

## ELEVEN ON TOP

### Chapter One

My name is Stephanie Plum. When I was eighteen I got a job working a hotdog 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 chilli 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 hotdogs. 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 hotdogs. Okay, maybe it was only nine, but it felt like fourteen. Anyway, it was too many hotdogs. 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 bad-ass 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 gob 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, fire-bombed, 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 one hundred 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 kneecap whacking.

"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 roomy, 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 foot 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."