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FRANK KANE

A Johnny Liddell
Mystery

The Fatal Foursome

(Originally titled: ABOUT FACE)

Victor Kalin

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IT STARTED OUT AS A DOG OF A CASE—with Johnny Liddell keeping tabs on a drunken movie star for a fat producer.

But it picked up interest when the actor was found dead in a phony auto accident. Then, two blondes and one brunette later (as Liddell figured time), somebody put a bullet through the producer's fat skull.

A killer seemed bent on giving the morgue a little extra business. Three more customers, to be exact, and one of them was named Johnny Liddell.

***The New York Times* rated it:
“Murder and mayhem in
abundant measure.”**

OTHER BOOKS
BY FRANK KANE

The Living End

Key Witness

Green Light for Death

Red Hot Ice

Frank Kane

**THE FATAL
FOURSOME**

(Originally titled: ABOUT FACE)

A DELL MYSTERY

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Dedication: TO MY WIFE
Without whose pearl-handled horsewhip,
this never could have been possible.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE postage-stamp-sized dance floor was packed. Décolleté ingenues swayed with writers and production men in open-necked sports shirts. A wavy-haired juvenile, whose face was as familiar as the slogan of the hair tonic he endorsed, managed to move on the outer fringe where he was certain to be seen. Here and there scattered through the crowd could be seen tourists, recognizable by their bewildered expressions and stares of stupefaction at the nearness of the great. And the noise of the band was deafening. The Clover Club might not be up to the movies' conception of the last word in hot spots, but what it lacked in glamour it more than made up in clamor.

Hollywood hadn't changed too much, Johnny Liddell decided. He leaned comfortably on the bar with the ease born of long experience, and ordered a double rye.

"Where'd a guy find Julian Goodman, the producer, bud?" he demanded. "They told me I'd probably locate him here."

The bartender looked Johnny over appraisingly, then squinted into the spotlight. He ran his eyes over the crowd clustered around the dance floor.

"Ringside table, third one from the band." He had to raise his voice to be heard over the blare of a corny trumpet.

Liddell's eyes found the table. "And the upholstered broad with him?" he asked. "The one in the black dress."

"Name's Mona Varden," the bartender grunted.

Johnny downed his rye with a gulp, poured a handful of silver on the bar, and shouldered his way through the mob.

"Goodman?" he asked the man who seemed to overflow the tiny chair behind the table.

The producer nodded. He was not only fat, but soft-looking. Dark, damp ringlets made a futile effort to cover the bald spot that gleamed and matched the pinkness of his cheeks and lips. His eyes, two shiny black marbles, were almost lost behind puffy balls of flesh.

“What can I do for you?” His voice sounded choked by the heaviness of his jowls and chins.

“Name’s Liddell. Acme Agency in New York.”

As Johnny answered, his eyes were taking in the fat man’s table companion. Mona Varden was sleek and svelte, and looked to be a few inches taller than Goodman. The low cut of the neckline of her dress revealed the deep hollow between her breasts and served to accentuate their prominence and perfect roundness.

She smiled up at Liddell as she felt his eyes on her. Full, soft-looking lips opened to reveal flawlessly white teeth.

“Turn off the glamour, babe,” Goodman growled at her. “Go comb your hair or something. I got business with this guy.”

He added something under his breath that Johnny Liddell missed. Liddell thought he caught a quick flash of resentment in the girl’s handsome eyes. She merely smiled, however, patted the thick, glistening black coils that were caught up in a knot at the nape of her neck, and rose to her feet. The producer watched the supple figure with poorly disguised interest as it moved across the room. Finally he tore his eyes away reluctantly and focused them on Johnny.

“You the dick Acme’s putting on the Harvey Randolph matter, eh?” His eyes gave Liddell a fast going over.

Liddell dropped into the chair vacated by the girl, fumbled through his pockets, came up with a battered pack of cigarettes. “All I know is that I’m to catch up with you. You got a story to tell. I get paid for listening.”

He shook one badly mangled cigarette loose from the folds of the pack, hung it from his lower lip and settled back.

Goodman scowled. “Okay. But what I got to tell you is confidential, plenty confidential. I don’t want no damn reporters snooping around and I don’t want nobody except maybe us two in on it. For all I know he’s maybe got himself some little floozie and lammed off for a weekend in the country.”

Liddell scratched a paper match negligently across the thin strip of sandpaper on the bottom of the folder. “Maybe if you broke down and let me in from the ground floor I could get more worked up about Randolph and his Lost Weekend. So far it ain’t very exciting.”

The fat man leaned his elbow on the edge of the table, brought his face closer to the detective's. A new hard note crept into his voice. "Get this," he said. "I contacted Acme because back in the old days when I operated from New York, they was a good agency. They used to have some good dicks on their books who could do like they was told and keep their mouth shut. That's what I want. A good dick who can do like he's told and keep his mouth shut. I don't want no comedians. I got too many of those on my payroll already."

Johnny's eyes narrowed slightly. "Sure," he said evenly. "That's understood. And now—what's America's Pretty Boy Number One got himself into?"

Goodman grinned, exposing the yellowed stubs of his teeth. "Don't let them sell you on that Pretty Boy stuff, chum. It wouldn't pay you to take too many bets that he couldn't take you."

Liddell flicked some ash into a saucer on the table. "Okay, okay. So he's Superman, Jack Dempsey and two panzer divisions all rolled into one. What's cooking?"

The producer looked about as if to discover possible eavesdroppers. "He's disappeared," he whispered. "A week or ten days ago. Ain't seen him since."

Across the floor, Mona Varden had left the powder room. Liddell made a mental note that she bounced just a trifle more than was necessary as she walked, but he heartily approved of the effect.

Goodman started to say something further, caught sight of the girl and stopped.

"We can't talk here. Better catch up with me at my office in the morning." He pulled a calling card from his jacket pocket, turned it over, and with the stub of a pencil scribbled an address on the back and passed it over to Liddell. "Make sure you're there by eleven."

The girl reached the table. Trouble with these voluptuous wenches is that they always turn to fat, Liddell mused. But until they do . . .

"Okay. See you in the morning then."

He got to his feet and helped the girl into her chair. She thanked him with her eyes, and the fat man glowered.

Back at the bar Liddell ordered another rye. His watch showed it to be nearly eleven-thirty. He wondered morosely whether he should go to bed or

try to find a wandering crap game and lose the rest of his expense money.

He decided against bed, but even a crap game didn't sound too appealing.

Suddenly he remembered Doc Morrissey. Good old Doc who, as county coroner, helped him break the Macaulay killing.

"Give me a Los Angeles telephone book," he called over to the bartender, "and fill this up again."

His stubby finger ran speedily through the listings and stopped at the line proclaiming, "City Hospital . . . Gouverneur Street." He gulped down the rye, fumbled through his pockets for a nickel and headed for the telephone booth.

A clear young voice answered on the other end. "City Hospital."

"Let me speak to Doc Morrissey." Was his voice getting thick, Liddell wondered, or was that the damned receiver? "Matter of life 'n' death . . ."

He heard the girl's sharp intake of breath, then the buzzing as she rang Morrissey's phone.

"Coroner's office, Dr. Morrissey speaking," the telephone proclaimed.

"Hello, Doc, you old body snatcher! This is Johnny Liddell of Acme."

Doc's voice sounded glad. "Hello, Johnny. Where are you?"

"Over at the Clover Club."

"Hop a cab and come up here. The rye's better and there's no cover charge. Take you only a few minutes and you're just the guy I want to talk to."

"Be right over," Johnny promised.

A mist had blown in from the ocean and City Hospital loomed through it like a sixteen-story ghost, its upper stories lost in the swirling fog. The cab dropped Liddell in front of the long gray flight of stairs that led to its second-story entrance. He peeled a bill from the roll he took from his pocket, tossed it to the driver.

Johnny swore his way to the top of the stairs and addressed the resplendently dressed guardian of the door.

"Hi, Admiral," he panted. "I'm looking for the coroner."

The doorman sized him up carefully, then without a change of expression, grunted, “Any more cracks about the uniform, chum, and all you’ll have to do is open your eyes. You’ll find him bending over you.”

Liddell shook his head sadly. “Brother, after a climb like I just had, I’ll take back talk from Margaret O’Brien. All I want to know is where do I find Doc Morrissey, the coroner.”

The doorman swung the door open ceremoniously. “The information desk is in the lobby, sir.”

A heavy, sickish sweet fog of iodoform descended on Johnny Liddell as he skidded across the highly polished tile lobby. The girl at the switchboard looked freshly scrubbed in her white uniform. Wavy wisps of auburn hair cascaded toward the whiteness of her neck from under the jaunty little starched cap that sat perched on the top of her head. She turned her attention from a pair of white-clad internes as the detective crossed the floor to her desk.

“Whom did you wish to see, sir?”

“Doc Morrissey, the coroner. I’m a corpse and I’ve come to give myself up.”

The girl smiled patiently. “Yes, of course. But what name should I give him?”

Johnny Liddell was still puffing softly. “Just tell him that Johnny Liddell made the balloon ascension of the front steps safely.”

The girl nodded, started plugging wires in the switchboard. She relayed the message, then directed Johnny Liddell to the third floor. “Third door from the end of the corridor, sir. You can’t miss it.”

Doc Morrissey jumped up from his chair behind the desk as Johnny Liddell walked into the room. He was small and chipper with a thatch of untidy gray hair that belied the youthfulness of the grin that split his face from ear to ear.

“Well, well. Back in Hollywood, eh, Johnny? Crime must be picking up.”

Liddell acknowledged the greeting and plopped into a convenient chair. “The guy that built that flight of stairs in front of this butcher shop must’ve had the same kind of sense of humor as the guy that put the hill in front of the poor house.” He looked around hopefully. “What do they use around here to revive a guy that’s on the verge of collapse?”

“Spirits of ammonia,” the coroner informed him.

Johnny nodded sadly. “I might have known. I’ll save my collapse for the more hospitable surroundings of a bar.” He sighed contentedly as the doctor produced a bottle and two glasses from a bottom drawer of the desk. “That kind of ammonia I’ll take.”

Doc Morrissey poured two stiff hookers, put the bottle back in the drawer. “I’m on call tonight,” he explained. “Got to take it easy.” He looked Johnny Liddell over with knowing eyes. “You’re looking top shape, Johnny. Out here on a case?”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “A dog. Trying to find some playboy who wandered off, for a fat producer named Goodman.” He tasted the jigger experimentally, grimaced. “Not like the good old days with a couple of spicy murders.” He tossed off the drink, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

The coroner shook his head. “Wish we had you out here about a week or ten days ago, Johnny. Somebody killed old Maurer.”

Johnny Liddell sat up. “Doc Maurer? Who’d want to kill him? Why, he didn’t have an enemy in the world.”

Morrissey nodded. “Just the same, somebody did. Shot him four times at close range. Any one of the bullets would have been enough.”

The private detective reached over to the desk, helped himself to a cigar from the humidor. “Four shots, eh? Sounds like a professional killer. Those boys never let one do when they can keep squeezing lead out.”

The coroner’s eyes followed the spiral of white smoke as it went ceilingward. “Funny you should say that, Johnny,” he said.

Liddell studied the older man’s face. “Why?”

“Fogarty over in Homicide made the same point the night we found Maurer. Tried to intimate that Doc was messing around with the racket boys, fixing them up and not reporting. All that sort of thing.”

Johnny tapped a light film of ash from the end of the cigar. “Nuts,” he said. “Doc Maurer wasn’t the type to be a gang doctor. He was overloaded with ethics.” He noted the troubled look on the other man’s face. “There’s something else, ain’t there, Doc?”

The coroner nodded. He settled back, fumbled through his pockets, came up with a pack of cigarettes. “When we got to Maurer’s office, all his

instruments were out and the basket was filled with bloodied gauze squares.”

Liddell’s eyes narrowed. “An operation, eh?”

“Yeah. But worse than that. First thing Fogarty spotted were bits of paraffin on the instrument stand and a set of penciled notes.” He indicated the metal filing case with a shake of his head. “I have ’em in there.” He took his time about lighting a cigarette. “Johnny,” he said finally, “that paraffin and those notes meant only one thing: Maurer had performed a plastic surgery operation before he was killed.”

Johnny Liddell rolled the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. “No idea who he did it on?” Doc Morrissey shook his head. “That does look bad. You don’t suppose he *had* been messing around with those babies?”

“I don’t know, Johnny,” the coroner admitted frankly. “I hope not. Doc Maurer was a friend of mine and I have a lot of faith in his integrity.” He shrugged his shoulders in a tired way. “But I haven’t been able to make Fogarty or the others at Homicide see it that way. They’ve been smearing that gang angle over every tabloid in town.”

Johnny Liddell shook his head. “No sign of the killer?”

“No. Not a chance of getting him either. In the first place, even if we knew who he was, the only one who had any idea what he’ll look like after the bandages come off is dead. No, Johnny, I’m afraid we’ll never know who killed old Doc.” He touched a match to the cigarette, blew it out carefully. “The only thing we can do for him is clear his name. I’m afraid we have our job really cut out for us there.”

Liddell grinned, shook his head. “Not us, Doc. You. In case you’ve forgotten, I’m out here for old Acme to do or die for dear old Goodman. That, my dear Doctor, puts it right back into your lap.”

CHAPTER TWO

ELEVEN o'clock the following morning found Johnny Liddell outside the frosted door that bore the legend, *Julian Goodman—Private*.

The reception room wall was heavily lined with autographed photos of movie greats, near greats, have-beens and never-were. A buxom blonde in a dark green sweater sat at a desk in a railing-enclosed space. She stabbed listlessly at the keys of a large desk typewriter, taking excessive care not to fracture the finish on the carefully shellacked fingernails. Above her desk Johnny recognized the cameolike profile of Harvey Randolph.

“Goodman in?” he asked the bored blonde.

She stopped jabbing at the typewriter keys long enough for a pair of unblinking chestnut-colored eyes to approve Johnny’s broad shoulders, his pugnaeous jaw, and the unruly brown hair spiked with gray.

“Might be,” she admitted. “Who wants to know?”

He tossed the penciled notation the producer had given him the night before onto the girl’s desk.

“Liddell. Acme Agency. I’ve got an appointment with him for eleven.”

The girl studied him with new interest. “A dick, huh? Don’t look much like one.” She went back to her typing. “He’s got somebody in there. Be with you in a few minutes.”

Liddell slid into a chair near a table stacked with magazines. He fingered through them, finding little of interest. After a bit, the door marked *Private* swung open and a man came out.

He was beetle-browed, with a gray fedora pulled down low to hide a pair of cold slate eyes. From the set of his bulging shoulders, the bent nose and the hand in the jacket pocket, it didn’t take a Sherlock Holmes to tag him as a professional bodyguard.

Goodman followed him to the door and waved for Liddell to come in.

While the detective settled into a large armchair, the producer waddled around the desk and plumped himself into his swivel chair.

In the early morning light that streamed through a window near the desk, Goodman's pink skin had a greenish tinge. His little black eyes were red-rimmed as though from lack of sleep. He jumped at every muffled noise from the street below.

Goodman pulled a large white handkerchief from his breast pocket, and blew his nose noisily. "Like I started to tell you last night at the club," he began, "Harvey Randolph has disappeared. I want you to find him, and I don't want no publicity on it."

Liddell settled back in his chair and waited. Randolph's disappearance might call for the presence of an Acme operative, but it didn't explain the need for the slate-eyed bodyguard with his bulging shoulders, or the green tinge in Goodman's face.

"There ain't much use for you to go digging around in the kid's past," the producer continued. "I picked him up about a year ago after he clicked in *Forgotten Faces*. Since then he got in the big time. We started shooting on his latest flicker two months ago, and we're right in the middle of it when he takes off. Like I said, maybe he's got himself a floozie and is off on a little trip. You know how it is. But then, maybe . . ."

His voice trailed off. Johnny watched with interest while the producer dug into a lower drawer and came up with a bottle and two glasses. His hand shook as he poured out two stiff pegs. Without waiting for Liddell to take his, he downed the rye with a gulp.

"I'm a little worried about that kid," Goodman resumed. "You got him wrong with that Pretty Boy stuff. Way wrong. He's an East Side kid; his real tag is Angie Petrillo. Grew up tough and got into a couple of small jams while he's still a punk. Served time on one of them. . . ."

Liddell downed his rye. It was better than the other stuff he'd had since he hit town.

"Then he came out here as an extra." The producer's voice quavered just a trifle as he spoke. "Got himself a couple of spots by playing up to that hag, Daisy Downs."

"She the one who writes that syndicated column?"

Goodman sneered. "Yeah. On the make for every new kid that comes out here. Randolph's good-looking and he's smart. He plays his angles, and the first thing you know he's riding high."

The sharp peal of the telephone interrupted him. He grabbed the receiver from the hook and jabbed it against his ear.

“Yeah?” he snapped.

Liddell fancied he could see the green tinge seep upward. The pinkness left the fat man’s face, leaving it a muddy white.

“I told you I’d make it right, didn’t I?” he snarled into the mouthpiece. “You’ll have to wait. I’ll get back to you later. I got somebody with me now.”

He dropped the receiver back on the hook with a ham-like hand that shook visibly and poured himself another stiff hooker. He downed it neat, wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the palm of his hand, and made a forced effort to compose himself.

“Damned directors,” he growled. “Always trying to run the show.” He poured another drink, drank it more slowly. “To get back to Randolph,” he said, “I want him found as soon as possible. We’re holding up production on a picture that’s costing us millions.”

Liddell leaned forward. “Do I get to ask any questions?”

The producer leaned back in his chair. His breath was coming more evenly. “Depends on what questions you ask.”

“What happens to the picture if Randolph don’t get himself found pronto?”

The fat man’s marblelike eyes receded even farther behind their pouches. “We shelve it.”

Liddell’s voice was careless. “That sounds expensive. Don’t somebody take an awful shellacking on the dough already spent?”

Goodman waved his hand to indicate that the interview was at an end. “You know all you gotta know. Find Randolph and find him fast. If you need dough, contact my girl. She signs the checks. Anything else you want, ask her. And on your way out, send that gorilla in that’s waiting out there.”

Liddell shrugged, dragged himself to his feet. Mentally he cursed the tough break that had him in the west when the call came through for an Acme man to report in Hollywood. Playing nursemaid to a movie star!

The bodyguard was sitting in the chair by the table. He looked up from the picture magazine he was reading when Liddell came out of the door marked *Private*.

“Goodman wants you, bud,” Johnny told him.

Without a word he got up, brushed past Liddell and went into the office.

The blonde in the green sweater was polishing her nails.

“Nice talkative guy, isn’t he?” Johnny commented.

She raised her eyes for a moment, then dropped them back to her nails. “Maybe he didn’t have anything to say.”

The detective pulled a fresh pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. He stripped off the cellophane and tore open the tinfoil.

“Smoke?” he asked. The girl shook her head. “Goodman told me if there was anything I wanted you’d get it for me.”

She continued to polish her nails.

“In that case, I can’t think of anything I want more right now than that Mona Varden baby. Got her number?”

The girl hesitated for a minute, looked up at him as if to determine whether or not he was fooling. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she started to dial. She listened, and handed the receiver over.

“ ‘Allo!” a voice on the other end responded.

“Hello. This is Johnny Liddell. Remember last night I decided when it was time for you to powder your nose?”

The voice on the other end was silent as though its owner was busy remembering. When it was heard again it was thick with accent. “But of course. Las’ night at the Clover Club eet was. The beeg fello wit’ the wild ’air. How clevaire to find my numbaire so queeck. . . .”

Johnny grimaced. “How about my dropping by for a drink if I bring the drink?” he asked. “I want to talk.”

“Eet ees not usual for me to entertain here.” The voice seemed dubious beneath the accent. “But eef you care to come een half hour, I expec’ to be free then.”

“It’s a date, beautiful. How do I get there?”

He copied down the address on the back of an old envelope, then handed the receiver back to the no longer bored blonde.

“Good hunting,” she called after him as he started through the door.

The Alvarado Arms was an ornate apartment house boasting a doorman dripping braid in the naval manner and a receptionist in the lobby. The elevator boys looked more like movie juveniles than most movie juveniles.

Mona Varden answered his knock herself. Her thick black hair was caught just above the ears by a gaily colored ribbon, then cascaded down onto her shoulders. A silk blouse accentuated her shapeliness and the prominence of her breasts, while her carefully tailored slacks gave evidence of being well filled.

“You are mos’ prompt.” She smiled. “Eet is not more than half hour sence you call.”

Once again Liddell tried to place the accent, and failed. She took his hat, dropped it on a table in the foyer and led the way through a slightly over-furnished living room, out onto a sun porch that was hung perilously from the side of the house, with no apparent support from below.

She dropped onto a large couch set against the wall of the building and drew her knees up under her. Liddell drew a bottle from his pocket and placed it on the table near the couch.

“Best cognac I could buy,” he commented. “Since the war, they get your right eye and a mortgage on your right arm for the stuff. Any glasses around?”

She pointed to a small barrel-shaped table in the center of the porch.

“Eet’s a small bar. You’ll find glasses and ice.”

He was acutely conscious of the fact that her eyes were sizing him up as he brought two glasses out and placed them on top of the table. He poured three fingers of cognac into each glass.

“Any soda?”

“No, thank you.” She smiled. “Jus’ cognac.”

He brought over her glass and slid onto the couch next to her.

“You came here to talk, no?” She smiled.

“Believe it or not, unlike Marc Antony and the millions of plagiarists who’ve been getting giggles on his best line, I did come here to talk.” He raised his glass and clicked it against hers. “To our conversation.”

“To our conversation, may eet be mutually profitable.”

He nodded and they drank to it.

“There are a couple of things that’ve been tickling my curiosity. For instance, I’m curious to know more about Julian Goodman and Harvey Randolph.”

Her eyes, when they met his, were wide. “Ees there anything to know?”

“Yeah. I’m curious to know why Harvey Randolph cut loose from Daisy Downs’ stable to run under the Goodman colors. Daisy could have put him in the big time while Goodman’s definitely bush league for this territory.”

The girl warmed her glass with the palms of her hands and inhaled the bouquet of the cognac.

“How curious deed you say you were?” she asked.

The detective shrugged. “Say about five hundred dollars’ worth.”

Mona Varden laughed. “You’re not very curious, are you? I thought you were at least twice that curious.”

Liddell pulled a worn wallet from an inside pocket.

“At that, it’d be worth a grand not to go through life wondering.”

The girl carefully folded the ten crisp century notes and pushed them into the pocket of her slacks. She held her glass out for more cognac, and Liddell filled both glasses. He was beginning to feel his blood pounding a steady beat in his ears.

“How about it, baby?” he asked. “Why is Goodman scared skinny of Pretty Boy Randolph?”

“Goodman has enough on Randolph to run him back to the sticks if he doesn’t play ball. I think he’s half scared Randolph will take a crack at clearing the slate . . . for good.” She said it as casually as if she had asked for a cigarette.

It took a moment or two for it to sink in. Could that have been where the call in Goodman’s office came from?

“That Lacy Pants,” Liddell snorted. “He’d shudder before killing a fly.”

The girl laughed again, harshly. “Don’t let that baby face fool you,” she warned. “He was doing time in reform school before he was fifteen.”

“What for?”

“Stabbed some kid in an argument. After he got out, he ran around with a tough mob and just missed a real jolt by being in the can on a disorderly

conduct rap the night some of his playmates stuck up a garage and killed the attendant.”

The girl lighted a cigarette and flipped the match out over the edge of the porch.

“That what Goodman’s been holding over the kid’s head?” Liddell asked.

“Part of it,” the girl admitted.

“Incidentally, what’s happened to the accent?”

She pulled a pillow up behind her head and settled back comfortably. “That’s just for the tourist trade,” she answered glibly. “Any guy that’s carrying around a grand for loose change isn’t exactly a tourist in my book.”

Liddell grunted. “I was wondering what kind of an accent it was.”

“Brooklyn.” The girl grinned. “Williamsburg to be exact.”

Johnny fumbled for a minute before finding his cigarettes. “Well, what about Lacy Pants?”

“Goodman knew all about the trouble back in the Big Town, knew that Harvey had served time. After *Forgotten Faces* was previewed, it was a cinch that Harvey Randolph was headed for the big dough.”

“Sure, sure.” Liddell’s eyes were closed, his voice was dreamy. “But how’d he persuade the kid to cut loose from that old barnacle who was building him into a real star with her column and let himself be farmed out to the Goodman stable?”

The girl flicked her cigarette up into the air. It made a wide arc upward, rising slowly to its peak, turning in the air, then increasing in its speed downward until it hit the floor with a force that sent sparks scattering in all directions.

“That’s Hollywood,” she said. “It’s a long, hard grind up, but when you’re on your way down, you go like a bat out of hell, and when you hit bottom . . .!”

She took a deep swallow out of her glass. There was a new color in her cheeks, a sparkle in her eyes.

“Right after *Forgotten Faces* the studio tossed a big party in Harvey’s honor. He got himself stinko for fair. Goodman’s been looking for a chance to get at him, so he hires a good-looking doll to make a play for the kid.

Harvey goes for this dame in a big way, and they manage to skip plenty early. Next thing Harvey knows, he wakes up the next morning and this babe is standing there with nothing on but an appendix scar and there's a copper with her. She's yelling like hell that she's only sixteen. . . ."

"Oh, oh." The detective clucked sympathetically without opening his eyes.

"Well, the copper shakes Randolph and drags him into the bathroom and sticks his head under the shower. He tells the kid that it's a tough rap and does he know anybody who can put in the fix for him. The kid thinks as hard as his hangover'll let him and says no."

The girl paused and leaned over to add a little soda to her glass. Johnny Liddell sighed and enjoyed the effect.

"Well," she continued, entirely oblivious of the stare, "this copper who's in on the con with Goodman and the dame, tells the kid he knows Goodman the producer and that Goodman can make it straight. The kid thinks of his record back east, knows what'll happen if the tabloids get their teeth into the story and gives the copper the office to put in the fix."

"Sounds like a nice picture with a frame to match," the detective grunted. "Then?"

The girl pulled another cigarette from the pack, lighted it and inhaled deeply. "So that's how Goodman got Randolph's name on the dotted line. He pays the kid practically peanuts, lends him out to other studios for ten times what he pays him." She exhaled two feathery blue tendrils of smoke. "That's okay until a couple of weeks ago. Then one night Harvey's playing house with Goodman's wife and she lets slip to Randolph that the fat boy had done a job on him. That's all Randolph had to hear. He does a little checking around and finds out that the dame was a plant and could have played the grandmother in *Birth of a Nation* without makeup. He went on a two-week toot and at the end of it tried to take fat boy apart."

"That would take a lot of doing, baby."

Mona Varden grinned lazily. "Just the same, Goodman got himself a good scare. He must still be scared. The last day or so I've seen him with a gorilla who never gets farther away from him than a two-way stretch."

"The guy with the tin ear? I saw him today in the office."

"Yeah. But it doesn't look like he'll be needing him. For my dough, Randolph's off on another toot." She shrugged. "He'll show up as soon as

his money runs out. He'll come back nice and tame.”

Liddell reached across the girl for the bottle, turned it up and half filled his glass. “Empty already?” he growled. “You don't get your money's worth in this town.”

The girl poured half of her glass into his, moved a little closer. “I don't know about that,” she said. “You haven't really tried.”

It was just a few minutes after deadline when Johnny Liddell strolled through the city room of the *Dispatch*. The jangling of phones and the angry chatter of typewriters had stopped, and the reporters were enjoying a last minute smoke.

Toni Belden was listening to an argument between the political editor and the City Hall man on the probable outcome of the next election, when she caught sight of the detective making his way across the paper-littered floor.

“Well, look who's here! Johnny Liddell, the answer to a sob sister's prayer.”

Johnny grinned. “Hi, beautiful. How is the sob sister business these days?”

The girl smiled. “Should be picking up with Johnny Liddell in town.”

Johnny made a grimace and rubbed his chin. “Seems to me the last time I was in town I turned up two cold-blooded murderers, if I ever saw two, and by the time Toni Belden was through finding all their hidden virtues, I practically got run out of town.”

“That was last time, Johnny. What's cooking this time?”

“Nothing startling, gorgeous. Thought maybe you could do with a drink for old times' sake. Angelo's still in business, isn't he?”

Toni Belden ran her fingers over the thick, black mass of her curls, dexterously tucked in a runaway curl, picked up a hat from the corner of her desk. She opened the oversized handbag, quickly applied lipstick, and got up.

“Angelo is still in business, I'm dryer than a censored cablegram from Moscow, and I'm dying with curiosity to know what you're trying to pump out of me now.”

Johnny Liddell grinned. "That's hardly fair," he protested.

Outside the building, they walked down what looked like an alley, and went in a green door set in the red brick rear wall of a building. They found themselves in a bar room where half a dozen men were drinking. Toni exchanged greetings with the bartender and they passed on into an inner room where there were cloth-covered tables.

The bartender followed them in and helped Toni into a chair. "Same like in the old days, Mr. Liddell?" he asked, rubbing his palms together.

Johnny nodded. "Double brandy for me, Angelo, and a whisky straight for Miss Belden. Just keep them coming until she yells for mercy."

Toni Belden took off her hat, fluffed the blue-black hair and looked at Johnny Liddell expectantly. "I'd like to believe it was these baby eyes that brought you scampering back, Johnny, but something my mamma done tole me tells me better. What's on the menu?"

Johnny Liddell scowled and was silent for a moment. Angelo returned with two double brandies and two ryes on a tray. He bared two gleaming rows of teeth in an apologetic grin. "Excuse, please. I get busy outside, Mr. Liddell, so I bring them two at a time to save time."

Johnny Liddell watched the bartender's departing back until it had disappeared through the unpainted door, then picked up one of the double brandies and tilted his chair. "Your mammy was a very suspicious old gal," he chided. "Matter of fact, I'm not so sure that I know what I am looking for."

The girl offered no comment, but watched him with large, deep blue eyes. She tossed off a rye and shuddered slightly.

"I did come down here on a case," he admitted after downing his brandy, "but it turns out to be a nursemaid job for a movie drunk." He growled under his breath. "I guess it'll wind up with me checking all the tourist cabins in the Valley."

The girl opened her large purse, fumbled through the contents for a few moments, then emerged with a pack of cigarettes. She dumped several cigarettes out onto the table, perched one in the corner of her mouth, and applied a match.

"One of those, eh?" she sympathized. "Who's it this time?"

"Harvey Randolph. Know anything about him?"

The girl inhaled deeply on the cigarette, then exhaled slowly through her nostrils. “That swoon goon? What’s he done?”

“Disappeared,” Liddell grunted. “The agency caught me at Tucson and shipped me on to look him up and bring him back alive.”

“Who’d want him back?” the girl asked.

Johnny Liddell cocked an eyebrow inquiringly. “Who’d want him back? His studio for one. He’s in the middle of a picture and it’s costing them important sugar every day he stays away.”

Toni Belden knocked the ash from the end of her cigarette into an empty rye glass and shook her head. “That studio don’t give a damn if Randolph never shows up. Not if they’re smart—and nobody ever accused Goodman of being a dope. Randolph’s washed up. Finished.”

Johnny Liddell let that one sink in. He picked up a cigarette from the table, tapped it on his nail. “Come again, newshawk. I’m not much of a movie fan, but from what I’ve heard that guy could pack Radio City with teen-agers if he was appearing in a travelogue.”

Toni Belden nodded her agreement. “That’s right. Only he won’t appear in Radio City or any other place in a travelogue or any other picture. The rap is in on him. Undesirable character. Every parent-teacher group in the country would be down Goodman’s neck if he tried to release that picture.” She started to lift the glass of rye to her lips, stopped with it halfway. “Say, who did hire you to find Harvey?”

Johnny Liddell grinned. “Goodman. What gets me is why the hell he should throw good money after bad by hiring Acme to find him.” He shrugged. “Well, it’s his dough. Let’s spend it.”

He pounded on the table with the bottom of his glass. The bartender stuck his head in the door and grinned.

“More of the same, Angelo.”

They were silent until the bartender placed two brandies and two ryes in front of them. Then, after Angelo had closed the door, the girl lifted her glass. “Something bothering you, Johnny?” she asked.

Johnny Liddell frowned. “There’s something about this whole case that has the odor of herring,” he admitted, “but I can’t put my finger on it. Anyway, let’s not worry about that tonight. Tomorrow’ll be a swell day for worrying. To crime.” He tossed off the two brandies one after the other.

The girl tried to follow suit with her drink, gasped, then shuddered. After a brief coughing spell, she wiped her eyes and grinned. “Angelo doesn’t use as much fusel-oil in his rye as he used to.”

CHAPTER THREE

THE phone jangled so hard it practically danced off the stand near the head of the bed. Johnny Liddell groaned, turned over and tried to bury his head in the covers. Undiscouraged, the phone continued to scream at him. A hand stole out, felt blindly for the receiver, dragged it back under the covers where it made contact with the detective's ear.

"Yeah?" he growled.

The receiver spoke back with a metallic click. "That you, Johnny?"

An irritated consciousness was beginning to wipe the sleep from Liddell's eyes. "Who the hell did you think would be answering my phone at three in the morning? Who's this?"

The receiver laughed at him. "That's what you get for going to bed so early, Sherlock." There was a slight pause. "Johnny, this is Toni and I'm down at the morgue."

"Purely a social visit, I trust," he mumbled. "And even so, what kind of an excuse is that for waking me up in the middle of the night? I'm working on a case, and . . ."

"You *were* working on a case," the girl corrected him. "That's why I called you. You don't have to look for Harvey Randolph any more. We've got him here on ice for you."

"What!" He sat up. "Randolph? A bump-off?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Sherlock. No blood, no murder. Just a plain, every day, drunken driving accident. Tried to make a Buick climb a tree."

Johnny Liddell swung his legs out of bed, started to fumble into his trousers. "When and where?"

"Last night on the Montebello Parkway. Highway patrol saw the flames and got there in time to pull out enough of him to identify." She sounded slightly ill. "He's not very pretty now, Johnny."

Johnny shrugged into a shirt. "I can imagine. Doc Morrissey handling the details?"

The girl told him yes.

“Good. I’ll be right over. Wait for me.” As an after-thought he added, “You sound like a drink would be in order.”

“You’re not kidding, Johnny. Only, this is California and after midnight you’re likely to stay dryer than the Sahara, particularly out in this neck of the woods.”

Johnny grinned. “Maybe so. But have you tried the bottom right-hand drawer in Doc Morrissey’s office? I understand it has an all-night license.”

The morgue was in the basement of City Hospital. The thin, bald man at the desk looked up hopefully at the detective’s approach.

“I’m Johnny Liddell. Doc Morrissey expects me.”

The little bald man nodded with a smile. “Right this way, sir, right this way.” He led the way to a large white door set in the rear wall. “Terrible about that young movie actor, wasn’t it?” he gloated. “You should see him. The flames sure did things to that profile of his. Just goes to show we’re all human, all right.”

He pushed open the heavy door. A blast of hot, carbolic-laden air came out to envelop them. The little bald-headed man led the way to the rear of the windowless room where a small group huddled around one of several white enamel examining tables.

As Johnny Liddell came up to it, he could see that the table was covered with a canvas sheet which bulged in a manner suggestive of a body. He looked around the group, nodded to Doc Morrissey and fixed questioning eyes on Julian Goodman. The fat man’s face glowed wetly under the light of the single high-powered bulb in the enameled reflector above the body.

“Randolph?” Johnny Liddell indicated the bulging canvas.

Goodman nodded. “Crazy fool. Drove his car into a tree.”

“Mind if I take a look, Doc?” Johnny Liddell asked the coroner.

A white-dressed attendant caught a corner of the canvas, dragged it back. Johnny Liddell saw the charred, blackened remains of what had been a face. The hair was singed almost completely off it, white teeth gleamed whitely through what once were lips. No one had bothered to close the eyes, if there were any lids left, and the whites showed as they stared upward into the light.

“Not very pretty, is he?” Goodman’s voice sounded more choked than ever.

Johnny Liddell nodded to the attendant who dragged the sheet back over the face. “Sure did a job on him,” he assented. “It’s Randolph, all right?”

Morrissey nodded. “His personal papers, wallet, keys and jewelry weren’t touched.” He turned to the white-garbed attendant. “I’ve got somebody coming down from his dentist’s office with a dental chart just to make sure. Take care of him.”

The attendant nodded.

“Well, I guess that does it,” Doc Morrissey announced. “You fellows are welcome to a drink if you’d like to come upstairs.”

Julian Goodman shook his head. “I’ve had enough of this place for one night,” he blubbered. “I’m going on home.” He turned to Johnny Liddell. “Drop by the office in the morning. I’ll make out a check.” He tried a feeble attempt at a grin that fell flat. “I guess we won’t need any private ops to keep tabs on him now.” He nodded his good-bys, and waddled through the door.

“Long as you’re awake, Johnny,” Morrissey suggested, “how about a nightcap?”

Johnny grinned. “You got any liquor up in that padded cell of yours?” he asked.

The coroner turned to stare at him. “Hell, you know I have. Damn good liquor, too.”

“You mean you had,” Liddell corrected. “Right now Toni Belden is up there, and if I know that little newshawk, she’s put a fair-sized slug on that hoard of yours.”

Doc Morrissey shook his head sadly. “That’s what I get for letting an unethical ghoul like you know my innermost secrets. Oh, well.” He led the way into an inner vault where cold, damp air clung clammily to their faces. A long row of oversized drawers lined the far wall. Doc Morrissey tugged at the bottom drawer in the second row. It came out with a screeching protest.

Johnny Liddell had only a quick glimpse of a portion of putty white flesh, a shock of ragged, dirty white hair, a mask of a face fixed in a horrible grin. He saw Doc Morrissey fumble at the flaccid side of the corpse, and come up with a bottle.

“Always like to keep a bottle in reserve,” he grinned. “Old John Doe here’ll be going out tomorrow so I’d have to move it anyway.”

Toni Belden was sitting in the heavy leather over-stuffed chair in Doc Morrissey’s office as they walked in. She held up the empty bottle, tragically tilted it to show its condition.

“You got here just a minute too late, Doctor,” she said. “The patient just passed away.”

The coroner grinned. “I’m sure you did everything you could to make his last moments happy ones.” He placed the new bottle on his desk. “I never liked our friend down there.” He sighed. “He always typified everything I detest in Hollywood. Just the same, it’s a tough way for him to go out.”

Toni Belden shrugged. “Maybe it’s a break. If he had enough of a face left, Goodman would insist on putting him on display and that teen-aged following of his would be taking the contact lenses right out of his eyes for souvenirs.”

Johnny Liddell watched the coroner approximate a double shot in each of two lily cups. “So Glamour Pants wore contact lenses? Too conceited to wear glasses, the lug.”

Morrissey handed one of the cups to Johnny, took the other himself. He grinned at Toni. “Too much of a good thing robs it of its value. You’ve had enough for now, newshound.” He held the glass up in silent toast, drank it down.

Johnny Liddell emptied his cup, reached over on the desk and helped himself to a cigarette. “What happens to those contact lenses in a fire? They’re plastic, aren’t they, Doc?”

The coroner nodded. “I imagine nothing would happen to them.” He hung a cigarette from the corner of his mouth, accepted a light.

The private detective looked up in surprise. “What do you mean, you imagine? What happened to the ones Randolph was wearing?”

“Randolph wasn’t wearing any,” the coroner growled. “You saw his eyes. They were perfectly clear of any kind of lenses.”

Toni Belden pursed her lips. “Could they have burned or melted or something?”

“Not a chance, Toni. If they’d burned, they would have seared the eyeball so badly it would be immediately apparent. The eyeballs weren’t seared at all. As for melting, that’s ridiculous.”

Toni Belden sighed, leaned back. “I might have known that as soon as Johnny Liddell hit town, things would start popping.”

Johnny Liddell grunted. “Meaning?”

“Meaning that Harvey Randolph, the Swoon Goon of the Nation, was murdered.” The girl calmly contemplated the effect of her announcement. “I’m positive Randolph was nearly blind without those contact lenses and wouldn’t take a step without them.”

Johnny Liddell allowed that to sink in. “Maybe he was stewed to the skin and forgot to put them on. That might explain how he managed to find that tree in the dark.” He turned to the coroner. “Any idea of how snooted he really was, Doc?”

Doc Morrissey shook his head. “Not yet,” he said, “but I’ve got a couple of the boys down the lab doing blood analysis and stuff. Is it important?”

Toni Belden stared. “You kidding? Is it important that Harvey Randolph was murdered? It would just about break a scare headline in every paper in the country.” She examined her nails for a second, then looked up. “You know, it would make my editor very happy if we were to break this story.”

Johnny Liddell shook his head vigorously. “That would kick the whole deal over. In the first place, we’re just guessing. And if you run that story now, it would give the killer a chance to cover up his tracks.”

The coroner nodded his confirmation.

“Okay,” Toni Belden agreed, “I’ll make a deal with you. Our last edition is already on the street. We don’t come out again until late tomorrow. If I phoned in now we’d put out an extra, but if I have your word that nobody else gets it, I’ll hold off until the late afternoon edition.”

Morrissey looked worried. “You really sound as though you believe it’s murder, Toni.”

The girl reporter nodded. “I don’t believe it—I know it!”

“Call the lab and see what they say, Doc?” Johnny Liddell suggested. “This screwball sounds like she’s on the hop, but there’s just a possibility that she’s got something.”

The coroner nodded. He took the receiver from the house phone, punched a button on the board. After a moment, "Brewster? This is Morrissey. Finished with the Randolph analysis? Oh, I see. Well, just let me have the essentials on the alcohol concentration." He scribbled a few notes on a sheet of paper. "You're sure about the stomach content? Okay. I'd like a detailed report first thing in the morning."

Johnny Liddell watched wordlessly as the older man ran his stubby fingers through the gray thatch and studied his notes. Then he looked up.

"Concentration of alcohol in the blood .009. Stomach analysis shows no food, six ounces of alcohol," he announced. His forehead was ridged in an effort at concentration.

"Something screwy, Doc?"

Morrissey nodded. "I think so." He leaned back. "You see, alcohol is absorbed directly into the blood from the stomach and the small intestine. It isn't digested like other foods. The maximum concentration of alcohol occurs in the blood from twenty minutes to two hours after it's been consumed."

Johnny Liddell flipped his butt in the direction of the wastebasket. "Depending on what, Doc?"

The coroner pursed his lips. "Several factors. For instance, how much food is in the stomach. If he'd just had a large meal the alcohol would take that much longer to be absorbed. Or if it were diluted—that slows up absorption, too."

"But his stomach was empty?" Toni Belden asked.

"Empty except for six ounces of alcohol, Toni," Doc Morrissey pointed out. "And as for the concentration of alcohol, there wasn't enough to have any effect whatsoever. Less than one per cent concentration does not interfere in any way with the functioning of the mind or body. So, our little friend was not drunk."

Johnny Liddell rubbed the back of his hand across his chin. "That six ounces in his stomach, Doc. What's that mean?"

"That's what bothers me, Johnny. His stomach had no food, so that alcohol should have been absorbed in no more than a half hour. He cracked up at least thirty miles from the closest place he could have gotten that alcohol."

"Any sign of a bottle in the car?"

The coroner shook his head. “No. I suppose he could have thrown it out, but I doubt it. You see, Johnny, if he was drinking as he drove alone, he must have drunk those six ounces fast. In that case, absorption would have been speeded up to a point where there’d be very little alcohol left in the stomach.”

Liddell nodded. “I get it, Doc. That gives this whole business a very fishy odor.” He turned to the girl. “That, plus the contact lenses. How sure are you about the lenses, Toni?”

“Positive, Johnny,” she assured him. “I remember the fuss it kicked up when one of the contact lens outfits used his picture in connection with an ad. The studio thought it hurt his glamour appeal—something like being bald or having flat feet.” She shrugged. “You don’t have to take my word for it, Sherlock. It’s in the files at the office.”

“Why don’t we just drop down there and have a look at it?” Johnny Liddell suggested. “Maybe it’ll give us some ideas.”

The coroner held up a warning finger. “Look, you two. No funny business. Remember, it’s my office takes the licking on these cases. I’ve already got one headache in the Maurer killing without having another one in this one.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “Don’t worry, Doc. We won’t do a thing without keeping you informed.”

The *Dispatch* morgue was a metal-drawer mausoleum presided over by Pop Michaels, veteran of the city room for over forty years, and now relegated to charge of the files and the occasional pounding out of death notices.

He took the charred briar from between his teeth and wheezed a welcome to the detective.

“Hello, Johnny. Don’t tell me they’ve farmed you out to the obit beat, too?” He winked at Toni Belden. “If not, this is sure a late hour to read your press clippings.”

Liddell shook the old man’s hand. “Nothing like that, Pop,” he said. “Just came by to say hello.”

The old man jammed the briar back between his teeth and ran his hand over the silver bristles on his chin. “Now that’s a tough one for an old feller

to swallow, Johnny. You sure it wasn't because you're after information of some kind?"

Johnny grinned. "Come to think of it, I could use some, Pop." He parked himself on the edge of the shabby desk. "Getting giddy in my old age. I wanted to read up a bit on this movie glamour boy, Harvey Randolph."

Pop shrugged. "He's off my beat, Johnny. Got a lot of stuff in the files, though, if you want to see it."

"I'm trying to prove to old Sherlock here that Randolph wore contact lenses, Pop." Toni Belden grinned. "He's not going to be satisfied until he sees it in black and white."

Johnny Liddell pushed his gray fedora back on his head. "She's trying to destroy all my illusions, Pop. Next she'll be telling me that Van Johnson wears a toupee."

The old man grinned, then shuffled away down the line of filing cabinets toward the rear. He was back in a moment with two bulging manila envelopes and handed them to the girl.

Toni emptied the contents of the Randolph file on a long library table and she and the detective pored through it. Yellowing clippings, rotogravure prints, and news photos all detailed the rise of an obscure extra to stardom.

It was Toni who found the ad. It showed Harvey Randolph in full face with the caption, *You never knew he wore them*. On the margin was written, *Yanked after first edition*.

Johnny Liddell nodded gravely. "That's another strike on the accident theory," he conceded. "I think we'd better run through the rest of this junk and see what turns up."

A half hour later, he loosened his collar and tossed his sixth butt to the concrete floor. He held a two-column cut in his hand. The date was six weeks earlier.

"Ever see this, Toni?" he asked.

Toni Belden studied the picture for a moment. It showed Harvey Randolph, Julian Goodman, and a third man at a large cluttered desk that Johnny Liddell recognized as the fat man's. The caption stated that Producer Goodman had just insured his star's profile for a quarter of a million dollars as a guarantee that his latest epic would not be delayed.

“Publicity malarkey,” Toni Belden sneered. “If they can’t get their snoots in the rags one way, they’ll do it another—upside down, if necessary.”

Johnny Liddell tightened his collar again. “Maybe so, but suppose it isn’t just publicity. Suppose Goodman does get a quarter of a million if anything happens to Randolph. That could take him off the nut on this flopperoo he’s stuck with, wouldn’t it?”

“And then some,” Toni Belden admitted. “Say, you don’t think Goodman’s mixed up in this in any way?”

Johnny rubbed his chin. “I don’t know. You told me that Randolph could never finish that picture, or if he did it wouldn’t be allowed to play any of the decent houses. Why?”

Toni Belden made a face as though she had a bitter taste in her mouth. “Randolph got to playing around with some pretty shabby characters during the last two months. A couple of weeks ago a reform outfit here in town goosed the police into doing something about a string of orgies supposedly being held in one of the flea-traps downtown. Randolph got caught flat-footed right in the middle of it. The reform boys served notice on the exhibitors’ association that if Randolph made any more pictures, they’d blast the whole story and him with it.”

“So Goodman had no reason to want Randolph found, eh? Yet he hires Acme to find him. Then Randolph supposedly kills himself and drops a wad of coin into friend Goodman’s rapidly disappearing lap. Sounds faintly screwy, my sweet.”

Toni Belden nodded. “Awful screwy, but it could make a swell story.”

“Yeah, it could. Where’s the phone?”

Toni Belden pointed to the end of the corridor. In a moment the detective was connected with Doc Morrissey.

“What is it?” Morrissey’s voice was anxious.

“It’s murder, all right, Doc. My guess is that Goodman knocked the kid off, faked an accident to collect on insurance. Anything on your end to substantiate that theory?”

Doc Morrissey’s voice was muffled. “After you left, I went down and gave the stiff another going over.” He paused as though to take a breath. “I found a skull fracture that we’d passed up before as something that might have happened when he banged his head against the windshield. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Anything else?”

“No, except that the dental chart checks out. It’s Randolph, all right.”

Johnny nodded into the mouthpiece. “It all fits. He has a couple of drinks with Goodman or whoever Goodman’s hatchet man was, gets banged over the head. Goodman forgets the contact lenses, or maybe it’s some guy doing the job who didn’t know about them. They stick the body into the car, fix the face so it’ll burn plenty, then ram the jalopy into the tree.”

“What do we do now?”

“Sit tight. Give me eight or ten hours before you break it. Maybe we can break the solution right along with the announcement. But this much is dead certain, Doc—it’s murder. Cold-blooded, deliberate murder.”

CHAPTER FOUR

AN hour later, Johnny Liddell was leaning comfortably on the highly polished bar of an exclusive little “bottle club” which did a roaring, if not entirely legal, all-night business. He scowled at the oily ring left round the inside of his glass by the Brooklyn varnish the bartender proudly announced as brandy. He was less annoyed by the fact that the man he had been hired to find was dead, than because he might have to stay in Hollywood long enough to name his own client as the killer!

The bartender shuffled down to where he stood. “Your name Johnny Liddell, bud?”

Johnny nodded.

“Operator’s got that long-distance call you put through.” He jerked his head vaguely in the direction of a row of telephone booths in the outer hall.

Downing the remains of his brandy unhurriedly, Johnny shouldered his way through the two-deep crowd at the bar to the phone booth.

Steve Baron’s voice was half sleepy, half angry.

“What the hell’s the idea of tagging me with a collect call at this hour of the morning, Liddell? What’ve you got outside of d.t.’s that couldn’t wait until morning?”

Johnny Liddell laughed. “Just wanted to tell you that the guy we’re getting paid to find just ended up on a slab in the county morgue.”

“Is that any reason to get me out of bed?” Steve Baron grouched. “So he’s dead. We’ll send out a bill and it gets paid. So what?”

“Yeah, but there’s something awful screwy going on out here.”

The Acme home agency chief’s snort was plainly audible over the three thousand miles of wire. “Of course there’s something screwy. It’s Hollywood, ain’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s Hollywood all right—with our client head and shoulders ahead in a murder suspect race. In my book, he’s leading contender for the Client Most Likely to End in the Gas Chamber. What’s etiquette in a case like that?”

Steve Baron's voice was a shade more thoughtful. "That ain't good. Got any ideas?"

"Yeah. I got an idea all hell is going to break loose. This guy Randolph was washed up in pictures, but Goodman had him insured for a quarter of a million. Looks like a squeeze on the insurance company."

"Good, good," Steve Baron grunted. "I'll get with the insurance boys and see if I can't fix for a retainer. As long as we've got to suffer through this, we might as well get paid for it."

"That's damn nice of you, Baron," Johnny Liddell snorted. "You're safe in New York while I'm likely to get snowed under in a hailstorm of lead when the wind-up to this thing comes."

"Look, Liddell"—the sharp note was creeping back into Baron's voice—"that's what you get paid for. Besides, if I want a weather report, I'll buy a paper. This call is costing me important dough."

"Okay, okay. It'll probably come off my expense account anyway. What do I do next?"

"Seems to me the first thing you got to do is get to Goodman. After all, he is our client. Maybe you got him all wrong."

"Check. I'll let you know what he has to say."

"Write it. I'm not that curious that you got to rout me out of bed in the middle of the night to answer collect calls."

The girl at Julian Goodman's office was again stabbing haphazardly at the typewriter keyboard. She barely looked up as Johnny Liddell approached.

"Goodman in yet, sugar?" He leaned over the railing.

The blonde had substituted a white peasant blouse for the green sweater, but she still looked outstanding in most respects. She didn't seem to mind a bit the undisguised inventory the detective was taking of her assets.

"Go on in and see," she suggested. There was something in her tone that puzzled Johnny, but he took the hint, walked through the gate and pushed open the door marked *Private*.

A tall man, with a broad-brimmed, western sheriff type hat pushed back on his head, sat on the edge of the desk. His square jaw was champing

rhythmically on a wad of gum and he didn't miss a beat.

“Well, well! Johnny Liddell. I might've known. As soon as you hit town things start to pop at Homicide.”

Johnny stared past the bulky figure. Julian Goodman lay slumped back in the desk chair, his lower jaw sagged on his chest. From a blue-black hole just above the right ear, a dark red stream had cascaded down over his collar to gather in a pool on the floor.

“Holy cow!” Johnny muttered. “Goodman dead!” He looked to the man sitting on the desk. “Who did it, Inspector?”

Inspector Devlin brushed his mustache from the middle with his nail. “I was just going to ask you the same thing, Johnny. You've been closer to Goodman these past few days than we have.”

Liddell walked over to the body, glanced at it briefly, walked to the other side of the desk and sank into an armchair. “Not on anything connected with this,” he said. “Matter of fact, the job he hired us for was washed up yesterday.”

Devlin stared at him for a moment, his cold, gray-blue eyes expressionless. “What job was that?” he asked.

Johnny shrugged. “I don't suppose it makes much difference now,” he said. “Harvey Randolph has been missing for a week or so. Goodman wanted him found without any fuss or any publicity. Well, Randolph was found last night, as you know.” He shrugged again. “There was nothing more to do but collect the agency's fee and blow.”

Devlin took off his hat, dropped it on the desk. “Look, Johnny,” he said, after a long pause, “you and I've known each other a lot of years. We've usually worked together.” He looked the Acme man squarely in the eye. “I've never had any trouble with you, and I don't expect to have.”

“I'm listening,” Johnny said dryly.

“This case is loaded with dynamite. The papers will really go to town on it. A movie killing is always good for circulation, God help me.” Devlin hadn't missed a beat on his gum. “What I'm saying is this. I got an idea you'll stay around to help find the guy who killed your client. I got nothing against that. On the other hand, catching killers is police business. Sure, we like your help—but we don't want anybody trying to make the department look silly.”

Liddell grinned. “We still understand each other, Inspector. It isn’t good for an agency to have one of its clients bumped off while a man is on the job, but we’re not looking for glory. I’m playing ball down to the last pitch.”

The inspector nodded his satisfaction. “Good enough for me.”

A door opened and a uniformed man came in and whispered to Devlin. The inspector nodded, and the uniformed man left.

“Goodman’s wife’s here. I sent a squad car after her.” Devlin paused, watched two men come in silently, arrange the body on a stretcher, cover it with a blanket, and carry it out. “Now that’s over, we can have her in.” He reached over, snapped a lever on the intercommunication system on Goodman’s desk.

“Yeah?” The bored voice of the blonde floated through.

“Have Mrs. Goodman come in,” Devlin instructed.

Goodman’s wife still bore unmistakable signs of good looks, but the gold in her hair was too apparent, the bloom in her cheeks and lips too pharmaceutical. She stalked into the room grandly, selected a chair where the light would not be too harsh on her face, crossed her legs and waited.

“Have you met Mr. Liddell, Mrs. Goodman?” the inspector asked. She acknowledged the introduction, and looked back to Devlin.

“You’ve heard that your husband has been murdered?” The woman nodded. “You don’t seem terribly surprised?”

Mrs. Goodman permitted herself a brief smile. “You didn’t know my husband very well,” she said in a nasal voice, slightly higher than was pleasant. “It wasn’t a question of whether he’d be murdered or not. It was merely a question of when.”

Johnny Liddell wandered over to the desk, helped himself to a cigar from the humidor. “Your husband had enemies, Mrs. Goodman?”

The golden head swung in his direction. “Most producers have enemies. It’s a privilege of the profession to be a louse. My husband abused the privilege.”

Inspector Devlin pulled a brown, paper-covered notebook from his pocket. “Could you think of a couple of people who’d hate him bad enough to want to kill him?” he asked.

“Yes,” Mrs. Goodman answered promptly. “Anybody who spent more than an hour with him.”

“For instance?”

Mrs. Goodman wrinkled her brows as though thinking was a difficult chore. “Let me see now. Well, Cookie Russo who runs the Chateau Chance. I know Julian owed him a lot of money and had been stalling him off.” She tapped a small white tooth with an elaborately enameled nail. “Then there was that girl he was running around with, that Mona Varden.”

Johnny’s ears perked up. “Where does she fit into the picture?”

“He ruined her chances. Oh, not that she was ever any good as an actress. She wasn’t. The usual phony Latin-from-Manhattan sort of thing. But Julian saw to it that she never got a chance to find out if she was any good.”

Devlin leaned forward. “How?”

“He picked her up a year or so ago and offered her a contract. Naturally, she jumped at it. Had visions of being another Hedy Lamarr, I guess. But Julian just wanted a new plaything and was prepared to pay for it, that’s all. He had no intention of using her in pictures and never did.” She shrugged, asked for a cigarette, settled back. “She wasn’t getting any younger. If she ever had any chance of making a go of it, he’d have to be out of the way.”

Johnny Liddell held a match for her and watched her draw in a lungful of smoke. “Not necessarily,” he argued. “Wasn’t Goodman just producing? Even if he were dead, wouldn’t the company still own the contract?”

“Good try, Mr. Liddell.” The widow smiled. “Only, you see, Julian was what we laughingly call an independent out here. All contracts with him were personal contracts. Naturally, I, as his heir, could be expected to inherit the contracts. But, as Miss Varden knows only too well, I am not the least interested in further stymying her career. I shall release her from her contract immediately.”

“You were talking about suspects, Mrs. Goodman,” Inspector Devlin prompted. “Certainly there must be others?”

The widow tapped a thin film of ash off the end of her cigarette. “You mean me, of course. But I can assure you I did not kill my husband, Inspector. I did not consider him worthy of the effort.” She rose from the chair, crushed out the carmine tipped butt in a glass ash tray on the desk. “Now, if you’ll forgive me, I’d like to go home. Naturally, I shall be very happy to help in every way I can, but I would like to rest—and to talk to my attorney.” She smiled a rather brittle smile that fell just short of reaching her eyes. “You understand, of course.”

Inspector Devlin ran his fingers through his hair, looked for a moment as though he was going to protest, then evidently thought better of it. “Certainly, Mrs. Goodman. We understand perfectly.”

He took her to the door, opened it for her with a great display of chivalry, stamped back to the desk. He grabbed his hat, stuck it irritably on the back of his head. “A fourteen-carat bitch,” he growled. “But smart.”

Johnny Liddell sat staring at the ceiling. Two and two kept making six. It didn’t make too much sense now; not as much as it had when he strolled blithely into Goodman’s office less than an hour ago to tell him that he had killed Randolph for the insurance that would pull his production out of the red.

“How’s the Cookie Russo angle suit you, Johnny?” Inspector Devlin dragged him back from his day-dreaming. “Cookie could get awfully mad if somebody owed him money and welshed.”

Johnny shrugged. “The whole thing sounds screwed up to me. Anybody could have killed him. He’s been a louse for years.” He resumed his scrutiny of the ceiling. “What time did the coroner fix?”

Devlin consulted his pad. “About six this morning. The blonde floozie outside found him when she came in about nine-thirty.”

“About six, eh?” Johnny Liddell transferred his gaze to the inspector. “I saw him this morning about three-thirty down at the morgue. He must have come right up here.” He grunted. “Why? It might pay to find out who he had a date with up here after he left the morgue, Inspector.”

“Nobody. We already thought of that, Johnny. Night operator who went off about seven says he didn’t see anybody come up except Goodman and that so-called bodyguard of his. They came in at four, the bodyguard left about four-thirty.” He looked up from his notes. “We checked on the bodyguard, too. He arrived at Goodman’s house at five-fifteen, and it takes roughly a half hour to get out there.”

Johnny Liddell grunted. “God, I wish I’d known that Goodman was bumped off this morning.”

“Why?” Devlin demanded.

Johnny Liddell grinned. “I would have stayed in bed. I didn’t get there until about seven.”

Toni Belden was waiting for Johnny Liddell as he left Goodman’s office. She fell into step beside him. “Well, Sherlock, how about that fancy theory

now?”

Johnny growled under his breath. “There’s a hell of a lot more to this than meets the eye,” he told her. “Goodman didn’t just happen to get knocked off. I got a feeling that’s just one hunk of a big over-all pattern.” He stopped, turned to the girl. “You been able to dig up anything?”

“Not a thing.” She looked undecided, then opened the oversized handbag that hung from her arm. “I’ve some bad news for you, Johnny,” she said, and pulled out a still-damp page proof of the *Dispatch*. A headline announced that evidence pointed to the fact that movie star Harvey Randolph had been murdered. With a sinking stomach, Johnny Liddell read the details under Toni Belden’s by-line.

“Holy cow,” Johnny groaned. “This shows that we had all the facts on a murder the police don’t even know was committed. If this goes out we’ll end up in the hoosegow for obstructing justice, and I do mean you.” He re-read the proof. “How long have we got before this damn thing hits the streets?”

The girl consulted a jeweled watch on her wrist. “First edition won’t roll for five hours yet,” she said. “That gives us five hours to make it good with Devlin.”

Johnny Liddell whistled. “I’m telling Devlin everything we got right now,” he announced. “I’ll protect your scoop by telling him you dug this stuff up yourself. It’s our only out. But when the story appears, he has to get full credit for it.”

Toni Belden was unconvinced. “Why should Devlin get the credit for it? We did all the work. We’ve still got five hours. Maybe we can crack the case and deliver the killer before he even knows there’s been a killing.”

Johnny shook his head vehemently. “Don’t be crazy. There’s not a chance of cracking this thing in five hours.”

The girl argued, but was finally convinced. Fifteen minutes later Johnny Liddell emerged from the telephone booth, wiping beads of perspiration from his forehead and upper lip. “I’m glad we told him,” he said ruefully. “If he got that mad when we told him, I’d hate to be within hearing distance if he found out without us telling him.”

“Aside from the names he thought up, what did he say?”

“He’s contacting the insurance company with the theory. He figures they may have some angles on it.”

Toni Belden nodded. “Good.”

“Not so good,” Johnny groaned. “I called Steve Baron in the New York office this morning and gave him the whole pitch. He was going to contact the insurance people to see if they wanted us to handle for them. When Devlin tells them what’s happened, they’re going to look him right in the eye and say, ‘We know all about it.’”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE double murder of Harvey Randolph and his producer Julian Goodman provided the newspapers with their greatest movie-colony sensation since the Desmond Taylor killing. With the *Dispatch's* exclusive, opposition papers went after Inspector Devlin. Abusive editorials, heated conversations with the commissioner, demands for action from City Hall, all combined to make him a little less than genial when he stalked into Morrissey's office the following morning.

"Hi, Devlin," the coroner greeted him from behind his desk. He indicated the other occupant of the office with a nod of his head. "You know Johnny Liddell of Acme."

Inspector Devlin switched the wad of gum from one side of his mouth to the other. "I know him, to my sorrow." He turned back to the coroner. "Look, Doc. Holding out on that Randolph stuff is not my idea of co-operation inside the department. I've been taking all the raps around here, but I'm not taking them any more if you or anybody else holds out information like you did."

The coroner raised mild eyes to the inspector's face. "Holding out?" He picked up a copy of the early edition of the *Dispatch* and pointed a stubby finger at the lead story. "According to this, Inspector Devlin was the one who made all those story-book deductions that established the fact that Randolph was murdered. What more co-operation could you ask for?"

Devlin growled under his breath. "Anyway, I've got things to talk over with you. Official matters. I don't think it would be a good idea to have a private dick in on it."

Johnny Liddell grinned. "Sorry you're mad at me, Devlin. I did my best. Anyway, I'm not unofficial any more. I'm working on the case officially."

Devlin missed a beat on the gum. "You're what?"

Morrissey interrupted. "The insurance company and the producers' association have retained Johnny to work on the case. They've made a special request to the Hall that he be given a semi-official status. So, he's an honorary deputy commissioner or something. At least until the case is cracked."

Devlin grinned. “Well, I’m not saying that that makes me mad.” He ambled over, sank into a broad-bottomed armchair. “I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

The coroner nodded sympathetically. “I know, Devlin. Me, too. All this on top of the Maurer killing is a tough break for the department.”

Johnny Liddell looked up. “Any progress on that Doc Maurer job?” he asked.

“No, and that ain’t my headache,” the inspector grunted. “Fogarty’s handling that.”

“Mishandling it, you mean,” the coroner complained. “He’s got a one-track mind. All he knows is that somebody had a plastic done. That means gangsters to him. From there it’s only one jump to Maurer being a gang doctor.” He bit irritably at the end of a cigar, spat the end into the wastebasket. “I tell you . . .”

Devlin interrupted. “Sure, sure. But that’s Fogarty’s big headache. Ours is Goodman and Randolph.”

Johnny Liddell slouched comfortably. “I don’t buy that, Inspector. Looks to me like Goodman killed Randolph, figuring the insurance would take him off the nut on that picture of his. He had some trigger man do the job for him, they had a falling out, and the trigger man paid Goodman off with lead. At least that makes it a lot simpler. Like that we’re only looking for one killer.”

The telephone jangled impatiently. Morrissey lifted it off its cradle, listened for a few seconds, handed it to Johnny Liddell. “It’s for you. That female newshound.”

“Hello, Toni,” Johnny chuckled into the mouthpiece. “You’re a smart gal to be using the phone these days. I got a feeling neither the doc nor the inspector are in a mood for polite conversation—particularly with you.”

Toni laughed. “I figured as much. I dropped by your hotel to maybe get invited out to dinner, but they told me you were at the coroner’s. Purely social, I hope?”

“So far.”

“Oh, yeah. Another thing. The clerk asked me to tell you that Mona Varden’s been calling you all morning. Wants you to get in touch with her. It’s important.” He heard her snort. “I suppose that means the dinner is out?”

Johnny grinned. “Oh, I don’t know. It’s still pretty early.”

“Huh. Maybe you used to be that good, Johnny boy, but that was a long time ago. However, if you’re still in the mood for dinner, I’ll still be hungry.”

“I’ll call you at the office,” Johnny promised.

“Anything new on the Goodman killing? Or can’t you speak now?”

“Tell you all about it at dinner,” Johnny told her. “See you then.” He replaced the receiver on its hook. “I’ve got a call of my own to make, Doc. Mind?”

“Go ahead,” Morrissey growled. “It’s cheaper than getting yourself an office.”

Johnny dialed the number of Mona Varden’s apartment and waited while the operator buzzed a second time. Finally the receiver came to life.

“ ’Allo. Oo ees thees, please?”

“Hello, sugar. This is Johnny Liddell.”

The accent disappeared. “Hello, yourself. Say, you’re a hard guy to reach. Or maybe you didn’t like that cognac we had the other day?”

“Best thing I’ve run into here.” He grinned. “But it was so potent I figured to take a couple of days to rest up. Besides, things are beginning to pop around this town.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, Johnny. If you were real curious and that expense account hasn’t dried up too badly, I’d like to see you. It’s about Goodman and Randolph.”

“Can’t you tell me over the phone?” Johnny asked.

Mona Varden laughed softly. “That’s what I call a lazy guy. Look, Johnny. What I’ve got I’ll keep on ice for you—but when you want it, you’ll have to come and get it.” Her voice dropped slightly. “And it’s so hot I don’t know how long the ice can hold it.”

“The information, you mean?”

“Come on over and find out. And, Johnny—there are other people in town who are curious, too. Real curious.”

The phone clicked as the girl on the other end hung up. Johnny Liddell tossed the receiver back on the hook. He ground out the cigar in the ash tray.

“By the way, Devlin. Those suspects Mrs. Goodman named—seen ’em yet?”

“Sure, we’ve seen ’em,” the inspector growled. “Not a decent suspect in the bunch. All had airtight alibis.” He eyed Johnny Liddell curiously. “Why?”

“Just wondering,” Johnny answered. “No use of my going up any dead ends as long as you’ve already covered them.”

Johnny Liddell rapped softly at the door of Apartment 123 at the Alvarado Arms. He caught the faint rustle of movement within.

He rapped again, then tried the knob. It turned in his hand, and he pushed the door slowly open. From the hall he could command a view of the entire living room and much of the little porch beyond, where he had spent his last visit. Both were empty.

Johnny Liddell eased his .45 from its shoulder holster into his fist. He stepped cautiously through the open door, swung it shut with his heel. His eyes covered the room quickly. There were plenty of evidences of a hasty search—desk drawers stood open, papers littered the floor. The door leading into the bedroom was half ajar. Johnny crossed the living room slowly, pushed the bedroom door open, the .45 ready.

It was a large, ornately decorated room. A yellow light burned feebly in the center socket. Heavy drapes kept what remained of the daylight out.

Mona Varden lay on her back on the pink coverlet on the bed. One arm dangled to the floor, the other was thrown across her face as though to ward off a blow. Her throat had been cut from ear to ear.

Johnny Liddell’s eyes flashed to the windows. They were all closed. Whoever had made the rustling noise was still in the apartment. The bathroom door was open, offered no hiding place. He settled for the closet near the window.

“Okay, you in the closet. You got a count of three before I start blasting. Come out with your hands way up.”

In the brief silence, Liddell thought he could hear his heart pounding. His finger tightened on the trigger.

Suddenly the door swung open, and to his surprise, a woman stepped out of the closet. Her face was drained of all color, leaving the artifices with

which she fought off advancing age painfully apparent. She kept her eyes averted from the bed.

“Well, well, Mrs. Goodman.” Johnny Liddell waved the .45 to indicate a chair. “Fancy meeting you here.”

The woman walked shakily toward the chair. “Please, put away that gun. I’m not going to run.”

Johnny Liddell grinned. She didn’t look as though she would be able to walk, let alone run. He crossed the room, carefully avoiding the slowly congealing puddle near the bed, picked up the telephone, and dialed the coroner’s number.

“Hello, Doc. Devlin still there? Good.” He waited until the deeper voice of Devlin came through. “Got news for you, Inspector,” he said. “Another stiff. Mona Varden.”

He waited for the groan from the other end, then quickly gave the facts. “Okay,” he said in answer to a question. “I’ll keep her here for you. Hop to it, will you, Inspector?”

He slipped the .45 back in its holster and ushered Mrs. Goodman into the living room. “If I were you, I’d start talking and talk fast,” he advised, lighting a cigarette.

“Could I have one of those?” the widow asked. He held the pack out and she pulled one out with shaking fingers. Johnny Liddell lit it for her and she filled her lungs gratefully.

“How about it, Mrs. Goodman?” he persisted. “What were you doing here?”

The woman shrugged. “You won’t believe me, but I came here in answer to a telephone call from Mona Varden. She said she had something very important to tell me about my husband’s murder. She intimated that it wasn’t the sort of thing the newspapers should get their hands on.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. He could imagine that Mona Varden would consider Mrs. Goodman sufficiently “curious.”

“I—I came. The door was open and I found her like that.” She was beginning to shake again. “I don’t think I passed out. I—I just stood there not feeling anything and not seeing anything. Then, I heard you at the door. I wanted to hide. I . . .”

“Don’t say any more, Mrs. Goodman,” a harsh voice cut in from behind Johnny Liddell.

Cursing himself for leaving the door unlocked, Liddell pivoted around, hand streaking toward his right lapel. It froze with the tips of its fingers brushing the butt of the .45. He was looking down the wrong end of a businesslike .38 special.

“That’s smart,” the harsh voice told him.

The detective looked into the expressionless slate-colored eyes of the bodyguard Mona Varden had described as “staying closer to Goodman than a two-way stretch.” The gray fedora was tilted down over one eye, the thin mouth clenched a cold cigar. “Having trouble, Mrs. Goodman?”

The woman was shivering. “There’s a dead girl in there. He thinks I did it. He’s already called the police.”

Slate eyes glared balefully at Johnny Liddell. “Called the coppers, eh? We’d better get you out of here, Mrs. Goodman.”

Johnny Liddell puzzled over why the bodyguard seemed, somehow, so familiar. His mind tumbled over the years, vainly sorting out the hoods and gunmen he’d met on the job. Mrs. Goodman hesitated, cast one fearful glance at the bedroom door, decided to go.

For a split second, the bodyguard’s attention wandered as he, too, stared past Johnny Liddell toward the open bedroom door. Liddell had no time to weigh the consequences. He had told Devlin he’d hold the woman, and he intended to keep his word. He threw his entire one hundred and seventy-five pounds at the gunman in a flying tackle.

Liddell never even saw the blow that floored him. It couldn’t have traveled more than ten inches. He was conscious only of the streams of white-hot pain that seemed to split his skull, of the multitudinous lights that flashed as the barrel of a gun chopped down viciously on his skull.

Consciousness seared its way slowly and painfully back into Johnny’s brain. Dimly he made out voices. He tried to raise his head, groaned and let it fall back to the floor.

“Well, well. Sleeping Beauty has decided to come back to life,” a familiar voice boomed in his ear. Johnny winced, tried to open his eyes.

The familiar voice jangled his supersensitive nerves again. “Take a good look at him, Inspector. There’s one dick that really used his head.”

Inspector Devlin laughed. “Looks like too much wear and tear on the skull, Doc.”

Johnny Liddell’s eyes stopped rolling long enough to focus on Doc Morrissey. Beyond him he could see Inspector Devlin, his hands on his hips, his jaws champing away on his gum. Johnny tried to grin, but the result was more like a horrible grimace. “Imagine meeting you here, Doc,” he cracked.

Devlin’s voice jangled his nerves again. “Nice work, Doc. Think he’s going to live?”

Johnny Liddell made the mistake of trying to raise his head. He groaned. “I’m afraid I will. The dame’s gone, I suppose?”

Devlin nodded toward the bedroom. “That one isn’t, but the Goodman dame is.” He pushed the western type fedora to the back of his head. “You’re sure slipping, Johnny, when a dame can conk you and take a powder.”

Johnny Liddell tenderly massaged the sore spot on the top of his skull and mentally debated the advisability of holding out on Slate Eyes’ part in the evening’s festivities. He decided against it.

“Right after I spoke to you, Inspector, I was questioning Mrs. Goodman. Suddenly some guy slips in behind and beans me.”

Devlin brushed his mustache from the middle outward with the nail of his thumb. “I suppose you didn’t see the guy?”

Johnny Liddell grinned. “Wrong again, Inspector. The guy was Goodman’s bodyguard, the hard-looking baby with the busted beak.”

Devlin’s eyes narrowed. “Marty Mann, eh? I knew we should’ve looked that guy over better.” He shrugged. “But we had nothing on him. He’s got no record. Think him and the Goodman dame are working this together?”

Liddell shrugged. “Could be.” He tried his hat gently over the sensitive spot. “Of course, on the other hand, it’s more likely that since Goodman is dead, he’s playing nursemaid to Mrs. Goodman, and when she didn’t come down, he came up after her. Besides, that puddle of blood was here quite a while longer than Mrs. Goodman, unless I miss my guess.”

A white-coated representative from the medical examiner’s office handed Doc Morrissey a receipt. He initialed it and handed it back.

“That was a pretty nifty dish until somebody decided to make hash out of it,” the man in the white coat said. He signaled to the two other men. They rolled the body from the bed onto a stretcher and covered it with a sheet.

“Nice guys,” Johnny Liddell growled. He stepped back to let the stretcher bearers pass. “So long, kid,” he told the covered figure softly. “We’ll pay off for you even if you were playing all sides of the street at once.”

CHAPTER SIX

THE HOTEL ABBOTT wasn't exactly a family hotel, but Johnny Liddell wasn't exactly a family man. So it suited his purposes perfectly. A ramshackle old building out of the center of things in Hollywood, its main bid for patronage lay in the fact that no questions were asked and a wallet constituted satisfactory baggage. A tired-looking clerk, glancing hopelessly through the racing results of a morning paper, looked up as Johnny entered.

"Anything for me?" he asked.

The clerk ran perfunctorily through the mail cage, then nodded. "Two messages, Mr. Liddell. Miss Belden phoned and said she was still hungry." He held out a tinted envelope. "And a messenger dropped this one off."

Johnny Liddell took the envelope, jammed it into his side pocket. He rode the elevator to the fourth floor. Once in his room, he removed his jacket and tie, doused his face in cold water. The sore spot on the top of his head had settled into a hard, egg-shaped lump. He pressed a cold towel against it, wandered into the living room, dug a bottle of cognac out of his bag and took a deep swig. Feeling refreshed, he dug the tinted envelope out of his side pocket.

It had a tantalizingly familiar scent and the handwriting was angular, almost childish. Once opened, it turned out to be from Mona Varden.

Dear Johnny, Maybe I'm playing with dynamite. I got something so hot it'll bust this town wide open. If anything happens to me, though, just have a talk with Sal Moreno. He may be able to tell you something about Goodman and Randolph that will make the grand you dropped the other day well worthwhile. In the meantime, if nothing happens to me, I will have told you this before you came home so no harm's done. Mona Varden.

Johnny Liddell swore softly. So she knew she was flirting with a killer!

Moreno? Johnny kicked the name around in his mind for a few minutes, decided it failed to strike any familiar chord. Once again, he tried to connect the slate-eyed bodyguard with some experience that would make it possible to place him. He ended up by calling Toni Belden at the *Dispatch* and setting a date for dinner at Angelo's.

Toni was definitely cool through dinner. Her main grievance seemed to be that, instead of calling the coroner's office when he found Mona, he should have called her. Johnny pacified her by giving a few details that had not been made public.

He waited patiently while she phoned the story to her paper. A half hour later, he asked, "Know anybody around town called Sal Moreno, Toni?"

The girl reached for a cigarette. "Why?" she demanded.

Johnny shrugged. "Just curious. The name happened to pop up in conversation today and I'd never heard of him. He must be since my time."

Toni nodded. "You're lucky, then. Moreno's bad medicine. Don't mess with him."

"What's his racket?"

The girl reporter leaned forward. "Look, Johnny. There are some guys you can get tangled up with and come out on top. Others are just poison. That's Moreno. Too many guys who tried to take him were later dredged up from the bottom of Frisco Bay."

Johnny subsided until the waiter had replaced the empty jiggers on the table with full ones. "Who is he, and where do I catch up with him?" he persisted.

"Going to kill him?" Toni asked. "That's the only way you can come out on top. He never forgives and he always pays off."

"In that case maybe it'll pay for me to kill him." Johnny smiled. "Come on, stop stalling. Where do I find him?"

Toni shrugged. "Okay. Sal Moreno's quite a character in this menagerie of characters. He runs the Port of Peace Burial Haven."

"The what?"

"You heard me. The Port of Peace Burial Haven. You see, there are lots of floaters and bums come out here to die. They have no people, nobody to notify. Port of Peace takes their bodies and saves them from graves in Potter's Field."

Johnny tossed off his drink. "That don't make him sound like such a bad egg. Why the build-up?"

Toni tried to explain. "Lots of guys have disappeared in this town and it's awful hard to prove murder without a body. A lot of people wonder how

many of those floaters who were buried had other tags before the Port of Peace got them.”

Liddell nodded in approbation. “Leave it to Hollywood to think up a really good racket. Now, where do I get to see him?”

Toni Belden took a long drag from her cigarette. “I wish I could talk you out of it, Johnny. Why don’t you let the police handle Moreno? I tell you he’s a killer.”

“That’s what I’m looking for, Toni. A killer.”

Toni sighed. “Well, I’ve warned you. From now on you’re on your own.” She drank her rye quickly, with a grimace. “Moreno shows up at the Bird’s Nest almost every night at ten-thirty. He has a blonde floozie in the floor show.”

“Bird’s Nest. Where’s that?”

“It’s a little joint on the Laguna Beach Road. You can’t miss it.” She reached out, covered Liddell’s hand with hers. “You will be careful, won’t you, Johnny? And if you’re not careful and you do start something, remember—call me first. The cops can wait.”

The Bird’s Nest was twelve miles out of town according to the speedometer on the hired Buick. It was an ugly, square white building, almost gray in the dark, set back in a clump of trees off the twisting state highway. An unshaded bulb swung slowly in the faint evening breeze and cast a yellow light over the entrance. To the left was a string of cars. Johnny Liddell parked the Buick, and ambled up a few rickety steps that led to the bar room.

He stood at the door and peered into the smoky opaqueness of the interior. A tinny orchestra set off in the far corner was doing unmentionable things to a popular song. On the floor six bored chorines were pounding out the last few steps of a dance routine with more determination than inspiration.

Liddell skirted the tables. A big, heavy-boned Swede in a white jacket stood behind the bar, swabbing it with a wet cloth that left greasy circles.

“Double brandy, bud,” Johnny ordered. He turned and surveyed the room. The Swede slid a glass across the bar, scooped up the silver Johnny had deposited.

“About time for Belle to be coming out front, ain’t it?” the detective asked conversationally.

The Swede kept wiping the bar. “Belle who?”

“Belle St. Mary. You know, the blondie with the classy chassis in the show.” Johnny took a gulp of the brandy, winced as it seared its way down. “I been getting up enough nerve to brace her for a date ever since I hit this town.”

The Swede shook his head. “You better peddle your sex life some place else, chum,” he advised in an undertone. “She’s got herself a guy. Regular stuff. He don’t like competition.” He dumped the wet rag behind the bar. “And he can make it stick.”

Johnny Liddell tossed off the rest of the brandy with a show of bravado, put the glass back on the bar. “Who’s this guy she’s got?” he wanted to know.

The Swede didn’t lift his eyes. “Don’t look now, bud, but that’s him leaving with Belle. If I was you, I wouldn’t go looking for no trouble. His name’s Sal Moreno and he’s got all the connections that’s to be got.”

Johnny Liddell picked up his glass and swung around in time to see a tall, heavy-jowled man in a dark suit and a thickly painted blonde moving toward the door. They seemed to be arguing. The man glanced aimlessly around the room as he and the girl reached the door, his beady, restless eyes passing over the figures at the bar without interest.

The detective grunted, tossed down a bill and followed the couple to the door. He watched Moreno and the blonde get into a heavy sedan. The powerful motor sprang to life and, as the car moved noiselessly toward the state road, Johnny Liddell slid behind the wheel of the rented Buick.

He kept the bouncing tail light of the sedan a few hundred feet ahead. Moreno drove into the city proper, turned right down Grove Avenue, skirted the business section and headed for Cypress Boulevard. At Cypress the big car pulled up to the curb in front of a good-looking modern apartment building. The Buick drove slowly past. It was not until several hundred feet beyond that the detective was able to find a suitable parking place.

It took Liddell a couple of minutes to walk back to the apartment building. Belle St. Mary’s name was listed on the lobby register. Johnny walked up three flights of stairs and stopped in front of 3C. He could hear the muffled sounds of an argument inside. Then a door slammed and there was silence.

Johnny slid the .45 from his shoulder holster and tapped lightly on the panel. There was no answer or sound of further movement. After a moment he knocked again, somewhat more loudly. He could hear the man grumbling as he stamped across the room. The door swung open.

“What the hell . . .”

The snarl died suddenly and the heavy jowls turned a deep blue-gray. The man’s beady little eyes were riveted on the .45 pointed at his stomach.

“I ain’t selling subscriptions, Sal,” Johnny said grimly. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

The man’s lips quivered twice, as though he were about to speak. He changed his mind and led the way into the living room.

A pile of newspapers was scattered on the floor next to a big, comfortable-looking couch. Hanging over the back of one of the chairs was Moreno’s holster, with a .38 tucked in it. Johnny took the gun and dropped it into his jacket pocket. Then, still keeping his .45 trained on Moreno, he ran his hand down the sides of the chair and under the pillow. He brought up another .38.

“Okay, it’s safe to sit now.” He indicated the chair with his gun. “Maybe we ought to let Belle in on our party. Call her, Sal. And just in case you’re thinking of pulling something, try thinking back to the last guy you saw blasted through the belly with a .45. It leaves a hole like a cannon ball.”

The gleam of hope died in Moreno’s eyes. He dropped into the chair.

“Hey, Belle, come here.”

The bedroom door opened, and the blonde stepped through. She was wearing a sheer negligee, and looked younger than she had seemed at the Bird’s Nest. She had the face of a girl of twenty-two that was beginning to show signs of hard wear. Faint shadows were noticeable under the green eyes, little lines crossed at the corners of her red mouth, and there was a tired droop to her full lips. When she saw Johnny Liddell she made an ineffectual attempt to pull together the negligee to hide her nakedness. Then she saw the gun in his hand. The blood drained from her face, leaving it a transparent ivory. Her hand flew to her throat and for a moment she looked as though she were going to scream.

“Take it easy, sis,” Johnny cautioned. “Nobody’s going to get hurt. Sal here is going to tie you up just so’s you’ll be a good girl while he does some singing.”

The heavy jowls quivered indignantly. "I'm damned if I do . . ."

"And double damned if you don't," Liddell promised.

Moreno's eyes wavered. Then they fell. "Come here, Belle," he snapped.

The girl walked over, a faint flush of color beginning to return to her cheeks.

"Use your belt, chum," Johnny Liddell ordered. "And make sure that she's well tied. Then maybe you might stick a hanky in her mouth, a clean one if you have one. We might not want to be interrupted."

The perspiration was beaded on Johnny Liddell's face as he stood looking down at the man in the chair. The past hour's pushing around had not improved Moreno's appearance. There was a welt across the side of his head, and a thin trickle of blood ran from the corner of his lips to the bulging chin that overflowed his collar.

"You're being awful hard to get along with, Moreno," Johnny said softly. "All I want is what you know about Mona Varden. And I'm only going to ask you once more." He reversed the gun, and held it by the barrel. "Then I'm going to feed you this rod, butt first. If I don't like the little story you tell me, so help me I'll leave you as toothless as the day you were born."

The beady little eyes glared from behind discolored pouches. "Have all the fun you can," Moreno snarled. "I never forget a face and I'm double sure to remember yours."

Johnny Liddell's hand swung in a short arc, caught the man in the chair smartly across the cheek.

"Never mind what you're going to do to me, tough guy," he advised. "Just give a little thought to what's going to happen to you." He turned the gun around again, aimed the barrel at Moreno's stomach. "A girl who trusted me was killed today. You know who killed her. I promised to even up the score for her. Okay. If you won't tell me who did it, you'll do as a stand-in."

Moreno's eyes studied the detective's face for signs of a bluff. Johnny Liddell returned the stare unblinkingly. His finger tightened slowly on the trigger. Moreno squeezed back against the cushions of the chair.

"Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I'll talk."

Johnny Liddell released his pressure on the trigger. He became suddenly aware of the different direction Moreno's eyes had taken. They were staring past him to the door. There was a faint, almost imperceptible squeak behind him, as though the door were being slowly opened.

Without attempting to turn Johnny Liddell blasted away at the only lighted lamp in the room. The .45 slug tore the fixture half off the wall, leaving the room in perfect darkness. As he fired, he threw himself to one side, flattening out against the floor.

The door scraped all the way open.

Simultaneously with the crashing of the lamp bulb, there was a faint "plop" and a short flash near the door followed by a soft sigh and the sound of someone sitting down hard. The light in the hall had been turned off and the man in the doorway provided no target. Johnny Liddell slid cautiously to the left in an attempt to get a shot at him. His foot caught the leg of a small table that went over and hit the floor with a crash. Another faint "plop" from the door and Johnny Liddell could hear the buzz of an angry bee close to his ear.

He fired twice. The .45 made a deafening roar in the cramped space. He heard the patter of running feet in the hall. By the time he reached the door, the hall was empty.

Back in the apartment, Liddell closed the door and lit a match. He found an undamaged lamp and switched it on. Sal Moreno was still sitting in the chair. A little blue hole in his forehead had spilled a bright red stream that ran along the side of his nose and dripped from his chin down on his white collar. The beady little eyes, secure behind their purple buttresses, were glaring no longer.

Johnny walked into the bedroom, took the handkerchief from between Belle St. Mary's teeth. Her wide, scared eyes asked questions.

"Moreno's dead," he told her. "Some guy stuck his head in the door and killed him. The police will be coming and it means a big mess. If you play ball with me, I'll do everything I can to make it light on you."

The girl started to shake. "They'll give me what they gave Moreno," she wailed.

"Who's they?"

The girl shook her head. "I don't know. The ones he was working with. They had some stunt they were pulling. Sal said it would mean a lot of

money. More money than they ever seen, any of them.”

Johnny Liddell loosened the belt that bound the girl’s arms. There was a red welt prominent on the white skin.

“All that’ll keep,” he said. “First, we’ve got to set this scene right. Somebody must have heard those shots. The call is probably already in to headquarters.” He tossed the girl a housecoat that was thrown over a red upholstered chair.

“If I do tell you what I know will you help me get out of town?” the girl pleaded. “I’m scared. First Randolph, then Goodman, and now Moreno.” She wrung her hands piteously.

“That ain’t all, Belle,” Liddell told her. “Mona Varden had her throat cut this afternoon.”

Listlessly, the girl put on the housecoat, zipped it up to the neck. The last vestige of color had left her face. “Her, too? See, all of them. They all got it. I’m next. I know I am.”

Johnny Liddell caught her by the shoulder, shook her gently. “Do you know who’s behind all these killings, Belle?”

“No,” she said. “I just know they’re all connected. Randolph, Goodman, Mona and Moreno—they were all friends. They were working together.”

“We’ll talk about that later. That is—if you’ve decided to come in on my side?”

The girl nodded. “What do you want me to do?”

“Just forget what happened here tonight. Just remember that you and Moreno invited me over for a little talk. Leave the rest to me. I’ll see that you’re put some place where no one can get at you.”

Johnny Liddell took Moreno’s two .38’s from his pocket, wiped them carefully with his pocket handkerchief. Then, lifting the dead man’s right arm, he pressed one gun, and then the other into the lifeless hand. Holding the edge of the barrel with his handkerchief he breathed on each gun experimentally and grunted his satisfaction at the number of fingerprints showing. Then he slipped one gun back into the holster that hung on the back of the chair, the other down the side.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LESS than ten minutes later, Johnny Liddell opened the door for Inspector Devlin and his men. The inspector pushed his broad-brimmed hat back on his head.

“I might’ve guessed you’d be right in the middle of it, Johnny,” he growled. “Why don’t you do California a favor and take your crime wave back east with you?”

He crossed the room and bent over the corpse. After a careful scrutiny of the wound, he nodded for the headquarters man to take over. Then, perching himself on the arm of the sofa, he looked at Johnny Liddell soberly.

“We may have to take you on this one, Johnny,” he said. “Seems to me you’re showing up on the premises with too many corpses in one day. Fresh corpses, too.”

Johnny Liddell opened his eyes wider. “Take me for what?”

Inspector Devlin shifted the gum from his left cheek to his right cheek and grinned humorlessly. “You kidding?” he asked. “Here we walk in on you with two stiffs on your hands in one day. Both of them were apparently messed up in a dirty deal with a client of yours. Seeing as you’ve got a reputation of doing anything for a client, why not this? Pony up the artillery.”

Johnny Liddell shrugged, yanked the .45 from its shoulder holster and passed it over.

“You’re making a mistake, Inspector,” he said.

Devlin held the barrel of the .45 to his nose and sniffed.

“No use smelling it,” Johnny Liddell told him. “You won’t have any trouble proving it was fired tonight. Where you’re going to have your trouble is proving how I shot Moreno through the head with a .45 while he has a .38 hole.”

“You seem pretty sure it was a .38, Liddell,” Devlin growled. “Why?”

“Just a hunch, Inspector. Just a hunch.”

At that moment one of the uniformed men came out of the next room, leading Belle St. Mary by the arm.

“What’s this, Liddell?” Devlin growled. “Why didn’t you tell us this woman was here?”

Johnny snapped his fingers. “Plumb forgot all about her in the excitement of getting nominated for a murder rap. That’s Miss St. Mary. She lives here.”

Devlin turned to the blonde. “What were you doing in there?” he demanded.

“Getting sick if you must know,” the girl replied. She kept her eyes averted from the armchair and its gruesome contents.

Devlin faced Liddell. “What were you doing here tonight anyway?” he asked. “How come you knew Moreno?”

“I know a lot of people,” Johnny answered. “Besides, Moreno knew something about the Goodman killing. He got in touch with me to meet him here tonight. He was all set to break out with the information when the door opened and somebody started peppering at us. Poor Moreno never even had a chance to draw.” He indicated with a wave of his hand the gun in its holster hanging on the dead man’s chair.

“That right?” Devlin asked the girl.

She nodded. “Yeah. Moreno told me to stay out of the way. He wanted to talk to him.”

One of the headquarters men who had been going through Moreno’s pockets stuck his hand down the side of the chair and brought up another .38.

“Looks like he was expecting trouble, Inspector. Here’s another rod cached right at his elbow.”

“Get your paws off that gun, you numbskull,” Devlin roared. “There might have been prints. Turn it over to O’Reardon anyway and see whose prints are on it.” He turned back to Liddell. “Your story stinks, Johnny,” he told him.

Johnny grinned. “I like it. And I’ve got an idea the commissioner will like it, too. Particularly when I bust this case. Stop acting like a movie dick, Inspector, and we break it together. Buck me and I’ll do it alone.”

The patrolman at the door opened it in response to a light tap. Doc Morrissey, the coroner, breezed in and waved a cheery hello to Devlin. He stopped dead at the sight of Liddell, broke into a loud chuckle.

“I might’ve known things would pick up with you back in town, Johnny. Who’s it this time?”

He whistled shrilly as his eyes took a hasty inventory of the girl, then moved on to Moreno. “I’m glad it wasn’t her,” he said. “He’s not half as pretty.” Then he walked over to the corpse, bent down and studied the wound for a minute. “Hmmm. A .38, eh? Somebody beat you to him, Johnny?”

Inspector Devlin slammed his hat down on the table, ran his fingers through the thick mane of his hair. “Never mind the theatrics, Morrissey. How do you know it’s a .38 until you dig it out?”

The coroner dropped his topcoat on the couch, took off his jacket and started to roll up his sleeves. “I don’t, if you want to get technical about it, Devlin. Not any more than when you find a hole under your sink you know it’s a mouse instead of an elephant.” He took the head between his hands and rolled it from side to side. “Nice and fresh, ain’t he?” he asked maliciously.

The blonde put her hand to her mouth, grew patchy gray. “I want to get out of here, Inspector.” She sank onto the sofa and cushioned her head in her arms.

The fingerprint man stepped up to Devlin, whispered into his ear. Devlin grew red around the collar. “You’re sure of that, Murdock?”

“Positive.”

Johnny grinned. “Don’t tell me that Murdock found only Moreno’s prints on his guns? How sad. Whose did you expect to find?”

“Yours,” Devlin admitted. “Although I probably should have known better.” He started to pace, stopped in front of Liddell, and stuck an accusing finger under his nose. “Johnny, you know more about this case than you’re telling. I’m warning you. If I catch you crossing me, I’ll pay off. In spades.”

Liddell nodded. “Sure, sure. But in the meantime, I seem to be innocent as a new-born babe. Or maybe you’re going to arrest me anyway?”

Devlin’s jaw action on the gum was murderous. He combed his mustache from the center out with his thumb nail. “I ought to lock you up as a material witness anyway,” he growled. “Only trouble is the rest of the

prisoners would probably be signing petitions to get you out of their hair before the night was over.”

He handed the .45 back to Johnny and watched sourly as it was returned to the worn holster.

“Look, Liddell. These killers or killer, whichever it is, are playing for keeps. You’ve been close to two people so far that were so dangerous to them they had to be liquidated. It’s not too much to expect that you’ll be next. Why don’t you open up and work together with us, instead of playing bird dog for fresh corpses?”

Johnny shook his head. “I’m as much in the dark as you are, Inspector. But if and when I get to know what time it is, I’ll be around to help you set your watch. In the meantime, if you want to lock somebody up, it might be a good idea to file Belle away. Just in case some of Moreno’s playmates get ideas.”

Devlin studied him suspiciously. “What’s the matter? Don’t she know something you might want to pump out of her?”

“She says she doesn’t. Maybe she doesn’t. But I think the killer thinks she does. It’s not worth it to me to set her up as another sitting duck for that rat.”

Toni Belden stretched lazily on the couch in her apartment and yawned as she watched the broad shoulders of Johnny Liddell going through the motions of shaking a cocktail.

“So this masked marvel sneaks right up behind your back and pops poor Moreno right over your shoulder and you don’t even know what he looks like?” she asked.

Johnny found two clean glasses on the sink behind the chintz curtains, caught the shaker under his arm and walked over to the couch. He swept two books and a magazine off the low table near the head of the couch and put the shaker and glasses down.

“Don’t believe me, eh?”

Toni smiled. “That’s not important. Did the inspector?”

He filled the two glasses, silently. “Moreno was shot with a .38,” he said at last. “His own guns were right next to his hand. I always use a .45 . . .” He tasted one of the drinks, made a wry face. “I prefer it straight.”

The girl reporter's eyes were sober as they followed him across the floor to the sink where he emptied his glass, then refilled it from a bottle. He dropped into the big chair near the window and stretched his legs.

"Getting you down, Johnny?" she asked softly.

Johnny Liddell tossed off the drink, then scraped the side of his jaw with the heel of his hand.

"I'm beginning to get superstitious about the damned case," he admitted. "Things have happened to me since I hit this burg that shouldn't happen to a dog. I've got a good mind to pack it in."

He got up, walked over to the sink and refilled the glass.

Toni swung her legs off the couch onto the floor. "You mean quit? How about the case?"

Johnny Liddell tossed off the drink, wiped his mouth with an irritated gesture.

"What case?" he growled. "I get shifted out here to find a movie star who's either lost, strayed or on a Lost Weekend. He turns up dead in an accident, only it's not an accident. We put our heads together, decide my client did the bump-off and go up to rub it in his nose. Then what happens? The client is dead. Next thing I know, I'm about to get some hair-raising information from one of the suspects, only she can't give it to me because she's dead, too. But she does give me sort of a steer to Moreno who seems to know what's going on, and he gets blasted right under my nose. I tell you, I'm beginning to feel jinxed."

The girl frowned. "If we could only locate the connecting link in this mess! What could there possibly be to link up a movie star, a producer, an undertaker and a refined blackmailer?"

"Money," Johnny Liddell grunted. "Only, now with everybody eliminated, where would the money go?"

Toni held out her glass, watched Liddell refill it from the shaker, then pour himself a straight one. "Let's start from the beginning and add this thing up. Goodman has a lot of money sunk in the Randolph picture—more money than he can afford to lose. Randolph gets himself loused up and the picture has to be shelved. The only out Goodman has is if something happens to his star and the picture is called off on that account."

The detective nodded. "So, something happens to the star. That makes Goodman the gainer. Then who bumps Goodman off?"

“Mrs. Goodman. She gets the money, gets rid of Goodman all in one sweep. It’s simple.”

Johnny drank his drink morosely. “Not so simple. She might have blasted Goodman, although I doubt it. But she never did the job on Mona Varden. There are very few women who can cut a throat, and she’s not one of them. She couldn’t even bear to look at the body. No. She might be a killer, but a gun’s more in her line.”

“Then why did she run away?”

“What would you do if you were found in the apartment of your husband’s ex-sweetie and her throat is cut from ear to ear?”

“The same thing she did, I guess. Only faster.” She settled back comfortably into the cushions. “How about the guy who conked you?”

“He could be the killer,” Johnny Liddell assented. “Only why?” He shook his head. “No. He doesn’t stand to gain in any way. I’m pretty sure he’s not a gun for hire because when Devlin took him over the hurdles at headquarters, he couldn’t turn up a record. I think that tap on the head he gave me was his idea of protecting his mistress.”

Toni lighted a cigarette and smoked silently for a few minutes. “Could it be that these killings are not connected?” she said at last. “Suppose, for instance, that Goodman got some girl into his office and tried to make her. The secretary would know about that.”

Johnny Liddell looked up sharply. “The secretary, eh? Why didn’t I think of her? She knows all the people mixed up in this thing.” He leaned back, stared at the ceiling. “She’s smart enough. Suppose Goodman was only fronting in this deal? Mona Varden knew it and tried to shake her and got killed. Moreno helped in some way and had to be eliminated along with Goodman. Sounds far-fetched, but could be.”

The girl reporter wrinkled her nose to show that she didn’t like the solution too well. “I still think it would be better to . . .”

She was interrupted by the ringing of the phone on the table at her elbow. She reached over, lifted it from the hook.

“It’s for you, Johnny,” she said.

He took the instrument. “Who’s speaking?” he wanted to know.

“Johnny Liddell?” The voice was gruff.

“Yeah.”

“This is a friend of Mrs. Goodman’s. She wants to see you.”

Johnny winked at Toni. “Mrs. Goodman did see me today. I got a bump on the top of my head to prove it.”

The voice on the other end didn’t change in inflection. “I know. I gave it to you. I’m sorry but I thought you were tryin’ to pin something on her.”

Liddell nodded. “I thought it was you. Where are you?”

“We want to talk to you, but if the police come in on the deal, it’s all off. We had nothing to do with that killing today. We want to get straightened out.”

“Where are you?”

“If we meet you, is it a deal that the cops aren’t in on it?”

“I’m not working for the cops,” Johnny Liddell told him. “If you want to play ball with me, I’ll play with you. But if you try anything, I’ll pin that killing on you if it’s the last thing I do.”

“We’re at the Mermaid Tavern down at Water and Memphis Streets. We’ll wait here an hour, back room. Come alone.”

Johnny Liddell tossed his receiver back on the hook, sighed. “Looks like this case is beginning to level out. I’ve got a date to talk to Mrs. Goodman and Marty Mann, her husband’s bodyguard.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MERMAID TAVERN didn't get much of a night play. A bored bartender stood gossiping with a racetrack sport at the end of the bar while an overdressed redhead worked what appeared to be a very tired businessman at the other end.

Johnny glanced at the old-fashioned clock on the wall as he came in. It was exactly on the hour, what hour the clock failed to say. The short hand had long since gone to its reward and so great was the reverence in which it was held that it had never been replaced.

The detective headed directly for the little door next to the telephone booth in the rear. None of the occupants of the Mermaid Tavern paid him a second glance. As he placed his hand on the doorknob, he let his other hand dip into his jacket pocket. The handle of the automatic felt cold yet reassuring to his touch.

As the door swung open, he saw the slate-eyed man sitting at a rickety table inside. Next to him sat Julian Goodman's widow. She had aged in the few hours since Johnny had last seen her. The bodyguard sat with his hands out of sight under the table, his hat pulled low over his eyes.

"Come in and sit down," he invited. He watched without apparent interest while Johnny Liddell turned one of the unpainted chairs around and straddled it.

"You can bring that rod of yours up from under the table, Marty," Liddell told him. "There ain't going to be any shooting. There's been enough killing in this deal so far."

The bodyguard's eyes didn't change expression. "Maybe. But that's not a yo-yo you've got in your fist, either." He watched while Liddell withdrew his hand from his pocket. Then, with something that vaguely approached a smile, he brought a .32 from under the table, stowed it in its holster.

"What can I do for you?" Johnny Liddell asked.

The man with the slate eyes nodded to the widow. "Mrs. Goodman wanted to see you. She wants to hire you to find out who killed her husband."

Johnny Liddell grinned. This case was turning out to be one damned client after another as well as one damned murder after another. He started to reach for the button on the wall to summon a waiter. "Drink?"

Goodman's bodyguard shook his head. "Mrs. Goodman isn't drinking."

Johnny Liddell saw the pin-point pupils for the first time. "On the junk, eh?" He withdrew his hand. "I read some place that that kind of coke and rum don't mix."

Marty Mann shrugged. "That's one of the reasons I'm still hanging around. I figure with Goodman dead she can use some help. So I decided to see her through the investigation and then take off."

Johnny Liddell nodded. "How about this afternoon?" he asked her.

"Mona Varden called me. She said she knew something about Goodman and Randolph that I'd want to know. She said it was worth money." The woman's pin-point eyes showed no interest, seemed to be looking at something far in back of the detective's head. "When I got there I found her. She was dead. She deserved to be dead. But I didn't kill her." She spoke slowly, as though in a dream.

Her companion nodded. "She wasn't up there long enough to do the job. I saw you go in, spotted you as the detective Goodman had hired and I got curious. I went up and found you putting the arm on her. I thought maybe you were trying to ring up a frame, so I put the gun on you. You got gay, went for me and I had to conk you." His voice was flat, showed no sign of regret. "When I got her out of there and she told me what happened, I knew we were wrong. She was all busted up and I lost sight of her for five minutes while I went calling you to come down here. Guess she took herself a jolt. She's coked to the eyeballs. Be hours before I can do anything with her." He leaned across the table. "She didn't kill Varden or Goodman. I'd know if she did."

Johnny Liddell nodded. "Okay. I'll buy that. I owe you one for the clout on the head, but we'll just leave that on the books. If she didn't kill Mona, who did?"

"Russo." The slate eyes were steady. "Cookie Russo. As we pulled up to the Varden dame's place, he came out the front door. Get a picture of him and show it to the doorman. See if they don't make him."

"Why should Russo want to knock Mona off?"

Mrs. Goodman stirred. Again the words came slowly. “Mona knew too much. She always knew too much. That was her business. She knew that Russo had killed Julian. He didn’t mean a thing to me any more. But I want to see his killer get his.”

Her eyes were fixed on Johnny’s face in the same unblinking state. The detective reached over, picked up a silver cigarette case from the table. He selected a cigarette, smelled it, put it back.

“I prefer tobacco in mine,” he grunted. “I’m fresh out.”

Marty Mann tossed a pack of cigarettes on the table. Liddell took one, lighted it. “Why should Russo want to kill Goodman?”

“He owed him a package of dough for one thing. For another thing, Goodman had a way of making people want to do things to him.”

Johnny dropped his eyes, appeared to be studying the tip of the cigarette. “But Russo had nothing to do with the Randolph murder. That’s the core of this whole thing.”

The bodyguard snorted. “Randolph murdered! That’s a laugh! He got himself drunk, made a turn where there was no corner—and that was that!”

Mrs. Goodman yawned. “I want to go home.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “Take her on home, Marty. I’ll notify Devlin. I’ll tell him you spoke to me and it was all a mistake. It’ll be easy enough to prove that she couldn’t have killed Mona. From the looks of the blood, she was dead at least an hour when I got there, and if you can back up the time when Mrs. Goodman got there, there’ll be nothing to it.”

Johnny Liddell dropped his cab outside headquarters, ran up the steps and asked for Inspector Devlin. The clerk in the outer office was doubtful.

“The inspector’s grabbing a little shut-eye, Liddell,” he explained. “Besides, he’s plenty sore at you. He thinks you’ve been holding out. The commissioner’s been giving him hell.”

“He’ll see me,” Liddell assured him. “I’ve got a couple of people that he wants all sewed up for him. Of course, I could probably call the commissioner, and . . .”

Inspector Devlin told the clerk to send Liddell in.

He was sitting on the side of the leather couch in his office running his stubby fingers through his hair. He was yawning when Johnny Liddell entered.

“What’d you want to see me about, Liddell?” he asked. He was still antagonistic.

He got up, walked over to the sink in the corner behind the screen and slapped some cold water in his face. Johnny Liddell plumped himself down in the big leather armchair on the far side of the desk.

“Look, Inspector,” he said, “what would you do if I told you where you could pick up Mrs. Goodman and Goodman’s ex-bodyguard?”

Devlin dried his face on a towel, hung it back on the nail over the sink, ran a comb through his tangled hair. “Pick them up and give them the damnedest grilling you ever saw.”

“Suppose I told you that would be a waste of time, that you won’t learn anything from them, might even tip off the murderer that we’re getting hot?”

Devlin denuded a stick of chewing gum from its wrapper, folded it carefully and shoved it into his mouth. “Are we?”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “I think so. I know you think I’ve been crossing you, but I haven’t. I’m still fumbling around in the dark and there’s no sense of two of us getting confused with what little I know.” He stared at the ceiling. “But there is a certain pattern beginning to show through all this, and while I haven’t got it all, I’m beginning to see little pieces that should fit together pretty soon.”

“I’m going to send out for some coffee, Johnny. Want some?” Devlin asked, and Johnny Liddell nodded. “Two coffees, Mike,” the inspector called. “Make mine without sugar.”

Devlin leaned back in his chair, hooked his heels on the corner of his desk. “Look, Johnny. You’re doing one of two things. Either you’re as much in the dark as we are and you’re just dumb lucky enough to be pushing that killer so close that he’s got to go around bumping off possible witnesses, or else you know what’s going on and you’re holding out on us to protect a client.” Johnny started to protest, was cut short by a wave of the inspector’s hand. “I’m going to go along on the assumption that it’s the first, because, commissioner or no commissioner, if I find that you’ve been holding out on me or crossing me up, so help me I’ll have your shield if I lose mine in the process.”

Johnny grinned. “It’s a deal, Devlin. Friends again?” Devlin nodded. “Good. Well then, now that we understand each other, how’s about comparing notes?”

The clerk came in, placed two paper containers of coffee on the desk and went out. Devlin didn't move until the door had closed.

"All right. Sounds reasonable," he said finally. "We'll start with you. What have you got so far?"

Johnny Liddell reached over, took one of the containers, gouged the top out and took a sip. "Here's the way it shapes up for me. Goodman murdered Randolph or had the job done. Probably used Sal Moreno for that. Mona Varden had been in on it or else encouraged Goodman to do a lot of talking when he had a skinful." He took another drink of the coffee. "Goodman is also involved in a lot of other deals and has himself enough enemies to staff a regiment. The night Randolph's body is found, he's in his office, and one of these guys comes up and pays him off."

Devlin sipped thoughtfully at his container. "Sounds plausible," he agreed. "Then what?"

"Mona Varden decides to cash in on what she knows about Randolph's murder and tries to shake Moreno. He takes care of her. Moreno is in his apartment talking to me. One of his customers thinks he's blowing a whistle and blasts him."

Devlin switched his gum from the right to the left side. "Who killed Goodman in the first place then?"

Johnny Liddell emptied his container, tossed it at the wastebasket. "Cookie Russo. Goodman owed him a wad and was horsing him."

"Could be. In that case, you think the Goodman killing and the other killings are all separate jobs?" Johnny nodded. "The only thing wrong with that is the fact that the bullets in Goodman and in Moreno came out of the same gun."

Johnny groaned. "I was afraid of that. Then how about Varden's neighbors or the elevator boys or the doorman? Didn't they see anybody around the time of the killing?"

Devlin consulted his notebook. "No. Only reports we got were of a dumpy little guy with graying hair and with a walk like an ape. That was you. We also got descriptions of the Goodman dame and her chauffeur or bodyguard or whatever the hell he is. And that was after the body was found. No one else."

"Either this killer is getting all the breaks or he's an awfully smart cookie," Liddell growled. "Not counting Randolph, there have been three

murders right in the open. The killer must have gone into and out of Goodman's office, Moreno's place and the Varden dame's apartment and nobody sees him. He's even so sure of himself that he uses the same rod."

Devlin nodded. "Not only that, my friend, but consider this. You just listed three people who were probably in on the Randolph swindle—Goodman, Varden and Moreno. They're all dead. That means there was at least one other person in on it. Who? Who gains by the whole mess? Mrs. Goodman."

"That is if the insurance people decide to pay off. Don't forget, Goodman killed Randolph. That would invalidate the policy."

Devlin champed savagely at his gum. "Sure. That is, if you can prove Goodman killed him. Just the fact that he was murdered doesn't invalidate it. After all, it did stop production on the picture and that's what Goodman insured against." Devlin finished his coffee, smashed the paper container with his fist. "And with Goodman and probably the only two witnesses dead, we're going to have one helluva time proving it."

Johnny Liddell leaned back and groaned. "I see what you mean." He stared at the inspector's face. "You know, we may be forgetting one very important person in this whole mess—"

"Who?"

"That secretary of Goodman's."

"What about her?"

"Toni Belden has a theory about her being sort of a master-mind behind Goodman. I know it sounds screwy, but everything in this case does. And besides, there is something pretty funny about that dame."

"What?"

"I bet she can't even type," Johnny Liddell asserted.

Devlin snorted. "So what? With looks like hers she don't have to. Lots of these movie big-shots got secretaries that can't even spell their own names. She's got other compensations."

"I noticed that," Johnny admitted glumly. "All right, suppose it isn't her. There's someone else in on this Randolph swindle and my hunch is whoever it is was the brains behind the whole thing."

"That secretary don't look like no master-mind to me," Devlin argued.

Johnny nodded. “Okay. With a chassis like that you don’t need a mind. Maybe you’ve got a candidate?”

Devlin nodded. “My guess is the Goodman dame. Not that I’ve got much hope of getting anything out of her. She’s managed to set up some pretty good alibis for at least two of the killings. And since it’s pretty much of a lead pipe cinch that all three were done by the same guy, I’m pretty sure we’re wasting our time with her.”

“Well, she’s at her place now if you want to talk to her. When I saw her she had a skinful of junk and wasn’t in any mood for conversation.”

Devlin raised his eyebrows. “A hophead, eh? I should have guessed it. Well, no use going after her until the jolt wears off. What are you planning?”

Johnny shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve got a hankering to have a little talk with this Cookie Russo. Then I think I’ll look into that blonde secretary of Goodman’s. I’ve seen too many of that screwball reporter’s hunches pay off to ignore one like this. Besides, even if nothing comes of it, what can I lose?”

“Yeah,” said Devlin. “What can you lose? And just in case you haven’t got her address, I’ll save you a bit of trouble. She lives at the Denton Towers.”

CHAPTER NINE

AFTER several brief delays the inquest on Harvey Randolph got under way the following morning before a packed house. Teen-agers sobbed audibly. Sensation-seekers sat popeyed as witness after witness came under the pointed questioning of Coroner Morrissey. The jury, conscious of its own importance and alert to possible publicity, reached a quick verdict of “murder at the hands of person or persons unknown.”

Johnny Liddell, reading an account of the proceedings in the *Dispatch* that evening, chuckled.

“Sounds like Randolph got into a four star production at last, eh, Toni?”

The girl reporter nodded, cleaned up what remained on her plate of an oversized sirloin.

“You really missed a show, Johnny. To hear those kids moan and groan you’d have thought the guy was being seduced right before their eyes, instead of being declared legally dead.”

Johnny folded the paper, put it aside thoughtfully. “Toni,” he said, “remember how you suggested Goodman might have been trying to make some girl? Well, that good-looking babe in his office could have had some trouble, too. That is,” he amended, “unless she had him under her thumb, like you hinted last night.”

“Could be.” Toni Belden looked serious. “You don’t really think she’s behind all these killings, do you, Johnny?”

“She might,” Johnny told her. “All except Mona Varden. I don’t think that baby would handle a knife. Too messy. She’d use a gun. As for Goodman, why not? Whoever the killer was, Goodman must have known him, otherwise he never would have let him get so close. Almost anybody could have done the Moreno job.” He held out a pack of cigarettes, waited until the girl had taken one, then shook one loose for himself. “Anyway, she should know enough about Goodman’s business to be worth a visit.”

Toni Belden leaned forward for a light, her eyes fixed on Johnny. “From what I’ve seen of her, she should be worth a visit whether she knows anything about Goodman’s business or not. You just be sure it isn’t social.”

He tapped the cigarette on the rim of an empty cup. "It'll be business all right, Toni. I've got a hunch we'd better wind this case up, and fast. This killer has tasted blood and so far he's gotten away with it. He'll strike again and again. Murder is like an epidemic. It's catching."

He signaled the waiter, called for his check.

"Going to her place now?" Toni asked.

Liddell dropped a few bills and some change on the waiter's tray. "Might as well get it over with. If she knows something it'll be that much faster we get this killer. If not, at least I won't be wasting any more time figuring she can help us."

He ground the cigarette out after one long last drag. The girl pushed her chair back, got up, walked with him to the door of the restaurant.

"Do I get to go along, Johnny?"

The detective shook his head. "You get to go on back to your office. You probably have a lot of nice confidential information you'd like to tell your little typewriter that will make your editor ver-ry happy and will drive Inspector Devlin nuts."

The girl protested. "But I haven't, Johnny. Not a thing."

"In that case," Liddell told her, "you go on back to your place where I can reach you and I'll give you all the news."

"All the news?"

"Well," Johnny temporized, "all the news that's fit to print."

The blonde looked just as bored without a typewriter as she did with one. She opened the door in response to Johnny's rap, peered at him for a minute before she placed him.

"Oh, Johnny Liddell, the detective," she smiled. "How did you find out where I lived?"

"I'm a detective," he grinned. "Do I get asked in?"

She looked down at the revealing housecoat that clung to her figure, swung the door open. "You caught me unprepared. I don't even get to use the old gag about slipping into something more comfortable."

Johnny Liddell followed her into the living room, accepted the invitation to sit down. She selected a bourbon and a scotch from the liquor cabinet, carried them to the dinette. "Name your poison," she invited.

"Bourbon is okay by me." He watched as she poured two stiff hookers, then filled two highball glasses with ice cubes and ran a little water into them. She brought the two bottles back into the living room with her, placed them on the floor at the foot of her chair.

She dropped into the chair opposite Johnny. "Well," she said, "what is this, social or business?"

"Business. I thought you might be able to give me a couple of steers on Goodman that would help."

"Goodman!" The voice was bitter. "Here's to Goodman." She raised her jigger and drank the liquid without turning a hair.

"You didn't like him very well, did you?" Johnny asked.

"Did anybody?" the girl countered. "Even his own wife couldn't stand the sight of him." She sank back into the chair, the housecoat parting at the knee to reveal an expanse of thigh. "In a town where lice are a dime a dozen, Goodman was a standout."

Johnny nodded. "So I hear. How about Randolph?"

The girl's eyes became wary. "Randolph? What about him?"

"Like him?"

"Not too much. I'm a big girl now. Randolph was pash stuff to the high school kids." She pursed her lips. "Although there were some gals who were old enough to vote for Lincoln who did go for him."

Johnny Liddell emptied his jigger, washed it down with a swig from the water glass, deposited both on the floor. "Mrs. Goodman, for instance?"

"Well, yes. She had a very maternal feeling for Randolph. But there were lots of others. He used them, then discarded them. He was good-looking and he made it pay off."

"Never married, was he?"

The girl looked surprised. "Certainly he was. He married some wide-eyed society kid. It didn't last long, though."

"Why not?"

“The old eternal Hollywood triangle. They were both in love with him. What’s it all leading up to, Liddell?”

Johnny dumped a cigarette from a pack, tossed it to the girl who caught it deftly. He took one himself. “You know the pitch. Randolph was bumped so Goodman could collect on that insurance. I’m after the one who bumped Goodman.”

The girl lighted her cigarette. “I’m not saying that’s what happened,” she replied. “But supposing it was, there’s one thing sure. If Randolph was murdered, Goodman never did it. He didn’t have that kind of guts.”

“Who did?”

The girl shrugged. “You’re the detective. Remember?”

“Okay, okay. So I’m the detective.” Johnny Liddell smiled wryly. “But I’m not enough of a detective to figure out where the hell all these pieces fit. There have been three people killed besides Randolph. Moreno, Mona Varden and Goodman. How does that figure?”

“Maybe they knew who the killer was. Goodman certainly did. He hired him. Varden probably got it from Goodman and they probably cut Moreno in on the deal some place.” She took a deep drag on the cigarette. “I’m glad I don’t know from nothing.”

“Don’t you?”

At this she froze up. “Look, Liddell. I’ve told the cops all I know. I came into the office that morning and Goodman was cold. I called Homicide and reported. That’s all I know.”

Liddell nodded. “That’s right. But how about the afternoon before? Goodman got a call that upset him, didn’t he?”

Some of the color drained out of the girl’s face. “You’re crazy. There wasn’t any telephone call.”

“Yes, there was. Goodman must have had word from his boy that Randolph was taken care of, that the job was going to be done that night. Who was it that called?”

The girl crushed out the cigarette, pulled herself to her feet. “You’re nuts, I tell you. There was no telephone call. None.”

Johnny Liddell didn’t move. “Who was it?”

“It had nothing to do with Randolph.” The girl bent down, picked up the scotch bottle, filled her glass. “Goodman did get a call that upset him but it had nothing to do with Randolph.”

She sat down, tried desperately to regain her composure.

“Was it Moreno?” Johnny asked.

“No. It—it was Cookie Russo. He wanted to talk to Goodman. I knew Goodman was ducking him. He owed him a lot of money. So I told Russo that Goodman was out—”

“What happened?”

The girl drank her scotch, as though to wash away the memory. “He got kind of tough. Said that if Goodman didn’t pick up his phone, he’d send a couple of his boys over and deliver the message personally.”

Johnny nodded. “So?”

“I rang Goodman’s phone. He seemed mad because I had told Russo he was out. He—he said he was expecting the call, and to put it through. So I did. The last thing I heard before I cut out was Goodman telling Russo that he wasn’t ducking him, that I was just a dizzy blonde.”

“Cookie Russo, eh?” Liddell mused. “He told Inspector Devlin that the last time he talked to Goodman was about two weeks ago.” He played with the cigarette for a second. “And Goodman expected the call?”

“Yes. Anyway, that’s what he said.” The girl’s voice shook slightly. “There was another call that afternoon, Liddell. I know it sounds crazy but I—I thought it was Randolph. I said, ‘Hello, Harvey. Goodman’s been looking all over for you.’”

Johnny forgot the cigarette. “And?”

“The guy got sore. He said his name wasn’t Harvey. His name was Melody and that he wanted to talk to Goodman.” The deep red of her lips stood out against the pallor of her face. “I—I told him that Goodman wasn’t in and asked him where Goodman could reach him. He said just to say he called.”

“Could you have been mistaken in the voice?”

The girl nodded. “I guess so. It was over the phone, and I guess I was thinking of Harvey anyway. You know, what with all the excitement around the studio about the picture being called off.”

“What time was that?”

“About four-thirty, I guess.” She leaned back, seemed more composed. “I told Goodman when he came in and he said okay. A few minutes later he asked for a direct wire and dialed a number himself.”

Johnny Liddell rubbed his chin with the heel of his hand. “Four-thirty, eh? Was that before or after the Cookie Russo call?”

“Before,” the girl said. “Goodman called back that number the minute he came in. The Russo call didn’t come in until about fifteen minutes later.”

“That could have been Randolph,” Liddell mused. “He’d been out on a binge, sobered up and called Goodman for money or a car. Goodman found out where he was and sicked Cookie Russo on him. Cookie’s boys faked the accident and Randolph turns up dead in an auto accident. It may not be good, but it might sound awful loud to a jury.”

“But why should Russo do it?”

“Plenty of reasons. Goodman owed him dough, for one. The best way to get his dough was to see to it that Goodman laid his hands on some. Then, with that on Goodman, Russo had a soft touch for the rest of his life. He could bleed Goodman dry.”

The girl’s face was white, and she shivered as though she were cold. “I’m scared, Liddell.”

“What of?”

“I don’t know. Everybody connected with Goodman seems to be getting theirs. I—I’m afraid I’m next. Maybe they think I know something. I don’t, Liddell. I swear I don’t.” She asked for another cigarette, lighted it with shaking fingers. “Even Goodman’s wife feels it. She’s keeping on that gorilla Goodman hired—for all the good he did him.”

“Marty Mann, you mean? What about him, Blondie?”

The girl picked a fleck of tobacco off the tip of her tongue with one of her long, shellacked nails. “Goodman got him about a week ago. He stuck close to him all the time. When Goodman was out with a dame, Marty would be waiting out front. If Goodman was alone, Marty would be within calling distance.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “He hadn’t been in the office the morning Goodman got killed?”

She shook her head. “No. He was at Goodman’s house. Any time Goodman had an important conference, he’d set it late enough so that none of us would be in the office. I guess that night he sent Marty out to the house to wait for him. Anyway, when I called Goodman’s place, Marty answered the phone.”

“Well, that one does double duty. It alibis Marty and Mrs. Goodman at the same time.” He reached down without invitation, refilled his glass with bourbon, helped the girl to scotch. “Did you know Mrs. Goodman was on the junk?”

“Cocaine, you mean? Yes, I knew it,” the girl answered. “Goodman did that to her. He liked to destroy things and people, especially when they were strong willed and independent. So that’s the way he went about destroying her.”

Liddell took a sip of water, followed it with the bourbon. “You mean to tell me that even though Mrs. Goodman was a hophead, a movie pash like Randolph played around with her?”

“You’d have to know them to understand.” The harsh note that had crept into the girl’s voice had faded out and was almost tender. “Randolph was no good, never had been. But Mrs. Goodman mothered him. I guess she was the first one ever to be nice to him. He went for her.” She shrugged. “Things like that happen.”

Liddell pulled himself up from his chair, walked out into the kitchenette. He refilled his water glass, brought it back, and poured half into the girl’s tumbler. She looked tired.

“This has been a pretty tough deal for you, hasn’t it?” he asked.

The girl nodded. Liddell hoisted a thigh onto the arm of her chair, ran his fingers lightly through her hair.

“How come a gal with all you’ve got on the ball wastes her time behind a typewriter?”

She studied his face for a moment, then smiled. The smile stopped dead below her eyes. They were wary. “I haven’t exactly wasted my time. This hideout look like it?”

Liddell looked around the patently expensive room. “You never made this pounding a typewriter—at least not the way you pound it.”

Anger glared from her eyes for a second, then they were shielded by dropped lids. “So?”

“Who put the money up?” Liddell asked harshly. “It was Goodman, wasn’t it?”

The girl broke away from his arm, stood up.

“Get out.” She was shaking with anger.

“Don’t get so hurt, sugar,” Johnny said. “I’m not just sticking my nose into this mess for vicarious thrills. The guy I’m after is a murderer. I’ve got to know these things.”

“What things?”

Liddell stood up. “Why was Goodman paying for your apartment?”

“Maybe he didn’t always have his mind on business. Or in your book am I so hard to take?”

“Not hard to take, but hard to make—unless I miss my guess. That case-hardened act you put on doesn’t fool me, Blondie. What did you have on Goodman?”

The girl picked up her glass, refilled it. “Nothing.”

“Okay. Then why were you working for him? Not because you could type or be a secretary. Why?”

“I wanted to be near him. To watch him, if you must know.”

Johnny Liddell sighed. “Now we’re getting down to cases. Why did you want to watch him?”

“On account of what he was doing to his wife.” She drank the scotch, sank back into the chair. “I told him that I would kill him if anything ever happened to her.”

“Why?”

“Because Alice Goodman is . . . my sister. You wouldn’t think it to see her now, but she was wonderful once. Full of life and fire. He did this to her. He did it deliberately. I wanted to make sure he couldn’t hurt her any more.”

“Did you kill him, Blondie?”

The girl looked up. “No. I didn’t kill him. I should have, but I didn’t. When I realized he was dead, I was afraid Alice had done it. But she hadn’t. She hadn’t left the house, Marty said.” She blew her nose softly. “Liddell, don’t judge her by what she is now. Try to see as I see her—the way she was before Goodman got his hooks into her.”

Liddell sat on the arm of the chair. “Did Goodman know who you were?”

“Yes. I told him. I told him I’d kill him if he didn’t leave my sister alone. He thought I was fooling, and one night at the office, he tried to make me.” The hard look came back. “I fought him and got away. I came home here, got a gun and went back after him.” She paused, took a deep breath. “He had already gone. The next morning I told him I’d kill him the next time he laid a hand on me. He started to laugh and I pulled out the gun. He never bothered me after that.”

“Where’s the gun?”

She indicated a breakfront desk in the corner. “Top drawer.” She watched without comment as Liddell went over to the desk, opened the drawer, and took out a revolver.

“A .38, eh?” He spun the cylinder, noted no shells had been fired, smelled the barrel. “Goodman was shot with a .38 by someone he knew well enough to let get close to him. That wouldn’t be Cookie Russo, but it might be you.”

“It wasn’t me. It should have been, maybe. But it wasn’t me.”

Liddell dropped the gun into his jacket pocket. “It’ll have to be checked against the slugs they took out of Goodman and Moreno.”

“Check it against anything you like. That gun hasn’t been fired since I bought it.”

Johnny wandered aimlessly around the room. “You know you should have told all this to the police, don’t you?” he asked.

“What good could it do? I didn’t kill Goodman, neither did my sister. It would only drag her name through the mud, and God knows she’s been through enough already!”

The detective nodded. “Okay, Blondie. I’ll buy that.” He stopped his wandering, stood over her. “One more point. You said Goodman made a pass at you one night. Then you came home, got your gun and went back after him. How late at night?”

“About eleven.”

“Weren’t you afraid that the building people would see you and put the finger on you the next morning?”

She shook her head. “You don’t have to go up through the front of the building. Goodman had keys made for the freight entrance around the side. As I told you, he sometimes had conferences with people who didn’t want to be seen. He always gave them keys to that back entrance.”

“His wife had one of those keys?”

“Why do you keep harping on Alice? She didn’t have a key, and she didn’t do it, I tell you.” She got out of the chair, stood face to face with the detective. Her voice lost its edge. “Alice didn’t do it. Believe me, Liddell.” She took a step nearer. Her eyes were half closed and the blond hair, where he had rumbled it, hung down over her shoulders in a metallic gold cascade. Her lips were only a few inches from his.

“Stay here, Johnny,” she said huskily. “Don’t leave me. I—I’m afraid.”

He held her away from him. “I can’t, sugar. There’s a guy I’ve got to see. Cookie Russo.”

“No, don’t, Johnny.” Her voice was urgent. “Stay away from him. You can’t do any good. Goodman is dead, so are Mona Varden and Moreno. Why should you be next? Don’t go.”

Her arms slid around his neck, held him tight. Her lips crushed against his. Again he thrust her back.

“I’ve got to go, Blondie. You may think it’s a gag saying you’re afraid. But unless I can lay that killer by the heels, you are in real danger.”

The girl’s eyes fell. “It—it’s not a gag, Liddell. I want you to stay. I—I’ve never asked anybody to stay before. But I want you to stay.”

He shook his head. “I’ve got to finish this job now, Blondie.”

She looked him squarely in the eye. “You’ll come back, Johnny?”

“What do you think?” he asked.

CHAPTER TEN

JOHNNY LIDDELL'S cab rolled to a stop at the canopied entrance of the Chateau Chance. It was a converted private estate that got a heavy play from the movie crowd. The grounds consisted of about ten acres of water frontage overlooking the Pacific and were surrounded on three sides by a high wall of native stone and cement.

A gaudily uniformed doorman opened the cab door. Liddell tossed the driver a bill, got out and loped up the steps of the house, turned right into what was now the barroom. He hit the bar for two quick bourbons, was pleasantly surprised to note that the liquor tasted like the brand name on the bottle.

"Hear a guy can get a ride for his money here," Liddell said.

The white-jacketed man behind the stick shrugged. "I just tend the bar here, sir." Surreptitiously he signaled one of the floor men. A man in a tuxedo that fitted too snugly across the hips and showed signs of ample and expert padding across the shoulders approached.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked.

Johnny nodded. "Friends of mine in town told me I could play a little roulette out this way. Toni Belden of the *Dispatch*, for one. Know her?"

The man in the tuxedo smiled politely. "Of course, sir. Any friend of Miss Belden's is very welcome here!" He indicated a cleverly disguised door at the back of the room. "Would you mind speaking to the gentleman over there, sir? Explain that you are our guest tonight."

The detective nodded, slid off his bar stool, made his way to the rear. The door was guarded by a tuxedoed floor man with a flattened nose. He stared coldly at Liddell for a moment, then broke into a wide-mouthed grin. "Say, I make you. You're the private eye that cracked that Cameron case." His voice was a guttural croak. "Remember me?"

"Sure, Mushky. I thought I recognized you. Been a long time."

Mushky grinned happily. "Sure has. What are you doing out here, Liddell?"

Johnny Liddell shrugged. “I got a couple of loose bucks that feel ambitious. Game hot tonight?”

“Want to see how the other half lives, eh?” Mushky cast a cautious eye around, dropped his voice. “Stay off the blackjack and roulette. Sucker stuff. The crap table’s nearest thing to leveling in the joint.” He pushed on a section of the door frame and a panel slid open. Two eyes regarded them from within. “It’s okay, Harry. This here’s Johnny Liddell. Let him in.”

The panel slid shut, and after a second the door swung open. Liddell slipped a folded five into Mushky’s ham-like hand, and entered. He found himself in a little vestibule that had no lights. As soon as the door to the barroom had closed behind him, another door leading to the gambling room opened.

A low buzz of conversation spiced with the click of roulette wheels came to him. A dozen or more people were huddled around a large roulette layout in the center of the room while on the side a hot crap game was in operation. The bird cages and the slot machines lining the walls were getting a moderately small play.

Johnny walked over to the cashier’s cage, dropped a fifty. He received three red chips and four whites. In fifteen minutes he had run it up to twelve reds and six whites and in an hour he had lost the whole works.

Liddell wandered away from the roulette table, stopped to watch the crap game for a few minutes, played a few quarters in the slot machine. Beyond the slot machines, a corridor opened into a hall. At the far end, Liddell could make out a door marked *Private*. A tall, thin man in a tuxedo lounged outside. Johnny walked down the hall, found his way barricaded.

“You’re off your course, chum,” the thin man told him humorlessly. “It’s on the other side of the house. It says *Men* on it.”

“I’m looking for Cookie Russo. He wants to see me.”

“What’s the name?”

“Johnny Liddell.”

The thin man pulled a typewritten list from his breast pocket, studied it laboriously, then looked up with hard, expressionless eyes. “Cookie don’t want to see you, chum. Beat it.”

Liddell didn’t move. “He don’t know it, but he wants to see me bad. Try him. Tell him it’s about Goodman, about a telephone call the afternoon before Goodman was croaked.”

The thin man stared at him for a second, then grunted. "This better not be a gag, mister. I ain't got much sense of humor." He turned, gave a code knock against the metal door marked *Private*. From deep inside a buzzer sounded, and the door opened, swallowing up the thin man. In a moment he was back.

"Inside," he said in the same flat, expressionless tone.

Johnny Liddell preceded him into the office. He heard the door click after him, then felt a sharp jab in the small of his back.

"That's far enough," the thin man growled from behind him.

Cookie Russo sat behind a highly polished desk. He was anything but what Johnny Liddell had pictured him to be. He was thin, dapper. His hair, beginning to show signs of thinning at the temples, was light and wavy. He wore a heavy gold identification bracelet and had the habit of fumbling with the points of the fine Irish linen handkerchief he wore in his breast pocket.

"Is he light?" Cookie asked the thin man.

Liddell felt the man expertly fan him, come up with the .45 from his shoulder holster, and Blondie's .38 from his jacket pocket. The thin man slid both guns across the desk to Cookie.

"Okay, Jake," Cookie instructed. "You can wait outside."

The thin man faded, and the door clicked behind him. Liddell dropped into a large red leather over-stuffed chair across the desk from Cookie Russo. "Name's Johnny Liddell," he said.

Russo looked over the guns, opened his drawer, dropped them in. "Guns make me nervous," he explained. "Particularly when somebody else has them." He opened a silver chased humidor and held it out. Liddell took two cigars, stuck one in his pocket.

"That's for the fifty I lost on the wheel."

Cookie smiled. "Anybody who plays roulette should expect to lose." He waited while Liddell bit the end off his cigar and lighted it. "You said something about Goodman, Mr. Liddell?"

Johnny exhaled twin streams of smoke. "I was just interested to know why you told the police you hadn't heard from Goodman in weeks when you were talking to him the afternoon before he was killed."

"So the blonde did talk, eh?" He spoke as though it were a matter of no consequence. "That's too bad."

“All according to how you look at it, Russo,” Johnny countered. “The way I look at it, it would be bad, awful bad, if anything happened to that blonde now. I might have to come visiting again, and then when you took my gun away, it would be piece by piece—slug by slug, that is.”

Cookie considered the statement carefully, failed to be impressed. “You talk big, Liddell,” he admitted. “You’re not police?”

“Private,” Johnny told him. “Acme in New York. Working on the Goodman deal.” He took a deep drag on the cigar. “Like that, there’s no need for the cops to know about that call. Unless it’s got something to do with the killing.”

“Do you think so?”

“Could be,” Johnny replied. “There’s a Scandinavian in this deal some place, Russo, and I’ve got a sneaking hunch it’s you.”

Cookie Russo touched the tips of his handkerchief. “That’s kind of careless talk, isn’t it; seeing as how you’re here and there’s no telling what could happen to you before you got out of here?” He stuck a cigar in the corner of his mouth. “If you get out of here,” he added.

Johnny Liddell hung one leg over the arm of the chair. “Let’s stop telling each other how tough we are, Russo,” he suggested. “I’m ready to trade. I got some stuff on you that might make this town too hot for you. It’s none of my business. All I want from you is straight answers.”

Cookie Russo lighted his cigar and stared at the ceiling. “Such as?”

“This telephone call you made. Did it have anything to do with Harvey Randolph?”

“Could be!” the gambler admitted.

Johnny nodded. “I suppose you know that Randolph was killed less than eight hours after you made that call. Goodman was hard up for dough. He owed you plenty. Randolph’s death made it possible for you to get that dough.”

The gambler smoked silently. “You think I handled the Randolph bump-off for the dough Goodman owed me? Why should I?” He leaned across the desk toward Liddell. “But even if I did, why should I kill Goodman? Now I’ll never get my fifty grand.”

“That what he owed you?”

Without answering, Russo opened the top drawer of his desk, took out a small key ring. He selected one key, got up, walked to an oil painting on the far wall. Under it was a small safe that opened to the key. He fumbled in the interior for a moment, came up with a bundle of papers held together with a rubber band. He tossed them to Johnny Liddell. They were IOU's in varying amounts covering a period of over a year.

"Fifty grand," Russo growled. "Count it yourself."

Johnny Liddell tossed the bundle back on the table. "I believe you," he said.

The gambler dropped back in his chair. "Then why the hell should I kill Goodman?"

Johnny looked him squarely in the eyes. "I didn't say you killed Goodman," he said. "In fact I'm sure you didn't."

The gambler blinked. "What?"

"The guy who killed Goodman knew him well enough and was trusted enough by Goodman to get close to him. What's more, the killer stood behind him. He never would have let you or any of your men get in back of him. Besides, as you say, now you'll never get your dough."

Cookie nodded. "Okay. Then what do you have on your mind?"

"What about that phone call?"

"I called to tell Goodman my patience was running out, that I was going to send a couple of my boys over. He told me that a deal was cooking and that he'd have the money pronto. I promised him a week's grace. That was all."

Johnny Liddell was disappointed. "That leaves us right where we were. Goodman was getting set to kill Randolph, that's where he was planning to get the money to pay you." He settled back. "What do you know about Mona Varden?"

"A cheap blackmailer and tart. She was Goodman's twist, but she was on the make for anything that would stand still long enough."

"Sal Moreno?"

"Cute operator. What do you want to know?"

"He's tied into this thing some place. What's the connection between him and Goodman?"

The gambler got up, paced up and down for a minute in indecision. “You’re not copper, otherwise I’d clam up on this. But I’m fed up with getting hauled down to headquarters to answer questions. Maybe this’ll help you break the case. If it does, you’re welcome to it.”

“Yeah?”

Russo stopped in front of Liddell, towered over him. “You know anything of Moreno’s racket?”

“He had some free burial service for bums. Accommodated some of the hot shots by burying stiffes that might make the cops curious.”

“You’ve been around, pal,” Russo chided. “Why go to the trouble of burying them when you got the Pacific Ocean right at your door? Moreno would get these stiffes from the charity wards, from the morgues, any place they got unidentified bodies. That gave him a good supply. See?”

“For what?”

Russo walked back to his desk chair in disgust. “What do I have to do, draw you a picture? Suppose you got reasons you want to fade out. You got a wife who drives you nuts. You’re in a jam. Anything like that. Moreno arranges for your body to get found—it’s banged up pretty bad but there’s enough stuff to make sure it’s you. Hell, they’ve been cleaning up robbing the insurance companies for years.”

A bright light dawned in Liddell’s skull. He sat bolt upright, his legs slipped off the arm of the chair. “You mean you think that body in the car wasn’t Randolph, that it was one of Moreno’s ringers?”

Russo shrugged. “Who am I to guess anything like that? I ain’t a detective.” He opened the drawer, took out Liddell’s .45 and the blonde’s .38. He slid them across the table. “There’s your artillery.”

Johnny Liddell stared. “Holy cow, what a gag! The insurance company pays out a quarter of a million, and the guy ain’t dead. It’s a lead pipe cinch.”

“I’m not saying that’s how it was done,” the gambler reminded him. “You asked me where Moreno fitted in. I’m telling you where he might have fitted in.” He got up, pressed a button on his desk. The door opened, and the thin man came in, hand in pocket. “I think Mr. Liddell’s leaving, Jake.”

The thin man nodded, waited patiently. Johnny Liddell returned the .45 to its holster, dropped the .38 back into his pocket. “Thanks, Russo,” he said. “I’ll do as much for you some day.”

Toni Belden was curled up asleep on her couch when Liddell finally arrived. She grudgingly agreed to make coffee on Johnny's solemn promise that he had an exclusive for her that would make the others sound childish by comparison, but she muttered darkly about being put off until certain long-distance calls went through.

They were finishing their coffee when the long-distance operator announced that the connection had been made.

"Is that you, Johnny?" Steve Baron's voice had a sharp rasp. "What is this? I told you I didn't want any more collect calls."

"Hiya, Steve. Keep your shirt on," Liddell told the agency head. "If this information isn't worth the price of the call, I'll pay for it myself. Now listen, Steve. I've stumbled on a helluva insurance swindle stunt out here. An outfit called the Port of Peace gives free burials to unidentified corpses. Like that they have access to plenty of nice fresh bodies. They insure some guy heavily, dress one of the stiffs up in his clothes, stick him in a fire or float him in the bay for a week, then collect."

Steve Baron sounded mollified. "Say. That ain't bad. That'll satisfy the insurance people. They've been screaming their heads off because they got no action on the Randolph thing."

"Where the hell do they get their nerve screaming? It's only three days. What do they expect?"

Baron's voice was cold, clipped. "They paid a thousand dollar retainer. For a grand they can scream all they want to. See? Besides, what the hell have you been doing on the Randolph thing? I haven't even had a report, and . . ."

"I'm almost positive the body that was identified as Randolph's was one of those prepared stiffs rented out by Moreno and company." Johnny dropped the bombshell without warning. He paid no attention to the crash in the kitchen as two of Toni Belden's pet dishes hit the floor.

There was a new note of interest in the agency head's voice. "Let's have that again. Slow."

"I said Randolph isn't dead. Goodman and Randolph cooked up this deal to take the insurance boys for a quarter of a million. The body in the car was one of the stiffs collected by the Port of Peace for planting. They dressed him in Randolph's duds, stuck Randolph's ring on his finger, burned up his face and drove the car into a tree."

“That’s big talk, Johnny. Can you prove it?”

“Haven’t tried yet. I just stumbled on the setup tonight. I’ll go after it first thing in the morning and wrap it up for you.”

“First thing in the morning hell,” Steve Baron screamed. “You get on it right now.”

“Have a heart, Steve,” Liddell protested. “I’ve been going on this case for three days now. I haven’t had any sleep. I need some rest.”

“Rest my grandmother,” the chief growled. “You give us some proof of that chatter you just gave out with and I’ll see that you get a nice rest—on full pay and with a bonus. Now hop to it. And see that I’m kept informed of what’s going on.”

“Okay,” Johnny agreed wearily. “I’ll get a letter out to you tomorrow night.”

“Letter hell,” Baron yelled. “Keep in contact with me by phone. Collect.”

The telephone clicked in Liddell’s ear as the connection was broken. He replaced the receiver on the hook, stared at it and turned to face Toni Belden, hands on hips, in front of him.

“Well?” The girl reporter’s lips were compressed in a thin white line. “You had a story like that and you sat on it until I missed my deadline?”

Johnny Liddell got up wearily, soothed her. “This is just a hunch on my part, newshawk. Suppose I gave it to you and you got under the wire with it and it turned out to be a phony? You’d look pretty sick.”

Toni shook her head. “You’re not talking me out of it that easily, Johnny Liddell. You’re not dopey enough to feed that story to your home office unless you’re pretty sure it’s on the beam.”

“Maybe not. But it’s still only my interpretation of what’s been going on in this town. I’ve been wrong before on this case and it could be I’m off on another off-trail.” He sniffed. “Any more of that coffee left?”

“You’re not getting any coffee or anything else until you do something about proving that goofy theory of yours. Gee, what a story that would be. Harvey Randolph alive. Wow!”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “It sure would be. But before we can do anything along that line we’ve got to persuade the coroner’s office and Inspector Devlin that we haven’t been hitting the hop. Me, at least.”

“Well, there’ll never be a better time than right now.”

“Do you have any idea what time it is, sugar?” he asked.

The girl consulted the small watch on her wrist. “Only one forty-five. Doc Morrissey will still be at the hospital, and from what I’ve heard, Devlin hasn’t slept since this case started.”

“Me neither,” said Johnny. “Okay. Let’s go over and see Doc Morrissey.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE coroner was still up, puzzling over county records, when Toni and Johnny arrived. His eyes looked puffy from lack of sleep, but the boyish grin was still working. He pushed back the records, got up.

“Hello, Toni. Still keeping bad company, I see.” He shook hands with Johnny Liddell. “Without even looking at my watch, I can guess that the gin mills around town are closed.”

Liddell tossed his hat on the desk, hoisted a heavy thigh on the corner of it, pulled out a cigarette. He watched moodily as Toni sought the easy chair, and dropped into it.

The coroner looked from the girl to Liddell and then back. “Say, what’s eating you two? You look like you’re in trouble and you act like you’re sick. What goes?”

Johnny lighted the cigarette, blew the match out with great deliberation. “Doc, are you sure that the body in that car was Randolph’s?”

“You serious?”

“Dead serious.”

A frown ridged Morrissey’s forehead. He walked around the desk, dropped into his chair. “I’m not sure, I’m positive.”

“Why?” Toni asked.

“A guy is dressed in Randolph’s clothes, he’s got Randolph’s papers in his pockets, is driving Randolph’s car and has Randolph’s teeth in his mouth. Who would you say it was?”

Liddell froze, the cigarette half to his lips. “What did you say about Randolph’s teeth?” he asked.

“You heard me,” Morrissey told him. “We had one of the headquarter boys check the teeth in the corpse’s mouth against Randolph’s dental chart. They matched perfectly.”

A slow, sinking feeling assailed the pit of Johnny’s stomach. He took a deep drag on the cigarette, but the feeling persisted. “I forgot about that,” he growled. “You sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

“There’s something screwy, then. I’d bet anything that’s not Randolph’s body.”

“You’d lose,” the coroner told him. “It was Randolph.”

“You’ve been wrong before, Doc.” Liddell was stubborn. “A whole lot hinges on your being wrong this time.”

The coroner pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket, selected one, crossed the room and unlocked the metal filing cabinet. After rummaging through a pile of large manila envelopes, he selected one tied with red cord and pulled it out.

“I shouldn’t be showing this stuff in front of a reporter,” he said, nodding toward Toni, “it’s official records. But this is one argument I’m going to win from you.”

He dumped a batch of records and typewritten reports on the desk, rummaged through them, and came up with a dentist record with inked notations and arrows. “This is the chart of Randolph’s teeth, provided by his own dentist.”

“Why didn’t his dentist check the teeth?”

“He’s on a short vacation up at Arrowhead. There was no need to bring him back. Any flatfoot in Homicide can check a tooth, see if there’s a filling, check for a bridge and tell whether it’s there or not.”

“Okay,” Liddell nodded. “Now what?”

The coroner picked up the chart and with the point of his pencil showed the various fillings and bridges in Randolph’s mouth. Next to each was a check and a set of initials.

“See those initials?” he asked. “That means that the guy who checked the stiff’s mouth found each of those fillings and replacements just as in the chart.” He started to collect the papers, returned them to their envelopes. “That’s a positive identification. Hell, a dental check’s almost as good as a fingerprint. There are no two mouths in the world exactly alike.”

Johnny Liddell nodded glumly. “That’s hell,” he commented. “Here it fit together just like a clock. Only, it’s got no works. It won’t go.” He smoked his cigarette in silence, watched Morrissey return the folder to the files. “I’ve still got a hunch Harvey Randolph’s not dead.”

Morrissey locked the filing cabinet, returned the keys to his pocket, placed himself back behind the desk. “Then they sure played a dirty trick on him, Johnny. They buried him yesterday.” He dug into his bottom drawer, came up with a bottle. “From the looks of you, I’m prescribing this.”

Johnny nodded, unhooked himself from the desk, paced up and down while Morrissey poured three slugs into lily cups. “There’s got to be something,” Liddell insisted. “That’s the only way it makes sense. That’s the only way we can tie up the Goodman, Varden and Moreno killings and come out even.”

“Have your drink and stop talking to yourself, Johnny,” Morrissey urged. “What you need is a little sleep. Things’ll be a lot clearer in the morning.”

Johnny Liddell handed the girl reporter her cup, emptied his, tossed it in the approximate direction of the wastebasket. “Where was Randolph buried, Doc?”

“Meadowmere. Why?”

“I’m going out there and take a look at him.”

Toni Belden sat up on the end of her chair. “But he’s buried, Johnny. He was buried yesterday.”

Liddell snorted. “Graves have been robbed before now,” he said. “Maybe by digging him up I can save somebody else from being in the same spot he’s in. Me, for instance.”

Doc Morrissey drank his drink carefully, crushed the cup in his hand. He tossed it into the basket, leaned back and regarded the ceiling. “What a blessing to be deaf. Like that you can’t hear illegal proposals.”

Johnny Liddell stared at the coroner for a moment. “Okay, maybe you’re right. Maybe it is illegal. It’s a good thing you didn’t hear me because I’m going out to Meadowmere and have a look at that stiff. Maybe you better stay here. You got a job to worry about.”

The coroner nodded. “That’s right. And you’ve got a license. If you’re caught at this caper, it’s as good as losing a job. You’ll be blacklisted in every state of the Union and serve time on top of it.”

Toni Belden got up. “Well, Johnny. What are we waiting for?”

Morrissey shook his head. “You’re not going, Toni. It’s bad enough that he’s out of his mind and is going to bull himself right into a cell for the next

ten years, but you're too pretty to be cooped up. Besides, you wouldn't care for the styles they're wearing in there now."

"I'm going with him." Toni Belden stuck her chin out, her blue eyes flashed defiance. "I'm playing along with him all the way. And I'm not going to let him go out there alone. He wouldn't stand a chance."

Doc Morrissey grinned. "Who said he was going alone? I'm going with him."

Johnny Liddell leaned across the desk. "I should have known you wouldn't let me down, you old four-flusher. But then I should have realized that grave robbing would appeal to you."

"I'm sorry, Doc," Toni said penitently. "I should have known better, too. I've never known you to let down a friend." She turned to Liddell, stood on her tiptoes, and kissed him. "That's for luck, Sherlock. Don't let it give you any ideas." She blew a kiss to the coroner, walked to the door. Her hands on the knob, she turned again. "But don't forget, fellows, if there's any news, little Toni gets first crack at it."

Johnny Liddell reached across the desk, gripped the coroner's hand. "I'm not holding you to that, Doc," he said. "It would be crazy for a guy in your position to get messed up in a deal like this."

"It sure would," Doc Morrissey nodded agreement. He got up out of the chair and stretched. "I've got a feeling I'm going to hate myself in the morning for this, but let's go."

The black sedan hummed over the road leading to Meadowmere. A slight drizzle started, the sky clouded up. Johnny Liddell squinted into the darkness as they swung left off Route 126 onto a rougher county road.

"Pretty near there now," Morrissey told him. "This road runs along the back of the cemetery. Saves passing any guards or watchmen." He stared out at the wet road. "Besides, in this kind of weather, they'll probably stick close to their shanty out front."

Ahead to the right, Liddell could make out the shapes of tombstones and shafts. "That must be it up ahead."

Morrissey nodded. "Right. Let's see now. That burial receipt back at the office said Randolph was in section seven." He turned on the light on the dash of the Buick, spread out a map of the cemetery. "Ah, there it is." He

spearhead a rear section of the map with a square finger. “That’s a break. Section seven isn’t too far in from the back here.”

The car hummed along for about a quarter of a mile before Morrissey called for Liddell to pull over. Johnny swung the car off the road under a big tree, cut the lights. It was so black, Liddell fancied he could reach out and touch the darkness.

“I figure Randolph’s grave is about a hundred and fifty feet or so to the right,” the coroner muttered. “We walk from here.” He got out of the car, opened the rear door. Liddell could hear the clatter of shovels. “Don’t forget the flash,” Morrissey instructed.

The coroner led the way through the high weeds to a fence that enclosed the rear of the cemetery. He tossed the shovels over one at a time.

“Okay,” he told Liddell in a low tone. “You’d better boost me up. I’m not as young as I used to be when I was at my peak as a grave robber.”

Liddell made a stirrup for him by interlacing his fingers. He caught Morrissey’s foot, lifted him to the top of the wall. A moment later he heard the light thud as the coroner dropped to the other side. In a matter of seconds Johnny too was straddling the wall and jumped to the other side.

“This way,” Morrissey told him.

He led the way past tall silent shafts, flat ugly mausoleums and tombstones of all sizes and shapes. After a moment’s tramping, he signaled for a halt. The ground in front looked freshly turned.

“This is it, Johnny.” He dropped the shovels to the ground. “I think we’d better tackle it in relays,” he suggested. “Like that one of us can be resting and keeping an eye out at the same time.”

Liddell agreed, picked up a shovel. “I sure hope to hell I’m right,” he said. He shuddered involuntarily in the chill of the drizzle. “I’m beginning to doubt it more and more.”

He stepped on the new grave, his shoes sinking in the soft loam. The shovel bit into the dirt. He was knee deep in a six-foot hole and breathing noisily when Doc Morrissey spelled him. Then Johnny took his turn again. They had been at work about an hour when Johnny Liddell’s shovel hit the casket with a hollow wooden sound.

“That must be it, Doc,” he whispered. “Listen.” He tapped again.

Morrissey jumped into the hole beside him. “Clear away some space at the head.” He pointed to the direction in which Liddell was facing. “That would be right about there. Clear it away so’s we can open the top piece. It’ll save time.”

“Right.” Johnny went back to work with renewed vigor. After a few moments the top portion of the casket began to emerge. It was a brown metallic type.

“No good,” Morrissey growled. “That type casket has a one-piece top, Johnny. We’re going to have to clear the whole thing.” He handed Liddell the flashlight. “Let me get in a few licks. You’ll need your strength in a few minutes.” He waited until Johnny Liddell had pulled himself out of the hole and stood on the side of the grave, then went to work.

It took ten minutes to clear enough space around the casket to attach hooks to the handles. Doc Morrissey tossed the ropes up to Liddell, then clambered up.

“Our only bet is to pull the coffin out. We can’t work down there. I don’t think we’ll have too much trouble.” He walked to the other side of the grave. “Pull it up to the level and we’ll slide her up that way.”

But it took fifteen minutes of grunting, swearing and sweating on the slippery clay before the coffin finally slid out onto the ground. Johnny Liddell wiped the perspiration off his forehead and leaned breathlessly against the casket.

“And I’m the guy who was going to come out here and tackle this thing alone. What’s next, boss?”

Morrissey reached into his inside pocket, came up with a flat flask. “I brought this along in case of emergency and this, surer than hell, is an emergency.” He unscrewed the top from the bottle, passed it to Liddell, and then drank himself. “Well, now to work.” He recapped the bottle, returned it to his pocket. “Got those tools?”

Liddell produced a jimmy and tire iron. He walked around the casket, felt along the edge until he discovered the joint. Taking the jimmy he forced it in, used it as a lever. The cover of the casket creaked complainingly as it was lifted. A hot, dry odor of decay rose from the interior.

“It’s open, Doc,” Liddell said huskily. He was glad of the warm glow in his stomach that the liquor had left.

The coroner stepped to the side of the coffin, turned his flash on the interior. Johnny forced his eyes to look, felt like being sick. Instead, he clenched his teeth, looked more closely at the skull.

“Well, let’s check that hunch of yours, Johnny.” Morrissey said casually. He brought out the dental chart. “Multiple amalgam filling, rear lower molar.” He brought the flash closer, forced open the lower jaw, peered for a minute. “Check.” He consulted the chart again. “Fixed bridge holding right canine, bicuspid.”

He studied the corpse’s mouth again. “Check.” He looked up. “That’s really enough to be certain, Johnny,” he said flatly. “That’s Randolph all right, and we’re in dutch.”

Johnny Liddell wiped the heel of his hand under his chin. “I wouldn’t have believed it. It fitted so well. . . .” He shrugged. “You’d better scram out of here, Doc. This is my party and I’ll take the rap.”

“Horsefeathers,” Morrissey growled. “If there’s any rap to take, we take it together.” He checked one more notation on the dental chart, found it matched perfectly. “You know,” he said, “I didn’t want to admit it, but I really thought you were on to something there.”

“You’re absolutely sure, eh, Doc?”

The coroner nodded. “Dead sure, Johnny. Want to take a look yourself?” He handed the flashlight and a metal probe to the detective.

Liddell took Morrissey’s place at the side of the coffin. He flashed the light on the yellowed skull. The lower jaw hung open, white teeth catching the flashlight’s rays. With the probe, Johnny Liddell located one of the fillings marked on the chart. He tapped at the fixed bridge mentioned by Morrissey, started to go to another tooth, when a prickling sensation in the rear of his spine stopped him.

He went back to the bridge, put the light close to it and with the probe yanked and pulled at it. It came away with a scraping noise like a knife being drawn quickly across a plate. Liddell winced but pulled harder. The bridge came away in his hand.

“Look at this, Doc. One of the teeth that bridge was supposed to support is a real one. It only carried one tooth.”

“What?” Morrissey squeezed in beside him and stared. “That’s funny. Let me have that probe.” He took the probe, checked the tooth more carefully. “That’s a sound tooth, Johnny,” he announced, looking up. “Let’s

check a couple more replacements.” He consulted the chart again. “His right upper central should have a porcelain jacket on it. Let’s take a look.”

Liddell held the light close to the teeth while Morrissey worked. After a moment the porcelain jacket was in his hand. He showed it to Johnny. A short peg protruded from it that fitted a drilled hole in the root of the original tooth.

“I’m issuing an exhumation order on this body,” Doc Morrissey announced. “I don’t pretend to know much about dentistry but it looks to me as though this jacket has just been tacked on what was a sound tooth.”

“You mean it’s not Harvey Randolph?”

The coroner shrugged. “I don’t know.” He flashed the light in the corpse’s face again. “I don’t know, but I’m betting my dough alongside yours that it isn’t.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE room was still half dark when Johnny Liddell awoke. The telephone was ringing. There was a fuzzy dark brown taste in his mouth that refused to be washed out by the tap. He walked over to the window and ran up the shade. The light hurt his eyes and he blinked. His watch said a quarter to eight. It took him minutes to realize he was in the coroner's office.

Doc Morrissey was snoring softly in his chair. The telephone rang again, Morrissey opened his eyes, stared around, then took the receiver off its hook.

"Hello?" he said sleepily. "Oh, it's you, Devlin. Where the hell you been? I've been trying to reach you all night. Oh, okay. Can you get over to my office right away? Yeah. Very important. Okay. I'll wait."

Johnny let the tap water run into a glass, then held the glass to his forehead.

"Oh, my splitting head," he groaned. "Where the hell was Devlin all night?"

Morrissey ignored the question and touched a buzzer on his desk. A few seconds later a trim and highly starched nurse stuck her head in the door. From her look, it was obvious she disapproved of Johnny.

"Miss Martin, order us two breakfasts. Tell Miss McLennan to shoot Inspector Devlin up the minute he gets here."

They were just finishing breakfast when Devlin arrived. He looked tired, but still managed to convey an air of vigor that made Liddell shudder mentally.

"About time you got here, Devlin," Johnny growled. "Where you been all night? We rang you about fifty times."

Devlin champed away on his gum. "And every time you rang, you took another drink—from the looks of you. Well, if you must know, I spent all night in Los Angeles, helping to identify a body they dragged out of the drink. It had been in the water almost a week and when I saw it last night, it looked better than you do right now."

Johnny Liddell watched glumly while the inspector carefully hung his topcoat on the clothes tree. “Probably felt better, too,” he muttered.

Devlin pulled a chair up, sat down and rubbed his palms together. “Well, let’s have the bad news. You two have been up to something.”

Johnny Liddell leaned back. “Harvey Randolph isn’t dead.”

Devlin’s grin froze on his face. “That ain’t even a good rib, Liddell,” he said.

“It’s no rib, Devlin,” Doc Morrissey cut in. “Johnny here got a bright inspiration that a ringer was stuck in that car and messed up so bad that it would be identified by the stuff on it. He was right.”

“You’re crazy, both of you.” Devlin forgot to chew on his gum in his excitement. “We checked Randolph’s dental chart. It was him all right. Everything on the chart checked perfectly.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “Too perfectly. So me and Doc rechecked them last night.”

“How could you? Randolph was buried two days ago.”

Doc Morrissey pushed away his coffee cup, leaned back and studied the ceiling. “Never heard of unburying a guy, Devlin?”

“Oh, oh.” Devlin ran his chunky fingers through his hair. “I knew if you guys kept on that joy juice you’d get yourselves in trouble sooner or later. You mean you went out to the cemetery and dug him up?”

“That’s right,” Johnny said. “Not only that, but we busted open the coffin and took a look at that dental work. It was all faked up to match with the chart.”

Doc Morrissey nodded. “You needn’t look at him like he’s seeing pink elephants, Devlin. That body in the coffin is a clever fake. Somebody went to the trouble of putting caps on teeth, fillings in teeth and phony bridges into that mouth just so it would superficially check with Randolph’s chart. It was almost foolproof.”

Devlin jumped to his feet. “In that case we can still keep you guys out of jail. We’ll get an exhumation order, and . . .”

“Sit down, Devlin, and relax,” the coroner ordered. “I’ve already taken care of that. Even explained that it should be done at night to avoid creating a sensation. Some of my boys went out there last night and picked him up. The dental chief has been with him for a couple of hours already.” He

consulted his watch. “They should know something by now. Let’s see what they’ve got to say.”

He picked up the phone, gave an extension number of the dental chief surgeon. In a moment he was connected.

“Dr. Hammerschlag? Morrissey. Get a chance to give that stiff a going over? Good. What’d you find?” For the next few minutes he confined his conversation to grunts and nods. After a final vehement nod, he thanked the dental man, hung up. “That does it, boys. The dental work in that stiff’s mouth was all phony. Hammerschlag X-rayed the jaw and even found one false tooth with a filling in it. He’s prepared to kick over the identification. Says he’s sent for Randolph’s dentist and that he’ll clinch the fact that it wasn’t Randolph.”

Devlin had gone completely white. “This case gets worse and worse. First the guy’s dead, then he ain’t dead. If that wasn’t Randolph’s body, whose was it?”

Johnny Liddell found a cigarette, lighted it and filled his lungs. “Probably some derelict Sal Moreno picked up and kept on ice. Moreno had a sweet racket and probably stole thousands from the insurance companies. He was in the market to provide these tailor-made stiffes for guys who wanted to collect on their insurance while they could still enjoy it. Even had a dentist to fake up dental work so’s it would check.”

The inspector nodded. “And he provided this one for Randolph. Then where is Randolph?”

“There you’ve got us,” Liddell admitted. “My guess is that when you find Randolph, you’ll have the answer to this whole tangle.”

“You don’t think Randolph is the killer behind this, do you, Johnny?”

Liddell tapped some ash off his cigarette. “I stopped thinking, Devlin. Every time I get a theory in this damn case and it seems to fit all the angles, something happens with a bang, and I’m off to the races again.”

Doc Morrissey rang for Nurse Martin, waited until she had gathered all the dishes and left. “What gets me is, if he isn’t the killer, why hasn’t he come forward?” he asked.

Devlin chewed savagely on his ever-present gum. “That’s screwy. You can’t make me believe Randolph is behind all these murders,” he declared flatly.

“Why not, Inspector?” Johnny wanted to know. “You don’t mean to tell me you’ve fallen for that baby face of his?”

The inspector shook his head. “No, I haven’t fallen for it. But I know his face, and so does everybody else in the country. Why that guy’s pan is better known than the face on a dollar bill. He’d be recognized the minute he came out in the open. He might have breezed in to pull one of those killings without being seen, but it’s stretching it too far to believe that he could have shown up in three different places at three different times and pulled a killing without anybody spotting him.”

The coroner agreed. “You’ve put your finger right smack on the point that’s been bothering hell out of me, Devlin.”

“I’ve thought of it, too,” Liddell admitted. “Of course, it’s just faintly possible that Randolph hasn’t been doing the killings. Maybe he’s being held. . . .” He shook his head disgustedly. “That’s nuts. I’m as sure that he killed Mona Varden as if I had seen him do it. And if he did the Varden killing, he did the others.”

Devlin’s eyes looked alive with interest. “Why?”

“When I first talked with Mona Varden, she was selling me on what a tough boy this Harvey Randolph really was. His real name was Angie Petrillo and he was a New York East Sider. Or did you know that?”

“We have a pretty good idea of his background.”

“Good. Then you know that Randolph served a jolt in the reform school for being too handy with a shiv. Cut some little playmate to ribbons, if I remember correctly. Whoever did the Varden job was a guy who was plenty handy with a knife and got pleasure out of using one.”

Devlin picked up the telephone. “I doubt if that school would have any prints on Randolph, but it might pay to . . .”

Johnny Liddell interrupted. “You can save yourself the phone call. There are no prints of Angie Petrillo on file.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, how does this sound? When Goodman took over handling his affairs, he agreed to use some pull and get the prints out of circulation. He came through on his part of the bargain, delivered the prints to Randolph.” He took a deep drag on his cigarette, dropped it on the floor and ground it out. “There are no fingerprints of Harvey Randolph in existence as far as I know.”

“What do you need fingerprints for?” the coroner asked. “Certainly you know what the guy looks like.”

“Do we?” Johnny Liddell challenged. “There have been three murders. The guy who did them must have walked into those buildings and gone up the stairs or up in an elevator. He must have been seen by somebody, yet nobody has come forward to say they’ve seen Harvey Randolph. And with all the publicity in the papers lately, you can be sure that if anybody saw him, they’d come forward.”

Inspector Devlin nodded. “Yeah. But don’t forget he was an actor. Not a good one, but an actor. What would be more natural than for him to use makeup, put on a disguise?”

Liddell was not convinced. “I can’t buy that, Devlin. I can’t picture Randolph in crepe whiskers and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses. And don’t forget that being an actor doesn’t mean he’d know how to work up a good disguise. They’ve got makeup men who take care of that for them.”

Doc Morrissey sat rigid. He stared at Johnny Liddell as though he had never seen him before. “My God,” he murmured. “Maurer!”

Devlin threw up his hands in disgust. “That’s all this guy can talk about, Doc Maurer. All right, so he was a friend of yours, but . . .”

“But nothing,” Morrissey roared. “Don’t you see how it fits? Don’t you see how beautifully it fits? It answers everything.”

The inspector looked to Johnny Liddell, found no enlightenment in the puzzled frown on his face, looked back to Morrissey. “What the hell are you talking about now?” he demanded.

“Look.” The coroner shook with excitement. “Maurer was murdered right after performing a plastic operation. That blubbering idiot in Homicide, Fogarty, insists it was a gang killing and that Maurer had been patching up gangsters and not reporting. Horsefeathers!” He raced on. “It struck me funny at the time that somebody could be so anxious to change his face. There were no real manhunts on, nobody was really hot. Yet, somebody was anxious enough to change his appearance that he killed an inoffensive old man like Maurer.”

“Maurer,” Johnny said softly. “By God, Doc. You might have something there at that.”

Inspector Devlin shrugged, raised his hands palms up. “This may make sense to you two guys but it certainly don’t make sense to me. Suppose you

tell me about it in words of one syllable so I can join the party and bust a blood vessel with you.”

Morrissey made a visible effort to get himself under control. “Look, Devlin. Randolph wanted to disappear. At any rate, he wanted to change his appearance so that nobody would recognize him. He goes to Maurer, gets him to do the job, either by pretending it’s part of a role he’s going to play, or more likely at the point of a gun. After the operation, Randolph pays off with lead.”

Devlin chewed it over for a few moments. “You know better than that, Doc. Those movie guys live for those pretty pans of theirs. He’d rather fry in the hot seat or squat in the gas chamber a dozen times than get that perfect profile of his messed up.”

“Don’t be a damn fool, Devlin,” Morrissey yelled. “Of course he wouldn’t have any permanent changes made. Just temporary changes, alterations that can be removed by a simple operation, provided it’s performed in a reasonably short time.”

Johnny Liddell looked thoughtful. “Then you really think it was Randolph who killed Maurer, eh Doc?”

“I’m positive of it, Johnny. It’s the only explanation that fits all the pieces. It even ties the Varden, Goodman and Moreno murders together logically.”

Devlin ran his fingers through his hair. “It’s getting more complicated all the time. Suppose it was Randolph who killed Maurer. The reason he killed him after the operation was performed was so that nobody would know what he’d look like after the operation was completed. Right?”

Liddell and the coroner nodded.

“Okay,” Devlin grunted. “Then where the hell are we? We’d know who the killer was, but we wouldn’t know what he looked like. There’s no way in the world we can nab him now.” He got up, stamped up and down the room. “Why the hell didn’t I take my old man’s advice and become a fireman?”

Johnny Liddell frowned. “Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it. First let’s see whether we can fix Randolph at Maurer’s that night. Once we’ve got that, we can go on from there.”

Doc Morrissey nodded. “I’ve got all the records on the case right here.” He got up, unlocked the cabinet, came back with the manila file on the Maurer killing, and dumped the pile of pictures and reports on the desk.

“These the pictures the police photog took of Maurer’s office when he got there?” Liddell asked, studying an 8 x 10 glossy.

Morrissey got up, looked at the picture over Johnny’s shoulder, and nodded. “There’s Maurer just as he was found. You can see that the killer let him have it just after the operation was performed.” He pointed to the picture, indicating a pail at the foot of the operating table. “That pail was filled with freshly used gauze squares, and right here on the instrument stand was a hypo with some empty ampules of novocaine.”

Johnny Liddell grunted. “That means a local, eh? Guess the patient wanted to keep his senses, and insisted on that. Maybe so he could keep a gun on the doc.”

Devlin shook his head. “Okay, you guys. I’ll go crazy with you.” He picked up the phone, dialed headquarters. “This is Inspector Devlin. Put me through to Fogarty. Yeah.” He waited for a moment. “You know I’ll be the laughing stock of the Bureau if this is a wild goose chase,” he growled at Liddell. “I’ll— Hello! Fogarty? Inspector Devlin. Look, Fogarty. Get the slugs that were dug out of Dr. Maurer and turn them over to Ballistics. I want them compared with the slugs taken out of Sal Moreno and Julian Goodman. Tell Ballistics to be damn careful. A lot depends on this.” He nodded twice. “Good. I’m at the coroner’s office now. Call me here.” He slammed the receiver back on the hook. “That ought to prove something.”

“You say there was no other clue as to who was being operated on, or what was done. Nothing we can go on?” Johnny asked.

The coroner started to nod, then stopped suddenly. “Of course there was.” He began to dig through the pile of papers on the desk, came up with a much-folded piece of paper. On it were a series of penciled notations. “We found this on Doc Maurer’s desk,” he said.

Johnny read the notations. “N43 to N39h; F72 to F86.” He looked up. “Any idea what they mean?”

“I think they were notes Doc Maurer was making at the time of the operation. Some surgeons do keep a record, you know.”

The phone rang. It was Miss McLennan, the red-headed receptionist. A Miss Belden was calling to see Dr. Morrissey.

The coroner put his hand across the mouthpiece. “Good God, Johnny, we forgot all about Toni. She’s downstairs now and wants to see me.”

“What?” bellowed Devlin. “You mean that newshound knows about the switch in bodies?”

“She’s been in on this since the beginning, Devlin,” Johnny said. “She’ll play along and keep her mouth shut.”

Devlin was close to exploding. “I never knew a woman who could keep her mouth shut and I’ve never met a reporter who could do it. God help us, she’s a combination of both.”

Johnny Liddell shrugged helplessly. “Let her come up, Doc.”

Toni Belden was fuming as she strode in the door. She took in the resigned droop of Devlin’s shoulders, Liddell’s newly awakened interest and the coroner’s offer of a chair with one disdainful glare.

“A fine stunt that was, parking me at home while you two went traipsing around last night. You promised to call me if anything broke.”

Devlin growled. “Nothing broke.”

Toni turned to Morrissey. “Well, Doc? What happened?”

“Nothing much, Toni. We’ve had to revise our ideas since we last saw you. There was nothing we could tell you because we don’t know what’s happening yet ourselves, and . . .”

“Was it Randolph or wasn’t it Randolph?”

“It wasn’t Randolph,” Johnny Liddell broke in.

Devlin glared. “Why, you double crosser. Now she’ll splash it all over the papers and put the guy on his guard.” He turned to Toni. “That is not for publication. It is an unofficial opinion of a private investigator and in no way reflects the attitude or the opinion of the Department.”

The girl reporter winked at him. “It’s news no matter whose opinion it is, Inspector. Front-page news.”

“Wait a minute, Toni,” Johnny broke in. “I know it’s news and I know that you have a perfect right to print it. But I’m going to ask you to flag it until we give the go-ahead.”

“But somebody else might get it first and I’ll be holding the bag, Johnny. That’s not fair. You haven’t any right to ask me to hold back on a story like this.”

Doc Morrissey interceded. “We understand that, Toni. But look at it this way. You’ve only got this story because Johnny was good enough to keep

you on the inside right along. Now he's attaching a string to the favor he's done you. I don't think you'd want to refuse."

The girl pouted. "All right. I'll do it. But on one condition. I want Inspector Devlin's word of honor that he won't give out a statement on it until I can file my story."

"Nothing doing," Devlin shook his head. "If you think I'm going to have the rest of those vultures on my neck just to protect an exclusive for you, you're nuts."

"He'll promise, Toni," Johnny Liddell assured her. "If he doesn't, I'll give you the details before he gets them and he can read about it in the *Dispatch*."

"That's good enough for me, Johnny." She looked around. "Any ideas?"

Morrissey looked to Liddell. "I haven't any, have you, Johnny?" He signaled with his eyes.

Johnny pulled himself out of his chair, ran his hand over the stubble of his beard. "Not right now, Doc," he grunted, "except that maybe I'd better get a shave and get to looking human again." He turned to Toni. "If you're real nice, I'll let you walk with me."

The girl got up, started to leave with him when the phone rang. Doc Morrissey grabbed it, handed it to Devlin.

"For you, Inspector."

Devlin grunted into the phone three times, thanked the man on the other end and hung up. He looked at Johnny with new respect.

"That was Fogarty. He says it was the same gun, all right. It looks like instead of solving three murders at one time we're going to solve four at once."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE blonde was still working in Goodman's outer office when Johnny Liddell walked in that afternoon. Now she didn't even make the pretense of jabbing at the typewriter keys. She sat behind her desk, her torso for once de-emphasized by a mannish suit jacket. She looked up from the book she was reading as Johnny ambled in.

"Well, well. Holding down the fort, eh?" he greeted her.

She pursed her lips humorously. "I couldn't wait at home forever for you to get back. I suppose I should have said please. I'll know better next time."

Johnny Liddell reached over the railing near her desk, and speared a cigarette. "I dropped by to apologize, honey," he said. "I really got myself caught in a swindle. Been busier than a peeping Tom at a nudist picnic."

The blonde laughed. "I forgive you for ruining what might have been a glorious evening." Her eyes went down to the pages of her book, then up again to his face. "There'll be other evenings. Tonight, for example."

Liddell lit the cigarette, leaned over and tossed the spent match into the wastebasket. "Sorry, but this case has busted so wide open that I'll be jammed up tonight, too." He exhaled a lungful of smoke. "But it shouldn't be long before I'll have a lot of evenings all free."

A flicker of interest lighted the girl's face. "You mean you've got the case solved? You know who killed Goodman?"

Johnny shrugged. "I know who killed him, all right. I think we'll be able to prove it in a couple of days."

"Wonderful." The girl looked enthusiastic. "Are the police making the arrest?"

"Police?" Johnny growled. "They don't even know what time it is. I've got this case all wrapped up by my lonesome—and I'm keeping it to myself until I bust it wide open. After I've got the killer on ice, they can scramble for whatever scraps of credit are left."

"You're a hard man, Johnny. Can you give a girl an idea who the big bad killer is if she promises to keep her mouth shut?"

Liddell rolled his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, took another drag. “Suppose I told you that Harvey Randolph was still alive, that it wasn’t his body they dragged out of that car the other night?”

The girl’s face drained of all color. Her book hit the floor with a thud. “I’d say you were nuts. How could he be alive?”

“I don’t know,” Liddell admitted frankly. “That’s what I’m working on now. I’ve got an idea that he’s right around this town some place, that we’ve seen him, and that people in this building and the apartment house where Mona Varden lived all have seen him, but didn’t realize it.”

“How could they? He was so well known.”

Liddell shrugged. “He could have changed his appearance. Maybe looks just the opposite of how we’d expect him to look.” He returned the cigarette to his mouth, let it dangle there.

“Can you prove it?” the girl asked.

“Not right now, but I will in a day or so. When I do, I’ll be around. Keep that bottle of bourbon corked.”

The girl smiled. “It’s a deal. But don’t keep it waiting too long. You know bourbon can evaporate—and that ain’t all.”

After Johnny Liddell left Goodman’s office, he put in a series of telephone calls. One, long-distance to New York, started the Acme home office checking its district offices throughout the country. The second made an appointment for Inspector Devlin, Doc Morrissey and Johnny Liddell to meet later that evening.

As soon as he left the telephone booth, he hailed a cab and was driven to the studios where Goodman Productions had been shooting the now permanently delayed Harvey Randolph film.

The girl at the desk in the projection department had already received her instructions from Mr. Goodman’s office that Mr. Liddell was to see all the rushes on the Randolph picture. She led him into a miniature theater of about twenty seats and told him it wouldn’t take a minute.

Less than fifty seconds later the lights went out, the projector started to whirl softly in the rear, and on the screen Harvey Randolph’s familiar face started registering the full-range of emotions from frustrated fascination to full-blooded determination. Johnny Liddell could remember how hard he

had laughed when a New York columnist in a review had stated that Randolph could run the range of emotions from A to B. However, like the reviewer, he could not discount the very obvious appeal of the dark-haired figure on the screen.

When the picture was over, he thanked the young lady at the desk, made his way down the elevator to the street. He left the building with the peculiar feeling that he had seen something which should be invaluable in solving the puzzle at hand, but it continued to be elusive.

His watch told him that it was a quarter to four and that Toni Belden had already been waiting fifteen minutes at Nick's Preview Bar where he had promised faithfully to meet her. A cab got him there in something less than twenty minutes and as he walked in the door he could see that the girl reporter was still waiting. He wandered through the man-made fog of the bar, found an empty stool next to the girl, slid onto it.

"You're late again," she reminded him.

"Sorry, Toni," he apologized, "but this thing is beginning to get me down. The damn case gets cloudier and cloudier the farther we go into it."

Toni Belden watched him with an amused expression. "Look, darling. If that act's for my benefit, can it. You're on to something and you're holding out," she accused. "Don't forget our bargain, Johnny. I get the story."

Johnny Liddell nodded. "You get the story, all right. All I'm likely to get out of it is the works."

He ordered cognac. Toni accepted his invitation to a refill of her glass, and waited until the bartender had withdrawn. "You think Randolph killed Doc Maurer and had his face lifted, don't you?" she asked ingenuously.

Liddell nodded. "I might have known you'd have stooges right in Devlin's office. Well, he did the job all right. Devlin checked the bullets in Maurer and found they were fired by the same gun that did the other two killings."

Toni Belden sipped on her rye. "You're not trying to tell me that was Devlin's idea. If he ever had one of his own it would shrivel up and die of loneliness. It was your idea, wasn't it?"

"No," Johnny insisted. "It was Devlin's idea. You know, Toni, Devlin's an easy guy to underestimate. He knows more about what's going on than he lets on." He played with his glass. "He made believe that he was surprised

when the commissioner asked me to act in a semi-official capacity. But I think he was in on it from the beginning.”

“Okay, okay. So Devlin’s a genius in disguise. Now what happens?”

“I wish I knew,” Johnny admitted. “We’re in a funny position. We know who the murderer is but we don’t know what he looks like.”

The girl reporter leaned her elbow on the bar. “You make it sound very easy. How about fingerprints?”

“No can do,” Liddell growled.

Somewhere along the bar a telephone pealed. The call was for Johnny. He ambled down the bar, picked up the phone.

It was Doc Morrissey. “Devlin just called, Johnny. He can’t make it tonight. Something important broke on that stiff they fished out of the bay this morning and he’ll be tied up.”

“Hell,” Johnny muttered.

“Why don’t you come anyhow?” Morrissey suggested. “We can have a skull session and maybe we’ll get the case all tied up in pink ribbons for Devlin.”

“That’s one way he’d be sure of solving it,” Liddell muttered. “What time you free?”

“Any time after six. Why not get over here around seven. That’ll give us the whole evening.”

“Will do, Doc. See you then.” He hung the receiver on its hook, walked back to the girl.

“Trouble?” she asked.

Liddell shook his head. “Nope. I had a tentative date with Devlin and Morrissey for later this evening. Devlin can’t make it, so I’m going over to Doc’s and chin.” He looked up at the clock on the wall. It was a little after five. “I think I’ll get back to the hotel and freshen up a bit.”

“Right,” Toni nodded. “I’ve got to get back to the office, too. Am I going to be seeing you tonight?”

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. “I’d like to, honey. Only I don’t have much of an idea what time this session’s likely to break.” He swallowed what was left in his glass, scooped up his change from the bar.

Toni slid off her stool, accompanied him to the door. “I wish we had a picture of Randolph with his new face. That sure would sell papers.” She sighed. “Remember how the old *Graphic* in New York used to scoop the town with those composographs?”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t know how you’d explain it. Sort of an artist’s conception of what the guy looked like. Like for instance a shipwreck. Some survivor would give the artist notes and he’d follow the notes and draw a picture of what it must have looked like.”

Johnny Liddell stopped dead. “Darling, if you promise not to put on any more weight, you’re worth your weight in gold.”

“What did I do?” the girl asked.

“Just gave me the idea of the century. If it pays off, you’ll really have a story for that rag of yours!”

The day clerk was on when Johnny reached his hotel. As Johnny strolled past the desk, the clerk looked up.

“A couple of friends of yours dropped by almost an hour ago, Mr. Liddell.”

Johnny Liddell’s expression didn’t change. “I haven’t got any friends. What did they want?”

The clerk was concerned. “They didn’t say. Merely asked what time you were expected back. I hope I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“That depends,” Johnny growled. He walked back to the desk, flipped through the pages of the register, seemed satisfied to learn that the two adjoining rooms and the room across the hall had been rented by their present occupants before he’d checked in.

He took the elevator to his floor, keeping his eye peeled for something out of the way. The keyhole of his door showed no signs of tampering, but Johnny was enough of a locksmith to recognize that this particular lock wasn’t capable of putting up a struggle with a bent pin.

He inserted the key softly, turned it. Then, easing the .45 from its shoulder holster, he kicked the door open and stepped to one side. For fully a minute he stood motionless in the hall waiting for some sound to betray the presence of one of his “friends.” Then, feeling silly, he entered and switched on the room’s only light.

The room was empty, but there were plenty of signs that it had been carefully searched. Drawers were open, pockets turned out. The leather sides of his suitcase had been slashed, and the lining was torn out. Whoever had searched the room had done an excellent job.

Johnny Liddell cursed long and loud. He examined the bath and both closets before sliding the .45 back into its holster. He surveyed the damage with a jaundiced eye, turned over the wrecked suitcase, found the bottle of brandy intact, poured himself a stiff jiggerful. He started to drink it, decided against it, poured the jigger down the sink.

Picking up the house phone, he called the desk, but the clerk couldn't remember too clearly what his "friends" had looked like. He slammed the receiver back on its hook, stamped into the bathroom.

He felt refreshed after a quick shower, found a clean shirt that hadn't been too badly mussed. He stood in front of the mirror adjusting his tie when he caught a glimpse of motion out of the corner of his eye. He swung around, threw himself to the side. Behind the curtain, he could make out a shapeless figure on the fire escape. Two shots came so close they sounded like one. Johnny Liddell could see them chew pieces out of the dresser. There were two more shots. He managed to reach his .45, drag it down behind the bureau.

He shot twice, heard the roar of the .45 and the clatter of glass. There were two more shots from outside the window. A sharp insect bit Liddell on the side of the head. He heard a roar like thunder. The room started to spin, and somewhere in the distance he could hear screams and running feet.

The room spun faster. He was conscious that he was dragging himself to his feet. A sick feeling enveloped him, and the room started to tilt. The floor came up and hit him in the face. An inky black stain seemed to spread. It caught him, swirled him into its depths, and engulfed his entire consciousness.

Johnny Liddell had the sensation that this was happening all over again. That it had happened before. Many times before. He tried to remember what had happened but the blinding flash of light in his skull chased all lucid thoughts before it.

He tried to sit up. A pain started somewhere under his left ear and shot to a spot somewhere in back of his eyes. He tried opening them.

A man was bending over him. He had a gun in his hand. Johnny tried to struggle to his feet, but the man pushed him back gently. "Take it easy, Mr.

Liddell. You'll be all right in a minute."

Liddell tried to focus his eyes on the man's face. Recognition came slowly, but at last he realized that it was the house detective. Over his shoulder he could see the white, scared face of the room clerk.

"Are—are you all right, Mr. Liddell?" the clerk asked in a scared voice.

"What happened?" Liddell asked.

The house detective shrugged. "I don't know for sure, but from the looks of things, you walked in on a sneak thief. He must have shot at you. One of the slugs creased the side of your head."

"Get me a drink," Liddell ordered. The clerk started for the brandy bottle, but Liddell stopped him. "Not out of that. Get one from downstairs." He tried to pull himself to a sitting position.

The house detective looked worried. "I'll notify the police," he said. "That is, unless you'd prefer that I didn't?" he asked hopefully.

Liddell shook his head, groaned. "Never mind the cops. I'll take care of this myself." He indicated for the house detective to help him up.

Once on his feet he felt giddy. For a moment he thought he was going to be sick. He staggered to the chair near the window, sat down.

"Didn't see the guy that did it?" he asked weakly.

"He must have gone down the fire escape," the house detective volunteered. He moved aside as a bellboy rushed in with two double shots of brandy.

Liddell gulped the first drink greedily. He gasped as it seared its way to his stomach. After a moment his head stopped spinning. He could feel something wet running down the side of his face. He put his fingers up to touch it, brought them down stained with blood.

The room clerk trotted back into the room. "The house doctor is here, Mr. Liddell," he announced.

He was followed into the room by a wizened old man with a black satchel. As he walked up to Johnny, the Acme detective got a strong whiff of alcohol.

"A little accident, eh?" he chortled cheerfully. He put his case on the floor, peered at the wound. He opened the satchel, took out some gauze, and

a few bottles. He grunted once or twice as he worked on the wound, then leaned back.

“Nothing to worry about,” he wheezed. “Just a skin break.” His roving eyes fell on the bottle of brandy. “Looks inviting. Mind if I try some?” he asked ingratiatingly.

“Go ahead.” He watched morosely as the doctor poured the liquid into a water glass and prepared to down it. “I think it’s poisoned, though,” Johnny added.

The doctor put the glass down as though it had suddenly become electrified. He made a distinct struggle to regain his dignity, glared at the patient and picked up his belongings. “Nothing to worry about,” he repeated. He stole another look at the bottle, then at Liddell. “I’ll have to get along. Another emergency, you know.”

He trotted out of the room, and disappeared down the hall.

“Another emergency, he says,” the house detective sneered. “At the bar, that’s where it’ll be.” He looked at Johnny again. “Feel all right now, Mr. Liddell?”

Johnny nodded. He picked up the second of the jiggers the bellboy had brought him, downed it. He was beginning to feel more like himself. He got to his feet, felt dizzy for a moment, and caught hold of the back of the chair. After a second, the dizziness passed.

“Sure, I’m all right,” he said. “Whoever it was couldn’t have been too smart. He should’ve known you can’t down a private dick by shooting at his head.”

The room clerk bustled over. “Anything more we can do?”

“No,” Johnny Liddell grinned wryly. “I think you’ve done enough. I only wish you’d told me this room fronted on a rifle range when you rented it to me.”

After the clerk and the house detective had gone Johnny Liddell sat down in the chair for a moment. His legs still felt a little wobbly, but his head was beginning to clear. He still had a dull ringing in it but the mists in front of his eyes were fast dissipating. After a few minutes, he pulled himself out of the chair, staggered over to the bureau.

The deep scars where the gungsel’s bullets had chewed pieces out of the bureau were plainly visible. He spent a few minutes searching for a bullet

before he dug it out, found it was hardly scarred or misshapen. He put it carefully in his pocket.

He staggered back to the table next to the telephone, picked up what remained of the bottle of cognac. Taking care not to smear up any possible prints, he wrapped it in a towel. Then, taking the receiver of the telephone off its hook, he gave the operator Doc Morrissey's number.

"Coroner's office."

"This is Johnny, Doc."

"I've been expecting you, Johnny," Morrissey said.

"And I've damn near been expecting you—in your official capacity," Johnny retorted. "I've just had some guy shoot up my room and damn near take the top of my skull off." He scowled at the wrapped bottle. "And to add insult to injury, I think the louse poisoned the only cognac I've been able to buy in this town."

Morrissey's voice was solicitous. "You're not drunk, are you, Johnny?"

"Not yet, I'm not," Liddell promised. "But I'm going to be before the night's over." He leaned heavily against the table. "I think I've got this case licked, Doc. I got the whole picture now. The trick is going to be to get it in good enough shape so's a jury will see it, too."

"Want to put off that visit over here tonight, Johnny?"

"Nope," Liddell informed him. "I'll be over in about an hour."

He dropped the receiver back on the hook, fell across the bed. In a few minutes, he was snoring lightly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DOC MORRISSEY clucked sympathetically when Johnny Liddell walked into his office. The detective's hat sat sideways on his head, a mass of white bandage on his temple throwing it off balance.

"Quite an effective disguise." The coroner grinned. "Don't tell me, I know what you're made up as."

"Very funny," Johnny Liddell growled. He dropped into a chair, tossed his hat onto the desk. He didn't protest too strongly as Doc Morrissey undid the bandage over the wound on his head, peered at it critically.

"Nothing to worry about," Doc opined. "The bullet evidently was a ricochet or had been deflected before it hit you. Most of its steam had been dissipated, otherwise it would have done more damage than just crease the flesh that way."

"It did enough damage to suit me," Johnny grunted.

"Come, come. Let's not dramatize ourselves, Mr. Liddell. Trouble is the sawbones who put that dressing on it made it look worse than it really is."

He went to his desk, opened the bottom drawer and brought up his satchel. In a few minutes he had transformed the thick wad of bandages into a neat little patch. Johnny took a look at the effect, brightened immediately.

"How come you took so long getting here, Johnny?" the coroner asked. "I expected you around nine or ten."

"Had a couple of things to do, Doc. First of all, I needed a little sleep. Then I had a hunch that the brandy in my room was poisoned, so I lugged the bottle over to Identification at headquarters to see if my visitor left any prints. I also dug one of the bullets out of the wall and left it at Ballistics to be compared with the bullets from the murder gun."

Doc Morrissey nodded his approval. "That's using your head—for more than a moving target. Now what'd you have in mind this afternoon when you set up a meeting between you, me and Devlin tonight?"

Liddell shrugged his shoulders. "I thought we could put some skull work into this case and break it before it got any more complicated."

Doc sank into his chair, leaned back and rested his feet on the corner of the desk. "I've been giving it plenty of thought, Johnny, and I'm ready to admit I'm a bit stumped."

"Yeah, I know how you feel. That's why I figured if we talked it out, we might hit on something." Johnny Liddell found a cigarette, stuck it in his mouth, and lit it. "Think it might help to let the newspapers know Randolph's still alive and to put everybody on the lookout for him?"

"No," Doc Morrissey stated flatly. "If Maurer worked on that monkey, Johnny, you can be sure nobody will know him. Maurer was tops in his field and when he did a plastic even the subject's own mother wouldn't recognize him."

Johnny nodded. "I know. But I'm not his mother. I think I could lay my hands on Harvey Randolph tonight." He smoked for a second, waiting for a reaction, but got none. "Okay. Why don't you ask why don't I?"

"All right. I'll bite. Why don't you?"

"Because I'd have trouble making you and Devlin and anyone else believe I wasn't squirrel bait. I couldn't prove it. Don't forget—the only one who knew definitely what Randolph was going to look like when the bandages came off was Maurer. Got that? The only one. And that includes us."

They lapsed into a brooding silence. Suddenly Liddell jumped as though he had been shot.

"Holy cow, what an idea!" he exclaimed. "Doc," he said to the startled coroner, "you used to dabble some in plastic surgery, didn't you?"

Morrissey nodded. "Just a little. That's how I got to know Maurer. He was chief on facial surgery in the hospital where I served my internship. He was always after me to take plastic surgery more seriously, but I could never quite see it."

"Yeah, that's what I thought." Johnny was painfully serious now. "Any of the nurses or attendants in this place who are Harvey Randolph fans?"

"I guess so."

"Good. Find out if they have any pictures of Randolph. Some front views and some profiles."

"And if they have?"

“Then get them in here pronto. I’ll show you how you can spot Randolph in a crowd.”

Morrissey shook his head, then shrugged. He picked up the phone. “Hello. This is Dr. Morrissey. Do you know anybody in the hospital who’d be likely to have pictures of Harvey Randolph, the movie actor? Okay, call me right back.”

He hung up the phone. “I hope the bullet didn’t affect your brain, Johnny.”

“It did. Made me smart like a fox, Doc.” Liddell crushed out his cigarette. “Just keep your fingers crossed that this hunch of mine pays off. If it does, we’re going to hand somebody the stiffest jolt they ever got.”

The phone rang. Morrissey grabbed it. “Yes?” He handed it to Liddell. “For you.”

The private detective put the phone to his ear. “This is Liddell.”

“McMasters at headquarters, Mr. Liddell. Lieutenant Marsicano in Identification asked me to tell you that we found only two sets of fingerprints on that bottle. One set was yours.”

Liddell swore under his breath. “The other set isn’t important. That house physician at the flea bag I laughingly call a hotel poured himself a drink out of it.”

The voice on the other end of the phone didn’t change in tone. “We’d better get a stomach pump over to him right away then. That bottle was loaded with strychnine. A good-sized slug of that brandy would kill an elephant.”

Liddell nodded. “I stopped him from drinking it. I had a hunch that bottle was booby-trapped. Thanks, McMasters. You haven’t got any word for me from Ballistics, have you?”

“Nope. Want me to connect you?”

“Yeah,” Johnny told him. While the receiver clicked, he poured himself another drink. The connection was finally made.

“Ballistics,” a new voice announced.

“This is Johnny Liddell. I left a bullet there to be compared with some you had on file. Any luck?”

“Just a minute, Mr. Liddell.”

After a second a new voice came on. “Hello, Liddell? This is Fogarty of Homicide. Where’d you get the bullet you brought in?”

“It was pumped at me this afternoon. Why?”

“It matches perfectly with the bullets in Doc Maurer and those other two monkeys we’ve been investigating. I want to talk to you about it.”

Liddell nodded. “Sure, sure, Fogarty. Why don’t you come on up to the hotel and have a nice chat?”

“I’ll be right over,” Fogarty growled. Liddell could hear the receiver bang as the Homicide man broke the connection.

“Tsk, tsk,” he said. “And I didn’t even have time to tell him that I wasn’t at the hotel now.” He replaced the receiver on the hook, took over the armchair he had vacated.

“Anything important?” Morrissey wanted to know.

Liddell repeated the gist of the two conversations. Morrissey frowned.

“The killer must think you’re getting pretty hot, Johnny, when he goes to all that trouble to stop you. He won’t stop there.”

Johnny Liddell leaned back. “He don’t even know how hot I am. If this hunch of mine works out, we’ll have the arm on him by morning.”

The phone rang two sharp peals. Morrissey picked up the receiver. “Yes, this is Dr. Morrissey. You did find someone? Who? Who is she?” He nodded, then asked, “Does she live in? Good. That probably means she has them in her room. I wish you’d ask her to lend them to me. I’ll see that she gets them back first thing in the morning. Swell. Thanks a lot.”

He flipped the receiver back on the hook. “You’re in luck, Liddell,” he grinned. “Martha, one of the maids, shares your passion for Randolph. The switchboard operator is going to try to persuade her to part with a couple of pictures for a few hours. Trouble is, she probably sleeps with them under her pillow.”

Liddell didn’t deign to answer. “Something tells me that Pretty Boy Randolph has overreached himself this time, and there ain’t gonna be any script gal on this scene to yell for a retake.”

The pictures arrived within ten minutes. As soon as the male orderly who delivered them had left, Johnny snatched them and studied them. He snapped his fingers. “It’s going to work, sure as hell.” Taking one profile

view and one full face, he laid them side by side on the doctor's blotter. "What's that look like?"

"A rogue's gallery portrait, for one thing," Morrissey snapped. "What the hell is it supposed to look like?"

"Don't get it yet, eh?" Liddell pointed to the blotter. "You've got the length, width and depth of the guy's face in those two pictures. Right?"

Doc Morrissey concentrated with a puzzled frown. "Well?"

"In those notes Doc Maurer left, you have the actual measurements of the features. So using all three, you've got a pretty damn accurate picture of Randolph."

"As he used to be," Morrissey reminded him gloomily. "Hell, we didn't have to go to all that trouble. Any one of ten million fans could have told you that. I'll bet that maid Martha knows the exact measurement of his nose, how many hairs in his eyebrow and every other detail about him."

"Sure, sure. But Martha can't make a bust of Randolph that will have all the exact measurements. You can."

"What the hell for?"

Liddell pounded the desk in his exasperation. "Don't you see? Once you have that bust with all the measurements, you're in exactly the same position Doc Maurer was the night Randolph walked in on him for the operation."

"Good God, you've got something, Johnny."

"Sure," Johnny Liddell almost yelled in his enthusiasm. "Then all you've got to do is perform the same operation, make the same alterations in features and you've got a bust of the killer as he looked when the bandages came off."

Doc Morrissey pounded him on the back. "That's it, Johnny." He yanked his keys out of his pocket, unlocked his filing cabinet, brought out the folder on the Maurer killing. As soon as Liddell had found the slip of penciled notations left by Maurer, Doc Morrissey folded the remaining papers back into the envelope, locked them in the filing cabinet. "Let me take another look at those figures, Johnny."

He sat studying the notes for a few minutes, stole a look at the pictures on his desk, made some rapid calculations. "It was Randolph," he declared.

“Of course, it’s pretty rough figuring, but the original measurements look about right.”

“Think you can do it, Doc?”

“I’m going to damn well try.”

Morrissey spent the next half hour dividing the face of the screen idol into segments, each of which was carefully measured and checked for general proportions. The features were tabulated by size, width and depth, the angle of the nose, the slope of the forehead, depth of the cleft of the chin, and so forth. Finally he threw down his pencil and began to collect his papers.

“This will be some stunt if we do it,” he announced.

Morrissey gathered up his notes and the pictures of Randolph and motioned for Liddell to follow him. He led the way down the hall to a door marked *Laboratory*.

The big room was empty. After locking the door behind them, the coroner opened a locker near the rear and brought out a large quantity of impression wax. He cleared off the top of one of the tables and piled the wax on it. Johnny found a seat where he would be out of the way and settled down to wait.

The coroner first made what appeared to be a rough head, an irregular ball of impression wax mounted on a triangular base. He worked feverishly until he had the general dimensions to his satisfaction, then rechecked his calculations with the memoranda found at the scene of the murder. Then he worked rather more slowly for a while and once, when he made a mistake, he wiped the embryo features clean with a swoop of his spatula. After about an hour Johnny was able to recognize some of Randolph’s more striking features, such as the arched eyebrows that had endeared the movie star to so many women, the long, thin, handsome nose, and the clean broad forehead.

Doc Morrissey worked faster. He gave the lips the proper uptilt, carved out a hollow in the cheek suggestive of a dimple, checked the nose to be certain it had the proper thirty degree angle, carefully sculptured the cleft in the chin. He stepped back, and drew a deep breath.

Johnny Liddell got out of his chair, walked over to study the face. It was a startlingly accurate likeness, an exact replica of the picture in the glossy prints supplied by Martha, the maid.

“Well, if we needed any more proof of who the patient was the night Maurer got his, that’s it,” he murmured. “It’s a swell piece of work, Doc.”

The sculptor wiped his forehead and mouth with his sleeve. “Thanks, Johnny, but maybe you’d better save those bouquets. Now comes the really tough part. Keep those fingers crossed.”

Johnny took a deep breath. “Now, if we’re right, every one of those corrections made by Maurer should be designed to hide those good looks.”

Morrissey picked up the notes, studied them, referred back to the head he had just sculptured. “No doubt about it, Johnny. Every one of these alterations goes from what approaches perfection to what almost approaches abnormality. Take this nose for instance.” He indicated the perfectly shaped nose on the figure. “It’s now at a thirty degree angle, almost perfect. According to these notes, it’s to be changed to 39h, which would be little better than a sharply hooked beak.”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “What about his eyes, Doc?”

Morrissey referred to the notes. “Shot of paraffin into the cheekbones to throw the shape of the face out and the eyebrows built up and beetling,” he muttered, then looked up. “The eyes would be practically reduced to a squint.”

Liddell shook himself. “I hope I’m not going to wake up and find this is all the product of that bum hooch of yours. Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s go.”

Morrissey nodded, took the spatula full of wax, slapped it on the perfect aquiline nose he’d previously fashioned and manipulated it until it had become a sharp hook. He picked up an odd-looking instrument, applied it to the nose, nodded.

“What’s that, Doc?” Johnny asked.

“A profilometer, Johnny,” Morrissey explained. “It’s often used in plastic surgery to check measurements and things.”

Johnny stepped behind the coroner, critically stared at the new nose. “Holy socks, that must be wrong, Doc,” he moaned. “That don’t even look human.”

“Don’t let it worry you,” Morrissey counseled. “It only looks that way because the rest of the face hasn’t been altered to match. A nose that doesn’t stand out needn’t be a perfect nose as long as it is in harmony with the rest

of the features. The only time you get the feeling that a nose or any other feature is—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Johnny was plainly impatient. “Let’s skip the classroom stuff. Where do we go from there?”

The next notation dealt with the cheekbones. Liddell watched in silent fascination while Morrissey changed their entire appearance. By consistent application of wax, he raised them to the height indicated, then built the brow down from above until the eyes were almost hidden and the figure seemed to glare malevolently.

“He sure looks like sudden death,” Liddell remarked. “But that cupid’s bow mouth never belonged to any gorilla that looked like that.”

Morrissey ignored the protest. He applied a little wax to the figure’s mouth, then with a deft twist of the wrist, transformed it into a perpetual leer.

“I knew it, I knew it,” Liddell exulted.

The coroner stepped back and admired his handiwork. “Know him, eh? I had an idea you would. At least we have the satisfaction of knowing that he was wasting his time shooting down old Maurer because he’d know what he looked like after the bandages were off. Now we know, too.”

Liddell scratched his head. “I just can’t figure a pretty boy like Randolph letting things like that happen to his face. He won’t have to go through life with that kisser, will he?”

The coroner walked over, turned on the tap and washed his hands. “No longer than he wants to, Johnny. There isn’t one alteration in his face that couldn’t be undone by a simple operation.”

Liddell held out a pack of cigarettes. Morrissey took one. “I might have known. Well, what now?”

Morrissey removed the white apron he wore over his suit and tossed it over the bust. “Guess we’d better get a photographer in here and take a few pictures,” he suggested.

Johnny snapped his fingers. “Right. Got an old hat we can stick on his head?”

“Hat?” Morrissey asked. “What for?”

“We can’t carry that bust around and he’s thorough enough to do the job right. Probably change the way he combs his hair, and chances are that he’ll

keep wearing a hat. That can make a lot of difference.”

“You think of everything. Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

He was out of the door before Johnny could answer. The detective wandered curiously about the lab, studying the labels on the bottles, pulling out the corks of some and sniffing experimentally. Tiring of this, he hoisted one hip up on the edge of the lab table and was lost in a cloud of blue smoke when the coroner returned.

In his hand, Morrissey carried a small candid camera with a flash attachment. “I thought it might be better if we took the pictures ourselves,” he explained. “Getting a photographer in here would be letting another person in on it.”

Liddell took the camera and studied it for a moment. “Perfect, Doc. This will do swell.”

“I just remembered I had it lying around in my locker. They use it here for before and after shots in the allergy clinic. You know, some guy comes in with his face all broken out, so we take a few pictures. Then we shoot a couple of grains of our pet theory into his arm and when the rash disappears, we take another picture. May not break *Life*, but every once in a while we do break the medical journals.”

“Poof,” Liddell snorted. “Who reads them except a bunch of doctors?”

Morrissey removed the apron from the bust, perched an old gray fedora on the top of the head, and stood back, focusing the camera. Suddenly the flash bulb went off with a faint plop and Liddell blinked.

“I’d better get a profile shot as well, eh?” Morrissey asked.

He took three more pictures from various angles, then they started breaking down the figure. They were almost done when Liddell stopped.

“Hey, Doc! What happens if the pix don’t come out?”

The coroner said something under his breath. “I never thought of that,” he admitted. “Let’s develop these things and get a drink.”

Liddell was the first one to the door. “Correction, please. Let’s get a drink—then develop these things.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JOHNNY LIDDELL was stopped at the canopied entrance to the Chateau Chance by the uniformed doorman.

“Sorry, sir. We’re just getting ready to close. Only a few people still in there, and they’re about ready to go.”

Liddell shook the man’s hand off his arm. “Cookie Russo’s still in there, ain’t he? He’s the one I want to see.” The doorman started to block his way, saw the look on the detective’s face, stepped aside. “That’s being smart,” Liddell informed him.

“I wish I could say the same for you.”

The doorman watched Johnny run up the stairs. When he had reached the top, the doorman pressed a hidden button three times. Johnny crossed the barroom to the door at the rear. The gunman named Jake stood guard instead of Mushky.

“Going some place, mister?”

“I want to see Russo. It’s important.”

“Russo ain’t here. The joint’s closed. Be a good guy and scram.” Jake’s voice was hard, and even. “We ain’t looking for trouble, but we ain’t mad if we get a little exercise every now and then.”

Liddell started to push the man aside, when another tuxedoed floor man materialized behind him. He was dimly aware of a swishing motion, swung his head to the side just in time to miss the full power of the murderous blow that was swung at his head. It caught him a glancing wallop that knocked him to his knees. Before Jake could raise his knee to kick him in the face, Liddell locked both arms around the gunman’s knees.

Jake rose through the air, landed flat on his stomach with a plop that emptied the air from his lungs. The other hoodlum lunged at Liddell, and hit empty air with his roundhouse swing.

The detective got to his feet as the guard lunged past off balance. He caught the guard by the arm, swung him around, hit him flush on the mouth with a right overhand. He felt the man’s lips burst like a pair of overripe tomatoes, cascading a red stream over the chin.

The guard recovered, cursed through battered lips, came in swinging. Liddell caught him again on the side of the chin. The guard staggered, and the detective hit him with a powerful short jab that sent him reeling back. He hit the wall, slid to a sitting position.

Jake lay where he fell, drawing breath into his lungs with greedy gasps. His arm was folded under him in an unnatural position. Satisfied that he stood in no immediate danger of attack from that direction, Johnny picked up a chair and prepared to break his way through the disguised door into the gaming room. He had the chair raised over his head, when a flat, unemotional voice ordered, "Hold it, Liddell."

He turned around to face Cookie Russo, gun in hand. "What's been going on around here?" Cookie wanted to know. He indicated the two guards sprawled on the floor.

"I wanted to see you," Liddell panted. "They said I couldn't. They were wrong."

Russo didn't lower the gun. "What'd you want to see me about?"

"Randolph. And the guy who killed Goodman."

The gambler looked him over carefully, nodded. He shoved his gun back into its holster, stepped past Liddell, fumbled with a piece of the molding on the door, and swung it open. Liddell put the chair back in place, preceded Russo through the door.

"Eddie," Russo called one of the bartenders who had watched the brawl from a safe distance, "get Jake and Moran upstairs and see that a doc gets to look them over. I'll be in the office."

Without a word he led the way through the gambling room, down the hall to the office. He used a key from a chain hanging from his belt to swing the heavy steel door open, led the way in.

"You must have something awful important to talk about to take on two tough boys like Jake and Moran," Russo opened the conversation.

"Plenty important, and there can't be any delay."

He made a dive for his breast pocket. In a flash, Russo had his gun cleared of its holster, on a line with Liddell's stomach.

"Don't move so fast," he counseled. "It makes me nervous, and the first thing that gets nervous on me is my trigger finger."

Johnny twisted his battered face into a grin. “Just getting a picture to show you.”

The gambler nodded, his eyes still bleak. “Bring it out slow. Nice and slow.” He watched until Liddell had brought a 4 x 6 print out of his breast pocket and tossed it on the desk. Then Russo returned his own gun to its shoulder hammock.

“What’s that?” he demanded.

“Goodman’s killer,” Liddell told him casually. “Take a look. See if you make him?”

Cookie Russo picked up the picture, stared at it for a few minutes with narrowed eyes. He tossed it back on the table with a frown. “That sounds nuts to me, Liddell. I’ve seen that guy around. He ain’t tough, he just looks that way.”

Liddell shrugged. “Maybe. But just the same that baby has gunned three guys and carved one gal to death in this man’s town.”

Russo held out a humidor, waited until Liddell had selected a cellophane jacketed cigar, then took one for himself. He slowly and deliberately denuded it of its wrapper; cut the end with a little gold knife. Then, “You’re sure this is the guy?”

Liddell bit the end off his cigar, spat it toward the wastebasket, leaned forward and accepted a light from the gold lighter the gambler held toward him. “Positive. If we can break this guy down into a confession, the cops will stop wondering if maybe you didn’t chill Goodman out of a grudge on a welsh.”

“They’d have a helluva time provin’ that.”

“Maybe. But it wouldn’t be doing your business any good for cops to be wandering in and out of here all the time.” Johnny rolled the cigar around the corner of his mouth. “Help me handle this guy and I’ll take the cops off your shoulders.”

Russo studied him shrewdly. “Something about this deal smells from herring, Liddell.” He leaned back, looked at the ceiling. “If you’re so sure this guy is the killer, why come to me to pick him up? Why not have the cops do it? The manpower situation ain’t that bad—not to judge from how many of them they can spare to be wandering around my joint every night.”

“That’s a good question. Cookie.” Liddell admitted. “There’s only one thing. The cops don’t know about this yet. In fact, I’m going to have one

helluva time convincing them this baby is the killer unless he breaks down and talks.”

“So that’s it,” Cookie shook his head. “None of my boys are gonna sit in on a session where some chump is going to talk his way into a gas chamber. No dice, Liddell.”

Johnny frowned. “I don’t want them to sit in. This guy’s taken a powder. I don’t know where he’s holed up. I hear you got some boys that can find a spit in the ocean. That’s the kind of help I need.”

“And I get?”

“You get to get let alone by the cops. The only thing they got on you now is suspicion of Goodman’s murder. Let me put the real killer in the clink and your connections will keep those cops from trampling all over your customers with their flat feet.”

The telephone rang in a subdued tone. Russo answered it, grunted a couple of times, and held his hand over the mouthpiece. “You must be real tough, Liddell,” he said. “One of my boys is in bed with a busted jaw and Jake will be out of action for a couple of weeks with a busted flipper and half a dozen cracked ribs.” He turned back to the telephone. “See that they’re taken care of and tell Mushky to get down here.” He hung up. “I ought to insist that you work for me until those boys can walk again.” He grinned. “Help is tough to get.” He took the cigar from his mouth, regarded the fine white ash on the end, tapped it off. “I’ll play. I’m going to send Mushky and one of the older boys out to find your friend. Where do you want him delivered?”

“Goodman’s office,” Johnny Liddell told him. “Know where it is, don’t you?”

“I should.” In response to a code knock on the door, Russo pressed a buzzer. The door swung open and Mushky stepped in.

“You wanted me, boss?” he asked. Then, seeing Johnny, he grinned broadly. “So it was you, Liddell? I shoulda known when I seen the way them boys was busted up.”

Russo drummed his fingers on the desk. “Mushky, I want you to help Liddell on a case he’s working on.” He picked up the picture, tossed it across the desk. “Take a look at that guy.”

The guard studied the picture. “Yeah. What about him, boss?”

“Liddell wants him. Get him for him.”

Johnny Liddell scribbled an address on the top sheet of a pad. “That’s where you find him.”

Mushky stuck the picture and address in his jacket pocket. “When do you want him and where, Liddell?”

Johnny chewed on the end of the cigar. “As soon as I can have him. Bring him to Goodman’s office. Know how to use the back way?”

The guard looked to Russo, who nodded. “We know the back way, Liddell. This is no trap, is it?” Mushky asked.

“This is no trap, Mushky,” Russo said. “Liddell knows we had nothing to do with Goodman getting his.” He looked at Liddell hard. “At least I hope he does—for his sake.”

Johnny Liddell knocked a solid piece of ash off his cigar. “Stop threatening. I’m beginning to come apart at the seams already. I know who killed Goodman and it ain’t you or any of your boys. That good enough?”

Mushky brightened, nodded. “It is for me.” He shook his head. “I’m sure glad you’re not after us, Liddell. I seen you work before.”

“I don’t usually play ball with coppers, private or city hall,” Russo informed the detective after Mushky had left. “But I had word on you, Liddell. The boys back East say you’re level. I like that. I saw the way you handled two of my best boys. I liked that, too. So, like I said before, if I can give you a hand without having anything rub off on it, all you got to do is yell.”

Back in town, Johnny Liddell sought out an all-night drugstore on Vine, stuck a nickel in the pay telephone, dialed the number of Toni Belden’s apartment. The phone rang seven times before it answered.

“Hello,” Toni’s sleepy voice greeted him.

“This is Johnny, Toni. Wake you up?”

The girl groaned. “Look at the time he picks to play guessing games. Here I stay awake all night waiting for a call, then as soon as I get to sleep, it comes in.”

“Stop grouching,” Liddell told her. “I just called to tip you that the case is in the stretch. We’re closing in on Randolph some time during the next twenty-four hours.”

All the sleepiness left the girl’s voice. “Have any of the other papers got wind of it?”

“Nobody has,” Liddell reassured her. “Doc Morrissey and I worked it out earlier tonight. I expect to pick up the killer sometime tomorrow.” He consulted his watch, groaned. “That is, today.”

“When will I have something?” she asked.

“Sit tight until tonight. If nothing cracks by then, I’ll give you the story anyway. But I’ve got a hunch we’ll have a confession and the damnedest best scoop you ever pulled.”

Toni sounded excited. “Gee, Johnny. Thanks. There’s no chance of a slip-up? You’re really hot this time?”

Johnny grinned wryly. “I must be. I’ve been shot at and somebody tried to poison me all within the last twelve hours.”

He could hear the girl’s gasp. “Be careful, will you?”

“Don’t worry, baby,” Liddell assured her. “I won’t let anybody kill me until I deliver that scoop in person. And don’t print anything at all until I give you the go-ahead.”

The girl reporter promised, and rang off.

Johnny Liddell put through a collect call to New York, then ambled out to the soda fountain. He drank three cups of black coffee before the connection was made. As soon as the bell in the booth rang, Liddell jumped for it.

“Hello, Steve,” he greeted the agency chief. “Got anything for me?”

“Yeah, Johnny.” Steve Baron sounded unhappy. “But nothing too good. We checked Detroit where the guy comes from, and he’s bona fide all right. Lots of the boys know him. He came from there five, six years ago, went to Hollywood and did some extra work in pictures. That stack up?”

Johnny Liddell scratched his head. “No. Matter of fact, it kind of kicks a hole in the whole damned case all over again. The way I had it figured the guy never existed before a week or so ago. You’re sure?”

“I put two of the best men in Detroit on it, Johnny. That’s their report. The cops out there remembered the guy, said he never gave them any trouble, just used to run with some tough boys. Got no record, no prints on file. They did say, though, that the Hollywood police had already checked.”

Johnny sighed. “I might have known that Devlin wouldn’t slip up on something like that. Now I’m right back where I was.”

Baron sympathized. “Sorry, Johnny. Facts is facts.”

“Yeah. Well, okay, Steve. I’ll take it on from there. I’ll keep you informed.”

He slammed the receiver back on its hook and swore loudly, he wished more than ever that he had been willing to accept Randolph’s death as an accident and that he had high-tailed it back East before the damned case developed. Then, shrugging, he left the booth, headed for police headquarters.

Inspector Devlin was in his office when Johnny Liddell arrived. He was trying to look affable, but there was electricity in the air.

Johnny, sensing a coming storm, slid into his favorite armchair, and draped a leg over the arm.

“I hear you had a little excitement tonight.” He indicated the white patch on Liddell’s head.

Johnny nodded. “Some jealous husband, no doubt. Tried to gun me in my hotel room.”

Devlin roared. “You know you’re supposed to report all shootings to the department.” He ran his stubby fingers through his hair. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know. I told you what happened. Some guy sat on my fire escape, pot-shot me when I came in. That’s all.”

The inspector snorted. “Some guy! You know damn well it wasn’t just some guy. It was the killer. You turned the slug over to Ballistics for comparison. Do you know that Fogarty spent the whole night waiting for you at your hotel?”

“So that’s how you knew, eh? I forgot all about Fogarty.”

Devlin tried desperately to restrain himself. “You forgot Fogarty! Where the hell were you? You told him to come over there. When he got there, you were gone.”

“I wasn’t there when I was talking to him. I was at Doc Morrissey’s. Fogarty didn’t even give me a chance to tell him.”

“Oh, he didn’t! He gets to that flophouse you call a hotel, tells the clerk who he is and the clerk spills the whole story. Fine business,” he growled. “We got to go and find out about things for ourselves.” He chewed furiously on his gum. “I hear your agency’s been checking up on some of our local citizens in their home towns.”

“Any objections?”

“Nope. Just could save yourself the trouble if you’d give us credit for knowing something about our business.”

“Okay. So I was just checking up for myself.”

Devlin leaned back in his chair.

“I hear you and Doc Morrissey are cooking up something, Liddell.”

Johnny sighed. “I thought so. Now, I’m not so sure. Every damn time it looks like this case is on ice, something crops up to kick over the whole apple cart.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, Johnny. I’m willing to play along with you to the hilt, even when you get me up to my ears in hot water . . . But,” he stormed, “I’m not going to stand for you failing to live up to the regulations in this town. I don’t know what this new stunt you have framed up with Morrissey is, but if it even smells of being irregular, I’ll personally break you right out of that license of yours.”

“Even if it means getting your murderer for you?”

Devlin scowled. “Why can’t you do things like a dick should? Why do you always have to do it the hard way? Just tell us who the killer is, give us whatever you’re holding out, and if it’s enough, we’ll arrest him and take it over from there.”

“I wish it was that easy, Devlin,” Liddell retorted. “We’re working with a smart operator. A guy who knows all the angles and who’s played them all. So far he’s outplayed us. We’ve got to take all the points from here in or he wins.”

“Who is he?”

“I’ll show him to you as soon as I lay my hands on him. I’ve got some boys out looking for him right now.”

“That’s what I mean. You’ve got some boys out looking for him. What boys? Not policemen?”

“With policemen you need search warrants and you can’t just pick a guy up for some friendly questioning. I got nothing I could give you to make a pinch. My only hope is to make the rat talk.”

“It’s Randolph you’re after?”

Liddell nodded. “That’s right. Harvey Randolph. We’ve got a pretty good idea of how he looks even with the plastic. I’ve got some friends who are sort of looking around for him. We’ll have a little coming-out party for him at Goodman’s office as soon as they locate him.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was five-thirty that afternoon when Doc Morrissey emerged from surgery. He was wiping his hands on a small towel.

“Switchboard has been paging you, Doctor,” the floor nurse told him. “Shall I ring them for you?”

Morrissey nodded, wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead with the towel and perched himself on the edge of the desk. The girl called switchboard, spoke with the operator for a moment, then held the receiver out to the coroner.

“Dr. Morrissey speaking. What is it?”

“Mr. Liddell called, Doctor. Said it was important. Said to tell you they were going to have an unveiling of Lacy Pants at Goodman’s office.” Her voice was puzzled. “I know it sounds crazy, but I’m sure that’s what he said. I asked him to repeat it, and . . .”

“When did he say?” Doc’s voice mounted with excitement.

“As soon as you were free. He gave me the address. It’s across town. Shall I have a cab waiting, Doctor?”

“Yeah. I’ll be ready in about ten minutes. No, wait a minute. Make it five.” He tossed the receiver on the hook, started down the hall on a run, peeling off his operating gown as he ran.

Doc Morrissey burst through the door marked *Julian Goodman Productions* and found Johnny Liddell sitting at the desk usually occupied by the blonde. His feet were on the desk, a bottle in his lap.

“I’m not as pretty as the doll who usually sits here,” he cracked. “But I’ll bet I’ve got better news than she ever had.”

“Got him?”

Johnny Liddell nodded. “You’re a miracle man, Doc! I just compared him with the picture. It couldn’t look more like him if he’d posed for it himself.” He swung his feet off the desk and kicked the little gate to the enclosure open for the doc.

“Where is he?” Morrissey demanded.

Liddell started to say something when the door to the office slammed open and Inspector Devlin stalked in. “I got your call, Johnny. You say you got Randolph here? Where?”

“He’s all nice and snug under glass,” Liddell assured him. He held the bottle out. “Better take a drink of this, both of you. It ain’t exactly peaches and cream.”

The inspector put the bottle down untouched. “Bring him out, Johnny,” he ordered.

Liddell shrugged, got up and led the way into the office behind the door marked *Julian Goodman—Private*. As they entered, Mushky jumped to his feet, stood to one side.

A familiar figure sat on the side of the couch, his hands cuffed together. Devlin stopped dead in the doorway.

“Marty Mann,” he exclaimed. “Goodman’s bodyguard!” He looked from Liddell to Morrissey and back. “What is this?”

“It’s kidnaping, that’s what,” the bodyguard growled. He held up his manacled hands. “If it’s a pinch, I’ve got the damnedest false arrest suit against you you ever saw.”

Devlin shook his head. “I don’t know of any arrest,” he growled. “What’s the idea, Liddell?”

Johnny Liddell pointed to Marty Mann. “That’s Harvey Randolph.” He nodded to Morrissey. “Doc reconstructed the operation Maurer performed and here’s what came out.” He showed Devlin a picture of the bust after the changes had been made.

“Looks like him,” Devlin admitted. “But that’s not evidence. You got to prove it’s him.” He waved the picture. “This ain’t enough.”

Liddell nodded unhappily. “I know it. And we have no fingerprints of Randolph. But it’s him.”

The bodyguard sneered. “Thanks for the compliment. Me, Harvey Randolph? That’s a good one.” He looked to Devlin. “Go on, take me in and book me. See what the newspapers do to you for that.”

Devlin shrugged. “I don’t know whether you know what you’re doing or not,” he told Liddell, “but I can’t be a party to this. If I ever tried to set foot in the station house with that guy and palm him off as Harvey Randolph, I’d be detailed out to the whack factory.”

“Well, we’re not going to let him get away with it,” Doc Morrissey growled. “He killed old Maurer in cold blood. Not to mention the other three who probably had it coming to them, anyway.”

The slate-gray eyes studied the coroner calmly. “The guy’s nuts. I never killed anybody.”

Morrissey started for him, but Liddell caught the coroner by the arm. “Take it easy, Doc,” he counseled. “The guy’s got us and he knows it. There he is, but there’s nothing we can do about him.”

The coroner wheeled. “What do you mean there’s nothing we can do about him? He killed Maurer and he’s going to burn for it if I have to do it myself.”

“Be yourself, Doc,” Liddell urged. “Like Devlin says, if we try to book this zombie as Randolph, from now on our suits will lace up the back. As Marty Mann, we can’t prove he killed any of the three of them.”

Devlin nodded. “What are you going to do with him?”

Liddell shook his head sadly. “Looks like the only thing we can do is let him go. He’s in no position to yell copper. He’s Randolph all right.”

Morrissey jumped at the manacled man before Johnny Liddell could stop him. “Before you go, you rat, here’s a souvenir from Maurer.”

There was a sharp crack as his fist caught the bodyguard just under one of the slate-gray eyes. It knocked him over the chair, left him lying half on the couch, half off.

Mushky looked at the coroner with new-found respect. “Geez, what a wallop for a little guy.”

It was plain what the man meant. The blow had shattered the artificially built up cheekbone of the man on the floor. It lay flatly against his face, an odd complement to the fullness of the other side.

Devlin knelt beside the fallen man. “Say, I’m beginning to think you’ve got something. This guy’s face has been built up.” He thought for a moment, shook his head. “I couldn’t risk it, Doc. A smart lawyer would still laugh us out of court.”

The coroner joined Devlin by the unconscious man’s side. He took one look, probed around with his fingers, then nodded. “I’ll take care of that. Get me a mirror, somebody.”

Mushky looked to Johnny for instructions.

“There’s a mirror in the medicine cabinet,” Liddell indicated with his head. “Behind the door over there.”

Mushky wrenched the mirror off the door of the medicine cabinet, handed it to Morrissey. Some of the color had returned to the doctor’s face.

“Funny time to play games, Doc,” Liddell grunted.

“Never mind the comedy, Johnny. Get a little of that bum brandy of yours between this guy’s teeth,” he ordered.

Mushky went into the outer office, returned with the bottle Devlin had put down on the desk. He knelt by the side of the man on the floor and forced the neck of the bottle into his mouth. The man coughed and gagged. Then the slate eyes fluttered open.

The coroner riveted his attention on the man on the floor.

“Well, Randolph, I suppose you thought all that plastic work in your face was like pencil marks on a sketch that could be erased at any time simply by scraping out the wax. I suppose after that you thought your face would resume its normal appearance?”

Suddenly he pushed the mirror under the ex-bodyguard’s nose. The man looked, then turned his face away.

“Not very pretty, eh?” Morrissey persisted. “Well, that’s the way it’s going to be from now on.” There was fear in the man’s deep-set eyes when they studied Morrissey’s face. “It’s true that you can pump paraffin into a man’s face, then later remove it without any great amount of damage,” the coroner continued, “but that’s only if there’s no complication. However, when that wax slips and distorts unaffected tissue as in this case, it can never be brought back.”

There was still fear in the man’s face, but he bit his lip stubbornly and refused to comment.

“Got anything to say?” Morrissey asked.

The smashed cheekbone made speaking difficult. “I’m not saying anything except that when I get out of here, I’ll . . .”

Morrissey nodded to Mushky. “Lift him up and tie him to the couch.”

The room was thick with the blueness of smoke. Inspector Devlin chewed angrily on the end of a cigar that had long since gone out. Liddell’s cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth as he poured rye into four lily

cups. Mushky sat sprawled behind the receptionist's desk, his feet in a drawer, his cigar forgotten in an ash tray.

Morrissey was pacing the floor. "It's the only way, I tell you," he insisted. "We've got to take a gamble. A rat like Randolph is ninety per cent conceit, five per cent cunning and five per cent intelligence. We've got to play on that conceit."

Liddell looked up. "And if it don't work, where the hell are we?"

"Can't be much worse off than we are now," Devlin growled. "We either got to prove this guy is Randolph and that he murdered your doctor friend and the others, or else we're flirting with a nice long federal rap for kidnaping." He grabbed a lily cup off the desk and gulped it down. "Count me in," he grunted.

Morrissey pounded him on the shoulder. "Good boy, Inspector. Now we're going to need a couple of spotlights, the hotter the better."

The inspector turned to Mushky. "Get over to Mammoth and tell Jonesey in the prop room that I gotta have two of the hottest baby spots he's got. And get 'em back here right away."

Mushky grunted and hoisted himself to his feet. On his way past the corner of the desk, he nailed a slug of rye and downed it. "Sounds screwy to me," he snapped.

"Who the hell asked you?" Liddell said. "All you gotta do is get those spots back here."

The man on the couch tried to disguise his interest in the preparations being made in the center of the room. His half-closed eyes followed Morrissey while the coroner tried to adjust two heavy looking baby spots so that their beams would focus on a chair set between them.

"What's that supposed to be for? Casting a d.a. flic?"

"You'll find out," Morrissey grunted. He turned the lights on, and their brightness made the man on the couch squint even more. After a moment of puttering, Doc announced his satisfaction with the result.

"Okay, boys," he said. "This is it. Let's get going."

The man on the couch struggled futilely against the combined tugging of Liddell and Mushky, but was handicapped by the lack of use of his arms.

They soon had him in the chair. Mushky tied his legs to the chair, then they untied his hands from behind his back and tied them to the arms of the chair.

“Wh-what’s coming off here?” the ex-bodyguard panted. “You can’t get away with this.”

“You’re not Harvey Randolph,” Doc explained patiently. “At least you say you’re not. So you got nothing to worry about. Now, if you were Harvey Randolph . . .”

The perspiration stood out on the squinting face. “What then?”

Morrissey shrugged. “Oh, then it would be just too bad. You see, plastic alterations are usually done with wax . . .” He stopped to adjust a meter on the side of the lamp.

“Well? Well?” Perspiration was flowing in little rivulets down the side of the man’s face and dripping off onto his collar.

“Well,” the coroner continued with deliberation, “you know wax has a low melting point. In that case, the terrific heat of these lamps would melt the wax. It would seep into the healthy tissue. Now when you correct a plastic, all you do is scrape out the wax, but when it’s run through a lot of healthy tissue, it’s so scattered that no can do.”

He turned on the lamps. The man in the chair jerked back his head when the glare hit him. He tried to turn his face out of its way. Suddenly the other lamp spat its brilliance at him.

“Let me out of here,” he screamed. “You’ll never get away with this.”

There was no answer, only the odd crackling noise of the lamps.

The man in the chair twisted and squirmed. Suddenly from somewhere beyond the white blistering heat, a voice said, “Holy socks, Doc. Look at his face! It’s just dripping down.”

“That’s just the wax in his phony nose melting,” Doc’s voice explained. “Just watch when those built-up eyebrows start melting down in his eyes.”

“Won’t that blind him?” Devlin’s voice was thick, as though he were laughing.

“Maybe.”

The man in the chair seemed to have passed out. But the searing of the big lamps brought him back. The sweat ran down his features. He seemed in the grip of a new and sudden fear.

“My face!” he screamed. “Turn them off! Turn them off! I’ll talk.”

Darkness followed. The man in the chair roused, squinted in an effort to locate the spotlights, and failed. Slowly a hideous conviction seemed to take form.

“I can’t see! I can’t see! You’ve blinded me!”

The doctor’s fingers pulled down an eyelid with a light, professional touch. “Just as I feared. That wax has run into the eye tissue. Only an operation can save his sight.”

“Then operate, damn you, operate.” The high note of hysteria had entered the bound man’s voice. He struggled futilely to free his arms, “I’m blind! Can’t you understand? Blind?”

The doctor’s voice was maddeningly low. “I can’t operate unless I have a signed release from my patient. Now if you really are Harvey Randolph . . .”

“I am. I am,” the voice groaned. “Operate. Operate. I’ll sign. I’ll sign anything.”

The man’s right hand was unbound. Another hand guided his to a table. A pen was placed in his fingers, then guided to the paper.

“Okay, Randolph.” Doc Morrissey’s voice sounded choked. “Sign right there.”

The man in the chair hesitated for a second, groaned, then scribbled, *Harvey Randolph*.

Inspector Devlin seized the paper, scanned it eagerly.

“Liddell. You’ve done it again. It’s Randolph’s signature all right.”

An hour later, in the outer office, Doc Morrissey wiped the perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand, leaned back and lifted his feet up onto the secretary’s desk. Devlin had removed Harvey Randolph, Mushky had gone, and he was alone with Johnny Liddell.

“I still don’t know how you did it, Doc,” the detective said, “but it sure worked like a charm.”

The coroner nodded. “I’ll never again call that psychology course I took in medical school a waste of time.” He put a cigarette into his mouth, lighted it and inhaled gratefully. “Those baby spots sure pulled our fat out of the fire.”

Liddell hoisted a hip onto the corner of the desk. "I'm still in a fog about the whole thing, Doc," he complained. "What was the gag about his face caving in under the lights? I didn't see it cave except where you clouted him."

Morrissey grinned. "It didn't. That's the trick. You see, I knew that he knew that all that built-up job on his face was done with wax. So I figured that if I could turn enough heat on him, he might fall for the gag that the wax was melting."

"Well, why didn't it?"

"It couldn't. Not in a million years. We couldn't get up enough heat with any lamp to melt something under the skin. It might blister and burn the skin, but it'd never change the temperature inside the body."

"The old psychology, eh?"

"That's it," Morrissey answered. "It's always been my contention that these movie glamour boys are all conceit. Their pretty pans are more important to them than life. I saw that panicky look in Randolph's eyes when I told him that flattened cheekbone would mar him permanently. I thought I had him then, but it wasn't enough. So I decided to really throw a scare."

Johnny tapped a cigarette on the end of the desk. "He couldn't really get blinded by that stuff, could he?"

The coroner laughed. "He was no more blind than you are. You try looking into a couple of hundred watt lamps for ten or fifteen minutes, and see how well you can see. Then, after he passed out, I turned out the lights so that when he came to he was convinced he was blind. That was the clincher."

Liddell wet the end of the cigarette with the tip of his tongue, then stuck it between his lips. He scratched a long wooden match on the under side of the desk. "That's a stunt a stenographer taught me back in Brooklyn." He grinned. "They never polish the under side of a desk, and if you did happen to scratch it, who'd see it anyhow?" He smoked for a second. "And there's another thing I don't savvy. What's the good of that damn release you made him sign?"

"That's our out, Sherlock. Suppose I didn't have it, just had his verbal confession that he's Harvey Randolph. We drag him into the corner police station, say he's Randolph. He laughs at us and says we're cracked. Then where are we?" Morrissey grinned. "Well, this way I've got his signed

permission to perform a plastic surgery on him and remove all traces of the previous plastic.”

Liddell was unimpressed. “Who’d have stopped us from doing it anyhow? We could’ve just tied the rat down on the desk and done it.”

“Not legally we couldn’t, Johnny. Even if it did turn out like we thought it would, and we made him look like Randolph again, we could be held. This way, we haven’t done anything illegal. At least, not very much.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE man behind the bar had just finished pouring when Toni Belden walked in. She stood in the doorway, spotted Johnny Liddell, and started across the room.

He saw her when she was halfway down the bar.

“Better make it a rye straight coming up, too,” Johnny told the bartender.

Toni slipped onto the stool at his side. “I could kiss you, Johnny,” she said. “We beat the opposition to the street with the story by hours. Did you know that Randolph has confessed?”

“Good.” Johnny nodded. “Doc Morrissey did the operation, didn’t he?”

The girl smelled her drink, nodded happily. “I had the beat on that, too. Gave all the gory details of how he worked up the image from wax, nabbed Randolph from the picture. We did a big feature on how he did the operation in reverse, just doing the opposite of what Doc Maurer had done in the first place. We took pictures before the operation when he was Marty Mann and we’ve got a man waiting for the bandages to come off so we can shoot him as Harvey Randolph.” She rubbed her hands, gulped her drink, and sighed. “One thing that bothers me, though. What happened to the real Marty Mann? The extra who came from Detroit?”

Johnny drew designs with his fingers on the bar. “He was the body they fixed up to be identified as Harvey Randolph. Harvey got to know him during the filming of his last picture. Marty Mann was a guy who had few, if any, friends in town. So, when he disappeared, hardly anybody paid any attention. Randolph took over as Marty Mann and that was that. Goodman hired him as a bodyguard so he wouldn’t have to go back to the studio. Besides, it gave Randolph a chance to keep his eyes on Goodman, too.”

Toni nodded, signaled to the bartender for a refill. When Johnny Liddell fished in his pocket, she stopped him. “Nothing doing.” She grinned. “This is on the *Dispatch*. Orders of the editor. And all on the expense account.” She fumbled in her bag, came up with a five-spot, dropped it on the bar. “Keep hitting it until it can’t hit back,” she told the barkeep.

“How’d you know Randolph was behind these killings in the first place, Johnny?” she asked after a while.

“Well, it stood to reason there was a pattern to them. I sat back and tried to figure out who stood to gain. Obviously Mrs. Goodman would inherit any money that came to Goodman. But why Varden and Moreno? So there it was—a case of protecting someone, getting rid of people who knew too much. I was pretty lead-pipe sure that Goodman’s killer was behind the other two killings, too.”

He waited while the bartender filled his glass, stopped him before he could carry off the bottle.

“Mona Varden had told me that Randolph favored the knife. So, when I saw that she had been knifed. I began to wonder if it weren’t possible that Randolph was behind this. Then finding out that Randolph was alive clinched it.”

“So what it actually boiled down to was an insurance fraud plus a double cross?”

“Right,” Liddell agreed. “Goodman knew that he stood to be wiped out financially because of the mess Randolph had gotten himself into. So he figured out this stunt to separate the insurance companies from a quarter of a million, and made the proposition to Randolph.”

“Was Goodman in on the Doc Maurer killing?”

“Must have been. It was his idea that Harvey get a temporary plastic so that there would be no slip-up. Harvey saw to it that nobody would know by getting rid of the doctor who did the job. The night that the body was identified as Randolph’s, he didn’t need Goodman any more, so Goodman died.”

The girl reporter found two cigarettes, lighted both and put one in the detective’s mouth. “How about Mrs. Goodman?”

Liddell shook his head. “I don’t think she was in on it at all. She hated her husband, and was grateful to Randolph for playing around with her. But I don’t think she knew that Randolph was Marty Mann.”

“But she could have killed Mona Varden. In fact, you found her right at the scene.”

Johnny drained his glass. “That particular job was just an example of what a smart hombre this Randolph baby is. He knew that he had been seen going into the building and that the witness would remember him. So, he went back to Goodman’s, got Mrs. Goodman and took her back there so that

when the witness described him to the police as being there, he'd have the answer that he was there after the murder."

"Pretty cute."

Liddell nodded. "Damn cute. After we handed Randolph over to the cops, Devlin sent for the witness who had described Marty Mann. When he asked him what time he saw him, the witness set the time almost an hour before he walked in on me."

Toni helped him to more cognac. "Why did he kill Mona at all?"

"She was putting the black on him. Goodman spilled the details of the plot to her. She called me and half a dozen other people and was going to sell the information out to the highest bidder. He refused to be blackmailed, that's all!"

Johnny Liddell kept consulting his watch as he talked.

"What's the matter, Johnny?" Toni demanded. "Got a date?"

"In about five minutes."

"Who with?"

"The blonde who used to work in Goodman's office. It's sort of a rain check. Besides, there's some unfinished business I want to attend to."

Toni Belden winkled her nose. "Unfinished business! Monkey business, you mean," she snorted. "You're no match for that female, Johnny," she said. "I'm going to repay you the favor you did me. I'm going along to protect your interests."

Good as her word, less than ten minutes later, Toni Belden squeezed into the cab with Johnny Liddell. They jumped two lights on Sunset Boulevard, veered east at Vine and kept weaving east.

The cab skidded to a stop in front of an ornate canopy that announced *Denton Towers*. Johnny Liddell slid out, handed the driver a bill.

"Is this where we're going?" Toni peered up at the apparently endless tiers of windows stretching skyward.

"This is where I'm going," Johnny corrected her. "You're going home."

"Nothing doing. Something's cooking and I've got a hunch it's you. I'm coming."

“Give me a couple of hours to clear up this unfinished business and I’ll help you write one last exclusive on this case.” Liddell put his hand gently on her shoulder and pushed her back into the seat. “The *Dispatch*,” he told the driver, “and don’t spare the horses.”

She didn’t even look around at him as the cab pulled away.

The blonde secretary opened the door. She had on another silk dressing gown, this one more revealing than the last. As he came in, she wrapped her arms around his neck, sought his lips with hers. He kissed back, shoved the door shut with his heel.

“You said you’d be back, but you didn’t say you were going to stay away this long,” she pouted.

Liddell followed her into the living room. She had the scotch and bourbon, a dish of ice and some glasses on a table at the head of the couch.

“That was pretty fancy sleuthing, running Randolph down like that, Johnny,” she praised, filling his glass with ice and pouring a stiff peg of bourbon. “You sure created a sensation in this town.”

Johnny shrugged. “He left a trail broad enough to drive a truck down once we stumbled on it. I guess Pretty Boy wasn’t so smart.”

The girl handed him his drink, sat down on the couch beside him. “I wish you’d tell me the whole story. I don’t know it too well. The papers were pretty sketchy.”

Liddell took a drink of his bourbon, settled back. “You know how Goodman got in a hole on Randolph’s new picture and decided to bail himself out by pretending that Harvey was dead? Well, he got over that hump and was ready to sit back and collect, but he didn’t reckon with one thing. Harvey hated his insides and couldn’t see any reason why Goodman should enjoy any of that money, so Goodman had to go.”

The girl stirred the ice around in her glass. “But Randolph wouldn’t get the money.”

“That’s right. It would go to Mrs. Goodman, your sister. But Harvey already had her under his finger. He’d take her away with him some place and in due time he’d get his hands on the money.”

The girl didn’t look up. “But he was home at Goodman’s house when I called. My sister swears that he was there from the time he first arrived,

several hours before Goodman was killed, until I called.”

Johnny drained his glass, put it on the floor. “I know. And it’s true. Devlin has testimony from the employees in Mrs. Goodman’s apartment to back that alibi up.”

“But—” the blonde started to protest.

Liddell waved her to silence. “He got to Mona Varden when she made it evident that she knew what was going on and was prepared to talk.”

“Okay, okay.” The blonde was impatient. “But if Harvey was at my sister’s house when Goodman was killed, who killed Goodman?”

“You did,” Johnny Liddell said casually. “You got a call from Randolph when he left Goodman at the office. He told you he was going home to establish an alibi, told you to go up the back stairway and do the job. Of all the suspects in the case—Cookie Russo, Randolph, Sal Moreno—you were the only one that Goodman would let get close enough to do the job.”

The girl’s mouth fell open. “But why should I? Why should I kill him?”

“To get the money. You only told me half the truth last time. You told me you came on here because you wanted to protect your sister against her husband. That was only half of it—the more important reason was that you were blindly infatuated with Harvey Randolph.”

The girl’s hand shook as she refilled her glass with scotch. “I hope you’re trying to be funny,” she said.

“When Goodman first got this idea, he outlined it to you. You saw a golden opportunity. You brought Harvey and your sister together, knowing that she would be flattered by his attentions and would fall heavily.” Liddell’s eyes were half closed. “Then, after the framed accident, you set up an alibi for Harvey that couldn’t be shaken—and you did the job on Goodman.”

The blonde made no comment.

“It was you and not Harvey Randolph that Mona Varden called. She told you she knew the whole story, that she was getting ready to sell it out to me. You sent Harvey there to shut her up. He doesn’t like a gun, so he used a knife as he always has ever since he was a kid.”

The girl slid her hand down the side of the pillow, came up with a .38 which she trained on the detective. “Go on,” she said.

“You got worried about Sal Moreno and decided to tell him that I was on the trail and seemed to be getting hot. You went up to his apartment, heard him talking to me, heard him say he’d tell everything. You shot him and ran.”

“You’re cleverer than I thought, Liddell,” the girl acknowledged. “I underestimated you. But how could you be so sure it was me?”

Johnny grinned. “You’re clever, too, Blondie. Maybe just a little too clever. Remember the gun in your desk? You told me you had used it to scare Goodman off several weeks before. But when I checked the serial number, I found it had only been bought two days previously. So there was another gun. Besides, when you told me about that little incident, you let slip the fact that you had the key to that back entrance when you told me that you went up that way—only to find Goodman gone.”

“Cookie Russo could fit that picture just as well as I do,” she pointed out. “He had the key to the back door. He could have walked in on Goodman just as easily as me.”

Liddell shook his head. “No. Cookie didn’t fit from the start. In the first place, an experienced gunman like Cookie would use a .45 instead of a .38. A lot surer and quicker. Second, he wouldn’t have killed Goodman with him owing him fifty grand. That way he was making sure he’d never get his dough. And third, Goodman would never let Cookie get behind him. He was too afraid of him.”

The girl shook her head. “And I thought I was being smart. You knew all along?”

“No, not for sure,” Johnny told her. “It wasn’t until last night that I knew for sure.”

“How did you know then?”

“You told me,” Johnny Liddell said grimly. “I told you that we had the whole picture on these killings but that I hadn’t told the police yet. I was inviting a murder, and I knew it. You didn’t disappoint me.”

“No wonder you didn’t drink that cognac. There was enough strychnine in it to kill a monster.” She drained what was left of her glass. “You made it necessary for me to take the terrific risk of trying to shoot you through the window.”

“It was a risk,” Liddell agreed. “If it hadn’t been for the fact that one of those bullets creased my skull and knocked me out, I would have had you

red-handed right then.”

The girl was puzzled. “What have you been waiting for? If you’ve known, why haven’t you picked me up?”

Johnny Liddell grinned. “We’ve been waiting for you to produce that gun. If I’m not mistaken, that’s the one that’s been used in three murders already.”

The blonde nodded. “That’s right. This is it. I was with Harvey when Doc Maurer operated. I had to let him have it before we left. Now you know—but it won’t do you any good, since it’s just about to get its fourth notch, and you’re it.” She kept him covered, leaned down, filled his glass with bourbon. “Maybe you’d like a last drink, Liddell?” She watched him with admiration as he picked up the glass, drank it without a tremor. “I’m sorry it has to work out this way, Johnny. I’ve got an idea you and I could have had a lot of fun.”

Liddell shrugged. “That’s the way things go.” He indicated the gun with his glass. “I’d put that up if I were you. Three of Inspector Devlin’s best men have you covered. You’ll get cut to pieces with a tommy gun if you move a muscle.”

The girl started to laugh. “Oh, Johnny. After all this, you continue to underrate me? That one’s too old.”

Somewhere a floor board creaked. “It’s no gag, miss. You’re covered on all sides,” a voice from the kitchenette informed her.

The girl jumped involuntarily, swung the gun around. Johnny Liddell moved in the same instant. His hand came down with a sharp snap on her wrist. She cried in pain as the gun fell from nerveless fingers, skittered across the floor.

Inspector Devlin walked in from the kitchenette, picked up the gun. He smelled it, broke it and examined it. “I think this is it, Johnny!”

The blonde didn’t even look at him. She turned her back, faced Liddell. “Got a cigarette, Liddell?” she asked. She permitted him to place the cigarette between her lips, accepted a light he held toward her. She drew deeply, exhaled.

Devlin dropped into an easy chair facing the girl. “I don’t get the whole picture yet, Johnny,” he admitted. “What was her angle?”

Johnny Liddell sadly took a cigarette for himself, lighted it. “As you know, she and Randolph were working it together. They were using her

poor, broken-down sister as a goat. You see, with Goodman dead, Mrs. Goodman would inherit his money.”

Devlin nodded, his powerful chaws savagely crushing a fresh wad of gum. “Then Randolph marries Mrs. Goodman?”

Liddell shook his head. “Nothing as crude as that. Sister here persuades Mrs. Goodman that she should go away for a rest. Mexico preferably. Marty Mann, her bodyguard, would drive them. Once they got to Mexico, Mrs. Goodman would take sick and one day soon would die. Then sister here, her only living relative, would inherit. If I’m not mistaken, the next step would be to orange-blossom it with Harvey, who would then regain his pretty face, and they’d live happily ever after.”

The blonde applauded sardonically. “Very pretty, Johnny. The way you tell it makes it sound even cleverer than it was.” She shook her head. “I tried to talk Goodman out of hiring you, but he insisted that he wanted to make it look good. He was so sure of his setup that he never figured anyone could tip his apple cart. Well, you did.”

Devlin pulled himself out of his chair, helped the girl to her feet.

“I suppose this is so long, Liddell.” She took a step closer to him. “I can’t say I’m glad I met you, but I wouldn’t have missed knowing you for the world.” She slid her arms around his neck, pulled his head down fiercely, crushed her lips against his. He felt her little teeth sink into his lower lip, then the grip around his neck relaxed. “So long, Johnny,” she said.

He watched wordlessly while Devlin threw a coat around the girl’s shoulders, led her out. Then he dropped into a chair, swore viciously. He picked up the bottle of bourbon, drank a healthy slug from it. There was a timid knock on the door.

“Can I come in?” Toni Belden asked.

Johnny turned swiftly. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Toni shrugged. “I told you I was going to look after your interests.” She walked over, sat beside him. She picked up the bourbon bottle, smelled it. “Not poisoned, is it?”

“Then you know?” Johnny asked.

The girl poured half a water glass of bourbon for Liddell, a like amount for herself. She leaned back on the couch. “Know what? That the blonde was in this mess up to her ears?” She took a swallow. “I told you she was, didn’t I?”

Liddell grinned broadly. “Damned if you didn’t. Well, aren’t you going to phone in your scoop? This is a real big one.”

“It’ll wait. It’ll wait.”

Johnny laughed. He put his glass down, leaned over the girl, kissed her. She kissed him back hard, caught him fiercely around the neck. Her lips were soft, smooth.

The phone rang with a suddenness that made them both jump. Johnny fought himself free from the girl’s embrace. She punched the pillow, groaned, “Damn!”

“Yes, this is Johnny Liddell,” Johnny told the operator. “Who? Baron in New York? Put him on.”

After innumerable clicks Steve Baron’s voice came through. “That you, Johnny? I’ve been trying to get you everywhere. I just got a call from the insurance company praising hell out of you and promising a juicy reward. What’s happened out there?”

Johnny explained. “Say, how the hell did you locate me here?” he concluded.

Steve Baron chuckled. “The coroner gave me the number. Said you’d probably be making a damn fool out of yourself with some woman and it wouldn’t make any difference if I interfered.”

Liddell muttered, “Okay, okay. Right now I’m busy, though.” He stole a quick glance at Toni.

“Well, get unbusy,” Baron roared. “We just got a retainer on another case out there. I’ll send you the details air mail.”

“But what about that vacation with pay?” Liddell protested.

“You got till tomorrow, ain’t you?” the agency chief roared. “What the hell more do you want?”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This book is the first novel about Johnny Liddell, Private Investigator. It was originally published by the title *About Face* and some editions give it the title *Death About Face*.

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Fatal Foursome* by Frank Kane]