

Chapter One

Margie dumped the contents of her carry-on bag onto the bed, cursing the weight she had gained over the last two months, the excess clothing that she couldn't shoehorn into the bag, and the online travel agent who'd convinced her and Theo to celebrate their retirements in Jamaica. Theo, who had been trying to get back to sleep for the past hour and a half, dragged his pillow on top of his head and rolled as close to his side of the bed as possible without falling off, just as he'd done ninety minutes ago. The necessity to empty his sixty-five-year-old bladder was nearing the red line, and he would have to oblige his body despite the tongue-lashing that awaited him.

Finally yielding to pressure and common sense, Theo threw off the pillow and swung his legs over the side of the bed, still holding onto the covers.

"It's after midnight and our ride to the airport will be here at 4:30."

Margie pointed a flip-flop at him. "Don't start with me, Theo."

"I'm not starting. I'm trying to get you to stop."

"Do you want me to spend the week in Jamaica without clothes?"

He grinned. "Hmmm, now that you mention it."

She threw the flip-flop at him, missing her husband's head, but smashing into the lamp on his nightstand. The tiffany lampshade, long overdue for replacement, broke into three large pieces, permanently ending its service in the Brattleburg bedroom.

"Nice shot, ace."

"I should have made you sell that last summer in the yard sale."

Theo sighed. "Selling my guitar wasn't enough?"

"The last time you played it, Nixon was President."

The urging in his groin reached the red line. "I have to pee."

Margie grabbed her cellphone. "I have CNN on speed dial, I'll let them know."

Theo stood, walked over, and kissed her. "When I'm done, perhaps we can..."

"Last night wasn't enough?" She shook her head. "You weren't satisfied?"

"I was, but..."

She shook her head. "Sex, sex, sex. Is this what I have to look forward to with retirement?"

He smiled. "Me being horny all the time?"

"I'm going to buy you one of those blowup sex dolls." Margie opened the Amazon shopping app on her phone. "Redhead or blonde?"

Quick stepping toward the bathroom, Theo shouted over his shoulder, "You're the only redhead I need. Get the blonde!"

Margie had repacked by the time he returned. Two blouses and a pair of shoes were on the bed next to the carry-on bag. Obviously, they had been weeded out. His bag was open next to hers and his wife was shifting his clothing around in what he assumed was an attempt to find space for her extra items.

"Why do you need eight t-shirts for seven days?"

"One spare."

She looked up at the ceiling and shook her head. "The last time we went to Florida, you wore the same two t-shirts for nearly ten days. In fact, I remember that one of them was so stained that I threw it in the trash when we got home."

Theo walked over to his dresser and opened the bottom drawer. Digging around for a few seconds, he pulled out a vintage Rolling Stones concert shirt and held it up for her to see. "I saved it."

"You didn't wash it?"

"I was going to, but I didn't want to contaminate the rest of the clothes."

"So considerate."

He smiled. "Always, my love."

Margie took the top shirt out of Theo's bag and placed it on the bed. "You have five books in here. It normally takes you a month to stumble through a novel, assuming you make it through the first chapter before giving up. Are you bringing extra books to trade for food and beverage?"

"I don't know which one to read, so I brought them all, including a classic that I've been meaning to read for ages. And as far as trading, remember, all the food and drinks are included." Grinning, he shoved the threadbare shirt back into the dresser drawer and nudged it closed with his toe.

She lifted the books one at a time and read the blurb on the back cover. "This one is a murder mystery. Just from the excerpt, I can tell you the ex-wife is the guilty party. No need to read this one." Tossing the book to him, she read the next title and shook her head. "Cooking without fat. You bought that stupid sous vide contraption for yourself last Christmas. The only thing you've made with it is a mess in the kitchen and a permanent burn mark on the cooktop."

"It's supposed to be a healthier way to cook."

"Says the man who used to burn water, turned toast into charcoal, and is yet to be successful with a can of tuna fish. Theo, sweetheart, I'm impressed with your recent attempts at cooking, but you still need to master the basics." Margie nodded. "Yeah, this one stays home, too."

"Maybe I should just bring a deck of cards and play solitaire instead of reading."

She took out a third book. "Jamaican history, volume one. Really? Is this to impress me or the women on the beach?"

Theo snatched the book out of her hand. "If we're going to travel the world, I think we should learn as much as we can about the places we visit."

"Will there be a test when we get home?" Grinning, Margie grabbed the book from him and opened to a random page. "Okay, professor, who was Marcus Garvey?"

"How the hell should I know? I haven't read the book yet."

Placing the textbook alongside his bag, she pushed the remaining two novels down to the bottom of the suitcase and filled the empty space with her two blouses and the pair of shoes. Zipping both the bags closed, she rolled them over to the bedroom door and dropped the handles.

"Can we get some sleep now?" Theo sat down on the bed and crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't want to arrive in Jamaica with my eyes closed and snoring."

Margie turned off the light and found her way to bed compliments of the illumination from the full moon. "You snore?" She chuckled. "Forty years sleeping together and you finally admit to snoring."

Theo pulled the covers back and laid down. "I don't snore. I breathe heavily when I sleep."

"There's an enormous difference between heavy breathing and a death rattle." She rolled over next to him and kissed his cheek. "But don't worry. I think I'm going deaf. A few more years and you'll be able to breathe as loud as you want without waking me."

At his retirement party two months ago, Theodore Brattleburg signed over Curve Construction to the three women who bought the prestigious architectural firm, famous for its curved structures, in a ceremony worthy of a coronation. Standing on the dais, next to his wife, Theo wrote each letter of his name with a different color pen. He held the completed contract above his head with both hands to the raucous applause of the two-hundred-and-seventeen employees of the company he'd founded in his late twenties.

Renowned on four continents for its buildings without corners, Curve Construction had designed and built everything from a round outhouse to a twenty-five-story glass and chrome sphere for the new United States Embassy in Oslo, Norway. Theo, a graduate of the Boston College of Architecture, started drawing round, oval, and curved houses in his sophomore year. Boston's mayor, a progressive man who favored the student population over the stodgy ancestors of the Pilgrims and the DAR, had a daughter in the same class who was enamored with Theo and his designs. She managed to convince her father to use one of Theo's plans for a new civic center after a heavy night of drinking and sex with the budding architect. The Mayor, who would reverse the spin of the planet to keep his only child happy, shouldered the plan through the city fathers even though it was twice as expensive as any of the other competing designs.

Margaret Hoover, who was working for the city's comptroller as an accountant, fought the overpriced civic center plan until Theo took *her* out to dinner at the city's most expensive restaurant, and sweet-talked her into rubber-stamping the project. Rumors of coercion and sexual favors rumbled through the local press for several months, but evidence was never found to derail the project, and the completed structure opened on time and to great fanfare.

Deciding that it would be best for her to exit the municipal swamp, Margie took a position at Boston's largest bank and, within a few years, worked her way up to become senior vice-president in the loan department. The bank's largest client—Curve Construction—dealt exclusively with that bank and it wasn't long before Margie and Theo were seeing each other socially several times a week.

They married a few years later and Margie switched to another bank to avoid any suggestions of impropriety. Moving from Boston to Northern Virginia in their mid-forties, Theo won a series of government contracts for his innovative designs. Working with a team of structural engineers, Curve Construction was able to develop techniques that maintained their signature round corners at prices that were anywhere from a ten-percent savings to half the cost of building a square structure.

Theo hired environmental scientists to make all their new buildings "green." In less than six months, they developed heating and cooling systems that relied on the sun, the wind, and the rain. Round solar panels, curved to fit the rolling rooflines of his buildings, reduced the structure's need for external power. Geothermal heating replaced oil-driven furnaces. The embassy in Norway showcased the Earth-friendly system with its bank of saunas and a heated indoor swimming pool.

As the years ground him down, Theo's workweek shrank from six days to three. The ideas came slower and were less innovative. He found himself rehashing old designs and knew that fresh blood was needed to keep the company alive. The Clancy twins, his two best

designers, joined with Jolene Kravitz from the environmental group and offered to take over Curve Construction as long as Theo would remain available for consultation for three years. He insisted on five years. Margie argued that twelve months was plenty of time. They settled on thirteen months for tax purposes.

Margie's retirement was long overdue. She'd gotten tired of the banking industry, the whining clients, the obnoxious lenders, and the government that changed the tax laws more often than Theo changed t-shirts. When he came home from work and announced that a hard date had been set for the turnover, she filed her papers the following morning, retiring two months before the date.

Not willing to sit on their porch and watch sunsets until the end of her life, Margie took on the task of travel planning. Neither had seen much of the U.S. that didn't involve business, and she wanted to buy an RV to take them cross-country and back. Theo, who rarely drove anywhere thanks to his chauffeur, had no interest in spending the rest of his life behind the wheel, dodging speed traps and eating fast food.

Using the air miles he'd accumulated in forty years of international travel, Margie developed a plan to visit all fifty U.S. capitals by air. Theo was less than enthusiastic and suggested they start their retirement with a beach vacation, a week just to unwind and learn about this thing called relaxation. She suggested a cruise. He found enough disparaging news about cruise passengers getting deathly ill, missing their ship when they spent too much time souvenir hunting, and even one story on the deep web where a group of rowdy passengers staged a mutiny that required the Italian Coast Guard to step in and regain control to convince him that cruising was too dangerous.

By the end of the first month of Margie's retirement, Theo joined the vacation search. The three women about to take control of Curve Construction had been slowly rerouting his duties to senior staff, and Theo found himself with an odd accumulation of free time. Alone in their home office, the advertisement for the all-inclusive resort in Jamaica popped up on his computer screen while Theo was poking around social media. He watched the short video twice before yanking the power cord out of the laptop and running into the bedroom with it.

"Look at this."

Margie closed the lid of her laptop and placed it on her nightstand. "Jamaica?"

"Look at the beach. Did you ever see sand that white before?"

"Jamaica?" She asked again. "Is it safe there?"

"We've been to D.C. hundreds of times. Every news broadcast starts out with a murder."

Theo blew out a short breath. "Do you feel safe going into D.C.?"

Margie played the video again. "They speak English."

"And a language called patios or something like that."

"What about the food and water? Our neighbors went to Mexico and came home sick as dogs from whatever they ate." She shivered. "I'm trying to lose weight, but I'd rather do it with less food going in than everything that I eat blasting out undigested."

Theo shrugged. "I'll do some research, but I've never heard anyone complain about getting sick in Jamaica."

"Oh, you know people who've been there?"

"No. But I know a lot of people and none of them have ever complained about Jamaica."

Margie rolled her eyes. "How many people have you had a conversation with about Jamaica?"

With his tongue jammed so hard into his cheek that he had to breathe through his nose, Theo looked down at the floor. "That's not the point. I can research the necessary websites and get some informed details."

Reaching over to her nightstand, Margie grabbed her cellphone and awakened its onboard assistant. "Is the water safe to drink in Jamaica?"

The response was instantaneous. "Yes." Followed by a long-winded dissertation about Jamaican water that she cut off after a few seconds.

"That's how you research in the twenty-first century, Columbus."

Theo smiled. "So, we can go to Jamaica?"

"It's gonna be dehydrated kale chips and water for the next thirty days." Margie sucked in her belly. "I'm not buying a one-piece bathing suit just to hide this gut."

"Please tell me you're not worried about people on a beach in Jamaica who you'll never see again." Shaking his head, Theo walked over and sat down next her on the bed. "In my world, you are the sexiest woman alive. A beauty with no equal. When I look at you—"

"Stop before I puke." Margie put her hand over his mouth. "Listen, bucko, it's fifteen pounds or bust. And if that means we starve, we starve together." She lifted her hand off his mouth. "That exercise bike in the garage is coming into the house. It's going in front of the television."

"What about the couch?"

"We'll stand it in the corner." She shook her head. "I don't want to go to Jamaica looking like a bunch of old people."

Theo took a deep breath. "We're not old people. We're a couple of mature adults with more free time and money than common sense. We worked all our lives to get to this point and nothing, including a few extra pounds that exist only in your head, is going to stand in our way."

Taking his hands in hers, Margie chuckled. "You could talk a bear out of hibernation in the middle of winter."

He pulled her close enough to whisper in her ear, "Can I talk you out of pajamas before I book this Caribbean adventure?"

Margie put his laptop on the floor. "Help me with the buttons, papa bear."