

FIRST LOOK

SPLIT SECOND: Thirty-Two Switcheroo

by Janet Evanovich

CHAPTER ONE

My grandma Mazur once told me that before you marry someone, watch what they select from a bowl of Halloween candy. Plain chocolate bar: boring but dependable. Chocolate with caramel or nuts: adventurous. If he chooses the bag of assorted fruit-flavored candies, he can't commit. Says no thank you to Halloween candy? Run! I recently married Joe Morelli without the benefit of knowing his candy preference. My name is Stephanie Plum, and when I married Morelli, I sublet my apartment to my cousin Audrey, so that my hamster, Rex, and I could move in with Morelli and his big orange dog, Bob. Morelli is a cop in Trenton, New Jersey, working crimes against persons. I'm a bail bond enforcement officer working for my cousin Vinnie. The marriage is a work in progress.

I was muddling through morning brain fog when I parked my pea-soup-green Kia SUV at the curb in front of Vincent Plum Bail Bonds and trudged into the office. Connie, the office manager, was

at her desk in the small front room. Besides writing bonds and running the office, she has the joyous job of keeping thugs, unpaid bookies, and assorted crazies away from Vinnie. She keeps a loaded gun in her bottom drawer next to her can of hair spray. My sort-of-partner, Lula, was slouched on the fake leather couch that hugged the wall across from Connie's desk. I slouched next to Lula.

"Girl, you look like you were busy all night again," Lula said to me. "You got bags under your bloodshot eyes, and it don't look like you took a comb to your hair. I know Morelli is a gorgeous hot hunk of Italian muscle, but it's been almost a year now that you been coming in dragging ass. You might want to take a day off from playing hide-the-salami."

"It has nothing to do with the salami. He gets up at four thirty in the morning. Every morning. It doesn't matter when we go to bed. He's up at four thirty. It's like he doesn't need sleep. He gets up and Bob gets up. They go into the bathroom, and I start to fall back to sleep and then he's back. He's showered and dressed but he has to come back to the bedroom to put his socks and shoes on. So he sits on the bed, and he puts his stupid socks and shoes on."

"He can't put them on in the bathroom?" Lula asked.

"He said there's no place to sit in the bathroom. He doesn't want to sit on the toilet and put his socks and shoes on. And he said he likes to see me in the morning before he leaves for work. It was romantic for the first week and now I'm glad my gun is downstairs in the kitchen because otherwise I might shoot him."

"It's not good to shoot a cop," Lula said.

"Then he goes downstairs and I start to go back to sleep and he grinds coffee. He has to have fresh ground coffee."

"You can hear that upstairs?"

"I can hear everything. It's an old house. He inherited it from his aunt Rose."

"I remember," Lula said. "I've never seen it. Is it nice?"

"It's a lot like my parents' house. Built in the 1930s, like most of the other houses in the neighborhood. Morelli updated the kitchen and added a powder room downstairs. There are three bedrooms and a shared bathroom upstairs that's also been renovated."

"The 1930s was a long time ago," Lula said. "They didn't even have internet back then."

"And he sings," I said.

"Say what?"

"He sings in the morning, but he only knows parts of songs, so he sings the same thing over and over and over."

"Why does he do that?" Lula asked.

"He's happy," I said.

"He's happy at four thirty in the morning? Before coffee?"

"Yes!"

"That's just not right," Lula said. "There's something wrong with him. That would be it for me. I couldn't live with a man who was happy in the morning."

"It gets worse," I said.

"Worse than being happy in the morning?"

"He eats breakfast. Coffee, granola, juice, toast. Before we were married, I thought it was great. I'd stay over on weekends, and the kitchen smelled nice, like coffee and toast. And his toaster is big enough for a bagel."

"He gets points for that," Lula said. "I like a toasted bagel in the morning. What's not to like?"

"The sink," I said. "He empties his cereal bowl and juice glass into the sink."

"And?" Lula said.

"And he doesn't rinse the sink. By the time I get to the kitchen there's stuff stuck to the sink like cement."

"That's one of them man things," Lula said. "They don't notice stuff like that. You can't really blame them. Their brains aren't set up for it. Also, they don't notice socks and underwear on the floor or on the coffee table or in the refrigerator. You know what they notice in the refrigerator? Condiments. Condiments are important to men. You give your man his own shelf in the door of a refrigerator for his mustard and sriracha sauce and he's a happy man. These are observations I've had from some past relationships. This is why I live with a parakeet and not a man. Expectations are already low for a parakeet so there's no problem. Plus, when you want it to stop talking all you gotta do is cover its cage with a sheet."

"When did you get a parakeet?"

"Couple weeks ago. Bought it from Tommy 'the Tongue' Capriolla when he was having his going-back-to-jail trunk sale out of his car," Lula said. "It's yellow. Name is Chardonnay."

Lula is a former lady of the night who abandoned her corner and steady clients but kept her wardrobe and attitude and went to work for Vinnie. She has a plus-size body that makes the Kardashians look like chump change, and like the Kardashians, she somehow manages to be spectacular in all her excess. She's a couple of inches shorter and a couple of years younger than me. Today, her hair was styled into a big Afro puffball. Caramel with splotches of pink. She was wearing a daffodil-yellow scoop neck sweater that showed about a quarter mile of cleavage, a short black skirt that had a lot of Spandex, and black Jimmy Choo–knockoff pumps with a six-inch heel.

My hair is brown and naturally curly. My eyes are blue. I have a smile that's a notch short of Julia Roberts. My nose is my best feature. Lucky me. My job is to track down losers who don't show up for their court appearance and wrangle them back

into the system. My usual workday uniform is jeans, sneakers, a girly T-shirt, and a sweatshirt. If Lula and I were side by side in a bakery display case, we'd be a three-layer chocolate cake with colorful sprinkles next to an almond biscotti.

The back door to the office crashed open and Vinnie walked in. Vinnie is the human equivalent of a ferret in a sharkskin suit with tight pants and pointy-toed shoes. His hair is black and slicked back. He cheats at cards. He cheats on his wife. And he's had sex with a duck. He claims it was consensual. That's just the tip of the Vincent Plum iceberg. He's a boil on the backside of my family, but his skill as a bail bondsman is unquestionable. His father-in-law, Harry the Hammer, owns the bail bonds agency, and he also owns Vinnie.

"Ziggy Zucker didn't show for court yesterday," Vinnie said to Connie. "Did you get the notice of failure to appear?"

"Not yet," Connie said.

"He's probably in Mexico," Vinnie said. "I should never have bonded the little turd."

Ziggy Zucker, also known as Double Z, Slick Z, or ZZ, is a major drug supplier with a side hustle of human trafficking. Slick Z is probably the most accurate name, because he has been accused many times of many things but has never been convicted. Witnesses die or disappear or recant statements. Evidence goes missing. Juries are hung and judges dismiss cases.

"I wouldn't worry," Lula said. "He probably didn't kill off enough witnesses yet. Soon as he takes care of business he'll show up."

"I wish it was that simple," Vinnie said. "He's been charged with arson, and the evidence is supposed to be solid. He got pissed off and burned down his competitors' warehouse. Did it personally. Ziggy and two of his lieutenants. It's all on video and Trenton PD has the footage. Or at least, that's what I'm told."

"So, he has incentive to disappear," I said.

"I didn't know about the video when I bonded him out," Vinnie said. "Usually, he's easy money. They set a high bond and he always shows." He turned to Connie. "Draw up the paperwork for Stephanie. I don't care if we have to extradite him from China. I want him brought in."