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JANET
EVANOVICH

A **STEPHANIE PLUM** NOVEL

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THIRTY-ONE ON THE RUN



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**NOW OR
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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.



CHAPTER TWO

Connie looked up from her computer when we walked in. “Did you get someone?”

“We got him and then we lost him,” I said. “Is Vinnie still here?”

“He left right after you did,” Connie said. “He had to go downtown to bond someone out.” She handed me a file. “I got a new FTA. It just came through. Indecent exposure in the supermarket. Not a big-ticket bond, but it’ll get you pizza money.”

I took the file and shoved it into my bag. “Can you get me more information on Bruno Jug?” I asked Connie. “Wives, girlfriends, social clubs, hobbies, vacation houses. Anything.”

“You bet,” Connie said. “I’ll do a search on him, and I’ll ask my cousin Carl. Jug isn’t in the family, but he moves in some of the same circles as Carl.”

Connie is remotely connected to the mob of yesteryear, and she has some current relatives who have unexplained incomes. Carl would be one of them.

Lula reappeared from the back of the office. “What did I miss? What are you talking about?”

“Bruno Jug,” I said.

“I could use to miss that conversation. I don’t like things that got to do with death.”

“I doubt he does his own wet work,” Connie said. “He’s white-collar. He’s a suit.”

“I still don’t want to talk about him,” Lula said. “I want to talk about the hitch. I expected to see a ring when I came in this morning, and all I got was news that there’s a hitch. Ranger isn’t backing out, is he? That would be real disappointing.”

I dumped my messenger bag onto the couch and slouched into one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs in front of Connie’s desk.

“It’s not Ranger,” I said. “He’s still in Virginia with his tech guy. They’re cleaning up a security breach in an office there.”

“Then what?” Lula asked.

“Remember when Morelli came back from Miami and showed up at the crime scene?”

“Yeah, I remember that,” Lula said.

“Okay, so we got together after.”

“Uh-oh,” Lula said. “How together?”

“Just together. Talking.”

“And?”

“And he asked me to marry him.”

“Holy shit,” Lula said.

Connie, the office manager and the most religious of the three of us, which isn’t saying much, made the sign of the cross.

“And?” Lula asked.

“And I sort of said yes.”

“Holy shit again,” Lula said.

Connie’s phone rang and Connie sent the call to voicemail. “Keep going,” she said to me.

Connie is a couple years older than me, a better shot than me, and caught in a Jersey Shore, eighties time warp with big hair, bright blue eye shadow, and black eyeliner.

“Are you telling me you’re engaged to both guys?” Lula asked. “Because if that’s what you’re telling me, I need a doughnut to calm down.”

Connie pushed the bakery box across the top of her desk toward Lula and turned to me. “Who did you choose?”

“That’s the problem,” I said. “I can’t choose. There are extenuating circumstances.”

“Like someone’s gonna kill someone else?” Lula asked, eating the last stale doughnut.

“No. I don’t think it will come to that. The problem is that when I got engaged to Ranger, we celebrated.”

“That’s to be expected,” Lula said. “Anybody would celebrate getting engaged to Ranger. He’s smokin’, and he’s got a full-time housekeeper taking care of him. And she cooks and irons.”

“Exactly,” I said. “But then I celebrated with Morelli when we got engaged.”

“Okay, I get that,” Lula said. “Anybody would celebrate getting engaged to him, too.”

“Hold on,” Connie said. “When you say that you ‘celebrated,’ do you mean with a glass of champagne?”

“I mean we *really celebrated*,” I said.

“So, you *really celebrated* with both men,” Connie said.

“Yep,” I said. “A lot. First with Ranger and then with Morelli.”

“No harm, no foul there,” Lula said. “Totally understandable.”

“Yes, but when I went to take my birth control pill the morning after Morelli, I found out they’d expired.”

“Were they a little expired?” Lula asked. “A little expired would still be okay.”

“They were a lot expired,” I said. “They should have been thrown away a couple years ago, but they were left in a bathroom drawer with the new pills, and I grabbed the wrong packet. I’ve been taking the stupid things all month. I don’t know why it suddenly occurred to me to look at the date.”

“I’d say a combination of guilt and fear,” Lula said. “Nobody was wearing a raincoat?”

“No raincoats.”

“Maybe you need one of them morning-after pills,” Lula said.

“I don’t think I want to do that,” I said.

Lula went wide-eyed. “You mean you want to have a baby?”

“I think I might.”

I couldn’t believe I was thinking this, much less saying it out loud. I couldn’t cook, and I gagged when I babysat Morelli’s dog and had to pick up after him. How was I ever going to take care of a baby?

“For one thing, I’m not getting any younger,” I said to Lula. “It could be now or never.”

“I suppose,” Lula said. “But you haven’t gotten any older either. And now or never is one of them overrated motivational ideas.”

“You still have to pick a man,” Connie said. “Do you know which one?”

“That’s the hitch,” I said. “If it turns out that I’m not pregnant, I know who I want to marry. If it turns out that I’m pregnant, I can’t make a decision until I’m seven weeks in. At seven weeks you can do a paternity test. I googled it.”

“So, if you’re preggers, you’ll marry whoever the baby daddy is?” Connie asked.

“Yes.”

“Even if it’s not your first choice?”

“Yep. Not a problem. I had a hard time choosing, anyway,” I said.

“You got a point,” Lula said. “You can’t go wrong with either of them. When are you going to know if you’re pregnant?”

“I can start testing six days after Morelli and I celebrated.”

“That would be four days from now,” Lula said. “When is Aunt Flo supposed to show up?”

“I’m not sure. I have almost two weeks of pills left, but I’ve stopped taking them, so Aunt Flo might be confused.”

“Okay, so we have to wait until Friday,” Lula said.

“The six-days-after isn’t a sure thing,” I said. “The ten-days test is more reliable, and the best test is after you’ve missed a period.”

“I can’t wait for ten days,” Lula said. “As it is, I’m gonna be holding my breath until Friday.”

“What about your apartment?” Connie asked me. “I heard you got evicted.”

“I did, but I’ve been reinstated. The management company changed its mind. They realized the fire wasn’t my fault. I mean, I can’t help it if some wacko firebombed my apartment.”

“Yeah, and we caught the wacko, so that has to count for something,” Lula said.

I glanced at the doughnut box on Connie’s desk. Empty. Damn. Connie kept a flask in her bottom drawer, along with her gun and a can of hair spray. Probably it was too early to take a hit from the flask. I didn’t usually drink hard liquor, but in the absence of a doughnut, it served a purpose. I gave up on the doughnut and the liquor and slumped a little lower in my chair.

“Most of the damage was cleaned up by the restoration team,” I said. “And if I can bring Jug in, I’ll collect enough on his apprehension to buy new bedroom furniture. And maybe a television.”

“Are you sure you want to do all that if you’re getting married?” Connie asked.

“I can get a mattress and frame overnight for under three hundred dollars. Otherwise, I might be sleeping on my couch for a couple months.”

“I see where you’re going with this,” Lula said. “You’ve got to keep two guys on the hook, so it’s not like you could live with one of them. I don’t know how you’re going to do this.”

“It should be okay for a day or two,” I said. “I’ll be busy getting my apartment set up. And I’ve got a couple FTAs that will be a priority. Ranger is out of town, so I only have to deal with Morelli.”

“What happens after a couple days?” Lula asked.

“I might get sick. Something contagious.”

“That’s good,” Lula said. “You should say you got COVID. That always works. That’s good for at least a week. And then you could get long COVID if you need more time.”

I was hoping I wouldn’t need more time. I didn’t like keeping Ranger and Morelli hanging like this. It felt icky. It wasn’t the way I wanted to start a marriage.

“Uh-oh,” Lula said to me. “You’ve got that face.”

“What face?”

“The face like you’re not happy, where your mouth turns down and your eyes don’t have no sparkle.”

“I shouldn’t have celebrated with both of them.”

“Yeah, well, that ship already sailed. You just need to take your mind off it. We should go get the indecent-exposure guy. They’re always fun. And they hardly ever shoot at us.”

My phone rang. It was Morelli.

“Hey,” I said to him.

“Just checking in,” he said. “I’m still playing catch-up on paperwork, but I should be done at the end of the day. I thought we could get takeout and you could spend the night.”

“That sounds great, but I told my parents I’d be there for dinner. And then Grandma wanted to go to a viewing at the funeral home. And you know how that ends up. I’ll have a headache from the carnations and lilies. Maybe tomorrow would be better. I’ve gotta go. I have another call coming in.”

“You’re going straight to hell,” Lula said to me. “No doubt about it. That was a monster fib.”

“I fib all the time. It’s part of my job,” I said.

“That don’t make it right,” Lula said.

“Do you fib?” I asked her.

“Hell yeah. I’m a lifelong fibber. One of these days I’m going to confession and get rid of my fibber sins.”

“I thought you weren’t Catholic.”

“Do you have to be Catholic? I’m Catholic by association. I know a lot of Catholics. And I had a bunch of Catholic customers back when I was a ho.”

I grabbed my messenger bag and hung it on my shoulder. “Time to saddle up and move out.”

“Yahoo,” Lula said.

I gave Lula the new file when we were in my Trailblazer.

“Jerry Bottles,” she said. “Sixty-two years old. Not an attractive photo. Bald, big belly, has a nose like Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*. Says he’s five feet six inches tall and weighs a hundred sixty pounds. Self-employed plumber. Looks like this isn’t his first exposure. His last arrest got him community service, but he exposed himself while he was doing his time, working to clean up the duck pond in Greenwood Park, so he was sent for a psychiatric evaluation. He lives in one of those little row houses on the outskirts of the Burg. Seventy-two Wilmot Street.”

The Burg is a chunk of Trenton on the other side of the railroad tracks from the center of the city. I grew up in the Burg and my parents still live there with my grandma Mazur. Houses are small. Streets follow no rhyme or reason. The bakeries are excellent. The medical center sits on the edge of the Burg. Vincent Plum Bail Bonds is several blocks away and on the opposite side of Hamilton Avenue.

I drove down Hamilton and made a left turn into the Burg before I got to the medical center. I wound my way through the Burg and found Wilmot. There was on-street parking in front of the row houses. I knew there was also parking in the alley that cut the block.

“That’s his house there,” Lula said. “The one with the Christmas wreath on the front door. There’s cars parked at the curb but none of them looks like a plumber’s vehicle.”

“What does a plumber’s vehicle look like?”

“It’s one of those things you know when you see it,” Lula said.

I drove around the block and turned into the alley. Some houses had single-car garages in the alley. Number 72 did not. There was a truck parked in the small backyard.

“You see,” Lula said. “That’s a plumber’s vehicle. I knew as soon as I looked at it.”

“It says *Bottles Plumbing* on the side panel.”

“Fuckin’ A,” Lula said.

I parked alongside the truck, and Lula and I got out of my Trailblazer and walked to Bottles’s back door.

“We should be nice to him,” Lula said. “You never know when you’ll need a plumber.”

I didn't think I needed a plumber who displayed his personal plumbing in public, but I would be nice to him anyway.

Bottles answered on the second knock. He was wearing jeans that sat below his belly overhang and a navy collared shirt that had *Bottles Plumbing* stitched in yellow on the pocket. He had a few greasy strands of hair stretched across his bald head and an outcropping of hair on his large Captain Hook nose. I try not to be judgmental, but by anyone's standards he was not an attractive man.

"Gerald Bottles?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "What's up?"

"I represent Vincent Plum Bail Bonds," I said. "You missed your court date. I need to get you rescheduled."

"That's a real pain in the buttocks," he said. "How about we just forget the whole thing. Nothing ever comes from this court stuff anyway. I'm already doing shrink time, which is a total waste. This shrink guy doesn't get it. I think he's got penis envy, but that's just my opinion."

"If you don't want to go to court, why don't you stop whipping it out in public?" Lula said.

"I'd rather stop breathing," Bottles said. "I'd rather gouge out my eyeballs. I'd rather become a vegan."

"So, you'd rather be a dead, blind vegan than give up being a pervert," Lula said.

"I'm not a pervert," Bottles said. "It's that when God gives you something special you got an obligation to make the most of it. I'm not stupid but I'm not real smart either. I don't have a lot of education. I don't have good hair. I got a big nose and a big belly. What it all adds up to is that I'm not exactly a heartthrob. I'm not even good at conversation. No one wants to talk about unclogging a toilet."

"I'm guessing this is going somewhere," Lula said.

"What I've got is a really pretty penis," Bottles said. "And it's a crime against nature not to show it to people."

"Honey, every man thinks his penis is pretty," Lula said. "Even the ones who want it to be bigger still think what they got is pretty. That don't mean everyone can go around waving it like a flag on the Fourth of July."