

ELEVEN ON TOP

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ONE

MY NAME IS Stephanie Plum. When I was eighteen I got a job working a hot dog stand on the boardwalk on the Jersey shore. I worked the last shift at Dave's Dogs, and I was supposed to start shutting down a half hour before closing so I could clean up for the day crew. We did chili dogs, cheese dogs, kraut dogs, and bean-topped barking dogs. We grilled them on a big grill with rotating rods. Round and round the rods went all day long, turning the dogs.

Dave Loogie owned the dog stand and came by every night to lock the stand down. He checked the garbage to make sure nothing good was thrown away, and he counted the dogs that were left on the grill.

"You gotta plan ahead," Dave told me every night. "You got more than five dogs left on the grill when we close, I'm gonna fire your ass and hire someone with bigger tits."

So every night, fifteen minutes before closing, before Dave showed up, I ate hot dogs. Not a good way to go when you're working at the shore nights and on the beach in a skimpy bathing suit by day. One night I ate fourteen

hot dogs. Okay, maybe it was only nine, but it felt like fourteen. Anyway, it was *too many* hot dogs. Well hell, I needed the job.

For years Dave's Dogs took the number-one slot on my list of all-time crappy jobs held. This morning, I decided my present position had finally won the honor of replacing Dave's Dogs. I'm a bounty hunter. A bond enforcement agent, if you want to make me sound more legitimate. I work for my cousin Vinnie in his bail bonds office in the Chambersburg section of Trenton. At least I used to work for my cousin Vinnie. Thirty seconds ago, I quit. I handed in the phony badge I bought off the Net. I gave back my cuffs. And I dropped my remaining open files on Connie's desk.

Vinnie writes the bonds. Connie shuffles the paperwork. My sidekick, Lula, files when the mood strikes her. And an incredibly sexy, incredibly handsome badass named Ranger and I hunt down the morons who don't show up for trial. Until today. As of thirty seconds ago, all the morons got transferred to Ranger's list.

"Give me a break," Connie said. "You can't quit. I've got a stack of open files."

"Give them to Ranger."

"Ranger doesn't do the low bonds. He only takes the high-risk cases."

"Give them to Lula."

Lula was standing hand on hip, watching me spar with Connie. Lula's a size-sixteen black woman squashed into size-ten leopard print spandex. And the weird thing is, in her own way, Lula looks pretty good in the animal spandex.

"Hell yeah," Lula said. "I could catch them sonsabitches."

I could hunt down their asses good. Only I'm gonna miss you," she said to me. "What are you gonna do if you don't work here? And what brought this on?"

"Look at me!" I said. "What do you see?"

"I see a mess," Lula said. "You should take better care of yourself."

"I went after Sam Sporky this morning."

"Melon-head Sporky?"

"Yeah. Melon-head. I chased him through three yards. A dog tore a hole in my jeans. Some crazy old lady shot at me. And I finally tackled Sporky behind the Tip Top Cafe."

"Looks like it was garbage day," Lula said. "You don't smell too good. And you got something looks like mustard all over your ass. Least I hope that's mustard."

"There were a bunch of garbage bags at the curb and Melon-head rolled me into them. We made sort of a mess. And then when I finally got him in cuffs, he spit on me!"

"I imagine that's the glob of something stuck in your hair?"

"No. He spit on my shoe. Is there something in my hair?"

Lula gave an involuntary shiver.

"Sounds like a normal day," Connie said. "Hard to believe you're quitting because of Melon-head."

Truth is, I don't exactly know why I was quitting. My stomach feels icky when I get up in the morning. And I go to bed at night wondering where my life is heading. I've been working as a bounty hunter for a while now and I'm not the world's best. I barely make enough money to cover my rent each month. I've been stalked by crazed killers, taunted by naked fat men, firebombed, shot at, spat at,

cussed at, chased by humping dogs, attacked by a flock of Canadian honkers, rolled in garbage, and my cars get destroyed at an alarming rate.

And maybe the two men in my life add to the icky feeling in my stomach. They're both Mr. Right. And they're both Mr. Wrong. They're both a little scary. I wasn't sure if I wanted a relationship with either of them. And I hadn't a clue how to choose between them. One wanted to marry me, sometimes. His name was Joe Morelli and he was a Trenton cop. Ranger was the other guy, and I wasn't sure what he wanted to do with me beyond get me naked and put a smile on my face.

Plus, there was the note that got slipped under my door two days ago. I'M BACK. What the heck did that mean? And the follow-up note tacked to my windshield. DID YOU THINK I WAS DEAD?

My life is too weird. It's time for a change. Time to get a more sensible job and sort out my future.

Connie and Lula shifted their attention from me to the front door. The bonds office is located on Hamilton Avenue. It's a small two-room storefront setup with a cluttered storage area in the back, behind a bank of file cabinets. I didn't hear the door open. And I didn't hear footsteps. So either Connie and Lula were hallucinating or else Ranger was in the room.

Ranger is the mystery man. He's a half head taller than me, moves like a cat, kicks ass all day long, only wears black, smells warm and sexy, and is 100 percent pure perfectly toned muscle. He gets his dark complexion and liquid brown eyes from Cuban ancestors. He was Special Forces, and that's about all anyone knows about Ranger.

Well hell, when you smell *that* good and look *that* good who cares about anything else, anyway?

I can usually feel Ranger standing behind me. Ranger doesn't ordinarily leave any space between us. Today, Ranger was keeping his distance. He reached around me and dropped a file and a body receipt on Connie's desk.

"I brought Angel Robbie in last night," he said to Connie. "You can mail the check to Rangeman."

Rangeman is Ranger's company. It's located in an office building in center city and specializes in security systems and fugitive apprehension.

"I got big news," Lula said to Ranger. "I've been promoted to bounty hunter on account of Stephanie just quit."

Ranger picked a couple strands of sauerkraut off my shirt and pitched them into Connie's wastebasket. "Is that true?"

"Yes," I said. "I quit. I'm done fighting crime. I've rolled in garbage for the last time."

"Hard to believe," Ranger said.

"I'm thinking of getting a job at the button factory," I told him. "I hear they're hiring."

"I don't have a lot of domestic instincts," Ranger said to me, his attention fixing on the unidentifiable glob of goo in my hair, "but I have a real strong urge to take you home and hose you down."

I went dry mouth. Connie bit into her lower lip, and Lula fanned herself with a file.

"I appreciate the offer," I told him. "Maybe some other time."

"Babe," Ranger said on a smile. He nodded to Lula and Connie and left the office.

No one said anything until he drove off in his shiny black Porsche Turbo.

"I think I wet my pants," Lula said. "Was that one of them double entendres?"

I DROVE BACK to my apartment, took a shower all by myself, and got dressed up in a stretchy white tank top and a tailored black suit with a short skirt. I stepped into four-inch black heels, fluffed up my almost shoulder-length curly brown hair, and added one last layer to my mascara and lipstick.

I'd taken a couple minutes to print out a resume on my computer. It was pathetically short. Graduated with mediocre grades from Douglass College. Worked as a lingerie buyer for a cheap department store for a bunch of years. Got fired. Tracked down scumbags for my cousin Vinnie. Seeking management position in a classy company. Of course, this was Jersey and classy here might not be the national standard.

I grabbed my big black leather shoulder bag and yelled good-bye to my roomie, Rex-the-hamster. Rex lives in a glass aquarium on the kitchen counter. Rex is pretty much nocturnal so we're sort of like ships passing in the night. As an extra treat, once in a while I drop a Cheez Doodle into his cage and he emerges from his soup can home to retrieve the Doodle. That's about as complicated as our relationship gets.

I live on the second floor of a blocky, no-frills, three-story apartment building. My apartment looks out over the parking lot, which is fine by me. Most of the residents in

my building are seniors. They're home in front of their televisions before the sun goes down, so the lot side is quiet at night.

I exited my apartment and locked up behind myself. I took the elevator to the small ground-floor lobby, pushed through the double glass doors, and crossed the lot to my car. I was driving a dark green Saturn SL-2. The Saturn had been the special of the day at Generous George's Used Car Emporium. I'd actually wanted a Lexus SC430, but Generous George thought the Saturn was more in line with my budget constraints.

I slid behind the wheel and cranked the engine over. I was heading off to apply for a job at the button factory and I was feeling down about it. I was telling myself it was a new beginning, but truth is, it felt more like a sad ending. I turned onto Hamilton and drove a couple blocks to Tasty Pastry Bakery, thinking a doughnut would be just the thing to brighten my mood.

Five minutes later, I was on the sidewalk in front of the bakery, doughnut bag in hand, and I was face-to-face with Morelli. He was wearing jeans and scuffed boots and a black V-neck sweater over a black T-shirt. Morelli is six feet of lean, hard muscle and hot Italian libido. He's Jersey guy smart, and he's not a man you'd want to annoy . . . unless you're me. I've been annoying Morelli all my life.

"I was driving by and saw you go in," Morelli said. He was standing close, smiling down at me, eyeing the bakery bag. "Boston creams?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

"I needed happy food."

"You should have called me," he said, hooking his finger

into the neckline of my white tank, pulling the neck out to take a look inside. "I have just the thing to make you happy."

I've cohabitated with Morelli from time to time and I knew this to be true. "I have stuff to do this afternoon and doughnuts take less time."

"Cupcake, I haven't seen you in weeks. I could set a new land speed record for getting happy."

"Yeah, but that would be *your* happiness," I said, opening the bag, sharing the doughnuts with Morelli. "What about mine?"

"Your happiness would be top priority."

I took a bite of doughnut. "Tempting, but no. I have a job interview at the button factory. I'm done with bond enforcement."

"When did this happen?"

"About an hour ago," I said. "Okay, I don't actually have an interview *appointment*, but Karen Slobodsky works in the personnel office, and she said I should look her up if I ever wanted a job."

"I could give you a job," Morelli said. "The pay wouldn't be great but the benefits would be pretty decent."

"Gee," I said, "that's the second scariest offer I've had today."

"And the scariest offer would be?"

I didn't think it was smart to tell Morelli about Ranger's offer of a hosing down. Morelli was wearing a gun on his hip, and Ranger wore guns on multiple parts of his body. Seemed like a bad idea to say something that might ratchet up the competition between them.

I leaned into Morelli and kissed him lightly on the

mouth. "It's too scary to share," I told him. He felt nice against me, and he tasted like doughnut. I ran the tip of my tongue along his lower lip. "Yum," I said.

Morelli's fingers curled into the back of my jacket. "*Yum* is a little mild for what I'm feeling. And what I'm feeling shouldn't be happening on the sidewalk in front of the bakery. Maybe we could get together tonight."

"For pizza?"

"Yeah, that too."

I'd been taking a time-out from Morelli and Ranger, hoping to get a better grip on my feelings, but I wasn't making much progress. It was like choosing between birthday cake and a big-boy margarita. How could I possibly decide? And probably I'd be better off without either, but jeez, that wouldn't be any fun.

"Okay," I said. "I'll meet you at Pino's."

"I was thinking my house. The Mets are playing and Bob misses you."

Bob is Morelli's dog. Bob is a big, orange, incredibly huggable shaggy-haired monster with an eating disorder. Bob eats *everything*.

"No fair," I said. "You're using Bob to lure me to your house."

"Yeah," Morelli said. "So?"

I blew out a sigh. "I'll be over around six."

I DROVE A couple blocks down Hamilton and left-turned onto Olden. The button factory is just beyond the city limits of north Trenton. At four in the morning, it's a ten-minute drive from my apartment. At all other hours, the

drive time is unpredictable. I stopped for a red light at the corner of Olden and State and just as the light flashed green I heard the pop of gunshot behind me and the *zing, zing, zing* of three rounds tearing into metal and fiberglass. I was pretty sure it was *my* metal and fiberglass, so I floored the Saturn and sailed across the intersection. I crossed North Clinton and kept going, checking my rearview mirror. Hard to tell in traffic, but I didn't think anyone was following me. My heart was racing, and I was telling myself to chill. No reason to believe this was anything more than a random shooting. Probably just some gang guy having fun, practicing his sniping. You've got to practice somewhere, right?

I fished my cell phone out of my purse and called Morelli. "Someone's taking potshots at cars on the corner of Olden and State," I told him. "You might want to send someone over to check things out."

"Are you okay?"

"I'd be better if I had that second doughnut." Okay, so this was my best try at bravado. My hands were white-knuckled gripping the wheel and my foot was shaking on the gas pedal. I sucked in some air and told myself I was just a little excited. Not panicked. Not terrified. Just a little excited. All I had to do was calm down and take a couple more deep breaths and I'd be fine.

Ten minutes later, I pulled the Saturn into the button factory parking lot. The entire factory was housed in a mammoth three-story redbrick building. The bricks were dark with age, the old-fashioned double-hung windows were grimy, and the landscaping was lunar. Dickens would

have loved it. I wasn't so sure it was my thing. But then, *my thing* wasn't clearly defined anymore.

I got out and walked to the rear of the car, hoping I'd been wrong about the gunshot. I felt another dump of adrenaline when I saw the damage. I'd taken three hits. Two rounds were embedded in the back panel and one had destroyed a rear light.

No one had followed me into the lot, and I didn't see any cars lingering on the road. Wrong place, wrong time, I told myself. And I would have believed it entirely if it hadn't been for my lousy previous job and the two notes. As it was, I had to back-burner some paranoia so as not to be in a terror-induced cold sweat while trying to talk some guy into hiring me.

I crossed the lot to the large glass double doors leading to the offices, and I sashayed through the doors into the lobby. The lobby was small with a chipped tile floor and seasick green walls. Somewhere, not far off, I could hear machines stamping out buttons. Phones rang in another part of the building. I approached the reception desk and asked for Karen Slobodsky.

"Sorry," the woman said. "You're two hours too late. She just quit. Stormed out of here like hurricane Slobodsky, yelling something about sexual harassment."

"So there's a job opening?" I asked, thinking my day was finally turning lucky.

"Sure looks that way. I'll buzz her boss, Jimmy Alizzi."

Ten minutes later, I was in Alizzi's office, sitting across from him. He was at his desk and his slight frame was dwarfed by his massive furniture. He looked to be in his

late thirties to early forties. He had slicked-back black hair and an accent and skin tone that had me thinking Indian.

"I will tell you now that I am not Indian," Alizzi said. "Everyone thinks I am Indian, but that is a false assumption. I come from a very small island country off the coast of India."

"Sri Lanka?"

"No, no, no," he said, wagging his bony finger at me. "Not Sri Lanka. My country is even smaller. We are a very proud people, so you must be careful not to make ethnic slurs."

"Sure. You want to tell me the name of this country?"

"Latorran."

"Never heard of it."

"You see, already you are treading in very dangerous waters."

I squelched a grimace.

"So, you were a bounty hunter," he said, skimming over my resume, eyebrows raised. "That is a quite exciting job. Why would you want to quit such a job?"

"I'm looking for something that has more potential for advancement."

"Oh dear, that would be *my* job you would eventually be seeking."

"Yes, well I'm sure it would take years, and then who knows . . . you might be president of the company by then."

"You are an outrageous flatterer," he said. "I like that. And what would you do if I were to ask you for sexual favors? Would you threaten to sue me?"

"No. I guess I'd ignore you. Unless you got physical.

Then I'd have to kick you in a place that hurt a lot and you probably wouldn't be able to father any children."

"That sounds fair," he said. "It happens that I have an immediate position to fill, so you're hired. You can start tomorrow, promptly at eight o'clock. Do not be late."

Wonderful. I have a real job in a nice clean office where no one will shoot at me. I should be happy, yes? This was what I wanted, wasn't it? Then why do I feel so depressed?

I dragged myself down the stairs to the lobby and out to the parking lot. I found my car and the depression deepened. I hated my car. Not that it was a bad car. It just wasn't the *right* car. Not to mention, it would be great to have a car that didn't have three bullet holes in it.

Maybe I needed another doughnut.

A HALF HOUR later, I was back in my apartment. I'd stopped in at Tasty Pastry and left with a day-old birthday cake. The cake said HAPPY BIRTHDAY LARRY. I don't know how Larry celebrated his birthday, but apparently it was without cake. Larry's loss was my gain. If you want to get happy, birthday cake is the way to go. This was a yellow cake with thick, disgusting white frosting made with lard and artificial butter and artificial vanilla and a truckload of sugar. It was decorated with big gunky roses made out of pink and yellow and purple frosting. It was three layers thick with lemon cream between the layers. And it was designed to serve eight people, so it was just the right size.

I dropped my clothes on the floor and dug into the cake. I gave a chunk of cake to Rex, and I worked on the rest. I ate all the pieces with the big pink roses. I was starting to

feel nauseous, but I pressed on. I ate all the pieces with the big yellow roses. I had a purple rose and a couple roseless pieces left. I couldn't do it. I couldn't eat any more cake. I staggered into my bedroom. I needed a nap.

I dropped a T-shirt over my head and pulled on a pair of Scooby-Doo boxers with an elastic waist. God, don't you love clothes with elastic? I had one knee on the bed when I saw the note pinned to my pillowcase. BE AFRAID. BE VERY AFRAID. NEXT TIME I'LL AIM HIGHER.

I thought I'd be more afraid if I hadn't just eaten five pieces of birthday cake. As it was, I was mostly afraid of throwing up. I looked under the bed, behind the shower curtain, and in all the closets. No knuckle-dragging monsters anywhere. I slid the bolt home on the front door and shuffled back to the bedroom.

Now, here's the thing. This isn't the first time someone's broken into my apartment. In fact, people regularly break in. Ranger slides in like smoke. Morelli has a key. And various bad guys and psychos have managed to breach the three locks I keep on the door. Some have even left threatening messages. So I wasn't as freaked out as I might have been prior to my career in bounty hunting. My immediate feelings ran more toward numb despair. I wanted all the scary things to go away. I was tired of scary. I'd quit my scary job, and now I wanted the scary people out of my life. I didn't want to be kidnapped ever again. I didn't want to be held at knifepoint or gunpoint. I didn't want to be threatened, stalked, or run off the road by a homicidal maniac.

I crawled under the covers and pulled the quilt over my