

Chapter 1 *New York in the spring*

It was a fine but chilly spring morning. Fine enough even to make the New York borough of Queens seem attractive. Like any other day, I left my apartment on Main Street, Queens, and walked to the subway station to commute into midtown Manhattan on the number seven train. Like any other day, I read the *New York Daily News* to pass the time during the journey. Out of professional interest, I always glance through the day's fresh crime stories. Muggings, thefts, a car-jacking, a shooting, a bank robbery, and so on. Crime – the unpleasant reality of life from which I make my living.

The name's Marley, Nat Marley, licensed private investigator. My prediction is that you already have a mental image of my type of work. I can safely bet that that your image comes straight from the fantasy world of Hollywood. That's a long way from the truth. The majority of my work is dull. Often just pure routine stuff like divorce, bad debts, or missing persons. Don't imagine for a moment that I'm good-looking either. Just an ordinary-looking guy, bald, overweight and on the wrong side of forty. And let's get another thing straight, my working days seldom start with a wealthy, attractive female client anxiously waiting for my professional services.

My office is on East 43rd Street, just a couple of blocks from Grand Central Station. Stella Delgado, my personal assistant was already at her desk talking on the phone.

Stella's been with me most of the time I've been in business. A beautiful, intelligent Puerto Rican in her late twenties. If she wanted, she could get a far better job elsewhere. And I've told her that too. But she insists on working for me; she must like me. You've heard of the expression 'on the wrong side of the tracks', meaning the poor, underprivileged areas of the inner city? That's where Stella grew up, in the Barrio on the Upper East Side, known as Spanish Harlem. She had left school early and got into plenty of trouble as a kid. Then it took years of night school study to catch up on her education.

As she put down the phone, I asked, "How are things on this beautiful spring morning?"

Silence. She just gave me a blank stare. The morning mail was on her desk, unopened. Something was definitely wrong. "Stella, what's the matter? Come on, out with it."

She looked up at me tearfully. "Nat, I don't know what to do. It's family – my kid brother, José. I've just been talking to him on the phone. He's been arrested. He could be in serious trouble."

There was work to catch up with that morning, bills to send out to our satisfied or dissatisfied clients, and some annoying letters from the IRS, the tax people. Yet again, they'd claimed I hadn't paid enough tax. But clients and the IRS would have to wait.

"Stella, tell me everything."

"It's a long story. José was found by the police in the early hours of this morning on 112th Street just off Lexington Avenue, Upper East Side. He was lying unconscious with head injuries, in the driver's seat of a car that had crashed into a wall in a parking lot. Nat, he

doesn't even own a car. Anyway, he was taken to the emergency room at Metropolitan Hospital. Now he's in a secure room under police guard. He was allowed to make one phone call, so he called me."

"So what's the story? How did he get into this mess?" I asked.

"The awful thing is he has no memory of what he was doing," Stella said. "All he can remember is being at some bar in Brighton Beach with his buddies yesterday evening. Then nothing."

"Has he been charged with anything?" I asked.

"No. At least, not as far as I know," replied Stella.

"Why were José and his buddies going out for a drink at Brighton Beach, anyway? That's quite a way from Spanish Harlem for a night out."

"José works in the summer at a diner on Surf Avenue, Coney Island. The place closes up in the winter. José had been to see his boss to confirm his job for next summer. He got some good news – they took him on as a cook. José had taken a couple of his buddies along to see if he could fix up work for them. They were taken on as waiters. Good money, plus room and board, starting first of April. Afterwards, they went out to celebrate."

The thought of Coney Island brought back some of those golden childhood memories: trips to Coney Island beach and the rides at the amusement park, family vacations at the beach. I put those thoughts to the back of my mind and concentrated on Stella's story.

"Anything more?" I asked.

"He said he had just a vague memory of a bar somewhere on Brighton Beach Avenue. He knew he'd had a few too

many drinks. Then nothing until he woke up in a hospital bed.”

“Maybe he’s in shock,” I suggested. “Temporary memory loss. If this was a simple case of drunk-driving, he wouldn’t be under police guard. And where did he get the car from?”

“I don’t know, Nat. José’s never had a driver’s license.”

Not having a driver’s license didn’t mean he hadn’t stolen the car and driven it anyway. But I didn’t say that to Stella.

I thought for a moment. If José hadn’t been charged with any offense, the NYPD could only hold him for a limited time.

“All right, Stella. This is what we’ll do. If José hasn’t been formally charged, there’s no reason why we shouldn’t be allowed to visit. We’re going straight over to the hospital to talk with him.”

Stella didn’t move but just stood by her desk, biting her lip.

“Is something else bothering you?” I asked.

“Nat, I’m worried sick. José’s an ordinary loveable guy who likes a good time. OK, he’s got a criminal record. He got into some trouble when he was a teenager. But I know he’s harmless. A danger to nobody. But someone with his background . . . you know as well as I do what conclusion the police will come to.”

“Come on, Stella,” I said. “Things have changed in this city. It’s not like the bad old days. You know how sensitive the police are nowadays about any question of possible prejudice. You can’t assume that the NYPD will think José is guilty because of his background. Any suspect has to be judged on the evidence.”

“Maybe you’re right,” she replied, simply.

Stella didn’t seem to be convinced. But I knew the NYPD would go to any lengths to avoid the kind of publicity an accusation of racial prejudice would attract. I also understood Stella’s fears. Stella and her family are Puerto Rican. During the 1950s tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans emigrated from their island to the U.S.A. When they arrived, some of them discovered that the U.S.A. wasn’t the land of opportunity they’d expected. Some had exchanged the poverty of Puerto Rico for the poor neighborhoods of New York. There were dead-end jobs waiting for them as kitchen hands or unskilled factory workers. Today, however, some have succeeded in creating a good life – like Stella, with a permanent job, comfortable apartment, and loving husband. But for Stella it had been a struggle. I could appreciate how her culture and background might affect the way she saw things.

“Lock up the office and let’s go,” I said.