”

The door to Vinnie’s inner office burst open and Vinnie stormed out. “What’s going on out here? What is this, a ladies’ tea party? I don’t pay you to sit around on your fat asses eating doughnuts all day.”

Vinnie is a forty-something barely human version of a weasel in skinny pants. His father-in-law, Harry the Hammer, owns the agency and owns Vinnie.

“I have two big-ticket bonds in the wind,” Vinnie said. “Harry’s got me by the nuts and he’s squeezing.”

“I hear that’s your second-favorite thing after getting spanked with a spatula,” Lula said.

Vinnie narrowed his eyes and retreated into his office. He slammed the door shut and threw the bolt.

I hiked my messenger bag higher onto my shoulder. “I’m on the move. Gotta catch some bad guys.”

“What about the hitch?” Lula asked.

“Later,” I said. “Are you coming with me?”

“Might as well,” Lula said. “There’s only one doughnut left in the box and it’s one of them plain cake ones. I’m the kind of girl that needs chocolate and extra sugar in the form of attached granules or creamy frosting.”

When Vinnie writes a bond, he guarantees that the bondee is going to show up for his court appearance. If the bondee doesn't show, Vinnie is out the bond money. So, Vinnie sends me out to find the miscreant and drag their sorry body back to jail. Lula is on salary, but I only get paid when I make a capture. This ensures that I have incentive to go to work every day.

We got into my SUV, and I pulled two files out of my messenger bag and handed them to Lula. "Eugene Fleck and Bruno Jug. Which one do you want to go after first?"

Lula paged through Bruno Jug. "It says here he's charged with tax evasion. That's what the feds use when they can't prove anything else on account of people involved keep getting dead. Previous charges were racketeering. That includes narcotics trafficking, extortion, and here's my favorite... murder for hire. He don't sound like a lot of fun. Let's see what's in file number two." She opened the second file and read down. "This is a good one. Eugene Fleck, AKA Robin Hoodie on account of he always wears a hoodie, and he robs from the rich and gives the shit to the poor. The guy is a porch pirate first class. Looks like nobody was complaining too much until he got carried away with himself and hijacked a UPS truck."

"He made the six o'clock news for that," I said. "He drove the UPS truck to a homeless tent city under one of the bridges and emptied it out. It was like Christmas in October with everyone ripping packages apart."

"I'm all about this guy," Lula said.

"Where do we find him?"

"He's twenty-six and lives with Mommy and Daddy," Lula said. "I'll plug the address into the GPS. Doesn't look like he's got a job. He lists his occupation as 'gamer.' Guess when he's not stealing stuff, he's on the computer." Lula looked over at me. "Are you sure you don't want to tell me about the hitch?"

"It's complicated."

"I bet."

I pulled out into traffic. "I'm working on it."

Twenty minutes later we were in front of the Fleck house on Elm Street. It was a medium-size colonial. Painted white. Black shutters and red front door.

Two-car attached garage. No car in the driveway. Nice middle-class neighborhood.

“Who are we going to be today?” Lula asked. “Good cop, bad cop? Pizza delivery? Church ladies come to say hello?”

Lula’s hair was fluffed out into a big puffball, and the hair color of the day was fuchsia. She was wearing a navy spandex dress that would have been tasteful on a much smaller woman. On Lula, it was a traffic stopper. There was a lot of cleavage and excess breast struggling to be set free from the plunging scoop neck of the dress, and the skirt was stretched to its limit across her butt. The hem was inches below what should never be seen in public. Her feet were happy in six-inch-high stiletto heels. I was in stark contrast in sneakers, jeans, a girly T-shirt, and a gray hoodie. My brown hair was pulled up into a ponytail and I’d gnawed my lip gloss off worrying about my engagement dilemma. I learned early in our friendship that it was hopeless to try to compete with Lula. She was a birthday cake with sparklers, and I was a bran muffin. Okay, maybe that’s too harsh. If I swiped on some mascara and lip gloss, I could bring myself up to an almond croissant. Maybe even a cupcake. No sprinkles. Bottom line is that I didn’t think either of us was going to pass as a church lady.

I parked the SUV in front of the Fleck house and cut the engine. “We’re going to be ourselves,” I said. “Two professional bail bonds enforcement agents.”

“Are you sure that’s who we are?” Lula asked.

“That’s what it says on my business card.”

“I gotta get some of them made up,” Lula said.

I rang the bell and a young man answered. About my height, which was five foot seven. Brown hair tied back into a low ponytail. Slim. Baggy jeans and beat-up sneakers and a red plaid flannel shirt, untucked.

“Eugene?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, looking Lula over. “Only I’m not interested in kinky sex. My mom’s going to be home any minute.”

“Hunh,” Lula said. “What makes you think we’d want to do *you*?”

I stepped in front of Lula so that my foot was halfway into the door frame. “I represent Vincent Plum,” I said to Eugene. “You failed to show for your court appearance and I’m going to help you reschedule.”

“Okay,” he said. “Go ahead and reschedule me.”

He made an attempt to close the door, but I was already inside. “We need to go downtown to reschedule. It won’t take long and then we’ll bring you home.”

“I guess I could do that,” he said. “As long as it doesn’t take too long.”

Truth is, he’d get booked in, and because it was early in the day and court was in session, he might be lucky enough to go in front of a judge and have his bail bond set and be given a new appearance date. Then if he could get someone to secure his bail bond, he’d be free to go. If all of this didn’t happen, he’d spend some time in lockup.

I put him in the back seat of the SUV. I drove out of the neighborhood and avoided the center of the city by taking Marlboro Street. I stopped for a light by the Catholic church.

“There’s a lot of people in front of the church,” Lula said. “Don’t look like they’re dressed up for a wedding.”

“There’s a homeless camp in the park on the next block,” Eugene said. “They come here to get food. The church gives out two meals a day.”

“Some of them are waving at us,” Lula said. “And they’re yelling something.” She cracked her window. “It sounds like they’re yelling *Robin!*”

“It’s because of all the publicity about Robin Hoodie,” Eugene said. “The police found my fingerprints on the truck and charged me with hijacking, and it got to be big news. My picture was all over the television and in the papers, saying I was Robin Hoodie.”

“Are you?” I asked.

“No. Of course not, but everyone thinks I am. I can’t walk past a homeless person without them telling me they’re one of my Merry Men.”

“Looks like they’re coming over,” Lula said. “Looks like *all* of them are coming over.”

In an instant the car was surrounded. The Merry Men were cheering for Robin and thumping on the car with their fists. The light changed and I couldn’t move because there were Merry Men in front of me. I leaned on the horn, and they started rocking the car.

“This here’s a riot,” Lula said. “I’m getting nauseous from the rocking.” She was rooting through her enormous fake Prada tote bag. “I got a gun in here

somewhere. You want me to shoot them?”

“No shooting!” I said. “Call for police.”

“I’ll already throw up by the time they get here,” Lula said.

“They’re just excited because they think they see Robin Hoodie,” Eugene said. “I could go out and calm them down.”

“That’s a good idea,” Lula said to me. “Don’t you think that’s a good idea?”

I thought it was a bad idea, but I didn’t have any better ideas. “Go out and get them off the road,” I said to Eugene, “but don’t take too long. We want to get to the courthouse before they break for lunch.”

I popped the door lock, and Eugene got out and was swallowed up in the crowd of Merry Men.

“This is working,” Lula said. “They’re moving away from the car. It’s like a herd of homeless migrating back to the church.”

“I see the herd,” I said. “I don’t see Eugene.”

I got out of the car and looked around. No Eugene. I got back in the car.

“Looks like the Merry Men got Robin,” Lula said. “Just like in the movie. They swooped in and saved Robin.”

I drove around a couple blocks, but I didn’t see Robin Hoodie or Eugene Fleck. I drove back to the Fleck house. A white Toyota Corolla was parked in the driveway. Mrs. Fleck was home.

I left Lula in the car, and I went to the house and rang the bell. A pleasant-looking woman answered.

“Mrs. Fleck?” I asked her.

“Yes.”

“I’m looking for Eugene. Is he home?”

“No,” she said. “I’m afraid he stepped out.”

I introduced myself and gave her my card. “He needs to reschedule his court date,” I said to Mrs. Fleck. “I’m available to help him.”

“That’s very nice of you,” she said. “I’ll tell him you stopped by. I’m sure he’ll be sorry he missed you.”

I returned to the car, drove to the end of the block, and parked.

“I suppose we’re doing surveillance,” Lula said.

“Yes. Sooner or later, he has to go home.”

“It better be sooner,” Lula said. “I need to tinkle.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No way. I don’t kid about tinkling. It’s on account of I drank all that coffee to wash down all the doughnuts. And then I had a couple sodas. They say you’re supposed to drink a lot of water, but I can’t see it. Water is too thin. I drink soda. It tastes better and it’s got bubbles. It’s like happiness in a can.”

“Can you hold it for a while?”

“How long is a while?”

“An hour,” I said.

“Not gonna happen.”

“Half hour?”

“Maybe ten minutes,” Lula said. “It was a lot of soda.”

I gave up on the surveillance and drove back to the office.