

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JANET EVANOVICH

A STEPHANIE PLUM NOVEL

HIGH FIVE

"THE ACTION NEVER STOPS... READERS CAN'T MISS
WITH THIS ONE!" — PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (starred review)

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**JANET
EVANOVICH**


A STEPHANIE PLUM NOVEL

**HIGH
FIVE**

**"THE ACTION NEVER STOPS... READERS CAN'T MISS
WITH THIS ONE!" — PUBLISHERS WEEKLY (STARRED REVIEW)**

HIGH FIVE

Janet Evanovich

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  NEW YORK

1

WHEN I WAS a little girl I used to dress Barbie up without underpants. On the outside, she'd look like the perfect lady. Tasteful plastic heels, tailored suit. But underneath, she was naked. I'm a bail enforcement agent now—also known as a fugitive apprehension agent, also known as a bounty hunter. I bring 'em back dead or alive. At least I try. And being a bail enforcement agent is sort of like being bare-bottom Barbie. It's about having a secret. And it's about wearing a lot of bravado on the outside when you're really operating without underpants. Okay, maybe it's not like that for all enforcement agents, but I frequently feel like my privates are alfresco. Figuratively speaking, of course.

At the moment I wasn't feeling nearly so vulnerable. What I was feeling at the moment was desperate. My rent was due, and Trenton had run out of scofflaws. I had my hands palms down on Connie Rosolli's desk, my feet planted wide, and hard as I tried, I couldn't keep my voice from sounding like it was coming out of Minnie Mouse. "What do you mean, there are no FTAs? There are always FTAs."

"Sorry," Connie said. "We've got lots of bonds posted, but nobody's jumping. Must have something to do with the moon."

FTA is short for failure to appear for a court date. Going FTA is a definite no-no in the criminal justice system, but that doesn't usually stop people from doing it.

Connie slid a manila folder over to me. "This is the only FTA I've got, and it's not worth much."

Connie is the office manager for Vincent Plum Bail Bonds. She's a couple of years older than me, which puts her in her early thirties. She wears her hair teased high. She takes grief from no one. And if breasts were money, Connie'd be Bill Gates.

"Vinnie's overjoyed," Connie said. "He's making money by the fistful. No bounty hunters to pay. No forfeited bonds. Last time I saw Vinnie in a mood like this was when Madame Zaretsky was arrested for pandering and sodomy and put her trained dog up as collateral for her bond."

I cringed at the mental image this produced because not only is Vincent Plum my employer, he's also my cousin. I blackmailed him into taking me on as an apprehension agent at a low moment in my life and have come to sort of like the job . . . most of the time. That doesn't mean I have any illusions about Vinnie. For the most part, Vinnie is an okay bondsman. But privately, Vinnie is a boil on the backside of my family tree.

As a bail bondsman Vinnie gives the court a cash bond as a securement that the accused will return for trial. If the accused takes a hike, Vinnie forfeits his money. Since this isn't an appealing prospect to Vinnie, he sends me out to find the accused and drag him back into the system. My fee is 10 percent of the bond, and I only collect it if I'm successful.

I flipped the folder open and read the bond agreement. "Randy Briggs. Arrested for carrying concealed. Failed to appear at his court hearing." The bond amount was seven hundred dollars. That meant I'd get seventy. Not a lot of money for risking my life by going after someone who was known to carry.

"I don't know," I said to Connie, "this guy carries a knife."

Connie looked at her copy of Briggs' arrest sheet. "It says here it was a small knife, and it wasn't sharp."

"How small?"

"Eight inches."

"That isn't small!"

"Nobody else will take this," Connie said. "Ranger doesn't take anything under ten grand."

Ranger is my mentor and a world-class tracker. Ranger also never seems to be in dire need of rent money. Ranger has other sources of income.

I looked at the photo attached to Briggs' file. Briggs didn't look so bad. In his forties, narrow-faced and balding, Caucasian. Job description was listed as self-employed computer programmer.

I gave a sigh of resignation and stuffed the folder into my shoulder bag. "I'll go talk to him."

"Probably he just forgot," Connie said. "Probably this is a piece of cake."

I gave her my *yeah, right* look and left. It was Monday morning and traffic was humming past Vinnie's storefront office. The October sky was as blue as sky gets in New Jersey, and the air felt crisp and lacking in hydrocarbons. It was nice for a change, but it kind of took all the sport out of breathing.

A new red Firebird slid to curbside behind my '53 Buick. Lula got out of the car and stood hands on hips, shaking her head. "Girl, you still driving that pimpmobile?"

Lula did filing for Vinnie and knew all about pimpmobiles firsthand since in a former life she'd been a 'ho. She's what is gently referred to as a big woman, weighing in at a little over two hundred pounds, standing five-foot-five, looking like most of her weight's muscle. This week her hair was dyed orange and came off very autumn with her dark brown skin.

"This is a classic car," I told Lula. Like we both knew I really gave a fig about classic cars. I was driving The Beast because my Honda had caught fire and burned to a cinder, and I didn't have any money to replace it. So here I was, borrowing my uncle Sandor's gas-guzzling behemoth . . . again.

"Problem is, you aren't living up to your earning potential," Lula said. "We only got chickenshit cases these days. What you need is to have a

serial killer or a homicidal rapist jump bail. Those boys are worth something."

"Yeah, I'd sure like to get a case like that." Big fib. If Vinnie ever gave me a homicidal rapist to chase down I'd quit and get a job selling shoes.

Lula marched into the office, and I slid behind the wheel and reread the Briggs file. Randy Briggs had given the same address for home and work. Cloverleaf Apartments on Grand Avenue. It wasn't far from the office. Maybe a mile. I pulled into traffic, made an illegal U-turn at the intersection, and followed Hamilton to Grand.

The Cloverleaf Apartments building was two blocks down Grand. It was redbrick-faced and strictly utilitarian. Three stories. A front and a back entrance. Small lot to the rear. No ornamentation. Aluminum-framed windows that were popular in the fifties and looked cheesy now.

I parked in the lot and walked into the small lobby. There was an elevator to one side and stairs to the other. The elevator looked claustrophobic and unreliable, so I took the stairs to the second floor. Briggs was 2B. I stood outside his door for a moment, listening. Nothing drifted out. No television. No talking. I pressed the doorbell and stood to the side, so I wasn't visible through the security peephole.

Randy Briggs opened his door and stuck his head out. "Yeah?"

He looked exactly like his photo, with sandy blond hair that was neatly combed, cut short. He was unbearded, unblemished. Dressed in clean khakis and a button-down shirt. Just like I'd expected from his file . . . except he was only three feet tall. Randy Briggs was vertically challenged.

"Oh, shit," I said, looking down at him.

"What's the matter?" he said. "You never see a short person before?"

"Only on television."

"Guess this is your lucky day."

I handed him my business card. "I represent Vincent Plum Bail Bonds. You've missed your court date, and we'd appreciate it if you'd reschedule."

"No," Briggs said.

"Excuse me?"

"No. I'm not going to reschedule. No. I'm not going to court. It was a bogus arrest."

"The way our system works is that you're supposed to tell that to the judge."

"Fine. Go get the judge."

"The judge doesn't do house calls."

"Listen, I got a lot of work to do," Briggs said, closing his door. "I gotta go."

"Hold it!" I said. "You can't just ignore an order to appear in court."

"Watch me."

"You don't understand. I'm appointed by the court and Vincent Plum to bring you in."

"Oh, yeah? How do you expect to do that? You going to shoot me? You can't shoot an unarmed man." He stuck his hands out. "You gonna cuff me? You think you can drag me out of my apartment and down the hall without looking like an idiot? Big bad bounty hunter picking on a little person. And that's what we're called, Toots. Not midget, not dwarf, not a freaking Munchkin. Little person. Get it?"

My pager went off at my waist. I looked down to check the read-out and *slam*. Briggs closed and locked his door.

"Loser," he called from inside.

Well, that didn't go as smoothly as I'd hoped. I had a choice now. I could break down his door and beat the bejeezus out of him, or I could answer my mother's page. Neither was especially appealing, but I decided on my mother.

My parents live in a residential pocket of Trenton nicknamed the Burg. No one ever really leaves the Burg. You can relocate in Antarctica, but if you were born and raised in the Burg you're a Burger for life. Houses are small and obsessively neat. Televisions are large and loud. Lots are narrow. Families are extended. There are no pooper-scooper laws in the Burg. If your dog does his business on someone else's lawn, the next morning the doodoo will be on your front porch. Life is simple in the Burg.

I put the Buick into gear, rolled out of the apartment building lot, headed for Hamilton, and followed Hamilton to St. Francis Hospital. My parents live a couple blocks behind St. Francis on Roosevelt Street. Their house is a duplex built at a time when families needed only one bathroom and dishes were washed by hand.

My mother was at the door when I pulled to the curb. My grandmother Mazur stood elbow to elbow with my mother. They were short, slim women with facial features that suggested Mongol ancestors . . . probably in the form of crazed marauders.

"Thank goodness you're here," my mother said, eyeing me as I got out of the car and walked toward her. "What are those shoes? They look like work boots."

"Betty Szajak and Emma Getz and me went to that male dancer place last week," Grandma said, "and they had some men parading around, looking like construction workers, wearing boots just like those. Then next thing you knew they ripped their clothes off and all they had left was those

boots and these little silky black baggie things that their dingdongs jiggled around in."

My mother pressed her lips together and made the sign of the cross. "You didn't tell me about this," she said to my grandmother.

"Guess it slipped my mind. Betty and Emma and me were going to bingo at the church, but it turned out there wasn't any bingo on account of the Knights of Columbus was holding some to-do there. So we decided to check out the men at that new club downtown." Grandma gave me an elbow. "I put a fiver right in one of those baggies!"

"Jesus H. Christ," my father said, rattling his paper in the living room.

Grandma Mazur came to live with my parents several years ago when my grandpa Mazur went to the big poker game in the sky. My mother accepts this as a daughter's obligation. My father has taken to reading *Guns & Ammo*.

"So what's up?" I asked. "Why did you page me?"

"We need a detective," Grandma said.

My mother rolled her eyes and ushered me into the kitchen. "Have a cookie," she said, setting the cookie jar on the small Formica-topped kitchen table. "Can I get you a glass of milk? Some lunch?"

I lifted the lid on the cookie jar and looked inside. Chocolate chip. My favorite.

"Tell her," Grandma said to my mother, giving her a poke in the side. "Wait until you hear this," she said to me. "This is a good one."

I raised my eyebrows at my mother.

"We have a family problem," my mother said. "Your uncle Fred is missing. He went out to the store and hasn't come home yet."