

THE LADY IN THE ROOM

When someone steps into my office, it means one of two things – a pay check or trouble. If it's a dame, it's usually just the latter; they rely real heavy on the “in-distress” gambit, and with those who got noble feelings, it works just dandy. Except I haven't. I have to earn a living, don't I?

With a guy, yeah, there are some cheapskates out there, and a lot of them end up here, or places much like it. With them I can play hardball a little and squeeze their pips; they all got troubles for which I occasionally find solutions. If I can't, they pay anyway. I don't work for nothing.

On one hot, unmoving Manhattan day, when the street sounds were forced to fight their way to the second floor, I looked up from nothing and watched a heavy silhouette mark time outside my door. I could tell its owner was looking real carefully at the graven lettering on the frosted glass, *Aaron Baum, Private Investigator*, and he was none too sure he wanted any further introductions. I leaned back and waited; I knew he would knock eventually. They always do.

His knock was firm enough, brusque even, and he strode in without waiting for permission. I recognised him straightaway; he was both expensive and expansive, his suit being of the tailor-made kind, the pinstripe making my eyes itch while he filled the room with a bulk I ain't seen since Big Joe Turner played the *Café Society* club. Don't get me wrong, in this room if you swung two cats by the tail, they might just clear the walls but his size was the intimidating kind and I guess intimidating others is just what a little coercion.

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I pushed back my

“Take a pew, Mr. Marino.”

If knowing his name was supposed to impress him, it didn't. He looked around at the fly-spotted walls.

“Nice place you have here,” he sneered impassively.

“Thank you... if you want to help me decorate sometime, be my guest.”

He narrowed his eyes and sat down.

“Funny guy, huh?”

“Sure, it's the only entertainment around here.”

We sat in silence. Something told me he wasn't too impressed with my attitude, and in the interest of moving things forward, I asked what I could do to help a rich and powerful guy such as himself. I guess he took that as a compliment, as he grinned like a wolf and said he'd come right to the point.

He reached inside his jacket, stretching his waistcoat taut like the skin on a hog, and pulled out a small, neat photograph. Even upside down, I could see it was of a lady with class, her hair and eyebrows were black and as glossy as the paper and when I took the photo, equally dark eyes looked into mine; I