

PLUM SPOOKY

ONE

Sometimes you get up in the morning and you know it's going to be *one of those days*. No toothpaste left in the tube, no toilet paper on the cardboard roll, hot water cuts out halfway through your shower, and someone's left a monkey on your doorstep.

My name is Stephanie Plum, and I'm a bail bonds enforcement agent for Vincent Plum Bail Bonds. I live in a one- bedroom, one- bath, unremarkable apartment in a three- story brick box of a building on the outskirts of Trenton, New Jersey. Usually I live alone with my hamster, Rex, but at eight- thirty this morning, my roommate list was enlarged to include Carl the Monkey. I opened my door to go to work, and there he was. Small brown monkey with long, curled tail, creepy little monkey fingers and toes, crazy, bright monkey eyes, and he was on a leash hooked to my doorknob. A note was attached to his collar.

Hi! Remember me? I'm Carl and I belong to Susan Stitch. Susan is on her honeymoon and she knows you'll take good care of me until she returns.

First, let me say that I've never wanted a monkey. Second, I barely know Susan Stitch. Third, what the heck am I supposed to do with the little bugger?

Twenty minutes later, I parked my Jeep Wrangler in front of the bonds office on Hamilton Avenue. At one time, the Wrangler had been red, but it had seen many lives before it fell into my hands, and now it was far from primo and the color was motley.

Carl followed me out of the car and into the office, hugging my pants leg like a two- year- old. Connie Rosolli, the office manager, peered around her computer. Connie had a lot of big Jersey hair, a freshly waxed upper lip, and breasts no amount of money could buy.

Lula stopped her filing and stood hands on hips. "That better not be what I think it is," Lula said, eyeballing Carl. "I *hate* monkeys. You *know* I hate monkeys."

"It's Carl," I told her. "Remember when we busted Susan Stitch for failing to appear? And remember her monkey, Carl?"

"Yeah?"

"Here he is."

"What are you doing with him?"

"He was attached to my doorknob with a note. Susan went on a honeymoon and left him with me."

"She got a lot of nerve," Lula said. "Where's he go to the bathroom? You ever think of that?"

I looked down at Carl. "Well?"

Carl blinked and shrugged. He looked at Lula and Connie, curled his lips back, and gave them a gummy monkey smile.

"I don't like the way he's lookin' at me," Lula said. "It's creepy. What kind of monkey you got here anyway?"

Lula is a former 'ho, and she's only moderately altered her wardrobe to suit her new job. Lula somehow manages to perform the miracle of squeezing her plus- size body into petite- size clothes. Her hair was blond this week, her skin was brown as always, her spandex tube dress was poison green, and her shoes were four- inch, spike- heeled, faux leopard Via Spigas. It came as no surprise that the monkey was staring at Lula. *Everyone* stared at Lula.

I didn't command that much attention in my jeans, girlcut red T-shirt, gray sweatshirt, and inadequate swipe of lash- lengthening mascara. Not only did I feel like a bran muffin in a bakery case filled with eclairs, I was also the only one not packing a gun. My eyes are blue, my hair is brown, and my favorite word is *cake*. I was married for ten minutes in another life, and I'm not inclined to repeat the mistake anytime soon. There are a couple men in my life who tempt me . . . just not with marriage.

One of those tempting men is Joe Morelli. He's a Trenton cop with bedroom eyes, and bedroom hands, and everything else you'd want to find in your bedroom is top of the

line. He's been my off- again, on- again boyfriend for as long as I can remember, and last night he was on- again.

The second guy in my life is Carlos Manoso, aka Ranger. Ranger's been my mentor, my employer, my guardian angel, and he's gotten as intimate with me as a man can get, but Ranger has never totally qualified as a boyfriend. Boyfriend might suggest an occasional date, and I can't see Ranger going there. Ranger is the sort of guy who slips uninvited into a girl's dreams and desires and refuses to leave.

"What's happening with Martin Munch?" Connie asked me. "Vinnie's in a rant over him. Munch is a big- ticket bond. If you don't drag his ass into court by the end of the month, our bottom line won't be good."

This is the way things work in the bail bonds business. A guy gets accused of a crime, and before he's released back into society, the court demands a security deposit. If the accused doesn't happen to have \$50,000 under his mattress to give to the court, he goes to a bail bonds agent and that agent posts the bond for the accused for a fee. If the accused doesn't show up for his court date, the court gets to keep the bondsman's money until someone like me hauls the accused back to jail.

My ferret- faced cousin Vinnie owns the bonds office on paper, but he's backed by his father- in- law, Harry the Hammer. If Vinnie writes too many bad bonds and the office runs in the red, Harry isn't happy. And you don't want a guy with a name like Harry the Hammer to be unhappy.

"I've been looking for Munch all week," I said to Connie.

"It's like he's dropped off the earth."

Martin Munch is a twenty- four- year- old genius with a doctorate in quantum physics. For what ever reason, Munch went postal on his project manager, riding him like Man O' War, breaking his nose with a Dunkin' Donuts coffee mug, knocking him cold. Moments later, Munch was caught on a security tape as he left the research lab cradling a oneof- a-kind monster cesium vapor magnetometer. What ever the heck that is!

Munch was arrested and booked, but the magnetometer was never recovered. In a moment of insanity, Vinnie wrote a bond for Munch, and now Munch is playing hard to get with his contraption.

"This is a white- collar guy," Connie said. "He hasn't grown up in a crime culture. His friends and family are probably horrified. I can't see them hiding him."

“He hasn’t got a lot of friends and family,” I told her. “From what I can determine, he has neighbors who have never spoken to him, and the only family is a grandmother in a retirement home in Cadmount. He was employed at the research facility for two years, and he never socialized. Before that, he was a student at Princeton, where he never got his face out of a book.

“His neighbors tell me a couple months ago a guy started visiting Munch. The guy was a little over six feet tall, with an athletic build and expensive clothes. He drove a black Ferrari and had shoulder-length black hair and pale, almost white skin. Sometimes Munch would leave with him and not come back for several days. That’s the whole enchilada.”

“Sounds like Dracula,” Lula said. “Was he wearing a cape? Did he have fangs?”

“No one said anything about a cape or fangs.”

“Munch must have come in when I was out sick last week,” Lula said. “I don’t remember him.”

“So what was it?” I asked her. “The flu?”

“I don’t know what it was. My eyes were all swollen, and I was sneezing and wheezing, and I felt like I had a fever. I just stayed in my apartment, drinking medicinal whiskey and taking cold pills, and now I feel fine. What’s this Munch look like?”

I took his file from my Prada knockoff messenger bag and showed Lula his mug shot, plus a photo.

“Good thing he’s a genius,” Lula said, “on account of he don’t have much else going on.”

At five-foot-two-inches tall, Munch looked more like fourteen than twenty-four. He was slim, with strawberry blond hair and pale freckled skin. The photo was taken outdoors, and Munch was squinting into the sun. He was wearing jeans and sneakers and a SpongeBob T-shirt, and it occurred to me that he probably shopped in the kids’ department.

I imagine you have to be pretty secure in your manhood to pull that one off.

“I’m feeling hot today,” Lula said. “I bet I could find that Munch. I bet he’s sitting home in his Underoos playing with his whatchamacallit.”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt for us to check out his house one more time,” I said. “He’s renting one of those little tiny row houses on Crocker Street, down by the button factory.”

“What are you gonna do with the monkey?” Lula wanted to know.

I looked over at Connie.

"Forget it," Connie said. "I'm not babysitting a monkey. Especially not *that* monkey."

"Well, I don't let monkeys ride in my car," Lula said. "If that monkey's going with us, you're gonna have to drive *your* car. And I'm sitting in the back, so I can keep an eye on him. I don't want no monkey sneaking up behind me giving me monkey cooties."

"I've got two new skips," Connie said to me. "One of them, Gordo Bollo, ran over his ex- wife's brand- new husband with a pickup truck, twice. And the other, Denny Guzzi, robbed a con ve nience store and accidentally shot himself in the foot trying to make his getaway. Both idiots failed to show for their court appearances."

Connie shoved the paperwork to the edge of the desk. I signed the contract and took the files that contained a photo, the arrest sheet, and the bond agreement for each man.

"Shouldn't be hard to tag Denny Guzzi," Connie said.

"He's got a big ban dage on his foot, and he can't run."

"Yeah, but he's got a gun," I said to Connie.

"This is Jersey," Connie said. "Everyone's got a gun . . . except you."

We left the bonds office, and Lula stood looking at my car.

"I forgot you got this dumb Jeep," Lula said. "I can't get in the back of this thing. Only Romanian acrobats could get in the back of this. I guess the monkey's gotta ride in back, but I swear he makes a move on me, and I'm gonna shoot him."

I slid behind the wheel, Lula wedged herself into the passenger- side seat, and Carl hopped into the back. I adjusted my rearview mirror, locked onto Carl, and I swear it looked to me like Carl was making faces at Lula and giving her the finger.

"What?" Lula said to me. "You got a strange look on you."

"It's nothing," I said. "I just thought Carl was . . . never mind."

I drove across town, parked in front of Munch's house on Crocker Street, and we all piled out of the Jeep.

"This here's a boring- ass house," Lula said. "It looks like every other house on the street. If I came home after having two cosmopolitans, I wouldn't know which house was mine. Look at them. They're all redbrick. They all have the

same stupid black door and black window trim. They don't even have no front yard. Just a stoop. And they all got the same stupid stoop."

I glanced at Lula. "Are you okay? That's a lot of hostility for a poor row house."

"It's the monkey. Monkeys give me the willies. And I might have a headache from all that medicinal whiskey."

I rang Munch's doorbell and looked through sheers that screened the front window. Beyond the sheers, the house was dark and still.

"I bet he's in there," Lula said. "I bet he's hiding under the bed. I think we should go around to the back and look."

There were fifteen row houses in all. All shared common walls, and Munch's was almost dead middle. We returned to the Jeep, I rolled down the street, turned left at the corner, and took the alley that cut the block. I parked, and we all got out and walked through Munch's postage- stamp backyard. The rear of the house was similar to the front. A door and two windows. The door had a small swinging trapdoor at the bottom for a pet, and Carl instantly scurried inside.

I was dumbstruck. One minute, Carl was in the Jeep, and then, in an instant, he was inside the house.

"Holy macaroni," Lula said. "He's fast!"

We looked in a window and saw Carl in the kitchen, bouncing off counters, jumping up and down on the small kitchen table.

I pressed my nose to the glass. "I have to get him out."

"Like hell you do," Lula said. "This here's your lucky day. I say finders keepers."

"What if Munch never returns? Carl will starve to death."

"I don't think so," Lula said. "He just opened the refrigerator."

"There has to be a way to get in. Maybe Munch hid a key."

"Well, someone could accidentally break a window," Lula said. "And then someone else could crawl in and beat the living crap out of the monkey."

"No. We're not breaking or beating."

I rapped on the window, and Carl gave me the finger.

Lula sucked in some air. "That little fucker just flipped us the bird."

"It was probably accidental."

Lula glared in at Carl. "Accident this!" she said to him, middle finger extended.

Carl turned and mooned Lula, although it wasn't much of a moon since he wasn't wearing clothes to begin with.

"Oh yeah?" Lula said. "You want to see a moon? I got a moon to show you."

"No!" I said to Lula. "No more moons. Bad enough I just looked at a monkey butt. I don't want your butt burned into my retinas."

"Hunh," Lula said. "Lotta people paid good money to see that butt."

Carl drank some milk out of a carton and put it back into the refrigerator. He opened the crisper drawer and pawed around in it but didn't find anything he wanted. He closed the refrigerator, scratched his stomach, and looked around.

"Let me in," I said to him. "Open the door."

"Yeah, right," Lula said. "As if his little pea brain could understand you."

Carl gave Lula the finger again. And then Carl threw the deadbolt, opened the door, and stuck his tongue out at Lula.

"If there's one thing I can't stand," Lula said, "it's a showoff monkey."

I did a fast walk-through of the house. Not much to see. Two small bedrooms, living room, single bath, small eat-in kitchen. These houses were built by the button factory after the war to entice cheap labor, and the button factory didn't waste money on frills. The houses had been sold many times over since then and were now occupied by an odd assortment of senior citizens, newly marrieds, and crazies. Seemed to me, Munch fit into the crazy category.

There were no clothes in the closet, no toiletries in the bathroom, no computer anywhere. Munch had cleared out, leaving a carton of milk, some sprouted onions, and a half-empty box of Rice Krispies behind.

"It's the strangest thing," Lula said. "I got this sudden craving for coffee cake. Do you smell cinnamon? It's like it's mixed up with Christmas trees and oranges."

I'd noticed the scent. And I was afraid I recognized it.

"How about you?" I asked Carl. "Do you smell cinnamon?"

Carl did another shrug and scratched his butt.

"Now all I can think of is cinnamon buns," Lula said. "I got buns on the brain. We gotta go find some. Or maybe a doughnut. I wouldn't mind a dozen doughnuts. I need a bakery. I got cravings."

Everyone vacated the kitchen, I closed the back door, and we all piled into the Jeep. I found my way to Hamilton

and stopped at Tasty Pastry.

"What kind of doughnut do you want?" I asked Lula.

"Any kind. I want a Boston Cream, a strawberry jelly, a chocolate- glazed, one of them with the white icing and pretty colorful sprinkles, and a blueberry. No, wait. I don't want the blueberry. I want a vanilla cream and a cinnamon stick."

"That's a lot of doughnuts."

"I'm a big girl," Lula said. "I got big appetites. I feel like I could eat a million doughnuts."

"How about you?" I asked Carl. "Do you need a doughnut?"

Carl vigorously shook his head *yes* and jumped up and down in his seat and made excited monkey noises.

"It's creepy that this monkey knows what we're saying," Lula said. "It's just not right. It's like he's a alien monkey or something."

"Sometimes Morelli's dog, Bob, knows what I'm saying. He knows *walk*, and *come*, and *meatball*."

"Yeah, Tank knows some words, too, but not as many as this monkey," Lula said. "Of course, that's 'cause Tank's the big, strong, silent type."

Tank is Lula's fiancé, and his name says it all. He's Ranger's right- hand man, second in command at Ranger's security firm, Rangeman, and he's the guy Ranger trusts to guard his back. To say that Tank is the big, strong, silent type is a gross understatement on all accounts.

Fifteen minutes later, we were in the Jeep and we'd eaten all the doughnuts.

"I feel a lot better," Lula said. "Now what?"

I looked down at my shirt. It had powdered sugar and a big glob of jelly on it. "I'm going home to change my shirt."

"That don't sound real interesting," Lula said. "You could drop me at the office. I might have to take a nap."

Plum Spooky

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