

**TRICKY  
TWENTY-TWO**

## BY JANET EVANOVICH

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# ONE

GINNY SCOOT WAS standing on a third-floor ledge, threatening to jump, and it was more or less my fault. My name is Stephanie Plum and I work as a bounty hunter for my bail bondsman cousin Vinnie.

Ginny had failed to show for a court appearance and it was my job to find her and return her to the authorities. If I don't succeed my cousin is out his bond money, and I don't get paid. On the other hand, there's Ginny, who would prefer not to go back to jail.

My colleague Lula and I were on the sidewalk, looking up at Ginny, along with a bunch of other people who were taking video with their smartphones.

"This here's not a good angle for her," Lula said to me. "Everybody could look up her skirt and see her hoo-ha. I guess technically you could see her thong, but we all know

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her lady parts are lurkin' in there behind that little piece of red material and ass floss.”

Lula was originally a respectable 'ho. A couple years ago she'd decided to relinquish her corner and take a job as file clerk for the bonds office. Since almost all the files are digital these days, Lula mostly works as my wheelman. She's four inches too short for her weight, her clothes are three sizes too small for her generously proportioned body, her hair color changes weekly, her skin is a robust dark chocolate.

I feel invisible when I stand next to Lula because no one notices me. I inherited a lot of unruly curly brown hair from the Italian side of my family, and I have a cute nose that my grandma says is a gift from God. My blue eyes and pale skin are the results of my mother's Hungarian heritage. Not sure where my 34B boobs came from, but I'm happy with them, and I think they look okay with the rest of me.

Just ten minutes ago I'd almost had the cuffs on Ginny. Lula and I were at her door, and I was giving her the usual bounty hunter baloney.

“We need to take you downtown so you can reschedule your court date,” I'd said to Ginny. “It won't take long.”

This was partly true. The rescheduling went quickly. Whether she would make bail again was a whole other issue. If she didn't make bail she'd be a guest of the penal system until she came up to trial.

“Screw you,” Ginny said, and she flicked her Big Gulp at me, slammed her door shut, and locked it.

By the time Lula and I got the door unlocked Ginny had

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climbed out her bedroom window and was standing on a two-foot-wide ledge. So here I was, in a soaking wet shirt, trying to talk Ginny off the ledge.

“Okay,” I yelled at her. “I’m out of your apartment. That’s what you wanted, right? Go back inside.”

“I don’t want to go to jail.”

“It’s not that bad,” Lula told her. “They let you watch television in the dayroom, and you’ll make new friends.”

“I’d rather die,” Ginny said. “I’m going to jump.”

“Yeah, but you’re only on the third floor,” Lula said. “You’ll just break a bunch of bones. And anyways you never know about these court cases. Sometimes they get dismissed.”

“She cut off her boyfriend’s penis,” I whispered to Lula.

“It could have been justified,” Lula said.

“It was his *penis!*”

“So probably chances of him dismissing the charges aren’t so good,” Lula said. “Men don’t like when you cut their dick off. I hear it’s real hard to sew a dick back on.

“If you want to die you have to make sure you land on your head,” Lula yelled up to Ginny. “That probably would do it.”

Two Trenton PD squad cars drove up and parked at an angle to the curb. They were followed by a fire truck and an EMS truck.

One of the uniforms from the squad car came over to talk to me.

“What’s going on?”

“She’s FTA,” I told him. “I went to cuff her, and she managed to get away and get out on the ledge.”

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A satellite truck from the local television station pulled up behind the fire truck.

“Can you get someone to talk to her? A relative or her boyfriend?” the cop asked me.

“Probably not the boyfriend,” I said.

The fire department put a bounce bag on the sidewalk under the window, and a cameraman from the SAT truck started to set up.

“You’re not gonna look photogenic when you hit that bounce bag, what with your short skirt and all,” Lula yelled at Ginny. “You might want to rethink this.”

Joe Morelli sidled up to me. He’s a homicide detective with the Trenton PD. He’s six foot tall with a lot of lean, hard muscle, wavy black hair, and a smile that makes a girl want to take her clothes off. I’ve known Morelli all my life, and lately he’s been my boyfriend.

“Looks like you’ve got a jumper,” Morelli said.

“Vinnie bonded her out, and she went FTA,” I told him. “I was about to cuff her, and she ran for the ledge.”

“What’s her charge?”

“She cut off her boyfriend’s pecker,” Lula said.

This got a grimace out of Morelli and the uniform.

“Maybe you can talk to her,” I said to Morelli.

Morelli had gone from a bad kid to a petty officer in the Navy, and had become a really great cop. He’s smart. He’s compassionate. He believes in the law, the American dream, and the inherent goodness of human beings. If you break the

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law or step on the American dream, he'll root you out like a wolverine going after a ground squirrel. He has a house, a dog, a toaster, and a level of maturity I suspect I haven't yet obtained. The men in his family are drunks and womanizers and abusive. Morelli is none of those. He's movie star handsome in a Jersey Italian kind of way, and he oozes testosterone. And from the first time he was able to put a sentence together he's had a reputation for being able to talk a woman into doing anything. He got to peek at my cotton Tinker Bell underpants when I was a little kid, and he relieved me of the burden of my virginity when I was in high school. It seemed to me that sending Morelli up to the third floor to talk a woman off a ledge was a no-brainer.

"Is she armed?" Morelli asked me.

"I don't think so."

"No butcher knives? Paring knives? Box cutters?"

"Didn't see any."

He disappeared into the building, and a couple minutes later I saw him at the window. Ginny inched away from him, beyond his grasp. The fire guys moved the bounce bag over to accommodate her. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I saw her smile. They talked a little longer, she nodded agreement, and inched back toward him. He reached out for her, and when she tried to take his hand she lost her balance, slipped off the ledge, and plummeted to the ground. She hit the bounce bag with a solid *thud* and didn't move. The EMTs immediately converged on her.

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Everyone watching took a sharp intake of air and went silent, focused on the EMTs. I felt Morelli move in behind me, his hand on my shoulder. And suddenly Ginny sat up.

“I’m okay!” Ginny said. “Wow, that was a rush. I bet I could be a stunt girl in the movies.”

Morelli motioned an EMT over to us.

“Is she going to be okay?” Morelli asked.

“She just had the air knocked out of her. We’ll transport her to St. Francis Hospital to get checked out and then she’ll be released.”

“She’s going to need a police escort,” Morelli said to the uniform who was still with us. “When she’s done at St. Francis she gets booked downtown.”

“Boy, for a minute there that was a heart stopper,” Lula said. “I don’t even want to hear anything go *thud* like that again. That made my stomach feel sick. I need a burger and fries. And then I’m going home on account of my favorite television shows are coming on.” Lula looked over at Morelli and looked back at me. “Do you need me to take you home or are you going with Officer Hottie?”

“I’ll take her home,” Morelli said.

Lula left, and I followed Morelli to his car. “How did you happen to turn up here?”

“Dumb luck. I had dinner with Anthony, and I was on my way home when I saw Lula’s Firebird parked half a block from a disaster scene. I thought chances were good you’d be involved.”

Anthony is Morelli’s brother. He’s married to a woman who

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keeps divorcing him and then remarrying him. Every time they get remarried she gets pregnant. I've lost count of how many kids Anthony has, but his house is bedlam.

"Thanks for helping out," I said to Morelli.

"I wasn't much help. I almost got your FTA killed."

Morelli opened the door to his SUV and his dog, Bob, bounded out and almost knocked me over. Bob is a huge shaggy-haired orange dog that mostly resembles a golden retriever. I got a lot of dog kisses, Bob and I wrestled over who was going to sit in the front seat next to Morelli, and I won.

"Your house or mine?" Morelli asked.

"Yours. My television isn't working. You have to drop me at the office first so I can get my car."

• • •

Morelli had inherited a nice little house from his Aunt Rose. It's just over the line from my parents' house in the Burg, and if you didn't know the line existed you would think Morelli lived in the Burg. Houses are modest but neatly maintained. Cars are washed every Saturday. Flags are displayed on appropriate holidays. Veterans and cops are revered. Even if you belong to the mob you still appreciate and respect veterans and cops. Hardworking people live in these neighborhoods, and they look to the police to protect their hard-earned civil liberties and flat-screens. If prejudice exists it is kept behind closed doors. Out in public everyone qualifies equally for getting the finger.

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When Morelli first moved into the house it was all Aunt Rose. Now, with the exception of the upstairs bedroom curtains, the house is Morelli. Small living room, dining room, kitchen, and powder room downstairs. Three small bedrooms and one full bath upstairs. He has a single-car garage that he never uses. And he has a backyard where Bob practices digging and pooping.

It was almost nine when Morelli, Bob, and I rolled into the house and made our way to the kitchen. Morelli pulled leftover pizza out of the fridge and divided it up among the three of us. Bob ate his on the spot, and Morelli and I took ours into the living room to eat in front of the TV. It was early September, and Morelli went with a Mets game. We finished the pizza, and before the Mets could get through an inning Morelli had his hand on my leg and his tongue in my mouth. This wasn't a shocking surprise. We'd been casually cohabitating with the occasional mention of love and marriage. He kept condoms at my house, and I kept tampons at his house, but that was as much as we'd moved in so far.

We migrated to the bedroom and didn't bother with a lot of the preliminaries since we'd already done that downstairs while the Mets were changing pitchers.

Morelli is an unpredictable lover. Sometimes he's slow and thoughtful. Sometimes he's almost violent with need. Sometimes he's funny. Frequently he's all three. Once in a while when we try to make love while the Giants are playing the Patriots he's a little distracted. I felt like this was one of those distracted nights, but without the Giants.

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We were cuddled together in postcoital lethargy, and I wondered about Morelli's thoughts. What was the source of the distraction? Murder, mayhem, marriage? Suppose it was marriage. What would I say? Things had been really good between us lately. I might say *yes!* Then again, I might not be ready. Marriage was a huge commitment. And there would be children. I suppose I could manage children. I'm pretty good at taking care of my hamster, Rex. I gave up a sigh. Probably I would have to accept his proposal. He would be crushed if I didn't. His police work might suffer. He'd be depressed and demoralized. He'd have self-doubt.

"About tonight," I said to him. "You seem a little distracted."  
"I have a lot on my mind."

I tried not to smile too much. I was pretty sure this was it. I wondered if he had a ring.

"Would you like to talk about it?" I asked him.

"There's not much I can say right now, but I think we should cool this off for a while and date other people."

"Yes. *What?*"

"I'm thinking about a lifestyle change, and I need to be uninvolved while I figure it out," Morelli said. "So I'm giving you the freedom to look around. As long as you don't look around with Ranger."

Carlos Manoso, mostly known as Ranger, owns Rangeman, an elite security firm located in a stealth building downtown. He's former Special Forces, former badass bounty hunter, and he was my mentor when I started working for Vinnie. He's dark. He's smart. He plays by his own rules, and I don't have

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a complete copy of his rule book. Morelli thinks Ranger is a loose cannon and bad influence, and Morelli is right.

“*Seriously?*” I said, sitting up, rigid, eyes bulging out of their sockets.

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

“And this is the time you pick to spring it on me?”

“Is this a bad time?”

I was on my feet. Arms waving in the air. Outrage steaming off the top of my head. “I’m naked. You don’t give a woman this sort of information when she’s naked. What the heck are you thinking?”

“It might be temporary.”

“*Might be temporary?* As in but it’s *probably permanent?* Adios. Goodbye. Are you freaking kidding me?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Do you have someone special in mind that you want to date?”

“No.”

“Omigod, you’re going to the other side. You’re gay.”

“Not even a little.”

“My friend Bobby says the only difference between a gay man and a straight man is a six-pack of beer.”

“Cupcake, after six beers I’m not worth much of anything to anybody.”

“So what kind of life change are you thinking about?”

“I’m thinking about a career change. Not being a cop.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. Shocker, right?”

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I kicked through the clothes on the floor, looking for my underwear. “What will you do?”

“Don’t know.” He crooked a finger at me. “Come back to bed.”

“You just dumped me and now you think I’m going to hop back into bed with you? Are you insane?”

“We can still be friends.”

“I’m not feeling friendly. I’m feeling angry.” I zipped up my jeans and grabbed my T-shirt off the floor. “And I certainly don’t sleep with men after they dump me. Okay, maybe once in a while, but not usually. And I’m absolutely not sleeping with you. Not *ever again*.” I hooked my tote bag over my shoulder and huffed out of Morelli’s bedroom.

“I’ll call you in the morning,” Morelli yelled after me.

I gave him the finger as I stomped down the stairs. He couldn’t see me, but it was satisfying all the same. I slammed the front door shut with enough force to rattle his living room windows, marched over to my crap-ass car, and rammed myself behind the wheel. I peeled away from the curb and drove to the all-night convenience store on Hamilton Avenue. I bought a load of comfort food and went home to eat it. Snickers bars, Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups, York Peppermint Patties, M&M’s, Twizzlers, everything I could find that contained caramel, plus three tubs of ice cream.