

Notorious Nineteen: A Stephanie Plum Novel

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#1 bestselling author Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum novels are: "irresistible" (Houston Chronicle), "stunning" (Booklist), "outrageous" (Publishers Weekly), "brilliantly evocative" (The Denver Post), and "making trouble and winning hearts" (USA Today).

New Jersey bounty hunter Stephanie Plum is certain of three truths: People don't just vanish into thin air. Never anger old people. And don't do what Tiki tells you to do.

After a slow summer of chasing low-level skips for her cousin Vinnie's bail bonds agency, Stephanie Plum finally lands an assignment that could put her checkbook back in the black. Geoffrey Cubbin, facing trial for embezzling millions from Trenton's premier assisted-living facility, has mysteriously vanished from the hospital after an emergency appendectomy. Now it's on Stephanie to track him down. Unfortunately, Cubbin has disappeared without a trace, a witness, or his money-hungry wife. Rumors are stirring that he must have had help with the daring escape . . . or that maybe he never made it out of his room alive. Since the hospital staff's lips seem to be tighter than the security, and it's hard for Stephanie to blend in to assisted living, Stephanie's Grandma Mazur goes in undercover. But when a second felon goes missing from the same hospital, Stephanie is forced into working side by side with Trenton's hottest cop, Joe Morelli, in order to crack the case.

The real problem is, no Cubbin also means no way to pay the rent. Desperate for money- or maybe just desperate-Stephanie accepts a secondary job guarding her secretive and mouthwatering mentor Ranger from a deadly Special Forces adversary. While Stephanie is notorious for finding trouble, she may have found a little more than she bargained for this time around. Then again-a little food poisoning, some threatening notes, and a bridesmaid's dress with an excess of taffeta never killed anyone . . . or did they? If Stephanie Plum wants to bring in a paycheck, she'll have to remember: No guts, no glory.

Janet Evanovich is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of the Stephanie Plum series, the Lizzy and Diesel series, twelve romance novels, the Alexandra Barnaby novels and Trouble Maker graphic novel, and How I Write: Secrets of a Bestselling Author, as well as the Fox and O'Hare series with co-author Lee Goldberg. ONE

I don't know why we gotta sit here baking in your car in the middle of the day, in the middle of the summer, in the middle of this crummy neighborhood," Lula said. "It must be two hundred degrees in here. Why don't we have the air conditioning on?"

"It's broken," I told her.

"Well, why don't you have your window open?"

"It's stuck closed."

"Then why didn't we take my car? My car's got everything."

"Your car is red and flashy. People notice it and remember it. This is the stealth car," I said.

Lula shifted in her seat. "Stealth car, my big toe. This thing is a hunk of junk."

This was true, but it was my hunk of junk, and due to a professional dry spell it was all I could afford. Lula and I work for my cousin Vinnie's bail bonds office in Trenton, New Jersey. I'm a fugitive apprehension agent, and Lula is my sometimes partner.

We were currently parked on Stark Street, doing surveillance on a rooming house, hoping to catch Melvin Barrel coming or going. He'd been accused of possession with intent to sell, Vinnie bonded him out of jail, and Barrel hadn't shown for his court date. Lula makes a wage as the office file clerk, but I only make money if I catch skips, so I was motivated to tough it out in my hellishly hot car, hoping for a shot at snagging Barrel.

"I worked this street when I was a 'ho," Lula said, "but I was in a better section. This here block is for losers. No high-class 'ho would work this block. Darlene Gootch worked this block but it turned out she was killing people as a hobby."

Lula was fanning herself with a crumpled fast food bag she'd found on the floor in the back of my car, and the smell of stale French fries and ketchup wafted out at me.

"You keep waving that bag around and we're going to smell like we work the fry station at Cluck-in-a-Bucket," I said to her.

"I hear you," Lula said. "It's making me hungry, and much as I like the aroma of food grease, I don't want it stuck in my hair, on account of I just had my hair done. I picked out the piñ a colada conditioner so I'd smell like a tropical island."

Lula's hair was fire-engine red today and straightened to the texture of boar bristle. Her brown skin was slick with sweat. Her extra-voluptuous plus-size body was squeezed into a size 2 petite poison-green spandex skirt, and the acres of flesh that constituted her chest overflowed a brilliant yellow spaghetti-strap tank top. At 5'5" she's a couple inches shorter than me. We're about the same age, which puts us in the proximity of thirtysomething. And we're both single.

My name is Stephanie Plum and I haven't got Lula's body volume or the attitude that goes with it. My attitude goes more toward survival mode. I have shoulder-length curly brown hair, blue eyes almost always enhanced by a swipe of black mascara, decent teeth, a cute nose in the middle of my face, and I can almost always button the top button on my jeans.

"Look at this fool coming at us, walking down the middle of the street," Lula said. "What the heck is he doing?"

The fool was a skinny guy dressed in homie clothes. Baggy pants, wifebeater T-shirt, \$700 basketball shoes. He was jogging more than walking, and every couple steps he'd look over his shoulder and scan the street. He spotted Lula and me, made a course correction, and ran straight for us. He reached my car, grabbed the driver's side door

handle and yanked, but nothing happened.

"What's with that?" Lula asked.

"My door's stuck," I said. "It happens when it gets hot."

The skinny guy had his face pressed to my window, and he was yelling at us.

"What's he saying?" Lula asked. "I can't make it out, and I'm gonna go blind from the sun reflecting on his gold tooth with the diamond chip in it."

"I think he's saying if I don't open the door, he'll kill me."

"That don't sound appealing," Lula said. "Maybe this is a good time to go get lunch."

I turned the key in the ignition, and the engine cranked over and died. I turned it again and there was silence. I looked back at the skinny guy and realized he had a gun pointed at me. Not just any old gun either. This gun was big.

"Open your door," he yelled. "Open your damn door."

Lula had her purse on her lap and was fumbling around in it. "I got a gun in here somewhere," she said. "Keep him busy while I find my gun."

I fidgeted with the door handle on my side so it would look like I was trying to open it. "Here's the plan," I said to Lula. "When you find your gun you let me know so I can duck down and you can shoot him."

"That would be a good plan," Lula said, "but I might not have my gun with me. I might have left it home when I changed from my red purse to my yellow purse. You know how I am about the right accessories."

The guy was really agitated now. He had the gun against my window and his forehead was glued to the gun, like he was sighting for the kill.

"Maybe you should open the door and see what he wants," Lula said. "Maybe he just feels like going for a ride. In which case he could have this piece of dog doodie car, and I'd be happy to take a bus home."

"Hold on," I yelled at the guy. "I'm going to open the door."

"What?" he yelled back.

"Hold on!"

I hauled back and rammed the door full force with my shoulder. The door flew open,

catching the guy by surprise, the gun discharged, and he went down to the ground and didn't move.

We got out of the car and stared down at the guy. He was statue-still and bleeding from his forehead.

"You killed him," Lula said. "You hit him with the door, and he shot hisself."

"It was an accident."

"Don't matter. You killed him all the same." Lula toed him, but he still didn't move. "Yep," she said. "He's dead."

I looked at my car and realized a bullet was embedded in the roof, just over the window. I bent down and took a closer look at the skinny guy.

"He's not shot," I said. "He got hit in the head when the gun kicked back. He's just knocked out."

"Hunh," Lula said. "That would have been my second theory."

We dragged him to the gutter so he wouldn't get run over and we got back into my car. I tried the key, but there was no response.

"I bet your battery's no good," Lula said. "That's my professional opinion. You're gonna have to call someone to juice up your battery. And in the meantime I'm going across the street to that sad-ass grocery store to get a soda. I'm all dehydrated."

I crossed the street with Lula, we got sodas, and we stood in front of the store chugging them down. A black Cadillac Escalade rolled down the street and stopped by my car. Two idiots wearing gang colors got out, scooped the skinny guy up, and threw him into the Escalade. A yellow Hummer careened around the corner, jerked to a stop half a block in front of the Escalade, and two guys in the Hummer leaned out the window and opened fire. The Escalade returned fire. A guy wearing a crooked ball cap popped his head out of the sunroof on the Hummer, aimed a rocket launcher at the Escalade, and phoonf! the rocket went wide of the Escalade and blew up my car. There was a moment of silence, then both cars roared away.

Lula and I stared wide-eyed and openmouthed at the fireball consuming my car.

"Jeez Louise," I said.

"Yeah, but you gotta look on the positive side," Lula said. "You don't have to worry about charging up the battery."

Lula's comment might have seemed casual considering the gravity of the situation, but

truth is this wasn't the first time someone had exploded my car.

My cellphone rang, and I knew from the ringtone it was Ranger.

"You're off the grid," Ranger said when I answered.

"Someone blew up my car."

There was a moment of silence. "And?"

"I guess I could use a ride."

"Babe," Ranger said. And he disconnected.

"He coming for us?" Lula asked.

"Yep."

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