

Artful Dodger

Chapter One

It was one rotten day.

I'm talking beyond rotten. It started out badly and sped rapidly downhill. I burned my toast twice in the chipped enamel toaster with the broken pop-up. I tripped over the base of the six-foot halogen lamp and stubbed my toe on the back of the couch, the same toe that was already missing a nail. Out of ten toes, what are the odds? And that was before eight o'clock. A.M., that is. I didn't care if the sky was blue and the birds were singing. The way my life was going, I fully expected to run out of deodorant, find a hole in my shoe, back my bald tires over a rusty nail, and plow into someone's fender while using the rearview mirror to put on my mascara. But I didn't expect to find a dead person.

Who does?

Who would think a quick visit to the toilet could set off a whole slew of incidents that would eventually lead me right here, wilting on my front porch step and staring up into a pair of flaring nostrils?

"What made you decide to check the septic tank?" This was Mr. Nostrils talking.

"I told you already. I told your partner and I told that guy over there." I pointed to the man with the shaggy mane of dark hair standing with a group of policemen huddled in the middle of my yard.

"Bear with me, Mrs.—" He thumbed through the papers on his clipboard.

"Kean. Maggie Kean," I repeated for the umpteenth time that morning.

“Uh, yes, that’s right.”

Yes, I know.

“Mrs. Kean, I’m—”

“It’s Ms.”

“Huh?”

“It’s *Ms.* Kean.” I’m not usually a stickler for all that feminist protocol stuff, but exhaustion had simply worn me down. At this point I’d gone over the story so many times I wanted to strangle this large, bumbling idiot who was sucking up all the oxygen within a five-mile radius through nasal passages the size of sewer pipes.

“Ms. Kean,” Vacuum Nose repeated, patiently exaggerating the *Ms.*, “I’m just trying to make sure I have all the facts. Anything you remember, even the smallest detail, could help. Something that may seem insignificant now can make or break a case.”

I took a deep breath, counted to ten, and let it out slowly. I wasn’t trying to be uncooperative, not intentionally, at least, but how many times could I say that I didn’t know anything? Putting a hand up to shield my eyes from the sun, I looked around my patch of yard now covered in blue uniforms, badges, yellow tape, and an ambulance, its red emergency lights still flashing. I was tired and frustrated. And completely confused. But there wasn’t a damn thing I could do.

“There aren’t any other details, Officer,” I said, squinting to read his nametag, “Mailer.”

"I'm sure it seems like you covered everything, Ms. Kean, but I'd like to go over your story one more time just to make sure I have it all down." He touched my arm. "Look, why don't you sit back and try to relax a little. Then just start from the beginning."

Okay, I know the guy appeared to be solicitous and he sounded nauseatingly sincere, but I wasn't buying his act. I mean, I wasn't exactly a neophyte at this sort of thing. Not that I see dead people or decomposing body parts on a daily basis, but I do like a good mystery and I've watched my share of *CSI* in multiple cities. I've got enough television smarts to know that the "you can trust me" act is all crap. It's a simple ploy cops use to break down a witness' defenses and I wasn't about to fall for that old trick. These guys breathe down your neck asking the same questions over and over, scouring for holes or discrepancies in your story. Then they scratch their heads and shuffle away, leaving you with sweaty palms and dripping armpits. And just when you start to breathe a little easier, they turn back, like they just remembered something, and point out the small misstep that lands your butt in jail. For life. Assuming you're guilty, of course.

"Why don't you read me your notes and I'll stop you if I remember anything new," I suggested helpfully.

"Ms. Kean, I understand this is unpleasant, but—"

This was more than unpleasant, Vacuum Nose.

"And I'm sure this has been a frightening experience for you."

No kidding, Einstein.

"But I have to follow police procedures. If you could try and help me a little here, this will be over before you know it. Let's start with why you decided to get your septic tank pumped today."

I shrugged. "I heard there were a lot of attractive, eligible men on the service crew and I thought I might be able to scare up a date for Saturday night."

Okay, I'll admit to being a little obnoxious, but in my defense, I'd been scared out of my wits. Evidently, Officer Mailer didn't like my answer because he started to snort and grunt like an angry bull. I leaned back on the palms of my hands, trying to put as much distance as I could between the two of us, seriously contemplating the chances of a quick getaway.

"I'll take it from here, Tom."

Officer Mailer stiffened at the deep voice and reluctantly turned away, but not before boring two nasty holes in me with his beady little eyes. So much for the concerned approach.

"I take it you're pretty shook up."

The voice belonged to the shaggy-haired guy, the only one who wasn't wearing a uniform. He stood in front of me, placing one cowboy boot on the bottom step, a black shadow swooping in like a modern-day Zorro.

"Not really. What's a body or two floating around in a septic tank?"

Zorro chuckled. "Tell me, are you always this difficult?"

"You caught me on a good day."

He leaned forward. "Look, I know this isn't easy, but we've got a dead body on our hands. A particularly gruesome murder, to be exact. The faster we get some

information, the faster we can clear out of here and let you get back to normal. But in the meantime, we need your cooperation.”

I gave him my best expressionless poker face.

He sighed. Waving me over, he sat down next to me on the porch step, rubbed his palms over his face, and dragged his fingers through his unruly mop of hair, a mop of wavy hair that was simply too sinful to waste on a guy. Especially a cop.

“I know this is the last thing you want to hear, but you’ll have to tell the story again... and probably again after that. Do it now and everything will be a lot easier for all of us.” Coffee and cigarette smells clung to him. “Otherwise, I’m going to have to drag you down to the station, where people aren’t quite as friendly.”

“Is this where we play good cop/bad cop?”

He gave me a grim smile. “Honey, this is as good as it gets. I’m being a real sweetheart right now. Much more of this and we’re going to play ‘Lock the Bad Lady Up.’ *Capisce?*”

“Oh, God, you’re Italian.”