

CHAPTER 1

“Spring has sprung, the dung is flung.”

Peter kept walking along the concrete beach walk in Manhattan Beach. He didn't turn his head to acknowledge the man who had spoken and was now keeping pace with him. He knew the man only as Ted. Ted was an ugly man with an acne problem and bad breath. He was also the creator of bad rhymes, and he had been the source of extra income for Peter ever since his retirement. Peter waited for Ted to speak again with his East Coast accent, possibly Brooklyn.

I gotta job for you. It should be an easy job for one of your prestigious accomplishments.”

These jobs were always the same—verifying several pages of figures and calculations for a business transaction that involved the manufacture of an unnamed product. Peter didn't want to know the name of the product. He suspected Ted's business was outside the legal framework he had operated within during his entire business career.

The work itself was easy. It was essentially an accounting job. Peter had been a financial manager and business professor, and he was overqualified for this sort of thing, but Ted had been using him for years, and seemed to trust him.

The MO was always the same too. Ted would accost Peter while he was taking his morning walk on the beach. When no walkers or runners were coming in their direction along the path who might be looking at them, Ted would slip a manila envelope to Peter. Exactly three mornings later Peter would carry the envelope with him on his walk, containing any comments he might have about the transactions in question. Ted would find him, and when the coast was clear Peter would pass the envelope to him.

In return, Ted would pass another envelope to Peter. When he was safely back in his apartment Peter would open the envelope. There would be cash inside, consisting of bills worth much more than was justified for the work he had done. Peter would use this cash for his daily expenses. Often it would last until the next time he met with Ted.

Ted didn't trust any other method of operation. He wouldn't call Peter on the phone, and Peter didn't have a number for him. Ted wouldn't use email or any electronic device. He said that when you put information in digital format and send it out into the ether, who knew where it would end up. Judging from the amount of hacking going on, Ted had a point.

Peter always felt a bit slimy when he was dealing with Ted. For several months he had intended to tell Ted he didn't want to do jobs for him anymore. Peter was very comfortably well off, and didn't need the extra income. He should tell Ted today. It was just very difficult to do so during their meetings, which were short and public. How would Ted react? Peter had no idea.

Ted handed him the manila envelope. He couldn't very well hand it back. All right, he would do this job, but it would be the last one. Next time they met he would have his goodbye speech prepared. Peter glanced in Ted's direction to say something to him, but Ted had disappeared.

Peter carried the basket with his bananas and eggs and a few other items toward the front of the Trader Joe's market and then stopped abruptly, almost getting clobbered by the cart of the impatient woman behind him. She gave him a look and steered around him. He was sure he had

forgotten something. What was it? Damn his short-term memory. Was he getting dementia? Finally he remembered. Blueberries.

He went over and collected a container, and decided to go to the line manned (woman-ed?) by the prettiest checker. He wasn't in any hurry, so he didn't care about going through the shortest line. When you're a senior citizen (God how he hated that phrase) and a widower and retired, you don't have a lot of responsibilities to take up your time.

He looked down the row of checkout stands until his eyes rested on a young redhead working at the stand nearest the exit door. She fit his description. He walked past the other checkout stands and was surprised to see that hers had only one customer ahead of him, and she was almost finished checking the lady out.

She finished in a minute, deftly took the items out of Peter's basket while giving him a quick smile and asking him how his day was going. He noticed that her face was dotted with freckles.

"Can't complain. Well, I can, but nobody would listen."

Arrrgh. He needed to get some new material. That's what happened when you spent too much time alone.

She gave him another smile. "Eleven dollars and eight cents, my friend."

The checkers were taught to be sociable, but Peter was sure the "my friend" was her own unique personality. Their fingers touched briefly as he handed her a ten, a one, and the eight cents, having already calculated the total in his head. She took his cloth bag out of the basket. He carried his own bag because it was stronger than paper and he was walking. It was also supposed to help the environment.

"Thank you for bringing your own bag."

She gave him a third smile. A modern record. He would always bring his own bag in the future.

She pulled something out of it. "Here's your receipt from your last trip here."

They had a chuckle together. When she asked if he wanted it he shook his head and she tossed it toward a trash receptacle. It fell on the floor, but she had already turned away. She gave him the current receipt, which he promptly dropped into the bag.

"You'll probably find it the next time I come here."

She smiled one more time and said, "Have a nice rest of your afternoon."

"Same to you."

Peter walked out of the store, his feet not quite touching the ground. This was the highlight of his day. It suddenly occurred to him what that said about his life. His elation evaporated and he trudged toward his apartment.