

Frank  
Kane

A NEW  
JOHNNY  
LIDDELL  
MYSTERY

Dead  
Rite

"Handle my case,"  
she told Liddell.  
"I'll make it  
worth your while."

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# **“I’LL KILL YOU FOR THIS.”**

The beaten bodyguard put his hand to the ugly welt left by the butt of Johnny Liddell’s .45.

“Don’t move out of your class, Killer,” Liddell said. “You do real good killing women. Stick to that.” He stopped halfway to the door. “In case your boss wants to report this to the police, he knows where to reach me.”

“You got us wrong, Detective. We bury our own dead—and we make our own.”

A DELL FIRST EDITION / an original novel

**FRANK KANE**

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**DEAD  
RITE**

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and events in the story are fictional, and  
any resemblance to real persons is purely  
coincidental.

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# 1.

Barney Evans had the penthouse in the Carter Arms, one of Hollywood's most desirable apartment houses. The lobby was furnished in modernistic style, with brightly colored couches and chrome chairs complementing the soft, restful pastel carpeting.

Two men entered the lobby, crossed to the bank of elevators. The cage swiftly whisked them to the penthouse, the door slid quietly open. One of the men knocked at the penthouse door.

A small panel slid open, a pair of icy blue eyes checked the two men. There was a grunt of annoyance inside the door.

After a brief interval, the door opened. Evans stood there, wrapped in a terry cloth dressing robe. "What is it, Rocky?"

"Got a message for you. From the big boss. Mario flew in from New York this morning."

Everything about Barney Evans suggested icy calm—sparkling blue eyes, the striking contrast between jet-black eyebrows and snow-white hair, thin lips and almost too perfectly capped teeth. A frown of annoyance ridged his forehead as he stepped aside to let the two men in. He glanced at his watch. "You realize what time it is? Couldn't this message wait until morning?"

Mario shook his head. "Couldn't wait even an hour." He glanced around approvingly. "Nice place you got here."

The white-haired man slammed the door. "You come to write it up for *House Beautiful*? Or you got a message?"

"Anybody here?"

Evans frowned. "The boss checking up on my morals or something? What is this?"

"Confidential," Mario assured him. He nodded to the other man to check the two doors leading into the room. Evans stood, balled fists dug deep into the pockets of his robe, watched while the man checked out the two rooms.

"Okay. So now you're satisfied. Suppose you give me the message and let me get back to bed," Evans growled.

“The big boss is tearing up his contract with the singer. Denton’s on his own from now on. Everybody’s out. You included.”

The frown on Evans’ forehead deepened. “That’s crazy. I don’t dig the creep either. But he’s going like a house on fire. Those last couple of movies of his made a pot full. This one he just wrapped up is even bigger.” He walked over to his desk, pawed through some papers, came up with a blue folder. “He can write his own ticket on a new contract with Mammoth. And his records—” He looked from Mario to the other man and back. “The boss sent you all the way out here to tell me I’m fired?” He stared thoughtfully at Mario. “How come he didn’t phone?”

Mario shrugged. “He didn’t confide.” He looked around, spotted a hi-fi against the wall. “You got any of the singer’s new biscuits?”

“Yeah.”

“So let’s hear.” Mario walked over to the set, admired it. “You know, I got a broad, she’s queer for the singer. Me, I could never see him.”

Rocky Castri nodded. “They’re all alike. They hear him, he’s got them eating out of his hand. Then they get to meet him. Then strictly no. Right, Barney?”

“To know him is to despise him.” Evans flipped through some records, put two on the turntable. “Here’s a couple of his latest.”

The opening intro was a blockbuster. It poured into the room, then died away gently as Mickey Denton’s voice came in on top of it, perfect, sure.

Mario listened critically, shook his head with reluctant approval. “Kid’s sure come a long way, I got to admit. I was with the boss the first night he hears him. In some gin mill out on Long Island.” He continued to shake his head. “I had him figured strictly a nothing. How wrong can a guy be?”

“With Agnelli behind him, how could he miss?”

“The kid’s solid now. He doesn’t need Agnelli, he doesn’t need me, he doesn’t need anybody. Everything he touches turns to money.” Evans gestured to the pile of papers on the desk. “I got a dozen top spots I can fit him into. His albums are breaking all records and they’re screaming for more. He’s a louse and nobody likes him except the people who buy records.” He shrugged. “If you’ve got that, you got everything.” He turned back to Mario. “That’s why I don’t understand what this message is all about.”

Mario grinned, shrugged. “It’s just like you said. The boss wanted you to know you’re fired.” He reached down, turned up the volume on the hi-fi. “He didn’t want there should be any misunderstanding about it. So he sent me out to take care of it.” He nodded to the other man.

Before Evans could move, Rocky caught his arms, pulled them behind him. The white-haired man opened his mouth to yell, Mario slashed him across the Adam’s apple with the side of his hand, the yell came out as a strangled gasp. Evans’ eyes popped, his tongue rolled out of his mouth.

Mickey Denton’s voice roared from the hi-fi, reached for a high note to get off.

As Evans struggled weakly in Rocky’s grip, Mario brought his knee up into the white-haired man’s groin. Evans went limp, the man holding him dumped him into a chair.

Evans’ head rolled uncontrollably from side to side. His carefully combed white hair hung dankly over his forehead, the icy blue eyes were watery, his lips purple.

Mario walked out onto the small patio that rimmed the penthouse. The Carter Arms was set on a high spot, the penthouse screened from any possible witnesses.

“Bring him out.”

Rocky walked back into the living room, loaded the semiconscious Evans on his shoulders, staggered out onto the patio. Evans’ lips were still moving, trying to form words. A stream of saliva glistened brightly on his chin.

“You take his head. I’ll take his feet. When I say go, we swing him over.”

The other man licked at his lips, nodded. When Mario got a firm grip on Evans’ weakly thrashing legs, his companion caught the white-haired man under the neck. At a signal from Mario they lifted and swung him outward over the hedge.

Neither looked over the side. Mario led the way back into the living room, walked over to the hi-fi, turned it down.

“Nice music,” he commented. “Real nice music.”

The other man nodded. “Music to die by.”



In Chicago, Harry Jacobs stood at the window of his suite of offices in the Lincoln Building, cursed the typical Chicago day with its dampness, its cold, its winds. Overhead the gray skies writhed and twisted like something alive, something in ferment.

Jacobs was short, heavy set, affected tweeds. A thin gray wisp of a mustache matched the color of his hair. He had the bulk of a one-time athlete whose muscles had been allowed to run to fat. His jaw was still heavy, making a last ditch effort to keep from being engulfed by his jowls. His high color testified to a diet of bourbon and beef supplemented by frequent massage, but it was a losing battle. Already a fine network of broken veins was visible on either side of his nose.

He stood, chewing on the cigarette holder, worrying about the turn events had taken. The news of Barney Evans' supposed suicide had preceded by less than a day the telegram from Agnelli.

He walked back to his desk, picked up the telegraph form, frowned at it. On the face of it, it meant nothing. Signed by a highly respectable firm of lawyers, it called for a meeting of Mercantile Exports, Inc. Normally such a notice heralded a new venture for the organization headed by Tony Agnelli. But coming this close on the heels of Evans' death, it could only mean one thing—the ransom money had showed up in the last shipment.

Jacobs took the cigarette holder from between his lips, removed the butt, replaced it with a fresh cigarette. He tilted the holder in the corner of his mouth, lit it.

He wondered if Agnelli knew anything. It didn't seem possible. Only he and Benny Welton knew who had bought that money. And with the kidnaping rap hanging over his head, it didn't seem likely that Welton would talk.

Jacobs chewed on the holder stem, cursed the day he had ever heard of the Cheyney ransom money. It had seemed so simple—30c on the dollar and a fast \$350,000 profit. Now everything had gone to hell!

He leaned against the desk, looked out at the lowering skies. On the streets below, the slush was ankle-deep in the gutters and the wind coming off the lake cut through a person like a knife.

He thought longingly of the cottony blue skies in Nevada, of the soft breeze that dried perspiration on a man's body. At this time of evening, the mountains in the distance were blue-black, the desert a purplish haze.

He reached back, pressed a button on the base of his phone. He lifted the receiver to his ear.

“Yes, Mr. Jay?” the upholstered blonde in the outer office wanted to know.

“Give me an outside line, Bunny.”

There was a click, then a buzz signal. He brought a small leather memo book from his breast pocket, flipped through it. He located the number he wanted, dialed.

“Yeah?” a voice on the other end said.

“Mendel around?”

“I’ll see.” He could hear the receiver bang against the wall. In the background were muted voices, the occasional click of a pool ball. Then a new voice came on.

“This is Mendel. Who’s this?”

“Mr. Jay.”

A respectful note crept into the voice on the other end. “Yeah, Mr. Jay? Something I can do?”

“I want you to take a little trip, Mendel. To California.” His eyes strayed to the premature darkness outside. “I should be so lucky.”

“Sure, Mr. Jay. I can leave any time you say.”

“Tonight. I want you to register in the Hotel Criterion downtown under the name of Albert Meyers.”

“I got it.”

“I want you to locate Benny Welton for me. He operates from some place around L.A. As soon as you locate him, I want you to get in touch with me. He shouldn’t know you’re looking for him. You understand that.”

“Sure, Mr. Jay. Leave it to me.”

Jacobs said unhappily, “I got no choice. Look, Mendel, the sooner the better. There could be a bonus in it for you if it’s extra quick. I’ll send some expense money out there. But I expect action.”

“Action you’ll get, Mr. Jay,” the receiver chattered.

“So let me know the minute you find him.” Jacobs dropped the receiver back on its hook, broke the connection.

In Las Vegas, Mitch Corday held the telegram between thumb and forefinger, squinted at it. He flipped it to the top of his desk, looked up at the man standing across from him.

“I thought you were the singer’s bodyguard, Castri,” he grunted. “I don’t remember asking Agnelli for any assistant. I been running this casino for ten years without any help.” Corday had come to Las Vegas in the early days from Detroit where he had been known as Mike Cordana. His new name was a tribute to the elegance of his new surroundings.

He was darkly tanned, wore suits that showed a good understanding with his tailor. His hair was touched with gray, was worn in a closely clipped brush cut.

Rocky Castri shrugged his shoulders. “I only do what I’m told, Mr. Corday.” Rocky Castri was a product of East New York’s Brownsville who had attached himself to Mickey Denton’s retinue. He was thick-set, with swarthy skin drawn tight over his high cheekbones. His eyes were heavy-lidded, expressionless. “I got sick of taking the singer’s crap, so when Mr. Agnelli gave me a chance to come out here, I jumped.”

Corday considered it, nodded. “Okay. Check in with the floor boss. He’ll find something for you to do.” He indicated the telegram. “I’ll be seeing Agnelli in a day or so. I’ll find out what he has in mind.”

He watched the short man swagger out of the office. There was a subtle change in Castri’s attitude that bothered the casino boss. The last time he saw him with Denton, Castri had been subservient, anxious to please. All of that was gone and an obnoxious self-assurance had taken its place.

Corday swung around on his desk chair, stared thoughtfully out across the desert haze. Barney Evans’ death had come as a shock to him. Even more shocking was the follow-up news that Evans had been hit because \$500,000 worth of hot ransom money had shown up in a payment Evans had made for the organization on a Seattle hotel.

He had never approved of the idea of using the singer as a front to buy into real estate and hotels and other legit enterprises. But the boys he represented had boodle money they couldn’t show legitimately and it was a good way to unload.

His eyes narrowed as he considered the possibilities. Money sent to Barney Evans came from four sources and he was one of them. He turned, stared thoughtfully at the door.

Was that the reason Rocky Castri had been sent to Vegas? Did they think the ransom money was included in his shipment?

He pulled a key ring from his pocket, walked over to the wall, moved a picture and unlocked the safe behind it. He fumbled inside the safe, brought out a list, checked each name off with his thumbnail. There wasn't one name listed that would have anything to do with hot money—especially money with blood on it. They all had more boodle money to unload than they could handle.

He put the list back in the safe, relocked it and straightened the picture. Someone was going to get burned for what had happened. But it didn't come from one of his boys.

In Miami Beach, the Runleigh is a huge pile of concrete and plate glass set off from Collins Avenue by a park studded with walks and small ponds. Small porches are pasted to the sides of the building, each with an unobstructed view of the ocean, each protected against an invasion of privacy by fan-shaped opaque glass screens.

A card table had been set on the porch leading off the living room of the corner suite on the 28th floor. Two heavy-set men, stripped to the waist, were playing gin. They looked up with a frown of annoyance as Larry Gatti walked through the living room, paused at the entrance to the porch.

The older of the two card players, perspiration gleaming through the gray matting on his chest and dripping from his heavy jowls, turned to the newcomer.

“Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Longino,” Gatti murmured. He looked cool despite the fact that he was wearing a maroon sport jacket over his black knit shirt. The crease in his black slacks was sharp, there was no sign of perspiration on his swarthy face. His hair had receded from his brow, leaving a large area of his bald pate to be sunburned.

Longino bobbed his head. “It's got to be important, that I know,” he growled. He nodded to his opponent. “You know Felix Gorgio from Tampa, no?” He turned to his partner. “Larry Gatti. He handles things for the organization.”

Gorgio nodded, made no effort to shake hands. He chewed on the soggy end of an unlit cigar, waited.

Gatti questioned the older man with his eyes, drew a nod. He dug into his pocket, brought up the yellow telegraph form, handed it over. Longino read it without comment, passed it across the card table.

“A meet,” Longino grunted.

Gorgio handed the telegram back to Larry Gatti. “I don’t need conversation. I need someone to tell me when I get my money back. Over a hundred big ones I got tied up in that shipment and the Feds grabbed it. Okay, so the Feds grabbed it. That don’t change I want my share back.” He pulled the cigar from between his teeth, jabbed it at Gatti. “That’s what you tell them when you make that meet.”

“Anything you want me to tell Agnelli for you, Mr. Longino?”

Longino had already turned back to his cards, his heavy chin sunk on the matting of his chest. “Yeah. You tell him what Gorgio say. We expect our money back. We don’t know nothing about ransom money. We put up good money.” His eyes rolled up from the cards to Gatti. “We got like two or three weeks we wait. Then we call for a meet of the Brotherhood. You tell him that.”

Gatti nodded. He brought a wadded handkerchief from his back pocket, polished the shining pate. “I tell him just like you say, Mr. Longino.” When the men at the table resumed their playing and appeared to have forgotten he was there, Gatti turned and left the porch.

## 2.

The day of the meeting, Tony Agnelli sat at the head of the table in the private dining room of Mercantile Exports, Inc., on the 39th floor of the Empire State Building. He loosened the napkin he had tied around his neck, swabbed at his pouting lips. He was fat, soft looking. The discolored sacs under his eyes, however, failed to dull the menace of the shiny black marbles. He gave off a strong odor compounded of equal parts of perspiration and toilet water.

He pushed his chair back, waited while the three waiters quickly and efficiently removed the soiled dishes. He waved them out.

“I call you if I need you.” He waited until the waiters had bowed themselves out, turned to Mario, his bodyguard. “We don’t want to be disturbed. By nobody.”

The thin man nodded, followed the waiters out of the room. He closed the door behind him, took up his position on the outside.

Agnelli turned his attention to the men around the table. “All right. We get down to business.” His voice was throaty, blubbery. “You all know why we call the meeting of the Board of Directors?” His beady eyes jumped from face to face of the men around the table.

Larry Gatti rolled his napkin into a ball, tossed it on the table. “We know.” He eyed Harry Jacobs across the table. “Not that I got anything personal against him, but how come Harry Jacobs sits in on a meet? He ain’t one of us.”

“Neither was Zwillman or Lepke, but we work real good with them,” Agnelli growled. “Besides this is no Brotherhood meet. This is a meet of the Board of Directors of Mercantile Exports.”

Harry Jacobs squirmed uncomfortably on his chair. “I’m not here speaking for myself. I got people with money on the line just like you, Larry. I got to protect them.” Once muscle had been his stock in trade. With pseudo-respectability had come uneasiness about delivering an ultimatum. “If the Brotherhood does have to settle this, my people will speak for themselves.”

“My people, too,” Gatti agreed. His eyes made a circle of the table. “If the Brotherhood call a meet, someone get lupara sickness.”

Agnelli sat puffing his fat lips in and out, bobbed his head, disturbing the rolls of fat under his jowls. “That’s why we have this meet. So we settle things among ourselves without the lupara.”

In the Brotherhood, there is no margin for error. When any project sponsored by a member fails, no matter how high his rank, he is answerable to a council of the Brotherhood. If he fails to make good to the last penny, he is likely to succumb to the “lupara sickness.”

Today, the “lupara sickness” is a figure of speech. In the old days, in Sicily, when the sentence of death was handed down, the executioners used shotguns loaded with hand-made, triangular pellets honed to razor sharpness. The pellets, called lupara, were fired at close range and sliced the victim’s face and throat to ribbons. Today, a .45 slug serves the same purpose. The head and throat are still the target so that, in the unlikely event the victim lingers with the lupara sickness, he is in no condition to identify his assailants or provide the authorities with any information.

Agnelli laced his sausage-shaped fingers across his middle, regarded the dimples that were his knuckles. “The last shipment we make to Barney Evans for the Seattle property is four million. One million from Las Vegas, one from Chicago, one from Miami and one from here.” He rolled his eyes up, stared around the table from under heavily veined eyelids. “A half a million turns up to be the Cheyney snatch ransom. The Feds have grabbed the whole four million.” He dropped his eyes to his hands again. “We got to find out who rang in the hot money. Then we know who catches lupara sickness.”

“In the meantime, what about Mr. Longino’s money? And Mr. Gorgio’s money?” Gatti wanted to know. “They figure the hot money is your headache. You take all the time you want to find out who switched in the loot. They want their money back in maybe two or three weeks. Or they ask for a meet.”

Agnelli gave no signs of having heard the ultimatum. He sat staring at his laced fingers, blowing tiny bubbles between his lips.

After a moment Mitch Corday cleared his throat. “My boys feel the same way, Tony.”

Agnelli appeared to have roused himself. He looked over at Corday. “This loot. It comes from some place. Not from Longino, not from Agnelli

or your boys or the Chicago boys. From where then?" When nobody ventured an answer, he continued, "In Vegas, you can buy all kinds of hot money for pennies on the dollar. You hear this?"

"Vegas is different?" Corday shot back. He pointed to Gatti. "In Miami there's plenty of hot money on the market. From Cuba, from Mexico, from all over." He swung on Jacobs. "And how about Chicago? You think you can't make a meet with a peddler in Chicago? If not, it's got to have changed a lot since the old days. And New York, too. So why point the finger at Vegas?"

"My boys got too much stuff in vaults they can't unload without going out and buying hot stuff—" Jacobs started to argue.

"You don't listen good, Jacobs," Corday told him. "Agnelli says it ain't Longino or him or your boys or mine. That means it's got to be one of us. Ain't that right, Agnelli?"

A deep V of worry etched itself between Jacobs' brows. "Why us? Maybe it was like you first figured. Maybe Barney Evans did switch some hot money he picked up for some that we sent—"

"The case money would have shown up. We went through everything he owned. Even his vault. Nothing like a half a million." Agnelli shook his head.

"Maybe if you wait to check with some of the others before you have him hit, we find out by asking Barney Evans," the man from Florida broke in. "Nobody consults us. First we hear is when the papers break the story."

"There was no time to consult," Agnelli said. "The Feds are leaning on the singer and he's leaning on us. He writes out the whole thing in a letter—where the money comes from, everything. If we bug him or the Feds lean too hard, he gives them the whole picture. We had to hit Evans to take the heat off Denton. You rather we waited and Treasury nails all of us?"

Gatti withdrew in sulky silence.

"The singer was your idea, Tony," Corday reminded the fat man. "It was your idea to build him for a front. You didn't ask us in, you told us we were in. You were there that night, Harry?"

The man from Chicago nodded.

"Building up the singer was Agnelli's idea," the fat man conceded. The heavily veined eyelids almost blotted out the discs of his eyes. "Nobody



complains about that. All of us did good. But switching the money wasn't Agnelli's idea. It was somebody else's—somebody in this room."

The other three men exchanged worried glances.

Some of Mitch Corday's color had faded. "That why you sent the heavy, Rocky Castri, out to work with me? You that sure it came from my shipment?"

The fat man shrugged. "Nobody's pointing a finger, you know? We're all in on this. That hot money comes from some place. We find out."

Gatti licked at his lips. "In the meantime, Mr. Longino and the boys want to know when they get their money back."

"When we find out where the hot money comes from," Agnelli shot at him.

Gatti tried to meet the fat man's glare, dropped his eyes first. "Like you say. Me, I'm strictly a messenger boy. Nothing personal, I do what I'm told." He raised his eyes. "Mr. Longino say you got two, maybe three weeks." He held up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "That's my instructions."

Agnelli turned to Corday. "And you, Corday?"

"Like Gatti says, Tony," the tanned man said. "My boys just want to know one thing. When do they get their money back?"

The fat man turned to Jacobs. "And you, Harry?"

The man from Chicago looked unhappy. He shrugged. "Mine, too."

Agnelli hit his chest with the side of his hand. "You go back home, all of you. You tell them that me, Agnelli, I guarantee they get their money back. But not until I find out who pull this switch."

"And how do you figure to do that, Tony?" Corday asked mildly.

The fat man stared at him for a moment, smiled dreamily. "These snatch artists, they sold the money, no? They know who they sold it to. Me, Agnelli, I figure they be real glad to tell me who they sold it to." He looked around the table. "Then maybe we have another meeting of the Board of Directors."

Mitch Corday pushed back his chair. "I'll tell them what you said. I don't think they're going to like it, Tony."

"They got to like it," the fat man growled.

The man from Florida stood up, caught Corday by the arm. “No sense fighting among ourselves. Agnelli’s got two to three weeks. Maybe he comes up with the switch artist.” He looked past Corday to the man at the head of the table. “But whether you do or not, Agnelli, we figure it like this. You came up with a deal. We back the singer into the big time, he fronts for boodle we can’t show by investing it for us.” He dropped his hand from Corday’s arm, leaned on the back of his chair. “That means you guarantee the action. Something goes wrong, you make it good.” He shrugged elaborately. “So something went wrong. They don’t want to know why or how, or who did it. They just want you to make it good.” He looked around the room. “Right?”

Corday nodded. “Right.”

Harry Jacobs bobbed his head. “That’s what they sent me here to say.”

“Okay, then we’re all agreed,” Gatti held up his hands. “There’s no sweat. We got your message, you got ours. Am I right?”

Agnelli stared at him wordlessly.

Gatti turned to Mitch Corday. “I’ll give you a lift to the airport.”

Corday hesitated for a minute, then nodded to the man at the head of the table. He turned and followed Gatti out the door.

Tony Agnelli sat huddled in his chair, seemed lost in thought.

The man from Chicago got up, walked to the window. From the 39th floor, the Empire State Building offered an unparalleled panorama of downtown Manhattan, the Narrows and the harbor. Ocean-going liners were feeling their way carefully out to sea; tugs, scows and barges puffed serenely along, thin ribbons of smoke trailing from their funnels. In the Narrows, the Old Lady of the Bay, the Statue of Liberty, stood impassively overseeing the huffing and puffing of the river traffic, waved a final farewell to the liners as they headed out into the ocean. On Governor’s Island, the colonial fort seemed unaware of its pitiful inadequacy in an age of 50-megaton bombs and guided missiles.

“I never did like this idea of getting involved with the singer,” Jacobs muttered, without turning away from the window. “It’s like I said that night. You can’t do business with them. They’re swell-headed and you get nothing back but grief.”

The fat man squirmed in his chair. “The singer didn’t switch the money. You know the operation—he never even saw it. It went straight to Barney

Evans and he turned it over into a deal—”

“You said yourself Denton wrote the whole story out for the Feds, naming names. You know what happens to you, me—all the boys? Them Feds get their hands on that letter and we all ride.”

Agnelli nodded. “The singer is a little rat. We take good care of him in time. But first, one of us that was in this room switched that money. Me, I know it wasn’t.” He eyed Jacobs thoughtfully. “That leaves you, Corday and Gatti.” He sucked his lips in and blew them out, stared dreamily at the wall. “I got to find out which one.”

Harry Jacobs felt the cold finger up his spine. Benny Welton would never stand up if Agnelli reached him. He wondered who else Welton had offered the money to, who else knew the identity of the kidnapers. He tried to chart his next move, knew before he started that there was no place to run. He had to reach Welton before Agnelli did.

It had seemed such a long way back to the violent days. Now, his life depended on the forlorn hope that his hand had never lost its skill!

“I got to find him fast,” Agnelli continued. “Because the lupara sickness don’t care who it hits—Sicilian, Jew, even a *capa mafiosa*. So I got to find out fast, before the boys get too impatient. You know?”

### 3.

San Francisco's fabulous Top of the Mark sits nineteen stories on top of the Mark Hopkins Hotel on the peak of Nob Hill. By day its glassed walls command a view of the Pacific, the Golden Gate, Treasure Island and Alcatraz, where the pelicans who had earned it the name of Isla de los Alcatraces have given way to another species of birds—the incorrigible jailbird.

At night, the lights from Alcatraz identify its rocky exterior poking its bulk up from the shimmering waters. Surrounding it in a tiara effect are the lights of all the cities that outline the shores of the bay. The Golden Gate Bridge is a spidery skeleton dotted with pinpoints of light as cars flit back and forth on its outer drive.

Johnny Liddell sat at a window table, looked down at the breath-taking panorama. He cooled the palm of his hand against his drink, wondered why he had let Muggsy Kiely talk him into making this appointment. From past, bitter experience he knew only too well to what lengths the redheaded ex-reporter would go to keep him on the Coast.

He raised his glass to his lips, heard rather than saw when his appointment arrived. There was a momentary break in the murmur of conversation in the room, then excited whispers. He looked over to the entrance near the elevator bank, saw the girl talking to a uniformed captain.

She was shorter than he had been led to expect by her appearance on the screen. Her dark hair was styled in a provocative gamin cut, her eyes were big and liquid. She was wearing a scoop neck dress that did no injustice to the fullness of her breasts and made no effort to interfere with their sway as she walked toward him.

The women in the room stared and whispered comments as she passed. The men just stared.

The waiter preceded her to the table, pulled the chair out for her. He seemed well rewarded by the smile she flashed at him for his efforts. She turned the smile on Liddell.

“I hope you haven't been waiting long. I'm Ann Connell.”

“I've seen you in pictures. I'm your number-one fan.”

The smile warmed up. “Thank you. Then asking this favor may be a little easier.” From close, she was even more striking than from across the room. The dark eyes, fringed with thick lashes, were slightly slanted, an effect that was enhanced by expert tinting. Each eyebrow formed a perfect arch in the heart shape of her face; her lips were pouting, soft looking.

Liddell waited until she was comfortably settled. “What are you drinking, Ann?”

“Ballantine on the rocks,” she told the hovering waiter. When he had scurried off to fill the order, she leaned across the table to Liddell. She seemed completely oblivious of the excitement she was creating. “When Muggsy Kiely told me you were in San Francisco, I begged her to ask you to meet me. I hope it wasn’t too much of an inconvenience.”

“I should be so inconvenienced more often.”

The waiter returned with the girl’s drink, slid it in front of her, retired. She picked it up, sipped at it. “Did Muggsy tell you what it was about?”

Liddell shook his head.

The actress put her glass on the table, stared at it for a second as if marshaling her thoughts. “You read about Barney Evans? He was the Hollywood agent killed in a fall from his penthouse last week.”

Liddell frowned. “I remember reading about him. He committed suicide over some irregularity in his accounts, or something.”

The girl dropped her voice, leaned closer. “Barney Evans didn’t commit suicide, Johnny. He was murdered.”

Liddell brought a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, held it up to the girl, drew a shake of her head. He dumped one out, hung it in the corner of his mouth. “That’s a pretty strong statement. The police apparently are satisfied it was suicide. If you have anything to prove it wasn’t—”

“I went to them. I went to the Department of Justice. Nobody would listen to me. They all consider the case closed.” She reached over, covered his hand with hers. “That’s why I was so anxious to meet you, Johnny. I want you to prove it was murder.”

Liddell sighed. He scratched a match into flame, touched it to the end of his cigarette. “I’m on my way back east.”

“Stay long enough to handle this case, Johnny. I’ll make it worth your while.”

He studied the slanted eyes, the half parted full lips, the terrain exposed by the drooping neckline, grinned. "I'll just bet you could, at that." He settled back, blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. "I don't suppose you have any idea who did it?"

"Mickey Denton."

Liddell snapped his eyes down from the ceiling to the girl's face. "Mickey Denton? The guy who starred in this latest picture with you? The singer?"

The actress nodded.

Liddell frowned at her. "Why should Denton kill Evans? From all I've read, the singer was just another groaner scratching for coffee and cake money until Evans took him to the top."

"Barney gave Denton an unmerciful beating the night before he died. In front of me. Denton isn't the type to forget something like that. The next day he went to New York—"

"Whoa, whoa. Who went to New York?"

"Mickey Denton."

Liddell's jaw sagged. "Denton was in New York when it happened? Then how could he kill Evans if he was 3,000 miles away when it happened?"

"Maybe he didn't do it himself, but I'm as sure as I am that I'm sitting here that Denton was responsible for Barney's death. He could have hired someone to do it, couldn't he?"

"It's been done," Liddell conceded. "But I can't see somebody like Mickey Denton giving anybody that kind of a hold over him just to square a beating."

"Then you don't know Denton. He'd stop at nothing to get even."

"I gather you're not president of the Mickey Denton fan club."

"I despise him, Johnny. So does everyone who's worked with him or who knows him. The grips and the electricians on our last picture were drawing straws to see who'd drop a light on him. Mark Whitehead, our producer, wouldn't even come to the wrap-up party Denton threw when we finished the picture. That's pretty rare. No matter how much a star and producer fight during the shooting, they usually go through the motions of patching it up at the wrap-up party."

“What did he do?”

Ann sighed. “Denton has a cute little hobby. He made a list of every female star in Hollywood that he had measured for his bed. When he scores, he puts a check next to their name. The list is tacked on his dressing-room door for everybody to see. My name is on his list.”

Liddell raised his eyebrows.

The girl shook her head. “There’s no check next to it. When he made his pass and I told him to get lost, he started to sulk. He deliberately slowed down shooting by fluffing his lines. We were weeks behind in our shooting and Whitehead was really getting it from the front office. They don’t want to know why you’re late, they just know that it’s costing them money. And they get real narrow-minded about it.”

Liddell grunted. “That figures. So?”

“Barney Evans came to me with a proposition. Be nice to Mickey until the picture was in the can, string him along so he’d remember his lines. Then, when it was all wrapped up, I could spit in his eye and Barney would back me up.” She took a swallow from her glass, set it back on the table. “The night of the wrap-up party, Mickey insisted on taking me home, Barney was there when we got there. When Mickey tried to get rough, Barney gave him an awful beating.”

Liddell picked up his glass, swirled the liquor around the sides. “The rumor is Denton is owned by Tony Agnelli. True?”

Ann looked up from her glass, shrugged. “I do know Barney Evans worked for Agnelli. I’ve heard him threaten Mickey with Agnelli several times. I think Barney was just protecting Agnelli’s interest.”

“Who’s standing in for him now?”

The girl shook her head. “Nobody. Denton called me just before I left to tell me he’s making his own deals now, that he has last say on casting and everything else. And if I want to work with him again, I’ll be reading my lines off the ceiling during rehearsals.”

“Gamy little character, isn’t he?”

“I can’t do him full justice.” She eyed Liddell’s face trying for a clue to what was going on in his mind. “Am I wasting my time or is there a chance you can find out how Barney was really killed?”

Liddell grinned ruefully. “Let’s say maybe to both questions. There’s that big IF we can’t overlook. *If* Evans was murdered.”

“But you are going to look into it?” The eager look on her face, plus the effect when she leaned forward, had the men in the room talking to themselves. “If you do, and nothing comes of it, at least I’ll know I did everything I could.”

She reached for his hand. “Please, Johnny?”

“I guess New York can get along without me a little while longer,” he said. “Besides, this Mickey Denton character is beginning to interest me.”

“Thanks, Johnny.” She squeezed his hand softly.

Liddell sighed, checked his watch. “I’d better get packed if I’m going to catch the Lark at midnight.”

The girl frowned slightly. “You’ll be leaving tonight?” There was a note of disappointment in her voice. “I’m stuck here on a personal appearance on my new picture. I’ll be here through Sunday. I thought—”

“You’ll be coming back to Hollywood after that?”

The frown disappeared. “Late Sunday night or early Monday morning.” She veiled the dark eyes with the heavy fringe of her lashes. “If, for any reason you want to see me when I get home, my phone number is Brewster 7-3121. It’s unlisted.”

Liddell grinned. He brought a pencil and an envelope from his pocket, noted the number. “I’m sure if I think hard enough I can come up with a good reason.”

She returned his smile. “I’ll count on it.”



## 4.

In Hollywood, the sun is a perennial late riser. It's invariably past noon by the time it makes its appearance through the smog that stings the natives' eyes, offends their nostrils and sours their dispositions. The morning Johnny Liddell arrived back in town was no different from the morning he left—a low-hanging, evil-smelling mist curtained the upper stories of the downtown buildings.

The starter at Union Station signaled for a cab, a hack of ancient vintage barreled up to where Liddell stood, skidded to a stop at the curb. The driver, a wizened little man with a greasy chauffeur's cap on the back of his head, a toothpick protruding from the corner of his mouth, made no effort to help Liddell with his bag.

"Where to, Cap?" he asked around the toothpick.

"Chateau Montrose on the Strip."

The driver rotated the toothpick from one corner to the other as he watched Liddell settling back against the cushions. He winced as the starter slammed the ancient door on the cab. "Easy, buddy," he complained in a hurt tone. "You could knock the damn door off like that." The starter ignored him, motioned him along with an imperious gesture.

The driver was still muttering under his breath when he headed for the Freeway entrance. He shortened the life of his tires with a screeching turn, barreled down the ramp toward the six solid lanes of traffic, fitted the ancient hack into the outer lane without once touching his brake. His eyes kept flicking from his rear-view to his side mirror in search of an opening in a faster lane. Finally he saw one, threw the cab at it. Liddell braced his feet against the floor-board when it became apparent he couldn't make it. The cabby kicked his brake hard enough to slide Liddell halfway off the seat. The triumphant driver who had blocked him made some colorful if physically uncomfortable suggestions to the cabby through his open window.

"Look at that," the cabby appealed to Liddell. "Iowa plates. Guys like that come from all over the country and louse up our roads. Why the hell don't they stay home?"

"You make it sound very enticing," Liddell growled.

The driver studied him in the rear-view mirror, bobbed his head. “You an out-of-stater, too, huh? Me, too. But I been here twelve years.” He thought about it, chuckled. “Guess there’s no such thing like a native out here, huh?”

Liddell braced himself as the driver made another try for the inside lane. This time he made it.

“How you like this smog? This is one thing I can’t get used to.” The driver sniffed audibly. “You think that’s maybe got something to do with the way all these big movie stars are checking out with C?” He shook his head. “That Big Casino. That don’t care who you are.”

Liddell eyed the lanes of maneuvering cars warily, grunted. “I can’t figure out how anyone in this town lives long enough to die a natural death with these roads. I’d sure like to have the Forest Lawn concession around here.”

The driver shrugged. “You think this is bad? You should see it like on a Sunday.” He wagged his head. “Bumper to bumper, ten, maybe twenty miles. Maybe even more.”

“What happens if you suddenly decide to get off and you’re in here on the inside?”

“You don’t.” The cabby half turned in his seat. “I hear about this dame once. She wants to swing off onto the Pasadena Freeway, you know? But her motor lays down on her and she can’t get out of her lane. She’s pushed all the way up to the Hollywood Bowl before she can get the damn motor turning over again.” He turned, studied Liddell’s face expectantly, seemed disappointed when he got no laugh. He swung around forward in his seat, pulled the toothpick from between his teeth, tossed it through the window.

He was silent for a few miles, then, “The Chateau Montrose, huh? They get a lot of actors staying there.” He eyed Liddell through the rear-view mirror. “You an actor maybe?”

“Yeah,” Liddell snarled. “I’m a stand-in for Jayne Mansfield.”

“Look, I was only making conversation,” the cabby told him in an aggrieved tone. “So you don’t want to talk, just say so. I can keep quiet, you know.”

He proved it for the rest of the ride by lapsing into a sulky silence. When he pulled up in front of the Chateau Montrose, he refused to be mollified even by the dollar tip Liddell pushed at him. He left Johnny standing on the

curb with his bag, screeched into an illegal U-turn and headed back downtown.

Liddell sighed, picked up his bag. “Everybody in this town is a prima donna,” he told himself sadly, “even the cab drivers.” He headed into the hotel.

The Chateau Montrose was a four-story pile of concrete and plate glass that had been done in the rococo style of the Twenties. In its day it had competed with the Garden of Allah as the home-away-from-home for the big stars on the town and many of Hollywood’s purplest orgies were staged inside its walls. Today, it had to be content with the hit-and-run affairs of the transients who came out from the Broadway stage for hit-and-run television assignments.

Johnny Liddell walked into the lobby where the influence of the Twenties was still reflected in the gilt-framed pictures on the walls, the period furniture, busts on marble pedestals and heavy velour drapes. Liddell contended that it was this unique atmosphere and obeisance to nostalgia that caused him to use the Chateau Montrose as his base of operations in Hollywood.

Muggsy Kiely was secretly convinced that it was the house detective’s broad-minded tolerance that appealed to Liddell. That plus the fact that the bar in the Chateau acted as a magnet for all the young hopefuls who lined it every night in the hope of being seen by a producer or a director—or even by a sport.

Liddell plowed across the deep-piled carpeting, dropped his bag alongside the ornate registration desk. The clerk, a rheumy-eyed old man whose near-sightedness could have accounted for his taste in ties, peered at Liddell for a moment. His habitually dour expression gave way to a rare smile, he laid down the pile of letters he was sorting, shuffled over. “Mr. Liddell! Back so soon? I thought you were going back east.” His voice suited the rheumy eyes better than the loud tie.

“So did I.”

The clerk shook his head. “I guess Miss Kiely knew what she was talking about. When she called, I told her we weren’t expecting you. She said we should.”

“She must have gotten up early. What time did she call?”

The rheumy-eyed man pinched his nose between thumb and forefinger, caused his eyes to water more. “About 2:30.”

“Two-thirty? This morning?”

The clerk shook his head. “Yesterday afternoon. She told me if 410 was open to hold it for you.”

“How could she know yesterday afternoon that I’d be back here today? I only made up my mind late last night.”

The clerk considered it, shook his head. “Beats me.” He shuffled to the key rack, brought out a tagged key. “But just on the chance she knew something I didn’t know, I held your usual room.”

“She not only knew something you didn’t know, she knew something I didn’t know,” Liddell grumbled. He left his bag at the desk, walked to the phone booth, dialed the number of Production City.

“Pro-duc-shun Cit-ty,” the receiver chirped at him.

“Miss Kiely. She’s a writer on the lot. I don’t have her extension number.”

“One mo-ment, puh-lee-ous.”

There was a brief pause, then the voice of Muggsy’s secretary came through. “Miss Kiely’s office.”

“This is Liddell, Smitty. Is Muggsy busy?”

“You’re late,” the receiver accused him, “She’s been expecting you to call since 8:30.”

“I’m not late. The Lark was. And we got caught in that damn Freeway traffic—” He broke off. “What the hell am I apologizing for? What do you mean I’m late? I’m not supposed to be here at all. Right now I’m supposed to be landing at Idlewild.”

“Here’s Miss Kiely,” the receiver told him.

“Welcome home, Johnny.” The redhead’s voice was perky.

“You were pretty damn sure of yourself, weren’t you?” he growled. “Reserving my regular room and everything.”

“I know Ann Connell,” Muggsy told him. “She wore that dress with the breakaway front, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, but—”

The receiver laughed at him. “It couldn’t miss. You always were a sucker for that kind of persuasion.”

“Okay, okay. So I’m putty in the hands of women. Since when are you so generous that you provide my goodies?”

The line was silent for a moment. “She’s got me convinced that maybe Evans was murdered. He was a pretty good Joe, Johnny. He mixed with a lot of the wrong people, but he leveled. Maybe you can do something about evening the score for him.”

“You got anything I can go on? She tells me the police have it tabbed as suicide. No d.a. is going to take intuition as evidence.”

“Nothing. But Ann Connell isn’t the only one who thinks it was murder. Charley Nelson on the *Express* thinks so, too.”

Liddell pulled out an envelope, scribbled the name “Charley Nelson—*Express*” on it. “Well, I’m not promising anything. But I’ll have a look.”

“Am I going to see you tonight?” Muggsy wanted to know.

“If you’re not booked up for some local orgy, you are.”

“No, I’m like you. I’m getting too old for that kind of jazz. I’ll drop by the Chateau around seven and you can buy me a drink in that casting couch corner they call the Blue Room. Then I’ll let you take me to Dino’s for dinner. How’s that sound?”

“Expensive,” Liddell growled.

“That’s what I love about you, Sherlock, your enthusiasm. I’ll see you at seven.”

There was a click at the other end, Johnny dropped his receiver back on its hook. He pushed open the door to the booth, walked over to the desk.

“Have one of the boys drop my bag up in my room, will you?” he asked the clerk. “I’ve got a couple of things I want to do.”

The clerk wiped at his rheumy eyes with a tattletale gray handkerchief, nodded. “Sure thing.”

He snagged the folded bill Liddell passed across the desk. When Johnny had left the lobby, the clerk stuck the folded bill into his watch pocket, found a quarter in his pants pocket and laid it on the counter. Then he banged the bell on the corner of the desk.

“Front!”

## 5.

The *Los Angeles Express* is an evening paper. By 10 a.m. its staff is already hard at work. As Johnny Liddell walked into the city room, reporters were filtering back from their assignments, peeling telephones were summoning rewrite men to the cubbyhole booths where they were taking calls carrying information to be whipped into news stories. The copy boys, who, a few minutes earlier, were loafing between the scattered desks delivering an occasional cardboard container of coffee, were now stepping up their tempo as calls of "Copy!" started to come from various corners of the room.

The copy was transferred to the horseshoe-shaped desk at the end of the room where copy men corrected it, slashed it to size, improved on it. Here, the city editor presides over general headquarters in his daily war with the clock, with every tick bringing him closer to deadline as the copy continues to mount. The important stories are cut up into short takes so they can be handled by several linotypers at a time, thus getting galleys back quicker for an okay and to be slugged for special positions. This is one place where there is no tomorrow, the only commodity these men deal in is today, what's happening today and how to get it on the street today.

Johnny stood in the entrance to the city room, could sense the mounting excitement and pressure as approaching deadline started the daily pile-up. The men in their shirt sleeves, the women with hats perched on the tops of their heads, pounded away at typewriters of ancient vintage, tore the receivers off the hooks of telephones that had long since lost their luster, scribbled notes as the news and follow-ups came filtering in. Some of it would make the bulldog, other stories would be held for more complete handling in the later editions.

Liddell walked over to a desk near the wall. A young-old man sat on the edge of his chair, pounding at the keys of his typewriter. An unlit cigarette was tucked behind his ear, another was burning on the edge of his desk, adding another service stripe to the varnish where others had been allowed to burn themselves out at the height of some forgotten deadline in the past.

The reporter paused for a moment, looked up from his keys, stared out into space, marshaling his thoughts. Automatically, his hand reached out for the soggy container of cold coffee.

"Do you know where I can find Charley Nelson?" Liddell asked.

The man at the desk brought his eyes back into focus, nodded. “Second office off the slot.” He pointed up toward the copy desk.

Liddell nodded his thanks, but the reporter had already dismissed him, was staring at a crack in the discolored wall opposite, apparently unaware that anyone had even broken his trend of thought.

Johnny wove his way through the organized confusion of the desks toward the door the reporter had indicated. He rapped his knuckles against it, waited. Then, deciding that his rap couldn’t be heard above the roar of the city room, he reached for the knob and pushed open the door.

The office was small, had been built by throwing up three partitions and using the wall of the building for the fourth wall. A thin, angular woman looked up from her typewriter, frowned at him as he stood framed in the doorway. “Yes?”

“Sorry.” Liddell backed away. “I was looking for Charley Nelson’s office.”

“This is it.”

“He around?” Liddell wanted to know.

The woman sighed. “I’m Charley Nelson,” she told him in a disgusted tone. “If you’re coming in, come in and close the door. If you’re just slumming, run along. We’ve got a paper to put out.”

Liddell stepped into the office, closed the door after him, shutting out some of the clamor of the city room. “Sorry. It’s just that—”

“I know, I know. You ask for Charley Nelson, you’re not expecting to see a woman. Full name’s Charlene. My old man never forgave me for not being a boy so he tagged me Charlene and called me Charley. The name stuck.” She leaned back in her chair, chewed on the end of her pencil. “That’s the story of my life. What’s yours?”

“My name’s Johnny Liddell. Muggsy Kiely gave me your name.”

“Heard about you,” the woman conceded.

“I’m handling a little chore for Seaway Indemnity. I was out here on another job when this one came up, so since nothing should go to waste, I agreed to handle it for them. Some guy named—” He broke off, pulled an envelope from his pocket, squinted at it. “Evans. Barney Evans—”

“You know something, Liddell?” Charley pulled the pencil from between her teeth, examined the splintered end. “You may be a good dick,

but you're a lousy actor. You're not representing any insurance company. What are you after?"

Liddell grinned. He stowed the envelope in his pocket. "Proof that Evens committed suicide—if he did. Proof that it was murder—if it was."

The thin woman reached down into her drawer, brought out a half-filled pint of bourbon. She got up, walked with a peculiar gait to the water cooler that stood humming to itself against the far wall. She pulled two paper cups from the rack, half filled one with water. At the desk, she divided the water into the cups, filled them with bourbon.

"Coroner's verdict was suicide." She picked up one of the cups, indicated for him to take the other. "Police closed the file and they buried him a week ago. They think it was suicide."

Liddell tasted the bourbon, grunted as it seared its way down to his stomach to set up a bonfire. "But you don't think so?"

Charley Nelson took a deep swallow from her glass, shrugged. "Who can fight City Hall?" She perched on the corner of her desk. "Who wants you to get this proof? Ann Connell?" she guessed shrewdly.

"You read tea-leaves as a sideline?"

The reporter shook her head. "She's the one hipped me on it being murder. She tried to sell the police, even the Department of Justice. No sale." She drained her cup, crushed it into a ball, threw it at the barrel-sized wastebasket and missed. "All she's got is a real yen to shaft that sterling young character Mickey Denton. The police are old-fashioned. They want proof, especially since he was—"

"Three thousand miles away when it happened."

"Right."

Liddell finished his drink, dropped the cup into the basket. "Muggsy tells me you did some digging into it?"

The reporter bobbed her head. "A dry well. Agnelli owned Mickey Denton, had Barney Evans managing him out here. That's just one of the things Evans handled for Agnelli. He opened this town up for Agnelli, fronted for him and his boys. With Evans dead, Agnelli's hurting real good."

"So you scratch Agnelli?"

"What's to scratch? Evens committed suicide. The case is closed." Charley poked a stray tendril of wispy hair back into place over her ear,



fixed it in place with a pencil. “They even have a reason for suicide—Evans was fooling around with Denton’s taxes and the Feds had caught up to him.”

“Muggsy told me you thought it was murder. You must have had some reason?”

The woman took her time about answering. “Nothing that would stand up in court.” She reached back onto her desk, picked up a pack of cigarettes, selected one, stuck it between her thin lips. “Evans had company the night he died. Two men. One of them was a character named Rocky Castri. He was Denton’s bodyguard. I don’t know who the other man was.”

Liddell scowled at her. “Did you tell this to the police?”

Charley lit her cigarette, took a deep drag, blew twin streams through her nostrils. “What for? That wouldn’t change their minds that it was suicide. And it might put my source on the spot.” She left the cigarette in the corner of her mouth where it waggled when she talked. “I gave it a real college try, Liddell. But I came up with nothing. I still think Evans was murdered. But knowing it and proving it are two different things.”

Liddell walked over to the desk, helped himself to a cigarette from the pack. “You must have had something else?” He lit his cigarette, winced as a curling tendril of smoke stung his eye. “A visit from Denton’s boy could have been a motive for suicide. Letting him know that the singer was going to blow the whistle, for instance.”

“Stubborn, aren’t you?” the woman grunted. She hopped off the desk, pulled open the top right-hand drawer, rummaged through a pile of pictures, came up with a glossy print. “Here’s a picture of Evans’ body before it was moved. What do you make out of it?”

Liddell took the glossy, examined it. Evans’ body was draped on the overhang at the fourth floor. One arm dangled over the side, a dark stream snaked from the corner of the dead man’s mouth. Liddell studied it for a moment, looked up.

“Interesting,” he conceded.

Charley Nelson studied his face. “If you get your kicks looking at dead people.” She reached for the picture; he moved it out of her reach.

“That’s not what I mean,” Liddell told her. “That ledge is what? Four or five feet wide?”

“No more than that.”

Liddell bobbed his head. “Then you’re right. Evans was murdered.”

The frown of annoyance on the reporter’s face gave way to a look of grudging admiration. “What makes you think so?”

“The ledge is only five feet wide. If Evans had jumped, his body would have arched out clear of the building line and would have cleared the overhang by feet. The only way he could have landed on that ledge was if he had been dropped over, close to the building line, in which case he would have dropped like a plumbline.”

“I owe you an apology. I had you figured as a fugitive from a hotel-room keyhole.” She reached over, took the picture from between his fingers, stared at it. “That’s the way I had it figured. But nobody would listen to me. Not even my own managing editor.”

“Why? An exclusive like this could sell papers.”

Charley sniffed, replaced the picture in her drawer.

“You’ve been seeing too many late-late shows, Liddell. A paper can’t make money selling copies if it loses its advertising.” She slammed the drawer shut. “And that’s what happened. Important people have some pretty big investments in the characters involved in this. And they get nervous about their investments getting dragged through a scandal. When they get nervous, they make the business office nervous, and that’s worse for the managing editor’s ulcers than vodka. I got ruled off.”

“How about the coroner’s office? Did you take it up with them?”

“Sure. They told me it was a pretty theory and I ought to be writing detective stories.” She shook her head. “It would take a lot more than this to make them climb down off their verdict.”

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to give me the name of this source who can identify Castri?”

The woman shook her head. “For what? It can’t do any good and it might give somebody the idea of tying up all the loose strings. I have a signed deposition from him that can be used if and when it will serve some purpose. But if the official verdict is suicide, what’s criminal about Rocky Castri visiting Evans that night or any other night?”

“Keep that deposition in a safe place. I might be needing it.”

“Don’t count on it, Liddell. You think Evans was murdered, I think Evans was murdered—but what’s our opinion against millions of others?”

## 6.

Mickey Denton had the tenth floor of an oppressively modern apartment building perched on the side of a hill a mile north of the Bowl. It looked like a waffle upended, with balconies for every apartment pressed into the grid of the waffle. Denton stood on his balcony, brooded.

He didn't want to admit it, even to himself, but he missed the guidance of Barney Evans in his everyday living. The white-haired man had been domineering, but he had also insulated Denton from the harsh realities of day to day living in Hollywood.

When Evans was alive, all decisions were made for him, all problems reduced to their simplest form before he was even aware that there was a problem. When the black moods seized him, Denton would employ the different-girl-every-night therapy that worked so well. Now even that was beginning to pall.

Everything was breaking for him. He had three pictures out that were making plenty of money, his record albums stayed at the top of every disc jockey's list, he had a teevee show in the works. But he still missed the steady and guiding hand of Barney Evans.

He flipped his cigarette over the railing, walked back into the living room. In the old days, Rocky Castri would be in there, waiting to gauge his mood, waiting to cater to him in every way. But even the Rock was gone, had taken a job with Mitch Corday in Vegas without even so much as a "by your leave."

Denton walked over to the portable bar in the corner, mixed himself a stiff slug of scotch. He had never felt so alone. In the old days there had been Rod Brady, his first manager, or Al Lister, who handled his publicity build-up. He'd outgrown them when Barney Evans took him under his wing. He wondered if either of them would be interested in picking up where Evans left off. He knew the answer to that without bothering to ask the question.

He took a deep swallow out of his glass, grimaced. It was an old joke of his that he'd like to hire a small boy to drink his first drink of the day for him. He hated the taste of liquor and the first drink always gagged him. No matter how many times he said it, Rocky Castri would always laugh as if it

were the first. Breaking him in to the stooge role had been a labor of love for Denton. But now he was gone for good.

Denton wandered aimlessly around the room, stopped to admire two gold records that had been framed and hung over the hi-fi. There'd be more as soon as the final returns were in on his latest biscuits. He continued to amble around the room, scowled at a framed picture that had been taken on the set of the last feature he had made with Ann Connell.

He swore under his breath as he remembered the last time he had seen her. Barney Evans had been waiting at her place for Mickey to bring her home. The white-haired man had given him a bad beating, but while he won that battle, Evans had lost the war.

Denton started at the sound of the telephone on the library table. He walked over, picked it up, held it to his ear.

“Yeah?”

“This is Johnny Liddell. I'd like to come up to see you. I'm in the lobby of your building.”

Denton took a deep swallow from his glass. “What about?”

“Barney Evans.”

The singer's hand jerked so violently, he spilled some of the liquor onto the floor. “I've got nothing to say about Evans.” He started to hang up, changed his mind. “Who'd you say this was?”

“Johnny Liddell. I'm a private detective from New York.”

Denton considered for a moment. He was mildly curious as to what a private detective would be doing looking into Evans' death. He was also more than mildly bored. “Okay. Let me talk to the desk.”

There was a brief pause, then, “Yes, Mr. Denton? This is Mallory, the security officer.”

“Liddell can come up, Mallory.” He dropped the receiver back on its hook, drained his glass. On an impulse, he walked over to the bar and built himself a fresh drink. It was a little early in the day for him, but this was beginning to show signs of being quite a day.

Denton opened the door himself in response to Liddell's knock. Since Rocky Castri walked out on him, he had no live-in help. He looked Liddell over with no show of enthusiasm as the private detective walked in. He kicked the door shut behind Johnny, motioned to the bar with his glass.

“There’s the makings over on the bar.” He watched while Liddell dumped some ice into a glass, doused it down with scotch. “Now what’s it all about?”

Liddell swirled his liquor over the ice, tasted the drink, approved. “Suppose I could prove to you that Evans was murdered? That he didn’t commit suicide.” He looked up from his glass at the singer. “Be interested?”

Denton considered it, shook his head. “You couldn’t prove it to me. Or to the police.” He sank into an armchair, draped one leg over the arm. “Evans did the dutch.”

“You seem pretty sure of it.”

The singer shrugged. “I am. The Feds were breathing down his neck for some deal he tried to pull. Hell, they were questioning me about it when it happened. He got the message, walked out onto his balcony and kept walking.” He sipped at his drink. “That first step was a doozy.”

“You wouldn’t be interested in being convinced that it wasn’t suicide?”

Denton shook his head. “He couldn’t be deader. Besides, in case you don’t read the columns, there was no love lost between Barney Evans and me. I couldn’t care less what happened to him.” He sipped at his glass. “That answer your question?”

“It gives me a clue,” Liddell conceded.

“What set you off on this kick, Liddell?” Denton wanted to know. “You don’t look like the type to be on nose candy.”

“If I am, I’ve got plenty of company.”

“You know the wrong kind of people. The people who count—the police, the coroner, the money men at the studios—they say you’re wrong. And in this town, what they say goes.”

“You telling me to lay off? That it?”

The singer shrugged elaborately. “You enjoy batting your head against stone walls? Be my guest. What’s it to me what you do?” He drained his glass, set it aside. “Who’s picking up the hot for your time, Liddell? Ann Connell?”

“Ann Connell? Why should she?”

Denton grinned. “You know something, Detective? We’re not going to get any place we both ask questions. Like I ask is Ann Connell picking up

the tab? You only got to say yes or no.”

“You pull a name out of the air. I’m just curious to know what makes you ask about her.”

The singer flattened the long hair over his ear with the heel of his hand. “She made a pest out of herself right after it happened. Went running to the police, to the newspapers. Got real hot on it, but they cooled her off.” He looked Liddell over. “I figure maybe she’s still hipped. Connell’s a kid who knows the score. She never window shops. She knows everything has a price tag and she’s willing to pay. You dig?”

“And if I said Connell wasn’t my client?”

Denton frowned. “Then it would have to be that monster on the *Express*. The one who kept snooping around and asking questions. Got a name like a man and a face like a horse.” He grimaced. “Connell sicked her on me and I couldn’t shake her. But like I say, there are important people in this town don’t like a valuable property like me to get upset. So—” He shrugged again.

“So the word went out for Charley Nelson to lay off.”

Denton snapped his fingers. “Charley Nelson! That’s her name.” He grinned insolently at Liddell. “Working for a due bill on Ann Connell, this I could understand. But the monster?” He shook his head dolefully. “You could do better than that in this town blindfolded.”

“Maybe she has something I want.”

The singer chuckled at the thought. “Then it don’t show. I’d—”

“She has proof that Rocky Castri, your bodyguard, and another hood were at Evans’ place the night he got killed.”

Some of the smile drained off Demon’s face. “So what’s that prove? Evans was my manager. He give the Rock orders, sent him running errands lots of times.” He brushed his hair back carefully. “Maybe you think you’re worrying me? You know where I was the night Evans took the dive? Sitting in the lap of the Treasury Department three thousand miles from here. So what are you telling me your troubles for?”

“How about Agnelli? How’s he feel about Evans’ death?”

“Why don’t you ask him? He doesn’t confide in me.” Denton drained his glass, set it down. “Look, Detective, I let you come up here for kicks, you

know? I'm sitting here with nothing to do and I figure you're good for a couple of laughs." He snapped his fingers. "So get with it, get funny."

"I might get so funny, you could die laughing."

"Yeah? How?"

Liddell set his glass down. "By finding out what made you be in New York the same night your muscle-man showed up at Evans' apartment. Wouldn't it be a scream if I could prove you ordered that hit?"

"You some kind of a nut or something?" the singer yelled.

"It could happen, Singer. Maybe I will have that talk with Agnelli. It's got to be something big that makes a guy like him cover up the killing of a friend instead of squaring it. Maybe if I can find out what's tying his hands and untie them for him, we'll get some action."

"You start something you can't finish, mister, and you're going to find out the world isn't big enough for you to hide in. A lot of people have a lot of money invested in me. You make that investment a risk and you couldn't run fast enough to get out from under."

"Or maybe it could work the other way, Singer. Maybe they figure your being dead wouldn't hurt that investment at all. They're still selling Russ Columbo records—"

Denton grinned confidently. "Don't count on it, Detective. They all light candles when I catch a cold."

Liddell nodded. "That's not the only time people light candles." He headed for the door. "Don't bother to show me out. I know the way."

"It figures. You're a detective," Denton shot after him.

After the door slammed behind Liddell, Mickey Denton chewed on the knuckle of his index finger. Then he walked over to the telephone, dialed long distance. He gave a number in New York, specified it to be person-to-person, hung up the phone and settled back to wait.

It was almost fifteen minutes before the phone finally rang. He snatched the receiver off its hook.

He could hear the voice of the well-stacked receptionist in Agnelli's outer office. "Who is calling Mr. Agnelli, Operator?" she was asking.

"Mickey Denton," he told her.

"I'll put Mr. Agnelli right on, Operator," the receptionist told her.

After a second, the blubbery voice of Agnelli came across the wire. “This is Agnelli, Operator.” When she clicked off the phone, “What do you want, Singer?”

“I just had a visitor. A private detective named Johnny Liddell—”

“Liddell? What’s he want?”

A frown of surprise creased the singer’s forehead. “You know him?”

“Sure, I know him. From the old days. I hope you’re not playing smart with Liddell. This guy plays for keeps.”

“Then I’m glad I called you. Some newspaper broad out here has a signed statement putting Castri at Evans’ house the night he died. Liddell is convinced it’s murder and he’s snooping around.”

Agnelli swore softly and fluently. “You tell him anything?”

“What was there to tell him? I was in New York when it happened. Remember?”

“I remember, Singer. I remember real good.” There was a low note of menace in the fat man’s voice. “You were real smart that night. Stay smart.”

Denton shrugged. “I was only doing you a favor by calling.”

“Yeah. A favor.” There was a slight pause. “I’m sending Castri back. He works for you like nothing happened. You understand?”

A slow smile twisted the singer’s lips. “I understand one thing. He gets out of line and I throw him out. If he works for me, he works for me.”

Agnelli grunted. “I take care of everything.” He slammed the receiver back into place, broke the connection.

Denton was still grinning broadly as he hung up the receiver. Things were working out just the way he wanted. He had been missing the feeling of adequacy it gave him to kick Castri around. It would be a safety valve for the feeling of insecurity that had bugged him since Evans’ death. Rocky would never know how much the singer had needed him and how ready he would have been to make any concessions to get him back.

Now that was no longer necessary. Now Castri would be back on Denton’s own terms. And with Agnelli to keep the Rock in line, Denton could start training him all over again.

He walked to the hi-fi, set a record, listened to his latest recording. Then he made himself another drink, settled down to wait for Castri’s call. He



rehearsed in his own mind the way he would handle him when he finally came back. It gave him a warmer feeling of well-being than even the scotch could.

## 7.

The bar at the Chateau Montrose was practically the post-office box of many of Hollywood's denizens. It had a separate entrance on the Strip a few doors down from the entrance to the hotel, marked by a neon that spit and buzzed over its entrance, staining the canopy that ran to the curb and the gutter beyond.

Known as the "Blue Room," it was dim, intimate. The only lighting in the room came from hidden fixtures in the corners. A number of leather chairs and low tables were scattered around the room; the bar ran the length of the far wall, its stools almost always filled from opening at 5 p.m. to closing at 4 a.m. with has-beens, hopefuls and never was—a normal cross section of Movietown.

Dimness is a great equalizer. In the dim, flattering light it was hard to tell who were the has-beens, who sat trying to pretend that today was yesterday, and who were the hopefuls, trying to pretend that today was tomorrow.

Johnny Liddell walked into the room, waited until his eyes adjusted themselves to the dimness, looked around. Muggsy Kiely waved him down from a table set near the wall that gave her a full view of the room. He felt his way through the tables, walked over to where she sat. She turned her face up for a kiss.

"I knew you couldn't stay away from me long enough to go all the way home to New York," she purred.

"Even if you had to push some guy off the roof, huh?" Liddell grinned. He dropped into the chair alongside her, peered at her glass. "Don't tell me you're drinking?"

"Just to drown my sorrows because you even considered leaving me," she told him.

A waitress materialized out of the gloom, smiled tentatively. Her tight-fitting uniform showcased the reason for the loving cups gathering dust in the closets of her furnished room identifying her as Miss Somebody or Other of 1958, 1959 or 1960. In Iowa or Michigan or even New Jersey she was beautiful enough to make men stop and stare after her. In Hollywood she was just one of the hundreds of rejects who fail to make the Big Time and who stubbornly man the drive-ins, service the restaurants or sign on as

starlets—a polite Hollywood term for the entertainment corps that most studios maintain to keep the visiting firemen, the home office big shots, the newspapermen and columnists happy without any danger of their turning up in a vice round-up. The only cameras most starlets are likely to see are the ones that furnish the art for the magazines that are banned from their hometown newsstands.

Johnny Liddell eyed the waitress' obvious assets. She preened.

"I'll have Ballantine on the rocks," he told her.

She dutifully noted the order on her pad, turned and headed for the service bar. The view from the rear was fully worth the extra 25c the Blue Room added to the price of its drinks.

"If you're done popping your eyes out of their sockets, suppose you fill me in on what happened today at the *Express*," Muggsy asked him tartly.

Liddell grinned at her. "Coming here was your idea."

The redhead took a sip of her drink, nodded. "That's right," she conceded. "This is one of the few places in town you can talk. Most of the men in here are too busy eyeing the livestock to do any eavesdropping." She replaced her glass on the table. "How'd you like Charley?"

Liddell considered. "She should do all right in a town like this where every girl looks like every other girl. She doesn't look like any other girl I've ever seen, any place."

"She doesn't pretend to be a glamour girl—"

"That's for sure."

Muggsy scowled at him. "But she's a good reporter." She tossed her head in the direction the waitress had disappeared. "She's got more brains in her little finger than that waitress has in her whole body."

"You're probably right," Liddell conceded. "And for a guy who goes for little fingers, she'll probably make a real dream girl."

Muggsy sniffed audibly, leaned back as the waitress materialized from the dimness, deposited a glass in front of Liddell. She looked from Johnny to the redhead, correctly interpreted the expression on Muggsy's face and beat a hasty retreat.

"Let's get off the subject of girls and talk about something you know something about," Muggsy told him. "How about Barney Evans?"

Liddell smelled the drink, tasted it. It tasted as good as it smelled. “Ann Connell could be right. Evans might have been murdered.” He brought out a pack of cigarettes, held it out to Muggsy. She selected one, put it between her lips, leaned over for a light. “Aren’t you going to ask me how I know?”

The redhead assumed an innocent expression. “I wouldn’t think of questioning your judgment,” she told him sweetly. “How do you know?”

Liddell scowled at her, lit his cigarette from hers. “I read it in a fortune cookie.”

“Don’t go sensitive on me.” Muggsy blew a feathery stream of smoke at him. “I’m impressed. Tell me how you know, O Master.”

“He was dropped off the patio. He couldn’t have jumped or he would have cleared the ledge he landed on.”

“Again please?” Muggsy frowned.

“When somebody jumps off a roof, they jump, right?” Muggsy nodded. “Okay. When you jump, your body arches out. The only way his body could have hit that five-foot overhang was to drop in a straight line. That means the odds are overwhelming in favor of his being dropped rather than jumping. Dig?”

Muggsy frowned over it for a moment, nodded. “I dig. But would the police?”

Liddell shook his head. “Charley Nelson has already tried them. They told her to take up fiction writing. She also has a witness to the fact that Rocky Castri, Denton’s bodyguard, was at Evans’ house that night.” He glanced around the room, dropped his voice. “I figured we might as well get things stirred up a bit, so I dropped that little tidbit in Mickey Denton’s tone-deaf ear this afternoon.”

The redhead stopped with the cigarette halfway to her lips. “Why? If they didn’t know you had that, they wouldn’t be able to cover their tracks and—”

Liddell shook his head. “That’s just the point. They have covered their tracks so well, my only hope is to stampede them into making a mistake. That’s our only chance to drag this out into the open. As it is, the lid is on the case as tight as a drum.”

“And Charley? Will she work with you?”

Liddell shrugged. “Her editor called her off. Seems like a lot of important people in this town would just as soon everybody forgot there ever was a Barney Evans. It could hurt a lot of important investments.”

Muggsy took a deep swallow from her glass. “It has happened. Look what happened to Fatty Arbuckle and the people mixed up in the William Desmond Taylor and the Thelma Todd murders. How about Denton? What was his reaction?”

Liddell frowned. “He sounded pretty sure of himself. Pretty sure that Agnelli would stand behind him.”

“I thought Evans was Agnelli’s boy. But if Denton is mixed up in it and Agnelli’s standing behind him, it means that maybe Agnelli had something to do with it, too.”

Liddell nodded. “Could be.”

“I didn’t figure on that. If Agnelli’s mixed up in it, don’t fool around with it, Johnny.”

“Now she tells me! In case you don’t remember, you’re the one who got me involved in this thing in the first place. If it weren’t for you, I’d be back in New York right now.”

“I know. But I never figured that you’d be going up against Agnelli. I figured it was some amateur like Mickey Denton.”

“The minute Evans went over that side, even if it was an amateur, the killer lost his amateur standing. And killing’s like getting olives out of a bottle. After the first one, they come easy.”

“Walk away from it, Johnny. The police are satisfied it’s suicide, so is the coroner. Let’s leave things lay.”

“I’m in too deep for that now, Muggs,” Liddell told her. “I’ve already made the first move by telling Denton I knew his boy was at Evans’ house that night.”

“I hope it’s not also your last.” Muggsy sighed, drained her glass, set it on the table. “I think I need another drink.” She looked around the room. “That is if you can locate the waitress. She’s probably out making sure her broom isn’t double parked or giving an audition for an agent in one of the phone booths.”

“You’re not showing the proper respect for talent, Muggs.”

“You know something? You’ve got something there. It takes real talent to do an audition in a phone booth.” She spotted the waitress across the room. “There she is. Catch her before she does her disappearing act again.”

Liddell caught the girl’s attention, held up two fingers. The waitress nodded her understanding, headed for the service bar. Liddell turned back to Muggsy.

“I’m sorry I got you into this, Johnny. I know you’re too damned thick to get out of it. But how can you win? You can’t even prove there’s been a murder. All you stand to get is a few knots on your head.”

“It all shows up in the bill.”

“What bill? Who pays it? Ann Connell?” Muggsy shook her head. “She’s a nice little package, but you can’t discount it at your bank.”

“There’s no income tax on it either.”

“But you’ve got to be alive to enjoy it,” Muggsy countered.

“So maybe I’ll find someone who will be willing to pick up the tab?”

The redhead snorted. “Why don’t you try the Utter McKinley Mortuary? You stand a good chance of being paid off in lead anyhow.”

Liddell studied the girl’s face. “How about the *Dispatch* picking up the tab?”

“For what? The *Dispatch* is a New York paper. If the local sheets want no part of it, why should the *Dispatch*?”

Johnny shrugged. “Maybe the *Dispatch* isn’t as allergic to the studios’ pressure as the local sheets.”

“Don’t count on it. You said Agnelli’s involved. You know how many legitimate businesses he’s mixed up in? All he has to do is say the word and those businesses put the pressure on. The *Dispatch* is no different from the *Express*. They both need advertising to pay their bills.” She waited while the waitress slid two fresh drinks in front of them, removed the empties and withdrew. “You know Dad’s publisher. Some of the pressure will come from members of his own club—lawyers who represent the mob, fancy fronts for the organization’s legitimate enterprises. Do you think Harry Edwards would stand up?”

“Your Dad has fought him before.”

Muggsy bobbed her head. “Not when Edwards is backed by the business office. I can just hear him telling Dad”—she mimicked the high-pitched, agitated tones of the *Dispatch's* publisher—“the function of this paper is to publish the news, not to make it.”

Liddell shrugged. “You could be right. We’ll know before long.”

“How?”

“I tried to reach Jim this afternoon and missed him. I left word for him to call me in the room at 8 our time. That’d be 11 his time. Right?” He consulted his watch. It showed 7:35. “Drink up. He might get impatient and put the call in early.”

“It’s not even a quarter to,” Muggsy complained. “What’ll we do up there? Sit and look at each other?”

“We could ad lib.”

## 8.

The elevator shuddered to a stop at the fourth floor, the door whooshed open. Muggsy Kiely led the way into the hallway, headed for 410.

“Anybody’d think you’d been here before, the way you know your way around. For the sake of appearances, at least let me lead the way,” Liddell told her.

The redhead snorted. “Any girl with less than two heads who doesn’t know her way around this riding academy is underprivileged.” She broke her stride, cocked her head. “Isn’t that your phone ringing?”

Liddell listened, nodded his head, rushed to the door. He fumbled with the key, got it open just in time to catch the fourth ring. The voice of the desk clerk came through the receiver.

“Liddell? This is Rogers on the desk. Two men just stopped here, asked for your room number. They’re on their way up.”

Liddell grunted, “Thanks.” He dropped the receiver back on its hook, turned to Muggsy. “We’re going to have company. You’d better stay out of sight while I greet the boys.”

Muggsy looked worried, shook her head. “You see? It’s started already. Johnny, why don’t you just tell them—” She studied his face, shrugged at what she saw there. “No sale?”

“No sale.”

“Figured.” She walked to the lavatory door, walked in, managed to leave it open enough to hear what was going on.

Liddell tugged his .45 from its holster, walked over to the armchair, dropped into it, the gun cradled in his lap.

He didn’t have long to wait.

Out in the hallway, the elevator clanged to a stop, the doors ground open. There was a slight wait as the men checked the numbers on the rooms, headed down to 410, then there was a rap on the door.

“It’s open,” Liddell told them from the chair.



The door swung open, two men stepped into the room. The older of the two had a tired face that seemed to belong with the rumpled blue suit, the stained fedora he wore on the back of his head. The other man was taller, thinner with the sharp features of a ferret.

Liddell waved the .45. "Shut the door."

The tall man complied.

The older man eyed the .45 with no show of being impressed. "Always greet your company with a gun?"

"Only when they're not young or pretty." Liddell grinned bleakly and looked from one to the other.

The thin man looked over to the half-opened lavatory door. "If we interrupted something, we can come back."

"That won't be necessary," Liddell told him. "Mind opening your jackets?"

The older man pasted a tired grin on his face. "This is a social call, Liddell. We don't carry guns on social calls."

"I'd just like to make sure you weren't making an exception in my case. The jackets!" There was a new, hard note in Liddell's voice. The barrel of the .45 had moved up, was eying a spot a few inches above the belt buckle of the man in the blue suit.

The man shrugged. "It's your home grounds. You set the rules." He opened his jacket, held it open to show he was wearing no holster.

"Turn around and lift the back of the jacket over your belt."

"You do keep up with the times," the man in the blue suit conceded. He turned around, lifted his jacket to prove he wasn't wearing a trouble gun in the back of his belt. He turned, waited while his partner went through the same paces.

Liddell dropped the snout of the gun back into his lap. "Okay. So now what's on your mind?"

The thin man looked to his partner, drew a nod. "Barney Evans."

Liddell raised his eyebrows. "Who are you guys?"

The thinner of the two men started to answer, permitted himself to be waved to silence by the older man.

“I’d rather talk about that some time when you don’t have company. The names wouldn’t mean a thing to you.” He glanced at the half-open lavatory door. “Anyway, we just dropped by to give you a little advice.”

“About Barney Evans?”

“About Barney Evans.”

Liddell scowled at them. “And the advice?”

“Barney’s dead. The coroner called it suicide. Let it lay.”

Liddell’s eyes went cold, his mouth lengthened into a long, thin line. “And you went to the trouble of coming all the way over here just to give me advice?” His eyes hopped from one face to the other. “Advice is a funny thing. A lot of guys can give it who can’t take it. Me, I’m like that. Maybe you’re smarter, so I’ll give you some. Don’t come telling me what I can do and what I can’t do. And tell whoever sent you that if he gets in my way I’ll stamp him flat. You read me?”

“Loud and clear.” The tired grin was back on the older man’s face. “I’ll tell him that. But confidentially, it could be you’re biting off a pretty big piece. The guy who sent us don’t stamp easy.” He motioned for his partner to precede him, stopped at the door. “Like I said, this was just a social call. It could be we’ll be seeing you again.” He pulled open the door, followed his partner into the hall, closed the door softly behind them.

The door to the bathroom opened, a white-faced Muggsy came out. She looked from Johnny to the hall door and back. “They meant business, Johnny.”

Liddell shook his head. “It was like they said. They just dropped by to give me some advice. If they meant business, they’d have come heeled.” He stuck the .45 back into its holster.

“There’s always another time. Why take the chance of—”

“I like to take chances. When I applied for my license I knew it was no way to break ninety. These characters aren’t the first to figure they could break my winning streak. And they won’t be the last. A lot of them who tried never got to know the final score.”

Muggsy bobbed her head. “So you’ve been lucky. But it only takes one, Johnny. You don’t get to reshoot this action. There’s only one take.”

“You’ve been out here too long. You’re going chicken on me.”

The redhead shrugged. “You want to call it that, call it that. All I know is that Evans is dead. It won’t do him any good for you to move into the morgue with him. He isn’t likely to get lonesome. And I am.”

“You worry too much. Maybe my head is pointed but I like it just the way it is—without any holes in it. And I intend to keep it that way.”

The phone jangled on the table, Liddell consulted his watch.

“That should be your old man. Unless it’s the desk announcing another unconducted tour.” He reached for the phone, held it to his ear.

“New York calling Mr. Johnny Liddell,” a metallic voice droned in his ear. “This Mr. Liddell?”

“Speaking.”

“One moment for Mr. Kiely in New York.” There was a faint click. “Hello? I have Mr. Liddell on the wire, Mr. Kiely.”

Jim Kiely’s voice came through clear, staccato. “Hello, Johnny. What’s the scoop?”

“I’ve got an exclusive for you, Jim. Remember the Hollywood agent named Barney Evans supposed to have committed suicide a couple of weeks back?”

“What do you mean supposed to have?”

“He didn’t. He was murdered. It can be real juicy. There are some big names involved—Tony Agnelli, Mickey Denton, the singer—” He broke off. “You get it exclusive. Interested?” He waved for Muggsy to put her ear against his at the receiver.

There was a brief pause. “I sure am. What have you got?”

Muggsy glanced at Liddell, nodded.

“Nothing concrete. I need someone to underwrite the investigation and to give me official standing—”

“Whoa, whoa,” the receiver cautioned. “I’m interested in the story if and when you can back it up. But I can’t commit the paper on the off chance you can deliver. When you’ve got it, we’ll buy. But until you can make it stick, don’t use our name as a client.”

“Why not?”

“I can tell you why not in one word—libel. When the *Mirror* here reopened the Hall-Mills case, it cost them \$50,000 when they couldn’t come up with a conviction. That one’s made us all gun-shy.” He paused for a second. “Another thing. You say Agnelli and his boys are mixed up in it?”

“To their eyeballs.”

“All the more reason we need something to get our teeth into before we move. Tony’s mighty sensitive about publicity and he’s got a bunch of high-class lawyers to back him up.”

Liddell growled. “So you’re afraid, too?”

Kiely’s soft sigh came across the wire. “Not afraid. Just cautious. You come up with proof there was a murder and enough evidence to satisfy the d.a. and we’ll back you all the way.” He paused for a second. “Our impression was that Evans worked for Agnelli. Why should he have him hit?”

“Maybe he got tired of the way he combed his hair. Working for Agnelli is no way to grow old gracefully. You know that. When he fires them they don’t even have to worry about severance pay. There’s no pocket in a shroud.”

Kiely’s chuckle came across the wire. “Just the same, come up with the proof, we’ll come up with the loot.”

“Thanks for nothing,” Liddell growled.

“Look, Johnny, let’s not get feisty. I’m not even asking you what my daughter is doing up in your hotel room.” Before Liddell could retort there was a click at the other end. He dropped the receiver back on its hook, looked at the redhead. “I just hope he doesn’t have a license for that shotgun of his.”

Muggsy frowned. “Why? What’d he say?”

“He wanted to know what you were doing in my hotel room.”

Muggsy shook her head impatiently. “I mean about the case. He didn’t buy?”

Liddell shook his head. “That about makes it unanimous.”

“And you’re still not convinced?”

Liddell considered, shook his head. “I’m still not convinced.”

“Connell must have really done a job with that diving neckline,” Muggsy muttered. “If that’s what you’ve decided, that’s what you’ve decided. So, what happened to that invitation to dinner at Dino’s? As long as it’s going to be a short life, it may as well be a merry one.”

# 9.

Dino's was crowded.

Johnny Liddell and Muggsy Kiely sat at one of the rear tables in the lower section that seemed suspended over the multicolored carpet of variegated lights spread out below them. A light rain had sprung up, giving the lights a blurry, soft hue.

Liddell fidgeted nervously with his fork, stared out over the view beyond.

"Where did I lose you, Sherlock?" the redhead wanted to know. "I've been talking a blue streak and you didn't hear a word."

Liddell dragged his attention back from the panorama of Hollywood and Beverly Hills. "Sorry, Muggs, I was trying to figure out how to lick this one."

"You've had the wild night life for tonight, I take it?"

He grinned. "If you don't mind?"

The redhead shrugged. "I can do my monologue any place." She stood up as he motioned for a check, laid a twenty on the plate and waved away the change. "I'll drop you off at your place."

He followed her to the door, waited while the bare-headed parking attendant loped down the driveway to the parking space in the rear. Muggsy shuddered as he zoomed her Jag back up the hill, kicked it to a screeching, bone-jarring stop in front of them. He showed no sign of enthusiasm at the two quarters Liddell handed him.

"The other two are going into a fund to put a new rear end in the car," Liddell told him.

The attendant was standing on the ramp, dragging his comb through his high pompadour as Muggsy rolled the Jag out onto the boulevard, fitted it into the light traffic. Liddell amused himself trying to write the dialogue for the muttered comments the attendant sent after him.

He settled back in his seat, stared out the rain-streaked window at the shops and restaurants that line this portion of the Strip.

"What are you thinking, Johnny?" Muggsy wanted to know.

“I’m wondering if this isn’t one time I should listen to other people. If everybody is satisfied that Evans committed suicide and if nobody is willing to pick up the hot to prove otherwise, why bang my head against the wall?”

“Now you’re thinking constructively,” Muggsy approved. “Hold on to that thought. The Evans case is as cold as a stepmother’s kiss. All you can get is grief. Even if it means you go back to New York, I’m still glad you’re showing some sense.”

“I did promise Ann Connell—”

“That you’d look into it. Okay, so you looked into it. You kept your promise. You still don’t have anything that could make the d.a. change his mind that it was suicide, do you? So what are you supposed to do? Find out who killed him, then be judge, jury and executioner?” She turned, studied his face. “It wouldn’t be the first gang killing that was never solved. The files are full of them.”

“You’re probably right,” Liddell conceded. “But I still hate to throw in my cards without giving it a try.”

“You have. Tell you what I’ll do. I’ll let you buy me a nightcap in the Blue Room. Just to celebrate your showing some sense.”

Liddell continued to stare out at the rain-darkened streets. “I’ll have to tell Ann Connell. She gets home Sunday.”

Muggsy nodded. “So that’s Sunday. Tonight’s tonight. Do you buy me that drink?”

Liddell checked his watch. “You talked me into it.” In the dim light, the face of his watch showed 11:20. “I’ve got a bottle up in the room and—”

“I’m happy, but not that happy,” the redhead told him. “We’ll have our nightcap in the Blue Room.”

It didn’t turn out exactly that way.

The telephone on the night table next to the bed started to jangle. Johnny Liddell groaned, opened one eye warily, blinked at the thin strip of gray light that showed under the drawn shade. He peered at the clock alongside the telephone, managed to decipher the time as 9 o’clock. The color of the light under the shade identified it as a.m.

Liddell dug his head under the covers, hoped the phone would go away. But it continued to ring with a shrillness that set his teeth on edge. He

reached a hand from under the covers, snagged the instrument from its cradle. For a moment, he debated the advisability of leaving the receiver off the hook, dropped the decision. He held it to his ear.

“Yeah?” he said.

“This is Charley Nelson, Liddell. I’ve got to see you right away. There’s been a development—”

Liddell groaned. “Do you have to sound so cheerful at this ungodly hour? Do you know what time it is? I only got to bed at—”

“So you’ll catch up on your sleep some other time. I just got a tip on something that might tell us the reason Evans was killed. I don’t want to discuss it over the phone, but if you can meet me—”

“Forget it,” Liddell growled. “I’m off the case by unanimous vote. As far as I’m concerned, Evans could have died from old age.”

“You can’t quit now, Liddell.”

“I already have, Charley.”

There was a brief pause. “I had you wrong, shamus. I had you mixed up with a guy with guts.” There was a loud bang at the other end of the line as the reporter slammed her receiver down on its hook.

Liddell rubbed his ear ruefully, glared at the receiver. He dropped it back on its hook, swung his legs from under the covers, winced as his feet touched the cold floor. He walked over to the window, ran up the shade, looked out over the city.

The smoke blowing from smokestacks in the distance was merging with the haze which overcast the city. The day itself was bright enough, but the blue of the sky was hidden behind the low-hanging smog.

Liddell raked his fingers through his hair, tried to justify his decision to walk away from the case. No one knew better than he that no one can win them all. This one was one of those jewel-smooth gang kills where not a loose thread was left, where there wasn’t a chance to pin it on anyone. The only excuse for knocking his head against the wall was the promise he had made to the movie star. He felt sure she’d understand when—and if—he could convince her that he’d done his best.

He reached over to the bureau for a pack of cigarettes, stuck one in the corner of his mouth, lit it in a futile effort to get rid of the bad taste.



He knew what Charley Nelson thought of him, and he didn't blame her. Encouraged by his apparent interest in the case, she had started digging into it again, could end up by sticking her neck into a noose. He swore softly, blew smoke at the window, watched it curl slowly under the sill out into the morning air.

After a moment, he walked back to the telephone, dialed the number of the *Express*. A brassy-voiced operator informed him that Miss Nelson had called in to say she'd be out several days. There was no way the operator could give him Miss Nelson's home address. It was against the policy of the *Express* to give out personal information on its staff.

Liddell tossed the receiver on its hook, reached for the telephone directory. He riffled through the pages until he came to the page headed NELS-NELS. He ran his finger down the list of Nelsons, decided that they must have settled Los Angeles from the number of them. He threw the telephone book down on the bed in disgust.

He picked up the telephone, dialed the number of Production City, asked for Muggsy Kiely. After a moment, the redhead's voice came through.

"What are you doing up so early?" she wanted to know after she recognized his voice. "I thought only us working stiffs could operate on four hours' sleep."

"Remind me not to invite you to my room after you close every bar in the neighborhood," he told her. "I just had to call down and ask the management to put teabags on the feet of that cat in 408." He touched his fingers to the side of his temple. "Ooh."

"If you called for sympathy, you're coming to the wrong place," the redhead told him. "On top of everything else, I had to drive home." She sighed softly. "What did you call for?"

"Do you have Charley Nelson's home phone number?"

There was a slight pause. "Don't tell me I got this head in vain? I thought we were celebrating you getting off the case?"

"I am. But she called here a little while ago and I brushed her off. I figure I at least owe her an explanation."

"I have it here some place," Muggsy sighed. There was a short wait. "Never can find anything when I want it in this—Oh, here is it. Charley Nelson—home—Riverside 7-3113."

Liddell scribbled it on the pad on the night table. "Thanks."

“Am I seeing you tonight?”

Liddell groaned. “Check the morgue. If I’m not registered, give me a call. I’ll be still in bed.”

“You in bed and me sweating over a hot typewriter. There ain’t no justice,” Muggsy told him. “I’ll call you around eight.”

Liddell depressed the bar on the phone, waited until he had a dial tone. He dialed the reporter’s home number, waited. The sound of the ring on the other end pounded in his ear like a compressed air hammer. Finally, a metallic voice answered.

“Miss Nelson’s wire.”

Liddell frowned. “This her home or an answering service?”

“Her answering service. Would you care to leave a message?”

“Expect to hear from her?” Liddell wanted to know.

“She usually checks in every three hours. I spoke to her about fifteen minutes ago. I expect her to call again at twelve.”

“Have her call Johnny Liddell at the Chateau Montrose. I’ll be here most of the day.”

“Thank you.” The wire went dead.

Liddell took a last drag on his cigarette, crushed it out. He felt unaccountably depressed and the grayness of the day did nothing to help. He jumped back into bed, pulled the covers up around his neck. He was asleep in less than five minutes.

# 10.

Benny Welton sprawled in the wing chair in the living room of his North Hollywood apartment, stared out into the early evening haze that hung over the city. Already a few neons were staining the sky, but it was too early for most of the lights.

He was brooding over the bad deal he had made with Harry Jacobs.

At the time it seemed like a great idea. He got a hundred and fifty big ones for the five hundred thousand in ransom money, but he knew the hundred and fifty was clean. There was no way to be sure about the ransom money. Now, he cursed himself for making such a stupid deal.

It was over a month since Jacobs bought the ransom money. He knew Jacobs well enough to know that a big broker like him wouldn't sit on it more than a couple of weeks. Already a good chunk of that money was probably in circulation.

Every night, Welton had Bunty bring in every newspaper he could lay his hands on. He read them from cover to cover, looking for some hint that some of the money had turned up. There hadn't been a ripple. He had outsmarted himself out of three hundred and fifty thousand. He had taken all the risks of the snatch, had to work out all the details of the pay-off, take his chances that the Cheyney kid's parents hadn't contacted the FBI. And what did Jacobs do? Nothing. And he ended up with three hundred and fifty and Welton got a lousy one-fifty.

There was a tap at the door. He got up, walked over and pulled it open. Bunty walked in with an armful of papers, dropped them on the table. He was a heavy-shouldered man with a cue ball for a head, twisted pieces of cartilage for ears and a flattened nose. His eyebrows were twisted bits of scar tissue testifying to his failure to solve the intricacies of a right cross in his early days.

The name Bunty, too, was a relic of his days in the ring. He got it the night he was disqualified in a Garden semifinal for using the top of his head to split open an opponent's eyebrow.

Following his disqualification, he indignantly told reporters that he got a dirty deal. "He bunted me, so I bunt him," he protested. The next morning in

his sports column Dan Parker had baptized him Bunty and the nickname had stuck.

He walked over to the open bottle on the coffee table in front of the oversized couch, spilled some into a glass. He drank it neat, watched while Welton started his nightly routine of checking the papers from front to end.

When Benny had satisfied himself that there was no news of any hot money turning up, he cleared the papers off the table with a sweep of his arm, swore fervently. “He jobbed us, the dirty bastard. That money was as good as gold and he takes it away from us for thirty cents on the dollar,” he complained.

Bunty poured himself another drink, tossed it off in one swallow. “Like this we’re living, ain’t that right?” he offered philosophically. “We sat on that money for a year eating in greasy spoons, scared to break it out.” He looked around the apartment approvingly. “Me, I figure it’s better to live like this on thirty cents on the dollar than starve with loot we can’t touch.”

Welton swore at the big man, stalked over, took the bottle from his hand, poured himself a drink. “Maybe thirty cents on the dollar’s good enough for you, but it ain’t for me.” He slammed the bottle down on the coffee table. “You think a hundred and a half lasts forever, maybe? The way we been living we’ll be out hustling again in a year. With a half a million—” He shook his head, tilted the glass over his mouth.

“So while we got it, we might as well enjoy it, am I right?” Bunty demanded. “Let’s get out of here and go over to Millie’s joint. I hear there’s some new stuff. Real movie stuff.”

“What difference would that make to you? You’ll end up with that fat cow of a Pearl anyhow. You do every time we go there.”

Bunty grinned, “She’s got something I go for,” he conceded. “But you like variety. And if it’s real movie stuff—”

Welton wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Movie stuff?” he snorted. “I never saw a broad in that joint that could get in the movies even by buying a ticket.” He set his glass down.

“What else we got to do?” Bunty argued. “At least like that we take a walk and get some air.”

Welton glared around the well-furnished apartment. “Maybe we might as well. I’m beginning to get cabin fever holed up here.” His eyes stopped on

the scattered papers on the floor. “I was sure these Cheyney creeps let the Feds in on it. I had it figured that money was marked.”

“Maybe Jacobs hasn’t started passing it.”

“Jacobs? He wouldn’t sit on it. Him and the rest of the big brokers might have started passing it slow to see if it kicked back. But they wouldn’t hold it this long.” Welton shook his head. “By now there would have been a kickback.”

“So next time we’ll know. So let’s go over to Millie’s,” Bunty persisted.

“Okay,” Welton agreed grudgingly.

He walked over, lifted his jacket off the back of a chair, shrugged into it. From force of habit, he checked under his left arm, remembered that as a well-to-do man about town he didn’t have to carry a gun. A habit of years’ standing is a hard one to break.

Bunty led the way out of the apartment to the elevator. They rode to the lobby in silence, left the cage and headed for the street.

A tall, tired-looking man sat in a chair in the lobby reading the *Express*. He looked up as they crossed the lobby, dropped his eyes when Benny Welton glanced over to where he sat.

Welton saw a long horse-like face, shrewd looking in a thin-lipped, pinch-nosed sort of way. The man in the chair wore his long hair pasted back against his skull in an unsuccessful effort to cover a bald spot. Welton frowned slightly as the face rang a faint note of familiarity.

He was still frowning over it, trying to remember where he had seen the man, when they stepped out into the street.

“You make the guy sitting in the lobby, Bunty?” he wanted to know.

“What guy?”

“The horse-faced guy reading the paper. I got a feeling like I saw him some place before.”

Bunty shrugged, lost in happy anticipation of what lay ahead at Millie’s. “You probably seen him coming down in the elevator. Something like that, you know?”

Welton bobbed his head. “I guess so.” But he couldn’t shake the conviction that he had seen the other man in different surroundings and

under different circumstances. It stuck with him all night despite the distractions that Millie's fresh stock offered.

After the two men had left the lobby, the horse-faced man got up and walked to the door. He watched until they had turned the far corner, then he headed back to the elevator. He walked over to the operator who stood operating on a rear molar with his thumbnail.

"Was that Mr. Parsons who just came down with you?"

The elevator operator stared at him impassively. "I didn't notice."

The horse-faced man's hand disappeared into his pocket, reappeared with a folded bill. "I'm waiting for Mr. Parsons. I hope I didn't miss him."

The folded bill changed hands. "I don't know no Mr. Parsons," the operator told him. "But that couldn't have been him. The big guy is Mr. Warren and the little guy is Mr. Welton. They're in 702." He went back to work on his rear tooth, regarded the horse-faced man with no show of curiosity.

"Maybe I better call my friend, make sure he hasn't left," the thin man said. "Is there a public telephone around?"

The elevator operator shook his head. "Not in here. There's a phone around the corner in the hotel."

The horse-faced man nodded, crossed the lobby to the street.

Harry Jacobs stood at the window of his suite, looked out over Lake Michigan. A cold wind was whipping the water into whitecaps and he shivered involuntarily. He walked back to his comfortably upholstered chair and dropped into it. From his breast pocket he brought a cigarette holder, absently screwed a cigarette into it. He tilted the holder from the corner of his mouth, chewed on it nervously.

The telephone rang at his elbow, startled him. He lifted the receiver off its hook, carried it to his ear. "Yes?"

"A person-to-person call for you, Mr. Jay. From Los Angeles."

"Put them through. And, Bunny—stay off the line."

There was an indignant snort, then the click as she put the call through.

"Mr. Jay? Mendel. I see our friend today."

"Where?"

“He has an apartment in North Hollywood. He has the big moose with him. They just went out.”

Jacobs pulled a pad over to him, picked up a pencil. “What’s the address?”

“Carlyle Apartments. 2850 Murdock. He’s using his own name.”

“Why shouldn’t he?” Jacobs snapped.

The voice on the other end was apologetic. “No reason, Mr. Jay. No reason. I—I just thought I’d mention it.”

“Okay. Stay away from him now. I’ll be out as soon as I can get away from here.” He looked out at the foul weather on the other side of the window pane. “Tomorrow probably. You still at the hotel?”

“Yeah.”

“Stay there. I may need you some more. I’ll call you as soon as I arrive.”

# 11.

Johnny Liddell sat at the bar of Patsy D'Amore's Villa Capri, making overlapping circles on the mahogany with the wet bottom of his glass. Muggsy Kiely, perched on the barstool at his side, signaled for the green-jacketed bartender to build a refill for both of them.

"Wouldn't you figure a dame like Nelson would keep in touch with her answering service?" Liddell checked his wristwatch, squinted in the dimness of the room to make the time at 9:05. "I've called four times since she got me out of bed this morning. Her service says she hasn't checked in. And that's rare."

"You said she had a new lead. Maybe she's running it down."

Liddell surrendered his empty glass to Johnny, the bartender, accepted a fresh Ballantine on the rocks. Muggsy smiled at the man behind the bar, swapped her empty glass for a full one.

"You tried her apartment?"

Liddell bobbed his head. "Hasn't been there all day. Or else she's not answering her phone."

"You know—you might have something there. You said she sounded teed-off when you said you were off the case. Maybe she just opened a fresh bottle of scotch and spent the day sulking."

Liddell considered it. "Could be." He sloshed the liquor over the ice in his glass. "You know where her pad is?"

"The Delroy Apartments. Downtown. Not very fancy, but convenient to the *Express*. You want to drop in on her?"

"If it's not too far out of the way. No sense of any hard feelings. When I read her the score, she'll stop sulking. She probably thinks I got either scared off or bought off."

Muggsy took a deep swallow from her glass. "I'm with you." She held it to her lips again, drained it. "Nothing should go to waste." She grinned.

Liddell slid off his chair. "Anyway, I'm curious to know what she stumbled on."



Muggsy headed past the piano bar to the entrance, stood talking to Patsy while Liddell settled the bar bill, joined her. The restaurant man accompanied them out to the ramp, chatted with them until the attendant brought the Jag from the lot.

It had started to rain again while they were in the restaurant. Liddell found his seat uncomfortably wet, muttered his opinion of convertibles as Muggsy spun the car out onto Yucca, headed for Highland and the Freeway.

It was a twenty-minute ride on the congested Freeway to the downtown exit where Muggsy swung off.

The Delroy Apartments were housed in a nondescript old stone building on a side street two blocks off the square. During the day, Chauncey Street is clogged with heavy trucks lumbering toward the railroad station, but by night it is practically deserted.

An occasional car barreled through, swung around them and disappeared as a winking red light ahead. On the sidewalk a few pedestrians ambled along, umbrellas over their heads or coats clutched together in front. A handful of street lamps spilled an ineffectual light on the sidewalk and into the gutter. The light formed puddles at the foot of the poles, spread to the building line, leaving the alleyways and the unlighted entrances to most of the buildings in shadow.

Muggsy Kiely rolled the Jag a few feet beyond the entrance to the Delroy Apartments, braked it to a stop in front of a sign marked: *No Parking—Loading Zone*.

“That’s only for the daytime when the trucks are being loaded along the street here,” she explained to Liddell as he laboriously unfolded himself from the low-slung car, joined her on the sidewalk. He looked up at the unprepossessing façade of the building. It was grimy and neglected looking.

“Not exactly the Waldorf Towers.”

“Charley’s lived here since it was a fashionable neighborhood. It’s so convenient to her office she never bothered to move.”

“Since it was fashionable? Nobody could be that old,” Liddell said. He turned up the collar of his jacket, caught the redhead by the elbow and herded her to the entrance of the building.

Inside, the lobby was dingy, cheerless. A thread-bare and faded red carpet ran its entire length. The chairs scattered around it in an attempt to provide a homelike atmosphere were rickety, unsafe looking. The artificial

rubber plants had long outgrown their original function of proving decorative, now were forlorn looking, dirt grimed. The air of decay and degeneration was heavy throughout.

Liddell wrinkled his nose, looked around. “What floor’s she on?”

“Apartment 218. There’s an elevator in the rear of the lobby,” the redhead told him. She led the way across the lobby.

Inside the ancient elevator, Liddell jabbed at the button marked 2, was rewarded by the doors creaking together. The cage itself swayed and groaned its way upward, came to a sudden, bone-shattering stop at the second floor. The doors creaked complainingly as they slid back.

The carpeting in the corridor was even more faded than that in the lobby. Its backing was exposed where the nap had been worn away by generations of tenants. Liddell stepped outside the elevator, stood for a moment to get his bearings.

Two-eighteen was at the rear of the building. He motioned to Muggsy to follow him, led the way.

He stopped outside the reporter’s room, knocked on the door. There was no sound from inside. He waited for a moment, knocked again. This time, when there was no answer, he tried the knob. The door was unlocked, the knob turned easily in his hand. He frowned, pushed the door open, squinted into the darkness of the room beyond. A sickly sweet odor, spiced with an acrid smell assailed his nostrils, made him wrinkle his nose.

He swore softly under his breath, tugged the .45 from its hammock, reached into the room, felt along the wall for the light switch. He snapped it on, spilled yellow light into the room from an overhead fixture.

The room was a luxurious contrast to the griminess of the building. Comfortable armchairs were scattered around the room, one wall had been made into a book-case, another accommodated an expensive looking hi-fi.

But now the room was a shambles. Books had been tumbled out of their shelves, two large colonial lamps with matching eagle shades lay on their sides. The contents of a small desk had been dumped on the floor, an end table had been ruthlessly smashed.

Liddell motioned for Muggsy to stay put, walked into the room. Here the sickly sweet smell was more marked. At the end of the room, a curtained area revealed a small kitchenette. Here the damage had been continued.

Liddell swore under his breath, investigated one of the two doors leading off the room. It was a lavatory.

The other door opened into a bedroom. He stood in the doorway, drew his breath through his teeth. The contents of the closets had been emptied on the floor. The drawers of the dresser had been pulled out, emptied into an untidy pile. Everything in the room gave evidence of a frenzied search.

Liddell lost the struggle to keep his eyes off the thing on the bed. Charley Nelson lay across the bed, one arm hanging over the side, the other across her head as if in a futile effort to ward off the shot that had ended her life.

Alive, Charley Nelson had never been attractive. Death, particularly in the form it took, did nothing to improve her appearance.

The bullet had entered above the cheekbone on the left side of her face, had taken a piece of her jaw with it where it had exited low on the right side. A red stream that ran from the corner of her mouth had congealed into a small pool alongside her head. Her eyes were staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

Liddell swore helplessly. He walked over, poked the muzzle of his gun at a pillow that lay close to her. A small cloud of feathers floated up into the air as he turned the pillow over. On the other side there was a blackened area and some charring where a gun had evidently been pressed against it to muffle the sound of the shot.

Muggsy Kiely crossed the living room toward the bedroom door.

Liddell stepped out, closed the door behind him.

“Mice?” the redhead wanted to know. Her serious expression belied the banter in her tone.

“Rats,” Liddell grunted.

She stopped, looked from him to the closed door and back. “Johnny, is Charley in there?”

Liddell nodded. “She’s dead.” When Muggsy tried to squeeze past him, he blocked her. “There’s nothing you can do for her.”

She pushed past him, opened the door. She gave a half-strangled gasp, tried to swallow her fist. The color drained from her face, she turned away, leaned her head against the wall. Liddell closed the door to the bedroom, shutting off the view of the dead woman.

He took the redhead by the arm, led her to a chair. She sank into it heavily. Under the relentless glare of the overhead light, her face was chalky, had a greenish tinge.

“She didn’t deserve that.” She shook her head. “She didn’t deserve to die like that.” She buried her face in her hands, her shoulders heaved.

“It’s my fault,” Liddell told her grimly. “If I hadn’t tried to stampede Denton, she might still be alive.” He pounded the heel of his hand with a clenched fist. “It’s my fault.”

The redhead looked up at him, shook her head. “It’s nobody’s fault. You always say it yourself. It goes with the job. Charley knew the risks she was taking—”

There was the sound of heavy footsteps in the hallway, Johnny Liddell went for his .45. The door was slammed open, two uniformed patrolmen stood in the opening. One had his gun in hand, the other was tugging his from its holster.

The younger of the two cops trained his .38 special at Liddell’s midsection. “Okay, mister. Bring it out with two fingers. And they better not be near the trigger.”

“Take it easy,” Liddell cautioned. “I’m a private detective—”

The cop’s finger whitened on the trigger. “I couldn’t care less who you are or what you are. I told you to bring that gun out with two fingers.”

Liddell sighed, lifted the gun out of its holster with thumb and forefinger, brought it into view.

“Now drop it and kick it across the floor,” the cop ordered.

When Liddell complied, the young cop’s partner squeezed past him into the room, circled around behind Liddell. With his partner’s gun on Johnny, the older cop patted him down expertly. “He’s clean, Vince.”

The younger cop relaxed the pressure of his finger on the trigger. “Have a look around, see what you can find, Ray,” the cop named Vince suggested. “I’ll keep an eye on these two.” His gun hand was steady, the muzzle of his .38 stared Liddell down.

The older cop checked the lavatory, headed for the bedroom.

“There’s a dead woman in there,” Liddell told him. “She was dead when we got here.”

The cop with the gun ignored him, waited until his partner reappeared from the bedroom, wiping his face with a balled handkerchief. “One for Homicide, Vince.” He turned, squinted at Liddell. “You do that to her, Mac?”

Liddell snorted at him. “Take a look at the gun. It hasn’t been fired. You think I shot her then sat around here cleaning the gun?”

The older cop walked over to where the gun lay against the wall. He fished a pencil from his tunic, poked it through the trigger guard, picked it up. He lifted the muzzle to his nose, sniffed. “He’s right. It hasn’t been fired.”

“That’s not our headache,” the young cop growled. “Let Homicide worry about that. Our only responsibility is to see to it that nothing is touched.”

The older cop assumed a pained expression. “You don’t have to quote the book for me, Vince.” He laid the gun down on a table.

“Sorry. Force of habit.”

“I know.” The older cop circled Liddell, making certain not to come between him and his partner’s gun. “I’ll use the manager’s phone to call it in. Might as well talk to him while I’m at it. He made the squeal.”

“Mind if we smoke?” Liddell wanted to know.

The young cop considered it. “You got any cigarettes, miss?” he wanted to know.

“In my bag.”

He reached out. “Let me have it, please?” She handed the bag to him. He satisfied himself there was no gun in it, handed it back to her. “Okay. You can smoke. And you might as well get comfortable. I’ve got a few questions here to be answered.” He walked over to the table where Liddell’s gun lay, put his .38 alongside it. Then he tugged a leather memo book from his hip pocket. He wet the point of his pencil on the tip of his tongue, looked to Liddell.

“Now, for the record, who are you, mister? What are you doing here?”

“Name’s Johnny Liddell. I’m a licensed private detective. The dead woman’s name is Charlene Nelson. She’s a feature writer for the *Express*.”

The officer made some notes. “You didn’t say what you were doing here?”

“Miss Nelson called me this morning, wanted me to do some work for her. I telephoned her all day—” He ignored the quizzical look on the cop’s face. “She didn’t check in for her calls, which is unusual. So we came out to see if anything was wrong.”

“All of this can be checked, you know.”

Liddell nodded wearily.

The door opened and the older cop herded in a thin, nervous-looking man with a shock of wild hair. His eyes hopped around the place, his Adam’s apple bobbed nervously.

“This is McCabe, the manager of the place. He says he called for us because there was an awful racket going on up here earlier tonight.”

The young cop turned to the manager. “How long ago?”

McCabe coughed nervously. “A couple of hours, maybe—”

“A couple of hours ago? Why didn’t you call then?”

The Adam’s apple bobbed piteously, the thin man dry-washed his hands. “I didn’t want to make trouble for Miss Nelson. She’s one of our oldest tenants. And she doesn’t have too many parties. But Mrs. McCabe—that’s my wife—she kept insisting.” He shrugged. “So just to keep the peace I called to ask for a policeman.”

“Better late than never, I guess,” the young cop sighed. He looked at his partner. “This one insists he’s a licensed investigator. Mind checking, Ray?”

The older cop walked over, came up behind Liddell. “The papers, mister.” Liddell brought his folder out of his breast pocket, passed it back to the cop. He riffled through it, checked the photostats of Liddell’s license, handed the wallet back, nodded to his partner. “He’s licensed.”

“How about you, miss? You got a name?”

“Now, look. The manager just said the commotion took place here a couple of hours ago,” Muggsy told him. “We can prove where we’ve been all day—”

“Better do like my partner says, miss,” the older cop told her. “He’s the new breed—the college cop. They do everything by the book. It says in the book he has to have your name.”

The younger cop ignored his partner. “Your name, please.”

“Veronica Kiely. I’m a contract writer at Magna Studios. And my bosses get very nervous when high-priced help like me gets pushed around, because it upsets me so much it’ll be days before I can write a line—”

“Nobody’s pushing you around, Miss Kiely. The regulations say—”

The redhead smiled at him sweetly. “Does it say in the regulations what happens to a cop who makes it unpleasant for representatives of a studio like Magna? My impression is that the book says this could get the shine taken off a bright young cop by pasturing him out in the sticks.”

The young cop looked uncertain, glanced at his partner for advice.

The older cop shrugged. “It’s your party.”

The young cop snapped his book shut. “I’m merely doing what’s expected of me in a situation like this, Miss Kiely. It’s my duty to do the preliminary questioning before the Homicide Squad takes over.” He stowed the book in his hip pocket. “You can do anything you like, except leave. After Homicide takes over it’s up to them whether they take you in for questioning or not.”

Somewhere there was the screech of a siren.

The manager winced, shook his head. “I’ve asked a hundred times that you boys turn your siren off when you’re coming here. Mrs. McCabe will be very much upset. She says it hurts the reputation of the place.”

The older cop grinned at him. “You kidding?” He turned, walked out into the hall, waited at the head of the stairs for the Homicide men. When they stepped up onto the landing, he indicated the open door to 218, followed the plainclothesmen back, closed the door behind them.

The plainclothesmen were old-timers, took the scene in their stride.

“Where is it?” the first one in wanted to know.

“In the bedroom,” the young cop told him.

The second plainclothesman stopped, grinned at the young cop. “Hell, we got no problem on this one, Murph,” he called to his partner. “Look what we got on the scene. A real honest to God college-trained cop. By now he probably has it all wrapped up. And the scientific way, too. Look at the suspect. Not a mark on him.”

“He’s not necessarily a suspect, Sergeant Wills,” the young cop snapped. “I kept him here as a possible witness.”

The detective called Murph disappeared into the bedroom, reappeared a few seconds later. “We’ll leave her for the doc. She’s real dead. Has been for a couple of hours from the look of things.” He turned to the college cop. “You noticed that, didn’t you, Rellis—the degree of coagulation, I mean?”

“I didn’t examine the body, Sergeant Murphy. According to regulations I merely—”

Murphy held up his hand in mock surrender. “I know, I know. You are to detain all possible suspects and witnesses for interrogation by the Homicide Division. You’ve done real handsome. Now why don’t you and Ray get back to your kiddy car and scare the hell out of some spooners?”

The older patrolman grinned, followed his partner as he hightailed it into the hall.

Murph looked after them, sighed. “I’m glad my retirement’s less than five years away. Imagine having that for a skipper?” He walked over, stood with his hands on his hips, studied Liddell and the redhead. “My name’s Murphy. My partner is Wills. Mind going through the same routine with me you went through with the uniformed men?”

“I’m Johnny Liddell, a licensed private detective—”

Murphy pursed his lips. “The one who broke the Dirk Messner case out in Beverly Hills a few months ago?”

“That’s right.”

The plainclothesman nodded for him to continue.

“Miss Nelson was working on something where she needed some help. She called me this morning, was supposed to call back. I tried to reach her all day, but she never checked in with her answering service, so I came out here to see her.” He tossed his head at the closed bedroom door. “We found her like that.”

“We?” The homicide man turned to Muggsy. “Who’s this? Dr. Watson?”

“This is Miss Kiely. She’s a writer for Magna Studios. I had dinner and a few drinks with her at the Villa Capri just before coming here.”

“Okay. That takes care of you two.” Murphy turned to the thin manager. “What’s your story, mister?”

McCabe licked at his lips, his Adam’s apple bobbed in tune to a series of nervous barks. “I’m the manager of the building. This evening”—his eyes rolled in an effort at concentration—“I’d say it was before 7:30, there was a



terrible din from this apartment—” He broke off, brought his eyes back into focus. “Mrs. McCabe persuaded me to come up and quiet them down. When I got up here it was quiet—” He smiled apologetically. “I didn’t see the necessity for coming in as long as the noise had stopped. But Mrs. McCabe wanted to make sure it shouldn’t happen again. So I notified the police there was a disturbance here.”

“The disturbance you heard was probably the killer finishing her off. If you came in, you might have been able to save her life.”

McCabe paled at the prospect, punctuated it with another series of nervous barks.

Murphy turned to his partner. “Take him downstairs and get a statement from him, his wife and anybody else who heard anything.”

He waited until the door had closed behind them. “Probably a good thing he didn’t come in. We would have had two stiff. He’d probably have dropped dead of fright.” He saw the .45 on the table. “Yours?”

Liddell nodded.

The Homicide man walked over, stuck his finger through the trigger guard, smelled the muzzle. “Hasn’t been fired.” He weighed the gun in the palm of his hand. “Nice iron.” He walked back to Liddell, held the gun out to him butt first. “You wouldn’t have any idea what the killer was looking for?”

Liddell shook his head.

The plainclothesman surveyed the damage. “Could have been a sneak thief. Place like this is a palace compared to the rest of the neighborhood. Word could be out that she had a lot of money on hand.” He shook his head. “Never could figure why women live alone.”

Muggsy flashed a glance at Liddell. “Maybe because nobody asks them not to.”

“That’s as good a reason as any,” Murph conceded. He turned back to Liddell. “You planning on staying around town for a while?”

“I wasn’t. But I am now.”

The plainclothesman eyed him quizzically. “You wouldn’t be thinking of taking a hand in this?”

“It could be.”

Murph considered it, tugged at his ear lobe. “Trying to run down a sneak thief who panicked? I got the idea from television that you guys only got involved in the big ones.”

“How many men are you going to put on it?” Liddell wanted to know.

“You got any idea how many homicides we get in this neighborhood, mister? If it’s not a wino cutting up some other bum, it’s some hopped-up hustler bashing her pimp’s brains out with a bottle because he gave her one beating too many. Or maybe it’s a mugging in an alley for a couple of cents. Slashings and killings are a dime a dozen down here. We don’t have the time or the manpower to play Sherlock Holmes.” He looked around again. “We’ll give it the college try. Dust the place down for prints and maybe come up with somebody on record. Or maybe we’ll get real lucky and find someone who saw the killer leaving. But that’s all we have time for.” He brought his notebook out. “We can reach you at Magna Studios, did you say, Miss—”

“Kiely. Veronica Kiely.”

The plainclothesman copied the information down. “And where can we find you, Liddell?”

“Chateau Montrose.”

Murph looked up, grinned lewdly. “Brings back happy memories of when I was on vice. Quite a place in those days. I guess it’s slowed down a bit now though, eh?”

“So have its tenants,” Muggsy told him.

Murphy bobbed his head. “Happens to all of us.” He snapped his notebook shut, stowed it away. “If the d.a. thinks of anything he wants to ask either of you, we’ll be in touch.”

Liddell nodded his thanks to the plainclothesman, he and Muggsy headed out into the hall. They met the coroner’s men on their way up.

Neither had a word to say as they walked up to where the Jag was parked. Liddell jackknifed himself into the front seat, Muggsy slid behind the wheel.

She stared for a moment, then muttered an impolite epithet as she reached for the oblong card attached to her steering wheel.

“That lousy college cut-up.” She waved the card under Liddell’s nose. “He got the last word after all. He gave me a ticket for being parked in a loading area!”

## 12.

Johnny Liddell was silent all the way back to the Chateau Montrose. Muggsy glanced at him several times from the side of her eyes, decided to leave him to his brooding.

When she pulled up in front of the Chateau Montrose, she reached forward to switch off the ignition. He reached forward, caught her hand. “Not tonight, Muggs. I’ve got a lot I want to think about.”

She pouted. “Not even a nightcap?”

“Not even a nightcap.”

Impulsively she reached out, caught his hand, squeezed it. “I know what’s bugging you, Johnny. You think it’s your fault that Charley’s dead.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Not really. She was digging into Barney Evans’ murder long before you came on the scene. If what she had was so dangerous to them, it was only a question of time before they killed her. It might even be like that detective said. Some sneak thief who heard—”

“Forget it, Muggs,” Liddell cut her off. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Maybe I’ll be feeling better by then.” He pushed open the door to the Jag, managed to disentangle his legs, got out. “Maybe I wasn’t responsible for what happened to Charley. Let’s just say that I sure didn’t help her to break ninety.”

“You’ll feel better after a good night’s sleep.” The redhead touched her fingers to her lips, blew him a kiss. Then she roared the Jag into gear, headed back to the Strip, and west.

Liddell melted into the shadows of the building, waited until the blinking tail-light of her car was just a dot. Overhead, the Chateau Montrose neon was clicking on and off tirelessly, alternately dyeing the side street with light or drenching it with darkness. When the tail-light blinked out completely, Liddell walked out to the curb, waved down a cruising taxicab. He gave the cabby Mickey Denton’s address, sank back against the cushions and listened to the meter tick.

This time, knowing the number of Mickey Denton’s apartment, Johnny Liddell was able to bypass the security officer, headed directly for the

elevators. He called for the eleventh floor as he walked into the cage, leaned against the back wall. The operator made no effort to wipe the boredom out of his eyes, reached over and pushed the button marked *11*.

At the eleventh floor, Liddell got out, headed toward the rear of the building. When the doors had closed on the elevator and the indicator showed it was on its way back down, Liddell reversed his direction, headed for the red bulb that indicated the stairway. He walked down to the tenth floor, headed for Denton's apartment.

Rocky Castri opened the door in response to Liddell's knock, his eyes widened until the white showed around the pupils when he saw the gun in Liddell's hand. Slowly, wordlessly, he backed into the apartment. Liddell followed him, kicked the door shut.

"Who was it?" Denton called from an inside room.

Liddell motioned with the gun for Castri to bring the singer into the living room.

"You better come on out, Mike. It's for you," he managed.

"Can't you handle anything without screaming for me?" Denton yelled at him. He came stalking into the room, his shirt collar unbuttoned, a tie in his hand. He stopped stock still, his jaw dropped at the sight of Liddell.

"How'd you get up here?" he wanted to know.

"I got influence," Liddell snarled.

Denton stared at him, sneered, "You got a hole in your head, or you're bucking for one. I got influence, too. People who are going to get pretty mad about you waving guns at us." He looked at Castri. "You're the muscle around here, Rocky. Take it away from him."

Castri shook his head slowly. "You want the gun that bad, Singer, you take it away from him."

"Yeah, Singer, why don't you take it away from me?" Liddell's eyes jumped from Castri to Denton and back. "Your meatball is all soft inside. The only thing he's good for is beating up women. And killing them."

Some of the color drained from Castri's face. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Charley Nelson, a reporter from the *Express*, has a statement that puts you at Barney Evans' house the night he died. You suddenly show up from

whatever sewer you've been hiding in and Nelson gets killed. The killer tore her place apart looking for something. You find it, Killer?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Castri told him.

Liddell walked closer, stuck the muzzle of the .45 inches from Castri's face. "Maybe this will help your memory. Your face is nothing to brag about. But a .45 slug wouldn't improve it any."

"You're bluffing, Liddell, and you know it," Denton told him. "You haven't got a thing on Rocky or you wouldn't be here, the cops would. Suppose I say he was here with me all night, never went out?"

"You going to say that, Singer?" Liddell wanted to know.

"I might." Denton walked to the phone. "And now I'm going to call to have you thrown out of here." As he reached for the phone, Liddell stepped over, caught him by the arm, swung him around.

Liddell's left looped up, buried itself to the wrist in the Singer's midsection. Denton's eyes bulged, his mouth sagged open, the breath whooshed out of his lungs. His knees buckled under him, he sagged to the floor a bundle of arms and legs. He lay there gasping for breath, a stream of saliva gleaming from the side of his mouth.

Castri galvanized into action, came at Liddell. Johnny swung the hand with the .45. The side of the barrel caught the bodyguard across the side of the face, slammed him halfway across the room. A small table tangled in his legs, he crashed to the floor in its wreckage, moaning.

Liddell stuck the .45 back in its holster, walked over to the bodyguard, caught him by the shirt and pulled him to his feet. Castri stood swaying, his eyes unfocused and watery. A welt on the side of his face was already beginning to discolor, blood trickled from his nostrils and from the corner of his mouth.

"You get what you were looking for at Nelson's apartment?"

The bodyguard's head rolled uncontrollably from side to side. He made a visible effort to focus his eyes on Liddell. "I'll kill you for this," he managed to mutter. "I'll kill you."

"Don't move out of your class, Killer. You do real good killing women. Stick to that." Liddell slammed him across the side of his face with the back of his hand, knocked it to the side. He slapped it back into position. "That's a little something for Charley Nelson. And you're going to get it every time I see you until I nail you for the killing." He bunched the front of Castri's

shirt in his fist, pulled the shorter man off his feet onto the toes. “Did you get the statement?”

Castri licked at his lips, shook his head weakly. “There is no statement. There never was. I never went near Evans’ place and no one can say I did.”

“Then you did find it!” Liddell pushed him away, Castri stumbled, collapsed into a heap on the floor.

Liddell walked over to where Denton was trying to gasp his way back to full consciousness. He stood over him, looked down at him. “That’s the trouble with you amateurs, Singer. You don’t know when to leave well enough alone. You could have walked away from the Evans kill. But this one you’re paying for.”

Denton stared up at him, his hands laced across his tender midsection. “You’re dead, Liddell. You’re as dead as Evans or the monster. Agnelli won’t let you get away with this.”

Liddell sneered at him. “You think Agnelli would dirty his hands for something like you?”

Denton tried to fill his lungs with air, winced. He lay for a moment, mouth open, gasping for breath. Finally he muttered, “He will. He better.”

“Like that, huh?”

The singer nodded his head. “Like that, dead man.”

Liddell looked over to where Castri lay on his back, his mouth open, his breath rattling in his damaged nose, grinned. “If he sends anything after me, tell him he better use the first team. There’s not much fun without a little competition.”

The man on the floor continued to nod his head, breathing heavily. “You’ll get only the best. Take my word for it.”

“You know where to reach me.” Liddell started for the door, stopped halfway. “In case you want to report this to the police, that is.”

Denton shook his head. “You got us wrong, Detective. We bury our own dead—and we make our own.”

Liddell considered it, nodded. “You’ve been quite a busy little boy in that direction—Evans and now Nelson. I hope you do try for number three. So far you’ve been lucky. Maybe I can break your string.”

Denton managed to sit up, supported himself against a chair. “Don’t leave town, dead man. When you get hit, that one is on me. I’m going to sing at your funeral.”

Liddell grinned at him. “Before I’m done with you, you’re going to sing all right. And when you do, it’ll be your funeral.” He looked over to where Castri was groaning his way back to consciousness. “When it turns out to be a case of your skin or his—both he and I know whose skin it’s going to be. And maybe he won’t wait that long.”

The singer shook his head. “Sorry to disappoint you, dead man. There are too many important people who start worrying when I even catch cold. Nothing’s going to happen to me. But if I were you, I wouldn’t start reading any continued stories.”

Liddell grinned again, headed for the door, slammed it behind him.

Denton struggled painfully to his feet, dropped into the chair. He sat, eyes closed, knees pressing together to help his laced hands ease the pain in his midsection. After a moment, he was able to straighten up, wipe his eyes with the side of his hands. He waited until the pain subsided and he could breathe with some degree of ease. Then he pulled himself out of the chair, tottered over to the portable bar.

He picked up the bucket filled with ice and some water where the ice had started to melt. He walked back to where Castri lay, dumped the contents of the bucket, ice and all, into his face.

Rex Turner stepped out of the doorway of the American Airlines 21 flight from New York, stood for a moment at the top of the debarking stairs. The air was cool, clear. There was a slight drizzle, but after the weather he had left in New York, it felt wonderful.

He put the collar up on his topcoat, started down the steps and headed for the ramp into the airlines terminal. The clock over the entrance showed the time to be slightly after 1 a.m. He shook his head, never could get used to the fact that he could leave New York at 11, and be in L.A. by 1.

Turner was tall, rangy. He wore no hat, his sandy hair was clipped short. A recent vacation had left his face tanned a deep mahogany; when he smiled his teeth were startlingly white, square.

An observer could have taken him for anything—an actor, a successful businessman, a former professional athlete who had kept himself in perfect

condition.

He wasn't any of these. He was the top trouble-shooter for the Treasury Department.

He followed the straggling line of passengers into the terminal, headed for the bank of elevators facing the newsstand inside. He shrugged out of his topcoat, slid into the booth, folded the coat on his lap. He brought out a memo book, flipped through the pages, found the number he wanted, then dropped a dime in the slot and dialed.

A crisp voice came through the receiver. "Chateau Montrose."

"Johnny Liddell of New York, please."

There was a slight pause, then the voice informed him, "Mr. Liddell doesn't answer."

"Would you try paging him in the bar, please?" Turner asked. He drummed on the base of the phone with impatient fingers as he waited.



# 13.

Johnny Liddell leaned against the bar in the Blue Room, debated the advisability of taking up the little blonde on the thinly disguised advances she was making to him from a nearby table. He checked his watch, decided it would be only token infidelity to Muggsy since it was too late to call her, picked up his drink and walked over.

The blonde was the cuddly type, fluffy hair, thick, pouty lips, heavily made-up eyes. When he stopped at the table, he saw her dress was deeply enough cut to testify that she needed no artificial aid to the cantilever construction of her balcony.

“Lonesome?” Liddell asked.

She glanced up at him, shook her head. “Not now.” She nodded to the chair opposite her. “Sit down.” As he slid into the chair and parked his feet under the table, he could feel the fullness of her leg against his. “What’s your name?” she wanted to know.

“Johnny Liddell.”

“That’s a nice name. Are you in movies or television, Johnny?” She batted her eyes at him.

“Neither.” She looked disappointed.

A uniformed bellboy walked into the Blue Room. “Mr. Liddell! Mr. Johnny Liddell!” He stood in the entrance, looked around, saw Liddell’s upraised hand. He worked his way through the tables. “Telephone call for you, Mr. Liddell,” he told Johnny and happily lost the struggle to keep his eyes off the blonde’s buxomness.

“I won’t be a minute,” Liddell promised. He pushed back his chair, followed the bellboy. His back was hardly turned before the blonde’s eyes were already beginning to move in on another stag at the bar.

He headed for the booth, picked up the phone. “This is Liddell. You holding a call for me?”

“Just a moment.” There was a click, then, “Go ahead, Mr. Liddell.”

“Hello? This is Liddell.”

A familiar voice came across the wire. “Hi, Johnny. Rex Turner.”

“Rex! Good to hear your voice. I thought they had you chained to a desk in the New York office?”

Turner chuckled. “I get time off for good behavior every so often.”

“How long you been in town?”

“Not even five minutes. You’re the first one I’m contacting. Shows how you rate, buddy boy.”

Liddell groaned. “This is going to cost. What did I do now?”

“I want to talk to you, Johnny. Just as soon as possible. Tonight if I can.”

Liddell checked his watch. “What kind of a union do you Feds have? It’s after one.” He peered curiously at the phone as though by it he could read the T-man’s mind. “What’s the fever?”

“I can’t discuss it over the phone.”

“Okay,” Liddell said. “Where do we meet?”

“Would it be too inconvenient for you to come down to the Bureau office? I know it’s way downtown, but I have my reasons.”

Liddell sighed. “You talked me into it. You know I could never resist that cloak-and-dagger approach of yours. I’ll leave here in about five or ten minutes.”

“Thanks,” the T-man told him. “I’ll be waiting.” There was a click as he dropped the receiver on its hook.

Liddell hung up, sat for a moment in the booth. The last time he had worked with Turner, the T-man’s ace undercover operator, Blossom Lee, had been murdered, and Johnny had been able to find her killer and avenge her death while Turner’s hands had been tied by red tape. He wondered what could be that pressing to bring a trouble-shooter like Turner across the country, asking for a meeting in the middle of the night.

He left the booth, walked back to the Blue Room, worked his way through the tables to where the blonde was sitting. Another man was sitting opposite her, she was talking animatedly, leaning over to do full justice to the décolletage and its contents.

“Pardon me.” Liddell reached for his glass. “You won’t be needing this?”

The blonde looked up with a blank stare, gave no sign that she had ever seen Liddell before. He grinned at her, turned to the fat, sweating type who

seemed to be having difficulty tearing his eyes from the girl.

“Just for the record, friend,” Liddell addressed him. “What are you in? Television or movies?”

The man looked up at him in surprise. “Television. But how’d you know?”

Liddell grinned. “You’re going to have an awful lot of trouble doing justice to all that talent on just a 21-inch screen,” he told him. He grinned at the blonde, waved. “By, by baby.”

She placed her thumb to her retroussé nose and waved back.

Johnny Liddell headed across the deserted lobby of the Federal Building, stepped into the night elevator. The door closed silently, it whisked him to the eighth floor, the doors slid open. He stepped out, headed for the double glass door at the far end of the hall that bore the simple inscription: *Treasury Department* surmounting a reproduction of the seal inscribed *Thesaur. ★ Amer. ★ Septent. ★ Sigil.*

Inside the glass doors, despite the hour, the brightly lighted room showed signs of full-scale activity. From some of the offices came sounds of typing; men in shirt sleeves, carrying ledgers, walked from office to office; telephones were jangling on some of the desks.

Liddell crossed to a waist-high railing behind which a cool-looking blonde was sitting at a desk transcribing some notes. She looked up, smiled. “May I help you?”

“I’m looking for Rex Turner. He’s expecting me.”

The girl consulted her calendar pad. “May I have your name?”

“Johnny Liddell.”

She consulted the pothooks on the pad again, nodded. “Mr. Turner is occupying Room 110, Mr. Liddell.” She pushed a button that unlocked a gate in the railing. “It’s the fourth office on the left.”

The corridor beyond the reception room was lined on either side by offices, most of them showing signs of activity. He headed down the corridor, knocked at the door with the gilt *110* stenciled on it.

Rex Turner was seated behind a small desk. He pulled himself out of his chair as Liddell walked in, pushed out his hand at Johnny and gave him a

warm, firm grip.

“Thanks a helluva lot for coming down, Liddell,” he said. “I know it’s an imposition to pull anybody out on a night like this—especially from a bar.” He indicated a chair, walked around the desk, dropped back into the leather desk chair. “What are you doing with yourself these days?”

Liddell pulled his chair closer to the desk, sat down. He dug a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, shrugged. “A little of this, a little of that.” He offered the cigarettes to the man behind the desk, drew a shake of his head. “Why don’t we skip the preliminaries and get down to cases, Rex? You didn’t jet in here, roust me out of a bar after midnight just to renew old acquaintances and kick around old times.” He hung the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, waited.

Rex Turner opened the top desk drawer, pulled out a battered old briar. He looked up at Liddell, nodded. “Okay, we’ll skip the preliminaries. You’re digging into Barney Evans’ death, aren’t you?” He tapped the bowl of the pipe against his hand. “Who’s your client on this case, Johnny?”

Liddell touched a match to the cigarette, frowned at the smoke as it spiraled upward. “That’s kind of a leading question, isn’t it, Rex?”

Turner got up from his chair, walked to the window, looked down on the rain-blackened streets. “Very leading, and if I didn’t consider you a friend I wouldn’t have asked it.” He broke off for a moment. “Would it do me any good to ask you to drop it?” he asked without turning around.

“Can you give me a good reason why I should?”

Turner turned around, considered, nodded his head. “I think so. I came out here because I wanted you to meet a couple of guys. They can explain better than I can why you should drop it.” He walked to the desk, pushed a button on the base of his phone. He picked it up. “Have Vaught and Tilden come in for a moment, will you please?” He returned his receiver to its hook, brought out a tobacco pouch and dug the bowl of the pipe into it. He started packing it with his thumb.

There was a knock at the door. Johnny Liddell turned around as it opened. He half started from his chair, his hand streaked for the .45 in its shoulder holster. He stopped with the tips of his fingers touching the gun butt. The two men who came in were the men who had walked into his hotel room.

Liddell’s eyes shot from the two men to Turner and back. “What is this, Rex?”

“Tilden and Vaught are Department of Justice. Vaught is agent in charge of the Los Angeles office.”

Liddell scowled. “Then why didn’t they identify themselves when they busted into my hotel room?”

The man in the rumpled blue suit grinned crookedly at Liddell. “We didn’t bust in. Seems to me I remember knocking and being invited in.” He walked over, hoisted one hip on the corner of Turner’s desk. “As for not identifying ourselves, there was someone present at the time. We were not at liberty to discuss this matter in front of a third party.”

“How far did you think you’d get advising me to get off the case?” Liddell wanted to know.

Rex Turned answered. “When they checked you out with the New York office, I told them that was the wrong way to handle you.” He shrugged. “That’s why I came out.” He stuck the pipe stem between his teeth, scratched a match, held it to the bowl. “We’re going to level with you, Johnny, and when you know all the facts I think you’ll agree to keep hands off.” He nodded to Vaught. “Suppose you fill him in.”

Vaught pursed his lips for a moment, as though deciding how to begin. “In the first place, we think it’s highly probable that Barney Evans was murdered.” He held up his hands to ward off a possible interruption. “But it would be almost impossible to prove in a court. Besides, we have some more important fish to fry and your interference might let them get off the hook. Do you remember the Cheyney kidnaping out here a little over a year ago?”

Liddell nodded. “Vaguely. They never got the kidnapers, did they?”

Vaught and Tilden exchanged significant glances. “Not yet. But that doesn’t mean we won’t.”

Turner blew a blue-gray cloud of smoke at the ceiling. “The Cheyney job was a particularly filthy one, Johnny. The kid was already dead when they asked for the ransom. The parents didn’t hesitate to pay over a half a million, but they never had a chance to get their kid back.”

Liddell frowned. “What’s the connection between the Cheyney snatch and Barney Evans’ murder?”

Vaught dug a rumpled pack of cigarettes from his pocket. “I’ll try to give you some background. Barney Evans managed Mickey Denton, the singer. He represented Tony Agnelli. And through the singer they were pushing a

lot of boodle money from the mob into legitimate businesses. Through him they got control of television stations, hotels, gambling casinos, the works.”

“Didn’t your office want to know where he got the money?” Liddell turned to Turner.

The T-man shrugged. “They paid his taxes, they kept him clean as a whistle with us. We knew that every so often a shipment of money would be sent to him—”

“Couldn’t you grab it?”

Turner rattled the juice in his pipe. “Evans was a talent agent. He’d arrange screen tests for girls from Miami, from the line at Vegas, from Chicago, even from the New York clubs. Only, instead of clothes, they’d be carrying money in their bags. Knowing it was one thing, proving it was another.”

Liddell shook his head. “I still don’t see where the Cheyney snatch comes in.”

“A couple of weeks ago, Evans put up four million as a down payment on a Seattle hotel. Five hundred thousand of it was the Cheyney ransom money. We had been able to mark it before the Cheyneys made the pay-off.”

Liddell whistled softly. “They thought Evans bought the money and rang it in? That why he died?”

The man in the blue suit shrugged. “Somebody rang it in. Evans took the fall. We don’t think it was Evans. We’re hoping it wasn’t. Because if it wasn’t, whoever did buy that money is still around. And he knows who pulled the Cheyney snatch. That’s who we’re after.”

# 14.

Johnny Liddell sat smoking thoughtfully. He studied the face of the man in the blue suit. “How about the singer, Mickey Denton? He must know something.”

“He outfoxed us,” Turner put in. He leaned back, drummed on the desk with powerful fingers. His every movement was that of a man who resented inaction, who projected action even while he talked. “It’s pretty clear that he never saw the money that was invested in his name. Evans handled all that. Denton was in New York at the time Evans was killed—giving us a sworn statement that Evans had admitted switching the money.”

“Why go to New York? Why not tell the local boys?”

Vaught grinned mirthlessly. “He claimed Evans had threatened to have him killed if he talked. He even showed the New York boys that his abdomen was all bruised and discolored. The beating was a warning.”

“He got that beating at Ann Connell’s house the night before Evans was killed. She’ll tell you that—”

Vaught nodded. “She already has. But like I said, we’re more interested in getting the Cheyney killers than Evans’ killers. When Evans started working for the mob, he knew he could end up like this. The Cheyney kid was only ten years old. And they never gave him a chance.”

“That’s why the Department wants you to drop the Evans case,” Turner put in. “We’ve impounded the entire four million. That means that the heat will be going on from the boys who got the bundle together. They’ll be wanting their money back. When they start leaning on each other, something’s bound to give.”

Liddell lifted the cigarette from between his lips, studied the glowing end. “I’ll stay out of your way, as much as I can. But I’m not walking away from it—”

The man on the corner of the desk clasped his hands as if in prayer, leaned forward, making a visible effort to control his impatience. “Look, Liddell, if we work at cross purposes, you’re liable to spoil the trap we’re laying for a couple of cold-blooded kid-killers.”

“Maybe we can work together—”

“You crazy? If the newspapers thought we were working with a private eye, they’d laugh us right out of our next year’s appropriation.”

Turner held up his hand. “Wait a minute, Vaught.” He turned to Johnny. “Just what did you have in mind?”

Liddell returned the cigarette to his mouth, took a deep drag. “Tonight Charley Nelson, a reporter on the *Express* was murdered—”

Turner turned to Vaught, who nodded melancholically.

“She was murdered because she had proof that Rocky Castri, Denton’s bodyguard, was at Evans’ house the night he was murdered. Castri murdered her,” Liddell said.

Vaught scowled at him. “Can you prove that?”

Liddell shook his head. “Not yet. But I had a little talk with both Castri and Denton tonight.”

Turner sighed, sucked noisily on his pipe. “Were either of them able to hear while you were talking?” He swiveled his eyes to Vaught. “Liddell has a bad habit of talking with his hands when he gets excited.”

“They heard,” Liddell said. “They also did some talking. It didn’t make sense at the time, but it does now. Denton told me that Agnelli would back him up all the way, that he got nervous when Denton even got a cold.” He took a last drag on the cigarette, crushed it out in the ash tray. He started to talk, was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone.

Turner answered it, handed it wordlessly to Vaught. He turned back to Liddell. “You were saying?”

“I was guessing that Denton has some information that could be very expensive to Agnelli. So he has to keep Denton healthy and happy,” Liddell told him. “That means the unhealthier and unhappier the singer gets, the more likely something is to break.”

Turner shook his head. “You could not only get unhealthy, you could get very dead playing it that way.” He looked at Vaught as the man in the blue suit hung up the phone. “Something?”

Vaught tried a rare smile on for size. “Looks like the gathering of the clan. Harry Jacobs from Chicago just landed in town. He’s checked into the Hotel Criterion.” He dry-washed his hands in anticipation. “With Castri and Denton here and Jacobs showing up, things could really start to pop.”



Turner nodded his head. “Jacobs is the organization’s man in Chicago. He’d be one of the ones shipping the boodle money to Evans. Maybe he knows something we don’t.”

“Then why don’t you pull him in and ask him?” Liddell growled.

“For what? Since when it is a crime to take a trip to Los Angeles?” Vaught wanted to know.

“That’s the trouble with the way you operate. You go by the rules the mob’s mouthpieces set up. You’re licked to start with. My way, I set the rules. I’ve never yet seen a mouthpiece who was able to tell a client how to talk his way out of a .45 slug,” Liddell told him.

“Your way does have some advantages,” Turner conceded. “If you had played by the book, we never would have nailed Blossom Lee’s killer. But our way has its advantages, too. If we make a mistake, we can correct it. You bury your mistakes.”

The man in the blue suit grimaced at Liddell. “You’re going ahead on this in spite of what we’ve told you?”

“Because of what you’ve told me. It’s beginning to make some sense now,” Liddell said. “If it was just Evans, I might be willing to forget the whole thing. As a matter of fact, I was getting ready to walk away from it. But the Nelson killing changes things. If I hadn’t decided to drop the Evans case when I did, she might be alive now.”

“You’re convinced there’s a tie-in between the two?” Vaught wanted to know.

Liddell nodded. “There has to be.”

Turner sucked thoughtfully on his pipe. “You understand you can’t expect any help from us?”

“I don’t want any help. I’ve got all the parts now. All I have to do is put them together.” He pulled himself out of his chair. “When I do, I think it’s going to make a real pretty picture. In the meantime, you boys can keep the pot boiling by hanging onto the organization’s money. The big brokers get very narrow-minded about one of the boys who costs them money. Let’s keep them leaning all over each other.”

Tony Agnelli sat behind his desk in his New York office, fingers laced across his belly, knuckles dimpling. His heavy lidded eyes were half closed,

only the movement of his lips as he puffed them in and out indicated that he was awake.

Three days of the two-week period of grace had already passed. His pipeline into the underworld had dredged up some interesting pieces of information—some encouraging, some definitely menacing.

Following the return of Larry Gatti to Miami and Mitch Corday to Las Vegas, there had been a meet between the two men's principals. It was agreed to call upon a disinterested member of the organization to preside at a hearing at which Tony Agnelli's failure to swing the Denton deal which he had sponsored would be completely aired.

The procedure wasn't unfamiliar to Agnelli who had in his day been called upon to act as judge in other cases. The trial of a man as high in the councils of the organization as Agnelli is no light matter. The injured parties lay their case before the agreed-upon judge, the offender is given an opportunity to make good all losses. If he fails, there is only one sentence—death. The judge then appoints a small committee of other disinterested leaders who are charged with carrying out the sentence.

In some cases, when the sentence of death has been handed down, the committee imports "heavy workers" from another part of the country. They are not rushed in their work, there is no time limit set on carrying out the sentence. They study the condemned man, his habits, his protection, and work out a complete plan for his execution. There is only one rule for the execution of an important leader and that is that it be sudden, unexpected and clean. No matter how well prepared the subject may be, no matter how carefully he avoids usual associates and known hangouts, once the sentence is pronounced, he is already dead. The time and place are the only details left to be consummated.

Or, in other cases, the condemned man may be sufficiently important to be given the choice of carrying out the sentence himself or of having it carried out. Like Frank Nitti, Al Capone's enforcer.

When Capone let the reins of the organization drop from his hands, the enforcer took over. He gave Willie Bioff and George Browne the go-ahead to shake the movie colony and they did it with a vengeance. When the Feds moved in and pinned Bioff and Browne, the word went out from the organization that they were to take the fall. But Willie and George sang like stagestruck canaries and eight important members of the organization were indicted by a New York Grand Jury.

The day the indictments were handed down, the engineer and fireman of a locomotive on an Illinois railroad saw a man staggering down the track with a bottle in one hand, a gun in the other. He threw the bottle at the locomotive, put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger. The story was that Nitti was carrying out the organization's sentence on himself as a penalty for subjecting the entire Chicago branch of the organization to the indignity of being indicted. And there were other cases where the organization gave ranking members the alternative of doing the job themselves or having some heavy workers do it for them. Regardless of who did the job, there was only one verdict for failure.

So Agnelli knew how much was riding on his finding the kidnapers and making them talk before the meet requested by Longino could be held and the sentence passed.

But the news wasn't all bad.

His pipeline into the underworld had come up with some helpful information. There had been rumors of the money being offered for sale in Miami, in Reno, in Detroit and in Chicago. No one could put the finger exactly on who was peddling the money, because most brokers stay as far away from ransom money as they can get. But Pete Volpe in Detroit had agreed to talk about buying some of it if the price was right, and Volpe had been persuaded to co-operate.

Agnelli didn't look up as the door opened and Mario, his bodyguard, walked in. When the dark-haired man had stopped on the far side of the desk, Agnelli unveiled the black discs of his eyes, glanced up at him.

"Pete Volpe is outside with the guy you want to talk to," Mario told him.

Agnelli nodded his head, disturbed the rolls of fat under his chin. "Bring them in. You stay while we talk."

Mario walked to the door, held it open. "Come on in," he told the men in the anteroom. He waited until they walked into the room, closed the door behind them. He took up his position alongside the door, folded his arms across his thin chest with the tips of his fingers almost touching the butt of the .45 under his arm.

Agnelli stared up at the two men with no show of interest. Volpe he knew as a hustler on the rise, moving from petty gun-for-hire assignments for the organization a few years ago, to a position of relative importance in the Detroit branch. He was the smiling, urbane type. Fat, always perspiring, his constant smile unmatched by the cold, unblinking menace of his eyes.

He bobbed his head obsequiously, made no attempt to shake hands with the man behind the desk.

“I got your message, Mr. Agnelli.” His head continued to bob. “I got here as soon as I could.” He turned to the thin man alongside him. “This here is Andy Regan. Your message said you’d like to talk to the guy I talked business with. This is him.”

Regan was palpably nervous. He had the sad face and bad coloring of an embalmer and a disturbing tic under his left eye. His thin hair was pasted artfully over the top of his skull in a futile attempt to disguise the growing expanse of baldness. He licked at his thin lips, tried unsuccessfully for a smile when Agnelli turned his attention to him.

“You selling the Cheyney ransom?” Agnelli wanted to know.

Regan licked at his lips, his eyes did a nervous circuit of the room. “No. I—I just—”

Volpe turned on him. The smile was still there, but it had a strained quality, his voice was hard. “You came to me with a deal. You could lay your hands on the money for fifty cents on the dollar.”

The other man faced him, shook his head nervously. The tic under his eye was marked. “I know, I know. I already explained it to you a hundred times. I was just picking up a couple of points as in-between man.” He turned back to Agnelli. “I run a handbook. I handle lay-offs like for the boys in Chicago, even some of your boys here. We have a handle like a couple million a year and even with the clout costing like it does, we do good. Right, Volpe?”

Volpe nodded. “Regan, he stands real good with the boys, Mr. Agnelli. He comes in handy lots of ways. When you tell me you want to talk to him, I ask Don Louis Gregorio. He says it’s okay for me to bring Regan, that I should tell you he says Regan you can trust.”

Agnelli nodded impassively. “So you were picking up points fronting the money. For who?”

The tic jumped agitatedly, Regan dry-washed his thin, heavily veined hands. “I don’t know the guy.” His eyes were avoiding Agnelli’s face again. “He walks into my handbook behind the candy store, he asks for me. I sit down with him, he springs with this deal. A half a million in small bills for fifty cents on the dollar. I ask him what’s my edge, he figures to go for twenty-five big ones if I make the connect. I don’t ask who he is, nothing. I

know Volpe can make the buy if it's any good, so I make the connect. I tell Volpe the money's ransom loot and he won't even see the guy."

"How'd you get word to this guy that the deal's off?"

Regan licked at his lips. "He gives me a telephone number. If the meet's on, I call him there between six and six-thirty that night. If it's no show, I don't call."

Agnelli rolled his eyes over to Volpe. "You check this number?"

The smiling man nodded. "A pay phone in the lobby of the Book Cadillac."

The fat man shifted his attention back to Regan. "What does this guy look like?"

Regan frowned in agonized concentration. "He's big, got his nose busted and his face mashed up like he was maybe a pug. You know? Ears all banged up, shuffles a little when he walks. Don't sound too smart. Like maybe he just runs errands for the gee with the loot."

"I want him." Agnelli squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. There was no change of expression in his voice. "I want him fast. And I want him in condition to talk."

Regan flashed a helpless glance at the man alongside him. "But I never seen him before or since. He didn't even come from Detroit."

"How do you know?"

"He's dark. Like he's been living some place that's sunny. In Detroit, with the kind of winter we been having, he looks like he just blew in, with his tan and all. And it ain't the kind you get like maybe just spending a couple weeks in the sun. It looks like he's always had it. Like he's been living where it's sunny most of the time."

Agnelli puffed his lips in and out, made and broke bubbles between them. "Like maybe Miami? Or Las Vegas?" he asked finally.

"Or even California," Regan told him.

The fat man considered it, grunted. He turned to Volpe. "You take him over to Eddie Ranch who runs that boxing sheet. You figure out how old this stumble bum is, what year he was fighting. I want you to keep looking at pictures of every pork-and-beaner for those years until you bring me this guy's name."

Regan started to object, thought better of it. Agnelli turned his baleful glare back on him. “I don’t care if you go blind looking at pictures. This guy, I want. Fast!”

Volpe bobbed his head. “We do our best, Mr. Agnelli. You hear from us.” He tapped Regan on the arm, inclined his head toward the door. The thin man followed him mournfully. Mario let them out.

# 15.

Johnny Liddell wasn't sure what woke him. He lay for a moment, not moving, his eyes open, his ears alert. Slowly, imperceptibly, his hand slid below his pillow, closed over the butt of his .45. He lay and waited.

After a moment he heard it. It was the thin, scraping sound of a window being slowly raised.

He turned his head to the window, saw the dark shadow of the man outside on the fire escape. He threw himself to the side, rolled off the bed onto the floor. Almost at the same moment, the window started spitting orange flame. He could hear the slugs biting chunks out of the head of the bed directly over him; the sound of the .38 was like a cannon in the confined area of the room.

He raised his head over the side of the bed, pegged two fast shots at the window, ducked. The man outside the window replied with two shots that buzzed over his head like angry bees, dug themselves into the wall.

Liddell crept to the bottom of the bed, glanced around it. The man on the fire escape was starting down. Liddell raised the .45 deliberately, aimed at the figure of the man, squeezed the trigger. The man on the fire escape was slammed to the side as the heavy slugs rammed into him. He made an effort to regain his balance, a third shot caught him flush, sent him reeling.

One moment the shadow of his bulk was visible against the window. The next, the fire escape was clear. There was a screaming, punctuated with shouted curses. Somebody started pounding on Liddell's door. He got up, walked to the door and opened it.

"What the hell's going on in here?" a tall, raw-boned, redheaded Irishman in a blue suit demanded. He stood in the doorway, gun in hand, looked past Liddell into the room. Down the whole length of the hall doors were open, heads were poking out. "It sounded like a dress rehearsal for the Battle of Bull Run."

"Somebody was out on my fire escape taking target practice with me the target," Liddell complained. He reached for the light switch, spilled light into the room. He inclined his head toward the bed.

The house detective walked in, examined the scars in the bedstead, the perfect little holes in the wall. “He was a lousy shot.”

“He might have improved with age. If he lived long enough,” Liddell said.

“He could at least—” The redheaded house detective broke off, did a double take. “If he lived long enough?” Comprehension dawned in his eyes, he ran to the window, stuck his head out.

In the courtyard, a dark tangle of arms and legs was sprawled on its face. The house detective swore loudly and fluently, ran for the door. “The cops will be on their way. But you better phone in that we’ll need the Homicide men,” he flung over his shoulder.

Liddell walked over to the phone, dialed the police. He tossed the .45 on the rumpled bed, reached for his clothes, started to dress.

Sergeant Murphy’s jaw dropped as he walked into the courtyard of the Chateau Montrose, recognized Johnny Liddell.

“Not again?” Murphy grunted. He walked over to the covered body of the dead man, pulled the blanket back, studied him with no great show of interest. He looked up at the uniformed man who had responded to the first call. “Identify him yet?”

The cop consulted his memo book. “Name’s Castri. Rocky Castri.” He nodded toward Liddell. “He showed up on this man’s fire escape, started throwing lead at him. Man fired back, and didn’t miss.” He looked up the fire escape. “Fell off the fourth-floor landing. Didn’t help his looks any. What the slugs started, the fall finished.”

Murphy walked over to where Liddell stood with the redheaded house detective. “Some people smell out water. Looks like you smell out killings.” He inclined his head toward Castri. “You ever hear of this guy before now?”

Liddell nodded. “He’s the one Charley Nelson wanted to talk to me about,” he lied.

The Homicide man scowled at him. “You told me she didn’t have a chance to tell you what she wanted to see you about.”

“She didn’t. She just mentioned his name, asked me if I knew him. Then she asked me to get over and see her and she’d fill me in.” He looked over at the suggestive bulge under the blanket. “He must have figured she told me more than she did.”



Murphy's jaw dropped. "You trying to tell me this guy killed Charlene Nelson?" He looked back at the body thoughtfully. "You got anything to back that up?"

Liddell shrugged. "Stands to reason. Why would he come gunning for me if he didn't think I knew something that could hurt him?"

The Homicide man scratched at his jaw thoughtfully. He walked over to the uniformed cop who stood by waiting to be relieved by the tech detail. "You find a gun?"

The cop nodded. "I haven't touched it. It must have bounced out of his hand, skidded over there." He pointed to the far wall with his pencil.

Murphy walked over, lifted the gun by its trigger guard. He wrapped it carefully in a handkerchief, brought it back to the beat cop. "Get this down to Ballistics. Tell Weiss I want it checked against the slug they took out of the Nelson woman—"

When the cop frowned, Murphy waved his unspoken objection away.

"They'll know who I'm talking about. Tell Weiss I'm going to want a fast report."

The uniformed cop headed for the courtyard door. Murphy walked back to Liddell.

"Be interesting if you happen to be right. One way to be sure of it would be for the bullets to match." He studied Liddell incuriously. "Be even more interesting to know how much you really do know."

"If I knew anything, would I be stretched out in bed, letting some trigger-happy hood use me for target practice?" He turned to the redheaded house detective. "The least you guys could have done was to let me know my room was fronting on a rifle range."

"The guy really peppered Liddell's room with slugs, Sergeant," the house detective admitted glumly. "Played hell with the wall, chewed chunks out of the head of the bed. The manager's not going to be very happy about it."

"I'll apologize to him. I shouldn't have rolled out of bed, then the slugs would be in me and there wouldn't be holes in the wall," Liddell growled.

There was a flurry of activity at the entrance to the courtyard, two men came in wheeling a stretcher. They were followed by three reporters. The

men with the stretcher headed for the covered body, the reporters hightailed it to Sergeant Murphy.

“Anything good, Murph?” one of the reporters wanted to know.

Murphy shook his head. “Looks like a sneak thief trying to break into a room on the fourth floor. Tenant threw a couple of shots at him, he forgot to duck and missed the first step.” He pointed up the spidery skeleton of the fire escape.

The reporters made sounds of disappointment, walked over and watched the men from the medical examiner’s office lifting the body onto the stretcher. They covered it with a blanket, strapped it to the stretcher. One of them held up the blanket that had been used to cover the dead man.

“You can have your blanket back now,” he called.

“No, thanks,” a woman hanging out the first floor window called back. “I’d rather freeze than cover myself with that.”

The redheaded house detective walked over, took it, folded it up. “You don’t know the manager. Nothing should go to waste.”

“Well, that cleans it up here.” Murphy turned to Liddell. “How about taking a ride downtown with me and repeating everything you know for a stenographer?”

“Do I have a choice?” Liddell wanted to know.

“No.”

Liddell sighed. “You talked me into it.”

The Central Squad bullpen took up the whole fourth floor of the new police administration building. A railing separated the small waiting-room space from the main room. A profusion of desks, back to back and lit by common lamps, were scattered around the room. Rows of filing cabinets lined the walls. At some of the desks, men sat in shirt sleeves, pecking away on reports with labored one-finger typing, the butts of .38 police specials protruding from the shoulder holsters under their arms.

Sergeant Murphy led the way through a gate in the railing, past a dark-skinned man who was gesticulating wildly to a shirt-sleeved detective who was listening with only half an ear. The dark-skinned man had “informer” written all over him.

Murphy crossed the room to a desk near the wall, indicated for Liddell to take the chair across from him. “I’ll get a stenographer, you can tell him

what you know. You can smoke if you like.” He lifted the phone off its hook, grunted into it, dropped it back.

After a few minutes, a tired-eyed man walked in, drew up a chair and flipped open the notebook he carried. He looked up at Liddell. “Ready any time you are.”

Liddell found himself a cigarette, marshaled his thoughts. He started telling the stenographer as much as he felt sure they would find out anyway. The stenographer’s pencil skidded speedily over the page, leaving a track of whirly lines and dots.

While Liddell was dictating, a uniformed officer walked in, deposited a large manila envelope on Murphy’s desk. He dumped the contents out, listened with half an ear to what Liddell was saying, poked through the small pile of belongings that had been taken off Castri’s body and sent up by the property clerk.

When Liddell finished, Murphy nodded to the stenographer. “In triplicate so he can sign it tonight.”

The tired-looking man pushed his chair back, headed for the door. Murphy picked up a wallet, started riffling through the cards.

“Been in Las Vegas lately, Liddell?” he asked without raising his eyes.

Liddell shook his head. “Why?”

“Castri just got in from there yesterday.” He picked up an airline envelope, held it up. “Looks like he’s got himself a pad down there.” He reached for a tagged key, exhibited it. He leaned back, stared at Liddell. “Guy’s only in town two days and he’s throwing lead at you. You still insist you didn’t know him before?”

Liddell took a deep drag on his cigarette, leaned over, crushed it out. “I haven’t been in Vegas so I couldn’t see him there. And I never even heard of him before he went out there.” He shrugged.

The Homicide man looked unhappy. “When I heard that name, Rocky Castri, I couldn’t get it out of my head I heard it before,” he growled. “I just figured maybe he was some little hood I ran across some place along the line. He wasn’t.” He stared at Liddell glumly. “Going through his papers I found out where I heard it. Castri worked for Mickey Denton.”

“The singer?” Liddell wanted to know. “But you just said he was living in Vegas.”

Murphy shrugged. “I didn’t say I knew the answers. I just said Castri used to work for Denton, maybe still does. But according to the stuff in his pockets, he’s been living out in Vegas the last couple of weeks. Why, I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you ask Denton?”

Murphy glared at him, was about to retort, was cut off by the shrilling of his phone. He yanked it from its hook, held it to his ear. “Yeah?” The frown deepened. “You’re sure of that?”

The receiver chattered indignantly.

“Okay, okay. I didn’t say you didn’t know your business. I just wanted to be sure, that’s all.” He dropped the receiver back on its hook. “That was Ballistics. The bullets fired from that gun match the bullet they took out of the Nelson dame.” He got up, stamped over to the water cooler, helped himself to a drink, then returned to his desk. “I guess that’ll let you out. If the house dick’s story backing you stands up and the slugs in the wall come from that same gun, the d.a. probably won’t even bother you. You can go any time you like.”

“Okay if I stay around?”

“For what?”

Liddell shrugged. “I’d just like to be around when you talk to Denton. Somebody’s going to have to identify Castri and since he worked for the singer—”

Murphy stared at him, a reluctant smile twisted his lips, “You might be right at that. Maybe the morgue would be a good place to have our talk.” He reached for the telephone.

## 16.

The morgue was at the end of a long silent corridor in the basement of the City Hospital. There were two doors at the far end, one lettered *Medical Examiner*, the other opening into a brightly lighted room, painted a sterile white. A thin, bald man sat at a white enameled desk, biting on the almost invisible nail of his left thumb while making entries in a ledger. The unshaded bulb in the ceiling caused the shiny pate of the man at the desk to gleam.

He looked up as Sergeant Murphy walked in, followed by Johnny Liddell, nodded his head in greeting. He looked past Murphy to Liddell.

“He’s with me. Mickey Denton get here yet?” Murphy asked.

“Not yet.” The bald man pointed to an unmarked door with his pencil. “The doc’s waiting for you. Inside.”

In the inner room, two white-smocked men were leaning over a half-covered body on the sandstone examining table. The older of the two straightened up, grinned when he recognized the plainclothesman. “Hi, Murph!” His eyes jumped to Liddell.

“This is Liddell.” Murphy inclined his head toward the body on the slab. “That’s some of his handiwork.”

The old man’s bright, inquisitive eyes narrowed humorously. “Pretty good shooting. He didn’t need the fall at all. Any one of the bullets in him could have done the job.” He poked out a damp hand, gave Murph’s a moist squeeze, then took it back. He repeated the process with Liddell.

On the table, Rocky Castri lay on his back. His hair was wet, dank, had been washed back out of his face. His head had a lopsided appearance, one side of it almost caved in. He stared at the ceiling with sightless, open eyes.

His head was supported by a notched wood block, the canvas sheet was pulled low enough to expose the large X-shaped suture that signified that an autopsy had already been performed and the bullets removed.

“Your office called in to say he was going to have visitors so we cleaned him up nice and pretty for you.” The doctor grinned. “This the company he was expecting?”

Murphy shook his head. “Mickey Denton, the singer, is on his way down to identify him.” He consulted his watch. “Figured he’d be here by now. We had one of the boys pick him up in a prowler car.” He walked over, rested balled fists on his hips, studied the dead man’s face. “I’d give a buck if he could tell us his side of it.” He turned to Liddell. “I hope you’re not squeamish? Being the one who put him here, I mean.”

Liddell grinned at him. “The script called for one of us to spend the night here. If you’ll pardon the expression, better him than me. He started pitching and ended up catching.”

Murphy considered it, nodded. “Happens sometimes.”

“Besides, I gave him a better chance than he gave Charley Nelson. He might have been able to walk away clean on that one if he hadn’t suddenly got so neat and tried to tie up all the loose ends.”

“He must have had a good reason to peg you for a loose end. He didn’t just up and decide to scratch you just because he didn’t like the way you part your hair. I still think you know more than you’re telling us.”

“So did he. And look where it got him.”

Murphy’s retort was cut off by the arrival of the patrolman sent to drive Mickey Denton to the morgue. He held the door open, waited until the singer was inside, closed the door after him and waited in the anteroom.

Denton’s eyes hopscotched from Murphy to Liddell and back, made a visible effort to stay off the body on the slab. “What’s this all about, Sergeant? I’m not used to getting roused out of bed in the middle of the night. I’ve got some friends in this town and—”

“We think that’s one of them over there,” Murphy cut him off. “We thought you’d be willing to identify him. There was no question of rousting you or inconveniencing you in any way.” He walked over, stood alongside the sandstone table. “Do you know this man?”

There was a slightly greenish tinge to Denton’s face as he forced his eyes to stop on the dead man’s face for a moment, then he looked away. “I—I don’t know.”

“You should. Our information is that he worked for you.”

Denton looked again, licked at his lips, his head nodding weakly. “I—I guess it’s Rocky Castri.”

“Don’t you know?”

“How do you expect me to recognize him like that? He looks like he might be Rocky Castri. And he doesn’t work for me. I fired him a couple of weeks ago.”

“That so? Mind telling me why?”

Denton turned his head away, gestured at the body. “Cover him up if you expect me to talk.” He crossed the room, dropped into a chair while the doctor pulled the canvas up, blotted out sight of the dead man’s face. Denton sank his face into his hands, sat for a moment, then he looked up.

“What happened to him? An automobile accident or something?” He studiously avoided Liddell’s face.

“He was shot on this man’s fire escape. Man’s name is Liddell. Know him?”

Denton turned his eyes to Liddell. “Should I?” he asked. “If he killed Rocky, why isn’t he behind bars?”

“Because it was self-defense. Castri tried to kill him from the fire escape,” Murphy told him.

Denton didn’t take his eyes off Liddell’s face. “That’s his story. Why should Rocky want to kill him?”

“For the same reason he killed Charley Nelson of the *Express*,” Murphy told him.

Denton’s eyes snapped back to the Homicide man’s face. “That’s a pretty strong statement. You might have to prove that and I don’t—”

“The bullet that came out of Charley Nelson’s body came out of the same gun Castri was carrying tonight.”

Denton stared at him for a moment, dropped his eyes. “I don’t know anything about it. I haven’t seen Rock since I fired him until last night when he dropped by, asked if I could put him up for a couple of days. For old times’ sake—”

“Why’d you fire him?” Murphy wanted to know.

Denton studied his hands in his lap, shrugged. “After my business manager committed suicide—” He looked up, squinted at Liddell. “He was caught trying to rob me—” He waited for Liddell to contradict him, continued when it was evident Johnny didn’t intend to speak. “I found out that Castri was working for Evans, not for me. So I cleaned house. Got rid of them all.”

Murphy considered it, nodded. “Sounds reasonable. Know where Castri’s been the past few weeks?”

The singer shrugged. “Said he was in Vegas. I don’t know.”

“Know any reason he should kill Charley Nelson?”

“I don’t believe he did.”

“You don’t believe he tried to kill Liddell?”

Denton stared insolently at Liddell. “Could be. Some people just beg for it. If it wasn’t Castri, maybe it’ll be somebody else.” He got to his feet. “You got me down here to identify Castri. Okay, so I did. You’re asking a lot of questions I don’t know the answers to. You got any more questions, I want my lawyer around when I answer. That’s what I pay him for.” He glared at Murphy. “Or maybe you got different ideas?”

“We just asked your co-operation and we’re grateful you were so helpful,” Murphy told him. “The officer outside will be glad to drive you back home.”

Denton nodded, headed for the door. He stopped halfway, turned back to Liddell. “You know something, mister? You’re a pretty lucky guy.”

Liddell shrugged. “It’s like the guy says. You want to win the game, stop sending in the second team.”

Denton stared at him for a moment, turned and walked out without a word.

“What was that all about?” Murphy wanted to know.

“A mutual admiration society at work.” Liddell grinned.

“Then you did know each other?”

“We have mutual friends.” Liddell jammed his balled fists into his jacket pockets. “I think maybe Denton’s a little annoyed at me because he figures that more than anything in the world I want to hear him sing.”

Murphy stared at him. “The way you say that I get the feeling that music has nothing to do with it. Sing about what?”

“Why do you read things into what I say? He’s a singer, so I want to hear him sing.”

The Homicide man snorted. “That strong a stomach I know you don’t have.” He debated the advisability of pressing Liddell further, knew that



Johnny would tell him as much as he wanted him to know and no more. He nodded. “Okay. So at least I tried. Like he says, you’re a pretty lucky guy. Don’t press it too far. Maybe if we knew what you know it wouldn’t be so dangerous for you to know.”

Liddell shook his head. “I don’t know a thing. Charley Nelson was murdered, Castri murdered her and we’ve got him down here keeping her company. So what’s to know?”

“You don’t want to level with me, that’s your business. Maybe you like the idea of being a walking shooting gallery. But do me a favor. Go home and go to bed and stay there. I’ve had all the business I can handle tonight.”

“You mean I’m free to go?”

Murphy considered it, nodded. “I can’t think of any good reason to hold you or I would. Sending you home is like setting Typhoid Mary loose in a kindergarten.”

“Thanks, Sarge. Then I’ll be seeing you.”

Murphy nodded. “I’ve got a feeling I will be seeing you again, Liddell. And when I do, I hope you can see me, too.” His eyes wandered over to the covered bulge on the examining table. “If we do get together again, I hope it won’t be here.”

“I hope you get your hope,” Liddell told him.

Mickey Denton finished his scotch, set the glass on the edge of the table, got up and paced the room. He had put the call in to Tony Agnelli the minute he got back into his apartment. He checked his watch for the tenth time, found it was only five minutes later than the last time he looked.

He walked out onto the patio, stared out over the lights of the city. He had thought he was scared when Barney Evans’ death put him on his own. Now he knew what being scared was really like. He cursed Evans, Agnelli and finally himself for getting him into this spot. For the first time in years he thought longingly of how uncomplicated his life had been when he was plain Mickey Donelli back in East New York.

Thinking of the old days in East New York brought a vision of how Rocky Castri had looked on the slab. He tried to wipe the picture out of his mind, finally walked back into the living room, made himself another drink.

It wasn't that Rocky's death was that much of a personal loss. The truth was he always hated Castri. Even when he was a kid back there on Sutter Avenue. Rocky was one of the East New York boys who traveled with the Brownsville gangs until Abe Reles' confession had made the troops too hot for comfort. Denton had taken him on as a bodyguard only so that he could smash Rocky's arrogant self-assurance by turning him into a stooge, by making him dependent for the clothes he wore, the food he ate. He delighted in humiliating Rocky and in making him grovel. But when the chance came, Rocky walked out on him, went to work for Mitch Corday in Vegas. No, it wasn't that Rocky's death was any great loss.

It was something else. Secretly, he was still in awe of Castri. He always felt safe when Rocky was around. Seeing him on the slab, his face smashed, the stitches that showed where his chest had been opened, the way he stared at the ceiling with dead, sightless eyes gave Denton a preview of what could happen to himself.

He needed reassurance that his hold over Agnelli would keep him safe. He took a deep swallow from the glass, went over, yanked the receiver from its hook.

"This is the long-distance operator, sir," a metallic voice told him. "We're still trying your New York call. We'll ring you when we have your party."

Denton slammed the receiver back down on the hook.

He walked to a chair, dropped into it, stared at the mute telephone.

An hour later he was still staring at it, but the phone refused to ring.

# 17.

Harry Jacobs yanked irritably on his coat collar, drew it closer to his face in a fruitless effort to stave off the cold drizzle that had started since he stood there. He took a deep drag on the soggy cigarette he held cupped in his hand, cursed the weather in general, the weather in California in particular. He had expected that when he left Chicago behind that he would be coming to a land of perpetual sunshine. Here he was colder than he had been in Chicago. At least there he was dressed for it.

For the past two hours, he had been keeping close watch outside the North Hollywood apartment house where Mendel had told him Benny Welton and his punch-drunk pug partner lived. He squeezed back into the questionable shelter of the building line where he stood, consulted the wet face of his watch. He decided to give the kidnaper another half hour to show before he packed it in for the night. After all, if Welton was shackled up some place for the night, Jacobs could stand there in the rain for hours and get nothing but pneumonia for his trouble.

He took a last drag on the cigarette, dropped the butt to the ground and crushed it out. He hunched his shoulders, dug his hands into his pockets. The gun butt in his right pocket felt cold, unfamiliar.

In the old days Harry Jacobs had done most of his own muscle, but the years that followed the downfall of Capone were years of prosperity and expansion for the organization. Tax experts and lawyers replaced muscle and its members depended for survival more on loopholes in the tax laws than on the number of troops they could throw into a fight. They became businessmen instead of kill-happy hoodlums and slowly, carefully, their money was invested in real estate, night clubs, cleaning firms, and other legitimate businesses.

Now, after years of soft living, he was forced to revert to type. He tightened his grip on the butt of the gun, wished Welton and his goon would come along so he could get it over with.

He brought a limp cigarette out with his left hand, stuck it in the corner of his mouth.

He peered up and down the length of the street. Pale yellow street lights, with halos of mist, did a reasonable job of lighting the rain-blackened

pavement. If Welton did show, there would be enough light to do the job right.

He was fumbling for the package of matches when a cab swung around the far corner, headed for the entrance to the building across the street. Its tires made a sticky sound on the pavement as the driver brought it to a slow stop in front of the entrance.

Jacobs let the cigarette fall from his lips, brought the snub-nosed .38 from his pocket.

Two men got out of the cab, paid the driver. The cabby ground the hack into gear, roared away from the curb. In the light from the street light it was easy to recognize the smaller man as Benny Welton, the bigger as Bunty.

The two men started for the entrance to the building. Jacobs emerged from the shadow of the building line, started across the street.

“Benny,” he called.

The two men whirled around just as Jacobs raised the .38 to firing position, started squeezing the trigger. There was a shattering of glass as some of the shots went wild, smashed the glass door to the building. Welton and Bunty fell on their faces, the big man tugged a gun from his shoulder holster, returned the fire.

Panic seized Harry Jacobs as the big man’s gun started to spit orange flame and slugs buzzed by his head. His finger froze on the trigger, he felt the tug at his shoulder as one bullet nicked the material. He dropped his gun, turned and ran ingloriously, hugging the building line to give him as much cover as he could get.

Some place near, a siren started to screech.

“We got to get out of here,” Welton grunted. “Let’s go.”

He got to his feet, sprinted for the alleyway alongside the building, disappeared into its shadows. Bunty, with a speed surprising in a man his size, was right on his heels.

The figure of a patrolman materialized in the mouth of the alley. “Halt or I’ll fire,” he yelled.

Welton reached the wooden door that let out on the row of garages that opened onto the next street. He pushed through the door, let Bunty squeeze past him, slammed the door behind them.

From the mouth of the alley came the sharp bark of a .38 special. Little holes appeared as if by magic in a straight line in the door, ripping long ragged splinters as they tore through.

By the time the patrolman reached the door and came through into what the tenants called Gasoline Alley, it was empty. The two men had made their exit onto the next street and were out of sight.

The patrolman replaced his gun in his holster after a short search, walked back to the front of the building where two officers in a prowler car were questioning the badly shaken elevator operator who had almost witnessed the whole thing.

“You didn’t recognize the two men?” the officer wanted to know.

“Me? I had my nose so deep in the carpet I could smell Chinese cooking,” the elevator jockey told him.

The cop wet the tip of his pencil on his tongue, relayed the information into his notebook less colorfully. “You didn’t see the guy who pegged the shots either, then?” he asked without looking up.

“I didn’t see nothing,” the elevator operator said.

The cop finished taking his notes, slammed the book closed. “Sounds like a stickup that went haywire to me.” He looked to his partner for confirmation. He saw the beat cop who had chased the two men. “Anything?”

The beat cop shook his head. “They made it clean through to the next block.”

“We’ll get them,” the cop from the prowler car growled. “One of them dropped his gun. When we get him, we’ll find out who the other two were. Meanwhile, you and Marty do a door-by-door check of the building. Could just happen that somebody did see something.”

Mickey Denton sat gnawing on the knuckle of his thumb, cursing Tony Agnelli under his breath. It was over three hours since he had placed the call and no amount of harassing the operator had gotten him through to the fat man.

He checked his glass, found it empty again. He debated the advisability of refilling it, decided no quantity of alcohol could shake him out of the

apprehensive mood. He set it back on the table, fumbled for his cigarettes, found the pack empty.

He swore loudly, got up, prowled the room, couldn't find a fresh pack. He settled for the longest butt he could find in the little pyramid in the ash tray on the table.

The first streaks of dawn were lightening the heavy sky when the telephone jangled. He crossed the room in quick strides, tugged the receiver off its hook.

"I have your New York party, Mr. Denton," the operator told him curtly. "He's on the line."

"Agnelli?" Denton snapped.

"What is it now, Singer?" the fat man's blubbery voice wanted to know. "I thought you could do so good without Agnelli. Then why you keep calling?"

"Rocky Castri is dead. Johnny Liddell gunned him down."

There was a moment of silence. "Liddell? Why should he gun Castri?"

Denton licked at his lips. "Castri came back, got that statement from the reporter—"

"We got newspapers here. Nobody told him to kill her. How many times I got to tell you punks killing brings heat?"

"Don't tell me, tell Castri. If you can work a Ouija board. The reporter told Liddell about the statement, he came up here, roughed us up, told us he was going to get us for the reporter's death. Castri decided to get him out of the way—"

The fat man snorted loudly. "A punk like Castri going up against Liddell? He got what he deserved—"

"I don't care about Castri. I care about me, Mickey Denton." The singer's voice rose shrilly. "This guy is out to kill me and you've got to stop him. Stop him for good."

Agnelli's voice went cold. "You telling Agnelli what he should do and what he shouldn't do, punk?"

"Anything happens to me, fat man, the Treasury Department gets that letter I wrote. It tells names, dates and places. Who put up the money Evans spent, where it came from, everything." He paused, took a deep breath.

“With that, Treasury puts a lot of important people in front of the gun. Maybe you think the boys will pin a medal on you for lousing up the details?”

“Now you threaten Agnelli?”

“Yeah! Yeah! I’m threatening. You either take care of me, Agnelli, or you go down with me.” The shrillness of his voice had a thin edge of hysteria in it.

The sound of the breath whistling through the fat man’s nostrils came through the wire. “Don’t worry, Singer, Agnelli take care of you. Give him plenty of time, he take real good care.”

“In the meantime, get this Liddell off my back. I’m warning you, he’s going to try to pull something. If I go, I don’t go alone.”

“You sound like a crazy woman. Make yourself a drink and go to sleep. Agnelli handle everything.” There was a click as the fat man slammed down the receiver.

Mickey Denton’s hand was shaking so badly he could hardly fit the receiver back on its base. He shuddered when he realized that the thing that kept him from heading the fat man’s list was the letter to the Treasury Department that he had left to be mailed in triplicate if anything happened to him. He wondered if three copies of the letter were enough, decided he was safely covered. Agnelli couldn’t be sure how many letters were spread around, and he couldn’t take a chance on even one being mailed.

# 18.

Jacobs Beach is a short block in New York City between Broadway and Eighth Avenue which is traditionally the capital of the boxing world. Two short blocks away is Madison Square Garden, the royal palace of the sport of flattened noses and cauliflowered ears.

The Beach itself might some day be eligible for membership in the United Nations. It has its own customs, its own language, its own mode of dress and its own culture.

*Boxing Age*, the official publication of the ring, was published by Eddie Ranch from a third-floor office in one of the grimy fronted buildings that line the Beach. It was a two-room suite, the outer room filled with tied bundles of back issues stacked to the ceiling. Off to the side there was a small desk with a typewriter of ancient vintage sitting on it. At the moment, it was unoccupied.

In the inside room, two dust-stained windows looked out over the street. A man sat at the only desk in the room, his heels hooked on the windowsill overlooking the street. Below matinee crowds were giving traffic a case of the creeps, a situation that hackies were protesting with loud honks of their horns.

Andy Regan and Pete Volpe were sitting in chairs, a bound volume of *Boxing Age* for 1953 perched on their knees, laboriously checking through it page by page. Regan reached into his pocket, brought out a balled handkerchief, swabbed at his face. He shook his head.

“I don’t see nobody even looks like him, Pete.” He rubbed his eyes. “I keep going through these books, I’ll go blind.”

Volpe nodded impatiently. “You think maybe this is my idea how to spend a couple days in New York? Agnelli says you find this gee, you find him. Agnelli’s a good guy to do favors for—a bad guy to say no to. You know?”

The balled handkerchief made another circuit around the thin man’s face, went back into the hip pocket. Wordlessly, he went back to turning the pages of the book, studying the faces of the fighters that glared back ferociously from the pages.



Finally he finished the bound volume for 1953, stood and eased the stiffness in his back. "He's not in there."

Eddie Ranch dropped his heels from the window, spun his chair around. "You say this guy is how old like?"

Regan shrugged thin shoulders. "Who can tell when a guy's face looks like he caught it in an electric fan? I figure him for maybe forty, give or take a little."

The publisher rolled his eyes up at the ceiling, computed. "So in 1953, he's like thirty-two?" He rubbed his chin.

"I could be wrong," the thin man admitted dolefully.

"So try 1954 and 1955." Ranch indicated two bound volumes on the end of the desk. "This guy got marks like you say, he's been around a while. He's been around a while, we got him mugged some place."

Regan sighed, carried the 1953 volume to the desk, took the 1954 book back with him. He sat down, started leafing through the pages. Eddie Ranch turned back to his survey of the traffic situation.

The only sound in the room was the turning of the pages. Suddenly Regan stiffened, the breath whistled through his teeth. He bent his head closer to the page, studied the face of the fighter on it. He looked up eagerly. "This is him, Bunty Warren. A heavyweight."

Eddie Ranch got out of his chair, walked over, leaned over Regan's shoulder and studied the battered face of the fighter.

"I remember this character." He nodded. "A real canvasback." He reached over, lifted the bound volume from the thin man's knees, glanced over the article. "Comes from California. L.A., I think. A bunter. If he uses his fists as good as he uses his head, this boy might have gone some place."

"What's he doing now?" Pete Volpe asked.

Ranch squinted in thought, shook his head. "Last I hear of him, he's tied up with some two-bit character Bunty's backing up with muscle."

"This character got a name?"

Ranch stared at the ceiling for a moment, watched the painfully slow progress of a cockroach across its cracked surface. He was fishing through the filing cabinets in his brain, the storeroom of his amazing memory, his stock in trade. Suddenly, he grinned, nodded his head. "Guy's name is Benny Welton. Had a shakedown pitch, strictly penny-ante stuff. Bunty was

his collector.” He slammed the book closed, piled it on top of the other volumes on his desk. “Help any?”

“Might be just what we’re looking for.”

“Good.” The publisher rubbed his hands together. “Tell Agnelli like any time Eddie Ranch can do him a favor, just yell.”

Volpe nodded. “I’ll tell him.” He waited until the sad-faced man had gotten to his feet, made a fruitless effort to brush the creases out of his pants. “Let’s go, Andy. Agnelli will be glad to get this.”

Tony Agnelli showed no change of expression while Pete Volpe and Andy Regan gave him their report. He sat back in his chair, his fingers laced across his midsection.

“The pug’s Bunty Warren. Eddie Ranch is sure about that. He’s not sure he’s still running with Benny Welton,” Volpe told him.

The fat man turned his attention to Regan, squinted at him soberly. “You’re sure you’re fingering the right guy?”

“I’d bet my life on it.”

Agnelli squirmed uncomfortably. “Maybe it ain’t your life, but it’s somebody’s life you’re betting on it.” He turned his head with an effort. “Mario, get us on the first plane to L.A.”

The bodyguard widened his eyes in surprise. “You, too, Mr. Agnelli? You’re going on a plane?”

The fat man nodded unhappily. “Too much I left in other people’s hands. This, Agnelli handle himself. Then he be sure it’s handled okay.”

Mario nodded, scurried out of the room.

Agnelli turned back to the two men. “You thank Don Louis. You tell him Agnelli remembers this.” He half closed his eyes. “On the way out, you stop by the desk. My girl she have an envelope for each of you that make up for time you lose.”

Regan and Volpe exchanged gratified glances. “Thank you, Mr. Agnelli. Thank you very much.” They bowed their way out of the room as the fat man seemed to go to sleep.

Benny Welton started nervously at the knock on the door. He reached for the .38 that lay on the table, walked over to the door, put his ear to it. The knock was repeated.

“Bunty?”

“Yeah, Benny, let me in.”

Welton unlocked the door, removed the chair that was propped under the knob. He covered the door with the .38, his finger white on the trigger.

He relaxed when the door opened and Bunty walked in. As soon as the ex-pug had closed the door behind him, Welton replaced the chair under the knob, relocked the door.

“How’d you do?” he wanted to know.

Bunty shrugged. “I picked up what money we had stashed around the place, but I didn’t touch nothing else. If I came down with a valise that snotty kid on the elevator might start shooting off his mouth.”

“He seen him around since last night?”

“Who?”

Welton swore irritably. “I told you. The horse-faced guy that I made following us? Don’t you remember? I asked you if you ever saw him before. He’s the one who fingered us. He’s got to be.”

“He’s not the one who did the shooting.”

“I know it.” Welton got up, started pacing the room.

It was a far cry from the apartment in North Hollywood. The furniture was old, decrepit. The linen on the bed was rumped, unclean. There was one armchair, with the rug in front of it badly worn, showing the nap through the cracks in it.

He stopped pacing. “It was Harry Jacobs.”

Bunty rubbed the heel of his hand along the side of his jaw. “Why should Jacobs try for us? He got a good deal. You said yourself we got the short end.”

“How do I know why he’s trying for us?” Welton resumed his pacing in short nervous steps. “One thing’s for sure. We can’t go to the cops and ask for protection.”

“What do we do?”

“We get out of here and keep going.” He stopped in front of the big man, held his hand out. “How much did you get?”

“A couple of grand. That ain’t going to last us long if Jacobs puts the organization on us. It costs to be on the lam. Costs double if you’re lamming from those boys.” He dug a wadded roll of bills from his pocket, passed it over.

Welton moistened the tip of his finger, counted the bills. “So it costs. That’s better than getting dead, isn’t it?”

“What about all the stuff back at the apartment? The clothes, the furniture, all that?”

“We leave it.” Welton shook his head. “He’s probably got that place staked out and—” He paled, reached out, grabbed the big man by the arm. “You sure nobody followed you back here?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Bunty wrinkled his battered features into a perplexed scowl. “I still can’t figure why Harry Jacobs should want to burn us.”

“I sure as hell ain’t going to stay around and find out,” Welton grunted. He wadded the bills into a roll, stuck it into his pocket. “We hole out here for a couple of days until the heat dies down, then we head for Tia Juana.”

Harry Jacobs stood at the window in his room at the Hotel Criterion, chewed on the stem of his cigarette holder. His carefully trimmed wisp of a mustache was awry, there were white bristles glinting on the sides of his jowls and under his chin. His hair showed the effect of constant raking with his fingers.

The fiasco of the night before had completely unnerved him. He was sure Benny Welton had recognized him and he knew he could expect no mercy from that quarter if a showdown came with Agnelli.

He raked at his hair again, walked from the window to the room’s only chair, sank into it.

By now Agnelli had his lines of communication out all over the country. It was only a question of time before one of his sources came across someone who had been contacted to buy the money.

He tried to remember how the contact had been made with him. There was a preliminary telephone call, then a meeting with the pug. He ran the heel of his hand up and down over the bristles. His only contact with Benny

had come after he agreed to discuss terms. Benny hadn't shown in any of the early negotiations. If he had operated that way with everybody, there was still a chance.

He brought a crumpled cigarette from his pocket, fitted it to the cigarette holder. It looked unduly jaunty tilted in the corner of his mouth in contrast with his unshaven appearance. His hand shook as he lifted a lighted match to the end of the cigarette, took a deep drag.

Last night could have been it. If the pug's aim hadn't been thrown off by the suddenness of the surprise attack, Jacobs might be down in the morgue right now with Rocky Castri. He pulled himself out of the chair, walked over to the waste basket, brought out the newspaper. He straightened its wrinkled front page out on the top of the table, read the story of Rocky's death again. The damn fool, going up against a guy with Liddell's reputation!

He rolled the paper into a ball, jammed it back in the waste basket. Who was he to talk? He went up against Bunty Warren, rusty after twenty to twenty-five years lack of practice.

He dug into his pockets, brought up a pair of silk gloves that had been rolled into a ball. That was one thing he remembered from the old days—wear gloves. And it was plenty lucky that he did, dropping the gun like a scared amateur.

He smoked in short, nervous puffs. Last night had been a fiasco. Next time it would be done right. And there would be a next time. There had to be!

# 19.

Ann Connell arrived at her Beverly Hills home the evening after Rocky Castri's ill-fated attempt on Johnny Liddell. She had absorbed the details on the trip down from San Francisco, contacted Liddell the minute she walked in the door. Castri's death, and his involvement in the murder of Charley Nelson, had shaken her badly. She realized now the Pandora's box she had opened the night she talked Liddell into taking a hand in Barney Evans' murder. It had seemed like such a good idea then—now it had all the earmarks of a full-blown nightmare.

She walked out onto the small porch that was pasted on the side of the house overlooking the valley. Below her, the road curved and twisted up from Doheny like a silver strip of tape. It was lined at respectable intervals with stucco houses with tile roofs, modern ranch houses that were built right into the sharply inclined hills. Some of the houses were dark, from others yellow geometric shapes spilled light onto the darkening lawns.

Still farther down, the Strip was beginning to smear the sky with the reds and greens of the lights on the restaurants and honky-tonks that were getting ready for the night trade.

She felt a sudden chill, warmed the backs of her arms with the palms of her hands. It looked so gay on the surface, but it was typical of the town—a bright false front masking the sewer it disguised. She turned, walked back into the house.

It was almost a half hour before she heard Liddell's cab pull up onto the concrete apron of her garage. She got to the door in time to see him pay the cabby, start up the stairs to the entrance. The cabby roared his hack into reverse, headed back down the road toward Sunset. Ann worked on a smile as Liddell mounted the stairs. She held out her ridiculously small hand to be engulfed by his big paw. "Thanks for coming, Johnny. I—I guess it was pretty forward of me to call you instead of waiting for you to call me, but—to tell you the truth, I'm scared." She led the way into the living room, let him close the door behind them, "I just read about Rocky Castri and Charley Nelson." She turned, looked up into his face. "It's all tied in with Barney's death, isn't it?"

"Figures to be," Liddell told her. "Charley had some kind of a statement placing Castri at Evans' house that night. He went after it and got it. Charley

got in the way, so he killed her.”

“And you killed him.”

Liddell grinned at her. “Don’t make it sound noble. I didn’t kill him because he killed Charley. I killed him because he was trying to tattoo my hide with a .38.”

“Is it all over now, Johnny? Was Castri the one who killed Evans?”

Liddell considered it, shrugged. “It took more than one man to kill Evans, I think. Castri was one of them. The other is still walking around—” He took the girl by the hand, led the way to the couch, dropped down on it. “There’s a lot more to it than just a hit on Evans. Denton is in it up to his ears. So is Agnelli. Maybe some other people. We’ve only started to scratch the surface.”

The dark-haired girl tightened her grip on his hand. “Forget the other people, Johnny. I don’t want you to go any further. I never should have started this in the first place.”

Liddell studied her face—the perfect arcs of her brows, the luminous liquid eyes, the full, moist lips. “Hell, honey, a thing like this is like getting on a merry-go-round. You don’t just get on and off when you please. You have to wait for the end of the ride. Even if I was willing to quit now, it’s not that simple. The men behind Castri couldn’t be sure I was quitting. There’s only one way they could make sure. And I’m not about to stand still for that.”

Ann caught her full lower lip between her teeth. “And me? Do they know that you’re working for me?”

Liddell shook his head. “Not from me. But you did leave a bit of a trail. You went to the FBI, you went to the local cops and you even went to the newspapers. It wouldn’t take a genius to put two and two together to figure out you might take the next step and hire a private eye.”

Some of the color drained from the girl’s face. “Then they might be coming after me next?”

“Not if we get them first.”

The girl pulled her hand away from his, jumped to her feet. There was a subtle transformation in her face. The brows were still perfectly symmetrical, the eyes still large and slanted, the mouth still full and red. But anger had given the cast of her features a harder, less feminine look.

“That lousy press agent of mine,” she stormed. “I should have known better than to let him talk me into this. I should have known something like this would happen.”

“Your press agent talked you into this?”

She nodded her head angrily. “He told me it should be worth plenty of space. If we didn’t find out who killed Evans, there’d be stories about how hard I tried. If, by some freak, we did get the killer, he could paint me like some kind of female Robin Hood or something. Now look at the spot he’s got me in.”

“Then you didn’t really care who did kill Evans or even if he was killed?”

“Why should I? What was he to me? It just happened he beat Denton up in my place and my press agent thought we could grab some space on it.”

Liddell sighed. “There’s only one good thing I can say about this town. It’s so consistent.” He got up from the couch, shook his head. “Me, I’m still a farmer. But I should have figured that anyone who could claw her way to the top in this racket couldn’t be the helpless little thing I met in San Francisco.”

She caught his arm. “Where are you going, Johnny?”

“Home. What’s there to stay for? I’ve already seen your performance. Good as it was, it wasn’t good enough to sit through two times.”

The actress’ face showed the first signs of panic. “No. You can’t go. You can’t leave me here alone. I need protection.”

“By me or from me?”

Ann grabbed his arm. “If those hoods think I was that sure Evans was murdered, they may think I know more than I do.” She tugged on his sleeve. “You can’t leave me here where they can walk right in—”

“You know something? If one of them did, I don’t know which one of you would need protection more. Those big eyes and that low-cut dress bit are pretty lethal.”

The girl licked at her lips, worked for a warm smile. “Johnny, don’t dislike me.” She drew him toward the couch, sat down alongside him. “It’s all part of the business. I didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt. I just saw a chance for a publicity build-up—”



Liddell could feel the firm roundness of the girl's thigh against his. She was wearing a heady scent that made it difficult for him to remember his indignation. Her lips were moist, half parted, close. "Maybe if you weren't so hard on the make for that publicity, Charley Nelson wouldn't be dead," he argued.

"I didn't know, Johnny. How could I know? I thought it was just a press agent's brainstorm, that nothing would come of it." She brought the lips closer, the scent became more powerful. "I owe you something, Johnny, for getting you into this. I want to make it up to you." She reached up, pasted her lips against his mouth.

After a moment, he pushed her away. "I haven't had time to itemize your bill," he told her.

She reached for the knot of his tie, loosened it, opened his collar. "If I overpay, you can always give me a refund."

Barney Evans had carefully invested most of the boodle money shipped to him from the various points. One of the successful speculations had been in the Fairview, one of Los Angeles' more modern hotels. It served a dual purpose—it was a profitable venture that returned the organization good money for the money that had been doing no good lying in banks. And it gave the various big brokers and organization chiefs a home-away-from-home where they would not be spied upon or disturbed. The security men were a well-trained troop who could be counted on to protect the visiting dons' privacy as well as their health.

Tony Agnelli, as befitting a ranking member of the organization's top echelon, was assigned a whole floor on his arrival at the Fairview. This was a floor that was not on the elevators' regular stop, could only be reached by a private elevator which made this floor its only stop. When the cage stopped, the wall beyond was blank, showing no signs of a door. The elevator was equipped with a signal that would alert the security man who stood guard in the corridor beyond. The door to the floor could only be opened from the inside.

Most guests in the Fairview were unaware that the floor even existed. The blueprints for the hotel placed on file with the building department had neglected to indicate the many security measures that had been installed in it. The only visitors to it were expected and invited—it would take a full-scale assault to invade it.

Tony Agnelli sat in a dressing gown in the sumptuously furnished sitting room of the main suite. He was eating southern fried chicken with his fingers. He appeared to be ignoring the man who sat on the edge of the upholstered chair facing him. Finally he tossed a gnawed drumstick onto the plate, leaned back, sucked on his sausage-shape fingers. He glanced over at the man. "You try to tell me this Welton, he take off before we start looking? Why? You think maybe someone tip him we looking?"

The man on the chair shook his head positively. "I just got your instructions last night. The kid on the elevator at his building said Welton and his buddy haven't been around in a couple of days. Last time he saw them was two days ago when the pug came back for a little while. He left and neither of them has been back."

Agnelli snorted, wiped at his gleaming chin with his napkin, threw it angrily on the tray. "You think maybe he reads tea-leaves, he figures Agnelli come looking for him?"

The man on the chair twisted uncomfortably. "I don't know if this has anything to do with it, Mr. Agnelli. A couple nights ago, there was some kind of a shooting scrape right outside his building. Nobody sees who's involved and the cops have it pegged for a botched stickup. But Welton hasn't been seen around since."

The heavily veined lids hooded the fat man's eyes. "You think he's maybe on a trip somewhere?"

"He didn't take any suitcases or anything, the kid says. Just went out one night, like usual, hasn't been back since."

Agnelli leaned back, sucked his pouting lips in and out thoughtfully. He folded his hands over his midsection, seemed to go to sleep. The man in the chair sat watching him nervously.

Finally Agnelli opened his eyes, bobbed his head. "You pass the word Agnelli wants to see this Welton?" he asked.

The man on the chair nodded. "Word is out all over town. If he shows any of his usual places they'll tip us right off. I got all the pool rooms and bars on the look. He'll show sooner or later."

"It's got to be sooner," Agnelli growled. "You got his place staked out?"

The other man nodded. "We got it sealed tighter than a box. A mouse couldn't get in or out, let alone a rat."

“Call them off. Welton won’t try to get in, he’ll smell your boys a mile away,” Agnelli said. “He’s maybe got someone keeping an eye open for him.”

The man on the chair started to argue, was waved to silence. Agnelli dismissed him with a gesture. “Mario!” he bawled.

The dark-haired bodyguard materialized from an outer room. “He’s leaving,” Agnelli told him.

The man on the chair got to his feet, scurried out. Mario stuck his head into the hall, signaled to the security man to let the visitor out. Then he walked back to where Agnelli sat, glowering.

“Anything?”

The fat man sputtered angrily. “These locals, they couldn’t find an elephant in a rat’s nest. They scared him off, now he’s holed up. We got to smoke him out. And fast.”

“The singer, he’s been trying to reach you. He says he’s got to have a meet with you.”

Agnelli scowled. “Who tell him Agnelli in town?”

Mario shrugged. “He called New York, told the girl in the office it was important. She told him you were out here. Now he wants to see you. You want I should cool him off?”

The fat man wagged his head. “Not yet. When the time come, you cool him off good. But not yet.”

Mario nodded. “You want to talk to him?”

“Maybe later. You tell him Agnelli is up to his ears. We have a meet maybe tonight. Tell him you call.” He watched the thin shoulders of the bodyguard until they disappeared through the door to the adjoining room.

Denton was a problem, would only get worse! Yet he knew his hands were tied. The singer had enough on all of them to get them all indicted for tax fraud. The boys around the country wouldn’t understand that. So Denton had to be kept alive and happy.

The fat man laced his fingers across his midsection, sat lost in thought. Time was running out and the situation was complicated by someone’s bumbling.

He wondered if the shooting outside Welton's apartment house was an attempt to get the kidnaper, and if it was, who shot at him? It had to be whoever bought the money from him, trying to silence the only possible witness against him. Then, in that case, Welton would be only too glad to finger the man who tried to kill him.

Agnelli heaved his oversized belly in a deep sigh. It wasn't enough that he had this problem to solve with time running out. The singer had to get hard to handle at the same time.

He sat for a minute plotting and planning. By the time Mario re-entered the room, some of the grimness had faded from the fat man's face. He had figured out how to kill two birds with one stone.

He hoped.

"I got a job for you, Mario," he told the bodyguard. "But you want to be careful. Real careful. You blow this, it could be you won't be around too long. You know?"

## 20.

Johnny Liddell left the elevator at the fourth floor of the Chateau Montrose, walked down the hall to his door. He inserted his key, frowned when he saw the door was unlocked. He tugged the .45 from its hammock, turned the knob and pushed it open. He stepped to the side out of range of fire from inside the room, waited.

Then he poked the snout of the .45 around the door jamb, followed it into the room.

A thin man was sitting in the chair facing the door. He stared at Liddell stonily, held his arms away from his body. "I'm not heeled." He got up slowly, unbuttoned his jacket, turned around and flipped up the rear.

"Who are you?" Liddell wanted to know.

"Mario. I work for Mr. Agnelli. He wants to sit down with you. Talk."

Liddell frowned. He walked over to the thin man, patted him down, found he was unarmed. He stowed the .45 under his arm. "How'd you get in here?"

Mario grinned, shrugged negligently. "That lock. A hairpin can open it."

"How'd you know my apartment?" Liddell asked.

"That nance on the desk. I tell him I got a message, are you in? He checks to see if your key is in your box. So I know your room number. I tell him I wait in lobby. Then when he gets busy, I come upstairs to wait."

"I get more traffic through this damn room," Liddell complained. "What does Agnelli want, and what's he doing in town?"

Mario grinned again. "He don't confide. Mr. Agnelli figures if I know as much as he knows, why do we need him?"

"When's this meeting to take place?"

"Now."

Liddell frowned. "And if I decide I don't want to meet with the fat man, then what?"

"It's like they say. It's a free country." The grin was a little more strained. "But Mr. Agnelli, he tells me to say it's better for everybody you sit

down and talk.”

Liddell considered, nodded his head. “Okay. I’ve got nothing to do this afternoon. The fat man might come up with a few laughs.”

“He’s real funny, Mr. Agnelli,” the bodyguard conceded. “He’s got lotsa people die laughing. Okay if I tell him you come?”

Liddell indicated the phone. “Be my guest. But tell him not to go to any special trouble for me. A sawed-off shotgun, even a sap—just the simple things.”

Mario squinted at Liddell. “You know something? You’re a real funny fellow. Mr. Agnelli, he want to take care of you, you be dead. He wants to talk to you, maybe you don’t be.”

“Figuring on giving me a guided tour of Forest Lawn isn’t an original idea, meatball. There was a guy named Rocky Castri got the same idea a couple of days ago. He made it back to the stable ahead of schedule.”

The dark man glared at Liddell for a moment, then turned and walked over to the telephone and started dialing.

Johnny Liddell followed Mario across the acres of deep-pile carpeting that constituted the lobby of the Hotel Fairview. A glassed-in central column was alive with tropical blooms of breath-taking colors, a spiral staircase rose from the lobby to the mezzanine, the expensive chairs and couches that dotted the lobby were filled with young girls dripping mink and middle-aged men draped by Fashion Park.

The bodyguard led the way past the double bank of elevators to a door in the rear of the lobby. A curly-haired man in a patently expensive blue-flannel suit sat reading a late edition in an armchair near the door. He looked up, recognized Mario, smiled a greeting.

Only the icy, unblinking eyes identified him as a gunsel. From the smile down to the tips of his highly polished Italian-type shoes, he could have been anything from an executive from one of the studios to a wealthy playboy. But the eyes were the hallmark of his profession. He went back to his paper as Mario opened the door, motioned Liddell through.

On the other side of the door was what appeared to be a cul-de-sac. There were no windows, no door opening off it. Liddell watched curiously as Mario fumbled with the molding, stepped back. After a moment, a section of the apparently solid wall slid back, an elevator door slid open.

The elevator operator could have been a twin of the man sitting in the chair in the lobby. He was shorter, but made up in breadth what he lacked in height. He waited until Liddell and the bodyguard were in the cage, touched the button that closed the elevator door and the sliding panel simultaneously.

As the car started its smooth ascent, he turned to Liddell. "I'll have to ask you to check your gun," he told him in a flat, disinterested tone. "I'll have it for you when you leave."

Liddell looked from the operator to Mario, who stared back impassively.

"Just a routine," the operator told him. "The management doesn't like any disturbances. It's bad for business. You understand, I'm sure."

Liddell grinned bleakly. "I'm the most understanding guy you ever met." He tugged the .45 from its holster, turned it over to the operator. He offered no resistance when Mario apologetically patted him down. "You make a man feel so much at home," Liddell told them.

The operator stowed the .45 in his belt, turned back to the front of the cage. The car slowed to a smooth stop at the unmarked floor. The operator pushed a concealed button in a prearranged signal, then the wall slowly slid back, revealing a sumptuously carpeted corridor beyond. Another security man stood to the side, covering the exit from the cage with a hand deeply sunk in the pocket of his jacket. He relaxed at a nod from the operator. The cage door opened, Mario walked out, led the way to the entrance to the suite.

Tony Agnelli sat slumped uncomfortably in the depths of a heavily upholstered chair. He looked up as Johnny Liddell followed the bodyguard into the room. He regarded him through sleepy eyes. "Hello, Liddell. Long time," he said in his blubbery voice.

"I've managed to survive," Liddell told him.

"Must be like five or six years." Agnelli motioned Mario out of the room with a toss of his head, waited until the door had closed behind him. "Still for hire?"

"Depends."

"I come all the way out here to hire you. I need a boy."

Liddell chuckled. "From the looks of the army you have in this place you don't need anything."

The fat man snorted. “All muscle. They only know one thing. I need a boy who’s got brains too.” He studied Liddell’s face. “You still for hire?”

Liddell considered, shook his head. “You don’t want me, Agnelli. I don’t hire out my gun.”

Agnelli chuckled. “This job you do on Rocky Castri. That’s like for charity?” He held up his fat hands to ward off an answer. “I got no sweat with you over this. Castri got out of line, he had it coming. I don’t buy your gun—guns I got more than I can use. I want you to find someone for me.”

Liddell shook his head again. “Same answer. I don’t bird-dog somebody for one of your guns to hit. In my book, that’s no different—”

“Not even if this guy is a snatch artist and I want him alive?” Agnelli asked softly. “And he stays alive until I turn him over to the Feds?”

“Why do you want him?”

Agnelli submerged his jowls in a monumental shrug. “I got a few questions I ask. That’s all I want. Then the Feds are welcome to him with Agnelli’s best wishes.” He scowled. “Me, Agnelli, I want no part of any snatch artists. No pro pull a job like that. Only rat amateurs. Them we can do without.”

Liddell grinned. “They give crime a bad name, eh?”

“What you say, Liddell? This rat, he’s worth five thousand to me alive. With a grand bonus for every day under five days it takes to bring him in.”

“You want to tell me any more?”

The fat man shook his head ponderously. “You know all you got to know. I want him alive and when I ask him a couple questions, you get to turn him over to the Feds and be a big hero.” He shrugged. “Me, I make a deal the Feds release some money belonging to friends of mine. So nobody gets hurt but the snatch artist.”

Liddell considered. It was a chance to bail out of an unprofitable situation. Ann Connell’s gratitude was a delight, but it was strictly non-negotiable. The fat man and he were both heading in the same direction, even if their objectives were different. If Agnelli already knew the identity of the Cheyney kidnaper, it would save Liddell days, weeks or even months of digging. “Okay,” he agreed. “You have a boy as long as we understand each other. I bring him in in one piece, the Feds get him the same way.”



“A deal.” Agnelli nodded and turned to the closed door. “Mario!” he bellowed. The door opened, the dark-haired man walked in. “Get the singer.”

Liddell peered at the fat man, then back to the door where Mickey Denton was standing. The singer stood in the doorway, his jaw dropped in surprise. He looked from Mario to the fat man and back. “What is this?” he wanted to know.

“You tell Mario you want a meet,” the fat man told him. “So okay. We have a meet.”

“You know who that guy is?” He jabbed his finger at Liddell.

“Liddell? Sure. He just agree to do a job for Agnelli. Nothing to do with you, so now he get off your back.” He turned to Liddell. “Part of our deal.”

“You didn’t mention that,” Liddell told him.

Agnelli shrugged. “It’s not important. You be too busy earning the grand-a-day bonus to worry about the singer.” He looked back at Denton. “He’s a nothing. Not worth wasting your time.”

Denton walked into the room, stopped in front of the fat man. “I’m a pretty important nothing, then. You better keep me in your prayers, Agnelli. Suppose I tell you I don’t want any part of any deal he’s mixed up in—”

Agnelli regarded the singer through slitted eyes. “You got bullets back to back, Singer,” he conceded, “but any smart gambler tells you not to push too hard. You can’t afford to bluff when there’s no limit on table stakes. You know?”

“Just don’t call my bluff,” Denton snarled.

“Like I say, you got aces. But maybe somebody else hold the trumps. It happens.”

“Not in this case, Agnelli. I know where I stand and so do you. If there’s anybody trying to bluff, it’s you. I don’t care how you do it, but I want him off my back.” He glared at Liddell. “If I had my way I’d rather see you knock him off than pay him off.”

“There’s been too much of that already. We got big business connections, we got to act like businessmen. There was no need for what happened to Evans, or the newspaper woman or Castri. Somebody pull a double cross, everything get out of hand. We get it back under control, Singer, without any more hits.” He nodded to Mario. “Have one of the boys

see Denton gets home, Mario. Make sure nothing happen to him on the way.”

Denton turned on his heel, hightailed it to the door, followed by the bodyguard.

The fat man spat his contempt for the singer as the door closed behind them. “A nothing,” he snorted. He pulled his attention back to Liddell. “You find this snatch artist for me? Denton has no part of this, I give you my word. This is personal. For Agnelli.”

Liddell nodded. “What have you got on him?”

Agnelli sighed at the need for movement, squirmed until he could bring the memo book from his breast pocket. He wet a finger, flipped through the pages. “His name is Welton, Benny Welton. He has an ex-pug working with him named Bunty Warren. A couple of days ago, somebody tries for him outside his apartment house. He’s gone underground. I want him.” He tore the sheet out of the notebook, handed it to Liddell. “That’s the address of his apartment.”

Liddell took it, folded it absently. “We understand each other, Agnelli. I’m taking this on only because I want this kidnaper for the Feds. You can put the finger on him through contacts they can’t touch, so you can short-cut it for me. But that doesn’t mean I won’t nail you or any of your men who had anything to do with the Evans kill or the Nelson kill.”

Agnelli snorted. “All you have to do for me is find Welton. You want to knock your head against the wall trying to pin something else on me, that’s your affair. Only”—he raised a warning finger—“lay off the singer. He had nothing to do with either of them.” He turned to cast a baleful glare at the door. “He’s got plenty coming to him. But Agnelli pick the time and the place.”

“We understand each other,” Liddell told him.

## 21.

Bunty Warren pushed the small pile of dead butts aside in the ash tray to make room to crush out the live one he held in his hand. “How long we got to stay cooped up like this, Benny?” he wanted to know. “I’ll go stir crazy.”

Welton lay sprawled on the unmade bed, riffling through the pages of a fact detective magazine. He stopped at the double spread devoted to the Cheyney kidnaping, glanced through it, found nothing new. The police and the FBI were still working on it, but no new leads had been uncovered, the hack who wrote the article from morgue clips reported. None of the money had ever turned up but all agencies were still on the alert, the article concluded.

Welton threw the magazine across the room, laced his fingers at the back of his neck, stared at the ceiling.

“How long?” Bunty persisted.

“Until I think it’s safe to go out.”

The man with the scrambled features got up, walked to the sink, picked up a bottle of scotch. He held it up to the light, estimated the supply. “We got maybe two, three more drinks then we’re out,” he grumbled. He tilted the bottle over a glass, softened it with water. “Least we can do is have Millie send a couple of girls over. It helps to pass the time.”

“Sure. And one of the organization’s boys follows them over and he picks you off on the rise. Nothing doing. We stay under cover until they let up a little. Then we take it on the lam for Mexico and keep going.”

“So it don’t have to be one of Millie’s girls. I can go down on the boulevard, find a couple—”

“No dames. They got loose mouths. Can’t you get it through your thick head the organization’s got ears every place? They want us bad enough to try to burn us right out in the open like that, they want us bad enough to pass the word to every hustler, every bartender, everybody that’s likely to lay eyes on us.”

Bunty took a deep swallow from his glass, smacked his thickened lips. “They probably think we lammed out of town already.” He debated the advisability of refilling his glass, felt the other man’s eyes on him, set the

glass down. “You want to stay cooped up in this dump twenty-four hours a day, that’s your business. Me, I need air.”

Welton unlaced the fingers from the back of his neck, sat up. “Look, Bunty, it’s not your skin I’m worried about. But they get you, they get me. That’s what I’m worried about. You stay put.”

The big man wrinkled his battered features in a scowl. “You know something, Benny? Ever since I tie up with you, you give orders. You tell me, ‘Bunty, you do this,’ or ‘Bunty, you do that.’ So I go along. But I tell you this room is giving me the hots. I got to get out and stretch my legs.”

“I ain’t steered you wrong so far, have I?” Welton demanded. “So maybe I do tell you what to do. But I been right. And I’m telling you this ain’t no time to be walking around with half the gees in this town eye-balling for us.” For a moment he thought he detected signs of revolt in the other man’s face, prepared to retreat. But Bunty just turned away sulkily. “You want another drink, help yourself. I don’t feel like any right now,” Welton added.

The big man lifted the bottle, spilled some scotch into his glass. He started to put the bottle down, estimated that there was less than another drink in it, poured in the rest.

“Hey, take it easy,” Welton said.

The big man didn’t turn around, poured some water from the tap into the glass. The man on the bed eyed the hulking shoulders of his partner apprehensively. He slid his hand under the pillow, felt the reassuring bulk of the gun butt. It was beginning to look more and more like a showdown was looming between him and the big man. Bunty developing claustrophobia was a throwback to a jail term early in his career. It had been a scarring experience and in the throes of the claustrophobia, the big man could become vicious.

Welton wondered how much longer he could control him with words alone. His fingers tightened around the gun butt, drew some comfort and assurance from it.

But Bunty wasn’t the only one in town going stir crazy.

Few of his acquaintances would have recognized Harry Jacobs. The once carefully tended mustache had been allowed to grow wild, there was a three-day growth of beard on his face, blurring the outline of his jaw. His eyes were bloodshot, the faint network of broken veins at the sides of his nose were now prominent and multicolored. The row of empty bottles on his dresser top testified to the reason.

He had the air and the appearance of a man faced with his own doom. Word had reached him indirectly that Tony Agnelli was in town. That could mean only one thing. Agnelli had finally found someone who knew who had the hot money to sell and he was close on their heels. He walked unsteadily over to the bureau, tilted one bottle after another over the glass, got less than a half inch of liquor from the batch. He tossed it off in a gulp, coughed.

It was only a matter of time until Agnelli, with the organization's local chapter helping, would uncover Benny Welton. When they did, Welton would spill everything he knew and Agnelli would finally know that it was Jacobs who bought the ransom money and switched it into the shipment.

He thought of the \$500,000 worth of good money he had taken from the shipment in exchange for the ransom money. It was stashed away in his vault in Chicago, for all the good it would do him now. He could break and run for it, maybe even make Chicago. But nobody could run fast enough or far enough to outrun the organization.

His only chance for survival lay in the slim possibility that he could still get to Welton before Agnelli did. The botched-up attempt he had made on Welton had made the kidnaper gun-shy and would keep him under cover. He cursed himself loudly for missing the one opportunity he had to get Welton. If he hadn't missed that night, there would be nothing to worry about. Now he was running a race with the clock and the odds were all against him.

He walked over to the table, picked up the pair of black-silk gloves wadded into a ball, dropped them into his pocket. He didn't anticipate any trouble getting another gun. And it was too late in the game for him to continue sitting around, holed up, waiting for the ax to fall.

Johnny Liddell dropped the cab outside the building housing Benny Welton's apartment in North Hollywood. He stood on the curb, looked around. The area wasn't the most fashionable in this part of town, but it was expensive.

He pushed through the street door into the lobby, crossed to the bank of elevators in the rear. A uniformed operator stood outside his cage, digging at his teeth with his thumbnail. Liddell stepped into the cage, the operator grudgingly followed him in.

"What floor?"

"What floor's the Welton apartment?"

The operator turned. “He’s not in. He must be out of town. I haven’t seen him around in a couple of days.”

Liddell brought his hand out of his pocket with a folded five-spot visible between his fingers. “It’s got a twin if I like the answers.”

The elevator operator hesitated. “Who are you?”

“A private detective.” Liddell brought out his credentials, flashed them for the man.

Wordlessly, the operator turned back to his controls, closed the door to the cage. He pushed the lever, brought it up to a position between the third and fourth floor, stopped it. He turned back to Liddell.

“What are the questions?”

“There was a shooting outside the apartment a couple of days ago. Welton in it?”

The elevator operator seemed to be having trouble keeping his eyes off the bill. “I hit the rug when the slugs started chewing holes in the door. I did get a look as they headed down the alley. It could have been them.” He reached over, lifted the five-spot from between Liddell’s fingers.

“You didn’t tell the police that?”

The operator shrugged. “Why should I make trouble for them? They were always nice to me. Besides, they didn’t start it. Somebody tried to cut them down.”

Liddell nodded. “Any idea who?”

“None.”

Liddell frowned. “Anybody hanging around getting a line on them? Anybody asking questions or—”

The operator started to shake his head, stopped. “Wait a minute. There was a guy. Just a night or so before the shooting. He was in the lobby when I bring them down. He wants to know if they’re—” He fumbled for a name, shrugged it away. “I don’t remember the name he mentions. But it wasn’t anybody that name. It wasn’t Welton.”

“Ever see him before or since?”

The operator shook his head.

“What’d he look like?”

The man grimaced, shook his head. “I didn’t pay too much attention. I remember he had a real horse face, looked kind of creepy. When I told him it wasn’t this guy he was asking about, he took off.”

Liddell dug into his pocket, brought up another five, handed it over. Then he separated a ten-spot from the roll, held it up.

“What’s that for?”

“I’m making a mind bet with myself that you’re going to give me a few minutes in that apartment—”

The operator shook his head firmly. “No, sir. I could get in real trouble if one of them came back—”

Liddell added another ten to it. The operator looked uncertain. “First time I ever booked a mind bet,” he murmured. He lost the fight to keep his eyes off the bills. “You’ll cover for me if anything goes wrong?”

Liddell nodded his head, let the man lift the two bills from his fingers. The operator turned back to the controls, rode the cage up to Welton’s floor. He opened the doors, pointed to a door across the hall. “That’s his apartment.”

Liddell got out, walked over to the door. He brought a celluloid strip from his pocket, fumbled with the door for a moment, then opened it. The last thing he saw in the hall as he closed the door behind him was the worried face of the elevator operator.

Liddell set about a systematic search of the apartment. The closets were filled with expensive suits and bench-crafted shoes. The dresser drawers were undisturbed, filled with hand-tailored shirts and ties. The apartment had every appearance of being lived in and testified to its occupants’ intention to return.

After an hour, Liddell stood in the center of the room, looked around with a puzzled frown. He had a small pile of material that he considered of some value.

One or both of the men had been extensive collectors of pornographic materials. One particularly repulsive picture had been autographed: *To Bunty—It might not look it, but I love you*. It was signed Pearl. Liddell wondered which of the performers was Pearl, decided it didn’t make too much difference to the fastidious and none at all to the nonfastidious. There were a number of matchbooks he had dredged from the pockets of the suits in the closets, the majority of them advertising *Millie’s—Hollywood’s Most*

*Popular Rendezvous.* He dropped one into his pocket, took a last look around. Then he headed for the door, let himself out into the hall.

There were two women in the elevator when it stopped at his floor. Liddell stepped in, gave the operator an almost imperceptible shake of his head. The operator looked relieved, shot the cage down to the lobby.

After the two women had debarked and were headed for the street, Liddell brought out a pack of cigarettes, stuck one in his mouth. "All their clothes are still there, their razors, everything. They sure had every intention of coming back."

"Maybe they still will," the operator murmured. "Maybe that guy laying for them scared them more than we think. But their rent's paid up and they can take their time about coming back. Make sure things have cooled down."

Liddell brought the matchbook from his pocket, lit the cigarette. He held the packet out to the operator. "Ever hear of this joint, Millie's?"

The operator grinned lewdly. "I've heard plenty about it. Never made it myself. It's kind of rich for the blood." He eyed the matchbook thoughtfully. "You find that up there?"

Liddell nodded. "There were quite a few of them. Looks like Welton and his boy didn't find it too rich for their blood."

The operator considered it. "The big guy, the one with the broken nose, he has a babe there. Brought her back here a couple of times." He outlined an hour glass with his hands. "Big, blond, stacked. A couple other times she came by herself. I been saving my pennies for a crack at that one myself. As soon as I get enough I'm paying Millie's a visit and having me a time with this one."

"You're sure she's a hustler?"

"With that equipment, she sure wasn't collecting for the Salvation Army. Anyway, one night I hear her say 'Millie ain't going to like it, me walking out like this on a busy night.' The big guy told her to forget it, that he'd square things with Millie. That's when I started saving my pennies."

"You ever hear him call her by name?"

The operator nodded. "You're getting pretty good mileage on that down payment." He watched while Liddell dug into his pocket, came up with a bill. It changed hands. "What did you just ask me?"



“Did she have a name? Did he ever call her by one?”

The operator folded the bill lovingly, added it to the others. “Pearl. That’s what he called her. Pearl.” He patted the pocket where the bills reposed. “So I just walk into Millie’s and ask for Pearl.” He raised his eyes ceilingward. “You should see this bimbo, mister. You should just get one look at her.”

Liddell grinned. “I might just do that.”

Millie's turned out to be typical of the new fad in Hollywood rendezvous that dot the older stretch of Santa Monica Boulevard. It was on the ground floor of the middle of three buildings. The buildings on either side were empty, their shadeless windows staring blankly down onto the boulevard. The floors above Millie's were also deserted, the window panes dust-grimed and blank.

The whole three buildings looked as if they had been condemned and were only marking time until the wreckers came and finished the job.

Millie's was six steps down from the sidewalk level, a huge subterranean room that had been built by knocking out the walls of the cellars of the two adjoining buildings. The lighting was provided by stubs of candles stuck into the necks of wine bottles; a perpetual cloud of smoke swirled near the ceiling.

Mobiles spun in the smoky air and customers enjoyed the proceedings from canvas chairs, while waitresses with long, dank hair and dangling earrings worked their way through the chairs, their swaying hips brushing lightly against the customers.

In a clear space in the center of the floor, a tousled haired man had one hip propped on a tall stool, was thumbing a guitar and singing a folk song. The far wall was covered with espresso machines and coffee urns of all sizes and shapes.

Johnny Liddell walked down the short flight of steps from the sidewalk level, stood looking around. The last thing he had expected Millie's to be was a coffee house. As he stood there, one of the long-haired waitresses materialized alongside him.

"Looking for somebody?" she wanted to know. There was the faintest tinge of a Mexican accent in her voice.

"Pearl," Liddell told her.

The waitress frowned slightly, her eyes hopscotched over his thick-set shoulders, the heavy jaw. "I am new here. I do not know Pearl. I will send Millie." She turned, disappeared into the dimness. Liddell walked in, felt his way to a canvas chair near the wall.

A tall man in a shapeless tunic, faded dungarees and sandals on his bare feet stopped alongside Liddell's chair.

"You were looking for somebody?" His hair was long, bleached; a straggly beard sprouted from the point of his chin.

"Millie," Liddell told him.

The bearded man nodded. "I am Millie. I don't think I know you." There was a trace of hostility and suspicion in his voice.

Liddell managed to conceal the shock. "You don't. I'm a friend of Bunty Warren and Benny Welton. They been talking so much about this spot I didn't want to go back east without seeing it." He broke off, dropped his voice. "Bunty said I should say hello to Pearl for him."

Millie grinned. "The girl said you smelled like fuzz. But I wouldn't figure Bunty turning his favorite dish over to a cop." He squinted down at Liddell. "I haven't seen either of them in days. The longest Bunty's stayed away since he met Pearl. Where are they keeping themselves?"

Liddell shrugged. "You know how it is. Every so often you have to get out of town for a couple of days, promote some fresh loot."

"Sure." He looked around, dropped his voice. "You want to go up now? I don't think Pearl's busy. You're the first one's asked for her tonight."

Liddell nodded.

The bearded man headed for a curtained doorway at the rear of the building. He held the curtain aside for Liddell. Beyond there was a flight of stairs leading to the upper stories of the building.

"Go up two flights. This building is vacant, you cross over to the building next door on the second floor. They'll take care of you there." He pressed a concealed buzzer.

Liddell headed up the uncarpeted stairs. On the first landing, he turned, looked around. There had apparently been two apartments on this floor. Now it was deserted, doors hung askew, there were some boxes, a dust-grimed armchair with its springs resting on the floor. He climbed to the second floor, found the same condition. Two empty apartments furnished with the junk and cast-offs of their last tenants.

Liddell stood, looked around. Then a sliding panel opened in the wall, a geometric design of light spilled into the hallway. A gnomelike little man

stood in the entrance. “Right this way.” He had a deep voice that was completely incongruous with his size.

Liddell walked over into the next building. There was a small area with a desk, a filing cabinet and an easy chair. A crumpled newspaper lay next to the chair. The far wall was covered with a blue velvet drape.

The misshapen little man scurried around the desk, climbed into his swivel chair which he rode like a triumphant jockey. He eyed Liddell carefully. “Haven’t been here before?”

“Just passing through town. Bunty Warren recommended the place.”

The man behind the desk twisted his lips in distaste. “I suppose he recommended that cow of his?” When Liddell nodded, the little man shook his head. “You won’t like her.” He hopped out of his chair, pulled open the drawers of the filing cabinet. “Look through some of these. There’s plenty better than Pearl.”

Liddell walked over, thumbed through some of the folders in the cabinet. Each folder contained several pictures, some nude, some illustrating specialties. The old man dry-washed his hands, watched Liddell’s face as he flipped through some of the folders. There was the sound of a hidden buzzer.

Liddell looked up, the old man shook his head.

“That’s just Millie telling me some more customers are on their way.” He grinned, exposed toothless gums. “You don’t have to worry about any raids. These three buildings all belong to Millie. We been operating for years, never no raids.”

Liddell closed the drawer. “I still think I’d like to take a look at Pearl,” he told the little man.

The gnome shrugged. “You pay the tariff, you pick the route. It’s fifty dollars. In advance.” Liddell whistled soundlessly, the little man shrugged again.

“It’s worth something for the insurance. In this state you get picked up in a raid, they publish the Johns’ names in the paper same as the girls’. It’s worth something for the protection.”

Liddell pulled the roll from his pocket, separated two twenties and a ten, passed them over to the little man. He unlocked the desk drawer, placed them on a pile of bills. He hopped over to the curtain, opened the door behind it. “For Pearl,” he told the chocolate-colored girl in the short maid’s outfit.

Beyond the door, the place was sumptuously furnished. The walls were all draped in heavy velvet to prevent any leakage of light or sound. The floors were carpeted with thick-pile Karastan. The furniture was huge, expensive. The entire rear of the house had been made into one room with couches and easy chairs distributed in such a way as to provide the maximum privacy for their occupants.

“I’ll tell Pearl you’re here,” the colored girl told him. “Would you like a drink while you’re waiting?” She indicated a bar at the head of the room, stocked with a dozen or more bottles. “Please make yourself at home.” She turned and headed for the spiral staircase that led to the upper floor. When she walked her hips flipped the short skirt with interesting effects. She wore nothing under it.

Liddell shook his head, walked over to the bar, built himself a scotch and soda. Another dark-skinned girl had taken up her position at the entrance, was welcoming two men. One of them apparently was a regular, was explaining the operation of the place with the pride of familiarity to his short, heavily perspiring companion. Liddell moved away from the bar as they approached, found himself a chair.

He was almost finished with the drink when the café-au-lait hostess came down the stairs with a tall, buxom blonde in tow. Pearl was the type with extravagant curves that were destined some day to turn to fat. But until that day, she was enough to make any man stop and look twice.

She asked a question of the hostess, who pointed out Liddell. She walked over to him with a fixed smile on her lips. Her walk was a production in itself, with her ripe breasts bobbing and weaving as if trying to free themselves from the questionable constraint of the décolleté dress. Liddell stood up as she approached the chair. “Hello, Pearl,” he greeted her.

From close, her eyes were a deep blue, an effect aided by expert tinting. Her hair was a platinum shade, her full lips a startling red. With her other attributes, she added up to a technicolor spectacular and she was pleasantly aware that she had stolen the attention of some of the other men in the room from the girls they had selected.

She looked him over with interest. “We don’t get too many like you in here.” She glanced past him at the small, fat perspiring man at the bar. “They’re mostly fat and old. What do I call you, honey?”

“Johnny.”

She grinned. “Everybody that comes here is a Johnny. Don’t you have a name? You can trust me. I won’t go crying to your wife.”

“There is no wife. The name’s Johnny Liddell.”

The grin widened. “That’s what I like about this town. There isn’t a married man in it. At least, I never met one.” She looked at the unfinished drink in Liddell’s hand. “Do you want another drink or shall we go upstairs?”

“We go upstairs.”

“Not the nervous type, huh? That little man back there is going to drink so much getting up his nerve he’s not even going to be able to get up the stairs.” She stuck her arm through Liddell’s, turned and led the way back across the room.

She was pleasantly aware that most of the male eyes in the room were on her as she climbed the stairs. The effect against the tight fabric of the gown was almost worth the price of admission in itself, Liddell had to admit as he walked slowly up behind her.

At the top of the stairs the top floors of the three buildings had been made into one floor, with a single corridor running the entire length. It was lined on either side by rooms: the doors were closed, only half muffling the sounds of movement and giggling.

Pearl led the way to a room halfway down the corridor, pushed the door open and stepped aside for Liddell to enter. It was furnished with a large dresser with a make-up mirror, a couple of easy chairs with a reading light in position behind one of them and a king-sized bed. The walls here too were draped in heavy velvet. Each of the rooms had its own lavatory opening off it. Pearl walked in, closed the door after her. “How’d you come to ask for me, honey? Ever see me before?” she wanted to know.

“Bunty Warren talked about you.”

The girl walked over to the make-up mirror, poked at her hair with her fingertips, started removing her ear-rings. “What’s happened to Bunty?”

“Hasn’t he been around at all?”

Pearl pursed her lips, eyed the lipstick critically. Then she took a piece of tissue, wiped her lips clean of it. “Not in days. It’s the longest time he’s stayed away.” Her eyes met his in the mirror. “Have you seen him?”

Liddell shook his head.

The girl reached back, caught the zipper and tugged it down. The dress peeled away from her body, she stepped out of it. Her breasts were full, round, a shade over-ripe, the shadow of things to come. There was a little too much flesh on her hips, her belly was softly rounded. She ran the flat of her hands up from her thighs, over her body to cup her breasts.

“Why should we talk about Bunty? That’s not what you came here for, is it?” She walked over to him, unbuttoned his jacket, slid it back off his shoulders.

“As a matter of fact,” Liddell told her dolefully, “that’s just exactly what I did come here for. To talk about Bunty. I want to get in touch with him or Welton. The sooner the better.”

The blonde’s jaw slackened in surprise. She studied his face for a sign of a rib. “You some kind of a nut or something?” A shadow of suspicion narrowed her eyes. “You a cop?”

Liddell shook his head. “This is a private matter.” He dug into his pocket, brought out the roll of bills. “It’s worth a hundred dollars to me to find him—”

The girl snorted, swung away from him. She padded over to the bureau, picked up a pack of cigarettes, shook one loose. “What do you think I am? You think I’d sell out a friend?”

“Three hundred.”

Pearl tossed her head. “I ought to call Millie and have him throw you out of here on your head.”

“Five.”

The girl lit the cigarette, took a deep drag, blew the smoke at the ceiling. “I don’t know where he is, and I wouldn’t tell you if I did.”

“I’ll make it a thousand if you can find him for me.”

The blonde looked at him, dropped her eyes. “I told you. I haven’t heard from him.”

“But you will?”

She shrugged, set her breasts in fluid motion. “I think so. He’s real hooked on me. Can’t hardly stay away from me.” She glanced into the mirror as if in tribute to his good taste. “He’ll be back.” She turned back to Liddell. “You’re not kidding about that thousand?”

Liddell shook his head. “Will you let me know the minute you hear from him?”

Pearl licked her lips, glanced down at the roll in Liddell’s hand. “Where do I reach you?”

He took out a pad, wrote the telephone number of the Chateau Montrose, handed it to the girl. “You can leave a message for me there.”

She took it, moved her lips as she read it, nodded. “How do I know I get the thousand?”

Liddell flattened out the roll, counted off five hundred, dropped it on the bed. “That’s on account.”

The blonde crushed out her cigarette, rushed to the bed, counted the bills. She smoothed them out lovingly, folded them. She walked back to the bureau, opened the top drawer, dropped the money into it. Then she turned, studied him from under half-closed lids. She brushed the thick, silver hair out of her face with a sweeping motion of her hand. “Okay, we’re finished with business. How about some fun?”

“I’ll take a raincheck on it.”

The girl stared at him. “You are some kind of a nut.” She glanced down at her nudity. “What’s the matter with me?”

“Nothing. I just don’t want to come between you and the man you love.”

“The man I love? What are you talking about?”

“That picture you gave Bunty. The one that said you still love him.”

The frown disappeared from the blonde’s face. She threw her head back and laughed. “That one? I take a pretty good picture, don’t I? You should come to one of those Saturday night specials. We get a lot of important people at them—actors, movie stars, politicians—a lot of important people.”

“You won’t forget about Bunty?”

“For a thousand dollars? You kidding?”

“The sooner the better.” He pulled his jacket back on, buttoned it. “I’m depending on you.”

“You can trust me.”

Liddell nodded, headed for the hall and the spiral staircase. So much for the legend that all whores have a heart of gold, are steady and unswerving in



their loyalty and are victims of their own integrity. Pearl should see “Never on Sunday” or “Irma La Douce,” he mused. Or maybe the producers of both of them should see Pearl.

The males in the big room at the foot of the stairs eyed Liddell enviously as he crossed to the sliding door. Then, turning back to their choice for the evening, they commented on the short staying powers of such a strong looking ox. They expanded their narrow chests, or lifted their sagging waistlines, to explain that it only shows you can't go by looks.

## 23.

Benny Welton sat on the bed, his back supported by the head board, watched Bunty Warren apprehensively. In the past two days, the ex-pug had been drinking more and more heavily of the whisky a “free delivery” retailer had been providing at regular intervals. Now the big man was weaving drunkenly around the room, knocking over chairs in his progress.

“Sit down, Bunty,” Welton told him. “Better still, get yourself a little sleep.”

Bunty stopped at the foot of the bed, regarded Welton owlishly, through narrowed, bloodshot eyes. “You know something, Benny? You’re beginning to bug me. This whole mess is your fault. You know that?”

“You didn’t complain when I showed you how to pick up a half a million dollars,” Welton growled. “Even if we did unload it for a couple of cents on the dollar, when did you ever see that kind of money? A guy like you, who’d get his head punched lopsided for a couple of hundred bucks.”

“So what good is the money doing us?” Bunty included the whole room in a sweep of his arm. “We’re stuck in this cockroach ranch. We can’t go out because they’re waiting for us.” He rested his big-knuckled hands on the foot of the bed. “That’s what you keep telling me. They’re waiting for us. Right?”

“You know that,” Welton grunted. “They tried for us the other night, didn’t they?”

Bunty pasted a wide, drunken grin on his lips, shook his head. “Wrong. They tried for you.” He jabbed his index finger at the man on the bed. “You.”

“You’re crazy. They know that you—”

The ex-pug wagged his head with drunken emphasis. “You. Me? I’m a nothing. You’re the big brains. You’re the guy who sold them the money.” He bobbed his head with owlish solemnity. “So you’re the guy they want. Not me.” He straightened up. “So what am I holed up here for?” He threw his arms out in an abandoned gesture. “Nothing. So you know what? I’m getting out.” He turned, started for the door.

“You better wait a minute,” Welton told him.

“For what?” Bunty swung around, saw the .38 in Welton’s hand for the first time.

“For this. I’m not letting you get us both killed. You itching for a slug in your gut, I can accommodate you right here. You ain’t going no place. You’re staying right where you are.”

The big man stared at the unwavering muzzle of the .38 drunkenly. He looked up from it to Welton’s face. He shook his head sadly. “You shouldn’t have done that, Benny. You shouldn’t have done that.”

Welton waved the gun toward the chair. “Go over and sit down. When you cool off, you’ll know I did you a favor.” He swung his legs over the side of the bed, stood up. The muzzle of the .38 stared at a spot right under Bunty’s heart. “Make yourself a drink and sit down.”

Bunty shook his head, muttered under his breath. He walked over to the half-empty bottle on the sink, poured himself a stiff shot. He turned around, leaned his hips against the sink. “You shouldn’t have done that, Benny,” he repeated sadly.

The glass, filled almost to the brim with liquor left Bunty’s hand, streaked for Welton’s face. The man with the gun tried to duck away, started squeezing the trigger. Slugs plowed long trenches in the wall near the big man’s head. Welton screamed and pawed at his eyes as the raw liquor burned into them. He lifted the gun again, didn’t quite make it to a firing position.

Bunty moved with a co-ordination surprising in a man with the amount of liquor he had in him. He sank his fist to the cuff in Welton’s midsection. Air rushed out of the smaller man’s lungs as he staggered back. He was gasping for breath as Bunty grabbed him by the shirt, slammed him back against the wall a couple of times. Then he brought his right in a murderous uppercut into Welton’s midsection. Benny’s knees buckled, he collapsed in a heap against the wall.

Bunty put the flat of his shoes against Welton’s shoulder, pushed him over onto his side. He turned him over, removed the roll of bills from his pocket. “That means our partnership is dissolved,” he told him. He took a last look around the room, headed unsteadily for the door. There was one person who could make it all up to him. And with a roll the size of the one he had in his pocket, there wasn’t any question that she’d go all out trying.

Pearl was sitting in the armchair under the reading light in her room when the colored hostess knocked on the door. She frowned, put up the magazine she was reading, got up and straightened out the folds in her dress. "Come on in," she called.

The colored girl stuck her head in the door. "You got a call, Pearl," the hostess told her. "Millie says it's okay to take it. But you got to raise the ante. He don't like for you going out on busy nights."

"Who's the call?"

"Bunty Warren."

Pearl lost no time getting to the door, hustling down to the telephone at the end of the corridor. She could tell by his voice the minute he spoke that Bunty was more loaded than usual.

"I got to see you, hon," he told her. "I been hurting not seeing you all this time."

"I don't know, Bunty. Millie says no go tonight. We got a big convention in town and Millie wants to put on a special for them."

"Let him get someone else for it tonight." Bunty's voice turned sullen.

"You know how Millie is, Bunty. He's hard to reason with. A convention like this, he can do real good tonight—"

"Tell him I'll double the usual fifty: Triple it even. I got to see you."

"Well—" She seemed to hesitate. "Maybe I can talk him into it."

"Sure you can. I'm at the Courtland Hotel. Room 512. Get over here as soon as you can. I'm hurting, baby."

"Okay." The blonde replaced the receiver, chewed indecisively on her thumbnail for a moment. She walked back to her room, poured herself a drink from a carefully stashed bottle of scotch. She sat on the side of the bed, tried to make up her mind.

Finally she got up, walked over to the bureau and opened the top drawer. She brought out the scribbled telephone number Johnny Liddell had left for her. She fumbled in her purse for a dime, headed back down the hall toward the telephone.

Bunty Warren was sprawled in the chair in his room, feet extended full length in front of him, head lolling drunkenly on his chest, snoring softly,

when the knock came on his door. He opened his eyes, stared around the strange room for a second, then he pulled himself to his feet. The knock on the door was repeated.

Things fell into place for him. He remembered the fight with Welton, the call to Pearl. He lurched to the door, turned the key and pulled the door open.

Johnny Liddell stood in the doorway, .45 in his hand. He jabbed the muzzle into the big man's midsection, sent him staggering back into the room. He followed him in, kicked the door shut.

"What is this?" Bunty roared. He was on the verge of lunging at Liddell, took another look at the yawning muzzle of the .45, changed his mind. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Where's Welton?" Liddell wanted to know.

Bunty went sullen on him. He walked over to the chair and dropped into it. He stared up at Liddell venomously. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Liddell sighed. "Don't make me do it the hard way, pal. Not that I wouldn't enjoy it, but I haven't got the time. I'll ask you just once more. Where's Welton?"

The man in the chair ignored him, glanced at his hands in his lap. Liddell crossed to where he sat. He grabbed a handful of the big man's hair, pulled his head back until he was looking him in the face. "Don't go hard to reach on me, Bunty." He jabbed the snout of the .45 under the ex-pug's nose. "You're telling me what I want to know or you're not walking out of here. Whether we do it the hard way or the easy way depends on you."

Bunty's breath whistled through his smashed nose. "I don't know anything. And you can't make me change my mind."

"That's what makes horse racing. A difference of opinion." Liddell reversed the gun, held it by the barrel. "I'm going to start feeding you this rod, butt first. I'll leave you as toothless as the day you were born." The big man looked from the gun to Liddell's face, flattened back against the cushions. Still he shook his head. Liddell swore under his breath, swung the flat of his hand in an arc, slammed the big man across the side of his face. He continued the motion back and forth until the man in the chair held his hands up in surrender.

"I'll tell you. I'll tell you."

Liddell backed away from him. “There never was any question about it,” he snarled. “Where is he?”

Bunty wiped the thin dribble of blood that ran from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. “He’s holed up in a rooming house on Las Palmas. 221 Las Palmas.”

“What room?”

The big man hesitated for a moment, took a look at Liddell’s eye, hastened to add, “Room 18.” He licked at his lips. “What happens to me?”

“Depends on your answer to the next question. Who bought the Cheyney loot from Welton?” Liddell interpreted the stubborn look that clouded the big man’s eyes. “Your only chance to walk away from this without taking a ride on the thunderbolt is to talk. Welton’s already measured for it. You might cop a plea if you co-operate.”

“How do I know you’ll give me a break?”

“You don’t. All you do know is that if you don’t talk now, you won’t be in any condition to later on. And maybe Welton will talk and lay it all in your lap.”

Indecision etched a deep V between the big man’s battered eyebrows. There wasn’t any question that Welton would double-cross him, if he had the chance. He tried to estimate his chances of denying any knowledge of the snatch, realized it was hopeless.

“A guy in Chicago. Harry Jacobs.” He scowled at the memory. “He’s here in town. Tried to cut us down a couple of nights ago. As long as I got to fall, get him, too.”

“It’ll be a pleasure.” Liddell waved the gun. “On your feet.”

“What are you going to do?”

“On your feet!”

The big man pulled himself to his feet, stood swaying. He watched Liddell with apprehensive eyes. “I told you what you wanted to know. What more do you want?”

“Inside.” Liddell motioned toward the lavatory door.

The big man turned, lumbered into the lavatory.

“On the floor,” Liddell told him. He brought out a pair of handcuffs. When Bunty squatted on the floor, Liddell handcuffed him to the radiator.

“There. Just in case you get the wanderlust, you can take the plumbing with you.”

He walked out into the bedroom, picked up the telephone. “Get me the Fairview Hotel,” he told the operator.

When the connection was made, he asked for the manager. “My name is Liddell,” he told him. “I had a meeting there the other day with Mr. Agnelli —”

“Who?”

Liddell growled. “This is important, friend. If Mr. Agnelli misses this call, he’s going to be mighty narrow-minded about whoever made him miss it. Check him and see if he wants to talk to me.”

There was a pause, then, “I’ll see if we have any such person listed, Mr. Liddell.”

Johnny drummed on the base of the telephone, waited. There was a click at the other end, then the fat man’s blubbery voice came across the wire.

“Yeah?”

“The two guys you’re looking for. You can pick one of them up in room 512 at the Courtland Hotel. The other is in a rooming house at 221 Las Palmas. Room 18.”

“Good. The money will be at the desk of your hotel. I’ll handle it from here on.” There was a click as the fat man broke the connection.

Liddell replaced the receiver, grinned glumly. He picked the phone up again, clicked for the operator. “Would you get me the local office of the FBI, please?”

There was a slight delay, then the operator at the Federal Building came through. “Rex Turner. He’s working with Mr. Vaught,” Liddell told her.

Turner’s voice was clear, crisp over the wire. “Turner.”

“Liddell, Rex. Something you can help me with. The day I was in your office, Vaught got a call about a guy named Harry Jacobs—”

“The Chicago broker. What about him?”

“They had him tucked away in a hotel. I forgot the name of it.”

There was a note of suspicion in the T-man’s voice. “What do you want Jacobs for, Johnny?”

“Just a little conversation.”

“You got something we can use?”

Liddell considered, shrugged. “Not yet. But I think I may have something that would be worth you sitting by your phone for a couple of hours.”

“Give it to us and let us handle it, Johnny.”

Liddell shook his head. “You couldn’t. You have to go by the book, and there’s nothing in the book about handling a situation like this. After I have a talk with Jacobs, then you can handle it—by the book.”

“You’re sure you know what you’re doing?” Turner sounded worried.

“Positive.”

There was a muffled sound from the other end as Turner covered the mouthpiece with his hand. Then he was back on the wire. “I guess I’ll have to play it your way. Harry Jacobs is in the Criterion Hotel. And Johnny—” He seemed to be selecting his words carefully. “It could be very serious for everybody if you louse this up.”

“Stay by your phone,” Liddell told him. He dropped the receiver on its hook.



Johnny Liddell sat in one of the lounge chairs in the Criterion Hotel lobby, glanced through the pages of the *Express*. He checked his watch, noted that it was almost an hour that he had been waiting for Harry Jacobs to come in. By now Agnelli's men should have picked up both Welton and Bunty Warren and he could picture both men falling all over themselves to tell the fat man everything he wanted to know. If Jacobs didn't get back pretty soon, there was a possibility that he wouldn't get back at all.

Liddell went back to the sports section of the paper, was immersed in an article on the Angels' chances for the coming season when a bellboy walked over to where he sat. "Mr. Jacobs just came in, sir." He pointed to the Chicagooan's back heading for the bar. "You wanted me to let you know."

Liddell got up, a folded bill changed hands. "Thanks." He crossed the lobby to where the neon sign chattered *Summit Bar—Cocktails*.

He stood in the entrance, waited until his eyes became accustomed to the dimness of the room. Harry Jacobs was leaning against the bar halfway down its length. Liddell walked in, took up a position alongside him. He ordered a scotch, waited until the bartender selected a bottle from the back bar, poured a shot into a glass, dumped some ice into it. Harry Jacobs seemed unaware of his presence, was moodily staring at the drink he held cupped in his hand.

When the bartender headed to the far end of the bar, Liddell turned to the man next to him. "Agnelli has Welton and Warren, Harry."

The heavy-set man started so violently, he spilled some liquor on the bar. He whirled on Liddell, his eyes wide, the whites showing around the pupils. "What'd you say?" He looked around, satisfied himself that he hadn't attracted any undue attention, dropped his voice. "What'd you say?"

"Agnelli has Welton and Warren. By now he knows who bought the ransom money."

"Who are you? What are you talking about?"

Liddell shrugged. "You want to waste time pretending you don't know what I'm talking about, you're just cutting down your own margin. Me, if Agnelli was after me, I'd want every second I could get."

The bartender shuffled up to where they stood, swabbed the bar dry where Jacobs' drink had spilled. He eyed them curiously. "Everything okay, gents?"

Jacobs nodded his head absently. "Sure, sure." He waited until the bartender was out of earshot, then he seemed to deflate. "What's the use of running? Agnelli can reach out any place." He shook his head. "I guess that's it. If I could only have reached them first." He peered at Liddell. "You're Liddell, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"Maybe you'd be doing me a favor if you did the same thing to me you did to Castri." He drained his glass. "That way I wouldn't have to wait for it to happen, not knowing when or where."

"It doesn't have to. You can still walk away from this."

A faint spark of hope lighted Jacobs' face. "How?"

Liddell set his glass down. "You weren't involved in the kidnaping. All you did was buy the money. I think the Feds might be willing to make a deal if you'd co-operate." He watched the hope drain out of the other man's face. "You can positively finger the kidnapers and you could do Treasury a big favor by blueprinting the whole boodle operation. Who the money came from that Evans spent, how it was shipped, what it bought. Everything. Treasury would be pretty grateful."

Jacobs shook his head. "I couldn't do it."

Liddell shrugged. "Then it's like you said. You just wait. Agnelli isn't going to move overnight. He's going to let you stew awhile and sweat. But as soon as he's got what he wants, he'll move. And don't worry about him not being willing to deal with Treasury. He'll sell them the kidnapers in return for them releasing the money. Then he's off the hook and he can pay some attention to you."

Jacobs waved to the bartender, indicated a refill. He waited until it was in front of him and the bartender gone. "How do I know the Feds will make a deal?"

Liddell shrugged. "You're small fry compared to what you can turn over to them. They get the kidnapers and the brokers on taxes. Seems to me you've got something worth trading." He picked up his glass, swirled the liquor around the ice. "And you've got nothing to lose."

Jacobs bobbed his head. “You might have the answer. I do a couple of years and I come out clean. By the time Agnelli and the others get out I can be out of the country some place.”

Liddell drained his glass, set it back on the bar. “The guy you talk to is Rex Turner. He’s temporarily working out of the Department of Justice office in the Federal Building. Tell him I said to call.” He turned, headed out of the bar.

In the lobby, he walked back to the chair he had occupied, picked up the paper and sat down. He watched the entrance to the bar.

In a few minutes, Harry Jacobs came out of the bar. He crossed to the bank of telephone booths, picked up a directory and started leafing through it. When he stepped into the booth and dropped a dime in the slot, Liddell got up and headed for the street.

Mickey Denton sat perched on a barstool in the lounge of the Mocambo morosely studying his reflection in the back-bar mirror. It didn’t look any better than he felt. It was one of those nights that he didn’t feel like any company, yet he hated being alone. The truth of the matter was that he didn’t know what to do with himself when he wasn’t with somebody.

He thought for a moment of Rocky Castri who was really alone. He hadn’t attended the funeral, because he wanted any connection between him and the Rock to be forgotten. The newspapers had been surprisingly cooperative about keeping him as far in the background as possible in covering the story. He knew he could thank the studio’s press corps for that. Some of them got paid as much to keep stories out of the papers as others did for getting stuff in.

Denton felt one of his black moods closing in on him. He wondered whether a girl would help, decided that he was bored with his current stable. Starting in the morning he would announce plans for the casting of his next picture. That’s probably what he needed, he decided—variety.

He finished his glass, set it down, and hopped off the barstool. As he turned toward the door, Johnny Liddell was ushering Muggsy Kiely into the place. Denton scowled at them, blamed Liddell in his mind for much of his present misery. He started to shoulder past them, when Liddell caught him by the arm. Muggsy headed on to the powder room.

“What do you want?” Denton growled.

“To do you a favor.”

“Do me a real favor and drop dead.” He caught Liddell’s sleeve, lifted his hand off his arm. “Careful with the material, it bruises.”

“I just thought you’d like to know that Harry Jacobs has turned state’s evidence.”

Denton had started past him, stopped cold. He turned around, a stricken look on his face. “What?”

Liddell bobbed his head. “He’s singing like a stagestruck canary. All about the big brokers and how they kept Barney supplied with the loot to invest for the organization.”

“Agnelli?” Denton managed to croak.

“He’s tying in everybody.” Liddell grinned humorlessly. “That means Agnelli has nothing to lose any more. Even if a guy had something he was holding over his head, that’s scratched now.” He watched the slackness come into the singer’s face. “I’d say the fat man hasn’t an awful lot to look forward to. Except maybe to pay some overdue debts.”

Denton stared at him wildly, turned and ran for the door.

When Mugsy came out of the powder room, Liddell was sitting at the bar. She looked around. “Where’s Denton?”

“He remembered something he should have forgotten a long time ago. He had to run.”

Mugsy stared at him. “Here we’ve been in every joint on the Strip looking for him, and when you do find him you hardly have a word to say to him.”

Liddell motioned to the bartender for two drinks. “It’s like I said. He had to run.” He grinned. “And if I don’t miss my guess he’s going to keep right on running from now on.”

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.

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[The end of *Dead Rite* by Frank Kane]