

## IDENTITY CRISIS

by Debbi Mack

### CHAPTER ONE

I've never been a morning person, and if it's one thing I don't need before my first cup of coffee, it's a visit from the cops. But at eight forty-five on a Friday morning, two of them waited for me at my law office.

I shut the door on the steam heat—typical July weather in Maryland—and shook my sticky blouse loose. Seven years in practice had taught me many hard lessons. One of them should have been never to wear dry-cleanable blouses in the summer.

Sheila, the seventy-plus receptionist and secretary for the accounting firm where I sublet space, gave me a brief wave while answering the phone through her ever-present headset. Her long, bony fingers clacked away at the keyboard without skipping a beat.

Both men stood as I approached. I recognized Detective Martin Derry of the Prince George's County police. I wondered what the homicide investigator wanted with me.

"Good morning," I said.

"Morning Ms. McRae." Derry had light blue eyes, the color of lake water in January. "I need to speak to you about one of your clients."

Derry's companion was tall and gangly, as if loosely constructed of mismatched bones. His frizzy reddish-blond hair was short, making his head seem too small and his nose and ears too big. He peered at me with his head cocked to one side, like a pigeon.

"Let me have five minutes, okay?"

Derry nodded, and I trudged up the steps to my office. I didn't have any clients charged with homicide. Since I'd left the public defender's office, most of my criminal clients were yuppies with first-time DWIs or habitual traffic offenders, so I was dying to find out what he wanted. Whatever it was, it could wait five more minutes.

I went through the daily routine of opening the Venetian blinds, turning down the thermostat on the ancient window unit, and booting my computer. I started a pot of dark roast coffee, placing my mug on the burner to catch it as it dripped out. When I felt ready, I invited them in.

They each did a cop's visual sweep of my office before they sat down. No doubt, they were impressed by the plush furnishings—a used desk, two guest chairs, a metal filing cabinet, a small

hutch for my supplies, and tables for my fax, copier, and Mr. Coffee, most of which I'd bought at a state surplus outlet. My one indulgence was a new high-backed desk chair.

"This is Special Agent Carl Jergins, FBI," Derry said.

"Sam McRae," I said, extending my hand. Jergins worked my arm like a pump. FBI? I wondered what was up.

Derry sat stiffly upright. Dark-haired and mustached, he had a solemn, squarish face. In a charcoal gray suit, starched white shirt, and red tie, Derry was one of those people who manage to look dapper, no matter what. We'd met years before when I'd defended the man accused of killing his fiancée. Derry treated me with complete, almost excessive, professionalism. I tried to ignore the charged feeling in the air when he was around.

"We understand you have a client named Melanie Hayes," Derry said.

I stared at him. "She's not . . ." I couldn't finish the thought.

"No. It's her ex, Tom Garvey. He was found shot to death."

"Oh, my God."

"We know you represented her in a domestic violence matter," Derry said, watching me closely as he spoke. "You understand why we need to talk to her."

I nodded. "When did this happen?"

"Over the weekend," Derry said.

"I'll be present when you question her." It was not a request.

Derry bobbed his head in brief acknowledgment. "When was the last time you spoke to Ms. Hayes?"

"Last Friday."

"On the phone or in person?"

"In person. She came to the office."

"And you haven't spoken to her since?"

"No. Why?"

Derry leaned back in his chair. He appeared to think about whether to answer the question.

"There's a problem," he said. "She seems to have disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"She hasn't been home and hasn't shown up for work all week."

An angry sizzle interrupted my thoughts. The odor of burnt coffee filled the room. My cup was overflowing onto the hot plate.

"Shit." I jumped up and exchanged the cup for a carafe. Coffee was everywhere. In haste, I ripped a couple of pages from a writing pad and daubed at the mess, grinning sheepishly at the cops.

Derry's mustache twitched into a brief grimace. Jergins stared.

"Well, I have no idea where she could be," I said, swiping at drops that had landed on my blouse.

Both cops studied me, maybe waiting for more. I hate that. I sat down and drank my coffee. The air conditioner clicked and roared in the background.

Jergins cleared his throat, leaning forward. "Ms. McRae," he said, in a gruff, rat-a-tat voice, "it's extremely important that we get in touch with Ms. Hayes as soon as possible. Her life may be at risk."

"Why? And what's the FBI's interest in this?" I looked directly at the bony fed.

Jergins' nostrils flared as if he detected a bad smell. From the look in his beady eyes, you'd have thought I was the source.

"Has your client ever mentioned the name Gregory Knudsen?"

"No. Who is he?"

"What about Christof Stavos?"

"What about him?" I asked, a little annoyed that he'd ignored my question.

"Have you heard that name? Ever?"

"Nope. Never ever."

Jergins did that pigeon move with his head again.

I resisted the urge to imitate him.

He said, "Mr. Stavos is a sick and dangerous man. It's absolutely essential that Ms. Hayes get in touch with us as soon as possible. For her own safety, if nothing else."

"Why?" I asked. "Who is he?"

"Wiseguy from New York."

The phone rang.

I decided to let the voice mail get it. "Mafia? What would someone like that want with my client?"

Jergins leaned back, allowing himself a dramatic pause. "Did your client leave anything with you? A CD, maybe?"

"No."

"And she never mentioned Knudsen?"

"Like I said, no."

He nodded, still not looking satisfied.

"So, who is this guy, Knudsen?" I said. "And what's on the CD?"

Jergins said nothing.

"Let's get back to your client," Derry said. "Did she ever mention anything about leaving town? Even a hint that she might?"

I spread my hands in a helpless gesture. "Not that I recall."

Derry appeared to ponder my response then said, "I guess we've taken enough of your time."

Jergins looked like he wanted to subpoena every piece of paper in the room.

"Wait a second," I said. "What's going on? Obviously, someone's been murdered, but is there more?"

Derry glanced at Jergins, who remained mute.

"There's got to be," I said, in answer to my own question. "Or why would the FBI be involved?"

Another look passed between the men.

Derry said, "Right now, I'm concerned about investigating a homicide."

As opposed to what? I wanted to ask.

"This mobster—what was his name? Stavos—he's also a suspect?"

Silence.

Forget it, I thought. I might as well go outside and ask a fire hydrant.

As they stood up, Derry said, "You'll let us know if you hear from her."

"Of course."

Jergins pulled out a business card and thrust it toward me. It said he was with the field office in Baltimore.

"You hear anything about Knudsen, you let me know," he said, in his clipped monotone. Probably picked it up watching too many reruns of *Dagnet*.

After they left, I checked my voice mail. Someone named Christy from my credit card company had called. I was up-to-date on my bill, and the message didn't say anything about their "great new services." Curious, I dialed the number and connected directly with Christy, who sounded like a college student working the phones during her summer break.

"Stephanie Ann McRae?" she said. The credit card was in my full name rather than the acronym I use as a nickname. "I'm calling to confirm your recent application for a line of credit," she continued, sounding as if she were reading from cue cards.

"But I haven't applied for more credit."

A few seconds of silence. "You haven't? Oh, wow. Have you lost your card recently?"

"No, no. I would have reported that." I pulled my purse out of my desk, to check anyway. The card was still in my wallet.

"Well, it looks like someone has applied for a credit line in your name," Christy said. "I'm glad we were able to catch this. The amount is unusually large."

"How large would that be?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

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