

TEN BIG ONES

Chapter One

The way I see it, life is a jelly doughnut. You don't really know what it's about until you bite into it. And then, just when you decide it's good, you drop a big glob of jelly on your best T-shirt.

My name is Stephanie Plum, and I drop a lot of jelly globs, figuratively and literally. Like the time I accidentally burned down a funeral home. That was the mother of all jelly globs. I got my picture in the paper for that one. I'd walk down the street and people would recognize me.

"You're famous now," my mother said when the paper came out. "You have to set an example. You have to exercise, eat good food and be nice to old people."

Okay, so my mother was probably right, but I'm from Jersey and truth is, I have a hard time getting a grip on the good example thing. A good example in Jersey isn't exactly the national ideal. Not to mention, I inherited a lot of unmanageable brown hair and rude hand gestures from my father's Italian side of the family. What am I supposed to do with that?

My mother's side is Hungarian and from this I get blue eyes and the ability to eat birthday cake and still button the top snap on my jeans. I'm told the good Hungarian metabolism only lasts until I'm forty, so I'm counting down. The Hungarian genes also carry a certain amount of luck and gypsy intuition, both of which I need in my present job. I'm a Bond Enforcement Agent, working for my cousin Vincent Plum, and I run down bad guys. I'm not the best BEA in the world and I'm not the worst. An incredibly hot guy with the street name Ranger is the best. And my sometimes partner, Lula, is possibly the worst.

Maybe it's not fair to have Lula in the running for worst bounty hunter of all time. To begin with, there are some really bad bounty hunters out there. And more to the point, Lula isn't actually a bounty hunter. Lula is a former hooker who was hired to do the filing for the bail bonds office but spends a lot of her day trailing after me.

At the moment, Lula and I were standing in the parking lot of a deli-mart on Hamilton Avenue. We were about a half-mile from the office and we were leaning against my yellow Ford Escape, trying to make a lunch choice. We were debating nachos at the deli-mart against a sub at Giovichinni's.

"Hey," I said to Lula. "What happened to the filing job? Who does the filing now?"

"I do the filing. I file the ass out of that office."

"You're never in the office."

"The hell I am. I was in the office when you showed up this morning."

"Yeah, but you weren't filing. You were doing your nails."

"I was thinking about filing. And if you hadn't needed my help going to look for that loser, Roger Banker, I'd still be filing."

Roger was accused of grand theft auto and possession of controlled substances. In layman's terms, Roger got high and went joy riding.

"So you're still officially a file clerk?"

"Heck no," Lula said. "That's so-o-o boring. Do I look like a file clerk to you?"

Actually, Lula still looked like a hooker. Lula's a full-bodied black woman who favors animal print spandex enhanced with sequins. I figured Lula didn't want to hear my fashion opinion, so I didn't say anything. I just raised an eyebrow.

"The job title is tricky since I do a lot of this here bounty hunter work but I've never really been given any of my own paper work," Lula said. "I suppose I could be your body guard."

"Omigod."

Lula narrowed her eyes at me. "You got a problem with that?"

"It seems a little ... Hollywood."

"Yeah, but sometimes you need some extra fire power, right? And there I am. Hell, you don't even carry a gun half the time. I always got a gun. I got a gun now. Just in case."

And Lula pulled a 40 caliber Glock out of her purse.

"I don't mind using it either. I'm good with a gun. I got an eye for it. Watch me hit that bottle next to the bike."

Someone had leaned a fancy red mountain bike against the big plate glass window in the front of the deli-mart. There was a quart bottle next to the bike. The bottle had a rag stuffed into it.

"No," I said. "No shooting!"

Too late. Lula squeezed off a shot, missed the bottle and destroyed the bike's rear tire.

"Oops," Lula said on a grimace, immediately returning the gun to her purse.

A moment later, a guy ran out of the store. He was wearing a mechanics jumpsuit and a red devil mask. He had a small backpack slung over one shoulder and he had a gun in his right hand. His skin tone was darker than mine but lighter than Lula's. He grabbed the bottle off the ground, lit the rag with a flick of his Bic and threw the bottle into the store. He turned to get onto the bike and realized his tire was blown to smithereens.

"Fuck," the guy said. "FUCK!"

"I didn't do it," Lula said. "Wasn't me. Someone came along and shot up your tire. You must not be popular."

There was a lot of shouting inside the store, the guy in the devil mask turned to flee and Victor, the Pakistani day manager, rushed out the door. "I am done! Do you hear me?" Victor yelled. "This is the fourth robbery this month and I won't stand for any more. You are dog excrement!" he shouted

at the guy in the mask. "Dog excrement."

Lula had her hand back in her purse. "Hold on. I got a gun!" she said. "Where the hell is it? Why can't you ever find the damn gun when you need it?"

Victor threw the still lit but clearly unbroken bottle at the guy in the devil mask, hitting him in the back of the head. The bottle bounced off the devil's head and smashed against my driver's side door. The devil staggered, and instinctively pulled the mask off. Maybe he couldn't breathe, or maybe he went to feel for blood, or maybe he just wasn't thinking. Whatever the reason, the mask was only off for a second, before being yanked back over the guy's head. He turned and looked directly at me, and then he ran across the street and disappeared into the alley between two buildings.

The bottle instantly ignited when it hit my car, and flames raced along the side and the undercarriage of the Escape.

"Holy crap," Lula said, looking up from her purse. "Damn."

"Why me?" I shrieked. "Why does this always happen to me? I can't believe this car is on fire. My cars are always getting exploded. How many cars have I lost like this since you've known me?"

"A lot," Lula said.

"It's embarrassing. What am I going to tell my insurance company?"

"It wasn't your fault," Lula said.

"It's never my fault. Do they care? I don't think they care!"

"You got bad car karma," Lula said. "But at least you're lucky at love."

For the last couple months I've been living with Joe Morelli. Morelli's a very sexy, very handsome Trenton cop. Morelli and I have a long history and possibly a long future. Mostly we take it day by day, neither of us feeling the need for documented commitment right now. The good thing about living with a cop is that you never have to call home when disaster strikes. As you might suspect, that's also the bad part. Seconds after the emergency call goes in on the robbery and car fire, describing my yellow Escape, at least forty different cops, EMTs, and fire fighters will track Morelli down and tell him his girlfriend's done it again.

Lula and I moved further from the fire, knowing from experience that an explosion was a possibility. We stood patiently waiting, listening to the sirens whining in the distance, getting closer by the second. Morelli's unmarked cop car would be minutes behind the sirens. And somewhere in the mix of emergency vehicles my professional mentor and man of mystery, Ranger, would slide in to check things out.

"Maybe I should leave," Lula said. "There's all that filing back at the office. And cops give me the runs."

Not to mention she was illegally carrying a concealed weapon that was instrumental in this whole fiasco.

"Did you see the guy's face when he pulled his mask off?" I asked her.

"No. I was looking for my gun. I missed that."

"Then leaving might be a good idea," I said. "Get me a sub on the way back to the office. I don't think they'll be making nachos here for awhile."

"I'd rather have the sub anyways. A car fire always gives me an appetite." And Lula took off power walking.

Victor was on the other side of the car, stomping around and pulling at his hair. He stopped stomping and fixed his attention on me. "Why didn't you shoot him? I know you. You are a bounty hunter. You should have shot him."

"I'm not carrying a gun," I told Victor.

"Not carrying a gun? What kind of bounty hunter, are you? I watch television. I know about these things. Bounty hunters always have many guns."

"Actually, shooting people is a no-no in bond enforcement."

Victor shook his head. "I don't know what this world is coming to when bounty hunters don't shoot people."

A blue and white patrol car arrived and two uniforms got out and stood hands on hips, taking it all in. I knew both cops. Andy Zajak and Robin Russell.

Andy Zajak was riding shotgun. Two months ago he'd been plain clothes, but he'd asked a local politician some embarrassing questions during a robbery investigation and had gotten busted back to uniform. It could have been worse. Zajak could have been assigned to a desk in the tower of Irrelevance. Sometimes things could get tricky in the Trenton police department.

Zajak waved when he saw me. He said something to Russell, and they both smiled. No doubt enjoying the continuing calamitous exploits of Stephanie Plum.

I'd gone to school with Robin Russell. She was a year behind me, so we weren't the closest of friends, but I liked her. She wasn't especially athletic when she was in high school. She was one of the quiet brainy kids. And she surprised everyone when she joined Trenton P.D. two years ago.

A fire truck followed Zajak and Russell. Plus two more cop cars and an EMT truck. By the time Morelli arrived the hoses and chemical extinguishers were already out and in use.

Morelli angled his car behind Robin Russell's and walked across to me. Morelli was lean and hard muscled with wary cop eyes that softened in the bedroom. His hair was almost black, falling in waves over his forehead, brushing his collar. He was wearing a slightly over-sized blue shirt with the sleeves rolled, black jeans and black boots with a Vibram sole. He had his gun on his hip and, with or without the gun, he didn't look like someone you'd want to mess with. There was a tilt to his mouth that could pass for a smile. Then again, it could just as easily be a grimace. "Are you okay?"

"It wasn't my fault," I told him.

This got a genuine smile from him. "Cupcake, it's never your fault." His

eyes traveled to the red mountain bike with the destroyed tire. "What's with the bike?"

"Lula accidentally shot the tire. Then a guy wearing a red devil mask ran out of the store, took a look at the bike, tossed a Molotov cocktail into the store and set off on foot. The bottle didn't break so Victor pitched it at the devil. The bottle bounced off the devil's head and crashed against my car.

"I didn't hear the part about Lula shooting the tire."

"Yeah, I figured it wasn't necessary to mention that in the official statement."

I looked past Morelli, as a black Porsche 911 Turbo pulled to the curb. There weren't a lot of people in Trenton who could afford the car. Mostly high-level drug dealers ... and Ranger.

I watched as Ranger angled out from behind the wheel and ambled over. He was about the same height as Morelli, but he had more bulk to his muscle. Morelli was a cat. Ranger was Rambo meets Batman. Ranger was in S.W.A.T. black cargo pants and T-shirt. His hair was dark, and his eyes were dark, and his skin reflected his Cuban ancestry. No one knew Ranger's age, but I'd guess it was close to mine. Late twenties to early thirties. No one knew where Ranger lived or where his cars and cash originated. Probably it was best not to know.

Ranger nodded to Morelli and locked eyes with me. Sometimes it felt like Ranger could look you in the eye and know all the stuff that was inside your head. It was a little unnerving, but it saved a lot of time since talk wasn't necessary.

"Babe," Ranger said. And he left.

Morelli watched Ranger get into his Porsche and take off. "Half the time I'm happy to have him watching over you. And half the time it scares the hell out of me. He's always in black, the address on his driver's license is a vacant lot, and he never says anything."

"Maybe he has a dark history ... like Batman. A tortured soul."

"Tortured soul? Ranger? Cupcake, the guy's a mercenary." Morelli playfully twirled a strand of my hair around his finger. "You've been watching Dr. Phil again, right? Oprah? Geraldo? Crossing Over with John Edward?"

"Crossing Over with John Edward. And Ranger's not a mercenary. At least not officially in Trenton. He's a bounty hunter ... like me."

"Yeah, and I really hate that you're a bounty hunter."

Okay. I know I have a crappy job. The money isn't all that great and sometimes people shoot at me. Still, someone's got to make sure the accused show up in court. "I do a service for the community," I told Morelli. "If it wasn't for people like me the police would have to track these guys. The tax payer would have to foot the bill for a larger police force."

"I'm not disputing the job. I just don't want you doing it."

There was a loud phooonf sound from the underside of my car, flames shot out and a steaming tire popped off and rolled across the lot.

"This is the fourteenth Red Devil robbery," Morelli said. "The routine is always the same. Rob the store at gun-point. Get away on a bike. Cover your get-away with a bottle bomb. No one's ever seen enough to ID him."

"Until now," I said. "I saw the guy's face. I didn't recognize him, but I think I could pick him out of a line-up."

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An hour later, Morelli dropped me off at the bond office. He snagged me by the back of my shirt as I was leaving his unmarked seen-better-days Crown Vic cop car. "You're going to be careful, right?"

"Right."

"And you're not going to let Lula do any more shooting."

I did a mental sigh. He was asking the impossible. "Sometimes it's hard to control Lula."

"Then get a different partner."

"Ranger?"

"Very funny," Morelli said.

He French kissed me good-bye, and I thought probably I could control Lula. When Morelli kissed me, I thought anything was possible. Morelli was a terrific kisser.

His pager buzzed and he pulled away to check the read-out. "I have to go," he said, shoving me out the door.

I leaned in the window at him. "Remember, we promised my mom we'd come for dinner tonight."

"No way. You promised. I didn't promise. I had dinner at your parent's house three days ago and once a week is my limit. Valerie and the kids will be there, right? And Kloughn? I'm getting heartburn just thinking about it. Anybody who eats with that crew should get combat pay."

He was right. I had no comeback. A little over a year ago my sister's husband took off for parts unknown with the babysitter. Valerie immediately moved back home with her two kids and took a job with a struggling lawyer, Albert Kloughn. Somehow, Kloughn managed to get Val pregnant and in nine months time my parent's small three bedroom, one bathroom house in the Chambersburg section of Trenton was home to my mom, my dad, Grandma Mazur, Valerie, Albert Kloughn, Val's two little girls and newborn baby.

As a short-term fix to my sister's housing dilemma I volunteered the use of my apartment. I was spending most of my nights with Morelli anyway, so it wasn't a total sacrifice on my part. It's now three months down the road and Valerie is still in my apartment, returning to my parent's house every night for dinner. Once in awhile something fun happens at dinner... like Grandma setting the tablecloth on fire or Kloughn choking on a chicken bone. But usually it's just flat out migraine inducing bedlam.

"Boy, too bad you'll miss the roast chicken with gravy and mashed potatoes," I told Morelli in a last ditch effort. "Probably pineapple upside-down cake for dessert."

"Not gonna work. You're going to have to come up with something better than roast chicken to get me over to your parent's house tonight."

"What, like wild gorilla sex?"

"Not even wild gorilla sex. It would have to be an orgy with identical Japanese triplets."

I gave Morelli an eye-roll, and I left for the bond office.

"Your sub's filed under "S" Lula said when I swung through the door. "I got you capicola and provolone and turkey and pepperoni with some hot peppers."

I opened the file and retrieved my sub. "There's only half a sandwich here."

Well yeah," Lula said. "Me and Connie decided you wouldn't want to get fat by eating that whole sub all yourself. So we helped you out."