

CHAPTER ONE

The package was marked...

ATT: STEVE JAMES

of the

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE

...and wrapped in brown butcher's paper as if it were a poor-man's version of a Christmas present.

Steve had received anonymous packages before, some with leads to run down, others with incriminating evidence from a source he was working with. However, this package had not been delivered to the *Pittsburgh Tribune* like it should have been. It was left outside his apartment door.

Perplexed, Steve lifted the package, gingerly, from the floor. It was light and about six inches long by four inches wide. He shook it, but nothing moved inside.

He had not been expecting a delivery, certainly not one to his home by an anonymous person. His guts tightened into an uncomfortable, disconcerting knot. Turning, he looked down the hallway, to where the back stairwell led out to the rear entrance of the apartment building. Sunlight shone through the single window at the end of the hall and cut a sharp blade-like angle of light onto the floor. Dust particles floated in the air as if recently disturbed – maybe by the deliverer of the package.

Someone could have gotten into the building by the rear entrance, made their way up to Steve's apartment, dropped the package by his door, and slipped back out before anyone noticed. He did not live in one of the new high-rises being built around Pittsburgh – apartments that came with all the security bells and whistles – but rather an old turn of the century building on the lower east side of Pittsburgh. The rent was cheap, and the landlord damn-near nonexistent, especially when it came to the safety and upkeep of the building. It was what Steve could afford on a reporter's salary.

He looked back at the parcel in his hands. The sense of unease continued to coil his stomach. Was he being targeted like reporters after 9/11, with anthrax-sealed packages delivered to their homes and offices? Possibly.

The fact that his article "MOB IN PITTSBURGH" had helped put Anthony Palazzo, a local money launderer affiliated with the New York-based DeLuca Crime Organization, behind bars could have something to do with the mysterious package outside his door that afternoon. Again,

he wondered what was inside and cautiously shook it, like a kid trying to figure out the present under the wrapping on their birthday.

Nothing moved, nothing rattled inside.

Steve knew he should leave the package alone; place it back on the floor where he found it, call the police, and have them look at it first. That was the smart thing to do. The right thing to do. There could be anything inside meant to bring him harm, especially nowadays, when reporters were being unfairly besieged for spreading false information to the public.

Against his better judgment, Steve forced the apprehension away like a fly at a picnic, tucked the bundle under his left arm, fished his keys from his jacket pocket, and opened the apartment door.

Once inside, he closed the door and peered through the peephole to the hallway. Still, the hall was empty, and no one passed by. Again, he felt the skin on the back of his neck prickle, and the hairs stand on end with nervousness.

Why was the package left and what was inside? Steve wondered.

Turning away from the door, he moved into the kitchen. He placed his laptop bag on the counter beside his keys, then removed a Zippo lighter and a pack of cigarettes and placed them beside the laptop bag. He put the brown package beside his things. It looked odd on the countertop, as if it were some evil present that had been left at his home – a gift from Satan himself.

There was nothing out of the ordinary with its appearance. Other than the handwritten address, there were no other identifiable words or labels on the outside. Gooseflesh rose across Steve's body. Whoever delivered the package knew who he was, where he worked, and where he lived.

Normally, Steve had all large packages sent to the Tribune's mailroom. He didn't trust his landlord, Horace Baker. The slimeball charged an extra ten dollars a month to hold deliveries larger than what could fit into the small gold mailboxes in the lobby. He called it a 'holding charge.' Steve was sure it was illegal, a scheme to get more money from the tenants.

Steve was not about to pay the extra money. He had heard stories from others in the building that when they received their packages some were opened, searched, and sometimes things were missing. Of course, Baker claimed it was how the parcels arrived.

This particular package, sitting ominously on his countertop, should never have made it to his floor.

Or maybe it IS from Palazzo, Steve thought. It could have been a scare tactic to get Steve to retract his story, setting Palazzo free from prison, while simultaneously clearing the DeLuca Family of any wrongdoing. For all Steve knew, there could be a small explosive inside the box, just big enough to rattle his cage but not kill him. Or, if they wanted to get the job over with, they could have laced it with anthrax, just like reporters received after 9/11.

Yet, he wasn't so sure Palazzo or the DeLuca Family were ready to make that kind of move against him. At the moment, Palazzo and the DeLuca Family were letting their mob lawyers handle the process through the courts with a defamation and source exposure lawsuit on Steve and the Pittsburgh Tribune.

No, Steve was confident it was delivered by someone else. But who? And more importantly, why?

He pulled a bottle of Jameson Irish Whiskey from the cupboard along with a small glass and poured himself a healthy snort.

Just to quiet the demons, Steve thought bitterly, taking a swig. *Just to quiet the demons*.

He studied the package while swirling the brown liquor around in the glass, knowing he should leave it alone and call the police. But intrigue was sinking its fangs into his mind, poisoning his thoughts with fantasies of what dwelled inside its dark recesses.

Someone knew Steve well enough to know he could never leave a mystery alone. He thumbed one of the cigarettes out of the box, popped it into his mouth and lit it with the Zippo lighter. He inhaled deeply. Smoke filled his lungs. Calmed his nerves. Helped him think straight – so he thought.

What's inside? a shadowy voice spoke from the alcoves of Steve's mind, pulling him from his reverie. He could not argue with this strange, archaic voice. He desperately wanted to know what was inside the package. Taking a long drag on the cigarette, he let the smoke out slowly between his teeth with a low sssss.

What to do? What to do?

There was only one thing *to do*.

Setting the cigarette in the ashtray, Steve picked the package up. He felt that familiar chill of disquiet crawl over him, like cold skeleton fingers walking up his spine, vertebra by vertebra.

“Enough of this guessing-game shit,” Steve said and tore the heavy brown paper away, exposing a white box underneath which resembled something a pastry would come in. The lid was sealed shut with a single piece of Scotch Tape.

Steve knew no one would send him sweets – maybe anthrax, maybe a bomb, but certainly not sweets. In a career that spanned more than twenty years as a crime reporter for the Tribune, Steve had made more enemies, like Anthony Palazzo, than friends. Such was the life, he supposed.

He peeled the Scotch Tape from the box and then lifted the lid slowly, as if a venomous snake were about to spring out and bury its sharp fangs into his face. With the box lid cracked, he peered inside.

Instead of finding something harmful, the box contained a USB Flash Drive secured in white tissue paper. Two words were handwritten on the front of the flash drive in black magic marker:

PLAY ME!

Steve frowned. Why would someone send him a flash drive anonymously? Did it have something to do with the Palazzo story he'd spent the better part of two years working on? Some missing information that would, without a shadow of a doubt, ensure that Palazzo stayed behind bars for the rest of his life?

Or was it something unrelated?

Steve didn't know.

Then he noticed the USB was not the only item inside the box.

Tucked beside the flash drive was a small piece of white plastic. Removing the plastic from the box, Steve found it was about the size of a credit card and coated with a reddish-brown dirt. He rubbed his fingertips together feeling a gritty dust, like a fine sand. Turning the card over revealed it was a Pennsylvania Junior Driver's License issued to a Rebecca Ann Turner of 428 Water Street, Abbottstown Pennsylvania. Her birthdate was 10/02/1982. The issue date on the card was 11/23/1998 — twenty-six years ago. The top right-hand corner, where the expiration date should have been, was broken, the plastic chipped away, forever lost to time, leaving a jagged edge that looked sharp enough to slice through flesh.

The driver's license photo of Rebecca Turner showed an attractive sixteen-year-old girl with blonde hair and bright blue eyes that sparkled with life. Her face was long, narrow, and innocent, holding the optimism of youth. Her beaming smile radiated from the picture, enhancing her natural beauty and charm. According to the driver's license, Rebecca was born in 1982, which would make her forty-two years old now. But Steve got the sickening feeling that Rebecca did not live to see her forty-second birthday.

He looked back to the flash drive resting inside the box. He was unsure how the driver's license and the USB were connected, but he was certain they were, or they would not have been delivered together.

What's on the flash drive? Steve wondered anxiously. His heart began to race, and his palms grew moist with sweat. A horrible notion rushed through his mind that something awful had happened to Rebecca Turner, something the USB would ultimately reveal.

"H-holy shit," he said aloud; the shudder in his voice surprised him. *Someone wants you to find out what happened to this young lady, Steve ol' Boy, and expose the truth.*

Reaching for the cigarette in the ashtray, he brought it to his lips and inhaled. The smoke settled on his lungs with a comfortable bite that he relished.

He looked back to the box; his eyes lingered on its contents. Possible scenarios played across his mind as to why someone would want him involved. But none of these thoughts made much sense at the moment.

Steve took another drag and stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray. He had smoked it down to the filter as he often did; a haze of heavy, thick smoke hovered around the ceiling. He picked up the glass of whiskey and finished it in one swallow, and then poured himself another – three fingers worth this time. His mouth had gone bone dry, but he wasn't sure another shot – even three fingers worth – would wet his whistle.

The demons inside were growing, and Steve needed to calm them. Or, at least, he continued to tell himself that on a nightly basis.

Warily, he lifted the USB from the box. Dare he view whatever was on it, or call the police and let them handle the situation?

He shook the thought off. His reporter instinct had taken over. He needed to know what was on the USB, how it connected with the girl on the junior driver's license, and why he was chosen to unravel this mystery before going to the police.