



Top Secret Twenty-One (Stephanie Plum)

By Janet Evanovich

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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Catch a professional assassin: top priority. Find a failure-to-appear and collect big bucks: top score. How she'll pull it all off: top secret.

Trenton, New Jersey's favorite used-car dealer, Jimmy Poletti, was caught selling a lot more than used cars out of his dealerships. Now he's out on bail and has missed his date in court, and bounty hunter Stephanie Plum is looking to bring him in. Leads are quickly turning into dead ends, and all too frequently into dead bodies. Even Joe Morelli, the city's hottest cop, is struggling to find a clue to the suspected killer's whereabouts. These are desperate times, and they call for desperate measures. So Stephanie is going to have to do something she really doesn't want to do: protect former hospital security guard and general pain in her behind Randy Briggs. Briggs was picking up quick cash as Poletti's bookkeeper and knows all his boss's dirty secrets. Now Briggs is next on Poletti's list of people to put six feet under.

To top things off, Ranger—resident security expert and Stephanie's greatest temptation—has been the target of an assassination plot. He's dodged the bullet this time, but if Ranger wants to survive the next attempt on his life, he'll have to enlist Stephanie's help and reveal a bit more of his mysterious past.

Death threats, highly trained assassins, highly *untrained* assassins, and Stark Street being overrun by a pack of feral Chihuahuas are all in a day's work for Stephanie Plum. The real challenge is dealing with her Grandma Mazur's wild bucket list. A boob job and getting revenge on Joe Morelli's Grandma Bella can barely hold a candle to what's number one on the list—but that's *top secret*.

Praise for *Top Secret Twenty-One*

"The combination of biting dialogue, outrageous characters and intense story lines are consistent throughout. And [Janet Evanovich] novels are the true definition of a guilty pleasure."—**Associated Press**

"Evanovich doesn't disappoint. . . . [She] weaves setting, family, romance and crime to pull the plot of *Top Secret Twenty-One* forward."—**Bookreporter**

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

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.

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One

I was perched on a barstool in a dark, noisy, overpriced restaurant in Princeton, New Jersey. I was wearing a red dress that was too tight, too short, and cut way too low. And I was wearing an earbud that connected me to a guy named Ricardo Carlos Manoso, aka Ranger.

My name is Stephanie Plum. I usually work as a bond enforcement agent for my cousin Vinnie, but tonight I was moonlighting as a lookout for Ranger. Ranger was stalking Emilio Gardi, a man many considered to be untouchable. Gardi had friends in high places, an army of thugs guarding his body, and money to burn, and his enemies tended to disappear without a trace. He was currently facing a racketeering charge in Miami, but he’d decided to keep his dinner date in Jersey rather than attend his court hearing in Dade County. This meant that the idiot who’d been dumb enough to post a bond for Gardi was out big money unless Gardi was dragged back to jail. The idiot happened to be Ranger’s cousin.

Ranger owns Rangeman, a small high-tech, high-end security firm. Ordinarily Ranger doesn’t do bond enforcement, but tonight he was making an exception. He was standing off to the side at the entrance to the dining room, and he was watching Gardi.

Gardi was wearing a tan sports jacket over a shirt with red and yellow flowers printed on it—the South Beach-meets-JCPenney look. He was in his fifties. He was balding. He was built like a fireplug. He was drinking red wine and eating rack of lamb, having a good time, entertaining three other men who were laughing too hard at his jokes.

Ranger was in his usual black—a perfectly tailored black suit, and a black dress shirt open at the neck. The Glock at the small of his back was also black. Ranger’s body is perfect. His hair is very dark brown. Cut short. His eyes are dark brown and intense. His skin is the color of hot chocolate, the lucky result of his Latino ancestry. His earbud matched his skin tone and was barely detectable.

Standing beside Ranger was a guy named Tank. Tank is big and solid and lethal. He’d been with Ranger’s unit in Special Forces, and now he’s second in command at Rangeman and watches Ranger’s back.

I didn't see any of Gardi's henchmen. They'd waited for him to take his table and then left the room.

"The room is clean," I said to Ranger via the earbud.

Ranger moved forward, his gaze never wavering from his quarry. Eye of the tiger. I've seen him focus like this on other takedowns, and it always raises the hair on my arms and at the nape of my neck.

Tank was steps behind him, surveying the rest of the room. Ranger unbuttoned his jacket to get better access to his gun and handcuffs. He stopped behind Gardi, put his hand on Gardi's shoulder, and said something to him, close to his ear.

Gardi shrugged Ranger away, said something I couldn't hear, and everyone at the table laughed.

Ranger didn't laugh, and even at a distance I knew things were about to get ugly. Ranger made another civil attempt, Gardi got angry and brushed him off, and in one swift move Ranger snatched Gardi out of his chair like a wolverine rooting out a groundhog.

In a heartbeat Gardi's head was smashed onto the table, everyone grabbed their drinks, and Ranger cuffed Gardi behind his back and handed him over to Tank. Ranger told the table he was sorry for the intrusion and followed Tank and Gardi out of the room. The whole episode had taken maybe a minute.

A Rangeman vehicle idled in front of the restaurant, ready to take Tank and Gardi back to Rangeman headquarters in center city Trenton. In the morning Gardi would be escorted onto a plane and extradited to Miami.

My job done, I turned back to my black sambuca. Okay, I know they put food coloring in the sambuca to make it black. Don't care. It's sexy. And I swear the black tastes better. I guess I could also say that about Ranger. Not that he's my boyfriend or anything, but we have had a moment.

I downed the sambuca, paid my tab, and went outside to meet up with Ranger. The Rangeman SUV was pulling away, and Ranger was waiting for me beside his black Porsche 911 Turbo.

"Babe," he said.

"Babe" covers a lot of ground for Ranger. It can be a simple greeting, or a warning that a tarantula is sitting on my shoulder. Tonight it came on the heels of a full body scan, and I was pretty sure it suggested he liked my dress.

Ranger slipped an arm around me, leaned close, and kissed me. The kiss was a further indicator that he liked the dress. In fact, the kiss suggested that while he liked the dress a lot, he wouldn't mind getting me out of the dress as soon as possible. And I was thinking that was a great idea. Fortunately we were in Princeton, and my apartment was at least a half hour away if the traffic was moving. I was going to need that time to talk myself out of sleeping with Ranger.

Ranger keeps me safe from everyone but himself. He's the panther stalking the gazelle, keeping all other predators away. He enjoys the hunt. And I enjoy being the gazelle, although truth is I'm more prairie chicken than gazelle.

Ranger's reflexes are quicker, his brain engages faster, his instincts are far superior than the average man's.

My skin heats under his touch, and his kiss sets delicious things in motion in my body. I know from past experience he's magic in bed. I also know he has dark secrets that take precedence over personal relationships. And I know it's in my best interests to keep him at arm's length.

Plus, I sort of have a boyfriend.

Ranger pulled out of the restaurant lot, stopped for a light, and his hand went to my knee and traveled north.

"Um," I said.

He cut his eyes to me. "Is there a problem?"

"Your hand is moving up my leg."

"And?"

"We've talked about this."

"Not lately," Ranger said.

"Has anything changed?"

"No."

"Well, then."

"Is that a definite 'Well, then'?"

"Afraid it is."

"Too bad," Ranger said.

Thirty minutes later, Ranger parked behind my apartment building and walked me to my door.

"Call me if you get lonely," he said.

"I have you on speed dial," I told him.

A barely perceptible smile twitched at the corners of his mouth, he gave me a light kiss, and he left.

Truth is, I would have liked to invite him in, but that wouldn't have been the smart thing to do. Not that I always do the smart thing, but tonight I'd managed to keep from grabbing him and ripping his clothes off. Two points for Plum.

I let myself into my apartment and went to the kitchen to say hello to my hamster, Rex. Rex lives in an aquarium on my kitchen counter and sleeps in a soup can. He was running on his wheel when I looked in on him.

"Hey," I said. "How's it going?"

Rex blinked his round black eyes at me and twitched his whiskers. That's about as complicated as our conversations ever get. I dropped a peanut into his cage and he jumped off his wheel, shoved the peanut into his cheek, and scurried into his soup can with it.

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My cousin Vinnie's bail bonds office is on Hamilton Avenue. It's a one-story storefront building with some parking spots by the back door. Vinnie has an inner office where he hides from people he's stiffed, pissed off, infected with herpes, or previously incarcerated. Vinnie looks like a weasel in a pimp suit. His wife, Lucille, is a saint. His father-in-law, Harry the Hammer, owns the agency and didn't get his nickname because he was a carpenter.

Connie Rosolli, the office manager and guard dog, was at her desk when I walked in.

"How'd it go last night?" she asked.

"It was good. Ranger walked up to Gardi, yanked him out of his chair, and cuffed him. Very smooth."

"And?"

"That was it."

"No naked Ranger in your bed?"

"Nope."

"Disappointing," Connie said.

Tell me about it. "Anything new come in for me?"

"I have a failure-to-appear. High money bond. Jimmy Poletti."

"He owns all those car dealerships, right? He shoots his own commercials. 'Make a deal with Jimmy!'"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Melba More:

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