

Chapter One

George Anthony stopped by the post office to pick up a certified letter just before noon on July 15, 2008. White hair flowed straight back from his forehead, leaving a pronounced widow's peak. Still-dark eyebrows predominated his face making his eyes appear sunken over his sharp nose.

Considering the way the mail was sent, and his recent financial problems, George thought it was bound to be bad news inside the envelope. He was right. It was a notification from Johnson's Wrecker Service. It made no sense. According to the company, they had possession of his family Pontiac. His daughter Casey drove this car and she was in Jacksonville. He didn't understand how the 1998 Pontiac Sunfire ended up in a impound lot in Orlando.

He called his wife Cindy. She was equally puzzled by the situation. George headed to the Narcoossee Road address to ask questions and pick up the car. At the front counter, Nicole Lett surprised him when she said that Johnson's Wreckers towed the Pontiac at the end of June at the request of Amscot, a payday loan company, on the corner of East Colonial Drive and Goldenrod Road in Orlando. To retrieve the vehicle, he needed to show proof of ownership and pay \$466.78 in cash for the towing and storage charges.

George called Cindy again. Then, he called Amscot and asked why they ordered the car removed from their lot. They told him the car sat in the spot for three days before they called Johnson's Wreckers. They thought it had been abandoned.

Cindy and George met at home, picked up the title, stopped at the bank to withdraw \$500 and two hours after the first visit, George returned to the towing company with his wife.

The couple walked up to the counter and greeted Nicole. Cindy, in a cute, short blonde cut with youthful bangs, was in obvious ire. She demanded an explanation of the company's process for sending a certified letter, expressing her annoyance at the number of days that passed before they received notification in the mail. "We thought the car was in Jacksonville. How were we supposed to know it was here?"

Nicole attempted to explain the situation but Cindy wasn't listening. She launched instead into a long complaint about having to pay the high charges, particularly the \$35 administrative fee for sending the certified letter. She also balked at paying all of the accumulated storage charges, blaming the company for the notification delay.

Nicole was used to dealing with disgruntled customers. No one was ever pleased to come to the lot to recover their car and usually, they took it out on her. The difference with this couple was their surprise and confusion. They could not understand why the car was here instead of up north where their daughter said she'd driven it. They fretted vocally about not seeing her or their granddaughter for a month or more. Nicole had no answers to that question. She called her supervisor, Simon Burch, to address their other concerns.

When he approached the counter, Cindy asked, "Why is the bill so expensive? Why did it take eleven days to notify me that you had my car?"

"Per Florida Statutes, on the fourth day, we're required by law to send out a certified letter to the registered owner of the vehicle. Our computer system automatically generates those letters," he answered. He spread out a calendar and together they looked at the dates. "Four days after your car arrived was the Fourth of July. Due to the holiday and the weekend that followed, that's probably why it took so long for the letter to get to you. We can't control the post office."

“Okay,” Cindy said. “I understand and I appreciate it.” She then turned to George and they exchanged terse comments. She obviously was still dissatisfied and a bit disgruntled that George was not taking a strong stand. Cindy turned back to Simon and asked for a discount.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am. I’m not at liberty to do that. You know, unfortunately, this is a business. It’s not a particularly pleasant job sometimes, but it is a business, you know, that’s in business to make money and we don’t give discounts.”

Unhappy, but seeing no other alternative, Cindy agreed to pay. Nicole filled out the paperwork, got verification of ownership on line, accepted payment and issued a receipt. Simon asked, “Do you have the keys?”

George said he did.

“Okay, no problem, then. I’ll come around and get you.”

As Simon and George walked to the vehicle in the pouring rain, George apologized for his wife’s aggressive manner. “We’ll probably get divorced over this. The daughter is telling us crap, a bunch of lies.”

“I’m sorry about your situation,” Simon empathized.

“I just need to see my granddaughter. You know, she won’t let us see our granddaughter,” George complained.

“I’m sorry about your situation, sir. You know, I’m sorry your car got impounded, but this is what it is,” Simon said.

When they got within three feet of the white Pontiac, George smelled a distinctive unpleasant odor. He once worked in law enforcement. He knew that smell and it filled him with dread. He thought of his daughter and granddaughter. *Please don’t let this be what I think it is.*

He walked around to the driver's side and inserted the key. He noticed his granddaughter's car seat in the back and pulled open the door.

"Whoa, does that stink," Simon exclaimed. The stench reminded Simon of another car that had been impounded recently. Before they towed it, the vehicle sat for five days--with the body of a man who committed suicide inside.

George sat down in the driver's seat and reached over to the other side, opening the passenger's door to ventilate the car. As he breathed in the odor, his horror increased. He turned the key in the ignition to start it but then he stopped. *No, George, he told himself. If there's something wrong, you got to find out now. You can't take it away.*

"Will you please walk around to the back of the car and look inside this with me?" George asked. *Please don't let this be my Caylee.*

"Well, here, let me. Give me the keys and we'll open the trunk up. There's something like garbage in here."

"Yeah," was all George could find to reply.

When the trunk opened, flies flew out and both men rocked back on their heels from the pungent odor. "Poof!" George exclaimed. "That's rotten!"

Simon knew with certainty rotting garbage did not smell like that, but he kept those thoughts to himself.

The men saw an imperfectly round, basketball-sized stain in the middle of the trunk. To the left, by the taillight, was a trash bag. "Let's just make sure there is garbage in here," Simon said. He pulled the bag toward the edge of the trunk, surprised by its lightweight. Unfastening the tie, he spread open the top. They both peered down at papers, dryer lint, Arm and Hammer laundry detergent, a pizza box and other assorted trash.

“Well, here, I’ll take care of this. I’ll get rid of it for you,” Simon said. He walked toward the front of the car where a dumpster sat on the other side of the fence. He heaved the bag over. While Simon disposed of the trash, George stepped into a corner, hunched over and heaved up his last meal.

George pulled himself together, slid into the front seat and tried to start the car again, but he couldn’t get the engine to turn over. Simon looked over George’s shoulder at the control panel and saw that the gas gauge pointed to empty. “Oh, it’s out of gas,” he said.

“Okay,” George said. “Well, I brought gas with me.”

Together they walked back to George’s car. George reiterated his complaints about his daughter’s lies along the way. He pulled a small, round, battered metal gas can with chipped paint out of the trunk. On the way back to the Pontiac, George apologized again for his wife’s attitude.

“I totally understand, dude,” Simon said. “We get it all the time. It’s no big deal.”

With a gallon of gas in its tank, the car started right up. George drove it out of the fenced lot to the front of the business where he got out and approached Simon again. George offered his hand and said, “Thank you. I’m sorry.”

Simon shook his hand and said, “Yeah, no problem. No problem. Have a good day now.” He turned away and went inside as George approached Cindy’s car.

“This car stinks so bad,” he told his wife, “I don’t know how I can drive it home.”

He wanted to roll the windows all the way down but the rainfall made that impossible. With the windows cracked less than an inch, he could not get enough fresh air and gagged all the way home. He pulled the Pontiac into the garage.

Cindy walked in and came to an abrupt stop. “Jesus Christ!” she shouted. “What died?”

