

PLUM LOVIN'

Chapter One

Men are like shoes. Some fit better than others. And sometimes you go out shopping and there's nothing you like. And then as luck would have it, the next week you find two that are perfect, but you don't have the money to buy both. I was currently in just such a position... not with shoes, but with men. And this morning it got worse.

A while ago, a guy named Diesel showed up in my kitchen. Poof, he was there. Like magic. And then days later, poof, he was gone. Now without warning he was once again standing in front of me. "Surprise," he said. "I'm back."

He was imposing at just over six foot. Built solid with broad shoulders and deep-set, assessing brown eyes. He looked like he could seriously kick ass and not break a sweat. He had a lot of wavy, sandy blond hair cut short and fierce blond eyebrows. I placed his age at late twenties, early thirties. I knew very little about his background. Clearly he'd been lucky with the gene pool. He was a nice-looking guy, with perfect white teeth and a smile that made a woman get all warm inside.

It was a cold February morning, and he'd dropped into my apartment wearing a multicolored scarf wrapped around his neck, a black wool pea coat, a washed-out three-button thermal knit shirt, faded jeans, beat-up boots, and his usual bad attitude. I knew that a muscular, athletic body was under the coat. I wasn't sure if there was anything good buried under the attitude.

My name is Stephanie Plum. I'm average height and average weight and have an average vocabulary for someone living in Jersey. I have shoulder-length brown hair that is curly or wavy, depending on the humidity. My eyes are blue. My heritage is Hungarian and Italian. My family is dysfunctional in a normal sort of way. There are a bunch of things I'd like to do with my life, but right now I'm happy to put one foot in front of the other and button my jeans without having a roll of fat hang over the waistband.

I work as a bond enforcement agent for my cousin Vinnie, and my success at the job has more to do with luck and tenacity than with skill. I live in a budget apartment on the outskirts of Trenton, and my only roommate is a hamster named Rex. So I felt understandably threatened by having this big guy suddenly appear in my kitchen.

"I hate when you just show up in front of me," I said. "Can't you ring my doorbell like a normal person?"

"First off, I'm not exactly normal. And second, you should be happy I didn't walk into your bathroom when you were wet and naked." He flashed me the killer smile. "Although I wouldn't have minded finding you wet and

naked."

"In your dreams."

"Yeah," Diesel said. "It's happened."

He stuck his head in my refrigerator and rooted around. Not a lot in there, but he found one last bottle of beer and some slices of American cheese. He ate the cheese and chugged the beer. "Are you still seeing that cop?"

"Joe Morelli. Yep."

"What about the guy behind door number two?"

"Ranger? Yeah, I'm still working with Ranger." Ranger was my bounty hunter mentor and more. Problem was, the more part wasn't clearly defined.

I heard a snort and a questioning woof from the vicinity of my bedroom.

"What's that?" Diesel asked.

"Morelli's working double shifts, and I'm taking care of his dog Bob."

There was the sound of dog feet running, and Bob rounded a corner and slid to a stop on the kitchen linoleum. He was a big-footed, shaggy, orange-haired beast with floppy ears and happy brown eyes. Probably golden retriever, but he'd never win best of breed. He sat his ass down on Diesel's boot and wagged his tail at him.

Diesel absently fondled Bob's head, and Bob drooled a little on Diesel's pant leg, hoping for a scrap of cheese.

"Is this visit social or professional?" I asked Diesel.

"Professional. I'm looking for a guy named Bernie Beaner. I need to shut him down."

If I'm to believe Diesel, there are people on this planet who have abilities that go beyond what would be considered normal human limitations. These people aren't exactly superheroes. It's more that they're ordinary souls with the freakish ability to levitate a cow or slow pitch a lightning bolt. Some are good and some are bad. Diesel tracks the bad. The alternative explanation for Diesel is that he's a wacko.

"What's Beaner's problem?" I asked.

Diesel dropped a small leftover chunk of cheese into Rex's cage and gave another chunk to Bob. "Gone off the edge. His marriage went into the shitter, and he blamed it on another unmentionable. Now he's out to get her."

"Unmentionable?"

"That's what we call ourselves. It sounds better than freak of nature."

Only marginally.

Bob was pushing against Diesel, trying to get him to give up more cheese. Bob was about ninety pounds of rangy dog, and Diesel was two hundred of hard muscle. It would take a lot more than Bob to bulldoze Diesel around my kitchen.

"And you're in my apartment, why?" I asked Diesel.

"I need help."

"No. No, no, no, no, no."

"You have no choice, sweetie pie. The woman Beamer's looking for is on your most-wanted list. And she's in my custody. If you want your big-ticket bond, you have to help me."

"That's horrible. That's blackmail or bribery or something."

"Yeah. Deal with it."

"Who's the woman?" I asked Diesel.

"Annie Hart."

"You've gotta be kidding. Vinnie's on a rant over her. I spent all day yesterday looking for her. She's wanted for armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon."

"It's all bogus... not that either of us gives a rat's ass." Diesel was systematically going through my cupboards looking for food, and Bob was sticking close. "Anyway, bottom line is I've got her tucked away until I can sort things out with crazy Bernie."

"Bernie is the... um, unmentionable who's after Annie?"

"Yeah. Problem is, Annie's one of those crusader types. Takes her job real serious. Says it's her calling. So, the only way I could get Annie to stay hidden was to promise her I'd take over her caseload. I suck at the kind of stuff she does, so I'm passing it off to you."

"And what do I get out of this?"

"You get Annie. As soon as I take care of Bernie, I'll turn Annie over to you."

"I don't see where this is a big favor to me. If I don't help you, Annie will come out of hiding, I'll snag her, and my job will be done."

Diesel had his thumbs hooked into his jeans pockets, his eyes were locked onto mine, his expression was serious. "What'll it take? I need help with this, and everyone has a price. What's yours? How about twenty bucks when you close a case?"

"A hundred."

"Deal," Diesel said.

Here's the sad truth, I had nothing better to do. And I needed money. The bonds office was beyond slow. I had one FTA to hunt down, and Diesel had her locked away.

"Just exactly what am I supposed to do?" I asked him. "Annie's bond agreement lists her occupation as a relationship expert."

Diesel gave a bark of laughter. "Relationship expert. I guess that could cover it."

"I don't even know what that means! What the heck is a relationship expert?"

Diesel had dropped a battered leather knapsack on my counter when he popped into my kitchen. He went to the knapsack, removed a large yellow envelope, and handed it over to me. "It's all in this envelope."

I opened the envelope and pulled out a bunch of folders crammed with photographs and handwritten pages.

"She's got a condensed version for you clipped to the top folder," Diesel said. "Got everything prioritized. Says you better hustle because Valentine's Day is coming up fast."

"And?"

"Personally, I don't get turned on by Valentine's Day with the sappy cards and creepy cupids and the hearts and flowers routine. But Annie is to Valentine's Day what Santa Claus is to Christmas. She makes it happen. Of course, Annie operates on a smaller scale. It's not like she's got ten thousand elves working for her."

Diesel was a really sexy-looking guy, but I thought he might be one step away from permanent residence at the funny farm. "I still don't get my role in this."

"I just handed you five open files. It's up to you to make sure those five people have a good Valentine's Day."

Oh boy.

"Listen, I know it's lame," Diesel said, "but I'm stuck with it. And now you're stuck with it. And I'm going to have a power shortage if I don't get breakfast. So find me a diner. Then I'm going to do my thing and look for Bernie, and you're going to do your thing and work your way down Annie's list."

I clipped a leash onto Bob's collar and the three of us tripped down the stairs and out to my car. I was driving a yellow Ford Escape that was good for hauling felons and Bob dogs.

"Does Bob go everywhere?" Diesel wanted to know.

"Pretty much. If I leave him at home, he gets lonely and eats the furniture."

