

Chapter 1 *East 43rd Street, Manhattan*

Monday, January 17th. It was Martin Luther King Day, a holiday in the U.S.A. The streets of Manhattan were white with snow and unusually quiet. Many New Yorkers were enjoying a lazy long weekend with their families. But I don't have a family to spend time with, so I was working by myself at my office on East 43rd Street.

The name's Nat Marley. I've been a private investigator in this city for over ten years. Before that, I was a police officer with the New York Police Department, "an NYPD cop." The working life of an investigator is rather different from what you see in the movies – I'm not often in danger. Maybe a wife wants to know if her husband's seeing another woman. Or sometimes I'm looking for a teenager who's run away from home.

While I was working, I got a phone call.

"Nat Marley speaking," I said.

"I'm pleased I caught you on a holiday. My name's Curtis Wilson," the caller began. "I want to talk with you about a family problem, but not over the phone. Could I see you this afternoon?"

"Sure. I could meet with you at two o'clock," I replied.

January can be a quiet month for business, so I hoped this man was going to be a rich new client.

Wilson arrived just after two o'clock, his smart coat white with snow. He was tall and good-looking – unlike me –

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and his clothes were expensive. He looked like the sort of man who knows what he wants in life and how to get it. I also thought I knew his face from somewhere. Then I remembered a name from the past – Bad Boy Bronx. That was his name when he was a famous hip-hop musician.



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“I know your face, Mr. Wilson,” I said. “I guess you don’t do much rapping now.”

“You’re right,” he laughed. “I’ve come a long way in life since I was a kid in South Bronx. Things are different now. I make more money from my businesses than I ever did from music. The banks open their doors when they see Curtis Wilson coming.”

“So you have a family problem?” I asked.

“Yeah, my sister Dionne is worried about her husband, Ellis Freeman,” he replied. “In the last few months, she’s seen a real change in him. He’s just not the same man. Something’s happened, but he won’t talk about it.”

“Tell me more,” I said. “How has he changed?”

“He was always full of fun and loved to laugh and joke,” said Wilson. “But Dionne doesn’t see that side of him now. She says he seems worried all the time. But he does his work as usual.”

“What does your brother-in-law do?” I asked.

“Ellis and Dionne have a pet store called Animals International on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. You can find everything there from birds to snakes,” said Wilson.

“An interesting kind of business. But could they have money problems?” I asked.

“I asked Dionne the same question,” Wilson answered. “She told me that doing business has gotten more difficult, but they make enough money.”

“Are there any other problems between them?” I asked. “Do they get along well?”

“Dionne couldn’t be married to a better guy,” said Wilson.

“What happens when Dionne asks him why he’s worried?” I asked.

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“He just won’t say anything. She thinks he could be afraid of something – or someone,” Wilson replied.

“I’ll tell you what I could do. I’ll visit their store tomorrow morning and see what I can find out.”

“OK, but do it carefully,” said Wilson. “I don’t want Ellis to know that his brother-in-law is paying an investigator. He likes to do things his way.”

“Sure, I understand,” I said. “Do you have a photo of them I could have?”

Wilson passed me a picture of the Freemans. They looked like any other happy husband and wife. I thought for a moment and decided what to do.

“I have an idea,” I said. “When I visit the store I’ll let them think I’m interested in buying a snake. I’ll get them talking and see what happens.”