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A JOHNNY
LIDDELL MYSTERY

GREEN LIGHT FOR DEATH

Frank Kane



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GREEN LIGHT FOR DEATH

Frank Kane

It was a rough week for Johnny Liddell. They were shooting clients out from under him, and witnesses, and suspects.

First there was the girl who hired him. She had something Johnny Liddell liked, but it couldn't have been brains—because they fished her out of the river a couple of days later.

Then there was Johnny's key witness, a blonde who was worth seven days of any man's time. She made a pretty corpse, but she'd been better company alive.

Then there was the redhead, a singer, hip chick, in the know, wise doll. Johnny wanted to keep her away from bullets. He had a special reason. . . .

Also by Frank Kane in Mayflower Paperback

JOHNNY COME LATELY

GREEN LIGHT
FOR DEATH

FRANK KANE

A MAYFLOWER PAPERBACK

GREEN LIGHT FOR DEATH

Frank Kane

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TO MY MOTHER
with my deepest affection and gratitude

Chapter One

JOHNNY LIDDELL carefully stripped the cellophane jacket from a cigar, bit off the sealed end, spat it onto the floor. He stared unblinkingly at the girl stretched out before him. Her hair was as thick and coppery as he had remembered it. There were a few more lines crisscrossing under the eyes than there had been in the old days, but the lips were still full and inviting. As she lay there now, her lips slightly parted, she showed the perfect little teeth he had always admired. She was uncovered to the waist, her small, perfectly molded breasts bared to the searching yellow light.

“That her?” Detective Sergeant Happy Lewis sounded slightly bored with the formality.

Liddell nodded. He jammed the cigar into his mouth, clamped his teeth savagely into it. “What’s supposed to have happened to her?” he wanted to know.

The homicide man signaled to the morgue attendant. Liddell watched without comment as the attendant drew a rough canvas sheet over the girl’s face, slammed the oblong metal drawer into place with a clang that reverberated through the whole morgue.

“Don’t have to worry about disturbing the other guests.” The morgue keeper showed the yellow stumps of his teeth in a grin. “They’re real sound sleepers.” He looked from the homicide man to the private detective expectantly. When nobody gave him any encouragement, he shuffled off toward the office in the rear, muttering under his breath.

“Well?” Liddell persisted. “What’s supposed to have happened to her?”

Detective Sergeant Lewis shrugged. “What usually happens to a dame like that? She either jumped or fell off the end of the pier.” He pushed his fedora back on his head, wiped his forehead with the side of his hand. “Got enough of this?”

Liddell scraped a long wooden match on the sole of his shoe, applied it to the end of the cigar. “It was neither,” he said flatly.

“It was neither what?”

“It was neither accident nor suicide,” Liddell asserted. “Nancy Hayes had too much sense to walk off the end of a pier. She had too much guts to jump off.”

“She didn’t call herself Nancy Hayes up here,” the homicide man told him wearily. “Up here she was Nancy Martin. And she either jumped or fell.” He stared moodily at Johnny Liddell. “If you were to try to make something else out of it, I think maybe you ought to have a talk with Connors first. He’s the police chief up here. He don’t like for private dicks to come into his territory upsetting things and making trouble.”

Liddell nodded, exhaled a feathery tendril of dirty white smoke ceilingward. “That’s how Connors feels about it. How about you?”

Lewis studied the private detective’s face for a moment from under his eyelids, then dropped his eyes. “Like I said, Connors is the chief. How I feel ain’t important.”

“She was a nice kid,” Liddell indicated the metal drawer. “You would have liked her if you knew her. I’d hate to think somebody could pull a stunt like that and get away with it. Wouldn’t you?”

Detective Sergeant Happy Lewis looked unhappy. “Maybe,” he admitted cautiously. “But Connors still calls the turn around here.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about Connors. I’ve got an idea he and I are going to be good friends before this is over.” He tapped a thin film of ash off the end of the cigar. “That is, of course, unless he’s got some angle in trying to hush up this case.”

“Hush up what case?” The homicide man pinched his long thin nose between thumb and forefinger. “Maybe I forgot to tell you. There is no case. The dame either jumped or fell off the end of the pier.”

CHIEF CONNORS sat behind an oversized, varnished desk and eyed Johnny Liddell with no sign of enthusiasm. He reached out for a pack of cigarettes on the corner of the desk, selected one on the basis that it was less rumpled than the rest, hung it from his lips.

“So you’re a private detective, eh?” His eyes dropped from Liddell to the credentials on his desk. He riffled through them, snorted, shoved them back across the desk. “Anything on your mind?”

Liddell picked up his papers, rearranged them, shoved them into his breast pocket. “Thought I’d check in with you before I went to work.”

“We don’t like peepers up here in Waterville, Liddell.” The chief’s deep voice didn’t belong to his thin frame and washed-out eyes. “I understand that you came up here to do a job for the Martin dame.”

Liddell nodded.

“Well, whatever kind of a caper she was setting up, it fell through.” Connors scratched a paper match across the strip on the box, applied it to his cigarette. His colorless eyes never left the private detective’s face. “So I suppose you’ll be catching the next train back to town. I’ve got one of the boys arranging your reservations. Like that you won’t be delayed.”

Liddell grinned, dropped into an old armchair, draped his leg over the arm. “There’s no hurry, Chief. I was figuring on staying around until you broke the case.”

Chief Connors’ eyes flicked from the private detective to Detective Sergeant Lewis and back. “Maybe you ain’t heard. There is no case. It was an accident or a suicide.”

“So I’ve been told. But it wasn’t either. Nancy was murdered.” Johnny Liddell rolled his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. “If you’re not going to break the case, I intend to.”

“Maybe there’s more to this than I know, Liddell.” The chief’s deep voice grew dangerously soft. “Maybe you know some things that we ought to. You’re so sure it was murder, suppose you break down and let us in on it.”

Liddell grinned, shrugged. “Just guessing, Chief.” He indicated the homicide man with a toss of his head. “If you’ve got any ideas about tying me into it, your boy here can tell you that I was on the train when Nancy got it.”

“Nobody said you were in on it, Liddell,” Connors growled. “But seeing as how she was your client, maybe she told you something. Maybe she was getting you up here to put the shake on somebody, eh?”

“I haven’t seen or talked to the kid in years,” Liddell told him. “Last time I saw her she was hoofing in an upholstered sewer on 47th Street.” He took the cigar from his mouth, studied the wet end, pasted a loose leaf back with the tip of his tongue. “I’ve been working out of the Coast office for Acme for years. I kind of lost touch with her.”

“She was your client.”

“Technically. Day before yesterday she called the Acme home office. Spoke to the boss down there. Guy named Steve Baron. Asked him where she could get in touch with me. Said it was very important.” He stuck the cigar back in his mouth. “You can check all that.”

“We already have.” Chief Connors leaned his elbows on the desk. “Go on. What’d she want? What was so urgent?”

Liddell shrugged. “I don’t know—yet. I didn’t get to talk to her. Whatever she had to tell me, somebody arranged that she didn’t get around to it.”

Chief Connors snorted cynically, leaned back in his chair. He stared at the private detective through a thin veil of cigarette smoke. There was a faint wrinkle between his eyes that could have been either disappointment or relief. “Who’ve you seen since you got into town?”

“You ought to know,” Liddell grunted. “I arrived at a fleabag this town laughingly calls a hotel about two hours ago, gave my name to the clerk, and for all the action I got you’d think I yelled Bingo.” He rolled the cigar to the other side of his mouth. “For guys who are so sure the kid either jumped or fell, you’re wasting the time of a lot of homicide men.”

The expression in the chief’s washed-out eyes remained unchanged. “Just routine. Regular check on the deceased’s friends and relatives. Found a telegram from your office saying you’d arrive at the hotel tonight. Thought you might give us some reason why she did it so’s we could close the case.”

The private detective grinned. “Now that goes to show you how suspicious some people are. Here I was thinking you were just keeping me on ice so’s I couldn’t get to talk to anybody.”

Chief Connors looked hurt. His eyes rolled up toward the ceiling. “Now why should we want to do a thing like that?”

“I thought maybe you might be afraid I’d frighten off the murderer before your boys had a chance to collar him,” Liddell told him blandly.

Chief Connors’ eyes stopped taking census of the flyspecks on the ceiling. “We don’t look for murderers in a suicide, Liddell.” He looked over at Detective Sergeant Happy Lewis with what approached distaste. “Just to prove to you how co-operative we really are, I’ll let you in on something. We know it wasn’t an accident.”

Detective Sergeant Lewis looked uncomfortable. He rubbed the heel of his hand over the faint stubble on his chin, squirmed.

“It seems we have a real honest-to-god detective on the force,” Connors continued bitterly. “Go ahead, Lewis. Tell Liddell how you discovered it was suicide. Maybe he can arrange for you to get a job peeping through keyholes.”

A faint flush crept up from the homicide man’s collar. He turned to Liddell. “I didn’t think it could be an accident,” he said defiantly. “I told the coroner why and he agreed with me.”

The chief dropped his cigarette to the floor, stamped it out. He applauded sarcastically. “Go ahead, Sherlock. Tell him the rest and save him the price of a correspondence course.”

“I was there when we fished her out of the drink,” Lewis continued without looking in the chief’s direction. “She was naked. All her clothes were piled on the pier.”

“And the m.e. was willing to consider it an accident?”

“He didn’t see the body until it was in the morgue,” the sergeant explained. “I guess he took for granted it was fully dressed when we fished it out.”

Liddell nodded thoughtfully. He transferred his gaze to the police chief. “But your office was willing to write it off as an accident anyhow, eh Chief?”

“Why not?” Connors growled. “What’s the sense of branding the girl a suicide? Call it an accident and let the poor girl rest in peace. Besides, what’s the use of looking for any scandal?”

Liddell failed to be impressed. “Just like it wasn’t an accident, it wasn’t suicide.” He tossed the soggy butt of his cigar in the general direction of the wastebasket. “It was murder.” He ignored the chief’s angry growl, continued, “No doll who’s worked herself up to the state where she’s going to knock herself off takes the trouble to call in a private eye the day before she does the job.”

“Look, Liddell,” Connors’ voice was low, loaded with menace. “I tried to reason with you. You’re stubborn. Okay, I’ll put it on the line.” He pulled himself out of his chair, walked around the desk, and stood facing the private detective. “This is my town. I don’t want any private peepers coming up here fouling things up. We got enough on our hands right now without any phony murder cases. Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

Liddell nodded. “That’s good advice, Chief. Anything I start I’ll make sure to finish.”

“It could be you’ll find Waterville’s a very bad town to start stirring things up in, Liddell,” Chief Connors told him.

The private detective slid his leg off the arm of the chair, let the chair slam back on all fours with a suddenness that made Connors jump to get his toes out of the way. “Thanks for the advice, Chief.” He took his time about getting up, stood facing Connors. “Of course, if you were to make it impossible for me to look after the interests of my client, I might have to go higher.”

Connors bared his teeth in a smile that fell far short of his eyes. “I wouldn’t make it impossible for you to do anything, Liddell,” he purred. “But there might be some people in this town who wouldn’t give a damn for your higher authority.”

Liddell thought it over for a moment. “You’re telling me there might be someone in town who might try to stop me from proving Nancy Hayes was murdered?”

The chief shrugged, the phony smile frozen on his face. “That’s not all they might try to stop you from doing.”

“What else could they stop me from doing, Chief?” Liddell seemed unimpressed.

“Breathing.”

Chapter Two

THE damp dank air of the morgue seemed to permeate through the walls to the medical examiner's office. A thick, yellowish cloud floated around a dirty unshaded bulb set in the middle of the flyspecked ceiling.

The medical examiner, Doc Herley, was in his late thirties, and the rolls of fat under his chin testified to his lack of interest in motion of any kind. He was sitting in his big swivel chair behind his desk, his pudgy hands clasped comfortably on his paunch when Johnny Liddell walked into his office.

"I'm looking for Doc Herley," Liddell greeted him. "That you?"

The m.e. grinned, waved him in. "You must be Liddell, the private copper. Heard you were on your way over. Glad to see you."

"I'm Liddell all right," Johnny told him. "Been warned by the chief that I'm a bad boy, I suppose?"

The medical examiner chuckled, disturbing the rolls of fat. "He warned me that you're a trouble maker, hell-bent on fouling up a perfectly simple suicide." He leaned back in his chair and with much grunting managed to hook his heel into a well-worn notch on the corner of his desk. "I don't mind trouble, so long's it's not mine."

Liddell nodded. "Fair enough." He leaned against the side of the desk, fumbled through his pockets, came up with a pack of cigarettes. He held it out to the fat man, waited until he'd helped himself, then stuck one in his own mouth. "Nancy Hayes was a client of mine—and a friend," he explained. "Mind if I ask you a couple of questions about her death, doc?"

"Go right ahead." The medical examiner lit his cigarette, tossed the matches over to Liddell.

"When I got into town they gave me a song and dance about it being either accident or suicide. Now it's narrowed down to suicide. I think it's murder."

The fat man shook his head ponderously. "Can't buy that, Liddell. When I first saw the body I didn't know she'd peeled before she dived so I marked

the slip accident or suicide. When Happy told me her clothes were left on the pier I changed it to suicide. But murder is out.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“Look, Liddell. I don’t know you and you don’t know me. If you think I’ve got an angle in covering up anything you’re nuts,” the man behind the desk told him. “I’m not the most conscientious guy in the world, but I’m not that bad that I couldn’t spot signs of violence if there were any. There weren’t.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Positive,” the medical examiner asserted. “I did a complete check of the body. No signs of violence any place. Water in her lungs to show she was alive when she went in. Everything as it should be.”

Johnny Liddell puffed on his cigarette, added blue white streams to the murkiness of the room. “No bruises or bumps beyond the hair line? No needle marks in her arms or legs? Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“You sure make it tough, doc,” Liddell complained. He straightened up, ambled aimlessly around the room, stopped by a large metal cabinet in the corner. “Any chance of seeing her stuff?”

Doc Herley considered the request for a second, shrugged. “Don’t see why not.” He sighed as he contemplated the necessity for pulling himself to his feet. Then, as though reaching the decision that movement was inevitable, he dropped his feet from the desk, pulled himself from his chair. “Know her very well?” he asked conversationally, as he waddled across the room to the locker.

“Used to. Knew her when she was hoofing in a night club,” Liddell told him. “Hadn’t seen her in a couple of years.”

The medical examiner pulled a ring of keys from his pocket, selected one, fitted it into the lock on the cabinet. “Quite a dish she must have been.” The door creaked complainingly as he tugged it open. “She’s still not bad. Have to keep an eye on that morgue attendant. Catch him sneaking out there every so often to pay her a visit.”

Johnny Liddell grinned bleakly. “Maybe it keeps her from getting lonely. Besides, what’s she got to lose?” He peered over the m.e.’s shoulder into the locker.

“Well, there’s what she had with her.” He indicated a neatly pressed dress, a pair of shoes, some stockings and underpants. “Help yourself. Not that I see how you’re going to make anything out of that.”

“Neither do I,” the private detective admitted. He studied each article carefully, replaced it. He seemed particularly interested in the dress.

“Find anything?” Doc Herley asked.

Johnny Liddell nodded. “Proof that it was murder.” He held up the dress.

The medical examiner stared at the dress curiously. “From that? How?”

“Take a good look at it, doc,” Johnny invited. He held the dress out for the fat man’s inspection. “All nice and freshly pressed, eh?”

“A little wrinkled from being rolled up, but so what?”

“It’s not wrinkled in the right places. Last night was plenty hot. Right?”

“Plenty hot.”

Liddell nodded. “This pier she’s supposed to have jumped off, it ran about three hundred feet out into the water I understand?”

The coroner nodded. “I still don’t get it.”

“You will. How far is this pier from where Nancy lived?”

Doc Herley frowned, then waddled over to his filing cabinet. He riffled through a bunch of cards, came up with one. “She lived in the 200 block on Locust.” He considered for a moment. “I’d say offhand it was at least a mile. Maybe more.”

“Okay, let’s say a mile. Now, she walks a mile on a hot, sticky night, then walks three hundred feet out on a pier, and the dress doesn’t get mussed up at all. No signs of perspiration, no creasing, no nothing.”

The medical examiner was impressed. A faint line appeared between his eyes as he considered where the private detective was leading. “Maybe she rode over. In a cab or got a lift.”

Liddell shook his head. “Makes no difference. If she rode in a cab or got any kind of a ride, on a hot night like last night the seat would show signs of creasing or wrinkling.” He dismissed the half-hearted argument with a toss of his head. “The answer is that she never had that dress on last night. For some reason somebody took the dress she was wearing and substituted this one.”

Doc Herley took the dress from the hand of the private detective, walked back to the light with it. He studied it carefully for a moment.

“You’re beginning to sell me, Liddell,” he admitted. He went back to his desk, dropped into his chair. “If you’re right about her not having this dress on last night, then it was murder.” He worried his lower lip with his teeth for a moment, then made a production of bending down to get a bottle and two glasses out of his lower drawer. “But why would anybody want to do that? What could there be about the dress she had on that would make it necessary for the killer to switch dresses?”

Liddell watched him fill each of the glasses half full, replace the bottle in the lower drawer. “When we know that, doc, we’ll know who killed Nancy—and how.”

AN hour later, Johnny Liddell leaned on the bar of the dim, cool lounge of the Hotel Waterville with the ease born of long experience. He watched glumly while the bartender went through the complicated motions necessary to mix some exotic hangover builder for a couple of obvious tourists at the far end of the bar. He finally caught the barman’s eye, signaled him down.

“Let’s have a refill, Jack,” he told him. “Might as well be unconscious as the way I am.”

The bartender nodded, poured a red-brown liquid right to the brim of his glass, wiped off a drop that threatened to trickle down the neck of the bottle, and replaced it on the back bar, all in one motion.

Liddell was engrossed in making concentric circles on the bar with the wet bottom of his glass when Detective Sergeant Happy Lewis finally showed up.

“Got your call, Liddell,” Lewis told him, sliding onto the barstool at his side. “You said it was important?”

The private detective nodded. He looked significantly at the bartender who had shuffled down, stood waiting expectantly.

The detective sergeant bent over, sniffed at Liddell’s glass. “Give me some of what he’s drinking and bring him more of the same.”

The man behind the stick put up two clean glasses, filled them to the brim, then scurried down to the other end of the bar to answer impatient calls from his other customers.

“How important would you say it was?” Lewis wanted to know as soon as the bartender was out of earshot.

“Suppose I tell you I can prove Nancy was murdered,” Liddell told him. “Would that be important?”

Lewis wrinkled his long, thin nose, pinched at it. “Depends on how good the proof is.” He sniffed at his cognac appreciatively. “You know, you’re making yourself awful unpopular around here awful fast. You can’t afford to make any mistakes.”

“Never mind about that. Suppose I can prove to your satisfaction that she was murdered. Would you be willing to help me to do something about it?”

“I’m willing to listen. But it better be good. I’ve got a date at 9:38 that I’m figuring on keeping.” He peered through the eddying blue smoke to the clock on the wall. “That only leaves time for two fast ones and some fast talking.”

Liddell nodded. “It won’t take that long. Either you’re in or you’re out.” He found a cigarette, stuck it in his mouth. “Stop me if I’m wrong. I got the idea back there in the chief’s office that maybe you and he don’t see eye to eye on how a police department should be run.”

“You’re doing the talking.” The homicide man made no attempt to answer the implied question.

“Okay,” Liddell continued. “I also got the feeling that Chief Connors would be just as well pleased if nobody were to prove that Nancy Hayes was murdered. How do you stand?”

Lewis watched the smoke cascade down Liddell’s nostrils. “I don’t know how Connors feels about it, but as for me, if you can prove that kid was murdered, I’ll play on your team.” He took a sip of the brandy, appeared to be making up his mind about something, put his glass down deliberately. “I’ll go further than that. You’re right. I don’t like the way the department is being run in this town and I don’t like the people that are running it.”

“That’s all I wanted to know,” Liddell nodded. He signaled the bartender for a refill. “I think maybe we understand each other.”

The barkeep appeared, poured the drinks. Liddell dumped a handful of silver on the bar that seemed to satisfy the man behind the stick. He scooped it up, scurried back to the cash register.

“Okay, then we understand each other,” Lewis nodded. “Now suppose we get down to cases and stop sparring around.”

“After I left you and Connors this afternoon, I dropped by the medical examiner’s office. I had a long talk with Doc Herley. He sounded okay. Know anything about him?”

The homicide man shrugged, played with his glass. “Not much. He keeps his nose clean and minds his own business. All’s I know about him is that he got his appointment through politics.”

“I think he’s okay,” Liddell said. “He’s willing to go along. He’s holding up the certificate. He’s satisfied it’s murder.”

The detective sergeant grunted, drained his glass, shoved it back on the bar. A faint line of perspiration was beginning to bead his lip.

“You’re going to have to prove that, you know. Connors won’t take it laying down. He’s chief in this town and he throws around a lot of weight. A lot of weight.”

“It’s not too late for you to pull out,” Liddell told him. He looked back at the clock. “It’s not quite 9:30. You can still make that 9:38 appointment and forget you were ever here.”

“What, and die wondering? As long as I’m in this deep I might just as well get wet all the way. You say you can prove the dame was murdered. Okay, prove it. Prove it, and you’ve got yourself a boy.”

“So far it’s mostly a hunch,” Liddell admitted. The homicide man groaned, pushed his hat on the back of his head, started to protest. “Wait a minute,” Liddell cut him off. “I said mostly a hunch. After all, I’ve got enough facts to satisfy the m.e. it was murder. That ought to be good enough, shouldn’t it?”

Lewis tossed off the rest of his cognac, wiped his upper lip with the back of his hand. “Let’s have it.”

“Nancy’s supposed to have fallen in or jumped. Right?”

Detective Sergeant Lewis merely stared, made no comment.

“Okay,” Johnny continued. “That means she got from her house to the pier by herself. Now, we know she didn’t fall because she had taken her clothes off and tossed herself in. Anyway, that’s the way Connors would like the story to go, isn’t it?”

The homicide man continued to stare impassively. “I know all about Conners’ story. You tell me yours.”

Liddell nodded. “Okay. My story is that it couldn’t have happened that way. Not unless Nancy walked from her house to that pier with nothing on but a pair of panties. She couldn’t have worn the dress you found on the pier on a hot night like that without getting it perspiry or wrinkled.” He saw a protest forming on Lewis’ lips. “And she didn’t ride there either,” he headed off the objection. “There’s no sign of a crease or a wrinkle in the seat, under the arms, or around the belt. And if she wore that dress last night long enough to get from her house to the end of that pier there’d be plenty!”

Lewis considered the theory, liked the taste of it. “You’re sure about that, Liddell? The wrinkles, I mean. There were no wrinkles at all?”

“Positive. So that blows the suicide theory sky high. Somebody must have been with her. Somebody who tossed her into the drink. Somebody who was worried about something on the dress she was wearing and went to all the trouble to go home and get another one to leave on the pier for the police to find.”

The homicide man made no effort to disguise his interest. “The dress was switched, eh? That could mean the one she had on was full of blood, or —” He broke off, the interest started to drain from his face. “Wait a minute, Liddell. We’re overlooking one very important thing. The coroner found no signs of violence.” He scowled, pounded the bar with the heel of his hand. “That kicks the whole thing right in the head. That would mean that this babe would have to let the killer strip her, toss her in the drink without putting up any fight or resistance.”

Liddell crushed out his cigarette against the end of the bar. “I know. But let’s take one thing at a time. We’re sure the dress was switched. It had to be. Let’s find out why—and then go on from there.”

“And how would you suggest we go about that?”

“One way would be to get into Nancy’s apartment and have a look through her clothes. Maybe the dress is there. If it isn’t, we can get some idea of what dress is missing and see if we can’t turn it up.”

Detective Sergeant Lewis was unenthusiastic. “That ain’t going to be easy,” he mumbled. “She lived with another dame, a redhead named Lorna Matthews.”

“So what?”

“So this. The Matthews babe is allergic to cops. And you can’t push her around. She works for Mike Lane, and he’s a big enough wheel in this town to slap you down if you get out of turn.”

“Let me worry about that,” Liddell suggested. “Will we have any trouble getting into the place? From your boys, I mean.”

“No. There’s a cop on duty out in the hall, but I can take care of him.”

Liddell nodded. “Good. You take care of the cop. I’ll take care of the redhead.”

Lewis picked up the rest of the change from the bar, pocketed his cigarettes. “You’ll take care of the redhead?” he inquired gently. Liddell nodded. “Let’s get going then.” Lewis indulged in a rare grin. “This I have definitely got to see.”

Chapter Three

THE young patrolman on duty outside the dead girl's apartment straightened up and sprang to a smart salute when Detective Sergeant Happy Lewis and Johnny Liddell stepped off the elevator. He didn't quite succeed in wiping the boredom out of his eyes.

"Hello, Turk. Anything new?" Lewis greeted him.

The patrolman relaxed, shook his head. "Not a thing, Sarge. The Matthews dame is still bitching about my being here. Says it plays hell with her social life." He looked curiously at Liddell.

"Don't let her worry you," Lewis grinned. "Feel like a cup of coffee?"

The patrolman grinned. "Wouldn't mind it a bit."

"Okay. Run along. I'll be here for a half hour or so. Take your time."

As soon as the patrolman's back had disappeared around the turn in the stairs, Lewis turned to Liddell. "Okay, Johnny. There's the door and it's your ball." He folded his arms, leaned against the wall.

Liddell grinned, rapped on the door, waited. When it became apparent that no one was paying any attention to the rap, he rapped again. This time he got results. They heard a key turn in the lock, the door opened.

A tall redhead, about twenty-eight, looked through the opening with unfriendly eyes. "More cops? Don't you guys have a home?"

Detective Sergeant Lewis tipped his hat politely, indicated Liddell. "He wants to see you. Has a few questions to ask."

The girl looked Liddell over coldly. "Go away, boys. I'm not in the mood for guessing games. Blow."

Liddell grinned. "Don't be so hard to get along with, Red. Why don't you break down and ask a guy in?"

She took another look that took in his broad shoulders, the friendly grin, the unruly brown hair spiked with gray. "I'm old-fashioned, junior. My

mother always told me never to invite strange men into my apartment unless they've got search warrants. And that goes double for cops."

"Your mammy must have been a suspicious old gal. Besides, I'm no cop. I'm private," he told her. "Name's Liddell. Nancy sent for me day before yesterday."

The hostile look left the girl's eyes. "Johnny Liddell?"

"That's me."

The door closed a few inches, there was the sound of a chain being removed, then the door swung wide open.

"Come on in," the redhead invited. When the homicide man made a move to follow Liddell inside, the girl held her hand against his chest, pushed him out. "Not you, copper. This is a private party. I get self-conscious when there are spectators."

Lewis screwed his face up into an unfamiliar grin. "I can take a hint," he wrinkled. "I'll lay chickee."

The door slammed in his face.

Inside, the redhead looked Liddell over with new interest. "So you're the guy Nancy did all the raving about. To hear her go on, you're a cross between Sam Spade and Ellery Queen with a little Superman thrown in on the side."

"Are they in the business, too?" Liddell asked politely.

The girl giggled, led the way into a cluttered living room. A pile of papers was scattered on the floor near a comfortable looking couch. The redhead bent down, picked them up, deposited them on an armchair.

"Poor Nancy's last press notices," she explained.

She dropped onto the couch, patted the cushion beside her. "Make yourself comfortable," she invited. Liddell plopped down beside her.

From close, the girl looked older than she had in the dim light of the hall. The bright table light mercilessly exposed the fine network of lines under her eyes and the losing fight her make-up was waging with crow's-feet around her eyes and at the sides of her mouth. She looked tired.

"Drink?" she asked. She indicated a bottle of scotch and a fifth of bourbon within easy reach of the couch.

Liddell nodded. “The bourbon looks good.” He reached over, got two glasses, loaded them with ice and drenched it down with the bourbon. He handed one to the girl, sniffed at the other, tasted it. He approved of the result.

“I suppose you’ve talked to the cops?” the redhead asked.

Liddell grinned. “They had a delegation waiting for me when I hit town to tell me to go back where I came from.”

The redhead took a deep swallow of the bourbon, coughed. “They think Nancy committed suicide,” she told him.

“They want to think she committed suicide,” Liddell nodded.

The girl regarded him through narrow eyes. “You don’t think so, do you, Johnny?” She dropped her eyes. “Why should she do such a thing?”

Liddell shrugged. He produced some cigarettes, lit two, passed one to the girl. She smiled her thanks.

“She didn’t. She was murdered. By whom or why, I don’t know.” Liddell leaned back, stared at the ceiling. “I didn’t get a chance to talk to her when she called my office. It would have made a lot of difference if I had.” He looked at the girl. “You don’t know what she had on her mind?”

“No. But it was something big. She’s been acting strangely the past couple of days. Like—well, like she was scared.” The girl’s voice was low. A thin blue spiral of smoke escaped through her lips as she talked. “As though she had something big by the tail and couldn’t let go.”

“You don’t know what it was?”

The girl shook her head. “Whatever she had on her mind died with her.” She took the cigarette from between her lips, studied the crimson stained end with distaste. “If—if you’re right, and somebody did kill her to keep her quiet, then I’m not in too good a spot if that somebody gets the idea she confided in me, am I?”

“Not until we nail the murderer,” Liddell admitted.

“That’s just ducky.” The redhead took a deep drag out of the cigarette, crushed it out in a china ashtray. She lost the fight to keep her hand from shaking. “And here I’ve been bitching about having a cop stationed outside my door. Tonight I’m going to invite him in.” She made a reasonably successful attempt at a smile.

Liddell reached over, caught the bourbon bottle by the neck, spilled some into each of the glasses. “There’s another surer way of staying healthy,” he told her.

“How?”

“Helping to put the finger on the killer.”

The redhead snorted bitterly. “Some chance. The cops in this town are so crooked they could hide behind a corkscrew without throwing a shadow.” She put her glass down untasted. “They don’t want it to be murder, so it isn’t murder. It’ll be just as easy to get rid of me as it was to get rid of poor Nancy.”

Liddell nodded. “Maybe. But we’re not going to depend on the cops to catch the killer. We’re going to do the job. That is, if you’re willing to help.”

The girl shivered as though she were cold. “Do I have any choice? What do I do?”

“Answer a few questions?” The girl nodded. “Did you see Nancy last night?”

“Yes. About nine or ten. I work at the Villa Rouge. That’s Mike Lane’s place. I do some singing and some bar hustling out there. Last night I had to be out there by 10:30 so I left a little earlier than usual.”

“Nancy was okay then? Not upset or more worried than usual?” Liddell asked.

The redhead caught her lower lip between her teeth, worried it for a moment. “No. She was a little excited because you were coming. She seemed to think that once you were here everything was going to be okay.”

Johnny Liddell growled under his breath. “How was she dressed when you left her?”

“How was she dressed?” The redhead ridged her forehead in concentration. “Let’s see. I think she had on her dark green dress. Yes, that’s it. She was wearing a dark green dress. Why?”

“Take a look among her things. See if you can find that dress, will you?” Liddell sounded eager.

The girl stared at him curiously, shrugged, got up. She headed for a closet. Liddell’s eyes followed her, took quick inventory. The weary lines in her face had no counterpart in her body. She stood about 5’7”, weighed in the neighborhood of 128, but not an ounce of that was misplaced or

unaccounted for. He finished his cigarette while she rummaged through the closet.

When she returned, she had a dark green dress over her arm. Liddell jumped to his feet, took the dress from her.

The girl made no attempt to conceal her curiosity while Liddell went over it inch by inch. After a moment, Liddell looked up, disappointment etched on his face.

“A dry well,” he admitted. “I was looking for some tear or mark on it to show why it should have been switched.” He threw the dress across the back of a chair. “You’re sure this is the dress she had on?”

“Positive,” the redhead insisted. “But why—”

Liddell cut short her question. “Maybe she changed after you left. You know all her clothes, don’t you?”

“Of course. When two girls who are the same size and the same coloring live together, they couldn’t own a bandanna without the other one knowing it. Why?”

Liddell ignored the question, caught the girl by the arm, propelled her to the closet. He threw open the door, indicated the neat row of dresses and coats. “Take a good look. Tell me if there’s anything at all missing.”

The girl shook her head in bewilderment, transferred her attention to the closet. After a moment of fumbling through the clothes, she shook her head positively. “Of course not. There’s not so much as a slip missing.”

Liddell tried to ignore the sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. “I want you to be certain, Red. This is awfully important. Is there a chance something could be missing without your knowing it?”

“Don’t be silly. Of course not. Nancy had five dresses. The green one, those three hanging there, and the one she had on when they found her. Now what’s this all about?”

Liddell swore softly under his breath, rubbed his chin with the heel of his hand, tried desperately to rearrange his picture of what must have happened. He was sure Nancy hadn’t worn the dress found on the pier, yet no other dress was missing!

“The whole damned thing is cockeyed,” he growled. “This is the dress she was wearing last night. Yet, when she’s found there’s a dress on the pier that she couldn’t have worn. How can that be?”

The redhead shrugged, hung the green dress back on its hanger. “I hope you know what you’re talking about. I’m sure I don’t.” She took Liddell by the hand, led him back to the couch. She pushed him down, dropped down beside him. “Now give, Johnny. What’s got you so puzzled?”

Liddell settled back. “It’s like this. Nancy’s body is found in the ocean. There’s a pile of clothes on the pier. That’s to make it look like she jumped. Okay. But the dress hasn’t been worn since it was pressed. That means that Nancy would have to walk halfway across town with nothing on but a smile.”

The redhead shook her head. “Not Nancy, Liddell. She was plenty modest, especially for a gal who’s been in show business. Why, she wouldn’t even come out in her slip if I happened to be entertaining a gentleman friend.” The redhead didn’t seem particularly perturbed by the fact that her dress had crept well above her knees. She plucked at it for a second, made no appreciable progress, gave it up. “She was just that way.”

Liddell had the feeling that there was some string dangling in his unconscious which, if he could latch onto, would spill more ideas than Fibber McGee’s closet. He wrestled with the facts he had so far, struggled desperately to make them stand still long enough to capture them. Suddenly, the haze in front of his eyes dissolved. He snapped his fingers.

“I think I’ve got it.”

The redhead stared at him with wide eyes. “Got what?”

“Don’t ask me until I can check on it, baby,” he pleaded. “Where’s your telephone?”

The redhead shook her head, grinned. “You sure would keep a girl dizzy, honey, but maybe I can get used to it.” She pointed to a telephone stand in the hallway.

Liddell pulled himself up off the couch, ran to the phone. He took a look at the number, went to the hall door, threw it open.

The long thin face of the homicide detective showed in the doorway for a moment. Liddell whispered urgently, talked down Happy Lewis’ attempts to shake his head. Finally, Lewis seemed convinced. He shrugged his capitulation, disappeared in the direction of the elevators.

When Liddell got back to the couch, the redhead had freshened up his drink with ice. “Still no questions?” she teased.

“Not yet, baby.” He reached over, kissed her lightly on the neck.

“What’s that for?” the girl asked.

“That’s for giving me an idea, Red,” he told her.

The redhead grinned. “Well, that’s a new one. Usually when I kiss them it gives them ideas. Here’s a guy who gets the idea first then kisses me. I must be slipping.”

Liddell took his drink, perched on the arm of the couch. “Did Nancy ever give you any idea as to what she was doing in this town? It doesn’t add up. She was a gal that was going places in the Big Town. Suddenly, she chucks the whole thing, comes to this jerkwater burg. Why?”

The girl pulled a pillow under her head, settled back comfortably. “I never could figure it, either. She didn’t do any talking about it, so I never pressed her.”

“Could be the spark went out,” Johnny suggested. “It’s happened. A kid on her way to the top suddenly loses her touch, starts on the slide.”

“Not Nancy. I’ve seen letters from booking agents and managers, big ones, offering her spots. Of course, in the last year or so they got few and far between, but there used to be plenty of them.”

Liddell drained his glass, laid it on the end table. “How’d you come to team up with her, Red?”

The girl shrugged. “One of those things. She was hustling butts at Mike’s place. We took to each other and decided to team up.” She sipped at her bourbon. “We were living together a couple of months before I found out she was Nancy Hayes—the Nancy Hayes. Hell, even up here her name was beginning to mean something. I kept after her to go back where she belonged, but it was no dice. Then I got to figuring maybe she’d gotten into some kind of jam and had to hide out, so I laid off.”

“You never did find out what she was doing here?”

The redhead swirled her bourbon over the ice in her glass, shook her head. “Nope. Like I said, a couple of days ago she started acting funny. Like she was scared. Then last Monday she quit out at Mike’s place. Then she put in that call for you and sat back and waited.” She emptied the glass, leaned over and placed it on the floor at her feet. The combination of her low-cut dress and Liddell’s vantage point made the effect one of which Johnny eminently approved.

“I think you just gave me another idea,” Liddell grinned. He got off the arm of the chair, walked over to where she sat. This time she had her face

up, her lips in position.

“Why don’t you make yourself comfortable, Johnny?” the redhead asked. She reached up, loosened his tie, opened his shirt at the neck. She kissed him again lightly, pulled herself up from the couch. “Excuse me for a minute?”

“Don’t take too long, baby.”

“Not too long,” she promised. He watched her until the bedroom door closed behind her.

Liddell ran his fingers through his hair, made himself comfortable on the couch. He poured himself another drink and had almost finished a cigarette when the bedroom door opened again. He jumped to this feet, his jaw sank onto his chest.

“What’s the idea of the street clothes?” he asked.

The redhead looked down at her suit, stared at him, then burst out laughing. “Why, you goon. I work for a living. I’m due at Mike’s place in half an hour.” She pecked him lightly on the chin. “Don’t go away. I’ll be back.”

Liddell refused to be mollified. “Never heard of hookey? It’s being played in the best of families this season.”

“With a truant officer right outside my door with a night stick?” the redhead laughed. An artistic make-up job had erased the tired lines leaving her face youthful, vibrant. “Don’t be such a big baby. You look like somebody just stole your candy.”

Liddell grinned ruefully, slid his arm around her waist, pulled her close. His lips sought hers, but she turned her cheek.

“Uh huh,” she scolded. “Mike always gets peeved when his help wanders in with their faces painted on crooked.” She pecked him on the cheek lightly. “That’ll have to do—for now.”

Liddell nodded. “Okay, baby. I can wait. And I’m going to do my waiting right here.” He patted the pillows on the couch, stretched out comfortably. “Like that, you’ll know where to find me—if you need me.”

Chapter Four

JOHNNY LIDDELL was still sprawled out on the couch when the telephone began to jangle. He debated whether or not to answer it, lost the decision, dragged himself to his feet.

It was Happy Lewis calling from headquarters.

“The coroner says he’ll check that for you, Liddell,” the homicide dick told him. “Where can I reach you later?”

“Right here.”

There was a slight pause on the other end of the wire. “It may be a couple of hours the doc says. How long do you expect to be at that number?”

Liddell grinned. “All night from the looks of things. Now go eat your heart out.” He slipped the receiver back on the hook, chuckled.

A tall old-fashioned secretary propped caty-corner near the bedroom door caught his eye. He ambled over, tried the drawer, found it locked. He shrugged, started back to the couch when he noticed a series of fresh scratches near the lock. He bent down, examined them. Someone had made an effort to open the drawer without a key apparently.

Liddell fumbled through his pockets, came up with a penknife, inserted the blade above the drawer near the lock. He flipped his wrist, was rewarded with a faint click, and the drawer slid open. A few minutes search of the contents proved disappointing. Obviously the drawer had been Nancy’s, but she either had kept no personal papers or whoever had forced the lock before him had gotten them all.

The detective closed the drawer, relocked it with a reverse flip of his wrist. He wondered if the searcher had found what he was looking for.

He ambled into the bedroom, carefully searched every drawer in the large, old-fashioned dresser, found nothing. A couple of old pocketbooks on the top shelf of the closet were equally unproductive. He had better luck in the closet itself. In the pockets of a light topcoat he found a crumpled Acme Agency business card with his name scribbled in pencil on the back. There

were also two small slips of paper, marked “Observer File Room” with penciled dates and somebody’s initial in the right-hand corner. He puzzled over them for a minute, then slipped them into his pocket. After a quick check to be sure there were no signs of his search, he meandered back into the living room.

He was back on the couch, pillow under his head, feet propped comfortably on the arms of the chair, when the call finally came through. The ashtray at his shoulder was heaped high with butts, the bourbon bottle was beginning to show signs of a complete collapse. He dropped his feet to the floor, crossed the room in a few steps, grabbed the receiver from its hook.

“Yeah?”

It was Doc Herley, the coroner. “Liddell? That you Liddell?” His voice was quivering with excitement. Liddell could almost visualize the extra chins shaking.

“Yeah, Doc. This is Liddell. Got anything?”

“It’s the most amazing thing I ever saw. How you guessed it, I’ll never know!”

“You mean I was right, doc?”

“Right as rain,” the receiver assured him. “There’s absolutely no question about it now. It was murder.”

Liddell could feel some of the fat medic’s excitement seeping into his blood. “You’ll stand by that, doc?”

“All the way, Johnny. What do you want me to do?”

“Where’s Happy Lewis?”

The voice at the other end of the wire changed. “Here I am, Liddell,” it whined in Happy’s nasal drawl. “I gotta take my hat off to you, mister. You’re a genius.”

“I think you’re pretty, too,” Liddell grinned. “Satisfied to play along now?”

“You call it, brother, I’ll play it.” The homicide man’s voice was definite. “What’s our next move?”

Liddell started straightening his tie with his free hand. “Feel like going up against Chief Connors? He’s got to be told, you know.”

“It’ll be a pleasure.”

“Like I told you before, Happy, it’s still not too late to bow out of this deal. You got plenty to lose if this play goes wrong.”

The voice at the other end snorted. “I got more to lose if someone don’t shake Connors loose from control of this town. I’ll be at the chief’s office when you get there.”

CHIEF CONNORS was still behind his oversized desk when Johnny Liddell pushed open the frosted glass door, sauntered in. He looked as though he hadn’t left the chair. His thin, sad-looking face was an ugly red with repressed anger, his teeth were clenched savagely into an unlighted cigar.

Detective Sergeant Happy Lewis looked up from the chair Liddell had occupied earlier in the evening. He nodded to the private detective glumly.

“Hi, Chief,” Johnny greeted Connors. He waved to Lewis. “I see you’ve got the news.”

“So you didn’t think my advice to get out of town was any good, eh, shamus?” Chief Connors asked softly.

“Your advice may have been good at the time, Chief, but there have been some developments since then. I found out your facts were cockeyed and I started wondering what really did happen to my client. You wouldn’t want me to go through life wondering.”

Chief Connors tore the cigar from between his teeth, looked at the ragged end, bounced it off the floor. “Don’t come around here with your funny sayings.” He put his hands flat on the desk, lifted himself out of the chair. “I told you I didn’t want you around here sticking your nose into things that are none of your business.”

Liddell perched on the arm of Happy Lewis’ chair. “I won’t. All I’m interested in is the murder of my client. That is my business.”

The police chief stamped around the desk, planted himself in front of the two men. He waved a stubby forefinger under their noses. “Get this straight, both of you. The Martin dame either jumped or fell. I don’t give a damn which it was. She either jumped or fell.”

“You sound like you’re anxious to cover this killing, Chief,” Liddell told him. “Why?”

The deep red of the chief's face turned purple. A little vein in the center of his forehead throbbed, the corners of his mouth twitched nervously.

"Okay, wise guy," he breathed heavily through his nose. "You got to have it the hard way, eh? That's okay with me." He swung on Happy Lewis. "I told you where this case stands for the records. You got off base. You're suspended. For good."

Happy Lewis' perpetually unhappy expression didn't alter. He stared unblinkingly at his superior.

"As for you," Chief Connors turned on Liddell, "I'm going to get your license for unwarranted interference in the affairs of my department. What's more, I'm going to toss you into the pokey and throw away the key."

"On what charge? Or don't they stand on ceremony in this burg?"

The chief bared his teeth in an ugly, crooked grin. "Sure. We like ceremony, Liddell. Lots of it. What's the charge? Breaking and entering Lorna Matthews' apartment. Conducting an illegal search without a search warrant. Impersonating an officer. That's just a few. When the boys in the squad room get finished with you, maybe we'll have a couple more ideas."

"You couldn't make it stick, Connors. The redhead would never stand still for you to pull a frame like that. She'll tell you she invited me in, and ___"

"She'll tell just what I want her to tell, see? In this town people do like they're told. Like you should have done." He turned to Happy Lewis. "Tell him, Lewis. You're so fond of telling things."

The homicide detective stirred uneasily in his chair.

"The carrot-top would do what she's told, Liddell. After all she's got to live here and work here."

Chief Connors sneered. "That's right. She'll do what she's told because she wants to keep working here—and living."

Liddell got up from the arm of the chair, stuck his chin into the police chief's face. "Okay, Connors. I've been sitting here listening to what a tough guy you are. Now you pull up an ear and do some listening. Go ahead. Get tough. Break Lewis and start shooting for my tin. But before you do, you better start reading classified ads. You're going to be needing a new job."

Connors pushed him away with the palm of his hand, walked around the desk, punched at a button. "You terrify me. When the boys in the cellar are

done playing quiz games with you, maybe you won't be so tough." He sank into his chair, laced his fingers across his chest. "You'll like this game. They don't give \$64 for the right answers, but you should see some of the prizes they give for wrong ones."

Happy Lewis got out of his chair, put his hand on Liddell's shoulder. "He's not kidding, Johnny. He's got a couple of gorillas down in that squad room would beat their mothers' brains out just to kill a rainy afternoon." He turned to Connors. "Get smart, chief. Liddell ain't bluffing. He's got enough on you right now to blast the town wide open. Tell him, Liddell."

Connors grinned. "Let him tell it to the boys downstairs. They'll be nice and sympathetic. They just love to listen to guys like you."

"I won't have to tell them, Connors," Liddell said. "If they can read, they'll be able to read all about it in the *Observer*. I dropped by there on my way over and gave them the dope. Unless I call them off, they'll splash it tomorrow."

The grin froze on the chief's face, his washed-out eyes narrowed angrily. "You're lying, Liddell. You haven't anything to give them."

The door at the far end of the office opened, a beefy face filled the opening. "Want me, Chief?"

Liddell grinned at the police chief. "Here's your chance to find out, Connors."

The chief stared at him through lowered lids. "Stand by for a minute, Clemens. I think I got a customer for you."

The beefy face broke into a grin. "Okay, Chief. The boys can use some exercise." The door closed behind him.

"Start talking, Liddell. What could you give the *Observer* that would be worth the price of the ink they'd waste on it?"

"Proof that Nancy Hayes was murdered and that Police Chief Connors is trying to hush it up by railroading through a suicide verdict."

"You're a liar," Connors pounded the desk with his fist. "The dame killed herself and there's no way you or anybody else could prove it different."

"That's what you think, Chief," Happy Lewis' nasal drawl broke in. "Liddell has proved it. And it'll stand in court."

The chief's washed-out eyes played hop skip from Liddell to Happy Lewis and back. "Could be I'm being hasty." He wet his lips with a quick dart of the tip of an over-red tongue. "Suppose you convince me she was murdered. I could be mistaken, I suppose."

Liddell leaned across the desk, stuck his face near that of the chief. "You could be and you are. Nancy Hayes was fished out of the ocean, where there's salt water. But the water in her lungs is sweet water." He saw the look of stark amazement that wiped all expression from the police chief's face. "Nancy Hayes didn't die in the ocean at all. She was probably taking a bath when someone came in, pushed her head under the water, and held it there until she was dead."

Beads of perspiration glistened on the police chief's forehead. He started to say something, changed his mind, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand instead.

"That's why there were no signs of violence on the body," Liddell continued. "But the killer made one mistake, Chief. A bad one. In his hurry to get the body from her apartment to the ocean, he grabbed the first dress he could lay his hands on to plant on the end of the pier. He happened to grab one that had just been pressed and hadn't been worn." He straightened up, found a cigarette, stuck it in the corner of his mouth. "Now, if you still think you'd like to have your boys in the back room play tag with me, go ahead. You have your fun now. I'll have mine tomorrow when the *Observer* hits the street."

He watched the police chief's face, saw the eyes falter, then fall. With a silent sigh of relief, Liddell knew he'd made good his bluff. He glanced over at Happy Lewis, made a circle with his thumb and the tip of his forefinger.

Chapter Five

AFTER he left Detective Sergeant (recently reinstated) Happy Lewis at headquarters, Johnny Liddell wandered across the street to an all night bar that rejoiced in the name of Nick's Downtown Oasis. A few heavysset characters, whose feet left little doubt of their usual occupation, huddled over the bar in groups. At the far end of the bar, a tired looking blonde was pleading with her boy friend. "Let's go home, honey."

Liddell walked the length of the room to a tier of telephone booths, spoke to the long distance operator for a few moments, returned to the bar. He spent the next five minutes trying to catch the eye of the bartender, who was trying to make a date with the blonde over her boy friend's shoulder. When he finally made the grade, Liddell ordered a brandy.

He had just taken a sip of his drink when the door of Nick's Downtown Oasis opened, and the beefy face he had seen in Chief Connors' office entered. Beefy Face joined the characters at the bar, whispered something. There was a flurry of emptying of glasses and the whole herd trooped out like a pack of performing elephants.

Liddell stared glumly at the oily ring left around his glass by the varnish the bartender had proudly announced as cognac. Chief Connors' goon squad had been summoned. That meant things were going to pop. The discouraging part of the whole thing, he ruminated, was that it looked likely they were all going to pop over his head.

Somewhere a phone shrilled, the bartender disappeared from behind the bar. A few moments later, he shuffled down to where Liddell stood, broke into his musing. "You called Liddell, bud?"

"Among other things."

The bartender failed to be amused. He tossed his head in the direction of the phone booth. "Operator says you put in a long distance call. She's got your party on the line."

Liddell nodded, downed what remained of his drink, took his time about getting down to the phone booth.

“Hello, that you, Steve?” he asked amiably into the mouthpiece.

The voice of Steve Baron, head of the Acme home office, was bitter. “Who’d you expect would be answering my phone in the middle of the night? Look, Liddell. There are twenty-four hours in the day. I sleep only four of them. Why do you always have to pick on those four hours to call?”

Liddell shrugged. “Had nothing to tell you up to now.”

“All right, cut the clowning, Liddell. What’s the idea of getting me out of bed like this? And collect, too?”

“I needed some advice, fast. You know that client I came up here to see? Well she’s no client anymore. She’s a corpse.”

The sleepiness went out of Steve Baron’s voice. “When did it happen?”

“Last night. Before I got to town.”

“Any line on the killer? What do the police say?”

Johnny grunted. “They spent all day trying to prove it was suicide. They got some goon named Connors wearing the gold badge up here. Know anything about him?”

“Yeah. Plenty. None of it good. He used to hire out union sluggers and strike breakers before the war. He tied in with the mob running that town, settled down, and became police chief.”

“Local boy makes good, eh?” Liddell grinned. “How’s his hospitality?”

“Meaning?”

“He’s been inviting me to all kinds of games and stuff in the cellar of the police station. So far I’ve been able to refuse without hurting his feelings. But I have a hunch he’s going to keep pitching.”

Steve Baron brushed it aside. “How about the suicide angle? Can he make that one stick?”

“Not now. I just blasted it wide open. The m.e., who acts like a good joe, is set to tag it murder. Connors ain’t very happy.” He flipped a cigarette into his mouth, managed to light it. “What do I do now?”

“Get yourself a client fast. You don’t have a leg to stand on up there unless you have one. Can do?”

Liddell nodded glumly. “And then?”

The agency chief's snort was audible over hundreds of miles of wire. "And then you find out who killed her. What then? It's not good advertising for an agency's clients to get bumped off. It makes people superstitious."

"That would be terrible," Liddell agreed solemnly. "What happens if one of your agency men gets himself knocked off? Namely me."

"We give him a nice funeral." A sharp note crept into Baron's voice. "Operatives are easier to find these days than clients." He failed to suppress a yawn. "Anything else? This is costing the agency money."

"It'll come out of my expense account," Liddell growled. "It always does. You haven't been much help, Steve."

"What did you expect me to do, come up there and hold your hand? Don't forget so far we haven't even got a retainer on this one. I can't spare any more ops right now, Johnny."

Liddell nodded. "Okay, Steve. I'll keep you informed."

"If it's got to be at this hour, don't bother, Liddell. I can read all about it in the obituary columns."

The receiver clicked metallically as the connection was broken at the other end. Liddell glowered at the mouthpiece, slammed the receiver back on its hook.

Back at the bar he ordered another brandy, tossed it off with a grimace. He was debating the advisability of another to keep that one steady in his stomach when someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"You Liddell?" a deep voice rasped in his ear.

Liddell swung around to stare into a pair of cold-slate-colored eyes. From the set of the powerful shoulders, the battered face and thickened eyebrows, it didn't take a Sherlock Holmes to tag him as an ex pug. The man at his side was his direct antithesis. He was thin, dapper, almost pretty in an effeminate way. He was hatless, and his hair, beginning to show signs of thinning at the temples, was light and wavy. His hand was sunk deep in a bulging jacket pocket, but on his wrist a heavy gold identification bracelet was visible.

"Well, Beauty and the Beast," Liddell grinned. "What's on your minds?"

"There's someone wants to see you, friend," Slate Eyes told him.

Liddell shook his head. "Some other time. I'm not feeling very sociable tonight, Buster." He started to turn back to the bar. A hamlike hand caught

his arm, spun him around.

“This guy I’m talking about don’t like to be kept waiting.” The battered face screwed up into what passed for a smile. “He ain’t particular what condition you come in, just so long’s you come.”

The light-haired man stepped between them. “None of that, Edwin.” His voice was low, intimate, almost as though he were whispering.

Slate Eyes glowered, then dropped his hands, stepped back.

The slight man turned to Liddell. “The shamus will come along without any rough stuff. Won’t you, Liddell?” The hand with the gold bracelet drew far enough out of the pocket to reveal that the bulge was of .45 calibre.

“I’ll be charmed.” Liddell bowed slightly. “That’s the kind of an invitation I find it difficult to resist.” He looked over to where the bartender sat, working hard at being nonchalant, the sweat glistening on his forehead. Liddell reached toward his breast pocket, felt the snout of the .45 bore into his belly. “I was just getting some dough to pay the bar tab,” he growled.

Wavy Hair smiled bleakly. “This one is on us.” Without taking his eyes off Liddell, he flung back over his shoulder at Slate Eyes, “Drop a couple of dollars on the bar, Edwin. Mr. Liddell will have a terrible impression of our hospitality.” He bowed at Liddell. “And now, if you’re ready, shall we go?”

THE man who lounged on the couch was fat and soft looking. Dark, damp ringlets tried futilely to cover the bald spot that glowed pinkly in the indirect lighting of the study. His eyes, two black shiny marbles, were almost lost behind the puffy balls of his cheeks. He seemed half asleep as he sat there, hands clasped across his middle, regarding Johnny Liddell.

“Nice of you to come see me like this, Liddell.” His voice sounded choked by the heaviness of his jowls and chin.

“You mean I had a choice?” Liddell asked. He indicated the wavy-haired gunman with a toss of his head. “Pretty boy here had an invitation engraved in lead. It sounded like such a jolly party I couldn’t think of staying away.”

The fat man’s eyes gave Liddell a fast going over. “Naturally, this is a friendly conversation?” he gurgled.

“He was heeled, so I took the liberty of making him more comfortable,” the wavy-haired gunman volunteered. He tossed Liddell’s .45 down on the couch next to the fat man.

“Good, good.” The man on the couch picked up the gun, opened the top drawer of a small cabinet by his side, dropped the gun in. “I won’t need you now, Joey. Wait outside.”

A faint color tinged the gunman’s neck. He looked as though he was about to retort, but instead turned on his heel and minced out the door. He slammed it going out.

“My name is Lane,” the fat man told Liddell. “Mike Lane. I operate the Villa Rouge outside town. I understand we have some friends in common.”

Liddell ambled over to a large overstuffed chair facing the couch, dropped into it, draped one leg over the arm. “Such as?”

“Nancy Martin,” Lane told him. He pulled a large handkerchief from his breast pocket, blew his nose noisily. “Sad about Nancy, very sad.”

Liddell nodded, waited.

The fat man reached over, opened the lower doors of the cabinet, pulled out a bottle and two glasses. “Understand you think Nancy was murdered?” His little eyes rolled up from the bottle to Liddell. “You could be wrong, eh?” His voice trailed off insinuatingly.

“I could be,” Liddell admitted. “But I’m not. The m.e. is convinced it’s murder. So’s Chief Connors.”

Lane shrugged deprecatingly by hunching his shoulders upwards, submerging what little neck he had. He carefully measured a drink into each glass, pursed his overripe lips. “They’ll be reasonable about it.” He corked the bottle, replaced it in the cabinet, held out a glass to Liddell. “How about you?”

“I don’t get it. A cigarette girl who’s not important to anybody gets knocked off and suddenly she’s important to everybody. Why?”

The fat man leaned back, clasped his hands across his middle. “Maybe we figure a resort town like this can’t stand scandal. It’s bad for business. You understand.”

Liddell tasted the liquor, found it superior to any he’d yet encountered in town. He drank it neat, replaced his glass on the top of the cabinet. “Nancy worked for you, I understand.”

The fat man nodded. “Couple of years or so. She was a looker. We can always use lookers in a joint like mine.”

Liddell found a cigar in his breast pocket, denuded it of its cellophane jacket. “Know her real name was Nancy Hayes and she was a big name hooper from the Big Town?” He crumbled the cellophane into a ball, tossed it in the approximate direction of the wastebasket.

“So they tell me. She never peeped. Me, I don’t ask questions.” He smiled oilily. “It ain’t healthy sometimes, being too curious.”

Liddell wet the end of his cigar with the tip of his tongue. “Maybe that’s what happened to Nancy, eh? She got too curious. Could get fatal, I guess?”

The fat man reached a pudgy hand for his drink, raised it slowly to his lips, studied the detective over the rim. “It’s like I said.” He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. “I got a hundred people working for me. I ain’t got time to play godfather to them all. Anyway, that wasn’t what I asked you to come here to talk about.” He pulled himself free of the clutching depths of the couch, waddled to a safe set in the wall. He puffed audibly as he spun the dials, finally swung open the thick steel door. He fumbled in the depths of the safe for a moment, closed the safe, waddled back to the couch. “I got some business I want to discuss with you.” He dropped a flat pile of bills on the top of the cabinet. “Interested?”

“Fascinated.” Liddell stuck his cigar between his teeth, touched a match to it.

“I thought you would be.” He pushed the pile of bills closer to Liddell. “May take you a couple of months, may take a year.” He leaned back, puffed out his fat cheeks. “I’d want you to start right away. Tonight.”

“What’s the job?”

The fat man grinned. “Want you to find somebody for me. Last time I heard he was out west. Arizona, Montana, one of those places.”

“That’s a pretty big order. Be like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

The fat man indicated the pile of bills. “There’s plenty there for expenses as well as the agency fee. Money’s no object. What do you say?”

The private detective removed the cigar from his mouth, studied the light film of ash on its tip, tapped it onto the rug. “I don’t see why the agency couldn’t handle it. They’ve got a couple of boys doing nothing, and—”

The man on the couch leaned forward. His marblelike eyes receded farther behind their pouches, the pink of his face grew an angry red. “Don’t play cute with me, Liddell. I don’t want any other men. I’m hiring you to do this job.”

“I already have a case. Remember?”

“Don’t give me that. You were hired by Nancy Martin. Well, she’s dead and there’s nobody to pick up your tab. You guys don’t work for experience. You figure you’ve latched onto an angle where you can pick yourself up some extra cash. Well, so okay. I’m offering you the ready cash—legitimate cash.” He wiped the wet smear of his mouth with the back of his hand, leaned back. “Be smart for once. You know it ain’t being done for a smart-boy private eye to go messing round with police business. They only get away with it in storybooks.”

Liddell nodded. “Maybe. But maybe I’ve got a client, a client who hired me to find out who killed Nancy Hayes and why.” He blew out a lungful of blue-grey smoke. “In that case, it mightn’t be a good idea for anybody to be getting in my way.”

The fat man closed his eyes, sighed. “Well, you can’t say I didn’t try to give you a good steer. If I were you, I’d think it over.” He jabbed a disguised button near his elbow, the door opened and the blond gunman appeared in the doorway. “Liddell is going, Joey. See that nothing happens to him—while he’s on the premises.”

Joey nodded, smiled bleakly. “On your feet, Liddell.”

The private detective pulled himself to his feet, walked over, towered over the man on the couch. “My gun, if you don’t mind, Lane.” He watched the fat man open the drawer, take out the .45. Lane weighed the gun in the palm of his hand, grunted. He removed the clip and ejected the cartridge from the chamber, held the gun out to Liddell.

“I wouldn’t want you to go hurting yourself,” he said.

Liddell slipped the .45 back in its shoulder holster. “I’ll send you a bill for the shells.”

“Do that,” the fat man told him pleasantly. “Or maybe it could be arranged that you’ll be getting them back—one at a time.”

THE city room of the Waterville *Observer* was just beginning to come to life. Half a dozen reporters, their hats shoved back on their heads, their jackets hanging from the backs of their chairs, sat with their ears glued to telephones. At other desks, typewriters chattered noisily about the day’s doings in Waterville. From another room, the teletypes added their deeper

tones to the clatter with the occasional pinging of a bell to underscore some particularly important news break.

Johnny Liddell picked his way over sprawling legs down an aisle between desks to a frosted glass door that bore the legend “Managing Editor.” He knocked, decided the knock couldn’t be heard over the clamor, opened the door, and walked in.

A thick, squat man with a shock of untidy grey hair looked up from the room’s only desk as the door slammed shut. His face was tired, deeply lined under the green eyeshade he wore. In his mouth he clamped a short-stemmed bulldog pipe. He scowled his annoyance at the intrusion. “You’re maybe in the wrong room, mister,” he said without bothering to remove the pipe. “It’s across the hall. Says ‘Men’ on the door.”

Liddell grinned. “You top man on this sheet?”

The editor leaned back in his chair, ran stubby fingers through his hair. “That’s right. Name’s Rivers. Only, I’ve got no time to listen to subscribers’ complaints right now. We’re getting ready to put her to bed. Why don’t you come back tomorrow morning and talk to somebody cityside?”

“You’d never forgive yourself in the morning if you let me walk out of here now,” Liddell told him. He stood in front of the desk and rested his weight on it.

“Okay, so I’ll hate myself in the morning. But right now I’m busy.” Rivers ground his teeth on the stem of the pipe, started to reach for a phone, looked the private detective over carefully. “You’re no crackpot subscriber. Who the hell are you and what do you want?”

“Name’s Liddell. Johnny Liddell. I’m a private op from Acme in New York. I’ve got a good yarn for you.”

The editor sank back in his chair, pushed his eyeshade back on his forehead. “A private eye, eh? Well, I guess we can always use some scandal. I’ll give you a rewrite.”

Liddell shook his head. “It’s not bedroom stuff. We don’t touch divorce. This is front page stuff. Top of the page.”

“You better peddle it someplace else then. I got my front page set and I wouldn’t tear it out if you came walking in here with a Martian by the hand for an interview.”

“You will for this, unless you’re scared of City Hall.” Liddell told him. He pulled two cigars from his pocket, tossed one across the desk to the

editor. “What I’ve got will sink a shaft into the city fathers’ fannies so deep that only the feathers will show.”

Rivers scowled, but there was a new glint of interest in his eyes. “That kind of talk sounds good, Liddell, but we get it every day. Everyone knows this sheet is antiadministration, so every crackpot who has a beef thinks it rates front page. What’s yours?”

“Front page.”

“If what you’ve got is a lot of hunches and half-baked suspicions, save your breath. We’ve got plenty of our own.” The editor tossed the cigar back at Liddell. “If you’ve got anything with meat on its bones you won’t have to come around here passing out bum stogies to make me buy it.”

“Bum stogies, he says,” Liddell grunted, rescuing the cigar and returning it to his pocket. “At two for a half yet.”

The editor scratched a wooden match on the underside of the desk, held it to his pipe. He sucked noisily for a moment, finally got it going. “If you’ve got anything to peddle, go into your pitch. What’ve you got?”

“A nice juicy murder,” Liddell told him.

“Murder, eh?” The editor squinted at him, then reached over and consulted a check list on the corner of his desk. “My headquarters man checked in less than fifteen minutes ago and he didn’t list any murders. What’d you do, bring the corpse with you?”

“Nope. I left it where I found it. In the morgue. Been there all day.”

“Now wait a minute, friend,” Rivers started to protest. “We get a complete list of all—”

Liddell cut him short with a wave of his hand. “You told me to make my pitch. Okay, let me.”

The editor subsided with a shrug. He motioned for Liddell to go ahead.

“It started a couple of years ago when a big-name hooper who’s going places in the Big Town suddenly chucks it and buries herself alive in this cemetery with lights,” Liddell told him.

“How you talk,” the editor chuckled. “I’ll bet the Chamber of Commerce would like to have you for dinner—roasted preferably.”

“She changes her name, takes a job selling cigarettes at the local den of vice. One day she ups and quits there, sends for a private eye she can trust,

namely me, but by the time I arrive, she's cooling off on a slab in the morgue."

"This doll you're talking about. What's her name?"

"Nancy Martin in this town. Nancy Hayes in New York."

The interest drained from the editor's face leaving it just tired. "I might have known it was too good to be true. You almost had me going. Murder," he snorted, slamming the blackened briar back between his teeth, "that dame wasn't murdered. She just stepped off the end of a pier. Look. Be a nice guy and run along."

Liddell shoved his hat back, stuck a cigarette in his mouth, leaned over and confiscated a paper pack of matches on the desk. "Like I said, the kid was murdered before I had a chance to find out what she wanted with a private eye."

"Look, Liddell. Stop banging your head against the wall. I just told you this town is loaded with rumors and stories. But they got no guts—nothing behind them. Just like this wild yarn you breeze in with. All right, so there's a little feature in the dame, why she left the bright lights and all that—but the murder part. You're off base."

"You think so?"

"I know so. The police report says accident or suicide, the coroner finds no signs of violence, but you say it's murder." Rivers created a cloud of dark blue smoke directly over his head. "Besides, why go to the trouble of murdering a dame like that? Let them alone and they'll save you the trouble."

"You say the coroner told your boys there was nothing suspicious about her death? When'd you check his office last?"

"About six tonight."

Liddell pushed the phone closer to the man behind the desk. "Why don't you call him now? Maybe he'd have something interesting to tell you."

Rivers glared at the man perched on the corner of his desk, grabbed up the phone, muttered some instructions into it. He returned it to its cradle, glowered wordlessly at Liddell, his stubby fingers beating out a nervous tattoo on the scarred desk top.

"If you're just wasting my time, I'm going to do what I should have done when you came in here—have you tossed out on your fanny. Every

time I—”

The peal of the phone cut him off. He scooped up the receiver, talked into it for a moment. The scowl on his face smoothed out into an incredulous expression, then a grin. When he hung up, he stood up, stuck his hand out.

“We can’t always be right,” he conceded. “Doc Herley tells me it was your idea that kicked the hole in the suicide theory. Nice going.” He took his hand back from Liddell, started jabbing buttons on his desk. “Here goes that front page you were talking about.”

“What, no Martian?” Liddell grinned.

The frosted glass door opened and half a dozen people tried to crowd into the room.

“What’s up, Chief?” a lean, hungry looking newshawk wanted to know.

“That Martin dame they fished out of the ocean and tagged a suicide wasn’t. It was murder. I want it covered from every angle. Get pix, background, everything. Liddell here tells me she was show business back in New York. What was her name down there?” he turned to Liddell.

“Nancy Hayes. You can probably get all her pix and some background from Murray Korman, the photographer. He knows more about the girls than their own mothers.”

Rivers took over. “Get on the phone to New York, get Korman for pix and background. We want to know why she tossed over a good career to come up here.” He pointed to the lean reporter. “You, Woods, get down to City Hall and find out why Chief Connors was so damn anxious to label this one a suicide and cover it up.”

The reporter’s eyes crept up to the clock over the editor’s desk. Rivers caught the significance.

“Okay, so if it’s too late to get him at his office, get him at home. I want a statement from Connors if you have to crawl into bed with him and his wife to get it.”

“Have a heart. Chief,” the reporter drawled, “have you ever seen his wife?” He elbowed his way through the crowd at the door, disappeared.

“All right, the rest of you. You know what I want. Hop to it.” The crowd at the door receded, the door slammed. Outside there was a mounting murmur of excitement.

“Think the skinny guy will get anything out of Connors?” Liddell asked.

The editor shrugged, tried relighting his pipe. “Woods is the best man on the staff. If anyone can get a line on what Connors is trying to hide, he’s the boy.” He gave up the pipe as a bad job, started emptying the tobacco ash from the bowl. “You wouldn’t know, would you, Liddell?”

Liddell shook his head. “No. And it don’t look as though I’m going to get a chance to find out either.” He tapped the ash off the cigarette onto the floor. “I got warned off this case less than half an hour ago.”

“Yeah? Who by?”

“A character named Mike Lane. He sounds like he wants it hushed up, too.”

“So he scared you off, eh?” Rivers grabbed a pinch of tobacco from a battered humidor, started shoving it into the blackened bowl. “Well, guess I can’t blame you. They tell me Lane plays rough.” He looked up at Liddell from under heavy eyebrows. “Guess it’s a lot safer framing divorce evidence with a stable of blondes, eh shamus?”

“Ain’t my doing. My client’s dead. I can’t stick my nose into a police investigation unless I got a client who tells me to.”

“Like for instance the *Observer*, no doubt?”

“Like for instance the *Observer*.”

The editor scowled at his pipe as he tamped the tobacco down. “I see what you mean. Suppose the *Observer* was to hire you as a special correspondent on this case. Would it be okay with you if we get the breaks exclusive? Before the police, even?”

“I’ll give you my reports direct. What you do with them is up to you. You can print them or frame them and hang them up in your parlor. All I want is an official or semi-official standing in this case.”

“Okay. You just got yourself a job. Special correspondent for the sheet on the Nancy Martin case. Who do I make the deal with?”

“Steve Baron, New York office of Acme.”

Rivers wrote the name and address on a piece of copy paper, impaled it on a hook. “Now that that’s taken care of, how do you plan to work this thing?”

Liddell crushed out his cigarette, fumbled in his pockets. “First, find out why Nancy came here. My own hunch is that she was looking for somebody or something. When she found it, she became dangerous to somebody and she was killed.”

He located the two slips marked “Observer File Room” that he’d found in the dead girl’s coat, tossed them to the editor.

“I found these in Nancy’s room. Mean anything to you?”

“Not much,” the editor shrugged. “They’re slips issued by the librarian in our file room to people who want to look over the bound copies of back issues.” He indicated the penciled dates on the slips. “Apparently she was interested in something that happened in March or April of 1950. But what?”

“That’s one of those things we’ve got to find out. That may be the key to the whole puzzle.”

Rivers sucked on his pipe noisily. “Do you have any idea of how many items were printed in those two months? How are you going to find out what you’re looking for if you don’t know it when you come to it?”

Liddell pursed his lips, considered. “It’ll be a tough job, all right. We’ll just have to eliminate the stuff we’re sure she couldn’t have been interested in and run down the rest. I’ll need a couple of your boys for that. Or maybe one smart one will do.”

“Now it starts,” the editor sighed. “I hire the guy and right off the bat he needs a corps of assistants. Okay, I’ll assign Lee Woods to you. He’s the guy I sent down to interview Connors. He’s a good man, knows the town—and besides, you’ll need someone to translate your reports into readable feature pieces.” He looked at the pile of work on his desk significantly. “And now ___”

“Wait a minute, will you, Rivers? There are a couple of things I’ve got to know before I can get started. This guy Mike Lane. What about him?”

“Bad business. The local Lucky Luciano and Buggsy Siegel rolled up into one. He looks fat and soft but he’s strictly rattlesnake.” The editor fumbled through a pile of sheets on the copy hook, came up with one sheet that had been heavily edited with a dark pencil. “We had a sobber work out on the Martin suicide, but the only angle she came up with was that Martin used to work for Lane and was probably carrying the torch for him. We finally killed it.”

Liddell shook his head. “That don’t add up for me. First place, Nancy was particular about her sweeties. That fat slob wasn’t her type. If you’re going to say she could overlook that because he was a big shot, that still won’t wash. Back on Broadway she could have had her pick of the racket boys, she didn’t have to come out here to play house with any bush league Capone.”

“Maybe so,” Rivers admitted, clicking the stem of his pipe against his teeth. “But she worked for Mike and he goes on the make for anything in skirts that works in his joint. If they play hard to get, they’re unemployed. And the Martin dame worked there for a couple of years.”

“This guy Lane fascinates me. Tell me more. How about those two playmates of his, the pantywaist with the marcelled hair and the mug with the steam-rollered kissers?”

Rivers stole a look at the clock, groaned. “What’s there to tell you? Lane was a small time muscle man up to the war. During prohibition he peddled some hooch, after Repeal he did some pimping, some gambling. The regular stuff in a resort town like this.”

“Now he’s strictly big time. How long?”

“Ever since he took over the Villa Rouge in 1949. Does a terrific business out there. Mostly out-of-towners.”

The buzzers on the editor’s desk started yelling for attention.

Liddell ignored them. “Owns the police department lock, stock, and barrel, I suppose?”

The editor shook his head. “Not quite. He’s got the chief under his thumb. Put him in the job, as a matter of fact, right over the head of some of the old timers on the force. They’re burned, of course, but there’s nothing they can do while Connors is in the saddle.”

“Know a character named Happy Lewis?”

“Straight as a die. Met him yet?”

Liddell nodded. “He’s been playing along with me. I just wanted to be sure he wasn’t a plant.”

The buzzers on the desk started to get insistent.

“Look, Liddell,” Rivers told him, “I’m going to be swamped from here in. I can’t waste any more time chinning with you. Where are you staying?”

“A fleabag named the Weston House on the square.”

Rivers wrote the information down on a piece of copy paper, marked it to the attention of Woods.

“Woods will contact you first thing in the morning,” he told Liddell. “You can trust him. He’ll work with you all the way.”

Liddell stood up, brushed some ash from his pants leg. “How do I get out to this Villa Rouge? I got a couple of bucks I want to lose.”

The editor pulled his eyeshade down over his eyes. “Out route seven about three miles, and—oh, hell! It’ll be simpler to write it out for you.” While he was scribbling the instructions, he told the detective, “Don’t do anything foolish, Liddell. A couple of bucks ain’t all you could lose out there.”

“This is the damndest town,” Johnny grinned. “Just here one day and already the chief of police, the town bad man, and the editor of the town rag have all promised me a ride home in a baggage car.”

The editor handed him the sheet with the penciled instructions. “It doesn’t take some guys as long as others to get unpopular,” he said. “And if you’re planning on prowling Mike Lane’s place after getting warned off by Mike personally, you’re candidate number one for the guy mostly likely to succumb.”

Liddell folded the copy paper, stuck it in his pocket. “Just so long’s you don’t make the obit too flowery.” He shoved his hat back on his head. “I’ll expect to hear from your boy in the morning.”

The managing editor nodded absently, started stabbing at buttons on the desk, shouting orders into the intercom system. He looked as though he had completely forgotten about Johnny Liddell—hardly looked up as the door slammed behind the private detective.

Chapter Six

JOHNNY LIDDELL took route seven out of town. It was a steep tortuous climb that seemed to hug the shore line most of the way. Somewhere beyond the black abyss that yawned off to the right there was a rumble of surf and the boiling hissing sound of water retreating from the beach.

He kept a close check on the speedometer. When it showed that he had gone exactly three miles from Waterville, he swung off onto a macadam road that meandered almost a mile. Suddenly, just ahead and set back a little from the road he could make out the outlines of what he knew must be the Villa Rouge.

From the outside it gave no indication of its character, looked like any large country estate that had been kept up. Shrubs, lawns looked to be in good condition, and it was only by a small brass nameplate picked out by his lights that he knew he had arrived.

He swung the rented Buick off the macadam road through two large stone pillars onto a crushed bluestone driveway, which wound and curved its way through a row of trees to the house itself.

Johnny Liddell pulled up to the canopied entrance, turned the car over to a uniformed attendant, noted the direction of the parking field. Then he mounted the broad stone staircase, entered through a metal grilled door.

The reception hall was filled with small groups of chattering patrons dressed formally. Overhead a pall of smoke stirred restlessly in the breeze from the opened door. At the far end of the hall, a staircase led to an upper floor, while off to the left one of the original parlors had been converted into a lounge. A bar that ran the full length of the room looked inviting, seemed as good a place as any to start, so Liddell wandered in, found elbow room, signaled for the bartender.

“Cognac,” he ordered.

The bartender nodded, ambled toward the other end of the bar. Liddell brought up a handful of change and a pack of cigarettes, dumped them on the bar. He selected a cigarette from the package, hung it from his lip.

He watched glumly while the man behind the bar made a production out of selecting a bottle with a foreign label from the back bar. Finally, bottle in hand, he slid a glass in front of Liddell, tilted the bottle over it. He filled the glass a little too full, scowled as he lifted the glass, swabbed the bar dry.

“Nice spot you got here,” Liddell told him.

The bartender stared at him, nodded briefly, selected two quarters and three dimes from the pile on the bar, made for the cash register.

Liddell turned his back to the bar, took inventory. The operators of the Villa had retained as much of the flavor of the original parlor as had been feasible. At the far end an archway had been broken through the wall into what was obviously a supper room beyond. From where he stood he could make out a number of tables crowded together night club style with couples and foursomes practically sitting in each other’s laps.

He swung back to the bar in time to surprise the bartender eyeing him with what might have been curiosity. The man’s deadpan face still lacked any identifiable expression, but there was no doubt he had been trying to place the private detective. As Liddell swung around, the bartender dropped his eyes to a glass he was polishing.

“Heard so much about this place thought I’d take it in while I was still in town.” Liddell tried to break the ice.

The bartender responded with what he apparently believed was a smile. “Yeah?” From his tone, it was obvious he didn’t give much of a damn.

Liddell emptied his glass, indicated a refill.

“Understand Mike Lane operates this place. Must be quite a character, eh? Is he around?” he asked.

The bartender selected the brandy bottle from the rack deliberately, refilled the glass. “You must like brandy, mister.” His voice was hard, flat, expressionless like his face.

Liddell shrugged. “I like cognac better.”

“That’s what the label says, mister.” He held the bottle out for Liddell’s inspection. “Cognac. Like it says on the label.”

Liddell grinned. “That’s what it says, all right. But I don’t think I’m in any danger of getting a French accent from drinking it.” He sniffed the glass. “Offhand I’d bet it never got any closer to France than Lorimer Street in Brooklyn.”

The bartender chuckled deeply in his chest, recorked the bottle, set it back in the rack. “You don’t guess so good, friend,” he said. “That stuff never got as far as Brooklyn. Strictly local stuff.” He picked up eighty cents, pursed his lips, and looked up with narrowed eyes when Liddell laid a five spot next to it. “What’s the fin for? You got enough silver here to cover.”

Liddell shrugged. “I always pay off when I lose a bet. I made a bet with myself it came from Brooklyn.”

The bartender picked up the five, pocketed it. “First time I ever booked a mind bet. Looks like a good racket.”

“I’d make another bet,” Johnny told him. “I’d bet you knew a gal used to work here by the name of Nancy Martin. Cigarette girl.”

“Stranger in town, ain’t you, mister?” the barman countered.

Liddell nodded. “Yeah, I heard the swimming was pretty good up in these parts. Thought I’d try it.”

“You do that,” the man behind the bar nodded. He stood jingling a handful of coins. “The swimmin’s real good. But fishing ain’t very healthy. Not around here it ain’t.” He grinned mirthlessly, exposing the discolored stumps of his teeth. “Lots of guys who try to fish find themselves swimming—only they don’t know about it.” He wiped the grin off his face, turned and rang up the money. He picked up a glass and polishing rag and apparently lost all interest in Liddell.

The private detective stared at his own reflection in the back bar, lifted his glass. “Well, at least they’re consistent,” he muttered to nobody in particular.

He gave no sign that he caught the signal between the bartender and one of the house floor men. After a moment, a man in a tuxedo that fitted too snugly across the hips and showed signs of ample and expert padding in the shoulders approached him.

“Do you wish a table, sir?” he asked. “The last show of the evening is about to go on.” He indicated the supper room with beefy hand. “No doubt that’s what you came out to see?” He smiled politely.

Liddell nodded. “No doubt.” He emptied his glass, replaced it on the bar, followed the man in the tuxedo.

The barman continued to polish his glasses, his eyes on Liddell’s back until the private detective had passed through the archway into the supper room. Then the white-jacketed man reached under the bar, brought up a

telephone. He jabbed at a button on the base of the phone with a stubby finger.

“Alex just took in a guy that’s been asking a lot of questions,” he told the mouthpiece. “Never seen him around here before.”

He nodded at what the mouthpiece chattered back, grimaced, and replaced the instrument on its hook.

The upper room was small, intimate, and airless. Liddell slid into the chair the house man held for him, squinted through the opaqueness of the swirling smoke toward the postage-sized dance floor where six tired looking chorines were pounding out the last few steps of a dance routine with more determination than inspiration. A tall, rawboned waiter with buck teeth hovered at his elbow.

“Something to drink, sir?” he asked.

Liddell nodded, fumbled through his pockets in search of a cigarette, found none. “Yeah. Cognac or a reasonable facsimile,” he said. “And see if you can rustle me up some cigarettes.”

The waiter nodded, disappeared in the general direction of the bar.

Suddenly the dance number was over and the chorines scampered from the floor with unsuspected animation. A dozen white-jacketed musicians, showing no remorse at the unmentionable things they’d just done to a popular number, filed down from the bandstand and disappeared through a small door in the rear.

The house lights went up while a piano was being wheeled from backstage onto the floor. At the far side of the room, Liddell saw a blonde with a cigarette tray around her neck come out of a cleverly disguised doorway set flush into the wall. He saw her look in his direction, then pick her way through the closely packed tables with a swaying motion.

She was tall, loosely put together in a way that flowed tantalizingly when she walked. Her long legs were unencumbered by a breathtakingly brief pair of shorts. Above, she stretched a white silk peasant blouse to the limits of credibility. She smiled as she drew closer, gave no sign that she minded the undisguised inventory he took of her obvious assets. She acted as though she, too, approved of what she saw.

“You the gentleman wanted to smoke?” she asked.

“I already am. And I don’t need a cigarette,” he countered with a leer.

She pouted prettily. “You wouldn’t cheat me out of a sale, would you?” She patted the thick, glistening golden coils that were caught up in a bun at the nape of her neck, extended the tray. “Help yourself.”

“Don’t tempt me.” He selected a pack of cigarettes, dropped a bill on the tray. “What do you do when you’re not working here?”

The girl deposited the bill in a small covered box. “Get ready to come to work here. Monotonous, isn’t it?”

“It needn’t be. I have a couple of ideas that would break the monotony.” Liddell tore the cellophane off the pack. “That is, if I knew where to reach you sometime to talk them over.”

The girl’s eye took in Liddell’s broad shoulders, the pugnacious jaw, the unruly hair spiked with grey. She pursed full red lips thoughtfully, then smiled. “You might try the Lowell Hotel some afternoon. Ask for Verna Cross.” She patted his hand softly, turned, undulated toward the bar room. The effect was as satisfying from the rear as it had been from the front.

The piano was on the floor and a spotlight picked it out as the house lights went down. The rawboned waiter reappeared, placed a drink in front of Liddell. The waiter turned to stare after the disappearing figure of the blonde.

“Not bad, eh?” Liddell grinned. He selected a cigarette from the pack, bent over to take the light the waiter held for him.

“If I was you, mister, I’d peddle my love life somewhere else,” he told Liddell in an undertone.

The detective took a deep drag on the cigarette, let the smoke dribble lazily down his nostrils. “Not stepping on your toes?”

The waiter shook his head. “No. But she’s got a guy. Regular. And he don’t like competition.” He looked around, lowered his voice. “She’s the boss’s private stock. Mike Lane’s.”

Liddell gave no sign of the tingling along his spine. He nodded to the waiter, added a bill to the tab for the drink, turned his eyes to the dance floor.

A pasty-faced man with aggressively curly hair and a red wet smear for a mouth had appeared from nowhere and took his place at the piano. His fingers jumped from key to key until the first few bars of a torchy tune became recognizable. The backdrop curtains parted and Lorna Matthews stepped into the spotlight.

The rumble of low conversation died down to a whisper, glasses stopped jingling as she leaned against the piano. The low cut gown she was wearing amply verified Liddell's earlier guess that all of her weight was carefully apportioned and that none of it had been misplaced or wasted.

Her voice was husky, the kind that played on the spinal column like a xylophone. As she sang, she left the piano, wandered from table to table. A multicolored spotlight began to flit restlessly through the audience, stopping here to drench the colorless blob of a face a bright red, darting there to pick out another in orange. Near the end of the song, it stopped to rest on Liddell, bleaching his features a lemon yellow.

The song was ended and the house lights came up. Two men appeared from behind the bandstand, hustled the piano off the floor while the white-jacketed bandsmen filed through their little door and listlessly took their places on the bandstand.

Liddell dumped another cigarette from the pack, lit it with the one he'd been smoking. The redhead had seen him, he knew. There had been an involuntary halt in her voice when the yellow spot had stopped on him. He leaned back, added twin streams of feathery blue smoke to the man-made fog that swirled lazily against the lights. The night's activities in the supper room had apparently drawn to a close, and parties were already deserting their tables, heading for a sliding door in the rear.

He noted a dozen or two house men—big, burly, uncomfortable in their tuxedos—mixing with the guests. No one seemed to be paying him any particular attention.

For a moment he considered the advisability of following the crowd to the gaming room. He had no clearly worked out plan in his mind, wasn't even quite sure why he had come. Actually it was nothing more than a lay-of-the-land operation and so far it was a complete bust.

"You are Mr. Johnny Liddell?" a sirupy voice with just a trace of an accent asked near his ear.

He looked around into the pasty face of the piano thumper. "That's right."

"I am Nino. Miss Matthews' accompanist. I have a message for you." He looked around as though he expected someone to be looking over his shoulder, then lowered his face closer to Liddell. His breath smelled. "Miss Lorna, she would like to see you." He indicated the little door behind the bandstand. "In her dressing room."

“Fine.” Liddell crushed out his cigarette, rose and followed the mincing figure of the pianist through the tables to the rear. Stepping through the door to backstage was like stepping into a new atmosphere. The tinsel and glamor of Villa Rouge frontside wasn’t duplicated backstage. There was nothing but a long bare, semi-dark corridor with a cluster of closed doors, a strong smell compounded of perfume and perspiration.

Pastyface stopped at a door near the end of the corridor, knocked. A voice invited them in.

Lorna sat on a straight-backed chair in front of a littered make-up table removing her stage face. She’d taken off the evening gown and sat in a garishly colored dressing robe that hung carelessly open, revealing much of the reason for the Villa Rouge’s popularity with the out-of-town trade. Her thick red hair was pushed back from her face, providing a sharp contrast to the whiteness of her skin.

“Well, hello. Imagine my surprise to see you out front. And here I was picturing you back at my place biting your fingernails impatiently waiting for me to get home.” She made an attempt to pull the robe together, made no appreciable progress, gave it up as a bad job. “You’ve met Nino?”

Liddell nodded. “We’re practically buddies.” He pulled an unpainted wooden chair to the side of the table, sat down. “I got so impatient waiting I thought maybe I could pick you up and take you home.”

“Good deal. I won’t be long getting ready. As long as you’re here, you might as well see something of our establishment. Maybe even win the price of a fresh bottle.” She patted his knee, turned to Pastyface. “Nino, be a honey and take Liddell out and pass him through into the casino, will you?”

The pianist nodded. “Then there will be no rehearsal tonight, Miss Lorna?” He sounded almost sad at the prospect.

“Not tonight, Nino. I’ll stay on after the dinner show tomorrow and we’ll run through that number. I think I know it already.”

Pastyface shrugged, opened the door. “Will you come this way, Mr. Liddell?”

Johnny pulled himself out of his chair, leaned over, kissed the redhead lightly on the neck. “Look for me at the roulette table, baby. I got a feeling tonight’s going to be my night.”

“Not at roulette, Johnny. The wheel’s rigged. So’s the black jack set-up. Stick to craps. That’s the closest thing to leveling in the house.”

“This way, Mr. Liddell?” the sirupy voice persisted.

“Coming, Paderewski.” Liddell leaned down, whispered in the girl’s ear. “I wouldn’t kid you for the world, baby. I’ve already got those fingernails bitten down to the knuckle.”

Nino’s okay served to pass Liddell through the sliding door into the elaborate gambling set-up that represented the Villa Rouge’s real reason for being. The house was getting a big play as he strolled into the room. The roulette table was ringed three deep, the bird cages and slot machines lining the wall were getting only a moderate play, while a hot crap game was in progress near the far wall.

Liddell walked over to the cashier’s cage, dropped a fifty. He picked up three blue chips and four reds in return. By the time Lorna joined him at the table, he’d run it up to twelve blues and six reds.

The redhead had changed to street clothes and showed no inclination to hurry. Liddell gave her six blues and three reds, watched her run it into a stack of blues, then lose the whole works in a bad run.

“Looks like my luck ran out, Sherlock,” she shrugged as they pushed their way through the crowd. “Sorry about the money.”

“Think nothing of it. It’s expenses.” Liddell pulled out two cigarettes, handed her one, stuck one in his own mouth. “I’ve got a client.”

The redhead let him light her cigarette, blew out a mouthful of smoke. “A client? Here in Waterville?”

Liddell nodded. “The newspaper here in town has hired me as an investigator and special correspondent to break the Martin case.” He took the girl by the arm, piloted her over to the roulette table. “You see, up to now I’ve had no standing in this burg. With Nancy dead, I had no client, and if I kept sticking my nose into police business, the chief could jug me for obstructing justice if I got under his feet. This way, I’ve got a right to protect the interests of my client and I’ve got a legitimate excuse to keep digging into the case.”

“I get it,” the redhead nodded. She removed a fleck of tobacco from the tip of her tongue with a shellacked nail, studied it for a moment. “But where do you start? How do you go about finding out who killed her if you don’t know why she was killed?” She turned her eyes on him. “Or do you?”

“Not yet. But I will.” He stopped on the outer fringe of the crowd surrounding the roulette table, watched the wheel spin.

“Aren’t we going home?” the redhead asked.

Liddell nodded. “In a minute. There’s a guy I know doing all right for himself at the wheel here. I wanted to give him moral support.”

The redhead got up on her toes, peered over the shoulders of the man in front of her. “Which one?”

Liddell indicated a thin, dapper man with a hairline scar running the length of his cheek. He had a triple pile of blues stacked in front of him. As the wheel scraped to a stop, the croupier pushed another pile of blues in front of the man.

“Looks lucky, eh? His name’s Duke Butler. Had a couple of occasions to run into him on the Coast. He’s a big time hood.”

The redhead grinned. “You know nice people, don’t you?”

“It’s all in the line of duty, baby,” the private detective shrugged. “After all, you don’t exactly play to Sunday School teachers either. While you were chirping, I noticed a couple of other out-of-town mugs like Tommy Burns of St. Louis, and—” He looked past the girl to the blackjack table. “Say, that’s funny. Looks like the visiting team is really scoring tonight.”

The redhead turned, followed the direction of his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“See the guy with the pile of blues in front of him at the blackjack table? That’s Tommy Burns. Looks like he’s cleaning up, too. I thought you said those games were rigged?”

“They have to let somebody win to keep the suckers coming,” the redhead shrugged.

Liddell nodded, took a last drag on his cigarette, flipped it toward a sand-filled urn. “I spotted both of them during your number. They both got a red light. Looks like maybe I got the wrong colored light, eh?”

The redhead stared at him, tried to read something in his eyes. “You’re kidding, aren’t you?”

Liddell patted her arm, grinned. “Sure I’m kidding. I met this Mike Lane character tonight. He don’t strike me like a philanthropist.” He took her arm, led her toward the door. “What say we amble? I don’t think my new client is going to approve of me shelling out more than fifty clams in one session—even with such a lovely skill.”

A hot flush colored the girl's face. She stopped, wrenched her arm free. "Is that a crack, Liddell? You think I shilled you into dropping that money? Why, you tinhorn sport, I'll—"

Liddell laughed. "The red hair's real, eh baby? Relax. I'm only kidding."

Lorna dropped her cigarette, stamped it out with her foot. "With me that's not funny, McGee. It's not part of my job to ride herd on suckers. I just soften them up with the hearts and flowers and from there on they're on their own."

"Sure, sure. Let's go back to your place and talk it over." Liddell put his lips close to the girl's ear. "I held out enough for that fresh bottle, too."

"You needn't bother. I've got a bottle of my own. Next thing you'll be telling me is that I'm hustling liquor for the joint, too."

The redhead led the way to the door, sent a waiter for her wrap. While they were waiting, Liddell felt a tug on his arm. He turned to face Joey, the wavy-haired gunman Mike Lane had sent for him earlier in the evening.

"The boss wants to see you, Liddell."

Liddell grinned at him. "Sociable guy, ain't he? Imagine throwing two parties in the same evening—and both for me." He brushed an imaginary speck of dust from the gunman's lapel. "Tell your boss for me that from now on when he wants to see me to come himself, sweetheart."

Wavy Hair pushed Liddell's hand aside, touched the points of the handkerchief in his breast pocket. He smiled bleakly. "Mr. Lane doesn't usually attend wakes. But in your case he might make an exception."

"Tell him something else for me, will you? Tell him I've got that client that was worrying him so much. Tell him I'm working for the *Observer* and that I'm going to find out who killed Nancy Martin and why if I have to bust the town wide open. Tell him that."

"How nice for you." The gunman flattened the side of his hair with the flat of his palm. "I'll tell Mr. Lane. Don't you go too far, Liddell. I'm looking forward to looking you up one of these days."

"Save yourself the trouble, sweetheart. I prefer redheads." He turned his back on the gunman, took Lorna's wrap from the waiter, hung it over his arm.

"What's that all about?" Lorna wanted to know. Her face seemed a shade whiter under the lights, her mouth a deep red smear.

“Pantywaist wants to play with me.”

“Take it easy, Liddell. Joey’s nobody to play games with. He’s a killer.”

“Yeah. That’s what he keeps telling me. He’s got me scared half to death.”

The redhead caught his arm. “Maybe you ought to drop it, Johnny. It’s not worth it if you’re going to get yourself hurt. You can’t do Nancy any good now.”

“That’s what they want me to do, Red, but I’m not buying it. Don’t worry about me, baby. There’s a lot of difference between drowning a helpless girl and gunning out a private eye with an agency and a newspaper in back of him. I’ve got a hunch that whoever’s behind this isn’t looking to stir up too much publicity.”

Chapter Seven

THE girl had very little to say on the drive back to town. She sat huddled in her corner of the front seat, staring at the thin ribbon of road that stretched ahead. Finally, as Liddell guided the car off the highway into town, she stirred.

“I still don’t think it’s worth it, Johnny,” she said. “Nancy’s dead. They can’t hurt her any more. But maybe if you keep on stirring things up there’ll be a couple more will die.”

“Maybe. That’s the chance I’ve got to take, Red.” He studied the girl’s profile. “That what’s been bothering you all the way home?”

Lorna shrugged vaguely. “That and a lot of other things, I guess. That little conversation you had with Mike Lane’s torpedo, Joey, wasn’t exactly soothing to my nerves either.” She shuddered. “You shouldn’t needle a guy like that, Johnny. They’re bad. I’d rather have a man-eating tiger on my tail than a swish with a grudge. They don’t forgive easily.”

Liddell swung the car to the curb in front of the girl’s apartment.

“My bowing out of this thing now wouldn’t do any good. Nancy was knocked off because somebody thought she knew something, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Okay. You were her roommate. What would be more natural than for her to spill it to you? So, now they’re wondering if you know what she knew. And they’re in no spot to take chances.”

The whites of the girl’s eyes grew larger in the dim light. “She didn’t. Honest, she never told me a thing. I didn’t even know she was snooping around until the day she quit at Mike’s place. Then I heard her putting through the call to you. I don’t know anything about it.” She crept closer to Liddell. “You don’t really think—”

Liddell put his arm around the girl, drew her closer. “Look, baby. Put it this way. You know you don’t know anything. Now I know it. But the killer doesn’t know it and he’s the one that counts. He’s the guy that’s got to be sure so he won’t be sorry.” He lifted her chin, kissed her on the mouth. “We

can't let anything happen to you, Red. So our job is to lay the killer by the heels before anything does." He peered through the windshield at the lightening sky. "Looks like it's getting awful late—or awful early."

Lorna Matthews shook herself, patted her hair. "How about coming up for some ham and eggs. I'm a pretty good cook."

"All that and heaven too?" Liddell consulted his watch. "I'd like to, baby, but maybe I'd better take a rain check. It's almost five and I've got a couple of early appointments."

The redhead pouted. "I thought we had so much to talk about." She pulled away from his arm. "You're crazy if you think I'm going to beg."

"Don't be a dope, Red. We're playing for keeps with this killer. I've got to get him before he gets you or me or anybody else. This is no time to be playing house."

The redhead nodded. "I know. I'm scared, Liddell." She slid closer to him, her lips a few inches from him. "That's why I want you to stay. How do I know he's not up there right now waiting until you've gone? How do I know?"

"There's a cop stationed outside your door, isn't there? I asked Happy Lewis to keep him on there for another day or so." He leaned over to kiss her, she turned her face. "Besides, the killer knows that if you knew anything you'd have told me by now. I'm the first one he's got to get. Maybe after me comes you. But for now I think you're safe."

The girl moved back to her corner of the seat. "Okay, Liddell. Whatever you say." She pulled out a compact, surveyed the damage, set about repairing it with an expert hand. "But don't count too much on that cop outside my door. Connors put him there and when Connors wants him away from there, he'll call him off." She finished fixing her make-up, snapped the compact, put it in her bag. "Connors takes his orders from Mike Lane. So you see how much good that cop'll do me if either Mike or Connors is mixed up in this. And if it's big, they're in it."

She opened the door, stepped out. "See you in the morgue."

"Maybe you're right, Red," Liddell sighed. "I'll come up with you and see that everything's all right."

The door slammed in his face. "I wouldn't dream of putting you to all that trouble, Sherlock. You just said everything would be all right. What more protection could a girl ask?"

Her heels beat a sharp tattoo on the pavement as she walked across the sidewalk and disappeared into the dark doorway.

JOHNNY LIDDELL found an all night drug store, consulted the Waterville telephone directory. After three wrong numbers, he finally reached the right Lewis. He was interested to learn that the homicide detective's real name was Mortimer.

Happy Lewis sounded sleepy and irritable.

"What the hell time is it anyway?" he wanted to know after Liddell had identified himself.

Liddell grinned. "Five o'clock. What a racket you harness cops have, sleeping all hours of the day and night while we poor privates work our fingers to the bone."

"I forgot these were your office hours," the receiver replied sarcastically. "What's the occasion of the call, to invite me to a midnight lunch?"

"I wanted to check a couple of things with you, Happy. Way I understand, Mike Lane's been operating the Villa since 1949. How long's this redhead been working there?"

The receiver groaned. "You had to get me up in the middle of the night for that? Tomorrow wouldn't do?"

"I may not see you tomorrow and I've got an early date. When did the redhead go to work for Lane?"

"Why didn't you ask her? Far's I know she's been there since he opened the place. She's supposed to have a pretty good following."

Liddell made a notation on the back of an envelope. He consulted the figures he'd copied from the *Observer* file room slips. "Then Nancy Hayes blows in four or five years ago and is interested in something that appeared in the local papers in March or April 1950." He scratched his head with the receiver. "Have you ever seen the creep that accompanies Lorna on the piano? When'd he show up?"

"Came with the redhead, far's I know." Liddell could hear the homicide man yawning over the wire. "If you want to check up on Lane's help you ought to meet this nance he has as a stooge. Guy named Joey. I understand he's quite a thing."

"You understand? Don't you know?"

“I don’t know from nothing about Lane’s operation, Liddell. That joint of his is off bounds for all members of the department except the chief’s confidential squad. The rest of us have orders to keep our noses out.”

“Don’t you ever get curious?”

“Not curious enough to toss over my job. I got a pension coming up one of these years. Besides, what would it get me? The chief would cover up anything I picked up, can me, and that would be that.”

Liddell nodded. “Okay, Happy. That’s something to know. In other words, Mike Lane has a private police force all his own and only picked members can go out to his place. Right?”

The receiver clicked affirmation. “Right.”

“By the way, I’ve got a standing in the case now. The *Observer* hired me tonight to represent them in this case. They’re going all out to break it.”

“They’ll stand behind you on it?”

“All the way. Rivers, the managing editor, is out for Connors’ scalp, apparently, and this looks like a good chance to get it. Connors’ neck is all the way out on this one.”

The homicide man’s voice showed some animation. “Good. Rivers is a clean operator and with him in back of you, maybe we can really do something about cleaning out this town.”

“We?”

“Yeah, we. Count me in. I know my way around this town. I may be able to steer you on it.”

Liddell grinned. “How about that pension?”

“The hell with the pension. That’s only for old men. Like this it looks as though I won’t be growing much older anyway. Give me a ring as soon as you get cleared away tomorrow and we’ll compare notes.”

THE phone jangled so hard it almost danced off the stand. Johnny Liddell groaned, stuck his head deeper under the pillow, tried to pull the covers over his head. Ignoring the phone did no good, it stood on the edge of the stand and continued to scream at him. Finally, he snaked one arm from under the covers, stuck the receiver against his ear.

“Yeah?” he growled.

A voice that was so cheerful that it made his stomach do back flips chirped through the receiver, “Hello, Liddell? This is Lee Woods from the *Observer*. Got orders from the old man to report to you this morning.”

Liddell emerged from under the covers, peered at the battered alarm clock on the table next to the bed. “What time is it?”

“Almost twelve.”

“Be specific, chum. Day or night?” He yawned, tore his fingers through his hair, swung his feet out of bed. “Well, long’s I’m up I may as well stay up. What’d you find?”

“Nothing,” the receiver told him cheerfully.

“Nice work. Like that we’re bound to get nowhere fast. How come?”

“The old man, Al Rivers that is, left me instructions to check some back copies. He forgot to mention what I was supposed to be checking for.”

Liddell nodded, fumbled on the night table for a cigarette. “That’s right. We don’t know what we’re looking for.”

“Oh, fine. All I’ve got to do is run through sixty issues averaging about forty-eight pages, seven columns to a page, and look for something I don’t know.”

“It’s a tough deal,” Liddell admitted. He reached over, got his pants, started shoving his legs into them. “Any place around here where I can get a decent cup of coffee? Maybe if we talk it over it won’t sound so bad.”

“There’s a joint just down the street from your hotel ain’t too bad. It’s called the Knife and Fork. Serves pretty fair ham and eggs and the coffee tastes like coffee.”

“Sounds okay. Want to meet me there in about twenty minutes?”

“Right.”

“Get a back booth where we can talk. I’ll bring you up to date on this thing and maybe we can work it out without too many grey hairs.”

Lee Woods was on his second cup of coffee when Johnny Liddell finally reached the Knife and Fork. He waved the detective to an isolated rear booth, moved a battered hat off the seat so he could sit down.

“Sorry to drag you out of bed so early, Liddell,” he drawled. “Didn’t know they had you working the lobster shift.”

“Glad you did,” Liddell yawned. “I’ve got a lot of things to do today that won’t get done in bed.” He glanced at the coffee-stained menu, tossed it aside, signaled for a waitress. “I didn’t get a chance to pick up a paper this morning. How’d the sheet treat the Martin killing?”

“Gave it the works,” the reporter grinned. From a jacket pocket he pulled a copy of the *Observer* that screamed in scare heads: “OBSERVER Investigator Proves Girl’s Suicide Really Murder.” The account subtly accused the police department of trying to cover up the murder and broadly implied corruption at all municipal levels involved.

“This is really going to make me popular with that police chief of yours,” Liddell grinned. He folded the paper up, stuck it in his pocket. “Anything new?”

The reporter shrugged. “The usual screams from the mayor, the police chief, and all the other stooges. You should have heard Connors last night when I told him the *Observer* was retaining you. I thought he was going to burst a blood vessel, but no such luck. He was still perking when I left.”

A waitress slopped a glass of water in front of Liddell, took his order without comment.

“You really think Connors is mixed up in this one?” the reporter asked curiously.

Liddell buttered a piece of roll, chewed on it. “He’s in it some place. He was too anxious to hush it up to be just an innocent bystander.”

“In that case, if we’re going to break it, we’d better move fast or they’ll have every bit of evidence destroyed before we can get at it. Connors is no amateur, you know.”

“I know. But I think he’s stymied in this one. I think the basic evidence can’t be destroyed. Nancy Hayes came here four or five years ago looking for something. She found it, so it must still be around. I figure if she can find it, we can.”

Lee Woods wasn’t too sure. “Don’t forget that she knew what she was looking for. We don’t.”

“We’ve got a good idea. It was something that happened in March or April, 1950. My guess is that either Connors or Mike Lane, or probably both of them, were mixed up in it. Most likely it was something permanent, like murder. Anyway, it was something important enough to rate some mention in one of the issues of the *Observer*.”

The waitress dumped a plate of ham and eggs and a cup of black coffee in front of Liddell. He took a sip of the coffee, burned his tongue, swore under his breath.

“Suppose I find this item. What’s it mean?” Woods asked.

“Maybe a lot, maybe nothing. If it’s what I think it is, we’ll know why Nancy Hayes was in this burg posing as a cigarette peddler. Once we know that, we’re on our way to the races.”

Woods nodded, but his heart wasn’t in it. “Okay. The old man says I’m to work with you and to file stories as soon as something worth while breaks. You call ’em, I’ll pitch ’em.” He drained his cup, set it back on the table, “Anything else?”

Liddell shook his head. “Not that I can think of, kid. I admit I’m doing a lot of fumbling on this one. Don’t let it worry you. Soon’s I know where I’m headed we’ll make better time.”

The reporter nodded, grinned. “Don’t mind me if I seem confused. That’s my normal condition.” He reached for the battered fedora, perched it on the back of his head. “Guess I better mosey on over to the file room and get at this. You can reach me there if you want me.”

“What’s the number over there?” Liddell asked. He wrote it down on the back of an old envelope “If you strike something that looks promising, call my hotel and leave word. Otherwise, I’ll check you at this number some time later this afternoon. Okay?”

“Okay,” Woods agreed. He ambled to the door, brushed off the waitress who hustled toward him with a check. “Give it to my friend back there,” he told her, “he’s keeping me.”

Chapter Eight

THE ham and eggs and coffee succeeded in improving Johnny Liddell's outlook on life. After the waitress had cleared the table, he leaned back, pulled the copy of the *Observer* out of his pocket, read the account of the case carefully. Alan Rivers had done an admirable job of dragging the case out into the open. Any possibility of hushing up the Nancy Martin killing was now definitely a thing of the past.

Liddell fumbled through his pockets, found the notation he had scribbled the night before at the Villa Rouge. The blonde cigarette girl had suggested he call her some afternoon. He looked at the clock over the entrance, noted it was almost 1:30.

"Well, this is some afternoon," he muttered to nobody in particular, pulled himself out of his chair, headed for the telephone booth.

The girl on the switchboard at the Hotel Lowell was a bit doubtful about ringing Miss Cross.

"She's not usually up until two, sir," she said. "She works nights you know, and doesn't get in until pretty late. She gets awful mad if we wake her for anything."

"I know, I know," Liddell insisted, "but I'm leaving town in a few minutes and she'd never forgive either of us if I got out of town without telling her."

There was a slight pause, then the switchboard girl gave in. "Well, all right," she said doubtfully. "I hope you're right."

The phone buzzed spitefully, then there came the click of a receiver being lifted from its hook. There was a slight pause, then, "H-hello. Who's 'is?"

"Hello, Blondie. This is Johnny Liddell."

"What's the idea of waking a girl up at this hour?" Her voice made it evident that she didn't know Johnny Liddell and didn't feel as though she'd been missing anything. "Johnny who?"

Liddell assumed a hurt air. “Liddell. Remember last night at the Villa you said I should call you up some afternoon? Kind of to break the monotony?”

“Last night?” the voice wondered. Then a new note of interest crept in. “Oh, sure. I remember you. The big guy that had some ideas. Say, you sure take a girl up fast.”

“I may not be in town long and I wouldn’t want to miss anything. I thought maybe I could pick up a bottle and drop up—just for a few minutes.”

“Well, I don’t know,” the blonde countered. “I’m not dressed, and I’m not in the habit of entertaining strange men in my apartment.”

Liddell grinned into the mouthpiece. “Nothing strange about me, baby. I’m the normalest guy you ever met. Say a half hour?”

“You sure rush a girl. Well, okay. Give me half an hour to get beautiful. Better check me from the lobby anyhow. Just in case. Okay?”

“I’ll be there.” He flipped the receiver back on its hook, went back to his table whistling.

THE HOTEL LOWELL might most charitably be described as a “theatrical hotel.” It was an old stone building on a side street off the square. Its façade was dirty and neglected looking. Inside, the lobby was dingy, lightless, and dusty. A couple of discouraged looking rubber plants were placed around it in an attempt at decoration, half a dozen chairs were scattered around in an abortive attempt to make it passably cozy.

A gaunt grey-haired man with a pair of pince-nez on a sleazy ribbon presided over the registration desk. He didn’t stop picking his teeth as Liddell approached.

“Miss Cross’s room. Verna Cross,” Liddell told him.

The old man stopped picking his teeth, sucked at them noisily as he looked the detective over. “She expecting you, mister?” he asked incuriously.

“Been praying for me every night,” Liddell assured him solemnly. “Just tell her it’s Liddell.”

“Ring Miss Cross’s room, Es,” the clerk called to a faded middle-aged woman sitting at the end of the reception desk at an old-fashioned telephone

switchboard.

The woman nodded, jabbed the key.

“You said you were an old friend of hers,” she accused Liddell. “She didn’t even know you at first.”

“People who eavesdrop hear unpleasant things, Es,” Liddell told her.

The woman sniffed, muttered a few words into the mouthpiece, nodded. “She says you’re to go right up. Room 614.”

The clerk had already lost interest in Liddell and the switchboard operator. He was staring at the door in rapt concentration on an operation he was performing on his right molar with a toothpick.

The blonde opened the door in response to Liddell’s knock. She was wearing a clinging hostess gown that concealed little or nothing more than had been concealed by her costume the night before. Her thick, glossy blonde hair was caught just above the ears with a bright blue ribbon, then allowed to flow freely down over her shoulders.

“Well, hello.” The soft-looking lips parted welcomingly. “Come in.”

She took his hat, dropped it on a small end table, led the way to a couch. She dropped down, patted the pillow beside her invitingly. A bowl of ice and a pitcher of water stood on a small table within handy distance of the couch.

“Cozy little place you have here,” Liddell told her.

“Liar,” she smiled amiably. “It’s a dump and you know it.” She looked around at the faded wallpaper, the cracked plaster. “Even Waterville hasn’t much worse than this.”

Liddell grinned. “Okay, so now we’re past the formalities.” He handed her the bottle he had in his pocket. “Hope you like cognac.”

“Grape’s my favorite fruit,” she assured him. She indicated the glasses and the ice. “Help yourself.”

He dropped three ice cubes into each glass, uncorked the bottle, “Say when.” He’d poured over three fingers into the glass before she told him “When.”

“Water?” he asked.

She shook her head, took the straight brandy and ice. When he’d finished fixing his drink, she held her glass up in a toast.

“Here’s to us, the only two nice people I can think of at the moment.” She took a deep swallow of the cognac without turning a hair. “Well, Liddell,” she said finally, “I’d love to think it was my fatal fascination that brought you panting around here the first thing today, but I have a sneaking suspicion you’ve got something besides pleasure on your mind.”

Liddell tasted his cognac, studied her over the rim of the glass. He decided to play it straight. “A little of each, business and pleasure.”

The girl leaned back into the couch, her hostess gown splitting at the knee to expose an expanse of thigh. “That’s what I thought.” She reached down, put her glass on the floor at her foot. “You level with me, I’ll level with you. I heard a couple of things about you last night that interested me. For instance, I know that you’re a private eye and you’re nosey.”

Liddell nodded, finished his drink. He doused down the ice cubes with more cognac, refilled the girl’s glass. “That’s me. Who was doing all this talking?”

The girl pursed her lips, considered the question. “I guess there’s no harm telling you. It won’t come as any great surprise. It was Mike Lane and Connors, the police chief. They don’t like you.”

“That won’t keep me awake nights, baby.”

“From the way I understand the thing it might help you sleep sounder—and permanently. They can get awful rough.”

Liddell found his cigarettes, dumped a couple from the pack, tossed one to the girl. “Know Mike Lane long, Blondie?”

The girl’s eyes became wary. She shrugged. “Not very. Maybe a year or so.” She leaned over, accepted a light from his match. “Why?”

“Just curious. I can’t feature a dream like you and a nightmare like him teaming up.”

“You must have figured it’s not his profile. You’re a detective.”

He nodded. “I figured that.”

“Okay. So the answer’s obvious. The only reason I can stand the fat slob near me is because it pays me to.” She took a deep drag on her cigarette, exhaled through her nostrils. “You wouldn’t guess it to look at me now that I’m Miss Chenango County of 1952, would you, Liddell?” Some of the color had drained from her face, making the deep red of her lips stand out against the pallor of her cheeks. “Back home they think I’m some pumpkins.

They think I'm doing swell. That's why I play house with Mike Lane. Because that way I get some money to send home to the folks. I'd rather die than let them know what a failure I am."

Liddell nodded sympathetically. "I know how it goes, Blondie." He smoked for a moment. "So Chief Connors and Lane gave me a going over after I left, eh?"

"Not after you left. While you were there. I was in Mike's office when the barman called up to tip Mike off someone was snooping around asking questions. He had a houseman seat you at Table 18 where Mike could look you over. He recognized you, had the yellow spot thrown on you so's the house men could get a look at you and keep an eye on you."

"So that's the gimmick. Not a bad idea. Then you knew who I was when you gave me your name and address?"

The girl nodded. She took a drink from her glass, drained it. Most of her color had returned. "I figured if you were really curious maybe you and I could do some business."

"That we can, Blondie. If you know the answers to some of the questions that are bothering me."

"Try me," the blonde challenged. "I always did want to get on a quiz show." She crushed out her cigarette, leaned over and snagged the bottle. She poured a generous slug in each glass. "Of course, the \$64 question is just a figure of speech?"

Liddell dragged a worn leather wallet from his inside pocket, counted out ten crisp one hundred dollar bills. He laid them on the table. "Let's do it this way. Every time you tell me something I want to know, you get one of them. Right?"

The girl's eyes sparkled. "Right."

Liddell leaned back, studied a speck on the ceiling. "You knew Nancy Martin, the gal who was supposed to have committed suicide?"

The blonde nodded.

"Her real name was Nancy Hayes," Liddell told her. "She was here in Waterville looking for something or someone. Do you know what she was after? Did you ever hear Lane or Connors mention her?"

The blonde considered the question carefully, shook her head regretfully. "No. She was Mike's girl but that was before my time. Even after she quit

she hung around the place. The redhead who sings was her roommate.” She looked at him hopefully. “Is that any good to you?”

Liddell indicated the pile of bills. “Help yourself.”

Blonde took a hundred dollar bill, kissed it, slipped it down the neck of her gown. “Next?”

“What’s the play with this Connors character? Why keep a guy like that on just to cover a gambling set-up? What’s he got on Lane?”

The girl shook her head. “Pass that one. All I know is that he and Lane check almost everything with each other. I wouldn’t be surprised if Connors was a partner in the Villa.”

“There may be something in that,” Liddell mused. He indicated the money. “Take one for a good try.” He sat smoking for a moment, his eyes fixed on the spot on the ceiling. “Know anything about Lane’s records? Where’s he keeps them, at his house or the joint?”

“At the joint,” the girl answered unhesitatingly. “He’s got a place on the second floor fixed up as an office, big safe and all. He keeps everything there.”

Without waiting to be invited, she lifted another bill from the pile. “Lincoln may have freed the slaves, Liddell, but you’re doing the job for me. Mike gives me money, sure. Just enough so I can send it home and keep the folks from suspecting. But never enough to get away from him.” She reached over, picked up her glass, drank as though trying to wash away an unpleasant thought. “Okay, doctor. You’ve got a girl on the couch. What’s the next question for a hundred dollars?”

“What brings all the out-of-town hoods to Mike’s joint?” Liddell asked. He swished the cognac over the ice cubes in his glass, took a sip. “I made a dozen of them in the place last night.”

“That’s another one I don’t know,” the girl admitted. “They don’t do much talking in front of me. All I know is the odds and ends I pick up when they don’t think I’m listening or when they don’t notice I’m around.” She picked up Liddell’s cigarette from where it lay smouldering in the ash tray, took a deep drag. “Here’s something for free. Watch Joey, Mike’s torpedo. He may be a nance but he’s quick on the trigger and vicious. I know he don’t like you.”

“Why? Ain’t I pretty enough?”

The smoke dribbled lazily from between the blonde's half-parted lips. "I don't know what he's got against you. All I know is that he's bad business. I think even Mike Lane is afraid of him. He's so quiet spoken and so—oh, I don't know. He just makes me think of snakes, and snakes give me the screaming horrors."

"How long's he been around?"

"He was here when I came to Waterville. I think he's been with Mike ever since he opened the joint. I know Edwin, the punchy-looking pug, has been. He used to work for Mike back in the days they ran hooch."

"This Mike Lane must be a good boss," Liddell mused. "His help stays with him forever, looks like. Lorna, that anæmic piano player, Pantywaist, the pug—all of them. Even Chief Connors. What's he got?"

The girl shrugged. "Maybe they're afraid to leave him. I don't know." She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Let's talk about something pleasant. The rest of that money, for instance."

Liddell folded up the remaining six bills, waved them under the girl's nose. "Tell you what we'll do. Let's make the whole roll the jackpot question. You tell me how I can get into that office of Mike's and you take it home."

Blondie considered. She worried her full lower lip with a set of flawless white teeth. "I don't think you can." She shook her head. "First place, he practically lives there when the joint's open. And after it closes he's got half a dozen guards around the place. They shoot, too." She shook a cigarette from his pack, stuck it between his lips. "One night we had to go back to the joint. Mike had forgotten something. Even though he gave the signal, there were about six guards jumped us. All armed to the teeth. I made a joke about it and Mike told me they'd shoot anybody even set foot on the grounds. They did it once, too. Turned out the poor guy was just a tramp looking for a place to flop." She looked up at him, shook her head prettily. "That's not the right answer, is it?"

"Not quite. Maybe the question was too tough. How about this? Let me worry about getting into the joint. Can you get me the combination to the safe?" He pulled out the wallet again, added four more hundred dollar bills. "We'll make it an even grand just to be neat."

The blonde stared at the bills hungrily. "A thousand dollars, all in one piece." She wet her lips with the tip of a pink tongue. "Sure, I'll do it. I'll get it for you tonight."

“Let’s drink to that.” Johnny Liddell refilled the glasses, handed one to the girl. He reached over, took a cigarette from her lips, covered them with his. “That’s for luck.”

They clicked their glasses, took a deep swallow. The blonde lowered her glass, looked speculatively at him over the rim. She fixed the pillow behind her head, leaned back.

“That about takes care of the business part, doesn’t it, Johnny?” she asked.

Liddell caught the bottle by its neck, moved to the edge of the couch so she could put her feet up. He tilted the bottle over each glass, freshened it with ice. “Just about.”

She pouted. “You said you came up part for business and part for pleasure, didn’t you?”

Liddell leaned over, kissed her hard. “It’ll be a pleasure, baby.”

Chapter Nine

IT was almost five o'clock when Johnny Liddell finally got around to dialing the number Lee Woods had given him. After a brief wait, the drawling voice of the lean reporter came through the receiver.

"Woods talking."

"This is Liddell. How you coming?"

"Not too hot, Johnny." The voice on the other end sounded tired. "Still at it."

"Tough going, eh? Need some help?"

"It mightn't be a bad idea. I've got most of the likely stuff marked off but it doesn't amount to much." He yawned. "It's pretty dead stuff but maybe it'll strike a spark with you."

Liddell nodded. "Keep at it. I'll be over as soon as I check with the hotel." He tossed the receiver back on its hook, fished a coin out of his pocket, dialed his hotel.

"Weston House. Good evening," the receiver told him.

"This is Liddell. Any messages for me?"

"One moment please."

There was a click, then a male voice.

"This is the desk clerk, Mr. Liddell. There's a message here for you to call Sergeant Lewis at his home at seven, one from Miss Lorna Matthews asking you to see her tonight at the Villa Rouge." His voice sounded envious.

"Okay, thanks." Liddell hung up the phone, wiped the perspiration off his upper lip with the side of his hand. His watch said a few minutes after five and it seemed as though there were a hundred things that needed doing before many hours had passed. With powerful forces at work covering all trails, he knew time was going to be the deciding factor in whether the case would be broken or not.

He sighed, left the telephone booth, bought some cigarettes. From force of habit, he passed up the hack stand outside the building, walked through an arcade, made sure there was no tail on him, hailed a cruising cab and gave the driver the address of the *Observer*.

The file room of the *Observer* looked more like the reference room of a library than the reference rooms of most libraries do. Long tiers of bound volumes, jealously guarded by a white-haired custodian, lined the walls. In the center of the room were three long library tables. At one, his head half buried in the open pages of a bound volume was Lee Woods.

Liddell slipped into the chair beside him, tapped the reporter's arm. His eyes were red rimmed.

"Damnedest assignment I ever drew," Woods growled. "Looking through a thousand stories to find one I wouldn't know if I did find it." He slammed the big volume shut so hard columns of dust rose from it. "I think I finally stumbled on something, though." He consulted a few scribbled notes, pulled one bound volume from the pile. "It was just a small item. We only gave it a few lines, but it sounds like it might be the kind of thing you're looking for."

He opened the book, started leafing through the pages. He finally found the copy he was looking for, pointed out a small news box at the top of page three.

Liddell leaned over his shoulder, read the item:

PROWLER KILLED AT VILLA ROUGE

An unidentified prowler was killed early this morning by special guards at the Villa Rouge, well-known supper club on Route 7 here when he attempted to break into the back entrance. The man, described as armed, was bearded and from the condition of his clothes was believed to be a vagrant. The body has been removed to the City Morgue pending identification. Police Chief Connors has indicated that his department is satisfied that the case is one of justifiable homicide and that no action is contemplated against the guards.

Liddell read the item through twice, grunted. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, started to take one when the reporter shook his head. "No smoking in here, Johnny."

Without protest, Liddell replaced the cigarettes. He ran his fingers over the faint stubble on his chin. “You know, it’s just possible that this could be it. Villa Rouge means Mike Lane and Chief Connors obligingly white-washed it as justifiable homicide. Funny thing, just this afternoon somebody told me about this very same killing. One of Mike’s employees, that is.”

Woods sniffed, grinned. “Female, I trust? Offhand I’d say it was Chanel.”

Liddell let it pass. He jabbed at the item. “That all there is on it?”

“Just the usual follow-up with some sob stuff,” the reporter told him. He riffled through the pages, stopped a few issues further. “Here it is. Sally Mason did the drool for us. She’s the best sobber in town. She really opened all the stops on this one.”

Liddell read the story carefully, leaned back.

“There may be something in this, at that, Lee,” he told the reporter. “Look. Nobody identifies the guy, he’s buried by the city. The story says that although his clothes were pretty messy and torn they were of good quality, and that the man himself looked as though he had seen good days. Get this part about his hands? She says they weren’t those of a vagrant or a laborer, that they were a gentleman’s hands. No calluses, nothing but a few stains.” He stared at the reporter. “What kind of stains, do you suppose?”

Woods shrugged. “Don’t take any of Sal’s drool too seriously, Johnny. Chances are the guy’s hands were dirty. She probably figured it was more dramatic to hint that his hands were stained with honest toil. He was probably some grifter that never did an honest day’s work in his life.” He studied Liddell’s face. “Hey, you look like you maybe think there’s something in it.”

“I don’t know. It could be coincidence, of course, but this is just the kind of thing we were looking for. Both Lane and Connors involved, some guy knocked off by Lane’s private Gestapo, then shipped off to the City Morgue and conveniently planted in, let’s see—” he consulted the dates on the two papers, “—in less than a week. I wonder why?”

The reporter took his pencil from behind his ear, chewed on the end of it. “You mean they didn’t want him identified?”

Liddell shrugged. “Who knows? Let’s see how it fits. That’s in 1950. A year or so later, Nancy Hayes shows up in town, starts snooping around the Villa Rouge. Even shacks up with Mike Lane for a spell. Then we find she’s been going through these files and this is approximately the time she was

most interested in. Bingo! She finds what she's looking for and calls a private eye in and gets herself killed for her trouble." He pulled a cigar from his pocket, stripped the cellophane jacket. "It may add up to a wrong number, but at least it adds up."

"Who would this dead guy be likely to be?"

Liddell bit off the end of his cigar, spat it on the floor, and ignored the scandalized stares of the white-haired custodian. He clamped it unlit between his teeth.

"That's something we've got to find out." He picked up the bound volume, reread the sob sister's account. "It won't be any cinch to identify a guy after he's been buried all these years, but I'm sure as hell going to take a stab at it!"

THE damp smell of the morgue down the hall still seemed to permeate the coroner's office. He sat behind his desk, fat, immobile, his heel hooked on the scarred corner of it, regarding Johnny Liddell unblinkingly.

"You're sure trying to play hell with the police department in this town," he wheezed amiably. "First you turn a perfectly simple case of suicide into a murder. Now you're trying to dig up a guy that was planted as John Doe over five years ago and tell the local gendarmes who he really was." He shook his head to the accompaniment of a wagging of the double chins. "Chief Connors won't like that."

"He's going to like it a helluva lot less if and when I get to the bottom of whatever's going on in this burg," Liddell promised. "How about you? How do you stand?"

The coroner considered it a moment. He pursed his lips, stared at Liddell. "You mean am I throwing in with you or Connors. That it?"

Liddell nodded. "That's it. I need your help. I can make it without your help, but with it I can make it a lot faster."

Doc Herley unclasped the pudgy hands resting on his stomach, reclasped them. "You're going ahead no matter which way I fall, eh?" He started slightly as the door opened and Detective Sergeant Happy Lewis walked in, the customary worry wrinkle between his eyes more pronounced than usual.

"Got here soon's I got your message, Johnny," he told Liddell. He nodded to the coroner. "What's up?"

“Liddell thinks he can identify a John Doe who was knocked off five or six years ago at the Villa Rouge.” Doc Herley puffed his fat cheeks, waved the homicide man to a chair. “Wants to know where I stand. Where do you stand, Sergeant?”

Happy Lewis pinched his long thin nose between thumb and forefinger, stared at Liddell glumly. “Sounds like a tough one.”

“Could be,” Liddell admitted. “And let’s get this straight. I wouldn’t blame you a bit if you toss your cards in right now, Happy. If I’m digging another dry well, this time it’ll mean your job for sure.”

The coroner nodded. “It means we’re both finished, Happy.”

“So what? I’m in. All the way,” Happy Lewis grunted. “How about you, doc?”

Doc Herley sighed unhappily. “When I think of going back to private practice with lines of runny-nosed kids and squawling brats it gives me hot flashes.” He opened his hands, held them palm up, shrugged. “What choice have I got? Count me in.”

“Sucker,” Happy Lewis drawled at him. He turned to Liddell. “Well, Svengali, now what? How do we identify a stiff five years later if they couldn’t identify him when he was still warm?”

“I don’t know,” Liddell admitted. “But we’ve got this much on our side. We want to identify him, maybe they didn’t want to. Our only hope is that they might have been in a hurry to get rid of him, or they might have been so sure of themselves and so sure that nobody would ever come snooping around, that they got careless.”

“Go on,” the coroner urged.

“That’s where you come in, doc. If they did get careless, you’re the baby in the spot to put the finger on it for us.”

Doc Herley shook his head sadly. “Strike one, Liddell. Sorry to disappoint you, but I wasn’t here back then. Old Doc Stewart was coroner then, and if you want to do any talking with him, you’ll have to use a ouija board. He died two years ago.”

“He kept records, didn’t he?” Liddell asked. “He must have had a file on it. Maybe there’s something in the file would help us.”

Doc Herley grimaced, contemplated the necessity of moving with distaste. He sighed deeply, dropped his feet to the floor, braced his pudgy

hands on the edge of the desk, propelled himself out of his chair. “Don’t expect too much from it, Liddell,” he warned.

He waddled toward a huge metal filing cabinet that covered one wall. Fumbling through his pockets, he found a ring of keys, selected one.

“I shouldn’t be doing this. But I’m beginning to like the idea,” he chuckled. “I’m sure going to get a bang out of Connors’ face if you make this stick, Liddell.”

He pulled open a drawer marked “1950,” rummaged through a stack of large manila envelopes, came up with one bearing the notation, “John Doe.” He slammed the file drawer, waddled back to his chair, dropped into it with a contented sigh. “This is all that’s left of him.”

Liddell jumped from his chair, walked over to the desk, watched with interest while the coroner dumped the contents of the envelope out.

“The usual routine stuff,” Doc Herley growled.

He picked up a single-spaced typed report, glanced through it. “Testimony of one of the special guards up at the Villa Rouge. Says this prowler was trying to get into one of the back doors of the place, pulled a gun when he was hailed and was shot.” He flipped the report to Liddell. “Just like that. Nice and neat.”

Liddell glanced through it, passed it wordlessly to Happy Lewis. “Anything else?”

“Report on the inquest clearing the guard, order for burial, I guess that’s about all,” the coroner shrugged. He picked up another single-spaced report. “Here’s Doc Stewart’s report after examining the stiff.” He turned it over, read a penciled notation on the back. “Apparently it wasn’t even introduced at the inquest. Nothing much in it.”

Liddell took the report, read through it carefully. He screwed up his forehead, reread it slowly. “Maybe there is something in this.” He waved the typewritten sheet. “Says here there were a lot of bruises on the body and that the man was suffering from malnutrition.”

“What bum isn’t?” Happy Lewis asked.

“Killed by a .32 bullet fired directly into the back of his head.” Liddell tossed the report on the desk. “That makes your inquest report smell a little, doesn’t it? The guard testifies that this guy was trying to get in the back door, was hailed, turned around and pulled a gun and was killed. He must have turned all the way around because he was shot from the back.”

Doc Herley nodded. “So what? Even suppose it was a deliberate bump-off. That doesn’t help us find out who he was or what his connection is with the Villa Rouge.” He fumbled in the manila envelope, brought out a glossy print, studied it for a moment, passed it over. “This is what he looked like, if that’ll help.”

The picture was the usual characterless morgue flash-light showing head and torso being held up by a pair of hands, eyes half open, staring sightlessly into the camera, mouth frozen in a horrible semi-grin. The face was thin, gaunt, a dark stubble of beard covered the chin, the hair was long, dank.

“Tough looking character, all right,” Happy Lewis grunted. “Could be we’re on the wrong track?”

Liddell stared at the photo, tried covering the chin and hair, gave it up. “For a minute there I thought there was something familiar about him, but I never saw him before,” he conceded. “Mind if I send it along to the agency for a check, doc?”

The coroner pursed his lips, sucked air through them. “I could get in a helluva jam. This stuff’s town property.” He tapped stubby fingers on the arm of the chair, regarded Liddell through lowered eyelids. “Still I don’t know how anybody’d know. No one’s likely to go messing through a six-year-old file.”

Liddell nodded, stuck the picture in an inside pocket. “May not mean a thing, but there’s always a chance they might make him from the files and help us find out where he fits in this picture.”

“If he fits,” Happy Lewis added lugubriously.

The coroner gathered the rest of the reports, dumped them back in the manila envelope, wordlessly returned it to the files.

“Any of you guys feel the need of a drink?” Doc Herley asked. He watched both men nod, pulled open another drawer in the filing cabinet, came up with a bottle of rye. He held it up to the light, measured the contents with a judicious eye. He locked the filing cabinet, returned the keys to his pocket, propped himself back behind his desk. “Strictly medicinal, of course,” he chuckled.

While the coroner rummaged through his desk drawer, came up with three paper cups, Liddell unhooked himself from the desk, paced up and down. “There’s got to be something big in back of this,” he argued. “That’s the only way it makes sense. It’s not just a case of a dame getting herself

knocked off. Nancy's death is only one piece of the whole picture. It's got to be."

"Sure, sure." Doc Herley nodded. "You better have your drink and stop talking to yourself, Liddell." He handed over a cup, saw to it Lewis had one, settled back with his own. "There's a medical term for that and it's not pretty."

Lewis grunted, held up his glass. "Here's luck. Looks like we're going to need it—but good."

Liddell held his up, emptied it. He crumpled the cup, pitched it in the general direction of the wastebasket. "Thanks, doc. That's just what I needed." He fished the glossy print from his pocket, took a look at it. "Just hold onto your hats, boys. I've got a feeling that from here on in this ride's really going to get rough."

STEVE BARON, at the home office, was more genial when the long distance operator finally got through to him than he'd been the night before.

"I got a call from that guy Rivers at the *Observer*," he told Liddell. "Told me his sheet was underwriting the investigation. Nice work, Johnny."

"I had to promote somebody to get myself some standing around here. They were getting ready to ride me out of town on a rail. Like this, all they can do is ship me out—in a box."

The voice at the other end didn't seem particularly impressed or concerned. "Making any progress?"

"Not too much," Liddell admitted. "I've got a picture I'm shooting down to you. Guy who was killed here over five years ago and John Doe'd into the local marble orchard. I think he may be a link."

"Anybody we know?"

"Can't tell," Liddell said. "He's hiding behind a couple of weeks' growth of spinach and his hair's all long and mussed. He was tagged as a vag but I've got a hunch that underneath that beard and with his hair slicked back, he might be a respectable looking citizen."

Baron's voice was brisk over the wire. "When do we get it?"

"Should be there in a couple of hours. I chartered a private plane to run it down." He could hear the sharp intake at the other end. "Don't go blowing your fuse. It's expenses. The *Observer*'ll okay it."

“They better,” Baron grunted. “What do you want done with it?”

“Have some copies made as soon as you can and shoot the original back right away. The coroner’s playing ball and I don’t want to put him out on a limb.”

“Will do,” the receiver assured him.

“Then have a couple of the boys work out over our copies. Wash out the beard, comb his hair or put a hat on him. Dress him up and let’s see if anyone recognizes him.”

“Think he’s from New York?” Baron wanted to know.

Liddell nodded. “Yeah. If I’m right, there should be some connection between this stiff and Nancy Hayes. The way I got it pegged so far is that she came up here looking for him. He’d disappeared and she was trying to pick up his trail. Somehow she stumbled on the trail of this dead guy, found some stuff on him in the local files, put two and two together and called us in to follow through.”

“You think that’s why she was knocked off, eh?” Baron was silent for a moment, kicking it around. “A little far-fetched but it sounds just barely possible. I’ll have copies of the retouched pix over to all the Broadway reporters tonight. Anything else?”

“Not right now,” Liddell told him. “I’m going out to the Villa Rouge tonight to see what I can scare up there. I’ve got the local bad man’s sweetie working with me, so maybe I’ll strike pay dirt.”

Baron’s voice turned a shade cautious. “What do you mean working with you? I trust your personal attraction is the only compensation for the co-operation?”

“That and fourteen hundred in folding money.”

The voice on the other end groaned. “There goes the profit. Look, Liddell, see if you can’t wrap this thing up without putting everybody in town on a pension, will you?”

“Sure, sure. You do something for me. Soon’s you get that picture, hop on it and check me as soon as you uncover anything. This town’s getting hotter than a fifty cent pistol, and the sooner I get out of here the longer I’m going to live,” Liddell told him. He heard the grunt on the other end, then the connection was broken. He replaced the receiver on the hook with a grin.

The clock on the bureau across the room said 8:45. Liddell shrugged out of his jacket, locked the door and threw himself across the bed. In a few minutes he was snoring lightly.

Chapter Ten

THE room was in total darkness when Johnny Liddell awoke. The telephone was ringing. He got out of bed, walked into the bathroom, filled a glass of water, but even the water couldn't wash the dark-brown taste out of his mouth. He ignored the phone, checked his watch. It was almost eleven. The phone refused to be discouraged. He walked back into the bedroom, scooped the receiver off its cradle. "Yeah?"

"Well, so you are alive." It was Lorna Matthews' voice. "I was beginning to give you up. Not sleeping on the job, are you, Sherlock?"

"Just getting ready for a big evening, Red. Where are you?"

The redhead's voice sounded a little piqued. "I'm a working girl. Remember? I thought maybe you'd call today so I could tell you I was sorry about last night." The voice shrugged. "You didn't, so—well, I'm not proud."

Liddell ran his fingers through his hair, yawned. "I'm sorry, Red. I've been up to my ears all day. I was figuring that maybe we could get together tonight after you finish your chores at the joint."

"Sure you want to?"

"Don't start going female on me, Red." He peered at his watch again. "I'll be out there in an hour or so. See you then."

"Okay," the redhead cooed. "I just thought maybe you found greener pastures—or blonder ones. I'll be around."

The receiver clicked in his ear. Liddell wandered to the tap, drank another glass of lukewarm water. Then he lifted the receiver, clicked for the operator.

"Desk," a metallic voice informed him.

"This is Liddell. Anything for me?"

The voice on the other end was apologetic. "There are a couple of calls, Mr. Liddell, but I'm afraid I put you in a rather embarrassing position."

“How?”

“A young lady called several times a little after nine. She was very anxious to speak with you. I couldn’t rouse you so I took the message. Her name was Miss Cross.” The voice coughed apologetically. “She must have called at least three times in half an hour, so a few minutes later when the phone rang again, I assumed it was the same girl. I said to her, ‘I have your message right here, Miss Cross,’ and—”

“And what?”

“Well, as soon as I said that she waited for a minute, then said thanks and hung up. But by then I realized it was a different voice. It wasn’t Miss Cross at all. I’m very sorry, Mr. Liddell. I don’t know who it was.”

Liddell cut him off. “I can guess. That’s all the calls?”

“That’s all. I hope I haven’t—”

“You have,” Liddell growled. “But don’t let it keep you awake nights.” He tossed the receiver back on the hook, headed for the shower.

THE clock on the dashboard of the rented Buick said 12:30 when Liddell rolled it up to the entrance of the Villa Rouge, turned it over to the uniformed attendant.

The long bar in the lounge was almost deserted. Liddell leaned against it, grinned at the poker-faced bartender. The man in the white jacket stopped polishing glasses long enough to run a damp cloth over the bar in front of him.

“Cognac?” he asked.

Liddell shook his head. “Make it a bottle of beer tonight.”

The bartender raised his eyebrows. “Beer?”

“Yeah. And open it here, my friend,” Liddell grinned at him.

The bar man managed to look hurt. “You must have the idea we don’t like you, mister. We hardly ever give a paying customer a mickey. Hardly ever.”

“I know. But in my case you might be willing to make an exception. Beer, friend.”

The bartender reached into a lower cupboard, pulled out a cold bottle of beer. He opened it, poured it into a glass, shoved it over in front of Liddell.

“Been around here a long time, eh? Probably since the joint opened, I suppose?” Liddell asked conversationally. He fished in his pocket, came up with a handful of change.

“More mind bets? Afraid the book’s closed. Ain’t taking any more this year.”

Liddell shrugged, took a sip of his beer. He watched the bartender separate the right amount from the pile of silver, retreat to the cash register, where he resumed his apparently endless task of polishing glassware.

From where he stood, Liddell could watch both the entrance to the supper room and the hallway leading to the flight of stairs in the rear. On his second bottle of beer, he noted with well-disguised interest the arrival of a Chicago hoodlum named Windy Grayson, with whom he’d had frequent but highly unsatisfactory dealings through the years.

Grayson, short and cocky, looked neither left nor right as he strode through the lounge to the supper room. If he saw Liddell, he gave no evidence of it.

The private detective finished his beer, followed in a few minutes. He found a table near the wall of the supper room. As on the night before, the clientele of the Villa was well spiked with out-of-town hoodlums.

From where he sat, Liddell commanded a good view of Grayson’s table. But by the time the chorus numbers were finished and the piano wheeled out onto the floor for Lorna Matthews’ number, he was ready to admit that he might be off on a false scent. In all that time nobody had attempted to communicate with Grayson in any way, nor had anybody even passed close enough to his table to have made any kind of contact.

When the pasty-faced pianist scurried out to his piano, Liddell leaned back to enjoy the redhead’s songs. She did two numbers before swinging into her specialty.

Then, as the night before, the house lights dimmed. Lorna started crooning from table to table, the colored spot darting through the audience. When the red light stopped momentarily on Grayson’s table, Liddell began to feel an old familiar tingling along his spine. The night before the red light had stopped on Tommy Burns and Duke Butler. Both had subsequently won heavily in the gaming room.

Suddenly the light swung in his direction, causing him to blink involuntarily and drop his eyes. He saw his shirtfront and hands dyed an eerie green. The light stayed on him for a moment, then moved restlessly away.

The number ended in an avalanche of applause and the redhead bowed her way back to the stage entrance. The house lights went up and overhead the pall of smoke started to surge restlessly as parties stirred the air by leaving their tables and heading for the gaming room.

Tonight, for some indefinable reason, the air seemed surcharged with a new tension. The house men seemed more uncomfortable in their tuxedos, the patrons more feverish in their excitement.

Liddell dropped a bill on his table to cover his drink, followed casually in the wake of the crowd heading for the roulette table and the craps layout. As he walked through the archway, he could hear the click of the roulette ball, the low chant of the croupier.

He watched while Grayson headed for the cashier's desk, laid down some bills, received in return a pile of blues and reds. From the size of the pile, Liddell made a quick estimate in the neighborhood of five thousand. He followed the Chicago hoodlum to the roulette set-up, took up a position where he could watch without being conspicuous.

Grayson was riding high. In the first ten minutes of play, he easily doubled his stake. Every number he played seemed to turn up without fail. A low murmur of excitement spiced the conversation at the table as his winning streak continued and the piles of chips in front of him continued to mount.

Suddenly, Liddell felt a tug at his arm. He turned to look into the worried face of the blonde cigarette girl, Verna Cross. Something had happened to frighten her, he could see. Her eyes were wide, her face colorless with dabs of rouge and a smear of lipstick standing out in vivid contrast against the pallor.

“You wanted some cigarettes, sir?” she asked in a loud voice. As she lowered her head, her voice dropped. “Get out of here, Liddell. You’re in danger.”

Liddell took a pack of cigarettes, dropped a bill on the tray. “What’s it all about?”

“Meet me out in the parking lot near your car. I’ll explain. But hurry.” Her voice was low, but there was no mistaking the urgency of her tone. She

looked up, flashed a bright counterfeit of her usual smile. “Thank you, sir.” Her eyes still had a haunted, scared look as she melted into the crowd.

Liddell casually tore open the pack, selected a cigarette. As he lit it, his eyes scanned the room. So far as he could tell, no one was paying him any special attention. Yet, there was no mistake about the girl’s being frightened. Something had happened, something big.

He stayed at the roulette table long enough to see Grayson make two more strikes, adding to his pile, then Liddell elbowed his way through the crowd that now ringed the table six deep. He wandered aimlessly toward the side door to the terrace.

After the smoky closeness of the gaming room, the air outside had the bracing effect of a cold shower. He filled his lungs with the cool, clean air and stretched. Beyond the terrace it was so dark he had the sensation that he could reach out and touch the black curtain that shut out all light. A cool breeze was blowing in from the ocean and the rumble and roar of the surf somewhere beyond the dark curtain had a soothing and reassuring sound.

Liddell took a long drag on the cigarette, flipped it out into the dark void. It cut an orange-colored arc through the black, ascending slowly, then gathering speed as it descended it shattered into a myriad of pinpoint sparks as it hit the ground.

He took his bearings for a moment, then stepped off the terrace onto a cinder path that ran in the direction of the parking field. He was aware that in spite of the urgency in the girl’s voice, in spite of her patent panic, this could easily be a plant. She could be working with all the others who seemed so determined to get him out of Waterville.

As he walked down the cinder path, his mind wrestling with the complexity of the case, he was only dimly aware of the sweet scent of the grass, of the rustling of the leaves in the ocean breeze. Yet, suddenly he stopped, all senses alert. Subconsciously he was aware of an alien sound, the sound of a stone dislodged, of a twig snapped. He started to feel for the .45 under his arm, his eyes trying to pierce the darkness that flowed over him.

He heard, rather than saw the blow that hit him. There was a hissing rush of sound from behind. He tried to spin, to fall away from whatever was coming. It hummed like an angry bumblebee, exploded on the side of his head with the blinding brilliance of a flare. The .45 slipped from his limp fingers, clattered on the path. There was another swish, another display of fireworks in the back of his skull and he went to his knees.

There was a loud roaring in his ears as he fought his way to his feet. He tried to lash out, but his arms were leaden, almost useless. His knees folded and the ground rushed up at him. He was dizzily aware of a sinking sensation as the earth turned horizontal and rushed up to hit him in the face.

Doggedly he raised himself to his elbow, determined to fight against the spreading black that was catching him, swirling him dizzily. He knew he was slipping, fought to maintain consciousness. There was another blinding flash behind his ear and he sank quietly into the engulfing depths of the black blot.

It was the sound of voices as much as anything else that convinced Liddell that he was still alive. His head swirled and spun sickeningly and the voices were no more than a rasping cacophony of sound that grated on his nerves. He couldn't separate words or phrases, they were like thick liquid, all run together.

He struggled to get his eyes open but the blackness yawned again. A sharp ache, that started behind his ear, seared its way through his brain, coming to rest behind his eyes, leaving him blinded. When he moved his head, nausea enveloped him and the blackness came closer, the voices receded, became a distant whisper. He tried to cry out as the sinking feeling assailed him again, but it came out of his throat no more than a hollow groan.

His next snatch of consciousness came with the sickening sensation of motion. His body seemed suspended in air, bouncing jerkily through space in nerve-shattering bounds. He managed to get one eye open. There was sky and a tree branch over his head. Weakly he tried to squirm, but his feet and shoulders seemed gripped in a vise.

A voice was talking somewhere. It said, "Sleeping Beauty's come up for air. He sure can take it."

There was another swish, and a dull thud and the sky and tree dissolved in a bright smear of lights and vivid colors. Once again the black flowed over Liddell, erasing all consciousness.

It seemed like endless time had passed when consciousness next came knocking at his skull. There was an acrid smell of gasoline, and another more subtle odor, an odor he knew he should recognize. He tried to remember where he'd last smelled it, what had happened, but the blinding brilliance of the pain drove all consecutive thought before it.

From somewhere near came the low rumble of voices. Liddell fought to get his eyes open, finally succeeded. The familiar odor was stronger now. He wrestled vaguely with the memory, finally identified it. It was the scent the blonde cigarette girl had worn. He tried to move, but some heavy weight pinned him down. Weakly he called out.

One of the voices approached, a note of surprise in it. "Hey Ed. The guy's alive. I just heard him. We better get him out."

Liddell was aware of a lot of activity outside where he was, then suddenly the weight that had pinned him behind the wheel was off him. He felt rough hands catch him under the arms and drag him into the open. For the first time, Liddell saw what it was that had pinned him in. It was the smashed body of a woman, a woman who in life was beautiful, but in death looked like a shattered doll. Verna Cross, the cigarette girl who had tried to warn him of his danger.

He stared vaguely around him. The rented car had half climbed a tree, its windshield and grill shattered by what must have been a terrific impact. He struggled shakily to his feet, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The men who had dragged him out of the car stood watching him incuriously. They were dressed in the uniform of the state highway police.

"Got a cigarette, bud?" Liddell croaked.

The shorter of the two cops, a squat, red-faced man dug into his blouse pocket, came up with a pack. He held it out to Liddell. "You sure sobered up in a hurry, friend."

Liddell waited until he had the cigarette going, drew a lungful of smoke, let it out slowly. "I been sober all evening."

The second cop grinned crookedly. "Sure. That tree just up and ran right into your jalopy, eh friend?"

"I wasn't snooted," Liddell growled. "I was sapped by somebody. Last thing I remember was—"

"You must bleed hundred proof, bud," the short, red-faced cop interrupted. "Take a whiff of yourself."

Liddell sniffed. The front of his jacket and shirt were saturated with liquor. "Somebody went to a lot of trouble to set up this nice little picture, with a frame to match. And me, I'm sitting front row center."

The tall cop grunted. "Sure, it's a Communist plot, no doubt." He walked over to where the blonde's body lay sprawled on the grass, pulled down the

skirt. “She must’ve been a swell dish, but that tree sure’n hell made hash out of her.” He reached into the wrecked car, found a short bolero jacket, covered the girl’s face.

Liddell walked shakily to the side of the police car, leaned against one fender. His head was still spinning but his mind was beginning to come back to life. He had walked into a trap right enough, but it hadn’t been the blonde who led him into it. She’d been marked for destruction, too. Whatever she had to tell him, he might never know now. Whoever was behind this had accomplished two things—eliminated the blonde and implicated Liddell as her killer.

A searching flash of pain shot through his head and he identified it as the screech of a siren. After a moment a car with red headlights skidded to a screaming stop behind the patrol car.

The short, beefy cop walked over to the newcomer, saluted, gave a brief report in a low voice. The door of the police car opened and Chief Connors stepped out. He swaggered over to the body, pulled the bolero from the dead face, peered at it for a moment, then stiff-legged it to where Liddell stood propped against the patrol car.

“So you decided against my advice to go home, eh Liddell?” There was a note of satisfaction in his voice, a cruel smile on his lips. When Liddell made no move to remove the cigarette from the corner of his mouth, Connors brought his hand around in a short arc, knocked it out. “I warned you against pulling anything in my territory.”

“Says he was sapped and framed,” the tall cop put in. “Claims he wasn’t drunk.”

The police chief’s lip curled in a sneer. “Smell him. He smells like he slept in a beer barrel.” His washed-out eyes glared red in the reflection of the headlights. “What’s the matter, wouldn’t the blonde perjure herself for you, Liddell? That why you killed her? What was the story you were trying to force down her throat?”

“I didn’t kill her, Connors. Somebody killed her all right, but it wasn’t me.” Liddell wiped the beaded perspiration off his upper lip with the back of his hand. “You won’t have any trouble finding out whether I was sapped or not. I got lumps to prove it, and they’re not where I could have gotten them banging my head against any dashboard.”

“Still the smart private eye, eh Liddell? So you think this one was murdered too, eh?” Chief Connors found a cigar, jammed it between his

teeth. “You know, you got murder on the brain seems like. First you’re so sure the Martin dame was murdered. Now this one.” He rocked on the balls of his feet, rolled the unlighted cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. “Maybe you ought to come down to headquarters and tell my boys all about it. They were sorry they didn’t get a chance to meet you last time. I wouldn’t want to disappoint them again.”

Chapter Eleven

CHIEF CONNORS sat behind the desk in his office, stared coldly at Johnny Liddell. The unlighted cigar was still clenched in the corner of his mouth, his hat tilted on the back of his head. The desk lamp, the only light in the room, gave his face a malevolent leer.

“I don’t think I like you around here, Liddell,” he said. “You been getting in my hair ever since you arrived.” He pulled the cigar from between his teeth, stared at the soggy end with distaste. “What I ought to do to you for what you did to that poor girl back there is toss you in the clink and throw away the key. Could do it, too.” He jammed the cigar back between his teeth, stared at Liddell. “But I’m going to give you a break.”

“What kind of break?”

“I’m going to let you pack your things and get out of town. Professional courtesy, sort of. But don’t get the idea I’m squashing the drunken driving and manslaughter rap. Just sort of letting it pend, you might say.”

Liddell shook his head. “No dice. You know that accident was a set-up. I’m not running.”

Chief Connors ripped the cigar from his mouth, slammed it down so hard it bounced. “I got about all of you I can stomach, wise guy. You want to prove you’re tough, eh? I’m going to give you a chance.” He stabbed at the button on his desk. “I’ll have the boys work you over a bit. Maybe then you’ll want to tell us what you’re really snooping around after.”

The door to the squad room swung open and the face of the strong-arm cop Connors had threatened him with leered through the open door at Liddell.

“I got some company for you, Clemens,” Connors told him “This big-towner thinks he’s tough. I want you and Booker to see just how tough he really is.”

The big cop grinned crookedly at Connors. “Sure, Chief. Taking the starch out of tough guys and making them wilt is a specialty with us. Especially big shots from the Big Town.” He stepped into the office. “We’ll

take it out of him and send him back like jello—nice and shaky.” He indicated the open door, crooked a thick, twisted finger at Liddell. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s go to the May party.”

Liddell backed away until he felt the wall behind him. He kept his eyes on both Clemens and the chief. “Come and get me.”

Clemens chuckled deep down in his chest. “I like ’em with spirit, Chief. That’s the kind breaks up first.”

Chief Connors got out of his chair, walked around the desk. “You’re not too smart, Liddell. Clemens would love to see you get tough and resist. He’s an officer of the law, you know.” He kept his eyes on Liddell, nodded to the strong-arm man. “Take him, Clemens.”

The big cop glared, reached up, took out his upper plate, dropped it into his side pocket. Then, hunching his shoulders so that his head was almost lost between them, he started for Liddell. As he slouched forward, a coarse red tongue licked at his lips obscenely.

“We could plug you where you stand, resisting an officer like this.” Chief Connors made a stab at diverting Liddell’s attention. “Might be cleaner at that. All the way around.”

Liddell didn’t take his eyes off the strong-arm man. “Shoot and be damned, Connors.” He kept watching the crouching cop, watching for an opening, waiting for the assault.

Clemens moved in suddenly with a speed unsuspected in a man of his bulk. He shot a hard right at Liddell’s face. Johnny swayed out of its path, brought his left up into the cop’s midsection. Clemens growled like a stung bear, bored in. He caught Liddell on the side of the head with a hamlike fist that started the lights flashing and bells ringing again. The big paw landed again and Liddell felt the floor slope upward, then hit him in the face.

The last sound he could identify was the delighted cackling of Chief Connors. He had a vague consciousness of someone dragging him across the floor into another room. After awhile the cobwebs that clouded his brain began to dissolve and he opened his eyes. He recognized the room as a typical back room in a typical police headquarters.

Clemens had taken off his coat and hung it on a hook behind the door. He was rolling up his sleeves, his cruel little eyes fixed on Liddell, who sat slumped in the hard-backed chair where he’d been dumped.

“Well, good morning, glory,” the strong-arm cop greeted him with a toothless grin. He turned to this partner. “Our little friend’s come back for more, Booker.”

Booker was a shorter, chunkier version of Clemens. Coarse features, broken nose, thick cruel lips, beady eyes and all. He snuffled when he breathed through the broken nose, shuffled when he walked.

“So you hit my friend Clemens, eh shamus?” He caught a handful of Liddell’s hair, yanked it back until the private detective’s face was less than a foot from his. “That wasn’t nice. I think maybe we got to teach you some manners.” He let go the hair, slammed Liddell’s head back against the chair. His thick hand came around in a short, vicious chop that caught Johnny on the side of the head, jarred his eyes open.

“Maybe you got the idea by now we don’t like you around here, wise guy,” Clemens put in.

His partner laughed. “Why don’t you go home while you can still walk, Liddell?” Booker sneered. He shoved his face close to Liddell’s, blowing his foul breath into it. “This is your last chance, sucker. Do you want to turn over anything you’ve picked up and blow, or do we give you the treatment?”

Liddell opened his eyes painfully, stared into the cop’s face. Suddenly, he reached out, grabbed Booker’s tie near the knot, held on. Startled, Booker pulled away, dragged Liddell to his feet. Johnny tightened his grip on the tie with all his strength, watched the strong-arm man’s face turn a deep red, then purple. Booker put both his hands to his throat in a frantic effort to ease the pressure. Liddell let go, threw all his remaining strength in a blow into the cop’s unprotected belly.

Booker retched, fell forward, his face hitting the floor first. Liddell, swaying over the fallen man, was only dimly aware that Clemens had moved up behind him. He hardly felt the rabbit punch that felled him, dropped across the unconscious body on the floor as though the ground had been moved out from under him.

Clemens growled deep in his chest, pulled back his foot, kicked the private detective viciously in the side. He reached down, caught Liddell by the hair, dragged him off Booker.

At that point the door to the back room burst open and Chief Connors strutted in. His washed-out eyes were pink with fury, his hand shook.

“Cut it, Clemens. Cut it,” he ordered.

Clemens stopped a vicious kick aimed at Liddell's head in midair. He turned a puzzled look on the chief.

“What's the idea, Chief? We were just starting on this guy.” He stirred Liddell with his toe. “Quite a guy at that. Look what he does to Booker before we down him.”

Connors made a move to block the doorway, but wasn't quick enough. Lee Woods, the reporter from the *Observer*, pushed his way in. He saw Liddell stretched out on the floor, turned to Connors.

“Okay, Chief. The *Observer's* going to love this.” He walked past Connors, knelt beside Liddell, felt his pulse. “A little bit more and it would take more than a habeas corpus to get him out of here. It would take an exhumation order.”

Clemens wiped the saliva off his chin, stared from the reporter to Connors and back. At a signal from Connors, he moved away from Liddell.

“You don't understand, Woods. This private eye has been running wild in town. Tonight he killed a girl. I'm not saying it's murder, yet. But it was manslaughter. The guy's a killer.” He indicated Booker's empurpled face. “You can see for yourself. We try to book him, he goes crazy and almost kills one of my men. What'd you expect Clemens to do, handle him with kid gloves?”

Woods ignored him, caught Liddell under the arms, propped him up in a chair. He stamped past Connors into his office, came back with a carafe of water. He soaked his handkerchief in the water, wiped off Liddell's face, then held the sopping cloth at the nape of Johnny's neck.

After a moment, Liddell shuddered slightly, rolled his head punchily. He tried to look up, had trouble focusing his eyes, finally recognized the newspaperman. He grinned through battered lips.

“It was a great fight, mom,” he mumbled. “Sorry I lost.”

“You didn't,” Woods told him. “You ought to see the other guy.” He indicated Booker, still out, gasping noisily for breath.

Chief Connors rubbed the heel of his hand across the silvery stubble on his chin, looked from Clemens to Woods. “Don't know's I can let him out on this habeas corpus. This man assaulted an officer since the writ was drawn. That might change things a bit.”

Woods continued to ignore him, found a cigarette in his pocket, lit it and stuck it between Liddell's lips. He held the carafe while Johnny sopped his

face and hair with cold water.

“Get your hat and things, Johnny,” the reporter told him. “We’re getting out of here.”

Liddell, cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, pulled himself painfully to his feet. He took the water carafe from Wood’s hands, walked over to where Booker lay, reaching for consciousness. Then, with a supreme effort to give no sign that every bone and muscle in his body ached in protest against the exertion, he emptied the contents of the carafe over Booker.

Clemens started for him, but stopped at a signal from Connors. The chief moved back to block the door, one hand on his gun.

Woods grinned crookedly at him. “Al Rivers, managing editor of the *Observer*, knows where I am, Chief. All he needs is an excuse to yell for state cops to move into this stinking town. Start something now and you’ll have to finish it. We’re going out.” He caught Liddell by the arm, steadied him, walked to the door. Connors continued to block it. Woods pushed him aside. “If you do start something you can’t finish, I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes when you try to explain it to the big boys.”

Chief Connors dropped his eyes, let his hand slide off the butt of his gun. “All right, Woods. I’ll honor this writ and let him out.” He turned to Liddell. “You haven’t heard the last of this, shamus. See that you stay available.”

Liddell took a last drag on his cigarette, flipped it to the floor, exhaled leisurely. “I’ll be available, Chief. Any time you or any of your boys feel up to it, let’s take this up where we left off.” He picked his hat up from the floor, brushed it, set it carefully on his tender head. “But from now on we’re playing for keeps, Chief. Don’t sit in the game unless you can afford to lose.”

In the cab on the way to the *Observer* office from City Hall, Liddell leaned back, tried to keep the bad springs from jiggling his sore spots too badly.

“You probably don’t feel much like it, Johnny,” Woods told him, “but the boss wanted me to bring you right up to the office. He figures this thing is moving too fast for comfort and maybe we better have a council of war.”

“Suits me,” Liddell said. “This thing is in the stretch now. We’ve either got to crack it wide open soon or it may be too late. No telling what Connors and his gang will cook up next. My guess is that the blonde was dead when she was put in the car. If there’s any way of establishing that they may try to

hang a murder rap around my neck. But that'll be tomorrow. We've still got tonight to work."

Woods stared at him. "You think the blonde was dead, eh? Even so, they couldn't make that kind of a rap stick."

"Maybe not, but they could sure as hell try." Liddell consulted his watch, held it to his ear to make sure it was still going, checked it with the reporter's. "I figure we've still got about twenty-four hours to crack this thing."

The reporter scratched his head. "That ain't much. Not considering how little we've got to go on. But if that's the deadline we'll just have to make it."

Liddell nodded, regretted the impulse. "By the way, how'd you know they had me down at the Bastille?"

"We didn't. Happy Lewis saw them bring you in. He guessed the entertainment schedule they had set up for you and got hold of the old man, Rivers, at the paper. Al hustled a judge out of bed, got that habeas corpus and sent me down to pick up the corpus."

"Which it nearly was."

Woods nodded, leaned forward, tapped the cabby on the shoulder. "Take us to the State Street entrance to the *Observer*, will you, bud?" Then, settling back, "That way we go straight into Rivers' office through his private entrance and you won't have to go through the city room."

Liddell nodded gratefully, leaned back and closed his eyes.

Chapter Twelve

DETEKTIVE SERGEANT HAPPY LEWIS was the only one in the office when Johnny Liddell and Lee Woods walked in. He looked up from where he lay sprawled on the old leather couch, jumped up and grabbed Liddell by the arm.

“You made it, eh? All in one piece?”

Liddell grinned lopsidedly. “Thanks to you, I understand.” He indicated the empty chair behind the desk. “Where’s friend Rivers?”

“Out arranging for some assistant editor to take over for him tonight,” the homicide man said. “He wants in on the action. Says he’s paying for it, he might as well get some fun out of it.”

“He should. It’s a lot of fun,” Liddell grimaced. He hobbled over to an armchair, sank into it. After a moment, he managed to get one leg comfortably over the arm, leaned back.

“Pretty rugged, eh Johnny?” Lewis sympathized. “Those two goons, Booker and Clemens are bad medicine from what I hear.”

Lee Woods chuckled. “Clemens may still be tough, but the last view I had of Booker was peaceful enough. He was flat on his back admiring the ceiling, only he wasn’t in any condition to see it.”

“Dead?”

“Dead to the world, and in no hurry to come back to life.”

The homicide man eyed Liddell with new respect. “You mean he took one of them? I miss all the fun. I would have kissed my pension good-bye for good to get in on that brannigan.”

They all looked up as the frosted glass door opened. Alan Rivers stalked in. He looked pleased when he saw Liddell, walked over to him. “Looks like you’ve been seeing the town, Johnny.” He perched on the corner of the desk. “Feel like bringing us up-to-date?”

“Why not? You’re paying for it.” He started to fumble through his pockets, caught the pack of cigarettes Woods tossed him. He dumped one

out, stuck it in his mouth. “I suppose Woods told you we think we found what Nancy was going through the back issues for?”

Rivers shook his head. “I haven’t seen Woods all day. After all, he only works for me.” He turned to the reporter. “See if you can get hold of somebody to get us some coffee, will you, Lee?”

Woods nodded, disappeared through the door.

“Well, we found a couple of items in the issues of that date about some guy who was shot and killed by special guards out at the Villa. The shooting was declared justifiable homicide by Connors. That was the only item that tied in the gang Nancy was apparently keeping her eye on.”

Rivers dug out his pipe, started filling it. “I remember the case. They never identified the guy. Right?”

Happy Lewis nodded. “That’s the case. He was John Doe’d a couple of days later.”

Rivers nodded, touched a match to his pipe, created a dark blue cloud of smoke. “Go on.”

“Doc Herley down at the morgue played ball with us. Let us take a peek at the official picture taken at the time the stiff was brought in. I shot a copy of it down to the home office so Steve Baron could try to get a line on it and see what connection, if any, there was between this guy and Nancy Hayes.”

“In other words, you think this guy was deliberately planted without any real effort being made to identify him?” Rivers asked.

Liddell nodded, groaned. “Check. My guess is that Nancy Hayes came here looking for him. When she couldn’t find any trace, she started rambling through the newspapers starting with the date she knew he got here. She found this item, started checking. Someone tumbled to what she was up to, decided she might get dangerous, gave her a dose of what they gave John Doe.”

Rivers scowled at a spot over Liddell’s wall, unhooked himself from the desk, walked around it to his armchair. “You think the guy was knocked off too, then?”

Liddell shrugged. “The coroner’s report says he had a gun in his hand, tried to shoot it out. Yet he was shot in the back of the head. He was shot with a .32. Whoever heard of a special guard or any kind of a copper, regular or private, toting a .32?”

Happy Lewis sucked his breath through his teeth noisily. “I missed that one first time out,” he admitted. “You’re right. All our boys are carrying .38 specials and if I’m not mistaken, Mike Lane’s hoods are heeled with .45’s.” He rubbed his chin with the heel of his hand. “What do you figure’s behind it, Johnny?”

“I don’t know,” Liddell admitted.

Rivers hooked his heel on the corner of his desk, leaned back. “Okay for that end of it. There’s not much we can do on it anyway until we hear from New York. What about tonight? What about this dame you’re supposed to have knocked off? Who is she?”

“Verna Cross. The cigarette girl out at the Villa. Mike Lane’s current sweetie.”

“That’s really playing with dynamite. What was she doing in your car?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t paying much attention when she got in.”

The door opened and Lee Woods entered with four containers of coffee. He placed them on the desk, indicated the one closest to Rivers. “That one has no sugar, Chief.” He helped himself to a container, found a chair near the wall.

“What do you mean you weren’t paying attention? Sapped?”

Liddell nodded.

The homicide man pulled himself up off the couch, picked up two containers, handed one to Liddell. “Let’s take it from the beginning. This might be important.”

Liddell gouged the top out of his container, took a sip. “I met Verna the first time I went out to the Villa. She was plenty friendly, gave me her name and address with a come-up-and-see-me grin.” He took another sip of coffee.

“So I went up this afternoon. She lived in a joint called the Lowell.”

Rivers nodded, didn’t take the pipe out of his mouth.

“We had a couple of drinks, did some talking. She told me she was playing house with Lane but hated his guts. She only stayed with him because she needed the dough he kept her supplied with.”

“How come she was willing to risk losing Lane and that dough by making passes at you? Or are you that irresistible?” the editor inquired.

Liddell shook his head. “She had an answer for that one. She heard Lane and Connors talking about me, heard I was a private dick and on the make for information.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “She wanted to trade some information for some dough.”

Happy Lewis tasted his coffee, grunted. “She heard them talking about Liddell. But how’d she know you were Liddell?”

“That bothered me too, Happy,” Liddell grinned bleakly. “But she had all the answers. It seems the Villa has a pretty cute gimmick for tipping off its house men about strangers and spies.” He emptied his container, tossed it at the wastebasket. “Lorna, that’s the redhead who roomed with Nancy, does a torch number. While she’s singing, a colored spotlight picks out people in the audience. It picked me out in yellow.”

“So?”

“So a yellow light means this guy is questionable, keep an eye on him, see that he doesn’t get into anything,” Liddell told them. “The blonde spotted me the same way the house men did—by seeing me when the yellow spot picked me out.”

Alan Rivers pulled the pipe from between his teeth, whistled soundlessly. “Not a bad gadget. Looks like I’ve been underestimating our Mr. Lane.” He indicated for Liddell to continue. “So?”

Liddell shrugged. “So when I got up there today, I let her know I was in the market.”

“For information, of course?” Lee Woods grinned cynically.

Liddell ignored the interruption. “She was willing to trade, so we started comparing notes.” He raked his fingers through his hair, winced as he touched the tender spots. “Unfortunately, she didn’t have much to trade. So I made a deal with her. I offered her a grand more if she’d make it possible for me to get the information myself.”

The editor tapped out his pipe, picked up the container of lukewarm coffee. He gouged out the top, tested it with his finger, seemed satisfied. “How?”

“By her getting me the combination to Mike Lane’s safe. I planned to go there after closing hours and have a look around.”

“After you read about what happened to the last guy they caught wandering around out there?” Happy Lewis wanted to know.

“This was before I saw that story or heard about John Doe. Anyway, Blondie tells me okay it’s a deal. She was supposed to get the combination and give it to me tonight at the joint.” He shook a fresh cigarette from the borrowed pack, lit it. “I went out there, had a couple of beers, sat through the floor show.” He blew a stream of smoke toward the ceiling, watched it swirl lazily. “And the spotlight stopped on me again tonight. Only tonight it was green.”

Alan Rivers frowned, took a sip of his coffee, waited.

“I didn’t pay too much attention to it,” Liddell continued. “After the floor show I wandered into the gambling room and watched the play. After awhile, the blonde comes tearing up to me. She looks like she’s seen a ghost, tells me I’m in danger and that I’ve got to meet her out in the parking lot.”

“Did you get to see her?” the homicide man asked. He was leaning forward on the edge of the couch.

“The next time I saw her or anything was when those two highway cops pulled her body off me out on the road. Somebody sapped me and framed it to look like I had an accident while out joy-riding with a blonde. They did it right—poured whisky all over me and everything.” He tapped a slight film of ash from the end of his cigarette, watched it float down to settle on his pants leg. “Whoever that somebody is killed the blonde.” There was a tight look around his eyes when he lifted them, stared at the editor. “When this case is broken, that boy belongs to me.”

“Okay, okay,” the editor growled. “So you’ll chew him up. But first we’ve got to get him.” He ripped his stubby fingers through his hair, felt automatically for his eyeshade, realized it wasn’t there, contented himself by chewing on the pipe stem. “She must have gotten enough to be dangerous to someone. But apparently you were the one she thought was in danger.”

“Why didn’t they kill you, too, while they were at it, I wonder?” Happy Lewis asked.

“They’re too smart. Look at it like this. They decide to get rid of me, get me out of the way. So they knock me off. What happens? My agency floods this burg with ops and they wouldn’t rest until they got whoever did it. Acme is very narrow-minded about people who go around shooting up their hired help.”

“It would have been an accident.”

“The agency wouldn’t go for that. They already know that at least three people have warned me off this case. Including you, Rivers.”

“You nuts? I hired you to break the case. What am I, the client or the chief suspect?”

“You could be both,” Liddell told him amiably. “I was just making the point that Baron knew I’d been warned off the case. He’d be suspicious of any accident no matter how many witnesses there were.” He brushed the ash from his leg. “No, they did it the really smart way. Knocked off the blonde in such a way that I’d be a fall guy. Like that they get rid of somebody who was going to sell them out and discredit me, both at the same time.”

Rivers considered the idea, seemed to like the taste of it. “Sounds reasonable. But how’d they persuade the blonde to put you on the spot that way?”

Liddell looked up, squinted through the smoke. “My guess is she didn’t. She really thought I was in danger. You see, they turned the green light on me. I may be wrong, but I’m willing to bet that in the Villa Rouge code green is for death!” He forced a grim smile. “What she didn’t know was that it meant her death, not mine.”

Lewis cursed under his breath, crushed his empty coffee container in his fist. “What are we going to do about it?”

“Plenty,” the editor promised. “I’m going to splash this story on the front page, I’m going to scream for the state police to come in—”

“Not yet you’re not,” Liddell told him. “This is a personal matter now, Rivers. I’m going to have the pleasure of wrapping these boys up and I’m personally going to tie a lover’s knot right under the chin of the so-called brain behind this whole mess.”

Rivers got up from his chair, stamped up and down behind his desk. Finally he shook his head. “It’s no go, Liddell. I know how you feel. You want to pay off for those two girls and you want to even up for your cracked noggin, but it isn’t in the cards.” He stopped pacing, leaned across the desk. “Don’t you see the thing’s too neat? There’s nothing to get your teeth in. You don’t have any more right now than you had when you breezed into this burg. They’ve covered everything up like a blizzard.”

Liddell shook his head. “It’s not quite that bad. I know a couple of things now I didn’t know this time yesterday. For one thing, I know why Nancy was murdered and how she was murdered. I think I’ve even got a good idea of who did it.”

Happy Lewis stared at him with open mouth. “You sure that shellacking hasn’t softened your brain? You know who did it? Who?”

“I said I think I have an idea. That’s all. I haven’t got the whole picture yet, and it wouldn’t do anybody any good to ball you up with a lot of half-baked theories.” He crushed his cigarette on the arm of the chair, dropped it to the floor. “Don’t worry. As soon as I know what time it is, I’ll help you set your clocks.”

“You said you know why the Martin kid was killed. You mean because she was snooping around this John Doe deal?” Rivers asked.

“That’s only a small piece of the whole picture. I think the important piece of the puzzle is the Villa Rouge set-up. I don’t know yet what’s going on out there, but I’ve got a pretty fair idea of how they’re operating it.” Liddell touched the tender spot behind his ear, tried brushing the hair down over it. “Before this case is over I intend to find out what the elaborate system they have out there is really used for.”

Detective Sergeant Lewis tweaked his nose between thumb and forefinger, stared morosely at Liddell. “I don’t think I like the way this is going. Either we’re working on this together or we’re not. Either we trust each other or we don’t. Anyway, if you don’t feel you can let us in on what you got so far, Liddell, count me out.”

“Act your age, Happy,” Liddell grinned. “I’m not holding out and I’m not grandstanding. It’s just that I don’t know. I can tell you what my guess is, but that won’t prove anything.”

“It might help,” the homicide man grunted.

“All right. Take the Villa Rouge. This morning the blonde told me the yellow light during Lorna’s song is a tip-off to the house men to keep an eye on the guy it flashes on. I think the green one means this guy has to be taken care of. I don’t know what the other colors mean.”

Alan Rivers scratched his head with the stem of his pipe, scowled. “Why should every color mean something? Maybe just those two are signals.”

Liddell shrugged. “Maybe that’s right. I just have a hunch there’s more.” He dropped his leg from the arm of the chair, leaned forward. “The red light, for instance. Both last night and tonight I noticed that the red light stopped on familiar faces. I recognized at least three or four of them.”

“Recognized them as what?”

“Out-of-town hoods,” Liddell answered. “Not the petty larceny variety, either. Guys who toss a lot of weight in their home territory.”

The editor scratched a wooden match, applied it to the cold pipe, sucked noisily. “Told you myself the joint crawled with out-of-towners, most of them shady looking. So what? Waterville’s no different than Miami, Atlantic City, or any other wide-open resort. It draws that kind of guy like a dead horse draws flies on a hot day.” He burned his finger on the match, shook it out, dropped it to the floor. “Could be because there are so many of them the red light was bound to stop on one of them by the law of averages.”

“Could be,” Liddell admitted. “But this is the interesting part. Both nights the guys that got picked out by the red spotlight drifted into the gambling room. Both nights those guys were heavy winners and I do mean heavy.”

Happy Lewis leaned back, picked at his teeth with a thumb nail. “Smells like a payoff. But for what?”

“Could still be a coincidence,” Rivers muttered, but his expression showed he didn’t have much faith in it. “After all, what logical connection could there be between big-town hoodlums and a small-town gambling set-up?” His teeth ground noisily on the pipe stem.

“That’s another thing I intend to find out tonight. The hoods are big town, Nancy Hayes was big town, I’ve got a hunch John Doe was big town. There’s a connection someplace, and I intend to come up with it. When I do, we’re going to get a picture of what’s behind this whole Villa Rouge deal.”

“Suppose you’re right, suppose there is a connection. What do we do now?” the homicide detective wanted to know.

“Like I said, I made the two guys in the red spot last night. One was Duke Butler, the other was Tommy Burns. Tonight it was Windy Grayson from Chicago. I intend to have a talk with one of them, maybe all three of them. I figure they’ll tell me what I want to know.”

Alan Rivers wrote the three names on a sheet of copy paper, handed it to Lee Woods. “Canvass the hotels and see if any of these guys are still in town and where they’re registered.”

Woods took the paper, disappeared through the frosted glass door.

“Suppose they are still here, what makes you think any of them will open up, Johnny?” Lewis wanted to know. “Maybe they’ll figure it’s none of your damned business.”

Liddell fingered the bruises along the side of his jaw, the swelling under one eye, grinned crookedly. “Maybe I can persuade them it is my business,

Happy.”

The telephone on the desk buzzed. Rivers scooped it up, held it to his ear. He nodded wordlessly, dropped the instrument back on its hook. “Not registered under that name, Johnny,” he reported. “If they were staying here in town, though, they’re still here. There’s been no checkouts at any of the hotels since midnight.”

“Then Windy’s still here. I saw him after midnight at the Villa. Can you put a couple of boys on it and find out what name he’s using, Rivers?”

Rivers grunted, pulled a piece of copy paper in front of him. “What’s this Windy guy look like?”

“Short. Maybe five two, cocky, loud-mouthed. Left ear a little cauliflowered from back when he was a pretty good featherweight. Sharp dresser.”

The editor copied the description on the copy paper, impaled it on the copy hook. “Where’ll you be, Johnny?”

“At the hotel. I’ll grab off a couple of hours of shuteye. I have a feeling that I’m not going to get much rest from here on in.”

Chapter Thirteen

THERE were two messages for Johnny Liddell at the hotel. Both were from Lorna Matthews. The night clerk looked askance at the dried blood on his face, the rips in his clothes, but offered no comment. He acted as though it were customary for guests to walk in looking as though they'd dropped a close decision to a windmill.

Liddell took the elevator to his room, shrugged out of his jacket, examined his face in front of the mirror. Aside from the bruised chin, some puffiness in the lips and under one eye, there wasn't much damage that some hot and cold compresses and a good sleep couldn't improve.

He dropped his clothes where they fell, drew the shade to keep out the first cold grey light of dawn, crawled into bed. He was still sleeping twelve hours later when Lee Woods pounded on his door.

He grunted, turned over, but the banging on the door continued. Finally convinced that whoever was out there had no intention of going away, he swung his feet out of bed. He staggered to the door, unlocked it, scowled at the reporter's bright grin.

There was a fuzzy brown taste in his mouth that refused to be washed out by the tap water. By careful experimentation, he determined that most of the soreness had gone out of his face and body.

"Hi, Johnny," Woods grinned. "Feel better?" He consulted his watch. "Looks like you slept the clock around. That is, if you slept."

"I slept all right," Liddell grunted. He sat on the side of the bed, indicated the room's only chair. "Get anything for me?"

Woods nodded. "What you want, I think." He pulled a folded sheet of paper from his jacket pocket, consulted it. "Two of them left town about nine last night, but that last one, the one you call Grayson, he's still here."

"Where?"

"He's registered at the Delcort. Room 424. Uses the name of Clark. But it's your man, all right. Fits your description. Been here three days, gets in at about three every morning."

“Sounds like Windy, all right. He’s still here?”

The reporter nodded. “Set to go out on the Colonial flight at 7:30 tomorrow morning. Ticket calls for a New York transfer to the Chicago flight.”

Johnny Liddell took the copy paper from Woods’ fingers. “This the address of the Delcort?”

“That’s it. What are you going to do, Johnny?”

Liddell grinned mirthlessly. “Give Windy a chance to live up to his name. He’s got a rep for liking to shoot the breeze. Okay, I’m a good listener.”

“Need any help, Johnny?”

“No. You better stay out of this one, Lee. I may have to cut a few corners and there’s no sense fouling you up. Besides, you may have to be coming down to the Bastille to pull the dogs off me again.”

After the reporter left, Johnny Liddell fumbled through his valise, came up with a bottle of cognac and a spare .45. He set the cognac on the bureau, fitted a clip to the .45, slipped it in his jacket pocket. Then, after satisfying himself that no one had tampered with the seal on the cognac, he broke it, took a slug from the bottle.

He was under a stinging cold shower when the telephone rang. He cursed volubly under his breath, decided to ignore it. It was still ringing a few minutes later when he stepped out of the shower, so he stamped dripping from the bathroom to answer it.

“Johnny?” It was Lorna. “Is that you, Johnny?”

“What’s left of me. Hiya, Red?”

A peevish note crept into the girl’s voice. “What do you mean how am I? Don’t you ever bother to call people back? I’ve been calling all day. I’ve been worried stiff.”

Liddell reached over for the bottle, tilted it to his lips. “I’m sitting up taking nourishment.”

“I can hear it gurgle. You sure you’re all right, Johnny? I heard about what happened. I’m really awful sorry. Verna was a nice kid.” Her voice was softer now. “I thought maybe I could drop by after I finish up here at the Villa tonight and play nurse.”

“That’d be nice, Red. Only, I expect to be out. I’ll take a rain check on it, though.”

“You’re going out? You must be nuts, Johnny. You ought to be taking care of yourself. Look, Johnny, why don’t you let me—”

“Can’t, baby,” Liddell interrupted her. “There’s a guy I got to see, and it won’t wait. Say, wait a minute. The Delcort. That’s right near your place, ain’t it?”

“Next corner. That where you’re going?”

“Yeah. Shouldn’t take me very long, either. What time you expect to be getting home?”

“About two.”

Liddell nodded. “I should be through pretty close to that. I’ll—wait a minute. How about that brass-buttoned chaperone of yours?”

The redhead laughed. “Getting bashful? You don’t have to worry about him. Tonight when I got back from shopping he was gone.”

“Good. In that case, if it’s not too late, I’ll drop by.”

“It won’t be too late, Johnny. I’ll be expecting you.”

The receiver clicked in his ear. Liddell grinned at the mouthpiece, hung up the instrument. He took another slug of cognac, recorked the bottle, hid it under a pile of shirts in the bottom drawer.

THE HOTEL DELCORT represented the tops in what Waterville had to offer in the way of plush. The lobby was huge, luxurious, dimly lighted. It was deserted as Liddell skidded across the freshly swabbed marble floor. He walked past the elevator operator, leaned against the back of the car.

“Six, please,” he told him.

The car whizzed noiselessly to the sixth floor, the doors swung silently open. The operator didn’t give him a second glance as he walked out, started briskly down the corridor.

As soon as the elevator doors swung shut behind him, Liddell reversed his direction, headed for the red light that proclaimed “Stairs—Emergency Exit Only.” He descended two flights, came out on the fourth floor.

His footsteps made no sound on the deep pile carpet as he walked down the corridor checking room numbers. Finally, he stopped in front of 424. He tried the knob softly, found it locked.

From an inside pocket he pulled a flat, thin metal ruler, inserted it at the lock. In a moment he was rewarded with a sharp click. He tried the knob again. This time it turned easily in his hand.

The room beyond was dark. He stepped in, closed the door behind him. He yanked the .45 from its holster, transferred it to his left hand.

He had the uncomfortable feeling that he wasn't alone in the room. He squinted into the darkness, strained his ears for some sound that would betray the presence of someone else in the room. There was no sound.

After a moment, Liddell slid his hand cautiously along the wall until he felt the light switch. He pressed the switch, throwing the room into sudden, blinding light. Simultaneously he dropped to his knee, the .45 at ready.

Windy Grayson, [alias Clark] the Chicago hoodlum, sat in an overstuffed library chair not ten feet from him, staring at him with unblinking eyes. His holster, with a snub nosed automatic nestling in it, hung over the back of the chair, the handle of the gun less than a foot from his hand.

Liddell got up from his knee, walked over to where Windy sat. He bent over him, examined the three dark little holes that had ripped through the back of his head, spilled a cascade of red down his shirt. Liddell straightened up, switched the gun back to his right hand, looked around. There were two doors leading into the room besides the door to the corridor. Both were closed.

Softly he walked to the nearest door, pushed it open, fanned the room with his gun. It was a bathroom. Empty.

The door next to it was obviously the bedroom. He turned the knob cautiously, pushed it open, stepped back out of range of any possible fire from the room. After a second, he stepped into the room, switched on the light.

The drawers of the bureau had been ransacked, someone had slashed the sides of the two valises that stood in the corner, and the contents of the closet were strewn over the floor and bed. Whoever had killed Grayson had been looking for something, and from all indications had found it—if it had been in the room.

Liddell replaced the .45 in its hammock, walked back into the sitting room. First, he carefully locked and bolted the door, wiped any possible fingerprints from the knob and light switch. He went back over everything he had touched, wiped them clean. When he was satisfied that he had left no traces of his presence, he walked back to where Windy Grayson sat staring tirelessly at the door. Liddell again bent over the body, examined the bullet wounds.

“Somebody in this burg sure fancies a .32 applied to the back of a man’s head,” he grunted.

On the table at the dead man’s elbow there was a bowl of ice, two glasses half full of a dark brown liquid.

Liddell put his fingers inside one of the glasses, spread them out so he could lift the glass without leaving any mark or defacing any already on the outside of the glass. Then, he breathed on the glass. There was no sign of a print of any kind on the glass. He repeated the procedure with the other glass, found a set of large prints.

“That’s a big help. Killer probably wore gloves.” He replaced the glasses on the tray, ran his fingers through the dead man’s pockets, found nothing.

He had just turned his attention to the coat which had been tossed over the back of a chair when he heard footsteps and voices in the corridor. The footsteps stopped outside the door. There was a light rap on the door.

“Mr. Clark,” a blubbery voice called softly.

Liddell tiptoed to the bedroom, satisfied himself that the window opened on a fire escape. He eased the window up.

The rapping on the corridor door became a little more insistent. “Mr. Clark, you in there?”

Liddell swung his leg over the sill, got out onto the fire escape, started down. He was down to the second story when he heard a voice above him shouting. He looked up, saw a head hanging out the window he’d just left.

“Stop in the name of the law!” a voice demanded.

Liddell swung down the steps to the first landing. From above there came the vicious spit of a .38 and a slug screamed wildly as it ricocheted off a metal step.

Liddell hugged the side of the building as he scurried down the last flight of steps to the first floor emergency ladder. The gun above barked

twice more. Once it gouged a piece of concrete out of the wall, close enough to his head to sting him with splinters.

He yanked the .45 from its holster, fired twice in the air. The head and shoulders disappeared from the window above as though they had been yanked by a string. They hadn't reappeared by the time he'd crossed the courtyard and ducked up an alleyway to the street.

At the corner he found a hack idling at its stand, jumped in and gave the driver an address across town. As they headed toward the Square, Liddell heard the scream of a siren in the distance.

He paid the driver off a few blocks from his hotel, walked back. From the lobby he ordered another cab, gave the driver Lorna Matthews' address and leaned back against the cushion. He wondered what the killer had been searching for in Windy Grayson's apartment, decided the money he had won could easily be the lure. The thing that really bothered him was the fact that either through accident or design, the killer always seemed to stay one vital move ahead of him.

As he left the cab in front of the redhead's house, he could see the police cars and ambulance blocking traffic in front of the Delcort down the street. He crossed the sidewalk casually, entered the building.

The redhead opened the door in response to his knock. Her face had been scrubbed clean of its make-up, her thick coppery hair piled youthfully on the top of her head. The dressing gown she wore gave ample evidence of being well filled.

As he came in, she wrapped her arms around his neck. He kissed her, carried her into the living room.

"You said you'd be seeing me, but you didn't say when," she pouted. "I've called your hotel so often today that clerk must suspect me of having designs on you."

He kissed her again, deposited her on the couch, sank down beside her. "Since it sounds inevitable, I may as well relax and enjoy it." He looked around, spotted a bottle. "Isn't it part of the technique to ply the victim with liquor first?"

The redhead chuckled, filled a glass with three ice cubes from a tray on the floor, drenched them down with a stiff peg of brandy. "Try this. Wonderful for the nervous system. It has vitamins in it to build you up and alcohol to tear you down."

Liddell took the glass, leaned back, watched while the redhead lit two cigarettes, placed one between his lips. Then she picked up her glass, made herself a drink, snuggled up beside him.

“You look like things haven’t been breaking for you, Liddell. Can I help?”

“I don’t know if anybody can help, baby.” Liddell swished the cognac around the ice. “I don’t think I’d recognize a helping hand if I tripped over it. I don’t even know for sure what I’m supposed to be looking for.”

The redhead made appropriately sympathetic sounds. “Why don’t you forget about it for tonight? Maybe tomorrow you’ll have a fresher outlook, a new viewpoint.”

“I’ll have a new viewpoint, all right. One with bars.”

“What do you mean?”

“That was no accident last night. I wasn’t driving that car when Verna was killed. In fact, I don’t even think she was killed in the car. She was dead when she got into it.”

The girl looked startled. “But I heard—”

“I know what you heard, but forget about it. Somebody set out to frame me and between us, he did a good job of it.”

“But why?”

“I’m not sure myself,” Liddell admitted. He took a deep drag on the cigarette, let the smoke dribble out of his nostrils. “Only answer I can see is that somebody thinks I’m getting too close to the secret behind the Villa Rouge. They can’t afford to take the chance of stirring things up by knocking me off, so they’re trying to discredit me.”

“The secret behind the Villa Rouge?” the redhead asked. “What secret?”

“That joint’s more than just a gambling den, Red. Every night there’s a flock of out-of-town racket boys hanging around out there. Suddenly during your number a red light hits one of them. He goes in the gaming room later and Bingo! He hits the jackpot. It’s some kind of a fancy pay-off system. But who’s paying them off? For what?”

Lorna stared at him, shook her head. “It sounds like you’ve been seeing too many B pictures, Johnny boy. I work out there. Remember? That joint has no secret panels or underground passages. It’s just a dressed up boob trap where the yokels get invited to contribute painlessly.”

“Okay. So you work out there. Verna worked out there, too, remember. And she was a lot closer to Mike Lane than you are. She knew what those lights meant and she told me. That’s why she died. Somebody found out she told me.”

“But—I thought you were looking for Nancy’s murderer. What’s all this got to do with her? Why should you worry about what goes on at the Villa? If the suckers like to get clipped, that’s their business.”

Liddell emptied his glass, deposited it on the floor by his feet. “Nancy’s killing is tied into it someplace. She took that job at the Villa, even shackled up with Lane because she knew that the key to what she was looking for was out there at the joint. Either she found it or came damn close to it. So she died.”

The redhead shuddered. “Sounds fatal.” She leaned past him, picked up his glass, poured more cognac over the ice. “Suppose we’re blowing the wrong end of the flute, though. Maybe she wasn’t looking for anything. Maybe she just got into a jam in the Big Town and came up here to hide out from somebody or something. Maybe she sent for you to find out for her whether it had cooled off enough for her to go back to New York. Buy that?”

“Go on.”

The girl’s shoulders shrugged expressively under the thin gown. “As for working at Mike Lane’s, well, she was show business. You wouldn’t expect her to take a job as a salesgirl or in a factory. She couldn’t dance, because whoever was looking for her might hear about it, but she could take a job peddling butts and be close to her kind of life.” She flipped a crumb of tobacco off her tongue with the tip of a long shellacked nail. “How’s the picture look from that end?”

“Not bad. You make a good case. Only, that way there are a lot of loose ends. Like the lights at the Villa. Like the man Nancy was looking for, the clipping she found that told her what happened to him, and—”

“Wait a minute, wait a minute. What man? What clipping?”

“Nancy spent a lot of time going through the back files of the *Observer*. We went through the same issues, found a story about a man who was buried here as an unidentified vagrant about six years ago. We think that’s what Nancy was doing here, looking for him. She finally found him, tipped her mitt to somebody and was killed.” He took a last drag on the cigarette, snubbed it out. “Where does that fit into your hypothesis?”

“It doesn’t,” the girl said. “You’re sure of all this?”

“I can prove most of it and tonight I expect to get the proof to the rest of it.”

“But how? Nancy’s dead, the man’s dead and you don’t even have any way of finding out who he was. I don’t see what you have to latch onto.”

“There’s a guy in town who isn’t dead who should have a lot of the answers,” he told her. “Mike Lane.”

“Mike Lane?” The redhead was startled. She took a fast drink from her glass, nearly gagged on it. “Stay away from him, Liddell. Mike’s bad medicine.”

Liddell shrugged. “When you’re real bad off, sometimes the only thing that’ll do any good is bad medicine, Red.” He picked up his glass, balanced it on the arm of the couch. “What do you know about Lane’s private life?”

“What’s that crack supposed to mean, what do I know about his private life?”

“Don’t go coy on me, Red. I’m not interested in his sex life. What I want to know is what’s he do after he closes the joint? How close does that pretty boy gunsel of his stay to him? In other words, how do I get to him?”

“You don’t. Not if you’re smart. You leave well enough alone.” She took a sip from her glass, watched Liddell over the rim. “But you’re not smart, are you?”

He gave her a horizontal nod.

“That’s what I was afraid of. I wish I could talk you out of it, Johnny. Lane’s a killer.”

“I’m looking for a killer. Remember?”

“Well, you can’t say I didn’t warn you.” She emptied her glass with a grimace. “I’ve got a pretty good idea where Mike’s likely to be right now. He plays kind of rough after hours. Tea parties and stuff. Real knock down and drag out stuff. Orgies.”

“Marijuana, eh?” Liddell recalled the soft fat look of the gambler, the heavy-lidded eyes, the discolored sacs under them. “Now that you mention it, he looks the type. Where?”

“How do I know?” There was a stubborn set to the girl’s chin. “If I did I wouldn’t tell you. You’d never get out of there alive.”

“I just finished telling you they can’t afford to knock me off. Anyway, let me worry about that. I’ve got to see Mike Lane and I’ve got to see him tonight. Where is this dive?”

Lorna worried her lower lip with her teeth. “I don’t know much about the place. First hand, I mean. Mike likes to provide the entertainment from among his own girls. Had the blonde, Verna, over there a couple of times and from what I hear she’s a holy terror, or she was when she was high.” She studied the shellack finish on her nails, looked up. “Mike wanted me to go a couple of times but I don’t go for public parties. I like privacy.”

Liddell nodded. “Stop stalling. Where is this place?”

The redhead sighed, shrugged. “Okay. You’re asking for it. It’s called Marshy’s. It’s an old frame building over on State, just outside the city limits.” She reached out, covered his hand with hers. “You’re not going to be dopey and go out there?”

“I have no choice. Besides, it sounds like the kind of a party where Mike Lane might be in a mood to let down his hair and do some talking.” He consulted his watch, frowned at the time. “I’ve got to be going.”

He leaned over, kissed the girl’s half-parted lips. She reached up, clamped her arms around his neck. After a moment, he pushed away.

“Don’t make it too tough, babe.” His eyes took in the disarrayed gown, the expanse of flesh exposed by it. “Do me a favor before I go?”

“I’d love to.”

“Let me use your phone.”

An angry flush colored the redhead’s cheeks. “Wise guy, eh?” She pulled away from him, sulked. “Help yourself. To the phone.” She yanked the housecoat around her, moved to the corner of the couch.

She refused to be mollified by his grinning apology, glowered at him from the couch while he put through his call to Happy Lewis.

The homicide man sounded worried when Liddell finally reached him. “I’ve been trying to locate you, Johnny. Something’s happened. That guy Grayson you were talking about. He’s dead. Gunned out in his room.”

“I know,” Liddell said.

“Then it was you,” Lewis groaned into the phone. “The house dick says he pegged a couple of shots at the killer when he was going down the fire escape. You kill him?”

“Nope. It was a .32, wasn’t it?”

The wire was silent for a moment. “That’s right, it was. The same caliber as the one used on the unidentified guy. I didn’t think of that.” He turned it over in his mind for a few minutes. “Wonder if it was the same gun?”

“That’s what I’d like to find out. The case your baby?”

The receiver mumbled assent.

“That gives you an excuse to go snooping around, doesn’t it? See what you can get on it.”

“Will do. When’ll I see you?”

Liddell rubbed the stubble on his chin, considered. “The way things are I don’t think I better show at my hotel, do you? You should know some hideaway where we can meet in say two hours.”

The homicide man muttered under his breath, then. “There’s a bottle club about a mile from your hotel. Runs all night—not legal, but mighty convenient. It’s called the Sports Club. Any cabbie’ll take you there. I’ll be there in as close to two hours as I can make it. If I’m not there, wait for me.”

Liddell told him okay, dropped the receiver back on the hook. He walked over to where the redhead sat, still sulking, sat on the arm of the couch next to her.

“Don’t be such a sorehead, Red. You know I’d rather stay with you than do anything else I can think of. But like you told me the other night, I work for a living. And I’ve got to keep working if I want to keep on living. I’m hot, baby. Plenty hot.” He leaned over, kissed her on the neck. “I’ll make it up to you when this deal is finished. And it’ll be finished for sure by this time tomorrow.”

“Or you’ll be,” the redhead snapped. Anger glared from her eyes for a moment, then was blotted out by dropped lids. “You’d better run along before I make a couple more passes at you.”

Chapter Fourteen

STATE street turned out to be a row of dingy frame buildings, each more ramshackled than the next. As the street meandered beyond the city limits, even the small degree of care given the sidewalks and streets disappeared. Street lights became fewer and the lawns bordering the sidewalks were overgrown and weedy.

The white frame house was the only one in the row that gave any evidence of ever having been painted. From where he stood, Johnny Liddell was sure that the houses on either side of it were unoccupied. The street itself was unnaturally quiet, the roar of traffic that characterized upper State Street didn't extend to this isolated spot.

Liddell stood back in the shadows, watching the house. No lights showed any place, it looked deserted, untenanted like its neighbors. Then, suddenly a door opened and a thin shaft of light spilled out into the street. There was a brief fragment of laughter and music that was smothered as the door closed again.

Two forms emerged onto the sidewalk, merged in the shadows again and disappeared. After a moment, Liddell heard the roar of a car being started, glaring headlights split the inky black of the alley and a car roared up State Street toward the center of town.

Obviously there was a parking space in the rear of the building. Liddell crossed the street, felt his way down a narrow driveway between two buildings halfway up the street from the white house. After a while he emerged into a weed-choked open space behind the buildings. He worked his way through the adjoining yards to what he figured to be the rear of the white house. He stood still for a moment, eyes peering into the darkness until he was satisfied that there was no guard set in the back lot.

To the left of the house, the driveway yawned blackly, while to the right was what appeared to be an open field. Liddell walked cautiously to what had once been the back door. It had been nailed shut at some time so well that now it stoutly resisted the cautious pressure he exerted against it. The lower windows, too, had been boarded and gave no encouragement.

Liddell cursed under his breath, continued to survey the possibility of bypassing the front entrance. A small cellar window held out some promise. Boarded over, it seemed to give as he pushed against it. He put the muzzle of his .45 against the weak spot, shoved. He was rewarded by the faint screech of a nail, then the entire board swung back. Liddell waited, listened for signs that the sound had been heard. After a moment, he worked on the board above, managed to open a hole large enough for him to slide through.

The interior of the cellar was like pitch. Liddell took a chance, lighted a match. The stairs were in the corner, roughly under where the back door had been. With luck, he reasoned, that could mean there'd be a back flight of stairs to the upper story.

He tiptoed to the stairs, tested each one before he put his weight on it. As he neared the top of the stairs he began to be aware of a monotonous beat that made the place vibrate.

The stairs led into what was once a kitchen, now dust-ridden, long unused. Another flight of stairs led upward from the kitchen to the second floor. Out front where he estimated the front door to be, a thin blood-red dot glowed and brightened as though someone were puffing on a cigarette at some vantage point that gave him full control of the front door.

Liddell ascended the second flight of stairs cautiously. Now the monotonous beat was identifiable as the pounding of a drum. It was supplemented by the thin whine of a clarinet, the deep-throated moan of a sax and a couple of other instruments he couldn't place. The music was wild, frenzied. It had all the earmarks of a jam session run wild.

A sweet smell began to assail his nostrils, almost made him sneeze. He crept to the head of the stairs, put his hand out, felt the heavy black velvet drapes hung across the closed door beyond. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make the place lightproof and soundproof.

Liddell slid behind the heavy drape, fumbled for the knob of the door. He jammed the .45 into his jacket pocket, dropped his hat to the floor. He turned the knob, pulled the door open a crack, applied his eye to it.

The room beyond was bathed in a dull blue light that transformed the faces in it into leering death masks. On the floor was a thick, dark blue rug. There was no furniture in the room, but a dozen or more men and women were draped over cushions scattered around the floor.

In the corner a group of musicians were frenziedly pounding out a wild jungle beat that had the room rocking. As Liddell watched, one of the death

masks detached itself from the arms of a half-dressed girl, slammed itself at the empty piano, joined the jam.

A tall brunette danced wildly in the middle of the floor, her hair flying, her body undulating and throbbing in time to the music. As he watched, her motions became more and more abandoned until suddenly, with a wild scream, she collapsed in a heap on the floor, lay there. Nobody paid her any attention.

All over the room a heavy dark smoke swirled sluggishly, moved only by the temporary breeze created when somebody moved. Liddell made out the fat form of Mike Lane draped over a divan, a long cigarette between the thick wet smear of his lips. His head was throbbing jerkily in time with the music, his eyes had retreated completely behind the bulging sacs of fat.

Liddell flattened against the door, looked to the left and right. Just to the left, a big figure bulked. He recognized the battered profile of Edwin, Lane's ex-pug bodyguard. The man was licking his lips, staring at the unconscious figure of the brunette in the middle of the floor. He started slightly as the door by his side creaked.

With a snort of annoyance, he walked over to the door, looked out. He felt the .45 jab its snout into his kidney, turned slowly. When he saw Liddell, his thick lips split in a leering smile, his hand streaked for his pocket.

Liddell's right came up from the floor, buried itself to the wrist in the bodyguard's middle. The air wheezed out of his lungs like a punctured balloon. Before he could straighten up, Liddell laid the flat of his gun against the ex-pug's head.

The bodyguard unbuckled at the knees and flopped to the floor, a loose bundle of arms and legs. Liddell stepped over him, applied his eye to the door, satisfied himself that the fracas had attracted no attention.

He stuffed a rolled-up handkerchief in the fallen bodyguard's mouth, then handcuffed his hands in back of him in such a way that if he decided to go anyplace, he'd have to take the hall radiator with him.

"That's just in case you get wanderlust," Liddell told him.

He opened the door a crack, waited until the frenzied pitch of the band hit a hysterical high. He widened the opening a little more, oozed in and kicked the door shut with his heel. Nobody paid him any attention. All eyes were on another half-naked girl who'd taken the brunette's place in the middle of the floor. Her arms flailed wildly, her eyes rolled, she screamed her ecstasy.

Liddell's eyes sought out Mike Lane where he sat gloating like an obscene Buddha, his tiny eyes fixed hungrily on the cavorting girl, his head nodding in time to the music.

Liddell worked his way around the room until he stood behind the gambler. He moved close to him, jabbed the snout of his gun in the back of the fat man's neck.

At first Lane paid no attention to Liddell. It was almost as though he were unconscious of the prodding of the .45. Slowly, awareness seemed to seep into him. His head rotated on its axis, his beady, red-rimmed eyes stared up into Liddell's.

"Don't try anything, Lane," Liddell warned him. "That stuff you smoke may send you out of this world, but this baby in my pocket will make it more permanent. Get up."

The rolls of fat that ringed the gambler's neck quivered in anger. His overripe, wet lips puffed and blubbered their futility. For a moment, Liddell thought the fat man was going to resist, then the fight seemed to die out, he struggled to his feet.

"Make for that back door and don't do anything to attract anybody's attention," Liddell told him.

Hate glared through the film over the fat man's beady eyes. "You won't get out of here alive, fellow." His voice sounded thick, strangled.

Liddell jabbed the .45 deeper into his back, saw the gambler wince with pain. "Start for the door. And remember. No smart stuff."

The music was reaching for new heights of frenzy. The unconscious brunette on the floor had the company of the girl who'd taken her place. A blonde on a pile of cushions in the corner screamed shrilly, tore the shirt from the man beside her, dug her nails into his flesh. The room began to rock.

Mike Lane dried the wet smear of his mouth with the back of his hand, pulled himself together with an effort. "Be smart, Liddell. Get out now and keep going." His breath was coming in wheezes, perspiration beaded the pink bald spot on his head.

"Save your breath. You'll have plenty of time to talk. Now. Back up to the door. Real slow. Come on."

With Liddell behind him, Lane started backing up slowly to the back door.

Suddenly, without warning, “Joey, Joey. It’s Liddell. He’s here. He’s here,” the fat man bellowed.

The music broke off with a suddenness that made the silence almost a tangible thing. The dancers stood in the middle of the floor, frozen, with vacant, shocked expressions on their faces.

Joey, the wavy-haired gunman, suddenly appeared at the far door. He held a .38 special equipped with a silencer in his hand. His lips formed an obscene curse, the gun in his hand spit viciously, made a faint plopping noise.

The fat form of Mike Lane stiffened, his hand went to his throat. He shuddered violently, and then he seemed to come apart like some huge figure made of blocks. His knees sagged under him and his huge hulk hit the floor with a thud.

Across the room the blond gungel was still shooting.

Liddell fired twice, winced at the impact of the .45 in the soundproofed room. Joey staggered, fired again and Liddell could see the slugs chew bits out of the wall near his head.

He raised his .45 again, watched Joey waver on top of the sight, squeeze the trigger. The gungel’s body jerked as the heavy slugs slammed into it. He folded his arms across his belly, went to his knees, then slid out full length on his face.

In a moment chaos broke out in the room. Men and women, dressed and naked, rushed for the door. The unconscious bodies of the dancers were trampled. Musicians with instruments cradled in their arms fought hysterically with undressed women. All tried to get through the door at the same time. Then, as suddenly as it started, it was over. The room was empty except for the bodies on the floor.

Liddell felt a curious lightness in his head, put his hand up, brought it down, the fingers stained with blood. A slug had dug a shallow furrow along his scalp. He knelt down beside Mike Lane’s body, turned it over.

Mike Lane was in no condition to answer the questions Liddell had intended to put to him, nor would he ever be. One of Joey’s shots had caught him in the neck. It left a little dark blue hole right above where his tie was knotted.

It only took one.

Chapter Fifteen

AN hour later, Johnny Liddell was leaning comfortably on the highly polished bar of the bottle club where Happy Lewis had promised to meet him. The place did a roaring, if not entirely legal, business despite the hour.

The bartender placed a bottle on the bar, marked the level of the liquid in it with a small piece of wax. He slid a glass over to Liddell, went back to his racing form.

Liddell had lowered the level in the bottle by a full half inch by the time Happy Lewis ambled in. The detective sergeant nodded to the man behind the stick, indicated that he wanted a glass.

After the bartender had shuffled back to his paper, Lewis helped himself to some cognac, cockeyed an eye at Liddell. “Had a busy night, little man?” he asked amiably.

Liddell shrugged. “It wasn’t exactly fun, but you couldn’t say it was dull. What’d you find out at the medical examiner’s office? How about the slugs in Windy Grayson? They match the one in John Doe?”

The homicide man took a drink of his cognac, wrinkled his nose. “Got some bad news for you, Johnny. The slugs they dug out of John Doe got misplaced couple years ago. I fixed it so’s these won’t get misplaced the same way. Just in case there’s a next time.”

“There’ll be a next time, all right,” Liddell grunted. “I’m a candidate for a cold slab right now. Got a cigarette?”

Lewis gave him a cigarette, watched him take a pack of matches from his jacket pocket. He tried to scratch one, but the head was soft and wouldn’t light. It came off like paste when he rubbed it on the abrasive strip. He tried another one, swore when the same thing happened. Lewis lighted a match, held it for him.

“I thought you said they didn’t want you. That was only a couple of hours ago,” the homicide man drawled.

“There’s been an awful lot happened in that couple of hours,” Liddell grinned bleakly. “Mike Lane’s dead. So’s that gunsel of his with the marcel

and the slave bracelet.”

Happy Lewis looked around, lowered his voice. “For God’s sake, Liddell, you gone kill crazy? When and where?”

“In a reefer joint out on State. Place called Marshy’s. I didn’t gun Lane, incidentally. His own boy did it. The slugs’ll tell the story. Joey’s keeping a couple of mine warm, but the one in Mike Lane came from Joey’s gun.”

Lewis started for the phone, stopped when Liddell caught his arm. “Don’t call it in yet, Happy. It’s out of your territory anyhow.”

“It’s probably been turned in already,” the homicide man said. “There must have been some witnesses, weren’t there?”

“Dozen or more. But I don’t think any of them will peep. When the joy juice wears off, they’re going to be scared stiff of being associated with that place. They won’t talk.”

Lewis tugged gloomily on his nose with thumb and forefinger. He stared at Liddell, picked up his glass, drained it. “Suppose you give me a blow by blow break-down, eh Liddell?”

“I had a tip Lane would be out there so I went out looking for him. Seemed to me that he was the only one who had the answer to all the questions in this case. The rest were all dead.” He took a drag on the cigarette, dribbled it down his nostrils. “I got into the joint through a back window. They had some kind of a guard stashed out front. I ease into the joint, take care of your broken-nosed friend, Edwin, and worked my way over in back of Mike Lane.”

Happy Lewis pushed his hat on the back of his head, leaned against the bar. “Nobody sees you?”

“You could have marched a panzer division through that room and nobody would have paid no mind. They’re all higher than the cost of living and there’s a good-looking chick in the middle of the floor doing a strip that would make Margie Hart blush.”

Lewis nodded. “Okay. So you get in back of Mike. Then what?”

“I put the rod on him, tell him to back up slowly. Out of a clear sky he starts bellowing for his gungel and before I can duck, the joint’s raining lead. Joey’s spraying everything in sight and one of his wild ones nests next to Mike’s Adam’s Apple and he goes down for good. Another one nicked me on the side of the head and I got mad.” He showed the homicide man the flesh wound in his scalp.

“You got mad,” Lewis repeated lugubriously. “So?”

Liddell shrugged, took a sip of his cognac. “I had to take him, Happy. There were a dozen people in that room. As soon as they snapped out of their trance I knew there’d be a stampede. A lot of innocent people could have gotten hurt.” He wiped his mouth with his hand. “I figured Joey wouldn’t be any great loss to the community. Besides, he was beginning to settle down and get too damn close for comfort.”

“Alan Rivers know about this?”

Liddell shook his head. “Nobody but you. I can’t take the time to issue on the hour bulletins on this one. When I got it all wrapped up nice and neat I’ll take it in, drop it on his desk and say there she is.”

“It couldn’t be that you have a sneaking hunch that Al Rivers is in this mess someplace, could it?” Lewis asked.

“I don’t know from nothing. Anybody and everybody could be in on it. You could be.” He lowered the level in the bottle by two more drinks. “All I know is that Rivers suggested I ought to get out of town when I first met him. Second, only the people in that room knew I was on my way to get some information out of Windy Grayson and when I got there, Windy’s all air conditioned and ventilated—but not wired for sound.” He took a final drag on his butt, dropped it on the floor, ground it out.

The homicide man turned it over in his mind. “Rivers a killer? Nah. You’re off base on that one.”

“I know he’s not the actual killer,” Liddell growled. “I just say that he could be in with the killer.” He consulted his watch. “Looks like I still have an hour or so to get the proof I need and then—”

“Where? As if I didn’t feel it in my bones,” Lewis groaned.

“That’s right. The Villa Rouge. That’s where this whole thing started. It’s an appropriate place for it to finish.” He lowered his voice. “I’m positive that we’ll find the explanation to everything that’s been going on once we get in that safe out there.”

Happy Lewis had a pained look on his face. “It’s a good thing I didn’t hear you say you were going out to the Villa tonight, force your way in, crack the safe and then probably have to shoot your way out. Hell, I could lose my pension for just listening to such talk.”

“Okay, so make like you didn’t hear me because that’s exactly what I intend to do.” He fished through his pockets, came up with a leather-covered

memo book. "The blonde got cut down before she could get me the combination to that safe, but this little book I found on Mike Lane ought to take care of that." He stuck the book back in his pocket. "So make like you didn't hear me."

The homicide man concentrated on making concentric circles on the bar with the wet bottom of his glass. "I can't, Liddell. I heard it all right, and if I don't stop you, my pension's good as gone."

Liddell snorted. "And I thought you were a right guy."

Happy Lewis straightened up. "Well, now that my pension's gone, I got nothing else to lose by going with you. After all, I always did have a yen to see what that joint looked like from the inside and like this I can do it for free."

"You leveling, Happy?"

The homicide man nodded.

"That's a relief," Liddell told him. "I sure as hell can use some help on this caper tonight." He consulted his watch. "It'll be light in about two hours and then it'll be too late. We better pull out."

Somewhere a telephone shrilled. The bartender growled under his breath, disappeared from behind the bar. After a moment he was back. "Your name Liddell, bud?"

Johnny nodded.

"Operator's got a call for you. From New York." He sounded impressed.

"Must be Steve Baron," Liddell told Lewis. "I left word at the hotel I'd be over here in case the call came through. Now if he's only got some line on John Doe." He crossed his fingers, walked back to the telephone booth.

Steve Baron's voice showed no signs of sleep or fatigue. "What kind of a rat-trap you in now, Liddell?" He growled. "That fleabag you're holed up in told the operator you'd be over there. What is it?"

"Bottle club. How come you're up so late, Steve? You must have something hot."

Baron grunted. "How about you? What's with you?"

"What ain't? All hell's popping and I've got a ringside seat. Got myself in a shooting corner tonight and lost a perfectly good suspect."

"Anybody I know?" Baron asked.

“Mike Lane, the local bad man. The guy who operates the Villa Rouge. One of his guns was tossing lead my way so I stepped behind Mike. He fielded one for me. By the way, another one of your pals got his here tonight. Windy Grayson, the Chi hood. Somebody dropped by his hotel a couple of hours ago and did all the things Capone threatened to do but couldn’t.”

The voice on the other end was thoughtful. “What would a big league racket boy like Windy be doing in a jerkwater set-up like that?”

“You tell me,” Liddell invited. “Better still, tell me you got our John Doe tagged.”

“I have,” the receiver told him. “I had the prints retouched like you said, and sent Louie D’angelo over to Ed Doherty, the Broadway reporter for the *Express* with them. He made your guy the first time out.”

“Who was he?”

“Hold onto your hat. His name was Hayes. Carter Hayes.”

Liddell wiped the perspiration off his upper lip. “Any relation to Nancy?”

“Her kid brother. Doherty says the kid lived with Nancy and she was nuts about him. Spoiled hell out of him, matter of fact. Sent him through art school and stuff. The kid ups and takes a powder one day and Nancy almost blows her top. Then one day she does a fadeout, too, and today was the first time Doherty’s heard her name since then. Just disappeared right off the face of the earth.”

“This kid, Nancy’s brother, what’d he do for a living? Anything?”

There was a rattle of paper over the phone as though Baron was checking the report. “Not much. Sort of a half-baked artist. Guess the kid had a sour streak. He did time, a short stretch for faking copies of old masters and peddling them. Must have been pretty good at it. He stuck a couple of collectors with his phonies.”

“Anything else?”

“He was petticoat happy. Go on the make for anything that would stand still long enough. Took his romances big, too. Carried a torch you could read by half the time.”

Liddell nodded. “Well, that explains what Nancy was doing here. Chasing her no good brother. But it sure as hell doesn’t show any connection

between either of them with the Villa Rouge.” He rubbed the stubble on his chin with the heel of his hand. “What happens if I’ve been barking up the wrong tree? Suppose like everybody says there’s no case?”

“In that case, my fine-feathered friend,” the unsympathetic voice on the phone told him, “you are in what I would call one helluva jam.”

Liddell nodded forlornly. “It’s just possible I could be wrong.”

“In that case, just apologize and come on home. Drop by the morgue and tell Mike Lane and his gungsel it’s all a big mistake, tell Windy Grayson it’s been fun and stuff but there’s been a slight error made. Oh yes. Don’t forget to tell the chief you’ve decided you’re wrong. That I have got to see.” Baron’s laugh came over the long distance wire, but even at that distance it didn’t sound as though he thought it was funny, either.

Happy Lewis was still drooped over the bar when Liddell returned.

“Your home office?” the homicide man asked. “Any luck?”

Liddell helped himself to a cigarette from the pack on the bar. “Yeah. We’ve identified John Doe.”

“No kidding?” Lewis brightened up. “Put us any further ahead?”

Liddell lit the cigarette, stared at the burning match, blew it out with a mouthful of smoke. “Not so’s you could notice it. John Doe was Carter Hayes, Nancy’s kid brother. Took a powder from the Big Town, almost drove his sister crazy with worry. Somehow she traces him here, does a fadeout herself. First time anybody hears of her after that is the day she calls the agency and asks for me.”

The hopeful expression froze on Happy Lewis’ face, curdled, faded. “That ain’t much help, at that.” He tweaked his long nose between his thumb and forefinger. “Well, at least you were right about her coming here to look for somebody. Must have been a tough blow when she found him dead.” He puzzled over that for a moment, looked up at Liddell. “But, in that case why call for you? She knew damn well where the kid was then.”

“She probably figured the kid was bumped off. Maybe even had a good hunch by whom and why.” He poured more cognac into each of the glasses, moodily contemplated the amount of white space under the bartender’s mark. “When she called us in, she signed her death certificate.”

“Why didn’t she go to the police?”

“And do what? Tell the desk sergeant that the chief or his silent partner Mike Lane murdered her kid brother?”

Happy Lewis grinned wryly. “I see what you mean. Even so, I don’t see how this punk kid could get so important that either Connors or Lane would be mixed up in his kill. Chances are he did try to break into the Villa and got gunned for his trouble.”

“Maybe. But I still don’t think so. I’m still convinced that kid has an important connection with the Villa and I’m going out there to see if I can pick it up from that end. With me?”

“Sure. I’m not reading any continued stories.”

Liddell lifted his glass. “Luck,” he said.

“I’ve got a sneaking suspicion we’re going to need it,” Lewis nodded.

They drained their glasses, set them back on the bar.

Chapter Sixteen

THE light coupé skimmed along the same road Johnny Liddell had driven on his way to the ill-fated rendezvous with Verna, the dead cigarette girl. The sky had darkened and a cold drizzle was falling.

“We turn off route 7 just a little up ahead. Slow her down a bit, Happy. Here’s the turn-off.”

Happy Lewis swung the wheel, skidded the light car off the state highway onto the macadam strip leading to the Villa. “How far do we go on this one, Liddell?”

“About a mile,” Liddell told him. He peered out into the black, could see nothing. “Better not drive all the way up to the place. We can ditch the heap a quarter mile or so down the road and hoof the rest of the way. It’ll be wet, but the stuff running down our face is more likely to be water than blood that way.”

The homicide man nodded without taking his eyes from the road. “Got any idea how we’re going to get on the grounds? Seems to me I’ve heard Mike Lane has a baby army patrolling them.”

“We go in like gentlemen. Through the front gate.”

“Oh, sure. Maybe we stop at the gate and have them send a car to escort us the rest of the way.” Lewis sounded annoyed. “I hope you know we’re breaking and entering and that they have a perfect right to plug us so full of holes we couldn’t even hold water. They already sent one guy out feet first.”

“I’m not underestimating them, Happy. But I’m serious about going in the front way. That’s about the safest.”

“Why?” Lewis was having difficulty keeping the light car on the slippery, steep road.

“Well, from the little bit of casing I’ve been able to do, I found out that on one side, maybe two, it’s protected by high cliffs hanging over the ocean. I figure they’ve got the open sides booby trapped with alarms and stuff. Maybe worse. But the front entrance is probably only guarded by one man. They won’t have anything permanent set up there because they use that

entrance for the paying customers. Besides, Verna told me that ever so often, Mike would come back to the joint pretty late. They wouldn't have anything complicated that they'd have to disconnect every time that happened."

"Sounds reasonable," Lewis conceded. He peered down at the speedometer. "Almost there. We've gone better than half a mile since we left the state road."

Liddell opened his window, stuck his head out. "Here's a good place to ditch the car. Pull her off the road here, run her up under that tree. Nobody would notice her unless they were looking for her."

Lewis nodded, swung the car off the road, jounced across rough ground, pulled it to a stop under a big tree and cut the lights. He yanked his .38 special from his hip pocket, checked the shells in it. Then, from the glove compartment, he took a spare box of shells, dumped them in his pocket.

"Better check the artillery, Johnny," he suggested. "There'll never be a better time."

"It's all checked. Fresh magazine and all. Nothing but the best for the Villa Rouge." He gave his crooked smile. Then, as an afterthought. "Look, Happy. I think you're a sucker for sticking your neck out like this. You can still bow out and I'll be grateful for the lift."

"Don't be a chump. Like I told you, I may never get another chance to see what the joint looks like from the inside. That cover charge is a little too rich for my salary."

They left the car, trudged a quarter of a mile in complete silence, staying as far back from the road as feasible. Finally, Liddell signaled a halt. He pointed ahead to where two large stone pillars loomed dark against the sky.

"That's the front way in," Liddell whispered.

"Looks like the gate's closed. Now what?" He indicated the high hedge to their right. "Over the hedge?"

"Probably electrified," Liddell warned. "Nope. Safest bet is still to go in through that front gate." As they watched a tiny pinpoint of light glowed red, died away. "There's a guard on the gate. That's our in."

He signaled for Lewis to get closer to the hedge, merged with the deep shadow it threw. Cautiously they advanced closer to the main gate.

Now, when the cigarette was sucked to a glow, Liddell was able to make out the dark outline of the guard's head. He held up a stubby finger to his

lips for silence. Lewis nodded that he understood, watched Liddell bend down, fumble for a stone.

“Stay close to me, Happy,” Liddell whispered.

He brought his arm back, tossed the stone out onto the road at the far side of the gate, stepped back into the shadows. There was a clatter as the stone hit the road, rolled into the underbrush on the opposite side of the entrance.

For a moment, there was no sign from the guard at the gate. Then they saw the cigarette hit the ground, heard the slight squeak of the well-oiled gate. A dark figure crept out from the entrance toward the road, went a few feet in the direction of the noise.

Liddell tugged on Lewis' coat, indicated for him to follow. They reached the gate, flattened themselves against the side of the stone pillar. After a moment they heard the guard returning. He passed within inches of Liddell, stopped short with a muffled groan when he felt the snout of Liddell's .45 bore into his back.

“Quiet, friend,” Liddell advised. He prodded the guard inside the gate, closed it behind him. “Frisk him, Happy.”

The guard offered no resistance. Happy Lewis came up with a .45 and a sawed-off shotgun. “Must have been expecting company.”

“What do you guys think you're pulling?” the guard wanted to know. “What is this?”

“This?” Liddell asked. “This is a .45. It's got two ends. This end spits lead—the other end splits skulls. You don't have to find out first hand if you play smart and do like you're told.”

“You guys are nuts. I'm not the only guard on here. You'll never get to the house,” the guard sneered.

“That's your tough luck, buster,” Liddell told him. “If anything starts, you get it first. So it's going to pay you to see to it that we don't run into those other guards.”

“How?”

“How many other guards are here on the grounds?”

“Four more. One on this road, one on each side of the house.”

Liddell nodded. “How about inside? How many?”

“One.”

“Good.” Liddell prodded him with the gun. “We’re going to pay a little visit to the guard on this road. You’re going to call him, get him over. We’ll do the rest.”

“How do you know I won’t warn him?”

Liddell snorted. “I don’t. But like I said, you get it first. Right through the kidneys. Ever see what a sawed-off shotgun can do close up?” He jabbed the gun into the guard’s back.

The guard was shaken. “How do I know you won’t blast me anyhow?” There was an anxious note in his voice.

“You don’t. You’re sure you’ll get it if you kick up. This way you’ve got a chance I won’t. So what’ve you got to lose? Start moving.”

The guard walked slowly along the path, stopped in the shadow of a big bush. “This is where we meet.”

Liddell indicated he was to signal. The guard took a deep breath, called softly, “Ernie! Ernie, where are you?” There was hardly a quaver in his voice.

A heavy pair of footsteps was the answer. As they approached, their owner stumbled, cursed colorfully.

“What’s the matter? Lonesome?” he growled as he came up. “What do you want?”

Happy Lewis stepped around the newcomer, jabbed his gun into his back. “We just wanted a fourth for bridge, Ernie. You play dummy.”

The newcomer snarled under his breath, started to swing around. Lewis lifted his gun, chopped down. The guard never saw the blow that felled him. He went down without a sound, never moved. Happy Lewis bent over him, came up with a .45.

“He won’t bother us for a while,” he told Liddell.

The other guard started to whimper. “Look, fellows. I did like you said. I ain’t looking for trouble.” In the dark his face had the color of warm butter.

Lewis stood looking at the fallen hood, his gun hanging at his side. Without warning, the gate guard made a dive for it.

Liddell hit him with the flat of the .45. There was a sickening crunch of bone and flesh. The guard sighed, slipped forward on his face.

“We can’t take any chances,” Liddell whispered. “There are four more of these guys wandering around here someplace.”

Lewis nodded his agreement, fished two pairs of handcuffs from an inner pocket. He helped Liddell strip their belts from the unconscious men, then drag them back under the tree.

“Prop ’em up with their back to the tree and we’ll cuff ’em hand to hand,” Liddell whispered.

After they’d been cuffed, he wadded their pocket handkerchiefs in their mouths, used the belts to make certain they couldn’t work the gags out.

“So far so good,” Lewis muttered. “Now what?”

Liddell shrugged. “Now we walk right up to the house and go in. After all, we’re guests, aren’t we?”

No one challenged them as they walked up the path to the steps. The little vestibule where the uniformed attendants sat during business hours was empty. Liddell tried the door, found it unlocked. He entered, motioned for Happy Lewis to follow.

The reception hall and the bar were empty. Tables and chairs were stacked in the supper room. Liddell indicated the stairs, started in that direction when he heard footsteps approaching. He waved Lewis to silence, drew his .45, waited.

The unmarked door to the left of the bandstand opened and a short, thickset man came through. He didn’t notice the two men standing watching him until he was well into the room. Then, his hand streaked for his shoulder holster. It froze inches from the butt of the gun cradled there when he saw the two guns covering him.

“That’s being smart, buster,” Liddell told him. He walked over, relieved him of his gun. “Now, relax.”

“What is this, a heist?” the short man asked.

Liddell grinned. “No. I just made a down payment on the joint on one of the wheels last night. I’m just taking inventory.”

The guard’s cold little eyes studied Liddell, then widened with recognition.

“I make you now,” he grunted through tight lips. “You’re the nosey private eye that was snooping around here past couple of nights. You must like it here. Now what are you after?”

“Like I said. I paid for a tour of the joint, so I came back to get it.” He waved him back toward the door through which he’d come. “We’ll start with Mike Lane’s office.”

The short man’s beady eyes flicked from Liddell to Happy Lewis and back. He licked his lips with his tongue, then shrugged. “You’re the boss. That heater in your fist says so.”

“It also says you’d be a sucker to try anything, buster,” Happy Lewis drawled. “Like for instance you were to touch an alarm or some kind of a signal. You wouldn’t be around to see how it came out. You know what I mean?”

The guard nodded.

“Just so’s we all understand one another,” Liddell told him. “Okay. You first.” He indicated the unmarked door.

The office was situated directly above the supper room. It was small, had the standard equipment of desk, filing cabinets, leather chairs and couch. Near the desk a section of the rug was rolled back. Under it the floor was made of glass and standing by the desk, Liddell could look down into the supper room they’d just left.

“Cozy arrangement.” He called Lewis’ attention to it, “Mike Lane could sit here at his desk and see everything that was going on down below in the supper room. Take a look at that glass floor. It’s that two-way glass—transparent from this side, opaque from the other. He could watch everybody and everything without anybody being the wiser.”

Lewis nodded, indicated a chair for the guard. The short man dropped into it without argument, showed no interest in what was going on.

Liddell opened the drawers of the desk, sifted rapidly through their contents. He found nothing of particular interest. Under the blotter, a comprehensive floor plan of the supper room with the location of the various tables marked in red was pasted to the top of the desk.

“Here’s the way he was able to call for the lights,” Liddell told Lewis. “Somebody would tip him off to the various people as they came in.” He indicated the twin phones on the desk. “These phones are probably connected with all parts of the house. When the bartender or the doorman fingered somebody, they’d be assigned to a particular table. Mike would roll back his rug, look them over, then give the guy handling the spotlight his orders.” He dropped the blotter back into place, turned to the guard. “Yellow

light meant the guy was suspicious and unknown. It was a signal to the house men to keep an eye on the guy. Right?"

The guard looked him in the eye, shrugged. "It's your story."

Liddell sighed. "Okay, buster. If you insist on doing it the hard way, I can use the exercise." He passed his gun over to Lewis, stripped off his coat. "Besides, for all I know, you may be one of the guys who worked over me with a sap last night."

Perspiration glistened on the short man's upper lip. He wiped it off with his cuff, watched Liddell with apprehension.

Liddell's arm swung in a short arc, caught the man in the chair high on the cheek, drove his head back. "We'll start easy and work up to it, eh buster?"

"Okay, okay." The man in the chair protected his face with his arm. "The yellow light was for guys we was to keep an eye on."

"The red light?"

"I don't know, mister." The perspiration beaded on the guard's face unnoticed. "You can beat my brains out but I still don't know. That wasn't a signal for us guys on the floor. That was for the stick men in the gambling room. That's level." He licked his lips, kept his elbow half crooked in front of his face.

Liddell stared at him, pursed his lips. "The green light?"

The man in the chair retreated further behind his elbow. He looked from Liddell to Happy Lewis. "I didn't have nothing to do with it." He wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a nervous gesture. "I seen you get green-lighted last night but I didn't have anything to do with it."

"What's the green light mean?"

"It means the guy's a stoolie or a flycop. The floor men are to keep an eye on him while he's in the joint. When he leaves, we signal the boss here, and he arranges for him to get taken care of."

Liddell nodded. "Green for death. That's what I thought." He picked up his jacket, shrugged into it, stuck his .45 in its holster. "I guess that's all we need you for, buster."

The short man stared apprehensively at the .38 Happy Lewis held on him, wet his lips. "I won't give you any trouble, mister. I don't get paid to commit suicide. I'll behave."

Liddell frowned at him, appeared to study the situation. “Well, could be you don’t have to get hurt. If you were me, where would you stick a guy like you so he wouldn’t get under your feet?”

The guard hopped out of his chair, scuttled across the room, pulled open a door. “In here.”

Liddell walked into the small lavatory, satisfied himself there was no other exit. “No windows, eh?”

“It’s got a ventilating system. I’ll make like a mouse. You won’t even know I’m around.”

Liddell nodded, transferred the key to the front of the door, closed the man in, turned the key in the lock. He grinned at Lewis, walked back to the desk, selected a cigar from the humidor.

“Well, now what?” the homicide man asked. “We’re in. There’s not much of a chance of our getting out. And we haven’t found a damn thing.”

Johnny Liddell denuded the cigar of its wrapper, bit off the end, spat it on the floor. “Maybe that’s because we haven’t looked yet,” he said.

Chapter Seventeen

THE safe was the built-in variety, hidden by a huge sporting print on the wall. Happy Lewis looked it over with a jaundiced eye of an expert, sighed, scratched his head.

“It’ll take both the combination and a key to open this one, Liddell. Without them it’d take a month to blast your way in. It’s built like the rear wall of a brick battleship.”

Liddell shifted the cigar from the right side of his mouth to the left. “Sure, but we’ve got the keys and the combination.” He pulled out the leather-covered memo book from his breast pocket, a key ring from his pants pocket.

“Picked a dead man’s pocket, by god,” Lewis grinned. “You’re a genius. You know that?”

“Sure. Besides, I figured Mike wouldn’t be having any further use for them, so I borrowed them before I left him for the meat wagon,” he admitted cheerfully.

Happy Lewis lit a cigarette, watched Liddell skim through the pages of the memo book.

“Take your time, Johnny. It’s just about daybreak and in a little while those other guards are going to find the two we trussed up and all hell’s going to break loose.”

Liddell stopped leafing through the pages, studied a set of figures near the back of the book. “Bingo,” he yipped. “Here it is.”

“No kidding?” Lewis’ face brightened. “Let’s have it.”

Liddell took a fresh hold on the cigar with his teeth. “I’ll call ’em, you spin ’em. Okay?”

“Good deal. I always did want to make like Jimmy Valentine.” The homicide man stepped to the safe, spun the dials experimentally. “All set.”

“Three left,” Liddell consulted the book. He watched the other man manipulate the dial. “Two right, twenty-seven. Left eight.” The dial clicked

softly. “Right three, thirteen,” waited until Lewis nodded. “Right four, zero.”

There was a soft click as Lewis stopped twirling the dial. He caught the handle of the safe, twisted. He looked puzzled when the handle wouldn’t budge.

“The key,” Liddell told him. He tossed over the bunch of keys, watched Lewis try several before one fitted.

This time the thick door swung out without a hitch.

Liddell squeezed in alongside Lewis, peered into the safe. He stuck his hand in, pulled out large bales of bills, dropped them to the floor, repeated the process until the safe was empty. After a moment, he turned to Lewis.

“Nothing but money. Looks like we’re really in trouble.”

Lewis nodded, stirred the pile of bills on the floor with his toe. “The one time that I hit the jackpot I have to be in a spot where I’m not likely to be going anyplace where I can spend it. This place must be a goldmine. There’s an awful lot of cabbage there.”

Liddell stared at the floor glumly. “It is an awful lot of dough for a small set-up like this one. Besides, the two nights I was here the house wasn’t doing much winning. It was—” He broke off, rubbed his chin with the heel of his hand. “Wait a minute. There’s something screwy here.”

“It wouldn’t be us, by any chance?”

Liddell bent down, picked up a fist full of bills, carried them over to the desk. He arranged them in a neat stack, ran through them. They were of three denominations—fives, tens, and twenties.

Lewis watched narrowly while Liddell examined each bill carefully, front and back.

“Take a look at this ten,” Liddell called to him finally.

Lewis ambled over, plopped on the corner of the desk, took the bill. “Been a long time since I saw one of these,” he drawled.

“Take a good look at it.”

Lewis frowned, crinkled the bill, held it up against the desk lamp, stared. Then he looked up. “Queer,” he said in a soft voice. “It’s counterfeit, by god.”

Liddell flipped feverishly through the rest of the bills, subjected each to a searching scrutiny. Then he ran over to the pile of bills on the floor,

brought back another stack and repeated the process.

“They’re all queer. Every damn one of them,” he announced.

Lewis stared at him open-mouthed. “Well, what do you know?”

“I know a helluva lot I’ve only been guessing up to now,” Liddell growled. “In fact I know enough to close this case, but good.” He reached for the telephone, got long distance, gave a Washington number.

“That’s fine. Only how are we going to get out of here to tell somebody about it?” Lewis wanted to know.

“We’re not going to. We’re going to wait for reinforcements.”

Lewis grunted. “Call for the police, no doubt. They’ll give us an escort all right. One at each corner of the box.”

“I’ll get somebody better than the police department to bail us out. The Federal boys. Counterfeiting’s a federal offense, and—” He broke off to answer the phone. In a moment he was talking to a Treasury Department official. “This is Liddell of Acme. Been getting any beefs down there about a flood of phony fives, tens, and twenties? You have? Brother, I’ve just uncovered the nest where they’re being hatched.” He gave the man on the other end of the phone a brief outline of the night’s events. He grinned into the mouthpiece, hung up. “They’ll have a flying squad down here in no time, Happy,” he said.

“Just so long’s that’s not too late.” Lewis plopped himself on the couch. “Now it’s counterfeiting fouling up a perfectly simple murder case. What the hell can that have to do with it?”

Liddell touched a match to the dead grey end of his cigar, sucked it to life. “Let’s break it down. Here we have a small time gambling operation that breaks out with a rash of big-time sharpshooters giving it a heavy play. Right?”

“Go on.”

“There’s a complicated system of light signals. When the outside men don’t like a sucker’s look, they yellow-light him. That’s the signal for the house men to see the guy doesn’t get under anybody’s feet. Also, it gives the house a chance to check him against any pictures or identification they might have on him.”

“For why all these precautions?”

“To make sure they weren’t having a T man rung in on them. Suppose the T men got wind of the fact that this spot was the distribution center for the queer and that Lane was selling it wholesale to out-of-town passers. They put the arm on some out-of-town hood, put him on ice and send a T man masquerading as him. It’s been done, you know.”

Lewis nodded. “I get it. Mike Lane arranged to have pictures or something of the guys he was doing business with. He’d sit up here, compare the picture with the guy sitting down there below.”

“Right. Now, just as a measure of precaution, the first time the guy showed up in the joint he got yellow-lighted. That was so he could be identified. If the guy was a phony, passing under somebody else’s name, he got green-lighted next night. He never showed up again.”

“And the red light?”

“The red light was the whole gimmick,” Liddell nodded. “Like the guy in the john said, that was the signal for the stick men in the gambling room. Got it?”

Happy Lewis sighed sadly. “I hate to make like a dope, but don’t forget that I’m just a small time flattie tossed in with a bunch of big citylickers. I haven’t the faintest idea what the hell you’re driving at.”

“Okay, I’ll chew it for you. I was here last night, I got the usual going over. Tonight I got the red light. The stick men from the gambling room spot me. I go into the cashier, pick up say five thousand in chips, then go over to one of the tables. They’re rigged and the stick man lets me win up to fifty gees, say. Then I go back to cash in my chips and I’m directed to a special window—where I get paid off in queer. So what I’m doing is buying a hundred in queer for ten bucks in real money. But I never get to meet the guy I’m buying it off.”

“What a gadget,” Lewis breathed reverently. “You don’t think Chief Connors could figure out a set-up like that, do you?”

Liddell shook his head. “No. I doubt if he knew all the details himself.” He pulled the cigar from his mouth, studied the soggy end, pasted back a loose leaf with the tip of his tongue. “He probably thought he was just selling protection to a wide-open gambling joint. As long as he got his cut, he wasn’t too curious.”

“How about Rivers?”

Liddell raked his fingers through his hair. "I guess I better call him and give him what we've got so far. He'll probably want to have Woods and some cameramen out here when the Feds crash in." He reached for the telephone, dialed the number of the *Observer*. "Then I'm going back to my hotel and sleep around the clock. A lot's happened since the last time I was in bed. Anybody's bed."

It was dark again when Johnny Liddell awoke. The telephone was dancing noisily on the table by his bed. He pulled the covers over his head, closed his eyes, wished it would go away. When he opened them it was still there. He sighed resignedly, shoved his hand out from under the covers, dragged the phone back, stuck it against his ear.

"I told you I didn't want any calls," he grumbled.

"That's what I told the gentleman," the receiver chattered back indignantly. "But he said he was your boss and you damn well better take the call."

"Okay. Okay. Put him on."

There was a moment's delay, then Steve Baron's voice boomed through the receiver. "What the hell are you doing, hibernating? I've been calling you all day."

"I know you have, and I've been sleeping all day. I don't get to sleep nights on this damn job, so I'm going to sleep days." He got up on his elbow, consulted the watch on his bureau. "Besides, it's nighttime now, so I'm going to bed."

"The hell you are," the receiver told him. "You're going over to the *Observer* office and give Rivers the rest of that story."

Liddell groaned. "He's got the story. What more does he want, a revolution? His man was there when the Feds marched into the place, he got pix of the inside of the joint, he got a blow-by-blow description of the gun fight. What more does he want, my blood?"

"If he wants that, he gets that too," Baron told him. "He just sent the agency a check for three thousand for the job you did. For three thousand, he can keep you."

"Where else could you get slave labor to work for you? Okay, I'll get over there."

Baron's voice lost its edge. "By the way, Johnny, it was a pretty slick job."

"I'll bet you're only saying that because it's true. Boss."

Baron grunted. "Don't get any ideas. Those aren't my sentiments. The boss T man told me to pass that along to you. For my part, you weren't so sensational. Don't forget, you were originally sent up there to run down the guy who killed a client of ours. Remember?"

Liddell nodded. "Okay. I got that, too."

"You know who killed the Hayes dame?" the receiver screamed at him. "Then what the hell are you waiting for? Want the guy to take a powder or something?"

"Don't worry. This killer is so sure the tracks are covered, there won't be any powders. Besides I want the rap to be murder not counterfeiting. And I don't want Chief Connors to make the collar."

Baron snorted over the long distance wire. "If you'd been awake at all today, you'd know that Connors was picked up by the T man for his part in the counterfeiting set-up."

"Tough on him. I don't think he knew a damn thing about it," Liddell told him mildly. "But he's earned himself a ten-year rest a dozen other ways. Who'd they name to take over for him?"

"Your buddy. The guy they call Happy Lewis. He's acting chief until the City Council or whatever they call the bunch of jokers that run that burg have a chance to meet and make it official."

Liddell stuck his feet out from under the covers, reached for his pants. "So Happy Lewis is the new chief, eh? Well, in that case, maybe it's about time to get up and put this case on ice. He can use the credit for it."

"Suppose you tell me about it, first. After all, you know—"

"I'll tell you all about it in my report," Liddell said. He cut off the sputtering from the other end by the simple expedient of dropping the receiver on the hook.

The phone rang again while he was shaving, but after a long while it gave up in disgust.

Chapter Eighteen

THE police chief's office looked different with Happy Lewis sitting behind the desk. Alan Rivers, managing editor of the *Observer*, sat on one of the hard-backed chairs when Liddell sauntered in.

"Evening, Chief," he greeted the grinning Happy Lewis. "Evening, Boss," he tossed at the glowering Rivers.

"You're a helluva reporter," Rivers told him. "Slept right through your deadline, missed the edition, then have the nerve to call your managing editor and practically order him to meet you at City Hall. I ought to fire you." He wiped the scowl off his face, got up, extended his hand. "Instead, I'm going to congratulate you on the swell job you did."

Liddell nodded his thanks, dropped into the armchair. "On you the job looks good, Happy."

Lewis bent down, yanked open the bottom drawer of the desk, pulled out a bottle. "I'll drink to that, friend," he said.

Liddell shrugged. "Never touch the stuff myself. Oh, well. On an occasion like this—well, just this once." He turned to Rivers. "The job belongs to him permanently, of course?"

The editor shrugged. "It should, but you never know these things. It's just possible some of the members of the Council might like the kind of chief Connors was. After all, a wide-open town is usually good for business."

Liddell watched the man behind the desk pour three stiff slugs into paper cups. "How about you, Rivers? What kind do you prefer?"

The color started to rise in the editor's face. "What kind of a crack is that, Liddell?"

Liddell shrugged, reached across the desk, took one of the paper cups. "No crack, Boss. Just a question. What kind of a police chief do you prefer?"

Rivers studied the defective's face for a moment, his stubby fingers beating a nervous tattoo on the chair arm. "I prefer the kind Happy Lewis will make. So what?"

"So let's drink to the new Chief, then. The *Observer's* support ought to clinch it for you, Happy."

Lewis made a gesture with his hand. "Wait a minute, Johnny. That's kind of putting Rivers on the spot. He may have some commitments on this thing he can't break."

Liddell turned to the editor. "Well?"

Rivers reached out, took a cup, raised it. "I'll drink to the new chief," he said.

Liddell drained his cup, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Now, just to show you that you didn't make any mistake in giving Happy your support, I'm going to tell you something else he did. He solved the murder of that unidentified stranger who was John Doe'd here five years ago."

Rivers looked from Liddell to Lewis and back. "On the level?"

Liddell nodded, cut off Lewis' protest with a gesture. "He's just modest," he said, watching Rivers fumble through his pockets for some copy paper. "Ready? Well, as you know, it's all mixed up with Nancy Martin's murder. She came here looking for him. His real name was Carter Hayes. Nancy's real name was Hayes."

The editor was busy scribbling notes. "Husband?"

"Kid brother." Liddell rummaged through his pockets without success, caught the pack of cigarettes Lewis tossed over. "He was a bit of a stinker, but Nancy was nuts about him. She was that kind of a kid. Loved stray cats and dogs and kid brothers who couldn't keep their noses clean."

"That's good stuff," Rivers nodded. "I'll stick one of our sobbers on that angle and you can pour out a column or so of background on her. By the time we're through with her they'll be sanctifying her. Now for the kid brother." He sat with pencil poised over the paper.

"Like I said, the kid was strictly no good. Forever getting into jams that she had to bail him out of. Even sent him to art school because he showed some talent in that direction." He lit a cigarette, tossed the pack back to Lewis. "Even that didn't keep him out of trouble."

“What kind? Dames?”

“Fraud. He had a knack for reproducing other people’s work. He was so good at it he was even able to sell some reproductions to collectors, and the copies were so good he almost got away with it.” He leaned back, studied a spot on the ceiling, blew some smoke at it. “One day he ups and disappears, leaves no word for sister or anybody else. I guess she pretty nearly went nuts looking for him.”

Rivers fished his blackened briar from his pocket, started packing some tobacco into it, waited.

“She must have traced him to Waterville some way,” Liddell continued, “but by the time she found out he was here, he’d disappeared again. She decided to chuck everything and come down and look for him. Just in case he was in trouble and needed help, you understand.”

Rivers nodded. He stuck the pipe between his teeth, lit it noisily. “So that’s what she was looking for. Her kid brother.”

“Right. But when she got here, there was no trace of him. She decided to check through the papers around the time he was here, and when she came on that item about the unidentified stranger who had been killed here just about that time, she knew.” He smoked for a moment. “I can only guess what went on in her mind. She must have figured he’d gotten into another jam, a serious one this time, and got killed. But she must have been suspicious, too. So she went to work out at the place where the killing took place.” He shrugged. “What she stumbled on or what she found out to cause her to send for me, I don’t know.”

“But you’re still convinced there’s a connection between her kid brother and the Villa?” Happy Lewis asked.

“Of course. Take the kid’s appearance when he was found. Clothes filthy, a couple of weeks’ growth of beard. Don’t forget this kid was skirt crazy and he had a sister he could always go back to if things got real rough. How’s it add up to you?”

For a moment, the juicy rattle of Rivers’ pipe was the only sound in the room.

“Sounds like he might have been kept prisoner someplace,” Happy Lewis drawled finally. “Only, that don’t make sense. Why should Mike Lane hold a punk kid prisoner?”

“Think back. That was 1949, the year Mike Lane opened. The kid was an expert in copying art work.”

“I see what’s perking in your brain, Liddell,” the editor said softly. “You think the kid made the plates from which the counterfeits were made?”

“Give that man a silver dollar,” Liddell nodded. “Many artists are etchers on the side. This kid had a peculiar knack of duplicating. Who’d be a better candidate for the guy who duplicated treasury plates so well even experts could be fooled? Remember the newspaper account of the appearance of his body, Rivers?”

“There’ve been a couple of stories pass my desk since then, Liddell,” the editor reminded him. “That was some years ago, after all.”

“The sob sister who wrote up his burial made special mention of stains on his hands. Stains from acid, the acid used in etching the counterfeit plates. How about that? Think that piece of work qualifies Happy to be permanent police chief?”

Rivers folded up his notes, placed them in his inside jacket pocket. “No doubt about it. But, since you’re an *Observer* employee at the moment, I’d rather see you get the credit for it. After all, we do have that much coming for our money.”

Liddell nodded. “You’ll get plenty for your money. Before you go to press tonight, you’ll have the whole solution to the Nancy Martin murder on your desk—with a full confession!”

LORNA MATTHEWS opened the door in response to Liddell’s knock. The redheaded singer wore a severely mannish suit that de-emphasized her figure. She seemed surprised to see the detective.

“Well, come in.” She stood aside. “You’re just in time to attend the wake. Nino and I were just toasting our late boss and our dear, departed jobs.” She led the way into the parlor. “You remember Nino, my accompanist?”

The pasty-faced pianist pulled himself out of an armchair, made a half-hearted attempt at a smile, extended a wet, clammy hand.

“You are to be congratulated?” he said in a soft, sirupy voice. “I have read of your exploits. They were thrilling.”

The redhead broke out a fresh glass, splashed some cognac into it. “Who would have thought this little burg could work up so much excitement?”

Liddell tossed his hat on the table. “It certainly came as a shock to a lot of people,” he agreed politely. He accepted the glass the redhead held out to him.

“Well, here’s to new bosses and new jobs. The boss is dead, long live the boss,” she toasted. She dropped onto the couch, patted the pillow next to her. “You don’t have to go yet, do you?”

He sat down. “Not for awhile.” He put his glass on the floor near his foot. “Hope I’m not breaking up anything?”

The pianist sighed. “Nothing. We are sitting here trying to decide how one goes about getting a new job.” He raised his hands helplessly. “It has been a long run, you know. One gets out of practice.”

Liddell nodded. “By the way, Red. Thought you’d like to know that we found out why Nancy was in town. She was looking for her kid brother. He disappeared here in 1950. He was shot and buried as a John Doe. Killed out at the Villa.”

“Poor Nancy,” the redhead clucked sympathetically. “Did she know what happened to him? I mean before she died?”

“That’s why she was killed. She knew too much.” Liddell slid down on his spine. “Kid was an etcher. He made the plates all these counterfeits were printed off. Good plates, too, the Feds say. Good enough so all the big-time passers started buying their goods here.”

“Amazing,” the pianist breathed softly. “Who would have thought that a gross, obscene creature like Mike Lane would have had the imagination for so large scale an operation?”

Liddell reached into a dish on the end table, picked out two cigarettes, lit one for the redhead. “He didn’t. Lane was never anything more than a front. He wasn’t geared for that kind of operation, never had any experience with counterfeit. He was valuable because he had good local connections, knew most of the underworld boys by sight, and was willing to do what he was told. At first.”

The pasty-faced man drank from his glass, regarded Liddell over the rim. “What a fascinating theory, Mr. Liddell.”

“It’s more than just a theory, isn’t it, Johnny?” the redhead wanted to know.

“Most of it. We’re pretty sure that Lane was put in there by the real brains to act as boss, and Mike threw his weight around so much that pretty soon he began to believe he really was the boss.”

“But of course, he wasn’t?” the sirupy voice asked.

Liddell shook his head. “No. Believe it or not, but Mike was supposed to answer to Joey, the little violet who was so handy with a .38. I was in Mike’s place one night when he ordered Joey around and for a minute it looked like Joey was going to blow his top. You know how undependable those fags are when you push them too far?”

Pastyface made no comment, emptied his glass. He dried his mouth with his pocket handkerchief, replaced it in his pocket, patted the points. “I’ve heard,” he said without looking up.

“Anyway, when I started crowding them, Lane had to go. I busted in on a tea party where Mike was enjoying himself in his own inimitable way. Some shooting started and Lane stopped one.”

“Meant for you, Johnny?” the redhead asked.

“No, baby. It was meant for Lane. The next couple were meant for me, and almost were delivered.” He touched the small piece of plaster just above the hair line over his ear. “I drilled Joey before he could better his range.”

The pasty-faced man dropped his hand to his pocket. “So you did kill him?” The voice was still sirupy, had a new sinister note. “As you say, Mr. Liddell, you can be pushed too far. Joey was my brother.”

“I had the relationship figured out differently, but it amounts to the same thing,” Liddell told him calmly. “Put him there to watch over Lane, eh Nino?”

“I must warn you, Mr. Liddell,” the pianist fought for control of a quivering lip. “I have a gun in my pocket.”

Liddell left the cigarette hanging from his lips. “This isn’t exactly a yo-yo I have in mine. Mine’s a .45. What’s yours, a .32?”

Pastyface showed his teeth in a grin that drew the skin tight over his face. “You do know a lot, don’t you, Liddell?”

“Enough. I know it was you brought Carter Hayes down here to engrave those plates for you and then you let him have it.”

“He was tiresome.” Pastyface shrugged. “Besides, we were finished with him. I was willing he should have a reasonable fee for his efforts. He was

greedy.”

Liddell nodded. “Why did Nancy have to die?”

The pianist shrugged. “Like you, Liddell, she was clever. Too clever. I wouldn’t try to move. I would regret exceedingly having to kill you here, but if it is necessary—” he shrugged expressively.

Liddell turned to the redhead. Her face had drained of all color, leaving her eye shadow and lipstick as garish splashes of color. “Mind handing me my drink, baby? I wouldn’t want to upset Nino.”

Nino nodded to the girl. She held the glass to Liddell’s lips with shaking hands.

“We can drop the play acting now, Liddell,” Nino told him. “You see, I know you do not have a gun in your pocket. I took particular notice when you sat down. I, on the other hand am not bluffing.”

Liddell grinned wryly. “In that case, I might as well take my hand out of my pocket. It’s getting cramped.” He took his hand out, removed the cigarette from his mouth, flipped the ash off onto the floor. “What happens now, Nino?”

“What can happen? You’ve destroyed a highly profitable set-up for me, you murdered a brother of whom I was most fond. You must go.”

“Killing me won’t do you any good, Nino. The police know as much about you as I do.”

Nino smiled, drew the .32 from his pocket. “In that case I have nothing to lose. They can only hang me once. No?”

“All you’ll succeed in doing is to drag Red here down with you. Or maybe that’s what you want, eh Nino?”

Nino laughed mirthlessly. “For a man who is perspiring as freely as you, Liddell, you talk very brave. Perhaps you are not as brave as your words?” He waved the gun. “You will please stand up. My car is downstairs. Perhaps a little ride?”

Liddell pulled himself to his feet, realized he had over-played his cards. He debated reaching for the .45 under his arm.

Suddenly the pasty-faced man’s expression changed. He raised his revolver.

Two shots spit out so close together they sounded like one. The first one seemed to jar Pastyface, the second knocked him backwards over the chair. He tried to raise himself to his elbow. The gun roared again close to Liddell's ear, slammed Nino back against the floor. His arm dropped, hitting the floor with a crack that sent the .32 skidding across the room.

Liddell turned to the girl at his side. She sat staring with horror at the .38 in her hand. She held it out from her, dropped it, started to cry.

Liddell wiped the stream of perspiration from his face, leaned over, poured two stiff hookers from the bottle. He pressed one glass into the girl's hand, drank the other neat.

Chapter Nineteen

THE redhead's hand shook as she raised the glass to her mouth. The cognac ran down her chin, dripped off onto her suit as she downed the drink, shuddered, replaced the glass on the end table. She covered her face with her hands, resolutely refused to look over where the body of the pianist lay sprawled.

Liddell patted her shoulder, walked over, knelt next to Nino's body. He felt for heart action, found none.

"Nice shooting, baby," he grunted. He walked over, picked up the .32 the pianist had been carrying, studied it for a moment. "I imagine this is the baby that killed both Windy Grayson and Nancy's kid brother." He wrapped it in his handkerchief, stuck it in his pocket.

The redhead looked up. "Is he really dead, Johnny?"

Liddell nodded. "But good." He walked over to the telephone, dialed police headquarters. After a moment he was connected with Happy Lewis.

"Better come on over to Lorna Matthews' place, Happy. I've got a murderer for you." He looked over to where the body sprawled. "You better bring along the meat wagon. There's been more shooting."

The receiver chattered excitedly.

"Nope. Nothing like that. Self-defense pure and simple," Liddell assured him. "Better get here as fast as you can."

He flipped the receiver back on the hook, stopped by the bedroom, stripped the spread off the bed. He covered the pianist's body, dropped down on the couch next to the redhead.

She looked up at him with tear-stained face. "They won't do anything to me for this, will they, Johnny? It was self-defense. If I hadn't done it, he would have killed you. He would have killed you."

"They won't do anything to you for this, Red," he assured her. "I'm your witness it was self-defense." He leaned his head back wearily. "That was the idea, wasn't it?"

He felt the girl's body stiffen. "I don't know what you mean."

Liddell shrugged. "I just mean it's convenient I was here so I could testify it was self-defense. After all, you did save my life. Although for a minute there I was afraid it would be too late. I almost died of heart failure."

The girl pushed a stray tendril of hair into place, wiped her eyes. "I must look a mess. Mind if I freshen up a bit?" She started to get up from the couch.

Liddell caught her by the arm, pulled her back. "I'm afraid I do, baby," he told her. "There might be another gun stashed back there. I wouldn't want you to have to shoot me in self-defense, too."

The redhead shook his hand from her arm. "You gone crazy? What's all this double talk supposed to mean? What's on your mind?"

"Plenty, baby," he sighed. He held out the pack of cigarettes, shrugged when she moved them away. "I'm holding you for the murder of Nancy Hayes, Windy Grayson, Carter Hayes and most important of all, the attempted murder of me."

The girl's mouth dropped. "You *are* crazy. You could never make that stick and you know it. Nino was the killer. You said yourself he was behind Mike Lane. He even had the gun—"

Liddell shook his head. "You're not nearly as smart as I had you pegged, at that. You made mistakes, baby. Lots of them." He stuck a cigarette in his mouth. "I knew it had to be you that killed Nancy. The thing I couldn't figure was why. Now I know that too."

The redhead shrank away from him, her face a grey mask. "I tell you you're crazy."

"You told me a lot of things, Red. You told me you killed her the first night I talked to you."

The girl could only shake her head. She kept wetting her lips with her tongue. "No. I couldn't. I couldn't."

"Remember that first night? You told me how modest she was. Yet, according to the evidence she let somebody walk right into the bathroom while she was taking a bath and push her head under the water. No struggle, no nothing." He sighed, shook his head. "Know why? Because she was used to seeing her killer walk in and out. Her killer was her roommate."

“You’re trying to frame me!” The redhead made a sudden dive for the .38 which lay on the rug where she’d dropped it, screamed her rage when Liddell kicked it out of reach, pulled her back on the couch. “That’s not all you did. You told me how she used to get offers from managers and agents and you wondered why a well-known gal like Nancy Hayes would bury herself up here.”

“That’s the truth,” the redhead screamed.

Liddell shook his head. “No one knew where she’d gone. Not even her best friends on Broadway. You didn’t know she was Nancy Hayes until the night you killed her. You must have heard her telling the agency it was Nancy Hayes calling. You remembered the punk kid you’d had killed, put one and one together and it was curtains for Nancy. You killed her that same night.”

“You’re wrong, Liddell. It was Nino. Just like you said, it was Nino, though. He made me keep quiet about it. I was afraid to cross him. You saw how he is. I was afraid he’d turn Joey loose on me. Joey hated me. You know what a fag like that would do to a girl. I was terrified.”

“It must have given you quite a shock to learn that Nancy had traced her kid brother all the way down here, to you. You were the one lured him down, weren’t you?”

The redhead shook her head tearfully. “It was Nino, Johnny. He knew the kid in New York, knew how good the kid was at duplicating things. He got the idea for the counterfeiting set-up, knew the kid could make the plates.” Her shoulders shook convulsively. “The kid was girl crazy. I made eyes at him, sure. But I didn’t know he was going to be killed. Then it was too late for me to get out. I knew too much.”

Liddell took the cigarette from his mouth, examined it with distaste, ground it out. “Then I showed up. That was another shock when I refused to buy the suicide theory. You realized I’d tumbled to the pay-off system in the gambling room the night I mentioned the two guys who had been red-lighted were heavy winners. You were afraid I was beginning to get warm. The next night I kept watching Grayson. I had you really worried then, didn’t I, Red? When I let it slip I was going to see a guy at the Delcort, that really did it. You knew Windy was at the Delcort, and you knew Windy had a loose lip. You were afraid he’d spill, so you got to him first.”

“Won’t you believe me, Liddell? It was Nino. He killed Grayson. Not me.”

“It was you. It wasn’t hard to get Grayson to invite you up to his room. You had the kind of equipment he liked on deluxe models.” He jabbed a finger at her. “It had to be a woman who killed him. His killer wore gloves. It was a hot night. Do you think a gun-smart hood like Grayson would have sat there like a clay pigeon with his gun a few inches from his hand if anyone but a woman came close to him with gloves? Act your age!” He shook his head sadly. “You were a sloppy killer, Red.”

The girl looked at him desperately, her lips drawn taut over her teeth. “Suppose I did kill him, Liddell? He was nothing but a killer himself. You owe me something for getting Nino tonight. He would have shot you down like a dog. You owe me something for that.” She wiggled close to him, caught his arm. “And the other night, if I’d given the word, they would have killed you instead of just sapping you.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Let me go. The police’ll be satisfied with Nino. They don’t need me. Don’t turn me in, Liddell. Don’t.”

Liddell pushed her hand off his arm. “I don’t owe you anything, Red. Sure, you saw to it that they didn’t kill me the other night. Not because you wanted to do me any favor. You were afraid my agency would be down here tearing the town apart. You were thinking of you, not me.” He got up from the couch, towered over her. “Tonight you killed Nino because that gave the cops a nice cut-and-dried suspect. He was the killer, you killed in self-defense, everybody would be happy.”

“I wanted to get out a long time ago, Liddell. They wouldn’t let me. Give me this one break and I promise you I’ll—”

“Your promises! You couldn’t even play square with the guys on your team. You sent me to that hophouse looking for Mike Lane, then tipped Nino off I was on my way.”

“No! No, I didn’t,” the girl wailed.

“You’re a liar. When I got there, there was a jam session in full swing. But nobody was at the piano. Know why? Nino was sitting down in the hallway with Joey and a couple of guns waiting for me to come in that door. They were going to cut me down, use my gun to blast Mike Lane, and make it look like we’d gunned each other out. You’d decided Lane had outlived his usefulness, eh?”

“Johnny,” the girl’s voice was hoarse. She got off the couch, crept to him, caught his knees. “Don’t turn me in. Give me a break. I’ll do anything

you say. I'll—"

The door swung open. "I got here as fast as I could, Johnny." Happy Lewis walked in alone. He nodded to the redhead, walked over to the covered body, lifted the bedspread. "This our killer?"

Liddell helped the girl to her feet. "How long you been standing outside that door, Happy?"

Lewis looked from the private detective to the girl and back. "As long as you say I have."

The redhead turned to Liddell. "You see, Liddell? He'll give me a break. Be regular. What good'll it do you to put the finger on me? What good?"

Liddell pushed her away, walked to the window. "Forget it, Happy. You've been out there as long as you've been out there. Whatever you heard goes."

Lewis nodded, grinned bleakly. "That's the way I thought it would be, Johnny. Sorry, Red. But you'll have to come with me." He caught the girl by the arm, made no move to stop her when she jerked her arm free.

"I wouldn't want to go without telling Johnny good-by," she said. Happy Lewis nodded.

She walked over to where Liddell stood at the window, turned him to face her. She looked into his face for a moment, then, reaching up, she dragged her nails down the side of his face, leaving four parallel red grooves down either cheek.

"That's so you won't forget me, handsome." She chuckled mirthlessly. "Like you said, I made plenty of mistakes. The worst one I made was in stopping the boys from dropping you over the seawall that first night you were in town."

JOHNNY LIDDELL leaned disconsolately on the bar, watched the reporter fill page after page of copy paper with his crabbed script.

"That'll make a lulu of a yarn, Johnny," Lee Woods gloated. "And exclusive, too. That'll make my editor very, very happy."

"I owe him that one, Lee," Liddell grunted. "You know, for a while I had the idea Rivers was mixed up with the redhead someplace along the line. It was just one of those cockeyed hunches that don't make any sense, but that you can't get out of your skull."

“The old man?” The reporter leaned back and guffawed. “Funny part is that he’d be the last one to deny it. It’s too flattering. Like the 105-year-old guy locked up on suspicion of rape.” He scribbled some notes. “That goes into the story, too. Of course,” he added dolorously, “it’ll probably get chopped at the city desk.” He folded his notes, put them away. “One more on the *Observer*?”

Liddell nodded, looked up as the bartender stopped in front of them. “Phone. For you, Mr. Liddell.” He nodded toward the bank of phone booths, watched Liddell shoulder his way down.

“What a guy he is,” Woods praised. “Just broke the toughest case this town ever saw.”

The bartender stared at Liddell’s back, grunted. “Ah, he ain’t so smart. Me, I coulda found better uses for a redhead like that than locking her up from now on—for the worms.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Green Light For Death* by Frank Kane]