Fearless Fourteen

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Extract

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1

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One

In my mind, my kitchen is filled with crackers and cheese, roast chicken leftovers, farm fresh eggs, and coffee beans ready to grind. The reality is that I keep my Smith & Wesson in the cookie jar, my Oreos in the microwave, a jar of peanut butter and hamster food in the over-the-counter cupboard, and I have beer and olives in the refrigerator. I used to have a birthday cake in the freezer for emergencies, but I ate it.

Truth is, I would dearly love to be a domestic goddess, but the birthday cake keeps getting eaten. I mean, you buy it, and you eat it, right? And then where are you? No birthday cake. Ditto cheese and crackers and eggs and the roast chicken leftovers (which were from my mother). The coffee beans are light-years away. I don't own a grinder. I guess I could buy *two* birthday cakes, but I'm afraid I'd eat both.

My name is Stephanie Plum, and in my defense I'd like to say that I have bread and milk on my shopping list, and I don't have any communicable diseases. I'm five feet, seven inches. My hair is brown and shoulder length and naturally curly. My eyes are blue. My teeth are mostly straight. My manicure was pretty good three days ago, and my shape is okay. I work as a bond enforcement agent for my cousin Vinnie, and today I was standing in Loretta Rizzi's kitchen, thinking not only was Loretta ahead of me in the kitchen-needs-a-makeover race, but she made me look like a piker in The Loose Cannon Club.

It was eight in the morning, and Loretta was wearing a long, pink flannel nightgown and holding a gun to her head.

'I'm gonna shoot myself,' Loretta said. 'Not that it would matter to you, because you get your money dead or alive, right?'

'Technically, that's true,' I told her. 'But dead is a pain in the tuchus. There's paperwork.'

A lot of the people Vinnie bonds out are from my Chambersburg neighborhood in Trenton, New Jersey. Loretta Rizzi was one of those people. I went to school with Loretta. She's a year older than me, and she left high school early to have a baby. Now she was wanted

for armed robbery, and she was about to blow her brains out.

Vinnie had posted Loretta's bond, and Loretta had failed to show for her court appearance, so I was dispatched to drag her back to jail. And as luck would have it, I walked in at a bad moment and interrupted her suicide.

'I just wanted a drink,' Loretta said.

'Yeah, but you held up a liquor store. Most people would have gone to a bar.'

'I didn't have any money, and it was hot, and I needed a Tom Collins.' A tear rolled down Loretta's cheek. 'I've been thirsty lately,' she said.

Loretta is a half a head shorter than me. She has curly black hair and a body kept toned by hefting serving trays for catered affairs at the firehouse. She hasn't changed much since high school. A few crinkle lines around her eyes. A little harder set to her mouth. She's Italian-American and related to half the Burg, including my off-and-on boyfriend, Joe Morelli.

'This was your first offense. And you didn't shoot anyone. Probably you'll get off with a hand-slap,' I told Loretta.

'I had my period,' she said. 'I wasn't thinking right.'

Loretta lives in a rented row house on the edge of

the Burg. She has two bedrooms, one bath, a scrubbed-clean, crackerbox kitchen, and a living room filled with second-hand furniture. Hard to make ends meet when you're a single mother without a high school diploma.

The back door swung open and my sidekick, Lula, stuck her head in. 'What's going on in here? I'm tired of waiting in the car. I thought this was gonna be a quick pickup, and then we were going for breakfast.'

Lula is a former 'ho, turned bonds office file clerk and wheelman. She's a plus-size black woman who likes to squash herself into too small clothes featuring animal print and spandex. Lula's cup runneth over from head to toe.

'Loretta is having a bad morning,' I said.

Lula checked Loretta out. 'I can see that. She's still in her nightie.'

'Notice anything else?' I asked Lula.

'You mean like she's tryin' to style her hair with a Smith & Wesson?'

'I don't want to go to jail,' Loretta said.

'It's not so bad,' Lula told her. 'If you can get them to send you to the workhouse, you'll get dental.'

'I'm a disgrace,' Loretta said.

Lula shifted her weight on her spike-heeled Manolo

knock-offs. 'You'll be more of a disgrace if you pull that trigger. You'll have a big hole in your head, and your mother won't be able to have an open-casket viewing. And who's going to clean up the mess it'll make in your kitchen?'

'I have an insurance policy,' Loretta said. 'If I kill myself, my son, Mario, will be able to manage until he can get a job. If I go to jail, he'll be on his own without any money.'

'Insurance policies don't pay out on suicides,' Lula said.

'Oh crap! Is that true?' Loretta asked me.

'Yeah. Anyway, I don't know why you're worried about that. You have a big family. Someone will take care of Mario.'

'It's not that easy. My mother is in rehab from when she had the stroke. She can't take him. And my brother, Dom, can't take him. He just got out of jail three days ago. He's on probation.'

'What about your sister?'

'My sister's got her hands full with her own kids. Her rat turd husband left her for some pre-puberty lap dancer.'

'There must be someone who can baby-sit for you,' Lula said to Loretta.

'Everyone's got their own thing going. And I don't want to leave Mario with just anybody. He's very sensitive . . . and artistic.'

I counted back and placed her kid in his early teens. Loretta had never married, and so far as I know, she'd never fingered a father for him.

'Maybe you could take him,' Loretta said to me.

'*What?* No. No, no, no, no.'

'Just until I can make bail. And then I'll try to find someone more permanent.'

'If I take you in now, Vinnie can bond you out right away.'

'Yeah, but if something goes wrong, I need someone to pick Mario up after school.'

'What can go wrong?'

'I don't know. A mother worries about these things. Promise you'll pick him up if I'm still in jail. He gets out at two-thirty.'

'She'll do it,' Lula said to Loretta. 'Just put the gun down and go get dressed so we can get this over and done. I need coffee. I need one of those extra-greasy breakfast sandwiches. I gotta clog my arteries on account of otherwise the blood rushes around too fast and I might get a dizzy spell.'

* * *

Lula was sprawled on the brown Naugahyde couch hugging the wall in the bonds office, and Vinnie's office manager, Connie Rosolli, was at her desk. Connie and the desk had been strategically placed in front of Vinnie's inner-office door with the hope it would discourage pissed-off pimps, bookies, and other assorted lowlifes from rushing in and strangling Vinnie.

'What do you mean she isn't bonded out?' I asked Connie, my voice rising to an octave normally only heard from Minnie Mouse.

'She has no money to secure the bond. And no assets.'

'That's impossible. Everyone has assets. What about her mother? Her brother? She must have a hundred cousins living in a ten-mile radius.'

'She's working on it, but right now she has nothing. Bupkus. Nada. So Vinnie's waiting on her.'

'Yeah, and it's almost two-thirty,' Lula said. 'You better go get her kid like you promised.'

Connie swiveled her head toward me and her eyebrows went up to her hairline. 'You promised to take care of Mario?'

'I said I'd pick him up if Loretta wasn't bonded out in time. I didn't know there'd be an issue with her bond.'

'Oh boy,' Connie said. 'Good luck with that one.'

'Loretta said he was sensitive and artistic.'

'I don't know about the sensitive part, but his art is limited to spray paint. He's probably defaced half of Trenton. Loretta has to pick him up from school because they won't let him on a school bus.'

I hiked my bag onto my shoulder. 'I'm just driving him home. That was the deal.'

'There might be some gray area in the deal,' Lula said. 'You might've said you'd take care of him. And anyways, you can't dump him in an empty house. You get child services after you for doin' that.'

'Well, what the heck am I supposed to do with him?'

Lula and Connie did *I don't know* shoulder shrugs.

'Maybe I can sign for Loretta's bond,' I said to Connie.

'I don't think that'll fly,' Connie said. 'You're the only person I know who has fewer assets than Loretta.'

'Great.' I huffed out of the office and rammed myself into my latest POS car. It was a Nissan Sentra that used to be silver but was now mostly rust. It had doughnut-size wheels, a Jaguar hood ornament, and a bobble-head Tony Stewart doll in the back window. I like Tony Stewart a lot, but seeing his head jiggling around in my rearview mirror doesn't do much for me.

Unfortunately, he was stuck on with Crazy Glue and nothing short of dismantling the car was going to get him out of my life.

Loretta had given me a photo of Mario and a pickup location. I cruised to a spot where a group of kids were shuffling around, looking for their rides. Easy to spot Mario. He resembled Morelli when Morelli was his age. Wavy black hair and slim build. Some facial similarities, although Morelli has always been movie star handsome and Mario was a little short of movie star. Of course, I might have been distracted by the multiple silver rings piercing his eyebrows, ears, and nose. He was wearing black-and-white Converse sneakers, stovepipe jeans with a chain belt, a black T-shirt with Japanese characters, and a black denim jacket.

Morelli had been an early bloomer. He grew up fast and hard. His dad was a mean drunk, and Morelli got good with his hands as a kid. He could use them in a fight, and he could use them to coax girls out of their clothes. The first time Morelli and I played doctor, I was five years old, and he was seven. He's periodically repeated the performance, and lately we seem to be a couple. He's a cop now, and against all odds, he's mostly lost the anger he had growing up. He inherited

a nice little house from his Aunt Rose and has become domestic enough to own a dog and a toaster. He hasn't as yet reached the crockpot, toilet seat down, live plant in the kitchen level of domesticity.

Mario looked like a *late* bloomer. He was short for his age and had 'desperate geek' written all over him.

I got out of my car and walked to the group of kids. 'Mario Rizzi?'

'Who wants to know?'

'I do,' I said. 'Your mother can't pick you up today. I promised her I'd bring you home.'

This produced some moronic comments and snickers from Mario's idiot friends.

'The name is Zook,' Mario said to me. 'I don't answer to Mario.'

I rolled my eyes, grabbed Zook by the strap on his backpack, and towed him to my car.

'This is a piece of shit,' he said, hands dangling at his sides, taking the car in.

'And?'

He shrugged and wrenched the door open. 'Just saying.'

I drove the short distance to the bonds office and pulled to the curb.

'What's this?' he asked.

'Your mother's been returned to lockup because she failed to show for her court appearance. She can't make her bail, and I can't take you home to an empty house, so I'm parking you in the bonds office until I can find a better place for you.'

'No.'

'What do you mean *no*? *No* isn't an option.'

'I'm not getting out of the car.'

'I'm a bounty hunter. I could rough you up or shoot you or something if you don't get out of the car.'

'I don't think so. I'm just a kid. Juvie would be all over your ass. And your eye is twitching.'

I hauled my cell phone out of my bag and dialed Morelli. 'Help,' I said.

'Now what?'

'You remember your cousin Loretta's kid, Mario?'

'Vaguely.'

'I've got him in my car, and he refuses to leave.'

'Possession is nine-tenths of the law.'

Zook was slouched down, watching me from the corner of his eye. Arms crossed over his chest. Sullen. I blew out a sigh and told Morelli the deal with Loretta.

'I'm off at four,' Morelli said. 'If Loretta isn't bonded

out by then, I'll take the kid off your hands. In the meantime, he's all yours, Cupcake.'

I disconnected and dialed Lula.

'Yeah?' Lula said.

'I'm outside, and I have Loretta's kid in the car.'

Lula's face appeared in the front window to the bonds office. 'I see you and the kid. What's going on?'

'He won't get out of the car,' I said. 'I thought you might help persuade him.'

'Sure,' Lula said. 'I could persuade the hell out of him.'

The bonds office door opened, and Lula swung her ass over to my car and yanked the door open.

'What's up?' Lula said to the kid.

Zook didn't answer. Still pouting.

'I'm here to escort you out of the car,' Lula said, leaning in, filling the doorframe with her red hair extensions and acres of chocolate-colored boob barely contained in a low scoop neck zebra-stripe sweater.

Zook focused on Lula's gold tooth with the diamond chip, and below that what seemed like a quarter mile of cleavage, and his eyes almost fell out of his head. 'Cripes,' he said, kind of croaky-voiced, shrinking back into his seat, fumbling to get out of his seat belt.

'I got a way with men,' Lula said to me.

'He's not a man,' I told her. 'He's just a kid.'

'Am too a man,' he said. 'Want me to prove it?'

'*No*,' Lula and I said in unison.

'What's this?' Connie wanted to know when the three of us walked into the bonds office.

'I need to leave Mario someplace for an hour while I hop over to RangeMan.'

'I *told* you my name is Zook! And what's RangeMan?'

'I work with a guy named Ranger, and RangeMan is the security company he owns.'

'Are you the Zook that writes his name all over town?' Lula asked him. 'And what kind of name is that anyway?'

'It's my Minionfire name.'

'What's a Minionfire?'

'Are you kidding me? You don't know Minionfire? *Minionfire*'s only the world's most popular, most powerful, totally awesome, badass difficult game. Don't tell me you've never heard of the Nation of Minionfire?'

'In my neighborhood, we only got the nation of Bloods, Crips, and Islam. Maybe a few Baptists, but they don't hardly count anymore,' Lula said.

Zook took his laptop out of his backpack. 'I can hook up here, right?'

'Don't you have homework?' Connie asked him.

'I did my homework in detention. I gotta check on Moondog. He's a griefer, and he's massing the wood elves.'

That caught Lula's attention. 'Are these wood elves the same as Santa's elves?'

'Wood elves are evil, and they can only be stopped by a third-level Blybold Wizard like Zook.'

'You don't look like no Blybold Wizard,' Lula said. 'You look like a kid that's drilled too many holes in hisself. You keep doing that, and stuff's gonna start leaking out.'

Zook's hand unconsciously went to his ear with the six piercings. 'Chicks dig it.'

'Yeah,' Lula said, 'they probably all want to borrow your earrings.'

'Getting back to the problem at hand,' I said, 'I need to park Mario, or Zook, or whoever the heck he is. Ranger wants to talk to me about working a job for him.'

'Oh boy,' Lula said.

'A *real* job,' I told her.

'Sure,' Lula said. 'I knew that. What kind of job?'

'I don't know.'

'Oh boy,' Lula said.

Carlos Manoso is my age, but his life experience is worlds away. He's of Cuban heritage and has family in Newark and Miami. He's dark-skinned, dark-eyed, and his hair is dark brown and currently cut too short for a ponytail but long enough to fall across his forehead when he's sleeping or otherwise occupied in bed. He's got a lot of muscle in all the right places and a killer smile that is rarely seen. His street name is Ranger, a leftover from his time in Special Forces.

When I started working for Vincent Plum Bail Bonds, Ranger was doing mostly bounty hunter work and was my mentor. He's now co-owner of a security company with branches in Boston, Atlanta, and Miami. He wears only black, he smells like Bulgari Green shower gel, he's extremely private, and he eats healthy food. I'd be tempted to say he isn't a lot of fun, but he has his moments. And on the rare occasions when we've been intimate . . . *WOW*.

RangeMan Security is on a side street in center city Trenton. It's housed in an inconspicuous seven-story brick building, the name visible only on a small plaque above the door buzzer. The seventh floor is Ranger's

private apartment. Two more floors are dedicated to housing RangeMan employees, one floor is occupied by the property manager and his wife, Ella, the fifth floor is control central, and the remaining two floors are conference rooms, first-floor reception, and private offices. There are two levels below ground and I've never gotten the personal tour, but I imagine dungeons and armories and Ranger's personal tailor toiling away.

I key-fobbed my way into the underground garage and parked next to Ranger's black Porsche Turbo. I took the elevator to the fifth floor, waved hello to the guys at the monitoring stations, and walked across the room to Ranger's office. The door was open, and Ranger was at his desk, talking on a headset. His eyes went to me, he wrapped up his conversation and removed the headset.

'Babe,' he said.

Babe covered a lot of ground with Ranger. It could be good, bad, amused, or filled with desire. Today it was hello.

I sat in the chair across from his desk. 'What's up?'

'I need a date,' Ranger said.

'Is date synonymous with sex?'

'No. It's synonymous with business, but I could throw some sex in as a bonus if you're interested.'

This got a smile from me. I wasn't interested for a bunch of complicated reasons, not the least of which was Joe Morelli. Still, it was nice to know the offer was on the table. 'What's the business?'

'I've been asked to provide security for Brenda.'

'*The* Brenda? The singer?'

'Yes. She'll be in town for three days doing a concert, some media, and a charity fund-raiser. I'm supposed to keep her dry and drug-free and out of harm's way. If I assign one of my men to her, she'll eat him alive and spit him out in front of the press. So I'm taking the watch, and I need someone riding shotgun.'

'What about Tank?'

Tank is Ranger's next in command, and he's the guy Ranger trusts to watch his back. Tank's called Tank because that's what he is. He's seven feet of muscle packed into a six-foot, four-inch, no-neck body. Tank is also Lula's current boyfriend.

'Brenda's management team has requested security be invisible at public functions, and it's hard to hide Tank,' Ranger said. 'Tank and Hal will work shifts standing guard at Brenda's hotel. When she's at large, we'll take over. She can pass us off as traveling companions, and you can go into the ladies' room with her and make sure she doesn't test-drive mushrooms.'

'Doesn't she have her own bodyguard?'

'He slipped and broke his ankle getting off the plane last night. They've shipped him back to California.'

'I'm surprised you're taking this on.'

'I'm doing it as a favor for Lew Pepper, the concert promoter.' Ranger passed a sheet of paper to me. 'This is Brenda's public appearance schedule. We need to be at her hotel a half hour ahead. And we're on call. If she leaves her room, we're there.'

I looked at the schedule and chewed on my lower lip. Morelli wasn't going to be happy to have me spending this much time with Ranger. And Brenda was a car crash. Like Cher and Madonna, she didn't use a last name. Just Brenda. She was sixty-one years old. She'd been married eight times. She could crack walnuts with her ass muscles. And she was rumored to be mean as a snake. I couldn't remember her last album, but I knew she had a cabaret act going. Baby-sitting Brenda had 'nightmare' written all over it.

'Babe,' Ranger said, reading my thoughts. 'I don't ask a lot of favors.'

I blew out a sigh, folded the paper, and put it in my jeans pocket. 'Looks like the fund-raiser is tonight. Meet and greet at five-thirty. I'll meet you in her hotel lobby at five.'