

CITY IN SHADOW

by Evan Marshall

Chapter One

Anna Winthrop arranged throw pillows on the twin bed, then stepped back to admire her handiwork. The touches of cocoa and pale green were a perfect complement to the freshly painted cream-colored walls. She looked around the room, taking in the lamp on the nightstand, her grandmother's crocheted lace runner on the dresser, the area rug in rich earth tones. A very pleasing guest room, she decided. The only reminder that this space had previously served as her home office was the oak rolltop desk in the corner. With any luck, that would be gone within the hour if the man coming in response to her Craigslist ad decided to buy. She was fond of the old desk—it had once belonged to her father—but her cousin Patti needed a guest room more than Anna needed the desk.

Patti Fairchild was actually Anna's second cousin: Anna's mother and Patti's mother, Mary Jean, were first cousins. Three weeks earlier, Mary Jean had called Anna from Cincinnati and asked if Patti could come for a visit. She had graduated from high school seven months earlier, wasn't interested in college yet had no idea what she wanted to do with her life. In New York Mary Jean thought Patti might get some ideas. Mary Jean also felt Anna would be a good role model for Patti, who would spend some time with Anna at the Sanitation garage where she was a supervisor. Long interested in art, Patti could also visit museums and maybe even take a class. She would arrive in two days and stay for a month.

Gazing at the nightstand, Anna remembered a spare alarm clock she'd put away somewhere and went to look for it.

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In the apartment directly above Anna's, Nettie Clouchet tackled another box. She'd forgotten how much work it was to move. She'd also forgotten how much stuff she had. Two months earlier, when she'd left Eddie and moved into the Webster Apartments, a women's residence, she had put her things into storage. Now, a week after retrieving them, she was still unpacking.

Of course, she'd been doing other things as well, mainly grinding out the articles she produced for dozens of bloggers on the Web. Not that anyone would ever know Nettie wrote them. She was a ghost blogger, by her calculation the most prolific ghost blogger on the Internet. No matter what the subject, if someone needed a blog, Nettie Clouchet could deliver quality work fast.

Thinking about her blogs made her step over to her laptop, open on the dining table. She'd been working on a piece called *The \$2,000-a-Month One-Bedroom New York Apartment: Fact or Fantasy*. So far she'd written:

Contrary to popular belief, it is possible to find that elusive \$2,000-a-month one-bedroom apartment in New York City, but you'll need to look in neighborhoods like Harlem, Washington Heights and Morningside Heights, in non-doorman

buildings. If you've got your heart set on more desirable areas such as the East Village, the Lower East Side and neighborhoods north of Midtown, \$2,000 a month will only get you a studio.

Dull but serviceable. These pieces paid the bills and Nettie was grateful for that, but once her book deal came through she would never write another blog as long as she lived. She closed the file she'd been working on and opened the book proposal being shopped to publishers by Nettie's literary agent, Jane Stuart. *New York SuperWomen: Fifty Fabulous Females Who Have Made a Difference.*

She scrolled down. *Chapter One: Anna Winthrop—From Deb to Debris.* Nettie smiled. She'd been very clever to come up with that, she decided. Even cleverer to nab this apartment when Uncle Allen mentioned it was available. What better way to learn about Anna than to live right above her? Not that Anna could know yet that Nettie was delving into her life. Over the course of her career Nettie had formed the firm opinion that you learned more about people when they didn't know you were writing about them.

Nettie wanted to know everything about Anna Winthrop. She already knew a lot. For example, that Anna was a debutante from a wealthy Greenwich family who had broken with tradition and become not a lawyer or a doctor but a sanitation worker, then worked her way up to section supervisor in a garage off Times Square. That Anna had a talent for solving murders. That she had once killed a murderer in self-defense.

But Nettie needed to know more, a lot more. She was sure there was a lot more to know. Ever since Uncle Allen had first talked about Anna, well before Nettie had had the idea for *New York SuperWomen*, she had considered Anna one of the most interesting women in New York City.

Nettie continued scrolling through her book proposal, smiling at her own talent. Yes, this book would make her wealthy, and when she was wealthy she wouldn't have to hide from Eddie in this third-floor walkup apartment near Times Square. She could live where she liked, hire security like movie stars and Wall Street executives.

In the meantime, her ghost blogs were all she had, a grim necessity. She reopened the apartment article and wrote:

Of course, you'll find many more apartments within your reach if you opt to take on a roommate, a strategy favored by many new and not-so-new New York City renters . . .

* * *

Directly under Nettie, Anna hear her intercom buzz and hurried out to the living room. "Yes?" she called down.

"I am here about the desk," came a man's deep voice, heavily accented—Russian, it sounded like. She let him in, then went out to the landing as he came into view on the stairs. He was tall and gangling, with dark curly hair and extreme features that were ugly yet attractive. He wore a brown leather jacket over jeans and a hooded black sweatshirt. He looked at her, his face expressionless.

"Anna Winthrop," she said, putting out her hand.

"Grigori," he said, taking it.

“Russian?” she asked pleasantly.

“Ukrainian.”

“Ah,” she said, smiling, and led him to the new guest room. He studied the desk for a moment, moved the rolltop up and down. Then he gave one nod. “She will like it,” he said and counted out two hundred dollars into Anna’s hand.

She thanked him. “Did you bring someone to help you get it out of here?”

“Of course.” He took out his cell phone, punched in a number and muttered something in Ukrainian.

A moment later the intercom sounded. Anna went to the living room. “Yes?” she called down.

“Desk,” came a man’s voice.

She buzzed him in, then waited in the doorway as he mounted the stairs. He was Grigori’s exact opposite: short and fat, with thinning blond hair cut very short, smooth pink skin and angelic features. “I am Yuri,” he said.

She introduced herself, then led him back to Grigori and the desk. The two men spoke briefly in Ukrainian, then picked up the desk and carried it out to the living room. Anna opened the door for them and stood out on the landing to one side. Yuri went first through the doorway, backing out. As Grigori squeezed through he suddenly cried out in pain. He quickly lowered his end of the desk and shook his hand. “*Durnyj!*” he barked at Yuri, who mumbled what sounded like an apology.

“Are you all right?” Anna asked Grigori.

“I am fine,” he replied, then turned back to Yuri and said something else to him in a heated tone. Then they began carrying the desk down the stairs.

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Nettie looked up sharply from her laptop, brows lowered. From the hallway outside her apartment had come the sound of a man’s voice speaking—could it be?—Ukrainian. Specifically, the word *durnyj*—“stupid.” Eddie was Ukrainian and during the two years she had lived with him her Ukrainian had become quite serviceable. Curious, she hurried out to the landing and peered over the railing to the floor below, careful not to be seen.

Two men, one tall and thin, the other short and fat, were carrying a rolltop desk through the doorway of Anna’s apartment.

“Are you all right?” came Anna’s voice, surprisingly close—she must be on the landing.

“I am fine,” the tall man replied, then spoke angrily in Ukrainian to the short man. Nettie understood it immediately: *Hurry up! If she gets away I’ll kill you.*

Wide-eyed she watched the two men start down the stairs.

Another opinion Nettie had formed over the course of her writing career was that she produced her best work when she followed her instincts. Those instincts were now telling her a man who threatened to kill another man was worth following, especially if he was connected to Anna Winthrop, the subject of chapter one.

Without another thought Nettie ran back into her apartment, threw on her coat, grabbed her keys and dashed back out, locking the door. The men were still on the stairs, negotiating the turn at the bottom. She would wait until they were outside to make her move. As she watched, Anna moved into view below, peering over the railing

to watch the men's progress with the desk.

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As Anna watched Grigori and Yuri near the bottom of the stairs, the front door opened and her boyfriend Santos entered. He looked handsome in his police uniform, dark jacket and glossy-brimmed cap. His face was red from the cold. Looking up he saw Anna and gave her a big grin. He stood aside to let Grigori and Yuri carry the desk out to the sidewalk.

Anna ran down the stairs and gave Santos a kiss.

"Way to go," he said. "Finally getting rid of that old thing."

They followed Grigori and Yuri out to the street and watched them lift the desk onto an olive-green pickup truck parked at the curb. Anna crossed her arms against the bitter cold. Gusts of wind played with her shoulder-length ash-blonde hair. Santos put her arm around her and pulled her close against him.

Once the desk was on the truck, Grigori and Yuri got in. As Yuri opened the passenger door Anna caught a glimpse of a young woman sitting on the front seat. She was extraordinarily beautiful, with creamy skin and full, sensuous features. Rich chestnut hair cascaded to her shoulders.

As the truck's engine roared to life the brownstone's door opened and a woman hurried out. Anna guessed her to be in her mid-thirties. A voluminous black coat flapped open on her bony frame. Her brown hair was tied into a pineapple-like spray on top of her head. She dashed past Anna and Santos and grabbed a passing cab. The pickup truck pulled into traffic and the taxi followed.

"Who was that?" Santos asked.

"She may be my new upstairs neighbor. Moved in last week."

"Whoever she is, she sure is in a hurry."

As Anna turned to go inside, something in the gutter where the truck had been parked caught her eye. She walked over and picked it up. It was a sheet of yellow lined paper, folded in quarters.

"Someone dropped that out of the truck as I was walking up to the building," Santos said with a laugh. "I should have ticketed them for littering."

As they headed back inside, Anna stopped in the open doorway and unfolded the paper. In its center, printed in crude block letters, were two words:

HELP ME

She looked up at Santos. "You're sure you saw this fall out of the truck?"

"Absolutely."

"It was that young woman in the truck who dropped it out," Anna said, meeting Santos's gaze.

"Shut that door!"

They spun around. Iris Dovner, who lived directly below Anna and with whom Anna was in nearly constant conflict, stood in her doorway with her hands on her hips. She wore an overlarge purple velour track suit that made her look like a clown. Her fluffy white hair was pulled back in an incongruously youthful ponytail.

"I guess since you live upstairs you don't care about the cold air that blows in here

like the Arctic.”

“We’re sorry,” Anna said, shutting the door. She and Santos started up the stairs.

“Letting questionable people into the building again, I see,” Mrs. Dovner called up after them. “Criminals, from the look of them.”

Anna stopped, turned. “I hardly think you can know that just by looking at them.”

“I did more than just look at them. I saw how they treated that girl.”

Anna met Santos’s gaze.

“The girl in the pickup truck?” Anna asked as she and Santos came back down the stairs. Mrs. Dovner nodded. “How did they treat her?”

“When the tall one got out of the truck she reached out to him, like she was pleading with him. He shoved her back and slammed the door. Then the fat one got out and the girl did the same thing. He took her face in his hand and said something to her in Ukrainian before he shut the door. I know Ukrainian because my parents were from there.”

“How were you able to see and hear all this?” Anna asked.

“I was coming back from shopping when the truck pulled up. I was suspicious so I watched from up the street. Once you’d let them both in, I came in, too.”

“I wish I’d taken down their license plate number,” Anna said, “but why would I have?”

“I took it down,” Mrs. Dovner said easily. “I always do when I see a suspicious car.”

“May we have it, please?” Santos asked.

Mrs. Dovner narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

Anna handed her the paper. Mrs. Dovner glanced down at it and her white brows rose. She looked up, eyes wide. Then she disappeared into her apartment and returned a moment later with a slip of paper which she handed to Santos.

“I told you those two were bad news,” Mrs. Dovner said and turned to Anna. “And you let them into the building. With a neighbor like you it’s a wonder we’re all still alive.”

Her door slammed.

Santos held up the slip Mrs. Dovner had given him. “I’ll see what I can find out,” he said, gave Anna a kiss and hurried out.

* * *

Nettie tapped on the Plexiglass separating her from the cab driver. “Go faster. You’ll lose them.”

The driver shook his head but sped up slightly.

It had been a surprise to see Anna standing outside on the sidewalk. The handsome dark-haired cop with his arm around her must be her boyfriend. Later Nettie would knock on Anna’s door and introduce herself, apologize for rushing by without a word, make up some excuse, stay on her good side.

A vacant cab was passing and Nettie grabbed it. “See that green pickup truck?” she said to the driver as she hopped in and slammed the door. “Follow it.”

“Lady, this ain’t a movie.”

“It’s leaving. Go!”

Now, as the pickup reached the end of the block and turned north on Tenth

Avenue, she leaned forward excitedly, at the same time finding her cell phone and calling Jane Stuart's office.

"Stuart and Willoughby," came the voice of Adena, assistant to Jane and her partner, Daniel Willoughby.

"It's Nettie Clouchet. Is Jane there?"

"Let me check."

After a moment Jane's strong voice came on the line. "No news."

"That's some greeting," Nettie said with a laugh.

"You called five times last week to see if we'd gotten an offer. It seemed pretty likely that was why you were calling this time."

"Well I'm not," Nettie said, "though what I have to tell you may help you get an offer."

"Go on."

"Two Ukrainian men just came out of Anna Winthrop's apartment and one of them threatened to kill the other."

"Really?"

"Really. To be exact, he said—in Ukrainian—'If she gets away I'll kill you.'"

"If who gets away?"

"I think a young woman in their pickup truck. I'm trying to find out who these people are."

"How?"

"I'm in a cab following them. Stay tuned." Nettie snapped her phone shut.

The pickup had gone only a block up Tenth Avenue before turning east on West Forty-Fourth Street. Then it had gone seven blocks, turned south on Park Avenue, gone two blocks and turned west on Forty-Second Street. The cab followed the truck across Madison and Fifth avenues, at which point the truck pulled up in front of a Crazy Ice Cream shop.

"They're getting ice cream?" the driver said.

Nettie ignored him. The two men got out of the truck. While the tall one came around, the short one reached into the truck and helped the young woman out.

"Holy . . ." The driver let out a low whistle. "She's gorgeous."

The two men each took one of the young woman's arms and escorted her not to the ice cream parlor but to a plain glass door next to it. Above the door hung a brown awning. Nettie couldn't tell what this door led to. Maybe an apartment building.

She shoved some bills through the money tray and got out. The two men and the young woman were in front of the glass door, where a uniformed doorman let them in.

Nettie decided to use a technique that often worked for her. Affecting a nonchalant air, she walked briskly toward the glass door, as if she had every right in the world to go through it.

It didn't work.

The doorman's arm shot out, barring the way. "May I help you?"

"I'm visiting someone here." She was careful not to say *someone who lives here*, since she didn't know if this was an apartment building.

"The name, please?" the doorman asked.

"Those three people who just went in."

He frowned skeptically. "And their names?"

"Look, are you going to let me in, or do I have to make trouble?"

“You’re going to have to make trouble, because I’m not going to let you in.”
She decided to try another technique that often worked: outright bluntness.
“What is this building?” she asked.
“It’s private.”
“I know it’s private, but what is it?”
He made no reply, simply glared at her.
She turned and walked away, wondering how she could get in.