


**DELL**

FIRST  
EDITION

7451

40c

**A NEW**  
**JOHNNY LIDDELL**  
**THRILLER**



# ring-a-ding-ding



“My number’s  
unlisted,” she  
told Liddell.  
“You’re a  
detective,  
find it.”

**FRANK  
KANE**

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**DEBBIE** She lay there, one arm stretched over her head, the loosely tied robe pulled back to reveal her breasts.

Her hair was the color of burnished copper. Her eyes were blue. Her lips were full, soft.

She was lovely. She was built. She was very dead.

“What a waste,” Liddell thought, as he pictured what he would do to the person who did it.

**ring-a-ding-ding**

**BY FRANK KANE**

**A DELL FIRST  
EDITION**

**an original  
mystery**

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**RING-A-DING-DING**

# one.

A cold, driving rain slanted down from the black sky, looked like buckshot hitting the puddles along the curb. A bitter wind swept 64th Street as though down a canyon of man-made stone. The few pedestrians abroad leaned against the wind, clutched their hats and coats, scurried for the shelter of their doorways.

Above the entrance to Morgan's Cave halfway up the block a neon buzzed and spit, staining the rain-drenched canopy a murky red.

A black Cadillac swung around the corner from Fifth Avenue, rolled to a stop in front of the curb. Rocky, the uniformed club doorman, hustled from the shelter of the entrance out to the car with an umbrella, but the driver shouldered him aside, ran across the sidewalk to the short flight of stairs that led down into the club.

The doorman folded the umbrella, slid into the driver's seat and drove to a vacant space at the curb a few doors beyond the club. He cut the motor, doused the lights, checked the rear-view mirror to make certain the owner of the car was nowhere in sight.

Then he brought a small square of wax from his pocket and pressed the ignition key into it until he had a clear impression. He turned the wax over, repeated the process with the other key on the ring. In the reflected light of the street lamp, he examined the impression, grunted his satisfaction. He wiped the key carefully on his coat, got out of the car, shuffled back to his post.

Inside the Cave, it was close after the cold and wet of the street. Smoke stirred lazily around the ceiling like an early morning mist. Andrew Reeves grinned at the hatchcheck girl as he handed her his hat. He waited to enjoy the effect on the loose peasant blouse and skimpy shorts as the girl reached up to put his hat on the top shelf. It was a ritual by now. She never disappointed him and he never failed to express his appreciation with a big tip.

Andrew Reeves had the bulk of a one-time athlete whose muscles had run to fat. His jaw, still strong and heavy, was making a last-ditch effort to keep from being engulfed by his jowls. The high color of his face testified to a diet of beef and bourbon supplemented by frequent massage. But it was a losing battle. Already a fine network of broken veins was visible along the sides of his nose.

When the hatcheck girl had finished making a production of checking his hat, Reeves walked over to the man in the midnight-blue tuxedo who stood at the doorway to the supper room.

“Hello, Tony.” Reeves’ eyes hopped around the room, noted the number of empty tables. “Pretty slow tonight, huh?”

The man in the tuxedo shrugged narrow shoulders. “The weather, Mr. Reeves.”

Reeves chuckled. “Month before last it was Lent. Last month it was income taxes coming due. Now it’s the weather. Always something, eh, Tony?”

The headwaiter shrugged again. “Maybe people don’t go out like they used to. Nobody lives in the city any more. And it’s a long haul to the suburbs. It’s easier to stay home and turn on the idiot box.”

Reeves bobbed his head. “New York’s not a late town any more, that’s for sure.” He checked his watch. “Maybe Marta could go on a little early tonight? That way we could make an early break. You think?”

The headwaiter considered, nodded. “Why not? I’ll send word back to her.” He covered the hand Reeves extended to him with a damp grip. When Reeves took his hand back, the folded bill that had been in it had changed ownership.

Reeves walked into the supper room, threaded his way through the half-empty tables, selected one at ringside. A waiter materialized; he ordered a scotch and settled back. He was on his second drink when the house lights went down. He checked his watch, grunted his satisfaction. The last show was starting a half hour early.

An expectant hush descended on the room as a baby spot picked out the center of the rhinestone curtain. A tall blonde stood speared by the spotlight.

Marta Shane was stacked like an 85¢ sundae. Her gold-blond hair had a metallic sheen as it cascaded down over her shoulders. Her skin was a nutlike color, a hangover from a three weeks’ stand at the Oasis in Las Vegas, augmented by an occasional sun lamp. The gold lame gown was skin tight, complemented the color of her hair, emphasized the color of her skin. Standing there, she looked as if she had been sculptured from milk chocolate, wrapped in gold foil.

Her walk, as she proceeded to the center of the stage, was a production. She reached the piano as her accompanist finished the introduction. Then, as

the rest of the orchestra proceeded to blend in smoothly, she started to sing in a low, husky voice.

The silence in the room grew. The waiters stopped their endless prowling; the soft murmur of conversation became muted.

Suddenly, the number was over. The scattered groups around the room released their collective breaths, then the applause rolled toward her in waves.

The blonde smiled her thanks. When she bowed, the neck-line of her gown sagged, giving ample evidence that she needed no artificial assists in the magnificence of her façade. The applause continued.

Finally, Marta held up her hands, waited for the noise to die down. She nodded to her accompanist and started to sing again. Her shoulders swayed gracefully in time to the rhythm. The bodice of her gown seemed inadequate to contain the fullness of her breasts as she swayed in rhythm to the stepped-up tempo.

The drummer, his face gleaming with sweat, his lips moving spasmodically, was beating out a primitive rhythm that set the hair on the audience's neck on end. Behind him, the trumpet was nailing down the beat while the sax started to roam.

The girl's body started to twist and squirm. Her breasts were like something alive, swaying and flowing in an attempt to break loose from the halfhearted restraint of the loose bodice of her gown. She stood there, in the center of the floor, the audience in the palm of her hand.

As she undulated, her hands started at the sides of her thighs, came up slowly, palms smoothing the flesh over her hips, and slid over her stomach, up under her breasts, cupping them. Slowly, sensuously, she ran her palms over her cheeks, raked her fingers into the cascading hair, sent it flying outward as she ended the number with a little scream.

There was a momentary silence. The faces of the ring-siders gleamed whitely in the reflected light. The women stared, then whispered. The men stared, wet their lips.

Marta followed the rhythm number with another blues chant, her voice playing on the spinal column of the audience like a xylophone. This time, when she finished, she shook her head firmly to pleas for an encore, turned and headed back toward the rhinestone curtain. Her hips worked slowly, tantalizingly, under the soft fabric of the gown. The view from the flip side alone was worth the price of admission.



She was replaced on the floor by a dance team that swirled and scampered frenetically in its version of a cha-cha. The audience went back to its chattering, the waiters to their roaming and dish-rattling.

Andrew Reeves flagged down his waiter, signaled for a check. The waiter flat-footed it over to the table, scribbling some figures on the check en route. He slid the tab onto the table, face down.

“That Marta’s some woman,” he commented, shaking his head. “I get to see that act every night and she still does it to me.”

Reeves bobbed his head in agreement. “She’s all woman.” He turned the tab over, added a generous tip, scribbled his signature across the face of it.

“Tell Marta I’ll be waiting in the car for her.” Reeves handed the waiter the check. “Tell her to hurry.”

The waiter eyed the size of the tip approvingly. “Yes, sir. Right away, sir.” He could sympathize with the big man’s impatience.

It was dark in the bedroom, even though it was almost noon. On the night table, the telephone was shrilling loudly.

Andrew Reeves grunted, tried to bury his head in the pillow. His eyes were sticky, his head throbbed, his mouth felt as if it were filled with cotton. As he turned over, he collided with another body. Marta Shane mumbled in her sleep.

Finally, when it became evident that the phone wouldn’t stop its pealing, Reeves reached out and lifted the instrument from its hook.

“Who is this?” he growled.

“A guy who figures to do you a big favor, mister.”

“Do me a real big favor and get lost—”

“Is that the way to talk to a guy who wants to keep you out of jail?”

A chill finger of apprehension traced its way up the big man’s back. “Out of jail? You crazy?”

“No, but you would be if you didn’t listen to me. But suit yourself. You prefer I go to the police—”

Reeves blinked, tried to focus his eyes. “Go to the police? About what?”

“You didn’t know there was a witness, did you, mister?” the voice on the other end told him. “Well, there was. Me. I saw the whole thing.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The guy you hit. I saw the whole thing. I saw you run him down and then keep going. Okay, it’s no skin off my nose. I just thought you might be grateful. But as long as you’re not—”

A note of desperation crept into Reeves’ voice. “I still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“This morning around five. You hit and killed an old man. So okay, he was just an old bum. But the police still get narrow-minded about drunks who kill and run. Even if it is just an old bum.”

“How did you get this number?” Reeves demanded.

“Easy. I took down your license plate. I got contacts. They ran you down for me. But I guess I just wasted my time; I guess the police will be more interested than you are.”

“You’re not bluffing me, whoever you are. I wasn’t alone. I have a witness who—”

The voice at the other end chuckled. “A tip from me to the cops and one look at the front end of your car would make that witness look pretty silly. I’m going to give you a break. I’ll wait until five this afternoon before I do anything about the police. I’ll give you a ring then. Be near the phone.”

There was a click as the connection was broken at the far end. Reeves took the receiver from his ear, stared at it as if he had never seen it before, then dropped it on its hook. He reached over, turned on the light on the night table.

He tried to reach into his subconscious, dredge out some recollection of what had happened the night before. He drew pretty much of a blank.

The blonde stirred uneasily, opened her eyes. She sat up, pulled the sheet up to her throat, smiled at him tentatively. “How do you feel, lover?”

Reeves raked his fingers through his hair. “What do you remember about last night, Marta?”

The blonde considered, smiled vaguely, shook her head. “Not too much. Why?”

“We get into any trouble?”

Marta brushed her long blond hair out of her face with the side of her hand. “You couldn’t prove anything by me.”

“Think hard. It’s important.”

The blonde pursed her lips, considered. “Last thing I remember is when they put us out of the key club. Next thing I remember is right now.” She eyed him solicitously. “Something happen?”

“I just got a telephone call. Some guy claims we were involved in a hit-and-run accident last night.”

Marta started violently. The sheet fell away as she sat up, baring her to the waist. Her breasts were full, tip tilted. The brown, nut color of her body was crossed by the contrasting white streak that outlined the thin wisp of brassière she wore with her bikini.

“A hit-and-run accident?”

Reeves nodded.

“How bad?” Marta wanted to know.

The big man licked at his lips. “Real bad. He claims I killed the guy I hit and ran for it.” He caught the girl by the arm. “Think hard! Do you remember us hitting anybody?”

The blonde stared at him, oblivious to the fact that she was uncovered from the waist up. She shook her head. “I can’t remember a thing.” She winced as he increased his pressure. “You’re hurting my arm.”

He released his grip, got to his feet and paced the room. She followed him with anxious eyes.

“But if it’s just his word against yours—” she started to say.

Reeves stopped pacing. “He said something about the front of my car.” He rushed over to the chair where his clothes were piled. He could tell at a glance the condition he was in when he went to bed. If his clothes were neatly folded on the chair, he was in pretty good shape. If they were just tossed across the back of the chair, he had been feeling no pain. But if they were all rolled into a ball and thrown at the chair, to hit or miss, he had been stoned. The ball that was his jacket had hit the chair, his pants had missed it, lay rolled up in the corner. He started to dress.

“What are you going to do?” Marta wanted to know.

“Take a look at my car. He’s bluffing. He’s got to be bluffing.” He stuffed his legs into his pants, shrugged into his jacket. “I’ll be right back.”

After Reeves had rushed out of the room, Marta Shane headed for the shower. She was walking out of the bathroom, toweling her hair vigorously, fifteen minutes later, when the door to the bedroom slammed open. An ashen-faced Andrew Reeves tottered into the room, dropped into a chair.

“What’s wrong?” Marta wanted to know. She stood there, totally unself-conscious of her nakedness. Her legs were long, sensuously shaped. Full, rounded thighs swelled into high-set hips and converged into a narrow waist. But Reeves had no eyes for her just then. He stared fixedly at the floor.

“The front fender. It’s folded like an accordion. The headlight’s smashed to bits.” He held his hand out in front of him, stared at the bright stain, wiped it off on the side of the chair. He rolled his eyes up to the girl’s face. “The front of the car’s smeared with blood.” The blonde gnawed at her knuckle. “What are you going to do about it?”

“What do you think I’m going to do about it? You think I’ve got a choice? A man in my position involved in a hit-and-run accident?” He suddenly looked old. “I’m going to pay. I’m going to pay whatever he asks, God help me.”

## two.

It was raining again the following Thursday night when a damp and bedraggled Johnny Liddell wandered into Mike's Deadline Café. He headed for the bar, signaled for a drink.

Mike shuffled down to where Liddell stood, reached to the backbar for a bottle of scotch. He slid it in front of Johnny, brought a glass and some ice up from the well.

"Your secretary reach you, Johnny? She called here a couple of times around eight. Said it was important."

Liddell grunted, looked up at the clock on the wall, saw it was after twelve. "It can probably wait until morning."

Mike shrugged. "Suit yourself. All I know is she kept calling and said it was important. She said to tell you to call her whatever time you dropped by." He tilted the scotch bottle over the glass, filled it to the rim. He reached for the water pitcher tentatively.

"No water. I've seen all the water I want to see. Out there. It's been pouring all night."

Mike replaced the bottle on the backbar. "Like I said, it's your business. But that girl of yours sounded real insistent."

Liddell grunted. "Okay, okay. So I'll call her." He picked up his glass, shuffled toward the bank of telephones in the rear. He took a deep swallow from the glass, located a dime and dialed his secretary's home number.

Pinky's voice sounded sleepy when she answered on the third ring. Liddell could picture the rumpled, curly red hair, the sleepy eyes, the moist lips and the musky smell of her.

"Johnny?" the redhead wanted to know. "What time is it?"

"Wouldn't it be easier for you to get an alarm clock than to have me calling you in the middle of the night to tell you what time it is?" he growled.

Pinky giggled. "My, we are grouchy tonight, aren't we?"

“I don’t know about you. But standing in the rain for two hours to check on how long it takes that fat dame’s husband to score isn’t my idea of a reason to keep smiling. I don’t care how broke we are, this is the last divorce case we take—”

“Of course,” the redhead told him sweetly. “Matter of fact I’ve already called Acme and asked them if they could spare a man to take this one off our hands.”

Liddell scowled suspiciously. “What is this? First, you bulldoze me into taking the case because we’re going to be evicted. Now, you decide it’s okay to scratch it.”

“I persuaded you to take the case. But that was before we got this new client.” She giggled. “You sound waterlogged.”

“Half drowned. Instead of finding it so damn funny, why don’t you invite me to come to your place and get into something warm?”

“You weren’t listening. I told you we have a new client.”

“So, okay. We’ve got a new client. That’s tomorrow. Tonight, we could —”

“Uh-uh. Our new client wants action right away. Said she wants to see you tonight.”

Liddell groaned. “Have a heart, will you? It’s after midnight. I’m soaked to the skin and I’m dead on my feet,” he complained. “Besides, you don’t go barging in on people at this hour—”

“You’ve got plenty of time to go home and get in some dry clothes. This is just the middle of the afternoon for our new client. She’s the hat-chick at Morgan’s Cave.”

Liddell took a deep swallow from his glass, appreciated the warm glow it set up in the pit of his stomach. “Well—”

“Got a real sexy voice. The kind that gives your goose pimples goose pimples. She’ll be expecting you any time after two. That’s the time she usually gets home.”

“The hatcheck girl at Morgan’s Cave?” Liddell furrowed his brow in concentration. “Her name’s Debbie something, isn’t it?”

“Debbie Rains. I might have known you’d know her.”

Liddell conjured up a picture of the peasant blouse stacked with goodies, the tight skimpy shorts and the long, well-shaped legs. Suddenly, he didn't feel quite so tired any more. "I remember her. She's just a kid."

"Sounded like it. Seventeen going on twenty-nine, like."

"Maybe I should drop by. Can't tell what kind of trouble the kid's in."

Pinky giggled. "That's what I like about you, Johnny. You'd never let a girl down—especially not at two in the morning and never when her voice sounds like the sound track from a stag movie. Besides, she sounded like she's the type who might not wait until tomorrow."

"We never sleep. Service with a smile, that's our motto."

"From here it sounds more like a leer than a smile. Got a pencil? You'll probably need her address. A good detective you may be, but not that good." She paused, then read, "426 West 54th Street, Apartment 2B."

Liddell copied the information on the back of an envelope. "Some days it doesn't pay to get out of bed," he complained.

"Depends on who's in it with you," the redhead told him as she hung up.

Pinky had told him that the girl's voice would give his goose pimples goose pimples. Looking down at her, stretched out on the couch in front of him, he had to admit that the rest of her belonged to the voice.

She lay there, one arm stretched over her head, the loosely tied dressing gown gaping sufficiently to reveal the deep hollow between her breasts that served to accentuate their prominence and roundness.

Her hair was the color of burnished copper, cut close to her head, curved softly. Her eyes, showing under carefully tinted, half-closed lids were blue, slanted. Her lips were full, soft looking; her teeth small and white.

She was redheaded. She was stacked. She was also very dead.

The thin red stream that ran from the corner of her mouth matched the large darkening stain on the side of her dressing gown.

Johnny Liddell tore his eyes away from the dead girl, looked around the apartment. There was no sign of a struggle, no indication that the girl had any warning or any opportunity to fight off her killer. The only thing amiss was the half-opened door when he arrived. He had knocked twice, and when no one answered, he had pushed it open and walked in. It was

understandable that the killer, in his haste to leave, might have neglected to shut the door.

Liddell was about to investigate the two doors leading off the room when there was a heavy clatter of feet on the stairs outside. He went for the .45 in his holster as the door crashed open, froze with the tips of his fingers brushing the gun butt. Two uniformed patrolmen stood in the doorway, service revolvers in hand. The gun in the hand of the first cop was aimed at a spot a few inches above Liddell's belt buckle.

"Don't move, mister," the cop advised. All things considered, Liddell thought it was good advice.

The cop stepped to the side so his partner could enter the room, circle over to get a better look at the body on the couch. His eyes took in the salient points, he rolled them up from the body to Liddell's face with reluctance. He motioned with the snout of his gun for Liddell to turn around.

"Okay, mister. Face the wall, spread your feet and lean the flat of your hands against the wall. Keep backing up until I tell you to stop."

Liddell obeyed. When he was completely off balance, with most of his weight on his hands, the patrolman walked over behind him.

"Not that it'll ever blossom into a friendship, mister," the cop told him, "but I'll give you a friendly tip. Don't go trying anything fancy. A guy I'm fanning once tried to waltz with me. I had to kick him in the side of the knee. He don't do much dancing any more. He's lucky if he can walk. You know?"

"I read you."

The policeman checked Liddell between the shoulder blades down to his waist, along the waist up under the coat to the armpit. He tugged Liddell's .45 from its holster. Then he checked the right trouser leg, moved to the other side and repeated the procedure. When he was satisfied Liddell had no other gun, he joined his partner who was standing alongside the couch, staring down at the girl.

"Quite a dish," the older of the two cops commented.

"If you like cold turkey," his partner grunted. "Me, I like mine walking and talking."

"Wait'll you've been married thirty years," the older man prophesied. "Maybe then the quiet ones will appeal to you more."



“If you guys are finished discussing your sex lives, is it okay if I straighten up?” Liddell asked.

“What’s the matter, son? You’re not getting tired, are you?” the older cop asked. He turned, saw the beaded perspiration that was starting to glisten along the side of Liddell’s jaw. “I saw a picture once. This real tough guy could take twenty minutes of that.”

“Maybe you don’t have to be tough to kill women,” his partner said.

“I didn’t kill her,” Liddell growled. “She was that way when I got here.”

The older cop hefted the .45 on the flat of his hand. “You always go calling on young chicks this time of day with a .45?”

“I’m a private detective. I’ve got a license for that gun.”

“A hunting license?” The younger cop’s eyes flickered back to the dead girl. “Nobody ever tell you there’s a closed season on doe? That’s a real waste of good material, mister. There was plenty of good mileage left in that chassis.” He rolled his eyes up to Liddell. “Let’s let him straighten up, Vince. Maybe he’ll get some ideas. I sure would like to see how tough a guy has to be to kill a girl.”

Homicide heralded its arrival by the wail of the siren in the street below.

“That’s Homicide. Tell them your story, mister,” the older of the uniformed cops advised. “Make it real good. Sergeant Ryan’s a good listener.”

They waited until a plainclothesman came rushing up. A red-faced sergeant followed him into the room, looked around. The plainclothesman took the older cop off to the far side of the room, started copying some information the cop read to him from his notebook.

“I’m Ryan, sergeant in Homicide. Who’s this man?” the red-faced man asked the younger cop.

“Says he’s a private detective. We found him in here with the body when we got here.” He nodded to the .45 on the table. “He was armed, says he has a license for it.”

The sergeant turned back to Liddell. “Suppose you tell me.”

Johnny shrugged. “It’s like he says. I’m a private detective. Name’s Liddell. I have a license for the gun.”

Ryan scowled at him. “So he said. What he didn’t say is what you were doing here. You tell me.”

“I had a call from Miss Rains.” He indicated the bundle on the couch. “She wanted to see me. I got here, found her like that. Before I had a chance to look around, Tweedledee and Tweedledum walked in on me.”

“You keep pretty late hours.” The sergeant checked his watch, “It’s after three. How long ago did you say you got here?”

“Around two-thirty.”

Ryan pursed his lips. “Funny time to be making a business call, even in a funny business.”

“So we’ve got a lousy union. Besides, getting here at that time wasn’t my idea. She was a hatcheck girl, didn’t get home until two. I figured to give her enough time to get into something comfortable.”

The sergeant stared at him with no sign of enthusiasm. He shouldered past him, walked over to the couch and bent over the dead girl. He touched the tip of his finger to the darkening stain on her dressing gown, studied it. “She’s been dead more than an hour from the amount of coagulation. A lot more than an hour.” He brought a pencil from his pocket, drew the point of it through the corner of the stain. When the pencil left a mark instead of the blood covering up the track as the pencil was drawn through, he looked up thoughtfully. “It’s a pretty rough test,” he conceded, “but I’d say she was dead a couple of hours at least. Where’d you get this call? In Chicago?”

“I didn’t get the call personally. Miss Rains reached my secretary about eight last night. I was on a stakeout and didn’t get the message until after twelve. I was soaked to the skin, went home, took a shower and changed before I came over here.”

“This can all be checked, you know.”

Liddell shrugged. “Be my guest. I finished the stakeout at about twelve, went to Mike’s Deadline Café. You know the joint?”

The Homicide man nodded.

“Mike had a message for me to call my secretary at home. I called her. She told me to get over here around two or later.” He glanced at the girl on the couch. “The door was open, so I walked in. I found her just like that.”

The sergeant turned to one of the plainclothesmen who was supervising the setting up of a departmental camera, taking measurements and preparing

for the arrival of the medical examiner's men. "You heard the man, Ray. Call Mike's Deadline. Ask them if"—he consulted the notes the uniformed man had made—"if a private eye named Johnny Liddell was in there tonight and at what time. Also, ask Mike if he had any kind of a message for Liddell, and if so, what was the message."

He handed the uniformed officer back his notebook. "Okay. You and your partner can take off. We'll handle from here."

When the two patrolmen had left, the sergeant held out his hand. "Let's have a look at that license you keep bragging about."

Liddell dug into his breast pocket, brought out his wallet, passed it over. He watched while the red-faced man flipped through it. He paused for a desultory examination of Liddell's private detective license, wrinkled his nose as he handed the wallet back. "Amazing what some people will do for a living."

Liddell's retort was cut off by the plainclothesman, who was just hanging up the phone. He bobbed his head. "Mike knows this Liddell well. Says he was in there from just after twelve to about one. He was soaked from a stakeout so he was going home to change his clothes."

The sergeant managed to look unhappy. "The message? What about the message?"

The plainclothesman nodded again. "Mike had a message for him to call his secretary. Says Liddell didn't want to make the call, but he kept telling him it was important." He eyed Liddell incuriously. "Doesn't know why it was so important or what it was about."

Ryan swore softly, turned to Liddell. "This secretary of yours. What's her telephone number?"

"Wilton 2-2054."

"Get her," the sergeant snapped. He watched while the plainclothesman dialed with flicks of his index finger. He identified himself, started to ask questions, looked over to the sergeant with a helpless shrug. "She says she won't answer any questions without talking to Liddell first."

"The hell she won't," Ryan growled. "Give me that phone." He crossed to the telephone, pulled the instrument out of the plainclothesman's hand. "This is Sergeant Ryan of Homicide—" He broke off for a moment, scowled. "Of course I know what time it is, lady. I just told you this is Homicide and—" He broke off, listened for a moment. When he resumed,

some of the bluster had gone out of his voice. “Okay, lady, okay. We appreciate your co-operation. I just want to ask one question and you don’t have to answer it. In fact, I half hope you won’t.” He glared at Liddell. “Because if you don’t, I’m going to drag this boss of yours downtown, book him for withholding information and toss him in the pokey. Now, did you give Liddell a message tonight and what was it?”

He peered over at where Liddell was smoking with no sign of concern. Pinky’s voice could be heard in the quiet room, chirping over the receiver. Ryan frowned slightly. “What time was it when he called you?” He listened to the answer, the frown deepened. “You’re sure that’s the first time you spoke to him about it?” The chirping from the other end got louder. “No, lady, I’m not questioning your word. I just want to be sure that’s the earliest he got that message.” He nodded unhappily at the response. “Thank you very much. Sorry to have disturbed you.”

“Satisfied?” Liddell wanted to know.

The sergeant pushed his fedora to the back of his head, brought a balled handkerchief from his pocket, swabbed at his forehead. “That’s quite a spitfire you got there. I don’t blame you for working nights if she minds the store during the day.”

“You can’t blame her for getting annoyed. She needs her beauty sleep and she’s not likely to get it if people keep calling up at all hours of the night to ask silly questions.” When the sergeant ignored him, he added, “Do I get to ask a question?”

Ryan squinted at him. “You can ask a hundred questions. I don’t guarantee you’ll get any answers.”

“How come you boys came busting in here so conveniently? Just in time to walk in on me prowling the joint?”

The sergeant considered, shrugged. “I guess there’s no harm in answering that one. We roll on a squeal. A squeal came in, so we rolled.”

“Yeah, but she’s dead a couple of hours. How come the minute I show up, you get the squeal?”

Ryan scowled at him. “You got any complaints about how fast we roll, you take them to the police commissioner.” He tugged his notebook out of his pocket, dug out a stub of pencil. He wet the tip of the lead on the tip of his tongue. “Name’s Johnny Liddell—” He looked up. “Let’s see that ticket of yours again.”

Liddell passed his wallet over, the sergeant copied some of the information into his notebook. He handed the wallet back. “I guess we’ll be able to find you when we want you.”

“I won’t be far away.”

The sergeant stowed his notebook in his hip pocket. “You got any idea of sticking your nose into this investigation, forget it. Murder is police business.”

“Not if I’m the one to get murdered.”

Ryan’s perpetual frown deepened. “Meaning?”

“Debbie Rains was killed because she knew something that was dangerous to someone. Suppose that someone thinks she passed that information along to me. In that case, I could be bucking for a slab in the morgue.”

“Now, just a minute. I thought your story was that you got the message from your secretary, that by the time you got here the girl was already dead, that you never had a chance to talk to her. If you never talked to her—”

“I know I never talked to her. You know I never talked to her. But maybe the killer doesn’t. And maybe he’s the neat kind that doesn’t like to leave loose ends?”

“It’s your time if you want to waste it. But remember this—don’t get in our way and don’t foul things up.” He dismissed Liddell with a toss of his head. “Now get out of here and get back to your keyholes. We have work to do.”

# three.

The neon lights over Morgan's Cave had been doused and the front of the club was dark by the time the cab bringing Johnny Liddell banged its front tire against the curb, squealed to a stop.

The cabby swung around on his seat. "You want I should wait, boss?" He was a wizened little man with a short stub of cigarette burning perilously close to his lips.

Liddell shook his head. He brought a roll of bills out of his pocket, peeled one off, stuck it through the window.

The cabby shrugged. "It's your head if you like to wear it with bumps on it."

Liddell looked up at him. "What's that mean?"

"Just a friendly tip. Without you got one waiting, it's easier to pick up Natalie Wood than to pick up a hack around here at this hour. You know how many muggings they rack up here in this precinct in a night? You know how far's the nearest subway?"

"A couple of blocks."

"A couple of blocks, he says." The cabby rolled his eyes heavenward as though asking for guidance. "So when you get to the subway, where are you? A local stop. You know how often runs the local trains at this hour?" He brought his eyes down to Liddell's face. "You should have so long to pay your income tax."

Liddell opened the cab door, stepped out.

The expressive shrug the cabby gave as he watched Johnny cross the sidewalk to the short flight of stairs that led to the darkened club indicated that he thought Liddell would be more at home in Creedmore than on 64th Street. He ground the cab into gear, roared away from the curb and by the time Liddell was down the short flight of stairs, the cab was a red light blinking in the distance.

Although the neon and the vestibule lights were off, a dim light filtering from the inner room indicated that someone was still in the club. Liddell

tried the door. It opened and he walked in. He crossed the small, dark vestibule with its hatchback alcove, walked to the entrance to the supper room.

Chairs were piled on tables, an unshaded bulb spilled a blinding light from the dance floor to the ringside area where a cleaning woman was doing a halfhearted job of chasing the dust and cigarette butts around with a broom.

In the rear, two men were sitting at a table playing gin. One wore a fedora pushed to the back of his head. He sat scowling at his cards, his jacket hanging over the back of his chair. Liddell recognized him as Pete Degna, Morgan's right-hand man and bouncer. The other, wearing the peaked hat of the doorman, was a stranger to him.

Johnny picked his way through the empty tables to where they sat. Neither man acknowledged his presence until he stopped alongside their table.

"Joint's closed. Come back some other time." Rocky, the doorman, reached for the discard pile, picked up a red ace, discarded a ten of spades.

"I want to see Morgan," Liddell told Pete.

The bodyguard ignored him, reached for the ten of spades, scowled when Liddell caught his sleeve. His eyes rolled from the card to the hand holding his sleeve, up into Liddell's face. His eyes were a washed-out, expressionless blue, his nose showed signs of having been broken, his mouth was a thin, bloodless slash in the fish-belly white of his face. "You heard the man. We're closed. We don't give benefit performances for single-o's." He yanked his sleeve free, reached for the card on the discard pile.

While he was fitting it into his hand, Liddell put the sole of his foot against the side of Pete's chair, knocked it over sideways, sent the bodyguard sprawling.

The man in the doorman's cap jumped to his feet, looked for a moment as if he were going to jump Liddell, thought better of it and backed away.

Pete was on the floor, struggling to disentangle himself from the wreckage of the chair. He was swearing loud, viciously. When he finally freed himself, he got to his feet, dug into his pocket, came up with a knife. He touched a button, a four-inch blade sprang into place. He tested the point of the blade on the ball of his thumb.

“I guess you never met the peeper, Rock.” He glared at Liddell through slitted eyes. “This is Liddell. Scrounges for nickels peeking through keyholes. He thinks he’s tough. Let’s see if he bleeds like other people when he’s cut.” He got into a semicrouch, started circling slowly, knife held waist high, blade up.

Rocky backed away, watched as Pete started to close the distance between himself and Liddell. Pete slashed out tentatively, permitted the corners of his thin lips to twist upward as Liddell backed slowly away. Too late, he saw that Liddell was backing toward Rocky’s empty chair. He moved in, slashing upward in a lunge that should have laid Johnny open from belt button to Adam’s apple.

Liddell picked up the chair, held the four legs aimed at Pete, the blade scraped against the wooden bottom of the seat. Liddell jabbed with the chair, one of the legs caught Pete in the chest, staggered him slightly. He kept jabbing with the knife, Liddell parried the blows expertly with the chair. Now, Liddell was taking the offensive. Pete eyed the approaching chair warily, threw caution to the winds, and lunged in.

As soon as he was within striking distance, Liddell kicked out with his heel, had the satisfaction of hearing the other man howl with pain as the side of the heel made contact with his shin. Liddell tossed aside the chair, caught Pete in an armlock and heaved. The bodyguard’s feet left the floor, he crashed against the wall, and crumpled to the floor in a heap. The knife was jarred from his nerveless fingers, skidded across the floor to where Liddell stood. He bent over, picked it up.

Johnny walked back to where Pete lay huddled, reached down, grabbed a handful of the front of his shirt, yanked him to his feet. The bodyguard stood there swaying, a dribble of saliva glistening from the end of his lips to the point of his chin. He had difficulty keeping his eyes from rolling, finally managed to focus them on Liddell’s face. His lips rolled back in a snarl, baring his teeth; his eyes became thin slits, his voice was almost inaudible. “There’ll be other times, other places.”

Liddell touched the tip of the blade to Pete’s Adam’s apple, nicked the skin. The snarl went slack, the man’s eyes widened until the washed-out pupils were surrounded with white. He jerked his head back, touched his finger to the nick, brought it away with a fine smear of blood.

“I don’t like people who wave an edge at me, Degna,” Liddell told him. “You like cold steel so much, maybe I ought to let you taste it.” He brought the blade up again, the other man flattened against the wall. His lips were



moving, forming words, but no sound came out. His eyes seemed hypnotized by the glitter of the bare blade.

“Okay, that’s enough,” a new voice commanded from behind them.

Liddell let the knife hand drop to his side, turned around. He grinned crookedly. Race Morgan stood in the doorway to his office; the muzzle of the .38 he held in his hand had picked out a spot above Liddell’s kidney.

“So I finally get to see Morgan after all?” Liddell grinned.

“You’re lucky you can still see,” the night-club owner growled. “A man comes out, finds a trespasser threatening his help with an edge, he’s got a right to shoot first ask questions afterward. You know?” He rolled his eyes over to the man standing flattened against the wall.

Pete licked at his lips, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes made a circuit of the room, avoided Morgan’s. “He jumped me when I wasn’t expecting it. Ask Rocky.”

The night-club operator snorted. “You better go home and get into a dry pair of pants.”

The bodyguard made a stab at bravado, didn’t quite make it. “You think he was scaring me? I—”

“You sure could have fooled me. You looked like you were going to shake yourself loose from your skin. Go on, get out of here.” He turned to Rocky. “You, too, hero.”

The doorman shook his head. “Look, Mr. Morgan. I got hired to open and close car doors. You want somebody to go up against guys like this, you got yourself the wrong boy.”

“Get out, both of you.”

Pete sidled cautiously around Liddell, backed toward the doorway leading to the vestibule. The doorman scurried on ahead of him, disappeared into the cloakroom area. At the doorway, Pete turned. “Like I said, shamus, there’ll be other times, other places.”

Liddell grinned at him. “You forgot something, Pete.” He reversed the knife, caught it by the tip of the blade. He brought his hand back, the knife whistled across the room, bit deeply into the wall near the bodyguard’s head. Degna reacted violently, turned to run. Then, as an afterthought, he tugged the knife loose, stuck it in his pocket and disappeared in the same direction as the doorman.

Liddell turned back to Race Morgan.

“You were pretty rough with my boy, Liddell. You should know I don’t like people who bust into my club after hours, rough up my help.”

“So I blew your vote in a popularity contest. Put up the gun, Race. It bugs me.”

The night-club man squinted at him. “It could do more than bug you, it could make you very dead.”

Liddell considered it, shook his head. “You put me on wheels and you bring a lot of heat. There are a lot of boys interested in your enterprises that wouldn’t appreciate that. That could buy you a pair of cement overshoes for wading in the East River. Your meatball out there might not think it through. But you would, Race. You were always the brains type, not muscle.”

The night-club operator looked undecided, stowed the .38 in his waistband.

Morgan was no stranger to violence when it was unavoidable, but he had always preferred brains over muscle. Like that, he had managed to stay on the sidelines over the years, watching the hot-shots, their pasts filled with gunned and slashed bodies they had muscled on the way up, their future filled with the shadowy figures of the ones destined to climb over their bodies on the scramble to the top.

He willingly ran the errands, did the little jobs the big shots wouldn’t dirty their hands with, was seemingly content with the bone they threw him from time to time. Sooner or later they disappeared, withering before rivals’ gunfire, trying to shoot it out with the police or taking a ride on the thunderbolt in Sing Sing’s death house. One by one, no matter how it happened, the end for the hot-shots was always the same—a slab in the morgue. But Race Morgan continued on the scene. And eventually he was rewarded with a franchise from the Organization to operate one of its better night clubs.

But anything the Organization gives is strictly a short-term loan that can be called at a moment’s notice.

The call came when Kefauver’s investigation started probing dangerously close to some of the big men. The heat was growing and the opportunists decided to cut themselves a piece of the pie while the big boys were too busy taking care of themselves to worry about taking care of anybody else. One of the smart boys was Mike Hughes, a small-time loan shark from the West Side who saw to it that the investigating committee kept

the boys on the hot seat by judiciously supplying the kind of information the committee needed.

Race Morgan's only contact with the Kefauver Committee was the headlines he read every day in the papers. That changed the night an obscure attorney dropped by the club and told him he had a message from the Organization. Morgan felt the chill finger of fear along his spine, bowed to the inevitable, and led the messenger back to his office.

"You know Mike Hughes?" the messenger asked, the minute the door was closed behind them.

Morgan bobbed his head. "I know Mike Hughes."

"He's been getting out of line, muscling in. The big boys can't make a move because the spotlight's on everything they do. Hughes has been stooling and trying to take over." His eyes grew bleak. "You draw the contract."

Morgan's face went slack. "That's not my line. I don't—"

"You do now," the messenger told him flatly. He turned, walked out the door, closed it softly behind him.

Morgan stared grimly at the closed door, realized that the Organization wanted the contract handled with brains. They had all the muscle and gunpower they needed, but Mike Hughes' exit would have to be handled with finesse. There could be no traces leading back to the men who had passed the sentence.

The days that followed were filled with delicate attempts to set up a meeting with Mike Hughes. The word was out that Race Morgan was getting ready to move out on his own and it was finally set up that Race Morgan and Mike Hughes would meet at Morgan's hotel to discuss a possible partnership.

Mike Hughes swaggered into the meeting, confident of his invulnerability, drunk with his recent success. As a status symbol, he was accompanied by a thin-faced, narrow-shouldered punk he referred to as his bodyguard.

Morgan greeted him at the door to his apartment, ushered him in. He suggested that negotiations be conducted in his den, led the way across the living room to a closed door. When the door was opened, Hughes was confronted with three men sitting at a table that was scattered with cards, chips and half-empty glasses. Two of the men were wearing gray whipcord

jackets that bore the insignia: *Superior Rug Cleaners*, the third was in his shirt sleeves. All three had guns aimed at the men in the doorway.

Hughes reacted violently, whirled on Morgan, froze when he saw the silenced .38 in the night-club man's fist. His eyes swung to his bodyguard, who stood frozen with his hand halfway to the holster under his right arm. Hughes' eyes came back to Morgan.

"You can't get away with this. There'll be so much heat on the Organization—"

Morgan's answer was to squeeze the trigger. There was a faint plop, the silenced gun jumped in his hand. Hughes reeled under the impact, clasped both hands across his midsection. There were two more faint plops, the slugs sent Hughes staggering backward into the den. He caromed off a chair, rolled over on his face.

The bodyguard stood frozen, stared at the tableau with stricken eyes, made no attempt to move.

Morgan walked to the body, satisfied himself Hughes was dead. He signaled to the two men in the whipcord jackets. Wordlessly, they walked over, pulled Hughes to the edge of the rug, started rolling it. When they were finished, they straightened up, wiped the perspiration from their foreheads with the backs of their hands.

"The freight elevator takes you right to the garage," Morgan told them. "The truck is there."

The two men nodded, picked up the rug. It sagged suggestively in the middle as they carried it toward the service entrance in the rear of the apartment.

The remaining man pointed down at the big stain where the blood had seeped through the rug to the carpeting beneath it. "Look, Race. It ran through—"

Morgan nodded, shook his head. "That was a risk we had to take. You can't shoot a man without having him bleed." His eyes rose from the stain to the bodyguard who was staring with fright-widened eyes. "Bring him over."

The shirt-sleeved man nudged the bodyguard with his gun, prodded him over to where Morgan stood. The bodyguard's legs were trembling, seemed to be having trouble supporting his weight. The whites showed around the irises of his eyes. He made no effort to resist when Morgan lifted the .38 from his holster, dropped it into his pocket.

“Give me a break, Mr. Morgan,” he whined. “I didn’t see nothing. I don’t know nothing.”

“You’re going to be lucky this time,” Morgan told him. “And remember what you just said. You don’t know nothing, you haven’t seen nothing.”

The bodyguard bobbed his head eagerly. “If you give me a break—”

“Hold his arms,” Morgan told the man in shirt sleeves.

Before the bodyguard could move, the other man was holding his arms securely.

Morgan swung at the bodyguard’s unprotected face, grunted with satisfaction at the sound of bones crunching when the punch connected. A crimson stream spurted from the man’s broken nose, stained the front of his shirt, cascaded down his chin. He hit him again, nodded for the man holding the bodyguard to let him collapse to his knees, flatten out on the floor where his blood mixed with the stain on the carpet.

Race Morgan stared at the bleeding man for a moment, then walked to the phone. He asked the operator to be connected with the house physician. When the connection was made, “Doc? This is Race Morgan in 8G. We had a little card game going up here, a couple of boys got into a fight and one of them got punched in the nose. Could you get up here right away? He’s bleeding all over my rug.” He nodded at the physician’s answer, dropped the receiver back on its hook. He walked back, stood over the man on the floor. “Doc will be right up to take care of that nose of yours, friend.” He raised his eyes to the face of the shirt-sleeved man. “He’s notifying the housekeeper to get a couple of maids up here right away to clean up the mess.”

Liddell was right. Brains was Race Morgan’s stock in trade, not violence. He squinted at Johnny, bobbed his head. “Come on into the office. We can’t talk out here.”

## four.

Race Morgan walked across the office, dropped into his chair behind the desk. He reached over to the humidor, selected a panatella, ran it under his nose. When Liddell had closed the door behind him, he bit the end off the cigar, stuck it between his teeth. “Okay. You had a fever to see me. What about?”

“Some conversation. A few answers.”

Morgan chewed on the unlit cigar. “Why should I answer any questions for you?”

Liddell shrugged. “Because you’re going to answer the questions, whether it’s for me or for the boys down at Homicide,” he reasoned. “This way you get sort of a dress rehearsal, a chance to try your answers out on me.”

“Why should I have to rehearse anything for the cops? I don’t know anything they’d be interested in.”

“Your hatcheck girl, Debbie Rains, was murdered tonight,” Liddell told him flatly.

The night-club man raised his eyebrows in polite surprise. “No kidding?” He shook his head. “This town’s not a safe place any more. Too many muggers. I hate to see a kid like that working late.” He settled into a more comfortable position. “That’s why I send her home early when business is slow.”

“Like tonight?”

Morgan bobbed his head sadly. “Especially tonight. Tonight was one of the worst this year.” He rolled the cigar between thumb and forefinger in the center of his mouth. “Not only her. I chased some of the waiters, too.”

“About what time was this?”

Morgan rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. “A little after twelve. Hell, there were more waiters than customers in the joint. They were falling all over each other.” He shook his head. “All this mugging—”

Liddell scowled at him. “She wasn’t mugged. She was killed in her apartment.”

Morgan squinted at him, chewed thoughtfully on his cigar. “Her apartment, eh? Somebody break in?”

Liddell shook his head. “No signs of a forced entry.”

“Must have known the killer then, huh?”

Liddell found a cigarette, fitted it to the corner of his mouth. “She not only knew the killer. She knew him real well.”

“Why?”

“She was wearing a dressing gown, very little else. There was no sign of a struggle and she was draped out on the couch. How do you read that?” He touched a match, filled his lungs with smoke, blew it at the ceiling.

Morgan managed to look sad. “I wouldn’t have figured her being on that kick. But you never know. That’s one of the occupational hazards of a job like that.”

“You think it was someone she brought home with her?”

Morgan shrugged. “It happens. A cute trick like Debbie gets a job in a joint like this where she gets to meet the big spenders. She lets them make a little time. First thing you know they’re moving in and got a big thing going.”

“This guy was a killer, not a lover,” Liddell said.

“Where does one start and the other end? After the babe has a guy on the hook, she starts asking more and more and the mark wants to give less and less.” Morgan shrugged. “Why give bait to a caught fish? Some of these babes don’t let them off easy. They keep putting on the pressure and if the mark is in deeper than he can afford—” he paused. “One night he blows his stack and takes what looks like the easiest way out. You read about it all the time.”

“You’re quite a student of human nature.”

The night-club man grinned glumly. “About guys and dolls, I know. Believe me.”

“Who’d Debbie leave here with tonight, Morgan?”

The night-club man raised his eyebrows. “You think she walked out of here on someone’s arm?”

Liddell frowned. “You know guys and dolls. Me, I know night clubs. Nobody’s got a patent on the operation. A big spender comes in, picks out a babe in the line or the hatcheck girl. He passes a couple of bucks so she can get off early—”

Morgan shook his head. “No broad uses my joint for a recruiting station. If Rains made a deal with a John last night, she met him on the outside. Look, if you’re trying to tie my joint in with this—”

He was interrupted by the jangling of the telephone on the corner of the desk. He scowled at Liddell, reached over, lifted the receiver off its hook. “This is Morgan. Who?” The scowl faded, was replaced by a grin as he glanced up at Liddell. “Sergeant Ryan of Homicide. I suppose it’s about Debbie Rains?”

Liddell groaned, settled down on the back of his spine on the chair, blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. He could hear the questions the receiver was throwing shrilly at Morgan.

“Of course I know about it, Sergeant,” Morgan cut off the tirade. “There’s a private eye named Johnny Liddell here. He’s been throwing questions at me. I took for granted he had your permission—” He grinned maliciously at Liddell.

He held the receiver away from his ear so Liddell could hear Ryan’s comments on Johnny, his personal habits and his probable forebears. Morgan replaced the receiver at his ear.

“I’ll tell him what you said, Sergeant,” he said with mock solemnity. “As for Debbie, there’s very little I can tell you about her private life. She didn’t confide in me.” He shook his head. “No, I never saw any of her friends and she never left here with anyone. Tonight?” He glanced over at Liddell. “It was kind of slow, so we let her go home a little after twelve.”

The receiver chattered back at him. “Of course, I’ll help you any way I can. Me? It won’t be hard to prove that I arrived at the club at nine and haven’t left since.” He listened carefully to the voice at the other end. “I’ll be glad to do anything to help.” He leaned over, dropped the receiver on its hook. “I got the feeling that Sergeant Ryan doesn’t appreciate your interest in this case.”

“You might just have something there,” Liddell conceded. “But I think I’ll survive his disapproval.” He took the cigarette from between his lips, tapped a thin collar of ash off the end. “How long has Debbie worked for you?”



Morgan considered it, shrugged. “You could find it out anyway. She’s been working for me for about two weeks.”

“Know her before she came to work for you?”

“No. These kids come and go. You keep them a couple months, you’re pretty lucky. Some of them make a score, get somebody to pick up the tab for them, others float on or get a better job. But soon’s one leaves, there’s always another one waiting to take her place.”

“Where’d you get her?”

Morgan chewed on the cigar. “Broad who headlines the show, Marta Shane. The hatcheck girl and the doorman walked out on me the same night. Happens she knows Debbie’s looking for a job and that lion-hearted character I chased out of here used to handle the door in some club she worked in before. So she gets me out of a spot by bringing in both of them.”

“Sort of a walking employment agency, huh?”

The night-club man shrugged. “You don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. Especially a gift horse like Marta.” He rolled his eyes upward in appreciation. “There’s a lot more you’d be looking over first.”

Liddell took a last drag from his cigarette, dropped it to the floor, crushed it out. “So Marta Shane knew her before she came to work here? Where do I find this Marta?”

The man behind the desk considered it. “It’s against our policy to give out the addresses of our entertainers. But for you—” He smiled nastily. “For you, and for the sake of giving that Sergeant Ryan a real good reason to really shaft you—I’ll make an exception.” He reached for the phone, pulled it over, dialed with quick flicks of his spatulate fingers.

After a moment, “Marta? This is Race Morgan.” He glanced at his watch, nodded. “Sure, I know what time it is.” He glanced over at Liddell. “I got a guy here wants to see you.” He leaned back, hooked his heel on the corner of the desk, stared up at a discolored crack in the ceiling while he listened to the girl’s complaints. “Look, be my guest, see him or don’t. Debbie Rains got herself dead tonight. This guy’s a private peeper working on the case. He thinks you can help him find out who killed her—if he can keep out of jail that long himself.” He rolled his eyes down to Liddell’s face, grinned.

The receiver chattered at him. He said, “Okay.”

He dropped the receiver back on its hook, nodded to Liddell. “You know the Sherbrooke Lounge?”

Liddell nodded.

“Tomorrow at four,” Morgan told him. “She’ll meet you there.”

“Tomorrow?” Liddell started to argue, thought better of it. “Okay. I’ll be there.” He pulled himself out of the chair, started toward the door.

There was a rapping at the door, it swung open, revealing a red-faced Sergeant Ryan and two of his men.

Liddell turned from the sergeant to the man behind the desk. Morgan snapped his finger. “I knew there was something I forgot to mention. I forgot to tell you that the sergeant was on his way over.”

Liddell turned back to Ryan. “I won’t be in your way. I was just going anyhow.”

Ryan glowered at him. “I told that secretary of yours that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to take you downtown, book you, and let you cool your heels, shamus. And I warned you not to get under my feet or I’d stamp you flat.” He turned to the two plainclothesmen who had followed him into the office. “Take him downtown, book him for obstructing justice, withholding information—” He broke off angrily. “Book him for anything. Mopery, barratry, anything. Just as long as it sticks.” He held his hand out to Liddell. “Your gun.”

“You already have it. Remember?” Liddell reminded. “By the way, you didn’t give me a receipt for it.”

Ryan bobbed his head. “You’ll get a receipt for it from the Property Office. But if I have my way, by the time you get out it’ll be out of style. They’ll be using ray guns!” He nodded to the two detectives. “Get him out of here. I want to talk to Morgan.”

## five.

Marta Shane frowned at the sound of the doorbell. The singer checked her watch and the frown deepened. It was after five a.m. and she had just finished over an hour session with the Homicide men investigating the murder of Debbie Rains. She stood up, smoothed the skin-tight Capri pants over the firm roundness of her thighs, paused at a mirror on the way to the door to fluff up the thick gold hair, made sure the blouse she was wearing was unbuttoned to the proper depth, then walked to the door.

“Yes?”

“It’s me, Marta. Rocky,” a low voice assured her from the other side of the door. “Let me in.”

The singer unlocked the door, waited until the doorman was inside, then locked the door again. When she turned to him, her face was dark with anger. “What’s the matter with you? You crazy, coming here at this hour?”

“Something’s come up you ought to know about.” Rocky headed across the room for the portable bar, fixed himself a fast shot. “There’s a private detective snooping around—”

“His name’s Liddell.”

The doorman stared at her. “That’s right. How’d you know?”

“Morgan called me and told me.”

The doorman refilled his jigger, tossed it off. “That ain’t all. The cops came around and dragged Liddell out. But Pete says that ain’t going to cool Liddell off. He’s a real hot-shot.”

The blonde walked over to the coffee table, picked a cigarette out of a converted mustache cup. “So?”

“So?” Rocky stared at her. “So there’s too much heat. I vote we pull out of here and lay low.”

“I have three more weeks on my booking at the Cave.” Marta lit the cigarette, took a deep drag, let the smoke dribble from between half-parted lips. “Besides, I’ve already started setting old man Byers up for a take. He should be worth even more than Reeves. He has more to lose.”

Rocky shook his head. “It’s too risky. They’ll be watching the Cave. I tell you it’s too risky.” He reached for the bottle, poured himself another drink.

“Take it easy with that juice,” Marta warned. “That’s not soda pop. That’s hundred-proof stuff.”

“I can handle it. Don’t worry.” The doorman tossed the drink off and set the jigger down. “We’ve done real good with this racket. Let’s not get greedy. We take a little, leave a little. That way we last a lot longer.”

“And pass up old man Byers when he’s all softened up?”

“To hell with Byers. I say lay low for a couple of weeks, blow this town and start living it up with some of the loot we’ve got stashed away.”

The blonde took a long, contemplative drag on her cigarette, eyed the man speculatively. She walked over to the couch, dropped down onto it. “Not going soft on me, are you, Rock?”

The doorman shook his head, walked over, dropped down alongside her. “No. I’m thinking of both of us. Of course, if you figure I’m in the way or something—”

Marta shook her head. “You know better than that, Rock. I couldn’t begin to handle this without you.” She took a deep drag, laid her head back on the top of the couch, blew the smoke at the ceiling. “Okay. If you say lay off, we lay off. I’ll scratch old man Byers and start cooling him off.”

Rocky leaned over, put his hand on her thigh. “Then maybe we can spend a little time together. I’ve hardly been with you at all since we left Vegas. I keep having to cool it and lay low so I won’t upset the mark.” His hand moved restlessly on her thigh.

Marta looked down at the hand, then up at Rocky coolly.

Sulkily, he withdrew his hand. “So, all right. You want to know? I figure it’s about time for me to get a break. Don’t you think I get a little tired knowing you’re playing house with all these slob?”

“Your share hasn’t been too bad for what you’ve had to do,” the blonde pointed out. “It doesn’t take any special kind of genius to ram a fender into a pole then smear it with red paint and stick the car back into a garage.”

“I’m not kicking about the dough. But that’s not the reason I strung along. You know I’m crazy about you.” Rocky was having difficulty tearing his eyes from the soft lines of her breasts as they jutted against the fabric of

the blouse. Suddenly, impulsively, he reached out for her, tried to pull her toward him.

Marta broke his hold with an upward and outward thrust of her arms, pushed him back against the arm of the sofa.

“You flipped? Since when did you get so big you could lay your hands on me?” She stood up, towered over him, hands on hips. “You were running an elevator when I took you on. Just because I’ve been nice to you, don’t let it give you ideas.”

Rocky stared up at her petulantly. “What do you think I’m made of? Sure I got ideas. I keep getting more and more every time I see you leaving the Cave with some rich, fat slob.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’m down there in the garage and I can picture you up there in bed with him. You know something?” He leaned forward, scowled up at her. “I feel like breaking in and killing both of you.”

The blonde started to get mad, shrugged. “You know it doesn’t mean a thing. You know what they’re getting? Nothing. I just lie there with them, figuring out how much we’re going to take them for, you and me. That’s right, you and me.”

Rocky got to his feet, shook his head. “Maybe you think it’s nothing, but they’re getting—”

“What? A few practiced bumps and grinds, remembering to moan every now and then? They’re getting nothing, because I have nothing to give them. I despise them all.” She reached out, touched his arm. “With you, it’s different. I’ve taken you with me all the way. Doesn’t that prove I like you?”

“Then why don’t you give me a break? I go crazy seeing you every night, being allowed to look but not touch.”

“I’ve never allowed any man to lay a hand on me, Rocky, unless there was an angle in it. All my life men have pushed me around. One day I made up my mind to push back and make them pay for everything that’s ever happened to me. When I stumbled on the idea of how to make them pay, that’s when I took you in. But I leveled with you from the very beginning. Between you and me it had to be strictly business.” She took a last drag on her cigarette, bent over, crushed it out. “You knew how it was going to be and you agreed.”

“That was then,” Rocky told her. “I didn’t know what it was going to be like, near you all the time, knowing what those Johns were getting. You said yourself we’ll be laying off for a couple of weeks. Okay, so now it’s my

turn, Marta.” He reached out for her, grabbed the fragile fabric of the blouse, tore it away.

The sight of her firm, pink-tipped breasts drove him into a near frenzy. His hands fumbled with the breasts, he tried to press his wet mouth against hers. As he forced her to him, he was pleasantly surprised to feel the resistance oozing out of her. He slobbered against the side of her neck, tried to reach her mouth with his.

Marta seemed to go completely limp. Then, suddenly, she brought her knee up into his groin. Rocky’s arms slipped from around her, folded over his stomach. He collapsed in a heap on the floor, twisting and squirming, his knees up under his chin, unable to cry out at the pain that tore at him. Marta stood, watched him unsympathetically as he finally managed to fill his lungs with a sobbing gasp.

“Don’t ever try it again, Rocky,” she told him flatly. “This time you can walk away from it. Next time you might not.”

She walked over to the bar, spilled two fingers of bourbon into a glass, brought it back to him. She held it to his lips, spilled the liquor into his mouth. Some of it ran down the side of his mouth, dripped off his chin. The liquor made him cough, his eyes watered.

The blonde got her arm under him, helped him onto the couch. Rocky moaned, turned his face to the back of the couch, brought his knees up to ease the pain in his midsection.

“I’m sorry, Rocky,” Marta told him. “But you should know I don’t like people leaning on me. You of all people.”

And he should, she told herself. He had been with her since the beginning. She remembered the first night she had met him. It brought back memories of New Orleans that she could do without. There were the eight shows a night in the honkytonk on Bourbon Street, the marks who paid champagne prices for the ginger ale she swilled by the quart while they were being set up for a mugging, the city cop who stood just outside the entrance as if protecting the customers while his real job was to cool off any tourist who objected to being robbed.

She was real ripe for a proposition the night Vince Lee and Mikey Bigg approached her. She had been surprised when the manager told her they wanted her at their table. But she wasn’t surprised when she was served champagne instead of ginger ale and that they got a bottle for their table instead of the watered down bar slops that the average customer got. Vince

and Mikey were riding real high that year, and nobody on Bourbon Street wanted to be on their list.

The proposition was short and to the point. They wanted her to pose for some pictures. There'd be plenty of money in it for her, a chance to get out of the dump where she was working, and a chance to make a lot of friends for herself. Important friends who could help her realize her ambitions.

She was neither startled nor insulted by the proposition. Stag pictures were the second biggest industry in her circles. She'd been approached before, many times, by fly-by-night operators. But she wasn't interested in spending the rest of her life in Bourbon Street, New Orleans, or the Bourbon Streets of other cities throughout the country. Vince and Mikey were making it more attractive—a chance to shake the dust of all the Bourbon Streets from her shoes for good. She accepted.

Arrangements were made with the manager, who was only too willing to accede to any request made by the boys. She was given the following Thursday night off and would meet them at the La Neuf Hotel. Even now she could remember the La Neuf, an old, disreputable hotel, the kind that gives adultery a bad name. An old man with a yellow-white mustache, rheumy eyes and a mottled red complexion was behind the desk as she crossed the lobby. He watched hungrily the smooth play of her hips against the tight fabric of her skirt, sighed as she stepped into the elevator cage.

The operator was a short, heavy-set man with the dark shadow of a beard. He was dressed in shiny uniform pants, his bellhop jacket was unbuttoned, showing a tattle-tale gray T-shirt. He leaned against the wall of the elevator, let his eyes roam from the top of her head to her feet and back, with appropriate stops on the way.

The elevator wheezed to the third floor, shuddered to a stop. Marta followed the faded red carpet down the hall to 304, knocked at the door. It was opened a crack, then when Mikey Bigg recognized the blonde, he opened it wide enough for her to step in, closed and locked the door behind her.

Vince Lee was standing behind the couch in the room, a man she didn't recognize was sprawled out on his back on the couch. His mouth was open, he was snoring softly. Marta looked from the man on the couch to Vince Lee and back.

“Who's the Sleeping Beauty?”

Vince looked past her to Mikey Bigg, who shrugged. “Why not level with the kid? She looks like she knows how to keep her mouth shut.” He walked over to the couch, caught the sleeping man by the hair, pulled his head up. “Meet Lloyd Martell, the prosecutor in St. Dennis Parish. Don’t tell me you haven’t been reading all about him?” He shoved the head back contemptuously. “The one-man vice squad. He’s been giving the boys in the Parish a real headache with his headlines. Our job is to cool him off.

“So you see, you won’t have to worry about anybody recognizing you. These pictures will be strictly a collector’s item.” Vince winked at the girl. “You want to get ready?”

Marta nodded, headed for the lavatory. When she came out, dressed in nothing but a robe, the two men had undressed Martell. He lay on the couch, looking piteously defenseless in his nudity. Mikey Bigg straightened up, walked over to a table near the door, picked up a Polaroid camera. He fiddled with it for a moment, looked up.

“I hope these things work as good as they say,” he grunted. “I never used one.” He aimed the camera at the couch, clicked the shutter. After ten seconds, he opened the back of the camera, brought out a print. He examined it, a satisfied smile appeared on his face. “Good. Real good.” He handed the picture to Vince Lee.

“You take a good picture, baby. A real good picture.” Lee passed the picture over to the blonde.

Lloyd Martell was pictured sprawled unconscious on the couch. Clearly identifiable in the background were Vince Lee and Marta. On an impulse, she slipped the picture into the pocket of her robe. Neither man noticed as they pulled the man off the couch in preparation for more pictures.

“We’re ready for you, babe,” Mikey Bigg grunted. “Get the robe off and get set on the couch.” As Marta slid the robe back off her shoulders, he grinned at her lewdly. “You know what? You’re not even going to have to wait to see how you photograph. We’ll have a full set for your scrapbook tonight.”

After an hour of posing with the still unconscious prosecutor, Marta had shrugged into her robe, walked out into the kitchen, poured herself a stiff drink and tossed it off neat.

“You sure do take nice pictures, baby,” Vince Lee chuckled from the other room. “Want to see them?”



“I don’t have to see the pictures. I was there, remember?” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Okay if I put some clothes on?”

“What’s the matter? Getting bashful?”

“No. Just cold.” She walked into the lavatory, locked the door behind her. She took the picture of her and Vince Lee with the unconscious man from her pocket, dropped it into her handbag, then got into her dress.

When she returned to the other room, Vince Lee and Mikey Bigg were dumping a limp Lloyd Martell back into his clothes.

“It won’t work,” Marta told them. “He’ll yell frame and he’ll make it stick.”

Mikey grunted, didn’t look up. “If he’s in any condition to yell anything.”

“Meaning?”

Bigg shrugged, picked up the stack of pictures from the end table. “Maybe he saw the jig was up. Setting himself up as Mr. Pure himself, maybe he couldn’t stand being shown up for what he was. Maybe he took the easy way out.”

Marta snorted. “That’s even crazier. He wouldn’t kill himself. He’s not the type.”

Vince Lee sighed. “We were afraid he might get stubborn, too. So we’re going to help him make up his mind.” He helped tug the now fully dressed prosecutor into a sitting position. “Tomorrow, when they find him with the pictures spread out in front of him, our troubles are over.”

A cold chill trickled the length of Marta’s spine. It all fell into place. Martell wouldn’t be the only one they found. She was in those pictures, too. They’d find her with a bullet from Martell in her. It would make a nice picture with a frame to match. She came to blackmail Martell, he shot her and killed himself. A nice picture with her sitting dead center.

Before anyone could stop her, she turned and ran for the door. She was out in the hall before they realized what she was doing. Instead of heading for the staircase, she ran to the far end of the hall where the corridor turned to the north. She flattened out against the wall just in time to hear the door to 304 burst open, running footsteps in the hall.

She could hear the whine of the elevator as it stopped at the floor. “You see anything of a blonde just now?” Vince Lee asked the elevator operator.

“I didn’t take anybody down,” the operator told him. “I had a call to take a paper up to 405. That’s the only time I been out of the lobby in the last fifteen minutes.”

She could hear the running footsteps again, this time going up the stairs. She ran out into the hallway just as the elevator started down. The operator saw her, stopped and eased open the door. “What’s going on?” he wanted to know as she squeezed in.

“They’re trying to kill me. Where can I hide?”

Rocky scratched his head. “Nobody ever goes into the basement except me. I go down there sometimes to catch a little shut-eye or a smoke.” The elevator kept descending beyond the lobby, settled to a stop in the basement.

Rocky led the way out of the cage into a small room that was evidently used as a catch-all for the hotel. Odds and ends were stored in confusion. Old furniture and crates were piled to the ceiling. Rocky picked his way past the crates to a little cleared space where a couch and lamp made a cozy hideaway. Piles of lurid-covered pulp magazines were scattered around.

“Nobody will find you here.” There was a muted, metallic buzz from the direction of the cage.

“That’s probably them. You won’t tell them, will you?”

Rocky shook his head. “If you need me, buzz three long ones. I’ll come right down.”

The buzzer pealed its impatience.

Marta dug into her bag, came up with the photo. “Can you have some copies made of this? Photostats or anything?”

Rocky stared at the picture, his eyes widened. “Hey, that’s—”

“I know who it is,” Marta silenced him. “Can you get copies?”

Rocky scratched his head. “I guess so. Soon as the places open up.” He studied the picture closely. “He looks like he’s dead.”

“He wasn’t then, but I wouldn’t guarantee a thing right now,” Marta told him.

There was a long buzz from the direction of the cage.

“You better get going,” Marta told him. “They’ll be getting suspicious.”

When Rocky left, Marta threw herself down on the couch. To her surprise, sleep came easily. When she awoke she had the impression someone was shining a bright light in her eyes. She jumped up, looked around wildly. A bright shaft of sunshine was knifing its way from a partially covered window across her bed. Her watch showed eleven-thirty.

The only sound in the basement was the hum and creak of the old elevator. She got up, walked to the window, stood on a chair and looked out. The window gave out on a large cement area backing the hotel. She pulled the curtains together, blocked off the light, sat in dimness, waiting.

It was almost noon when she heard footsteps. She jumped from the couch, hid behind a crate.

“It’s me, Rocky,” the elevator boy announced. He stood near the couch, looked around. “You can come out. Everything’s okay.”

Marta let her breath out with a whistle, walked out from behind the crate. “Did you get the pictures?”

“Five of them.” Rocky held up the prints. “And this.”

The newspaper headlines were an inch high: *Parish Prosecutor Kills Self in Love Nest* and a three column sub-head read: *Lewd Photos Given as Reason for Suicide; Police Seek Unidentified Blonde in Pix.*

She read through the story, nodded her satisfaction when she read that the face of the girl in the pictures had been smudged beyond recognition. The police theory was that the girl had blackmailed Martell with the pictures after first taking care to hide her identity. Public and religious officials were quoted as being shocked by the double life led by the reform leader.

Rocky grinned lewdly. “All hell broke loose here last night when they found him.” He looked her over with interest. “I got a look at some of those pictures. You sure know your way around.”

“Don’t let them give you any ideas,” Marta told him. “I posed for them with a gun at my head. From now on, I’m the one who holds the gun.” She waved the paper under his nose. “They killed Martell and they were going to kill me with him. But they didn’t—and that’s where they made their mistake.”

“What are you going to do?”

Marta grinned. “I’m going to write out the whole story for the police, the newspapers, the district attorney and enclose one of these pictures.” She

held one up. “It shows Martell out like a light with Vince Lee and me in the background. It’ll prove my story.”

“They’ll nail you as an accessory.”

Marta shook her head. “If those letters get mailed, it won’t make any difference to me, because I’ll be keeping Martell company down at the morgue.” She studied the picture, smiled. “But I don’t think that will happen. I think the boys will listen to reason.” She rolled her eyes up to Rocky’s face. “I think they’ll be able to persuade the Big Boys to book me into the mob circuit—Miami, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and New York.”

“Take me with you. I’m tired of looking at the four walls of the elevator in this trap.”

Marta considered it, nodded. “Okay, but on one condition. We’re partners, nothing else. All my life, men have played me dirt. All my life I’ve tried to fight back but I never could lean hard enough. Now, I intend to make every man I meet pay through the nose. So, remember, if I take you along—you’re a partner. Not a man.”

The boys had seen the light and the bookings had come through. After the Rockleigh Hotel in Miami, it was the Chez Chanson on the Strip in Hollywood, the Oasis in Vegas and now Morgan’s Cave.

Rocky should have known better than to try to make this pass. She looked over to where he was sitting up painfully on the couch.

“Sorry, Rocky. But you should have known better.”

He nodded unhappily. “It won’t happen again.”

Marta smiled. “Good. Let’s forget it did happen. I don’t want anything bitter between us, Rocky. You’re the only friend I have. Don’t do anything to spoil it. Okay?” For the first time, she seemed to be aware of the torn blouse and what it exposed. “I’ll be right out. Make yourself a drink.”

When she returned a few minutes later, she had changed into a tight-fitting sweater. He watched her as she crossed to the bar. The snug Capris clung to her hips.

“I didn’t get a chance to tell you that Morgan called me about this private eye, Liddell. He was in Morgan’s office when Race called. He wants me to meet him.”

“You’re not going to?”

The blonde swirled the liquor around the inside of her glass. “Why not? What’s a better way to find out what he knows and what he suspects, if anything?”

“This guy is no pushover, Marta. You should have seen how he handled Pete. He’s dangerous. Plenty dangerous.”

Marta shrugged. “It’s more fun that way.”

Rocky stood up. He massaged the pit of his stomach gingerly. “Have it your own way. Just as long as we lay low for a while. Where are we booked next?”

“Chicago.”

Rocky nodded. “Let’s lay low until then.”

Marta sighed. “I hate to let old man Byers off the hook. I’ve done most of the hard work, letting him slobber all over me. You think it’s fun with someone that old, you ought to try it sometime.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Rocky said. “I guess I better be going.”

The blonde stuck her hand out. “No hard feelings?”

Rocky shook her hand. “No hard feelings.” He walked to the door, stopped with his hand on the knob, turned around. “I’ll buy what you say about using these slobs to get everything we can out of them. But you’d better never fall for one of them and leave me out in the cold.”

“Don’t worry about it, Rocky. If I ever fall for anybody, I promise it’ll be you. Okay?”

Rocky peered at her, bobbed his head. He walked out, closed the door behind him. Marta stared at the closed door thoughtfully, wondered if Rocky was about to become a problem.

# six.

Johnny Liddell awoke with the unfamiliar odor of disinfectant in his nostrils. Someone was shaking him roughly. He rolled over on his back, stared around at the unfamiliar surroundings. The door to the cell was open, Sergeant Ryan was standing over him, eyeing him with no show of enthusiasm. The Homicide man's eyes were red-rimmed; the dark shadow of a beard dulled his heavy jaw line.

“Why didn't you tell me you were a friend of Inspector Herlehy's?” Ryan wanted to know.

“You didn't ask.”

Ryan glowered at him. “Well, the inspector's in his office now. He wants to see you.”

Liddell swung his feet off the side of the cell cot, stood up. He walked over to the piece of chrome that served as a mirror without offering the ability to be used as a weapon that glass might. He studied his face critically, probed the stubble on his chin with the tips of his fingers.

“By all rights, I ought to get a shave before I go in. I wouldn't want the inspector to think I was a slob.”

Ryan snorted. “Right now, thinking you were a slob would be one of the kindest things the inspector could think about you. He's wearing a purple tie and a complexion to match. And you're number one on his Hit Parade.”

Inspector Herlehy was standing at the window of his cubbyhole office on the fourth floor when Sergeant Ryan opened the door. His hands were clasped behind his back, he was staring down into the street with unseeing eyes. As the door closed behind Liddell and the sergeant, Herlehy took his time about turning around. He glared at the two men, bobbed his head toward the chairs on the opposite side of his desk.

“Sit down. Both of you,” he snapped. He walked to his desk chair, lowered himself into it. “Now that you're both here, suppose you tell me what the hell is going on around here?”

The sergeant shrugged. "I roll on a squeal and I find this guy on the scene of a murder." He pointed to the flimsy in the inspector's basket. "The Rains girl."

Herlehy nodded. "Go ahead."

"His story holds together that the girl wanted to see him. The timing is off for him to be the killer. So I tell him to beat it and to keep out from under our feet." He favored Liddell with a jaundiced look. "An hour or so later when I call a material witness, the girl's boss, this guy is already there, asking questions."

"Maybe that's where you should have been, instead of making telephone calls," Herlehy told him tartly.

"I had to locate the guy before I could question him, Inspector. It was almost four o'clock. Who could figure he'd still be at the joint?"

"Liddell did." He turned to Johnny. "And you, what's your excuse for interfering with the work of the department?"

"The dead girl was a client."

Herlehy picked the flimsy out of the basket, held it up between thumb and forefinger. "Not according to this. According to this, you never talked to the girl." He squinted at him. "You want to change that testimony?"

Liddell shook his head. "She called me for help. In my book that makes her a client."

The inspector flipped the flimsy back into the basket. "What's in your book don't matter a damn. It's the book we go by that counts." He leaned back, he studied the two men for a moment. "According to all I can find out, with all the horsing around, neither of you came up with anything that can be used. Maybe if you guys spent less time playing Flagg and Quirt and worked together, you might come up with something."

A pained expression twisted the sergeant's face. "Work together? Inspector, this guy's a private eye." He managed to say it in a way that made it sound like a dirty word. "If word gets out that the department is using a private eye to help it solve a case, the newspapers would laugh us right out of next year's budget."

The inspector leaned forward on his desk. "I've worked with Liddell on a couple of cases. I don't remember anybody laughing at me. Especially when he's helped some in keeping our batting average up." He pounded the desk with the flat of his hand. "We're going to be able to use any help we

can get on this one, from the way it looks. If you've got any ideas, Johnny, let's have them."

Liddell dug a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, shook his head. "No ideas, Inspector. But maybe if we kick it around a little bit?" The inspector bobbed his head, waited while Liddell stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "Dead girl's name is Debbie Rains. She was a hatcheck girl for Race Morgan at the Cave. She died from a gunshot wound—" He eyed the sergeant quizzically.

"A .22. From close range," Ryan filled in. "We checked the neighbors, both sides up and down. Nobody heard the shot."

"Yet, a squeal was called in," Liddell said.

The sergeant shrugged. "So maybe whoever called it in heard the shot and doesn't want to get involved. It's happened."

Liddell considered it, nodded. "Could be." He puffed on his cigarette. "No sign of a struggle. The girl was undressed, so we can hazard a guess that whoever killed her wasn't a complete stranger." He looked at the inspector. "Morgan thinks she might have taken a John home, tried to put on the pressure and got herself killed for her trouble."

The inspector grunted. "It wouldn't be the first time. The open files are full of cases like that. If that's what happened, we could have a real headache. That kind of a kill is almost impossible to break unless we get a break."

"No signs of a break in this one, Inspector." Ryan shook his head. "We're running down everything we can lay our hands on—" He shrugged. "And that ain't much."

Herlehy glanced from the sergeant to Liddell. "You, Johnny?"

"Nothing I can put my finger on."

"But?"

Liddell grinned at the inspector. "But what?"

"I don't know you just from yesterday, Liddell. There's something going on in that head of yours. I want to know what it is."

Liddell took the cigarette from between his lips, studied the glowing end. "I don't know, Inspector, and I'm leveling. There's something bugging me about the case, but I don't know what it is." He squinted as smoke from the cigarette spiraled up, stung his eye. "It's like something I heard or



something I saw that doesn't ring true. But I don't know what it is. If it's okay with you, I'd like to do a little digging around and see if I can't come up with something more tangible."

Herlehy frowned. "You weren't figuring on solving this one with a .45? Ryan tells me Morgan was a little huffed because you broke into his place after closing hours, started roughing up the help. You've got to scratch that kind of detecting, Johnny."

Liddell eyed the sergeant with no show of enthusiasm. "Did the sergeant tell you that Morgan's meatball came at me with a shiv? What was I supposed to do, stand still while he carved his initials on my liver?"

"You had broken into the club. Degna was only protecting—"

"Make up your mind whose side you're on, Sergeant. I didn't break into the club. The door was open and I walked in."

Ryan started to argue, got a look at the inspector's face, changed his mind.

Herlehy turned back to Liddell. "Okay. We'll let you go now. With the understanding that if you come up with anything, you don't try to take the law into your own hands. You turn it over to us and let us handle it."

Liddell nodded. "And thanks for the accommodations. It wasn't exactly the Waldorf, but the price was right."

Herlehy frowned. "If you hadn't wanted to play martyr last night and had told Ryan to contact me, it wouldn't have happened. But you had to be the big tough guy."

Liddell grinned. "I wouldn't hurt the sergeant's feelings by turning down his hospitality for the world." He reached over, crushed out his cigarette. "I don't suppose you have any objection to my getting my .45 back?"

Herlehy hesitated for a moment. Then he pulled over a pad, scribbled a note, shoved it across the desk at Liddell. "Give this to the property clerk. But remember one thing—we've already got a stiff on this one. Let's not get greedy."

Liddell picked up the receipt, glanced at it. "Don't worry, Inspector. I have no great yen to see New York littered with corpses. Especially since there's a pretty good chance that one of them could be mine."

An hour later, Johnny Liddell was irritably shouldering his way through the ground-glass door that bore the inscription *Johnny Liddell, Private Investigations*, slammed it after him. His redheaded secretary sat at a desk in an enclosed space, listlessly stabbing at the keys of an electric typewriter, taking excessive care not to fracture the finish on her carefully shellacked nails.

She stopped jabbing at the typewriter, turned a pair of sea-green eyes on him as he walked in. She eyed critically the wrinkled clothes, the stubble on his chin.

“I’ve been trying all over town to reach you,” she complained.

“You didn’t try the right place. The city jail.”

He crossed to the office marked *Private* and the redhead followed him. “Debbie Rains?”

He bobbed his head. “Debbie Rains.”

The redhead walked over to his desk, picked up a clipping. “I saved the story from the *Dispatch*. Thought you might want to see it.”

“Who needs to read about it? I was there.” Liddell walked over to the basin in the corner, examined his face in the mirror on the medicine cabinet. He turned on the tap, splashed cold water into his face, reached for a towel. “She was dead when I got there. Had been for a couple of hours.”

“What time did you get there?”

Liddell towed his face, ran a comb through his hair. “At two. Maybe a half hour later. That was the time you said, wasn’t it?”

The redhead frowned. “But—”

“It wasn’t your fault. Race Morgan let her off early. Things were pretty slow so he sent her home. Looks like she brought someone home with her.” He shucked out of his jacket, picked up an electric shaver. “She didn’t give you any kind of a hint what she wanted to see me about?”

Pinky shook her head. “Just that it was important.”

Liddell swore under his breath. “There was no chance of anyone finding out she called me from this end?”

“No. I called a few places where I thought you might drop by and asked them to have you call in. But I didn’t tell them what it was about. And I certainly never mentioned any names.”

“No one in the office when she called?”

Pinky shook her head. “It was almost eight. I was getting ready to go home.” She frowned at him. “Why?”

Liddell shrugged, started shaving. “Just an idea. You want to call my hotel and tell them to send over my blue suit and some fresh linen?”

“You going to check with Acme, see if you can take back that divorce action we dumped on them last night?”

Liddell shook his head. “Debbie Rains hired us to protect her from someone or something. We got the message too late to protect her, but that doesn’t mean that we don’t have an obligation to get whoever did it to her.” He lowered the razor, explored the side of his cheek with his fingertips. “Get that suit over fast, will you? I have a date for this afternoon.”

“Female, no doubt?”

Liddell nodded. “All in the line of business.”

“Monkey business, if I know you.”

“No. It’s in connection with the Debbie Rains kill. This girl, this Marta Shane, was a friend of the kid’s. She may know who she was playing house with.”

“Marta Shane?” She wrinkled her forehead for a moment, then sniffed. “That wouldn’t be the Marta Shane that sings at the Cave? A big overstuffed, overupholstered blonde?”

“I don’t recognize the description, but I think we’re talking about the same Marta Shane.”

The redhead shook her head admiringly. “I sure have to hand it to you. They could throw you off a plane, in the middle of the Sahara Desert and you’d land smack in the middle of somebody’s harem!”

## seven.

At a few minutes after four, Johnny Liddell leaned against the bar in the Sherbrooke Lounge. Most of the tables were occupied by girls whose hair ranged all shades of the spectrum. They were all identical, as if turned out of the same mold—all luxury models with outstanding equipment; all dressed in the height of expensive fashion. They were all slender to the point of thinness, like high-fashion models, all accentuated their eyes with a clever coat of make-up and played down their lips with a light lipstick. It was like looking into a many-sided mirror to see many reproductions of the same face. They had one other characteristic in common—all of them seemed to come to life when the telephone rang, waited expectantly to be called.

When it did ring, the bartender would take the call, motion to one of the girls. She would leave her table, eye the other girls victoriously, hustle to the phone and set up an assignation. Then, there would be a handshake with the bartender, during which a folded bill would change hands, and she would head for the exit and a taxicab, content that the rest of her day was spoken for.

Johnny Liddell had survived the first perking of interest at the various tables when he walked in, had taken in his stride the immediate loss of interest when it became apparent that he wasn't window-shopping. Cocktail time had just started, but already café society was putting its most salable merchandise out for approval. Whatever had been picked over but not selected by dinner time would be redisplayed in some of the East side *boîtes* at slightly marked down prices. The later in the evening it became, the sharper the cut in the price.

Johnny checked his watch for the third time in ten minutes, noted that Marta Shane was already four minutes late. He was about to order another drink when the blonde appeared in the entrance to the lounge. She stood for a moment, looked around, then walked over to the bar.

She wore a navy-colored blouse, its v-neck cut deeply enough to make speculation as to whether or not she wore anything under it unnecessary; she walked with a practiced sway that gave her breasts a motion of their own—a motion, which when combined with the way the sheath skirt clung lovingly to her hips and thighs, made her entrance something worth noting. The

bartender balled his damp cloth, tossed it under the bar, flat-footed it down to her.

“Hello, Miss Shane, good to see you.” He made no attempt to disguise the inventory he was taking of her obvious assets.

“Anybody been asking for me, Louis?” she asked.

Liddell set his glass down. “Are you Marta Shane?”

The blonde looked him over coolly, nodded. “That’s right.”

“My name’s Liddell. I think we have an appointment.”

“Are you the man Race Morgan spoke to me about this morning?” Her eyes flicked over the heavy jaw, the thick shoulders, the hair flecked with gray.

“That’s right.”

The blonde dismissed the bartender with a smile. “This is the gentleman I was expecting, Louis.” The smile seemed to compensate him for any trouble he might have taken. “Mind if we sit at a table?” Without waiting for an answer, she turned and headed into the table area.

Liddell delayed following her for a second, enjoyed the effect from the rear. He turned to find the bartender engrossed in the same appreciative study. Liddell grinned at him, turned and followed the girl to the table.

He waved down a waiter. “What are you drinking?”

“Dubonnet on the rocks.”

The waiter walked over to the table, Liddell relayed her order. “You can bring me a scotch on the rocks,” he added. He settled into his chair as the waiter headed for the service bar.

“So you’re a private detective? They’re making them in nicer models this year.”

“What models have you seen?”

Marta shrugged. “All kinds. Fat, skinny. Some on the make, some on the take.”

“Takes all kinds,” Liddell conceded. “You must have been around.”

The blonde considered, shrugged. “The way I make a living isn’t exactly a sheltered life. I’ve worked them all, from the joints along Bourbon Street

to the fanciest spots in Vegas. It doesn't leave you exactly wide-eyed. You know?"

"I can guess."

The waiter appeared with the drinks, slid them onto the table in front of them, headed for a table across the room.

"Race Morgan told me you wanted to talk to me about Debbie Rains." She lifted her glass, admired the deep red color. "What did you want to know?"

"How well did you know her?"

Marta considered, shrugged. "How well does anybody know anybody else?" she countered.

"Morgan tells me you brought her in, got her the job as hatcheck girl."

"That's right." The blonde nodded. "She was out of work and I heard Morgan beefing that the hatcheck girl had walked out on him. I figured Debbie would fill the bill nicely. And she did." She took a sip of her wine. "You know how it is in club work. On and off. You get around enough, you meet a lot of people who are looking for jobs and when you hear of an opening you try to bring them together."

"But you knew Debbie before?"

Marta frowned at him. "Didn't Morgan tell you?" She studied him from under expertly tinted lids.

"Just that you recommended her to him."

"Debbie Rains lived in the same apartment house as I do. In the next apartment, matter of fact. I got to know her from meeting her in the halls, lending and borrowing, stuff like that. The usual neighbor routine. She was working in a spot in the Village when I opened at the Cave, place called Beat Haven. The police closed it down for some kind of a violation and Debbie was out. When I heard Morgan hollering about having no one in the coat room, I called Debbie and told her to get down there right away. He was tickled to death to get her."

"Small world," Liddell said. "Were you home at the time of the murder?"

"Nobody seems to have an exact time of when it did happen. I got home about one, maybe a few minutes later. My impression was that her place was dark. I figured maybe she had a late date and wasn't home yet."

“Hear any noise, any time during the night?”

The blonde shook her head. “The police asked me the same thing. I didn’t hear a thing.”

“But living next door, like that, a shot should have sounded like a cannon—”

Marta shook her head. “I usually get home pretty late and I sleep most of the day. If I didn’t, I’d look like a hag. So when I moved in, I had the walls and windows pretty heavily curtained so outside noises and light don’t disturb me.”

Liddell hung a cigarette from the corner of his mouth. “You wouldn’t know any of the men Debbie had been dating?”

The blonde shook her head. “I’m not the nosy type. You know the old story about people who live in glass houses.”

“Being neighbors, you might have run into her with somebody in the hall. After all, you did work pretty much the same hours.” He lit the cigarette, blew twin streams of smoke through his nostrils.

The blonde shook her head. “I never saw her with a man. If she was meeting somebody, she kept him away from the apartment.”

“Still, whoever killed her must have known her pretty well. There was no sign of a struggle and she wasn’t dressed for company. Whoever it was, it was no stranger.”

Marta shook her head. “You’d know more about that than I would. You’re the detective.”

“You’d never know it from the way I’ve been floundering around. I haven’t come up with a solitary thing.”

The blonde smiled. “I’m afraid I haven’t been very helpful. I’m sorry.”

Liddell grinned at her. “To tell you the truth I wasn’t expecting too much help from you.”

Marta frowned. “But you told Race that it was very important that you talk to me.”

“I’ve caught your act a couple of times and I’ve wanted to meet you. This seemed like a pretty good excuse. Especially when Morgan said you knew Debbie.”

“That was very enterprising of you. I’m flattered you went to all that trouble.” The girl drained her glass, set it down on the table. “Hope I didn’t disappoint you.”

“Disappoint me? You more than lived up to my expectations.”

The blonde grinned her appreciation.

“As long as Debbie Rains was a friend, wouldn’t you like to know how things are going from time to time?” Liddell wanted to know.

“I certainly would.”

“How would I get the reports to you?”

“Don’t you go to the movies? Don Ameche invented a thing called the telephone.”

“And Marta Shane has an unlisted number.”

“You *are* a detective.”

Liddell shrugged. “It was nothing. Really.” He balanced his cigarette on the edge of an ash tray, brought an envelope and a pencil from his breast pocket. “Now what was that number?”

“Persistent, too.” She hesitated for a moment. “I don’t like to give out my number usually, but it would be nice to know how you’re progressing. My phone is WATson 2-7644. I never take calls before two in the afternoon. Or visitors.”

Liddell grinned. “I’ll try to remember.” He copied the telephone number on the back of the envelope. “This evening?”

The blonde consulted the baguette on her wrist. “I have a dinner date. As a matter of fact, I only have time for one more drink.” She dropped her eyes, turned the full power of them on him through her long lashes. “I didn’t know about the new models in private detectives. If I had, I might have made other plans for this evening.”

“There’ll be other evenings,” Liddell suggested.

She pursed her lips, considered it. “There’ll be other evenings,” she concurred.

Andrew Reeves stood at the window of his office on the 54th floor of the RCA Building in Radio City, stared moodily out over the spectacular



panorama of lower Manhattan and the harbor. A little to the south, the Empire State Building was spearing the low ceiling with the glistening shaft of its tower. To the east, the Chrysler Building towered over its neighbors, while far downtown the once wonder of the world, the Woolworth Building, was dwarfed by comparison.

As he watched, two tiny tugs were escorting a giant liner out to sea. The smoke from its stacks swirled upward, merged with the growing haze of the evening. The Statue of Liberty looked like a toy souvenir of the big town standing in the Narrows, watching the tugs and ferries puffing, hooting, churning and throbbing.

Reeves stood staring at the familiar panorama for a moment, then he turned, walked back to his desk where the afternoon paper lay flattened out. He reread the story of Debbie Rains' murder for the fifth time. He raked clenched fingers through his hair, rumbled the paper into a ball and threw it into the waste basket.

He opened the humidor on the corner of his desk, brought out a cigar, bit off the end and spat it at the waste basket. He lit the cigar, started pacing the office, puffing at the cigar, and occasionally locking his hands behind him. He was the classical picture of a man trying to make up his mind and afraid of the final decision.

Finally, he walked to the waste basket, pulled out the balled-up newspaper and smoothed it out on the top of his desk. With his thumb, he underscored the paragraph that read:

. . . Private detective Johnny Liddell, who discovered the body, told police that the murdered girl had called his office and had left word for him to come to her apartment regardless of the hour. A spokesman for the Police Department declined comment on the report that the private detective had been detained overnight. Liddell was not available for comment. . . .

Reeves smoked thoughtfully for a moment, then, as though reaching a decision, he pressed the buzzer for his secretary.

The girl's voice came through the intercom metallically. "Yes, Mr. Reeves?"

"Let me have the Manhattan telephone directory, Sally."

The secretary's voice sounded puzzled. "I'll be glad to look up any number for you, Mr. Reeves."

“I didn’t ask you that,” he snapped. “I asked you to bring me in the Manhattan directory.”

A hurt tone replaced the surprise in her voice. “Yes, sir.”

A moment later the door opened and his secretary came in. She was tall, dark. Her face was almost perfectly oval under the bouffant black hair, her eyes were narrow with each eyebrow forming a dark arc. Her normally full, red lips were compressed, narrowed. She walked to the desk, threw the directory onto it, turned and hightailed it out of the room wordlessly.

Andrew Reeves riffled through the pages of the phone book until he came to the page headed LIA-LIE. He ran his finger down the last column on the page, underscored the line “Liddell, Johnny, b. 51 West 42 Street, Skidmore 5-2121.” He picked up the phone, dialed 9 for an outside line. Then he dialed Johnny Liddell’s number.

“Johnny Liddell’s office,” Pinky’s voice came through the receiver.

“Is Mr. Liddell there?”

“No. But I expect to be hearing from him. May I ask who’s calling?”

“This is Andrew Reeves, vice president of the Amalgamated Automobile Insurance Corporation. I’d like Mr. Liddell to drop by here at his earliest convenience. Tonight, if possible.” He consulted his watch. “It’s four-fifteen. I’ll be here until six p.m.”

“Mr. Liddell is on an appointment outside the office. I know where to reach him. I’ll have him over there as soon as I can. It will certainly be before six p.m.”

“Thank you.” Reeves dropped the receiver onto its hook. He walked around the desk, lowered himself into his chair, rescued the cigar from the ash tray where he’d deposited it to make his call. He sank his teeth into its cold, soggy end. It tasted bitter. He pulled it from between his teeth, bounced it off the bottom of the waste basket.

Already, he was beginning to wonder if he had made the right move.

The girls at the various tables perked up perceptibly as the telephone on the Sherbrooke Lounge bar started to peal. The anticipation faded when the bartender looked up, frowned at Liddell.

“Your name Liddell, mister? Johnny Liddell?” he called across the room. He held the instrument up. “You’ve got a call.”

The girls went back to a moody contemplation of their half-empty glasses as Liddell headed for the bar. It looked as if it was going to be a quiet night. And quiet nights didn't pay the installments on their old man's convertible, or the haberdashery and jewelry bills. It might get so bad that they would be reduced to getting out the black book and hustling some business by telephone. Some nights it got that bad.

Liddell picked up the phone on the end of the bar. "Yeah?"

"I'm glad I caught you, Johnny." Pinky's voice came through. "Looks like our luck's changing. We just latched onto a new client. The Amalgamated Automobile Insurance Company. Some guy named Reeves—" She paused to consult her notes. "Andrew Reeves, vice president of the company wants you to drop by before six. Their offices are in the RCA Building. Can do?"

"You kidding? I'll be there."

There was a relieved note in Pinky's voice. "I was afraid you might have made other arrangements for tonight. I hope I didn't interrupt anything?"

"You're a liar. You're hoping like hell you broke in right at the crucial moment. But you didn't interrupt anything. We're in the lounge at the Sherbrooke and I get nervous with an audience."

"Better luck next time," Pinky chirped.

Liddell walked back to the table. The waiter had brought refills and the blonde was sipping on hers. He slid across the table from her. "Maybe you could break that date for tonight. I feel like going out to celebrate."

Marta shook her head. "I would if I could, but I can't. What's the occasion for the celebration?"

"We've landed a new client, sounds like." He consulted the scribbled notes on the back of his envelope. "Amalgamated Automobile Insurance." He kissed the notation. "It couldn't have come at a better time."

"So you couldn't take me out to dinner anyway. You'll be busy."

Liddell shook his head. "I just have to see one of the vice presidents up there before six. I could get away in time to—"

Marta shook her head. "I can't, Liddell. But I do get off around two or so tonight. If you're still in a celebrating mood, why don't you drop by the club and let me buy you a drink"—she held up her half-empty glass—"to make up for these."

Liddell checked his watch. “I might just do that.” It was almost five. He looked up. “Can I drop you any place near Radio City?”

The blonde shook her head. “No. Matter of fact, I’m heading uptown. So you just run along. I’ll sit here and finish my drink.”

Liddell pulled out a roll of bills, separated two from the roll, dropped them on the table. “I’ll be seeing you later.”

The girl nodded, watched his back until it disappeared through the doorway to the street. Then she got up, walked to the telephone booth in the rear of the lounge.

She dropped a dime in the slot, dialed a number, bit on her lower lip while she listened to the ring at the other end.

An old, wheezy voice came on. “Hotel Martense.”

“Rocky Norton,” Marta told him.

There was a slight pause, a click as the connection was made. Rocky’s voice sounded heavy with sleep. “Yeah?”

Marta put her lips close to the mouthpiece. “This is Marta. Stay there, I’ve got to see you. I’ll be right over.”

“But wait a minute, I—” Rocky started to protest.

“What I want to talk to you about is personal and private.” She heard the angry intake of breath by the old man on the switchboard as she hung up in his ears.

# eight

Johnny Liddell walked down the corridor to the double glass door at the far end of the hall which bore the inscription *Amalgamated Automobile Insurance Corporation*. He pushed through the doors into the anteroom, walked up to the girl at the desk in the enclosed area.

“Andrew Reeves, please.”

The receptionist stopped pecking at the typewriter keys, turned a pair of incurious eyes on him. “May I have your name?”

“Johnny Liddell.”

The girl depressed the key on the intercom, relayed the information. She released the key, nodded to him.

“Mr. Reeves is expecting you, Mr. Liddell.” She got up from her chair, waited until Liddell had pulled open the gate. She turned, headed for an office diagonally across from her desk. “Will you walk this way, please?”

Liddell watched for a moment, shook his head. “I don’t have the equipment.”

The girl gave no sign that she had heard, held the door open for him. He had an impression of full breasts and firm thighs as he brushed against her entering the room.

Andrew Reeves stood at his desk as Liddell walked in. He waited until his secretary had closed the door behind him, shook hands with Johnny.

“Thanks for coming over.” He indicated a leather-upholstered chair drawn up to the desk. “Are you free to take on an assignment?”

Liddell dropped into the chair, nodded his head. “Completely.”

“Good,” Reeves approved. He sat down behind the desk, leaned forward with his elbows on it, his fingers laced. “This is a personal matter, not connected with the company in any way. I will be the client, not Amalgamated. Is that satisfactory?”

Liddell shrugged. “It’s all right with me.” He settled back, waited for the details.

Reeves studied his fingers, as though seeking clarification of his thoughts. "It's about Debbie Rains."

Liddell raised his eyebrows. "Debbie Rains?"

"This is in strict confidence, of course?"

"Unless you're going to tell me that you killed her. Anything else you tell me is in strict confidence."

"Of course I didn't kill her," Reeves snapped irritably. "I had no reason to kill her." He got up out of his chair, paced the room. Liddell waited patiently while the big man cooled off. "I knew Debbie only from seeing her at the Cave. She was a cute little trick and I couldn't help but notice her. We became friends, but I never once saw her outside the place." He stopped pacing, studied Liddell's face for some sign that Liddell might not believe him, seemed satisfied. "Matter of fact, the reason I dropped by the Cave as often as I did was because I was having a bit of a thing with Marta Shane."

Liddell grinned. "Something like that could keep a man too busy to do anything more than just look at other women," he conceded.

Reeves pulled the humidior to the edge of his desk, selected a cigar, bit off the end. "One night we were on the town. I got a lot more loaded than I can ever remember. So did Marta. Most of the night was a blur. The first thing I can remember is waking up to the telephone ringing." He stuck the cigar in his mouth, held a match to it, took a full mouthful of smoke, blew it out. "It was a man's voice. He told me that I had killed a man in a hit-and-run accident the night before. He had seen the accident and had gotten my license number."

"A shake?"

Reeves bobbed his head melancholically. "He said he hadn't notified the police yet. He gave me until five o'clock that afternoon to make up my mind how I wanted to play it."

"You took his word for the accident?"

"Of course not. I went down to the garage, checked over my car." He chewed on the cigar nervously. "The front fender and light were smashed, there was a damp red smear on the fender. I panicked." He waited for some comment from Liddell; when none was forthcoming, he pulled the cigar from between his teeth, used it to indicate his surroundings. "Can you imagine the field day the newspapers would have with that one? Vice

president of one of the biggest automobile liability insurance companies in the world mixed up in a hit-and-run killing?”

“It could have been messy,” Liddell conceded. “He got in touch with you again?”

Reeves stuck the cigar back in his mouth, chewed on the soggy end, nodded. “That afternoon at five. He told me how much he wanted and how to get it to him. I followed instructions.”

“How did you get it to him?”

“He gave me the number and location of a locker in Grand Central. I put the money in the locker, stuck the key to the back of the locker stand with gum.”

“So the payoff went smoothly and the accident was never reported,” Liddell said. “But you didn’t get me up here to unburden your soul and so far I don’t see where Debbie Rains comes into the picture. So why don’t we get down to cases?”

Reeves smoked the cigar with short, nervous puffs. “When the panic wore off, I checked the records at the insurance cross-reference bureau. There was no report of any fatal hit-and-run accident in the area I was in that night. I had kept the car locked up in the garage, let nobody near it. I went down, scraped off some of the red stuff that was smeared on the fender. I brought it in and had some of the boys in the company lab have a look at it.” He made a face, pulled the cigar from between his teeth, studied the soggy, macerated end with distaste. “It not only wasn’t human blood. It wasn’t blood at all.”

Liddell whistled softly. “And the payoff had already been made?”

Reeves nodded. He set the cigar down in the ash tray, leaned a hip against the corner of his desk. “I was taken, but good. I’m not crying about it. How and by whom I was taken, I don’t know. At the time it seemed like the only thing to do. They had me over a barrel. They knew it and I knew it.”

“You say the front of the car was damaged as if you had hit something or somebody?”

“When I had it repaired, the garage man found splinters lodged in the damaged fender, indicating that it had rammed into a pole or a tree.”

“And you don’t remember hitting any pole or tree?”

Reeves shook his head. "I'm sure I didn't."

Liddell considered it, nodded. "Who else uses the car?"

"No one. I'm a bachelor."

"Servants?"

Reeves nodded. "A woman who comes in by the day. She's been with me almost twenty years. I'd trust her with anything. Besides, she doesn't drive."

Liddell grunted. "So where does Debbie Rains come into this?"

The insurance man raked his fingers through his hair. "I wish I knew." He squinted at Liddell. "She's been trying to reach me. She called three times. The last time was yesterday afternoon, only hours before she was killed." He compressed his lips. "I didn't take the calls."

"Any reason?"

Reeves thought about it, nodded. "Yeah. I had been burned once for playing out of my league. I'm not saying there was any connection. But I made up my mind that when a man like me, vulnerable as I am to a shakedown, starts to play the café society circuit, he's asking to be taken, one way or another. I didn't take the calls because I'd broken with those associations clean and I didn't want to start things up again."

"How about Marta Shane?"

"Marta, too. I saw her just once after that night. We parted friends. I haven't been near her or the Cave since."

"And you think that maybe if you'd taken Debbie's calls, you might have prevented her death?"

"That's what I don't know." He was raking his fingers through his hair again. "It's been eating at my guts ever since I read about the murder." He made an abortive attempt to smooth his hair down with the flat of his hand. "That's why I wanted to talk to you."

"I don't know if there was any connection between the calls and her death," Liddell told him. "I wish I could help you, but—"

Reeves cut him off. "The paper said she called you. If you could only tell me what she wanted to see you about—"

"I never got to see her. By the time my office relayed the call to me, and I got to her apartment, she was dead."



“What do you think? Was there any connection between the calls and her getting herself killed?”

Liddell shrugged. “I won’t be able to give you the answer to that until I find the guy who killed her and ask him.”

“You intend to find the killer?”

Liddell nodded.

Reeves reached for the cigar, found it dead. He stuck it between his teeth, held a match to it. “That’s what I wanted to hire you to do. Find the killer.” He exhaled a gray cloud of smoke. “It’s to be personal and confidential. My name is never to appear in it.”

“You don’t have to hire me. I’m already committed to find the killer. If you think that by hiring me to do the job you get the privilege of covering up whoever—”

Reeves shook his head. “You don’t even have to report back to me. I don’t care if I read the killer’s name in the newspapers. As long as you nail him.”

“Why? You say your only contact with Debbie was when you saw her at the club. Why should you be so anxious to see her avenged?”

The big man rolled the cigar between his thumb and forefinger in the center of his mouth for a moment. He took it from between his lips, used it as a pointer. “Because I can’t get it out of my head that the shakedown and her calls were connected. There was no way I could hit back at the shake artist, as mad as it made me to be suckered that way. It wasn’t important enough to raise a stink over. But if Debbie was murdered by the shake artist, I want you to lay him by the heels.” He watched Liddell’s face intently. “I won’t get in your way, and I do have access to facilities that could be of great value to you. Amalgamated has first-class labs, first-class technicians. Within reason, they’re available to you.”

“On that basis I’d be a chump to say no,” Liddell admitted.

“You’ll do it?”

Liddell nodded. “Be glad to. I have no client on this one, and one would come in mighty handy.”

Reeves walked around the desk, pulled open the center drawer on his desk, brought out a checkbook. He flipped it open, looked up. “Five hundred be enough for a retainer?”

“Plenty.”

Reeves scribbled out the check, made a notation on the stub in the checkbook. He tore out the check, handed it across to Liddell. “Keep in touch. And if there’s anything I can do to help, just yell.”

Liddell waved the check, blew on it. Then he folded it, stuck it into his pocket. “The minute I know anything, you’ll be hearing about it.”

Marta Shane wrinkled her nose in distaste as the cab skidded to a stop outside an old soot-stained building that was identifiable as the Hotel Martense only by the discolored metal plaque alongside the door.

The cabby swung in his seat, stared at her curiously. “You sure this is the place you wanted to go, lady?”

“This is the Hotel Martense, isn’t it?” the blonde asked him coolly.

The cabby nodded.

“Then this is where I wanted to go.” She passed a bill up to him, waved away the change. She got out onto the sidewalk, crossed to the entrance.

The cabby watched her until she was out of sight in the lobby, shook his head. He’d taken them on call to the biggest and the plushiest. But this was the first time he’d ever brought something like this to a place that looked like nobody in it could even afford to shake her hand. He shook his head, put the cab into gear, roared off. It took all kinds!

The Hotel Martense had a small lobby with a few rickety looking chairs, a rug that was worn clear through to the nap with a few breaks where the backing showed through.

The rheumy eyed old man who presided over the registration desk looked up as she started across to him, his jaw sagged. He brought a dingy handkerchief from his hip pocket, swabbed away at his wet eyes, looked her over hungrily.

“If you missed anything, I’ll be glad to answer questions.” The blonde stopped at the desk, looked around. The Martense was a New York version of the Hotel La Neuf in New Orleans and of all the hundreds of other hot sheet operations in every city from coast to coast.

The old man grinned at her lewdly. “Don’t worry about me, lady. There ain’t a lot to be seen that I ain’t seen.”

“Quite a memory you must have,” Marta told him. “What room is Rocky Norton in?”

The old man frowned. His eyes redid the circuit. “Rocky Norton? You the one who—”

“I’m the one who called. You want to do something about that nose of yours, Pop. It’s a dead giveaway when you’re listening in. You sound like a steam shovel. Now about Norton? What room?”

The old man shook his head groggily as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. “406.” He couldn’t seem to get the idea of this quality room service for the seedy character in 406.

The blonde nodded, turned and headed for the elevator cage. The old man leaned across the desk, watched the flash of Marta’s silk-clad legs. For his benefit, she gave her hips a slightly exaggerated wiggle that she knew would keep the old man’s mind off his scratch sheet for the rest of the night. If he did have a good memory, it should bring memories flooding out of the past of other nights and other places when he was not the man behind the desk.

Rocky opened the door to 406 in response to her knock. He stepped aside, motioned for her to come in.

Marta looked around the room curiously. It had a lone window that faced on an airshaft with the blank stone wall of a building less than six feet away. An unmade bed revealed gray, dingy linen; a soiled shirt was draped over the back of the room’s only chair, a pile of newspapers lay alongside it. There was a worn spot in front of the chair, the floor lamp behind it was old enough to have been known as a bridge lamp in its day. The only other door led to a lavatory.

“Come to see how the other half lives?” Rocky said. “Pretty fancy, huh?”

“It’s not the Plaza,” Marta conceded. “But it’s just until we’ve made enough to quit.”

“And in the meantime I have to live like a Bowery bum in a flophouse, huh?”

Marta frowned at him. “Stop griping. How would it look for the doorman in a dive like the Cave to be living in anything but a joint like this? There’ll be plenty of time for the fancy living later.” She walked over, picked up the soiled shirt, tossed it onto the bed, sat down.

“What was the fever you had to see me right away? Couldn’t it wait until tonight and—”

Marta fumbled through her bag, came up with a cigarette, held it to her lips, waited until he sulkily came up with a light. “It couldn’t wait at all. And it couldn’t be discussed over the phone, not with that character downstairs panting on the line.” She took a deep drag on her cigarette, let the smoke curl from her lips.

Rocky walked over to the dresser, tilted a bottle over an empty glass.

“You better go easy on that bottle. You’ve got to work tonight,” Marta told him.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be able to open and close the doors. While you’re making eyes at the customers.”

Marta sighed. “You’re not going to start that again? I thought we settled that this morning.”

“We damn near settled me, that’s what we settled. You damn near kill me for laying a hand on you, then you spend the afternoon with a private dick who’s trying to nail you. What did you come over here for, to give me a blow-by-blow description?”

The blonde watched while Rocky tossed off the drink. “I came over here to tell you that we’ve got enough trouble without you getting out of line. And you’re not going to help things by looking through the bottom of a bottle,” she snapped.

“What kind of trouble?”

“Liddell. Reeves.”

Rocky squinted at her. He reached for the bottle, saw the expression on her face, withdrew his hand. “What’s the connection between them?”

“I don’t know, but I think Reeves is getting set to blow the whistle. While I was with Liddell today, he got a call from his office. Somebody from Amalgamated Automobile Insurance wanted to see him.”

“So?”

“Amalgamated’s office is in Detroit. Andrew Reeves runs the New York office. He’d be the only one up there with authority to hire a private detective.”

Rocky managed to look concerned. “It could be a coincidence.”

The blonde shook her head. “Too much of a coincidence. Debbie Rains was threatening to spill the whole story to Reeves. Now Reeves gets in touch with the private detective the newspapers said was trying to find her killer.”

Rocky chewed on the cuticle of his thumb. “It’s like I told you this morning. It’s time to cut out.”

“You crazy? That’s the best way to bring them down on our necks. We’ve got to keep right on acting as though nothing’s happened. I finish my engagement at the Cave and go on to Chicago. A couple of weeks later, you quit and disappear. We meet and split the loot and lay low. How’s that sound?”

“Great. But how about Reeves? If he spills, we’re dead.”

Marta turned the full power of her slanted eyes on the doorman. “That’s why it was so important for me to see you, right away. Something has to be done about Reeves.”

Rocky stared at her for a moment. “Give me a for instance?”

“He’s got to be shut up. For good.”

“And by who?”

Marta licked at her lips until they gleamed wetly. “By you.”

Rocky laughed nervously, shook his head. “Oh, no. It’s one thing to put the arm on a guy like Reeves over the telephone. But I’m not the muscle type. He could break me in half—” He reached for the bottle, this time refused to be deterred in pouring himself a drink. He lifted the glass to his lips, drained it. “Besides, he’s an important man. Something happens to him and Liddell smells a rat, starts digging around.” He wiped his lips with his sleeve, shook his head. “Not me. I don’t go that murder route.”

“Don’t worry about Liddell. Leave him to me.” Marta took a deep drag on her cigarette, leaned over, crushed it out in an ash tray on the floor. “As for Reeves, who said anything about murder? Accidents have been known to happen. Even to important men.”

Rocky was back macerating the cuticle on his thumb. “And what do I get out of all this?”

“You get to stay out of jail, just like I do. You get your share of the loot when we’re in the clear—”

“And in the meantime?”

Marta straightened up, studied his face. “What’d you have in mind?”

“You know what I have in mind. I told you all about it this morning. It’s time you gave me a break.”

The blonde met his stare. “I told you when I take myself on a man for good, it’ll be you. Isn’t that enough?”

Rocky shook his head. “Not enough to get me to commit murder for you. I told you I’m hurting from wanting. That’s it, take it or leave it. Either you give me a break or I’m picking up my half of the loot and cutting out.”

“That’s crazy. They’ll nail you—”

“And you,” Rocky told her quietly.

“Can’t you wait until we’re in the clear? Then—”

Rocky shook his head firmly. “Now. Right now.”

The blonde studied his face, found a determination there she had never seen before. “And Reeves?”

“I still have the key to his car and for his garage. When he gets into his car, I’ll be in the back seat. He’ll have an accident. A bad accident.”

Finally, almost in resignation, Marta laid her bag alongside the chair. She stood up, loosened her hair, let it cascade down over her shoulders. She walked to the dresser, half filled the glass with whisky, swallowed it with one gulp. It burned a fiery path to her stomach. She set the glass down, walked back to where Rocky was watching her hungrily, his lips slack, his body tensed.

She slid her arms around his neck, pasted her body against his, smiled at the taut, thrusting eagerness of it. She let him slide his hand down her spine until it came to rest at the cleft at the base of her spine. He increased the pressure, forced the center of her body against his; then his mouth swallowed up her lips.

After a moment, he fumbled for the zipper, pulled it down. Her flesh was soft, cool to the touch. He tried to push the dress back over her shoulders.

“Easy, Rocky,” she ripped her lips away from his. “We’ve got all the time in the world. But I’ve got to walk out of here in this dress to go to the club.” She slipped out of his arms, pushed the dress back, let it slide to the floor. She stood there in her bra, a pair of sheer panties, her high-heeled shoes. She turned to the window.

“We don’t need all that light, do we?” She walked to the window with the strut he had watched hungrily night after night at the Cave. When she had drawn the shade, she turned, reached back and unhooked the brassière. She tossed it on the bed, hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her panties, started to slide them down.

# nine.

Greenwich Village is many things to many people. There is the residential area where tall apartment houses tower over the lower, older buildings that still wear the grime they acquired in the days when they were “under the El.” There are the small tearooms, almost cheek by jowl with the dives and cellars that keep the vice squad working a full schedule. There are the gift shoppes, the art galleries, the bookstores. There are the Bohemian hangouts, real and affected, that bring the tourists from Oshkosh and Schenectady to see how the other half lives and loves.

Johnny Liddell knew them all—the tourist traps, the “closed clubs” restricted to members of one sex, the peeler joints with their whispered promises of further excitement behind closed and bolted doors for the proper fee. He neither approved nor disapproved. It wasn’t his way of life, but it was a way of life and he accepted it.

The Beat Haven was on Village Mews just off MacDougal. Tonight it was dark, its curtained door locked with a huge padlock. Pasted to the inside window was an official-looking paper that announced that the premises had been declared unfit for human occupancy until further notice.

Liddell read through the notice, looked around. An old man, perched precariously on a wooden box tilted back against a telephone pole, was watching him incuriously. Some of the stoops across the street were occupied by under-shirted men and their wives getting their first smell of spring night air. Liddell decided against getting involved with them, walked to the building next door, entered the gift shoppe.

A thin woman with painfully prominent front teeth was arranging some greeting cards in a rack in the rear. She looked up as Johnny Liddell walked in.

“I’m looking for the people who ran the place next door, the Beat Haven. You wouldn’t happen to know who the owner was?”

The thin woman sniffed her disapproval. “Les Wells owned the place. No great loss when the police closed it, I can tell you.” She pushed a wisp of graying hair out of her face, tucked it untidily behind her ear.

“You happen to know Debbie Rains? She used to work there.”



“I had as little to do with any of them as I could help.” The woman wiped the palms of her hands along her thighs, walked over to where Liddell stood. “I suppose you’re the police or something, eh?” She eyed him shrewdly. “I can tell you it didn’t come as any great surprise when I read what happened to her. The goings-on in that place all hours of the day and night, the kind of people that hung out in there! It didn’t surprise me. Not one bit.”

“Any special person you’d consider more likely than anyone else to do it?”

“I just told you. I had nothing to do with any of them. But I saw them coming and going. At all hours of the night.” She shook her head. “A mighty vicious-looking crew, I can tell you.”

Liddell sighed. “You wouldn’t know where I could find this Les Wells, would you?”

The thin woman sniffed again. She managed to look disapproving, her thin lips drawn into a bloodless line. “The Seven Sisters, like as not. That’s where they all hang out, giving a decent neighborhood a bad name.” She clasped her hands primly in front of her. “I should think you police would give some thought to cleaning this part of town up. Jimmy Walker and Al Smith and the rest of the old-timers must be spinning in their graves when they see what’s happened to their old neighborhood. It’s a sin and a shame, I can tell you.”

Liddell bobbed his head in agreement. “This Seven Sisters. That’s the place around on the Square?”

“The same.”

“And there’s nothing else you can tell me about Debbie Rains? No men friends, nothing?”

“Nothing,” the gift-shoppe operator snapped.

Liddell thanked the woman, backed out of the store. The clear, fresh air of the street was a welcome relief from the closeness and cloying sweet odor of the store’s interior. He headed south on the Mews toward the Square.

A loudly humming neon sign over the entrance identified the Seven Sisters. It turned out to be a large subterranean room that had been built by knocking out two adjoining cellar walls. The only lighting was provided by stubs of candles stuck in the necks of bottles; a perpetual cloud of smoke swirled near the ceiling.

Liddell stood in the entrance, looked around. On the floor, two girls were locked in close embrace, looked as if their bodies had been glued together. They were undulating slowly, insinuatingly; barely moving from the spot on which they were standing. Every ounce of their bodies was moving in time to the rhythm of the jukebox except their feet.

The long bar that lined one wall was almost empty. Two Marines were laughing with a man in drag at the far end. Mobiles spun in the smoky air, the tables scattered around the room were filled with customers or entertainers or both. In spots like this that dot the Village it would be hard to tell the customers from the entertainers. Most floor shows were impromptu with customers jumping onto the floor to cavort with the entertainers, adding to the gaiety.

Johnny Liddell walked over to the bar, beckoned to the bartender. The man behind the stick reluctantly tore himself away from the small group at the far end of the bar, plodded down to where Liddell stood. He was heavy, fleshy. His eyes were almost hidden behind discolored pouches, his lips were a thick, wet smear. In token deference to the law, he wore pants and a shirt open at the neck. His experienced eyes flicked over Liddell's bulk. "What'll it be?" His voice was blubbery, low-pitched.

"I'm looking for Les Wells," Liddell told him.

The bartender's eyes started a circuit of the room. He started to shake his head. "I don't know if—"

Liddell cut him off. He brought a leather folder with a badge pinned in it out of his pocket, gave the bartender a quick look at it. "We can do it either way. The hard way or the easy way," he snapped. He glanced around the place. "I wouldn't say the boys who own this trap would be very grateful if you brought a lot of heat down on it."

The bartender's eyes stopped wandering, focused on Liddell's face. He bobbed his head, disturbed the rolls of fat around his neck. "I'll get Les for you." He reached down under the bar, scooped some ice into a glass, set it on the bar. "Have a drink meantime?"

"White Horse," Liddell told him.

The bartender snatched a bottle off the backbar, tilted it over the glass, filled it to the brim. He set the bottle back on the backbar, trotted toward the end of the bar. He waddled across the floor to a table in the rear, bent over to talk to someone.

Liddell took a taste of his drink, watched in the backbar mirror as a slim figure got up from the table, followed the bartender back to where he stood. They came up behind Liddell.

“You wanted to see me?” Les Wells’ voice was low, intimate, almost a whisper.

Liddell turned around, studied the newcomer. Wells’ thick, wavy black hair was combed back from a low hair line in a three-quarter part that exposed the whiteness of his scalp. He was wearing a powder-blue suit and a flaming red tie. His lips were full and sensuous, his eyes large and liquid. Despite the mannish attire, Les Wells was a woman.

“If you’re Les Wells, I want to see you,” Liddell told her.

“I’m Les Wells.” She looked down the bar, snapped her fingers at the bartender. “Let’s have a drink down here, Willie.” She turned her attention back to Liddell. “Willie tells me you’re fuzz. What’s on your mind? I figured you boys did me all the damage you could do when you padlocked the Haven.”

The bartender slid a glass in front of her, brought a bottle of White Horse from the backbar.

“Leave the bottle. We’ll call you when we want you,” Liddell told him.

The bartender’s eyes receded behind their discolored pouches, a muscle flicked in the side of his throat. The fat, wet lips puffed in and out with indignation, leaving a little bubble between them. For a moment he seemed on the verge of retorting; instead he turned and flounced back to the end of the bar where the Marines and the man in drag were getting loud and gay.

When the bartender was out of earshot, Liddell picked up the bottle, spilled a stiff drink into Les Wells’ glass. “You heard about Debbie Rains?” He looked up into the woman’s face.

“I heard.”

Liddell picked up his glass, took a swallow. “I’m trying to find the killer. Got any ideas?”

“Why should I have any ideas?” The boy-girl reached for her glass. “If you’re asking if I did it, the answer is no. I can account for every hour of my time last night.”

“But she was a friend of yours? A real good friend?”

Les swirled the liquor around her glass, shook her head. “Not like that. Debbie was a spook.” She rolled her eyes up to Liddell’s face. “She didn’t dig gay.”

Liddell frowned. “But she worked down here, mixed with the gay set.”

“Loot, man. Debbie really dug the loot. That’s why she made this scene. When she came to work for me, she was just a hatcheck girl. By the time you boys padlocked the place, she was my partner.” Les took a deep swallow from her glass. “She was really shook up when the joint closed. All she could think of was to raise enough money to reopen. And this time she wouldn’t have any partners.”

Liddell raised his eyebrows. “You mean she did raise the money?”

The deviate shrugged her slim shoulders. “That’s the way I read it. She called me the other night, walking on air. She wanted to know if I’d hostess the place when she reopened.” She shrugged again. “I said why not? I spend most of my time making this scene, I might as well get paid for it.”

“She didn’t tell you where she got the money?”

The mannishly dressed woman shook her head. “She was one chick who knew how to keep her lip buttoned.” She drained the glass, set it down. “All she said was she had a line on the money to lift the violations on the building and she’d be ready to move in a couple of weeks. Then I pick up the paper—” she shrugged. “That money’s not going to do her much good now.”

“You think she had the money or she expected to get it?”

Les Wells considered. “I don’t know if she had it in her hot little hands, but she sure sounded like she could almost taste it.” She nodded her head positively. “She made the score. She was just waiting to count it.”

Liddell reached for the bottle. The boy-girl shook her head. “Sorry I can’t help. Debbie was real close-mouthed. She kept her eyes open and her mouth shut. Wherever that loot was coming from, I’ve got a pretty good idea she never told anybody.”

“It wouldn’t be from somebody she knew down here?”

“Uh-uh. Nobody around here has the kind of loot it would take to fix that firetrap up good enough to reopen.” She pursed her lips, considered. “Whatever the connection Debbie made, she made it uptown. I guess she just leaned a little too hard. Debbie was like that, mister. What she wanted, she wanted hard.”

Liddell sighed. “She never leaned on anybody down here hard enough to make him want to kill her?”

Les shook her head. “Down here, when somebody gets mad enough to kill, they grab a knife and do it on the spur of the minute. She’d been gone a couple of weeks. Nobody down here nurses a grudge that long.”

Liddell nodded. “Okay, thanks.”

The woman shrugged. “Sorry.” She turned, walked back across the floor to her table. Liddell checked his watch, decided against going back uptown to catch the last show at the Cave. He headed for the street and a cab to his apartment.

It was close in the darkness of the garage.

Rocky sat with his back propped against the wall, longed for a cigarette that he knew he couldn’t have. It felt as though he had been in here for days, waiting for Andrew Reeves to come home. For the fourth time in fifteen minutes, he scratched a match, checked his watch in the weak light of the flame to find he had been waiting less than an hour. He wondered whether he hadn’t made a serious mistake in agreeing to the blonde’s proposition that he kill Reeves. Blackmail was one thing, but murder was another thing altogether.

He sat, straining his eyes against the darkness, reliving the hours he had spent with Marta. She had been everything he’d imagined in his daydreams of possessing her. She had been satisfyingly agile, she had a beautiful body and she knew how to use it. It was the first time she had ever allowed him to lay a hand on her, but from now on it would be different. From now on, he would possess her, when and how he wanted. He gave himself over to the pleasurable anticipation of what lay ahead.

His reverie was rudely interrupted by the sound of a car being braked to a stop on the other side of the garage door. There was a brief pause, then the sound of a key scraping in the lock. Rocky got to his feet, hurried to the far side of the garage, huddled against the side of the large workbench that took up most of the wall.

The garage door swung upward, twin beams speared through the darkness of the garage. Rocky melted further back into the shadow of the workbench as Reeves walked back to the car, slid in behind the wheel. Then, the big Cadillac inched slowly into the garage, stopped when its bumper almost touched the wall. Reeves cut the motor, killed the lights.

The door to the car opened. For a brief moment, the big man was silhouetted by the car's interior lights.

Rocky moved quickly, quietly. He raised the tire iron over his head, brought it down with all his strength on the back of Reeves' head. With a soft groan, the big man sank to his knees. Rocky raised the tire iron again, hit him over the head for the second time. This time, it gave off the sound of an overripe pumpkin. Reeves slammed face-down into the floor. He didn't move.

Rocky walked to the garage door, brought it down. Then he fumbled along the wall until he located the light switch, spilled light into the garage. He walked back to where Reeves lay, caught him by the arm and tugged him onto his back.

He checked the floor to make sure there was no sign of blood. The only bleeding was a thin stream that ran from Reeves' right ear and some that seeped from his nostrils. The big man was breathing heavily in a gargling snore.

Rocky brought a bottle of 100-proof bourbon from his hip pocket. He knelt down alongside the unconscious man, tugged him into a sitting position. Then, he tilted the bottle up to his lips, watched while the liquor poured down his throat. Reeves choked slightly several times, offered no resistance. When the bottle was almost empty, Rocky grunted his satisfaction, returned it to his pocket. Some of the liquor had run down the side of Reeves' mouth, but enough of it had found its way to his stomach to serve the purpose.

He opened the door to the back seat, tugged and strained until he had succeeded in dragging Reeves in. He covered him with a blanket that was on the rack behind the front seat, listened until he could hear the strained gargle of the unconscious man. He stepped out of the car, checked the garage to make certain there were no signs of his wait. Then, he headed for the light switch, doused the garage in darkness.

He pushed up the garage door, stood back in the shadows, satisfied himself that the street outside was deserted. He walked back to the car, slid behind the wheel. He wrinkled his nose at the strong smell of whisky.

Five minutes later, he was headed north on Third Avenue toward the Queensboro Bridge and the far reaches of Long Island. Behind him, on the floor of the back seat, Andrew Reeves was breathing heavily, unevenly. By

the time they reached their destination, the heavy, strangled breathing had stopped.

# ten.

The telephone on the night table jangled jarringly.

Johnny Liddell grunted, turned over and tried to bury his head in the pillow. The phone continued to screech at him.

Finally he managed to get his eyes open. He glared at the instrument with no appreciable effect on its insistence. He reached a hand out, snagged the receiver. For a moment he debated the advisability of leaving the receiver off its hook and enjoying the blessed silence. He dropped the decision, relayed the instrument to his ear. “Yeah?”

“You sure took your time about answering,” Pinky’s voice scolded him.

“I didn’t take long enough,” Liddell grunted. “What could be on your mind at this hour?”

“At this hour?” Pinky sniffed. “You’re just lucky I decided to get in late today. Andrew Reeves’ secretary’s been bugging the answering service since eight this morning.”

Liddell scowled at the ceiling. “Tell him I’ll get back to him later. I didn’t get to bed until—”

“I don’t care about your sex life,” the redheaded secretary told him tartly. “And Andrew Reeves won’t mind waiting. He’s dead.”

Liddell came awake with a start. “He’s what?”

“Dead. At least they’ve got him in the morgue and they were doing an autopsy at eight this morning. I don’t imagine that will lengthen his life any.”

“Never mind the funny sayings. What happened to him?”

“He was killed in an auto accident early this morning out on Long Island. That’s the police version. His secretary thinks differently. She thinks he was murdered.”

“I think she may be right,” Liddell said. “Call her back and tell her I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” He dropped the receiver on its hook, headed for the bathroom and a shower.



In less than ten minutes, he was dressed and on his way to Andrew Reeves' Radio City office.

Reeves' secretary was sitting in the outer office, talking to a heavy-set girl with horn-rimmed glasses when Johnny Liddell walked in. Her eyes were red-rimmed; the heavy-set girl had obviously been trying to comfort her. She greeted Liddell's arrival with poorly disguised relief. She regarded Liddell owlshly through her thick lenses, turned back to the secretary. "If there's anything you want, Sally, don't hesitate to call me." She smiled tentatively at Liddell, straightened up, circled around him to the door. "Excuse me." She hustled out the door, closed it after her.

Reeves' secretary dabbed at her eyes with a frilly handkerchief. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Liddell." She stood up. "I think we can talk better in Mr.—" She broke off for a second. "In the inside office," she amended.

Liddell followed her into Reeves' office, took the same chair he had occupied during the interview with the dead man. The girl's eyes hopscotched around the office, lingered for a moment on the papers on his desk, filled up at the sight of his humidior and desk lighter. "I just can't believe he's gone." She walked over to the window, stood looking out over the panorama of lower Manhattan, struggled to get herself under control. When she turned around, she walked to the desk chair, sat down.

"Your office told you what happened?" she asked.

Liddell shook his head. "Not in any detail. Just that there was an accident and Mr. Reeves was killed."

The girl took a deep breath. "There isn't a lot more to tell. He was killed at about five this morning. His body is in the morgue at Carport, Long Island." She caught her lower lip between her teeth. "The police say it was an accident. I'm sure it wasn't."

Liddell settled back. He brought out some cigarettes, handed one across the desk to the girl. He waited until she had lit it and drawn a lungful of smoke. "Why are you so sure it wasn't an accident?"

"The police report says he was drunk, drove his car off the road, overturned and was killed." She stared at Liddell. "I was out with Andrew last night, Mr. Liddell. He left me about three, said he was going straight home. What was he doing all the way out at Carport?"

Liddell smoked silently for a moment. "He might have changed his mind, decided to go for a ride and get some air. Maybe to clear his head."

“Andrew wasn’t drunk, Mr. Liddell. He didn’t have more than two drinks all night. He had an early appointment this morning and needed a clear head for it. Yet, an hour or so later, the police find him dead and say he was blind drunk.”

Liddell considered it. “The police notified you? What time?”

“A little after five. Mr. Reeves was a bachelor. He had no relatives in New York. He carried identification with my name as the person to be notified in case of an accident.” She took a deep drag on her cigarette, blew the smoke in twin streams from her nostrils. “I almost went crazy. I didn’t know where to reach you until this morning—”

“Why me?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because he was so secretive about that appointment he had with you. He wouldn’t even let me look your number up for him. When he left last night, I looked in his checkbook, then looked you up in the telephone directory. I found out you were a private detective.” Her eyes filled up, she blinked away the tears. “I knew there was something bothering Andrew lately. He was nervous, irritable. Then, last night after seeing you he was more like his old self.” She dabbed at her eyes with the wisp of lace she held balled in her hand. “Was he in trouble of some kind, Mr. Liddell? Something I didn’t know about?”

Liddell watched the smoke from his cigarette curl ceiling-ward. “Mr. Reeves hired me on a confidential matter, Miss—” He broke off with a smile. “I don’t know your name.”

“Sally Regan.” The girl blew her nose and settled back, almost lost in the big chair. “I’m not trying to pry into Andrew’s personal affairs. I just thought that if there was any connection between why he hired you and what happened—”

Liddell shook his head. “I don’t think there is.”

Sally Regan studied Liddell’s face for a moment. “Mr. Liddell, a girl had been trying to reach Mr. Reeves for the past few days. Her name was Debbie Rains—” She broke off for a second. “He refused to take her calls. That wasn’t like Mr. Reeves.”

Liddell nodded. “So?”

With obvious reluctance, she forced herself to continue. “The night before last Debbie Rains was murdered. I know Mr. Reeves was upset about it because when he went out of here last night the afternoon paper was all

wrapped up in a ball. It had the story of the murder on the front page.” She shrugged. “Then he sent for you. You can’t blame me for wondering if there was a connection.”

“You spoke to Debbie Rains when she called. Did she give you any idea what it was she wanted to talk to Reeves about?”

“Just that it was very important. She wouldn’t leave a message with me. Just her number for him to call her back.”

Liddell took the cigarette from between his lips, frowned at the glowing end. “It could be a coincidence,” he said. “The police usually have a pretty good reason when they call a death accidental.”

“They want it to be an accident, so they call it an accident,” the girl flared angrily. “They can’t explain what he was doing out there at that hour and where he got the liquor. He certainly wasn’t drunk when he left me.” She took a deep drag on the cigarette, leaned forward, crushed it out in the ash tray. “They don’t care about what they do to a person’s reputation or his memory. How do you think it will look when the papers print that he was killed in a drunken-driving accident? A man in his position?”

“What do you want me to do?”

Sally dabbed at the end of her nose with the handkerchief. “Use the money he paid you to clear his name. Find out what really happened. Prove he wasn’t drunk.”

Liddell nodded. “I’ll have a look into it. I’m not promising anything. But there are a couple of points I’d like cleared up myself.” He pulled himself out of his chair, walked over to the desk. “Okay if I make a call?”

The girl nodded. “Dial nine, then the number you want.”

Liddell got the outside line, dialed Homicide North and waited. A male voice answered, questioned the likelihood that Inspector Herlehy could be disturbed, permitted himself to be persuaded to try the name of Johnny Liddell on the inspector. After a moment, he was back.

“The inspector will take the call,” he conceded. “One minute.”

Herlehy’s voice came over the phone. “What is it, Johnny?”

“Inspector, a client of mine named Andrew Reeves was killed in an auto accident out on the Island early this morning. I wanted to go out, have a look at things. I was wondering if you knew anybody out there I could look up for a little co-operation.”

The inspector's sniff came across the wire. "When you start asking or offering co-operation I get nervous. This guy Reeves tied up with the Rains kill or something?"

Liddell looked as innocent as the facts permitted. "Reeves? He was a vice president of Amalgamated Auto Insurance, one of our clients." He dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Matter of fact, Inspector, we're trying to check out the police report that he was loaded when the accident happened. It'll look like hell in the papers."

Herlehy hesitated for a moment. "Where's the body?"

Liddell put his hand over the mouthpiece, looked up at the girl. "What morgue did you say he was in?"

"Carport, Long Island," she told him.

Liddell relayed the information to the inspector.

"They're pretty good boys out there. They'll co-operate. But just to make sure, I'll call one of the deputy inspectors in Carport and do some lying about what a great guy you are."

"Thanks, Inspector."

"By the way, have you come up with anything on the Rains case?"

Liddell hesitated, decided to play it straight. "Just that she was expecting to get her hands on a big chunk of money."

The inspector grunted. "I gather you've been talking to Les Wells, her old boss and partner. I hope you weren't the one who was around there last night, posing as a cop?"

"Me, Inspector?"

"Just goes to show you what little faith Sergeant Ryan has in human nature. He was sure it was you. He was all for picking you up and extending some more of the city's hospitality for impersonating an officer." He broke off for a second. "I was able to talk him out of it—this time. Next time I may not be able to. Do you read me?"

"Loud and clear, Inspector. Loud and clear."

An hour later Johnny Liddell headed his convertible up the East River Drive to the 125th Street ramp of the Triborough Bridge. He took the Long Island entrance, headed south past LaGuardia Field to the Long Island

Expressway. Once on the expressway, he headed east toward Carport, settled back for the thirty-six-minute run.

In Carport, the medical examiner's office adjoined the morgue in the basement of the new four-story stone courthouse. Liddell wheeled the convertible into the courthouse parking lot, squeezed it between two whitewashed lines that were labeled *Mortuary—Official Use Only* and locked the car.

He crossed the courtyard, pushed through a revolving door, followed the stenciled arrow that pointed to *Medical Examiner's Office*. It led down a flight of stairs, past a row of closed doors marked *Mortuary—Employees Only* to a plain door bearing the legend *Medical Examiner*.

A small wisp of a woman with graying hair sat at a desk in the outer office. She looked up, smiled as Liddell walked in. "I'd like to see the medical examiner, please."

"Is it about one of our cases?" she asked.

Liddell bobbed his head. "Andrew Reeves. He was in an accident early this morning."

The woman pulled a small index card file over, flipped through the cards. She stopped at one, looked up. "That would be Dr. Gould you want to see." She shut the file. "You'll find him in the receiving room." She pointed to an unmarked door across the room.

Liddell nodded his thanks, crossed to the door. Inside was a completely furnished receiving room where new arrivals were made ready for the vaults. Two freshly scrubbed sandstone tables with individual drains stood under cone-shaped lights. One wall was given up to a long, glass-doored cabinet filled with surgical instruments. There was an overpowering smell of antiseptic spiced with another smell, heavy and unpleasant.

A man in a white smock was standing, talking to two men who had the word "cop" written all over them. Liddell crossed over to them. "I'm looking for Dr. Gould."

The man in the white smock nodded. "I'm Dr. Gould."

"My name is Johnny Liddell. I'm interested in a man who was brought in here this morning. Man by the name of Andrew Reeves."

Dr. Gould nodded. "We were expecting you, Mr. Liddell. This is Sergeant Lester of the Carport Police." He indicated a tall, thin man in a rumpled blue suit, who held a stained gray fedora in his hand. Lester had the

thin, pinched nose and bright eyes of a ferret. “The other gentleman is Sergeant Harrison.” Harrison was fat. He looked good natured—all but his eyes, which were hard, uncompromising.

Sergeant Lester nodded to Liddell. “We got word from Homicide North that you’d be paying us a visit.” He eyed Liddell curiously. “They sort of thought maybe we could lend you a hand. Thing that puzzles me is why a private eye should be interested in a cut and dried accident.”

“You’re sure it was an accident?” Liddell said.

The sergeant pinched his thin nose between thumb and forefinger, considered it. “You got any reason to believe it wasn’t?”

Liddell shook his head. “No. I’d just like to be sure.” He dug a folded piece of paper from his pocket, held it out to Lester. “Andrew Reeves was a client of mine. When anything sudden happens to a client, I get curious.”

The plainclothesman eyed the check, whistled. “Five hundred dollars.” He turned to his fat partner. “You know, Harry, maybe those guys on television do know something. We hardly make that in a month freezing our cans in a patrol car, scraping up drunks after they stop their cars the hard way.”

“Would you like to see Mr. Reeves, Liddell?” the man in the white smock cut in.

“If it’s okay.” He turned to the two plainclothesmen.

Sergeant Lester shrugged. “Be my guest.”

Dr. Gould led the way to a heavy door set in the far wall, 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 a card on them with a name typewritten on it.

The man in the white smock walked over, stopped alongside a locker with a card on it that read *Andrew Reeves*. He tugged the drawer open. Liddell wrinkled his nose at the heavy, carbolic-laden air that rose from it.

Inside the drawer was a suggestively shaped bulge, covered by the usual stained canvas. The doctor peeled back the canvas. Andrew Reeves’ lifeless eyes stared upward. His hair was wet, dank and washed back from his face. His neck was supported by a small, notched block. The canvas was rolled down far enough to expose the large x-shaped stitches that indicated an autopsy had been completed. The dead man’s head was misshapen, his features battered.

Liddell turned to the doctor. “What was the official cause of his death?”

“Compound fracture of the right frontal. His whole head was cracked, as you can see.” He put his fingers alongside the dead man’s cheek, pushed it to one side so Liddell could see the damage.

“Kind of funny, isn’t it?” Liddell grunted. “You’d think the wheel would be enough to keep him from cracking his head against the windshield that hard.”

The doctor shrugged. “Happens sometimes. Would have been a big help if he wore a seat belt. Even then, the way this car rolled over, it might not have been enough to save him.” He indicated the drawer. “Seen enough?”

Liddell nodded.

The doctor re-covered Andrew Reeves’ face, slammed the door shut with a clang that reverberated through the room. They walked back into the receiving room where the two plainclothesmen stood waiting.

“Did a pretty good job on himself, huh?” Sergeant Harrison asked.

“Guy never did anything by halves, seems like,” his partner chimed in. “Autopsy showed a blood-alcohol concentration of point one five. That right, Doc?”

The man in the white smock nodded.

“How many drinks would that mean?” Liddell asked.

“Well, according to American Medical Association figures, it would take about twelve ounces of hundred-proof stuff to get that kind of a blood-alcohol concentration.”

“That’s a lot of liquor,” Liddell said.

The man in the white smock nodded. “Legally, we consider anything over point-oh-five concentration excessive, and he had roughly three times that much.”

“Must have been at it quite a while to take on that kind of a load,” Liddell commented.

“That’s not all,” Sergeant Lester broke in. “There was still some alcohol in his stomach that hadn’t been absorbed yet. Right, Doc?”

The medical examiner nodded again. “It’s all in the autopsy report. Would you like a copy, Mr. Liddell?”

“Sure. Thanks, Doc,” Liddell told him.

Lester turned to his partner. “Why don’t you go along with the doc and pick up a copy of the report for Liddell, Harry. Meanwhile he and I can be having a little talk.”

The fat man bobbed his head, disturbed the rolls of fat under his jowls. “Sure thing.” He smiled but his eyes weren’t in it.

After Harrison followed Dr. Gould out of the room, Lester hoisted himself up onto the side of one of the sandstone tables. “Interesting about all that liquor in his stomach, wasn’t it?”

“Very interesting.” Liddell brought out his cigarettes, held them out to the sergeant. Lester provided the lighter, lit Liddell’s cigarette, then his own. “What time did it happen?”

“A little after five. People living in a house set back off the road heard the crash. Took maybe ten minutes, give or take a little, to get dressed and get out to the car. He was already dead when they got to him.”

“Bottle in the car?” Liddell asked casually.

The plainclothesman eyed him with a new respect. “What makes you ask that?”

Liddell shrugged. “Curious.” He waited for the answer.

“Matter of fact,” the sergeant told him, “there was no bottle in the car. Or any place near it. What makes you ask?”

“The liquor in his stomach. He must have gotten it just shortly before he was killed.” He took a thoughtful puff on his cigarette. “The ABC Board out here has a three a.m. closing, so he didn’t get it in a bar. So he must have had a bottle with him and must have taken a pretty stiff slug just before he was killed and the process of absorption stopped.”

“Odd thing. That occurred to us, too. Soon as it got light, we searched the side of the road and the scene of the accident for that bottle. We didn’t come up with any that could have been his.” He eyed Liddell with a new interest. “Just as a precaution, we questioned all of the bars along the road. Most of them were closed long before legal closing because business was so bad. Nobody saw him.”

“You went to a lot of trouble checking out a simple drunken-driving accident.”



The man in the blue suit grinned at him glumly. “You didn’t come all the way out to Carport because it was a nice day for a ride. What was on your mind?”

Liddell shrugged. “Like I said. He was a client and he showed up dead. I wanted to satisfy myself about what really happened.”

“Satisfied?”

Liddell considered, shook his head. “No.”

“Then let’s stop fencing,” the sergeant suggested mildly. “You came out here because something about this accident didn’t smell kosher. Right?” He didn’t wait for Liddell’s nod. “Something about it got us to wondering, too.”

“Such as?”

“When you’ve been riding the front seat of a prowl car and have scraped up as many guys who’ve been mixing alcohol and gasoline as I have, you get so you can smell a phony. This one smelled.” Lester took the cigarette from between his lips, tapped a thin collar of ash on the floor. “There was too much alcohol in his blood for one thing. I don’t believe he could have gotten this far with that kind of a blood-alcohol concentration. Then, when the m.e. tells me about the alcohol in his stomach, I got to wondering.”

“And?”

The sergeant grinned glumly. “I made the notification to the woman whose name he had in his wallet—”

“His secretary, Sally Regan.”

Lester bobbed his head. “She claimed he had just left her about two hours before and that he wasn’t drinking. That didn’t make sense. Unless—” He broke off dramatically, shrugged.

“Unless the alcohol was a plant and it wasn’t an accident,” Liddell filled in.

“That’s when we started looking for the bottle or for a bar where he could have gotten the liquor. That and the fact that he had hired a private eye that very same evening.” He took a deep drag on his cigarette, blew the smoke out with force. “What was Reeves afraid of, Liddell?”

“Is this an official investigation, Sergeant?”

Lester managed to look unhappy, shook his head. “Strictly off the record.” He nodded toward the door through which the m.e. had left. “The

m.e. has posted it as an accident. We've got enough business without going looking for more, so on the books it's an accident." He eyed Liddell curiously. "You don't think it was an accident, do you?"

"The possibility has occurred to me," Liddell conceded. "There's more than one way for alcohol to get into a man's stomach. Someone could have clobbered him and poured it down his throat. Maybe he died from the clobbering before all the alcohol could be absorbed. That would account for the amount in his stomach."

"We're small-town boys compared to the boys you work with, but that occurred to us, too. Then, when we learned that he was afraid for his life and hired a bodyguard—"

Liddell grinned at him. "I didn't say he was afraid for his life. And I don't hire out as a bodyguard."

"Reeves being a bachelor, it wasn't a divorce action he hired you for." The sergeant eyed Liddell innocently. "You can't blame us for thinking—"

Liddell's grin grew broader. "It was you who needled Reeves' secretary into getting in touch with me, wasn't it?"

"Well, my hands are tied by the medical examiner's report. Our Town Board couldn't care less what happened to Reeves if it's going to cost us money. But you, now, with you it's different. You've been paid for your time and there's nobody to tell you to lay off." He crushed his butt out on the rim of the sandstone table, dropped it to the floor. "What was he afraid of?"

Liddell shook his head. "Nothing that I know of."

A pained expression crossed Lester's face. "He didn't give you that check for \$500 because he liked your face. Look, we're not going to get anywhere unless we level with each other. We know about the other attempt on his life."

Liddell raised his eyebrows, looked genuinely puzzled. "The other attempt? What other attempt?"

"Like I said. We're small-town cops but not Mack Sennett cops. Our lab can hold its own with any in the country. Our boys gave that car a going-over from stem to stern. Very recently it had been involved in some kind of an accident that had caved in the front right fender. Could have been a dress rehearsal for what happened last night." He squinted at Liddell. "That why he hired you?"

Liddell shook his head. "I know about that one. He ran his car into a pole one night, damaged the front fender and the light. You can check his garage. They found splinters and—"

"We already have," Lester told him melancholically. "You're leveling when you say he wasn't afraid something like this was going to happen?"

Liddell nodded his head. "If I were bodyguarding him, what would I be doing in bed when it happened?" He dropped his cigarette to the floor, ground it out. "He was interested in a case I was working on. He knew I had no client and he wanted to underwrite the cost of the investigation."

The sergeant eyed him speculatively. "I read something about you being mixed up in that hatcheck girl killing. That the case?"

Liddell grinned at him. "I've already told you all I'm at liberty to tell."

Disbelief showed on the plainclothesman's face. "Just like that. You're mixed up in a case and you're trying to break it to keep your own skirts clean. So along comes a Good Samaritan to take you off the hook by picking up the tab. This I don't believe."

"You asked the question, I gave you the answer. You don't want to believe it, that's your privilege."

"You know, if you're right and Reeves was murdered, maybe we ought to reserve a slab out here for you, too. This killer plays rough."

"You can reserve one in my name, all right. It won't be for me. It'll be for whoever killed Reeves."

Sergeant Lester jumped nimbly from the edge of the sandstone table to the floor. "You're that sure it was murder, eh?"

"Aren't you?"

The sergeant sighed. "Me, I have to go by what the book says. The book says it was an accident. So it's an accident. I wish the county attorney was as easy to convince as you are."

"He has to worry about convincing a jury. All I need is to convince myself. It's a lot quicker."

"And a lot more permanent. I never heard of a smart lawyer winning an appeal from a .45 slug. On the other hand, it doesn't leave much of a margin for error, does it?"

Liddell grinned at him. “The trick is to make sure there is no error.” He shoved his hand out at the sergeant. “If there’s nothing else you want to tell me, I’d better be getting back to New York.”

“Nothing else.” The sergeant shook his head. “You know something? Pension or no pension, I wish I could work it by your book just for once.”

# eleven.

Sergeant Ryan shouldered his way through the double door that led to the detectives' bullpen in Homicide North. A shirt-sleeved detective, his shoulder holster strapped under his arm, stood talking to a thin, nervous-looking man who was answering the detective's questions in a low voice. He had "stool pigeon" written all over him.

Ryan wasted an incurious glance on the informer, walked to the waist-high gate that separated the outer section from the portion of the room containing rows of unpainted desks, back to back. Some of the desks were occupied by shirt-sleeved detectives, laboriously punching out reports with one finger on battered typewriters of ancient vintage. At others, the occupants sat with chairs tilted back, heels hooked on the corner of the desk, gossiping with their neighbors.

Ryan looked neither to the left nor right as he stamped down the row of desks to his own. He tossed his battered fedora on the top of the desk, slumped into his chair.

His nose always twitched when he had a hunch. Right now it was twitching like a nervous rabbit's. Herlehy was so damn sure that Liddell would level with them, he was just as sure the private detective would cross them the first chance he got. Ryan had had too much experience with private eyes and their elastic codes to believe that any of them would knowingly cooperate.

He reached for the lusterless phone on the corner of his desk, dialed Operator.

"This is Sergeant Ryan, Homicide North. I want to talk to the police department in the Carport, Long Island, morgue," he told her.

"One moment, please," she chirped.

Ryan settled back, waited. He had been in Herlehy's office when the inspector had called the Carport officials and had given Liddell an okay. The inspector had taken Liddell's word for the fact that the Reeves death wasn't connected with the Rains kill. His hunch said it was. And even the inspector would have to admit that Liddell was crossing him if he caught him in an outright lie.

“I have your party, Sergeant. They’re on the line.”

“Hello? Carport Police Department?” Ryan spoke up.

“Patrolman Lynch speaking. Who’s calling?”

“Sergeant Ryan, Homicide North in New York. I’m interested in an accident you had out there early this morning. Man named Reeves. Andrew Reeves. Can you give me the name of the officer who handled the case?”

There was a slight pause, then, “Sergeant Lester.”

“Can you connect me with him?”

“One moment.” There was a buzzing on the line, then a new voice came through. “Sergeant Lester.”

“This is Ryan, Homicide North. I’m interested in the Reeves case, Sergeant.”

There was a snort of annoyance from the other end. “What’s the matter? You boys got nothing to do in the Big Town? First your inspector calls to okay a guy asking questions, then the guy comes all the way out, now you. What cooks?”

“This guy you’re talking about. His name Liddell?”

“That’s him. He left here about an hour ago. Asked a lot of questions, seemed to think there was something fishy about Reeves’ death.” There was a pause. “Tell you the truth, there are a couple of things that have me wondering.”

“Such as?”

There was another pause. “I don’t like to discuss business over the telephone, Sergeant. Maybe you could take a run out and—”

“I’m up to my ears in alligators right now. Just answer me one question. Why did Amalgamated hire Liddell and what—”

“Who?”

“Amalgamated Automobile Insurance. Liddell’s client.”

“I don’t know from nothing about any Amalgamated. Reeves was Liddell’s client. That’s what he told us.”

“You sure?”

There was a note of annoyance in the Carport detective’s voice. “Of course I’m sure. Reeves hired him to work on a killing. Some girl Liddell

was interested in—”

“Debbie Rains?” Ryan asked eagerly.

“He didn’t give me a name.”

Ryan bobbed his head. “Okay, Sergeant. Thanks a lot. If we can do anything for you here, just give me a ring.” He dropped the receiver back on its hook, leaned back and dry-washed his hands. So far, so good.

Sally Regan sat at her desk in the outer office of the Amalgamated Insurance Company office, looked up as the door opened and Sergeant Ryan walked in. He flashed his badge. “I’m Sergeant Ryan, Homicide North.”

The secretary nodded. “My name’s Regan. I’m—I was Mr. Reeves’ secretary. There was an accident last night and—”

Ryan nodded. “I’ve been talking to the Carport police about it and there are a couple of questions I’d like to ask.”

Sally Regan rose from her chair. “Then they know he was murdered? They know it was no accident?”

Ryan frowned. “Murdered?” He shook his head. “That’s news to me. I thought there was an accident—”

The hope drained out of the girl’s face. “It wasn’t an accident,” she said flatly. “They said he was drunk when it happened. I know he wasn’t drunk. Somebody tried to make it look like an accident.”

“Why should anybody do that?” Ryan prodded.

The girl’s shoulders drooped; she dropped back into her chair. “I don’t know. I just know that Andrew Reeves was not drunk.” She looked up at the sergeant. “I was with him up to a couple of hours before it happened. He was not drunk,” she repeated.

“Do you know a man named Liddell? Johnny Liddell?”

“He’s a private detective. Mr. Reeves hired Mr. Liddell last night.”

“Mr. Reeves? Or Amalgamated?”

The secretary frowned. “Mr. Reeves.”

The sergeant leaned on the corner of the desk. “Are you sure of that?”

“I’m positive. Mr. Reeves paid Liddell a \$500 retainer from his personal account. I have the checkbook right inside.” She got up and led the way into

the inner office.

From the bottom drawer of the desk, she brought out a checkbook. She flipped it open. The checks were printed in the name of Andrew Reeves. Ryan watched impatiently as she flipped to the last row of stubs, pointed a carefully shellacked fingernail at the inscription on the last stub. It read *Johnny Liddell*. The amount was \$500.

“Very good,” Ryan exulted. “Now, just one more question. Why should Andrew Reeves personally hire Liddell? Could it have been a divorce action or something like that?”

The secretary shook her head. “He wasn’t married.” She peered at the sergeant for a moment, her eyes suddenly clouded with doubt. “It might have had something to do with a woman, though.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know her name?” Ryan inquired hopefully.

“She’s dead. Her name was Rains, Debbie Rains.”

The sergeant beamed. “Wonderful. What was her connection with Mr. Reeves?”

The girl shook her head. “I don’t know. I never heard him mention her. Then about five days ago, she started calling him and he gave me instructions never to put her call through.” She studied the gleeful expression on the sergeant’s face. “Is that important?”

“It could be very important.”

“Are you going to try to find Mr. Reeves’ murderer, Sergeant?”

Ryan hesitated, shook his head. “The accident was out of our jurisdiction, Miss Regan. And the Carport authorities think it was an accident.” He put his hand on her arm. “But you’ve been very helpful. Very helpful. Thank you.” He turned, hustled across the carpet toward the door.

The girl stood at the desk, stared at the sergeant’s departing back with worried eyes. She glanced down at the notation on the stub, wondered if she had done right in imparting the information.

Marta Shane sat on the couch in her apartment, reread the story of Andrew Reeves’ death in the early edition of the afternoon papers. She nodded her head in satisfaction when she finished the story, walked over to the portable bar and built herself a drink.



She brought the drink back to the couch, dropped onto it, drew her legs up under her. So far as she could determine from the story, everything went off without a hitch. Rocky had done a good job and it had served a dual purpose—it eliminated a possible threat in the form of a vengeful Andrew Reeves and it gave her a hold over Rocky which might come in handy if he got out of line.

The door buzzer sounded. The blonde frowned. It was probably Rocky, coming to brag about the job he had done and to try to solidify his new-found relationship with her. She debated the advisability of not answering it, and decided that would only postpone the inevitable.

She placed her drink on the coffee table, got up, walked to the door. She unlocked it, pulled it open. Instead of Rocky, Johnny Liddell stood in the hallway.

“Well—this is a surprise,” she told him.

“It was after two, so I took a chance on dropping by.”

The blonde stepped aside. “I was just having a drink. And I do hate to drink alone.”

“You talked me into it.” Liddell walked in, looked around the apartment. It was inexpensively furnished, but the walls and windows were draped with heavy velvet. He noticed a peculiar absence of sound as if he were in a vacuum. “What kind of a kick are you on?”

The blonde shrugged. “As I told you, I need my beauty sleep. The drapes help me get it. Sometimes the traffic along this street would raise the dead. This way it doesn’t disturb me a bit. I don’t even hear it.” She pointed to the bar. “Make yourself a drink. I have mine.” She walked to the couch, watched while he dumped some ice into a glass, drenched it down with scotch, brought it back to the couch.

Marta sipped at her drink, eyed him over the rim of the glass. “I was beginning to think I was slipping. I kind of expected you to drop by the Cave last night.”

Liddell sat down alongside her. “Disappointed?”

She pursed her lips, considered it. “Piqued.”

“I kind of got a little jammed up and by the time I got free I figured it would be too late.” He smelled the scotch, tasted it. It tasted as good as it smelled. “You knew a man named Andrew Reeves, didn’t you, Marta?”

The blonde nodded. "I just finished reading about his accident. It was too bad."

"Andrew Reeves was a client of mine," Liddell told her.

She raised her eyes. "I didn't know that."

"Not a very old client. I only took him on last night. You remember I mentioned I had an appointment."

The blonde frowned, nodded. "I remember you saying you had something to celebrate." She shook her head. "That's too bad. You get a client and you lose him almost the same day."

Liddell took another swallow, set his glass down. "How well did you know Reeves, Marta?"

The blonde looked humorously shocked. "Now that is a leading question if I ever did hear one."

"I have a reason for asking. Was he much of a drinker?"

Marta nodded. "Like a fish." She inclined her head toward the paper on the coffee table. "He was loaded when it happened, eh?"

Liddell shook his head. "According to the guy who did the autopsy, yes. According to his secretary, no."

"His secretary!" Marta snorted. "Who should know better? The doctor who does an autopsy or a secretary who sits across the desk from him and takes dictation?"

"She was out with him last night. He left her off two hours before he was killed. She says he was cold sober."

"I don't believe it. I could tell you some hair raisers about old Andrew. He'd get himself so blind he couldn't tell you his name without checking his driver's license." She shook her head. "That man didn't drink. He inhaled it."

"That why you stopped seeing him?"

"Partly. And partly because he was an old man with young ideas," she told him with apparent frankness.

"How about Debbie Rains? What was her relationship with him?"

"Debbie?" Marta's voice sounded puzzled. "I guess she knew him. He was a regular at the Cave and a heavy tipper. Debbie could smell that type a

mile away. But I didn't know she ever saw him on the outside. Did she?"

"I don't know. I just know that she called him a couple of times just before she was killed. I was wondering if you'd know."

Marta shook her head. "I've already told you that Debbie kept her personal affairs pretty much to herself. In our business, you don't try to keep tabs on your neighbors. Especially where men are concerned."

"I dropped by this place Debbie worked before you got her the job at the Cave last night."

"The Beat Haven? What'd you think of it?"

"I got a little different impression of Debbie. That's quite a hip crowd she ran with down there."

"There was no dew on Debbie. She was real hip. The way Reeves spent money, like it was going out of style, maybe she latched onto him when I turned him loose."

"Could be." Liddell nodded. "I was talking to her partner at the Beat Haven—"

"Partner?"

Liddell bobbed his head. "This babe, a real butch, told me Debbie expected to get her hands on a lot of loot. Enough for her to reopen the Beat Haven on her own."

The blonde looked thoughtful. "Sounds like she was putting the arm on somebody who—" She broke off, stared thoughtfully at Liddell. "You don't think she was blackmailing Reeves, do you?"

"I'm not closing the door to any possibility. If she was, it will show up when the accountants check his books." He looked at his watch. "If it's okay, let me check my office. Then maybe we can have dinner before you go to the club."

The blonde caught his sleeve, pulled his watch over. "It's only about three-fifteen. We can't eat before five-thirty. What'll we do in the meantime?"

"I think we ought to be able to figure something out that won't be too boring."

The blonde frowned at him. "You can use the phone, but I'm not making any commitments about the dinner part."

Liddell got up, walked to the telephone, dialed his office number. He waited for three rings, then Pinky's voice came through.

"Johnny Liddell's office."

"This is Liddell, Pink. Anything new?"

Pinky considered. "I've got an advance fashion tip if that's anything. They tell me stripes will be all the rage this season. For you, anyway."

"What's up?"

"I just got a call from that Regan gal in Reeves' office. A sergeant named Ryan was up there asking a lot of questions. Seems he was interested in who our client was—Amalgamated or Reeves."

Liddell groaned audibly.

"That's not all," Pinky told him cheerfully. "She also told him about the calls from Debbie Rains and how you thought there might be some connection."

"Chatty little thing, isn't she?" he growled.

"Outside of that, there's not a thing new," Pinky assured him.

"What else were you expecting? An earthquake?" He raked his fingers through his hair. "Hold the fort. I'm coming right in—" He paused for a moment. "You remember yesterday you hoped you weren't breaking anything up?"

"I remember."

"Today you're luckier. You are."

"How nice for the girl," she said sweetly and slammed the receiver down in his ear.

The girl on the couch had finished her drink, held her glass out for a refill. "I've been thinking about that offer—"

Liddell shook his head. "I'm going to have to give you a rain check. Something else just came up. I've got to try to put out a fire." He checked his watch. "If I'm lucky I'll just be getting out from under in time for the last show." He looked up. "Can we take it up from here then?"

Marta pouted her disappointment. "You're not very dependable, are you?"

“That’s part of my charm,” Liddell said. “Sorry, but I do have to run. And if things don’t break right, I might have to keep right on running.” He crossed the room in long strides, opened the door and left.

Marta stared at the closed door. She was aware that for the first time in her life there was a peculiar conflict going on inside her. She knew now beyond doubt that Johnny Liddell represented a greater danger to her than Reeves ever did. She tried to reconcile the deep-seated hatred she felt for men with the growing interest she felt for him. She rationalized the conflict, decided she was counterfeiting the interest and leading him on as a means of destroying him. In the last analysis, if it became a question of her survival or his, there would be no question.

And sitting here, she knew that it had reached the point where it was a question of her survival or his.

# twelve.

Inspector Herlehy was sitting on the well-worn leather couch that occupied almost the full length of one wall of his office when the door opened and the uniformed clerk ushered Johnny Liddell in. The inspector looked bleary-eyed, his thick white hair showed the effect of constant raking with his fingers.

He greeted Liddell, turned to the clerk. “Get us a couple of coffees in here, will you, Ray?”

When the clerk had left and closed the door behind him, Herlehy indicated a chair. “What’s on your mind, Johnny?”

“I just got back from Carport, Inspector. Thought there were a couple of things I’d like to talk over with you.” He paused for a second. “And Sergeant Ryan.”

Herlehy walked over to his desk chair, dropped heavily into it. “The boys out there treat you all right?”

Liddell nodded. “Great.” He dug a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, held it up for an okay. The inspector nodded, Liddell lit up. “First place, Inspector, Andrew Reeves is a personal client of mine. He took me on last night—”

“You told me Amalgamated was your client,” Herlehy growled.

“I know. I was suspicious about him being killed so soon after he hired me, but I had nothing to go on.” He shrugged. “I’d look like a real dope if I stirred something up by telling the Carport cops they don’t know their business.” He took a deep drag, blew the smoke at the ceiling. “I also couldn’t prove there was a connection between Debbie Rains and Andrew Reeves.”

Herlehy leaned forward. “Is there?”

Liddell shook his head. “I don’t know. He knew her from the Cave and there’s some evidence that Debbie tried to reach him by telephone before her death. He told me he didn’t take the calls.”

“Why did he hire you?”

Liddell took a deep breath. “He was being blackmailed.” He interpreted the disbelief that clouded the inspector’s eyes, and shrugged. “It will be easy enough to prove. He made a big cash withdrawal and paid off.”

“For what?”

“It has nothing to do with the Rains case that I know,” Liddell told him. “It was a personal indiscretion that a man in his position couldn’t afford. So he paid off. And unless I find there’s a connection with Debbie Rains’ death, I have to honor his confidence.”

“Now just a minute!” Herlehy started to rise angrily.

“Inspector, I promised to co-operate and I’m co-operating. You have my word that if there’s any connection between the Rains case and what Reeves hired me for, I’ll turn the whole works over to you. But both Reeves and his secretary have told me that he never talked to her.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Herlehy snapped.

The door opened. A grinning Sergeant Ryan walked in. His face dropped slightly when he saw Liddell.

“Liddell just got back from Carport,” Herlehy said. “It now turns out that Reeves was a client of his.” He directed a baleful eye at Liddell. “It’s a good thing you leveled, Johnny. We probably would have found it out and when we did—” He left the threat unsaid.

The grin drained from Ryan’s face. “I suppose he also told you that Reeves knew Debbie Rains, that she called him—”

“And never reached him,” Liddell said. “I told the inspector everything. Just as I promised to do.”

Ryan ignored Liddell. “The Carport police don’t think the Reeves accident was completely kosher, Inspector.” He eyed Liddell unhappily. “Apparently Liddell agreed with them.”

Herlehy stared at Liddell. “Why?”

Liddell shrugged. “The autopsy found alcohol in him, but too much. According to their estimates, he must have had twelve ounces of hundred-proof stuff in a two-hour period, driven all the way out to Carport with it in him.” He shook his head. “I don’t believe it.”

“You don’t believe the coroner’s report?”

“I believe that. But I don’t believe he could drink that much hundred-proof stuff, drive that far all in two hours. And besides that he had plenty of alcohol still in his stomach.”

“Where do you get the two-hour figure?”

“His secretary. She was out with him last night. He left her off at about three, cold sober, turns up all the way out in Carport stoned out of his mind two hours later.”

Herlehy studied Liddell’s face. “Why were you so anxious to get out there and check for yourself? What made you even think there was anything wrong?”

Liddell shrugged. “In my business, it’s not good for business for a man to end up on a slab less than twenty-four hours after he hires you.” He glanced up at Ryan. “There wasn’t much to report, but I wanted to make sure to get it to you right away.”

Herlehy looked up at Ryan. “What’d you have on your mind, Sergeant?”

Ryan shook his head. “Not a thing, Inspector. Not a thing.”

An old man in a sweat-stained fedora sat at a table overlooking the backstage entrance to Morgan’s Cave, reading an early edition of the *Dispatch*. Two coffee-stained cardboard containers stood soggily on the table in front of him. He pulled a blackened briar from between his teeth as Pete Degna, Morgan’s bodyguard, walked in.

“The boss’s been asking for you, Pete,” the old man told him. “He’s back in his office now.”

Degna nodded his head, started down the narrow corridor toward Morgan’s office. He passed the open door to Marta Shane’s dressing room, stopped to peer in.

The blonde was leaning across the dressing table, examining her make-up in the slight magnification of the mirror. She smoothed her lipstick with the ball of her pinky, studied the effect, seemed satisfied. She leaned back, glanced languidly at the bodyguard.

“Well, well. The big tough bouncer,” she taunted.

The grin faded from Degna’s face, was replaced by a scowl. “What’s that mean?”



Marta grinned at him. “I thought you were supposed to be the one who bounces other people around. I hear you got bounced around pretty good yourself the other night.”

“Nobody bounces me around. That Rocky been making some kind of cracks?”

Marta lifted a cigarette from the pack on her table, stuck it between her lips. “Do I look like the type to be getting chummy with a doorman?”

“Who then?”

The blonde lit her cigarette, filled her lungs with smoke, blew it at him. “I had a drink with a private detective named Liddell. He was bragging about pushing you around.” She grinned at the bouncer. “He said you’re not nearly as tough as you pretend to be. And here I am, figuring I’m safe because you’re around.”

Pete growled, “He had the jump on me. Next time, I’ll be ready for him. It’ll be a different thing.”

Marta lifted the cigarette from between her lips, held it to the side between thumb and middle finger, tapped it gently with her index finger. “I just thought I ought to warn you. He’ll be out front tonight for the last show. He’s taking me home.”

Degna’s normally swarthy complexion darkened. His eyes narrowed to slits. “You ought to be more careful who you’re seen in public with. You’ll be getting yourself a bad name.”

The girl grinned at him. “This is a dangerous neighborhood. A girl needs protection.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

“Looks like you’ve got all you can handle protecting yourself without worrying about me,” she taunted. “Don’t forget—a girl was murdered in the apartment right next to mine. That’s a pretty dark hallway. Who knows when somebody might be waiting for me in the dark some night?”

Degna looked thoughtful. “I see what you mean.” He plucked at his lower lip with thumb and forefinger. “Maybe you do have something there. It is a dark hallway.”

“I’ll feel a lot safer in that hallway with someone like Liddell along.”

“Be my guest,” Degna growled. He turned, headed down the corridor toward Race Morgan’s office.

Marta got up from her chair, walked to the door, leaned against the door frame and watched the bodyguard until he disappeared through the door into Morgan's office. She drew the robe tighter around her, dropped her cigarette to the floor, ground it out with the sole of her shoe.

It had the makings of quite a night!

The late show was already on when Johnny Liddell walked into Morgan's Cave. A new girl presided over the hatcheck concession in the vestibule. She was tall, loosely put together in a way that flowed with every movement. Her long legs were unencumbered by a pair of shorts that were at least a size too small; above, she stretched a silk peasant blouse to the limits of credibility.

She eyed Liddell incuriously as he headed into the supper room, went back to a minute examination of the lacquer on her nails as the head waiter ushered him toward a table.

On the floor, Marta Shane was leaning against the piano, keeping time to the orchestra's version of "Nobody's Sweetheart."

As Liddell slid into his seat, the drum and the bass were in the background providing the solid, steady beat, paving the way for the three wind instruments to romp out front, waving together around the melody. The trumpet man was blowing up a storm, eyes closed, horn pointed at the ceiling, the side of his cheek puffed out like a balloon. At the piano, Marta's accompanist had two hands full of keys, weaving in the rhythm.

The trumpet was playing the lead in the harmony part, setting the pace, laying down the basic riffs. The trombone was providing the foundation for the clarinet to keep easing in and out, contrapuntally filling out the melody. The rest of the combination was accentuating the afterbeat, sometimes providing the afterbeat itself.

Marta Shane stood in the spotlight, her body undulating, her eyes closed, snapping her fingers.

Suddenly, they came to the break. The rest of the musicians laid back four bars, the trumpet stepped up to speak for itself. Even Marta stopped swaying while it blew full, pure melody. At the end of the chorus, the rest of the band came in to hold a chord, then the drummer took a break and hit the cymbal.

That was the signal for a musical reunion. The wandering instruments that had been romping and speaking out for themselves were back together again.

The trumpet player turned to Marta and nodded. The music sank under her. Her voice was husky, sure. The bass, drums and piano kept step while the clarinet wailed softly, and the trombone slurred. The trumpet man had muted his horn, was playing straight, sweet melody under her wail.

Marta did a chorus, then broke off as the drummer hit a cymbal crash and a heavy bass drum beat giving the instruments a chance to catch their breath and come up roaring to a smashing close. Torrents of applause roared toward the floor. The patrons were applauding, shouting, pounding the tables with the flat of their hands or with spoons.

As the lights went up, the members of the band looked slightly wilted, gleaming with perspiration; but Marta Shane looked as fresh as if she had just come onto the floor. She waved her hand at the cheering audience, shook her head to cries of “More, more.” She motioned to the members of the band, urged them to stand up for a bow. Then, tossing a kiss to the audience, she turned and headed for her dressing room.

Johnny Liddell sat through the dance duo that followed Marta’s spot. They handled their routines with professional grace, but from where he sat it was obvious that the male partner’s teeth were too white to be real and the female didn’t have enough meat on her to make a good soup. He wondered idly how it would be to go to bed with one that bony, decided it would be better to curl up with a good book.

The dance team took two encores, one of which was legitimate. As they headed off the floor, the lights came up, and waiters started wandering around the tables delivering the refills that had been ordered during the show.

Liddell managed to catch his waiter’s eye, brought him over to the table. “I want to get a message back to Marta Shane,” he told him.

The waiter grinned sadly. “Every guy in this joint’s got a message he’d like to get to that babe, me included.” He shook his head. “The boss don’t like for us to—” He saw the five spot Liddell held cupped in his hand, sighed. “Of course, there’s no harm trying. What’s the message?”

“Tell her Johnny Liddell is out front. I’d like to see her.”

“You know what your chances are, mister?” the waiter asked. “This chick is up to her balcony in passes. Yours will just get filed with the rest.”

He eyed the fiver regretfully. “You better save that. Maybe it’ll give you a down payment on your love life some place else.”

“Let me worry about throwing my money away, huh?” He held out the bill, waited while the waiter palmed it, transferred it to his pocket.

“You understand I’m not guaranteeing a thing,” the waiter told him. “I’ll try to get the message back. But even if I do, chances are she won’t even answer it.”

Liddell nodded.

“What was the name again?”

“Johnny Liddell.”

The waiter repeated the name to himself a couple of times, then turned and shuffled off.

Liddell settled back, enjoyed his drink and a smoke. When the waiter returned, there was a new look of respect on his face. “She says you should come back to her dressing room.” He eyed Liddell curiously. “You got any idea how many guys send back like they’d like to take her out on the town and then home? Hundreds of them. All of them she brushes. You send back a message, she looks like it’s Christmas. What have you got the rest of us don’t have?”

“Talent,” Liddell assured him gravely.

“Must be. But it don’t show when you’re sitting down.” He picked up the bills Liddell had laid alongside his check, watched enviously as Johnny headed backstage.

Marta Shane’s door was identifiable by a peeling gilt star. Johnny Liddell looked down the corridor to where Pete Degna, Morgan’s bodyguard, was sitting outside the private office. He was reading the morning tab, his chair was tilted back against the wall. He dropped the front two legs to the floor when he recognized Liddell.

Johnny knocked on the door, gave no sign that he was aware of the bodyguard walking down the corridor toward him.

“I’m decent. Come on in,” the sultry voice of the blonde invited.

As Liddell reached for the doorknob, the beefy hand of the bodyguard caught his sleeve. “What are you doing back here?” Degna wanted to know.

Liddell looked from the heavily veined hand up into Degna's face, down to the hand again. "Take the claw off the suit. The material wrinkles," he told him in a deceptively mild voice.

Degna hesitated, dropped his hands to his side. "Morgan doesn't like sightseers. This is off bounds."

Liddell ignored him, reached for the knob, pushed the door open.

Marta Shane was sitting on the straight-backed chair in front of the make-up table. She had exchanged the décolleté gown she wore in the act for a light blue robe that made it unmistakable that her assets were as liquid, and as negotiable, as those of the First National Bank.

She looked from Liddell to Pete. "What are you doing snooping outside my door?" she flared at the bodyguard.

"You know Morgan don't like people wandering around backstage."

The blonde's eyes flashed fire. "He doesn't happen to be wandering around. He happens to be a friend of mine and I invited him to come back," she snapped.

"Just the same, Morgan don't like—"

"I don't care what Morgan likes and what he doesn't like. I'll invite anybody I like backstage any time I feel like it. You tell that to your boss, and if he doesn't like it, he can get someone else to try to fill this barn for him."

Liddell turned to Pete. "I wouldn't like to say for sure, but I get the feeling you ought to change your deodorant."

The bodyguard glowered at him. Then he turned, stamped his way back to the private office at the end of the corridor.

Liddell walked into the dressing room, closed the door behind him. "That's a side of Morgan I never knew. Imagine him playing house mother!"

The anger in the blonde's face drained away. She grinned. "Morgan's not so bad when you get used to him. But this goon of his! Who could live long enough to get used to him? He's forever snooping around, getting under my feet." She got up out of her chair, perched on the edge of her dressing table. The gown split, exposed a sizable area of tanned thigh. She made a halfhearted attempt to pull the gown together, then gave it up. "I was beginning to be sure I was slipping. I didn't see you out there, and when there was no message—"

“I was just getting my breath. When you did that rhythm number you had the men in the audience panting so hard they almost drowned out the music. I’d sure like to see what you do for an encore.”

“Maybe we can set up a private showing some night.”

“I can hardly wait. I—”

There was a rapping at the door, it swung open and Race Morgan walked in. He jerked his thumb in the direction of the door. “Okay, Liddell, out!”

Pete Degna stood behind the night-club owner, his right hand jammed deep in his jacket pocket.

“Now, wait a minute, Morgan—” the blonde began.

Morgan swung on her. “You wait a minute, Shane. This is my club. You want to be seen with this character, that’s your business. But when you see him in my club, that’s my business. You want to meet him, meet him some place else.”

“You and nobody like you tells me what to do and what not to do, Morgan,” the blonde flared. “You try pushing me around and I’m finished \_\_\_”

“Then you really would be, baby,” Morgan told her in a hard voice. “This isn’t some burlesque wheel you’re playing. The boys who booked you in here didn’t ask me if I wanted you. They told me I was getting you. And they’re not asking you if you want to stay or not. You try canceling out on them, baby, and they may take your face apart and put it back together again real funny.”

Some of the color drained from the girl’s face. She caught her lower lip between her teeth.

Morgan turned to Liddell. “I told you the other night, shamus. Stay out of here. Spend your money some place else. I wouldn’t want to be responsible for something real permanent happening to you.”

“Don’t let it keep you awake nights,” Liddell told him.

The night-club man ignored the remark, turned and stamped out of the room. Marta ran to the door, slammed it after him. She stood, massaging the backs of her arms with her palms. “He can’t get away with this. I’ll—”

Liddell grinned at her. “Stop getting your blood pressure up. He’s in the right. He gets to make the rules when we’re playing with his ball on his home grounds.”

The blonde let him guide her back to her chair, dropped into it with an angry grimace. “Just the same, I don’t like that big gorilla talking to me like that.”

“Forget it. Having him talk to you like that is better than having him have some of those boys he was talking about having a talk with you.”

“Nevertheless, I’m getting out of this rat trap. Tomorrow I’ll see my agent and find some way of breaking my contract.”

“That’s tomorrow. We still have all of tonight in front of us,” Liddell told her.

“And I owe you a couple of drinks.”

Liddell nodded his head happily. “And you owe me a couple of drinks.”

“Well, I’m sure not going to give this dump any of my business. How about my place?”

Liddell considered. “The price sounds right.”

“Besides, I’ve had about all the smoke and hard talk I can stand for one night. This place is really beginning to get me down.” She swung around in her chair, checked her lipstick and eye shadow in the mirror. “You just sit down some place and stay out from under my feet and I won’t be a minute.” She jabbed at her hair with her fingertips, stood up and unbelted her robe. She walked behind the small screen in the corner of the dressing room, reached out for a dress hanging on the wall. When she stepped out, she was completely dressed.

“Let’s go find those drinks.” She slipped her hand under Liddell’s arm, led the way out of the dressing room. The corridor was empty; neither Morgan nor his bodyguard was in sight.

The old man at the stage door didn’t look up from his morning tab as they walked past him. The air in the small alley that ran from the stage door to the street was cool and fresh after the smoke and the closeness of the club.

“It’s such a beautiful night.” Marta looked up at the star-studded sky. “Let’s walk. Do you mind?”

“Love it,” Liddell told her.

“I don’t get much of a chance to do any walking. It’s so late when I get finished I wouldn’t dare try to walk alone in this neighborhood. It’s full of muggers so I always grab a cab. Then, by the time I get up, it’s afternoon and I have a million things that have to be done. And I do love to walk.”

“We’ll have to do this more often,” Liddell told her.

They walked in silence for a few minutes.

“What are you thinking about?” Liddell asked.

The blonde shrugged. “I don’t know. Being morbid, I guess. I can’t get Debbie Rains and Andrew Reeves out of my mind. A couple of nights ago, they were just like us. Enjoying life, glad to be alive. Now—” She broke off. “Now they’re both dead.”

“None of us gets out of this world alive,” Liddell said.

“But it was so sudden.” She tightened her grip on his arm. “Do you really think there was any connection between what happened to them?”

Liddell nodded. “I’m pretty sure of it.”

“You said over the phone you thought it could be suicide. Do you still think so? The papers said—”

“The papers said it was an accident,” Liddell conceded. “I don’t believe it.”

“Suicide?”

“Why should Reeves commit suicide?”

Marta shrugged. “You said yourself Debbie was expecting to get her hands on a lot of money. Maybe she was shaking him too hard and he had to get her off his back.”

“Then why hire me?”

The blonde considered. “What better way to keep tabs on what progress you were making? Maybe you inadvertently dropped something when you were talking to him that convinced him you were onto him.” She looked up into Liddell’s face. “You said his accountants were going to go over his books.”

Liddell nodded his head glumly. “They did. A couple of weeks ago, he made a large withdrawal to cash—”

“You see? If he was being blackmailed and—”

“He was being blackmailed, all right. He was supposed to be mixed up in a hit-and-run case a couple of weeks ago.”

The blonde looked straight ahead. “He told you that?”

Liddell nodded.



Marta looked at his face. “I knew about it. I was with him the night it happened. I’ve never mentioned it because he asked me not to. It would have been a terrible scandal.”

“You say you stopped going with him. Was it over that?”

Marta shrugged. “A little of everything. He was getting too serious to suit me. Then, if he was going to drink that much and get mixed up in scandals like that—” She shrugged again. “I do have a career to think about.”

“It could be messy,” Liddell conceded. “But why don’t we talk about something pleasant? You, for instance.”

For the remainder of the walk, Marta Shane gave Liddell a carefully edited version of her life. When they finally stopped in front of the brownstone building that housed her apartment, Marta stopped, looked up at the curtained windows of Debbie’s apartment. She laughed nervously. “I’m not the jittery type, but I don’t mind admitting I’m awfully glad you came home with me tonight.”

She started up the short flight of stairs. Liddell followed her slowly. Liddell watched the play of her rounded hips against the tight skirt and sighed appreciatively. It was one of the richest rewards in his long career of girl-watching.

The door in the vestibule of the building was open despite the printed plea to *Please Keep This Door Closed for Your Own Protection*.

The hallway beyond was dimly lighted, smelled pleasantly of a combination of aged wood and the mustiness that characterizes old, well-built and carefully maintained houses. Despite the carpeting on the stairs, the steps creaked slightly as they climbed to the second floor.

When they reached the second landing, Marta looked down the hall to the closed door to Debbie Rains’ apartment, then crossed with quick, nervous steps to her own door in the rear. Johnny Liddell stood aside while the blonde fumbled in the depths of her purse for her key. Behind them, the stair well led to the third floor.

There was the slightest creaking of a step that gave the warning. Liddell ducked to the side, heard the whiz of the sap as it arced past his head, the grunt of the man wielding it as it missed its target. Liddell swung around, had an impression of bared teeth, a murderous snarl as the arm and the sap went up for another blow.

Liddell bent over double, plowed into the other man. His shoulder caught the man in the midsection, sent him staggering backward. The air wheezed out of the man's lungs as he collided with the banister. He disappeared over the railing. There was a short, startled scream, then a dull thud as he hit the floor below.

Liddell rushed over to the railing. The man was a tangle of arms and legs on the floor. As Liddell tugged his .45 from its holster, the man struggled painfully to his feet. When he looked up to where Liddell stood he was easily identifiable as Pete Degna. He took one look at the gun in Liddell's hand, then ran for the vestibule door, limping from the effects of the fall.

Liddell started for the stairs as Degna disappeared through the hall door into the vestibule. He went down the stairs two at a time. He reached the vestibule just as Degna cleared the sidewalk and started across the street.

For a moment, the bodyguard was speared in the twin beams of headlights. He seemed frozen, threw his hands up and opened his mouth in a soundless scream. There was a screeching of brakes, a sickening thud, the sound of broken glass.

From where he stood, Liddell could see the lift of the right side of the panel truck as the wheel went over Degna's body. The driver skidded his truck to a stop, jumped out of the front seat and ran back to where Degna lay.

The rear lights of the truck dyed the street a blood color as Liddell raced down the steps and crossed to where the driver was anxiously checking the fallen man for some sign of life. Liddell had the momentary illusion that the driver and the dead man were wallowing in a pool of blood. The driver looked up with stricken eyes as Liddell came up beside him.

"He's dead," he said in a shocked voice. "He ran out in front of me, mister. I never saw him. I didn't have a chance. One minute the street was empty, the next minute he's standing right in front of my truck." He wiped the perspiration beading on his forehead with his sleeve. "As God is my judge, it wasn't my fault."

Liddell looked down at the tangle of arms and legs in the middle of the street. Dark streams were snaking away from the body, open eyes stared up at a star-studded sky they couldn't see.

"I'll call the police," Liddell told him. "You'd better stay here." He turned, ran up the steps into the vestibule.

A man with an old-fashioned bathrobe tied tightly across his middle stood in an open door on the first floor. His white hair was tousled, his voice was heavy with sleep.

“What’s going on around here?” he demanded.

“An accident,” Liddell tossed back at him, as he headed up the stairs. “Man got hit by a car out front.”

The man in the bathrobe turned, relayed the information to someone inside the apartment, and headed for the street.

Marta Shane stood in the open doorway to her apartment, her clenched knuckle between her teeth. When she saw Liddell, she cried out with relief. “Johnny! Thank God! I was afraid you—” She broke off, looked from him to the stair well and back. “What happened out there?”

Liddell brushed past her into the room, shut the door. “Pete Degna. He ran out into the street, got tagged by a truck. He’s it.”

The blonde’s eyes widened. “Pete Degna? From the Club?”

Liddell bobbed his head.

“He tried to kill you. Why?”

“Maybe he doesn’t like my brand of deodorant.” He motioned toward the phone. “You’d better call the police. Get it on the record that you phoned it in.”

“But what’ll I say? I can’t tell them that Pete tried to kill you, and—”

“You don’t. You don’t mention me at all. You were scared about coming back here alone after what happened next door. You asked Pete to take you home. He left you at the door, started back to the club. You heard the car skidding, you ran down and saw what happened. So you called for an ambulance. You got that?”

“Yes, but—”

“But nothing. This way it’s just an accident. You drag my name into it and the story gets out that Degna tried to clobber me and they’ll make a big production out of it.” He studied her face. “Can you handle it?”

Marta nodded. “I think so. But what about you? How do you get out without being spotted?”

“Got a service entrance?”

Marta nodded. She turned, led the way to the far wall. She lifted the heavy drape, revealed a closed door. "Through the kitchen." She opened the door into a small kitchenette and indicated another door. "It goes down to the areaway where we leave our garbage for the janitor."

Liddell nodded. "You make that telephone call and don't worry about me." He waited until she had closed the door behind her and dropped the drape. He tried to listen to see if she was dialing, realized that the heavy draping and soundproofing would make it impossible. He crossed to the service door, unlocked it, stepped out onto a small stairway that led from the back yard to the various apartments.

The service stairs opened on a small areaway. He crossed the areaway, climbed a fence and found himself in an alley.

Somewhere close by he could hear the wailing of a police siren. In the distance others were picking up its full-throated scream. He voted against going up the alley, climbed another fence that brought him into the back yard facing on the far side of the square.

He emerged into a tree-shaded street, walked to the corner, waved down a cab. He gave the address of his apartment, settled back into the seat.

The cab was stopped at the corner of 54th Street by a policeman who was holding back traffic so a police car and an ambulance could hurtle through. Down the block, another police car was angled against the curb, its red light flashing in the metal casing on its roof, its headlights spearing a twisted form in the middle of the street. The body had been covered with a blanket.

The policeman directing traffic waved the cab on. The cabby wasted an incurious glance at the bundle in the street, the policemen tumbling out of their car to join the one that stood next to the body.

"You know, this hour of the night, it ain't easy to tag somebody. There ain't that many on the street and them that is has got all the odds on their side," the cabby complained. The tone of his voice seemed to indicate regret at the unsportsmanlike attitude of a pedestrian who wasn't willing to give a driver an even chance to tag him.

# thirteen.

Sergeant Ryan sat in the chair across the desk from Inspector Herlehy. He watched as the white-haired man glanced through the flimsies in the file on the desk in front of him.

The inspector slapped the file closed, leaned back. He chomped away at the wad of gum, studied the sergeant with displeasure.

“You haven’t brought me anything new. Pete Degna was killed by a truck. The driver admits the accident. And that’s what it was, an accident. You waste my time telling me you have evidence that Liddell is crossing us. What is this, a fixation with you, Ryan?”

Sergeant Ryan shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “He is, Inspector. First, he gets himself mixed up in the killing of the hatcheck girl. He’s on the scene when we arrive—”

“That’s already been explained.”

“Maybe. We have his word for it—”

“And the word of the tavern man and his secretary. I’m willing to take their word for it,” Herlehy growled.

The sergeant managed to look unhappy. “Okay, so maybe I am getting feisty over the whole thing. But next thing we know, he’s sticking his nose into a drunken-driving accident on Long Island, only the dead man turns out to be mixed up in the Rains killing. And it also turns out that he’s a personal client of Liddell.” He leaned forward. “And he told you the client was the dead man’s company.”

Herlehy didn’t miss a beat on the gum, nodded. “Okay, that’s one strike on him. He explained it away, but you’re right. He lied to start with.” He raised a sausage-shaped finger, waved it at the sergeant. “But he came in here and leveled.”

The smug expression faded from Ryan’s face. “He probably found out I was checking up on him and beat me to the punch,” he concluded glumly. “I still don’t think he’s telling us all he knows about the connection between Reeves and Debbie Rains.”

“From what do you deduce this?” Herlehy wanted to know.

“It’s too much of a coincidence, the whole thing. Reeves knew Debbie Rains from the Cave. He’s a regular customer there for weeks, then all of a sudden he stops going there—”

“This is fact or theory?”

“Fact. I checked it out with the headwaiter. And he also told me that Reeves and the girl get along pretty good. She always puts on a show for him when she checks his hat. He was always kidding around with her.”

“Go on.”

“The day after Debbie is killed, Reeves sends for Liddell. That same night, Reeves gets himself killed in an accident. You know what I think? I think the Rains kid is shaking Reeves down. She’s pressing too hard and he goes to her place and knocks her off.”

“Theory?”

The sergeant bobbed his head. “Theory,” he conceded. “But it answers all the questions. Why Reeves won’t take a call from a tasty dish like Debbie Rains, everything. He just decides to put a finish to the shake and goes to her place that night.”

“So why hire Liddell?”

Ryan shrugged. “It says in the papers the next morning that Debbie Rains called Liddell. Reeves wants to know how much the Rains kid told Liddell so he hires him. When he finds out how much Liddell knows, he gets himself a bottle, gets stoned blind and kills himself.”

The inspector stared at the man across the desk. “You know something? You’re wasting your time. You ought to be out in Hollywood writing murder mysteries.” He slammed the flat of his hand down on the folder in front of him. “So where does Pete Degna come into all this?”

“It’s got to fit in, Inspector. Degna worked in the same place with the Rains kid. Chances are he gets to know her pretty good. Maybe he’s even working with her in shaking Reeves. Who knows how many they’ve put the arm on? Bang! He has an accident and he’s dead. Everybody who had anything to do with Rains turns up dead. It’s getting to be an epidemic.”

“Maybe the wrong department’s handling it. Maybe we ought to turn the whole damn mess over to the Board of Health,” Herlehy growled. “I suppose Liddell had a hand in Degna’s death, too?”

Ryan sighed. “I didn’t write that report, Inspector. Accident Investigation did—”

Herlehy scowled. “You mean Liddell’s mentioned in the accident report?”

“Page two. Halfway down the page.”

The inspector flipped open the folder, picked out the AID report, skimmed through the second page. He frowned, underscored a line with a spatulate forefinger, looked up. “You mean this bit about an unidentified man on the scene?”

Ryan nodded. “That caught my eye, too, Inspector—”

“It didn’t catch my eye. You directed my attention to it.”

“Okay, so it caught my eye. I had a talk with the driver of the truck.” He pulled a worn leather notebook from his pocket. “The driver’s name is Justin McGreevy. He says that just as he hit the man, another man came running out of one of the houses over to where the body is. This guy tells McGreevy to stay put, that he’ll call in the report.” He looked up. “I checked the squeals. Only report of the accident came from a woman. Marta Shane. Also from the Cave.”

“And the man?”

Ryan shrugged, shook his head. “We’ve done a door-to-door of the whole block. We haven’t come up with anybody who witnessed the accident.”

The inspector’s frown deepened. “What’s the matter, doesn’t Homicide have enough to do we’ve got to be wasting manpower on an accident?” He glared at the man. “It was an accident. That’s a fact.”

The sergeant fidgeted for a moment. “I guess so.”

“What do you mean you guess so? Don’t you know?”

“It was an accident,” Ryan conceded sulkily. “But I tell you I have a feeling, Inspector. There’s something pretty screwy about this. Why didn’t that witness come forward?”

“Anybody else see him?”

“A tenant in the house where Marta Shane lives saw him come into the house. The man said there’d been an accident, that he was going to report it.”

“Did he see what apartment this mysterious witness went into?”

Ryan sighed, shook his head. “He didn’t notice. Just then his wife called to find out what was the matter and he turned to tell her there’d been an accident. When he turned back the man was gone.”

“Description?”

“Nothing we could go on.”

“How about the truck driver? He should have gotten a good look.”

The sergeant shook his head sadly. “He was so upset, he couldn’t tell us what color the guy was, let alone what he looked like.”

“You say the report was made by the Shane woman. You questioned her?”

“For what it was worth,” Ryan said. “She asked Degna to escort her home. She was kind of nervous over what happened right next door to her \_\_\_”

“Understandable. Or does that sound suspicious to you, too?”

“Degna left her at the door. She had just closed her door and was getting ready to undress when she heard the skid and the crash. She ran downstairs to see what happened. When she saw it was Degna, she called for an ambulance.”

“She mention this mysterious witness?”

Ryan shook his head. “The guy could have gone up to the roof, crossed a couple of roofs and come down a block away.”

“And you’ve concluded it was Liddell?” He studied the face of the sergeant glumly. “You know something? You’ve spent more time backtracking Liddell trying to prove he isn’t co-operating than you have looking for the killer—”

“I know he’s holding out, Inspector, and I’m convinced that for some reason he was at that house last night.”

“Doing what?”

Ryan shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe going through Debbie Rains’ apartment trying to find whatever it was she was holding over Reeves’ head \_\_\_”



“Are you back to that again? You don’t have a shred of evidence that she was shaking Reeves down.”

“Inspector, it stands to reason she wasn’t killed because she was pure as the driven snow. If you could have seen the characters she hung out with in the Village—” He broke off, smirked triumphantly. “There’s an example. He was down there passing himself off as a member of the department. That’s co-operating?”

Herlehy scowled at him. “Okay. We’ll have Liddell in for a little talk. You can throw your suspicions into his teeth and I hope you still have some when you’re finished.” He wagged his index finger admonishingly. “But you’re getting this out of your system once and for all. And when you’re done chasing shadows, I want some action on the killer. And if I don’t get it, you may be getting some action from me.”

The telephone on the corner of the desk pealed.

Herlehy grabbed for the instrument but didn’t take his eyes off the sergeant. “Who?” The scowl deepened. “Send him in.” He dropped the receiver back on its hook. “Now you have the full cast. It’s Race Morgan. He wants to have a talk with me. About last night.”

Ryan got up, permitted himself to be waved back into his chair. He sat gnawing on his thumb until the rap came on the door. The uniformed clerk stuck his head in.

“Mr. Morgan to see you, Inspector.”

“Send him in.”

The clerk’s head disappeared from the doorway, and in came the nightclub operator. He nodded to Sergeant Ryan, turned to the white-haired man. “You’re Inspector Herlehy? I’m Race Morgan.”

Herlehy made no offer to shake hands. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes. One of my boys was killed last night. Hit by a truck, they tell me.”

“That’s what the report says.”

“I was asking a few questions down at Accident Investigation. They told me the file was up in your office.” He shrugged, looked from the man behind the desk to Ryan and back. “I got curious. If it’s an accident, what’s Homicide doing with the report? You know?”

“It was an accident,” Herlehy told him flatly. “The driver of the truck admits hitting him. Says Degna ran out in front of him.”

Morgan frowned over it. “Any idea what Degna was doing on 54th Street?”

“Don’t you?” Herlehy said. “The girl who sings for you says he escorted her home. She was scared. There was a murder there a couple of nights ago.”

Morgan bobbed his head thoughtfully. “That’s right. That’s where the Rains kid lived, isn’t it?” He fingered his chin. “You tying this in with the Rains kill? That why Homicide is interested?”

Herlehy shook his head. “Sergeant Ryan here was just commenting on the epidemic of accidents that happened to people who spent time at the club. Rains was no accident, of course. But Reeves—”

Morgan raised his eyebrows. “Andrew Reeves? What happened to him?”

“Don’t you read the papers?” Ryan said. “He was killed in a drunken-driving accident out on Long Island.”

“I didn’t know.” Morgan looked back at Herlehy, seemed honestly puzzled. “But what’s the connection?”

Herlehy considered it, then shook his head. “As far as we can tell, there is no connection. The sergeant just considered it an interesting coincidence. Isn’t that it, Sergeant?”

Ryan nodded. “I guess that’s it, sir.”

Johnny Liddell pushed his way through the glass doors opening on his outer office. The redhead at the electric typewriter looked up and frowned at him. She consulted her watch. “Keeping bankers’ hours?”

“I was out late last night,” Liddell said. “Business.”

“Monkey business, no doubt,” Pinky told him. “Anyway, it must have been something that made you real popular with the department. Herlehy called twice. He wants you down at his office as soon as you come in.”

Liddell grunted. “What’d you tell him?”

“I told him it was a waste of time trying to reach you here. This is the last place you’re likely to show up.”

Liddell pushed his way through the gate, headed for the private office. The redhead got up from her typewriter, wandered into the private office after him. She watched quizzically while he picked up the small pile of mail

on the corner of his desk, checked the return addresses, then dropped them one by one into the waste basket.

“The inspector didn’t sound very happy with you,” she told him.

Liddell sank into his chair. “Probably thinks I’m holding out on him.” He sighed.

“Are you?”

Liddell peered up at her. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re holding out on him.”

“That’s what I like. Confidence.”

“Well, aren’t you?” Pinky persisted.

Liddell swung his chair around to the window and looked out over Bryant Park. On the far side, the canopy over the entrance to the Overseas Press Club flapped desultorily in the breeze. He stared out for a moment, then turned back to the redhead.

“How can I be holding out when I don’t know anything?” He leaned forward, picked up a pencil, started doodling on the top sheet of his desk pad. “Sure, I’ve picked up a few things and I’ve got a few ideas, but nothing I could prove, nothing that adds up to anything solid.”

The redhead walked over to the client chair, sat down, folded her legs under her and managed to look lost in it. “Want to try it on me for size?”

Liddell finished shading the curlicue he was drawing on the desk pad, tossed the pencil aside and settled back. “It can’t do any harm,” he said. He leaned the nape of his neck on the back of the chair, stared up at the ceiling. “Here’s what we know. Debbie Rains was a hatcheck girl at the Cave. There she got to know Andrew Reeves.” He paused for a moment, marshaled his thoughts. “Reeves was the victim of a shakedown in a phony hit-and-run killing.” He rolled his eyes down from the ceiling to the redhead’s attentive face. “So far, so good?”

Pinky nodded.

“Reeves pays off and the next thing we know, Debbie Rains is trying to reach him. Why?”

“To shake him down?”

Liddell considered it, shrugged. “He’d already been shaken down. By the man who called him and claimed to witness the accident.”

“Maybe Debbie got greedy and decided to shake him down again?”

“And this man partner of hers, the one that called Reeves, finds out about her going in business for herself and decides to teach her a lesson. That it?”

“It could happen that way.”

Liddell shook his head. “By then, Reeves knew he had been had. He wouldn’t be likely to pay off again. And why would she call me?”

“You got an answer?”

“I’ve got a tantalizing feeling that I’m right close to the answer,” Liddell growled. “There’s something that keeps eluding me.” He hit the flat of his hand on the top of the desk. “Something I should remember and don’t.” He scowled at the desk top, shook his head. “I keep trying to remember what I saw that night that bugged me, but it won’t come.” He leaned back, closed his eyes. “All I can remember is that from the way she was dressed, she knew the killer better than to just shake hands. All she had on, practically, was a robe.”

Pinky bobbed her head. “It figures you’d remember that.” She watched Liddell struggling to open some of the drawers in the filing cabinet of his memory. “How about Reeves? Why was he killed?”

Liddell shrugged. “Because Debbie was trying to reach him. Whoever killed her couldn’t be sure she hadn’t talked to him. This killer sounds like he’s allergic to loose ends.”

“Then how could he be sure Reeves didn’t tell you what Debbie said, and—” She broke off, frowned at Liddell.

Johnny nodded. “He can’t be. And chances are he isn’t too sure Debbie didn’t reach me.”

“Then he’ll have to kill you, too?”

Liddell nodded. “I think he already tried. Last night, Pete Degna was waiting for me when I took Marta Shane home—”

“Business!” The redhead snorted. “I knew it had to be monkey business!”

Liddell ignored the interruption. “Degna was waiting in the hallway. He tried for me with a sap. In the fight, he went over the banister. He ran out of the house, played tag with a truck and he was it.”

“You think Degna was the partner?”

Liddell considered, shrugged. “I just said he was the one who tried to kill me. Maybe it wasn’t his idea. Maybe the real killer talked him into it.”

“Now what are you going to do?”

Liddell leaned the flat of his hands on the edge of the desk, stood up. “I’m not going to hang around here and have the inspector hauling me off to enjoy some more of his hospitality, that’s for sure.”

“You’re not going to try anything crazy?”

Liddell shook his head. “I think I’ll pay a visit to Race Morgan. That’s about the last place the inspector would think of looking for me. I’ll be in touch.”

“I hope it’s by phone. I never did learn to use the ouija board,” Pinky said.

# fourteen.

The ringing of her doorbell brought Marta Shane out of the bathroom, toweling her still damp hair. She checked her watch, frowned at visitors at such an early hour, crossed to the door.

“Who is it?” she asked.

“Rocky,” a low voice on the other side informed her.

The frown on the blonde’s face deepened. She unlocked the door, tugged it open. She was about to bawl the doorman out for breaking the rule about not coming to her apartment, when she became aware of a man alongside him.

Rocky flashed her a warning look. She turned to the other man. His head was completely bald, looked like a cue ball with twisted lumps of scar tissue for eyebrows, a nose that was flattened against his face. He was heavy in the shoulders, his arms hung low at his sides.

“Who’s your friend, Rock?” Marta asked.

“This is Mitch Drews, Marta. He’s taking Degna’s place.”

The bald-headed man shouldered past Rocky, shut the door in the doorman’s face. He looked around the heavily draped room. “Nice place you got here.”

“*House Beautiful* will never break the door down to write it up, but I like it,” Marta told him coolly. “I don’t remember inviting you in.”

“That’s right, you didn’t.” Mitch’s eyes continued their circuit of the room, came to a halt on the blonde, eyed her impersonally. “Race Morgan wants to see you.”

“Suppose I don’t want to see Race Morgan?”

The bald-headed man considered it. He found it very funny. He laughed at her appreciatively. “A real comic.” The laugh faded off his lips. He put a spatulate index finger under her chin and snapped her head back. “In case you don’t want to see Race Morgan, then maybe old Mitch gets to change your mind.”

The blonde studied the bald-headed man's cruel face. "I'll be seeing Morgan tonight before the first show. Why can't it wait until then? What's the big rush?"

"Morgan says 'bring the singer,' so I bring the singer. This is the first thing he asks me to do on the new job. You wouldn't want me to fall down on the first thing he asks me to do, would you?"

"Look, I've had a hard night. I've been up half the night answering questions about Degna—"

"You want they should ask Pete?"

"How can Morgan expect me to look my best if he breaks up my rest?"

The stocky man shrugged his shoulders. "He don't confide in me."

Marta tried to stare him down, but lost. "You'll have to give me time to get dressed—"

The bald-headed man caught her arm as she turned toward the bedroom. He spun her around. "This is a come-as-you-are party. The boss don't like to be kept waiting." He held her by the arm, propelled her toward the door.

"Wait a minute," Marta resisted. "My hair's wet. I can't go out like this."

Mitch hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "Okay. Get something to wrap around your head." He tightened his fingers on her arm and she winced. "But don't pull anything that'll make me do something we'll both be sorry for."

Marta interpreted the sadistic look in his eyes, walked to the bedroom, appeared a moment later with her head wrapped up in a scarf. She stalked to the door, pulled it open, walked out into the hall. The bald-headed man followed her, closed the door carefully behind them.

Rocky was waiting in the car out front, its motor running. The blonde slid in beside him, the bald-headed man squeezed into the front with them. She maintained a sulky silence as Rocky put the car into gear, slid away from the curb.

Race Morgan sat behind the cluttered desk in the private office of his closed club. He was staring at the far wall with a snarl on his face. He kept pressing his knuckles against his palm, cracking them sharply. The cigar that protruded from the corner of his mouth was long since dead.

He transferred his attention from the wall to the door at the sound of the knock. “Come in,” he barked.

The door opened. Johnny Liddell walked in.

The man behind the desk scowled his surprise. “What are you doing here? I told you I didn’t want to see you around my place.” He opened the top drawer of his desk, put his hand in suggestively.

“Last time we had a little talk, we were rudely interrupted. By you,” Liddell told him affably. “I figured it’s about time we finished that talk.”

“And if I say we don’t?”

Liddell looked regretful. “In that case, maybe I’ll have that little talk with Inspector Herlehy.” He hooked a chair with the tip of his toe, drew it over and straddled it. “You see, I’ve got a pretty good idea of why Debbie Rains was killed. It’s only a few steps from there to know who killed her.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

Liddell considered. “Maybe a lot, maybe nothing. Debbie was killed because of a little racket being pulled around this place. A shake.”

“You’re a liar,” Morgan snarled. “I’ve been around a long time, Liddell. No one ever accused me of being a shake artist.”

“Just the same, Debbie Rains was killed because she stumbled on the racket. So was Andrew Reeves.”

Morgan dropped back into his chair. “Reeves was killed in a car accident.”

Liddell grinned at him glumly. “He was killed in a car, all right. But it was no accident.”

“I don’t know what this pipe dream is all about. But that’s what it is. A pipe dream.”

Liddell shook his head. “No pipe dream, Morgan. Andrew Reeves was the victim of a shakedown. When the time comes I can prove it by his books. He paid off.”

“For what?”

“He was supposed to be in a hit-and-run accident. There was a ready-made witness and everything.”



The night-club man snorted. “So some guy claims to be a witness to a hit-and-run accident and a case-hardened businessman like Reeves pays off? Come off it.”

Liddell shook his head. “There was the damaged fender, the smear that looked like blood. A man in Reeves’ position couldn’t afford to dicker. He paid off.”

Morgan looked thoughtful. “Who pulled the shake?” he wanted to know.

“It was a man’s voice.” Liddell watched the expressionless face of the night-club man. “It could have been Degna. It could have been you.”

There was only a twitching of a jaw muscle to indicate that Morgan had heard. “Why Degna or me?”

“Because last night whoever killed Reeves and Debbie decided to tie up the last loose string. Me. Degna tried for me and—” He started to rise from his chair at the sound of the knock on the door, then permitted himself to be waved down by the .38 in Morgan’s hand.

“Sit still. You might be interested in the next few minutes.” Morgan raised his voice. “Come in.”

The door opened. Mitch stuck his head in. The twisted eyebrows rose in surprise at the sight of Liddell in the chair. He turned inquiringly to Morgan.

“Got her?” the night-club operator asked.

The bald-headed man nodded.

“Bring her in.”

Mitch disappeared from the open doorway, it was filled with Woman. Marta masked her surprise at finding Liddell there, turned to Morgan.

“What is this? My contract calls for me to sing for the people, not to give private concerts.”

Morgan’s face darkened. “You see, shamus? She not only sings but she makes with the comic sayings.” He got up from his chair, walked around the desk. The .38 swung negligently from his hand.

“You want me to stay, boss?” Mitch asked.

Morgan shook his head. The bald-headed man looked disappointed, turned and walked out, closing the door behind him. Morgan turned back to the blonde.

“You want to know what this is all about?” He chewed on the dead cigar butt, glowering at her. His long upper lip was a thin line, parentheses joined the corners of his mouth with his nostrils. The muscles along his jaw were bunched like grapes. “It could be about your funeral if you don’t come up with the right answers, singer.”

Marta started to retort, but was stopped by the look on his face. She looked to Liddell for guidance and drew a helpless shrug of his shoulders, a shake of his head. She looked back into Morgan’s face. “Answers to what?”

Morgan pulled the cigar from between his teeth, bounced it in the waste basket. “You lied to the police about last night. Why?”

The blonde hesitated momentarily.

“Don’t play games with me, Shane,” Morgan advised. “You hear about guys who are a little finicky about working a broad over.” He hit his chest with the side of his hand. “Me, it doesn’t bother me a bit.” He waved the gun carelessly in Liddell’s direction. “And don’t count on the shamus. I’ve heard how tough he is, but I never met anybody tough enough a .38 slug couldn’t soften him up.” His voice grew ominously low. “You told the cops that Degna took you home last night. That was a lie. Liddell took you home.”

“That what you wanted me to tell the cops?”

“It was true, wasn’t it?”

The blonde bobbed her head. “Sure. It was true. It was also true that Degna got there before us and was waiting for us. He tried to part Liddell’s hair with a sap. Is that what you wanted me to tell the police?”

Morgan squinted at her, then turned to Liddell for verification. “That right?”

Liddell bobbed his head. “That’s right.”

The night-club man frowned. “But Degna’s the one on the slab.”

“You’ve been around a long time, Morgan. You should know better than to send in your second string. You want to take me out of play, send in your first team. Degna was playing out of his league.”

Morgan leaned his hips against the edge of the desk. “When I get ready to take you out, shamus, it won’t be with any second team. If Degna was there last night to take you, it was his own idea. A guy like you gives a lot of people ideas.”

Liddell nodded. “He wasn’t the first and he won’t be the last. But before you get ideas, take a look at the record. There aren’t too many of them that stayed around long enough to see how it turned out.”

The night-club man frowned at him. “You trying to tell me you killed Degna?”

“Now why would I try to tell you something like that? Degna was killed by a truck. Ask the police. Ask the truck driver. Maybe that truck saved me the trouble. But I would have left him around a little longer. Long enough to ask him a couple of questions.”

“Degna wouldn’t have given you the right time if he owned a watch factory,” Morgan snarled.

Liddell grinned. “You’d be surprised how persuasive I can get. He would have told me what I wanted to know. Or I would have left him as toothless as the day he was born.” He eyed the night-club man speculatively. “I might even get around to asking you that question.”

“Why don’t you try?”

“Who killed Debbie Rains?”

Morgan frowned. “You got to be some kind of a nut. How would I know? How would Degna know? Neither of us was out of the club that night.”

“Alibis have been bought before now.” Liddell continued to stare at the night-club man. “Rains was killed because she was cutting herself in on a shake racket. Reeves was killed because nobody could be sure whether Debbie had reached him or not. She called him a couple of times. You knew that?”

Morgan’s face was dark, glowering. He held the .38 a little higher, its muzzle staring unblinkingly at Liddell. “Go on.”

“So the killer tied up that loose end. That leaves only one loose end around. Me. And nobody except me knows what Reeves knew. So I’m supposed to join Debbie and Reeves. Isn’t that why Degna was waiting in the hallway, Morgan?”

The blonde stared from Liddell to Morgan and back. “That’s right. Morgan did know you were going to take me home. He could have sent Degna to—”

Morgan's hand shot out. The sound when it connected with the girl's face sounded like a shot. It knocked her head sideways. He backhanded it into position.

Liddell moved fast. He came up out of his chair and grabbed the nightclub man by the front of his shirt. He shoved Morgan backward across the room. Morgan's legs tangled with a low table. He spilled to the floor in its wreckage.

"I don't like guys who work out on girls, Morgan," Liddell told him in a flat voice. "You ought to remember that from the old days."

Morgan's face was white as he struggled to disentangle himself from the shattered table. He spewed a stream of profanity at Liddell, raised the .38, his finger white on the trigger.

"You ought to remember something from the old days, too, shamus. Nobody pushes Morgan around."

"Morgan, wait a minute—" Marta pleaded.

Liddell turned to her. "Don't worry about it, Marta. Morgan's not about to shoot. He only shoots when he can walk away from it. He pulls that trigger in here and brings the heat down on this joint and he'll be deader than any of us. And he knows it."

The hand holding the gun shook, but the pressure on the trigger was released. "Maybe you're right, shamus. You're not worth the grief it would cause. But you're still not walking away from it." He turned, raised his voice. "Mitch!" he bellowed.

The door popped open so promptly the bald-headed man could have been leaning against it awaiting the summons. He charged into the room, his eyes hopscotching around. The eyes came to rest on Morgan who was laboriously pulling himself to his feet.

"You keep telling me how good you are, Mitch," he told the bodyguard. "Now you got a chance to prove it. I want you to take the shamus and take him good. There's a real nice bonus in it for you if he gets carried out."

Mitch twisted his battered features into a grin. "It'll be a pleasure, boss." He closed the door behind him, reached up, took out his upper plate and dropped it into his pocket. "Come on, shamus, let's dance. They're playing our music." He hunched his shoulders so that his head was almost lost between them, and started shuffling toward Liddell.

"Take him good," Morgan urged.

Liddell watched the big man closing the space between them. Mitch was licking his lips with anticipation; his beady eyes were sizing Liddell up.

Johnny braced his legs, waited for the bodyguard to make the first move.

Suddenly, Mitch sailed in with a speed surprising in a man his size. He shot out a tentative right at Liddell's head. Marta, fingering the red stain on the side of her face, screamed a warning, but Liddell had swayed out of the path of the blow, brought his own left up in an uppercut to the bald-headed man's midsection. Mitch roared like a stung bear and bored in.

He caught Liddell on the side of the head with a ham-sized fist that started the bells ringing and lights flashing in Liddell's head. Johnny tried to backpedal, but the big paw connected again, slamming Liddell back against the desk. Another right caught Johnny on the side of the jaw. He saw the floor sloping upward. Then it hit him in the face.

"Nice work, Mitch," Morgan exulted. "Stamp him!"

The bodyguard walked over to Liddell and turned him over on his back with the toe of his shoe. Liddell lay there, staring up at him, trying to get his eyes into focus.

Mitch raised his foot, the reinforced heel aimed at Johnny's face. Before he could kick out, the blonde was on his back, her nails going for his face. The bodyguard shook her off, caught her by the wrists, momentarily had two hands full of raging, struggling female. She was fighting wildly with feet, teeth and nails. Mitch lifted her bodily, sent her sprawling across the floor. She lay there, legs askew, dress twisted high over her thighs. The bald-headed man gazed appreciatively at the expanse of bared flesh.

It didn't take much more than a minute, but the minute was all Liddell needed. He forced air into his lungs, shook his head to dispel the fog. As the bodyguard reluctantly brought his attention back to Johnny, the private detective's head cleared.

Mitch brought his foot up, aimed the heel at Liddell's head and kicked. Johnny rolled out of its path, caught the foot and twisted with all his strength. Mitch hit the floor with a thud that rattled the furniture in the room.

Liddell struggled to his feet, watched warily while the snarling, cursing bald-headed man pulled himself up. He waited for Mitch to renew the assault.

The bald-headed man, infuriated, threw caution to the winds. He charged. Liddell managed to side-step. He planted his right up to the elbow

in Mitch's midsection. There was a gasp as the breath left the big man's body. Mitch's face purpled. As he jackknifed forward, Liddell brought his knee up into the man's face. There was a crunching sound as the smashed nose was rebroken. Liddell chopped at the exposed neck of the big man with a vicious rabbit punch. Mitch hit the floor face first. He didn't move.

Liddell looked from the fallen man to Morgan. The night-club operator was staring dourly at his unconscious bodyguard. He tossed the gun on the desk while Liddell walked over and helped the singer to her feet.

She eyed him with open admiration. "I never saw anything like it, Liddell. You took him apart."

"I had you on my side. If you hadn't given me a breather by trying to carve your initials on his kisser, he might have done a pretty good job of changing my face around."

"I'm glad. I kind of like your face the way it's put together now," Marta told him. She brushed the wrinkles from her skirt, felt to make sure the scarf was still in place on her head. Then she touched the tips of her fingers to the side of her cheek. "If Mr. Morgan is finished with us, would you like to take me home?"

Liddell nodded. "Morgan is finished with us. I'm not so sure I'm finished with Morgan."

"Don't push your luck, Liddell. There are other people involved in this operation who aren't as finicky as I am about cutting off the nose of people who stick it where it doesn't belong. You try to connect this operation with what happened to the Rains kid and you might just have a couple of visitors." He wasted an unsympathetic glance at the man on the floor. "One of these days you might run up against a guy who doesn't have muscles between his ears and the score-card could read different." He raised his eyes to Liddell. "Nobody's luck runs forever. You know?"

He made no move to interfere when Liddell took the blonde by the arm and led her to the door. Johnny opened the door, turned back to the man leaning against the desk.

"I'll be seeing you, Morgan."

"I'll be seeing you," the night-club man growled. "Whether you see me or not depends on how much longer that luck of yours is going to hold."

Liddell followed the blonde across the darkened club, through the vestibule housing the coatcheck room, out to the street. Rocky Norton was

standing against the building. He did a halfhearted job of hiding his surprise at seeing Marta and Liddell walking out.

Marta eyed him with no show of enthusiasm. “Would you get us a cab, Rocky?” she asked.

“I have the boss’ car across the street, Miss Shane. I could—”

“I’d rather have a cab,” Marta snapped at him.

The doorman scowled, stepped to the curb, flagged down a taxi. He held the door open while Marta climbed into the back seat. “Where to, Miss Shane?” He ignored Liddell.

“426 West 54th Street,” the blonde told him.

The doorman hesitated for a moment, then relayed the information to the driver. Liddell pushed a coin into the doorman’s hand, shouldered past him to join Marta in the back seat. The cabby roared away from the curb leaving Rocky standing with his mouth half open.

The doorman watched the cab until its stop light flicked as it slowed down to slew around the nearest corner. He opened his tightly clenched fist, glared at the quarter. Then he threw it as far as he could in the direction of the cab. He stood at the curb cursing venomously, then turned and ran down the short flight of steps into the club.

# fifteen.

Johnny Liddell stood at the portable bar in Marta Shane's apartment, mixing himself a drink. He carried it back to the couch, sank down with a sigh. "Okay if I call my office?" he called in to the blonde.

"Be my guest," she answered from the bedroom. "I'll only be another minute."

He set his glass down, dialed the number of his office. "Johnny Liddell's office," Pinky's perky voice came through.

"Hi, Pinky. What's new?"

A sniff was clearly audible across the wire. "Is that a conversation opener or do you really care?"

Liddell grinned at the phone. "What's the matter, Pink? Miss me?"

"No, I don't miss you, but the inspector does. And you better hope he keeps right on missing you. He sounds downright annoyed."

"Has he called again?"

"Again?" the redhead groaned. "He's been calling every ten minutes. I get the feeling he doesn't believe me." The bantering tone sobered slightly. "Look, Johnny, I think you ought to call him. He really sounds mad."

"But I've got nothing to tell him, Pink. I need more time."

"You keep playing games with him and you'll have plenty of time. At the city's expense." She paused for a moment. "He knows that Andrew Reeves was a personal client and that he's connected with the Debbie Rains case in some way."

Liddell groaned. "How do you know?"

"The check Reeves gave you. It was a personal check."

Liddell nodded. "What else?"

"He wants to know where you were this morning at the time Degna was killed. Seems there was some mysterious witness they haven't been able to locate. I gather he thinks it was you."



“What’d you tell him?”

“What would any good red-blooded girl do under the circumstances? I told him you spent the night with me.” She paused maliciously. “At least until about four.”

“Did he believe it?”

“No. Where are you now?”

Liddell hesitated. “No place you can reach me. I’ll get back to you when I leave.” He looked up as the blonde walked out of the bedroom. She had combed her hair out, let it fall down over her shoulders, caught it above the ears with a blue ribbon. She had changed her dress for a blue dressing gown. “I’ll get back to you, Pink.”

“Hey, wait a minute—”

Pinky’s objection was cut off by his dropping the receiver on its hook. “Just my office,” Liddell explained. “I like to keep in touch.”

Marta made herself a drink, brought it back to the couch, sat down beside Liddell. “You think somebody sent Degna after you last night. Why should anyone want you dead?”

Liddell reached forward, picked up his glass. He was pleasantly aware of the roundness of her thigh against his, of the smell of her perfume in his nostrils. “Somebody thinks I know the connection between Debbie Rains’ murder and Andrew Reeves’ killing. That makes me dangerous, so Degna was elected to scratch me.”

“Was there a connection between Debbie and Reeves?”

Liddell took a deep swallow from his glass.

“You were with him the night he was supposed to have been involved in the hit-and-run accident, you said?”

The blonde took a swallow from her glass. “Yes.”

“Do you remember him hitting the man?”

The girl shook her head. “I draw a blank on that night. We were both bombed out of our minds.”

Liddell dug a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, lit two, passed one to the girl. “It was a set-up. Reeves never hit anybody that night. He paid the shake artist who called him because he couldn’t take a chance on a scandal.”

“But the car—”

“Was damaged. Just the way it would have been if he had hit somebody.” He took a deep drag on his cigarette, blew it at the ceiling. “Yet he told me he never let the keys to his car out of his hands. He would have noticed the damage if it had been there when he put his car into the garage, but he didn’t. How do you read that?”

The blonde nibbled her full lip. “Somebody must have had access to the keys.”

Liddell nodded. “Very good. Who?”

Marta frowned, then her forehead cleared. “That’s what the connection was. Debbie got hold of his keys and had copies made.”

Liddell considered, nodded. “Go on.”

“After all, when a man checks his topcoat, most often he leaves his keys in it. Right?”

Liddell nodded his head. “It sounds good. What then?”

The blonde plucked at her lower lip thoughtfully. “She makes an impression of the keys in some way—”

“Wax?”

Marta bobbed her head. “That’s it. With wax. Then she gives the keys to someone—a man—”

“Why a man? Why not do it herself?” Liddell cocked his head, listened. He put his fingers to his lips, got up from the couch, tiptoed to the door. He signaled for her to keep talking.

“She’d have a man to help her. Reeves would recognize her voice and —”

Marta was still talking as Liddell reached for the doorknob, pulled the door open and faced the man standing in the hallway. Rocky Norton stood there frozen into inaction by the suddenness of Liddell’s move.

Johnny grabbed a handful of the doorman’s shirt, swung him into the room, and sent him sprawling into the middle of the floor. “Come on in. We’re serving tea.”

Marta stared at the man on the floor with wide eyes. “Rocky, what are you doing here?”

“Checking up on his partner,” Liddell said. “What else?”

The blonde swung back on Liddell. “Partner? Are you crazy? He’s the doorman at the club.”

Liddell nodded. “Yeah. Just like you were saying, there are a few people who have access to a man’s car keys that he doesn’t realize. The hatchback girl, the man who parks his car—”

The man on the floor started to get up. Liddell put the sole of his foot against his shoulder and sent him sprawling. “Debbie wasn’t the girl in the case. You were, baby. Your job was to get Reeves so plastered he wouldn’t know whether he had an accident or not. Then, while you kept him occupied, the punk here uses the duplicate keys, takes the car out, bangs it up and puts it back.”

The color drained from the blonde’s face, leaving the tan a murky yellow. She shook her head. Her lips moved but no sound came out.

“Debbie got wind of what was going on and wanted in. When you brushed her off, she tried to reach Reeves to tell him you were behind the shake.” He grinned at the slack look on the girl’s face. “You weren’t worried about Reeves. You figured you could handle him. But when she threatened to spill what she knew to me—”

The blonde shook her head. “You’re crazy, Johnny. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I’m saying you killed Debbie Rains. To shut her up.”

“I didn’t kill her. I swear I—”

“Morgan let her go early that night and you left early. Your partner here hung around the club with Degna. They were still there when I got there, playing cards. Neither of them had left. So that left you, baby, sitting dead center with egg on your face.” He indicated the draped walls. “I knew there was something bugging me right from the beginning. The walls in this trap are as thin as paper. Yet you didn’t hear a shot. That could be—with the way you’ve got these walls draped. But those drapes keep sound in as well as keeping sound out. That’s why nobody else heard the shot either.”

The blonde stared at him with stricken eyes. She reached under the pillow on the couch, came up with a .22. “As long as you’ve gone this far, go ahead.” She swung the gun to cover the man on the floor when he started to get up. “You stay where you are, Rocky.”

The doorman started to argue, then sank back.

“Go on, detective, tell me how it was.”

Liddell shrugged. “Now that I have all the pieces, it’s easy. Debbie was waiting for you when you got home. She had already undressed. She came in here for a showdown. When you told her it was no deal, she called my office, wanted to prove to you she held all the trumps. And you beat her with bullets back to back.”

“You’ll never prove it.”

“There were plenty of mistakes, baby. The day I met you, I told you I was going to the Amalgamated office. You guessed it was to see Reeves, so he had to go.” He looked down at Rocky. “Score one for your boy friend.”

The blonde searched his face. “Suppose it was Rocky all the time, Liddell? Suppose he killed Debbie and then killed Reeves to make sure he didn’t talk?”

“That’s a lie,” the doorman roared. “If you think I’m taking the fall—”

“Suppose he didn’t get to deny anything? You broke in here just as he was trying to kill me. Like he did Debbie—with the same gun. There’s plenty of money, Liddell. Plenty for both of us. We could wait a while—and then go away together.” She watched the play of emotions on Liddell’s face; some of the tenseness drained out of her. “It couldn’t bring Debbie back to turn me in. You’d be a big man, Johnny, a real big man. Then, later—”

“You’d swear he tried to kill you and that I got here just in time?”

The blonde bobbed her head eagerly. “I’d swear it.”

There was an anguished stream of obscenity from the floor. Rocky tried to get to his feet and was bowled over again by Liddell. He eyed the muzzle of the .22 staring at him, and subsided.

“If he was found with the gun that killed her—” Liddell mused. He indicated the .22. “Are you sure that’s the gun?” He held his hand out.

The blonde hesitated, started to resist as he started to take it from her hand, then gave it to him. Liddell flipped open the cylinder, found one shell fired.

“Maybe I’ll go to the chair,” Rocky screamed at her. “But you’ll be sitting in my lap.”

Marta walked over to him, lashed out with her toe, caught him on the side of the head. He lay there, glaring up at her.

“I told you what would happen if you ever tried to cross me, Marta. I came over here to cut your throat, but maybe it’ll be better spilling everything, giving you plenty of time to think about it while you’re waiting to fry.”

The blonde turned back to Liddell. “You see, he gives us no choice. We’ve got to kill him or he’ll spoil everything.”

Liddell shook his head. “I’ve never killed a man in cold blood in my life, Marta. You’ll have to do it.” He held the gun out to her, butt first.

She took the gun. “Why not? He stands in my way and he’s weak.” Her finger tightened on the trigger. “You said I made a lot of mistakes and you were right. I almost made another one.” She swung the gun until its muzzle pointed at Liddell’s midsection. “I almost made the biggest mistake of all, cutting you in. What do I need you for?”

“You’d burn,” Liddell told her. “How could you explain two dead men in your apartment?”

The blonde grinned at him. “I just rewrote the script. Rocky came here to kill me like he killed Debbie.” She waggled the gun. “With the same gun. You were here with me. Morgan can testify that you came back with me. You and Rocky were fighting and I ran into the hall for help. He managed to kill you, then, realizing he was trapped, he committed suicide. The gun’s in his hand and the bullets in both of you match the one in Debbie.”

Liddell nodded. “Pretty good,” he said.

“Of course, I’ll be around to tell how bravely you went out, fighting to save my life.” Her finger whitened on the trigger. “So long, Liddell. Thanks for everything. Especially for giving me this out.” She clenched her teeth, started squeezing the trigger.

The .22 clicked metallically.

“It shoots better with bullets in it,” Liddell said. He opened his clenched hand to reveal the shells he had removed while she was arguing with Rocky.

The blonde looked tragically at the empty gun. She made no attempt at resistance when Liddell walked over and took it from her hand. He dropped the gun into one pocket, the shells into another.

The man on the floor was on his elbows, laughing uproariously.

The blonde wet her soft lips with her tongue, threw her arms around Liddell’s neck. “I must have been crazy, Johnny. Crazy with fear. I wouldn’t

want to hurt you. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you.”

Liddell held her at arm's length, studying the almost flawless beauty of her features, the clear blue of the slanted eyes, the open seduction of the parted lips.

“I'll go anywhere with you, do anything for you,” she babbled. “We'll have all that money and—”

Liddell looked into the depths of the guileless eyes, smelled her closeness, felt the softness of her body close to him. In his mind's eye he counted up the murders for which she was responsible, of others that he might not know about.

He raised his hand, hit her across the face with the flat of his hand, knocked her sprawling across the couch. She lay there quietly, a trickle of blood running from the corner of her mouth.

On the floor, Rocky was still laughing when Johnny Liddell reached Homicide and asked to be connected with Sergeant Ryan.

## 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.

[The end of *Ring-a-Ding-Ding* by Frank Kane]