

**A**  
**JOHNNY LIDDELL**  
**SCORCHER**

**MARGIN  
FOR  
TERROR**

“I love the  
spotlight,” said  
the would-be  
actress, “but right  
now let’s work  
in the dark . . .”

**FRANK KANE**

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# Ring Around A Corpse

Rocky Nelson was a dumb boxer, but his written exposé of the fight racket was powerful enough to blast the syndicate wide open, and the bosses knew it. So for life insurance, Rocky got Johnny Liddell to lock the document in his office safe.

But they busted the safe—and then Rocky . . .

**Johnny knew it was murder, but he couldn't prove it. The only clue he had was a stage-struck redhead—and her disappearing act had stopped the show. . . .**

**Margin  
for  
Terror**

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**FRANK KANE**

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# **Margin for Terror**

# Chapter 1

Three men were in the room.

Maury Josephs sat behind the desk. He looked as if he had been spilled into the huge desk chair. He was fat, soft-looking, his eyes two shiny black marbles almost lost behind puffy, discolored sacs and heavily veined lids. Dark, damp ringlets made a futile effort to cover the bald spot that gleamed pinkly through them. He sat chewing on an unlit cigar, rolling it from one corner of his mouth to the other as he glowered at the other two men.

*The Dispatch* lay open on the desk to its sports section. The headline read: “Rocky By Kayo; Champ Next?” The other two men stood looking down at it.

The younger of the men looked up. The slight thickening of tissue over his eyebrows and the beginning of a flattened nose identified him as a prizefighter. He grinned uncertainly at the man behind the desk. “So what’s so bad about managing a champ?” he wanted to know.

“Champ?” the fat man snorted. “Chump!” He pulled the cigar from between his teeth, used it as a pointer. “You had your orders going into that fight. You didn’t follow orders, so you cost some important people important money. They get narrow-minded about things like that.”

Rocky Nelson shrugged. “Okay. So I was supposed to go into a tank. The guy’s wide open, I throw one at his jaw. Who knew it was glass?”

“Don’t snow me, Rocky. I was there. Remember? You went after that guy right from the first bell.” He swung on the other man. “That’s what you were in his corner for, Whitey. To cool him off. Why didn’t you?”

Whitey Bloom, the third man, was undersized, wearing a rumpled suit that made him look even smaller. He raked nervous fingers through his hair. It stood out almost at right angles from his head, giving evidence that he had been raking his fingers through it often since the end of the fight the night before. “I did what I could, Maury,” he squealed. “Like you say, he went at him from the first bell. No matter how much I argue during rounds, he brushes me off. What can I do? Hit him with the water bucket in front of all them people?”

“It might have been better for all of us if you did,” the manager told him coldly.

Rocky grinned at the man behind the desk. “Why all the sweat? You see what the papers say? I’m the next champ.” He jabbed a spatulate index finger at a column by-lined by *The Dispatch*’s sports columnist. “This guy don’t call them wrong often. You don’t get your name in his column by going into the tank.”

“Read all you want about yourself in his column. The next column you make could be the obituary column,” the fat man grunted.

“Stop scaring me to death, Maury. You think they’re crazy enough to have me hit? They got enough heat on their hands in this racket to go looking for more.” He grinned at the undersized man. “Maybe they have a couple of heavy men give Whitey a little lesson for not stopping me.” The grin broadened at the look of apprehension on the trainer’s face. “But what the hell, he doesn’t bleed for me while I’m in there getting my brains knocked out, so why should I bleed for him? The boys know that when I’m champ I can win them back anything they blew last night.”

The fat man leaned back in his chair, studied the fighter’s face. “You really think you’re good, don’t you?”

Rocky shrugged. “Don’t take my opinion. It’s in the record books. Thirty-five fights, thirty wins, twenty-six by knockouts.”

“You want to know how many of them you really won, sucker?” the fat man sneered at him. “Maybe half. Maybe not that much. The boys saw to it that you did.”

“That’s a lie.” The grin faded from the fighter’s face.

“They were building you for the big kill. Last night. You went in there a top-heavy favorite. They put all those guys in the tank for you on your way up. Last night was your turn and you crossed them.” He sneered at the look of disbelief on the fighter’s face. “Without them you wouldn’t rate a semifinal at St. Nick’s.”

Rocky Nelson licked at his lips. “I don’t believe you. Even if what you’re saying is true, I’m now the number one contender. They’re stuck with me.” He placed his palms on the desk top, leaned over and stuck his face close to that of the fat man. “I heard around that you were just a messenger boy. Now I know it. So take a message from me. Tell the big boys that anything happens to me, certain friends will deliver a sworn statement from me telling the newspapers everything I know about their setup. I’ve named



names, places and fights.” He straightened up. “I’ll add how you told me I was going to get hit for fighting an honest fight last night. You better start figuring out some answers.” He curled his lip at the undersized man at his side, nodded to the fat man behind the desk. Then he turned on his heel, headed for the door.

The fat man watched wordlessly until the door closed behind the fighter’s back. He turned back to the trainer, sighed deeply. “We got real trouble, Whitey,” he grunted. “The boys are burning. They took a real bath last night.”

Whitey Bloom made the trip through his hair again. “I couldn’t do nothing about it, Maury. I keep telling the kid to hold back, but he’s got the feel he can take this bum so he won’t listen.”

The fat man squirmed into a more comfortable position in his chair. “He ain’t the only one who won’t listen.” He pulled the cigar from between his teeth, examined the soggy end with distaste, threw it at the wastebasket. “The boys don’t want to know why they lost their money. All they know is that they lost it.” The heavily veined lids blocked out the slate-colored eyes for a moment, he worked his lips in and out in thought. “Maybe the kid’s got an idea in threatening to blow the whistle if they give out a contract on him.”

“He couldn’t be any deader,” the trainer reminded him mournfully.

The fat man opened his eyes, sank his jowls into his shoulders with an expressive shrug. “He’s as good as dead now, anyhow.”

The board meeting was usually held on every second Thursday in the private dining room of Mercantile Exports, Inc., on the forty-fourth floor of the Empire State Building. Occasionally, some unexpected development resulted in the calling of a special meeting. A luncheon meeting was called two days after the Rocky Nelson fight.

The man at the head of the table was broad-shouldered, wore an English-style double-breasted blue blazer, a light blue shirt and dark blue tie. His white hair was thick, combed in a three-quarter part. The blue ensemble made it look whiter than it was. His eyes jumped from face to face of the men around the table.

“Sorry we had to pull you in from Miami, Larry,” he told a dark-skinned man who sat, napkin around his neck, sopping up the gravy on his plate with bread. The man shrugged off the inconvenience. The white-haired man

turned to a man on the other side of the table. “And we held it off a day until you could get in from the Coast, Lew.”

Lew Merton was the organization’s contact in Hollywood. He nodded. “I wouldn’t want to miss it, Mitch.”

Mitch Corday returned the nod. He glanced around the table, cleared his throat. “We all know why we’re here.”

Larry Gatti, the dark-skinned man, tugged the napkin from under his collar, rolled it into a ball, tossed it on the table. “We know. So what do we do with this pug? He ain’t worth heat. Maybe we fix it so’s he can’t fight again. Not even with a Jayne Mansfield.” He looked around for approval of the idea.

Sid Weiss, from Chicago, stopped picking his teeth. “You didn’t tell them, Mitch?”

Mitch shook his head. “I wanted to wait for Lew to get in, so I could tell you all at the same time.” He nodded for the waiters, watched until they had left the room and closed the door behind them. “Rocky Nelson has written a letter that will get into the hands of the newspapers if anything happens to him. He knows enough about us to give us a few headaches.”

Weiss squirmed uncomfortably on his chair. “With the investigation going on out in Chicago, that’s about all we’d need.”

Larry Gatti snorted. When he leaned forward he gave off an odor compounded of perspiration and toilet water. “How much this fighter cost us by this double cross?”

Mitch Corday flattened the thick white hair over his ear with the palm of his hand. “Our investment? Or what we stood to make?”

“Both.”

Mitch consulted a pad alongside his plate. “We spread it out over the country, managed to get down a little better than a hundred grand.” He rolled his eyes up from the pad. “We average out at about five-to-one.” He tore the top sheet of the pad off, rolled it in a ball. “Say he cost us a half million.”

Lew Merton grimaced, shook his head. “Maybe we should have had our little talk with him before he got into the ring.”

“Wouldn’t have done any good, Lew,” Corday told him. “From what Maury Josephs tells me, this kid wants to be champ so much he can taste it.

He figures chilling this stumblebum will give him a crack at the title and he figures the risk is worth it.”

Larry finished an operation on a back molar with his thumbnail. “We can’t let him walk away from it,” he said flatly.

“I’m with Larry.” Lew Merton nodded. “It’s not the money alone. It’s just that we can’t afford to let anybody get this far out of line.”

Mitch smiled, exposing carefully capped teeth. “We intend to take some steps to show that we’re not happy about what’s happened. It’s just a question of being discreet.” His eyes hopscotched around the room. “If you’re willing to leave matters in my hands, I think I can guarantee that Rocky Nelson will be taught a lesson. And with a minimum of heat.” His glance passed from man to man, drew a nod from each.

“What about Maury Josephs?” Weiss wanted to know.

“You never did like Maury, Sid.” Mitch smiled.

“Liking or not liking has nothing to do with it,” the Chicagoan told him coldly. “Josephs was given the job of keeping this kid in line. I blame him as much as the kid.” He looked around the table for support.

Mitch Corday glanced over to where Lew Merton sat. “Maury’s your boy, Lew. How do you feel about it?”

Merton sat for a moment, pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Sid’s right about him being as responsible as the kid. I don’t figure he should get to walk away from it, either. But a hit?” He shrugged. “That would bring as much heat as if something happened to the kid. It might even scare the kid into running to the papers.”

“It don’t have to happen today,” Weiss argued.

Merton grinned mirthlessly. “You’re still burning because he cut your credit off in Vegas,” he told the other man.

“He was lucky I let him walk away from it that time. This time I say he don’t walk away from it.” He turned to Gatti. “What do you say, Larry? If he was your boy, would he get away with it?”

Larry shook his head. “Somebody ought to have a talk with him,” he grunted. “Then maybe some of the other people working for us, they get a little more careful.”

Merton looked over to Corday. “And you, Mitch?”

“I have to go along with the boys.”

“Can we stand the heat if something happens to him?”

Corday bared his perfectly capped teeth. “Nothing’s going to happen to him until we get our hands on that letter the kid wrote. That could take a long time.”

Merton considered, finally bobbed his head. “I guess we’ll have to leave things up to you.”

“But there’s got to be no heat,” Sid Weiss emphasized.

“There’ll be no heat,” Corday assured him.

“How you figure to find out what friends of the kid have that letter?” Larry wanted to know.

“We’ll have to play that by ear,” Mitch told him. “We’ll find a way.”

“Just as long as you remember that there’s an investigation going on out my way. We can keep it under control as long as nothing happens to blow it up into a front-page story,” Sid Weiss told him.

Corday bobbed his head. “I understand.”

Larry Gatti consulted his watch. “Anything else you want to talk about?” he wanted to know. “I still got time to catch the four-o’clock to Miami.”

“Not unless one of you boys have something on your mind.” Corday shook his head.

Gatti looked around the table, drew a shake of the head from the other two men. He pushed his chair back from the table. “Then I’ll be going. Anybody need a lift to the airport?”

“I’m going back on an evening plane,” Merton told him.

Sid Weiss nodded. “I can use a lift.” He turned to Corday. “Any idea when we’ll be hearing from you, Mitch?”

“Watch your newspapers,” Mitch told him.

Larry Gatti headed for the door in a wave of eau de cologne. Sid Weiss hesitated for a second, as if about to say something. Instead, he bobbed his head, turned and followed Gatti out the door.

Lew Merton sat at the table, watched while Corday got up, walked to the window. He stood with his back to the room looking out over the unparalleled panorama of downtown Manhattan, the Narrows and the

harbor. Oceangoing liners were feeling their way carefully to sea; tugs, with scows and barges trailing behind them, puffed serenely along, thin ribbons of smoke trailing from their funnels.

In the Narrows, a ferry was waddling past the Statue of Liberty on its way to Staten Island. The Old Lady of the Bay stood impassively overseeing the huffing and the puffing of the river traffic, and at the same time was waving bon voyage to the liners heading into the ocean.

“That’s quite a contract you took on, Mitch,” Merton told the back of the other man’s head. “You say no heat. But you can’t hit a guy in the public eye like the kid without heat. And you know Gatti and Sid. They don’t like for things to go wrong.” He reached onto the table, picked a cigar from the box in the center. He tested its firmness between thumb and forefinger. Then he bit off the end and spat it out. “You know what they’re remembering right now? They’re remembering that you were the one who wanted me to send Maury to handle the kid.”

Corday turned away from the window, nodded. “I know. Sid never wanted him in the first place.”

“Maury wasn’t any too happy about it, either. He wanted to stay put in Vegas.” He rolled the cigar between his fingers in the center of his lips. “We’ve got us a half a million reasons to wish we’d let him.”

“You mean to wish that I’d let him.” He smiled glumly at Merton. “Forget it, Lew. It’s my contract because I brought him here in the first place. Leave it up to me.”

## Chapter 2

Johnny Liddell sat tilted back in his desk chair, his heels hooked in the open bottom drawer of his desk. He studied the sealed envelope he held in his hands incuriously.

“Let me get this straight, Rocky.” He raised his eyes to the face of the man sitting in the customer’s chair across the desk. “All you want me to do is to keep this thing in a safe place?”

Rocky Nelson bobbed his head.

“Why not a safe-deposit box or a checkroom?”

“I might want it in the middle of the night. And you can’t get into a safe-deposit box in the middle of the night. And you’re safer than a checkroom.” He cracked the knuckle of his index finger nervously. “Besides, if something should happen to me, I want you to deliver it to someone.”

Liddell raised his eyebrows. “You figuring on something happening to you?”

The fighter grinned crookedly. “You being around to deliver that will keep things from happening to me.”

Liddell dropped his feet to the floor, leaned over, flipped the envelope onto his desk. “If you’re figuring on something happening to you, going to the police would be better insurance.”

Rocky shook his head. “This is personal business, not police business. Besides, how long will the police protect me? A month, two months before the taxpayers start yelling.” He indicated the envelope on the desk with his forefinger. “That makes it permanent. It’s as good a year or five years from now as it is today.” He stuck his hand in his pocket, brought out a roll of bills. “I’m willing to pay rent.” He peeled off two fifties, dropped them on the desk. “That enough to put it in your safe and forget about it?”

Liddell grunted. “Hell, that’s enough to buy the safe.” He picked a pack of cigarettes off the desk, shook one loose, offered it to Rocky. He drew a shake of the fighter’s head. “Want to tell me what this is all about, Rock?” He hung the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, where it waggled when he talked.

“That’s an insurance policy. I stepped on some toes the other night when I iced Marty Taub. There was a lot of money riding on Marty. They wanted me to take a dive.” He shrugged. “I didn’t and some of the boys are pretty mad.”

Liddell touched a match to his cigarette, leaned back in his chair, blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. “Did you tell them you weren’t going along with the fix?”

“Not in time for them to lay off their bets,” Rocky conceded. “I tried to reach Maury Josephs, my manager, to tell him the deal was off. He was laying low. He was afraid the commission might want to ask him some questions after the fight so he stayed out of my corner. By the time I could get to him, the fight was over.”

Liddell shook his head, grinned glumly. “That’s no way to break ninety.”

“I told Maury I was going to write out everything I knew about the fixes and the deals and leave it where it would be delivered to the newspapers if anything happened to me. He’ll get the word to the right guys. They’re too smart to let anything happen to me now.”

“Why’d you do it, Rock?”

“Because I want to be champ. Taking Taub puts me in line for a crack at the title.”

“You think you can take the champ?”

The fighter grinned confidently. “That clown’s all punched out. He’s the champ because the boys say he’s the champ and they’re calling the plays. So, when they get the message, what’s the difference whether they call the plays for me instead of him? With me, they get a longer run for their money.”

Liddell tapped the envelope on his desk. “And this is supposed to make them willing to trade him in on you?”

“Why not? They give him the office to drop his guard and I make it look good enough for the papers to yell for a return match. We all make a buck and I get what I want. The title.”

“Suppose they don’t go for it?”

The smile faded on Rocky’s face. “They will. They don’t even have to give him the office to go into the tank. I can beat the bum on the level. Just

like I iced Marty Taub on the level.” He eyed Liddell anxiously. “There’s nobody else I could trust like you, Liddell.”

“How about a lawyer or—”

The grin was back on the boxer’s face. “You know how much the mob would be willing to lay on the line for what’s in that envelope? Word will be out that they’re in the market. There’ll be enough to make any lawyer think twice about protecting his client. The big boys can be awfully grateful for a favor like that.”

“What makes you think I won’t be tempted?”

“You’re not just from yesterday in this town. A guy gets a name. You got one. You don’t sell out no matter what the bid is.” Rocky nodded at the two fifties on the corner of the desk. “Once you take that hundred, there ain’t enough money around to make you change teams.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Liddell reached over, picked up the two bills. “I’ll handle your insurance.”

A grin of relief split the boxer’s face. “Good. Now we find out just where we stand. I’m putting it up to Maury Josephs when I leave here that either he gets me a title bout or I’ll get a manager who can.”

Liddell sucked on his cigarette, shook his head. “You sure like to live dangerously.” He tapped a collar of ash off the cigarette into the oversized ashtray on his desk. “Suppose you get the match on the understanding that the champ keeps his title and you get a return match?”

Rocky shook his head. “He’s had a good long run. Now it’s my turn. I didn’t go up against these guys just to be shoved aside. If I’m going to walk away from this at all, I’m going to walk away with all the marbles.”

Liddell crushed his cigarette out in the ashtray, where it sent a wavering plume of smoke ceilingward. “It’s your skin, if you like to wear it with holes in it.” He reached into the ashtray, crushed out the butt with the ball of his index finger. “You want me to go along with you when you make your pitch?”

The fighter shook his head. “I don’t want them to know there’s any connection between us. They could figure out where that’s stashed.” He indicated the envelope. “I don’t want anybody trumping my ace.”

Liddell considered it, nodded. “You’re sure nobody tailed you when you came here?”



“Positive. And nobody will pick me up when I leave.” Rocky Nelson pulled himself to his feet, pushed back the chair and jabbed a hand across the desk at Liddell. “I’ll let you know what cooks. If they okay the title fight, there’ll be a couple of ringsides in the mail for you.”

Liddell gave the fighter’s five fingers a firm grip, gave the hand back to him. He watched the slight swagger in Rocky’s walk as he headed to the door to the outer office. After a moment, there was the sound of the hall door closing. Pinky, Liddell’s secretary, appeared in the doorway to the private office.

“Business?” she wanted to know.

“If you can call baby-sitting a sealed envelope that’s supposed to blow the fight racket apart business, I guess we got business.” He picked up the envelope, turned it over in his hands.

Pinky looked disappointed. “When he called, he said it was a matter of life and death. That’s all he wants? For you to keep an envelope?”

“That’s all he wants. And he’s willing to pay a hundred bucks for us to do it.” He flipped the envelope across the desk. “Stick it in the safe. And when you enter the hundred in the cash book, just mark it ‘bodyguard assignment.’ In case Rocky isn’t as good at spotting a tail as he thinks he is and somebody gets curious about who he was visiting in this building.”

Maury Josephs stood at the portable bar in his apartment, poured himself a straight Scotch and carried it to the window. The light drizzle of early afternoon had turned into a cold, driving rain. It slashed down from a black sky, hit the puddles in the gutter below like buckshot. A bitter wind swept down the street between the rows of buildings causing the few pedestrians abroad to lean against it. They clutched their coat lapels together, held onto their hats as they headed for the nearest shelter. Although it was late afternoon, already the bar at the corner of Madison glowed with lights and the pale, yellow street lights were wearing halos of mist as they spilled their weak light onto the rain-blackened street.

Josephs took a deep swallow from his glass, failed to get the feeling of well-being it usually gave him. There had been no further word from Mitch Corday since he had told him of Rocky’s threat to blow the whistle on the organization. He wondered how the rest of the boys were taking it, but he hesitated to call Mitch. In this case, no news could be good news. It was just

barely conceivable that the kid had been right. They might be too much in the limelight for any serious reprisals.

The doorbell rang with a discordant jangle. Maury started visibly. His hand shook so violently that he spilled Scotch over the rim of the glass. He chewed on his overripe lower lip, tried to decide whether or not to answer it.

The doorbell jangled again.

Maury set his glass down on the bar, wiped the wet smear off his mouth with the back of his hand. He crossed the room with the stride of a condemned man. At the door, he paused with his hand on the knob.

“Who is it?”

“Rocky. Open up, Maury. I’m soaked to the skin.”

The fat man took the chain off the door, turned the knob and pulled it open. He was relieved to see that the kid was alone.

Rocky pushed past his manager into the living room, headed for the bar. He poured himself a stiff slug of Scotch, tilted the glass to his lips.

The fat man replaced the chain on the door, waddled over to retrieve his glass.

“You gave the boys my message?” the fighter wanted to know.

Maury pursed his lips, blew bubbles between them. He bobbed his head, disturbing the rolls of fat over his collar.

“What did they say?” Rocky asked.

“What did you expect them to say? You’re still alive. That’s something.”

Rocky drained his glass, set it back on the bar. “Do I get the fight or don’t I?”

Maury raised his glass to his lips, took a swallow, studied the fighter’s face over the rim. His slate-colored eyes had almost disappeared behind the discolored pouches. He lowered the glass. “The champ’s manager wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole.”

Rocky shrugged out of his damp jacket, tossed it down on the couch. “Let’s stop treating me like a farm boy. We both know that the champ’s manager is just a front. Just like you are. We both know that the same people who own me own the champ. It’s no skin off their nose to throw me in with the bum. When I’m done with him, they’ll still own the champ.”

Maury drained his glass, set it down. “You’re right about one thing, kid. I’m just a front. You could get yourself very dead needling the people I represent. They’re already out a half million on the double cross you pulled the other night. Just because you’re still walking around don’t mean there isn’t a contract out on you already. If there isn’t, stop pushing your luck.”

“They’d be crazy to pull anything. They know it and you know it. Most important of all, I know it.”

Maury turned his back on him, waddled to a humidior on the table next to the couch. He flipped it open, selected a Corona, held it to his nostrils, sniffed delicately. “Don’t count on it making too big a splash, kid. Hundreds of people get run down by hit and runners in front of witnesses. Even a pug can get himself mugged by a gang of wild kids. There are a lot of ways a man could die without a suspicion that it was a hit.”

Rocky laughed at Maury’s back, caused him to turn around.

“You’ve got a funny sense of humor,” Maury told him.

“So have you. You and your friends better start worrying if I get a runny nose. Anything happens to me, anything at all, and the newspapers get the inside story on this whole filthy racket. With names.” He watched the fat man’s face. “And I don’t mean a rag like *The Express*. I mean a paper like *The Dispatch* that wouldn’t be afraid to use it and that wouldn’t be in the market to sell it back.”

Maury frowned slightly, stuck the cigar between his teeth, started chewing on it pensively. “You could be bluffing. How much you know and how much you could prove is another story.”

“I said it would be going to a newspaper, not a handout rag. A newspaper that has reporters who know how to dig once they know what they’re digging for. Let something happen to me. When the roof falls in, you’ll know how much I know and how much they can prove.”

Maury continued to chew on the unlit cigar. “Exactly what is it you want me to do?”

“You’re my manager. I’m the hottest thing in the game. So, act like a manager and get me a crack at the title.”

“I just told you the champ’s manager—”

“And I just told you I want you to take it up with the boys that count. Not with a cardboard cutout.”

Maury sighed. He took the cigar from between his teeth, studied the wet end. He patted back a loose tendril of tobacco with the tip of his tongue. "And if they tell me to go to hell, which they probably will?"

"I have faith in you. You persuade them." Rocky winked at Maury. "After all, why should they want to help *The Dispatch* sell more papers? Especially when they're so friendly to *The Express*?"

Maury replaced the cigar in his mouth. Then, as if reaching a difficult decision, he walked over to the telephone. He lifted the receiver, dialed with quick flicks of a sausage-shaped forefinger. He turned his back on Rocky, started talking in a low, urgent tone.

Rocky used the time to fix himself a fresh drink. He usually didn't drink this early in the day and he invariably restricted himself to two. But this was an occasion. He saw in the telephone call complete capitulation by Maury. He was confident that Maury could persuade his principals to go along.

The glass was empty again when Maury dropped his receiver on its hook. He took his time turning around to face Rocky. Surprise was etched deeply on his face. Surprise mixed with relief.

"They aren't mad at you kid," he told him. "They were impressed by what they saw in the ring the other night."

"Never mind the snow job. Do I get the fight?"

Maury bobbed his head, disturbing the rolls of fat in his neck. "You get the title go. You fight Monty Page in three months. We sign the papers tomorrow."

"They had to buy it." Rocky almost jumped up and down in glee. "And with no strings."

"No strings."

"Meet the new champ, Maury. You just got yourself a title to take care of."

"Just to prove there's no hard feelings, there'll be a table for dinner at the Cuernavaca. On the house. To celebrate." Maury studied the relatively unmarked face of the fighter from under heavily veined eyelids. "Who knows? Maybe Ray Carter might have some dessert for you in the chorus line."

"Your friends really know how to treat an important property."

"I'm beginning to think you are an important property."

## Chapter 3

Johnny Liddell was leaning against the bar at Mike's Deadline Cafe with the ease born of long experience. He glanced up, studied his reflection in the backbar mirror. It did nothing to shake him out of his mood.

At the far end of the bar, a tired-looking blonde was working on a tireder businessman. Half a dozen commuters lined the rest of the bar having the "one for the road" that had to last them until they could reach the bar car on their train. There they'd manage to stock up enough to hold them over until the two martinis before dinner.

The telephone on the backbar jangled. Mike muttered under his breath, wiped his hands on his apron and flat-footed it over to the phone. He lifted the receiver to his ear, scowled at Liddell, shoved the phone at him.

"I'm going to have an extension put in for you and get you a listing in the phone book," he grumbled.

Liddell took the instrument, held it to his ear. "Yeah?"

"This is your office," Pinky's voice came across the wire. "You do have an office. Remember?"

Liddell glanced at his watch. "It's after 6. What're you doing there? You're supposed to leave at 5:30."

"We've got a lousy union," the redhead told him. "Besides, I was just about to leave at 5:30 when the phone rang. I've been trying to reach you ever since. I had the moronic idea you might have gone home or something."

Liddell lifted his glass to his lips, drained it. "Couldn't it wait until morning?"

"Not according to Rocky Nelson. He wants to talk to you tonight."

Liddell caught Mike's eye, motioned for a refill. "What's he want?"

"He didn't confide in me. He wants to talk to you tonight. It's important. That's what the man said."

"Leave a number where I can reach him?"

"Yeah. Longacre 7-6499. But he won't be there until midnight."

Liddell sighed softly, checked his watch. He still had five hours.

“He probably wants his hundred back. I hope Mike hasn’t gotten into it too deeply.” A sniff came over the wire. “I won’t keep you from your pleasure.”

“You’ve already spoiled the whole night for me. Couldn’t we say you couldn’t reach me?”

“He has to talk to you tonight, the man said.”

“I’ll probably have to go to work if I do call him.”

“That would be tragic,” Pinky commiserated with him. “Everybody knows that work is the curse of the drinking man. Watch out you don’t spill that refill.”

Liddell was reaching for the refill Mike was sliding across the bar to him, pulled his hand away as if it had been burned. He took the receiver from his ear, stared at it. “Refill? Whatever gave you the idea I was going to have a refill?”

“I read tea leaves.”

“Either that or you smoke them. I’ll call the Rock at midnight. Go on home and try not to dig me up any more business tonight.” He handed the receiver back to Mike, who hung it up. “Talk about Big Brother knowing everything you do. I’ve got Big Sister on my back.” He eyed the refill doubtfully, then picked it up, tilted it to his lips.

The Cuernavaca was a chromium-plated double store front in the East Sixties. It had a multicolored canopy that extended to the curb. Over the canopy, a neon spelling out the club’s name buzzed and spit, staining the rain-drenched canopy a murky red.

As the cab pulled up to the curb, a uniformed doorman hustled from the shelter of the entrance with an umbrella.

Rocky Nelson got out, followed by Maury Josephs, hustled across the sidewalk under the shelter of the umbrella.

Despite the weather, a line had already formed on the wrong side of the rope across the entrance to the dining room.

Maury waddled over to the man in the blue tuxedo who was supervising the rope. The maître d’ raised bored, languid eyes. He fingered a carnation

in the buttonhole of the jacket. “Sorry, sir—”

“I have a reservation made by Ray Carter,” Maury cut him off. “For Mr. Josephs and Rocky Nelson.”

The boredom drained out of the maître d’s face. He consulted his reservation list, bobbed his head energetically. “Of course, sir.” He unhooked the rope, motioned Maury through. Maury waved for Rocky to follow him. The maître d’ eyed Rocky with interest, ignored the muttering of the people standing on the line. He rehooked the rope, signaled to a captain.

“These gentlemen are Mr. Carter’s guests, Mario. They are to have Table 49.” He turned, bowed to Rocky. “Ringside. If there’s anything you want, please let your waiter know. I’ll let Mr. Carter know you’re in the house.”

Wordlessly, the captain turned, threaded his way through the closely set tables to one at ringside. He made a production of pulling out the chair for Maury, then helped Rocky into a chair.

On the floor, six tall showgirls were gliding around to the tune of “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody.”

Rocky leaned across the table. “He said to ask for anything I want. How about that redhead?”

The fat man smirked at him. “You’re picking yourself a lot of woman. Don’t forget you’re fighting for the title in three months.” He glanced over to the entrance to the room, saw the maître d’ pointing their table out to a heavy-set man. “Here comes Ray Carter. He runs the joint. Maybe he can fix it up for you.”

Ray Carter was heavy with the bulk of an athlete turned to fat. He had a strong jawline beginning to be hidden by his jowls. Compared to Maury, he was solid, firm. The high color of alcohol daubed his cheeks.

In his prime, he had been a pro football great. But a liking for high living, liquor and women had made his income from the game inadequate. He augmented that income by seeing to it that the right team won at the right time. Now, past his prime, he managed the Cuernavaca for the Organization.

He stopped at the table, towered over Maury, offered his hand to Rocky. Then he slid into a chair. “Hope everything is okay?”

“We just got here,” Rocky told him.

“We’re here long enough for the kid to see something he likes.”

Carter raised his eyebrows, turned, stared at the showgirls slinking around the floor. “Which one?”

“The redhead. The third one.”

“Her name’s Jackie. Jackie Day.” He looked back at the fighter. “Real choice. I’ll get word to her that she doesn’t have to do the midnight or late show. Just get her back by tomorrow night at this time.”

“He will. He goes into training tomorrow. He signs to fight Monty Page in three months,” Maury confided in a low voice.

Carter managed to look impressed. “A title go. I hope you make it.”

“Hock everything you’ve got and bet on me,” Rocky told him.

“I might do just that.” Carter nodded. “What time do you want to pick Jackie up?” He consulted his watch. “The dinner show will be over in about an hour.”

“In sixty-one minutes,” Rocky told him.

It was 12:03 when Johnny Liddell stepped into a phone booth and dialed the number his secretary had given him. It was picked up on the third ring.

The voice on the other end was the husky kind that played on his spine like a xylophone. “Who is it, please?”

“Is this Rocky Nelson’s phone?”

“Yes, it is. Who is this, please?”

Liddell pursed his lips, whistled soundlessly. “Johnny Liddell. I was asked to call Rocky at this number around midnight.”

“I’ll see if he can come to the phone,” the husky voice told him.

Liddell could have understood if he wasn’t able from the promise in the voice.

A few seconds later, Rocky’s voice came across the wire. “Johnny, I got home earlier than I expected. I didn’t know where to reach you. Can you drop by my place?”

“Won’t tomorrow do?”

“It’s got to be tonight. And, Johnny, you won’t be sorry. It’s worth looking even if you can’t touch.”



“You’re getting the phone damp drooling into it. Tomorrow—”

“Tomorrow it won’t be here and neither will I. I’ll tell you about it when you get here.” Liddell could hear a girl giggling at the other end. “I’m at the Chatham Arms on 48th Street. You know the place.”

“I know the place,” Liddell told him. “A riding academy.”

There was a click as the connection was broken at Rocky’s end.

Liddell replaced the receiver on its hook. He debated calling the fighter back and telling him that he wouldn’t be over.

He hated sex with an audience. Particularly if he had to be the audience.

## Chapter 4

Her voice had been sultry and throaty over the phone. When she opened the door in response to Johnny Liddell's knock, it was obvious that the voice belonged to the rest of her.

She was tall. Her red hair was piled on top of her head. She was wearing a man's bathrobe that was tied around an incredibly tiny waist and gaped open at the top revealing the deep cleft between fully rounded breasts.

She eyed him up and down with approval. "You must be Johnny Liddell," she greeted him in the throaty, almost breathless voice. Her eyes were green, slightly slanted. They hopscotched from the broad shoulders to the rugged planes of his face approvingly. She stood aside. "Come in. Rocky will be right out."

Liddell estimated her to be in her early twenties, but he would hardly describe her as a kid. When she was twelve, she was already going on twenty-six.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything?" Liddell tossed his hat at a chair. He looked around the room. It was decorated with all the built-in ugliness of a furnished apartment. "I wanted to wait until tomorrow—"

"I'm glad you didn't. I won't be here tomorrow and after all I've heard about you I wanted to meet you."

A door in the rear opened, Rocky Nelson walked out. He left the light on in the bedroom, revealing dingy gray linen on a disarranged bed. Cheap toiletry articles were lined up on the bureau. Beyond, a door led to the lavatory.

"Hey, Johnny!" the fighter greeted him. His voice was slightly slurred, he walked with the careful gait of a man who is determined not to stagger. "Thanks for coming." He walked over to the girl, slid his hand into the gaping neck of the gown. She wiggled and giggled.

Liddell sighed.

"Make us a drink, baby." He withdrew the hand, patted her on the buttock.

"You've already had a lot, Rock," she told him.

“I thrive on it. And I’m not talking about the liquor.” The fighter slapped her flank again. “We got a lot to celebrate.”

The redhead shrugged, her breasts performing interesting convolutions inside the robe. She turned, headed for an open bottle of Scotch on the coffee table. Standing next to it were two empties.

“Overdoing things, aren’t you, kid?” Liddell asked. “You can even overdo a good thing.”

“It’s good, all right,” Rocky leered. “But don’t begrudge me. I go in training tomorrow in Maine. No more French pastry for three months.”

Liddell raised his eyebrows. “Go in training?”

Rocky bobbed his head so violently, he almost lost his balance. “In three months I fight for the title. We sign tomorrow.”

The girl came back with a glass in each hand, gave one to each. Then she walked back to where the third glass stood on the coffee table, picked it up and sank down onto the couch. She seemed not to notice how much of her thigh was exposed by parting of the robe.

Liddell frowned. “A lot of things can happen in a training camp.” He sipped at his drink, glanced over to where the girl sat. “I’d like to talk to you about it.”

Rocky started to argue, squinted at the girl on the couch. “Go on inside and lay down, baby. You look tired.”

She got to her feet. “You sound like a broken record. ‘Lay down, baby.’ A girl could get bed sores just knowing you.” She took her drink into the bedroom with her.

“Now, tell me what this is all about,” Liddell asked.

“I just told you. I laid it on the line to Maury Josephs. Either get me the fight or I blow the whistle.”

Liddell whistled soundlessly. “You must want that fight awful bad to try leaning on the kind of guys he works for.”

Rocky swayed slightly. “I wanted it that bad. And I got it.” He grinned triumphantly.

“I don’t see those guys backing down.” Liddell caught Rocky by the elbow, led him to the couch, sat him down.

“Turn off some of those overhead lights. This joint looks better in the dark,” Rocky grunted. He waited until Liddell had snapped the wall switch, leaving only a lamp that spilled yellow light over a chair near the window. “Those guys backed down just like I knew they would. Know why? Because they know that with me they got a much bigger thing than with that cheese champ.” He hit his chest with the side of his hand. “Me, Rocky Nelson, I’ll make them more dough than he ever could. And I’ll be cutting myself a piece of the action, too.” He illustrated the shabby room with a swing of his arm. “No more flophouses like this for Rocky. From now on, it’s a first-class ride all the way.”

Liddell pulled the chair close to the couch. “You told them about the envelope. Right?”

The fighter bobbed his head.

“You think that convinced them?”

Rocky grinned shrewdly, wrinkled his nose. “I’m their boy now. Nothing’s too good for the Rock.” He indicated the closed bedroom door. “They gave her the night off to celebrate with me. Just get her back in time for tomorrow night’s show, they tell me.” He winked. “You think they’d do that if they were mad at me?”

Liddell sat in the chair, his legs extended to their full length in front of him. “It doesn’t sound kosher to me, Rocky. Those boys don’t kiss and make up that easy.”

“They don’t buck the odds, either.” Rocky took a swallow from his glass, coughed. “Dead, I’m not worth a dime to them. Alive, I’m worth my weight in gold. You think they’d go to the trouble of setting up a championship fight if I wasn’t going to be around to fight?”

“Then you won’t be needing the envelope in my safe. Is that what you wanted to tell me?”

“No. I wanted to tell you I got the fight. Keep the envelope.”

“You’re sure, but not that sure. That it?”

“Coppering my bet. Laying off some of the action. Like they do. Besides, it don’t cost me more. It don’t put you out none.” He winked again. “You think I don’t know about how accidents can happen? You watch the papers. You read that Rocky Nelson has any kind of an accident, you turn that envelope over to *The Dispatch*. When they see what they’ve got in their hand, they’ll know what to do with it.” He eyed Liddell with drunken

intensity. “Make sure it’s *The Dispatch*, not *The Express*. They’d sell it back to the boys.”

Liddell nodded. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Good.” Rocky indicated the bedroom door. “What do you think of the French pastry?”

“You’ve already started to travel first class,” Liddell nodded.

Rocky took a deep swallow from his glass. “Maybe you baby sit, too? While I’m gone maybe you’d like to—”

Liddell grinned, shook his head. “I don’t like cold turkey.”

“Maybe you’re afraid you couldn’t fill the Rock’s shoes. At that, you’d have to have awful big feet.”

“Let me worry about my shortcomings.”

“It’d be a shame to let all that good material go to waste.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Liddell told him. “From what I’ve seen of it, I don’t think there’s any danger of it blue moulding.”

Rocky frowned. “Don’t get her wrong. She’s no hooker. She’s a show girl at the Cuernavaca. You know the joint?”

Liddell nodded.

“Real classy,” Rocky told him. “Jackie—that’s her name. Jackie Day.” He managed to get the glass to his lips, tilted his head back. Some of the Scotch dribbled from the corner of his mouth. “She’s real class. But the boys know now that nothing’s too good for the champ.” He squinted at his watch. “That reminds me, morning comes awful soon. You know?”

Liddell drained his glass, set it down on the coffee table. “And that ain’t all,” he nodded. “But if anything does happen, I’ll see to it that she goes into mourning.”

“That ain’t the kind of morning I’m talking about,” Rocky told him. “Nothing’s going to happen to me. Not unless it happens tonight. And I don’t know of a better way to die.”

## Chapter 5

On the night of the fight, the arena was stifling. A thick, blue-gray cloud of smoke swirled lazily in the triangle of light spilling down into the ring from the shaded overhead light. The capacity crowd was stirring restlessly. The preliminaries had been disappointing, but now there was a low undercurrent of excitement in anticipation of the start of the main go.

Rocky Nelson, the challenger, was already in his corner doing a ritual dance. Long, smooth muscles rippled under the sheen of his skin as he worked his arms.

Johnny Liddell sat in a ringside seat behind the press row, adding to the manmade fog with a cigarette that dangled from the end of his lips. He watched Rocky skipping around, limbering up. The way things were working out, it looked as if the kid had actually stood up to the mob and made them back down. During the past few months, reports from the two training camps indicated that the champ had slowed down to a walk while the challenger was sharper than ever. Going into the ring, consensus was that the brash kid would dance the champ to the point of exhaustion, then finish him off by the seventh. At ring time, Rocky Nelson was odds on favorite to walk out as the new champion.

There was a sudden roar from the crowd as the champion appeared at the head of the ramp leading from the dressing rooms. He was preceded by a uniformed cop and two handlers. His robe was draped over his shoulders. He walked down the aisle leading toward the ring, nodding apathetically to the cheering crowd on either side. He looked bored by the whole proceedings.

Once the introductions were out of the way, the referee called both men to the center of the ring. The noise from the crowd died away. It was as though everyone was holding his breath while the third man intoned his instructions to the fighters. Then, they were back in their corners. The men in the corners pulled the stools out of the ring, shoved the fighters' mouthpieces into place, climbed through the ropes.

The bell rang, and the fight was on.

Monty Page, the champion, shuffled into the center of the ring. The fleet-footed Rocky Nelson danced out to meet him, kept circling the heavier

man, tormenting him with sharp flicks to the face. Page shuffled after him, flat-footed, jaw tucked behind his left shoulder. Clumsily, he tried to trap Rocky against the ropes or in a corner, only to have the faster man dance away from him.

For the first two minutes of the round, the champion looked pathetic. By the time his punch traveled to where he sent it, the challenger was out of range.

It was shortly after the two-minute mark that Johnny Liddell noticed it. Rocky's footwork was slowing down. Page nailed him in a neutral corner and sent a barrage of rights and lefts to his midsection. Rocky seemed unable to escape from the punishment, covered his body with folded arms.

The crowd, smelling blood and aware the younger man was in trouble, started screaming.

The champ threw a left to the face, drew Rocky's arms upward. His midsection was unprotected for a second. That's all it took. The champion buried a right almost to the laces just under the rib cage. Rocky's eyes bulged, his hands dropped to his sides, he stood helpless while the older man kept throwing leather into his body.

The crowd was on its feet, roaring out its blood lust. Liddell jumped to his feet, added his voice to the roar, urging Rocky to back-pedal. He watched while Referee Joe Black pushed Monty Page toward a neutral corner as Rocky buckled and sank to the canvas, his knees folded up to his chest.

As soon as the champion was in the neutral corner, Referee Joe Black started the count. At the count of four, he broke off, leaned over the fallen man, studied him from close. He looked over into Rocky's corner, signaled his seconds into the ring. Then the referee straightened up, motioned for the overhead microphone to be lowered. There was an uneasy rumbling from the crowd as he raised his hand for silence.

"Will Dr. Kenny please come to Rocky Nelson's corner?" the referee's voice boomed into all corners of the arena.

The fallen man's seconds caught him under the arms and by the feet and carried his inert form to his corner. They sat him on his stool. His head rolled uncontrollably, his arms and legs spilled onto the floor. Whitey Bloom, his trainer, was having difficulty holding him upright on the stool as a short, paunchy man in a wild sports jacket and green slacks climbed

through the ropes. The small group in the corner surrounded the newcomer as he checked Rocky's wrist, rolled back his eyelids.

The doctor grimaced, glanced up into Whitey's worried face. "Get him back to his dressing room. Keep everybody out. Everybody."

The trainer wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Is he hurt bad, Doc?" he wanted to know.

"He's not hurting at all," the doctor told him grimly. "He's dead."

The corridor outside Rocky Nelson's dressing room was clogged with people. Prelim fighters, still wearing plaster patches over battered noses and thickened eyebrows, exchanged theories with sports writers and other dressing-room regulars. Special cops were on the inclined ramp leading up to the ring area, holding back hundreds of curious fans.

The fighters and the sports writers were still exchanging theories as to exactly what happened when special cops cleared a path to the dressing-room door. What had happened became painfully clear when two men from the medical examiner's office rolled a wheeled stretcher through the path being cleared by the special cops.

Inside, Whitey Bloom stared at the inert form on the rubbing table with stricken eyes. The fighter lay on his back, his arms dangling over the side of the table.

Dr. Phil Kenny stood against the discolored plaster wall near the shower, raking his fingers through his hair. He kept shaking his head. "I checked him over myself this afternoon. He was never in better shape," he muttered to Maury Josephs, Rocky's manager of record.

Maury swabbed at his streaming jowls with a wadded handkerchief. "You never know in this racket," he grunted. "Maybe he hit his head when he went down."

The doctor shook his head. "He never hit his head at all. He went down like somebody let the air out of him." He watched glumly as the men from the m.e.'s office lifted the fighter from the rubbing table onto the stretcher. They covered him with a blanket, strapped him on. "Just like somebody let the air out of him," he repeated.

The two men rolled the stretcher to the door, disappeared through into the corridor.



The crowd outside parted silently, made a path for the stretcher. It rolled past a poster on the wall announcing the title fight. In the lower half of the poster, a confident, grinning Rocky Nelson was crouched in his fighting stance. Above him, a tired-looking champion extended his left, covered his chin with his right in a familiar pose.

Inside the champion's dressing room, Ben Siegel was kneading Monty Page's shoulders as he sat on the side of the rubbing table, his feet hanging over the side.

"Geez, Ben," Page shook his head. "I hit plenty of guys harder than that and they came back to go the route."

The trainer shrugged. "Just goes to show he was an over-rated bum," he grunted. "They got no right putting a prelim boy up against the champ. What could they expect?"

The champion considered for a moment, pursed battered lips. "On the record he was no bum. Thirty wins, twenty-six knockouts." He licked at his lips. "I expected real trouble from this one, Ben. The old legs ain't what they were."

The other man continued to knead the fighter's shoulders. "You got a couple of more big ones in you, Monty. Then we find us a restaurant you can front and the boys see to it that you do all right." He nodded toward the water bucket. "You feel like washing your mouth out?"

Page nodded wearily.

The trainer brought an unlabeled bottle out of the bucket, handed it to the man on the rubbing table.

The champion lifted it to his lips, took a deep swallow. "Good thing they don't smell the water bottle." He twisted his lips in a grin. "I'd never be able to go the distance without it."

Ben took the bottle from the fighter's still bandaged hands. "Vodka don't smell." He held the bottle up. "To the champ." He took a deep swig out of the bottle.

There was a hammering at the door. "The press." The trainer twisted his lips in distaste. "Guess you might as well see them. They'll hang around until you do."

Monty Page bobbed his head. "Let them in."

## Chapter 6

Johnny Liddell stood in the aisle, watched the crowd milling about the entrance to the ramp. He was about to leave when he detected new signs of excitement in the crowd. He walked over, joined a small group of fans.

“What’s up?” he wanted to know.

One of the men turned. “The guys from the meat wagon are in Rocky’s dressing room. The kid’s dead.” He sounded as if he couldn’t believe his own words.

Liddell stared at him. “Dead?”

“He better be,” the man told him. “They’re going to do an autopsy on him right away.” He shook his head. “And I thought the champ was all punched out.”

Liddell dropped his cigarette to the concrete floor to join a dozen or more other flattened butts, ground it out with the sole of his shoe.

He left the small group of fans, headed for the exit to the street. Outside the arena, the word was already out that there had been a tragedy. Fans were clotted around the newsstand listening to the report of one who had seen the morgue wagon pull up to the back of the building. Some of the more morbid drifted away to watch the body being removed.

Liddell waved down a cruising cab, gave the address of his 42nd Street office. The cabby swung around in his seat, eyed Liddell incuriously.

“Fight over already?” he wanted to know.

Liddell bobbed his head. “First round.”

The cabby grunted, pulled the toothpick from between his teeth, glanced at the macerated end, tossed it out the window. “Figured. That cheese champ’s been done for years. I figured Rocky would—”

“Rocky’s dead,” Liddell cut him off. “He collapsed in the first round.”

The cabby’s jaw dropped. “Dead? I—”

“I don’t know anything more than that,” Liddell told him. “I’m in a hurry to get to my office. Okay if you get the details from the morning papers?”

The cabby scowled, swung around in his seat.

Liddell winced as the cab hurtled away from the curb, melted into the southbound traffic. Behind it there was a cacophony of screeching brakes and shouted imprecations. The driver gave no sign that he heard them.

“You don’t want conversation, all you got to do is say so,” he told Liddell’s reflection in the rearview mirror. “I can keep quiet, too, you know.”

He proved it for the rest of the ride by lapsing into a sulky silence. When he pulled up in front of Liddell’s building, he refused to be mollified even by the dollar tip Johnny pushed through the window at him. He left Liddell on the sidewalk, swung into an illegal U-turn and headed back toward the arena for details.

Liddell crossed the sidewalk, shouldered through the revolving doors and headed for the bank of elevators. He rode a night car to his floor, walked down the corridor to his office.

Cautiously, he tried the knob, wasn’t too surprised to find that the door was unlocked. He swore under his breath. He hadn’t thought it necessary to wear a gun to the fight and whoever had unlocked the door could be inside waiting for him.

He pushed the door open, stepped out of any possible line of fire from within. The outside office was in complete darkness. Liddell took a deep breath, slipped into the office and pulled the door shut behind him. He flattened himself against the wall and waited.

The darkness inside the office was so complete, Liddell had the illusion that he could reach out and feel it. He strained his eyes against it, listened for any sound that would betray the presence of somebody waiting for him. There was no sound but that of heavy breathing. His own.

Finally, he crossed the office to the railing that marked off the area where Pinky’s desk was set. He ran his fingers along it until he located the catch, opened the gate. He circled the office, taking care not to silhouette himself in the doorway of the inner office as a target for anyone hiding inside.

After a second, satisfied that no one was in the private office, he stepped in, snapped the overhead light switch, spilling yellow brilliance into it.

The room was empty, but there was ample evidence that there had been visitors. Papers from the tray on his desk were scattered over the carpet, the

top drawer had been forced open, the wood over the lock splintered.

Liddell swore silently, crossed to the picture that concealed the wall safe. He swung it aside, swore even more fervently. His visitors had found it after their search of the desk turned up nothing. The tumblers had been worked over with a cold chisel that had left deep scars in the metal face of the safe. The door opened to his touch.

Even though he knew without looking that Rocky's envelope would be gone, he went through the motions of checking the papers the visitors didn't want. The envelope was gone.

Liddell walked back to his desk, ran his finger over the damaged portion of the drawer, then sank into his desk chair. He pulled open the bottom drawer, was relieved to find that the half bottle of Scotch was still intact. He brought it out along with a glass and spilled three fingers from it. For a moment, he wondered whether or not it might have been tampered with, decided a good drink would be worth the risk of a mickey. He took a mouthful of the liquor held it for a moment before swallowing to savor the flavor.

Whoever had recovered Rocky's envelope had picked his time well. He held his glass up, admired the play of the light in the depths of the liquid. He wondered idly how long they had known the contents of the envelope were in his safe.

Rocky Nelson had been positive that he hadn't been tailed the night he delivered the envelope. They had virtually no contact since.

He swirled the liquor around the glass. The only time he had even spoken to the kid had been the night before he went into training.

Suddenly it hit him.

The girl who had been in Rocky's apartment that night could link him with the fighter. Whoever had sent her must have reasoned that the kid would tell the good news to someone very close to him, someone he trusted enough to hold the envelope for him.

Liddell swung his chair around, stared out over the lighted paths of Bryant Park.

The girl had been in the bedroom when they discussed the dangers of a training camp and when the kid had urged Liddell to hold onto the material. There was nothing to keep her from listening at the door. And the walls in a fleabag like the Chatham Arms figured to be tissue thin.

He drained his glass, set it down. He pulled himself up from his desk chair, headed across the office to a small cabinet. He unlocked it with a key from his chain, was glad to see that his small armory was untouched. Obviously, the visitors had come for one purpose and having found what they wanted, had left immediately.

Liddell brought out a shoulder harness and a .45. He checked the shells in the magazine, popped out the slug in the chamber, examined them, satisfied himself they hadn't been tampered with. It wasn't completely unknown that the lead nose would be removed from the shell in the chamber and some in the magazine to give a possible antagonist a three-or four-shot advantage.

He shucked his jacket, shrugged into the holster, stuck the .45 in the hammock. Then he covered it with his jacket.

His watch showed the time to be 10:50. The supper show at the Cuernavaca would be going on at 11:30. He hadn't been there in months. It seemed like a particularly appropriate time to renew acquaintance—with the place itself and with the showgirl who so fortuitously had the night off the day the kid found out he was going to get a shot at the title.

A hatchick wearing the briefest possible shorts and a loose peasant blouse full of goodies was behind the cubicle in the hat concession when Johnny Liddell walked into the Cuernavaca lobby. He handed her his hat, waited to enjoy the effect on the skimpy shorts and the peasant blouse when she stretched to deposit it on the top shelf.

Then he walked over to where the maître d' was supervising the seating from a line on the wrong side of the plush rope across the entrance to the main room. The maître d' raised languid, bored eyes as Liddell stepped up to him. Recognition washed some of the boredom out of his expression.

"Mr. Liddell. Long time no see." He unhooked the rope, motioned Johnny through.

"Looks like a good crowd this early, Mario." Liddell stood inside the rope, his eyes hopscotching around the room.

Mario shrugged narrow shoulders. "You heard about the fight?"

Liddell nodded.

"So it ends in the first," Mario grunted. "Nobody wants to go home at 10:30, 11 o'clock. Come around tomorrow night. You maybe go snow-blind

from the tablecloths.” He caught the attention of a captain, waved him down. The captain stepped up to the headwaiter’s desk. “This is Mr. Liddell. Make sure he gets a nice table.”

The captain failed to be impressed. He nodded, waited while Johnny covered the damp hand Mario extended to him with a firm grip. When he took his hand back, the folded bill that had been in it had changed hands.

Wordlessly, the captain turned, threaded his way through the closely set tables, selected one at ringside. Liddell again went through the ritual of palming a bill, settled down at the table.

A waiter materialized; he ordered a Scotch and settled back. He was on his second drink when the house lights went down.

On the floor, the band blared out an introductory chord and the spotlight knifed through the gloom to pick up the wasp-waisted figure of the master of ceremonies. He was tall, thin; his teeth were too white when he smiled and his hair looked as if it had been waved.

He rubbed his hands, *à la* Jack Benny, seemed to be counting the house. Then he launched into a long, topical routine that borrowed generously from Jackie Berman and Shelley Sahl with a soupçon of Mort Mason. The result was a sick take-off on sick comics. He was unperturbed by the audience’s lack of enthusiastic response, closed with a one-sided telephone bit that hammered home double entendres with the subtlety of a sledge hammer.

He reluctantly gave up the spotlight, headed for the stage exit next to the bandstand, giving way to a line of girls in spangled brassieres and satin pants. They scampered around the dance floor, bare legs flashing, bare stomachs undulating. While the ponies danced with more enthusiasm than talent, a line of tall show girls walked out onto the floor. They strutted around with a motion that did interesting things to their superstructures. The girl he had last seen in Rocky Nelson’s apartment was the third showgirl in the line. When the production number was over, the ponies ran off the floor, the showgirls posed in a tableau in front of the bandstand.

Liddell signaled to his waiter. “I want to get a message back to one of the girls. Can you handle it for me?”

The waiter shook his head dubiously. “Better peddle your love life someplace else, Mac. The boss don’t like for anybody to bother the help.”

“I’m not bothering anybody. I’m an old friend. I just want to say hello.” He brought a roll of bills from his pocket, separated a five from it, returned

the rest to his pocket. “She’d be awful disappointed if I didn’t let her know I was in.”

The waiter seemed to be having difficulty dragging his eyes away from the five. “What’s this old friend’s name?”

“Jackie Day.”

The waiter turned, watched as the showgirls filed off the floor. “The redhead, huh?” He shook his head again. “I don’t know, mister. You may be an old friend, but if you’re trying to pull something you won’t get to be much older.”

Liddell shrugged. “Well, if you can’t do it—” He started to return the bill to his pocket.

“I didn’t say I couldn’t do it,” the waiter told him hastily. “I just said the boss ain’t going to like it if you’re just on the make.” He reached over, lifted the bill from between Liddell’s fingers. “What’s the message?”

“Tell her Johnny Liddell is at ringside. That he’d like her to come out front and have a drink with him.”

“Johnny Liddell,” the waiter repeated the name. “She knows who Johnny Liddell is. Right?” When Liddell nodded, the look of indecision was back on the waiter’s face. “That’s another thing the boss don’t like. The help mixing with the customers.”

“He don’t have to worry. I had my rabies shots.”

The waiter shuffled off, Liddell turned his attention back to the floor, where a dance duo was going through the motions of an adagio with a reasonable amount of grace and much flashing of eyes and teeth. They took three bows, one of them legitimate.

Liddell looked up as the waiter stopped at the table with the refill. “I gave her your message,” he said in a low voice. “If I was in your shoes, mister, I’d get out of here. She picked up the phone and called the boss’ office. Like I said—”

“I know, I know. The boss doesn’t like people annoying the help.” Liddell pushed back the chair and stood up. “I might as well get hung for a sheep as for a lamb. Where’s the backstage entrance?”

The waiter hesitated, shrugged. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He grinned glumly at Liddell. “Mind paying your tab now? Just in case you’re not coming back this way.”

Liddell dropped two fives on the table, waited.

The waiter picked the bills up, smoothed them. “You hardly ever get a big tipper these days. You finally latch onto one and he has a death wish,” he complained. He turned his head. “See that fire exit on the far side of the house? There’s an unmarked door right next to it. That’s how you go backstage.”

Liddell bobbed his head, threaded his way through the tables toward the dim red light that marked the fire exit. There was no one to interfere with his progress. He reached it, found the door next to the exit unlocked.

Stepping through the door to backstage was like stepping into a different world. The tinsel and glamor of the Cuernavaca frontside weren’t duplicated backstage. There was a long corridor with an open door that spilled bright light. The air was heavy with an odor compounded of equal parts of perspiration and perfume.

Liddell headed down the corridor to the open door, stopped and looked in. The showgirls were seated repairing their makeup in front of mirrors circled with bare bulbs. They were bare to the waist in preparation for a Folies Bergère-type finale.

The girl nearest him wasted an incurious glance on him, went back to rousing her nipples from a delicate pink to a bright red.

Liddell looked down the line, realized there were only five showgirls in the room. Jackie Day was missing.

He started to ask the girl on the end, broke off when he felt the snout of a gun jammed into his back.

“Sightseeing?” a heavy voice behind him wanted to know.

“Looking for a friend,” Liddell told him over his shoulder. “Only she seems to be among the missing.”

“Let’s go tell it to the boss. He don’t like Peeping Toms bothering the talent.” The pressure of the gun barrel lessened as the other man stepped back, permitted Liddell to turn.

The man held a snub-nosed .38 as comfortably as if it were part of his hand. It was aimed at a spot roughly an inch above Liddell’s belt buckle. Behind them, the showgirls continued to apply body makeup, gave no signs that they saw the gun in the man’s hand.



The man was tall, thin, with wavy blond hair that was beginning to recede at the temples. He affected a heavy gold chain on the gun hand, he had the sallow complexion of a man who rarely saw the sun. There was a faint discoloration under his eyes, his lips were full and wet. He eyed Liddell coldly, nodded his head toward the far end of the corridor. "I'll be right behind you, sport." He noted the bulge under Liddell's right lapel. "Let's have the iron. And when you take it out, just use two fingers. Get fancy and you won't be around to find out how it turns out."

Liddell reached under his jacket, saw the blond man's knuckle whiten on the trigger. He lifted the .45 out of its harness with thumb and forefinger, held it toward the other man.

The gunman took the .45 from between Liddell's fingers, hefted it on the palm of his hand. "That's a lot of iron to go dear hunting with." He jerked his head in the direction of the girls in the dressing room. "There's no open season on those dears. They're all spoken for." He tucked the .45 in his waistband, indicated for Liddell to move on with a wave of the .38.

Liddell led the way down the corridor to a flight of metal steps leading to an upper floor. He started up the steps, the man with the gun in his wake. At the head of the steps he came to a closed door.

Liddell turned the knob, pushed the door open. He stepped through, the blond man following. With all his strength, Liddell slammed the heavy door behind him. He heard the yowl of pain as the door hit the gunman, sent him staggering backward. There was a brief scream, then the bumping sound of a body thudding its way down the stairs.

Liddell waited a second, then opened the door.

The blond man looked like a bundle of rags spilled at the bottom of the metal stairs. He was sprawled across the three bottom steps, his neck twisted at a crazy, impossible angle.

Liddell closed the door behind him, descended to the bottom of the staircase. The man on the steps looked up at him with unseeing eyes.

Johnny looked down the corridor in the direction of the showgirls' dressing room. The five girls were disappearing through the door to the stage. None of them had even glanced in his direction.

He debated the advisability of confronting the man who was so sensitive about his help being annoyed, lost the decision.

He dug under the dead man's jacket, tugged his .45 out of his waistband, replaced it in its hammock. Then he straightened up, walked toward the end of the corridor where he had entered. At the door to the front side of the club, he opened it a crack and peered out. On the floor the showgirls were parading their nakedness, commanding the attention of customers and help alike.

Liddell pushed the door open wide enough to slip through and headed for the checkroom. He ransomed his hat from the girl in the tight shorts and well-stacked peasant blouse and walked out into the street.

## Chapter 7

In Chicago, the Windy City, there was no wind that night. The humidity had changed it into one huge armpit.

Sid Weiss sat soaking up the air conditioning in the 41 Club on top of the United Bank of America Building. He was paying no attention to the striking, dark-haired girl who sat across from him. He was staring moodily across town to the twin towers of Marina City.

In the distance, the famous Lindbergh Light blinked from the top of the Palmolive Building. Once it had served as a beacon for the boats on the lake, but now it is surrounded by high-rise apartments and can't be seen from the lake. The government still pays \$48,000 a year rent for it in spite of the fact that the only place it can be seen is from the windows of the apartment buildings nearby.

The girl sitting across the table from him stirred irritably. "If all you wanted was a look at the scenery, I could have gone out with somebody who liked my kind of scenery," she told him petulantly.

Sid Weiss dragged his attention away from the view of the city. He eyed the girl coldly. "Shut up!" he snapped. "I'm thinking."

He had been watching the fight on the club's television an hour before. He saw the collapse of the contender, saw him being carried out of the ring. A half hour later, a waiter rushed over to tell him that a special newscast had announced that Rocky Nelson was dead.

Mitch Corday had advised the boys to take all they could get on a one-round kayo by the champ. The odds against Rocky being knocked out in one round were astronomical and the bets had been carefully placed all over the country. The organization's investment in Rocky Nelson, including the losses on the Taub fight, had been paid off many times over.

When he saw the challenger fold in one round, Weiss had taken for granted that Mitch had persuaded the kid to play ball. But Mitch had promised Rocky would be paid off for his double cross and with no heat. The kid was dead and no one could point a finger at the organization. Sid Weiss was satisfied that Mitch had engineered a hit in front of an arena full of people and a nation of viewers. What had him wondering was how.

The waiter approached the table with a telephone, bent down to plug it in. “We have your call to New York, Mr. Weiss,” he told him.

Sid nodded, scowled at the girl across the table. “Go comb your hair or something,” he told her.

There was a brief flash of resentment in the girl’s eyes. She refrained from an answer, patted the thick, glistening black coils that were caught up in a knot at the nape of her neck and rose to her feet. Weiss watched the supple figure as it moved across the room in the direction of the restrooms. Then he lifted the receiver off its hook.

“Mitch? Sid Weiss.”

“Hear the news?” Corday’s voice came across the wire. “We had a real tragedy here tonight. The kid, Rocky Nelson, got belted out for good by the champ.”

“Too bad,” Weiss grunted. “He looked like he was going places. He was a real ambitious kid, I hear.” He sucked at his teeth. “How did it happen?”

There was a brief pause from the other end. “Guys I’ve been talking to think it must have been an aneurism. You know, a weak spot in the arteries. Some guys have it from birth, then all of a sudden it pops.”

“That what the coroner’s going to say?” Weiss asked cautiously.

“What else? The commission doc gave the kid an okay this afternoon. You could see he was full of vinegar in the beginning of the round. The champ slowed him down and worked him over in the midsection. Guess that’s what did it.”

Weiss considered for a minute. “How about Maury Josephs? He must feel pretty bad about it.”

“You still don’t like the guy, do you?”

Weiss shrugged. “I don’t trust him,” he said simply. “What about that story the kid was all set to write?”

“I just finished reading it. I burned it.”

For the first time during the conversation, Sid Weiss smiled. “Good. Getting back to Maury—”

“Yeah?”

“I hope he don’t feel bad enough about what happened to the kid to do anything desperate. You know?”

“Why should he?”

“Who knows? I’d figure there’s only one way to be real sure.”

Corday was silent for a moment. “That shouldn’t be necessary,” he said finally.

Weiss shrugged. “It’s a nice clean package. We ought to keep it that way. I never trusted Maury. Now I got real reason to worry about him. You have, too. Larry Gatti and Lew Merton might get awful narrow-minded if something went wrong now.”

“I’ll take care of Maury,” Mitch told him. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe he is blaming himself for what happened to the kid.”

Across the room, the dark-haired girl had left the powder room and was swivel-hipping her way back to the table.

“You planning to have a talk with Gatti and Merton?” Weiss wanted to know.

“I have the calls in,” Corday assured him.

Weiss watched the girl as she approached. 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. Weiss noticed that she bounced them just a trifle more than was necessary, but he heartily approved of the effect.

“I’ve got some unfinished business,” he told the mouthpiece. “I’ll be in touch tomorrow.”

The girl stopped at the table. Her full lips were set in a pout.

“Don’t sit down, baby,” Weiss told her. “We’ll have a nightcap at the Pump Room, see who’s around.” He grinned lewdly. “Then you can take me on a guided tour of that scenery you were talking about.”

Ray Carter stood at the foot of the stairs of the metal staircase that ran from backstage to the second floor of the Cuernavaca where his office was located. He stood looking at the body of the dead man, then he knelt alongside it. He studied the half-opened eyes, got to his feet, brushed off his knee.

“You found him just like this?” he asked a short, squat man standing beside the body.

Mendy Carroll was short, made up in breadth what he lacked in height. His perfectly round, bald head was set on a thick neck and trunk that were out of proportion to the rest of his body. His legs were short, noticeably bowed; his eyes, cold and of a peculiarly washed out blue color. "I didn't touch him. Looks like he fell down the stairs and broke his neck."

"I didn't think he died of old age," Carter growled. "Get him up into the office before the girls finish that number." He watched while the short man leaned down, lifted the dead man effortlessly, carried him up the stairs. On the landing, he waited until Carter opened the door, walked toward the manager's office.

Inside the office, he laid the blond man on a worn leather couch. Carter followed him in, turned the key in the door. He walked over to the couch, stood, legs apart, balled fists on his hips and stared down at the dead man.

"Now what do we do?" Mendy wanted to know.

"His car's parked down back. Take him out the back way and put him in it until I decide how to handle this. He sure shouldn't be found here," Carter told him.

The short man bobbed his head. He reached down, picked up the dead man, carried him to a door set in the rear of the office. Carter tugged the door open, held it as Mendy carried his burden through. The dead man's arms swung with the motion, his head hung at an impossible angle.

When he closed the door behind them, Carter walked to his desk, reached for the telephone, dialed Mitch Corday's number. He drummed on the edge of the desk while the phone rang on the other end. It was picked up on the fourth ring.

"Corday here." Corday's smooth voice came across the wire.

"Ray Carter, Mitch."

"You must be wired in right. I was going to call you. I have a little chore your boy Willie can handle for us."

"Willie?" Carter grunted gloomily. "That's what I'm calling you about. Willie's dead. He fell down the backstage stairs and broke his neck." He could hear the sharp intake of breath across the wire. "I sent him back to take Jackie Day home. We got word that Liddell was in the house wanting to see her. I didn't want him to get to her so I told her to skip the last show."

"That wouldn't do much good. So he misses her at the club, he'll find out where she lives. He must have figured out she's the one who found out

where the envelope was. We'd better get her out of town."

"Maybe Lew Merton could find something for her on the Coast. She's got the hots to break into the movies."

"We'll think of something. I'll talk to Lew about it. Now, what are we going to do about Willie?"

Carter shook his head. "I haven't figured it out yet. I had Mendy carry him down to his car. I figure wherever he's found it shouldn't be here."

"Before you do anything, maybe you'd better drop over here. We'd better talk this thing out."

There was a click as the connection was broken on the other end. Carter stared bleakly at the mouthpiece, dropped the receiver on its hook. He dumped a cigarette out of the pack on his desk, wet the end with the tip of his tongue, stuck it between his lips. The lighted match was halfway to his lips when the knock came on the door.

"Come in." He held the match to the cigarette, drew a mouth full of smoke.

Mendy Carroll walked in, closed the door behind him. "He's in the back seat of his car," he told the man behind the desk. "Want I should drop him someplace?"

"No." Carter blew a feathery stream of smoke at the ceiling. "I want you to pull my car out of the garage and bring it around back. Wait for me there." When the short man started for the rear door, "Go down the other way. Tell Jackie Day I want to see her up here." He watched Mendy reverse his direction. "And try not to fall down the stairs on the way."

Carter was taking his last drag on the butt when Jackie Day walked into the office. She was still wearing a dressing gown that was doing a halfhearted job of retaining the magnificence of her balcony. The red hair was piled on top of her head, she had cold-creamed the stage makeup off.

"Mendy said you wanted to see me, Mr. Carter?" she asked.

"Yeah, Jackie." Carter leaned back in his chair, studied the lushness of her body. "I wanted to tell you that I have to go out for an hour or so, but that while I'm gone you shouldn't leave the place. Liddell may be watching your apartment. You can stay in here until I get back."

"Sooner or later I've got to go home," she told him. "I can't stay here forever."

“Maybe you won’t have to. Ever think of going into the movies?”

“That’s all I’ve ever thought of.”

Carter bobbed his head. “When I get back, we’ll talk about it. We have some real good connections on the Coast. In the meantime, make yourself at home. I’ll get back as soon as I can.”

Jackie smoothed the robe over the roundness of her thighs with the flat of her hand. “I’ll be waiting,” she told him.



## Chapter 8

It had begun to rain in earnest. Eighth Avenue was a kaleidoscope of reflected tail lights and neons. The tires of the cab made a sticky sound as it pulled to a stop in front of the Arena Cafe.

Johnny Liddell pushed a bill through the partition to the cabby, waved away the change and stepped out onto the sidewalk. Down the avenue, the pale yellow street lights glared down at the rain-blackened pavement. The windows of the Arena Cafe glowed and it hummed with activity.

Liddell walked into the barroom, stood in the doorway and looked around. Most of the tables were filled, drinkers were standing elbow to elbow lining the bar that ran the full length of the room. The place hummed with conversation.

At a table in the corner, Liddell spotted the bespectacled figure of Tom Farrell, a feature writer for *The Dispatch*. He was leaning across the table talking to a thin man in a brown and black houndstooth sports jacket.

Liddell threaded his way through the tables toward the corner. The occupants of many of the tables were familiar figures to Liddell—some from the sports pages, some from their appearances in the ring, some from his occasional visits to the gym to watch the hopefuls work out. The Arena Cafe was the regular gathering place for the fight fraternity after every big fight. The has-beens, the hopefuls and the never-was gathered there to dissect and improve upon the night's ring performances.

Tonight, the buzz of conversation seemed shriller than on other fight nights. The battered features of many of the table sitters were twisted into expressions of disbelief and wonder. Many of them had sparred with one or the other of the fighters on tonight's card. None of them expected to be sitting in on this kind of a post mortem.

Liddell stopped at the newspaperman's table. Farrell broke off his conversation, looked up. The scowl on his face faded when he recognized Liddell. "Hi, Johnny. See the fight?"

Liddell nodded.

"Sit down." The reporter indicated a vacant chair. "You know Charley Michaels?"

The man in the houndstooth jacket eyed Liddell hostilely. “I know Liddell,” he grunted. He shoved back his chair, pulled himself to his feet, headed for the group at the bar.

Farrell raised his eyebrows. “Just when I was getting him to talk. What was that all about?”

“It’s a mutual-admiration society. He hates me and I despise him.” Liddell pulled out a chair, settled into it. “I suppose you know he’s a finger man for the loan sharks that work this part of town?”

The reporter shook his head. “I knew he was a bookie. I never heard about him moonlighting into sharking.”

“It’s a natural. Who knows better when a guy’s in over his head than a bookie? He takes them to a shark. That way he gets the suckers coming and going.”

Farrell held his glass up to catch the attention of the waiter. “And you don’t like loan sharks.”

“No. And I hate the guys who finger for them. With Charley it’s a personal thing. He suckered a client of mine into a spot where the 6-for-5 boys were bleeding him white. He came to me when he couldn’t pay any more and they were promising him a going over. I called on Charley and made him a proposition. Either he could lend my friend enough to get the sharks off his back—”

“Or?”

“Or I’d personally dish out to him anything the sharks did to my friend. Just so he’d believe me, I gave him a sample on account.” He broke off while the waiter shuffled over, took an order for two Scotches and headed for the bar. “He kind of lost his enthusiasm for my company that night.” He studied the reporter curiously. “What’s with you and him? If you need money—”

Farrell grinned. “It was business, all right. But not that kind of business. The desk had a handle on a big story and I was trying to check it out.” He lowered his voice. “We got word that bookies all over the country are screaming. They got murdered on tonight’s fight.”

“Hell, Rocky was only 11 to 5. They couldn’t get hurt too bad at those odds. There must have been some Page money around.”

The reporter waited until the waiter slid two drinks onto the table in front of them. He watched until the man shuffled out of earshot.

“That’s not why they’re hurting. There was plenty of sucker money showing up. There always is. But this sucker money showed up all over the country, spread real thin but lots of it. The books didn’t know that every book in the country was loaded with it.”

Liddell frowned. “Loaded with what?”

“The champ by a knockout in the first.”

Liddell stared at him. “The champ in the first?”

“The books were taking all they could get at wild odds. None of them passed the word along because they wanted all the gravy. They got murdered when Nelson caved in in the first. If the kid wasn’t dead, they’d be screaming tank job. But nobody goes that far on a tank job.”

“Poetic justice,” Liddell grunted. “I hope Charley Michaels is one of the ones who can’t pay off and becomes a candidate for the lead pipe wrapped in newspaper.”

The reporter picked up his glass, sipped at it thoughtfully. “If the champ was the one that got belted out, I could understand. But for it to be the kid in the first and with half the population apparently expecting it,” he shook his head. “The desk thinks this one should be out of the sports section into the city side. That’s why I’m down here.”

“What does the kid’s manager have to say?”

“Maury Josephs?” Farrell made the pronunciation of the name sound like a dirty word. “He isn’t available. He disappeared right after they took the kid’s body out.”

“Shook up?”

“That blob of fat shook up? If he is it’s because he didn’t have his share of the action. All Rocky meant to him was a meal ticket.”

“You wouldn’t know where Josephs pads down, would you?” Liddell wanted to know.

“We don’t travel in the same social circles.” Farrell leaned back in his chair, ran his eye down the group lining the bar. “I see Whitey Bloom down there. He carried the bucket for the kid in tonight’s fight. He’d probably know.” He held up his hand, waved for the waiter’s attention.

“Ask Whitey Bloom to come over for a drink, Tom,” he called to the waiter. “He’s down there at the far end of the bar.”

“I know, I know,” the waiter told him wearily. “They’re always at the far end when somebody wants them.” He headed down the room on feet that obviously hurt.

“What do you want with Maury?” Farrell brought his attention back to Liddell.

“I have something belonging to the kid. I figure I should let Josephs decide whether the kid would want him to have it or not.”

At the far end of the bar, the waiter was indicating their table to a Whitey Bloom who was exhibiting a reluctance to make the trip. The waiter finally mentioned something that changed the trainer’s mind. He bobbed his head, left the group that had been hanging on his blow by blow description of the night’s events.

He walked diffidently up to their table, his eyes hopscotching from one to the other. “Tom tells me you wanted to see me. I’m Whitey Bloom.”

“Farrell of *The Dispatch*. This is Liddell,” the reporter told him. “Sit down and have a drink.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Whitey slid into the chair vacated by Charley Michaels with alacrity. He caught the eye of the waiter, ordered a double Bourbon. “I sure can use it. It’s tough enough to see your boy decked. But when it’s for the Big Count—” He cleared his throat with a bark that set his Adam’s apple bobbing, broke off and shook his head.

“You had no indication there was anything wrong with him before the fight?” Liddell wanted to know.

Whitey shook his head. “You never saw a guy so sure of himself. He stuck to the book all through training. He took worse punches from his sparring partners than the ones he got tonight. They just rolled off him.” The waiter returned. The trainer didn’t wait for him to put the glass on the table, reached over, lifted it off the tray.

He took a deep, noisy swallow, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “He couldn’t wait to get out of that corner when the bell rings. He dances out. You probably seen. He’s cutting the champ to pieces with that jab of his.” The telling had the cadence of a well-told tale. “He’s making the champ look like a chump. Then, all of a sudden he runs out of gas. Me, I coulda dropped dead when the doc tells me the kid is dead. The champ, I wouldn’t be surprised. He’s been burned out for years. But a young kid in his prime—” He shook his head, turned his attention to the glass.

“Must have hit Maury Josephs pretty hard, too,” Liddell put in.

The trainer set his glass down, wiped away the thin dribble that glistened from the side of his mouth. “Who knows? Maury’s a pretty cold guy,” he commented cautiously. “He’s got a job managing the kid, he manages. That don’t mean he’s got to be a father to the kid. In this game, a kid’s like a piece of meat. If he’s sirloin, he brings good prices. If he’s hamburger, he draws bottom dollar.” His eyes did a circuit of the men lining the bar. “Even when they’re sirloin to start with, sometimes they end up as hamburger after they’ve been through the grinder.”

“And Rocky?”

Whitey picked up his glass, noted morosely that it was almost empty. He brightened perceptibly when Liddell signaled to the waiter for a refill. “Rocky? The kid had plenty on the ball. He was a fresh kid and plenty conceited. When I saw him going into that ring tonight, I was sure I’d be carrying the champ’s gloves when we came out.”

“You wouldn’t know where I could reach Maury Josephs, do you?” Liddell consulted his watch. It was a quarter to two. “Think it would be too late?”

The old man chuckled hollowly. “It’s never too late for the fat boy. He’s a great one for cutting the kid off dames and late hours. But, like he says, he ain’t in training for nothing except food, booze and dames. He wants to set some kind of a record.” He swapped his empty glass for a refill on the waiter’s tray. “He has a pad in the Swaymore on 63rd. He’s probably drowning his sorrow in iced champagne, a big steak and an overstuffed blonde.”

Johnny Liddell pushed back his chair. He brought a roll of bills from his pocket. Against the reporter’s protests, he peeled a ten from the roll, dropped it on the table. “I’ve got to be going, Tom.” He indicated the bill on the table to the old man. “Have a nightcap on me, Whitey.”

The trainer turned in his chair, watched Liddell shoulder his way to the door. “First time I ever had a reporter buy me a drink.”

“It sure would set some kind of a record if he were a reporter,” Farrell grinned.

Whitey’s hand froze with the glass halfway to his mouth. “If he ain’t a reporter, what does he want with Maury Josephs?”

The reporter considered. “I wish I knew. He’s a private detective.”

The trainer barked apprehensively, his Adam's apple bouncing agitatedly. "I hope he don't tell Maury he got his address from me."

"I wouldn't worry. Johnny usually collects information. He doesn't give it."

Whitey took a deep swallow from his glass, wiped his lips with his sleeve. "So I noticed."

## Chapter 9

Maury Josephs stood at the portable bar in his apartment and poured himself a stiff drink. The dull throbbing that had started in the back of his neck when he saw the kid collapse to the floor was now an ache. He massaged his neck with the flat of his hand with no appreciable effect. He emptied half the glass with one swallow.

He debated the advisability of calling for a girl, decided that even that couldn't shake him out of the mood. He finished the drink, splashed more Scotch into the glass.

He was worried that in some way the kid's death would be traceable to him even though Mitch Corday had assured him there would be no trace of the cause of death. He'd read that there was no such thing as a perfect crime, but maybe that was because they didn't know a crime had been committed in a perfect crime.

The Scotch was beginning to set up a warm glow in the pit of his stomach. He lifted the glass to his lips, added more fuel to it.

The telephone, when it rang, startled him.

He hurriedly crossed to the instrument, lifted it on the third ring. "Yeah?"

"This is Mitch," the smooth voice of the white-haired man came over the wire. "I'd like to have a talk with you."

Panic gripped Maury in the midsection. "Something wrong?"

"On the contrary," the smooth voice assured him. "Everybody is very well satisfied and I thought we ought to talk about your future."

Josephs grinned his relief. He wiped the beads of perspiration that had popped out along his jowls with the side of his hand. "Me, too. I wanted to talk to you about losing this town."

"Suppose I drive by in half an hour. I can pick you up and we can ride around?"

"Why not come up here?" Maury wanted to know.

“Sometimes walls have ears,” Mitch Corday told him. “Also, in the event someone drops by to talk about what happened tonight, it wouldn’t be a good idea for them to find us together.”

“You mean the police?” The cold feeling was back in Maury’s midsection.

“Why the police? This isn’t the first time a man was killed in the ring. It won’t be the last time. No, I’m thinking about the press. After all, you were close to managing the champion of the world. The A.M. papers got the story of the fight. The P.M. papers will want to start digging color for background stories right away.”

The fat man bobbed his head, disturbed the rolls of fat that ringed his collar. “I get it. I’ll be out front in half an hour. I’ll walk down to the corner. Like that, even the night doorman won’t see you.”

“Good.”

Josephs dropped the receiver on its hook. He took a wadded handkerchief from his pocket, swabbed at his face. Then he ran it between his collar and his neck, stuck it back in his pocket. He picked up his half-filled glass, took a deep swallow.

The big boys were satisfied. That was a load off his mind. Mitch Corday didn’t seem upset that Maury wanted to get out of New York. That, too, was all to the good. Three months ago it had looked all black. Rocky Nelson had crossed the big boys. Maury Josephs had been assigned to keep the kid in line. So Maury was as guilty as the kid and the big boys had a habit of punishing anyone who got a contract and didn’t deliver. That went from the top of the organization to the bottom. Mitch Corday had given Maury the contract, so Mitch would have to answer to the boys. He must have talked fast to ward off retribution.

Maury finished his drink, returned the glass to the bar. He walked to the window, stared down onto the street below. A mist rose from the blackened sidewalks, creating a ghostly effect in the light from the street lamps.

Las Vegas was never like this, he told himself. The sky was always blue, with cottony white clouds. The streets and the casinos were never deserted at any hour of the day. Night People could find action all along the Strip. The craps tables would be lined three deep, the blackjack tables playing to standees. If what happened tonight meant he could go back to all that it was worth every minute of it. Even if it had seemed like ages while the kid was in that ring.



He debated the advisability of another drink, voted against it. He wanted to be at his persuasive best when he discussed Las Vegas with Mitch Corday.

He checked his watch, walked into the foyer, selected a raincoat and a rain hat from the closet. When he checked out of this town these were two items that would not be going back with him.

He took the elevator to the lobby, nodded to the night man, who sat dozing behind the desk. He walked out into the rain-freshened air and headed for the corner.

He was on his second cigarette when he saw the headlights of an approaching car dip twice. Then it swung over and slid to a stop a few paces in front of where he stood.

Josephs dropped his butt to the ground, crushed it out. He walked over to the car, couldn't see into it because of the beads of water that streamed down the window.

He reached for the handle, tugged the door open.

The man behind the wheel was holding a gun, its muzzle staring unwaveringly at a spot just between Maury Josephs' eyes. The fat man wasn't too startled when he recognized that the man behind the wheel was Ray Carter of the Cuernavaca, Mitch Corday's man.

He looked quickly into the back seat, expecting to see Mitch sitting there, grinning broadly. Instead, dumped into a pile on the corner of the seat was a bundle of rags that had once been a man, its head twisted.

"Get in," Carter told him.

For a moment, the fat man considered the possibility of turning and running for the protection of the apartment house lobby.

The man behind the wheel correctly interpreted what was in his mind. "You'd never make it," he told him. "Get in and maybe you walk away from it. Try something fancy and you'll have to try to outrun a slug. From your condition, I wouldn't say you'd make it."

Maury Josephs licked at his lips, bent down to get into the car. He never saw the blow that hit him.

The man behind the wheel just had enough room to slam the barrel of the gun against the fat man's forehead. Maury fell like an axed steer. His face hit the seat cushion, he lay half in, half out of the car.

Carter pushed open his door, circled the car. He caught the fat man by the feet, dumped them into the car, slammed the door.

He was breathing heavily as he stood in the rain, looked in both directions. There was nobody else on the street.

Leisurely he walked around the car, slid in behind the wheel. He jammed his foot on the brake three times. The wet roadway behind him was stained red three times. After a moment, a car pulled up alongside his.

Mendy leaned from behind the wheel of the second car to roll down the window.

“I’m heading for the top level of the Queensborough Bridge. Stay close enough to follow me but don’t make it look like a procession.”

The short man bobbed his head.

Carter grunted, pushed the button to close his window. He headed for the 57th Street entrance to the bridge. The lateness of the hour and the rain caused traffic to be almost nonexistent. He met only one other car heading over the bridge. In his rearview mirror, he could make out the lights on Mendy’s car behind him.

Across the bridge, he followed Northern Boulevard to 21st Street, turned left and headed north toward Astoria Park and Bowery Bay. As the residential areas thinned out to long spaces between houses, he speeded up slightly. For a moment, the other car’s lights disappeared but they soon came back into view jouncing over the uneven terrain.

Just ahead, a little off the road there was a clump of old oaks. Carter braked his car to a stop.

The fat man on the seat next to him was groaning his way back to consciousness. Carter got out of the car, walked around it and opened the door on the far side. He rolled Maury on his back, hit him with the butt of the revolver in the head until it gave off a sound like an overripe melon. Satisfied that Josephs was dead, Carter tugged him into a sitting position on the right side of the seat.

Then he walked around the car, caught the bundle on the back seat by the front of its jacket and lifted it bodily over the seat, propped it under the wheel.

He looked back, satisfied himself that Mendy’s car was still coming. Then he bent over, reached in and set Willie’s stiffening leg in position so

that his foot was pressing on the gas, roaring the motor. He shoved the lever into drive, jumped clear and rolled over twice as the car leaped forward.

It did not hit the first tree squarely, caromed off and bounced into a second. There was a rending of metal, a smashing of glass as it came to a shattering stop against the trunk of the second tree. The motor continued to roar as the dead foot pressed down on the accelerator, then it slowly choked to a stop.

Mendy drove up as Carter was straightening up, brushing the dust from his clothes. He opened the car door and stepped out.

Willie's car was sending up a stream of smoke from its shattered radiator. Mendy started toward it.

"Get back in your own car. Somebody may have heard the crash," Carter told him. When the short man started for the driver's seat, "I'll drive!" Carter snapped at him. "It would be just like you to get a ticket on the way home and bust our alibi."

Mendy shrugged, walked around to the far side of the car. Carter slid behind the wheel, swung the car around and headed back toward the Queensborough Bridge.

Johnny Liddell walked into the lobby of the Swaymore Apartments, walked up to the desk where the night man sat dozing. Liddell tapped on the desk, the night man came to with a start, shook his head.

"What can I do for you?" he wanted to know.

"I want to see Mr. Josephs. I'm from *The Dispatch*."

The night man shook his head. "Mr. Josephs isn't here," he told Liddell. "I saw him go out about an hour ago."

Liddell frowned. "Cab?"

"He was walking." The night man glanced at his watch, yawned. "But you're wasting your time. He's not talking to the press." He leaned back, watched Liddell from under half-closed lids, obviously wishing he'd leave so he could resume his nap.

Liddell plucked at his nostrils with thumb and forefinger, bobbed his head. "It was worth a try," he told the night man.

“I could have saved you the trip if you’d called here first like the other reporters did.”

Liddell walked out of the lobby into the rain. At 2:30 in the morning, Third Avenue is a different place. During the day, cars and trucks are lined up on the wide avenue where the El once stood griming the fronts of the low buildings that have since given way to luxurious high rises. The sidewalks are crowded with pedestrians, some ambling along as if they had all day to complete their missions; others striding forcefully, shouldering past the slow movers.

At 2:30 in the morning, the sidewalks on Third Avenue are deserted. The empty avenue seems to stretch for miles with the only signs of life the traffic lights clicking monotonously, alternately staining the curbs with red and green puddles.

Liddell crossed the avenue, squeezed into the questionable shelter of the side of a building. He yanked irritably at his coat collar, drew it closer to his face in a fruitless effort to stave off the cold drizzle. He lit a cigarette, took a deep drag on it and cupped it in his hand. If Maury had not taken a cab, it was reasonable to assume that he might be back before too long. Liddell gave him a half hour to return. If he didn’t show by then, Johnny decided, to coin a phrase, to go back to his apartment and get out of his wet clothes into a dry martini. The contemplation of this cozy picture was so pleasant that he almost forgot his discomfort.

## Chapter 10

Jackie Day was sitting in the corner of the couch, her legs folded under her, when Ray Carter admitted himself into his office through the back door. She had loosened her hair, let it pour down over her shoulder in a molten cascade. She had used the time to repair her makeup. The slanted, blue-green eyes were complemented by expertly applied tinting; the full red lips were vivid and moistly soft.

“I thought you had forgotten all about me,” she pouted prettily.

Carter grinned at her. “I haven’t had anything else on my mind since I left here,” he assured her.

“I never even knew you noticed me,” Jackie told him. “You were always so businesslike and everything.”

“I’ve had my eye on you for a long time, kid.”

She got up, walked over to the desk. “I made us some martinis while you were gone. I hope you don’t mind.”

She stood with her back to him. He admired the firm roundness of her bottom against the fabric of the gown. He walked up behind her, slipped his arm around her, cupped her breast gently. He was satisfied to find that she wore nothing under the gown. The nipple hardened against his palm as he squeezed the breast. He was close enough that she could feel the tautness of his body against hers.

She removed his hand, turned to face him. He could feel her breath on his face. Her eyes were half closed, her lips soft and moist. She made no move to remove his hand as it slid over the smoothness of her hip.

“You said you could do things for me in California,” she reminded him.

“Big things,” he told her. “According to how bad you want them.”

“Awful bad.”

“Give me a for-instance.”

She pressed against him, fitted the planes of her body against his. She reached up, pasted her full, red lips against his. He could feel the tip of her

tongue darting in and out of his mouth. When he moved to draw her closer, she put the flat of her hands against his chest, shoved him away.

“Whoa! Let’s not leave the whole fight in the gymnasium.” She was breathing heavily. “This is a two-way street. I’ve given you a sample of what I have to offer. What do you offer?”

Carter grinned. He reached past her, snagged a silver pitcher that was beaded with sweat. He poured two martinis into the glasses on the stand. He handed one to the girl.

“You’ve heard of Mitch Corday?”

“Who hasn’t? He’s Mr. Big in this town, isn’t he?”

The big man sampled the martini, approved. “If they come any bigger, I’ve never met them. If he guarantees that you’ll be taken care of by Lew Merton on the Coast, is that good enough?”

“Lew Merton?” The redhead’s eyes widened. “With him in back of a girl, there’s nothing to stop her.” She picked up her glass, tapped it against his. “If I could even get an introduction to Lew Merton you’d have a deal.”

Carter took a deep swallow from his glass, set it down, dialed a number. After a moment, the phone was picked up on the other end. Carter held the receiver between them so the girl could hear the man on the other end.

“Corday,” the smooth voice at the other end identified itself.

Carter held the receiver so the girl could hear. “Mitch, this is Ray Carter. I’ve got Jackie Day with me. She’s the kid that helped us out by locating that envelope of Rocky Nelson’s. You remember?”

“I remember.”

“Jackie feels it would be better if she had a change of scene. She doesn’t want this private eye, Liddell, bothering her. She’s thinking of the Coast.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Corday agreed. “How soon does she want to leave?”

“In the morning. She thinks she’d like Lew Merton to do something for her out there. Do you think it could be arranged?”

“I’m sure it can be. But suppose Liddell drops by her place tonight and \_\_\_”

“She won’t be there. She’s not even going back to pack. Merton can arrange for her to get anything she needs out there. Will you call him?”

“What plane will she be on? I’ll have him meet her at the airport.”

Carter let his eyes roam from the molten cascade of the girl’s hair to her feet and back with appropriate stops on the way. “I’ll have her on the eight o’clock from Kennedy.”

“Good enough.” There was a click as Corday broke the connection.

Carter looked at the girl, held the receiver up, dropped it on its hook. “Good enough?”

Jackie emptied her glass, coughed. Her eyes watered. She held the glass out. “I could use a martini.”

Carter filled her glass, picked his up, held it up in a toast. “New York’s loss is Hollywood’s gain.” They tapped glasses, emptied them.

Carter lifted the glass out of the girl’s hand, set both glasses down on the desk. He reached for her, she slipped past him. A frown ridged his forehead.

She grinned at him. “Fill the glasses again. I’m going to turn out some of these lights. I’m sick of working under lights.”

Carter, still frowning, filled the glasses, took them over to the couch, set them down on an end table and dropped down onto the couch.

The redhead stood across the room from him. He heard the whirr of a zipper. The irritation started to drain from his face as she slipped the gown back over her shoulders. When it fell to the floor around her feet, she was wearing only a pair of sheer panties. She hooked her thumbs in the waistband, slipped them down, stepped out of them and kicked them and the gown aside.

Wearing only her high-heeled shoes, she walked to the couch, stood proudly in front of him. The whiteness of her body gleamed in the dimmed light. Her legs were long, sensuously shaped. Full, rounded thighs swelled into highset hips, converged into a narrow waist. Her breasts were full and high, their pink tips straining upward.

Jackie stood there, ran the palms of her hands slowly up her thighs, across the flat belly to cup her breasts. They continued upward, her fingers lost themselves in the thick, gleaming cascade of hair.

“My analyst once told me that everything has a price but that a girl shouldn’t go window shopping unless she could afford to buy.” She sank slowly to her knees in front of him. “You just made yourself a bargain.”

Mitch Corday hung up the telephone and walked to the window of his flat. He stood with hands locked behind his back, staring out into the rain-drenched street.

He was annoyed that Ray Carter had put him almost in the position of a pimp. He knew that the girl must have been there in the room listening, that the phone call was the final argument for a night in the hay before she went to the Coast.

Yet, he was also aware that the nightclub man was right. A change of scenery was necessary. If Liddell were already on the girl's trail, he would not give up until he had forced her to tell him who had sicced her onto Rocky Nelson, who had paid her to find out where Rocky had hidden the envelope containing the names, dates and places.

He turned, lifted the top of a silver humidior, picked out a fat panatella. He tested it between thumb and forefinger, then clipped the end with a platinum pocket knife.

Lew Merton would think he was crazy. Two calls in one night.

He rolled the cigar in the center of his lips between thumb and forefinger.

The West Coast head of the organization had been delighted by the first call. Corday wasn't too sure how he'd react to the second call. Lew had too much to lose to take too many chances.

Corday produced a wafer-thin lighter, snapped it into flame, held it to the cigar. He hollow-cheeked a mouthful of smoke, blew it out against the window pane. There was no avoiding the call and the request. The girl was too dangerous to all of them to be permitted to stay in town. Merton had a stake in getting her away as well as the rest, Corday argued with himself. So, he must be willing to do his share.

He turned from the window, walked back to the telephone on the table in the corner. He dialed the code for Los Angeles, then Merton's home number. He glanced at his watch. Four o'clock in New York would mean one A.M. in California. Merton was never in bed before three.

When the connection was finally made: "This is Mitch again, Lew. Hope I'm interrupting something?"

Merton grunted. "You sure are. What's with you? Telephonitis?"

"Something came up here, too, Lew," Corday grinned. "You know how we found out where Rocky had stashed those papers?"



“Some jane, wasn’t it?”

“Right. We planted her on the kid, she heard him and Liddell talking about the stuff being in his safe. Liddell must have tumbled. He’s turning the town upside down looking for her.”

“So what do you want from me at this hour of the night?”

“She’s got to get out of town. We’re shipping her out on the eight o’clock from Kennedy.”

“You crazy?” Merton roared across the line. “What am I going to do with her? If I get her work, all he has to do is trace her through Equity or whatever union she belongs to.”

“I wasn’t figuring on her doing any union work,” Corday soothed him. “I was figuring when she gets out there, you see to it that she gets hooked good on some white stuff. It shouldn’t take too long if it’s pure, would it?”

“A week, ten days,” Merton conceded grudgingly. “Then what?”

“You’re always talking about what a big demand there is for American girls over in Tijuana. This is real good merchandise. Stacked.”

There was a short pause from the other end of the line. “I do know a couple of operators who would be real grateful,” Merton told him thoughtfully. “We wouldn’t have to worry about her popping up again. They’d see to that.”

“And no heat, no body to get rid of.”

“Where is she now?”

“At Ray Carter’s place. He’s keeping her away from her apartment in case Liddell is smelling around. She’s going directly to the airport, so she’ll be bringing nothing but what she has on.”

“That’s okay. The places I have in mind she won’t need any clothes. She’ll be kept too busy to be putting them on and taking them off.”

# Chapter 11

The noise sounded like distant thunder, settled down to the sharp chatter of a machine gun. Johnny Liddell groaned, tried to burrow his head under a pillow, but the noise refused to go away. Finally, he reluctantly opened one bleary eye and decided it was only someone trying to knock the door off its hinges. The clock on the night table said eight o'clock. The rain pelting against his window made it dark enough out to be a question whether it was eight A.M. or eight P.M.

Liddell settled for eight A.M. It was almost five when he gave up his vigil outside Maury Josephs' apartment house and from the stiffness in his joints it was three hours instead of fifteen hours that he had been sleeping.

The pounding on the door showed no signs of abating. Liddell slid his legs from under the covers, stuffed them into his pants, slid his feet into slippers and shuffled toward the door.

"Okay, okay. Keep your pants on," he yelled.

He unlocked the door, pulled it open.

"That's a fine way to greet a respectable young woman who's risking her reputation even being seen slipping into your apartment," Muggsy Kiely reproved him.

"Oh, no," Liddell groaned. "Not you," when he recognized the reporter—daughter of Jim Kiely, managing editor of *The Dispatch*.

Muggsy brushed past him, closed the door behind her. "If you feel like you look, I hope they'll make the services brief," she told him. "Who was she?"

"Who was who?"

Muggsy wagged a finger at him. "Nothing but a woman could tear a man down like that."

Liddell gave her a disgusted look, headed for the pack of cigarettes on the coffee table. "If you've got to know, I've been working. I didn't get in until almost five." He lit a cigarette, took a deep drag. He frowned as he eyed the reporter. "Which brings me to the very legitimate question of what you're doing knocking my door down in the middle of the night?"

“All in the line of duty, Luv.” Muggsy walked over to the couch, dropped onto it, crossed her legs. “Early this morning, you were trying to get some information about Maury Josephs. Tom Farrell, of our staff, got you the information, so we feel you owe us some cooperation.”

Liddell growled disgustedly. “So he got me Josephs’ address. I stood out in the rain half the night nearly catching pneumonia. For that I owe that rag of yours something?”

A brief flash of disappointment clouded Muggsy’s eyes. “You mean you didn’t get to talk to Josephs?”

“I didn’t get to talk to Josephs,” Liddell mimicked her. “He didn’t come home all night. But I intend to catch up with him—”

“I hope you know how to operate a ouija board. Josephs is dead. Died in an automobile accident over in Astoria some time this morning.”

Liddell groaned, dropped into the chair facing the couch. “That’s just the kind of rat-fink trick I’d expect him to play. Keeping me out in the rain until all hours while he’s on a nice, comfortable slab in the morgue.” He took a last, deep drag on his cigarette, crushed it out. “I suppose there’s no doubt it was Josephs.”

The reporter shook her head. “Both he and the guy driving the car had plenty of identification on them. Pop got our sports editor out of bed and sent him over to the morgue. It’s Josephs, all right. He didn’t know the other guy, but the morgue people are satisfied with his identification.”

“So what did you want from me?”

Muggsy shrugged. “Pop thought maybe you had a talk with Josephs before the accident. It could be a handle for a good story.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Liddell told her glumly. “How’d Maury die?”

“Front of his head smashed in by the windshield. The driver broke his neck and—”

Liddell jerked into full attention. “Broke his neck? You wouldn’t know what this second guy looked like?”

“No. But I have his name written down someplace if that will help.” Muggsy opened her oversized handbag, started rummaging in its depths. She came up with a small notebook, flicked through the pages. “He was carrying a driver’s license made out to William Simons. Mean anything to you?”

Liddell shook his head. “The guy I’m thinking about, I wouldn’t know his name.” He got up, headed for the bathroom. “But I would know him if I saw him, which is what I intend to do next.”

The taxi dropped Johnny Liddell and Muggsy Kiely at the entrance to the morgue, just across the street from the pile of bricks and acres of glass windows that make up Bellevue Hospital. This is the last port of call for glamorous keptees who went out a window when their paychecks stopped as well as for the pitiful bundles of rags that are collected from Bowery vestibules and hallways. Here there is complete democracy. They sleep side by side regardless of whether their passing was noted on the front pages of the tabs or went completely unnoticed except by those who demanded their removal from a hallway as a nuisance.

Liddell led the way down the short hallway to the old-fashioned elevator cage. They rode it to the basement, headed for the room bearing the stenciled information “Examining Room.” He knocked and they walked in.

A painfully thin man in a starched white jacket sat behind a white-enameled desk, biting on the almost nonexistent nail of his left thumb. He was making notations in a large ledger.

He looked up as Liddell and the redheaded reporter walked in, seemed glad of an excuse to put his pen down. He fished a wadded handkerchief from his pocket, polished his bald spot with a circular, swabbing motion. “Looking for someone?” His voice was rusty, as though he didn’t get much chance to use it.

Muggsy brought her press card from her bag, held it toward the man behind the desk. “Ronny Kiely of *The Dispatch*,” she told him. “We’re interested in two DOA’s that came in this morning.”

The thin man studied the press pass with a show of polite interest. “Already had one of your boys in here earlier.” He rolled his eyes up from the card to Muggsy’s face. “He got all the dope on Maury Josephs.”

Muggsy nodded, stowed the pass back into her bag. “I know. But we think our friend here may know Simons, the man who was with Josephs.”

The man in the white jacket resumed gnawing on the macerated cuticle. “You want to have a look at him?”

“That’s the general idea,” Muggsy told him.

The man behind the desk got up, limped around it. He led the way to a heavy door set in the far wall and tugged it open. Beyond was a high-ceilinged, stone-floored, unheated room with double tiers of metal lockers. Each locker had its own number stenciled on it. Most of the lockers had cards with typewritten names.

Liddell wrinkled his nose as a cloud of carbolic-laden air enveloped them. No word was spoken as they followed the thin man across the floor to the rear of the windowless room. The only sound was the clip-clopping of the attendant's bad leg. He stopped in front of one of the row of drawers, tugged on a handle. The drawer pulled open with a keening screech. A piece of canvas bulged suggestively inside it.

The attendant reached up, turned on a high-powered light in an enamel reflector. Then he caught a corner of the canvas, drew it back, exposing the body of a man.

The face was oyster white, the blond hair dank and damp. The bags under his half opened eyes were the color of liver.

The attendant placed a finger against the dead man's right cheek, rolled the head to the side, then back into position. "Broke his neck. Probably never knew what hit him." He looked at Liddell. "That your boy?"

Liddell studied the face of the man he had last seen at the foot of the backstage staircase in the Cuernavaca. He shook his head slowly. "No. I've never seen this one before."

"Don't matter. We've got a make on him." The thin man pulled the cover back over the dead man's face, slammed the drawer shut with a clang that reverberated throughout the entire room.

"Sorry to put you through that, Muggs." Liddell took her by the elbow, nodded his thanks to the man in the white jacket. He led her toward the door to the outer office.

Once in the corridor leading to the elevator, he lit two cigarettes, handed one to Muggsy. They both dragged deeply in a futile effort to clean the morgue smell out of their nostrils.

Neither spoke until they were out in the fresh air. Muggsy hollow-cheeked a mouthful of smoke, flipped her butt into the gutter. "All right, friend," she turned to face Liddell. "Maybe you could fool that poorly articulated bag of bones in there. But you can't fool baby. You knew that guy."

Liddell lifted his cigarette from between his lips, glanced at the glowing end for a moment, snapped it away between thumb and index finger. “I knew him,” he conceded. “Where can we sit down and have a talk with Jim?”

Muggsy consulted the baguette on her wrist. “He’s at my place. He doesn’t leave for the shop until ten.” She studied Liddell’s face eagerly. “That mean you’ve got a story for baby? One that will rate a by-line?”

“Could be,” Liddell told her.

Despite her teasing all the way uptown, she had to be satisfied with that.

## Chapter 12

Muggsy Kiely's apartment was in one of the cliff dwellings that surround Central Park. She opened the door, led the way through the foyer into a tastefully decorated living room.

"Pop must be out on the porch." She crossed the room to a pair of French doors, walked out onto a sundeck that seemed to be pasted to the side of the building with no apparent support from below. It had a gaily colored awning that protected it from the curious above and walls that guaranteed its privacy against neighbors on either side. Fifteen stories below, Central Park sprawled out like a huge green carpet, its lake glittering in its depths like a piece of broken mirror.

Jim Kiely was sitting on a settee set back against the wall, scowling at the complete coverage of Rocky Nelson's death given by *The Express*, the morning tab.

"Got company, Jim," Muggsy told him. "He's out here. Come on out," she called in to Liddell.

When Johnny Liddell walked out, Kiely hoisted himself off the couch, offered a gnarled claw of a hand. He was a thin, hollow-cheeked man with piercingly curious eyes. They were eyes that had seen almost everything and had known everybody worth knowing in his thirty-odd years with *The Dispatch*.

"When I sent Muggsy to see you I didn't mean for her to drag you all the way up here." The newspaperman retrieved his hand, massaged his fingers.

"I made him come, Jim. This character knew the guy who was with Maury Josephs last night." She eyed Liddell indignantly. "And he won't tell me what he knows. I figured he couldn't clam up on you."

Kiely studied Liddell curiously. His long, thin nose seemed to be sniffing out news. He dropped back onto the couch, stared up at Johnny. He looked from Liddell to Muggsy and back. "You met him when you saw Maury?"

Liddell shook his head. "I never saw Josephs last night. By the time I got to his place, he had already left. He wasn't back by five when I finally called it a night." He hoisted a hip onto the railing. "I didn't know the guy's name. I only saw him once in my life."

Kiely scowled at him. “But you went out to the morgue to see if it was the guy you thought it was?” Liddell nodded. “Why?” Kiely wanted to know.

“Because the one time I saw him, he was lying at the foot of a flight of stairs with a broken neck. When Muggs said the guy in the car had a broken neck, it was almost too much of a coincidence.”

“What?” Kiely half rose from the couch, sank back down.

Liddell bobbed his head. “He didn’t break his neck in any automobile accident, Jim. He was dead before he ever got into that car.”

“But he was behind the wheel. That would mean Maury Josephs was—” Muggsy broke off, stared wide-eyed at Liddell. “That would mean that Josephs was dead, too.”

“That’s the way I read it,” Liddell told her. “Somebody had a couple of dead bodies on his hands. He figured to handle two killed birds with one stone, to coin a phrase.”

Kiely reached for his pipe and tobacco pouch on the low table next to the couch. “You got anything to back this up?” he asked in a deceptively mild voice. “Why would anyone want Josephs dead?”

“The same people who’d want Rocky Nelson dead.”

“You going to tell us that Rocky Nelson was murdered, too?” Kiely growled. He dipped the bowl of the pipe into the pouch, started packing it with his thumb. “There are roughly 22,000 people at the fight, not to mention a couple of hundred thousand watching it on television and—”

“I know, I know,” Liddell cut him off. “And there were people laying bets all over the country that the kid would be knocked out in the first round. Those boys knew something. And those are the boys who would be interested in making sure that Maury Josephs didn’t spill what he might know.”

Kiely stuck the pipe between his teeth, rattled the juice in the stem. “Rocky Nelson died as the result of internal hemorrhages. You know that?”

Liddell bobbed his head. “I’m not saying I know how they did it. I’m just saying that I think they did.” He watched while the newspaperman scratched a wooden match into flame, held it above the bowl and sucked the flame down into it. “If I can come up with the story of what really happened in that ring last night, would *The Dispatch* be willing to underwrite the investigation?”



“You’d have to have more than what you’ve told me.” Kiely blew a cloud of blue-gray smoke at the awning above.

“Would you believe that Rocky Nelson came to me three months ago because he expected to be killed?”

“Should I?” Kiely countered.

Liddell nodded. “The kid came to me with a sealed envelope that he said contained names, dates and places of all the things rotten about the boxing racket. He wanted me to keep it for him, to be turned over to the press if anything happened to him.”

“Why should he expect anything to happen?”

“He was supposed to go into the tank in the Marty Taub fight. The big boys were set to make a killing betting against him. He crossed them by belting Taub out.”

The newspaperman smoked silently for a moment. “So where’s the exposé he left?”

“Last night, while I was at the fight, someone broke into my office, cracked my safe and took it.” He watched Kiely’s expression. “That means that someone knew about the envelope. More important, someone knew that something was going to happen to the kid and it was time to get rid of the stuff.”

The newspaperman cupped the bowl of his pipe in his hand, tapped the stem against his teeth thoughtfully. “So somehow they manage to get the kid, like he expected, and Josephs knew too much—”

“Either that, or they were giving him the same medicine for the double cross in the Marty Taub fight.”

Kiely shrugged it off. “Whatever the reason, they hit Josephs. Right?”

Liddell nodded.

“So where does this Simons character fit in? Or was he just another corpse kicking around that they threw in for good luck?”

Liddell grinned glumly. “Hasn’t it occurred to you that somebody must have fingered me as the guy holding the evidence? The kid told me he was extra careful not to be seen near my office and we had contact only once from the day he left the stuff with me. The night he left for training camp.”

“So?”

“There was a girl in his flat that night. A kid from the Cuernavaca. She was the only one that could tie me to him. Last night, I dropped by the joint to have a talk with her.”

“That’s where you saw Simons.”

Liddell nodded. “The kid panicked when I sent word back to her. I went backstage and this Simons character stuck a gun in my back. He was taking me up to have a heart to heart talk with the guy who runs the place—”

“Ray Carter?”

Liddell nodded. “Then, he missed his step and fell down the stairs. He broke his neck in the fall. He was dead by the time I got down to him.”

“Fell or was pushed?” Kiely wanted to know.

Liddell grinned glumly. “That’s a question Carter should be asking me. Apparently he’s going to stand still for it.” He leaned forward. “That’s another thing that smells about this whole business, Jim. There’s something awful big when a guy like Carter buries his men instead of paying off for them.”

Muggsy turned to her father. “It could be, Jim. It just could be.”

Kiely sucked noisily on his pipe, peered at Liddell through slitted eyes. “Suppose we didn’t put you on. What then?”

Liddell shrugged. “I’d follow through on what I have anyway,” he told him frankly. “Having *The Dispatch* behind me would make it that much easier.”

“You’re that convinced there’s something there?”

Liddell bobbed his head.

Kiely pulled the pipe from between his teeth, used the stem as a pointer. “Okay, we’ll play along. A hundred a day and expenses. A bonus if you come up with an exclusive.”

“A deal.” Liddell pulled himself out of his chair. “Okay to use the phone?” he asked.

“Be my guest,” the redhead told him.

Liddell walked back through the living room to where the telephone stood on a table in the foyer. He picked up the Manhattan directory, flipped through the pages until he found the one he wanted. He ran his finger down the column until he came to the telephone number of the Boxing

Commission doctor. He underscored it with his thumbnail, picked up the phone and started dialing.

Doc Kenny answered the ring himself.

“Doc? Johnny Liddell.”

“Yeah?” The doctor’s voice sounded dispirited.

“I won’t take up much of your time. I guess you’re pretty busy.”

“Doing what? Writing out my resignation?”

Liddell frowned at the mouthpiece. “Nobody can blame you for what happened, Doc.”

“Maybe not. But it’s not going to be any bed of roses around here. There’ll be weeks of ladies’ groups, anti-administration politicians and all kinds of crackpots yelling for my scalp. But when I think of going back to private practice and kids with runny noses, kids with broken arms and kids, kids, kids—I don’t know which would be worse.”

“That’s why I wanted to see you, Doc. I have some ideas. Crazy ideas, maybe. But if they’re right they may take the heat off you. That is, if you have time to sit down with me.”

“I’ll be tied up with the commission until around noon. After that I figure time is one thing I’m going to have plenty of. Can you make it around noon?”

Liddell bobbed his head. “Sure. How about Toots Shor’s?”

Doc Kenny grunted. “Why pull a dirty trick like that on a nice guy like Toots? You know what would happen the minute I walked into the place? The fight mob would get up like the place had been stink-bombed and walk out. Right now, the guy with bad breath is the life of the party compared to me.”

“You name where and when.”

“How about coming up here to the office and drinking your lunch? I have a feeling I’m going to have a lot of sorrows to drown.”

“Noon. In your office.”

“Good.”

Liddell dropped the receiver on its cradle, walked back to the sundeck. Muggsy eyed him curiously.

“I have a date with Doc Kenny for noon. He’s meeting with the commission this morning.”

“In the meantime?” Muggsy wanted to know.

“We might have a look through the files at the paper to see what they’ve got on the two dead guys.”

## Chapter 13

The morgue of *The Dispatch* was located in the basement of the building. It was the final resting place for dead speeches, forgotten celebrities, lost reputations and buried crimes. Its walls were lined with shelves containing more books than many public libraries, ranging from the *World Almanac* to the Old Testament. The clippings themselves were filed in rows of metal cabinets in heavy manila envelopes that bore on the outside not only the names of the subject, but cross references to others who had been involved with the subject.

The reference portion of the room was separated from the outer section by a chest-high railing with a counter top. Outside, three long library tables were placed in a row from one end of the room to the other.

Keeper of the morgue was Les Ryan, a wrinkled former legman and feature writer on the paper. The actual filing and cross filing was done under his direction by a staff of trained librarians. Les was in complete charge because of his encyclopedic memory and his personal knowledge of the people and events that bulked out many of the thousands of manila envelopes filling the file drawers.

He was seated at his desk behind the counter, chewing placidly on an ever-present wad of gum, when Muggsy and Liddell walked in. He got up, walked over to the counter, grinned a welcome.

“Well, if it ain’t the shamus. Muggsy I get to see every so often but you’re a real stranger down here.” He stuck his hand out to Liddell. “What poor slob that don’t know it is about to be shafted?”

Liddell grinned at him. “The guys I’m interested in don’t have to worry about shafting. They get moved over to the deceased file today. Maury Josephs and a guy named William Simons. Got anything on them?”

Ryan ridged his forehead. “Josephs I make.” He shook his head. “I don’t know the other guy. They the two that wrapped up a car last night?”

Liddell nodded. “Take a look. See what’s on them.”

The man behind the counter headed toward the rear of the room. They could hear him opening and slamming the drawers in the files. When he came back, Les Ryan piled four manila envelopes on the counter top. “Two

on Josephs. Mostly sports stuff, I guess. One on Simons with a cross ref to Larry Gatti, the Florida hood. You want the clips on Gatti, I'll need a wheelbarrow."

Liddell picked up the envelope marked "Simons, William." Under the name was scrawled "See Gatti, Larry, 11/19/64." He opened the envelope, spilled four clippings onto the counter, glanced through them.

"That's interesting," he grunted. "William Simons was known as 'Willie the Gun' in Florida. He was involved in a shooting in Miami Beach. The newspapers called him a bodyguard for Larry Gatti, reputed Mafia chief in Florida." He looked up. "Then he shows up in New York working for Ray Carter at the Cuernavaca."

"What's so strange about that?" the librarian wanted to know. "Willie gets himself in trouble in Florida so Gatti sends him up here for Carter to baby-sit. Chances are he figures it might be a good thing to have Willie keep an eye on how Carter is running the store."

"You think Gatti has a piece of the action in the Cuerna?" Muggsy wanted to know.

"It's a mob operation. It's the New York base of the Mob Circuit. They have a big spot running in all the big spots—Chicago, L.A., Florida and Las Vegas. It's a regular wheel like the old burlesque circuits."

"You think Gatti might have had Willie keeping an eye on Carter?"

The librarian shrugged. "Why not? None of those boys trust each other as far as they could throw an anvil. Those peepholes over the table in Vegas where they keep an eye on the dealers—you think they're to keep them from cheating the suckers? They're to make sure they don't cheat the house."

"In the old days when Ray Carter was playing football, the word was that he was Mitch Corday's boy, right?" Liddell put in.

"Still is, far as I know. Carter made a lot of money for Mitch in some of those games. This is his pension, running the Cuerna," the librarian told him.

"Sounds like they've got a better pension system for retired players than the NFL," Liddell grunted.

"The boys never have been close with a buck. One of the reasons the Cuerna always comes in for the breaks no matter what happens in the joint is the policy of never giving a newsman a check. Even now, when I drop by the place, they lift the hot for me and I couldn't give them a line if I stood on my head."

Liddell nodded absently. “We better get at the rest of this stuff, Muggs.” He picked up the envelopes, led the way to a library table. He handed one envelope with Maury Josephs’ name on it to the redhead, took the other himself. He laid the one with Rocky Nelson’s name to one side. “You know what we’re looking for, Muggs. Any connection between Josephs and the mob.”

A half hour later, Muggsy Kiely brushed back the hair from her forehead with the side of her hand. She leaned back wearily in her chair, watched Liddell glancing through the last of a batch of clippings in his hand. When he finally tossed them down onto the table, “Get anything?” she asked.

“Nothing sensational,” Liddell growled. “Most of it’s pretty current dating back to when he took over Rocky Nelson a couple of years ago. How about you?”

Muggsy picked up two clippings she had put aside. “I don’t know if these are worth anything. Looks like Josephs came from Las Vegas before he managed Rocky.”

She passed over a clipping showing a thinner Maury Josephs surrounded by several well-known entertainers smiling into the camera. The caption stated that the picture marked the occasion of the signing of the new show for the Oasis in Las Vegas by Maury Josephs, manager of the hotel.

Liddell grunted. “The Oasis, huh. Another stop in the Mob Circuit. What’s the other one?”

“Just an item from a Hollywood gossip column. It says: ‘Hollywood and Beverly Hills are the losers, Las Vegas the gainer, by Maury Josephs’ decision to leave Lew Merton’s talent agency to take over as manager of the Oasis in Las Vegas.’ That mean anything?”

“It could. If Willie Simons is Larry Gatti’s man and Ray Carter is Mitch Corday’s and Maury Josephs represented Lew Merton’s interests then this whole thing is tied in together.” Liddell shoveled the clippings back into their envelopes, carried them back to the counter.

“Check your files on Larry Gatti, Lew Merton and Mitch Corday, will you, Les? I don’t want to wade through the files. I’m just interested in any cross ref that shows on all three of them.”

The librarian gathered up the envelopes from the counter top, ambled back to the files. Liddell walked back to where Muggsy sat, lit a cigarette and stared at the ceiling.

The cigarette was burned down to a stub by the time the librarian came back. He was carrying a sheet of copy paper covered with scribbling. “There’s an awful lot of cross refs on all of them, Johnny. But this might help. All three had a mention of the Benson Committee Hearings a couple of years ago. Want to see the file on it?”

Liddell sighed. “We might as well.”

Les Ryan disappeared for a minute, came back lugging a bulging envelope. “This was the hearing where Corday’s lawyer insisted that televising Corday on the stand was an invasion of privacy. Remember?”

“So they just showed his hands.” Liddell nodded.

“That’s the one. They crucified him on the stand. But he’s still walking around.”

Liddell took the file, carried it to the library table.

He was on the third cigarette and his watch showed 11:40 by the time he returned the clippings to their envelope.

“The chairman of the Senate investigating committee was trying to nail Corday, Merton, Gatti and a guy out of Chicago named Sid Weiss as head of a nation-wide gambling syndicate. His theory was that they divided the country up into four parts—the east with Corday at the top, the west with Merton calling the shots, the south under Larry Gatti and Sid Weiss in the middle west.” He stubbed out his cigarette. “There’s your picture.”

“If it’s true that Willie Simons represented Gatti and Josephs was Merton’s boy, what do you think they’re going to do when they find out their boys are dead?”

“Probably nothing. Simons’ death was an accident. I think Maury Josephs had sentence passed on him because of the double cross in the Taub fight. Probably with Merton’s okay. The mob operates a tight ship. There’s no excuse for failure and death is penalty.”

“Then who killed Rocky?”

“Maury Josephs is my guess. He probably took the contract thinking it would get him back into the big boys’ good graces.” He pushed back his chair, stood up. “I’d better hop a cab if I’m going to keep my date with Doc Kenny.”

“Wait for me. I’ll go with you and—”



Liddell shook his head. “If there’s anything Doc Kenny probably couldn’t stand less than a reporter right now it’s a woman reporter. I think he’ll talk to me if I’m alone. I know he won’t if I bring an audience.”

Doc Kenny had a suite of offices on the fifth floor of the building housing the fight arena. The secretary in the outer office looked lachrymose when Johnny Liddell walked in, worked at a smile of welcome that missed by a mile.

“Doc finished with the commission?” Liddell wanted to know. He corrected himself immediately when he saw the hurt look in the girl’s eyes. “What I mean is, have they finished the meeting yet?”

The girl blinked, nodded. “He’s expecting you. Go right in.”

The doctor was seated in an oversized desk chair that made him look smaller and frailer than he actually was. The furniture in the inside office was all massive. The chairs were leather, polished to a high patina, looked deep and comfortable. The carpeting was deep pile, the drapes of heavy material with gold threading.

His present plight had had no effect on the old man’s addiction to wild sports jackets. He was wearing a burgundy-colored one, a white shirt and a burgundy tie. Normally nervous and temperamental, today he was riding his swivel chair like a neurotic jockey. His wispy gray hair was sticking out from his head at right angles, testifying to the fact that he had spent much of the morning raking his fingers through it. A faint stubble of beard glistened along the line of his jaw.

He waved wearily from the depths of his chair. “Hope nobody saw you come in, Johnny. It could spoil your social standing.”

“How’d it go this morning?”

The doctor grinned glumly. “The verdict’s in. All that remains is to set the date for the axe to fall. In the meantime, I’m to take a rest.” He waved Liddell to a chair, waited until Liddell had drawn it up to the desk. “After thirty years of service to boxing, all of a sudden it’s guys like me who are responsible for the stink attached to it.” He spun his chair around. Behind him, he slid open a panel to reveal a small built-in refrigerator and a miniature wet bar. He reached in, snagged a bottle of Scotch, looked back over his shoulder. “On ice or drowned?”

“On ice,” Liddell told him. He watched the doctor bring some ice cubes from the refrigerator, dump them into two glasses. Then he drenched them down with Scotch. He swung around, slid one across the desk to Liddell. “Don’t worry about staining the desk. I won’t be using it much longer.”

“You get the full autopsy report yet?”

The man behind the desk nodded. “That’s what brought the hounds baying for my scalp.” He took a deep swallow from his glass. “Matter of fact, if it was somebody else examined the kid, I might feel the same way.”

“What did it show?”

“The god-damndest thing. Massive hemorrhages of the arteries around the heart. From all appearances that kid’s heart was as rotten as a five-week-old tomato. Any wet-behind-the-ears interne should have spotted it. And I okayed him to fight.”

“But you found his heart sound?”

“As sound as a pre-Roosevelt dollar. Of course, it could be like the commission says. Maybe I’m not qualified to judge what a sound heart is like any more.”

“Suppose you were right and they were wrong? Suppose the kid’s heart was sound when he went into the ring? Suppose it was the pounding he took in the midsection that caused the damage, sound heart or no sound heart?”

The doctor considered it, shook his head. “I’ve watched Monty Page for a long time. When he was at his peak he didn’t have that kind of a punch. And after using vodka in his water bottle for the last couple of years, it certainly hasn’t improved.” He sipped at his glass. “If anybody should have conked out last night, it should have been Page, not Rocky.”

“If it wasn’t Page’s punch, what could have caused that kind of damage?”

Doc Kenny set down his glass, leaned back in his chair. He drummed on the desk with restless fingers. His every movement showed that in his present state of mind he was fighting a losing battle to keep his composure, that he was a man hag-ridden by his own feelings of guilt. “I didn’t say the punches didn’t do it. I said Monty Page doesn’t have the punch to damage a sound heart. My examination didn’t show it, but the kid could have had an aneurism, a soft spot in an artery.” He shrugged. “People sometimes have them from birth. Then, without warning they pop. From the extent of the internal damage the autopsy revealed, that’s probably what happened.”

“Could a soft spot in an artery be caused by something other than an aneurism? A drug, maybe?”

The doctor leaned forward, clasped his hands as if in prayer, visibly controlling his inner turmoil. “Do you know something or is that just an idle question?”

Liddell shook his head. “I have a theory. It may be cockeyed as hell. But I’ve got to find out. Could any drug cause such a weak spot resulting in a hemorrhage?”

The old man slid out of his chair, paced nervously back and forth, occasionally locking his hands behind him. Finally, he stopped in front of Liddell’s chair, stared down at him. “Spiritus Glycerylis Nitratis.” He snapped his fingers. “I haven’t tried to pronounce that in years.”

“What is it?”

“It’s commonly called nitroglycerin. It’s a vasodilator.”

“Dilates the arteries?”

“Used in diseases like angina pectoris where the arteries constrict and cut down the blood flow to the heart. Nitroglycerin relaxes the arteries and increases the blood flow.”

“If it were given to a man with a normal heart?”

The doctor considered for a moment. “It would probably play hell. The arteries would glut with blood, they’d completely lose their elasticity—” He stared at Liddell. “Even a powder-puff puncher like Page might make them explode if he kept pounding under the heart.”

“How long does it take for nitroglycerin to work?”

“Two minutes generally.”

Liddell picked up his glass, held it up. “Maybe better days are coming.” He drained his glass, set it down. “At the beginning of the round Rocky was fine. In about two minutes he started slowing down. Then, all of a sudden he went down as if he were pole-axed.” He watched the doctor pour a refill. “How would they give it to him?”

“In his water bottle at the beginning of the round, maybe.”

“What are we waiting for?” Liddell tossed off his drink in one swallow, set the glass down. “Rocky’s stuff is probably right where they left it.”

The doctor reached for his telephone. He dialed a number with quick flicks of his index finger. "This is Doc Kenny. Nobody's cleaned out Rocky Nelson's dressing room, have they?" A look of relief wiped some of the worried frown from his face. "Good. Don't let anybody in there until I come down. That means nobody." He slammed the receiver back on its hook. "Let's get down there before somebody does get the idea of getting rid of the evidence."

"The one guy who'd be most interested in getting rid of it got very disinterested in the middle of the night. Maury Josephs turned up dead in a wrecked car."

"So I heard. You think Maury was involved?"

"He was in the kid's corner."

## Chapter 14

The challenger's dressing room, in the basement of the Arena, was Spartan in its simplicity. The four walls were painted a battleship gray. A rubbing table set in the center of the room dominated it. In the rear there was a lavatory and sink, beyond it a shower. A corner of the room had been partitioned off to serve as a closet.

Johnny Liddell followed the commission doctor into the dressing room. His eyes smarted from the heavy smell of liniment that pervaded it.

Doc Kenny stood in the doorway, balled fists on his hips, his eyes hopscotching around the room. Finally he saw the waterbucket close to the sink. He rushed across the room, lifted the water bottle from the bucket. He held the neck of the bottle to his nose, sniffed. The worried frown was back on his forehead.

He tilted the bottle to his lips, took a mouthful. He held the liquid in his mouth for a moment, then spat it out into the sink. He looked at Liddell, shook his head. "Nothing but water."

"You're sure?"

Kenny bobbed his head. "Nitroglycerin is kind of oily, has a pungent taste like alcohol." He bent down, examined the other contents of the bucket. "Just some sponges and a repair kit for cuts," he grunted. He straightened up, dried the palms of his hands down the side of his slacks. "It was a nice try, but we're right back where we started."

"Is that the only way nitroglycerin could have been administered?"

"The most effective way would be liquid nitroglycerin. There are tablets, though."

"How big are they?"

"Very tiny. But I can't see Rocky letting Josephs feed him anything, even an aspirin. He trusted him. But not far. And the way they'd have to be administered would be to put them under the kid's tongue."

Liddell walked over to the dressing table, hopped on the side of it, legs dangling. "Suppose three or four were stuck on the top of the kid's

mouthpiece and it was shoved into his mouth. Wouldn't that be the same as sticking them under the tongue?"

Doc Kenny stared at him. "I've never heard of it being done, but offhand I can't see why it wouldn't work." He looked around the dressing room. "In that case, there'd be traces of nitrites on the mouthpiece." He prowled around the dressing room, then stopped. "It wouldn't be here. They took it out when they carried the kid back to his corner. Probably got thrown out of the ring and swept up by now."

"How about the presence of nitrites in the kid's blood?"

"Indicative, but not conclusive. There might be a number of reasons for it being there. If we could prove how the nitrites got into the bloodstream, that would be another thing. How do we go about doing it?"

"Doc, you've been around this fight racket for a long time. Will you level with me if I tell you your answer could be helpful to both of us?"

"If you'll answer one question."

"Go ahead."

Doc Kenny peered at Liddell for a moment. "We've known each other for a long time, but we've never been what you'd call buddies. So how come when everybody who was close to me turns their back, you stand up? I haven't lived this long without knowing that everybody has an angle."

"Rocky Nelson thought he was going to be hit. He hired me to prevent it. I didn't. Getting the people who did it is important to me. Helping you is incidental."

The old man considered, bobbed his head. "Sounds frank enough. What do you want to know?"

"How did Maury Josephs come to be the kid's manager?"

"Three or four years ago, word was out that this kid, Rocky Nelson, was a comer. The mob held the ticket on Monty Page, the champ. By picking his opponents carefully, they had themselves a good meal ticket. But Monty can't stay away from that bottle and it was pretty clear that anyone who depended on him as a meal ticket better start getting used to eating at the Automat. So they took a hard look at Rocky."

"Josephs wasn't his manager at that time?"

Doc Kenny shook his head. "Barney Godkin was. And Barney didn't want to give the kid up." He grinned humorlessly. "Someone tipped the

commission that Barney had been a bad boy when he was younger. Since the someone is supposed to have been a newspaperman, the commission listened respectfully. Barney was notified that he wasn't acceptable as a manager and the kid would be barred from fighting in New York if he continued to associate with Barney." The grin broadened. "Barney's record was petty larceny compared to those of the guys who took over. But they never appeared as manager on record. They brought Maury Josephs in from out west to handle. Then started the build-up. The whole works—tank jobs and all."

"The fights were rigged? My impression was the kid was pretty good."

The doctor shrugged. "Maybe he was. He didn't have to be. Not with those boys calling the play. With them backing me, even I could be champ. They tell the other guy dive, he dives or it doesn't pay him to start reading any continued stories. A couple of tame sports writers on top of that, and how could you miss?"

"You wouldn't have any names?"

Kenny shook his head. "Nothing I could prove." He grinned lugubriously. "I got enough troubles right now. Why should I go making enemies who could tear me apart in print?"

"Stop being so pessimistic, Doc. They're ahead on points, sure. But the only thing that shows in the record books is the win or lose. We're far from losing and the last round isn't here yet."

"Looks to me like the fight's over. The two guys who know the answers are on slabs. And that don't make them very talkative."

"There are other guys who know the answers. The guys responsible for them being on those slabs."

"You don't think they're going to talk?"

"Who knows what a guy will do when he's being crowded? We start crowding them, maybe we pressure them into making a mistake. One mistake, Doc, that's all they need to make. One mistake."

The big silver jet was coming in for a landing at Municipal Airport in Los Angeles at about the same time Johnny Liddell was leaving the Arena in New York. It taxied slowly to a stop, the landing platform was wheeled into place.

Jackie Day was the first passenger to step out into the glaring sunlight onto the debarking platform. She stood for a moment, looked around and tried to convince herself that she was finally in the movie capital. She started down the steps, crossed to the glass-fronted air terminal.

Ray Carter had told her that she would be met at the newsstand by Lew Merton's chauffeur. She headed into the building, sought out the newsstand. She was fingering through a magazine when a uniformed chauffeur stepped up to her and took off his cap.

"Are you Miss Day?" he asked.

The redhead replaced the magazine in the rack, nodded. "Are you from Mr. Merton?" she said it loudly enough to draw a few impressed stares.

The chauffeur nodded. "I'll get your baggage if you'll give me your checks," he told her.

"I think the studio will be providing a complete wardrobe," she told him. "I'm having a few things sent. They'll arrive later."

"The car is out front," the driver told her. He turned, led the way toward the entrance. She followed him, conscious of the envious stares and the whispered discussions of who she might be. That she was somebody, no one who heard the mention of Lew Merton's name doubted. He handled only the very cream, and to send a chauffeured car for her could only mean that she was someone very special.

The chauffeur held the door open for her, waited until she was comfortably settled. Then he slid behind the wheel and headed for Beverly Hills. At Sunset Boulevard, he swung left, passed through the Strip into the beautifully landscaped Beverly Hills area. At Doheny, he headed up into the hills. The road climbed steeply past stucco houses with tile roofs, past modern ranch types that clung to the almost perpendicular lots. Near the top of Doheny, he turned into Lambert. At the last house on the road, he swung into a circular driveway, stopped in front of a steep flight of steps that led to the house which was set on a high spot that looked out over a vast panorama.

The chauffeur opened the door for her, watched with interest as she climbed the stairs to the entrance. Lew Merton opened the door in response to her knock. His eyes ran from the top of her head to her feet with appropriate and appreciative stops on the way. "Jackie?" he asked in a pleasant voice.

"Yes, Mr. Merton."



He brought her in, closed the door after her. “Nice trip?” he asked conversationally.

“A perfect trip.” She stood for a moment, stared into the expensively furnished living room with awe. “I’ve never been in such a beautiful house in my life.”

“I’m glad you like it. You’ll be staying here for the time being,” Merton told her. “Come on, I’ll show you to your room.”

She followed him to a broad flight of stairs that dog-legged to the upper floor. The room was at the back of the house, the last one on the balcony overlooking the hall. Inside, she walked to the room’s only window. Below it, the ground seemed to fall away for hundreds of feet to a clump of trees almost invisible to the window. Beyond, the vast panorama unveiled Sunset Strip in the distance. The window itself was covered by a heavy mesh.

“Just in case one of our guests is a sleep walker,” Merton indicated the mesh. “That first step would be a pip.” He watched the girl look around the room with wide-eyed wonder. “I’m going to get me a room just like this as soon as I have it made,” she told him.

“Freshen up. I’ll send Fritz up to see if you’ll be wanting anything.” Merton walked out the door, closed it after him.

Jackie walked to the window, stared out. She had finally arrived! Out there in the distance was North Hollywood. And in North Hollywood and Studio City and Universal City were the studios. All her life she had been heading in this direction. Now she had arrived!

She turned from the window at the sound of the door opening. The man who had driven her from the airport walked in, closed the door behind him.

There was a change in his demeanor. He no longer acted attentive, made no attempt to hide the inventory he was taking of her assets. “Well, how do you like our little place?”

“It’s very nice,” she told him coldly. “You can tell Mr. Merton that there’s nothing I need right now. When there is—”

The chauffeur grinned at her. “Come down off your high horse, princess. Don’t go hard-to-reach on me. You and me are going to be seeing a lot of each other for the next week or two.”

The redhead stared at him. “Look, I don’t want to make trouble for you. But if I tell Mr. Merton that you’re getting rambunctious—” She started to circle around him to the door.

He caught her by the wrist, spun her back into the room, knocked her sprawling across the bed. She lay there, staring at him, her dress hiked halfway up her hips.

Fritz walked to the door, brought out a key and locked it. He returned the key to his pocket. He turned, leered at her. “You ought to be grateful I’m even interested in touching you. A few weeks from now, no man in his right mind would lay a hand on you.”

“You’ve got to be crazy. They brought me out here to make movies and \_\_\_”

The man laughed heartily. “You’ll be making movies all right. They’ll be getting showings in every dive in Hong Kong, Port Said and Tijuana.”

Jackie jumped up from the bed, ran to the door, started pounding on it with clenched fists. “Mr. Merton!” she screamed. “Mr. Merton!”

“Save your breath. Merton’s gone. So’s the help. The place is closed for two weeks. There’s just you and me.” He walked over, caught her by the shoulder, spun her around. He slashed the flat of his hand across her face, then backhanded it into position. The scream died away to a whimper in her throat. A slight trickle of blood ran from the corner of her full mouth. “I hate screaming women,” he told her.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she whimpered.

“You’re too dangerous to a lot of people to be allowed to run around. We’re going to fix it so nobody would believe you even if you did want to talk.”

“I will. You’ll have to kill me. If you don’t let me go, I promise you I’ll talk. You can’t keep me locked up here forever.”

“We don’t intend to. At the end of two weeks we’re going to let you go. Even better, we’re going to see that you’re in a place where you’ll have plenty of supplies.”

“Supplies?”

Fritz bobbed his head. “Heroin. Straight stuff. You see, in the next ten days you’re going to become a mainliner. By then, all you’ll ever think about is getting enough to feed that monkey. And the only way you’ll get that kind of money is from men. In Tijuana the men aren’t that particular. And the girls don’t need much. Just their shots.”

The redhead backed away from him, horror etched in her face. “No. Don’t do that to me. I won’t talk.”

“You only think you don’t want it, baby. A week from now you’ll be screaming and begging for it. You’ll learn all the tricks I’ve got to teach you to make a go of Tijuana. You’ll learn them just so you can get that fix.”

The girl continued to back away from him until the wall was against her back. She flattened against it as if she could stay outside his reach. When he continued to close in on her, she came at him with clenched fingers, clawing nails. He brushed the hands aside with a brutal chop, then hit her on the side of the neck with the side of his hand.

She slumped to the floor without a sound.

The man picked her up, carried her to the bed, dropped her on it. He walked over to the top drawer of the dressing stand, brought out a hypodermic. He held it point up, pushed out the air. Then he bent over the girl, felt for a vein and shot the contents of the needle into it.

“Enjoy it while you can, baby. A real needle, first-class stuff. In Tijuana you’ll be using eyedroppers for a spike and glad to get them.”

The city room of *The Dispatch* was just beginning to come to life when Johnny Liddell walked in. Half a dozen reporters, their hats perched on the backs of their heads, their jackets hanging from the backs of their chairs, sat with ears glued to telephones. At other desks, rewrite men were busily rehashing the follows on the stories that had appeared in *The Express* and the other morning sheets and putting stories phoned in by district men onto paper. From another room, the teletypes added their deep voices to the clatter with the occasional ping of a bell to signify a particularly important item.

Johnny headed across the city room, past the city editor’s desk where four copymen were working on the rim and two in the slot slashing copy to size and repairing battered grammar.

Muggsy Kiely’s office was a small cubicle that was made up of half glass partitions and the bare wall of the building. The furnishings consisted of a battered typewriter, a scarred desk and a coat tree. The walls were decorated with discoloring clippings of some of the first by-lined stories carrying the name “Veronica Kiely.”

She looked up from her typewriter as he walked in. “Anything?”

He nodded. "Let's go in to see Jim so I don't have to tell this twice."

Muggsy hopped off her chair with alacrity, led the way to the frosted-glass door marked "Managing Editor." Jim Kiely sat at an oversized desk, checking through a stack of galleys of time copy that would bulk out the bulldog edition until all the district men and legmen had filed. He picked them up, impaled them on the hook on the side of his desk.

His long, inquisitive nose seemed to be twitching. "Well?"

"Rocky Nelson could have been murdered. And in front of all the people in the arena and the ones watching the idiot box," he told them.

"How?"

"If he was fed nitroglycerin tablets, they would glut his arteries with blood. The constant pounding around the heart could have exploded the arteries."

Muggsy stared at him open mouthed. "How about that?" She turned to the man behind the desk. "Could it happen like that, Jim?"

Kiely shrugged. "Ask him. It's his story."

Liddell bobbed his head. "Doc Kenny says it could. It's the only explanation. Rocky's heart was in good shape at the four-P.M. weigh-in. A few hours later it pops like an overripe melon." He looked from Muggsy to the managing editor and back. "Nitroglycerin takes two minutes to take effect. If he got it when the round started, by the time the round was two minutes old, his arteries were the size of his thumb and inelastic."

"How do we prove it?"

"We bait a trap to draw them out of the woodwork and then depend on our persuasiveness to get them talking."

"And what do we use as bait?" Kiely wanted to know.

"Me," Liddell told him. "Doc Kenny mentioned a tame sports reporter. He wouldn't name names. Would you have any idea who he was talking about?"

The managing editor pursed his lips, shook his head. He lifted the phone on the corner of his desk. "Call the sports desk. Send Farrell in here." He dropped the receiver on its hook, reached for his pipe and tobacco pouch. He started filling the bowl of the pipe. "You want to tell us how you plan to lure these characters out of the woodwork?"

Liddell shook his head. “I’m going to play it pretty much by ear. I’d rather not try to lay out a plan.”

There was a knock at the door, the bespectacled sports writer walked in. He grinned at Liddell. “Hear you were a little late for your appointment last night, huh, Johnny?”

Liddell grunted. “Damn near got pneumonia waiting for him.”

Farrell turned to Jim Kiely, who sat sucking on his pipe. “You wanted me, chief?”

The managing editor nodded at Liddell. “Johnny does.”

The sports man turned back to Liddell. “What can I do for you?”

“I want you to identify a guy described as a tame sports writer.”

“You’ve got to be more specific than that. There’s Eddie Lawrence, who did the hockey broadcast on the air for Belgrade cigarettes. He uses his column to plug anybody and everybody connected with hockey. It’s pretty common gossip that he’s sold out down to his socks—”

“This guy would be in a spot to help build Rocky Nelson to a title-bout status.”

Farrell snorted disgustedly. “The Arena mob owns Matt Dennis of *The Express* body and soul. He’s not even subtle any more.”

“What about his paper? Do they stand for it?”

“*The Express*?” Jim Kiely made the name sound like a dirty word. “It doesn’t pay its men what you’d call walking-around money. It doesn’t care what they make on the side. Or how.”

“Matt Dennis was a big name in his day,” Liddell countered. “Couldn’t he line up something better than *The Express*?”

Kiely shook his head. “He came to us and every other paper in town. None of us wanted to take a chance with him after he broke down five or six years ago.”

“But he’s been dry all that time from what I understand,” Liddell pointed out.

“He hasn’t been drinking. But he’s doing something worse. Selling out his by-line.” Kiely shook his head. “He’s dead as far as any decent paper is concerned.”

Liddell looked thoughtful. “Where can I find him around this time of day? He wouldn’t be at the office working on a morning paper.”

“What would you want with him?” Muggsy wanted to know.

“It’s an old story. You never miss a slice off a cut loaf. Once you take money from one source, it’s a lot easier to take it from all sides.”

Farrell looked inquiringly at the managing editor, drew a nod.

“Try Stillson’s Gym,” he told Liddell. “That’s Matt’s home away from home. That’s where he gets his instructions from the boys.”

The entrance to Stillson’s Gym was a narrow doorway on Tenth Avenue, near the corner of 48th Street. A constant stream of heavy-shouldered, slim-waisted youngsters flowed in and out of the doorway, some with faces battered almost beyond recognition, others proudly bearing the first of what is destined to be an endless chain of plasters over smashed eyebrows or battered noses.

A steep, poorly lit stairway led to the gym on the second floor. At the head of the stairs, Johnny Liddell dropped a quarter into the turnstile, pushed his way through.

A thick fog of cigar smoke swirled lazily near the ceiling. The heavy smell of distilled liniment and perspiration was so thick as to be almost tangible as he walked in. A low hum of conversation was spiced by the rhythmic chatter of punching bags, the scuffing of skipping feet, the thud of punches against the heavy bags.

Liddell stood in the entrance until his eyes became accustomed to the glare of the lights overhead and the sting of the smoke. Fighters were working out in all corners of the big room, which had obviously once been a number of rooms. The walls between had been knocked down to make space for three regulation-sized rings.

In the first ring, a huge, heavily muscled Negro wearing a head guard was boxing listlessly with an old chopping block, sharpening his jab by battering the older man’s painfully mangled nose. Around the wall, other men were working out on pulleys, shadow boxing, feinting and weaving or skipping rope tirelessly. It made Liddell tired just to look at them.

These are the club fighters, the rank and file of the boxing world. They pick up the crumbs as fill-ins and preliminary boys at the bigger arenas. They get paid to bob and weave, to slug toe to toe, to smash and batter each

other until one or the other can no longer shuffle in to absorb the bone-crushing punishment. There are no pages devoted to their careers in *Ring Magazine*.

These are the hopefuls, unknowingly understudying the punch-drunk wrecks who clutter up the lobby of the clubs on fight nights or the sidewalks of what used to be known as Jacobs' Beach during the day. They live in the eternal hope of being tapped by a promoter for a "finals at St. Nick's" or a "semi in the Arena." They usually settle for an opening preliminary at either place. There they batter each other into unconsciousness before an empty house before the regular crowd arrives for the big bout.

Liddell's eyes continued to hopscotch around the gym. He caught sight of Matt Dennis, sports editor of *The Express*, talking to a coatless fat man in the rear. The fat man seemed to be doing all the listening. He stood with his hands in his pants pockets, his fedora pushed to the back of his head, chewing on an unlighted cigar.

Liddell started across the gym to where the two men stood. The sports writer broke off in the middle of a sentence when he saw Liddell approaching. He wondered what Johnny Liddell wanted with him.

Matt Dennis had no illusions about himself. He knew what the other sports writers said about him. He knew that everything he wrote was suspect, that it was known that it had been bought and paid for.

Once, he had done a widely syndicated column and was considered one of the best in his trade. Frequent bouts with the bottle had cost him outlet after outlet until the head of the syndicate had called him in for a final warning.

"Matt, I'm not going to put on any kid gloves. We're getting too many cancellations and the other syndicates are gobbling up what we're losing." When Dennis tried to shrug it off and argue that they'd be back begging for his column, the syndicate manager shook his head. "You're kidding yourself. There are some men who can drink and some who can't. If you don't face up to it, you're going to end in the gutter."

A year later, the syndicate refused to renew his contract. Then started the slow, certain descent. In the beginning, it wasn't hard to line up a job with a good paper on the sports desk. But, after he lost one by-line after another, the major papers started avoiding him.

*The Express* was the last stop on the road down. He took the job because he had to eat. Because *The Express* paid next to nothing for a man with his

tastes, he started accepting outside contributions. The other sports writers knew it and so did his immediate superiors. But having his by-line in *The Express* was worth making some concessions.

*The Express* had once been an important paper in New York. That was when there were twelve dailies on the stands. It was hidebound, ultraconservative, but important. It never really recovered from World War I and the revolution in morals and customs. It watched the birth of tabloid journalism with contempt and refused to admit, even to itself, that tabs were there to stay. It staggered along during the twenties, took serious body blows in the month that followed Black Friday and entered the thirties a shabby ghost of its once important self. Little by little, the tight band of ultraconservatives who constituted its *raison d'être* were dying off.

As revenues fell off, so did the good staffers. They were lured away with promises of good pay by the more solvent papers. By the time World War II rolled around, *The Express* was a dreary has-been and its battered owners put it on the block.

The new owners, after the first flush of enthusiasm, came face to face with the realization that there was no longer any room for *The Express*. The ultraconservatives who once kept its head above water had been plowed under along with surplus pigs by the Roosevelt administration. The conservatives were represented by two papers, the liberals by two others, and the middle-of-the-roaders by still another. Advertisers could see no reason to stretch their budgets thinner by supporting a sixth.

But, necessity is often the mother of inspiration. When Thomas Bruton III bought the reeling *Express* he did it with the cold-blooded purpose of using it to project himself and his wife to the top of New York's social heap. The project, along with the newspaper, was a dismal failure and Bruton decided to bow out. When attempts to salvage it failed, he made the *beau geste* of turning it over to his staff in lieu of severance pay.

It was then that inspiration entered the picture. Mike Sanders, the managing editor, was aware that there was no room for *The Express* in the normal scheme of things. He was also aware that in journalism, as in most things, sensationalism and accent on abnormality could be made to pay off. *The Express* concentrated on stories that might only merit a stick of type in the other papers, leaned heavily on "As Told To" stories purportedly dictated by people in the more lurid headlines, accented sex, violence and brutality.

Circulation increased in the early days of its new format and advertising slowly followed circulation, although many of the advertisers were not so



welcome in the other papers.

Then the outcasts of journalism began to discover that the door was open if their names meant circulation or a following. Matt Dennis had been in the forefront of that contingent. They worked for practically scale, because they knew they were unemployable elsewhere and scale was better than nothing. In return, the management closed its eyes to freeloading and worse on the part of its more favored staffers. Again, Matt Dennis was in the forefront of this contingent.

Today he had been dry for almost five years. Even *The Express* would not tolerate missed deadlines, absenteeism and all of the other shortcomings that get poured from a bottle.

Menthol had taken the place of whiskey. When he felt the flood of saliva at the back of his throat that begged for the astringent action of a double shot, Dennis turned to the menthol tube. He had such frequent recourse to it that the standing gag was that you could find Matt Dennis in a dark room by following the smell of menthol.

As Liddell walked up, the sports writer brought out the menthol tube. He took a deep sniff in each nostril, offered it to Liddell. "Have one on me?"

Liddell grinned. "Too early in the day for me."

Dennis indicated the fat man with a nod of his head. "You know Mike Curtis? He manages Billy Fox." He pointed toward the ring where the big Negro was stalking his sparring partner from corner to corner. "Looks like Billy rates a crack at Monty Page's title now that Rocky Nelson is out of the running."

Liddell looked back into the ring. The Negro's cue-ball head glistened with a thin sheen of sweat; his chest was covered with heavy caracul-like hair. He looked slow. "They could have Wayne King provide the musical accompaniment," he grunted. "The only thing I can see in him is that he makes Carnera look like he started smoking too young."

"You rate as an expert, mister?" the fat man wanted to know. Dried half moons of sweat stained the armpits of his shirt, the cold cigar rolled from one corner of his mouth to the other. "What was so great about Rocky Nelson? Just because he beat Marty Taub? That win was strictly a fluke."

Liddell grinned glumly. "I hear a lot of people were surprised," he agreed.

The fat man's eyes narrowed, he turned back to Dennis. "I better get Billy under a shower, Matt. I'll talk to you later." He ignored Liddell, headed for the ring.

"You know something, Liddell? You've got a real way about you. It takes some guys longer than others to get themselves disliked. You just broke the track record," the sports writer told him.

"I'll stay up all night crying." Liddell looked around. "Any place we can talk privately?"

"About what?"

Liddell shrugged. "I may have something to sell that you might want to buy. It's exclusive enough to take your name off the sports page and put it on page one."

The sports writer considered. "Let's go in the office. Nobody's in there." He turned, headed for a short corridor on the far side of the room. In the ring, the fat man was bonging the bell to signify the end of the round.

Dennis led the way past a crudely lettered sign that read: "Showers, Dressing Rooms. No Ladies Permitted." He stopped at the first door down the corridor, pushed it open. Liddell followed him in.

Inside there was a battered desk, a couple of wooden chairs and two metal cabinets that leaned drunkenly against each other.

Dennis dropped into the chair behind the desk, waited until Liddell had drawn his chair up to it.

"So what's the scoop?" He dug the menthol out of his pocket, used it. "And if it's worth a damn how come you're giving it to *The Express* instead of your buddies at *The Dispatch*?"

"Money. *The Dispatch* pays off in friendship. I have a lot of trouble getting my landlord to take it for the rent. I figure your sheet might come up with some loot."

The sports writer grinned knowingly. "Another legend shot to hell. Liddell, who never sells out, wearing a price tag. That's the biggest shock I've gotten since I found out that all whores don't have hearts of gold. What are you selling?"

"An exposé that will rock this racket like an atom bomb."

Dennis wiped the tip of his nose with the side of his index finger. "Exposés of the boxing racket are a dime a dozen. Nobody's ever proven

any of the things they keep exposing.”

“I can.” Liddell brought a cigarette from his pocket, lit it and expelled twin streams through his nostrils to wash out the menthol smell. “Before he died, Rocky Nelson gave me a lot of papers naming names and places. I wasn’t to use it unless something happened to him.”

The man behind the desk frowned. “Where are these papers?”

“In a safe place. Last night somebody broke into my office and got a set of them. I’ve got copies.”

The frown deepened. “Do I get a look at them before I start bidding?”

Liddell shook his head. “I can give you an idea of the kind of stuff that’s in them.” He hollow cheeked a deep drag on the cigarette. “Maury Josephs took over the kid when the big boys tagged him for a build up. Josephs came from the west, representing Lew Merton. Rocky was supposed to give the boys a payday by going the tank for Marty Taub, giving them a return match setup. He crossed them and—”

“How much are you asking?”

Liddell shrugged. “Make me an offer. Make it good enough so I don’t have to go peddling the stuff.”

Dennis considered. “I’ll have to take it up with the front office. Don’t do anything until you hear from me.”

## Chapter 15

The Cuernavaca was an entirely different place by day. The coat-check cubbyhole was empty and dark. An unshaded worklight had been set in the center of the dance floor. It spilled a puddle of light around the bandstand, overflowed into the ringside tables. A wavy-haired man was seated at the piano, his jacket hung over the back of his chair. A girl was leaning against the piano, singing to his accompaniment.

The rest of the room was in semidarkness. Chairs were piled on the tables, a man with an apron strapped around his waist was doing a halfhearted job of chasing dust around with a broom and sweeping up cigarette butts to be dumped into the wastebasket he was carrying.

Matt Dennis circled the supper-room floor, headed for the door leading backstage. He pushed through, followed the corridor to the flight of steps leading to the office above.

Ray Carter was sitting behind the desk in his office when the door opened and the sports writer walked in. He glanced up with a frown.

“I didn’t hear you knock,” he growled.

“I didn’t,” the sports writer told him.

“In the future knock,” Carter told him coldly.

“In the old days when you were knocking your brains out, you were glad if I took the time to talk to you, let alone—”

“Look, Dennis,” Carter’s voice was deceptively mild. “These are not the old days. Back then, we were both taking money from the same boss. Today you’re taking my money. That makes a difference. When you take a man’s money you don’t call him by his first name any more. You don’t go walking into his office like you had a right to. You hold your hat in your hand like any other employee.”

Dennis started to retort, thought better of it. “Sorry. Next time I’ll knock.”

“Better still, don’t be coming around. Somebody sees you coming in here, they know you’re on the teat, you’re no good to us any more. Don

Ameche made a big discovery.” He indicated the telephone on the corner of his desk. “Learn how to use it.”

“What I’ve got is so hot it could melt the wires,” Dennis told him. He pulled up a chair, sat down unbidden, undeterred by the scowl on the big man’s face. “You know Rocky Nelson wrote out a lot of stuff that could make the first pages. Right?”

The frown deepened. “What Rocky Nelson wrote don’t mean a damn. Rocky’s dead. So is his information.”

The sports writer shrugged elaborately. “Then what I’ve got won’t interest you. A private eye just offered to sell me copies of stuff Rocky left with him. The originals were stolen from his office last night. But he has copies.” He started to get up.

“What private eye?”

“Johnny Liddell.”

The nightclub man swore under his breath. “When did this happen?”

“A half hour ago at the gym. I’m in there talking to Mike Curtis about the build-up we got set for Billy Fox. In comes the shamus. Wants to see me in private he says. That’s when he makes the offer. An exclusive that takes my name off the sports pages onto the front page.”

“He could be bluffing.”

Dennis shook his head. “He told me some of the stuff in it. Dynamite and straight from the horse’s mouth. Nobody could know this stuff unless he got it direct.”

“How much does he want?”

“He wants me to make an offer.” He studied the expression on the nightclub man’s face.

“What’s to keep a twister like this from having more than one copy?” Carter wanted to know. “We pay off and maybe he gives a copy to his buddies at *The Dispatch* for auld lang syne.”

The sports writer shrugged. “That’s a chance you have to take.”

“How soon does he have to have your answer?”

Dennis shrugged. “I told him I’d have to take it to the front office.”

Carter nodded thoughtfully. “Okay. Stall him until we can figure out if there’s a better way to handle it.”

The sports writer started to argue, thought better of it, shrugged. “If you’re figuring on going up against this guy, better you than me. He’s been around a long time and a lot of guys have gone up against him who didn’t stick around to see how the game ended.”

“Don’t worry. We won’t be sending you up against him,” Carter told him contemptuously. He picked up a pencil from the desk, resumed jotting down a column of figures, a chore in which he had been engaged when Dennis walked into the room.

He gave no sign that he noticed when the sports writer finally got up and walked out. When the door closed behind the other man, Carter bounced the pencil off the desk top with a violent motion. He swore loudly and fluently.

His job had been to get the incriminating papers. He had assured Mitch Corday that the mission had been successful and Mitch had passed the word along.

Now it turned out that Liddell had copies, which, if put into the wrong hands, could put the organization into a very bad light. Worse still, it would put Ray Carter in the position of having taken a contract and failing to deliver. That, he knew, was no way to break ninety. Maury Josephs had found that out the hard way less than twenty-four hours before!

He reached for the pencil, doodled on the paper containing the column of figures. Finally, he reached for the telephone, pressed the button on the base three times.

Mendy’s voice came across the wire. “Yeah, Mr. Carter?”

“Come into the office!” Carter snapped at him. He replaced the receiver.

The correct thing to do was to notify Corday that things had gone wrong. But that would be an admission that he had blundered. It would be far better to get the copy or copies Liddell held. If he had only the one copy and put a price on it, it would be fairly simple. If he was planning a double cross, that was a different matter entirely!

There was a knock on the door. It opened and Mendy walked into the room. He stood in front of the desk, his washed-out eyes showing no expression.

Carter leaned back, studied the short, squat man. “When Sid Weiss sent you in here, he told me what a tough man you were. How would you like a

chance to prove it?”

Mendy shrugged. “Tell me what you want done.”

Carter rolled the pencil between thumb and forefinger. Suddenly he exerted pressure. The pencil snapped in two. “Ever hear of Johnny Liddell?” When the short man shook his head: “He’s a private eye here in town.”

Mendy sneered. “A private cop? Where I come from we eat them.”

Carter eyed the other man appraisingly. “This one could give you a bad case of indigestion. Fatal maybe.”

“I never met a guy who don’t bleed when he’s cut. This guy is no different.”

“He’s been around a long time. A lot of hot shots who tried to take him aren’t.”

“So he’s not just from yesterday. Yesterday ain’t my concern. Whether he’s around tomorrow. That is. Right?”

Carter nodded ponderously. “Right.” He tossed the pieces of splintered pencil at the wastebasket, leaned back. “He has something we want. Maybe he’s smart and makes a deal. Your job will be to see that all sales are final.”

“Why waste the gold? We could pay off in lead.”

“Because a hit means heat. One thing we don’t need is heat. And don’t question my orders.”

“I didn’t mean anything—”

Carter bobbed his head. “That’s right. You didn’t mean anything. You don’t mean anything and you never will mean anything until you learn to do what you’re told.”

“You’re the boss.” The short man shrugged.

“That’s something you want to remember,” Carter told him.

Mendy nodded wordlessly. He dropped his eyes so the big man behind the desk could not see the hatred in them.

“You know Matt Dennis, the guy from *The Express*?” He waited until the short man nodded. “He’s going to make a meet with Liddell. You’re going with him. It’s up to you to make sure that he’s not trying to cross us by holding out.”

Johnny Liddell spent what was left of the afternoon trying to locate Jackie Day, the Cuernavaca showgirl. He finally traced her to the Spotlight Club, an old residence hotel on 48th Street. The clerk behind the desk in the lobby knew her, but hadn't seen her all day. He permitted himself to be persuaded to ring her room, finally hung up, dropped the receiver on its hook.

"Probably didn't come home last night," he shrugged. "It could happen with these chicks." He was in his sixties, a light stubble of beard glistened along his jawline. The way he said it made it sound like he was sorry it no longer happened with him.

It was dark by the time Liddell finally inserted the key in the lock of his apartment. He pushed the door open and stepped through.

Matt Dennis sat in the armchair facing the door. Liddell's hand streaked for his right lapel.

"You'd never make it," a voice behind him warned. "Besides, this is a social call."

Liddell turned slowly, saw a short man, almost as broad as he was tall. The .38 in his hand looked as big as a cannon and was pointed at a spot about an inch above Liddell's belt buckle.

"Real social," Liddell grunted. He stood with the tips of his fingers brushing the butt of his .45. "What's that you've got in your hand? Your calling card?"

Mendy twisted the corners of his mouth up in a smile that failed to reach his eyes. "We hear all about how you shoot first and ask questions after. We didn't want you to get nervous because you're not expecting us."

Liddell turned back to Dennis. "How'd you know the number of my apartment?"

The sports writer shrugged. "New invention called the house phone. You pick it up and ask."

"I didn't know you went in for breaking and entering. The police sometimes get a little narrow-minded about that."

Dennis managed to look hurt. "Why would the police stick their nose in? This is strictly a business proposition. I talked to the front office. We're interested." He dug into his pocket, pulled out the menthol tube, applied it to each nostril. "You can put up the gun, Mendy."



The short man circled around Liddell. “Let’s both put up the gun. That way I feel more welcome.” He reached around, slid his hand under Liddell’s jacket, tugged the .45 free from its holster. Then he sidled past him, walked over and tossed the gun on the couch. He perched on the arm of Dennis’ chair.

“So you’re interested. That still doesn’t explain what you’re doing in here with a gofer,” Liddell growled.

Mendy scowled. “A what?”

“A gofer. It’s written all over you. You’re the type to go for coffee, go for cigarettes, go for anything the other boys want.”

The short man growled under his breath, started to get up. The man in the chair caught him by the sleeve, pulled him back down.

“No sense making enemies, Liddell. Mendy is along just to make sure all sales are final. I figured we could talk more private here than on the outside. So we let ourselves in to wait for you.” He watched with a frown while Liddell walked to the table in front of the couch, poured himself a drink. “We’re willing to be real generous, but we’ve got to be sure there isn’t more than one copy.”

“This guy wouldn’t be the one who tore my office to hell last night, would it?” Liddell wanted to know.

“We didn’t come here for conversation,” Mendy growled at the sports writer. “Get what you came for and let’s get out of here before I take him apart.”

Liddell grinned at him. “You know something, tough man? You just blew the deal. The papers aren’t for sale now.”

Dennis sniffled, touched the ball of his index finger to his nostrils. “You’re making a bad mistake, Liddell. We came for those papers. We can’t leave without them.” He sighed. “Don’t make us get rough, Liddell.”

Liddell swirled the liquor around the side of his glass. Suddenly, without warning, he threw its contents into the face of the short man. Mendy dropped the gun he was holding, clawed at his eyes with both hands. Liddell crossed, kicked the gun across the room and backhanded Dennis back into the chair when he started to rise.

He caught the short man by his lapels, yanked him to his feet. “Who sent you here?”

“The paper,” Dennis bleated. “They sent him with me because I was carrying so much money.” He dug into his pocket, brought out a thick roll of bills.

Liddell lifted Mendy to the tips of his toes. “Who sent you?”

The rubbing succeeded in wiping away the blinding liquor. Mendy glared hatred at Liddell from bloodshot eyes. He tried for Liddell’s shin with the tip of his shoe, tumbled over the man in the chair as Liddell shoved him back. He crashed into a heap on the far side of the chair. He lay for a moment, spewing profanity.

Then he was on his feet, moving with unsuspected speed. He caught Liddell on the side of the jaw with a right that set Johnny’s ears ringing and his head spinning. He shook off a hard right from Liddell that opened a gash on his cheekbone, tried to bore in. He threw a hamlike fist at Liddell’s face, missed, gasped as Johnny sank his left in the short man’s middle almost to his cuff. Mendy dropped his hands to protect his midsection just long enough for Liddell to slam a hard right to the side of the man’s jaw. He dropped like a pole-axed steer.

Dennis’ menthol tube was doing double duty. He stared with horrified eyes at the man on the floor. Painfully, he dragged his eyes up to Liddell. “You got to be crazy. You got to know what you’re going up against.”

“Maybe you’d like to tell me who sent him. And who gave you that money?”

Dennis shook his head. He squeezed back against the pillows of the chair, shook his head again. “I told you. The paper wants to buy what Rocky Nelson left with you. There’s twenty thousand in the roll and—”

“You’re a liar. *The Express* wouldn’t pay twenty thousand for an eyewitness account of the Creation.” He eyed the sports writer coldly. “Who sent you, Dennis?”

The newspaperman started to protest, was interrupted by a rapping on the door.

Liddell scowled, walked to the door, pulled it open. He stared at the man in the hallway for a moment. “Imagine meeting you here!”

Inspector Herlehy of Homicide West stood in the hallway, chewing on a wad of gum. His sheriff’s-type fedora was shoved to the back of his head. “Do I get asked in?”

Liddell stepped aside, let the inspector walk past him. Herlehy stopped at the sight of the man on the floor and the frightened man in the chair. He turned inquisitive eyes on Liddell, kept pounding on the gum.

“They were just going,” Liddell explained.

Herlehy looked back at the man in the chair, wrinkled his nose at the menthol-laden cloud that seemed to surround him. “You’re Matt Dennis, aren’t you?” he wanted to know.

The newspaperman nodded. “Yeah.” He looked anxiously to where Mendy was painfully sitting up. “Like Liddell said, we’re just leaving.” He hopped out of his chair, caught Mendy under the arm and helped him to his feet. He steered him to the door and out into the hallway.

## Chapter 16

Inspector Herlehy watched the door close behind the sports writer and the man he was supporting. He tugged the fedora off the back of his head, tossed it on the table in front of the couch. He spotted the .45 Mendy had tossed onto it. He shifted the wad of gum to the other side of his mouth. “Yours?”

Liddell nodded. He walked over to where the .38 lay, picked it up by the barrel. “This one was his.” He held it out, butt first, to the inspector. “Maybe your boys would like to check it out.”

“Who was he, Johnny?”

“Is this an official visit, Inspector?”

Herlehy shook his head. “Unofficial.”

“In that case, let me buy you a drink.” Liddell picked up the Scotch bottle, poured two fingers into each of the glasses. He offered one to the white-haired inspector. “I didn’t get an introduction. He was supposed to be body-guarding twenty thousand dollars that *The Express* was going to pay me for an exposé of the boxing racket.”

Herlehy pursed his lips, whistled noiselessly. “That’s a lot of money for that rag to come up with.”

“Too much.” Liddell dropped onto the couch, waved the homicide man into the big armchair. “My guess is that it came from the mob behind the racket.”

“Do you really have the facts?”

Liddell took a swallow from his glass, grinned glumly. Then he shook his head.

Herlehy grunted, gave the gum an extra pounding. “You sure like to live dangerously. How did you figure to persuade these guys that you did have?”

“There actually was a documented exposé, written out by Rocky Nelson. I had it in the safe in my office. Last night, somebody busted in and got hold of it.” He squinted at the inspector. “Today, I told Matt Dennis that I had a copy of it.”

“Figuring he’d go right to the right people with the word?” Herlehy sniffed at his Scotch, tasted it. It tasted as good as it smelled. “You sure got fast action.”

“Those boys saw the original. They must know it’s dynamite. They couldn’t afford to wait.” He grinned ruefully. “But I must admit that I didn’t expect them to be waiting for me here.”

Inspector Herlehy sprawled back comfortably in the armchair, studied the high polish on the tips of his shoes. “Odd coincidence that Rocky Nelson should have died the same day these characters got their hands on that material,” he commented.

Liddell grinned. “Real odd.”

“Any connection?”

The grin on Johnny’s face grew broader. “You never did tell me how come you dropped by, Inspector. I usually have my conversations with you over a desk in headquarters with a stenographer taking down the minutes.”

“Like I said, it’s unofficial.” Herlehy dragged his eyes from the tips of his shoes, studied Liddell’s face. “You’ve had a pretty busy day today. First, you show up at the morgue pretending to be a reporter.”

Liddell shook his head. “I never said I was. Muggsy flashed the press card.”

“I know. But when I found out who she was, it didn’t take too much of a guess to tell who was with her.” He swirled the liquor around the sides of the glass. “You told the morgue attendant that you didn’t know Willie the Gun. You didn’t even ask to see Maury Josephs’ body.”

“You’ve been doing your homework, Inspector.”

Herlehy chomped on the gum for a moment. “Did you know Willie?”

Liddell debated for a moment, decided to play it straight. “I saw him only once in my life. Last night at the Cuernavaca. He was laying at the foot of the stairs leading to the offices. He had a broken neck.”

“On the level?”

Liddell nodded.

Herlehy sighed. “I’m sorry you feel you have to hold out on us, Johnny. You could make things a lot easier for us if you leveled.”

“If I tried to convince you that Rocky Nelson was murdered in the ring last night in front of hundreds of thousands of witnesses, would you believe me?”

“You didn’t try.”

“Because you and everybody else would think I was bucking for a scholarship to the loony bin.”

“Suppose you try.” Herlehy took a deep swallow from his glass. “It’s all unofficial.”

“Rocky was afraid that the organization would punish him for double-crossing them in the Marty Taub case. He was supposed to take a dive and they took a bath by betting against him. As insurance, he wrote out everything he knew about the racket and the people in it. I don’t know if he let them have a look at it or whether he just told them the information was in a safe place. It bought him the title bout.”

“The information was in your safe?”

Liddell nodded. “The only person who knew that Rocky had any dealings with me, outside of Pinky and myself, was a show girl from the Cuernavaca line named Jackie Day. The night before he signed for the bout Ray Carter gave the girl the night off. Her job was to find out who was holding that information. Either she put two and two together when I dropped by at his request, or she wormed it out of him in the hay. Hell, you can’t spend all night whispering sweet nothings into a broad’s ear. And a guy like Rocky, he’d like to brag how he had the big boys over a barrel.”

Herlehy drained his glass, set it down. He brought out a fresh stick of gum, wrapped the chewed-out wad in the wrapper and set it down in an ashtray. “You know this for a fact or you guessing?”

“I know for a fact that someone knew I had the dope. A someone who knew that Rocky was going to get hit in that ring, but who wasn’t worried because they’d have the stuff I was supposed to turn over if anything happened to the kid.”

The inspector stuck the fresh stick of gum between his teeth, started pounding at it. He considered, nodded. “Makes sense.”

“I went to the Cuerna to ask this Jackie Day a few questions. She told Ray Carter I was in the house and when I finally went backstage, she was missing. That elusive someone didn’t want me to question her.”

“She still missing?”

Liddell bobbed his head. “She didn’t go back to her hotel last night. She hasn’t been seen all day.” He raised his eyebrows. “She hasn’t been found by your boys?”

Herlehy shook his head. “Mind if I use your phone?”

“Be my guest.” While Herlehy crossed to the phone and dialed a number, Liddell refilled the glasses.

After a moment, the inspector got through. “This is Herlehy in Homicide. I want a picture of a girl named Jackie Day in the line at the Cuernavaca. The club isn’t going to want to cooperate. So have one of your boys drop by Murray Forman’s studio. He does all the publicity pictures for spots like that. Have enough copies made to cover all airports, stations and bus terminals. I want to know if that girl left town last night or this morning.” He listened for a moment, bobbed his head. “Right. Get the report directly to my office.” He dropped the receiver on its hook, walked back to his chair.

“So it’s not just idle curiosity?” Liddell handed him his refill. “But it’s still not official?”

Herlehy shook his head. “We don’t have a thing we can take to the d.a. We’ve been after the big shots in the boxing racket for years. But no one will cooperate. If we do get a witness, he suddenly develops a fatal disease, like lead poisoning. It only has to happen a couple of times and the rest of the boys get the message.”

“What brought you into this one?”

“The coroner’s report on Willie the Gun and Maury Josephs indicated that Willie had died quite a while before Maury. Yet, Maury’s injuries were so extensive that he couldn’t have lasted a minute.” He chewed thoughtfully. “Then you come into the picture, wanting a look at Willie.” He shook his head. “You’re not the kind of guy gets his jollies looking at dead hoods. There had to be a reason why you wanted a look at him. That could mean you knew he was dead before he was put into that car.” He shook his head again. “Still not enough. You wouldn’t admit having seen a dead man without reporting it and a good lawyer would give any doctor a hard time to pinpoint the time of death exactly.”

“Which means you knew there was something smelly but couldn’t prove it.”

Herlehy bobbed his head. “Then, the stoolies started coming out of the woodwork. The bookies were murdered by a flood of money taking long

odds that the kid would lose in the first round. It had to be a setup. But no pug is going to cooperate to the extent of getting himself killed.”

“That was the way I read it.”

The inspector took a swallow from his glass. “It figured. I suppose you know you put a real bug up Doc Kenny’s nose with your theories?”

Liddell grinned. “The doc take it to you?”

“The medical examiner did. They checked for nitrites. There were plenty of them in the kid’s body. You could be right on how it was done. Being right and proving it, though, are two different things.” He frowned slightly. “There was another man in Rocky’s corner. His trainer.”

“Whitey Bloom.”

Herlehy nodded. “He could have handled it.”

Liddell shook his head. “They’d never put themselves in the hands of a broken-down water-bottle carrier. If it happened like I think it did, Maury Josephs handled it. By getting rid of him, they’d be killing two birds with one stone—they got rid of the guy that could blow the whistle on the kill and they paid him off for letting the kid pull the double cross.” He sipped at his glass. “Nobody could prove a thing, but the boys in the racket would get the idea.”

“Where are you planning to go from here?”

Liddell shrugged. “I’ve pulled them out into the open. Dennis being here is proof that they’re worried Rocky’s information may still be kicking around. When he reports back to whoever sent him that an inspector from Homicide showed up here, it’s going to shake them up. That’s when they’ll start making mistakes.”

“You don’t know who sent Dennis here to buy the stuff?”

Liddell considered for a moment. “I could make an educated guess. Willie was in the Cuernavaca, shows up next in a car with Josephs. Whoever put him there did the job on Josephs. It points a big fat finger at Ray Carter.”

“Carter is the front for Mitch Corday.”

“Did you know that Willie was once a bodyguard for Larry Gatti and that Maury Josephs worked for Lew Merton’s agency on the coast before he stepped up to manage the Oasis in Las Vegas?”



Herlehy grinned glumly. “You know, every so often you amaze me. I get to thinking of you in the same class as some of the keyhole peepers with licenses on their wall. Then I get an insight in the way you work on a case.” He shook his head. “I ought to have an apology mimeographed so I could hand you one the first of every month.”

“Do you remember the Benson Committee Hearings on organized crime a couple of years ago?”

“It stirred up a lot of mud and never came up with a conviction. It pointed a finger at guys like Corday and couldn’t make a thing stick,” the inspector complained.

“It did name a few names, though. Benson identified Corday, Gatti, Merton and a Chicagoan named Weiss as running the gambling syndicate in the country. Carter is Corday’s boy. Willie was Gatti’s and Josephs represented Merton. What about this Weiss? Figure he’s such a trusting soul that he doesn’t have a boy here looking out for his interests?”

Herlehy chewed his wad for a moment. “This character you just tossed out?”

Liddell shrugged. “You’ve got his gun. It should have plenty of his prints on it. By morning you could have a full kickback from the Chicago Bureau of Identification if he’s from there. Otherwise, the FBI.”

## Chapter 17

Ray Carter sat in his desk chair, glared at the short man who stood facing him. “I should have known better than to send you up against a guy like Liddell,” he thundered at Mendy. “He takes your gun away and throws you out bodily.”

The short man teetered on his bowed legs, tried to meet Carter’s glare, dropped his eyes. “He blinded me with the whiskey. I should have kept the gun on him all the time.” He cast a malevolent glare at Matt Dennis, who was applying the menthol tube to both nostrils. “But he tells me to put up the gun so we can talk.”

“You told me to try to do it peaceful,” Dennis told the man behind the desk. “How can you do it peaceful if we’re pointing a gun at him? Ask him why Liddell wouldn’t go through with the deal. Your tough boy here threatened to take him apart.”

Carter snorted. “He couldn’t take apart a fifty-cent watch.”

“You want to know something?” Dennis put in. “I don’t think Liddell has a copy of that stuff. I think he was just trying to draw somebody out in the open.”

“And you brought it to me,” the club manager growled.

“I just brought you what he gave me. It was your idea to make the meet and buy the stuff,” Dennis complained defensively. “But if he doesn’t have it, he can’t do any damage.”

“He can if he traces the buy-back to here. He knows the buy would be made by whoever lifted the original stuff. That means you two knuckleheads left a trail back to here.” He turned back to Mendy. “Worse than that, you leave a gun there. A gun that’s registered in my name.”

“If that Homicide dick hadn’t shown up when he did I would have taken it back,” the short man asserted.

“That’s another thing. What was that dick doing there? What does Liddell have that Homicide would be interested in?”

Matt Dennis was using the tube again.

“Put that damn thing away,” Carter roared at him. “You’re stinking up the whole office.”

“Give me another crack at him,” Mendy urged. “Only this time take off the wraps. Let me handle him my way.”

“And what’s your way?”

“A hit,” the short man told him flatly.

“You sure are a glutton for punishment. You got a sample tonight. You want the whole treatment?”

Dennis automatically reached for his pocket, thought better of it. “Maybe he’s right, Ray. If Liddell is bluffing about having the copies, then we’re all better off with him out of the way. Even if he told the Homicide dick about what was in it, nobody can prove anything without the copy. Even what Liddell tells the inspector would be hearsay. It couldn’t even be admitted as evidence.”

“And if he does have a copy and it turns up after he’s hit?” Carter wanted to know.

“Then we’re no worse off than we are now.”

Carter considered for a moment. “Let’s wait twenty-four hours. If *The Dispatch* prints the stuff in tomorrow’s paper we know he had a copy. If it don’t, then chances are he’s bluffing. If he is, you get a chance to even things up for tonight.”

“If he isn’t bluffing and he does have the stuff?”

Carter grimaced. “In that case, he’s my pigeon.”

Matt Dennis left Ray Carter’s office at the Cuernavaca an hour later with a heavy sense of foreboding. Mendy Carroll was going after Liddell. The private detective had seen him and Mendy apparently working together. If Mendy didn’t get Liddell the first time, Johnny might come looking for Matt Dennis after he took care of Mendy.

He had a sudden overwhelming need for reassurance. He checked his watch, stopped at the nearest public phone booth and dialed the number of *The Express*.

He asked to be connected with Larry Hall and told the city editor to use one of the rainy-day columns on the hook on his desk. A hangover from the days before he went dry, Dennis always kept five or six completed time-

copy columns ready in the event he went on a toot. It was a habit he had never broken. Tonight he was glad he hadn't.

In the old days, his favorite hangout had been the Lorraine Club, a little *boîte* on 47th Street near the corner of Seventh. In those days, there was a burlesque theatre next door to it and the girls would spend their time between shows at the tables or at the bar.

Dennis hailed a cab, gave the address of the Lorraine Club, settled back against the cushions. It wasn't that he needed a drink, he assured himself. Hell, it had been years since he took a drink. Tonight would be no different. It was just that tonight he needed a friendly atmosphere and a place where he could think out his next moves.

The Lorraine Club was identified by a garish neon sign halfway up Dream Street. On 47th Street you can get any kind of a dream—from a pink cloud to a nightmare. Inside the Lorraine, a trio was playing in the center of the oval bar, the usual complement of sailors in uniform, heavily mascaraed hookers from the nearby flea traps and their sharply dressed “managers” lined the bar.

Dennis found himself a spot alongside two sailors who were debating the advisability of taking up the open proposition in a tired-looking blonde's eyes. They were arguing whether or not they could get a club rate.

The bartender was heavy-set, with bulging eyes and a completely bald pate. He looked entirely capable of maintaining order at any odds. “What'll you have, friend?” he asked Dennis.

The heavy flow of saliva was clogging the back of the sports writer's throat. His eyes skipped along the familiar old labels on the back bar.

What the hell, he figured. After all this time he'd proven he could take it or leave it alone. One drink might be just what he needed to shake him out of his nervous state.

“Make it a Bourbon,” he told the man behind the stick. He hesitated for a moment. “Double.”

The bartender reached to the backbar, caught a bottle by the neck, brought a glass from the well. He spilled three fingers from the bottle into the glass, shoved it across the bar. As he started to replace the bottle on the backbar, he watched the sports writer's expression in the mirror as he lifted the glass to his lips. It was an expression with which he was long familiar. He turned, placed the bottle on the bar in front of Dennis instead of returning it to the backbar.

## Chapter 18

Inspector Herlehy had a cubbyhole office on the fourth floor with a window overlooking a courtyard. He was standing at the window, gazing through the dusty pane when the door opened and a uniformed clerk ushered Johnny Liddell into the room.

The inspector turned at the sound of the opened door, nodded to Liddell. He waited until the clerk had withdrawn and closed the door behind him. His thick shock of white hair gave the effect of having been thoroughly raked by his fingers. His jaws were pounding on the ever-present wad of gum.

“Not too early, I hope, Inspector?” Liddell greeted him.

Herlehy shook his head. He walked over to his desk, slumped into the desk chair. “I came back here to the office after I left you last night. I got a few things in motion.” He shrugged. “We got something. How much it means I don’t know.”

Johnny Liddell brought out a pack of cigarettes, held it up for an okay, drew a nod. “Such as?”

“First thing this morning we hit pay dirt on the girl Jackie Day.” He reached into his basket, brought up a print of a draped head and shoulders of a girl. “This is her?”

Liddell studied the black and white that didn’t do justice to the redhead’s coloring. He nodded. “That’s Jackie Day.”

“Clerk at the airline terminal at Kennedy made her immediately.”

Liddell raised his eyebrows.

“No great deal,” Herlehy told him. “First place, she had no baggage. Not a single thing except her handbag. Second place, the guy is queer for redheads.” He flipped the picture back into his basket. “She flew to LAX. That’s airline talk for the L.A. Municipal Airport.” He leaned back in his chair, ran his fingers through his hair. “We lost her there. The LAPD checked on all cabbies on the line when that flight came in for a redhead with no baggage. Nothing.”

“Merton probably picked her up or had someone pick her up.”

Herlehy shook his head sadly. “Merton isn’t in L.A. His house has been closed, his servants on a vacation. The place is shuttered. Beverly Hills police checked it out for us.”

Liddell scowled. “That ain’t good. I gather from your expression that the rest of the news is just as good?”

“Not quite as bad.” Herlehy picked up a flimsy from the top of his desk. “The fingerprints on the gun belong to Mendy Carroll. He was an enforcer for the shylocks out there. You must use a crystal ball. He’s Sid Weiss’ boy.” Herlehy chewed on his gum for a moment. “There was no ballistic want on the gun. It hadn’t been used in any shootings we have comparison slugs on file for. The gun is registered to Raymond Carter, application for the license states that as manager of the Cuernavaca the gun was needed for self-defense.”

“There’s your link.”

Herlehy shrugged. “It’s still not proof.” He picked up another report. “Here’s something a little better.” He frowned at the single-spaced copy. “There were traces of blood on the butt of the gun. Faint, but discernible. Precipitin test shows it to be human blood, type B.” He dropped the report on his desk. “Maury Josephs had type B blood. Trouble is, a couple of million other people have, too.”

Liddell transferred a cigarette from the pack to the corner of his mouth. He grimaced. “So close and yet so far.” He set fire to the cigarette, blew smoke at the ceiling. “Still not enough to take in to the d.a.?”

The inspector shook his head. “We add up two and two and get four. The grand jury might not. There are a lot of coincidences, some facts to back up our theories, but we need a helluva lot more than we’ve got before we can step into this officially.”

“And unofficially?”

The man behind the desk clasped his hands in front of him, stared at the ceiling. “I didn’t even hear you.”

“You say Merton isn’t in L.A. Do you know where he is?”

“Word we get is that he’s in Las Vegas. At the Oasis.”

“The girl couldn’t have gone to Las Vegas?”

Herlehy shook his head. “It was a nonstop from New York to L.A.”

Liddell grimaced, smoked with long, hard puffs for a moment. “I guess the only way to find out where the girl is would be to ask the guy who sent her.”

The inspector rolled his eyes down from an inspection of the crack in his ceiling. “You don’t really think he’d tell you, presuming there is such a guy?”

“I can be very persuasive if I have to.”

“So I’ve heard.”

Liddell leaned over, crushed out his butt in an ashtray on the corner of the desk. “I better get going, Inspector. I’ll be seeing you.”

Herlehy sighed. “I’m sure I’ll be seeing you. I just hope you’ll be in a condition to see me when I do.”

In Beverly Hills, Jackie Day lay spreadeagled on the bed, her hands tied to the sides of the headboard, her feet tied to the baseboard. Sometime when she was under the first shot, the man had removed her clothing. She lay there naked, waiting with mixed emotions to hear the sound of the key in the lock that announced his return.

It would mark his fourth visit, the fourth fix.

She couldn’t remember the first one. He had knocked her out before administering it. When she awoke, she was nauseous, but the nausea passed when he returned in the afternoon to administer the second needle. She had experienced a big lift, a euphoria that somehow felt reassuring. She was sure that nobody could be made an addict against his will. In the meantime, she would pretend to go along with it. If she was nice enough to him, he might help her to escape.

The third fix had come sometime during the night. She had been dozing fitfully. There must have been a tremendous increase in the humidity. The sheet on which she was lying was drenched with perspiration.

Suddenly, there came the sound of the key in the lock. Jackie licked at her lips, lifted her head to watch the man walk into the room. She waited for him to open the drawer for the needle. Instead he walked over to the side of the bed, studied her face.

“We’ll hold off the fix this morning. Today we start learning tricks for the trade in Tijuana. If you learn real good, you get the fix. It may be too

early to get the real whips and jangles, but you'll get the idea."

The girl in the bed felt a tightening of the muscles in her stomach. She worked on a smile that came out as a ghastly rictus.

"I don't need the stuff," she told him. "You're wasting your time trying to make a junkie out of me."

Fritz grinned at her. "Tell me that this afternoon. Say about three hours from now." He turned, walked out of the room.

Jackie heard the key turn in the lock. She bit on her lips when she felt the first signs of shaking in her arms and legs. It was only a mild twitching. The nausea of the first day was back accompanied by small prickling cramps.

The man looked in on her three hours later. She was writhing on the bed in discomfort, her arms and legs jerking spasmodically. She turned her face away to hide the wanting in her eyes.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Fine," she told him.

"Good. In that case, we'll wait a few more hours."

She spun her head, stared at him. "No. Give it to me now."

He considered. "It might be a good idea to let you wait so you know how it's going to be. You're going to have to keep real busy in Tijuana to make enough to feed that monkey. Real busy."



## Chapter 19

Sid Weiss stood at the window of his suite, looked out over Lake Michigan. A cold wind was whipping the water into whitecaps and he shivered involuntarily. He walked back to his comfortably upholstered chair and sank into it. From his breast pocket, he brought a cigarette holder, absently screwed a cigarette into it. He tilted the holder in the corner of his mouth, chewed on it nervously.

The telephone rang at his elbow, startling him. He lifted the receiver off its hook, carried it to his ear. “Yes?”

“A person-to-person call for you, Mr. Weiss. From New York.”

Weiss nodded. “Put it through. And stay off the line.”

He could hear the indignant snort of the girl as she put the New York call through and snapped her key.

“Sid?” Mitch Corday’s even tones came across the wire. “Mitch. What do you hear from your boy Mendy?”

“Nothing unusual. Why?”

There was a shade of worry in Corday’s voice. “I got a telephone call this morning. Matt Dennis, the sports writer. He was as drunk as a skunk—”

“I thought he dried out.” Weiss chewed on the stem of the cigarette holder. “I thought we could trust him.”

“Well, he fell off the wagon real hard. He said to tell Mendy he wasn’t going to get himself killed on account of Mendy. Then he hung up.”

The man in Chicago frowned. “Did you call Mendy?”

“I called him and I called Carter. I can’t locate either of them. I was wondering if Mendy reported back to you.”

“I haven’t heard from him since Josephs had the accident. You’d better keep trying to locate him. I don’t like the idea of Dennis making phone calls. See if the boys can pick him up and shut him up.”

“Okay. I’ll keep trying to reach Mendy. Of course, this could be the bottle talking.”

“Even so, I don’t like it.”

“I’ll get back to you,” Corday promised. There was a click as he broke the connection.

Weiss dropped the receiver on its hook. He pressed the button on the corner of his desk. After a moment, the door opened and a well-upholstered blonde walked in.

“We got any number to reach Mendy in case of emergency?”

The blonde nodded. “He has that girl in Brooklyn. He stays there sometimes.”

Some of the concern drained out of Weiss’ face. He bobbed his head. It could be that simple. “Call him there. I want to talk to him.”

But Mendy Carroll wasn’t at the Brooklyn number. An indignant female voice informed the long-distance operator that he hasn’t been available at that number for some time and there was no indication that he would ever be available at it in the future. Then the speaker had slammed down the phone.

Sid Weiss chewed thoughtfully on his cigarette holder when the blonde gave him the message. A worried frown corrugated his forehead. It looked like he’d have to leave it in Mitch Corday’s hands. He didn’t like it. It wasn’t like the kid not to keep him informed of the New York operation’s every move.

Mendy Carroll was in his own apartment at the Hotel Morse but he wasn’t answering the telephone even though he could hear it jangling at ten-minute intervals throughout the early afternoon. He wasn’t answering the telephone for the simple reason that he was handcuffed to the plumbing in his bathroom.

After the session with Ray Carter at the Cuernavaca it had been agreed upon that Mendy was to handle Liddell in his own way. He had never accepted a contract with greater alacrity. The beating Liddell had given him rankled, but Carter’s attitude rankled even more deeply.

He was still half asleep when his doorbell started to jangle. He glanced at the clock on the bedside table, swore under his breath. The club usually closed at four. Last night he hadn’t gotten to bed until after six and now it was only eleven o’clock.

He got out of bed, shrugged into a robe and headed through the living room to the hall door. He opened it, pulled it open.

“You know what time it is?” he growled. “I—” His jaw sagged when he recognized Johnny Liddell in the hallway. He tried to slam the door, but Liddell had already thrown his shoulder against it, knocking Mendy off balance, sending him staggering into the room.

Liddell walked in, closed the door behind him.

When Mendy got to his feet, prepared to rush Liddell, the .45 appeared in Johnny’s hand. He grinned grimly. “Go ahead. It’ll save the state plenty on its electric bill.” His finger whitened noticeably on the trigger.

Mendy pulled up short. “You think you could walk away from busting into a man’s apartment and burning him down?” he sneered.

“I could. If I were helping to bring in a murderer.”

“Murderer,” Mendy scoffed. “Maybe this time a week from now, somebody could say something like that. But not you. You won’t be around.”

“Maybe you didn’t recognize the man who dropped in on me last night? That was Inspector Herlehy of Homicide West. Matt Dennis made him.”

“So what?”

“So you left your gun. With your prints all over it. Chicago R&I identified you as an enforcer for the shylocks out there until Sid Weiss sent you east to keep tabs on Ray Carter.”

Some of the assurance drained from the short man’s face. “You do get around,” he conceded.

“You, too. Maury Josephs didn’t die in an automobile crash. The man with him, Willie Simons, was dead before he left the Cuernavaca. He broke his neck falling down the stairs. Maury was killed and stuck in the auto with him.”

Tiny beads of perspiration were beginning to glisten along Mendy’s hairline. “You couldn’t prove any of that.”

“Yes, I could,” Liddell told him. “So can the police. Maury Josephs was beaten to death with your gun. There were traces of blood on the butt. The same type as Maury Josephs.”

Mendy's eyes widened until the white surrounded the pupil. "You trying to frame me?" he roared.

Disregarding the gun in Liddell's hand, he charged at him. Johnny laid the side of the barrel across the short man's cheek, knocked him sideways to the floor. When Mendy tried to get to his feet, Liddell kicked him under the jaw, flipping him onto his back.

"I'm getting tired of picking you up off the floor," Liddell growled. He caught Mendy under the arms, dragged him to a chair, dumped him into it. Then he rummaged through the shelves in the kitchenette, came back with a half-empty bottle of Scotch. He held the bottle to Mendy's lips, tilted it. Some ran from the corner of his mouth to dribble from his chin.

After a moment, Mendy's eyes began to focus. He shook his head to clear it, wiped the liquor off his chin with the back of his hand. "You're a dead man, Liddell. I don't know when it will happen—"

"You're the dead man, friend. And you will know when it will happen. The judge will set the date when he passes sentence."

"I didn't kill him. That isn't my gun—" He broke off.

"Whose gun was it?"

The man in the chair clenched his teeth stubbornly.

Liddell shrugged. "So you take the rap for somebody else. It doesn't make any difference to me. As long as somebody takes it."

Fear was beginning to cloud Mendy's eyes. "You don't think you could get away with a frame like that. I never use a gun. Ask anybody. I never owned one." He held his big, scarred hands out in front of him, clenched and unclenched them. "These are all I ever needed."

"You could fool me. Ever since the first time I saw you you've spent more time on your back than a fifty-cent whore." He squinted at the man in the chair. "Maybe it isn't your gun. But it has your fingerprints on it, and Maury Josephs' blood. The d.a. couldn't ask for much more than that."

"I tell you I didn't kill him," Mendy told him in a tense voice. He studied Liddell's expression. "I don't know nothing about him or Willie the Gun. All I know is what the papers said. They both died in an accident."

"You're a liar," Liddell told him dispassionately. "Willie died in the Cuernavaca. I saw his body there when I was on my way up to Ray Carter's office. His neck was broken. So if he was dead, he couldn't have driven that

car. The front of Josephs' head was caved in to make it look like he smashed it against the windshield. It was caved in with the gun, loaded with your fingerprints."

"It ain't my gun, I told you!" Mendy shrieked at him. "I just had it because Dennis was carrying twenty thousand of somebody else's money."

"Whose money?"

Mendy licked at his lips, shook his head.

Liddell waved the barrel of the .45. "On your feet."

Mendy pulled himself out of the chair. A large welt across his cheekbone was beginning to discolor. "What are you going to do?"

"First, I'm going to make sure I know where to find you when I want you." He motioned to the bedroom with the gun. "Into the bathroom."

Mendy shuffled across the living room into the bedroom, then into the bathroom.

"Get down on your knees next to the radiator." Liddell watched the short man sink to his knees. Mendy started to say something, apparently thought better of it. "Face the wall and put your hands behind your back."

"What is this?" Mendy growled.

Liddell produced a pair of handcuffs, snapped one bracelet to the heavy radiator, the other to Mendy's wrist. "Just to make sure that if you get wanderlust, you have to take the plumbing with you."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to tell Homicide where to find you. They can come pick you up and charge you." Liddell stowed the .45 back in its hammock, stepped back out of range of the handcuffed man's feet. "What's more, they'll have no trouble making it stick." He started out of the bathroom.

"Wait a minute!" Mendy roared at him. "It's not my gun. I didn't use it on Maury."

"Who did?"

Mendy shook his head again. "You can get just as dead making like a canary as you can riding the thunderbolt upstate."

"And you can get just as dead riding the thunderbolt as telling what you know. You might be able to walk away from it if you cooperate. The big

boys are going to be too busy taking care of themselves to be going after you.”

“What big boys?” Mendy asked defiantly.

“You don’t think we don’t know that Larry Gatti, Lew Merton and Mitch Corday are in this with your boss, do you? The whole thing’s going to come tumbling down, friend. And you’re going to be sitting dead center when it does. Real dead.”

Mendy stared at Liddell. It hadn’t occurred to him that the private detective could know so much about what had been going on and who was calling the plays. “Suppose I tell you whose gun it was? Then what?”

Liddell shrugged. “I have a talk with him.”

Mendy sneered openly. “He’d chew you up in small pieces and spit you out before he’d talk to you.”

Liddell tapped the .45. “This baby has two ends. One spits lead. The other splits skulls. He’ll talk.” He watched the struggle going on in Mendy’s face.

“The gun belongs to Ray Carter. He gave it to me to bodyguard the dough he gave Dennis to buy the stuff you had.”

“Not good enough, Mendy,” Liddell shook his head. “It has your prints on it. Remember? Maybe he lent it to you the night Maury Josephs got it. Just like he did last night.”

Mendy licked at his lips, shook his head. “He didn’t. Carter killed him. I only drove the car that picked Carter up after he set up the accident.”

“Where did Carter get Josephs?”

Mendy wiped his mouth with the back of his free hand. “He was waiting on the corner where his apartment is. Carter pulled up to the curb. When Maury stuck his head in the door, Carter knocked him out. Then when we got over to where the accident was, he finished the job.” The perspiration was gleaming on the man’s face, beading his upper lip and forehead. “I never touched Josephs. I didn’t even see him in the car. Carter took care of him before I drove up. Then he was in a hurry to get away in case any one heard the crash.”

## Chapter 20

Johnny Liddell was sitting in the end booth of the Knife and Fork, a little hole-in-the-wall stuck between a novelty shop and a bookstore that featured pornography in its window. He was stirring his second cup of coffee thoughtfully when he recognized the bulk of Inspector Herlehy and a man in a dark suit in the doorway. They glanced around the half-empty restaurant, located Liddell and headed for his table.

“Two more coffees,” Liddell called over to the counterman, who sat reading the morning edition of *The Express* with moving lips. He set his paper aside, poured two cups of coffee, carried them over and sloshed them in front of the newcomers.

Liddell held a folded five between his fingers. “This is kind of private,” he told the bug-eyed counterman. “We don’t want anybody too close to us for the next few minutes. Okay?”

The counterman grinned, showing several spaces where teeth should have been. “Mister, you could almost buy the joint for that.” He lifted the bill from between Liddell’s fingers, hotfooted it back to his paper.

Herlehy waited until the man was back behind the counter. “This is Ed Phillips from the d.a.’s office, Johnny.”

Phillips had sandy hair that had started to recede, compensated for the balding pate with a cavalry-type mustache. He affected a two-button suit with narrow lapels. He nodded gravely.

“Still unofficial?” Liddell wanted to know.

“Still unofficial. You said you had something important?” Herlehy wanted to know.

“The goon that was at my place last night. He says he was there when Ray Carter killed Maury Josephs.” He looked from the assistant d.a. to Herlehy and back. “That enough to start things rolling?”

“Corroboration?”

“The guy was an eyewitness. He followed Carter with another car to bring him back to the club.”

The man from the d.a.'s office looked to Herlehy, shook his head. "The word of such a witness would be useless without corroboration."

"What do you guys need? A guy standing over a warm corpse with a smoking gun?"

Phillips shrugged. He sipped at his cup, strained it through his mustache. "Don't fault us. We don't draw the guidelines. The courts do. The law on corroboration is Section 399 of the Criminal Code of the State of New York, which says: 'A conviction cannot be had on the testimony of an accomplice, unless he is corroborated by such other evidence as tends to connect the defendant with the commission of the crime.' That's the law in New York State anyway. In a Federal court, the accomplice's testimony could convict a man without corroboration. Not here."

"But there were no other witnesses. There couldn't be any corroboration," Liddell argued. "The only way would be to force a confession out of him."

The man from the d.a.'s office looked pained. "Not without his lawyer present. It wouldn't be admissible."

"Now you see what we're up against, Johnny," Herlehy told him. "They've rewritten the book of rules giving the edge to the criminal element."

Liddell snorted. "Here I thought I was giving you Josephs' killer all wrapped up like a Christmas salami. With all we had on him I figured he'd try to deal by putting the finger on the man who ordered Josephs' hit and who talked Josephs into feeding Rocky Nelson the nitroglycerin." He eyed the mustached man with no sign of enthusiasm. "You can't even bring him in to show him the cards we hold?"

"We don't hold any," the assistant d.a. told him. "I came because Inspector Herlehy was hopeful that you might have something to change our theory into fact."

"An eyewitness isn't good enough, though."

The man with the mustache sighed. "If that eyewitness was also involved in the crime, as he certainly was in providing the get-away car, then there must be corroboration." He stroked the mustache with the side of his index finger. "By now, your witness has probably warned Carter—"

"No, he hasn't," Liddell told him grimly. "I've got him handcuffed to the radiator in the bathroom."



The assistant d.a. rolled his eyes ceilingward, sighed deeply.

“What are you going to do with him?” Herlehy wanted to know.

“I was going to turn him over to you. He admitted he was in on the kill  
—”

“Before he had a chance to consult a lawyer.” The assistant d.a. rolled his eyes down from the ceiling to Liddell’s face. “Unwitnessed and inadmissible.” He lifted his cup, stared at it for a moment. “Don’t think there haven’t been many times I’ve wished that we were in your position. You think you see injustice being done, you’re convinced that you have the right man, so you act directly, sometimes setting yourself up as judge and jury as well as executioner. We have to go by the book.”

“And a killer walks away from it.”

“Phillips is right, Johnny. He said you’re convinced you have the right man. Your way, if you happen to be wrong, it’s too late to do anything about it. Going by the book, if we do make a mistake it can still be corrected in time.”

“I’m not making any mistakes on this one, Inspector. Two men are dead and a girl is missing. I intend to find that girl. When I do, I’ll do something about paying off for those two men.” He pushed back his chair. “I’ll be in touch when I can find some caper these clowns cut in front of an audience.”

He stalked toward the street door.

At the table, Ed Phillips of the d.a.’s office drained his cup, set it down.

“How can you drink that stuff?” Herlehy demanded irritably. “It tastes like it was made with nitric acid.”

Phillips swirled his heavy mustache. “I filter it before I drink it.” He turned in his chair, stared down to the doorway through which Liddell had disappeared. “What do you suppose he’ll do now?”

Herlehy shook his head. “I don’t know. I do know that I wouldn’t want to be the one he does it to.”

The back entrance to the office above the Cuernavaca was in the rear of the building. An alley ran from the street, broadened into a parking area at the far end big enough to accommodate four cars.

At this time of the afternoon there were no cars parked in it.

Johnny Liddell stood near the back door. He dropped his cigarette, flattened it with the sole of his shoe, casually glanced around. When he was satisfied no one was paying him any attention, he brought a strip of heavy celluloid from his pocket, applied it to the door. There was a faint click, the knob turned in his hand, he walked inside.

Ray Carter's office was dark and empty when he walked up to it and entered. He closed the rear door behind him, crossed the office, opened the door to the backstage area a crack, peered out. There was no one in sight.

Johnny walked back to the desk, tugged the .45 from its hammock, laid it on the corner of the desk. He snapped on the desk lamp and started checking through the drawers one by one.

A half hour later he had found nothing of interest. He helped himself to a drink from the bottle in the bottom drawer, leaned back in the swivel chair to wait.

He was on his second drink when he heard sounds of the downstairs door opening and closing. It was followed by heavy footsteps on the stairs. Liddell reached for his gun, snapped off the desk light.

The door to the office opened, the big frame of Ray Carter stepped in. He reached for the wall switch, spilled yellow light into the room from the overhead fixture. When he saw Liddell sitting at the desk, his face froze into a ludicrous mask of disbelief. "Mendy!" he roared.

"Relax. That's what Mendy's doing. You know something, Carter? That boy's got a real fine voice. He's been singing like a stage-struck canary down at headquarters all morning."

"You could get in real trouble busting in here like this."

"And you can get real dead from some of the things he's been telling Homicide about you." Liddell waved the gun. "Close the door." When the big man didn't move fast enough, Liddell grinned glumly. "Don't go hard to reach, Carter. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to play a bongo on your head with this." The grin failed to wash the grimness out of his eyes. "Just like you did to Maury Josephs."

Carter stared at him. "Maury Josephs was killed in an accident."

"Why don't you put that to music? You picked Josephs up on the corner of the block where his apartment is located. You bashed his brains out and drove him out to Queens. The other guy in the car was dead before he ever left this place. Mendy drove the pickup car."

“You couldn’t make that stick.”

“We’ve got an eyewitness. Mendy.”

Carter closed the door, walked over to the desk. “It’s his word against mine. He’s lying in his teeth.”

“Homicide don’t think so. Neither does the d.a.”

The big man eyed him anxiously. “Why would I want to kill Josephs? I hardly knew him.”

“Orders. Josephs let Rocky Nelson double-cross the big boys. He had to be punished so the other stooges in their stable would get the idea.”

“What big boys?”

“The boys who knew that Rocky would go out in the first round. The boys who ordered Josephs to feed the kid the drug when the fight started.”

Perspiration was glistening on Carter’s face. “The only drug I know anything about is the one you’re high on.”

“You knew I had enough stuff to blow the whole fight racket sky high. It would go to the papers if anything happened to Rocky. So you had to know he was going to get hit that night when you sent Mendy to get the stuff out of my office.”

The big man stared at Liddell as if he couldn’t tear his eyes away. “How in hell would I know where the stuff would be if there was any stuff?”

Liddell grinned at him. “You sicced the redhead on him to wheedle the information out of him. She did a real good job. Where is she? Where is Jackie Day?”

“How do I know?”

“You ought to. She worked for you. The night of the fight when I dropped by to see her she disappeared. The next morning she was on a plane to the Coast. Where is she?”

“That miserable little bastard. He really has been shooting his mouth off, hasn’t he? Only he’s trying to make me take the rap. He’s the one you want. He killed Josephs. He’s the one who got the redhead out of the way. He’s the real boss around here. I just front the joint because he has a record.”

“You want to know something? I don’t care who killed Maury Josephs. That’s the police department’s job. I want the guy who ordered Maury

Josephs to feed Rocky the pills.” He saw the protest on Carter’s face. “Not you. You’re not big enough. I want Mitch Corday.”

“You got to be crazy.” Carter’s voice was low, shocked. “You think anyone would cross Mitch? You wouldn’t last twenty-four hours if you go up against him. Not even you.”

“Let me worry about that. I’ve got a proposition.” He glanced at his watch. “Homicide will be done taking Mendy’s statement in a little while. It will take an hour or so to clear it with the d.a. Then they’ll be coming for you.” He pursed his lips, studied the big man’s worried expression. “You could do yourself a lot of good with a few hours’ start.”

Carter licked at his lips, shook his head.

Liddell shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He reached for the phone.

“What are you going to do?”

“Tell Inspector Herlehy that I’ll baby-sit you until they decide to pick you up.”

Carter watched Liddell dial the first four units. “Wait a minute. What’s the proposition?”

“Where’s Jackie Day?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know if she’s alive. I tell you Mendy shipped her out—”

“If she were dead, she would have turned up. You don’t just wish away a body. Especially if you inherit one suddenly. The big boys aren’t going to take a chance on a murder rap just because you stand to take a fall if she talks.”

“About what?”

“About knowing that Rocky Nelson was going to get it in the first round. Believe me. If it’s you or them, you’ve had it.”

“I don’t know where she is.” A desperate note came into his voice at the change of expression on Liddell’s face. “Okay. I’ll deal. You’re right about her going to California. Corday was supposed to get her a job in the movies through Lew Merton,” he blurted out.

“Merton is in Las Vegas, not California.”

“He was in California the night she left.”

Liddell poured some liquor into a glass, pushed it across the desk. "Have a drink. You look like you need one."

Carter picked up the glass with a shaking hand. He downed it in a gulp. "I get the start?"

Liddell considered, nodded. "You get the start. If I were you, I wouldn't take the time to tell Corday I was leaving. He might have other ideas. He might arrange for you to stay. Permanently." He got up from the chair. "I'm going out first. Stay here ten minutes. Then you're on your own."

The phone on the desk began to peal.

"Probably Corday. He's probably found out what's going on," Liddell told him. "If you're feeling suicidal, pick it up and let him know where you are."

He walked to the door and left. The phone was still pealing when he let himself out into the parking area behind the club.

In the office, Ray Carter sat staring at the phone fearfully. He poured himself another drink, noticed there was only a half inch left in the bottle. He dumped the rest into the glass, held it to his mouth until the glass was empty.

The phone continued to ring, stopped on its seventh ring.

Exactly five minutes later, it started to ring again.

Jackie was docile enough now so that Fritz could leave her untied. He kept the door locked and her clothes downstairs, but she made no effort to escape.

In the beginning she had revolted at the routine he was teaching her. By holding off her regular shot for hours, he broke her resistance.

She could hardly remember what it had been like before she came to this place. She knew she was hooked and she despised herself for the degradation she endured for a fix. After the monkey had been fed, she would promise herself that she would no longer let Fritz give her the stuff. She would fight him and escape. She would never again be weak enough to beg for the fix, to crawl on her hands and knees and kiss his shoes until she got one.

But as the effects of the last fix wore off and the need for another started to make itself felt in her bowels, the sweating would start. The intolerable

itching would drive her half out of her mind. The nausea and cramps would double her over on the floor. She would huddle against the door like an animal listening for the footsteps that would herald the coming of Fritz and his dosage.

By the time he finally came, she would promise anything, do anything he required for the blessed relief that spilled from his needle.

## Chapter 21

Jim Kiely sat in his office, sucking noisily on his pipe, staring at a spot on the wall over Johnny Liddell's head while he listened. When Johnny had finished his tale of frustration, Kiely took the pipe from between his teeth, blew a stream of blue-gray smoke at the spot on the wall.

"Looks like the mob has it all its own way," he grunted. "We know a murder has been committed and we can prove who did it. Only, the proof is inadmissible so the murderer walks away." He returned the pipe to his mouth, rattled the juice in the stem. "How about Mendy?"

"He's still handcuffed to the bathroom radiator. I can't leave him there forever but I've got to buy forty-eight hours before anyone can get to him."

"To do what?"

"Find Jackie Day. That means going to L.A. I'm sure she's still alive but she won't be if Mendy spills what he knows I know to the big boys."

The newspaperman chewed thoughtfully on his pipestem. "If he doesn't show up pretty soon, won't some of his friends go looking for him?"

Liddell bobbed his head. "Last night, Mendy came at me with a gun. I took it away from him and turned it over to Inspector Herlehy. It was covered with Mendy's fingerprints. I'm going to swear out a warrant of attempted murder."

"He'll have a lawyer within an hour of his arrest."

Liddell considered it, shrugged. "Not if Herlehy cooperates. He could keep losing this guy by moving him around in outlying precincts where no lawyer can find him."

"Keep him away from a lawyer that long and it'll be thrown out of court so soon—"

"By then, who cares? You don't think I'm going to all this trouble to nail a cheap hood on an assault rap, do you? I want him out of the way so he can't spoil my play for the big boys."

Kiely smoked for a moment, nodded. "It might work."

“It’s got to work,” Liddell told him. “That girl didn’t disappear into thin air. We know she’s not in Vegas with Merton. She must be someplace in L.A. I need forty-eight hours to find where.” He watched the man behind the desk for a moment. “You still willing to put your money on me?”

Kiely nodded without hesitation.

“Okay,” Liddell told him. “Then there’s one other thing I want you to do. I want you to have a couple of your boys pick Mendy up and make a citizen’s arrest. Call Herlehy and tell him you want Mendy buried for forty-eight hours. He’ll cooperate as long as you press the complaint.”

“Why us? You’re the one he pulled the gun on.”

Liddell looked pained. “He pulled a gun on a representative of *The Dispatch*. He tried to brain me with it. You let word get out that a hood can beat up your reporters and no reporter would be safe on the streets.”

“You got a witness to this assault?”

Liddell grinned. “Yeah. Inspector Herlehy.”

Kiely sighed softly. “Okay. I’ve got a feeling I’ll hate myself in the morning for this. But right now it sounds like a good idea.” He reached for the telephone. Before he could lift it from its cradle, the phone started to peal. He picked it up. “Yeah?” He raised his eyebrows, listened intently, nodding absently. “Okay, Muggs. Johnny’s here right now. I’ll tell him. You’d better get back to the office. Leave a district man to handle it.” He dropped the receiver back on its hook. “Matt Dennis fell off the wagon with a vengeance last night. He’s in the county hospital with a bad case of d.t.’s. He keeps yelling that somebody is going to kill Liddell and he wants no part of it.”

“Matt Dennis was there last night when Mendy tried for me. The inspector saw him there. Maybe it would pay to tip Herlehy off that someone ought to stay close to Dennis to question him if and when he comes out of it.”

Kiely nodded. “That could easily take forty-eight hours.” He reached again for the telephone, started dialing the number of Homicide West.

In Hollywood, the Montecito apartment-hotel sits on the crest of Franklin and Cherokee looking down at Hollywood Boulevard sprawled out a few blocks below. A bulletin board in its lobby lists all the New York guests registered. Most of them are in Hollywood on television or movie



assignments. It is the home away from home for writers and talent from the east. Many producers and agents reserve apartments in the Montecito for their clients because of its proximity to Studio City, Universal International, Paramount Sunset and other television production centers. It is also within walking distance to the Hollywood Bowl and Patsy D'Amore's Villa Capri, one of the most popular watering holes for the television and movie crowd.

Johnny Liddell checked the out-of-town register as he walked into the lobby. There were many familiar names but Jackie Day's was not among them. He walked over to the desk, checked in and surrendered his bag to the bellboy.

The clerk behind the desk confirmed the fact that Lew Merton had several of his clients registered in the house, but the name Jackie Day failed to strike a bell. Nor could she be registered under another name as one of these clients, since all were personally known to the clerk.

Liddell followed his bag to the elevator, got out at the fourth floor. He waited while the bellboy aired out the room and withdrew. Then he opened his bag, brought out a bottle of Scotch. There was ice in the refrigerator in the kitchen. He filled a glass with it and drenched it down with the Scotch.

He walked his drink to the window, stood staring out at the pastel-colored houses that seemed to be pasted to the sides of the hills around him.

When he had finished his drink, he walked to the telephone. The clerk on the board answered immediately and Liddell placed a call to Lew Merton at the Oasis in Las Vegas. He could hear the clerk dialing the number, then the sound of the ring at the other end.

Finally the switchboard at the Oasis answered.

"Lew Merton, please. I believe he's registered there?" Liddell asked.

"One moment, sir," the metallic voice of the operator told him. There was a slight delay, then she was back on the line. "We're having Mr. Merton paged in the casino," she advised.

Liddell waited until a heavy voice came on the line. "This is Lew Merton. Who's this?"

"I'm a stringer for Lila Denton, the columnist, Mr. Merton. I'm checking out a tip that you're signing Mary Keene for the title role in—"

"Is that what you cooled off a hot run on the dice to ask?" Merton growled. "I never heard of the dame!"

“That’s funny, Mr. Merton,” Liddell told him. “I thought she was your client and—”

Merton spat an impolite epithet into the mouthpiece, punctuated it with a slamming down of the receiver. Johnny Liddell grinned, dropped his instrument on its hook. He was satisfied to learn that Lew Merton was still in Las Vegas.

He picked up the directory, turned to the page headed “Film-Fineman.” He ran his finger down the first column, stopped at the listing for “Film Talk—pub—HO 2-1098.” He dialed the number, waited.

“Film Talk,” a pert voice announced.

“Laury Ames in?”

“She’s covering a preview out in Studio City. Can you leave a message?”

“Yeah. Tell her Johnny Liddell called. Ask her if she can have a drink with me at the Villa Capri when she’s through?”

The girl on the board hesitated. “It might not be until around four.”

“I’ll be at the bar at four.”

“I’ll give her the message. The name was Johnny Liddell. Right?”

“Right.” Liddell dropped the receiver on its hook, carried his glass back into the kitchen for a refill.

## Chapter 22

The Villa Capri is on Yucca, halfway down the block from Las Palmas. The entrance is on the side, fronting on a driveway leading to the large parking area in the rear. At all hours the interior is pleasantly, intimately dim, the tables usually well filled in the barroom.

Johnny Liddell was perched on a barstool, a Scotch in front of him, talking to Tony, the green-jacketed bartender, when someone poked him in the back. He swung around on his stool.

Laury Ames was Hollywood's prettiest chatterbox. Her column in *Film Talk*, one of the best circulated trades in the business was an authentic and widely discussed daily chronicle of who was doing what to whom in the colony.

"You dog!" She threw her arms around his neck, kissed him on the cheek.

"Your aim is sure getting bad," Liddell told her.

"It could improve with practice." She turned, winked at the grinning bartender. "He stays away three years, then calls and snaps his fingers and expects me to come running. And you know something, Tony? I do."

Liddell took her by the arms, held her away at arm's length. Her ash-blond hair was cut in a perky poodle cut. She was wearing a powder-blue suit and ballet slippers. "You're looking wonderful, Laury."

"That's what you brought me halfway across town to tell me, I hope?" She inspected his face, shook her head. "Or is little Laury due for another fast and dizzy whirl on the Liddell Merry-Go-Round? My mother warned me there'd be men like you."

"Your mother was just a suspicious old gal. I have absolutely no designs on you."

Laury sighed deeply. "That's what I was afraid of." She slid onto the barstool alongside him. "A double Bacardi cocktail, Tony," she told the grinning bartender. "I'm about to drown my sorrows."

"How's the newshen business?" Liddell wanted to know.

“It’s getting to be a bit of a drag,” she told him. “This town stopped being fun when the big studios started falling apart. The TV crowd is kind of scabby and the independents that are making movies these days—” She rolled her eyes ceilingward in silent supplication.

The green-jacketed bartender slid a large Bacardi in front of her, then headed for the far end of the bar.

“What do you know about Lew Merton, Laury?”

The girl picked up her glass, shrugged her shoulders. “He plays at being an agent. Has a few really good clients on his list but the boys in the office actually service them. From what’s pretty common gossip, Lew uses the agency mainly to keep the cops from vaggging him. You know, a visible means of support. He’s a big-time gambler, as you know.”

“Has his office been touting a new discovery named Jackie Day?”

Laury repeated the name, shook her head. “Why?”

“He’s supposed to have imported her from New York for a big build-up.” Liddell made circles on the bar with the wet bottom of his glass. “He usually puts his clients up at the Montecito, doesn’t he?”

“Always. Unless it’s somebody who rates the star treatment. Then it’s the Beverly Hills.” She sipped at her drink, studied Liddell over the rim of her glass. “Have you tried there?”

Liddell shook his head. “I don’t think she’s ready for that. She was only working in the line at the Cuernavaca less than a week ago.” He watched while the girl produced a crumpled pack of cigarettes from her bag, took one when she held it toward him. “Besides, if she were that important, he wouldn’t have gone out of town just before she was due to arrive, would he?”

“Is he out of town?”

Liddell nodded. “He’s at the Oasis in Las Vegas.”

Laury placed her cigarette between her lips, leaned over and accepted a light. She sucked in a mouthful of smoke, blew it at the ceiling. “I doubt it. When Lew gives them the treatment, he gives them the full treatment. Personal attention and all.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know where he lives when he’s in town?”

The girl smoked for a moment. “It just so happens I would. Lew usually throws a wingding for his important clients. The press is always invited.”

She studied Liddell's face. "He throws a real swinging bash. Why?"

Liddell shrugged. "He's involved in a case I'm working on. I just thought I'd have a look around the place."

The newshen snorted. "You just come three thousand miles to have a look around? Stop kidding me, pal. What are you really after?"

"Jackie Day."

"The new client you think Merton has?"

"She's no more client than I am. She probably thinks she is. But they've got her out here so I can't get my hands on her to ask her some very important questions."

"You're sure she's out here?"

Liddell bobbed his head. "She flew out of Kennedy nonstop to L.A. We lost her when she arrived. She didn't take a cab."

"How can you be so sure?"

"She's a pretty striking redhead. And she carried no baggage. A cabby would be pretty sure to notice her. Every cab on the line that morning has been questioned. In cases where one did carry a single girl, even if she didn't answer the description, their trip sheets were checked. There were only a couple. None had red hair, none came anywhere near Beverly Hills or Hollywood."

"Maybe she is getting the red-carpet treatment. Lew has a car and chauffeur. Maybe he had her picked up." She took a deep swallow from her glass. "Maybe the chauffeur drove her right to Las Vegas?"

Liddell shook his head. "Las Vegas has been checked out. Merton is traveling alone."

"You've been a pretty busy boy," Laury conceded. "You think he may have this gal staying at his place here as a house guest while he's at Vegas?"

"I think it's worth checking."

"Got a dime?" She held out her palm, waited until Liddell dropped a dime onto it.

The phone booths in the Villa Capri are in a little corridor that runs from the end of the bar to the restrooms. Laury entered the first booth. She consulted a little memo book from her purse, started dialing. She stood in the booth for a few moments, then returned to her stool with a frown.

“There’s no answer from the house. His answering service got on, said Merton would be out of the city for a few weeks.” The frown deepened. “He always has a cook and Fritz, the chauffeur, around. He must have closed up the house when he left.” She shook her head. “I’ve never known him to use the answering service on his private phone.” She grinned glumly. “So much for the house-guest theory. He certainly wouldn’t have let the cook go if the girl was going to be living there.”

“I’d still like to look the place over. Where is it?”

“Beverly Hills. Just beyond the county line on the Strip. You go up Doheny, branch off onto Lambert and climb to the top of the hill. He’s the last house on Lambert.” She took a last drag on her cigarette, crushed it out in the ashtray on the bar. “But what’s the point of going all the way up there if nobody’s home?”

“I’m a tourist. I wouldn’t want to miss a thing while I’m here.”

Laury eyed him severely. “Do you know the penalty for breaking and entering out here? Those Beverly Hills cops don’t fool around. They’re not like the Keystone Kops the sheriff has parading around on the Strip.”

“Breaking and entering?” Liddell managed to look pained. “What do you think I am?”

“You wouldn’t want me to tell you, would you?”

Liddell considered, shook his head. “No.”

## Chapter 23

The door to the garage was open in the house at the top of Lambert Drive. Johnny Liddell paid off his cab, watched it swing around on the apron of the driveway, head back toward Doheny.

Liddell stood for a moment, looking around. The nearest house was over a quarter of a mile away, shielded from view by shrubbery and trees. There was no sign of life in the house itself or anywhere in the entire area.

He walked slowly up the steps, searched fruitlessly for a doorbell, settled by banging with the knocker on its metal plate. When there was no answer to his knock, he clanged the knocker again.

This time when there was no answer, he brought the celluloid strip from his pocket, fitted it into the space alongside the lock. It took a few minutes of manipulation before he heard the click. He looked around, made certain he was unobserved. Then he pushed the door open and walked in.

One by one, he checked the rooms on the bottom floor. The living room was huge, well furnished, with French doors that opened onto a patio that had a breathtaking view of Sunset Boulevard, far below.

He walked to the end of the entrance hall, opened the door leading into a paneled library. Shelves of books ranged from the floor to the ceiling. Comfortable-looking leather club chairs were on either side of a huge fieldstone fireplace, there were two marble-topped cocktail tables with cane-backed walnut swivel chairs grouped around them. A portable bar stood next to one of the tables.

Liddell closed the library door, walked back to the dining room. There was a pass through from the kitchen with closed, small plantation doors on it.

He walked out into the huge, modern kitchen with its gleaming stainless-steel sink, refrigerator and stove. A coffee pot stood on the counter next to the sink, still plugged into its socket. Liddell frowned, walked over to the counter, opened the top of the percolator. It was half filled. He tugged the refrigerator door open. There were two six packs of beer, a half-filled bottle of milk, some sliced ham and the remains of a barbecued chicken. The kitchen had all the appearance of being occupied within hours.

The frown grew deeper as he closed the refrigerator door and headed for the huge staircase in the hall. He went up the steps slowly, straining his ears for a sound to indicate someone else was in the house.

There were five rooms around the balcony at the top of the stairs. Cautiously, he tried each of the knobs, pushed the door open, satisfied himself that they were empty. He had about concluded that if there were an occupant of the house, the open garage door with the car gone would indicate that he was out either on an errand or shopping.

The door to the last room failed to open when he turned the knob. The key was in the lock, so he turned the key and cautiously pushed the door open.

He stood in the doorway, shocked by what he saw.

He had difficulty recognizing the redhead who stood naked near the large bed. Her hair was hanging down over her shoulders. It was lustreless, as dry and dead-looking as her skin. She stood staring at him with uninterested dull eyes, automatically scratching at her arm.

Liddell walked over to the girl, caught her wrist. He counted the scars in the tracks that lined the inside of her arm. The girl stood apathetically, made no effort to resist or pull her arm away.

“Who did this to you, Jackie?” he growled.

She ridged her forehead as if trying to remember. “Fritz.”

“Where is he?”

The girl shook her head. “He hasn’t been in for a long time,” she told him dully. “Sometimes he makes me wait. I hope he won’t make me wait today.”

Liddell left the girl standing in the room, walked out onto the balcony. He found a telephone in the next bedroom. He dialed the number of *Film Talk*, asked for Laury Ames. After a moment, the pert voice of the newshen came through.

“Laury, this is Liddell. I want you to pick up a dress and shoes and meet me at Lew Merton’s place.”

“What’s the idea? You planning to go in drag?”

“Laury,” Liddell’s voice was unusually harsh, “they have that kid locked up here without a stitch on. Somebody has been feeding her from a needle. I want you to come and get her.”



The girl's breath whistling through her teeth came across the wire. "Why not call the police?"

"I want to have a little personal talk with the guy who has been doing this to this kid. The police can have him then. Can you lay your hands on a gun?"

The girl hesitated for a moment. "I think so. The editor keeps one in his desk. Every so often we get a visit from a dissatisfied subscriber."

"Bring it and hurry. I don't know how soon her jailer will be back."

"I'm on my way." There was a click of the phone being dropped on the hook.

Johnny Liddell opened the door a crack in response to Laury Ames' knock. When he saw the girl outside, he reached for the dress and shoes she held. Then he took the .38 she held out to him.

"I'll run the car down the hill where he won't see it if he comes back. I'll wait for you there."

Liddell nodded, shut the door behind her. He stuck the .38 in his waistband, climbed up the stairs to where the girl was sitting listlessly on the side of her bed. She didn't bother to look up as he walked in. He dropped the clothes on the side of the bed.

"Put these on. I want to get you out of here before he gets back," Liddell told her.

Jackie raised her head, stared at him as though she had never seen him before. "But if I'm not here, how can he give me my fix?" she wanted to know.

"We'll take care of that. Put on the dress and shoes."

Jackie hesitated for a moment, then obeyed without further argument. The dress was a little tight around the chest but suited the purpose. She sat down on the side of the bed and Liddell helped her with the shoes. He caught her by the arm, led her out onto the balcony. They headed for the stairs.

As they started down, he could hear the sound of a key being turned in the lock. Quickly, he led Jackie into the first bedroom, pushed her behind the door and waited.

He could hear the sound of footsteps in the lower hall as the newcomer stamped in the direction of the kitchen. There was a wait while the man was in the kitchen. Liddell could feel his palm dampening against the butt of the gun. Jackie stood apathetically alongside him, neither moving nor speaking.

The footsteps came again, this time they were heading in the direction of the stairs. Liddell could hear the man stamping up the staircase. He got a brief glance at a brief flash of the newcomer as Fritz headed for the rear bedroom.

As Fritz passed the room where they stood, Liddell stepped out into the hall, gun in hand. "Looking for somebody?" he wanted to know. He was having difficulty controlling his trigger finger.

The big man whirled. He started to lunge for Liddell, froze at the sight of the gun in his hand.

"Breaking and entering with a gun is a pretty stiff rap, mister."

"So is trying to turn a girl into a junkie," Liddell told him.

"What are you talking about?"

"I've seen the girl. I've also seen the tracks on her arm."

Fritz sneered. "Sure you've seen the tracks. She's a junkie. I'm trying to help her kick the habit."

"That's why you've got her locked in a room with no clothes?"

"When a junkie tries to kick the habit cold turkey they sometimes try to hurt themselves. You have to keep them locked up for their protection."

Liddell didn't hear the girl come out of the room. She stood behind him, staring at Fritz.

"Don't be mad at me, Fritz. He told me to put the dress on and—"

"That's it! Grab his arm!" Fritz shouted.

Liddell fell for it, turned his head for a second.

A second was all Fritz needed. He cleared the space between himself and Liddell in two jumps. Before Johnny could brace himself, Fritz had caught him on the inside of his wrist with a vicious chop. The .38 slipped from Liddell's nerveless fingers, hit the floor. Both men scrambled for it. It skidded away from them, slid through the spokes of the railing circling the balcony. It clattered to the hallway below.

Fritz reached for Liddell, tried to pull him close enough for a bear hug. Liddell rolled away from him, hit the legs of the girl. She stumbled across Liddell, slammed into the other man who was struggling to his feet. They fell in a tangled mass of arms and legs.

Liddell got to his feet, tried to massage some life into his right hand. The wrist chop had rendered it almost useless. While Fritz was shoving the dead weight of the redhead off him, Liddell ran into the bedroom looking for something to use as a weapon.

He grabbed a small table lamp, yanked its cord free from the wall. He held it in his left hand, waiting for the next onslaught by the other man.

Fritz appeared in the doorway. He held a long-bladed switchblade in his hand, point up in the approved knife-fighter style. He grinned at Liddell.

“I hope you got real good digestion, friend. Because I’m going to feed you some steel. And it’s real hard to digest.” He started shuffling toward where Liddell stood, the lamp in his hand, his right arm hanging helplessly at his side.

Johnny backed slowly away. He could feel the perspiration running down his back, breaking out in little beads on his forehead. He watched warily, waiting for some break that would make it possible to get out the door and down the stairs. The .38 in the lower hallway seemed to be his only hope. The other man was too big and too strong for a man with only one hand.

Fritz continued to stalk him, grinning wolfishly. He seemed to divine Liddell’s plan, waved the knife. “Go ahead. Make a break for it.” He swung the blade of the knife in a sweeping motion. “I’ll lay your guts all over the floor. You ever see how long it takes a guy to die that way?”

Liddell kept backing away. Finally he felt the wall against his back and stopped. His right hand was still a mass of pins and needles, practically dead from his wrist to the tips of his fingers.

Fritz stopped and grinned at him. “No place to go, friend?” he leered. He held the tip of the knife at a level with Liddell’s eyes. “I got a ticket for you right here. A one-way ticket.”

As the other man started to close in, Liddell swung the lamp desperately. The cord swirled like a snake, hissed through the air. It caught the other man above the ears, wrapped itself around his head.

Fritz roared with pain as the lamp cord bit into his face and temporarily blinded him. He made the one mistake a knife-fighter should never make. In his rage, he threw the knife at Liddell. It missed his head, buried itself in the wall. Liddell whirled, tugged the knife loose and turned to face the raging Fritz.

The other man moved with a speed surprising in a man his size. He closed the distance, caught Liddell's left wrist, tried to smash its knuckles against the wall to break his hold on the knife.

Perspiration beaded on Liddell's forehead, ran down into his eyes, almost blinding him. As Fritz started to lean his weight against him, Liddell seemed to go limp.

The other man moved in for the kill.

Liddell suddenly brought his knee up into Fritz's groin. The big man roared his pain, the grip on Liddell's wrist loosened. Fritz tried to back away. Liddell lashed out with his heel, caught the other man on the knee cap, sent him staggering backwards. Johnny followed painfully.

Fritz turned and ran for the doorway. The .38 on the floor below still represented the margin of victory. Liddell scuttled after him in an attempt to head him off.

Neither man saw the girl standing to the side of the doorway. Neither saw her foot as she extended it.

Fritz hit the foot at full speed. He tripped over it, lost his balance. His momentum carried him forward. He hit the railing around the balcony with his full weight. There was a loud rending crash as the railing gave way, a keening scream that ended with a dull thud.

Liddell dropped the knife to the floor, walked to the shattered railing, looked down. Fritz was spreadeagled on the floor below. A thin dark stream was snaking away from his body.

Johnny Liddell took the unresisting girl by the hand, led her to the staircase and down. They both kept their backs to the thing on the floor when they headed toward the doorway.

Two hours later, the Los Angeles office of the Department of Justice alerted its Las Vegas office to pick up Lew Merton on charges of kidnapping.

When the two men from the Department who shouldered their way through the people who stood three deep around the craps table in the Oasis picked him up, Lew Merton had the dice. The table in front of him was stacked with chips.

It was the second time that day that he had been interrupted in the middle of a hot roll. When the two agents identified themselves and informed him that he was wanted for questioning in a kidnapping, Merton knew that he had crapped out.

## Chapter 24

Inspector Herlehy sat behind his desk, chomping happily on his gum. He eyed Johnny Liddell with thinly disguised approval.

“The details are still coming in, Johnny. From all accounts you really pulled this one out of the hat,” he told the private detective. He turned to Muggsy Kiely who was setting up her tape recorder on the corner of the desk. “Johnny wouldn’t give us all the details until you got here, Miss Kiely. Something about *The Dispatch* getting an exclusive.”

Muggsy beamed at Liddell. “That’s my boy.” She nodded to Johnny. “We’re ready whenever you are.”

“The whole problem was to nail these guys with something they could be prosecuted for.” Liddell squirmed into a comfortable position in his chair. “The d.a.’s man told me that even though Mendy Carroll was an eyewitness to Maury Josephs’ killing, his testimony wouldn’t stand up.”

Muggsy frowned. “Why not?”

“When a witness is also an accomplice, there must be corroboration,” Herlehy told her.

“In New York State, that is, Inspector,” Liddell emphasized. “In a Federal court you don’t need corroboration.”

Herlehy nodded. “Right.”

“So I had to stop trying to nail them for the Rocky Nelson kill because it looked impossible to get corroboration. Instead, I went after them for something that would bring them into a Federal court, where they’d be at each other’s throats. Jackie Day was missing. We figured she’d been shipped to California. All we had to do was to prove it was for an immoral purpose. If we could find one, sending her across a state line would be a Federal offense.”

“You sure hit the jackpot on that one.” Herlehy grinned. “Merton is blaming Corday for shipping the girl. Both of them are a cinch to draw a long rap as the result.”

“What about the other two in the syndicate? Gatti and Weiss?” Muggsy wanted to know.

“They’re about to find out that what Joe Louis said when somebody told him that Billy Conn intended to keep running the minute he got into the ring was more truth than poetry.”

“I don’t remember what he said,” Muggsy told him.

“Joe said, ‘Maybe he can run, but he can’t hide.’ Now that Jackie Day has told her story, the boys all over the country know that Gatti and Weiss as well as Corday and Merton took them for a bundle on a fix. Those boys can get awfully narrow-minded about a thing like that. And Corday better apply for permanent kitchen police when he’s sent up. Merton will be in the same pen with him. Corday would be smart to count the number of knives every night right after mess to make sure there isn’t one with his name on it floating around.”

“That’s an awful lot of work you did for a \$100 retainer,” Herlehy grunted.

“I took on an assignment. If anything was to happen to Rocky, I was to deliver an exposé to *The Dispatch*. The material disappeared but I still had the contract to deliver an exposé to *The Dispatch*. How am I doing, Muggs?”

The redhead grinned at him. “My father loves you.”

“How about you?”

“Wait until I see that beautiful by-line over the front-page series we start running tomorrow. That is, if you’re sure you haven’t traded me in on Laury Ames?”

“Your meow is showing, Muggs.”

“How about the other kid? The one they kidnapped. Do they think they can straighten her out?”

Liddell bobbed his head, “It’s going to be a bit of an ordeal. She’s going to have to kick it and that’s never easy. But once she does the docs don’t think she’ll ever get back on it. After all, there was no physical or psychological basis for the addiction.”

“So let’s take a look at the scoreboard. Josephs killed Rocky and Josephs is dead. The four top guys in the gambling syndicate have a very bleak future. The girl is being cared for in a sanitarium. The chauffeur has been paid off.” Muggsy ticked them off on her fingers. “That leaves just Mendy Carroll and Ray Carter. How about them?”

“I guess it’s my turn to contribute something to *The Dispatch* exclusive,” Herlehy put in. “Ray Carter is in custody as of this morning. He is being charged with the murder of Maury Josephs.”

“What’s the point? Phillips said you could never get a conviction without another witness. There was no other witness.” Liddell grunted.

Herlehy chewed his wad for a moment. “You didn’t listen too good that day. Phillips said that Section 399 of the Criminal Code states that a conviction cannot be had on the testimony of an accomplice unless it is corroborated by such other evidence as tends to connect the defendant with the commission of the crime. You’ll note that it doesn’t specify that this corroboration must be another witness. The testimony can be corroborated by evidence that connects the defendant with the crime.”

“So?”

“We’ve gone over Mendy Carroll’s story with a fine-tooth comb. At one point he said that Carter rolled the window down to tell him to follow him. The car has power windows.” He paused for effect. “Carter’s fingerprint was on the button that lowers the windows. There’s been an all-points bulletin out for him ever since you started him running. He was picked up late last night in Watertown. As soon as we get him back we’ll announce the indictment.” He rolled his eyes up to the discolored crack in the ceiling. “That should give *The Dispatch* plenty of time to carry it exclusive.”

“Drinks are on *The Dispatch*, gentlemen.” Muggsy snapped off the recorder. “How about the Deadline Cafe this evening after you’re off duty, Inspector?”

“I’m off duty right now,” Liddell reminded her.

“You’re always off duty. I’m not. I’ve got to get this right back to the paper for the early edition. Can you make it around six, Inspector?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Herlehy grinned. “I’ve been having a lot of new experiences lately. Like having a private detective do my work for me. But to have a newspaperman pick up a tab. That’s one I couldn’t miss.”

THE END



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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.

A cover has been created for this eBook as the original cover is still in copyright.

[The end of *Margin for Terror* by Frank Kane]