Finger Lickin' Fifteen

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Extract

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One

When I was a kid, I was afraid of spiders and vegetables. As an adult, I've eliminated vegetables from my fright-o-meter, but I've added a whole bunch of other stuff. Homicidal maniacs, serial rapists, cellulite, Joe Morelli's Grandma Bella, rabid bats, and any form of organized exercise.

My name is Stephanie Plum, and I work as a bond enforcement officer for Vincent Plum Bail Bonds. It's not a great job, but it allows me to avoid organized exercise, and I hardly ever encounter rabid bats. The remaining fright-o-meter items lurk in the dark shadows of my daily life. Fortunately, there are also good things in those shadows. Joe Morelli without his Grandma Bella, fellow bounty hunter Ranger without his clothes, my crazy family, my hamster, Rex . . . and Lula. Lula actually fits somewhere between the rabid bats and the good stuff. She's a former 'ho, now working as the office file clerk and apprentice bounty hunter. Lula's got a plus-size personality and body, and a petite-size wardrobe. She's got brown skin,

blond hair, and last week she had tiny rhinestones pasted onto her eyelids.

It was Monday morning. Connie, the office manager, and I were in the bonds office enjoying our morning coffee, and Lula slid her red Firebird to a stop at the curb. We watched Lula through the big plate-glass window in the front of the small office, and we did a joint grimace. Lula was in a state. She lurched out of the Firebird, beeped it locked, and burst into the office, her eyes wild, rolling around in their sockets, her hands waving in the air.

'I saw it all,' she said. 'It was terrible. It was horrible. I couldn't believe it was happening. And right in front of me.' She looked around. 'What do we got? Do we got doughnuts? 'Cause I need a doughnut. I need a whole bag. And maybe I need one of them breakfast sandwiches with the egg and cheese and bacon and grease. I got a big grease craving.'

I knew it would be a huge mistake to ask Lula what she'd seen, but I couldn't stop myself.

'What was terrible and horrible?' I asked.

Connie leaned forward, elbows on her desk, already knowing the telling of the story would be a car crash. Connie is a couple years older than me, and while my heritage is half Hungarian and half Italian, Connie is Italian through and through. Her hair is jet black, her lipstick is fire-engine red, her body is *va-va-voom*.

Lula paced in front of Connie's desk. 'First off, I hardly

had time for anything this morning. I had a big date last night, and by the time I booted his butt out of my bed, I already missed a lot of my beauty sleep. Anyways, I got up late, and then I couldn't decide what to wear. One day it's hot out and next thing it's cold. And then I had to decide if I needed to wear shoes that kicked ass or were good for ass kicking, on account of there's a difference, you know.'

'Jeez Louise,' Connie said. 'Could you get to it?'

'The point bein' I was late,' Lula said. 'I was tryin' to put make-up on and drive, and I missed a turn, and before I knew it I was someplace I didn't want to be. So I pulled over to look around and figure things out, and when I did that my make-up case rolled off the seat next to me, and everything went all over the floor. So I was bent over to get my make-up, and I guess it looked like there was no one in the car, because when I came back up there were two big hairy morons standing right in front of my Firebird, and they were removing a head from some guy's body.'

'Excuse me?'

'This one moron had a giant meat cleaver. And the other moron had a hold of this man in a suit. And *whack*! No head. The head popped off its neck and bounced down the street.'

'And then what happened?' Connie said.

'Then they saw me,' Lula said. 'They looked real surprised. And I know *I* looked real surprised. And then I laid down about two feet of rubber and took off.'

'Do you know who they were?'

'No.'

'Did you know the guy in the suit?'

'No, but it was a real nice suit. And he had a nice striped tie, too.'

'Did you go to the police?' Connie asked.

'No. I came straight here. It's not like the police were gonna put Humpty Dumpty back together again,' Lula said. 'Didn't seem like there was a big rush, and I needed a doughnut. Holy cow. Holy shit. I really need a doughnut.'

'You need to call the police,' Connie told Lula.

'I hate the police. They give me the willies. Except for Stephanie's Morelli. He's a hottie.'

Joe Morelli is a Trenton plainclothes cop, and Lula is right about Morelli being a hottie, but Lula is wrong about Morelli belonging to me. Morelli and I have had an off-and-on relationship for as long as I can remember, and we are currently off. Two weeks ago, we had a disagreement over peanut butter that turned into a disagreement over everything under the sun, and we haven't seen each other since.

Connie dialed into the police band, and we listened for a couple minutes to see if we could pick up anything to do with decapitation.

'Where did this happen?' Connie asked.

'The three hundred block of Ramsey Street. It was right in front of the Sunshine Hotel.'

The Sunshine Hotel is a roach farm that rents rooms by the hour. No one coming or going from the Sunshine Hotel would ever report anything to anyone.

'I seen lots of stuff,' Lula said, 'but this was disgustin'. Blood shot out like one of them oil gushers. And when the head hit the ground, I swear the eyes were lookin' at me. I guess I need to tell the police, but I only want Morelli.' Lula fixed on me. 'You gotta call Morelli.'

'No way. I'm not talking to him. *You* can call him.'

'I don't know him like you know him.'

'I don't know him that way anymore. I'm done with him. He's a jerk.'

'All men are jerks,' Lula said. 'That don't mean they aren't good for some things. And Morelli's a *hot* jerk. He could be a movie star or a underwear model if he wasn't a cop. He got all that wavy black hair and dreamy brown bedroom eyes. He's kind of puny compared to some men I know, but he's hot all the same.'

Morelli was actually six foot tall and solid muscle, but Lula used to be engaged to a guy who was a cross between an Army tank and Sasquatch, so I suppose by comparison Morelli might measure up short.

'I'll call Morelli,' Connie said. 'He's a cop, for crying out loud. You don't need a complicated relationship to call a cop.'

I was halfway to the door. 'I'm leaving. Things to do. And I don't want to see Morelli.'

'Oh no,' Lula said. 'You get your boney ass back here. We're in this together. Through thick and through thin.'

'Since when?'

'Since now. And before that, too. Remember when I rescued you from that big snake in the mobile home? And what about when we were lost in the Pine Barrens?'

'You ran screaming like a little girl when you *thought* you saw the snake. And Ranger found us in the Pine Barrens.'

'Yeah, but if he hadn't found us, I would have got us out.'

'You were up to your armpits in a cranberry bog.'

'I don't never want to see another cranberry, neither,' Lula said.

Twenty minutes later, Morelli sauntered in to the bonds office. He was dressed in jeans and running shoes, a blue button-down shirt that was open at the neck, and a navy blazer. He looked entirely edible and a little wary.

'What's up?' Morelli asked, eyes on me.

Okay, so I was no longer interested in Morelli. At least I was pretty sure I wasn't interested. Still, I was wishing I'd spent more time on my hair and make-up this morning, so he'd feel really rotten about what he was missing. I have naturally curly shoulder-length brown hair that was currently pulled back into a ponytail. I have blue eyes that look a lot better when they have a swipe of liner and mascara, an okay mouth that so far hasn't needed artificial plumping, and a little nose that I consider my best feature.

Morelli always thought my best feature was located considerably lower on my body.

'It was horrible! It was terrible!' Lula said. 'I almost fainted.'

Morelli shifted his attention to Lula. He didn't say anything, but he looked over at her and raised his eyebrows a little.

'I never saw nothin' like it,' Lula told him. 'One minute, I was having a day like any other, and then *whack* and this guy didn't have no head. And blood came out of him like he was a fountain. And when his head hit the ground, his eyes were lookin' at me. And I think the head might have smiled at me, too, but I'm not sure of that.'

Morelli was back on his heels, thumbs hooked into his jeans pockets. 'Is this for real?'

'Hell yeah,' Lula said. 'Who makes up shit like that? Don't I look traumatized? I'm practically turned white. I think my hand might even be shaking. Look at my hand. Is it shaking?'

Morelli's eyes cut back to me. 'Were you with her?'

'Nope.'

'Did anyone call 911?'

'Nope.'

Lula was hands on hips, starting to look pissed. 'We called *you*,' she said to Morelli.

Morelli did a fast office scan. 'You don't have the head here, do you?'

'So far as I know, the head and everything else is still in front of the Sunshine Hotel,' Lula told him. 'And I'm not sure I like your attitude. I'm not sure you're takin' this seriously.'

Morelli stared down at his shoe. Hard to tell if he was trying hard not to laugh or if he was getting a migraine. After a five-count, he took out his cell phone, called dispatch, and sent a uniform to the Sunshine Hotel.

'Okay, ladies,' Morelli said when he got off the phone. 'Let's take a field trip.'

I made a big show of looking at my watch. 'Gee, I've got to run. Things to do.'

'No way,' Lula said. 'I need someone with me in case I get faint or something.'

'You'll have *him*,' I said.

'He's a fine man, but he's the cop representative here, and I need someone from my posse, you see what I'm saying. I need a BFF.'

'It's not gonna be me,' Connie said. 'Vinnie is picking up a skip in Atlanta, and I have to run the office.'

Morelli looked at me and gave his head a small shake, like he didn't believe any of this. Like I was a huge, unfathomable pain in the ass, and in fact maybe that was how he felt about women in general right now.

I understood Morelli's point of view because it was precisely my current feeling about men.

'Terrific,' I said on a sigh. 'Let's get on with it.'

Lula and I followed Morelli in my ten-year-old Ford Escort that used to be blue. We didn't take the Escort because we liked riding in it. We took it because Lula thought she might be too overwrought to drive her Firebird, and she suspected she would need a bacon cheeseburger after visiting the scene of the crime and Morelli might not be inclined to find a drive-through for her.

There were already two cruisers angled into the curb in front of the Sunshine Hotel when Lula and I arrived. I parked, and Lula and I got out and stood next to Morelli and a couple uniforms. We all looked down at a red splotch that sprayed out over about a four-foot diameter. A couple smaller splotches trailed off the big splotch, and I assumed that was where the head had hit the pavement. I felt a wave of nausea slide through my stomach, and I started to sweat.

'This here's the spot,' Lula said. 'You can see it's just like I told you. There was a big gusher of blood when they whacked the head off. It was like Old Faithful going off, only it was blood. And then the head rolled down the sidewalk. It was like the head was a bowlin' ball with eyes. And the eyes were like big googly eyes kinda popping out of the head and lookin' at me. And I think I might have heard the head laughin', or maybe it was the guys who did the whackin' who were laughin'.'

The uniforms all did a grimace, Morelli was impassive,

and I threw up. Everyone jumped away from me, I gagged one last time and did some deep breathing.

'Sorry,' I said.

'No problem,' Morelli told me. 'I feel like throwing up a lot on this job.'

One of the uniforms brought me some paper towels and a bottle of water, and Lula stood a good distance away.

'You got lots of room for lunch now that you're empty,' she yelled to me. 'I could get a early start with one of them extra-crispy bird burgers they're servin' at Cluck-in-a-Bucket. Have you heard about them? They got some new secret sauce.'

I wasn't interested in secret sauce. I wanted to go home and go to bed and not get up until it was a new day. I was done with this one.

'We got a couple footprints heading south,' a uniform said. 'One of these guys had real big feet. Looks like a size fourteen. And there's some skid marks where they dragged the body to the curb. Imagine they dumped it into a car and took off.'

'You need to come downtown and give me some information,' Morelli said to Lula.

'No way. Nuh-ah. I got a allergic reaction to police stations. I get irritable bowel and hives and the heebie-jeebies.'

'You witnessed a murder.'

'Yeah, but there's extenuating circumstances here. I got a medical condition. I got a extreme sensitivity to cops.'

Morelli looked like he wanted to pull his gun out of its holster and shoot himself.

'I'll get you some cheeseburgers and a side of onion rings,' he said to Lula.

Lula stood hands on hips. 'You think I could be bought for some lame-ass burgers? What kinda woman you think I am?'

'I'll throw in a bucket of chicken and an ice cream cake from Carvel,' Morelli said. 'That's my final offer.'

'Deal,' Lula told him. 'We goin' in your car? On account of I'm not riding in a cop car, and I hate to say this, but Stephanie don't smell too good.'

Twenty minutes later, I parked in the lot to my apartment building. My building straddles the line between Trenton proper and Trenton improper. It's a three-story utilitarian brick box filled with tenants who are struggling to make ends meet. Frequently, I have a gap between my ends, resulting in a lot of dinners mooched from my parents, who live ten minutes away in a blue-collar chunk of Trenton called The Burg.

My apartment is on the second floor and my windows look out at the parking lot. My only roommate is a hamster named Rex. I manage to keep a good supply of hamster food in my fridge and in my cupboards. People food is spotty. I own a fry pan and a pot. Perfectly adequate since I mostly eat peanut butter sandwiches. Peanut butter and banana, peanut butter and jelly, peanut butter and potato

chips, peanut butter and olives, and peanut butter and marshmallow goo. So sue me, I like peanut butter. The rest of the apartment consists of dining alcove, living room with television, one bedroom, and bath.

I hustled from my car to my apartment, stripped, and jumped into the shower. I was approaching boiled lobster skin tone when I finally emerged and wrapped myself in a towel. I stepped out of the bathroom and spotted Ranger lounging in the club chair across from my bed. I gave a startled yelp and jumped back into the bathroom.

'Babe,' Ranger said.

I stuck my head out and looked at him. 'What are you doing here?'

'I need to talk to you.'

'You could have called. Or how about ringing my doorbell?'

Ranger looked like he was thinking about smiling. His attention focused on the top of my towel and slowly moved to the bottom hem that hung a half-inch below my doo-dah. His brown eyes dilated black, and I took a stronger grip on my towel.

Ranger was the second biggest complication in my life, and now that Morelli was out of the picture, I supposed Ranger was elevated to numero uno. He's close to six foot, one way or the other, is Latino, with medium brown skin and dark brown hair cut short. His teeth are white and even, and he has a killer smile that is seen only on special

occasions. He dresses in black, and today he was wearing a black T-shirt and black cargo pants. His given name is Carlos Manoso. His street name, Ranger, is a holdover from time spent in Special Forces. These days, he does the occasional high-risk bond enforcement job, and is the managing partner of a security firm located in a stealth building in center city. I've seen him naked, and you can take it to the bank when I tell you he's all hard muscle and perfect in every possible way. And I mean *every* possible way.

Ranger and I have three things in common. We're the same age. We're both single. And we both were previously married for about ten seconds. That's where the common ground ends. I'm an open book with a lot of blank pages. His book is filled with life experience but written in disappearing ink. I have three locks on my front door, plus a sliding bolt, and I was sure they were all in place. Somehow, this never stops Ranger. He's a man of mysterious talents.

Ranger crooked his finger at me. 'Come here.'

'No way.'

'Afraid?'

'Cautious.'

'That's no fun,' Ranger said.

'I didn't know you were interested in fun.'

There was a very slight curve to the corners of his mouth. 'I have my moments.'

I had a big, cuddly pink robe in my closet, but I had to cross in front of Ranger to get to it. I wasn't worried Ranger would jump me. My fear was that if I got too close, I'd get sucked into his force field, and I'd jump *him*. And jumping Ranger was a dangerous deal. He'd made it clear that his emotional involvement would always have limitations. Plus, there was Morelli. Morelli was currently out of the picture, but he'd been out before, and he'd always slid back in. Getting naked with Ranger would make a reconciliation with Morelli much more difficult. Of course, that wasn't currently an issue, because I wasn't in a mood to reconcile anything.

'What did you want to talk to me about?' I asked him.

'Three of my clients have been robbed in the last two months. All three had state-of-the-art security systems. And in all three cases the systems were shut down for exactly fifteen minutes and then reactivated. My clients weren't home at the time. There was no sign of physical tampering.'

'I see them using gizmos in the movies that can figure out codes.'

'This isn't a movie. This is real life.'

'Someone hacked into your system?'

'No.'

'That leaves an unpleasant possibility,' I said to Ranger.

'In theory, there are only a few people in my organization who have access to the codes, and I can't imagine any

of those men being involved in this. For that matter, *everyone* I employ is rigorously screened. Plus, the entire building, with the exception of private living spaces, is monitored twenty-four hours.'

'Have you changed the codes?'

'I changed them after each break-in.'

'Wow.'

'Yeah,' Ranger said. 'Someone on the inside is beating my system.'

'Why are you telling this to me?'

'I need you to come in and snoop around without raising suspicion. I can't trust anyone already inside.'

'Even Tank?'

'Even Tank.'

Tank is exactly what his name would imply. He's big and solid inside and out. He's second in command at RangeMan, and he's the guy who watches Ranger's back.

'You've worked for me before doing computer searches, and that's where I'd like to put you again. Ramon has been doing the searches, but he'd like to get out of the cubby and back on the street. You'd be working on the fifth floor in the control room, but you'd have total access within the building. Every man in my organization knows you and understands that you're my personal property, so they're not going to talk freely when you're around, but they're also not going to think I hired you to snoop. They'll assume I gave you the job to have you close to me.'

'Personal property?'

'Babe, you're the only one who would question it.'

I narrowed my eyes at him. 'I am *not* personal property. A car is personal property. A shirt is personal property. A human being is not personal property.'

'In my building, we share cars and shirts. We don't share women. In my building, you're my personal property. Deal with it.'

At a later time, when I was alone and had given it some thought, I'd probably find the flaw in that reasoning, but oddly enough it made sense at the moment.

'What about my cases at the bonds office?' I asked him.

'I'll help you.'

This was a really good deal, because I was a crappy bounty hunter and Ranger was the best. Not to mention I'd be drawing salary from RangeMan. All I had to do was keep my hands off Ranger and everything would be peachy.

'Okay,' I said. 'When do you want me to start?'

'Now. Do you have uniforms left from the last time you worked for me?'

'I have a couple T-shirts, and I have some black jeans.'

'Good enough. I'll have Ella order some more.'

Ella and her husband, Louis, serve as live-in property managers for RangeMan. They keep the building clean and running efficiently, and they keep the men fed and clothed. They're both in their early fifties, and Ella is dark-

haired, and dark-eyed, and pretty in a no-nonsense kind of way.

'I assume you still have your key fob?' Ranger asked.

'Yep.'

The key fob got me into the high-security RangeMan building, and it also got me into Ranger's private seventh-floor apartment. In the past, I'd used the apartment when I felt I was in danger. It wasn't a move I made lightly, because I had to weigh the danger at hand against the danger of living with Ranger.

Ranger's cell phone buzzed, and he looked at the screen. 'I have to go,' he said. 'Tank and Ramon are expecting you. Ramon will bring you up to speed and then you should be able to take over. You know the drill.' His eyes moved from my face to the towel and then back to my face. 'Tempting,' he said. And he left.