

## Chapter 1 *New York City in fall*

Monday, October 4th. A cool, clear morning with the promise of a fine day ahead. Fall is my favorite season in this city – the break between summer heat and winter cold. It’s a time when you’re not trying to escape the worst of New York’s weather. In the city parks, leaves on the trees were just beginning to turn red and gold.

The name’s Nat Marley, licensed private investigator. Before I became an investigator, I used to be a police officer – a cop with the NYPD, the New York Police Department. Since then, I’ve worked for myself. So what does “private investigator” make you think of? A cool handsome guy with an exciting, sometimes dangerous, job? Think again. Some of the time I’m looking for missing persons. Or maybe I’m watching a husband to find out if he’s seeing another woman. And when I look in the mirror, I see an ordinary guy in his forties who’s losing his hair.

As usual, I caught the number seven subway train from my home in Flushing Main Street, Queens, to Midtown Manhattan.

Through Queens, the subway runs above the streets. Below you can see different areas, each home to people from around the world – Flushing: Chinese and Koreans, Corona Heights: Central and South Americans. At Grand Central Station I picked up two coffees. Crowds of New Yorkers were hurrying out onto 42nd Street. Then, like any

other day, I walked the couple of blocks to my office at 220, East 43rd Street.

My personal assistant, Stella Delgado, was already at her desk opening the mail. She's a smart, good-looking Puerto Rican who understands everything about computers. She's been with me for most of the time I've been a private investigator. Stella comes from Spanish Harlem, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan – a part of the city where tourists don't go. On the streets there you'll hear more Spanish than English. She never finished school, but later, as an adult, went to night school. She's worked hard for what she has now – a job, comfortable home and loving family.

“How are you doing, Stella?” I asked. “I got coffee for you.”

“Thanks. I'm fine,” she replied. “Could you leave it on the desk?”

A knock at the door. Two women entered. One, a lady in her middle fifties, dressed in a dark green suit. The suit looked expensive, but she looked worried. The other, a young woman in her twenties. I compared their faces – they had to be mother and daughter.

“Do I have the right place?” said the mother. “This is the Marley Detective Agency?”

“That's correct, ma'am. The name's Nat Marley. What can I do for you?” I asked.

“Well, it's kind of difficult ...” she started.

“Come through to my office and take a seat,” I said. “Your names, please?”

“I'm Joyce O'Neill and this is my daughter, Julia,” said the mother. “It's about my husband, Patrick. He's disappeared

and I really need to find him. It doesn't matter how much it costs."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, ma'am," I said. "Let's take it slowly, from the beginning."

She looked at me with large sad eyes. "I haven't seen him since Saturday night. When I woke up Sunday morning, he was gone. He left this message on the kitchen table." She took a postcard from her purse and read to me:

"My dear Joyce. Don't worry. I'm safe, but I can't come home. The thing is, I know something which puts me and maybe you in danger. Don't phone me, or my office or the NYPD. If anyone asks for me, say I'm out of town. Trust me. Stay at Julia's place and wait for my call. All my love. Patrick."

"I have an apartment in Hamilton Heights, near Columbia University," Julia explained. "Mom has been staying with me there since Sunday."

"Mr. Marley, I'm worried sick," Joyce O'Neill continued. "Patrick's never done anything like this before."

I knew it could be bad news when someone disappears. But I didn't want to make her any more worried than she was already.

"There can be many reasons why someone disappears," I said. "Let's not expect the worst. Did your husband call?"

She nodded. "He's OK, but said he had to hide while he decided what to do. He wouldn't tell me what was happening. He just said the less I knew, the safer I would be. I just don't know what to do."

"It sounds like he's in immediate danger," I said. "It would be useful to know as much as possible about your husband."

I learned that Patrick O'Neill worked as an accountant. His employer was a firm on Wall Street called Ocean Star Finance. He had worked there for over ten years. His home address was Henry Street, Brooklyn Heights. His photograph showed a tall, gray-haired guy with black metal glasses, but there was nothing special about him. He had been married for twenty-three years. He was just an ordinary family man, with a daughter studying for her MBA at Columbia University.

"There must be a good reason why your husband asked you not to call his office. So tell me some more about his work," I said.

"Patrick's the second highest person in his department," Joyce O'Neill answered. "The head of department is Ronald Steinmann."

"What kind of guy is this Steinmann?" I asked.

"He's good at his job – excellent in fact, though he's not well liked. Patrick and Steinmann aren't the best of friends."

"A few more questions, if you don't mind," I continued. "Has your husband been acting strangely or differently in any way?"

She thought carefully before answering. "I can't say he has. His work's really important to him. He often has to work late, and he sometimes brings work home – that's normal."

"I'm afraid I have to ask this. Could there be another woman?" I asked her.

She looked at me angrily, then said, "Sorry. I guess it's your job to ask. My husband has never even looked at another woman."

"One final question," I said. "It's useful to know how carefully a missing person has planned to disappear. Has

your husband taken anything with him? Did he pack clothes? Did he take the car?"

"The car's gone, and he took a travel bag with a change of clothes and some books," she replied.

"Thanks, ma'am. You've been really helpful," I said. "I'll do everything possible to find out what's happened. I'll need to visit you at your home later to look at your husband's papers and computer. That might give me some ideas. Could you meet me there at three o'clock?"

After Mrs O'Neill and her daughter had left, I looked out of the window. The sun was trying to make the gray buildings of East 43rd Street look beautiful. It would need to try harder. So a normal, hard-working guy had suddenly disappeared. He could be in serious trouble. I had thought this was going to be another ordinary day. My mistake.