

CHAPTER 1

The hand holding the unfiltered cigarette was long, narrow.

Smoke curled up from the cigarette tip in a movie poster arabesque. The ash was half the length of the cigarette, gray speckled with black, wiry-looking like the knuckle hairs.

From a record player, not a CD, came Frank Sinatra's 1959 version of "Stormy Weather." The version he recorded before the Kennedy assassination. The song's sorrow conventional, dramatic not tragic, not specific, not full of tears like the version he recorded after Dallas.

Don't know why—Sinatra sang—there's no sun up in the sky

...

The hand shifted.

Stormy weather.

The ash fell off the end of the cigarette. A man—Harry Dickinson—cleared his throat.

Since my gal and I ain't together . . .

Harry sang along with Sinatra, coughed, and again cleared his throat, letting Sinatra sing alone.

Harry lay the cigarette in a chipped clear glass ashtray, found the tumbler half full of Jack Daniel's—from the way his hand moved cautiously half an inch one way, then half an inch the other, the pinky extended ahead of the rest of the hand like a blind man's cane, it was clear Harry wasn't



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looking at the side table where the glass stood—wrapped his hand around the tumbler (Harry would have called his hand a *mitt*) and brought the tumbler to his mouth.

He drank half the booze, his eyes shadowed, the light from under the old vanilla-colored paper lamp shade illuminating his upper lip, his mouth, his chin, his two-day-old beard.

He lowered the glass. Licked his lips.

With the back of his other hand, he wiped his mouth as the doorbell rang.

“It’s raining all the time,” Harry sang.

Harry’s office was a mess, a low-rent, dusty hole-in-the-wall. Brown-and-white cardboard bankers’ boxes were stacked along the baseboard of one wall. On top of them were back issues of the *Springdale Union*, *The Boston Globe*, yellowing magazines from the 1930s and 1940s—*Black Mask*, *Dime Detective* . . . Shelves were crammed with *Forensics*, *Criminalistics*, *Shadowing and Surveillance*, *Gun Digest*, *Emmanuals’s Evidence*, *Correction Law of Massachusetts*, *Penal Law* . . .

On the walls hung framed movie posters: *Where Danger Lives*, *Rogue Cop*, and *The Killers*.

Dusty daylight filtered in through the slats of crooked venetian blinds, bathing the office in a sepia glow.

Harry was thirty-five with a long, seamed face, sleepy eyes, and a mouth crimped up on the right in a semipermanent, dubious grin.

He was tilted back in his chair, his feet crossed on his desk. Next to his feet was the bottle of sour mash.

His baggy brown suit was cut with wide lapels. His white shirt was starched. One collar tip was bent up like the corner of his mouth. His maroon tie was wide, and he wore it short, a hand span higher than his belt. His brown brogans were polished.

Harry, the room, the whole atmosphere, evoked a 1940s hard-boiled detective movie.

“Life is bare,” Harry sang.

The doorbell rang.

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From an alcove, a kettle whistled.

“Harry!” a voice called.

A female voice, low, throaty, coaxing.

Friday’s voice.

“*Keeps raining all the time,*” Harry sang. The doorbell continued to ring.

Friday—whose real name was Linda Chapin—appeared in the entrance to the alcove, holding a copper tea kettle and a jar of Chase & Sanborn instant coffee.

She was a few years younger than Harry. With something doll-like about her eyes—as if they closed when she lay down and flipped open when she was upright.

That was the only doll-like thing about her.

Friday was a savvy, tough-talking, angular brunette whose hair always seemed on the verge of escaping from the knot on the top of her head.

“Harry,” she said.

“*Gloom and misery everywhere,*” Harry sang. “Harry!”

Friday repeated.

“*Stormy weather,*” Harry sang.

“Hey, Chief,” Friday said,

“Hold the phone,” Harry said, and he finished singing.

“The door,” Friday said.

She glanced significantly at the kettle in her hand.

Harry took a drag on his cigarette and flipped it toward the ashtray. It fell short. Harry let it lie.

The doorbell rang.

Friday sighed, turned back to the kitchenette, and put the kettle back on the hotplate.

“I’ll get it,” she said. She went to the door separating Harry’s office from the outer office. “You make the coffee.”

“Happy birthday,” Harry said.

From the kneehole of his desk, Harry took a brown paper bag, which he held out toward Friday.

Friday said, “Oh, Harry . . .”

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The doorbell rang.

Friday put the bag on Harry's desk, smiled at him, and said, "I'll be right back."

She disappeared into the outer office.

When Harry stood, he seemed to be unwinding, not just rising but growing.

From his desk, he took a dirty coffee cup.

Whistling "Stormy Weather," he crossed to the kettle. He emptied the dregs from the cup into the wastebasket and wiped the inside of the cup with a cotton handkerchief he pulled from his right hip pocket. He found a spoon on the table and scooped some instant coffee into the cup.

Friday came back into the room.

"Client?" Harry asked.

"Your favorite kind," Friday said.

"Rich?" Harry asked.

"Female," Friday said.

From the paper bag, Friday took her birthday present. As she unwrapped it, Harry picked up the kettle and poured hot water into his coffee cup.

"*Don't know why . . .*," Harry sang under his breath.

"Not again!" Friday said, holding up an army surplus ammo box, fastened with a lock.

"Can't crack a lock," Harry said, "can't be a detective.

"I don't *want* to be a detective," Friday said.

"Of course you do, Friday," Harry said. "Everyone does."

Friday tapped the lock and asked, "What's the combination?"

Harry sipped his coffee.

"It took me two hours to open my Christmas present," Friday said.

"This is a cheaper lock," Harry said.

Friday sighed and turned the knob on the combination lock.

"Anyway," Harry said, "you're getting better."

The lock didn't open. Friday scowled.

"I'll send in Miss Mysterious," she said.

Carrying the ammo box under her arm, Friday went into the outer office, where she put the ammo box on her desk.

A woman stood just inside the door. She wore a severe beige suit with a wide leather belt—vaguely military—as though she were fighting a war with her voluptuous figure. Her lipstick was a little too red. And smudged on her upper lip.

Friday jerked her head in the direction of the office.

“Boss’ll see you,” she said.

The woman—Carol LeGrange—entered Harry’s office.

Friday sat at her desk. From her pocketbook, she took an emery board, which she used to file her fingertips. Like Jimmy Valentine. Then, she blew on her fingers. Eyes closed in concentration, leaning close to the lock so she could hear—as well as feel—the tumblers drop into place, she turned the lock’s knob.

Carol hovered in the doorway of Harry’s office, a little impatiently.

“What do private eyes always say in novels?” he asked. “‘A hundred dollars a day plus expenses. And I don’t do divorce work.’ Well, it’s one-fifty. And I’ll take any case you got.”

“Seven-thirty,” Carol said.

“Address?” Harry asked.

Carol started for the door.

“I don’t have time for this,” she said.

Harry called after her, “What’s your address?”

Carol didn’t turn around. She sighed. “Twelve Crescent Hill.”

“A hundred-fifty now,” Harry said. “I’ll bill for expenses.”

Carol slammed out of Harry’s office.

Harry followed, entering the outer office just in time to see the door swing shut after Carol.

Friday was still trying to crack the lock on her birthday present.

Not glancing up, she said, “What did Miss Mysterious want?”

“The usual,” Harry said.

Friday got the last number. The lock snapped open. Harry glanced at his watch.

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“Fifteen minutes,” he said.

“I *am* getting better,” Friday said.

“But,” Harry asked, “can you do it when there’s a guy with a gun coming down the hall?”

Friday opened the ammo box and took out her birthday present: an old book in mint condition.

“*The Thin Man*,” she said.

“Pick you up at nine,” Harry said.

“You do,” Friday said, “and I’ll call the cops.”

Imitating Jimmy Cagney’s nasal voice and flat vowels, Harry said, “You threatening me? Are you threatening me? Don’t threaten me. I’m in the threat business.”

“*I’ll pick you up*,” Friday said. “I don’t like driving in cars older than my mother.”

Harry blew her a kiss and headed out the door.

Friday opened the book and read the copyright: “Nineteen thirty-four. A first edition.”

Harry re-opened the door and grabbed his battered slouch hat from the clothes tree.

“Harry,” Friday said, “it must have cost a fortune.”

He fit his hat on his head at a rakish angle and left.

Hefting the book, Friday smiled.