

## PLUM LUCKY

### Chapter One

My mother and grandmother raised me to be a good girl, and I have no problem with the girl part. I like men, malls and carbs. Not necessarily in that order. The good part has been spotty. I don't steal cars or sniff glue, but I've had a lot of impure thoughts. And I've acted on a bunch of them. Not limited to, but including, snooping through a guy's drawers in search of his underwear. On the surface this doesn't sound like a majorly hot experience, but this was no ordinary guy, and I couldn't find any underwear.

My mother and my Grandma Mazur are really good. They pray everyday and regularly go to church. I have good intentions but religion for me is like tennis. I play an excellent mental game and in my mind's eye I look terrific in the little white skirt, but the reality is I never actually get onto the court.

It's usually when I'm in the shower that I think of things spiritual and mystical and wonder about the unknown. Like, is there life after death? And just exactly what is collagen? And suppose Wonder Woman actually exists? If she was discreet you might not know, right?

Today is St. Patrick's Day, and when I was in the shower this morning my thoughts were about luck. How does it work? Why are some people flat out lucky and others not so lucky? Virgil said fortune favors the bold. Okay, so I read that on the stall door in the ladies room of the multiplex last week, and I don't personally know Virgil, but I like his thinking. Still, there has to be something else going on besides being bold. Things we can't comprehend.

My name is Stephanie Plum, and I try to leave the incomprehensible in the shower. Life is tough enough without walking around all day wondering why God invented cellulite. I'm a skip tracer for my cousin Vinnie's bail bonds agency in Trenton, New Jersey, and I spend my day hunting felons who are hiding in attics. It was a little after nine AM, and I was on the sidewalk in front of the bonds office with my sidekick Lula.

"You're a holiday shirker," Lula said. "Every time a holiday comes up, you don't do your part. Here it is St. Patrick's Day and you don't have no green on you. You're lucky there's no holiday police because they'd haul your boney behind off to the shirker's dungeon."

"I don't own anything green." Okay, an olive drab t-shirt, but it was dirty.

"I own lots of green. I look good in it," Lula said. "But then I look good in all colors. Maybe not brown on account of it blends with my

skin tone. Brown's too much of a good thing on me."

Lula's borderline too much of a good thing in lots of ways. It isn't exactly that Lula is fat; it's more that she's too short for her weight, and her clothes are too small for the volume of flesh she carries. Her attitude is Jersey times ten, and today her hair was candy apple red. She was packed into shamrock-green animal print stretch pants, a matching green sequin encrusted stretchy top, and spike-heeled dark green suede ankle boots. Lula was a hooker before she took the job at the bonds office, and I was guessing this outfit was left over from the St. Patrick's Day fantasy collection.

Truth is, I sometimes feel a little boring and incredibly pale when I'm with Lula. I'm Hungarian and Italian descent, and my complexion is more Eastern European than Mediterranean. I have shoulder length, unexceptional curly brown hair, blue eyes and a nice nose that I inherited from the Mazur side of the family. I was in my usual jeans and sneakers and long-sleeved t-shirt that carried the Rangers hockey team logo. The temperature was in the fifties, and Lula and I were bundled into hooded sweatshirts. Lula's sweatshirt said KISS ME I'M PRETENDING I'M IRISH, and mine was grey with a small chocolate ice cream stain on the cuff.

Lula and I were on our way to get a Lucky Clucky Shake at Cluck in a Bucket, and Lula was rooting through her purse, trying to find her car keys.

"I know I got those keys in here somewhere," Lula said, pulling stuff out of her purse, piling everything onto the hood of her car. Gum, lip balm, stun gun, cell phone, a forty caliber nickel plated Glock, TicTacs, a can of Mace, a personal mood candle, a flashlight, handcuffs, a screwdriver, nail polish, the pearl handled derringer she got as a Valentine's Day present from her honey Tank, a musical bottle opener, a roll of toilet paper, Roloids...

"A screwdriver?" I asked her.

"You never know when you'll need one. You'd be surprised what you could do with a screwdriver. I got extra strength cherry scented condoms in here too. 'Cause you never know when Tank might be needing some emergency quality time."

Lula found her key, we piled into her red Firebird, and she motored away from the curb. She turned off Hamilton Avenue onto Columbus Avenue, and we both gaped at the grey-haired, wiry little old lady half a block away. The woman was dressed in white tennis shoes, bright green stretch pants, and a grey wool jacket. She had a white bakery bag in one hand and the strap to a large canvas duffle bag in the other. And she was struggling to drag the duffle bag down the sidewalk.

Lula squinted through the windshield. "That's either Kermit the Frog

or your granny."

Grandma Mazur's lived with my parents ever since my Grandpa Harry went to the big transfat farm in the sky. Grandma was a closet free spirit for the first seventy years of her life. She kicked the door open when my Grandpa died and now nobody can get her back in. Personally I think she's great ...but then I don't have to live with her.

A car wheeled around the corner and rocked to a stop alongside Grandma.

"Don't look like there's anybody driving that car," Lula said. "I don't see no head."

The driver side door opened, and a little man jumped out. He was slim, with curly short-cropped grey hair, and he was wearing green slacks.

"Look at that," Lula said. "Granny's wearing green and the little tiny man's wearing green. Everybody's wearing green except you. Don't you feel like a party pooper?"

The little man was talking to Grandma, and Grandma wasn't looking happy with him. Grandma started inching away, and the little man snatched the strap on the duffle bag and yanked it out of Grandma's hand. Grandma roundhoused the man on the side of the head with her big black purse, and he dropped to his knees.

"She handles herself real good considering she's so old and rickety," Lula said.

Grandma hit the little man again, the man grabbed Grandma, and the two of them went down to the ground, locked together, rolling around kicking and slapping.

I wrenched the door open, swung out of the Firebird and waded into the mix. I pulled the little man off Grandma, and held him at arm's length.

He squirmed and grunted and flailed his arms. "Let me go!" he yelled, his voice pinched from the exertion. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"Are you okay?" I asked Grandma.

"Of course I'm okay," Grandma said. "I was winning, too. Didn't it look like I was winning?"

Lula clattered over in her high-heeled boots, got Grandma under the armpits and hoisted her to her feet.

"When I grow up I wanna be just like you," Lula said to Grandma.

I swung my attention back to the little man, but he was gone. His car door slammed shut, the engine caught and the car sped down the street.

"Sneaky little bugger," Lula said. "One minute you had a hold of him and then next thing he's driving away."

"He wanted my bag," Grandma said. "Can you imagine? He said it

was his, so I asked him to prove it. And that's when he tried to run off with it."

I looked down at the bag. "What's in it?"

"None of your beeswax."

"What's in the bakery bag?"

"Jelly doughnuts."

"I wouldn't mind a jelly doughnut," Lula said. "A jelly doughnut would go real good with the Lucky Clucky Shake."

"I love them shakes," Grandma said. "I'll share my doughnuts if you take me for a shake, but you gotta leave my duffle bag alone. No one's allowed to snoop in my duffle bag."

"You haven't got a body in there, do you?" Lula wanted to know. "I don't like carrying dead guys around in my Firebird. Messes with the feng shui."

"I couldn't fit a body in here," Grandma said. "It's too little for a body."

"It could be a leprechaun body," Lula said. "It's St. Patrick's Day. If you bagged a leprechaun you could make him take you to his pot of gold."

"I don't know. I hear you gotta be careful of them leprechauns. I hear they're tricky," Grandma said. "Anyways, I haven't got a leprechaun."

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The day after St. Patrick's Day I woke up next to Joe Morelli, my almost always boyfriend. Morelli's a Trenton cop, and he makes me look like an amateur when it comes to the impure thoughts. Not that he's kinky or weird. More that he's frighteningly healthy. He has wavy black hair, expressive brown eyes, a perpetual five o'clock shadow, an eagle tattoo from his Navy days and a tightly muscled, entirely edible body. He's recently become moderately domesticated, having inherited a small house from his Aunt Rose.

Commitment issues and a strong sense of self-preservation keep us from permanently cohabitating together. Genuine affection and the impure thoughts bring Morelli to my bed when our schedules allow intersection. I knew from the amount of sunlight streaming into my bedroom this morning that Morelli had overslept. I turned to look at the clock, and Morelli came awake.

"I'm late," he said.

"Gee, that's too bad," I told him. "I had big plans for this morning."

"Such as?"

"I was going to do things to you that don't even have names. Really hot things."

Morelli smiled at me. "I might be able to find a few minutes..."

"You would need more than a few minutes for what I have in mind."

It could go on for hours."

Morelli blew out a sigh and rolled out of bed. "I don't have hours. And I've been with you long enough to know when you're yanking my chain."

"You doubt my intentions?"

"Cupcake my best shot at morning sex is to tackle you while you're still sleeping. Once you're awake all you can think about is coffee."

"Not true." Sometimes I thought about pancakes and doughnuts.

Morelli's big orange shaggy haired dog climbed onto the bed and settled into the spot Morelli vacated.

"I was supposed to be at a briefing ten minutes ago," Morelli said. "If you take Bob out to do his thing I can jump in the shower, meet you in the parking lot and only miss the first half of the meeting."

Five minutes later I handed Bob over to Morelli and watched Morelli's SUV chug away. I returned to the building, took the elevator back to my second floor apartment, let myself in and scuffed into the kitchen. I started coffee brewing, and my phone rang.

"Your grandmother is missing," my mother said. "She was gone when I got up this morning. She left a note that said she was hitting the open road. I don't know what that means."

"Maybe she went to a diner with one of her friends. Or maybe she walked up to the bakery."

"It's been hours, and she's not back. And I called all her friends. No one's seen her."

Okay, so I had to admit, it was a little worrisome. Especially since she had the strange duffle bag yesterday and had been attacked by the little man in the green pants. Seemed far-fetched that there would be a connection, but the possibility made my stomach feel squishy.

"This is your grandmother we're talking about," my mother said. "She could be on the side of the road hitchhiking a ride to Vegas. You find people, right? That's what you do for a living. Find your grandmother."

"I'm a bounty hunter. I'm not a magician. I can't just conjure up Grandma."

"You're all I've got," my mother said. "Come over and look for clues. I've got maple link sausages. I've got coffee cake and scrambled eggs."

"Deal," I said. "Give me ten minutes."

I hung up, turned around and bumped into a big guy. I shrieked and jumped back, and he grabbed me.

"Chill," he said. "You just about broke my eardrum. You need to learn to relax."

"Diesel!"

"Yeah. Did you miss me?"

"No."

"That's a fib," he said. "Do I smell coffee?"

Diesel drops into my life every now and then. Actually, this visit makes it only three times, but it seems like more. He's solid muscle, gorgeous and scruffy, and he smells like everything a woman wants ...sex and fresh baked cookies and a hint of Christmas. Okay, I know that's an odd combination but it works for Diesel. Maybe because he's not entirely normal ...but then, who is? He has unruly sandy brown hair and assessing brown eyes. He smiles a lot, and he's pushy and rude and inexplicably charming. And he can do things ordinary men can't do. At least that's the story he tells.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him.

"I'm looking for someone. You don't mind if I hang out here for a couple days, do you?"

"Yes!"

He glanced at my coat. "Are you going somewhere?"

"I'm going to my mother's for breakfast."

"I'm in."

I blew out a sigh, grabbed my purse and car keys, and we trooped out of my apartment and down the hall. Mrs. Finley from 3D was already in the elevator when we entered. She sucked in some air and pressed herself against the wall.

"It's okay," I said to her. "He's harmless."

"Hah," Diesel said.

Diesel was wearing an outfit that looked like it belonged in the street-person edition of GQ. Jeans with a rip in the knee, dusty shit-kicker boots, a t-shirt advertising Corona beer, a ratty grey sweatshirt over the shirt. Two days of blond beard. Hair that looked like he styled it with an eggbeater. Not that I should judge. I wasn't exactly looking like a suburban sex goddess. My hair was uncombed, I had my feet shoved into Ugg knockoffs, and I had a winter coat buttoned over a pair of Morelli's sweatpants and a flannel pajama top imprinted with duckies.

We all scooted out of the elevator, and Diesel followed me to my car. I was driving a Chevy Monte Carlo clunker that I'd gotten on the cheap because it didn't go into reverse.

"So, Mr. Magic," I said to Diesel. "What can you do with cars?"

"I can drive 'em."

"Can you fix them?"

"I can change a tire."

I did another sigh, wrenched the door open and rammed myself behind the wheel.