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**JANET
EVANOVICH
SMOKIN',
SEVENTEEN**

A STEPHANIE PLUM NOVEL

ALSO BY JANET EVANOVICH

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Finger Lickin' Fifteen
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How I Write

SMOKIN' SEVENTEEN

A STEPHANIE PLUM NOVEL

Janet Evanovich

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About the Author

ONE

MY GRANDMA MAZUR called me early this morning.

“I had a dream,” Grandma said. “There was this big horse, and it could fly. It didn’t have wings. It just could fly. And the horse flew over top of you, and started dropping road apples, and you were running around trying to get out of the way of the road apples. And the funny thing was you didn’t have any clothes on except a red lace thong kind of underpants. Anyways, next thing a rhinoceros flew over you, and he was sort of hovering over top your head. And then I woke up. I got a feeling it means something.”

“What?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but it can’t be good.” And she disconnected.

So that’s how my day started. And to tell you the truth the dream pretty much summed up my life.

My name is Stephanie Plum. I work as a bond enforcer for my cousin Vinnie’s bail bonds office, and I live in an uninspired, low-rent, three-story, brick-faced chunk of an apartment building on the edge of Trenton, New Jersey. My second-floor apartment is furnished with my relatives’ cast-offs. I’m average height. I have an okay shape. I’m pretty sure I’m averagely intelligent. And I know for sure I have a crummy job. My shoulder-length curly brown hair is inherited from the Italian side of the family, my blue eyes from the Hungarian side of the family, and I have an excellent nose that’s a gift from God. Good thing he gave me the nose before he found out I wasn’t the world’s best Catholic.

It was early September and unseasonably hot. I had my hair up in a ponytail. I’d forgone makeup and opted for lip balm instead. And I was wearing a red stretchy tank top, jeans, and sneakers. Perfect clothes for running down bad guys or buying doughnuts. I parked my hunk-of-junk Ford Escort in front of Tasty Pastry Bakery on Hamilton Avenue and mentally counted out the money in my wallet. Definitely enough for two doughnuts. Not enough for three.

Loretta Kucharski was behind the counter when I entered the bakery. Last year Loretta was vice president of a bank. When the bank went belly-up, Loretta got the job at Tasty Pastry. To my way of thinking it was definitely career advancement. I mean, who doesn't want to work in a bakery?

"What'll it be?" Loretta asked me. "Cannoli? Italian cookies? Doughnut?"

"Doughnuts."

"Boston cream, chocolate cake, jelly, lemon glazed, cinnamon sugar, blueberry, pumpkin spice, chocolate glazed, cream filled, bearclaw, or maple?"

I bit into my lower lip. I wanted them all. "Definitely a Boston cream."

Loretta carefully placed a Boston cream in a small white bakery box. "And?"

"Jelly doughnut," I said. "No wait! Maple. No! Either Maple or pumpkin spice. Or maybe the chocolate glazed."

The door to the bakery opened, and an old woman who looked like an extra out of a low-budget mafia movie marched in. She was small and wiry and dressed in black. Plain black dress, black scarf on her steel-gray hair, sensible black shoes, dark stockings. Snapping dark eyes under bushy gray eyebrows. Mediterranean skin tone.

Loretta and I gasped when we saw her. It was Bella—the most terrifying woman in Trenton. She'd immigrated to the States over fifty years ago, but she was still more Sicilian than American. She was devious and sly and possibly flat-out crazy. She was also my boyfriend's grandmother.

Loretta made the sign of the cross and asked the Holy Mother for protection. Considering my lack of church attendance I didn't feel comfy asking the Holy Mother for help, so I gave Bella a weak smile and a small wave.

Grandma Bella pointed a bony finger at me. "You! What *you* doing here?"

To say that my relationship with Grandma Bella was tenuous would be a gross understatement. Not only am I the harlot who, to her way of thinking, seduced and corrupted Joseph Anthony Morelli, her favorite grandson, but even more damning, I'm Edna Mazur's granddaughter. Grandma Bella and my Grandma Mazur do *not* get along.

"D-d-doughnut," I said to Bella.

“Get out of my way,” Bella said, pushing me aside, stepping up to the counter. “I was here first.”

Loretta’s eyes were as big as duck eggs, darting back and forth between Bella and me. “Um,” Loretta said, still holding the bakery box containing my Boston cream.

“Actually, I was here first,” I said to Bella, “but you can go ahead of me if you want.”

“What? You telling me you first? You dare to say such a thing?” Bella hit me on the arm with her purse. “You have no respect.”

“Cripes,” I said. “Get a grip.”

“Christ? You say Christ?” Bella crossed herself and pulled her rosary beads out of her pocket. “You burn in hell. You gonna get smite down. Get away from me. I don’t want to be near when it happens.”

“I didn’t say Christ. I said *cripes*.”

“You *heathen*,” Bella said. “Like your Grandma Edna. She should rot in hell.”

Okay, so Bella was a crazy old lady, but that was going too far. “Hey, watch what you say about my grandmother,” I said to Bella.

Bella shook her finger at me. “I put the eye on you. I fix you good.”

Loretta sucked in air and ducked down behind the counter.

“I’m going to tell Joe on you,” I said to Bella. “You’re not supposed to be giving people the eye.”

Bella tipped her head back and looked down her nose at me. “You think he believe you over his grandma? You think he believe you when you ugly with boils? You think he believe you when you fat? When you stink like cabbage?”

Loretta whimpered from behind the counter.

“Stay down,” Bella said to Loretta. “You good girl. I don’t want you to get in the way of the eye.”

So here’s the thing with the eye. I’m pretty sure it’s a bunch of baloney. Still, there’s the outside chance that Junior Genovisi didn’t lose his hair from male pattern baldness. I mean no one else in his family ever went bald, and it happened right after Bella put the whammy on him. Then there was Rose DeMarco. She accidentally mowed Bella over with her motorized wheelchair, and the next day Rose broke out with shingles.

Loretta popped up, stuffed a bunch of doughnuts into the bakery box, and threw it at me. “Run for it!”

I caught the box and looked over at Loretta. “How many are in here? What do I owe you?”

“Nothing. Just get out of here!”

“Hah, too late for her,” Bella said to Loretta. “She got the eye now. I’ll take an almond coffee cake. I want the one in front with the most icing.”

• • •

Under normal circumstances, at this time of day I would head for the bail bonds office on Hamilton. Unfortunately the bonds office burned down to the ground not so long ago, so for the moment we’re operating out of a motor home owned by a guy named Mooner. I’ve known Mooner for a bunch of years, and he wouldn’t be my first choice for landlord, but desperate times call for desperate measures. My cousin Vinnie needed to find a place with cheap rent, and Mooner needed gas and burrito money. Voilà! A mobile bail bonds office. Problem is I never know exactly where the office is parked.

I drove down Hamilton and cruised past the lot that had been the site of the original office. Mooner’s bus was there. There was a construction trailer parked at the curb behind Mooner’s bus, the charred rubble had been carted away, and there were stakes stuck into the dirt. Vincent Plum Bail Bonds was in rebuilding mode.

It was Monday morning and business as usual, except today there were two cop cars, Joe Morelli’s green SUV, and the medical examiner’s meat wagon parked at odd angles around the construction trailer and Mooner’s bus. Four uniformed cops, Morelli, the M.E., my cousin Vinnie, the bail bonds office manager, Connie Rosolli, and Mooner were all standing in front of a small backhoe, looking into a shallow pit.

I’ve known Morelli all my life, and he’s one of those men who gets better with age. He was a handsome, reckless, heart-breaker in high school. He’s even more handsome now that his face shows some character and maturity. He’s lean and muscular with black hair waving over the top of his ears and along the nape of his neck. His brown eyes are sharp and assessing when he’s working. They soften when he’s aroused. He’s a Trenton plainclothes

cop, and he was wearing jeans and boots and a blue buttoned-down shirt with his gun clipped to his belt. This was in sharp contrast to my cousin Vinnie, who is four inches shorter than Morelli and looks like a weasel with slicked-back hair and pointy-toed shoes.

I parked behind Morelli's SUV and joined the group.

"What are we looking at?" I asked Morelli.

"I'm guessing Lou Dugan," he said.

A half-rotted hand was poking out of the disturbed dirt, and not far from the hand was something that might be part of a skull. I see a lot of bad things in my job, but this was right up there at the top of the Gonna Gork Meter.

TWO

“WHY DO YOU THINK it’s Lou Dugan?” the M.E. asked Morelli.

Morelli pointed to the hand. “Pinky ring. Diamonds and rubies. Dugan was at the pancake supper at St. Joaquin’s, told Manny Kruger he was going home, and that was the last anyone saw him.”

Lou Dugan wasn’t without enemies. He ran a topless titty bar downtown, and it was common knowledge that the women went way beyond lap dances. He was a flamboyant pillar of the community, and I’d heard he could be ruthless in his business dealings.

We all looked back at the grisly hand with the pinky ring.

“Okay, run the crime scene tape,” the M.E. said to one of the uniforms. “And get the state lab out here to exhume the body. Someone’s going to have to stay on the scene until the state takes over. I don’t want a screwup.”

“Awesome,” Mooner said. “This is like *CSI*: Trenton.”

Mooner has shoulder-length brown hair, parted in the middle. He’s slim and built loosey-goosey. He’s my age. He’s a nice guy. And his head is for the most part empty since his brain got fried on drugs in high school and never totally regenerated.

“I’m not paying for special-duty cops,” Vinnie said. “This isn’t my bad. Dugan got himself planted at the back of the lot, under where the garbage cans used to sit. Seems to me that’s city property. This isn’t gonna hold up construction, is it? They were supposed to start pouring foundation this week. I’m renting bogus office space from Scooby Doo here. Every extra day is a fork in my eye.”

Truth is Vinnie wasn’t in a good spot. He was on thin ice with his wife, Lucille, and his father-in-law, Harry the Hammer. Vinnie and Lucille were newly reconciled from a nasty split, and Lucille was keeping her thumb on Vinnie’s doodles. Even worse, at Lucille’s request, Harry had agreed to go back into the bail bonds business and finance Vinnie’s operation. And Harry had his *boot* on Vinnie’s doodles. So needless to say Vinnie was walking very carefully to avoid intense pain.

A red Firebird pulled in, double-parked next to my car, and Lula got out. Lula is supposed to do filing for the office, but she pretty much does whatever she wants. She was a blond today, her curly yellow hair contrasting nicely with her brown skin and her leopard print, spandex wrap dress. Her 5' 5" body is plus size, but Lula enjoys testing the limits of seam and fabric, squishing herself into size 2 petite.

“What’s going on here?” Lula wanted to know, sinking into the dirt in her four-inch Via Spiga stilettos. “This office-in-a-bus is a pain in the behind. I never know where anybody is. And nobody’s answering their cell phone. How the heck am I supposed to work like this?”

“You don’t work anyway,” Vinnie said.

Lula leaned forward, hands on hips. “That’s a disrespectful attitude, and I don’t tolerate no disrespect. I gotta work just to *find* your stupid office-on-wheels.” Her eyes moved to the pit and locked onto the hand. “What’s that? Are we getting ready for Halloween? This gonna be some kind of scary trick-or-treat place?”

“We’re thinking it’s Lou Dugan,” I said. “The backhoe accidentally dug him up.”

Lula’s eyes about popped out of her head. “Are you shitting me? Lou Dugan? *Mr. Titty?*”

“Yeah.”

“That’s disgustin’. Is there something attached to that hand? If there is I don’t want to know about it. Dead people give me the creeps. I might need fried chicken to take my mind off all this now. And anyways, what the heck was Mr. Titty doing under the bonds office?”

“Technically he was under the garbage cans,” Vinnie said.

“Let me get this straight. Some idiot dug a hole instead of throwing the body in the river or the landfill,” Lula said. “And they left the ring on his finger. What’s with that? That ring’s worth something. This here must have been a amateur job.”

Everyone stood silent. Lula was right. This wasn’t the way things were done in Trenton.

I turned to Morelli. “Did you catch this case?”

“Yep,” he said. “Lucky me.” His eyes dropped to my chest, and he leaned close, his lips brushing my ear. “You’re looking sexy today. I like this red shirt you’re wearing.”

I appreciated the compliment, but truth is Morelli thinks everything I wear is sexy. Morelli has testosterone oozing out of every pore.

“I’m going back to the bus,” Connie said. “I have new cases to process.”

“Where’s the bus goin’ next?” Lula asked. “I gotta get some chicken to settle my nerves, and then I might stop in to do some filing or something.”

“The bus is staying here,” Vinnie said. “I’m supposed to meet with the contractor this morning and go over some plans.”

“That’s a bad idea,” Lula said. “There’s probably all kinds of nasty juju leakin’ out of that decayin’ carcass. You hang around and you could catch something.”

Mooney went white. “Dude.”

Morelli wrapped an arm around me and moved me to my car. “I’ll buy you dinner tonight if you promise to wear this red top.”

“And if I don’t wear the red top?”

“I’ll buy you dinner anyway.” He opened the passenger-side door, removed the bakery box, and looked inside. “This isn’t your usual selection. You never get blueberry.”

“Loretta was in a hurry. It was a free sample, sort of.”

Morelli took the blueberry for a test drive, and I ate the Boston cream.

“Do you think Lou’s leaking bad juju?” I asked him.

“No more than he leaked it when he was alive.” Morelli finished off his doughnut and kissed me. “Mmm,” he said. “You taste like chocolate. I have to go back to the station to do paperwork now, but I’ll pick you up at five thirty.”