

CHAPTER ONE

"But, Kevin, I don't understand. What do you mean you went out with another girl? What girl?" Didi O'Brien's swiped at eyes brimming with tears.

Kevin Cabot sipped his single malt. "Her name's Mindy, and she relocated here from the Midwest a few months ago. She's a Pilates instructor at my gym." He squirmed in his chair and shrugged. "Look, she's just a kid of twenty-four, and she doesn't know anyone here in the area."

Stomach churning, Didi shoved her dinner away, barely noticing when the sauce from her beef bourguignon splashed onto the white tablecloth. She swallowed, words refusing to come.

Kevin continued in a monotone. "It's not like I planned it. I was just being a nice guy and showing a stranger around town. You know, being neighborly. Believe it or not, she's a real nut for baseball, and last night the Nationals were playing the Cardinals...."

"You took her to a baseball game? Last night?" Didi managed to squeak out the words despite the block of granite in her throat.

"Oh, come on. Stop getting so defensive here. You don't even like baseball. When I saw her last Friday...."

"You went out with her last week, too? On a Friday?" Didi's voice started out shaky but managed to rise over the conversational hum of the other diners.

"Shhh. Pipe down. Don't go getting all 'female' on me." Kevin picked up his fork and speared a green bean almondine. "So what if we've been to a baseball game, the museum, and had coffee a few times? Last Friday, the Smithsonian had this cool special exhibit on the life of Roberto Clemente. You probably don't know this, but he's a Hall of Famer who won the National League's Most Valuable Player in 1966. He led the league in batting average."

"Have you slept with her?" She had to ask, though she didn't really want to

know the answer.

Kevin didn't deny it. Instead, he growled, "So what if I did? I told you it's not serious. Plus, you had some ridiculous church thing going on last Friday, so you weren't available."

Her breath caught as she lowered her voice. "That's hardly the point, Kevin. Did you tell her you're engaged?"

"Why would I?"

"I'll take that as a no. Do you love her?"

"Of course I don't love her, and I'm getting tired of this tête-à-tête. I knew you were going to overreact. Mindy's a cute kid from Dubuque who needed someone to show her around, and now you're getting all weird on me, when I was only being considerate."

Glancing down at his Rolex, Kevin huffed out a sigh. "Maybe we should talk about this after you decide to behave like an adult." He flagged down the waiter and signaled he was ready for the check. "I decide to be honest, as a courtesy to you, and you put me through a Spanish Inquisition."

With a hot flush pricking her cheeks, Didi slipped out of the booth, storming toward the exit. She refused to hear any more of his flimsy excuses.

Dodging the other patrons leaving the restaurant, Didi sprinted across the asphalt to her car. She fell into the driver's seat, jammed her key into the ignition, and zoomed out of the parking lot. She had to get away from that man! On autopilot, she drove through town, barely remembering to stop at the stop signs. Leaving Chez Monte Carlo far, far behind, she headed to the safety of home.

She came to a fork in the road. In no mood to dally, she chose the shortcut home, veering left onto Deer Hollow Road.

Bad decision.

She drove way too fast, but right now, she didn't care. Sliding on shallow gravel

down the first steep hill, she missed the deep ditch on the right side of the road by a narrow margin. Instead, she slammed into a mud-drenched pothole, skittered sideways, and careened toward an ancient oak.

Stamping hard on the brake, she yelped as the car jarred to a halt. Maybe she did care after all. "Please, Jesus, help me get home in one piece. And if Kevin's still on the road, crash him into the biggest tree you can find!"

Deer Hollow, slippery and dangerous when wet, was rarely her route of choice. Now she remembered why. She shoved her two-door coupe into gear and edged her way toward home. The tires slowed, but her mind raced in circles like an Olympic speed skater. In one tortured hour, her balanced world had been tipped topsy-turvy. She closed her hands tightly around the steering wheel, desperate to make it home before this crazy country lane tore her little red car apart.

With great caution, Didi drove down a steep slope, eased over the one-lane bridge, and rounded a curve. She'd nearly made it to the end of the road when a rabbit darted in front of her. She had just enough time to wrench the wheel hard to the left to avoid it. She braced herself for that horrifying "thump-thump" announcing she'd killed one of God's furry creatures, then sighed with relief. Missing the bunny was the only happy event in what was otherwise a thoroughly rotten evening.

A cavernous empty space grew in the pit of her stomach as waves of fury crashed over her. Heat crept up her face and tears trickled from her eyes. Why did she always cry when she was mad? Kevin's announcement had left her reeling. With her adrenaline surging from the near bunny-cide, Didi breathed in and tried her best to calm down. She pulled to the side of the road and stopped the car before she did something stupid. Resting her head on the steering wheel, she slumped deep into her misery. After this terrible night, did she have a clue where her life was going? The uncertainty was unnerving.

A dreary, gray sky hung heavy with unshed moisture. Sheets of rain had

drenched the area for three days straight, and another whopper of a storm had been threatening for the past few hours. As she headed again for home, the first drops came splashing and splattering down. *Great. Just great.* As if to match her mood, wicked forks of lightning streaked across the sky, static electricity crackled in the air, and the rains crashed down with a vengeance.

Didi breathed a quick prayer her car would start and turned the key. Her trusty vehicle purred to life on the first try, even with 138,567 miles and an oil filter that should have been changed a thousand miles ago. She patted the dash and glanced up to the sky. *Thank you.* Tonight, she would have crawled the three miles home in the driving downpour rather than call Kevin Francis Cabot, a.k.a. The Rat, to come and rescue her.

How could he do that to her? Didn't she deserve better?

The problem was...she loved him. Until an hour ago, she'd have sworn he loved her, too. What was wrong with *her* that he'd wanted someone else?

She didn't want to think about it, didn't want to try and understand it tonight. With a heavy heart, she banished the conflicting thoughts from her mind and pointed her car toward home.

* * *

Jake Montgomery wadded up his napkin and placed it next to his plate.

"What's the matter? Not enjoying this fancy French food?" Lori Montgomery punched her big brother's arm and speared another sprig of asparagus. "I was afraid this place might be too sophisticated for you."

Jake glanced at his sister sideways and shook his head. "Gee, thanks. I'm as refined as the next guy. Can I help it if I'd just as soon have a pepperoni pizza? I was just wondering what all the commotion was about at that table in the corner. Didn't you see that pretty woman race out of here?"

"Sorry. Missed it. I suppose I was concentrating on the excruciating pain caused

by squishing round-toed feet into pointy-toed shoes. My tootsies are killing me." Lori fished under the table and came up smiling, black high-heeled pumps dangling from her fingers. "There. All better. Now, what were you saying?"

"You didn't hear that ruckus? All of a sudden, this woman's voice rose, and she took off out the back door. Her face ... well, she looked stricken."

"She must have heard some bad news, but at least it's nice to know you're noticing attractive women again." Lori grabbed a slice of bread from the basket on the table and slathered on the butter.

"I just hate to see someone so upset." Jake swished the overly-sauced chicken breast around on his plate. The devastation on the brunette's face sliced at his heart. "The way she dashed out of here, I hope she makes it safely to wherever it is she's going."

He folded his napkin and leaned back in his chair. He'd been hungry a few minutes ago, but his appetite was long gone.