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JANET  
EVANOVICH

A STEPHANIE PLUM NOVEL

  
SIZZLING

SIXTEEN

# SIZZLING SIXTEEN

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Janet Evanovich



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**SIZZLING  
SIXTEEN**

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**SIZZLING  
SIXTEEN**

# ONE

MY UNCLE PIP died and left me his lucky bottle. I suppose I'm fortunate, because he left my Grandma Mazur his false teeth. So I've got this bottle now, and I don't exactly know what to do with it. It's not like I have a mantel. My name is Stephanie Plum, and I live in a bare-bones apartment on the outer edge of Trenton, New Jersey. I share the apartment with my hamster, Rex, and he doesn't know what to do with the bottle, either. The lucky bottle is the size and shape of a beer bottle. The glass is red, and it looks handblown. It's not entirely ugly, especially if you like beer, but it's also not exotically pretty. And so far, it hasn't been very lucky. I have the bottle sitting on my kitchen counter, between Rex's hamster cage and the brown bear cookie jar that holds my gun. It was Monday morning, halfway through June, and Lula was in my apartment doing a pity pickup because my hunk-of-junk car was dead and I needed a ride to work.



"Hunh," Lula said. "What's that red bottle on your counter?"

"It's my lucky bottle."

"Oh yeah, what's so lucky about it? It don't look too lucky to me. Looks like one of them designer beer bottles, only it's got a fancy glass stopper in it."

"It's my inheritance from Uncle Pip."

"I remember Uncle Pip," Lula said. "He was older than dirt, right? Had a big carbuncle on his forehead. He was the one wandered out of the senior complex a couple weeks ago during that thunderstorm, pissed on a downed electric wire, and electrocuted himself."

"Yep. That was Uncle Pip."

I'm a bond enforcement agent, working for my cousin Vinnie, and Lula is the office file clerk, wheelman, and fashion maven. Lula likes the challenge of fitting her plus-size body into a size 8 poison green spandex miniskirt and leopard-print top, and somehow it all comes together for Lula. Lula's skin is milk chocolate, her hair this week is fire-engine red, and her attitude is pure Jersey.

I'm a couple inches taller than Lula, and where her body is overly voluptuous, mine is more 34B. My idea of fashion is a girl-cut stretchy T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. My skin is nowhere near chocolate, my shoulder-length, naturally curly hair is plain ol' brown and often pulled back into a ponytail, my eyes are blue, and I'm still trying to find my attitude.

I hung my purse on my shoulder and pushed Lula to

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the door. "We need to move. Connie called ten minutes ago, and she sounded frantic."

"What's with that?" Lula said. "Last time Connie was frantic was never."

Connie Rosolli is the bail bonds office manager. My heritage is half Italian and half Hungarian. Connie is Italian through and through. Connie is a couple years older than I am, has more hair than I do and a consistently better manicure. Her desk is strategically placed in front of Vinnie's door, the better to slow down stiffed bookies, process servers, hookers with obviously active herpes, and a stream of perverted degenerates with quick-rich schemes hatched while under the influence of who-knows-what.

I live ten minutes from the office on a day without traffic. This wasn't one of those days, and it took Lula twenty minutes to get her red Firebird down Hamilton Avenue. Vinnie's bail bonds business is located on Hamilton, just up from the hospital and between a dry cleaner and a used-book store. There's a front room with large plate-glass windows, an inner office where Vinnie hides, a row of file cabinets, and behind the file cabinets is storage for everything from guns and ammo to George Foreman grills held hostage until some poor burger-loving slob comes up to trial.

Lula parked at the curb, and we pushed through the door into the front room. Lula plunked herself down on the brown fake-leather couch that was positioned against the wall, and I settled into an orange plastic chair in front

of Connie's desk. The door to Vinnie's office was open, but there was no Vinnie.

"What's up?" I asked Connie.

"Mickey Gritch snatched Vinnie. Last night, he caught Vinnie in a compromising position, pants down on Stark Street, on the corner of Stark and Thirteenth. And from what I've pieced together, Gritch and two of his boys dragged Vinnie at gunpoint into the back of a Cadillac Escalade and took off."

"I know that corner," Lula said. "That's Maureen Brown's corner. Maureen and me used to hang out back when I was a 'ho. She wasn't as good a 'ho as me, but she wasn't no skank 'ho, either."

Lula worked Stark Street prior to her job as file clerk. She had a rocky beginning, but she's getting herself together, and I suspect someday she'll be the governor of New Jersey.

"Anyway, I guess Vinnie had a run of bad luck at the track, and now he owes Mickey \$786,000," Connie said.

"Whoa," Lula said. "That's a lot of money."

"Some of it's interest," Connie told her. "The interest might be negotiable."

Mickey Gritch has been Vinnie's bookie for as long as I can remember, and this isn't the first time Vinnie's owed money, but I don't recall him ever owing this much.

"Mickey Gritch works for Bobby Sunflower now," Lula said. "You don't want to mess with Bobby."

"Is this serious?" I asked Connie.

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"Times are tough, and Mickey wants his money," Connie said. "Too many people stiffing him, so they're going to make an example of Vinnie. If Vinnie doesn't come up with the money by the end of the week, they're going to kill him."

"Bobby Sunflower would do it," Lula said. "He made Jimmie Sanches disappear . . . permanently. Lots of other people, too, from what I hear."

"Have you gone to the police?" I asked Connie.

"The police aren't my first choice. Vinnie owes this guy for illegal gambling. Knowing Vinnie, it's possible some of the money came out of the business. We used to be owned by Vinnie's father-in-law, you know, but last year we were sold to a venture capital company based in Trenton. The venture capitalists aren't going to tolerate Vinnie's gambling with their money. If this gets out, we could all be out of a job."

"What about the father-in-law?" Lula asked. "Everyone knows he got a lot of money. Plus, he could squeeze Bobby Sunflower."

Vinnie's father-in-law is Harry the Hammer. As long as Vinnie does right by Harry's daughter Lucille, it's all good, but I suspect Harry wouldn't be happy to hear Vinnie got snatched while he was boffing a Stark Street 'ho.

"Gritch already went to Harry. Not only won't Harry fork up the money to spring Vinnie, if Vinnie gets out of this alive, Harry will bludgeon him to death," Connie said.

"Well, that settles it then," Lula said. "I guess it's adios, Vinnie. Personally, I could use one of them breakfast sandwiches from Cluck-in-a-Bucket. Anyone interested in a Cluck-in-a-Bucket run?"

"If there's no Vinnie, there's no bail bonds office," Connie said. "No bail bonds office means we don't get paid. We don't get paid, and there's no Cluck-in-a-Bucket for anyone."

"That's not good," Lula said. "I'm used to a certain standard of living. Cluck-in-a-Bucket is one of my first food choices. Not to mention I got bills. I charged a fabulous pair of Via Spigas last week. I only wore them once, so I guess I could take them back, but then I don't have shoes to wear with my new red dress, and I got a date Friday worked around the dress."

"We don't have a lot of options," Connie said. "We're going to have to do this ourselves."

Vinnie was like a fungus on my family tree. He was a good bail bondsman, but a slimeball in every other aspect of his life. He had the slim, boneless body of a ferret. He wore his brown hair slicked back, his pants too tight, his shoes too pointy, and he left too many of his sleazy shirt buttons unbuttoned. He wore multiple rings, chains, bracelets, and, on occasion, an earring. He gambled on everything, fornicated with anything, and wasn't beyond an adventure into the kinky. But the truth is, in spite of all this, deep down inside I was worried about Vinnie. When times were tough, and no one else would give me a

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job, Vinnie came through for me. Okay, so I had to blackmail him, but the bottom line is he gave me the job.

"I'd like to help," I said, "but I don't have that kind of money."

That was a gross understatement. I didn't have *any* kind of money. I was a month behind on my rent, my car was trash, and my boyfriend's dog ate my sneaker. Actually, I use the term *boyfriend* loosely. His name is Joe Morelli, and I'm not sure how I'd categorize our relationship. Sometimes we were pretty sure it was love, and other times we suspected it was insanity. He's a Trenton plainclothes cop with a house of his own, a grandmother from hell, a lean, muscled body, and brown eyes that can make my heart skip beats. We grew up together in lots of ways, and the truth is, he's probably more grown up than I am.

"I wasn't thinking of money," Connie said. "You're a bounty hunter. You find people. All you have to do is find Vinnie and bring him in."

"Oh no. No, no, no. Not a good idea. This is Bobby Sunflower we're talking about. He's mean! He wouldn't like it if I stole his hostage."

"Hey, girl," Lula said. "They're gonna ventilate Vinnie if you don't do something. And you know what that would amount to."

"No Via Spigas?"

"You bet your ass."

"I wouldn't know where to begin," I said.

"You could begin with Ranger," Lula said. "He knows everything, and he's got a thing for you."

Ranger is the other man in my life, and if I described my relationship with Morelli as confused, there would be no words for my relationship with Ranger. He's former Special Forces, currently runs and partially owns a security firm, is drop-dead handsome in a dark, Latino kind of way, and is sex walking. He drives expensive black cars, wears only black clothes, and he sleeps naked. I know all this firsthand. I also know prolonged exposure to Ranger is dangerous. Ranger can be addicting, and it's a bad addiction for a traditionally raised woman like me, since his life plan doesn't include marriage. For that matter, considering the number of enemies Ranger's made, his life plan might not even include living.

"Do you have any suggestions other than Ranger?" I asked Lula.

"Sure. I got lots of suggestions. Mickey Gritch is easy to find. Vinnie got him in his Rolodex. Hell, Gritch probably has a Web site and a Facebook page."

"Do you know where he lives? Where he conducts business? Where he might have Vinnie stashed?"

"No. I don't know none of those things," Lula said. "Hey, wait a minute, I know one of them. I know where he does business. He does it from his car. He drives a black Mercedes. It's got purple pimp lights running around the license plate. Sometimes I see him parking in the lot next

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to the 7-Eleven on Marble Street. It's a good spot, since it's close to the government buildings. You work all day in government, and you want to either blow your brains out or buy a lottery ticket."

"What about Bobby Sunflower?" I asked her.

"Nobody knows where he hangs. He's like the Phantom. He comes and goes and disappears like he's smoke."

"I guess we could sit at 7-Eleven and watch for Gritch," I said.

"Hold on," Connie said. "Let me run him through the system. If he owns a car, I can give you a home address."

People have a television idea about bounty hunters chasing felons down back alleys and kicking in doors in the middle of the night. I've chased a few guys down back alleys, but I've never mastered the art of door-kicking. Mostly, real bounty hunters track people on the computer and make sneaky phone calls pretending to be conducting a survey or delivering a pizza. The age of electronic information is pretty amazing. Connie has computer programs that will help you access your next-door neighbor's third grade report card.

"I have a couple addresses for Gritch," Connie said. "One is his home address and the other is his sister's. Her name is Jean. Looks like she's a single mom. Works at the DMV. I have six business properties for Bobby Sunflower. A pawnshop, a garage, a car wash, a residential slum on Stark, a titty bar, and a mortuary."



The translation was that Sunflower was into fencing stolen goods, chopping up stolen cars, laundering money, pimping women, and probably the mortuary had a crematorium.

“So I guess we gotta keep Vinnie from visiting Bobby Sunflower’s mortuary,” Lula said.

“What about all my open bonds cases?” I asked Connie. “Last week you gave me six guys who failed to appear for court. And that was on top of a stack of older files. I can’t look for Vinnie and find felons at the same time.”

“Sure we can,” Lula said. “Probably half of those idiots you’re looking for will be at Sunflower’s titty bar. I say we go do some surveillance, and first thing, we stop at the bakery. I changed my mind on the breakfast sandwich. I’m in a doughnut mood now.”

I followed Lula out of the office, and three minutes later, we were parked at the curb in front of Tasty Pastry.

“I’m only getting one doughnut,” Lula said, getting out of the Firebird. “I’m on a new diet where I only have one of anything. Like I can have one pea. And I can have one piece of asparagus. And I can have one loaf of bread.”

We walked into the bakery and conversation stopped while we sucked in the smell of sweet dough and powdered sugar and we gaped at the cases of cakes and pies, cookies, cinnamon rolls, doughnuts, and cream-filled pastries.

“I don’t know what I want,” Lula said. “How can I choose? There’s too much, and I only got one doughnut. I