



RING of
Fear

QUICKREADS

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Jack Mallahan spotted two cop cars parked at the curb. Then he saw a crowd gathering near the pier. What was happening on the beach? He limped as fast as he could across the parking lot.

Reaching the sand, Jack tried to work his way through the crowd. He was so eager to see what was happening that he didn't look where he was going.

"Hey, watch it!"

Jack glanced down and saw a pretty young woman sitting on a beach mat. She brushed away the sand he'd accidentally kicked on her and glared up at him. "Hey! Pick up your feet and watch where—" she said. Then she noticed the road map of scars on Jack's bad leg. Her cheeks turned bright

red. “Oh—sorry,” she muttered.

“*I’m* the one who should be sorry,” Jack said cheerfully. He put down his metal detector and leaned over to help her brush away the sand. “Guess I was too interested in what’s going on over there.” He nodded toward the crowd.

Shuddering, the girl glanced toward the pier. “Someone said they found a dead body. Ugh! That’s the *last* thing I want to see!”

“Can’t say that I blame you,” Jack said, gazing toward the crowd. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a station wagon pull up next to the cop cars. The call sign letters of a local TV station were painted on the door.

A good-looking woman climbed out on the passenger side. Jack recognized her at once. Margo Cole was one of the station’s best reporters. The young woman on the mat recognized Margo, too. “Wow!” she exclaimed. “Isn’t that—”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, it sure is. This must be a big story. I wonder who the

dead person was.”

The sunbather turned away and picked up her book. “I’ll wait to find out at six,” she said. “They don’t show the gory stuff on the news.”

Jack straightened up. The young woman glanced at his injured leg, then quickly looked away. Jack was used to that. Lots of people were uncomfortable around his disability. He grabbed his metal detector and started to move carefully around her.

“Hey,” she said, pointing at the metal detector. “Does that thing really work?”

Jack grinned. “Sure does. I find all kinds of good stuff.”

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Lost treasure?” she asked.

Jack laughed. “Mostly lost junk. But sometimes I get lucky. You ever use a detector?” She shook her head. Jack tried again. “I come here a lot. I—I don’t remember seeing you here before.” The moment the words left his mouth, Jack felt a little embarrassed. He didn’t want her to think he was being nosy.

“No,” she said with a smile. “I was just curious.” She turned over on her stomach and picked up her book.

As he limped away, Jack wished he’d had the courage to ask for the pretty girl’s name. But he was afraid she wouldn’t be interested in *him*. What girl in her right mind would want to go out with a *lame* guy?



Jack sighed and got back down to business. He put on his headphones and switched on the metal detector. That was why he’d come to the beach in the first place.

Limping slowly across the sand, Jack moved the metal detector back and forth in front of him. But he wasn’t paying as much attention to the sand as he was to the crowd. Then the detector suddenly began to beep.

Jack gazed down at the sand. Something gleamed from inside a pile of dead seaweed. Jack looked closer. It was the gleam of *gold!* He reached into the pile and pulled out a ring.

At first he couldn't believe what he was seeing. The ring was large and heavy—a man's ring. A fiery red stone flashed from a handsomely carved setting. Brushing away the sand, he peered at the inside of the band. The only thing that could be used to identify the owner was a date: *August 12, 1993*.

The red stone sparkled. Jack wondered if it was a real ruby. "It'll be just my luck if this is a fake," he thought.

Then he grinned to himself. Fake or real, he might get a reward for finding it. And if no one came forward to claim the ring, he could probably sell it. Either way, it was money in his pocket!

Jack stuffed the ring into the pouch at his waist. He glanced at the pier just in time to see the crowd break apart. Two workers were coming through, carrying a body on a stretcher.



Then Jack saw Margo Cole starting to work the crowd. She was thrusting a

microphone in people's faces and asking questions. This was her trademark. No matter what story she covered, Margo liked to get some local feedback.

Jack turned his attention back to the sand. If he'd found a ring, maybe his luck would hold and he'd find some coins, too. Or a watch. Or—

He kept on working his way down the beach. Then all of a sudden, Jack had the weird feeling he was being watched. He looked up.

Margo Cole and her cameraman were standing just a few feet away. As Jack slipped off his headphones, Margo put out her hand. "Hi," she said, "I'm Margo Cole from—"

"I know who you are," Jack said shyly, shaking hands with her. He introduced himself. Then he gestured toward the pier. "What's going on over there?"

"I'm afraid the excitement is over," Margo said with a grin. "A body washed up on shore this morning. A couple of

fishermen found it.”

“What a shame. Do they know who it was?” Jack asked.

Margo nodded. “Benjamin Greene.”

Jack gasped. “You don’t mean *the* Benjamin Greene? Greene Towers? Greene Plaza? Greene—”

Margo laughed. “Yes, *the* Benjamin Greene who developed most of this city.”

“What happened to him?” Jack asked. “How did he die?”

“The cops aren’t saying a word until after the autopsy,” Margo said. “It’s hard to say. Could have been an accident. But Greene had more than a few enemies. So—” She shrugged.

“I know,” Jack said with a grin. “Film at eleven.”

Margo smiled. “I think we’ll have film by six.” She paused for a second. “But that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. Actually, I’m more interested in you and your metal detector.”

Jack’s eyebrows shot up. “*Me?*”

“Sure,” Margo said. “I noticed you combing the beach a while back. I saw you pick something up. Would you let me do a feature story on you and what you found in the sand?”

Jack stared at her. “*Me?*” was all he could blurt out again. The word came out in a high squeak. Jack felt his face turning red.

Margo laughed. “Take it easy,” she said. “I like to do stories about ordinary folks—people like you, Jack. Developers, movie stars, and politicians always get a lot of press. But I find that ordinary people are usually more interesting.”

She hunkered down, studying the metal detector. “Have you found a lot of good stuff using this thing?”

Jack pulled the ring out of his pouch. “Well, this morning I got lucky,” he said.

Margo took the ring and examined it. “Hard to believe anyone could be so careless. This looks like the real thing. I wouldn’t wear any valuable jewelry if I was hanging out at the beach.”

“Yeah,” Jack said, “but a lot of people do. It’s really amazing the things I find. Usually, you can’t see the good stuff. It’s buried under the sand. That’s when the detector comes in handy.”

Margo straightened up. “This is great material, Jack. I think our viewers would love to know more. So, how about it? Can I do that story?”

Jack finally agreed, although he felt a little uncomfortable. He’d never faced a camera before. Margo put him at ease with her questions and comments. Before he knew it, Jack was talking excitedly about some of the interesting things he’d found, including the ruby ring. While he talked, he held up the ring for the camera.

“There’s a date engraved inside the band,” Jack finished. “But I’ll keep the date to myself for the time being. Viewers can reach me at the Second Chance Store. It’s a little place on 14th Avenue. If you tell me the correct date, the ring is yours.”

When the interview was over, Margo