



ONE

Ralph Abano was on a mission. His first job since leaving the big house and his damn car breaks down. Thank God this stone-white Grand Cherokee became available—with a full tank of gas no less—or he might have been fired on the spot. His whole life had been a series of good luck, bad luck. And this situation was no different. He took a hard right out of the parking lot and aimed east on Atlantic Boulevard in Margate, Florida.

Ralph's stress reliever was whistling, so he blew the "The Star-Spangled Banner" through his lips as he entered Interstate 95 north. He remained in the right lane and maintained the speed limit. He couldn't afford to get stopped. Not in this car anyway. When Ralph finished whistling—he knew only a few tunes, all patriotic—his right hand reached across to turn on the car radio. He stopped. Did he hear a strange sound coming from inside the car? Snoring? His eyes shot up and searched the rearview mirror. What the hell was *that*?

An elderly woman . . . snoring. This can't be happening. Not now when he was so close to completing the deal. He swerved onto the shoulder and stopped. He tapped the rearview mirror a few times wondering what to do. Then, as though the woman had sensed him staring, she opened her eyes.

"Marty?"

This was not part of the plan.

The woman rubbed her eyes. "You're not Marty."

No shit, lady!

"Who are you, mister?"

Ralph shot an arm across to the glove compartment and opened it. He fumbled through the mess of crumbled papers, a handful of pens designated First Margate Federal Bank, and a Pleasure Pack of condoms before pulling out the registration.

"I'm a friend of . . . Marty Singer."

The old woman, wearing a red straw hat with a red velvet ribbon tilted to one side, raised an eyebrow, and shifted in her seat. "Oh." She reached for the armrest in front of her and checked the seat. "Where's Rachel?"

"With Marty?"

The woman scrutinized Ralph. "Not for nothing, young man, but I'm a little confused. You weren't in the car when I fell asleep. Am I missing something here?"

Thinking quickly, Ralph forced a convincing smile. He fixed his eyes on the hat. The poor thing looked like an aging movie star. "That's true. I'm doing them a little favor since Marty and Rachel wanted to be alone tonight. I took over the driving at the restaurant. Don't worry, we'll have fun."

She frowned. "But they promised to take me out for my eightieth birthday."

Eighty?

"And now I'm here with you. Who are you again?"

"Ralph."

"Ralph what?"

"Just Ralph."

The woman leaned forward. "I'm just Sylvia. Nice to meet you." She extended her cold, limp hand, which Ralph shook quickly. He realized he had a problem and was concerned that any line of questioning would increase his chances of getting caught. So he played it safe and pointed to her hat. "You might want to straighten that."

He was about to shift into drive when Sylvia said, "Now I get it. This is a setup for my birthday, right? And I thought they were going to surprise me with one of those phallic symbol cakes."

I need to dump this woman.

"So how does it work, Ralph? You take me for a joy ride, we go to some fancy restaurant, and then you drive me back to my place where we make wild sex?"

She's alive and crazy.

"Because after you ply me with a few glasses of wine, I'm yours forever."

Ralph's jaw dropped.

"Just kidding, sonny. You're a nice looking young man but much too young for my liking. Nothing personal. So where are we going for dinner?"

When Ralph stalled on a destination, Sylvia leaned back in her seat and said, "Surprise me."

Ralph pulled out of the shoulder and cursed his piece of shit car that broke down on him. Now he's stuck with this . . . excess baggage.

Ralph kept one eye on the road while watching the old biddy. She removed her straw hat and placed it on the seat. He was colorblind, so he couldn't tell if this Sylvia woman's hair was blue or purple. He didn't much care either. He had to consider his next move. He could throw her out on the interstate, but that would be cruel.

"What are you thinking about up there, Ralph?"

"Nothing."

"You look intense. You said this was going to be fun, no?"

Ralph's head began to pound. He feigned a smile through the rearview mirror. "Right, fun." He could tell the old woman was dressed up like she was going to a wedding. She'd have to settle for fast food because he needed to be somewhere in less than an hour.

"So, Ralph, what's your last name?"

"Abano," he said too quickly. *I'm incriminating myself!*

"Italian?"

"Right, Italian." *Why did I say Italian? I'm not Italian. I'm Portuguese.*

"You look pretty handsome from what I can see. You remind me of that actor, what's that guy's name? You know, the one who was married to Elizabeth Taylor?"

Ralph wanted to bang his head against the steering wheel.

"Help me here, Ralph. I know she was married like eight times. It's on the tip of my tongue."

How the hell would I know? His brain searched one of its compartments and retrieved the only old-time actor he knew.

"John Wayne?"

Sylvia laughed. "They weren't married to each other. Besides, you don't look *that* tall. Are you even six feet?"

This woman doesn't shut up. "Yeah, I'm six feet, OK?"

"Sure, six feet is good." Then Sylvia remembered. "Eddie Fisher, the Jewish guy."

"What?"

"He was married to Elizabeth Taylor. You look a little like him. Well, when he was younger anyway. He's dead now. Are you really Marty's friend? Cause you seem too nice. Marty's rather testy."

Ralph stepped on the gas.

"Hey, cowboy, you're speeding."

Ralph's headache escalated. Maybe he should drop this woman off at the next exit, find a gas station, and have her catch a taxi back home. By then he'd already arrive at his stop, The Cottages, and dumped the car. He checked the rearview mirror one more time. She had a sweet

smile, like his grandmother. He loved Granny. Maybe if she would just stop yapping. "I gotta make a stop first, OK?"

"OK. And by the way, you said, I gotta make a stop first. *Gotta* isn't a word. It's grammatically incorrect, slang. I was a teacher for forty-five years, I know."

Ralph pressed his temple.

"Will Marty and Rachel be joining us at some point? I can't wait to thank them for this birthday surprise."

"Yeah, later."

Sylvia nodded. "By the way, I'm kind of hungry. I generally eat about five o'clock. You know, early bird. It has to be close to six by now And I have a touch of hypoglycemia. I think I might have passed that one on to Rachel. She can get real . . . difficult when she's hungry. Sorry, I'm talking out of school."

Maybe if she shoved some food in her mouth she'd be quiet for a while. Ralph didn't have time to search for a restaurant, but the damn woman probably would whine until he found one. And then, as though the Lord heard his plea, he noticed yellow arches off the highway like an apparition. He exited the interstate and worked his way over to the drive-through, and stopped behind a black Audi R8 Spyder sports car and snickered. Rich guy, poor meal.

"Ralph, I thought you said you had to make a stop first. I could have waited."

He shoved the car in park and shifted in his seat. "You said you were hungry!"

"Are you hungry, Ralph?"

He closed his eyes tight. When he opened them, Sylvia was smiling.

"You got an aspirin?" he asked.

"You mean do you *have* an aspirin? Yes, I do." She removed a CVS generic from her beige handbag and dropped two tablets into Ralph's hand.

He popped the painkillers into his mouth and chewed voraciously before swallowing.

"Well?"

"I still have the headache."

"That's not what I mean. Thank you would be nice."

"Fuck."

"No, Ralph. That word should only be used on special occasions, like when you're really upset. I don't think a headache counts unless, of course, you have a migraine. Do you have a migraine, Ralph?"

Why me? He shook his head.

"That's good. So getting back to me giving you the pain pills, what do you say?"

"Thank you?"

"Correct." Sylvia raised her head and gazed through the windshield. She shook her head. "Damn lines. Hit the horn, Ralph. My hypoglycemia is getting worse."

TWO

Forty Minutes Earlier

Giovanni's Italian restaurant in Margate, Florida, might not have invented the early bird special, but it certainly had enhanced it. Giovanni DeVito and his younger wife, Concetta—both from Brooklyn by way of Bari, Italy—knew a thing or two about pleasing their customers. To them, retirees were more interested in quantity, not quality, hence they provided two to three meals of cheap pasta doggy bags with each entrée. Giovanni had discovered the solution to success the hard way. His Brooklyn restaurant was situated in a yuppie community where early bird meant nine in the evening. The customers weren't interested in large portions: They demanded quality. That meant less profit. So Giovanni and Concetta searched the Medicare trail, which led them to Margate.

To show their appreciation, and in celebration of their tenth anniversary, Giovanni, a squat-looking balding man of sixty with a thick neck, and Concetta, a forty-eight-year-old beauty, rolled back the early bird special time one hour earlier to three-thirty and extended it to seven o'clock. Not only that, they rolled back their prices—the same \$5.95 they charged when Giovanni's opened. They were expecting a large crowd that weekend, so Giovanni and Concetta needed to start cooking their pasta earlier than usual.

Marty and Rachel Singer were regulars. Well, mostly Marty. He and Concetta had become lovers after meeting at First Margate Federal where Marty was the manager and Concetta a customer. As time went on, their flirting turned serious and then Marty and Concetta took the plunge around the eighth anniversary of Giovanni's. She made a deposit that morning, and Marty made one that evening at the Golden Motel on State Road 7.

It wasn't that Marty and Concetta were in love. Not Marty anyway. At fifty-five, he was still a handsome whoremonger who kept himself trim, sported a perennial tan, and mounded his wavy salt-and-pepper hair daily. Over the years, Marty managed to get laid by finding female customers with money to invest: young, old—not too old. Sixty was his limit unless the client was quite wealthy. He once slept with a seventy-year-old widowed millionaire. She invested heavily. Marty figured Rachel never suspected or cared about his infidelities. She did mention on occasion that he was a quick and lousy lover who talked obsessively about getting rich while making love and then fell asleep. What did she know?

As the big night approached, Marty expected a grand evening—Concetta had broached the special occasion during their last tryst. Marty had taken Cialis for the first time, which resulted in a two-hour romp. Marty loved it; Concetta not so much after an hour. She complained that her *thing* dried up.

The Singers brought along—against Marty's protests—Rachel's mother, Sylvia, for her eightieth birthday. She and Marty had one thing in common: They despised each other. So he took great pleasure in dumping her in the back seat.

While driving to the restaurant, Marty conjured images of his lover serving him hot garlic rolls with her cleavage overflowing her tight white waitress uniform. And at the \$5.95 rollback price! He entered the Winn-Dixie parking lot on Atlantic Boulevard and nosed the Jeep to the other side of the lot. Up ahead, a guy standing outside the restaurant appeared to be waiting for a car to pull up.

My God, valet service! Concetta must have kept that a secret. He thought he had squeezed everything out of her during their last encounter. Apparently, not everything. He smiled to himself. He'd get her for that one.

Rachel gazed through the windshield at the restaurant. "Glad we're here. I'm starved."

Marty nodded and kept his eye on the pale thirty-something-year-old skinny attendant dressed in a cheap blue shirt and shorts. "Can you believe this, Rachel? Giovanni's is providing valet service on its anniversary."

Rachel glimpsed the parking lot. "What's the big deal? There are spots all over the place."

"Yes, but don't you see? It's symbolic. Giovanni is showing his appreciation to his loyal customers."

Rachel shrugged. "Hurry up, my hypoglycemia is kicking in. You know how I get when my blood sugar gets low."

Oh, Marty knew. Rachel could be a complete bitch until she piled some carbohydrates in her mouth.

No sooner had Marty stopped the car than Rachel released her seat belt and caused the *ping, ping* to go off. "Patience, Rachel."

The attendant glanced back at the restaurant before opening Marty's door. He greeted the Singers with an attentive smile. Marty thought the guy looked like an actor but couldn't remember which one. The attendant trotted to the passenger side, but Rachel already had jumped out the door.

"She's hungry."

"I can see that," the guy said, closing the passenger door and returning to the driver's side.

Marty handed over his key. "It's a few weeks old, so how about parking it in a less crowded area?" Marty pointed at the far end of the lot. "I'll give you a good tip later."

The attendant smiled. "Sure, thanks. Enjoy your meal, sir. The food is great."

"I know, I'm a regular. Do I get a stub or something?"

"Not tonight." He winked. "I'll remember your car." The attendant jumped in and eased away for about fifty feet before flooring it. Marty was about to protest but just shook his head. *Forget the tip, asshole.* He watched him race to the rear of the lot and stop as if waiting for Marty to enter the restaurant.

Can't find good help these days.

"Marty, hurry, I'm starved! And I don't want to miss early bird."

"All right already, I'm coming." He should have called ahead and asked Concetta to greet them at the door with some bread.

When Marty reached the entrance, Rachel looked perplexed.

"What?" Marty asked.

Where's my mother?"