

## TO THE NINES

### CHAPTER ONE

My name is Stephanie Plum and I was born and raised in the Chambersburg section of Trenton where the top male activities are scarfing pastries and pork rinds and growing love handles. The pastry and pork rind scarfing I've seen first hand. The love handles are grown over time. Thank God for small favors.

The first guy I saw up close and personal was Joe Morelli. Morelli put an end to my virgin status and showed me a body that was masculine perfection... smooth and muscular and sexy. Back then Morelli thought a long-term commitment was twenty minutes. I was one of thousands who got to admire Morelli's best parts as he pulled his pants up and headed for the door.

Morelli's been in and out of my life since then. He's currently in and he's improved with age, butt included.

So the sight of a naked man isn't exactly new to me, but the one I was presently watching took the cake. Punky Balog had an ass like Winnie the Pooh... big and fat and furry. Sad to say, that was where the similarity ended because, unlike Pooh bear, there was nothing endearing or cuddly about Punky Balog.

I knew about Punky's ass because I was in my new sunshine yellow Ford Escape, sitting across from Punky's dilapidated row house, and Punky had his huge Pooh butt plastered against his second story window. My sometimes partner, Lula, was riding shotgun for me and Lula and I were staring up at the butt in open-mouthed horror.

Punky slid his butt side to side on the pane and Lula and I gave a collective, upper lip curled back eeyeuuw!

"Think he knows we're out here," Lula said. "Think maybe he's trying to tell us something."

Lula and I work for my bail bonds agent cousin, Vincent Plum. Vinnie's office is on Hamilton Avenue, his big plate glass front window looking into the Burg. He's not the world's best bonds agent. And he's not the worst. Truth is, he'd probably be a better bondsman if he wasn't saddled with Lula and me. I do fugitive apprehension for Vinnie and I have a lot more luck than skill. Lula mostly does filing. Lula hasn't got luck or skill. The thing Lula has going for her is the ability to tolerate Vinnie. Lula's a plus size black woman in a size seven white world and Lula's had a lot of practice at pulling attitude.

Punky turned and gave us a wave with his Johnson.

"That's just so sad," Lula said. "What do men think of? If you had a lumpy little wanger like that would you go waving it in public?"

Punky was dancing now, jumping around, wanger flopping, doodles

bouncing.

"Holy crap," Lula said. "He's gonna rupture something."

"It's gotta be uncomfortable."

"I'm glad we forgot the binoculars. I wouldn't want to see this up close." I didn't even want to see it from a distance.

"When I was a'ho I used to keep myself from getting grossed out by pretending men's privates were Muppets," Lula said. "This guy looks like an anteater Muppet. See the little tuft of hair on the anteater head and then there's the thing the anteater snuffs up ants with... Except ol' Punky here's gotta get real close to the ants on account of his snuffer isn't real big. Punky's got a pinky."

Lula was a'ho in a previous life. One night while plying her trade she had a near death experience and decided to change everything but her wardrobe. Not even a near death experience could get Lula out of spandex. She was currently wearing a skin tight hot pink mini-skirt and a tiger print top that made her boobs look like big round over-inflated balloons. It was early June and mid-morning and the Jersey air wasn't cooking yet, so Lula had a yellow angora sweater over the tiger top.

"Hold on," Lula said. "I think his snuffer is growing."

This produced another eeyeuuw from us.

"Maybe I should shoot him," Lula said.

"No shooting!" I felt the need to discourage Lula from hauling out her Glock, but truth was, it seemed like it'd be a public service to take a potshot at Punky.

"How bad do we want this guy?" Lula asked.

"If I don't bring him in, I don't get paid. If I don't get paid, I don't have rent money. If I don't have rent money, I get kicked out of my apartment and have to move in with my parents."

"So we want him real bad."

"Real bad."

"And he's wanted for what?"

"Grand theft auto."

"At least it's not armed robbery. I'm gonna be hoping the only weapon he's got, he's holding in his hand right now ...on account of this don't look like much of a threat to me."

"I guess we should go do it."

"I'm ready to rock and roll," Lula said. "I'm ready to kick some Punky butt. I'm ready to do the job."

I turned the key in the ignition. "I'm going to drop you at the corner so you can cut through the back and take the back door. Make sure you have your walkie talkie on so I can let you know when I'm coming in."

"Roger, that."

"And no shooting, no breaking doors down, no Dirty Harry imitations."

"You can count on me."

Three minutes later, Lula reported she was in place. I parked the Escape two houses down, walked to Punky's front door and rang the bell. No one responded so I rang a second time. I gave the door a solid rap with my fist and shouted bond enforcement. Open the door.

I heard shouting carrying over from the back yard, a door crashing open and slamming shut and then more muffled shouting. I called Lula on the talkie but got no response. A moment later the front door opened to the house next to me and Lula stomped out.

"Hey, so excuse me," she yelled at the woman behind her. "So I got the wrong door. It could happen, you know. We're under a lot of pressure when we're making these dangerous apprehensions."

The woman glared at Lula and slammed and locked her door shut.

"Must have miscounted houses," Lula said to me. "I sort of busted in the wrong door."

"You weren't supposed to bust in any door."

"Yeah, but I heard someone moving around inside. Guess that's 'cause it was the neighbor lady's house, hunh? So what's going on? How come you're not in yet?"

"He hasn't opened the door."

Lula took a step back and looked up. "That's because he's still mooning you."

I followed Lula's line of sight. She was right. Punky had his ass to the window again.

"Hey," Lula yelled up. "Get your fat ass off the window and get down here. We're trying to do some bond enforcement."

An old man and an old woman came out of the house across the street and settled themselves on their front stoop to watch.

"Are you going to shoot him?" the old man wanted to know.

"I don't hardly ever get allowed to shoot anybody," Lula told him.

"That's darn disappointing," the man said. "How about kicking the door down?"

Lula gave the man one of her hand on hip get real looks. "Kick the door down? Do I look like I could kick a door down in these shoes? These are Via Spigas. You don't go around kicking down doors in Via Spigas. These are classy shoes. I paid a shitload of money for these shoes and I'm not sticking them through some cheap ass door."

Everyone looked at me. I was wearing jeans, a t-shirt topped by a black jeans jacket and CAT boots. CAT boots could definitely kick down a door but they'd have to be on someone else's foot because door kicking was a skill I lacked.

"You girls need to watch more television," the old man said. "You need to be more like those Charlies Angels. Nothing stopped them girls. They could kick doors down in all kinds of shoes."

"Anyways, you don't need to kick the door in," the old woman said.

"Punky never locks it."

I tried the door and sure enough, it was unlocked.

"Sort of takes the fun out of it," Lula said, looking past the door into Punky's house.

This is the part where if we were Charlie's Angels we'd get into crouched positions, holding our guns in two hands in front of us and we'd hunt down Punky. This didn't work for us because I left my gun home, in the cookie jar on my kitchen counter, and Lula'd fall over if she tried to do the crouch thing in her Via Spigas.

"Hey Punky," I yelled up the stairs, "put some clothes on and come down here. I need to talk to you."

"No way."

"If you don't get down here I'm going to send Lula up to get you."

Lula's eyes got wide and she mouthed ...Me? Why me?

"Come up here and get me," Punky said. "I have a surprise for you."

Lula pulled a Glock out of her handbag and gave it over to me. "You should take this on account of you're gonna be the one going up the stairs first and you might need it. You know how I hate surprises."

"I don't want the gun. I don't like guns."

"Take the gun."

"I don't want the gun," I told her.

"Take the gun!"

Yeesh. "Okay, okay. Give me the stupid gun."

I got to the top of the stairs and I peeked around the corner, down the hall.

"Here I come, ready or not," Punky sang out. And then he jumped from behind a bedroom door and stood spread eagle in full view. "Ta-dahhhh."

He was buck naked and slick as a greased pig. Lula and I swallowed hard and we both took a step backward.

"What have you got all over you?" I asked.

"Vaseline. Head to toe and extra heavy in the cracks and crevices." He was smiling ear to ear. "You want to take me in, you have to wrestle with me."

"How about we just shoot you," Lula said.

"You can't shoot me. I'm not armed."

"Here's the plan," I said to Lula. "We cuff him and put him in leg irons and then we wrap him in a blanket so he doesn't get my car greasy."

"I'm not touching him," Lula said. "Not only is he an ugly naked mother fucker but he's a dry cleaning bill waiting to happen. I'm not ruining this top. I'll never find another top like this. It's genuine fake tiger. And lord knows what he'd do to rabbit."

I reached for him with the cuffs. "Give me your hand."

"Make me," he said, wagging his butt. "Come get me, sweetie pie."

Lula looked over at me. "You sure you don't want me to shoot him?"

I took my jacket off and snatched at his wrist but I couldn't hold tight. After three attempts I had Vaseline up to my elbow, and Punky was skipping around going, "...nah, nah, nah. Kiss my can, you can't catch me, I'm the Vaseline man."

"This guy's in the red zone on the breathalizer," Lula said. "Think he might also be missing a few marbles in his greased up jug head."

"I'm smart like a fox," Punky said. "If you can't catch hold of me, you can't take me in. If you can't take me in, I don't go to jail."

"If I don't take you in, I don't pay my rent and I get kicked out of my apartment," I told Punky, lunging for him, swearing when he slid away from me.

"This here's embarrassing," Lula said. "I can't believe you're trying to grab this funky fat man."

"It's my job. And you could help! Take the damn top off if you don't want it to get ruined."

"Yeah, take your top off momma. I've got plenty of extra Vaseline for you," Punky sang out.

Punky turned away from me, I gave him a good hard kick to the back of his knee and he crashed to the floor. I threw myself on top of him and yelled to Lula to cuff him. She managed to get both cuffs on and my cell phone chirped.

It was my Grandma Mazur on the phone. When my Grandpa Mazur cashed in his two dollar chips and moved on to the High Rollers' Suite in the sky, my Grandma Mazur moved in with my parents.

"Your mother's locked herself in the bathroom and she won't come out," Grandma said. "She's been in there for an hour and a half. It's the menopause. Your mother was always so sensible until the menopause hit."