

Chapter 1 *The client*

It was seven-thirty on a cold wet December evening, six days before Christmas. As usual, I was in McFadden's Bar, on the corner of East 42nd Street and Second Avenue. Most of the early evening Christmas shoppers had gone home, and the people left in the bar weren't the types who had nice homes and families to go to. Maybe that was why they were still drinking. But I liked it there. It was somewhere to relax with a few beers after a long day in the office doing nothing in particular.

My office is just around the corner from McFadden's Bar on East 43rd Street and just a block away from the Chrysler Building. If I ever make a success of my business, that's where I'd like to have an office. Seventy-seven stories of the most beautiful skyscraper in New York City. New York isn't all skyscrapers, though. 220 East 43rd Street is just eight floors and nothing much to look at.

The sign on the door looks important: "Nathan Marley – Licensed Private Investigator," but it didn't make me feel any more important right then in McFadden's Bar.

I didn't feel like talking to people that evening and nobody tried to talk to me. That suited me fine. I looked around. There was a new face in the bar. Someone very different from the usual tired office workers. An expensive-looking woman. People turned and stared as she walked to the bar. She ordered a bourbon, then took off her coat. She was wearing a short black dress which showed a lot of leg.

Not the legs you normally see in McFadden's. Thirty-something, with long wavy blonde hair and cold blue eyes. Around her neck was a diamond necklace – the diamonds looked like the real thing. So did the matching earrings. She was dressed as if she was going to a party. But this lady wasn't enjoying herself.

She ordered another bourbon and took out a pack of Marlboro Lites. I could feel the coldness in her voice from where I was sitting. Nobody offered to light her cigarette. She looked in my direction. I thought for a moment that she was trying to catch my eye. But then she turned away with a bored expression on her face. Why should a woman like her give a second look to an overweight bald guy in his mid-forties?

McFadden's Bar was quiet now. I stayed and watched from the corner. I didn't have anything better to do that evening. For a change, something interesting was happening. I was curious and watched every move she made. She took an envelope out of her purse and opened it. I could see a short note and a couple of photographs. As she read, her expression changed. That hard look was gone. Now she looked like someone who really did have problems. Suddenly she threw a bill on the bar and rushed out. The bartender called out, "Hey, Miss, don't you want your change? This is a hundred bucks!" She ignored him and kept walking. Now I was very curious. I followed her.

Outside, the rain was turning to snow. On Second Avenue, the signal had changed to "Don't Walk," but she ran across just before the lights changed. The street was suddenly a sea of yellow cabs racing downtown.

When I finally reached Grand Central I saw her for a

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moment – disappearing behind the information center – but then I lost her in the crowd. I waited and watched for a while, but it was no good. My excitement for that evening was over.

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The next morning I woke up late, as usual, and walked to the subway. If someone gave me a dollar for every morning I'd taken the number seven train from Queens to Manhattan, I'd be a rich guy now. As usual, I looked through the *Daily News* on the subway. A woman had been mugged on 42nd Street just around the corner from my office. All her money and valuables had been taken. There were no names, no details. I didn't think anything of it. These things happen in a big city.

When I got to the office on East 43rd Street, Stella Delgado, my receptionist and secretary, had already arrived. She knows how tough life can be in this city. From a Puerto Rican family, she grew up in East Harlem. I've told her she should move on and get a better job. The strange thing is, she wants to work for me. The truth is I depend on her. She knows how to use all the new office equipment and she speaks Spanish, a useful skill in this city.

"Nat! It's nearly ten o'clock and you look awful. What happened to you?" Stella asked.

"Too many beers in McFadden's Bar last night," I replied. "Anything in the mail?"

"The usual. Bills."

"Guess I'd better earn a few bucks," I said.

"You could start right now. There's a client waiting. She looks interesting, but wouldn't give me her name."

I went through to my office. There she was, sitting in the client's chair. Beside her was a large black bag. Through a cloud of cigarette smoke, I could make out long wavy blonde hair and cold blue eyes. She crossed her legs. I'd seen those legs before, the previous night in McFadden's Bar. Legs like those are hard to forget. Then she looked straight at me. I could feel the ice in her eyes. I was getting very curious.

"Good morning, Mr. Marley. I've already been waiting half an hour. You don't believe in starting your day early," she said.

"I start work when I'm good and ready," I replied.

She looked around her. "This office looks like something out of the 1950s."

The office computer, fax and photocopier were in reception with Stella. I just had my old-fashioned desk, a reading lamp with a green shade, an ancient typewriter, and a couple of filing cabinets. On the wall, a 1990 calendar. A good year for me: that was when I left the NYPD, the New York Police Department.

"So I'm old-fashioned. I like it that way," I said.

"Don't you have any manners, Mr. Marley?" she asked.

"I lost them a long time ago."

"Don't you take your hat off in front of a lady?"

"I'm going bald so the hat stays on. Keeps my head warm. I'm a very busy man," I lied. "Let's get down to business. Who are you and what can I do for you?"

I've seen a lot of life in my time. Often the wrong sort. Fifteen years with the NYPD doesn't make you feel very positive about people. Then another ten years trying to make a success of being a private investigator. This woman

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had class and money. Why was she seeing an investigator like me? And why had she been in McFadden's Bar the night before? In my experience, women like her usually mean one thing – trouble.