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JANET

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A STEPHANIE PLUM NOVEL

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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 on 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 lasts only 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 stuff but I've never really been given any of my own cases,' Lula said. 'I suppose I could be your bodyguard.'

'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 firepower, 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, doing a grimace and immediately returning the gun to her purse.

A moment later, a guy ran out of the store. He was wearing a mechanic's 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 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 alleyway 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 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 firefighters will track Morelli down and tell him his girlfriend's done it again.

Lula and I moved farther 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 a while.'

'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 the 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 plainclothes, but he'd asked a local politician some embarrassing questions during a robbery investigation and had gotten busted back in 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 PD 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 had a muscular build 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 oversized 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 SWAT 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 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 taxpayers 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 gunpoint. Get away on a bike. Cover your getaway 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 lineup.'

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 goodbye, 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 readout. '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 parents' 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 baby-sitter.~~

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 parents' 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 parents' house every night for dinner. Once in a while 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 parents' 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.

'Tour 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. The and Connie decided you wouldn't want to get fat by eating that whole sub all yourself. So we helped you out.'~~

Vincent Plum Bail Bonds is a small storefront office on Hamilton

Avenue. Ordinarily a more lucrative location for a bonds office would be across from the courts or the lockup. Vinnie's office is across from the Burg, and a lot of Vinnie's repeat customers are local. Not that the Burg is a bad neighborhood. Truth is, the Burg is possibly the safest place to live if you have to live in Trenton. There's a lot of low-level mob in the Burg and if you misbehave in the Burg you could quietly disappear for a very long time... like forever.

It's even possible that some of Connie's relatives might assist in the disappearance. Connie is Vinnie's office manager. She's five foot four and looks like Betty Boop with a mustache. Her desk is positioned in front of Vinnie's small inner office, preventing the unsuspecting from walking in on Vinnie while he's on the phone with his bookie, taking a snooze, or having a private conversation with his Johnson. Also behind Connie's desk is a bank of file cabinets. And behind the file cabinets is a small stockroom packed with guns and ammo, office supplies, bathroom supplies, and assorted confiscated booty that mostly runs to computers, fake

Rolex watches, and fake Louis Vuitton handbags.

I slouched onto the scarred dung-brown fake leather couch that was positioned against a side wall in the outer office and unwrapped the sub.

'Big day in court yesterday,' Connie said, waving a handful of manila folders at me. 'We had three guys fail to appear. The bad news is they're all chump change. The good news is none of them have been killed or raped in the last two years.'

I took the folders from Connie and returned to the couch. 'I suppose you want me to find these guys,' I said to Connie.

'Yeah,' Connie said. 'Finding them would be good. Dragging their asses back to jail would be even better.'

I flipped through the folders. Harold Pancek. Wanted for indecent exposure and destruction of personal property.

'What's the deal on Harold?' I asked Connie.

'He's local. Moved to the Burg three years ago from Newark,

Lives in one of the row houses on Canter Street. Got drunk two weeks ago and tried to take a leak on Mrs Gooding's cat, Ben. Ben was a moving target and Pancek mostly got the side of Gooding's house and Gooding's favorite rosebush. Killed the rosebush and took the paint off the house. And Gooding says she washed the cat three times and he still smells like asparagus.'

Lula and I had our faces frozen in curled-lip grimaces.

'He doesn't sound like much of a threat,' Connie said. 'Just make sure you stand back if he whips it out to relieve himself.'

I took a quick look at the two remaining files. Carol Cantell, wanted for holding up a Frito-Lay truck. This brought an instant smile to my face. Carol Cantell was a woman after my own heart.

The smile turned to raised eyebrows when I saw the name on the last file. Salvatore Sweet, charged with assault. 'Omigod,' I said to Connie. 'It's Sally. I haven't seen him in ages.' When I first met

Salvatore Sweet he was playing lead guitar for a transvestite rock band. He helped me solve a crime and then disappeared into the night.

'Hey, I remember Sally Sweet,' Lula said. 'He was the shit.'

'What's he doing now besides beating on people?'

'Driving a school bus,' Connie said. 'Guess the rock career didn't work out. He's living on Fenton Street, over by the button factory.'

Sally Sweet was an MTV car crash. He was a nice guy but he couldn't get through a sentence without using the T word fourteen times. The kids on Sally's bus probably had the most inventive vocabularies in the school.

'Have you tried calling him?' I asked Connie.

'Yeah. No answer. And no answering machine.'

'How about Cantell?'

'I talked to her earlier. She said she'd kill herself before she'd go to jail. She said you were going to have to come over there and shoot her and then drag her dead body out of the house.'

It says here she held up a Frito-Lay truck?'

'Apparently she was on that no-carbohydrate diet, got her period and snapped when she saw the truck parked in front of a convenience store. Just got whacked out at the thought of all those chips. She threatened the driver with a nail file, filled her car with bags of Fritos, and took off, leaving the driver standing there in front of his empty truck. The police asked him why he didn't stop her, and he said she was a woman on the edge. He said his wife got to looking like that sometimes, and he didn't go near her when she was like that, either.'

'I've been on that diet and this crime makes perfect sense to me,' Lula said. 'Especially if she had her period. You don't want to go through your period without Fritos. Where you gonna get your salt from? And what about cramps? What are you supposed to take for cramps?'

'Midol?' Connie said.

'Well, yeah, but you gotta have some Fritos while you're waiting for the Midol to kick in. Fritos have a calming influence on a woman.'

Vinnie stuck his head out the door of his inner office and glared at me. 'What are you sitting around for? We got three FTAs in this morning and you already had one in your possession. Four FTAs!

Christ, I'm not running a charity here.'

Vinnie is my cousin on my father's side of the family and sole owner of Vincent Plum Bail Bonds. He's an oily little guy with slicked-back black hair, pointy-toed shoes, and a bunch of gold chains hanging around his scrawny tanning salon-tanned neck. It's rumored that he once had a romantic relationship with a duck. He drives a Cadillac Seville. And he's married to Harry the Hammer's only daughter.

Vinnie's rating as a human being would be in the vicinity of pond slime. His rating as a bonds agent would be considerably higher. Vinnie understood human weakness.

'I haven't got a car,' I told Vinnie. 'My car got firebombed.'

'What's your point? Your cars are always getting firebombed.'

'Have Lula drive you. She doesn't do anything around here anyway,'

'Tour ass,' Lula said.

Vinnie pulled his head back into his office, and he slammed and locked the door.

Connie rolled her eyes. And Lula flipped Vinnie the finger.

'I saw that,' Vinnie yelled from behind his closed door.

'I hate when he's right,' Lula said, 'but there's no reason we can't use my car. I just don't want to pick up the drunken leaker. If he takes paint off a house, I'm not letting him near my upholstery.'

'Try Cantell,' Connie said. 'She should still be at home.'

Fifteen minutes later we were in front of Cantell's house in

Hamilton Township. It was a trim little ranch on a small lot, in a neighborhood of similar houses. The grass was neatly cut, but it was patchy with crabgrass and parched from a hot, dry August.

Young azaleas bordered the front of the house. A blue Honda Civic was parked in the driveway.

'Don't look like the home of a hijacker,' Lula said. 'No garage.'

'Sounds like this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.'

We approached the front door and knocked. And Cantell answered.

'Oh God,' Cantell said. 'Don't tell me you're from the bond agency. I told the woman on the phone I didn't want to go to jail.'

'This is just a rebooking process,' I told her. 'We bring you in and then Vinnie bonds you out again.'

'No way. I'm not going back to that jail. It's too embarrassing. I'd rather you shoot me and kill me.'

'We wouldn't shoot you,' Lula said. 'Unless, of course, you drew a gun. What we'd do is gas you. We got pepper spray. Or we could zap you with the stun gun. My choice would be the stun gun on account of we're using my car and there's a lot of snot produced if we give you a face full of pepper spray. I just had my car detailed.'

'I don't want the back seat full of snot.'

Cantell's mouth dropped open and her eyes glazed over. 'I just took a couple bags of chips,' she said. 'It's not like I'm a criminal.'

Lula looked around. 'You wouldn't have any of them chips left over, would you?'

'I gave them all back. Except for the ones I ate.'

Cantell had short brown hair and a pleasant round face. She was dressed in jeans and an extra-room T-shirt. Her age was listed as thirty-two.

'You should have kept your court date,' I said to Cantell. 'You might have only gotten community service.'

'I didn't have anything to wear,' she wailed. 'Look at me. I'm a house! Nothing fits. I ate a truck full of Fritos!'

'You're not as big as me,' Lula said. 'And I got a lot of stuff to wear. You just gotta know how to shop. We should go out shopping together some day. My secret is I only buy spandex and I buy it too small.'

That way it sucks everything in. Not that I'm fat or anything.

It's just I got a lot of muscle.'

Lula was currently in athletic gear mode, wearing hot pink stretch pants, matching halter top, and serious running shoes. The strain on the spandex was frightening. I was heading for cover at the first sign of a seam unraveling.

'Here's the plan,' I said to Cantell. 'I'm going to call Vinnie and have him meet us at the courthouse. That way you can get bonded out immediately, and you won't have to sit around in a holding cell.'

'I guess that would be okay,' Cantell said. 'But you have to get me back here before my lads get off the school bus.'

'Sure,' I said, 'but just in case, maybe you want to make alternative arrangements.'

'And maybe I can lose some weight before I have to go to court,'

Cantell said.

'Be a good idea not to hold up any more snack food trucks,' Lula said.

'I had my period! I needed those chips.'

'Hey, I hear you,' Lula said.

After we got Cantell rebooked and rebonded and returned to her house, Lula drove me across town back to the Burg.

'That wasn't so bad,' Lula said. 'She seemed like a real nice person. Do you think she's going to show up for court this time?'

'No. We're going to have to go over to her house and drag her to court, kicking and screaming.'

'Yeah, that's what I think, too.'

Lula pulled to the curb and idled in front of my parents' house.

Lula drove a red Firebird that had a sound system capable of broadcasting rap over a five-mile radius. Lula had the sound on low but the bass at capacity, and I could feel my fillings vibrating.

'Thanks for the ride,' I told Lula. 'See you tomorrow.'

To,' Lula said. And she took off.

My Grandma Mazur was at the front door, waiting for me.

Grandma Mazur rooms with my parents now that Grandpa Mazur is living la vidu loca everlasting. Grandma Mazur has a body like a soup chicken and a mind that defies description. She keeps her steely gray hair cut short and tightly permed. She prefers pastel polyester pantsuits and white tennis shoes. And she watches wrestling. Grandma doesn't care if wrestling's fake or real.

Grandma likes to look at big men in little spandex panties.

'Hurry up,' Grandma said. 'Your mother won't start serving drinks until you're at the table, and I need one real bad. I had the day from heck. I traipsed all the way over to Stiva's Funeral Parlor for Lorraine Schnagle's viewing, and she turned out to have a closed casket. I heard she looked real bad at the end, but that's still no reason to deprive people from seeing the deceased. People count on getting a look at the deceased, and I made an effort to get there, dressing up and everything. And now I'm not going to have anything to talk about when I get my hair done tomorrow. I was counting on

Lorraine Schnagle.'

'You didn't try to open the casket, did you?'

The? Of course not. I wouldn't do such a thing. And anyway, it was locked up real tight.'

'Is Valerie here?'

'Valerie's always here,' Grandma said, 'That's another reason I'm having the day from heck. I was a tired after the big disappointment at the funeral parlor, and I couldn't take a nap on account of your niece is back to being a horse and won't stop the galloping. And she whinnies all the time. Between the baby crying and the horse thing, I'm pooped. I bet I got bags under my eyes. If this keeps up I'm going to lose my looks.' Grandma squinted up and down the street. 'Where's your car?'

'It sort of caught fire.'

'Did the tires pop off? Was there an explosion?'

'Yep.'

'Darn! I wish I'd seen that. I always miss the good stuff. How'd it catch fire this time?'

'It happened at a crime scene.'

'I'm telling you this town's going to hell in a handbasket. We never had so much crime. It's getting worse where you don't want to go out of the neighborhood.'

Grandma was right about the crime. I saw it escalating at the bond office. More robberies. More drugs on the street. More murders. Most of it drug and gang related. And now I had seen the

Red Devil's face, so I was sucked into it.

TWO

I found my mom at the kitchen sink, peeling potatoes. My sister

Valerie was in the kitchen, too. Valerie was seated at the small wood table, and she was nursing the baby. It seemed to me

Valerie was always nursing the baby. There were times when I looked at the baby and felt the pull of maternal yearnings, but mostly I was glad I had a hamster.

Grandma followed me into the kitchen, anxious to tell everyone the news, 'She blew up her car again!'
Grandma announced.

My mother stopped peeling. 'Was anyone hurt?'

'No,' I said. 'Just the car. It was totaled.'

My mother made the sign of the cross and took a white-knuckled grip on the paring knife. 'I hate when you blow up cars!' she said. 'How am I supposed to sleep at night knowing I have a daughter who blows up cars?'

'You could try drinking,' Grandma said. 'That always works for me. Nothing like a good healthy snooze before bedtime.'

My cell phone chirped, and everyone paused while I answered.

'Are you having fun yet?' Morelli wanted to know.

'Yeah. I just got to my parents' house and it's lots of fun. Too bad you're missing it.'

'Bad news. You're going to have to miss it, too. One of the guys just brought in a suspect, and you're going to have to ID him.'

'Now?'

'Yeah. Now. Do you need a ride?'

'No. I'll borrow the Buick.'

When my Great Uncle Sandor went into the nursing home, he gave his '53 powder blue-and-white Buick Roadmaster to

Grandma Mazur. Since Grandma Mazur doesn't drive (at least not legally), the car mostly sits in my father's garage. It gets five miles to a gallon of gas. It drives like a refrigerator on wheels. And it doesn't fit my self-image. I see myself more as a Lexus SC430. My budget sees me as a secondhand Honda Civic. My bank was willing to stretch to a Ford Escape.

'That was Joe,' I told everyone. 'I have to meet him at the police station. They think they might have the guy who set fire to my car.'

'Will you be back for the chicken?' my mother wanted to know.

'And what about dessert?'

'Don't wait dinner. I'll get back if I can, and if not I'll take leftovers.' I turned to Grandma. 'I'm going to have to commandeer the Buick until I can replace the Escape.'

'Help yourself,' Grandma said. 'And I'll ride with you to the police station. I could use to get out of the house. And on the way home we could stop at Stiva's to see if they got the lid up for the evening viewing. I'd hate to miss out on seeing Lorraine.'

Twenty minutes later, Grandma and I cruised into the public parking lot across the street from the cop shop. The Trenton police are housed in a no-nonsense chunk of brick and mortar in a no nonsense part of town that gives the cops easy access to crime. The building is half cop shop and half courthouse. The courthouse half has a guard and a metal detector. The cop half has an elevator decorated with bullet holes.

I looked at Grandmas big black patent leather purse. Grandma was known to, from time to time, carry a .45 long barrel. 'You don't have a gun in there, do you?' I asked.

'Who, me?'

'If they catch you taking a concealed weapon into the building they'll lock you up and throw the keys away.'

'How would they know I got a concealed weapon if it's concealed? They better not search me. I'm an old lady. I got certain rights.'

'Carrying a concealed weapon isn't one of them.'

Grandma pulled the gun out of her purse and shoved it under her seat. 'I don't know what this country coming to when an old lady can't keep a gun in her purse. We got a rule for everything these days. What about the bill of health? It says I can bear arms!'

'That's the Bill of Rights, and I don't think it specifically addresses guns in purses.' I locked the Buick and called Joe on my cell. 'I'm across the street,' I told him. 'And I've got Grandma with me.'

'She isn't armed, is she?'

'Not anymore.'

I could feel Joe smile across the phone line. 'I'll meet you downstairs.'

Civilian traffic in the building was minimal at this time of day.

The courts were closed, and police business was shifting from front-door inquiries to back-door arrests. A lone cop sat in a bulletproof cage at the end of the hall, struggling to stay awake on his shift.

Morelli stepped out of the elevator just as Grandma and I swung through the front-entrance doors.

Grandma looked at Morelli and gave a snort. 'He's wearing a gun,' she said.

'He's a cop.'

'Maybe I should be a cop,' Grandma said. 'Do you think I'm too short?'

Thirty minutes later, Grandma and I were back in the Buick.

'That didn't take long,' Grandma said. 'I hardly had a chance to look around.'

'I couldn't make an ID. They picked up a guy who was carrying the backpack, but it wasn't the guy who'

ran out of the store. He said he found the backpack discarded in an alley.'

'Bummer. This doesn't mean we're going to have to go back to the house, does it? I can't take any more of the galloping and the baby talk.'

'Valerie talks baby talk to the baby?'

'No, she talks it to Kloughn. I don't like to make judgments on people, but after a couple hours listening to "honey pie smoochie bear cuddle umpkins" I'm ready to smack someone.'

Okay, so I was glad I'd never been there when Valerie called

Kloughn cuddle umpkins because I would have wanted to smack someone, too. And my self-restraint isn't as well honed as

Grandma's.

'It's too early to go to the viewing,' I said to Grandma. 'I guess I could stop in on Sally Sweet. He turned up Failure To Appear today on an assault charge.'

'No kidding? I remember him. He was a nice young man.

Sometimes he was a nice young woman. He had a plaid skirt I always admired.'

I pulled out of the lot, right-turned onto North Clinton, and followed the road for almost a quarter mile. At one time in

Trenton's history this was a thriving industrial area. The industry had all vacated or drastically downsized and the rotting carcasses of factories and warehouses produced an ambience similar to what you might find in postwar Bosnia.

I left Clinton and wove my way through a neighborhood of small bleak single-story row houses. Originally designed to contain the factory workers, the row houses were now occupied by hardworking people who lived one step above welfare... plus there were a few oddballs like Sally Sweet.

I found Fenton and parked in front of Sweets house. 'Wait in the car until I find out what's going on,' said to Grandma.

'Sure,' Grandma said, her hands gripping her purse in excited anticipation, her eyes glued to Sweets front door. The Buick was a car designed for a man, and Grandma seemed swallowed up by the monster. Her feet barely touched the floor, her face was barely visible over the dash. A timid woman might feel overwhelmed by

Big Blue. Grandma was a little shrunken, but she wasn't timid, and there wasn't a whole lot that overwhelmed Grandma. Thirty seconds after Grandma agreed to wait in the car, she was on the sidewalk, following me to Sweets front door.

'I thought you were going to wait in the car?' I said.

'I changed my mind. I thought you might need help.'

'Okay, but let me do the talking. I don't want to alarm him.'

'Sure,' Grandma said.

I knocked on Sweets front door, and the door opened on the third knock. Sally Sweet looked out at me, recognition kicked in, and his face creased into a grin. 'Long time no see,' he said. 'What brings you to my casa?'

'We're here to drag your behind back to jail,' Grandma said.

'Fuck,' Sally said. And he slammed the door shut.

'What was that?' I asked Grandma.

'I don't know. It just popped out.'

I gave another rap on the door, 'Open the door,' I said. 'I just want to talk to you.'

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