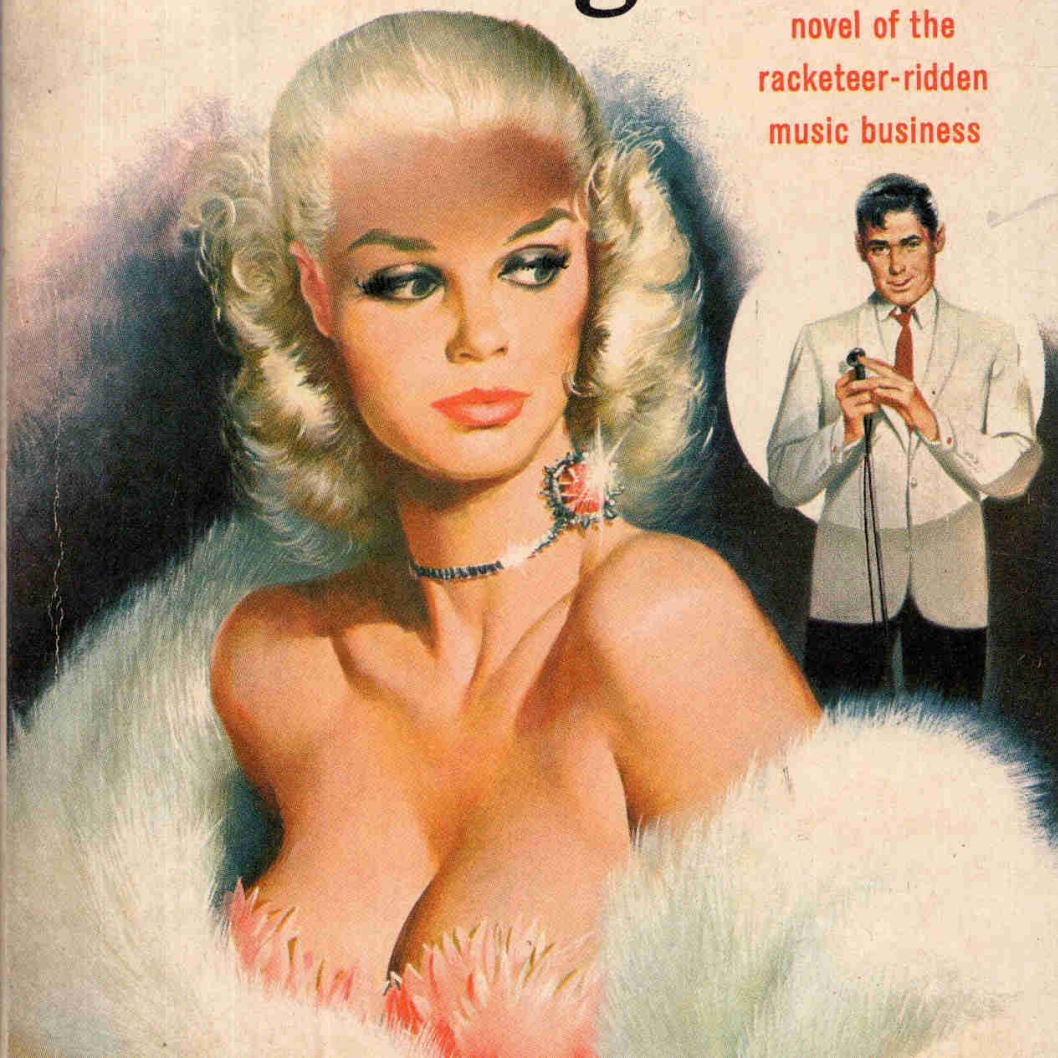


**FRANK KANE**

# Juke Box

# King

A tough, timely,  
behind-the-scenes  
novel of the  
racketeer-ridden  
music business



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*“There’s no roof in this business, kid,” they told him. “You can make it all the way to the sky.”*

*“But one thing you gotta learn. You gotta learn to take orders.”*

If he didn’t, if he got too big for his britches, The Boys knew there were ways of cutting him down to size.

Because once the kid had absorbed the build-up, he was worth almost as much to them dead as alive. There’d still be money in the records he left behind.

Either way they couldn’t lose.

BY FRANK KANE

# Juke Box King

A DELL FIRST EDITION

*an original novel*

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# Juke Box King

## Chapter 1

Nick's Place was a sprawling, peeled log cabin set back about fifty feet from 25A on Long Island. A flickering neon muttered tirelessly to itself, spilled a red pool of light onto the road and dyed the drooping branches of the pines that sheltered it. In the parking lot there was a clotting of parked cars—new models, jalopies; gleaming and mud stained.

The Cadillac swung off the road, skidded to a stop at the entrance. A uniformed doorman ran down the steps, pulled open the car door. He stiffened to attention when he saw the man inside.

“Mr. Agnelli.” He touched his index finger to the peaked brim of his hat. “We don't see much of you out here.”

Tony Agnelli grunted at the need for motion, pulled himself out of the back seat. He stepped onto the graveled driveway, looked around. A thin man in a dark suit materialized at his side.

“The place gives me creeps,” Agnelli growled. “There ain't a sound. I'd go deaf in a place like this.” He was fat, soft-looking. The discolored sacs under his eyes, however, failed to dull the menace of the shiny black marbles. His lips were pouty, damp. He gave off a strong odor compounded of equal parts of toilet water and perspiration.

“Tell Manny the boss is here,” the thin man told the doorman. “Have a table ready.”

The uniformed man nodded, turned and ran back up the stairs. When the driver returned from parking the car, Agnelli and his two companions followed the doorman. The thin man went first, Agnelli second, with the driver bringing up the rear.

The outer room was a barroom, a long mahogany bar running the length of it. The man behind the bar was polishing glasses, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. The bored expression melted from his face as he recognized the fat man. He hastily tore the cigarette from his lips, dropped it to the floor. He set the half polished glass down, busied himself with the backbar.

Manny Reiner operated Nick's Place. He was tall, cadaverous with a prominent Adam's apple that bobbed when he was nervous. It was bobbing steadily as he crossed hurriedly from the room beyond to greet the newcomer.

"Mr. Agnelli." He licked at his lips, seemed impervious to the steady rise and fall of his Adam's apple. "Glad to see you." His eyes shifted nervously to the two men with Agnelli. "Hello, fellows." He turned back to Agnelli. "Anything wrong?"

The fat man shrugged. "Why should there be something wrong? I own the joint, right? Something wrong I want to see how it's running?"

Reiner pasted a smile on his lips. "Of course not. But I know how busy you are and—"

"Never too busy to check up on my investments," Agnelli told him coldly. "You got that table ready?"

"Of course, of course. Come this way."

Reiner led the way to the room beyond. At the doorway he paused as the thin man stepped in, looked around. At a nod, Reiner continued to lead them to a table set at the far end of the postage-stamp-sized dance floor.

The room was filled with small tables, set so closely that the waitresses had to rub thighs and buttocks against the shoulders of the male patrons. The tables were all crowded, the room giving the illusion that the customers were sitting in each other's laps. On the dance floor a half dozen couples were glued together, swaying slowly and suggestively to the rhythms of a juke box against the far wall. There was a steady hum of conversation spiked by occasional laughter. Near the ceiling a pall of smoke stirred uneasily.

Agnelli slid into a chair facing the dance floor. His bodyguard pulled his chair around until he faced in the same direction. The chauffeur sat with his back to the dance floor.

Manny Reiner hovered over the table, dry-washing his hands, working at a smile. “Something to drink, Mr. Agnelli?”

The fat man shook his head. “Drinks I got plenty of without coming out here to the end of the world. You got a singer I want to hear.”

The manager consulted his watch. “It’s only eleven-twenty. He goes on at twelve, and—”

The fat man rolled his eyes upward. “He goes on now.” Heavy lids hooded the eyes. “I been hearing things about your singer. I don’t take anybody’s word for anything. I want to hear him.”

Reiner’s tongue licked at his lips, the Adam’s apple bobbed disconcertingly. “Sure, sure, Mr. Agnelli. Anything you say.” He turned, headed for a small door set in the rear wall of the room, disappeared through it.

There were no dressing rooms backstage in Nick’s Place. The small corridor ran to what had once been the kitchen. It was still reminiscent of the smells of those days.

Manny Reiner hustled down the corridor, walked into the darkened room at the end. He fumbled with the light switch, spilled yellow light into the room. The man sprawled out on the cot growled, sat up.

He was thin and dapper. His thick hair was shiny, and he affected a three quarters part that gave his widow’s peak the best play. His face was an almost perfect oval. The only thing that spoiled his good looks were his thin lips. He consulted his wrist watch irritably.

“What’s the idea? I got another forty minutes.”

“Not tonight you haven’t,” Reiner snapped at him. “We’ve got company. Real important company. And they don’t like to be kept waiting.”

The man on the cot grunted. “Just the same, I don’t go on until—”

“Tony Agnelli,” Reiner told him. He watched the singer’s eyes widen at the name.

The man on the cot reached over, grabbed his jacket. His bow tie was untied, hung from the open collar of his shirt. “Let’s go.”

Reiner nodded, turned and trotted back down the corridor toward the door leading to the dance floor. The singer followed, coat draped over arm, collar still unbuttoned.

When Reiner emerged into the smoky inner room, he waved for the piano to be wheeled to the center of the dance floor. The sound of the juke box died away abruptly, the couples on the floor started to drift back toward their tables.

Suddenly, the singer appeared in the doorway. The hum of conversation seemed to miss a beat, then there was a roar of approval. He stood in the doorway drinking it in, the thin lips parted in a smile, the thick black hair carefully disarranged to droop over his forehead, the collar open and the tie dangling informally.

Two men hurriedly pushed the piano to the center of the small floor, the house lights died down as a spot picked up the singer and walked him across the floor. He slouched as he walked, dragging his coat behind him. An accompanist materialized from the shadows leading to the barroom, scuttled across the floor to take his place. The low rumble of conversation died to a whisper, glasses stopped jingling as the accompanist's fingers picked out the first few bars of a popular song. Then the audience roared its approval, settled back to listen.

The singer's voice was husky, uncultivated. From the minute he opened his mouth, he had his audience in his hand. He did three numbers, his style an obvious attempt to ape Perry Como or Dean Martin or the Old Master, Crosby. As obviously as he lacked training, his lack of originality was even more apparent.

Tony Agnelli shifted uncomfortably on the hard wood chair, scowled. "A slob," he grunted.

The thin man at his side nodded, looked around. "The kids seem to go for him."

The fat man shrugged. "I didn't say he couldn't be built. But he's a slob. Thinks he's pretty good, too. He'll have to be handled."

The thin man permitted himself a tight-lipped grin. "That could be arranged."

Agnelli turned to his bodyguard, studied him from under heavily veined, thickened eyelids. "It will be."

At the end of the third number, the house lights went up. The entire room seemed to release its breath in a slow sigh of disappointment. The singer grinned at the explosion of applause as he walked away from the piano. He looked over to where Manny Reiner stood, drew a nod, permitted himself to

be coaxed into an encore. At the end of the number, he held his hands up, begged off.

“That was just an extra session, folks. I’ll be back for the midnight show.” He winked at a thin blonde at a ringside table, was rewarded by a thrown kiss.

Reiner was waiting at the entrance to the backstage area. “Come on over. Agnelli wants to meet you.”

Tony Agnelli sat slouched in his chair, stared up at the singer with no show of enthusiasm. The two men at his table didn’t bother to look up. The thin man looked out into the dance area, while the chauffeur stared past the fat man to cover his rear.

“This is Mickey Denton, Mr. Agnelli,” Reiner introduced the singer.

“Denton?” Agnelli grunted. “What’s your real name?”

The thin lips parted in a smile. “Donelli. Mike Donelli. The Denton’s a stage name.” He started to pull a chair up to the table, froze at the hard look of the thin man. “Okay if I sit down?” he amended hastily.

Agnelli disturbed the rolls of fat under his chin by bobbing his head. “I’m thinking of managing you, singer,” he told him in a fat, choked voice.

Denton looked from the fat man to Reiner and back. “Well, I have a manager—”

“What kind of a manager?” Agnelli looked around the place. “The best he can get you is half a C working weekends? I’m talking big time—not stuff like this.”

The singer dug a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, held it up, drew no response. “You think I’ve got the stuff to—”

“I think you stink,” Agnelli told him flatly. “That’s got nothing to do with it.”

A faint tinge of color started up Denton’s face. “They don’t think I stink. You see this place? It’s this crowded every time I—”

“So they think you’re a combination of Crosby and Como. So what can they do for you? Get you fifty lousy bucks for singing your head off three nights a week?” The fat man puffed out his lips contemptuously. “You think these creeps make or break you? They like you because you sing the songs they’ve been told they like. Go out there, try something different—they’ll hoot you off the floor.”

Denton tried to meet the fat man's glare, dropped his eyes sulkily. He stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, touched a light to it. "If I'm a nothing, why did you take the time to—"

"Don't get ideas, singer. Me, I like to play long shots. The longer the odds the better. You're a real long shot." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a roll of bills. "I'm putting you on the teat for a grand a month. There's your first month's draw." He tossed seven bills on the table.

The singer separated them with the tip of his finger. "There's only seven hundred there."

"Yeah," the fat man grunted. "I get thirty per cent. I figure you ought to rather get seventy per cent of a grand than ninety per cent of a couple of bucks." The heavily lidded eyes flicked over the singer. "Get yourself a decent suit. But that open collar routine—that stays in. Only from now on you come out all decked out and then you get around to pulling the shirt and collar open. You got it?"

"But—"

"You talk too much," Agnelli growled.

Denton looked as though he were about to protest, dropped his eyes, studied the glowing end of his cigarette.

"We start the build-up Monday. You'll be in my office at noon. Manny'll tell you how to get there." His eyes flicked up to Reiner, who bobbed his head. "We'll get some new material and cut a demo at the end of the week. Then we start moving. By this time next year, we'll be giving your comparri a run for those gold records I hear so much about." He nodded to the thin man, who stood up. "Monday at noon," he snapped at Denton.

The thin man led the way to the barroom, Agnelli got up and followed. The chauffeur walked closely behind them. The singer watched them go, a frown ridging his forehead.

"You're sure getting the breaks, kid." Manny Reiner dropped his hand on the singer's shoulder. "With Agnelli behind you, you can't miss."

Denton took a deep drag on his cigarette, blew the smoke in a feathery stream at the ceiling. "So what do I tell Pop Silvestri? He brought me to where I am and—"

"He got you under contract?"

Denton shook his head. "No, but—"

“Look, kid, take some advice. Worry about number one. With Silvestri you can knock your brains out for five, six years before you get a crack at a record. With Agnelli you step right into one—”

“But maybe I’m not ready. Pop says—”

Reiner grinned, the Adam’s apple quivered. “So what difference does that make? A guy like Agnelli, he don’t give the suckers what they want. He tells them what they want. When he gets behind your platters, every juke box in the country hammers them, the deejays stick them in their Top Thirty. After a couple of weeks of hammering, you got it made.” He grinned down at the singer. “You think all the kids go around humming ‘Pepsi Cola Hits the Spot’ because it’s great music? It’s because every time they turn the dial it comes at them. Pretty soon they can’t get it out of their heads.”

“And that’s how he’s going to sell me? Like a jingle?”

“You got any objection? As long as you’re sold?”

Denton considered, pursed his lips. “I guess not.”

## Chapter 2

Tony Agnelli had an office on the fiftieth floor of a new pile of brick and plate glass overlooking Radio City. There was no identification on the door except the gilt lettering that read *Mercantile Enterprises, Inc.* and the number 5008.

Mickey Denton scowled at the name on the door, checked the suite number against the penciled notation he held in his hand. Finally he turned the knob, pushed the door open. A cool-looking blonde in a black knit dress sat behind a desk. She glanced up with no change of expression as the singer walked in.

“I’m Mickey Denton. I’m expected.”

Her gray-green eyes flicked over him coolly. “I’ll tell them you’re here, Mr. Denton.” She manipulated the key on the intercom carefully as though to avoid damage to her shellacked nails. “Mr. Denton is here.” A muted voice came back, she nodded. “Yes, sir.” She snapped the key off. “If you’ll just wait a minute, Mr. Denton.”

After a moment, the door to the inner office opened. Denton recognized the man as Agnelli’s bodyguard. He had a chance to study him well as the bodyguard stood at the open door. He was medium height, thin—a fact that good tailoring and carefully padded shoulders tended to disguise. His eyes were cold, expressionless discs separated by a nose that seemed overly prominent in the thinness of his face. His hair had begun to recede at the temples, was brushed straight back. He smiled at Denton, but it consisted merely of an upward tilt of the corners of his mouth. It made no change in the hardness of his eyes.

“Want to come in?” His voice was flat, hard.

As Denton entered the room, the thin man closed the door behind him, leaned against the wall. It was a large room with beamed ceilings, had a peculiar absence of sound, almost like a vacuum. The floor was covered with thick gray-green carpeting, the leather furniture was polished to a soft gleam.

Tony Agnelli sat behind an oversized desk, looked as though he had been jammed into the chair. A tall man chewing on an unlighted cigar sat in a

chair across the desk from Agnelli. He eyed Denton curiously as he crossed the room.

“This is the singer, Brady.” The fat man nodded toward Denton. “This is Brady, singer. He’ll be fronting as your manager.”

The man in the chair didn’t get up, shoved a gnarled hand at Denton. The singer took it, got a surprisingly firm grip.

“Pull up a chair,” Agnelli told him. He waited until Denton was seated, turned to Brady. “What do you think?”

The man in the chair rolled the cigar between thumb and forefinger to the center of his mouth, shrugged. “As long as he don’t have two heads. I told you I can make any singer you give me with plugging, publicity, promotion and plenty of play. I’ll take care of the promotion and publicity.”

The fat man nodded. “We’ll see that he gets plenty of plugging and play.”

Brady nodded his satisfaction. “What kind of material you got, kid?”

“Crap,” Agnelli put in. “He does imitation good, but original stuff he hasn’t got.” He jabbed a stubby forefinger in the direction of the man in the chair. “That’s why I picked him. He should fit right in with your plan.”

Brady chewed on the end of his cigar. “It’ll cost.”

The fat man scowled. “I told you I was ready to make an investment in the singer,” he told him coldly. “So what it costs I’ll put up. But, Brady”—the guttural voice dropped ominously—“I don’t like for my investments to go wrong. I’m what you say a bad loser.”

“Look, Tony, I laid it all out for you. You bought the idea, right? You knew when you said okay it was going to cost. In no time you’ll make it back five times over.”

Agnelli grunted. “Okay. You’ll draw what you need from this office.” He nodded in the direction of the thin man leaning against the door. “Mario will okay what you want and issue the checks.”

Denton frowned, raked at his hair with his fingers, creating the carefully tousled look it had taken him months to develop. “Do I get to ask any questions?”

The fat man swung his chair, slid open a panel that revealed a miniature refrigerator and bar. “Ask.”

The singer looked from the fat man to Brady and back. “Suppose after I hear this proposition I decide I don’t want in?”

Agnelli deposited three glasses on the rim of the bar, dumped some ice into each and spilled scotch over it. “You’re already in.” He pushed a glass across the desk at Denton, shoved a second in the direction of Brady.

“But I don’t even know what the set-up is.”

“What’s to know? You do what you’re told and you make a lot of money. You’re a singer, right?” Agnelli peered at him through narrowed eyes. “So all you have to do is sing.” He raised his glass to his lips, sucked at it noisily.

Denton started to protest, caught a signal from the man with the cigar. He reached out, picked up his glass. It felt cool to his palm, the scotch was good, full-bodied.

“How soon can we start?” Brady wanted to know.

“You told me we could cut this what-you-call demo next week. Right?”

The man with the cigar nodded. “If I have the money to lay my hands on the arrangement.” He looked at Denton. “I want to give the kid a few days at least to get it under his belt.”

Agnelli nodded. “Okay. Keep in touch.” He drained his glass, set it back on the desk as a signal that the meeting was over.

Rod Brady had learned the music business the hard way. He didn’t date just from yesterday. He had been plugging songs back in the days when a plugger spent his days and nights hounding the footsteps of a name band or performer to give a song a play. He had used everything from money to girls to get the titles he was pushing before the public.

Then overnight, the business changed. The big bands with their wires into hotels, with their personal appearances and one-night stands were no longer the big push. Recordings, which had gone out of style with RCA Victor’s dog listening to His Master’s Voice, had staged a comeback. Disc jockeys had replaced soap operas as the housewife’s staple listening fare. And most important of all—a disc jockey could give a label a harder sell in a week of plugging than the best band in the country could give it in a year.

But with the disc jockey came other changes. With records selling into the millions, with royalties soaring to a point where a consistent hit writer could retire in a few years, the stakes became higher and higher. No longer

did entertainment and a small cash inducement do the plugger's job for him. The deejays assumed so much power that by playing a song they could make it—by ignoring a song they could bury it. As their power increased, their asking price kept pace.

And another new power emerged in the music business—the A&R man, the all-powerful artists and repertoire manager of the recording houses. His was the decision of what artist would record what song. His was the power to smash a comer by assigning the type of numbers he couldn't do, his was the selection that could make a song into a golden record. The result was that many of them owned pieces of top songs, many even took over pieces of the publishing companies they befriended by providing top artists and top arrangements for their sides.

Along with the other old-time pluggers, Rod Brady saw his life's work becoming outmoded. He watched the way songs were being made by men who never visited an artist, who sat and let the artists and publishers come to him. He saw the artists who refused to co-operate frozen out by disc jockeys who passed up their songs, by A&R men who never found the right song for them.

But Rod Brady hadn't taken the change lying down. He, too, discovered that the New Way could be a very Rich Way. Too many of the newcomers in the business really were newcomers. Too many of them couldn't remember back to the days when Congress cared about the little man enough to pass legislation for his benefit. Rod Brady did.

It had happened almost a year before he made his first contact with Tony Agnelli. A chance remark by a disgruntled publisher had sent him scurrying to the 42nd Street library where he verified something that was stuck in the corner of his brain.

The 1909 copyright law provided very clearly that anybody could make a mechanical reproduction of a song merely by paying the writer two cents a copy. But nowhere did it state that the payment of two cents a copy gave that reproducer an exclusive right to that song. Originally it had been intended to protect the small companies from having all the good material gobbled up by the big recording outfits. Under Rod Brady's interpretation it did just the opposite. It gave any company the right to sit back and wait until the song was a hit before recording it. And it was this discovery that sent him to Tony Agnelli with his proposition.

## Chapter 3

The week following their meeting with Tony Agnelli was a busy one for Mickey Denton and Brady. Their first stop had been the Brill Building, a nondescript stone building on the corner of 49th Street and Broadway which serves as the town hall of Tin Pan Alley. Its ground floor houses the Turf and Jack Dempsey's Restaurant and in the not too distant past its first floor was the celebrated NTG's Paradise Restaurant. Today it is a rabbit warren of music publishing houses, a gathering place for musicians, song pluggers and contact men who day and night stand clotted in little groups on the sidewalk outside and in the lobby.

Denton followed as Brady threaded his way to the elevator bank at the rear of the lobby. They entered the half empty cage, rode up to the sixth floor.

The door read *Pavilion Publishing Co.* Brady pushed the door open, motioned for Denton to precede him. There was no one in the outer office which seemed to be used as a storage space. Old, unsold sheet music rose in stacks to the ceiling. Brady led the way into the inner office.

A man sitting at an old rolltop desk looked up as Brady walked in. He raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

Brady nodded toward the battered spinet against the far wall. "Mind if we use the piano for a little while, Moe?"

The man at the desk shook his head, studied Denton inquisitively.

"I just signed the kid up," Brady explained. "Meet Moe Sherman, kid. He's Mr. Pavilion Music Co. in person. The kid calls himself Mickey Denton. I'm going to make a try with him."

Sherman shrugged expressively. "It's better to take unemployment insurance, take my word." He shook his head. "You can't break in, not even if he's a cross between Mario Lanza and Frank Sinatra."

Brady pulled a cigar from his breast pocket, bit off the end, stuck it between his teeth. "You can't count a guy out for trying." He shoved his hat to the back of his head, pulled the stool up to the piano. It bore service stripes branded into it by cigarettes that had been left to burn down

unnoticed, its veneer was dull, peeling. But when Brady ran his fingers across the keys, the tone was true, good.

The man at the piano looked up at Denton. “How about ‘Gray Cloud’? You know it?”

The singer nodded, waited while Brady played a few introductory chords, looked up, and nodded for Denton to come in.

The man at the piano chewed thoughtfully on the unlit cigar while he listened. Finally he stopped playing, looked over to the man at the desk. “Well?”

Moe Sherman shrugged. “Not bad. Maybe in about five years.”

“We’re not waiting five years, Moe,” Brady told him. “I think the kid’s good enough to cut a demo.”

“There’s a hundred kids good enough for a demo. But nobody works for no. You got the scratch to finance a side?” He watched while Brady nodded. “You know it’ll cost you in the neighborhood of three grand?”

Brady whistled noiselessly. “That much?”

The man at the desk shrugged. “You got to give him some backing, am I right? You think any big outfit’s going to listen if you just stand him at a piano?” He shook his head. “They’ll yank the arm before it gets to the voice.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to raise the three gees. Who’s a good guy to see to cut a side?”

There was a new note of respect in Sherman’s voice. “You must be real high on this kid.” He turned, cast an experienced eye on Denton. “Okay, so he might be real chippy-bait—but who can take the time to sell him right?” He looked back at Brady silently macerating the end of his cigar. “Better you save your three gees and let the kid do it the hard way. Latch onto a band, front it until he’s ready. Right now, Ricky Nelson ain’t going to give away his guitar on account of your boy. Believe me.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. How about a place to cut the side?”

Sherman shrugged in a manner to make it clear he was wiping his hands of all such foolishness. “Maller Records. Over on 46th near Eighth.” He got up from his desk, walked to a cabinet against the wall, pulled it open. “Just so you can’t say I didn’t warn you.” He indicated a stack of recordings. “Demos. Bought and paid for by guys as sure as you.”

Brady grinned at him. “That was them. This is us.” He pulled the cigar from between his teeth, examined the chewed-up end. “How much will he want on the line?”

Sherman grinned at him, baring the yellowed stumps of his teeth. “The whole works. Palm to palm.” He slammed the cabinet door. “Three grand.”

Brady winced. “Do me a favor, Moe?”

“I already did. I told you to forget it.” He limped back to his desk, sank heavily into his chair. He turned to Denton. “Nothing personal, kid. I may sound like a sonuvabitch trying to spoil your chances. But, believe me, I know. You’d be better off driving a truck.”

“You heard the Davy Morgan side on ‘Blue Shadows’?” Brady broke in.

Moe glanced back at him. “Who hasn’t? It’s on its way to the top.”

“I want a guy who can copy the arrangement for me.”

Sherman looked thoughtful. He searched his desk top, came up with a toothpick, stuck it between his teeth. He looked from Brady to Denton and back. “For what?”

“For the demo.”

The man at the desk considered. “Not a bad idea. The kid does sound a little like Davy.” He frowned, shook his head. “Might go as special material for a saloon act, but what company’s waxing imitations?”

“It’s just an idea. Got the man?”

Sherman nodded. “Cost a hundred and a half for the copy.”

“Get him right at it. I want to cut the side the end of the week.” Brady stuck the cigar back between his teeth. “How long’ll it take him?”

Sherman closed his eyes, considered. “Thursday?”

Brady nodded. “I’m at the Carlyle. Have him get it over there on Thursday.” He motioned to Denton. “We’d better get moving, kid. We’ve got a date with the press agent this afternoon.” He walked over to Moe Sherman, offered his hand. “Thanks, Moe. When the kid’s really riding, we’ll pay it back.”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure.” Sherman nodded to Denton, watched the two men as they crossed the outer office, walked through into the hallway. He pulled the toothpick from between his teeth, flipped it at the wastebasket, then reached for the phone.

Ransom's Drug Store is the Manhattan version of Hollywood's famous Schwab's. Here is the headquarters for aspiring hopefuls and tiring oldsters of the theatrical district. Here chorines get their messages, press agents maintain unofficial headquarters, shows are cast and post-mortems are held on opening nights. Rubbing elbows with a racketeer who might be sweating out the verdict of a deportation trial could be the star of tonight's television spectacular.

Denton walked in, looked around and slid onto a stool while Brady walked over and slid into a phone booth. He dropped a coin, dialed, was soon in animated conversation. Denton watched him for a moment, then told the freshly starched attendant behind the counter he'd settle for a coffee, waited for Brady to finish his discussion in the phone booth.

Mickey Denton, née Mike Donelli, had made his mind up. He decided to sit back and see where this crazy whirl deposited him. The worst that could happen was that he had \$750 in his pocket. The best—he hesitated to think.

In Brooklyn, where Mike Donelli left Sutter Avenue and Hemlock Street to serve a stretch in Korea, they called him stage-struck. When he came home it became a standing joke that Mike liked to brag he sang with USO performers in Seoul one night and the manager of the troupe had advised him to make a career out of it. It won him the title of Mikey the Singer.

Tireless tramping to talent agencies had convinced him of one thing. The doorway to new talent wasn't the wide, open-armed welcome he'd been led to believe. Once or twice he got as far as an audition—mostly it was a case of "Leave your address. We'll contact you."

The job at Nick's Place had been a fluke. Mike was paying his living expenses by working as a helper on Bud Silvestri's truck. Bud liked his singing, told his uncle about the kid, and that was how Mikey acquired his first manager.

Sitting here, stirring the sugar into his coffee, he had a faint twinge of guilt as he thought of the unceremonious way he had dumped the old man. Pop Silvestri hadn't said anything when Mickey told him he had a new manager—but it was his look. He had looked at Mike as though he had never seen him clearly before. But he made no attempt to stop him.

Mickey sipped at his coffee, burned his tongue, swore under his breath. What the hell! All the old man had ever gotten for him was the weekend date at Nick's. It wasn't as though he was taking a lot away from Pop. Ten

per cent of \$50 was only \$5 and nobody was going to commit suicide because he dropped a fin every week.

The boy in the white jacket slid a check across the counter at him, was startled by the frown on Mickey's face. The singer looked up, grinned as the counterman scurried to the far end of the counter.

Hell, Mickey told himself, if this worked out, there'd be plenty for everybody. Even old Pop. If he hit the way it sounded like Agnelli and Brady expected him to, he'd be rolling in it.

Doubt ridged his forehead again. Moe Sherman hadn't been in the business just since yesterday and he didn't give the idea much of a chance—

Denton stuck his hand in his pocket, felt the small roll of bills, brightened up. But Agnelli did! And the fat man didn't look like the kind of a guy who'd put his money on the line unless he knew who the winner was going to be.

He drained his cup, dropped two dimes on the counter, spun his seat around, waited for Brady. Finally the older man finished his phone conversation. He dropped the receiver on its hook, rushed over to where Denton sat waiting.

"We're in, kid," Brady told him exultantly. "That was Al Lister. He's going to handle the publicity."

"He's good?"

Brady grinned at him. "Good? He has contacts he hasn't even used. He's been around since God. He broke into the business doing a column for the *Vaudeville News*—"

"Never heard of it."

Brady looked at him pityingly. "It was sort of a show biz house organ. The Keith Albee Circuit put up the dough and it carried chatter about show people and their acts. He knew everything about everybody. From there he went to *Zit's*—" Brady broke off. "I guess you don't remember *Zit's*, either?"

The singer shook his head.

"It was a Bible for the business—like *Variety*. Most of the guys now writing columns or Broadway and Hollywood stuff broke in on it. When *Zit* died and vaudeville passed out, the sheet folded. But there were more than enough jobs waiting for the guys who learned their trade on it."

"Okay. So now I know."

Brady checked his watch. “His office is over on 42nd Street. Let’s drop by so we can get the show on the road. He’ll want to look you over.”

“Just a minute, pal.” Denton caught the older man’s arm. “A guy like this don’t come cheap. Who picks up the hot?”

“Nobody. He takes a piece. Like the rest of us.”

“What do you mean—a piece, like the rest of us?”

Brady stared at him coldly for a minute. “Look, kid, I’m no good at drawing pictures. I thought you knew the set-up. If you don’t, I can give it to you fast.” He pulled a cigar from his breast pocket, bit the end off, spat it at the floor, oblivious of the scowl of the counterman. “We have a deal—Agnelli and me. We need a singer to make the deal come off. If it’s not you, it’s someone else. We’re all in it together.” He jammed the cigar between his teeth, chewed around it. “Agnelli puts up the dough and the muscle. Me the brains, you the pipes. Lister gets a cut for helping to grease the works. But nobody does nothing for no.”

The singer stared at him. “You’re all cutting in? What do I get when you’re all done carving me up?”

“More than the fifty you were getting for singing your head off three nights a week,” Brady answered. “Things break right, you could be walking home with a couple of grand a week folding money. Meantime, Agnelli’s picking up the hot for a grand a month. You got no kicks, kid.” There was a tight look around his eyes. “You feel you want out on the deal, now’s the time to say so. Agnelli can get awful peeved—”

“Forget it,” Denton grunted. He raked his fingers through his hair, mentally stacked up the truckman’s helper job against a career in front of the footlights, dropped an easy decision. “I’m in.”

The tight look melted around Brady’s eyes. “Now you’re acting smart.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “There’s no roof in this business, kid. You can make it all the way to the sky. But just remember one thing. Learn how to take orders. Your job is with the pipes. I got mine, Lister’s got his, Agnelli’s got his. As long as we all do our jobs, we’ll make it.”

## Chapter 4

Forty-Second Street is a tired old block kept alive in its memories of the past by songs and books. The Apollo Theater is still there, and so is the New Amsterdam. But instead of housing the George White “Scandals” or the Ziegfeld “Follies” as they once did, today they run sixteen hours a day grinding out third- and fourth-run movies. The Lyric Theater where Lynn Fontanne starred for what seemed forever in *Dulcy* now features Randolph Scott and his marshal’s badge.

The Republic where *Abie’s Irish Rose* hung up an all-time record is now known as the House of Horrors, and the Lyric where Richard Bennett once played *The Unknown Purple* is a tired old stone building, turning an impassive face on to a street that bears no resemblance to its glamorous past.

Army and Navy stores sell surplus equipment; bookstores feature erotica and little known titles in their windows; cut-rate stores sell jewelry and novelties. In the place of roof gardens, there is a Childs restaurant in the middle of the block and a Greek restaurant at the corner of 8th. There are double-rich malts, a shooting gallery, all-beef hamburgers, photos while you wait, pizzas, a flea circus, hot dogs. Knitted ties are now being featured on the street that once hummed the lullaby of Broadway to limousines, fur-decked chorines and the fast disappearing stage door Johnnies.

The Harris Theater, the Eltinge where Jane Cowl won stardom in *Outside the Law* now provide warren-like offices for the press agents, talent agencies, and fly-by-night photographers who still capitalize on the touch of stardust that is the street’s only heritage.

Al Lister occupied a third-floor office in the Liberty Theater Building. Brady led the way from a creaking open grillwork elevator down the dusty hallway to an unmarked door. He knocked, waited a moment, then pushed the door open.

A prematurely balding man in his middle twenties raised red-rimmed eyes from the keyboard of the typewriter at which he was pounding. He eyed the two men incuriously. “Yeah?”

“Tell Lister I’m here. Name’s Brady. He’s expecting me.”

The man at the desk looked undecided, got up from his chair, shuffled across to the door to the inner room, pushed it open a crack, stuck his head in. They could hear the querulous whine in his voice. "You expecting a guy named Brady, Al?"

The answer was an affirmative grunt from inside the room.

The man at the door pulled his head out of the room. "Be with you in a minute. He's just finishing dictating some stuff for the columns." He walked back to his typewriter, dabbed at his damp eyes, started pecking away.

The room was windowless, close. Papers were piled on a second desk in wild profusion. An oversized wastebasket held more of them. On a battered library table which had long since lost its luster, thick scrapbooks bulged with as yet unentered clippings. The wall behind the man at the typewriter was filled with a number of photographs in which a central figure was seen in one with his arm around the shoulders of Walter Winchell, in another at a table with Ed Sullivan, and in others designed to testify to his relationship with top columnists and theatrical figures in both New York and Hollywood.

The central figure was a hunch-shouldered man, his head completely devoid of hair except for a gray tuft peaking over each ear in the Foxy Grandpa tradition. His lips were thick, smirking, his eyes cold and calculating. In none of the pictures was the smile anything more than a manufactured evidence of good fellowship.

Brady pushed some papers from the corner of the second desk in the room, hoisted a hip on it. He flashed a significant glance at his watch, was ignored by the man at the typewriter who was now biting at his cuticle in frenzied concentration. Denton wandered around the room, studied the pictures. Nobody had anything to say.

After a few minutes, the door to the inner office opened. A tall, copper-colored redhead stood in the doorway. She was almost five-eight, wore a tight-fitting green sweater which made no attempt to hide her assets. Her eyes were slanted, startlingly blue; her mouth a bright slash of red against a cocoa-colored skin which so few redheads manage to achieve.

Her eyes flashed from Mickey Denton's shoes to the artistically disarranged hair-do; she seemed to like what she saw. "Al's waiting for you, Mr. Brady." She waited until Denton started to follow his manager into the inner room. "I'm Aline."

"Mickey. Mickey Denton," the singer told her. He noticed her eyelids were expertly tinted to heighten the impact of her eyes.

“I know. We’ve been expecting you. See you on the way out.” She closed the door behind her.

The man behind the desk was the man from the pictures on the wall. In person, his eyes were even colder than the camera had shown. A perpetual scowl was etched between his eyes, his nostrils dilated when he talked.

“So this is next year’s Dean Martin, huh?” He got up, walked around the desk, leaned against it. After taking inventory of Denton, he turned back to Brady. “I still think I ought to get twenty per cent.”

Brady shook his head. “That’s out, Al. You know that. It’s my package and I’m only getting twenty per cent. Ten’s the outside limit. You don’t take my word for it, call Agnelli.”

The press agent twisted his lips in a dissatisfied pout, bobbed his head. “So we can iron that out later. How’s Tony going to move with the kid?”

“We’re cutting a demo next week, going to get Rhythm Records to record him. By the time the platters are getting a play, Tony books him into the Cuernavaca. We put a heavy sell behind the records and from the Cuernavaca he goes into Vegas.”

“Me?” Denton looked from Brady to the press agent and back. “Why doesn’t somebody tell me these things? The Cuernavaca? But—”

“Look, kid. You didn’t think Tony is going to keep shelling out that grand a month forever, did you? As soon as it can be set up you go to work and we start getting some interest on our investment.” He turned to Lister. “What do you think?”

The press agent pursed his lips, nodded slowly. “Can do.” He nodded his head in the direction of the outer office. “You notice the broad. He catnips her. That’s a good sign. She’s been around and if she goes for the type, shouldn’t be too hard to sell a million other broads.”

“Look,” Denton broke in. “Doesn’t anybody even want to know if I can sing? All I hear is promotion and publicity and—”

“This guy for real?” Lister raised his eyebrows. “He’s getting a million-dollar build-up and his feelings are hurt because we don’t ask him if he can sing. So all right. Can you sing?”

“Sure I can sing, and—”

Lister cut him off with an upraised palm. “So now we asked.” He dropped his hand. “First place, Agnelli wouldn’t have picked you if you

couldn't sing. But more than that he wanted a guy who could cream them. A guy with a message for the women. If you're okay with him, you're okay with me. I don't need anything to work with. I start from the ground and build up. I don't want to know nothing about you—where you came from, who you are. Leave that up to me—you'll like yourself better when I'm done telling you who you are. Tell him, Brady.”

“That's his business, singer. He'll dream up a whole new personality for you. If he can take Hollywood's number-one fag and sell him to the public as a he-man, he can do anything—”

“Agnelli tells me he likes the kid to pull open the collar when he sings. Like Dean Martin.” He studied Denton for a minute. “Maybe we could get by with it, but I'd rather he gets something of his own, not a copy of one of Dean's trademarks. You buy that?”

Brady shrugged.

“I been thinking about it. This is just spit-balling. Off the top stuff. But how's if we give him an Al Jolson thing? You know—”

“I don't sing like Jolson,” Denton protested. “I got a different kind of voice. I—”

“I know, I know. You sound more like Crosby than Crosby does, you're more relaxed than Como and you got the same kind of mannerisms that Martin has. I'm trying to get away from that. There's too many of these comparrri comalyea shouters. You got a mick name, so—”

Denton shook his head stubbornly. “I can't do it. First place, I can't sing without a mike.” He warded off an interruption. “Look, I know what I can do and what I can't do, don't I?”

Lister sighed his resignation, hashed a disgusted look at Brady. “Okay, singer. So you tell us.”

“I think Agnelli's right. So all right, Dean Martin does open his collar. So I'm imitating him. Didn't Como imitate Crosby? Doesn't Martin sound more like Como than Como does? So what's new about imitating a successful style?”

The press agent walked around his desk, dropped into his chair. “I just figured we could build you as the first Irish chirper to hit the top since Downey, that's all. I figure these Italians have had it so long—”

“I am Italian.”

Lister slammed his pencil down on the top of the desk. “So what the hell’s that got to do with it?” He dug a wadded handkerchief from his hip pocket, polished his bald pate. “I just finished telling you I was going to build you from the ground up.”

“Okay, okay. But that mammy-singing, that’s out. I couldn’t do it.”

“Maybe the kid’s right, Al.” Brady reached for a humidior on the corner of the press agent’s desk, found it empty. He sighed, pulled one of his own cigars out of his pocket. “Agnelli seemed to like the job he did of creaming the chippies out at Nick’s Place. Let him do it his way.”

The man behind the desk shrugged hunched shoulders. “Just an idea.” The phone on the desk jangled, he scowled. He jabbed at a button, lifted the receiver to his ear. “I thought I told you to—” His voice faded off. “Bill Lerner? Sure.” He hit another button. “Bill! How are you? Gee, baby, thanks for the breaks you gave me on those items. It was a life-saver.” He looked up, winked at Brady. “Anything, baby, anything.” He pulled a pad to the corner of his desk, scribbled a few notes on it. “Sure. You know me, Bill. It’ll be a pleasure.” He dropped the receiver back on its hook. “Syndicated in over three hundred papers, who does he come to when he wants something done right? Old Al.” He rummaged through his drawer, brought out a stick of gum, denuded it. “You’d figure a guy in his spot would have all the chicks he’d want. Just by snapping a finger.” He shook his head. “Got a couple of guys coming in from the Coast for a night on the town, he needs Al to provide the what-with. For tonight yet.”

“You really must rate.” Brady bobbed his head.

The bald-headed man grinned, touched the tip of his forefinger to the ball of his thumb, winked.

Al Lister knew all the holds. Most of the regulars around the Big Apple were convinced he had written the book. It was he who had first realized how easy it was to translate a plug in his column into coin of the realm. Every item soon had a price tag on it. When the paper showed signs of writing “30” to its career, Al expanded his field of endeavor. He now took on the task of getting the names of a select few plugged in the various columns for a fee. In return, he made his background and contacts available to the fledgling columnists who were just beginning to justify their existence on the feature pages of the major dailies.

Bill Lerner was one of them. The week *Zit’s* folded, Lerner was sitting in a small office that had been made by throwing three wooden partitions around an old unpainted desk. He was scowling at the galley proof of the

next day's column, rubbing the flat of his hand across his chin when Al Lister walked in.

"Busy, champ?"

Lerner flipped the galley proof face down on his desk. "Yeah, Al." He had heard the news of *Zit's* impending demise, studied the other man's face with apprehension. "Hear the sheet's throwing in the towel. Anything I can do?"

Al Lister shrugged. "Been shaky a long time. I been expecting it." He found some gum, tore the paper off it. "Thought maybe I could make a deal with you, Bill."

"Deal?" The columnist dumped a cigarette from the pack on his desk, stuck it in the corner of his mouth where it waggled when he talked. "What kind of deal?"

"I been watching your stuff, Bill." Lister's eyes were cold, an ingratiating smile twisted his lips. "Nothing personal, you understand. But with guys like Winchell and Sullivan. And now Sobol—" He held up a pudgy hand. "I'm not saying they're any better. But they got a flavor. You know, real Broadway flavor."

"And I haven't?"

The man across the desk shrugged. "It's not fatal. I've got as much know-how as any of them. Spent as long on the Main Stem—"

Lerner's eyes narrowed. "I don't get any expense account for a—"

"I'm not asking for a job. I'll contribute stuff to you. Good stuff. Every time you find something you can use, you give me a plug."

"With credit?"

Lister shook his head. "No credit. You wrote it all yourself. All I want is the plug. I'll tell you who I want plugged and I'll even leave the wording of the plug up to you."

"And you get paid by the one who gets the plug?"

The heavy-set man hunched his shoulders again, grinned. "It's no money out of your pocket."

Lerner leaned back, smoked and considered. No one had to tell him that he lacked the color and the authority on backstage stuff that Winchell and the others seemed to have. For a moment he had had the horrible fear that Al

Lister wanted his job. Now it turned out that what he wanted was to be an assistant—and unpaid.

“How many items would you have a week?” he asked.

“Depends.” Lister chewed on a wad of gum. “There’s one other thing, Bill. This won’t be an exclusive agreement. If you turn down an item, I reserve the right to submit it to one of the others. Just as I reserve the right to submit one to you the others have turned down.”

Lerner started to argue, decided against it. “When do we start?”

“I’m just lining up my clients now. I couldn’t—”

Lerner picked up the galley proof from his desk, flipped it across to the other man. “Take a look at this.” He watched while Al’s experienced eyes leaped from line to line, then, “It’s dull. Right?”

“The stuff’s not bad,” Lister said. “You think it might be easier to read if you varied it a little? You know, one paragraph light face, the next bold face. Stuff like that?”

Lerner considered, nodded. “Sounds reasonable. What else?”

“A few gags—one-liners, you know? Maybe I can come up with some doggerel, verses and stuff. Make it easier to read. Filling space with stuff like that makes it easier to write, too.”

Lerner reached over, retrieved the column, studied it. “You might just have something, Al.” He started scribbling type instructions in the margins of the galley. “I think this might work out for both of us.”

When Mickey Denton and Brady finally left Al Lister’s office that night, the singer stopped at the redhead’s desk.

“Guess I’m going to be one of your clients, Aline. That mean maybe I can get to see you sometime?”

The redhead grinned at him. “We aim to please.”

“How about dinner tonight then?” He looked at where Brady stood waiting at the door. “That is, unless my brain trust has me lined up for something.”

Brady grinned at him, shook his head. The singer turned back to the girl at the desk. “How about it?”

“I don’t see why not. I—” She frowned as the phone on her desk buzzed. She picked it up. “Yeah, Al? . . . Tonight? I have other plans. I—” She broke off, shook her head in disgust. “But why can’t—” She turned her chair around, listened to the metallic voice on the phone. “All right. I’ll make it.” When she swung around again to hang up the phone, both Mickey and Brady had left.

## Chapter 5

The reception room at Rhythm Records was half filled with people whose faces bore the stamp of being used to waiting. They lined the long benches that ran along two of the walls on one side of the low railing that cut the room in two. A girl with patently bleached hair presided over a small switchboard inside the fenced-in area. On the walls, giant-sized photographs of Rhythm's top recording stars were recessed in indirectly lighted frames.

Brady crossed the room toward the girl at the switchboard, Mickey Denton trailing behind him. The blonde looked up, permitted her eyes to flick from one to the other with no sign of interest, kept chewing on her gum.

"I want to see Andy Greer," Brady told her.

She jabbed at her blondined hair with the tips of her fingers, glanced at the full benches. "They're all waiting for him. He's taking you boys in turn. I'll call you when it's your turn."

"He's expecting me. Tell him Tony Agnelli set the date."

The blonde considered it, shook her head. "Didn't tell me anything about it," she complained. "He has a strict rule. On audition day, he just—"

She let herself be persuaded to check with Andy Greer. She pushed a button on the switchboard, muttered into the mouthpiece, then yanked the plug out.

"I guess he'll see you," she conceded. "I wish they'd let me know they're expecting somebody once in a while. How'm I supposed to—"

"Where is he? In his office?"

The blonde shook her head. "The Snake Pit. Know how to get to it?"

Brady shook his head.

She pushed a button that unlocked a small gate in the railing. "You go through that first door at the end of the hall. There's a flight of stairs. Go down one flight and you see an unmarked door. That's the back door to the studio. Like that you don't have to fight your way through pluggers."

As they walked through the gate in the railing, several of the others rose hopefully from the benches, permitted themselves to be waved back by the blonde.

The corridor beyond the reception room was lined with small offices, most of them empty. At the end of the corridor, they found the staircase leading to the floor below.

Andy Greer was slouched in a wooden armchair, his face buried in a manuscript, when Brady and the singer walked into the studio. A little bald-headed man was pounding an off-key piano with more determination than inspiration, singing in a high-pitched voice. Greer folded the manuscript, nodded to the man at the piano.

“We’ll think about it, Lou.”

The little man stopped playing. “Look, Andy. So maybe it needs a little work. You’re a clever boy with a pencil. You make the changes and—”

Greer looked past the little man to Brady and Denton. “Be with you in just a minute.”

The little man turned, saw them for the first time. He walked over to Greer, talked in a whisper. Whatever he was saying he was underscoring with his arms and constantly waving hands.

Greer nodded, added the manuscript to a small pile at his elbow, waited while the little man scurried from the studio. Then he turned to Brady.

Greer was lanky, with the features of an artist—large, expressive eyes, pale complexion. But something about the set of his mouth belied the softness of his appearance. It was thin-lipped, an almost colorless slash in his face. He pushed up at dank hair which drooped down across his forehead.

“You the fellows Mr. Agnelli called about?”

Brady nodded. “I’m Brady. This is Mickey Denton. I’m managing him.” A grimace contorted Greer’s face, he started to protest. “That is, I’m managing him for Tony Agnelli.”

The protest never materialized. “I see. Of course, anything I can do for Tony, I’ll be glad to do.” He eyed Denton curiously. “Managing a singer? Isn’t that out of Agnelli’s line?”

“He don’t look at it that way. He looks at it as a way to make money. That’s never out of his line.”

“I see.” There was a faint trace of midwestern twang in the A&R man’s voice. “How can I help?”

Brady handed him the large envelope he held under his arm. “This is a demo. Before I discuss it, I’d like you to listen to it. All the way through.”

The A&R man raised his eyebrows. He slid an unlabeled record out of the envelope, turned it over curiously in his hands. “You thought of everything, I see.” He fitted the record to the turntable next to him, flipped the switch and settled back.

As the first bars of “Blue Shadows” came out of the speaker, a scowl marred Greer’s forehead. “What is this? A rib?”

“I asked you to hear the whole thing through, Mr. Greer.”

The A&R man settled back slowly, his eyes still fixed on Brady’s face. Gradually the scowl dissolved, he turned thoughtful eyes to the turntable, listened. No one spoke until the record swung into the final chorus and Denton’s voice poured out a full, powerful echo of Davy Morgan’s original arrangement. Greer flipped off the switch, turned to Brady.

“Okay, so I’m impressed. Your boy does imitations. That does us no good.”

Brady pulled two cigars from his pocket, offered one to the A&R man who shook his head. “I’d rather you didn’t smoke either,” Greer told him coldly. “The damn things stink up the room.”

Brady returned the cigars to his pocket. “Davy Morgan used to record for you. Right?”

Greer nodded. “He tried to hijack us, we let Taos have him. But one of these days—”

“You’ll bring him back on his knees, right?” Brady nodded toward Denton. “He makes today that day.”

Greer turned narrowed eyes on the singer. “He don’t talk much, does he?”

“Nobody’s asked me anything yet,” Denton told him coolly.

“How does he help me break that little sonuvabitch Morgan?”

Brady walked to the turntable, picked the platter off it. “This is the same arrangement Davy uses, the voice is as good—can hardly tell them apart. Right?” Greer nodded, waited for Brady to finish. “Press this. Get behind it

and promote all hell out of it. We cover the Davy Morgan side and bury it. Three months from now nobody'll remember that Davy ever cut this side."

"That'll cost money. A lot of money."

Brady nodded. "A lot of money. Some we provide, some you provide." He pulled a chair close to where Greer sat. "Rhythm Records is a bigger outfit than Taos. The deejays will play ball if you put it to them nice." He pulled a roll of bills from his pocket, flashed it meaningfully. "Taos may try to fight, but they couldn't take the gaff." He returned the roll to his pocket. "Not very long anyway."

"That's a lot of money to pay for revenge."

Brady snorted. "Agnelli said you were a smart guy. So live up to it, Greer." He stuck his finger under the A&R man's nose. "You get a good property to replace Davy Morgan, and more than that you stand to make yourself a bundle."

"I'm listening."

Brady reached over, picked up the manuscript left by the little man. "So you do your friend a favor, you fix this song up. He's grateful and gives you a piece—" He waved off an interruption. "Look, I'm not sticking my nose in your business. But I'm not from just yesterday either." The A&R man subsided sulkily. "So on the flip side of Denton's 'Blue Shadows' you press this one you got a piece of. Does it make any difference which side sells a million copies? You get a million sales for both sides."

Greer looked thoughtful. He lifted the manuscript from Brady's hand, studied it for a moment. "You're a pretty smart character, Brady. Agnelli said you were." He looked up. "Where do you come in?"

Brady nodded at Denton. "I've got twenty per cent of the kid. The way I figure, that'll be enough."

The A&R man motioned for the record, put it back on the turntable, threw the switch. He listened carefully for a few minutes, turned it off. "It won't be a breeze, you know."

"It will be if you really get behind it." Brady pulled the cigar from his pocket, stuck it between his teeth, ignoring the frown on the A&R man's face. "You can sell your company that you've got to teach Morgan a lesson. You're one of the biggest outfits in the business and the deejays will play along with you—if you're reasonable. And you've got a winner riding for

you—one of your own songs on a million seller.” He rolled the cigar around his lips contentedly.

“And what’ll you be doing?”

Brady studied the A&R man with a new perspective. He had looked upon him as an important factor in the business, a man who could make or break talent, as a man who had been around, who knew the ropes. Now he could smell the mixed scents of greed and fear. Now he saw him as a scared man, scared of losing his job, scared to take the proposition—but more scared not to.

“We’ll be lead-piping your bet by making the kid a star. In two months, he opens at the Cuernavaca in the starring spot—”

Greer made an ineffectual attempt to hide the fact that he was impressed.

“We’ve got Al Lister personally handling the kid’s exploitation. Getting him ready for Vegas and Hollywood. That sound good enough to you?”

Greer pulled his lanky frame from his chair, paced the small studio. Finally he stopped and turned to Brady. “I’m convinced.”

Brady stuck his hand out at the A&R man, got a firm grip in return. He couldn’t restrain the grin of exultation. The show was on the road!

## Chapter 6

Tony Agnelli sat in the oversized chair behind his desk, blew bubbles in the center of his lips. From under heavy lidded eyes, he studied the other men in the room.

Harry Jacobs sat in the big leather-upholstered chair, rattled the juice in the stem of his pipe. He was short, heavy-set, affected tweeds. A thin wisp of a mustache was a contrasting black to the gray of his hair. He expelled a cloud of blue-white smoke, waited for Agnelli to start the conversational ball rolling.

Mitch Corday was lean, darkly tanned. He wore tailored suits that showed an understanding with his tailor. His hair was beginning to gray, was worn in a closely cut brush cut. When he smiled, wrinkles cut white trenches around his eyes in the mahogany of his skin.

“You ought to come out to Vegas, Tony,” Corday told him. “You’d never come back to this climate if you did.”

Agnelli leaned back, laced his fingers across his midsection, studied the dimples that were his knuckles. “I didn’t send for you for a Chamber of Commerce talk,” he said. “I got something going for us. It’ll need plenty of help.” He rolled his eyes upward. “And money.”

Jacobs clicked the stem of his pipe against his teeth. “What’s the proposition?”

Tony grinned mirthlessly. “A singer.”

“A singer?” Jacobs looked from the fat man to Corday and back. “Who needs a singer? The woods are full of them.” He gripped the pipe so tightly between his teeth, the muscles bunched on either side. “Take my word for it, Tony, they stink. You can’t do business with them, they get so swell-headed —”

“So in that case we put a hole in their head and let the swelling out.”

Jacobs twitched uncomfortably on his chair. Muscle had once been his main stock in trade. Now that seemed a long way back. With pseudo-respectability had come caution.

Agnelli studied the man. The years had made a lot of changes in Jacobs, he realized. The lean wolfishness of his face was blurred by a soft overlay of fat. Flat, lusterless eyes still peered beneath the heavily veined, thickened eyelids, but the soft, discolored pouches took away some of the menace.

“Leave the handling up to me,” Agnelli told him coldly in a low voice. “I didn’t call you guys in to ask you in. I’m telling you you’re both in on this.” He blew his lips in and out, turned his attention to Corday. “You getting your share of the Hollywood play at the Oasis, Mitch?”

The lean man shrugged. “We do all right.”

“All right’s not good enough. Some of the Hollywood mob don’t like that trip to Vegas. Seems like we should have it set up they can do their gambling closer to home. Maybe we shouldn’t make them go all the way to Vegas to bet.”

A frown ridged the gambler’s forehead. “But, Tony—”

The fat man waved away the objection. “It won’t cut into your take. But it’ll give us a chance to scoop up whatever’s slipping away from us.”

Jacobs looked puzzled. “First you’re talking about singers now it’s gambling. I don’t get it.”

“We tried to get some of our men in to organize Hollywood. Right? We never made a dent. Not on the white stuff, not on the unions, not on gambling. You know why? They’re scared off against outsiders. Ever since the Bug moved in on them, ever since Gross and his boys put on the heat. No outsiders.”

Corday thoughtful, nodded. “I begin to get the pitch.”

The fat man bobbed his head. “One of their own kind—a singer. He’s got it made. He opens the door for us. We operate behind him as a front.” He turned to Jacobs. “You get the picture now?”

Jacobs took the pipe from between his teeth, knocked out the dottle into his hand, dumped it into an ash tray. “Suppose this singer don’t play ball?” He looked up at the man behind the desk. “A guy big enough to walk in like that, maybe he don’t need us.”

“He don’t.” Agnelli squirmed into a more comfortable position. “So we don’t take a guy big enough. We take a nothing and we make him big enough. That’s why it’s going to take money. That’s why I’m cutting you two in.”

Corday brought a cigarette holder from his breast pocket, screwed a cigarette into it. “That takes time, Tony. When were you figuring on moving in on the Coast?” He tilted the holder from the corner of his mouth.

“First of the year, maybe.”

The man in tweeds stared at him, looked to the lean man, then back. “First of the year? That’s less than eight months. You figure to take a nobody and in eight months make him a name?” He shook his head. “Can’t be done.”

Agnelli grinned at him. The grin didn’t reach his eyes. “We can try.” He grunted, reached forward for a paper on his desk. “Kid’s name is Mickey Denton—”

“Never heard of him,” Jacobs said.

“Me neither,” Corday chimed in.

“You will.” The fat man consulted the typewritten sheet. “He’s going to record ‘Blue Shadows’ for Rhythm—”

“Davy Morgan did that for Taos,” Jacobs complained. “He’s big with it. No unknown can buck him—”

“Denton does. With your help.” Agnelli flipped the paper back on his desk, leaned back. “We’re using the same arrangement as Morgan. Bigger musical background, maybe. Rhythm’s getting behind it, so are we. By the time we’re done, nobody will ever remember this other creep even did a version.”

“How?”

Agnelli pointed a sausage-shaped finger in the direction of Jacobs. “You control the juke boxes. You haven’t been doing a good job of it, I know.” He watched the nerve jump under the stocky man’s left eye. “But we can forget that. If you do a good job on this.”

“Now wait a minute, Tony—” Jacobs had trouble controlling the twitching under his eye.

“This is all set. There’s no time to wait for anyone. Either you’re in—or you’re out. All the way.”

The man in tweeds tried to meet the fat man’s glare, dropped his eyes. “I’m in. You know that. It’s just that—”

“Okay.” Agnelli broke off for a moment, as though marshaling his thoughts. “We’re rushing the pressing on ‘Blue Shadows.’ You see to it that it’s spotted number-one play on every juke you have.”

Jacobs looked as though he were going to protest, subsided. He nodded.

“Your boys pass the word. Every time the box goes quiet, the house drops in a dime. It plays the Denton side. You got that?”

Jacobs bobbed his head miserably.

“Just so’s there’s no mistake, you make sure the Davy Morgan side doesn’t get into a single box. I don’t want any slip-ups.” He stared at the juke-box man. “And I want the word passed that no box stays quiet. Remember. If there’s no play, the house plays—and always Mickey Denton’s ‘Blue Shadows.’ You got it?”

“I got it.”

Agnelli turned his attention to the lean man. “We’ve got Al Lister working on the build-up.”

Corday permitted himself an elevation of his eyebrows.

“He’s going all out. In six months this kid is big enough for the Oasis in Vegas—” He waited for an argument, when he didn’t get one, he continued. “By then he’ll have the Cuernavaca under his belt—”

“You don’t fool around, Tony.”

“This is no game. This is big money, Harry. Real big money. And I want to wrap it up before somebody else gets the same idea.”

Corday nodded. “I’m with you.”

“Good. Your share of the build-up comes to twenty.” He rolled his eyes over to where Jacobs was dipping the bowl of his pipe into a pouch, packing it with his forefinger. “You’re in for the same, Harry.”

“And you?”

“The same. Andy Greer at Rhythm matches our sixty. It buys a complete plastering of all the deejay shows. Three, four plays a day on every decent-sized show in the country. We don’t want them just to play the record. We’re paying them to pound it.”

Jacobs stuck the pipestem between his teeth, frowned. “You know, it could be.”

“It’s got to be,” Agnelli told him. “We got too much to lose for it not to be.”

Corday brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his sleeve. “We didn’t go into that very deeply, Tony. Just exactly what have we got to gain?” He looked up, smiled deprecatingly. “After all, twenty thousand is twenty thousand.”

“Who should know better than you what a sweet take Hollywood could be? Out there, they’re loaded with money waiting for somebody to come along and take it away from them.”

Corday nodded. “With one difficulty. You said yourself nobody has been able to do it so far.”

“I said no outsider. I just told you, we’re going to work from the inside.”

“You can trust this kid? You know, once they get too big for their britches—”

“Stop worrying. His head gets too big, we cut it down to size.”

“But by then we’ve got sixty grand sunk in the bum.”

The fat man grinned. “There’s ways of getting our money out.” He touched the tips of his fingers across his belly. “You never heard of a guy named Russ Columbo?”

“What’s he got to do with it?”

“He’s a real hot property,” Agnelli told them. “Then one night he has an accident and he don’t walk away from it.” He looked around. “You know how long ago this is? Twenty-five, thirty years ago. And they’re still selling his records. They’re even talking about doing a picture of his life.”

“That’s true,” Corday conceded.

“And how about this kid, this James Dean? You think you couldn’t make a fortune if this kid leaves behind some records?” He snorted loudly. “Our singer gets out of hand, he’s worth as much to us dead as he is alive, after Al Lister is done with him.”

Harry Jacobs scratched a match, touched it to his pipe. “Sounds okay to me. I’ll have the scratch over tomorrow.”

Agnelli nodded, turned to Corday, who shrugged. “I don’t see any holes in it. I’ll play. You have him ready for the Vegas date, it’ll be ready for him.”

## Chapter 7

Despite the fact that Davy Morgan's waxing of "Blue Shadows" had a head start, it was generally conceded that the Rhythm cover by Mickey Denton had become the standard. By the time Denton was ready to open at the Cuernavaca, the flood of publicity on his side had completely obscured the fact that Morgan had even cut the number.

The afternoon of the Cuernavaca opening, Davy Morgan stormed into the office of Hymie Steinberg, president of Taos Records. He was waving a page torn from the current copy of *Variety*.

"What are you doing to me, Hymie?" He slammed the page down on the harried executive's desk. "You see this?"

Steinberg glanced at the clipping, nodded unhappily. "I saw."

"Take another look. The list of the most played discs of the week from a disc-jockey survey." He jammed his forefinger at line after line. "Washington, Baltimore, all of them. 'Shadows' is top of the list. But not mine. Denton's."

Steinberg sighed. "Now, wait a minute, Davy. This could be a plant. Give me a couple of yards and I can come up with all the best-played listings you want—"

"You've got the figures. How about it? Am I getting the play?"

Steinberg studied the man on the other side of the desk. Davy Morgan wouldn't see thirty-five again, a fact that darkened hair and numerous massages failed to conceal. His teeth had been capped in too perfect alignment, his hair was clipped in the approved brushcut style affected by his followers. But there was a grayness to his complexion, an aura of fear about him that marked the performer passing his prime. His eyes snapped angrily, but they were underlined by a desire for reassurance.

"How come a guy like this, a guy nobody ever heard of, clobbers us this way?" he demanded. "We had a real one going for us in 'Shadows.' We were away out front. You promised to get behind it all the way. Now we get no play at all. Why?"

“Because Taos isn’t Rhythm, Davy,” Steinberg told him. He fidgeted with a letter opener. “The word is out the big boys are behind this Denton. They got money they haven’t even counted yet. This you can’t buck.” He opened his top drawer, brought out a batch of clippings. “You think I haven’t been losing sleep?” He held up the clippings. “Denton, Denton. They got Al Lister working day and night. Nobody can stop this guy.”

“But it’s my song and—”

The man behind the desk dropped the clippings into the drawer, pushed it shut. “You want some advice? For free?” He watched the singer’s face. “Sit back and wait. Next side this guy cuts maybe he’s strong enough he don’t have to cover a going side. Anyway, we don’t buck him.”

“You’re going to let him get away with—”

“You mean I got a choice?” Steinberg leaned across the desk. “I’ll tell you what. Be my guest tonight at the Cuernavaca. Take a look at the backing they’re giving this guy. You won’t be able to get a seat. There’ll be broads all over the place screaming for this guy. The newspapermen will have to fight to get to their tables—” He broke off, leaned back. “It’ll be an Al Lister production. And believe me, baby, that ain’t small time.”

The Cuernavaca was a chromium-plated supper club in the mid fifties. It had a multi-colored canopy that extended to the curb, a seven-foot giant in the regalia of a full admiral as a doorman. The dinner show was just beginning to filter in. Already a line was forming on the wrong side of the plush rope across the entrance to the dining room. The soft strains of dance music filtered out into the lobby underscored by the low murmur of conversation.

A two-hundred-pound fashion plate in a midnight-blue tuxedo, carnation in his buttonhole, presided over the rope. As couples approached him, he either greeted them with a smile, opened the rope with a flourish or consulted the list he held in his hand.

By 10 o’clock, the Cuernavaca was a sell-out. By midnight, Mickey Denton had been acclaimed a sensation—the new darling of the supper-club trade.

Backstage, there was no attempt to duplicate the glitter and tinsel of the supper room. A dingy, uncarpeted corridor ran the length of the backstage area, lined on either side with doors to telephone-booth-sized dressing rooms.

Brady stood at the backstage door, listened to the roar of applause as Mickey Denton took his second bow. As the kid headed for the exit, the ringsiders started to pound their tables, demanding more. Denton tossed a glance at the spot where Brady stood, drew a nod.

Brady watched while the kid walked back to the mike. He stood in the spotlight, jacket open, tie untied and collar unbuttoned. He ran his fingers through his hair, waited while the pianist fingered an intro. The kid was no Crosby, Brady was the first to concede, but with the build-up, with a reasonable voice and with the heavy push he was getting, he had it made. He ran his eyes over to the tables with couples sitting in each other's laps that lined the floor, wondered how many of them were actual Cuernavaca regulars and not part of Al Lister's hired troops.

When the number was finished, Denton came loping to the backstage exit. He waited for a moment just inside the door, wallowed in the waves of applause. Then, he stepped out into the spotlight, held his hands up for quiet.

The big room slowly died away into silence.

"Thanks, folks. You've made this the biggest night in my life." He bowed, ducked through the door.

"How was it?" he asked Brady.

The older man winked, nodded to where the claque was still pounding on tables, stamping on the floor. "You creamed 'em, kid."

Denton led the way down the corridor to a door marked by a peeling gilt star. Behind him, the orchestra was manfully trying to drown out the applause.

"Me? Or Agnelli?" Denton pasted a crooked smile on his lips. "Maybe they should have Al Lister's name up in lights out there. They were applauding him, weren't they? Not me." He pushed the door open, walked into the dressing room, dropped into the straight-backed chair in front of the mirror.

"So maybe Al did paper the joint. So what?" Brady closed the door behind him, leaned his hip against the dressing table. "Agnelli has a lot riding on you, kid. You blame a guy for hedging his bets?" He stuck one of the ever-present cigars in his mouth. "Why don't you just relax and stop asking questions? You're on your way now. A year from now you'll be on top. Does it matter how?"

Denton shrugged. “I guess not.” He stuck his fingers into the cold cream jar, smeared some on his face, rubbed it off with tissue. “How long you figure we’ll be here?”

“You’re booked two weeks. You’ll be held over by popular demand another two.” Brady chewed on the cigar, watched the kid’s expression. “By then you’ll have a couple of new sides waxed and we’ll really be rolling.”

“More covers?”

Brady shook his head. “Andy Greer has come up with a couple of good ones—”

“How much of a piece do we get?”

“What makes you think we get any piece?”

Denton turned, studied his manager’s guileless expression. “Look, Brady. I’ve been a good boy. I’ve done what I was told when I was told. But I’m also a big boy. I know we don’t do anything for no. Like you said, tonight made me. It also means I want a little piece of every piece you or Agnelli get. Of anything.”

There was no change of expression on Brady’s face. “You oughtn’t talk like that, kid. Agnelli doesn’t like his investments to get ideas.” He took the cigar from between his teeth, touched his tongue to a loose leaf of tobacco, pasted it back. “You’re getting \$1,500 a week for this chore. That ain’t bad for a singer who was scratching for half a C only a couple of months ago.” He rolled his eyes up. “If I were you, I’d be satisfied.”

“Fifteen hundred? Who’s kidding who? Agnelli gets thirty per cent of that, you get twenty and Lister gets ten. In my book that leaves me forty or about \$650. Not fifteen hundred.”

“That still ain’t bad for a guy who was satisfied with peanuts. Especially if the guy gets to keep his health.”

“Don’t kid me, Brady. Nothing happens to me. You heard Agnelli. I’m an investment. It makes him mad when anything hurts one of his investments.”

Brady slid off the desk. “You wouldn’t get hurt where it would show, singer. And it wouldn’t interfere with your chirping. But a good workout in the belly has changed many a guy’s mind.” He walked to the door. “Think about it, pal.”

Denton sat looking at the door long after it closed behind Brady. For the first time, a cold hard ball of fear was forming in his stomach. He began to realize that he had stepped into something that could easily get over his head. He tore the tie off, stripped out of the shirt.

Denton was just finishing dressing when the knock came on the door. He opened it to find one of the Cuernavaca's pages standing outside. She wore a pair of abbreviated slacks, a peasant blouse that was well filled.

"Congratulations, Mr. Denton." She held up a handful of yellow envelopes. "The wires are beginning to pour in already." She was round faced, her hair unnaturally black. "I guess you're all set to celebrate."

He took the wires from her hand. "If I am, it's all by myself." He looked thoughtfully at the girl's obvious assets. "Unless you'd take pity on a lonely guy and have a drink."

The girl looked uncertain. "I—I don't know—"

He winked at her. "You wouldn't want the town's new fair-haired boy to do his howling all alone?"

She dimpled when she smiled. "You don't even know my name."

"What is it?"

"Dotty. Dotty Malthis." She stepped in, closed the door behind her. "I guess somebody should congratulate you, at that." She slid her arms around his neck, stood on tiptoes and pasted soft lips against his mouth. When his arm tightened around her waist, she put the flats of her hands against his chest, pushed him away. "Don't wear it all out at once, honey." She eyed him with new interest, pushed at her hair with the tips of her fingers. "If that invitation to celebrate is still open—"

"It sure is. If you know the spots."

She grinned at him. "Leave that to Dotty." She flashed a quick look at her watch. "I can be ready in twenty minutes. It should take you that long to read your telegrams."

Denton nodded, watched the exaggerated rhythm with which her hips worked against her shorts as she scampered out. He pushed the door shut behind her, started on the telegrams. Halfway through the wires, which were signed by every big name in show business he'd ever heard of, he sat up straight and stared. The wire said:

“Think you sensational. Would consider it an honor to have you join me on my program as featured guest three weeks from tomorrow. Caught your show, predict you the hottest thing in the business. All the best,” and it was signed “Howie Stewart.”

Denton reread the wire twice, then let out a yip of delight. Howie Stewart! Producer and star of the highest rated television show in the country! And Denton—Mike Donelli of Brooklyn—was being invited to be his guest! He felt a warm surge of satisfaction that Lister hadn’t arranged it, or Agnelli muscled it—

He read the wire again and the warm feeling seeped out of him like water from a punctured main. The sending time on the wire was 7:50. He had not gone on until after 11. So Stewart hadn’t seen him, didn’t have to see him. The works had already been in—just as the reviews had already been written and the applause already bought and paid for—before he had stepped out into that white circle of spotlight on the floor.

## Chapter 8

The morning following his sensational opening at the Cuernavaca, Mickey Denton awakened with sticky eyes, a throbbing headache and a mouth full of cotton. He groaned softly, tried to turn over, only to collide with another body. He got up on his elbow, peered at the girl who lay sprawled beside him. Her black hair was spread across the pillow, her mouth was slightly open; she was uncovered to the waist, baring small, heavily nipped breasts.

Denton slid his feet from under the covers, sat on the side of the bed until the room stopped rotating. The floor felt cold and good against the soles of his feet. He wondered if it'd be helpful to put his forehead down on the floor, vetoed the idea. He was afraid his eyeballs might drop out.

He shuffled across the room to the small kitchenette. He found some tomato juice, spilled it into a glass, drank it. It was at least cold and wet. His next stop was the bathroom where he finished the waking-up process by dousing his face with cold water.

The girl was sitting on the edge of the bed, staring around with drink-bleared eyes as he shuffled back into the bedroom. The sheet was pulled carelessly across her waist, she seemed oblivious to the fact that she was uncovered from the waist up.

“Hi, honey.” She worked on a smile, then shook her head. “We sure tied one on last night, didn’t we?” She wiped her lips with the back of her hand. “You wouldn’t have a little hair of the dog, would you?”

Denton scratched at his scalp, examined his nails. “There was some out in the closet, but we probably got at that, too.” He walked over, collapsed into a chair. “Where the hell did we go last night, anyway?”

Dotty made a face at him. “As though you don’t remember.” She threw back the cover, walked out to the kitchen. As she walked, her hips worked like a fist, clenching and unclenching. He wondered if he had her the night before and if she was any good. He decided the answer was yes to both questions, watched her as she returned to the room sipping at a good sized shot of liquor, with no signs of self-consciousness for her nakedness.

“You were a real bad boy last night.” She grinned at him lewdly. “You know that, don’t you?” She took a swallow from the glass, studied him over the rim. “So bad you were real good.” She drained the glass, walked over, plopped into his lap. “You’re not going to tell me you don’t remember that, are you?” she said sulkily.

“I’m lucky I remember my own name.” He ridged his forehead in concentration. “I remember going to Pietro’s.”

It had been small, smoky, intimate. As they walked into the room, somebody recognized him and there was a scattering of applause. Pietro had insisted on buying them a drink and having Denton add his autograph to the celebrity scroll on the back of the bar.

From Pietro’s it had been the Gaslight Club, with more and more people recognizing him, sending drinks over to his table. From there, the path got hazy. There had been a couple of other spots Dotty knew, places where his name had unlocked the door. He had a vague recollection of a fight. “We get into any trouble last night?” he asked Dotty.

“It was no trouble. You just brushed him off like a flea.”

Denton groaned. “Who was it?”

“Davy Morgan. You know, the singer? He tried to take a swing at you at the Silver Key. You clobbered him. But good.”

Denton ran the flat of his hand across his face. “What else?”

The girl shrugged. “Nothing. You were cute. Real cute.” She pecked him on the cheek. “You know what you kept buying drinks for? You kept telling everybody Howie Stewart wanted you on his show.” She giggled. “At the Gaslight, you even told it to Howie. And he said it was news to him.”

Denton stood up, dumping the girl onto the floor. “You better get some clothes on.”

She rubbed her buttocks. “What’s the idea? Did I say something wrong?”

“Get dressed,” he snapped.

She got up, shuffled toward the bathroom. After she closed the door behind her and he could hear the sound of the shower, Denton went out to the kitchen, poured a stiff slug of liquor into a glass, swallowed it with a grimace. Then he walked to the door to the apartment, opened it and picked up the small pile of newspapers. He recrossed the room, was sitting on the

edge of the bed when Dotty walked out of the bathroom, rubbing her hair vigorously.

“Oh, I forgot. Anything in the columns?”

“Danton Walker says I was a new and welcome addition to the midnight scene.” He tossed the *News* aside. “Bill Lerner says I’m the biggest thing to hit New York since Roberta Sherwood.” He looked up. “Is that good?”

She grinned at him. “Real good, honey.”

He picked up another paper. “Winchell manages to restrain his enthusiasm. Says I’m terrific. A new Pied Piper of Pop.” He reread the three-line plug in Winchell, felt some of the depression lift from his shoulders. “Hey, maybe we have got something.”

The girl stared at him. “You crazy? Didn’t you hear that mob tearing down the house last night? You had them right here.” She held out her palm. “In the palm of your hand.”

He looked up, seemed to be seeing her for the first time. She saw him getting up from the bed, turned and made a token run for the bathroom. She struggled for a moment, then her arms slid up around his neck, her body pasted to his.

Denton dropped Dotty at a small rooming house in the West Sixties, kept the cab and headed for Al Lister’s office in the Liberty Theater. He rode the creaking elevator to the third floor, followed the dusty hallway to the press agent’s office.

The redhead, Aline, was punching away at her typewriter, the white-faced young man feverishly pawing through pages of a French humor magazine, tearing out appropriate one-liners to be credited to the agency’s clients. He looked up as Denton walked in, went back to his plagiarism without any sign of recognition.

Aline looked up, grinned at him. “Hear you really boffed them last night, singer. Congratulations.” She nodded to the closed door to the inner office. “You can go in if you like. Might as well. It’s you they’re talking about.” She turned the full force of her blue eyes on him. “I was kind of hoping you might ask me to the opening.”

“I thought you might be busy with Bill Lerner and his playmates.”

A strained look came into the blue eyes. She forced a smile as she picked up a round eraser, attacked the page on the typewriter carriage. “That’s right. Business before pleasure.” She blew the grains of the eraser from the page, started typing in an angry rhythm as though she had forgotten he was there.

Denton walked to the door, pushed it open. Lister was sitting at his desk, pouring through a small pile of clippings, passing them to Brady as he read them. They looked up as Denton walked in, closed the door behind him.

“Hiya, Champ!” Lister grinned at him. “You really clobbered them.” He held up the clippings, dropped them to his desk. “Practically unanimous.”

“Practically?”

Brady scowled at the singer. “He means this story about you taking a poke at Davy Morgan.” He shook his head. “Agnelli ain’t going to like this.”

“It didn’t make Davy Morgan any too happy, either.” Denton walked over pulled the chair Brady was resting his foot on away, reversed it and sat down. “I suppose you know Howie Stewart asked me to appear on his show?”

Lister worked on a smile. “Sensational, kid, sensational.” He turned to Brady for support. “You hear that, Brady? The Howie Stewart show already! Hell, I knew you’d make it eventually, kid, but this soon—”

“Can it, Lister. Stop the snow job. I bumped into Stewart last night—”

The press agent half rose from his chair. “My God, you didn’t—”

“Clobber him? No. But I did mention about being on his show. He never heard of me.”

“So what? He doesn’t do all the hiring himself. So one of his scouts made sure he wouldn’t be—”

“Then his scouts must use an ouija board. The telegram was sent before I ever got out on the floor.”

Brady scowled at him. “I don’t know anything about when the wire was sent and I don’t care. A shot on the Howie Stewart show gives you an exposure you couldn’t buy for a million. Maybe he liked your records, maybe like he says nobody on the show ever heard of you. All I care is that you’re skedded for three weeks from tonight.” He held up the story of Denton’s scrap with Davy Morgan. “And there better be no more of this pub brawling. First thing you know Howie’ll be getting snowed under with letters from nice old ladies who don’t want saloon fighters in their living

room. You got so much fighting in your system you want to get rid of it, I'll have Agnelli send a couple of his boys around."

Denton started to retort, dropped his eyes. Brady swung on Lister who sat swabbing at his head with a wadded handkerchief. "And you don't come out smelling from violets either, Al. You told me that Dotty was a smart broad, that she'd keep him out of—"

Denton jumped up from the chair. "You mean that was rigged, too? You set me up with Dotty?" His eyes hopped angrily from his manager to the press agent and back. "For Chrissake, can't you even trust me to get laid by myself?"

"No, singer, we can't even trust you to do that. A couple of months ago you were just another punk—a guy who could maybe sing a little, look good on a stage. Now you're a property, and properties cost money. There's nothing we won't do to protect our property." He jabbed a finger at him. "Sit down." The singer dropped back into his seat, sulkily. "You ran have all the fun you want, you can do whatever you want. Just as long as you don't damage the property. You got that? You want a broad, we'll see you have one. You want a drink, be my guest. But stay out of trouble. You got that, singer?"

"Look, kid, it ain't as bad as it sounds," Lister put in. "We're going to make you a rich man. You can have the kind of things most guys dream about and never get to see, let alone touch. But you've got to play ball." He picked up a letter. "Here's a confirmation on a spread in *America Today*. Two pages of pictures on the new singing rage. That's you, kid. Elvis made it fast, but you're going to make it look like he was crawling. In a year, you'll be the hottest property in the business."

"Have your fun. Just remember one thing—you don't have to buy a cow when milk is so cheap. Nothing serious. Just a lot of laughs. We understand each other?" Brady added.

Denton stared at Brady glumly, nodded. "We understand each other."

"Okay. Then we start getting ready for the Howie Stewart show. We only have three weeks." Brady turned to Lister. "How much time's he slotting for the kid?"

"Two songs. Eight minutes."

"We want twelve and an okay of the introduction."

Lister groaned. “Be reasonable, Brady. Howie’s screaming already. If I —”

“Don’t do anything yet. Plant that build-up and plant it heavy. We go along with Stewart to the last minute. Then we tell him we want twelve minutes or else. By then everybody knows we’re due on the show. If we walk, we walk because the show isn’t big enough for us and Howie is too much of a dictator. No humility, like Godfrey says. He’ll behave.”

Lister stared at him, nodded. “I guess maybe he will. He’s spent so much time and so much money building up that good-old-Howie reputation, it could work.” He grinned crookedly. “Some day just before I’m ready to retire or commit suicide, I’m going to plant the real stories on some of these creeps. What a nice way that would be to go out.” He scribbled some notes on a sheet of paper, jabbed at the button on the base of his phone. The door opened, the redhead walked to the desk. She didn’t waste a look on Denton.

“Get those gags I’ve been saving for Lerner transcribed and over to him. Then have Allie do a full column on the kid here from those notes I dictated this morning.” He watched her make a notation on her pad. “You call Lerner personally. Tell him I hope he can use the column on the kid. He’s being featured on the Stewart show and Bill can practically point to Denton as his own discovery.” He broke off. “Make it strong, baby. Tell him we’re sending over a full column of gag fillers at the same time. Make him feel good.”

She turned, looked at Denton, her lips twisted in a smile. “Sure. For Mickey Denton, I’ll make him feel good. Real good.” She turned, hightailed it for the outer office.

Brady looked from Mickey to the slammed door and back. “What’s with her?”

Lister looked up, shrugged. “Who can figure a dame?”

## Chapter 9

During the next three weeks, Al Lister went all out on the Mickey Denton publicity push. The columns were loaded with plugs for Mickey's record-breaking stand at the Cuernavaca. Magazine spreads emphasized the singer's catnip-like appeal for the teen-agers, fruits of seeds that had been planted weeks before in anticipation of the need for the push.

The concentration on deejay plays of the Denton sides was stepped up, and the budget for pay-offs doubled. Juke boxes, under the prodding of Harry Jacobs's boys, roared Mickey Denton records morning, noon and night, building up impressive showings in the tabulations in *Billboard* and *Variety*.

By the time the date for Mickey Denton's appearance on the show rolled around, even Howie Stewart's mentors were pleasantly amazed to find that they had first crack at the year's hottest talent. Howie, himself, modestly disclaimed credit when columnists started to single him out as a star-maker. The campaign was so effective that by the time Lister had finished, not even the most cynical of the table-hoppers at Lindy's could grumble that Mickey Denton was too much of an unknown for a national TV show exposure.

The Howie Stewart show was broadcast from Studio 7 in the newly completed Federal Broadcasting Tower. A mezzanine, ringing the studio in a semicircle, contained a client's booth and the control room. In the center, four rows of seats gaped empty.

The director, Hal Morris, sat in a semi-collapsed state in the control booth, watched as the three monitors were checked out on the wall in front of him. He was unhappy because his number-one cameraman had reported sick; he was unhappy because there was a new man on camera two where standard interview close-ups were produced—but most of all he was unhappy because with ten minutes to go before the one-hour break between camera rehearsal and show time, the star of the show still refused to permit the guest star an additional four minutes of air time. And the guest star refused to go on without it.

In the rehearsal room that adjoined the studio, Brady sat unperturbedly on a high director's stool, stared into the anger-reddened face of Howie Stewart.

“I had this character shoved down my throat in the first place.” Stewart’s red hair stood up from his egg-shaped head at right angles, his eyes were slitted almost to the point of complete disappearance. “But I stood still because I’m a good guy. But that good that a creep like him dictates how much time he takes, that good a guy I’m not.”

Brady shrugged. “Then it was just a misunderstanding. No hard feelings. We’ll pick up our marbles and go.” He jumped down from the stool. “The kid’s probably grown too fast for a spot like this anyhow.” He started to walk past Stewart who grabbed him by the arm and swung him around.

“Too big? You know what I think—I think I’m running an amateur hour even letting the bum in the studio. But I’m a good guy—”

“Sure you are. Good enough maybe to fill eight minutes. But you better be awful good when the story gets out how you were jealous of a newcomer who—”

Howie Stewart’s voice hit a hysterical pitch. “Jealous? Me? You got holes in your head? Why—”

“Not me, baby, maybe you. Bill Lerner figures the kid’s his own discovery. When he finds out the kind of a shuffle you gave him—” He shrugged expressively.

Stewart let go Brady’s lapels as though they had been filled with pins. “Now, wait a minute—”

“No, you’re probably busy. We’ll be watching you. From Tony Agnelli’s office. He’s real interested in the kid. You know?”

“Look, I got all the respect in the world for Mr. Agnelli, but—”

“Funny guy, Agnelli. I can remember once in the movie business a couple of years ago, a guy thought he was a big shot. He steps all over a friend of Agnelli’s. You’d think a guy like Tony would have the guy clobbered. Not him.”

Stewart watched the other man’s face without expression.

“Agnelli just mentioned to some friends what a bastard this producer was. These guys have a lot of friends. Not important people. You know? Extras, stuff like that. So here’s this producer with a picture all ready to roll, everybody getting paid. And the extras walk out on him. Little guys. You know? The producer got the message.”

Howie Stewart stared at Brady. He, too, had gotten the message. It wasn't like the old days when entertainers like him had served an apprenticeship in burlesque, had graduated to revues, then radio and finally television. In those days it was only necessary to have talent, not backing. He knew Brady wasn't bluffing, that Agnelli would go to bat for the singer. And there was no one to go to bat for Howie Stewart—except Howie Stewart. And he had the unhappy feeling that Howie Stewart was no match for Tony Agnelli.

He nodded his head miserably. “Okay, Brady, you win. Denton gets the full twelve minutes.” His shoulders sagged slightly as he walked over to the phone connected with the control booth.

Inside the booth, the director dropped the receiver back on its hook. “Thank God, that's settled. Denton does the twelve-minute spot.” He exchanged a half grin with his assistant, pressed the button on the intercom.

“Mr. Denton,” the speaker boomed into the studio. “Would you please get ready for a run-through? Three songs and an introduction by the master.” He flipped off the speaker. “I don't know how they did it,” he told his assistant. “Taking four minutes from the master is like taking eternity away from God.” He moved out of the seat behind the monitor, watched while the assistant in the studio set places for the opening positions.

A secretary with a pencil stuck in her hair above her ear feverishly checked last-minute script changes, tore pages out of her script to compensate for the four minutes cut out of Howie Stewart's routine.

An agency man arrived with lead-ins for the commercial, was sent out into the studio to work them out on camera three where they could get close on it. The assistant called for action from the special effects cameras where the show's film clips and rear projection would be integrated with the regular cameras and cut into the action.

The big hand over the monitor board showed 8 p.m.

“We'll break for fifty minutes. Everybody back here no later than 8:45,” the assistant boomed through the intercom.

Outside in the studio, another assistant was chalking x's on the floor where Mickey Denton was to stand while doing his last number. He explained that the number would start on a long shot, that the camera would be dollied in to finish the number in a close-up.

“Pay no attention to the camera,” he grunted. “They won't run over you. At least they never have.”

“That’s real comforting.” Denton grinned at him.

At 8:45 the cast was back in the studio. The star of the show hadn’t so far spoken to his guest. He was busily rechecking the position of the cameras, the booms and the actors for the first number. Denton, who wasn’t in that number, sat on the sidelines with Brady.

“Nervous, kid?” Brady wanted to know.

Denton shook his head. “Why should I be? I have full faith in you, Brady. What could go wrong with you writing the script?”

“Don’t be so goddam sarcastic. You ought to thank your stars you have a bastard like me to look after you. That mealy-mouthed creep would rip you apart if I weren’t here.”

“I did get the feeling he wasn’t exactly helpless.”

“But you got your extra time just the same.”

Denton looked at the other man, grinned glumly. “Don’t give me the details. I have a weak stomach.”

The intercom boomed, “All right, we’ve got ninety seconds to go. Let’s get set for the opening.”

There was a last-minute scurrying as the technicians and cameramen adjusted the headsets that connected them with the control room. The floor manager scurried over to where Howie Stewart was arguing with a boom operator, settled the argument.

“Sixty seconds. You’re on your own, boys and girls. Let’s give ’em a show.”

The intercom went off as the lights picked up a center identification set. Larry Rules, the announcer, stepped to the center of the set, watched the countdown in pantomime. Then his big voice filled the room:

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, the Howie Stewart Show direct from the Federal Broadcasting Tower in New York. Tonight featuring that new singing star and idol, Mickey Denton.”

Somewhere a light flashed *Applause* and a dutiful sound of loud clapping came from the direction of the seats in the mezzanine. Howard Stewart bounded into the spotlight—and the show was on.

In his office overlooking Radio City, Tony Agnelli switched off the large television screen. He grunted with the effort as he snapped on the indirect lighting in the room. “Well?”

Mitch Corday shrugged. Tonight he wore a carefully tailored tuxedo, a small carnation in his buttonhole. “Looked great to me. Just great.”

Harry Jacobs chewed on his pipestem, nodded thoughtfully. “I could have been wrong. The kid’s really got it.” He blew a stream of smoke at the ceiling. “You know, Tony, we might be able to build this guy into a legit star. He’s really got something.”

“So what do you think I’m building him into?” the fat man growled. “Two, three months ago who heard of this guy? Now he’s mentioned in the same breath with Como, Sinatra and Martin. Sure he’s good.” He slapped his chest with the back of his hand. “Me, I made him that way. But not for peanuts. Not for what he can pick up singing or making pictures. That’s okay. But it’s peanuts.”

“You’re the boss.” Jacobs nodded. “But what a guy like Como or Sinatra can make legit, believe me that’s not peanuts. They do all right.”

“So suppose this bum sings himself out, busts a blood vessel in his throat, something like that? Then what’ve I got? Nothing.” He jabbed a sausage-like finger in the direction of the juke-box man. “But if I use him to open the door to my boys, no matter what happens to him, I’m in.”

“I buy Tony’s plan.” Corday studied his polished fingernails. “We don’t need this kid for talent. But to open doors, like Tony says, he’s worth a million.” He looked up. “Just the same, I think we ought to take it nice and easy. Give him a little more build-up, a little more polish. It’ll make it that much easier.”

“When can you open him in Vegas?”

Corday pulled a Morocco bound memo book from his pocket, flipped through the pages. “I can open him in a few weeks in the lounge—”

Agnelli shook his head. “No lounge. This kid doesn’t compete with a Twenty-one dealer. I told you he gets the big build-up. The big room. When?”

“Not until April.” He shrugged at Agnelli’s frown. “We’re booked solid, Tony. You can’t blame me. I didn’t even hear about this kid until a couple of months ago. By then—”

The fat man nodded. “Okay. Put him down for April or May. He gets held over for four weeks. You know?”

Corday made a memo in the book.

“What happens with the kid between now and April?” Harry Jacobs wanted to know. “Right now he’s real hot. Tonight a couple of million people saw him. From now on they’re going to know who the columnists are talking about when they mention Mickey Denton. We can’t let him cool off.”

“We won’t,” Agnelli told him. “Tomorrow I’ll see about booking him into a good spot in Miami Beach. Some place where they’ll keep talking about him. By the time he hits Vegas, everyone’ll know him.”

“Suits me,” Corday told him.

Agnelli swung around in his chair, slid open the partition hiding the miniature bar. He grabbed a bottle and some glasses, put them on his desk. “Let’s drink to Miami in December, Vegas in April and Hollywood by the end of the year.” He tilted the bottle over each of the glasses, spilled two fingers into each.

He waited until the others had reached for their glasses, held his up in a toast: “To the singer.” He emptied his glass noisily.

## Chapter 10

It was Mickey Denton's first time in Florida.

The Runleigh, where he was booked, was a huge pile of concrete and plate glass set off from Collins Avenue by a park studded with walks and small ponds. Small porches were pasted to the sides of the building, each with a view of the ocean—each protected against an invasion of privacy by fan-shaped opaque glass guard screens.

Denton stood on the balcony outside his rooms, looked out across the blinding white of the sand to the green surf beyond. He didn't even hear Brady as the older man stepped out behind him.

“All right, huh, kid?”

Denton turned around, nodded. “Plenty all right.” He led the way into the dim coolness of the living room. “You know I was reading in this morning's paper they got sleet in New York?” He grinned. “How you like that? Mikey Donelli from Hemlock Street walking around in shorts while they're shivering up there. How you like that?”

Brady grinned. “It's only the beginning, kid. You play your cards right and Mikey Donelli owns the world.”

“Only the mortgage is made out in Tony Agnelli's name.”

The older man shrugged. “So is that bad?”

Denton walked over to a portable bar against the far wall, poured himself a drink. “Depends. Mikey Donelli I own.” He tossed off the drink with a grimace. “Mickey Denton's cut up more ways than an orphanage turkey.” He spilled a little more liquor into the glass.

“That something new, kid? Lushing before dinner, I mean?”

Denton held the glass up, examined the inch or so of liquid in it, shrugged. “Just a short one to perk me up.” He tossed it off, set the glass back on the bar. “Good for the blood pressure.”

Brady dropped into one of the modernistic bucket chairs, crossed his knees. “Don't tell me the opening's got you bugged?”

“Why should it? Agnelli’s probably got the place loaded with friends. I could sing the Russian National Anthem and it would still bring the house down.”

Brady found himself a cigar, prepared to bite the end off it.

“Just one favor, Brady.” The singer interrupted his pacing. “If you stick it in your mouth, light it.” He watched the manager return the cigar to his breast pocket. “I’m tired of watching you gum those things to death.”

Brady grinned at him. “Why don’t you lie down, kid?”

“I’m not nervous, damn it,” Denton yelled at him. “I don’t want to lie down.”

“Sure. Then why don’t you go out and get some air? Go down to the pool and take a dip. Be surprised how much better it makes you feel.” He reached for a copy of the *New Yorker* on the small table next to his chair. “Especially when you remember they’re freezing in New York right now.”

Denton nodded briefly, headed for the bathroom. When he reappeared he had a towel draped over his shoulders, was wearing bathing trunks and sandals.

“I’ll be at the pool if you want me, Brady.”

Brady nodded. As soon as the door had closed behind the kid, he pulled the cigar from his pocket, bit off the end, spat it at the wastebasket and settled back with a sigh.

She was stacked.

Mickey Denton lounged in the deck chair at the side of the pool, enjoyed the effect as she walked from the pool-side bar back to the umbrella-shaded table directly across from him. Her gold-blond hair had a metallic sheen in the sunlight. Her body was the warm nutlike color that testified to many hours in the sun. Her mouth was a crimson slash.

As she walked, full breasts swayed rhythmically, threatened to negate the restraint of the thin wisp of brassière that did a halfhearted job of containing the cantilever construction of her façade. A matching V of bikini was perched perilously low on her hips.

The over-all effect was that her assets were as sound as those of the First National—and just as liquid.

Denton continued to watch her from behind the protection of his sun glasses as she slid in across the table from a squat little man with a broken

nose. Tufts of hair protruded from the front of the matching top of the man's trunks, he wore a peaked straw cap. It wasn't the first time Denton had seen them together. They had ringsided at the Cuernavaca on opening night and he had seen them in some of the after-hours spots in New York.

The man was Timmy Ryan, with top level contacts in the Syndicate in New York. She was Della Shawn, late of the chorus of the *Gayeties*. They weren't married. She had described their relationship to a Grand Jury as "Timmy is just a very dear friend of mine" when the chairman of the Grand Jury tried unsuccessfully to find out where Timmy got the money he spent so lavishly.

When Ryan felt the singer's eyes on them and looked over at where he lounged, Denton shifted his glance to the blue-green water of the pool, the reflection of the white furniture that was around it.

From the side of his eye he saw Ryan say something to the girl. She turned, looked over to where he sat. Denton brought his eyes back from the water, met her glance, then looked away.

A moment later, a waiter stopped at his chair. "Mr. Ryan," he paused, indicated the little man at the table, "would like to know if you'd join him for a drink, Mr. Denton?"

Mickey looked across, drew a nod from the man with the broken nose. "Be glad to." He pulled himself up from his chair, adjusted the towel around his shoulders, walked around the pool to where Ryan and the blonde sat.

"Hello, singer." Ryan's voice was flat, guttural. "You looked lonesome sitting over there."

"I was."

Ryan motioned to a chair, Denton slid into it. "Didn't think you glamor boys ever got lonesome. Dell, here, she made me take her back to the Cuerna three times. That's what she thinks of your pipes."

Denton turned to her, smiled. "Thanks."

"Timmy always forgets to introduce me," the blonde said, pouting. "I'm Della Shawn. And I am one of your fans." She nodded to a banner that was strung across the outdoor bar *Mickey Denton in the Diamond Ballroom—Every Night at 9 and 12:30* and smiled. "Timmy and I have a front-row table."

"You had one for the opening at the Cuernavaca."

She looked pleased. “You’re just guessing.”

Mickey shook his head. “I noticed.”

The man with the broken nose listened with a disapproving frown. “All right, so it’s a mutual admiration society. She likes your pipes, you notice her—” He let his eyes run over her obvious assets. “Not that I see how you could miss. But how about that drink?”

“Sure. Make it Dewar’s on the rocks. A touch of soda.” He looked up at the hovering waiter.

“Same,” Timmy grunted. “Only make them doubles.” When the waiter had glided off, “Man’s like a duck. Can’t fly on one wing.”

“A couple of those and I’d really be flying.”

Ryan leaned back, studied the singer’s face. “You’re moving real fast, kid. I been keeping tabs. Who’s your manager?”

“Brady.”

Ryan nodded. “Yeah, but who’s Brady’s partner? Agnelli?”

“I’ve met Agnelli, but I don’t know anything about any partnership. Why don’t you ask Agnelli?”

The short man worked at a grin which merely twisted his battered features grotesquely. “Look, kid, no offense. I’m not sticking my nose in. I got a proposition for you.” He shrugged. “If Agnelli’s in, there’s no room for Ryan. If he isn’t—”

“I don’t think Brady’s in the market for a partner.”

The waiter arrived with the drinks. Ryan waited until he had placed them on the table and retreated outside ear range.

“Just asking, kid.” He lifted his glass to his lips, took a deep swallow. His small eyes jumped from Denton to the girl and back. “I thought you might like my proposition.” He drained his glass, set it back on the table. “Let’s get dressed, Dell.”

The girl pushed back her chair, stood up without an argument. She smiled down at the singer. “Good luck tonight.”

“Thanks.”

Ryan got to his feet. “If anything changes, come see me.” He nodded to the blonde, she followed him toward the hotel entrance. The effect from the flip side was just as satisfying as it had been from the front.

Brady was dozing in the bucket chair near the porch when Denton returned to the room. He opened his eyes as Mickey walked in, grunted at him. “How’s the swim, kid?”

“I didn’t take one.” Denton walked into the bathroom, shucked the trunks, wrapped a towel round his middle. He walked out into the living room, stretched out on the studio couch.

“Saw one of the mob down at the pool.”

Brady raised his eyebrows, didn’t question him.

“Timmy Ryan.”

The manager’s eyes narrowed. “And that babe of his?”

“Dell.”

Brady reached down to the floor to recover the cigar that had fallen from his lips when he dozed off earlier. “Stay away from her, kid.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s got a man. A real mean man. And he don’t like competition.”

“Maybe she’s got something to say about it.”

“Look, I’m not talking because I like to make with the gums. Peddle your sex life some place else. Stay away from the Shawn broad. She’s taken.”

“What am I supposed to do? Live like a monk? Keep my hands off everything except the instant pussy Agnelli provides or Lister sends up?”

“It’d be a lot safer.”

“I’m tired of being safe,” Denton growled. He swung his legs off the side of the bed. “I got some rights, too—”

“Look, kid, I only work here. You got any beefs, take them up with Agnelli. Don’t give me ulcers.”

“You think I’m afraid of Agnelli? You think—”

“I think you’re a damn fool if you’re not. If Agnelli tells you to jump, you better jump. If he tells you you’re finished, don’t go reading continued stories. You know?” He jammed the damp end of the cigar in his mouth.

“You knew what you were doing when you sold yourself to Agnelli. Don’t try to renege. It makes him nervous.” He pulled the door open, stepped out.

Denton glowered at the closed door for a moment, reached over and snagged the phone. “Hello, I want to talk to Della Shawn.”

“Do you have the room number, sir?”

“No. But she’s registered.”

After a moment, there was a click. The voice at the other end was sultry, complemented the cocoa-colored skin, the golden hair, the scarlet slash of a mouth. “Hello? This is Della Shawn.”

“Mickey Denton, Della. Can we talk?”

There was a slight pause. He imagined he could hear her drawing her breath between her teeth. Her voice dropped. “Yes.”

“Any chance of my seeing you tonight? Alone, I mean?”

“I—I don’t know. Timmy has to go over to Biscayne around midnight. He wants me to go—”

“Have a headache,” he pleaded.

There was a slight pause. “I’ll have to hang up. I think I hear someone coming.”

“How about it?”

“I’ll meet you on the terrace outside the ballroom after your second show.” There was a faint click as the connection was broken.

Denton lay back on the bed, reached over and dropped the receiver on its hook. He grinned slightly, wiped the thin film of perspiration from his upper lip with the back of his hand. He closed his eyes, tried to remember how these well-rounded hips had worked against the frailty of the bikini.

When Brady looked in an hour later, he was asleep.

## Chapter 11

The Diamond Ballroom in the Runleigh (this year's hotel on the beach) was built on the lines of the amphitheater in Rome—only on a more elaborate style. The dance floor was bathed by hidden spots, nestled at the foot of tiered rows of tables that rose in sharp ascent. There was no ceiling to the five-storied annex; a sliding top covered the entire area in the event of rain.

At the fanfare, Mickey Denton ran from the wings, was pinned by a blinding white flash to the center of the floor like an insect in a collection. There was a wave of applause, then an expectant hush settled over the room.

From where he stood, the upper tables were no more than little specks of light, like fireflies, rising three stories. The flames flickered rhythmically as the breeze blew the candles.

He listened subconsciously while the pianist fingered an introduction to “Hold me,” his eyes roaming the ringside tables. Suddenly he saw her. Timmy Ryan's table was just off center front-row ringside. Timmy was wearing a white silk jacket, dark-colored tie. He looked as though he needed a shave in the half light. The girl was wearing a sharply décolleté golden lamé gown that complemented the color of her hair, provided breathtaking contrast for the cocoa color of her skin.

The rest of the orchestra blended smoothly into the number; Denton grabbed the mike, tilted it in front of his face. He was in it now, his voice throbbing low then building in intensity. He stood there facing her, mouthing the words to her as though she were the only one there.

The silence in the room seemed to grow. The waiters stopped their endless prowling, the soft mutter of conversation died away. For the first time, Denton was convinced that he held an audience in his hand—an audience that didn't have to be bought and paid for by Tony Agnelli.

Suddenly the number was over. The customers seemed to be releasing their collective breaths, then the applause cascaded down the tiers onto the floor like a tangible thing. It came in waves of increasing volume, built to a thunderous roar.

Denton raised his hand, grinned up into the dimness of the tables. “It’s only the beginning, folks.” His fingers tore at his tie, pulled it open, unbuttoned the collar, as he turned to the orchestra. “All right, fellows, let’s play for the people.” He looked back into the audience. “How about ‘Blue Shadows’?”

The result was instantaneous. He nodded to the orchestra leader.

“Blue Shadows” brought the house down. He followed it with the two sides of his new record, closed with “Who’s Sorry Now.” At the end of “Sorry” he ran for the wings. The thunderous applause followed him, but he stepped back onto the floor, waved for quiet.

“Sorry, folks, I’d love to do more. But we’ve got another show at 12:30. We’ll be back. Hang around.”

He stepped back into the wings as a dance duo pushed past him onto the floor. He stood for a moment, watching their graceful handling of a cha-cha, then permitted Brady to lead him back to his dressing room.

“It was big time, kid. Real big time. You can’t buy that kind of applause from a claque.” Brady shut the dressing room door after them, helped Denton out of his coat. “There’s two kinds of applause. The flat handclapping you buy. It has a slow beat to it, it always has the same sound. And the other kind—where they slam their hands together until they hurt, when you can just hear them screaming for more. Like tonight.”

Denton nodded happily. He had felt the difference himself. He dropped onto the couch, made no move to resist as Brady caught his ankles, lifted his legs onto the couch.

“There were a lot of news boys from the Miami dailies and from some of the trades out front tonight. You grab a little shut-eye. I’ll see what they think.”

On the way out, Brady turned the lights down, leaving the room in semidarkness. He didn’t have to talk to the local entertainment columnists or the boys from the trades. He already knew he had a winner. He had been counting on Agnelli’s backing to help Denton score, but he hadn’t hoped for what he had to back it up with—the kid was a natural!

The second show was the same—only more so. They were standing in line at the entrance to the Diamond Ballroom as early as 10:30. The word had gotten around that Mickey Denton at this year’s hotel was this year’s

Elvis Presley and Bing Crosby rolled into one. And every tourist in every hotel along Collins Avenue wanted to act as midwife to the birth of the new sensation.

Timmy Ryan's table was filled to overflowing at the second show by a Paterson, N.J., manufacturer and his wife. Along with the firefly effect of the candles on the upper tiers was the sparkle of bracelets and diamond earrings. There was no fear that this was a house stacked by Lister, Denton knew. This was a typical Miami crowd giving a typical Miami welcome to a star. And he was in!

The second show crowd was even more reluctant to let him off the floor than the first had been. Finally he begged off, rushed to his dressing room to wipe the make-up off his face. He was just slipping into a lightweight linen jacket when Brady broke into the room.

"I been on the phone to Agnelli, kid. He's pleased as hell. Been getting reports on you from a dozen of the boys. The Vegas date is set for—" He broke off. "You hear me, kid?"

"I hear you."

Brady caught him by the arm, swung him around. "How come the glad rags? You going some place?"

Denton took the older man's hand off his sleeve. "Easy, the material bruises."

"Kid, you didn't answer me. You going some place?"

"I'll be around. Look, tonight's my night to howl, isn't it? You said yourself I was good—"

Brady nodded. "Yeah. Real good." He studied Denton's face, seeking some clue as to what was in the singer's mind. "Want me to come along?"

"Not tonight."

"How about a nice private party? I know a couple of kids who—"

"I told you, Brady, that stuff is out."

Worry clouded the older man's face. "Okay, you're the doctor. But, Mick, take an older man's advice. Cold turkey may not be as much fun as chili—but you're less likely to get burned. You know?"

"I'm a big boy, Brady. Let me do my own worrying."

“Okay, kid. Just be careful.” Brady walked out of the dressing room, closed the door behind him.

Della Shawn was standing on the terrace when he came out, her features shrouded by the shadows. From where he stood, she looked as though she had been sculptured from milk chocolate and wrapped in gold foil. He crossed to her, was rewarded by a warm smile.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t make it,” he told her.

“If I had any sense I wouldn’t have.” She looked around, dropped her voice. “Let’s get out of here. Timmy’s over in Miami, but one of his friends might see us. He thinks I’m dying with a headache.”

Denton caught her arm, steered her toward the parking lot. “Where’ll we go? You probably know this town better than I do.”

“Hungry?”

He nodded. “I didn’t eat. First night jitters, I guess.”

She tightened her fingers on his arm. “Then let’s go up to Hallandale. You can get a real nice steak at Manero’s on Beach Boulevard.”

“You name it.”

The evening went past on a pink cloud. From Hallandale, they drove back onto the beach, crossed over to 22nd Street. In the key room in Bill Jordan’s, they sat on the floor, held hands, listened to the piano rhythms of the master.

There had been other nights like this for Della Shawn, nights touched with magic, underscored by hope. But that’s all they had been—nights of magic. Dawn never broke.

She had hit New York, fresh from upstate, determined that she would never be the work-wasted wreck her mother had been. The beauty crown for Miss Jefferson County had been almost a pass to the office of Jerry Madison, the producer of the *Gayeties*; and before she had been in town a month, she was rehearsing for the show.

She had gone into it with her eyes open. The older girls on the line, the ones who’d been around, all warned her. Timmy Ryan was a no-good; jealous, possessive, violent. But it gave her a perverse thrill to be seen with him, to be known as his girl. And he was generous.

It wasn't long before she knew what the others had meant. There'd be calls for dates—sometimes the caller even showed up. But never twice. Timmy had passed the word around. She was his girl—hands off.

Friends tried to reason with her. She admitted that she was playing with dynamite, but she couldn't help it. The excitement was in her blood.

“Besides,” she protested to one date, “for a girl in show business, there are only two kinds of men to go out with—the fellows in the show or fellows like Timmy.”

“Why?”

“Because we're just getting to bed when the average Joe like you is going to work. Our free time is your sleeping time.” She kissed the young lawyer on the cheek. “But fellows like Timmy, their time is their own: So we go out with them as fun-guys.”

The young lawyer, who never showed up for another date, shook his head. “But they're dangerous. If anyone was out to get them and you were along—”

“That's part of the excitement. I'm that kind of a girl, honey. I get more of a charge out of eating in an East Side spot with a guy like Timmy than I do in the Automat with a nice guy. Besides I hear all these awful things about Timmy and his friends. All I know is that he treats me right and that's the only way I can judge him.”

In time, she had nobody to compare Timmy to. The once in a while dates disappeared and word was out that Della Shawn belonged to Timmy Ryan. After a while there was nobody who cared.

Sitting, listening to the dreamy piano in the dim room, she knew in her heart there might have been. Only now it never would be. Idly she wondered if the singer would have the nerve to stand up to Timmy as Bobby Martin once had. But she knew she'd never find the answer—because she'd never let things go that far again.

Denton consulted his watch. “It's after two, baby. What time did you say Timmy'd be back?”

She shrugged lazily. “These are usually all-night meetings.” He noticed for the first time that her eyes were slanted. “We still have a couple of hours.”

“The smoke's beginning to get to my throat. How about going back to the hotel?”

She pursed her lips. “The way you say that—”

“Is the way I mean it.”

She grinned at him. “Then let’s go.” She got to her feet, straightened the dress against her body with the palm of her hand. “I probably should warn you that Timmy may have tipped a bellboy to keep an eye on me—”

“As long as he didn’t tip one to keep an eye on me we’re all right.” He took her by the arm, waved to the man at the piano.

“Good luck, kid. Heard wonderful things about your opening. Be out to catch you soon,” the pianist called after Denton. They walked out through the darkened supper room to where he’d left the rented car.

The parking lot was deserted as they pulled in next to the hotel. Denton guided the big convertible to the end lane, parked with its bumper touching the low concrete abutment that looked out over the beach to the ocean. Out beyond the gray formlessness of the sand there was a rumble of surf, the boiling, hissing sound of water retreating from the beach. The lacy tip of a breaker would appear, dissolve into the rush back from the beach.

Denton cut the motor, slid his arm around the girl’s shoulder. Her skin was cool, smooth. She turned her face, waited for his lips with half-opened mouth. They clung for a moment, his hands busy at the zipper on the back of her dress. She made an ineffectual effort to stop him, but suddenly the zipper gave way, the wired front of her dress sagged open. The milk chocolate color of her skin was striped in dazzling white where the top of the bikini had been.

“Please, Mickey. Maybe it’d be smart if—”

“I never was smart, honey,” he told her. His lips sought hers, she turned her head.

“I should warn you. Timmy’s crazy jealous, and—”

“Timmy doesn’t worry me, baby. Right now there’s just you and me and —”

“Don’t look now,” a hard voice broke in from the darkness at the side of the car. “You just got company.”

The car door was pulled open, a rough hand caught Della, pulled her sprawling from the car. She made an attempt to pull the top of her gown together but it fell to her waist.

“Hey, wait a minute, you can’t—” Denton tried to scramble from the car after the man who’d grabbed her. Something hit him in the pit of the stomach, he felt his knees buckle under him, he sprawled on his face in the sand.

“Turn him over,” a familiar voice growled.

He felt rough hands turn him over on his back. He managed to get his eyes open, looked up into the face of a man with a splattered nose. “You had to try it, huh, singer?” Timmy Ryan grunted. “What’d think she was, the welcome wagon?” He nodded to the man with him who reached down, caught Denton by the lapels and pulled him to his feet. He propped him against the front fender. Ryan licked his thickened lips in anticipation.

The blonde caught his arm. “Please, Timmy. It wasn’t his fault. I was lonely and—”

The man with the splattered nose backhanded her across the side of the face, knocked her to her knees. “Stay out of this. I’m going to fix this guy so’s he gets sick every time he thinks of you.” He brought his right back, sank it viciously to the cuff in the singer’s midsection.

Denton’s knees sagged, his head rolled forward as he doubled up. The second man caught him, propped him against the fender again. The singer’s eyes were glassy, spittle ran down the side of his mouth, his carefully mussed hair hung dankly in his face. He was deathly sick.

“Don’t worry, singer. I’m not going to mess up the face or the pipes. But you’ll know I’ve been around.” He hit him in the midsection again, caught him as Denton doubled over, pushed him upright.

The singer lay back across the fender, slowly slid down it, hit the ground face first.

“He’s out like a light, Timmy.” The second man knelt next to Denton, turned him over on his back.

“I’m not finished with him yet.” The little man kicked the unconscious man in the side. He kept kicking until Denton moaned, opened his eyes. His lips moved weakly.

“Agnelli,” he croaked. “Agnelli will get you for this.”

Ryan laughed. “Agnelli? Get me? Look, sucker, the only reason I didn’t bust you up good was because I promised Agnelli. He wants you in condition to sing.”

“He—he knew—?”

“Why not? He don’t like a claim jumper no more than I do.”

## Chapter 12

Mickey Denton opened his eyes, looked around. He shifted uncomfortably on the bed, winced at the soreness of his midsection. His eyes hopped around the room, came to rest on Brady, sitting in the big chair, the usual unlit stogie between his teeth.

“How you feel, kid?”

“Lousy.” Denton tried to sit up, fell weakly on his back. “That little punk. You know what he—”

“I know.” Brady pulled the cigar from between his teeth. “You wouldn’t take my advice and stay away from that broad, you got to take what’s coming. I warned you.”

“So you warned me.” The singer managed to slide his legs over the side of the bed, sit up. He massaged his midsection gently. “What kind of a guy is Agnelli to let a little punk like that work me over? I thought he—”

“He’s only interested in your pipes,” Brady grunted. “And Timmy didn’t damage them.”

The man on the bed got to his feet, shuffled painfully toward the bathroom. “Well, if you think I’m going to work feeling like this, you’re crazy.”

“You don’t take advice so I’m probably wasting my time. But if I was you, I wouldn’t try missing a show. Ryan’s tough, but he’s a kitten compared to Agnelli.”

“So I’m sick. What can he do about it?”

“Give Ryan the go-ahead to give you the full treatment.”

The singer stopped with his hand on the knob. “You think he didn’t? Just because it don’t show don’t mean—”

“Look, kid, I know Timmy. When he gives you the full treatment, you don’t just walk around moaning about how your belly hurts.” He chewed on the cigar. “Let me give you a for-instance. Remember Bobby Martin, the light heavy?”

Denton shuffled back to the bed, sat down. “Yeah?”

“Bobby Martin could’ve been champ. Real class. A real comer.” He rolled the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. “You never hear about Martin any more, do you?”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” the singer grunted.

“You ought to. If Agnelli wasn’t in you so deep, it could’ve happened to you. Like you said, you hadn’t thought about it. People forget fast, kid. Awful fast.” He leaned his head back. “They don’t like to remember guys in nursing homes, guys who don’t even remember their own names.”

“Martin? Punchy?”

“Punchy and half paralyzed. One whole side.” Brady pulled the cigar from between his lips, threw it into the wastebasket. “Ryan did it to him. Deliberately.”

“Ryan? On account of Della?”

The manager bobbed his head. “Years back, Della took one look at this kid and fell. Real hard. He liked what he saw, too.” He shrugged. “Everybody tried to tell him it was no good. But you should know how it is with a kid like that. Figures he can lick his weight in wildcats. Real cocky. Nobody could tell him a thing.”

“When was this?”

“A couple of years ago. Three or four. Right after Timmy picked up his option on the broad.” Brady got up, walked to the door leading to the balcony, looked out over the sand to the breaking surf. “It was at a party Timmy was throwing in his place. You know the kind. Loaded with celebrities—prize fighters, movie stars—the usual brawl.” He turned, studied the man on the bed. “Della takes one look at this kid and she wants more. Back then Martin stands about five-eleven, weighs one-seventy and built like an ad for Charley Atlas. On top of that he knows the right words from his college days. They get along just fine.” He walked back to the bed. “Everybody tries to give him the high sign, but he’s not buying. He’s a lot like you. He knows all the answers.”

“So?”

Brady shrugged. “Timmy catches them on the balcony before the night’s over, and he does a slow burn. Like with you, he don’t say nothing, just sits back and watches. The kid and Della start seeing each other on the sly. The kid’s real gone on her, and he don’t care who knows it.” He shook his head. “That’s when it happens.”

“What?”

“The kid’s manager—Doc Michaels—he gets a call down to Jacobs Beach. They inform him he don’t own the kid’s contract no more. He took in a partner—Timmy Ryan. Only nobody but Timmy, Doc and the boys know about it.” He pulled another cigar from his pocket, jabbed it between his teeth. “From then on, Doc has nothing to say about who the kid fights, about training, nothing.”

“I get the picture.” Denton started to get up, the manager put the flat of his hand against his chest, pushed him down.

“Hear the rest of it. It might do you good.” He chewed irritably on the cigar. “Martin’s only a kid. You got to ride a kid like that. Especially when he hates training like Martin does. Nobody rides him, he starts going for the bright lights, the bubbly stuff. This kid don’t do nothing halfway. He really hits the joy spots. That’s when they match him with Allie Novack.”

Denton frowned. “He fought Novack a couple of times.”

“Yeah, this is the first time. Before Allie became champ. When he’s real hungry. A real killer.” He shrugged. “Everybody knows the kid’s not ready for a tiger like Novack, but the kid thinks he can take the world. So he trains for the fight on champagne and Della.”

“And Novack half killed him.”

“He should have done the whole job. After the fifth round Doc wanted to throw the towel in, but Timmy told him he’d end up in an alley if he did. I think he still might have taken the chance, but the kid wouldn’t let him.” He shook his head. “Novack could have put him away any time after that fifth round, but he had his instructions. Don’t knock him out, just bust him up good. And Allie was an expert at that. It was a slaughter.”

“How come he got a re-match then?”

“What are you? Stupid? What do you mean how come? You got the in Timmy Ryan has with the boys and you could match Shirley Temple and Primo Carnera. They take orders, too.” He walked back to his chair, dropped into it, stretched his legs out full length and studied the shine on his shoes. “The second bout was the same as the first. Only worse. Bobby Martin comes out of this one walking on his heels. Then Timmy gives him the full treatment. They throw the kid in against house fighters week after week. He takes such a beating at the Ridgewood Grove one night, they take him out on a stretcher. They never unscrambled his brains after that one.” Brady took the cigar from between his teeth, looked at it with distaste. “That’s when

Timmy Ryan loses interest in the kid. He figures he's paid him off for moving in on his broad."

"So what's that got to do with me?"

The manager rolled his eyes up from his cigar to the face of the man on the bed. "Maybe nothing. But me, if I were in your shoes, I'd get down on my knees and thank God Agnelli has got a wad riding on me."

"Thank him for what? Those guys damn near caved in my gut."

Brady grinned bleakly. "Agnelli makes the difference. Between getting your gut damn near caved in or getting it really caved in." He stuck the cigar between his teeth, got up. "I just dropped by to see if you were still breathing." He walked to the door. "If you were thinking of taking the night off, forget it. Agnelli wouldn't like it." He walked out, closed the door after him.

Denton scowled at the closed door for a moment, wrinkled his nose. He walked to the wastebasket, picked up the chewed up cigar Brady had thrown into it. He walked with it to the balcony, tossed it over. Wincing, he opened his pajama top. The entire area under the rib cage was beginning to discolor. He touched it gingerly with the tips of his fingers, swore softly under his breath.

Al Lister and his redheaded secretary arrived on the morning plane. Brady drove them from the airport, got them settled in rooms on the same floor with the singer.

Denton was on the terrace sipping his coffee when Lister and his manager walked out. He looked up, registered surprise when he recognized the press agent.

"What are you doing here, Al? I thought you were up north shivering." He indicated the paper on the edge of his table. "Third straight day it's been below thirty."

Lister pulled out a chair, signaled for a waiter. "Heard about things getting hot down here. Thought I'd take a couple of days, see what's going on."

Denton looked from the press agent to Brady and back. "What's that mean?"

“That the only thing you read in the paper, kid? The weather report from New York?” Lister picked up the paper, started leafing through it. “There’s other things interesting in there.” He stopped, folded the paper back, his eyes skipped down the paragraphs of a featured column. “Like this one: ‘That singing star will be singing on a higher note if he doesn’t stop getting romantic outside office hours. He got a sample the other night in a parking lot.’ Guess who?”

Denton grabbed the paper, pulled it away. He read through it slowly, cursed under his breath. “I thought this Bill Lerner was a buddy-buddy of yours.”

“He is. That’s why he didn’t use your name.” Lister reached into his pocket, pulled out a folded clipping. “Here’s what put me on the plane this morning. An item in yesterday’s Larry Hays’s column in the *Mail*. He isn’t a buddy-buddy. So he used names.”

The item was circled with red pencil. It read: “The new singing sensation, Mickey Denton, got out of line with a well-known sportsman’s filly and now has horseshoe marks where they don’t show. Doesn’t take long for these boys to believe their publicity and start feeling their oats.”

“Why don’t those sons of bitches mind their own business?”

“You are their business.” Lister picked the clipping from between Denton’s fingers, folded it and put it into his pocket. “The minute you stick your head above the crowd, everything you do or say becomes their business. You might as well get used to that.”

The waiter walked over, took an order for a fresh pot of coffee and some cups, walked away.

“Agnelli sent Al down, Mickey,” Brady told him. “He don’t like this kind of stuff breaking. It’s Al’s job to put the lid on. But you’ve got to help him.”

“What am I supposed to do? Turn into a hermit?”

Lister pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, stuck one in the corner of his mouth. “Not necessarily. But if you’ve got to go sniffing around, pick on somebody besides the broad of a character like Ryan.” He touched a match to the cigarette, drew a deep breath, blew smoke in twin streams from his nostrils. “You know, if Agnelli wanted to teach you a real lesson—”

“I heard all about it. He called Ryan off. Well, thanks for nothing. I got a sore belly that says he didn’t do me any favors.”

The press agent shrugged. “You want to believe that, believe it. Me, I think Tony saved you from a real clobbering. That Timmy Ryan, he plays for keeps.”

“All right, all right. I’ve been a good boy. I haven’t even looked at her since. In fact I haven’t even seen her around.”

“She’s around,” Brady told him. “And if you had seen her, you’d have looked. She’s wearing a thick lip and a mouse under her eye. Real becoming.”

“Why, the dirty lousy—”

Lister put his hand on the singer’s arm. “Let’s not get heroic. So he slapped her around. Broad like this is used to it. It’s not the first time, believe me. Sometimes I think she likes it.”

Brady said, “I hope you haven’t got anything planned for this afternoon, singer. Al’s got you lined up for an interview on the Freddie Sands disc jockey show.”

“And if I have something planned?”

Brady grinned bleakly. “Cancel it. Sands is a big man in this town. A plug for your new side on this show means a lot.”

Lister bobbed his head. “A helluva lot.”

Brady waited until the waiter had placed two cups and a fresh pot of coffee on the table and withdrew. “I called Greer up at Rhythm this morning. I think it’s about time for him to sked an album. He acts like he won’t stand still for it, but he will. Especially if you show him you’re willing to help push the biscuits by doing some p.a.’s wherever you’re showing.” He squinted at the singer. “You got any idea what you could make yourself on a good selling album? Forty, fifty grand if it really gets hot.”

“You think he’ll go for it?”

“Depends a lot on you. You soften him up by being a good boy, I’ve got a clincher to nail him down.”

“What’s that?”

Brady shrugged. “We include a couple of his songs in the album. We guarantee him a play on the jukes—” He turned to Lister. “What do you think, Al?”

“You’re in like Flynn. It would be against his religion to turn you down. He’s a confirmed crook.” The press agent spilled some coffee into his cup, tasted it. He burned his mouth, swore under his breath. “They do that to you so you can’t taste how lousy the food is,” he complained.

## Chapter 13

Freddie Sands was a moon-faced, melon-shaped man with dank black hair that hung down over his forehead, which he made no move to brush out of his eyes. His lips were pouty, wet, his eyes dreamy, vacant. He sat at a desk in a room, half of which was cut off by a plate-glass partition. On the far side of the glass wall, his assistant was sorting the records to be fed to the twin turntables.

He did a last minute check of his typed list of commercials, penciled in a few notes on the margin. Then he reached over, switched on the cut-in mike.

“We’ll cut the last chorus off ‘Hold Me.’ Agency’s taking an extra minute for the High-Cal spiel.”

“Okay, boss,” the intercom chirped.

Sands snapped off the mike, leaned back in his chair. The big clock on the far wall showed twenty minutes to four. The show went on at four, and he felt reasonably sure that Brady and his singer would drop by before the show for a little talk. Most managers did.

There was a light rap on the door. It opened, Brady walked in, followed by Mickey Denton and Al Lister.

“Hello, Freddie,” Brady pushed his hand at the disc jockey, got a clammy paw in return. “This is the singer. Mickey Denton. Al Lister you know.”

Sands bobbed his head at Denton. “Hear you’re doing real good at the Diamond Ballroom. Gotta catch your show one of these nights.”

“Any night, Freddie. Any night at all,” Brady bobbed his head. He turned to Lister. “Make sure Freddie has a good table and everything he wants.”

Lister winked, touched forefinger to thumb. “Will do.” He turned to the disc jockey. “Thought you’d like to meet the Mick, Fred. We haven’t been getting many breaks on your show.”

“You get as many spins as you’re entitled to.” He rolled glassy eyes toward Brady. “Some of the other boys treat you better, I know. That’s because you treat some of the other boys better than you do me.” He turned

back to Lister. “Real reason I went for the interview with Denton at all was because the manager of the hotel asked me to do it as a favor to him. Maybe boost business at the ballroom.”

“Now, look, Freddie—”

“Wait a minute, Al,” Brady cut him off. He looked toward the glass partition. “Can we talk, Fred?”

Sands reached over, made sure the intercom button was off. “Sure.”

“I don’t expect you to go out on a limb just for the regular two spin a day fee.” He dropped his voice. “We’re trying to sell Rhythm on an album for the kid. You can help—”

When Sands nodded, his cheeks waggled. “So?”

“I want a tape of this interview. It’s worth four bills for the tape.”

Sands grinned lazily. “You could have the show taken off the air by half a dozen places in town for twenty-five bucks.”

“I know. But I figure if I buy the tape from you, it’ll be worth sending back to New York.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” Sands got up, walked to a small stand on which some coffee was perking. “Jangled nerves, anybody?” He held out a cup toward Denton. “How about you, singer?”

Denton took the cup, pulled a chair up to the desk, sat down.

Sands balanced a cup and saucer in one hand, walked around the desk, slumped into his chair. He set the cup down, reached over, snapped on the intercom mike.

“There’ll be a little change in the programing,” he told his assistant in the other room. “We’re doing a ten-minute interview with Mickey Denton. See that two of his sides front and back the interview.”

“Will do,” the intercom told him. “That means we have to drop a couple of numbers. Which ones go?”

Sands sipped at his coffee, picked up the typewritten list of selections prepared for him that morning by the assistant. “Stick the interview into the second segment. Drop plays seven through ten.” He set the cup down, picked up a pencil, made a big X in the center of the segment, scribbled the word *interview* in the margin.

“Boss,” the voice on the intercom was hesitant. “Can I slot number eight in the third segment? That’s the Sally Lee side of ‘Cloud.’ I—I promised her —”

“Look, buddy-boy, I’m the only guy on this show can promise a play and deliver. You banging that broad again?”

“Boss, she’s a friend. I just thought—”

“Okay. Slot it in the third segment. But remember, I get a piece of that.” He snapped off the switch. “He don’t get much money, but the way he’s making out, when he dies it will take two undertakers to get the smile off his face.” He leaned back, sipped at his coffee. “Here’s the way we’re going to handle it, Denton. We spin one of your sides, then I cut in and say, ‘And now guys and gals, hipsters and squares, all you hims and hers—this is the Sandsman bringing you the hottest new talent on the air today—Mickey Denton.’ From there on in, we do some questions. I ask you about albums, you say you have none—yet. So I do an open letter to Rhythm requesting one in the name of your millions of fans.” He spun on his chair, faced Brady.

“Okay?”

“Solid, man. Real solid.”

Two days later in the Snake Pit at Rhythm Records, Al Greer turned off the playback machine, leaned back, pursed his lips. He looked over to where his secretary, a thin girl with painfully prominent teeth, sat chewing on the end of a pencil. “Well?”

The secretary pushed a wisp of graying hair out of her face, tucked it untidily behind her ear. “I think we’d better give him anything he wants. The way he’s riding, any label in town would be glad to grab him.” She stuck the pencil in her hair, over her ear. “I’ve been sneaking peeks on the ‘Blue Shadows’ figures. Sales has requested another pressing. It’s a cinch for a gold record.” She grinned broadly. “That gives you your first. ‘Shadows’ can’t do it unless the flip side rides along.”

Greer nodded absently. “You know, this interview you just heard. I didn’t arrange it.” He squinted at her thoughtfully. “Sands must have done it on his own. And if the Sandsman does a push like that without payola, it must mean he’s getting heavy pressure from his listeners.”

“Why don’t we check some of the other key markets? Dole in Chicago, Larry Jensen in Phoenix—guys like that.”

Greer nodded. “Why don’t you?”

The thin girl got to her feet, wiped her hands along the sides of her thighs. Greer watched her angular form as she walked to the soundproof door to the room, closed it after her. On his job, he could have surrounded himself with the best looking stuff in the business, but he’d found it paid off a lot better to have one whose brains weren’t between her knees.

After the girl had left, he turned the tape on again. Freddie Sands’s voice spilled out into the room. “You’ve just heard the sensational best seller ‘Hold Me Always’ and now the Sandsman has a big surprise in store for you. Guys and gals, hipsters and squares, all you hims and hers—meet the sensational new talent who sang it—the hottest new talent on the air today—Mickey Denton. . . .”

Greer reached over, turned the tape off. Mentally he was trying to decide how many of his own numbers he could slip into an album by Denton. The question of whether or not he’d do the album was already settled. It was just a question of justifying it to the front office, and with orders for re-pressing of ‘Blue Shadows’ still rolling in, that was no problem at all.

The waiter brought the telephone to the pool-side table, handed it to Brady.

“Hello, Brady?” the voice was muted through the instrument.

Brady grinned, held it a few inches from his ear so that Lister could hear. “Hello, Greer. Get that tape all right?”

Greer grunted. “Brady, I’m going to take a flyer with you—”

“Flyer? Since when is a sure thing a flyer?”

“Well, I don’t know, buddy. Putting a whole album behind a newcomer like Denton—”

Brady winked at Lister. “Look, pal, I wouldn’t want you to do anything against your better judgment. Funny thing is Bill Markham of Taos is down here. He caught the Sands interview. They’re dumping Davy Morgan because he bombed with ‘Shadows’ and Markham would like to—”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t going ahead with the album. I’m willing to take a flyer, but I’ve got to be sure of the material.”

Brady winked at Lister. “No objection to that. You pick it.”

“Okay. How soon does the kid finish up down there?”

“They’re renewing him for four more weeks. But we don’t do a Sunday show so we can fly up after the last show on a Saturday night. You call it.”

There was a slight pause, then, “A week from next Saturday. We’ll work right through. While the kid’s this hot we better lean on it.”

“See you then, baby.” Brady dropped the receiver on its hook, leaned back, took a fresh hold on the cigar with his teeth. “Not bad. We get an album and all it costs us is a couple of hundred for Sands’s open letter, a few long-distance telephone calls to key deejays like Dole and Jensen, with a century to each of them for backing our play.”

“You’re letting Greer pick the stuff, though. He’ll load it with his own songs.”

“That’s all right. Next album we’ll pick the material. And by then I wouldn’t be surprised if Al Greer wasn’t the only one who had some songs to push.”

The waiter came over, accepted the folded bill Brady held out, removed the phone.

“All the big singers have their own publishing houses. Why not? It’s no different than the old days when the firms used to cut the singer in. Hell, Al Jolson never wrote a song in his life but he had his name on fifty-sixty songs. This way, instead of taking a piece, we get the whole pie.”

“That noise you hear is probably Joley spinning in his grave,” Lister grunted. “Comparing a Mickey Denton to an Al Jolson—”

“I’m not comparing anybody to anything. I just say a Jolson got behind a number, the next day it sold a million copies of sheet music. Today a Como or Martin or even a Denton gets behind a number, it could sell a million records. They make the song, they got a right to make a buck.”

“Suppose the A&R man nixes your songs?”

“Why should he? There are two sides to every biscuit. He gets one side, we get the other. How can he lose?”

Lister shrugged, squinted out across the pool. “Just the same, comparing a Denton and a Jolson—” He broke off, shook his head. “Hell, that’s sacrilege.”

## Chapter 14

Mickey Denton stood at the door leading to the balcony outside his room and watched the rain pour down in sheets. Beyond the sand the ocean was boiling and surging, crested with whitecaps as far as his eye could see. It was the third straight day of rain, and Denton couldn't think of a worse place to be than in Florida when it rained.

He dropped the drape to shut out the darkness, switched on a table lamp. Nervously he fingered through some magazines, restlessly tossed them aside. He got up, paced the room, stopped to pick up and examine the bric-a-brac lovingly placed by the hotel's decorator, finally stalked to the closet and pulled out his jacket. He shrugged into it, left the room.

Al Lister had 420, his secretary 424. Mickey stopped outside Lister's room, started to knock, decided against it. He was bored with himself and needed company, but right now he didn't think he could take Lister's assertiveness. Brady was out arranging transportation to New York after the last show the following Saturday to be back in time for Monday's dinner show.

He turned, started down the hall toward the elevator, stopped outside 424. Aline had spoken to him only when necessary since her arrival with Al over a week ago. He was aware that the redhead was deliberately avoiding him. On an impulse, he stopped, knocked at the door.

"It's open."

He turned the knob, pushed the door open. Aline was standing by the window, looking out. He saw a brief frown crease her forehead, then disappear.

"Something I can do for you?" she asked coolly.

"I was going down Collins Avenue for some delicatessen. I thought maybe you felt like some."

She pursed her lips, considered. "It does sound interesting." She turned, looked out the window. "And it doesn't look as though this damn rain is ever going to stop."

"I could bring you back some, or—"

“I’ll go with you. I like to walk in the rain.”

“Good.” He waited while she slipped into a coat, tied a scarf around her head. “This guy has corned beef that makes me homesick for the Stage Deli in New York.”

The redhead grinned. “You’re talking about my home away from home.” She closed the door behind them, didn’t bother to lock it. “Funny thing, no matter where you go—Miami, Chicago, Hollywood—they always have a New York delicatessen. Only thing, it isn’t New York. And that spoils it.”

At the elevator, he rang. “Live there all your life?”

She shook her head. “Just the best part of my life. I was born and brought up in Arkansas. I didn’t start living until I got to New York.”

“Me, I was born there. I guess when you’re born with a thing you don’t appreciate it as much as when you never had it and suddenly get it.”

The rain was cold and refreshing after the closeness of the hotel room. Mickey caught her hand as they walked down the rain-drenched avenue. The palm trees were bowing under the wind, the rain splashed in the puddles as they ran across the street. A few blocks later they stamped into the steamy warmth of the store.

A long glass-fronted counter lined one side of the room, small booths the other. A man in a white apron busily building a sandwich, looked up, waved to Denton.

Mickey and the redhead shared a booth and got to know about each other that afternoon. Not that there was much to know, but as they talked it suddenly seemed very important.

Aline Sampson was the oldest of a family of seven that lived on a decayed farm near Little Rock. She had matured early as the duties of a woman were pressed on a child, and had spent most of the first sixteen years of her life fighting off men. Her mother had wanted her to get an education, but she had never returned for her third year at the local high school. Instead, she lied about her age and entered a beauty contest being sponsored by a local theater chain. The judges took one look at the coppery red hair and the breathtaking curves and Aline Sampson was on her way out of Little Rock for good. She had never gone back.

The beauty title led by the usual route to modeling and a job in the chorus of a cellar night club on 48th off Broadway. She found that the only

difference between the men in Little Rock and the men on Broadway was the approach—the general destination was the same.

Al Lister was handling publicity for the club she was working with in those days. He got a big charge out of the redhead's Arkansas drawl, her dry humor, and attributed to her many of the gags he planted in the various columns. Soon she personified the typical chorus girl Dumb Dora. Her publicity caught on and she moved up from the chorus to a featured spot as what Lister described as the femme-cee of the revue.

That's when Charley Adams, who fronted the band at the club, first noticed her.

She had been noticing Charley ever since she started working at the club. He was tall, broad-shouldered, curly-headed; just about everything she wanted in a man. But in that department she had plenty of company—and some of the society girls who played the club for kicks had something Charley Adams was more likely to notice.

It was pretty generally accepted at the club that Marcia Kingman, whose father was major stockholder in the King chain of drive-ins, had a first mortgage on Charley. Aline had about given up making her pitch when the band leader seemed to notice her for the first time. From then on, it was a real thing.

The affair was in its second year when a rap came on the door of the apartment. Aline opened it, Marcia Kingman breezed past her, looked around.

“Looking for somebody?” Aline wanted to know.

“You.” Marcia sat down, crossed her knees. “Charley asked me to drop in and see you.”

“Charley?”

“Yes. He wanted me to tell you he'll be sending for his things.”

Aline reacted angrily. “I don't believe you.”

Marcia Kingman pasted a lazy smile on her lips. “Come off it, hon. That dumb broad act is fine for the club. But I happen to know you're a real smart girl. I'm marrying Charley.” She dug into her bag, brought out a checkbook. “I thought maybe you'd like to go out of town for a couple of months until it blows over.”

“That’d be just duck soup for you, wouldn’t it? I waltz out and leave the field free for you. Why, I—”

“You don’t believe me.” Marcia returned the checkbook to her bag. “May I use your phone?”

“Be my guest.”

Marcia walked over to the phone, dialed a number. “Charley? Yes. I saw her. Everything’s going to be all right.” She took the instrument away from her ear, held it out to the redhead. “Would you like to check on it?”

Aline took the phone, held it to her ear. “Charley?”

There was a long pause, then Charley’s voice came through the instrument. “Look, baby, this is the best way for both of us. Maybe later—”

The redhead slammed the receiver back on its hook.

Marcia shrugged. “I tried to do it the easy way. I know I’m not getting a prize in Charley. Matter of fact, I’m probably doing you a favor to—”

“Get out.”

The other girl walked over to the chair, picked up her gloves and bag. “The check?”

“Out.”

Marcia walked to the door, closed it after her. The redhead stamped into the bedroom, started stuffing clothes into a bag. She spent two months in Florida. When she came back, Charley Adams and his bride were gone. So was the job in the club.

That’s when she had tied up with Al Lister. It had been a mutually profitable association. She liked the work, she was able to take a lot of the load off his shoulders.

Denton nodded glumly. “I noticed that that day in your office.”

The redhead studied his face. “You mean when Al got the call from Bill Lerner for a couple of girls?”

The singer bobbed his head.

“Look, singer,” Aline told him coldly. “Being nice to columnists and their friends is part of my job. A guy comes into town the last minute and wants something to wear on his arm, as a favor to Lister I go along and bring a couple of friends. But there are no guarantees. And I do mean no guarantees.”

Denton shifted uncomfortably on his chair. “Look, you don’t have to explain to me,” he mumbled. “I—”

“You’re damn right I don’t have to explain to you. Or anybody else. But don’t get it into your head that Al Lister or anybody else can arrange for a roll in the hay with me. That’s a privilege I reserve exclusively for myself.” She started to get up, he put his hand on her arm, caught her.

“I’m sorry.”

She dropped back into her chair, the angry ridge disappeared from between her eyes. “Why are all you guys the same? The minute you see a girl you measure her for your bed, and then get sore if you think somebody else had the same idea a little earlier!”

“You tell me.”

She grinned at him. “Maybe you’re afraid you can’t stand the comparison?”

Denton grinned, dumped a bill and some change on the table. “We better get back. Lister might find out you went out with me and get sore.”

She caught his arm. “Lister? You think Lister and me—?”

“I’m taking no chances. I’ve already got one souvenir for claim jumping.”

“Don’t worry about Lister’s claim. He doesn’t even know if I’m man or woman.”

## Chapter 15

For the rest of the week, Mickey Denton and the redheaded press agent were practically inseparable. The thing that had started as a spark roared into a bonfire.

The night before he was to leave for New York to cut the album, they wandered out across the hotel parking lot to the beach beyond. He spread his jacket on the sand, waited until she was settled and then dropped down beside her.

“How about changing your mind and coming to New York with me?”

The redhead shook her head. “I already told you. Lister wouldn’t stand still for it.”

“Quit.” He picked up a handful of sand, let it sift through his clenched fingers. “I make enough to take care of both of us.”

“Uh uh. Little Aline pays her own freight.”

The singer threw the handful of sand toward the surf. “What’s the matter? Afraid you’ll miss standing in with a creep like Bill Lerner when he gets lonesome?”

Aline frowned at him. “You on that kick again? Look, singer, any time I went out with Bill Lerner, it was business.” She dug her elbows into the sand, sank back and stared at the star-filled sky. “And you know it.”

“Okay. So I’m business, too. Maybe I’d feel better if I had a cheering section when I cut my first album.”

“I can cheer just as hard from down here.”

“Yeah. But maybe I’d rather have it from my bed than from someone else’s.”

The redhead was silent for a moment. “You are a no-good bastard, aren’t you?” She straightened up. “Look, I met you and you looked good to me. Just like a girl looks good to a man. And you were good. But I’m not a pushover. Just because I let you move in on me doesn’t mean that every pair of pants I see I let crawl into me.”

Denton dug another handful of sand, threw it angrily down. “I didn’t mean it like that, Aline. I—”

“Yes, you did. Just exactly like that. You know why? Because you’re small, mean. Up here.” She tapped her head, waved aside an attempted interruption. “In your mind, a guy gets a roll in the hay, he’s a big man. But if a girl goes for one, she’s a tramp.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Maybe Mikey Donelli didn’t. But Mickey Denton sure as hell did.”

“What’s that mean?”

“You’re a real mixed-up kid, singer. Two different people fighting inside you all the time. One of them scared, insecure—Mikey Donelli. The other a swell-headed singer named Mickey Denton. The one I like, the other’s a bastard.”

“You got me wrong, baby, I—” He reached for her, she shrugged his hand off her shoulder. “What the hell is with you? Last night in bed—”

“You were sweet. You were a nice guy. Tonight all of a sudden you turn into Mickey Denton.” She got up on her elbow. “If you were a real smart guy, singer, you’d go back to being Mikey Donelli. Forget there ever was a creep like Denton.”

“That’ll be the day.”

“Yeah. That’ll be the day,” she conceded. “You’ve probably gotten so you like being Denton—”

“Why shouldn’t I? Mike Donelli was strictly a nothing—a football that got kicked around. Mickey Denton’s an important guy. Nobody kicks him around. Nobody. Too many people have too much riding on Denton.”

“How about Donelli?”

“How about him?”

“What’s he got riding on Denton?”

Mickey’s eyes studied the girl’s face in the dim light, looking for signs of a rib. “You kidding? Everything Donelli’s got or ever will have he gets from Denton.”

The redhead nodded seriously. “And that could sure be one fourteen-carat package of grief.” She put her hand on the singer’s knee. “Get smart, singer. This glamor kick looks real good from the outside. You’re on the

inside now. You must know it's strictly for the birds. You can get real hurt if you take it seriously."

"This I don't dig."

She looked away from him, watched the breakers ride up onto the sand then recede. "I've seen a lot of guys built up by the build-up boys, Mick. They give him a new personality, a new vocabulary and pretty soon he even believes it himself." She looked back. "You they're doing a real rush job on. Give them a little more time and there won't be a Mike Donelli any more— just a Mickey Denton."

"This is bad?"

The redhead shrugged. "Depends on where you're sitting. For the build-up boys, no. It's real great. For Mikey Donelli, not so great. Or for me. I happen to like Mikey Donelli. A lot more than I like Denton."

"Stop snowing me, baby. You know it's an act, that—"

"It's no act. You're beginning to think and talk like Denton. The only time I get a flash of Donelli is sometimes when you get real sentimental. Like the day over at the delicatessen, like last night—"

Denton grinned at her. "I'll be just as good tonight, baby."

She nodded ruefully. "I guess you would be."

"I don't like the way that sounds."

"There won't be any party tonight, Mick. I—I don't feel like—"

He caught her hand. "You got to, baby. Tonight's my last night. I've been counting on a little good-by party."

"It wouldn't mean anything, Mick. Not the way I feel right now."

The singer raised his hands, palms up, stared at the sky in frustration. "What the hell is this all about? What do you want me to do?"

"Get out from under. While you can."

"You must be kidding." He indicated the luxury hotels that lined the beach as far as they could see. "Give up all this? For what? You know what I was doing before I got this? Driving a truck."

"There are other jobs."

"Me, I like the one I got," Denton growled. "And anything they do to Mikey Donelli, it's strictly okay with me. He was a nothing. Always wanting

things he couldn't get and not enough guts to go out and take them." He hit his chest with the side of his hand. "Well, Denton isn't. He takes what he wants. Be smart, baby. Ride with the winner. And in my book Denton is way out front."

"Not in mine." She got up, brushed the sand from her skirt. "You only think Denton is taking what he wants. They're throwing you crumbs because they want to use you. But you're paying for everything you get, mister. Through the nose."

She started away, he caught her arm roughly, spun her around. "Where are you going?"

"Inside."

He stared into her face for a minute, then shrugged. "Look, what are we fighting about? It's a beautiful night and we can—"

"I'm sorry, Mick. I—I have a headache."

He released her arm as though it were suddenly hot. "What is this, a brush? Maybe I don't like getting brushed."

"I don't blame you. Why don't you do something about it? Like forget you ever knew me."

He shook his head, baffled. "I don't get it. Here she's mad at me because I'm making it. Most girls would—"

"They sure would. So why waste time with me?"

"You leveling? You're walking out on me?"

Aline nodded.

"But why? It don't make sense." He broke off for a minute, studied her expression. "You afraid I'm on my way to the top and I'll outgrow you. That it?"

"I hadn't thought about it. It could happen, I guess. But you wouldn't have to worry. You're not married to me."

Denton stiffened. "Look, baby, if it's the marriage bit—it's out. In my line, a wife would be an anchor and—"

"Don't flatter yourself, singer. I don't like to be chained down either. Like you'd probably put it—I'd rather make a lot of men happy than one man miserable."

"I keep saying the wrong things, baby. You know the score—"

“I know the score,” she nodded. “And you just struck out.” She turned, started plodding through the sand toward the hotel. He watched her a moment, then ran after her.

“Look, can’t we go into my room and talk it over. I—”

She grinned, shook her head. “No, that’s one department where I don’t underestimate you, Mick. Once I got into your room, I’d forget what I was saying ‘No’ to.” She stopped, laid her hand on his arm. “There’s nothing personal in all this. It’s just that I got hurt once by a guy with a big ego. I don’t want it to happen again.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Be a good boy. Stay here and give me a fighting chance.”

Denton stood on the beach, watched her until her figure blended into the shadows of the lot. Then he turned, kicked the sand, swore long and fluently. The dame was nuts. She had to be. And any guy in a spot like his who tied up with any dame on anything but a hit-and-run basis was an even bigger nut.

## Chapter 16

That Saturday night, in the recording studio at Rhythm, Mickey Denton stood on the small podium, felt the small beads of perspiration on his forehead and upper lip as he listened to the musicians finish their tuning up. In the control booth, Brady watched Al Greer fumbling with the controls, testing levels.

Finally, one by one, the musicians became silent, shifted comfortably in their seats and arranged the music on their stands. From the booth came the cue for a first take.

Denton wiped at his upper lip with the back of his hand, listened as the orchestra swung into the introductory bars.

“Wait a minute,” he bellowed. “I can’t sing without a mike.” He swung on the leader. “Knock it off.”

The orchestra trailed to silence, the door to the control booth opened, Brady came loping out. “What’s the matter, singer? Buck fever?”

“You know I can’t sing without a mike,” Denton roared at him. “How many times I got to tell you? You think I’m an Eddie Fisher, for Chrissake?”

“Look,” Brady spat out at him, “this place is loaded with mikes. You can whisper and still knock the controls off their dials. Just sing and—”

Greer ambled over to where they stood arguing. “Wait a minute, Brady. The guy’s used to a mike, let him have a mike.” He nodded to one of the engineers, who disappeared into the back of the studio. “You can’t blame him for being a little edgy on his first album.” He dug a small white pill out of his pocket, held it out to the kid. “Get edgy myself. Here, try one of these. It’ll calm you down.” When Denton hesitated, he grinned. “It’s only a happy-pill. It won’t do you any harm.”

Denton looked to Brady, who shrugged. He took the pill, stuck it into his mouth, swallowed it. He turned to glare at the musicians who, he felt, were glaring at him. Instead, most of them were gossiping with each other, a few fumbling with their sheet music.

When the engineer had placed the mike in front of the singer, Brady and Greer walked back to the booth. After a moment, they cued him for a take. It

wasn't until the fourth take that Greer was satisfied. Everybody relaxed as they listened to the playback.

Greer looked from Denton to Brady, then to the leader. "Well?"

"Sounded okay," the leader grunted. Brady nodded.

"How about it, singer?"

Denton shrugged. "You can't prove a thing by me. I'll take your word."

"How about the levels?" he asked the engineer.

"Perfect."

"Okay. That's one," Greer grunted. "With any luck we ought to get four sides tonight. Then we can finish up next week."

The second record was wrapped up on the second take. It was an old favorite of Denton's, one that could give him no trouble.

The third, one of Al Greer's, was complicated and cute. After four dry runs, they broke for coffee while Greer and the orchestra leader tried to simplify the orchestration. It took three more takes before they were satisfied.

By the time the fourth side was on a master, no one was talking to anybody else. It had been a long, tiresome session; Denton had complained about the third and fourth songs, Greer had refused to budge on his determination they stay in. When the session finally broke, no one could be sure whether they had a winner or a dog. Everything, by now, sounded alike.

Denton didn't wait for his manager, who stayed on to argue with the A&R man about the next four sides.

Brady knew that with four masters already cut, and with the company on the hook for an all-night session such as they had gone through, Greer could not stand up to a threat that Denton wouldn't be available for another session unless he got to okay the songs.

"What's he know about picking songs?" the A&R man roared. "That's the trouble with those guys. They get a few breaks and all of sudden they know more than anybody. We got too much wrapped up in that kid to let him pick a sour one. A wrong song has wrecked bigger guys than him."

"Maybe he knows more about what he can do than you do. He was right about the mike, wasn't he? After he got it—"

Greer stared at him incredulously. "You kidding? That was a dead mike."

The manager's jaw dropped. "A what?"

"A dead mike. Not connected," Greer growled. "You think I got time during a cutting to argue with a prima donna like your boy? He wants a mike to hold him up, we give him one to lean on. That doesn't mean we're gonna rewire the whole damn studio for him."

Brady scratched at the back of his neck, broke into a slow grin. "I got to hand it to you. You handled the singer right. Just right."

"I'm not in this business since just yesterday."

Brady bobbed his head. "Okay. Then we meet halfway on the songs. Give a little, get a little."

"Next album I okay seventy-five per cent of the sides. That gives him two sides to—"

"Fifty per cent," Brady told him flatly. "You ought to be able to buy a new car on that."

Greer stared at him, decided the manager couldn't be pushed any further, nodded. "Okay. We slice it down the middle." He watched while Brady bit into a fresh cigar. "But I got a bill that says the kid doesn't get to find out he picks four sides."

Brady considered, shook his head. "It's like you said. He doesn't know what's good for him. I'll make the arrangements for the sides."

New York City is a new and different place at four in the morning. The roar of traffic has muted to a low hum. Only an occasional cab barrels across the avenues, returning from calls and counting the hours until its driver can head it for the garage.

Mickey Denton walked uptown on Fifth. To his left, Rockefeller Center loomed over him, tall, dark and deserted; the Plaza itself lay wrapped in shadow. On his right, St. Pat's spire reached skyward. He stopped at the corner of 50th, debated whether or not the cathedral would be open at this hour, decided against it and continued ambling uptown.

Overhead, a light mist seemed to form around the street lamps, diffusing their glow into a soft, blurry yellow. The empty sidewalks stretched out before him for what appeared to be miles, with only an occasional store front spilling a pool of light onto the sidewalk. The whole city seemed like a

tired old woman, with her make-up off, relaxing, getting ready for another day of hurrying feet, grinding tires and restless activity.

At the corner of 52nd, he turned west. The old high-stooped brownstones that housed the Club 18, the Famous Door on the south side of the street were already gone to make room for the relentless spreading of Rockefeller Center. Across the street, 21 was still holding out against the real-estate operators who'd gobbled up the property on either side. Gaping holes and parking lots stood where once Eddie Davis told the sad lament of how "The Girl Came Down the Mountain" nightly at Leon & Eddie's.

On an impulse, Denton headed for the Sixth Avenue subway. He suddenly wanted to be surrounded by familiar people and familiar sights. Even if many of his memories of those places and people were bitter and brought twinges of shame.

Mickey Denton had been Mikey Donelli back then. Hemlock Street was in East New York, and the Sutter Avenue that bisects Hemlock Street also bisects neighboring Brownsville. The kids on Hemlock Street and on Crescent Street weren't as tough as the kids in Brownsville, but they liked to pretend they were. When police heat went on along Pitkin Avenue and Sutter Avenue in Brownsville, some of the more marked of the local characters drifted over into East New York. There, at all hours of the day and night, their sleek convertibles would be parked outside the poolrooms and the candy stores, living evidence to the local kids that only a square would work, while the smart guys drove late-model cars, set flashy broads up in apartments where they charged the local kids to visit. And they lived high off the proceeds.

As the heat receded, the boys would return to the Corner—a favorite hangout on Saratoga Avenue in the heart of Brownsville. Some of the East New York kids, hungry for a share of the high living their neighbors were able to pick up in Brownsville, trailed after them to take apprenticeships.

Tommy D'Agostino did, for one. He was seen less and less often in his own neighborhood. From time to time, word filtered back how well he was doing. Occasionally, he'd even barrel through in a flashy car, a well-peroxidized blonde at his side.

Those who were left behind dreamed of making it the same way. Even when the picture of Tommy D'Agostino appeared on the front page of the *News* one day with the caption: *Hood Icpicked to Death in Car*, it failed to dampen their ardor.

In East New York, headquarters was an all-night candy store on Sutter Avenue where messages could be gotten, contacts made to dispose of hub caps, lighters, tires or any other spoils from a night's marauding.

In the beginning, Mike Donelli had been one of the regulars. But after a while, the taunting slurs about "the singer" had gotten under his skin. He took on the taunter, Rocky Castri, and got an unmerciful beating. From then on, he spent less and less time in the candy store.

Rocky Castri went on to become the East New York version of a Brownsville tough guy. Mike Donelli had stuck to his singing, and now he was on his way home. He wondered if Midnight Maxie's candy store still stayed open twenty-four hours a day.

In the old days, the Fulton Street "el" would have dropped him at the Chestnut Street station and he would have walked down Pitkin Avenue to Hemlock. But the el had long since given up the ghost and now the Independent subway dumped him almost at the spot where the old Elite Theater had once nestled in the crook of the twisting el line on its way to the Crescent Street station.

Day was beginning to streak the sky with light as he walked toward the old neighborhood. Already people were beginning to come out of their houses, an occasional milk truck rattled past.

At the corner of Belmont and Hemlock, he stopped, looked at a stained old stone building. It was here, in a third-floor apartment that he'd had his first sex. It had been a complete failure. He could grin about it now, but back then it had been a major tragedy. Rocky had heard about it directly from the girl, who turned all her proceeds over to him, and elaborated on the details for the gang at Maxie's.

The candy store was still on a twenty-four-hour basis. As Denton walked in, Midnight Maxie turned from the magazines he was arranging in a rack. Two men sprawled at a table, empty glasses in front of them, legs extended full length under the table. One of them was thickset, with swarthy skin drawn tight over his high cheekbones. His eyes were heavy lidded; a pearl gray fedora sat on the back of his head.

The singer could feel a familiar tightening in his stomach as he saw recognition slowly light up the swarthy man's face. Castri turned to the other men at the table.

"You see what I see? It's the singer."

The other man, thin, with a long hooked nose, nodded without removing the cigarette from the corner of his mouth.

Maxie grinned. “Hello, Mikey. You been away a long time.” He walked over, poked a sweaty hand out in a wet handshake. “We been hearing a lot about you. You’re getting to be a real big shot.”

Rocky Castri got up from the table, swaggered over. “Yeah. Hear you’re a real big singer now. Mickey Denton. What’s the matter, you ashamed of Mikey Donelli for a tag?”

Denton studied the face of the man he had feared as long as he could remember. There was envy there now, even a trace of respect.

“So I changed my name. So what about it?”

Rocky tried to outstare him, dropped his eyes first. He looked around to Maxie and the thin man at the table, shrugged. “I was just wondering if Agnelli—”

Denton grinned. So that was it. It was already around that Tony Agnelli was behind him. But Silvestri and his uncle must have passed the word.

“Agnelli doesn’t tell me what to do. We’re partners.” He pushed past the thickset man, walked over to Maxie. “Still hide the dirty magazines behind *The Nation’s Business*, Maxie?”

Midnight Maxie exploded into laughter accompanied by a fine spray of saliva. “You see, Rock? The singer don’t forget. He’s still one of the boys.” He turned back, eyed Denton with interest. “How come you tie up with Agnelli, Mikey? He’s real big. Real big.”

“Yeah, Maxie. Real big.” He pulled a magazine from the rack, riffled through the pages.

“How come you’re in town, Mike?” Rocky asked, a new note in his voice. “I been reading in the columns about you. I thought you was in Miami Beach.” He rolled his eyes. “Boy, would I like to be in Miami Beach away from this crummy place! How come you come back?”

“Just for a day or two. I’m recording a new album. I fly back down tonight.”

“You don’t have room for a stowaway?” The thin lips split with a grin. “Maybe you need a bodyguard? All these broads trying to tear your pants off and all?”

Denton closed the magazine, stuck it back in the rack. “If I need a bodyguard, Agnelli takes care of that. He’s got an investment in me. He gets real nervous if anything happens to his investments.” His eyes narrowed. “But I could use somebody to take care of my clothes and things. Sort of pick up after me.”

Castri’s eyes flicked from Maxie to the man at the table. “You’re kidding.”

Denton shrugged. He recognized the look on Castri’s face. This was the face that used to haunt him in nightmares, the lips that curled in contempt. Now all it was was just the face of a man who wanted something so badly he was willing to accept any indignity to get it. There and then Mikey Donelli knew that Mickey Denton was going to make up to him all the hurt and all the humiliation Rocky Castri had inflicted on him.

“You want the job, be at LaGuardia tonight at eight.” He pulled a roll from his pocket, peeled off a few bills. “And buy yourself something decent to wear. You look like a character out of an old Jimmy Cagney movie.” He flipped the bills on the table. “The plane leaves at eight-thirty. Be there by eight.”

He walked out without a backward glance, but there was a lightness in his step that had been missing on his way in.

## Chapter 17

The training of Rocky Castri was a chore in which Mickey Denton took great delight. It began that first night on the plane when Rocky got the idea that it wasn't too smart to win at gin rummy. Mickey paid off all right—but what he won wasn't worth to Castri the extra heat it brought. By the end of the first week, Denton won if Rocky had to spend the whole evening breaking up runs and feeding the singer what he needed.

He also learned that for the two hundred dollars he was paid every Friday he was expected to be a combination punching bag, valet, wet nurse and butt of practical jokes. Occasionally, when he almost lost his temper and hit back, two things deterred him—the two C's every Friday and the fact that Tony Agnelli wouldn't appreciate anyone denting his golden boy.

Besides, as Mickey Denton explained, “You go back to East New York, baby, and all you're headed for is a short stopover at the Miller Avenue station house on your way to the Big House. With me, you go to the top.” He paused, studied himself in the mirror, his tie half tied. “You know something? There's a lot of guys riding on a pass on account of me. You, Lister, Brady—all riding on me. You guys ought to remember me in your prayers at night. Something happens to me, you guys are strictly from Nowheresville.”

By the end of the first week Denton had convinced himself that it was true.

The night before Denton and Brady were due to fly back to New York to finish the cutting, Al Lister slammed the door to 424, stalked to the small desk where Aline Sampson was typing on a portable.

“What the hell's got into the singer?” he growled.

“What now?”

“The same thing only worse. He's had a name-calling contest with Moe King from the *Advance*. All Moe wanted to know was did the singer have anything romantic on the fire and the kid calls him a parasite—”

The redhead shook her head, groaned. “Oh, no!”

“Worse yet,” Lister continued. “Moe tells the kid off, tells him if it wasn’t for guys like him, the kid would be driving a truck. Then the singer gets off on a tangent, tells Moe to get a decent job where he won’t be living on other people, that he’s nothing but a vulture living on garbage—” He pulled a balled handkerchief from his pocket, swabbed at his forehead. “I been trying to cool Moe off, but he’s going to give the kid the works unless we can stop him.”

“Me, I suppose?”

Lister shrugged. “I got from nowhere. You he likes. Maybe he’ll listen.” He ran his handkerchief down the sides of his jowls. “With the kid’s first album just set, this is no time for the boys to get mad at him.”

“There’s no sense talking to Moe if you don’t straighten Mickey out, Al. He’ll figure Moe is taking it lying down and he’ll pour it on all the more.” She stood up, straightened the skirt over her thighs. “He’s so used to using that new stooge of his as a football he thinks he can get away with it with anybody. Why don’t you get rid of that Rocky?”

“How can I? The singer pays him. How can I fire him?”

“Well, let’s see if we can talk some sense into him about Moe and the rest of the boys.” The redhead led the way into the hall, followed the corridor to Denton’s room. She knocked at the door, it was opened a few inches and Castri’s face appeared in the opening.

“Yeah?”

“I want to talk to Mickey.” Without waiting for an answer, she pushed the door open, walked into the room. Rocky stepped aside, looked the redhead over appraisingly as she stalked past him. She stopped and turned.

“Keep your eyeballs in their sockets or I’ll scratch them up for you, meatball,” she told him in hard, flat tones. “Outside. We want to talk to the master.”

“Why, you—” Castri started toward her.

“Cut it out,” Denton snarled from the porch. He walked into the room, motioned with his head. “You heard what she said. Outside.”

Castri licked at his lips, bobbed his head, shuffled out of the room, muttering to himself. After the door had closed behind him, the singer turned, looked from Aline to Al Lister and back.

“What are you in such a fever about?”

“Moe King,” Lister told him. “I’ve been trying to cool Moe King off but he won’t cool. He’s set to take you apart like a fifty-cent watch.”

“Yeah? Well, if that creep reporter gets in my hair again, he may get the chance.”

The redhead walked over, sat on the arm of one of the chairs, studied Denton. “What’s gotten into you, Mick? All of a sudden you’re tough and unreasonable.” She nodded toward the hallway. “Ever since Dracula joined the troupe.”

“Maybe that’s why I keep him around.”

“You’re not reaching me.”

Denton walked over to an end table, stuck a cigarette between his lips. “Last week I was lower than a snail’s belly. I was strictly nothing. I didn’t like the sides we cut—”

“They were sensational.”

He touched a match to the cigarette, drew a deep drag. “Okay, they were sensational. But I thought they stank. At least then. Nothing was going for me, so I took a run over to my old neighborhood.” He speared a tiny piece of tobacco from the tip of his tongue with his nail. “I bump into Rocky who used to give me a hard time when we were kids. All of a sudden, I realize something. This guy is kissing my hand instead of belting me. That’s when I knew I had it made.”

“This guy must be some hand-kisser.”

“Don’t play it Dumb Dora, baby. You know what I mean. All of a sudden I realized something I should have known. Everything is for sale. There’s nothing without a price tag. You can even buy a guy who hates your guts to kiss your hand. That’s why I keep him around. So I won’t forget that.”

“Now you figure you can spit in the eye of a columnist and then buy him off from spitting back?” Lister was swabbing his bald pate again, shaking his head violently. “It won’t work out like that. This they don’t sell.”

“Don’t snow me, Dad. Everything’s for sale. You can buy anything if you’ve got the price.”

Aline stared at him curiously. “You really believe that, singer?”

“Why shouldn’t I? You going to tell me it isn’t true? Give me one for-instance where you can’t buy what you want?” He tabbed them off on his fingers. “The cops? Ask Agnelli. A hit record? You got the scratch and you

could turn the sound of a saw going through a nail into a hit. You name it and you got it.”

The redhead snorted. “You’re talking like a kid.”

The singer swung on her. “Me? Who should know better than you what money can buy? Marcia Kingman bought herself a husband right from under you, didn’t she?”

Al Lister winced.

The redhead shook her head. “You sure like to hit low, singer. But let me give you something to chew on. You don’t buy any of these things—cops, hit records or even husbands. Maybe you get a short-term lease, but you don’t get to keep them. It’s like buying on the installment plan. Miss one payment and they’ll foreclose so quick it’ll make you dizzy.”

“That’s your opinion.”

Aline tossed her head in the direction of the door. “I suppose you think you’re buying loyalty from that goon? If he could figure a way to cut your throat and still keep the money coming, you’re as good as filleted right now!”

“But he won’t.” Denton grinned. “That’s the interesting part.”

“We’ll see,” Aline told him. “In the meantime, what do we do about King? You’ve got to apologize before he starts something we’ll all regret.”

“Apologize? For what? Because I told him to keep his nose out of my private affairs?”

“You have no private affairs,” Lister told him. “You sold your privacy to your public in return for their support. You got what you wanted. Now you can’t renege on giving them what they want. And what they want is to own you body and soul.” He stowed the handkerchief in his back pocket. “You made a deal. You’ve got to live up to it.”

“They buy the pleasure my voice gives them—”

“Come off it, singer,” the redhead told him. “You’ve got the same voice you had when you were singing for potatoes. You’re no better than you were then. The difference is that Agnelli sold you to the public.” She looked him over carefully. “Why the yen for the press? You afraid somebody’ll discover there’s no such person as Mickey Denton? You afraid they’ll tell the public that Denton’s really a nothing named Mike Donelli masquerading?”

Denton's face clouded. He jammed the cigarette into the ash tray, took a step toward the girl. "Look, don't push it, baby, or—"

"Or what?" the redhead asked him coolly. "Or you'll get real brave and take me on, too? Or maybe you'll sic your goon on me?" She stood up. "I'm trying to do this the nice way. Lister wanted to call Agnelli and tell him you won't co-operate. I figured I'd save you another shellacking like Ryan gave you. But now, the hell with you—" She turned, stalked toward the door.

Denton watched her go, licked at his lips. "Wait a minute." He raked his fingers through his hair, absentmindedly tousled it down over his forehead. "Maybe I was wrong. But what could I do about it, even if I was?"

The redhead stopped with her hand on the knob. She turned. "You can go down and apologize to Moe King."

"You nuts? I'd rather—"

She shrugged, pulled the door open.

He deflated. "Okay, okay. If that's the way you want it, I'll go down and apologize."

She stood in the doorway, nodded. "And I'll go with you to make sure you do." She motioned for Lister to join her, headed for her room. Rocky Castri was leaning sulkily against the wall halfway down the corridor. "You can go back in now," she told him sweetly. "The master's going to need somebody to chew out."

Back in her room she closed the door behind her and Lister grinned. "How'd I do?"

He shook his head. "Like Flynn." He exhaled his breath with a sigh of relief. "I didn't think he'd take it from you. And if he hit you, I wouldn't be too much help. I'm too old to fight and too fat to run." He grinned. "That sure was an inspiration, pulling in Agnelli's name."

"You know, it's not such a bad idea at that. I think maybe you or Brady ought to have a little talk with Agnelli. Maybe it'll calm Junior down." She walked to the window, looked out at the surf. "Funny thing was I was starting to like the guy just before he went on this Big Man kick." She turned and walked back to the desk, picked up the phone. "Will you ring Mr. Brady, please? Ask him to contact Miss Sampson in 424 as soon as you reach him." She dropped the receiver back on its hook, turned to Lister. "Just in case Moe decides not to accept the singer's apology."

"What can Brady do?"

“He can call Mr. Big, tell him to cool Moe off for us. Maybe he and Denton won’t fall on each other’s necks, but at least we can hold him off on going to work on the singer.”

“You think Agnelli will do it?”

Aline shrugged. “Maybe not himself. But he probably has some friends down here who’ll be glad to pass the word along for him.”

## Chapter 18

The feud between Moe King and Mickey Denton died a-borning. Aline Sampson's hunch that Tony Agnelli would have a friend willing to "talk to" the columnist worked out. By the time the meeting was arranged with Mickey in the bar of the Runleigh that afternoon, Moe was more than willing to bury the hatchet.

Denton, on the other hand, had done some heavy thinking. The redhead's jibe that he was deliberately alienating himself from the press because he was afraid they'd see through him as a build-up dependent on backing instead of talent struck home. He knew it was true that he lived in dread of being tagged as a phony. The perspiration beaded his forehead when he thought of the story that could be the outcome of an alliance between Moe King and Rocky Castri.

The "understanding" they reached that night paid off for both of them. Mickey Denton got himself a sympathetic handling in King's column, the columnist got the promise of a personal appearance "for no" on the local television show he ran. Both were satisfied that they had walked away from a dangerous situation.

The following week Denton finished waxing his first album. By the time Al Greer and Brady had listened to the playback they knew they had a winner. Tony Agnelli's backing might have been needed to push Denton out front, but these biscuits said he had the what-with to stay there.

At the end of the play of the fourth side, Greer lifted the arm of the turntable. "Big. Real big, baby. It should establish the kid for sure."

"How about you and me having a little talk some night soon, Al?" Brady bit the end off a cigar, spat it on the control floor. "I've got a couple of ideas."

The A&R man frowned at him. "What kind of ideas?"

"Money ideas."

Greer looked worried, shrugged. "I'm always ready to listen, but—"

"You know a character named Moe Sherman?"

The A&R man nodded. “A Poverty Row publisher. Hasn’t had a hit since ‘Dardanella’ was on the Hit Parade. And he didn’t even have that one.”

Brady grinned around the cigar. “I’ve got an idea he’s going to have quite a few hits from here in.”

“Go on.”

“My place tonight? Say about nine?”

Greer chewed on his lip. “Maybe tomorrow night would be better. I—”

The manager shook his head. “Tonight. I’ll be on my way back to Miami Beach tomorrow night. This has to be sewed up now. Or never.”

The A&R man leaned back nodded. “Tonight. At nine. Your pad.”

Moe Sherman was sitting on the big divan in Brady’s apartment when Al Greer walked in. It was a far cry from the efficiency Brady called home when he first tied up with Tony Agnelli and Mickey Denton. It was huge, luxurious, perched on the top of a new pile of bricks and plate glass towering over the East River in the Fifties.

Greer stood in the doorway, looked around, nodded his approval. The huge combination living room and studio was bisected by a breakfast bar at the far end, behind which nestled a miniature kitchen. It was carpeted lushly in deep-pile, wheat-colored Karastan.

“Not bad.”

Brady got up from his chair, walked over to the A&R man with extended hand. “Glad you could come. Sherman and I were figuring we might have to go ahead without you.” He led the way to where the publisher was sitting. “You know Sherman? Pavilion Music.”

“I know Sherman.” Greer nodded at the man on the divan, showed no signs of enthusiasm.

“We met,” the publisher conceded coldly.

“Sit down and let’s talk,” Brady suggested. He indicated a portable bar against the wall near a huge picture window overlooking the river. On it were an assortment of bottles and an ice bucket.

“Maybe later. Right now I’d like to hear what’s cooking.” The A&R man dropped into a chair, looked from Brady to Sherman and back. “Maybe it’s not for me and I can get going and let you gents do your business.”

Brady grinned at him. He pulled a cigar from his pocket, clenched it between his teeth. “You won’t. Not when you hear what we’re letting you in on.”

“I’m listening.”

“I’m putting some money in Pavilion Music. Not a lot. Just enough to give it some flash. I figure you might want in, too.”

Greer stared at the man incredulously. “You crazy? Even if the outfit was any good, I’d get run out of the busi—”

Brady cut him off with upraised hand. “You don’t show. Neither do I. We operate with Sherman as a beard.” Before the A&R man could interrupt again, he continued, “Right now you’re playing with pennies. I’m giving you a chance to make some real money. And you don’t have to do anything more than you’re doing right now.”

Greer shifted uncomfortably. “You listen to too many rumors.”

Brady grinned around the cigar. “Look, Greer, this is me, Brady. And this is Sherman. We’re in this racket. We know.” He got up, walked over to the bar, spilled some scotch into a glass, dropped some ice cubes in. “A guy like you can make or break a song. You put the wrong singer on it, it dies. You really get behind it, it makes. Right?”

“Go on.”

Brady swirled the scotch around the glass. “So you don’t make a mistake and give a baritone a song that’s meant for a soprano, the publisher cuts you in. So we know that, and we got no argument. Everybody’s got a right to make a buck if he can.”

“I think I will have a drink.” Greer got up, walked to the bar, poured himself a stiff slug of bourbon. He looked back to the divan where Sherman watched him impassively. “How about you?” The publisher shook his head, waited until the two men had returned to their chairs.

“Look, Greer, me I got no hard feelings. But what Brady’s saying is true. You know it, I know it. I could have the ‘St. Louis Blues’ and if I go to your outfit or any other outfit, it’s the same old jazz. You got a lot of songs to consider. When you come to mine you’ll think about it—”

“I got my company to think of. I pick a bomb, okay it could be an accident. I pick two bombs, somebody starts to get itchy. I pick three bombs and I don’t even have to show up for my mail. They’ll send it.”

Sherman grinned wanly. "I've heard that so often I go back to my office and try to put music to it." He leaned forward. "Confidentially, Greer. If I had the scratch—say maybe a grand—to let's say guarantee promotion, it would make a difference. Am I right?"

Greer swung on Brady. "Look, leave me and my operation out of this. You got a proposition, let's hear. You want to tell me what sons of bitches A&R men are, don't bother. I've heard it all."

"There's nothing personal. We just want to know we're all talking about the same thing." Brady laid the cigar in the tray next to his chair, took a deep swallow of his scotch. "Lots of good stuff passes over your desk that doesn't come from a big publisher. Right?"

Greer nodded wordlessly.

"So you find a couple of things need fixing and suggest the guy takes it over to Sherman. You hear he's in the market for stuff and will put up the what-with for promotion."

"Pavilion's pretty much of a two-bit operation."

"Right now, maybe. But the only difference between a publisher strictly from hunger and a publisher riding high is a couple of hits under his belt." He drained his glass, set it down. "And if you can guarantee to deliver Denton to do the side?"

The A&R man looked thoughtful. He turned and stared at Sherman. "How much is it going to cost for how much of the operation?"

Brady replaced the cigar in the center of his lips, twirled it between thumb and forefinger. "This you're going to like. You spring with five gees, I spring with five. You get forty per cent, I get forty and Sherman takes twenty."

"It sounds good, but—"

"It is good. And there's no risk. All you do is recommend a publisher you're used to working with. The publisher can guarantee a cutting and in really tough cases he can deliver Denton to do it. Who's going to argue?"

"I'll have the money in Sherman's office tomorrow," Greer said after a slight pause. "It'll be in cash and I'll want a receipt."

"Why not? This is going to be a strictly legit operation. Strictly legit."

Greer took a swallow of his bourbon. "What about Agnelli—and the singer?"

“What about them?”

“Aren’t they going to want in?”

Brady took the cigar from between his lips, studied it. “I just told you. We’re operating with a beard.” He rolled his eyes upward. “They got no kicks. I handled the whole build-up on the kid. I’ve put him on top. All I got was grief and twenty per cent. Agnelli gets thirty per cent. So, okay. A deal’s a deal. But now it’s my turn to dip my bread in the gravy.”

## Chapter 19

Las Vegas is the Coney Island of the mob. The rides are breathtaking and twisty, top entertainers shill for the games that pay their salaries, and it's a worse crime to be broke than wanted for murder.

By April, when Mickey Denton opened at the Oasis, he had two big albums and sensational runs at both the Runleigh in Miami Beach and the Cuernavaca in New York behind him. He scored an instant click in the Big Room and soon became a familiar figure in the casinos along the Strip.

Toward the end of the third week of Mickey's booking, Mitch Corday walked out of the office tucked in the far corner of the Casino at the Oasis and looked around. He failed to spot the singer at any of the set-ups, walked down the aisle between the slots. Here men and women of all ages fed nickels, dimes, quarters, halves and even silver dollars into the insatiable maws of the machines, stood watching breathlessly as the symbols ground around, wavered near a jackpot, then slid off. Every so often there would be a scream of delight as one of the machines made an infrequent pay-off. The less lucky players would watch with envy as a uniformed deputy materialized with a paper cup so the winner could carry off his winnings—at least as far as another machine. Then all would go back to feeding their own machines with renewed vigor.

Although it was early afternoon, and the sun was glaring down outside, in the casino it was dark and cool. Small groups huddled at the 21 tables, watching the dealer tirelessly place card against card. The craps tables were getting a moderate play—the heavy play at the felt-covered tables was usually later in the evening, particularly after the last show.

Corday walked through the breakfast room, checked the tables on the flagstone terrace beyond. The chairs, shaded by multi-colored umbrellas, that lined the pool were almost deserted; a few deeply tanned showgirls broiled their skins in deck chairs, resorting to frequent oilings of sun lotion.

Corday swore under his breath, walked back into the casino. He caught the eye of a deputy, called him over. The big man shouldered his way through the groups at the slots, walked over, saluted smartly.

“Seen Denton?”

The deputy shook his head. “One of the boys put him to bed early this morning. He got into a row with the floor man. Started kicking up.”

Corday nodded. “I know.” He squinted his displeasure. “He’s not in his cottage. See if you can locate him any place along the Strip. I want to see him.”

The deputy nodded. “Okay.”

Corday turned, started toward his office, walked back. “When you locate him, tell him I want to see him right away. If he doesn’t come, bring him.”

The deputy grinned. “That’ll be a pleasure, Mr. Corday.”

“I figured it would be.”

Mitch Corday’s office was a combination of den and office. Its knotty pine paneling featured autographed pictures of the top talent that had headlined the shows, the floor was covered with a colorful Indian rug. Comfortable looking chairs were scattered around the room, a large desk was placed so Corday could look out across the desert to the distant blue-black mountains.

He sat at the desk, his heel hooked on the corner, watched the cottony white clouds that seemed to hang motionless in the blue of the sky. The harsh rock outlines of the mountains were softened by haze. Corday wondered how the weather was back on State Street and if he’d ever be able to live in Chicago again after once having lived in Vegas. The last time he had been there, the slush was ankle deep in the gutters, the wind that came off the lake was cold, cut through him like a knife. Instead of the white clouds and the blue overhead, it had been a dark, dreary day with the skies the color of lead.

And yet there were times when he wished he had seen his last of the super-modern pastel-colored buildings, the neon lights, the dry air and the blistering sun that spelled Vegas. Some day he might go back East. There were lots of the boys who never could—who sat around at night and talked about the old days and the old places with the sad knowledge that they were now out of bounds. Nevada might be willing to overlook certain differences with the law. But New York and Chicago and even Miami had long memories. And the dry air, the monotony of the perfect weather, the blistering sun and the wind that dried the perspiration on your body—all of these were preferable to the even greater monotony of Sing Sing or Joliet or

Alcatraz. As long as it had to be a prison, they preferred the gaudier one—Las Vegas—even though in time it might become just as confining.

Corday started at the knock on the door, dropped his heel from his desk, swiveled around. “Come in.”

The door opened, the deputy stood in the doorway, holding Mickey Denton by the arm. He pushed the singer into the room, took up his place next to the door, closed it.

Corday studied the sullen features of the singer. The three weeks he had spent in Vegas had darkened his skin, thinned him down to a better weight.

“What’s the idea, Corday?” Denton walked over to the desk, leaned the flat of his hands on it.

“Don’t breathe in my face, singer. Your breath stinks.” Corday checked his watch. “You always drunk this early or you celebrating something?”

“Am I supposed to get your permission to have a drink?”

“Yeah. If you can’t pay for it.”

Denton tried to meet the other man’s glance, dropped his eyes. He straightened. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re quite a sport. On other people’s money.” Corday opened his top drawer, brought out a small pile of chits, dropped them on the desk. “This is paper you’ve been plastering the rest of the Strip with. Not counting what you’ve passed here.”

Denton straightened up. “That what you’re worried about? Don’t worry about it. I’ll pay it—”

“I’m not worrying, singer. But maybe you better. These boys expect to get paid. They get real unreasonable when they aren’t.”

The singer worked on a lopsided smile. “Big deal. I get on the hook for a couple of grand and you expect me to start pushing the panic button? I got some dough coming here—”

“You have?” Corday raised his eyebrows, leaned over, consulted a penciled notation. “Not according to my records. You’re getting five gees a week for eight weeks. Agnelli and Brady get half off the top. You’re in me for almost thirty.” He pushed the notes across the desk. “You’re in real deep, singer, and you couldn’t raise a dime in this town with a gun.”

Denton licked at his lips. “I—I didn’t realize. Look, lend me some money. You’ll get it back—”

“I already have lent you some money. And I’m not worrying about getting it back.” The man behind the desk picked up a scimitar-shaped letter opener, tested the point on the ball of his thumb. “It might be unpleasant for both of us. But it’ll be more unpleasant for you than for me.”

“You’re not scaring me, Corday. Agnelli wouldn’t stand still for you damaging his precious investment. He’d—”

Corday looked past him to the deputy. “Guy in a wheelchair could still sing even with a couple of broken legs, wouldn’t you say, Al?” He turned back to Denton. “Might even hypo the box office.” His eyes were cold, expressionless. “Don’t try to outguess me on what I could do or what I couldn’t do, kid. A lot of guys never made it.”

Denton licked at his lips. “You got no right to talk to me like I’m trying to welsh. I—”

“Running up a tab for more money than you can pay. You got a better word for it?”

“I’ll give notes. Things are breaking real big and—”

“Your note isn’t worth the paper to write it on. Sure things are breaking big. Because Agnelli says they break big. You keep getting out of line and you won’t sell enough platters to pay for the shellack.” He jabbed a finger at the singer. “You think you’re booked here or the Cuernavaca because you’re so hot? Hell, in this town we could fill the joint with a Japanese juggling act. So don’t get ideas you got a one-way ticket to the top. It’s strictly round-trip.” He pulled a printed form from his desk drawer, slapped it on the desk. “Just to be on the safe side, sign this. And maybe I’ll take the heat off these.” He held up the batch of IOU’s.

Denton picked up the form, started to read it.

“I said sign it. Not read it.”

“Wait a minute. This is a blank contract. You could fill it in for any salary for any length of time. You could—”

“I could have you knocked off. I could also tear it up if the boys decide you’re a bad bet. Don’t worry—before I fill it in, I’ll check with Agnelli. Just sign it.”

Denton hesitated, finally picked up a pen, signed the contract. “Now what?”

“I keep it in my safe. This time next year, if you’re around, maybe we book you back. Maybe not.” He picked up the tabs, flipped through them. “Meantime, I’ll pick up your paper. It gives a place like the Oasis a bad name for its star to owe money in the other joints.” He rolled his eyes up from the tabs to Denton. “Meanwhile, we got to figure out some way you can pay us back for taking you off the hook.”

In the weeks that followed, Mickey Denton’s phenomenal winning streak at the Oasis was the talk of the Strip. The sure-thing gamblers, convinced that his streak couldn’t last, kept doubling wrong bets, going broke in platoons. Every so often, when the singer collected a train of right bettors and when it looked like he might break the bank, craps would pop up to discourage hitchhiking on his runs.

On his closing night, word started down the Strip that Mickey Denton was out to break the bank at the Oasis. From the minute he stepped off the stage at the late show he was at a craps table, shooting with cold determination. There was a feeling in the air that a big kill was in the making, and slowly the players from the other tables gravitated over to his table.

As the game got really hot, by mutual consent the other players dropped out one by one, watched the struggle between the house and the singer. The confirmed gamblers whispered the opinion that the house had to win in the end, but they said it with their fingers crossed.

By six in the morning, the stack of gold chips racked in front of Denton stretched almost the entire length of the table. The boxman’s face was etched with worry, the wrinkles at the sides of his eyes dug deeper by his constant scowl.

Mitch Corday walked out of his office, crossed the casino floor to the center table, shouldered his way through the crowd that surrounded it. He walked over to the boxman, whispered to him. The boxman bobbed his head.

Denton looked at Corday, grinned. He started stacking chips in the center of the table. The stickman looked to Corday for an okay, handed over his stick in response to the manager’s gesture. Corday moved into the stickman’s place.

“Make it easy on yourself. If you want to quit—” Denton told him.

“We’ll accommodate you. It’s your action. You call it.”

The hush in the room was broken only by an occasional clearing of someone’s throat. In the reflected light, Denton’s face gleamed wetly. At his side, Rocky Castri tugged at his sleeve, whispered something into his ear. Denton shrugged him off.

“The works.”

There was a low hum of conversation. Denton stepped back as the boxman made a hurried estimate of the value of the chips in front of the singer. The boxman turned worried eyes to Corday. “The house is light about eight thousand.”

Corday pulled a wallet from his pocket, tugged a thick wad of bills from it, tossed them on the table. “There’s roughly ten thousand in there, give or take a few hundred. Will that be satisfactory, Mr. Denton?” He pasted a tight-lipped smile on his face. “You can count it if you like.”

“I’ll count it after the roll.”

Corday nodded. He expertly snagged a pair of dice, pushed them down the table to Denton. The singer picked them up, cuddled them between his hands, slowly transferred them to his right hand, shook them with a clicking cadence. The silence in the room was almost tangible, pressing against the people packed in layers around the table.

Denton’s arm came back, he sent the cubes twisting and spinning the length of the table to bounce off the rail. The crowd pushed forward in its eagerness to see what happened.

“Man comes out with a ten,” the end dealer intoned.

The crowd groaned softly as Corday gathered the dice with the slick, shoved them back at Denton. The singer picked them up, breathed on them, crooned to them softly.

Some place behind a man was explaining to his wife: “The odds against him making a ten are better than two to one. You can’t beat the house.”

The dice rocketed down the table again, hit the rail, spun for an intolerable second, showed a six and a five.

Denton mopped at the perspiration on his forehead with the cuff of his sleeve, waited until the dice were returned to him. He picked them up slowly, rolled them between damp palms. Then in a single motion, he swung

his hand back, threw them out. All eyes in the house were on the dice as they bounced off the rail, rolled halfway back on the table. They turned up a six and a four.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then it dawned on the crowd that they had witnessed a once-in-a-lifetime miracle. The singer had broken the bank.

“He made it,” one man yelled hoarsely. In a moment everyone else in the room joined the yelling.

Mitch Corday raised his hands for silence. The yelling died reluctantly. “Ladies and gentlemen, the bank is closed.” He signaled the deputy in charge of the security detail. Then he turned to Denton. “Congratulations. If you’ll come to the office. I’ll have a check drawn in full.”

The deputies moved in, shouldered the curious back from the table. One of the deputies shoveled the stacks of gold chips into a canvas bag. He placed the bills Corday had tossed onto the table in the bag with the chips. Two other deputies, guns drawn, broke a path through the crowd.

At a signal from the security chief, the other deputies herded the spectators to the exits where they vomited out onto the porte-cochere and the parking lots beyond. Already word had spread of the killing and they were soon joined by others who came from other casinos to hang breathlessly on the words of those lucky enough to have witnessed the game. Then all hustled back to other tables along the Strip to see if tonight was really the night for players.

Inside Corday’s office, Mickey Denton sprawled on the couch. Corday sat at the desk, smoothing his ruffled hair with the flat of his palm. Only Castri was too excited to sit.

“I never figured it could be done. Two, three hundred grand riding on a roll and this ever-loving character comes up with a—”

“Tell this goon of yours to shut up and sit down.” Corday snapped. “He’s making me nervous.”

Castri grinned at him. “I don’t blame you, mister. That kind of dough could make me nervous, too. And if—”

“Shut up, Rocky,” Denton told him wearily. “It was only front money.”

Rocky stopped in the middle of a word, his mouth open. He looked from Denton to the man behind the desk and back. “Front money?”

The singer nodded. "Corday was in me for thirty grand. I worked it out by shilling. Tonight and all the other nights they've been feeding me bricks."

"Bricks?"

"Yeah. When we were kids, we called them flats. Out here they get fancy. They call them bricks."

"You rang in flats? I don't believe it. You're not that good a mechanic."

"I don't have to be. Corday and his stickmen are." Denton dug into his pocket, dug out the "luck" dice they gave him as a souvenir. "Take a look." He tossed them to Castri.

The stocky man caught them, spilled them onto the desk. They turned up an eleven. He scooped them up, tossed them out again. A six and a four.

"Flats. In a joint like this," he said incredulously. He examined the dice carefully.

"You don't have to worry. They're reserved for very special occasions," Corday told him. "They're specially cut so that one always turns up the six, the other the four or five. Coming out he draws either a pass or a ten. His second roll was the eleven but odds are two to one his next roll will be the ten. It was."

Castri dropped the dice on the desk top. He walked over to the couch, dropped down alongside Denton with a groan. "And here I think you're burning up. Why don't you tell a guy? I coulda got a heart attack." He shook his head. "No. Maybe it's just as well. I sure would've got one if I knew those ivories were gaffers and somebody might just want to take a look at them."

"Not much chance of that," Corday told him. "Everybody pulls against the house. If the house wins they may look for funny work. But let somebody take the house and they'll all cheer."

"But I don't get it," Castri growled. "Why?"

"Not that it's any of your business," Corday told him, "but the singer was into us for important dough. So he gets a couple of hot winning streaks. There's always plenty to be picked up from the smart players who keep wrong betting a heavy winner. Then, when they decide to back the dice, a guy can always pick up a little more by crapping out a few times. It helped pay the singer's tab."

"But now you lose a couple of days' play. That could cost, too."

The gambler swung his chair, stared across the desert to where the sky was a golden aura over the black crags of the mountain. “I been needing a vacation for a long time, but who could rest when he knew that back here the dealers were stealing him blind? This way I’m closed down. And no one can steal. Besides, when word gets around that the house went broke, the day we open every sucker in Nevada will be fighting to give us his money.”

## Chapter 20

The Regent Theater on the corner of 44th Street and Broadway is Mecca for the blue jeans and bubble gum set. This week, in electric letters five feet high, it trumpeted the fact that it was presenting Mickey Denton “for a limited in-person appearance.”

On Broadway, the street was clogged with a squirming mass of teenagers in a queue that led to the box office, pushing and shoving in their eagerness to get in. Inside, the front-row seats were occupied by the same group that had shown up for the first show, had taken title to a seat and spent the time between the stage shows in the lounge primping and squealing. These were the shock troops of Al Lister’s claue.

Another contingent was assigned to lobby duty. There a ten-foot cutout of Mickey Denton dominated. An usher was assigned to come out every hour with a wet brush to wipe the lipstick smears from the cutout’s hands. When Al Lister swept into the lobby with a handful of press photographers in tow, a pony-tailed blonde got up on her escort’s shoulders to press smeary lips against the reproduction of Denton’s mouth to the accompaniment of popping flashlight bulbs and cheers from the crowd.

The management, which had agreed to the stunt with some misgivings, was secretly planning to add other life-sized portraits of the singer to its display. From past experience it knew only too well that such outbreaks are contagious and that by the middle of the week, it would require police help to control the crowds. It wasn’t a new stunt—but for some reason it never seemed to fail.

Inside, Mickey Denton was finishing his first show of the afternoon. With the last few bars of “Blue Shadows,” he turned and started slowly for the wings. From the orchestra came a deep-throated roar that rose to a peak of screaming voices, high-pitched whistles underscored by the stamping of feet.

In the wings he stood in the dimness, looked out. The audience squirmed and squealed, girls were bowling each other over, trying to get into the aisles. The private cops wearily fought them back, prevented some of the more determined from climbing onto the stage.

Denton stepped out onto the stage. The house lights went down, a spotlight found him. Almost as if on cue the wave of noise receded for a second, then it roared back with renewed force. He held his hands up, the noise died away to a reluctant hum.

“That’s all we can do now, kids. Hang around, there’ll be another show in a couple of hours.” He threw a kiss to one of the girls being restrained by a special policeman in the center aisle. The crowd screamed its approval, the girl fought wildly with the cop, who signaled for help from an usher to get her back to her seat. The tumult was quieted only by lowering the house lights and drawing back the curtain for a cartoon.

Rocky Castri joined Denton in the wings. “You sure catnip ’em Mikey. You sure got ’em right here.” He held out a cupped hand.

“You check the stage door like I said?”

Castri nodded. “They got cops on horses there. Looks like half the House of Good Shepherd’s out there waiting for you.”

Denton led the way to the dressing room. “You have to admit that flack knows his job. It’s going to cost, but he’s shooting we’ll break the house records.”

Castri scooted in front to open the door to the dressing room. “Everything costs. You got to take a little, leave a little. Right?”

The dressing room was larger than average, had a sagging leather chair and two wardrobe closets in addition to the usual dressing table and chair. Aline Sampson was sitting on the couch, legs drawn up under her.

“Why didn’t you tell me we had company?” Denton turned to Castri.

The thickset man shrugged. “Who knew?”

“Get rid of your boy, Mickey. I’ve got bad news I want to discuss with you.”

“You ever have any other kind?” The singer turned to the other man. “See if you can get out and get us some delicatessen. Corned beef on rye, wasn’t it, Aline?” The redhead nodded. “Get some celery tonic, some pickles, the works.”

Rocky nodded sullenly, walked out, slammed the door behind him.

“You’ve got a good memory, Mick. That was a long time ago.”

Denton pulled the chair over, reversed it, straddled it. “Some things you like to remember. I like rain ever since that day.”

“You never let a guy know.”

He shrugged. “Things get away from you. Everything looked so simple back then. I was going places—records, a big Florida night club. From there it was going to be Vegas and the big time.”

“So?”

“So I’m in the big time. I still get pushed around by every slob I meet. They tell me what to do, how to do it. Nobody asks me my opinion. They tell me—singer, this is what to do.” He shrugged again. “In the end that’s what I do.”

“You knew what you were doing when you tied up with Agnelli. You knew he’s no daisy chain.”

Denton raked clenched fingers through his hair. “I knew. But it’s like you said that time I got rough with that newspaper guy in Florida. I sold out because there were things I wanted. Trouble is I never got them. Not to keep. They just let me hold them while I’m a good boy. The minute I get out of line, they take them away. And I can’t stop them.”

The redhead nodded. She fumbled through her bag, brought up a pack of cigarettes, shook two loose. She lit them, passed one to the singer. “You could get out. Agnelli has no kick. He’s made his investment back. Brady’s branching out. Lister won’t try to stop you.”

“And if I do?”

Aline shrugged. “You’ve got nothing. As surely as Agnelli built you, that’s how sure he’ll tear you down. But so what?”

“But what would I do?”

“What you did before.”

He shrugged. “I was a helper on a truck. But hell, Aline, I couldn’t—”

“What’s so bad about that? At least you own yourself. You don’t have to dance every time some monkey snaps his fingers. You don’t have to worry about losing your hair or keeping your weight down. You don’t have to get cold chills every time you hear they’re grooming somebody to knock you off and take your place. That’s something, isn’t it?”

He shook his head. “I couldn’t do it.”

The redhead took a deep drag on her cigarette, exhaled through half-parted lips. “I guess we’ve been all through that before, haven’t we?” She set the cigarette on the arm of the couch, fumbled in her bag, brought up a folded envelope. “Ready for the bad news?”

“Shoot.”

“Brady asked me to drop this off. It’s from Internal Revenue.” She handed over the envelope. She watched while he opened it, unfolded a sheet of paper inside it, read it with a scowl.

“What are they talking about? I filed my taxes.” He looked up. “What’d Brady say?”

She shrugged. “Something about them disallowing a lot of claimed deductions.” She picked up her cigarette, studied the charred end. “They figure you owe them some money.”

“How much?”

She shook her head. “Nobody confides in me.”

“I haven’t got a dime.”

“What you haven’t got, they can’t take. As Mike Donelli you’d maybe never have it and they wouldn’t bug you too hard. But as Mickey Denton, they’re going to be on your tail every minute. And you’re going to be getting in deeper and deeper. I’ve seen it happen. All of a sudden one day you wake up and you’re working for your partners and the government. All you get is exercise.”

“So it’s easier to dig my way out from under if I’m on top—”

The redhead shrugged. “I won’t argue with you.” She stubbed out her cigarette. “Lister thinks maybe if you see Agnelli—”

“What’s he want? A bigger cut? I’m cut up like hamburger already.”

“Mick, I didn’t come here to tell you what to do.” She stood up, brushed the wrinkles out of the sheath skirt. “Al asked me to bring this over so you knew what was playing.”

“Aren’t you going to wait for Rocky to get back with the delly?”

“You haven’t been outside, singer. It’d take a Sherman tank to get through that mob. He’ll be hours.” She grinned, dropped her voice. “And the horrible part is that we’re paying them five dollars a head to give me claustrophobia.” She winked at him. “See you later.”

He got up, went to the door, held it closed. “Look, I’m lower than a snake’s belly. How about having a late supper with me, and—”

“I don’t think so, Mick.”

A scowl washed the good humor out of his eyes. “Look, I’m an important client of your boss. Maybe I could throw some weight and—”

“Maybe you could. But what’s the old saying about you can lead a horse to water? Besides, I don’t think I’ve got the answer to your feeling low.” She took his hand off the door, turned the knob. “If I did I’d say yes. I think it might only complicate things.” She touched her finger to her lips, put it against his, walked out.

When Rocky returned with the food, Denton was sitting sulkily on the side of the couch. Castri looked around. “Where’s the redhead?”

The singer looked up, glowered. “She starved to death waiting for you. Where the hell’d you go?”

“Come on, will you? You see that mob outside the stage door? They like to tear me to pieces.” He tossed the food on the dressing table. “So what thanks do I get—”

“You want thanks, too? What’s the matter, it’s not enough I keep you eating and dressed? Now he expects thanks. Look, pally, it’s like somebody said. Enjoy what you got. Maybe you don’t get to keep it. Maybe it’s just lent to you so they can bug you by taking it away.”

The thickset man stared at him. “Now what? So it takes me a couple of minutes to break through a crowd, so he makes a federal case out of it—”

“Maybe if I tossed you out on your can you’d find out how hard it is if you can’t live off other people.”

“Lay off that crap, Mikey. I don’t live off you. You need me. You’re bugged by all of them so it’s worth it to you to keep me around so you can feel like a big man. So okay, I’m willing to take the crap. Maybe because it’s easier than sitting it out in the Big House like a lot of the guys are doing. But don’t get the idea you’re not living off people, too. Everybody’s living off somebody else. Take Tony Agnelli away from you and you’re strictly nothing.”

“Get out of here. Get out and stay out.”

“Sure, Big Man. I’ll get out. See how you like it all alone.”

He stiff-legged it to the door, slammed it after him. Denton started for the door, sank back on the couch.

That afternoon was the first time he'd been alone in a long time. He didn't like it.

## Chapter 21

Mickey Denton sweated it out for almost two weeks, awaiting a call from Rocky Castri. Nobody knew better than he did now how much he depended on the feeling of adequacy he got from kicking Rocky around. It was an outlet for the feeling of inferiority that bugged him more and more these days. He had almost made up his mind to give in, to call Rocky and ask him to come back, when the dressing room phone rang.

“Mikey?” Castri’s voice was hesitant, as though uncertain of his reception. “How you doing, kid?”

The singer kept his voice impersonal. “I’m fine. How’s the big, cold world?”

There was a pause. “Big. Cold.” Denton could almost see the other man gagging over the words. “Okay if I drop by and see you, kid?”

“Suit yourself.” The phone on the other end was silent so long, Denton began to wonder if he’d gone too far. “That what you called for?”

“Mikey, you need somebody. To handle details, you know?” He waited for a reaction from the singer, got none. “Okay, so I’m crawling.” There was a note of desperation in his voice. “I didn’t mean what I said. I’m sorry if I got you sore. I—”

“Who’s sore? What makes you think anything you could say could make me sore?” He visualized Rocky mopping his face as he listened. “We were kids together. I tried to give you a break. You saw it different—”

“Look, Mike. I like working for you. I—I kind of miss being out of things. I want to work for you again. Give me a break.”

“Well, we can talk about it. Drop by after the supper show. Bring some delicatessen with you. You got any money?”

The voice at the other end was low. “I’ll borrow a couple from Maxie.” There was a new note of eagerness. “But you’re not sore any more, huh?”

“I’ll leave word to pass you at the stage door.”

There was a deep sigh at the other end. “Thanks, Mikey. I’ll see you tonight.”

Denton dropped the receiver back on its hook, grinned his relief. For the first time in days, he felt like a man again. Not even the fact that he was scheduled to face the Internal Revenue men in less than a week dampened his spirits.

Rocky Castri would never know how badly Denton had needed him, how close the singer had come to making an embarrassing admission. Mickey decided he'd have to really teach him a lesson to keep him in line.

Rocky Castri sat in the booth at Midnight Maxie's for a full minute after he hung up the phone. He pulled a wadded handkerchief from his pocket, swabbed at his face. Then he kicked the door to the booth open.

Maxie stood behind the counter, eyeing him curiously. "So?"

Castri shrugged. "Like I said. The kid's lost without me. He's dying for me to come back." He turned to the girl who sat on one of the stools. "I didn't want to, you know? But the scratch is good." He walked over, put his hand on her knee. "We want to live high, we going to need that scratch, huh, baby?"

She was tall, dark, high-breasted—a fact that a skintight sweater made no attempt to hide. Rocky had met her the night he broke off with Denton. She had been his constant companion ever since.

To Ruby this was all new and exciting. She had come to New York three years before from Puerto Rico. Until now, her life had been bounded on one side by Negro Harlem and on the other by Little San Juan. And anything that reminded her of San Juan was automatically distasteful.

At first glance, San Juan is a historical old town lazing in the sun between the ocean front and the harbor. The old city is walled in, the cathedral still draws a full house at mass on Sundays. The old fortresses of El Morro and El Cristobal are still used by troops and every street ends at the blue water.

But all of San Juan isn't beautiful. There is El Perla and El Fanguito, the slum areas that breed most of the *puta* who work the dives along the Plaza Colon.

El Perla is a malodorous collection of shacks near the old cemetery where goats, naked children and gamecocks run wild. Here in one-room shacks that lean against each other for support, all phases of life go on openly. In one corner the oldster of the family may be lying on a rough bed,

breathing his last, while in another the younger members of the family may be grunting and moaning in their efforts to replace him. Life, death and conception take place in close proximity in shack colonies like El Perla and El Fanguito.

Estella, Ruby's oldest sister, had worked in the Riviera on the Plaza Colon since she was fourteen. This was a low ceilinged, smoke-filled room where a highly colored picture of General MacArthur stares down on the "continentals"—the state-side troops—while they dance and haggle with the *puta* for a night's romance. Estella had been saving her money, determined that Ruby would not follow her into the Riviera.

When she had the price of a one-way plane ticket, she contacted relatives in New York. Finally she hit one who was willing to take Ruby into her already overcrowded flat. The following day Ruby was on her way.

At first New York had been exciting and new. But soon Ruby realized that Little San Juan in New York differed from El Perla in San Juan only in that the one-room shacks were piled one on top of the other instead of next to each other. The dirt, the crowded living conditions, the proximity of life, death and conception—all were identical.

She had her first glimpse of Rocky Castri as he strode angrily from the stage door at the Regent that night. To her he represented glamor and all that went with it. In the days that followed, he filled her with stories of his association with Mickey Denton, told her of the movie stars he had met and known, described the wonders of Las Vegas and Miami and the other places he'd been. When he gave her a chance to share these things with him, she gave in without too much of a struggle.

But, as the days drifted into a week then became two weeks, she started questioning. She wanted to meet Denton, she wanted to see this glamorous world in which the stars lived. She wanted to get as far away from Little San Juan as possible, and Hemlock Street in East New York wasn't far enough. Finally Rocky agreed to call the singer and "patch things up."

As he stood there, hand on her knee, "Everything is all right, Rocky?" she asked.

"I just told you, chu-chi. He needs me. He couldn't wait for us to get together again. He wants me there tonight."

"And me?"

Castri shook his head. "Not tonight, chu-chi. The singer and I've got too many things to straighten out." He chucked her under the chin. "You'll meet

him if I decide to go back with him.”

The girl pouted. “But, Rocky. You promised—”

“I just told you you’d meet him, didn’t I? Tomorrow.” He nodded. “Sure, tomorrow. I’ll bring him to meet you.” He turned to Maxie. “Max, I need some scratch. Mikey told me to tell you it’s okay.”

The fat man scowled. “How much?”

Castri shrugged. “A bill.” He looked down at his suit. “I want to get pressed up before I go to the theater.” He nodded to Ruby. “She needs some dresses, too. You’ll get it back.”

Maxie shook his head sorrowfully, pulled a thick roll from his pocket. He peeled a fifty from the outside, rooted through it for two twenties and a ten. “You shouldn’t forget, Rocky,” he told him softly.

Castri scooped up the bills, winked at the man behind the counter. “You’ll get it back.” He lifted Ruby off the stool. She was small, high-hipped as well as high-breasted. She was still sulky. “Come on, baby. First we’ll get you some clothes and then I’ll set you up in a hotel right on the main stem. That living?”

She let herself be coaxed into a smile. She caught his arm, walked out with him. El Perla and El Fanguito suddenly seemed a long way off.

Rocky Castri was sitting on the sagging couch in the dressing room when he heard the familiar explosion of noise and applause that signaled the end of Denton’s act. He fumbled for a cigarette, tried to get it lighted before the singer came rushing into the room.

Denton slammed the door behind him, hardly wasted a glance on the other man, stalked to the dressing table, started removing the make-up. To Castri, it was a tip-off that the singer was in a vile mood and he began to wish he had selected another time to make his peace.

“Still catnipping ’em, eh, Mikey?” he hazarded.

Denton wiped the last of the make-up off into his towel, grunted. He ran a comb through his hair, swung around. “You got the delicatessen?”

Castri pointed to a small pile of sandwiches, some pickles and two containers of coffee. “Corned beef. Like you like.” He got up, walked over, opened the waxed paper around the sandwich, hand it to Denton. The singer took it without a comment, ripped a big bite out of it.

“Take one. If you want it,” he grunted.

“No, thanks.”

Denton scowled at him. “What’s the matter? Delicatessen’s not good enough for you? Maybe I should have had a table reserved at Ronny’s?”

Castri smiled placatingly. “It’s not that, Mikey. I just had something to eat with Ruby. Just before I came over.”

“Ruby?” Denton stopped with the sandwich halfway to his mouth. “Who’s Ruby?”

Castri grinned at him, described an hourglass with his hands. “The most, Mikey. The most.”

“Something new?” Denton took a deep bite off the sandwich, chewed at it. “I never heard of her before.”

“Brand new.” Rocky leaned back on the couch, looking self-satisfied. “Met her at the stage door. She was hanging around in the mob. I got to talking to her.” He shrugged. “You know.”

Denton bobbed his head grouchyly. He reached for another sandwich. “How old?”

“Old enough.”

The singer gouged the top out of a coffee container, took a swallow. “Italian?”

“Puerto Rican. A real hot pepper.”

Denton denuded the second sandwich slowly, took a bite. “When’m I going to meet her?”

Castri brightened. “You mean it, Mikey? You mean it’s okay if I bring her around?” He leaned forward. “She’s dying to meet you. No kidding.”

“Sure. I’d like to meet her.” He stuffed the rest of the sandwich into his mouth, washed it down with coffee. “How about tonight?”

“I don’t know.” Rocky consulted his watch. “It’s kind of late—”

“What’s the matter? She got a mama who watches the clock?”

“No. She don’t live at home. I got her a room at the Marmont up on Sixtieth.”

Denton pushed the dressing room phone toward the other man. “So call her. Maybe I’ll even give her my autograph.” When Castri appeared to

hesitate, the singer scowled. “What’s the matter? You don’t want me to meet her or something?”

“I just told you. She’s dying to meet you.” Rocky got up from the couch, walked over to the phone. He dialed a number, waited. “Hotel Marmont? Ruby Castri. Mrs. Castri,” he amended.

Denton grinned at him. “You didn’t tell me.”

Castri covered the phone with his hand. “We’re not hitched. But you know—it makes it easier to shack up if you sign Mr. and Mrs.” He took his hand away from the phone. “Ruby? Yeah. . . . Hey, feel like meeting Mickey tonight?” There was an excited babble from the other end of the phone. Rocky grinned. “Sure Mickey Denton. Who else?”

The phone babbled back at him, he consulted his watch.

“Get real pretty. We’ll be there in about an hour.” He dropped the phone on its hook, turned back to Denton. “She’s real excited. You sure do catnip them, Mick. You sure do.”

The Hotel Marmont was on Sixtieth just off Broadway. It had a faded canopy that showed signs of having waged a losing battle with time and strong winds. Nobody had bothered to patch the gaping holes that flapped noisily in the breeze. The building’s façade was dirty and neglected looking.

The dim lobby had the requisite number of tired rubber plants, a few chairs obviously unsafe to sit on, and a general air of decay. At the far end of the lobby, a noisy neon chattered and pointed with an arrow to *Cocktails—Bar*.

Rocky led the way across the lobby toward a small, old-fashioned elevator in the rear. The carpeting had once been red, was now rust-colored with breaks and worn spots showing through to the backing. The registration desk was shabby, presided over by a rheumy-eyed old man who peered at them nearsightedly, and then went back to his copy of the morning tab.

At the fourth floor, they left the elevator. Rocky led the way to the rear of the building, knocked on a door. After a moment, it opened. Ruby had changed to a Nile-green sweater that hugged the small, high breasts and a tight sheath skirt outlined the curves of her thighs. She wore a heavy gold-colored medallion around her neck.

“Hi, baby.” Rocky pecked her cheek. “I told you I’d get him over here. This is your singing idol, baby. Mickey Denton in person.”

She stepped aside as they walked in, seemed unperturbed by the inventory Mickey took of her assets.

“You didn’t tell me she was this nice, Rock,” Denton chided him. “You got better taste than I gave you credit for.” He tossed his hat on a chair, looked around. It was a small two-room apartment, the bedroom off to the right, a small kitchenette masked by a sliding screen. “Nice place you got.”

“It’s a dump and you know it,” Castri told him. “But it’s just for now. Soon’s I can we’re moving to a classier place. Maybe even the Astor or the Taft. One of those places. Right on the MAIN DRAG. Eh, chu-chi?”

She grinned at him, nodded. “Sit down, Mickey.” She waved at the couch. “I can still hardly believe you’re here. When Rocky told me how good he knows you”—she shrugged—“I thought it was a line.”

Denton walked over, dropped onto the couch. He patted the cushion next to him. “Come on over here so we can get acquainted.”

Ruby looked to Castri, drew a nod. She walked over, dropped alongside the singer. He moved closer until she could feel his thigh against hers.

Castri watched with a frown, then walked over, rubbed his hands. “How about a drink?” He looked to the girl. “What’ve we got?”

“*Ron. Cerveza*. Beer, that is,” she explained to Denton.

“I want scotch,” the singer grunted. He dug into his pocket, brought out a small roll of bills, peeled off a twenty. “You want to get some, Rocky?”

“This ain’t the Waldorf, Mike,” Castri complained. “We don’t have room service.”

Denton turned from the girl, stared him down coldly. “I didn’t say anything about room service. I just said get some scotch.” For a moment he thought he detected revolt in Rocky’s face, prepared to retreat. But the other man just shrugged, picked up the bill and turned away. “Don’t hurry back,” Denton told him.

Castri stopped at the door, as though about to change his mind. He turned, looked from Denton to the girl. She stared at him, waited for him to speak. He pulled open the door, strode out and slammed it after him.

“What is he? Man or maricon?” She spat in the direction of the door.

“You mind?” Denton reached over, caught her by the arm, pulled her against him. She resisted for a moment, then melted against him. When his

lips found hers, her mouth was open. She gave no sign that she noticed he was sliding her sweater up to her shoulders.

Downstairs, Rocky Castri stepped off the elevator. His fists were clenched so tightly the knuckles showed white. For a moment he debated the advisability of getting back on the elevator, going back and throwing the singer out of the room. Then he remembered the two weeks he had been off the payroll, how it felt to spend the day with no money in his pocket. His shoulders drooped a little; he turned, walked to where the neon chattered *Cocktails—Bar* and went in. He was still leaning against the bar an hour later when Mickey Denton looked in on his way home—and waved.

## Chapter 22

Tony Agnelli loosened the napkin he had fastened around his neck, pushed his chair back from the table. He waited until the three waiters quickly cleared the table of soiled dishes.

“I’ll call you when I need you.” Agnelli watched with half-veiled eyes while the waiters bowed out of the private dining room, closed the door behind them. Then he turned his attention to the men at the table.

“All right, so first some food. Now we get down to business.” He looked to a tall man on his left. “I brought Evans back here so he can tell us first hand what we’re up against. Tell them, Barney.”

Barney Evans shifted comfortably in his chair. Everything about him suggested icy calm—sparkling blue eyes, striking contrast between jet black eyebrows and snow-white hair, thin lips that seemed always wreathed in a smile, almost too perfectly capped teeth. “There’s not a lot to tell, gentlemen. There hasn’t been a lot done.” He raised his hands, palms up. “The fact of the matter is that we haven’t been able to make a dent on the California market. The Indiana boys still have it sewed up.”

Mitch Corday grunted. “You mean with all the money you had for schmear and with all the muscle you got on tap, you haven’t been able to make a dent?”

Evans turned his attention to the gambler. “Muscle means nothing in California, Mitch. We can’t afford to use it. The studios have too much money tied up in their properties to let them get hurt. And the police know where their bread is buttered. Money?” He shook his head. “You need more than money.”

Harry Jacobs picked up a toothpick, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, proceeded to macerate it. “Now it begins to make sense, Tony,” he conceded. He turned to Evans. “When Tony bought himself a singer and spent all this time building him into a big name, I couldn’t figure it. Who needs this kind of aggravation? Now it makes sense.” He nodded his appreciation.

“I told you then. We can’t break in with muscle and money. So we walk in behind one of their own. We con a studio into buying the singer and

getting in too deep to walk away and the singer sponsors our play. Make sense?"

Mitch Corday shrugged. "Denton's not the easiest guy in the world to handle. I know."

The fat man puffed his lips out indignantly. "You got something to complain about? You got yours out of the kid. You could've ruined him with that gimmick."

"He papered the Strip with IOU's. Somebody had to make them good and this I don't do for no." Corday shrugged. "As it turned out, nobody got hurt. But he could have cost us a bundle."

"This is the character I'm going to handle?" Evans asked.

Agnelli nodded. "He'll follow orders. We only need him for a year or two. Until we get in. Then, he gets out of line—" He shrugged.

Jacobs chewed thoughtfully on his toothpick. "So give us the blueprint, Tony. Me"—he shrugged apologetically—"I'm just a country boy. I don't know what goes in California. You say it's a big deal. Okay, so show me."

Tony nodded to Mario, who sat near the door. The bodyguard got up, opened the door and walked out. He took up his position in front of the private room where no one could approach.

Inside, Agnelli dug into his jacket pocket, brought out a typewritten list. "This is the picture in Hollywood. There's no organization. A lot of petty larceny bookies walking all over each other's toes. No organization. We give them a program. Prove we can make everybody money with no risk."

"And if they don't buy?" Corday wanted to know.

The fat man shrugged. "We got to see to it they do buy." He pursed his lips, squinted at the gambler. "They can't touch the movie stuff. And that's where the big money is. We fix it so's they can. That bad?"

Corday nodded. "Okay, so we open that door."

Agnelli tapped the sheet of paper. "We got a working arrangement. A grand a phone a month to operate. Nobody in his right mind will set up a deal like that except with a big outfit who'll stand up. We don't need muscle to run out the small timers. The cops'll do that."

Jacobs shook his head. "That's dangerous. You shop the competition, they shop you. Nobody wins. Besides, you got to buy an awful lot of cops."

“You can’t buy enough cops in the L.A. department to make it work. But if you can get a few of the right ones—” He shrugged. “That’s better than buying the whole department.”

“You can do that?” Corday wanted to know.

“My job is to keep things running. How I do it will have to be left up to me,” Evans told him coolly. “If I get the entrée into the movie colony I think I can get, we won’t have to worry about the police or anybody else.”

Jacobs pulled the toothpick from between his teeth, examined the chewed end, flipped it to the floor. “You think the singer can give you that entrée?”

“We’ve invested a lot of preparation on that assumption.” Evans reached into his pocket, brought out a thin silver cigarette case. He offered it around, got no takers. “Tony and I have had our eyes on the Hollywood market for a long time.” He tapped a cigarette on the end of the table, stuck it between his lips. “As he told you, the bookmaking operation has been crying to be organized. We think we have it licked if we can persuade the bookies now operating to work through us on a percentage.”

“Why should they?” Jacobs wanted to know.

The white-haired man showed his perfect teeth, turned to Agnelli. “Will you? Or shall I?”

The fat man shrugged. “Be my guest.”

Evans turned back to Jacobs. “Two years ago we organized a finance and loan organization, took over a building on Sunset Boulevard. It’s outside the L.A.P.D.’s jurisdiction. In the county.” As a frown started to form on Jacobs’s face, “I forgot you’re not familiar with Hollywood. This area is not out in the woods some place—it’s right in the heart of Hollywood. But it’s unincorporated. The L.A. department can’t operate along this strip. Only the sheriff’s department.”

Jacobs nodded. “Go on.”

“For almost two years we’ve been running strictly legit. We could even crack the nut operating the way we are. We left the original tenants in upper floors of the building when we took it over, squeezed them out slowly and replaced them with fronts. We’ve got a hundred phones ready to go and not a chance of a backfire on a single one.”

Corday pursed his lips, whistled noiselessly. “You been holding out, Tony.” He pulled a pencil from his pocket, did some hasty figuring on the

tablecloth, “A hundred grand a month ice. You must be figuring on a gross of—”

“Seven, eight million a year.” Agnelli reached a fat hand out, grabbed a water glass, took a deep swallow. “That’s only the beginning.” He set the glass back on the table. “You think I been playing nursemaid to a singer for peanuts? This was so big there couldn’t be a leak. So only two people knew.” He nodded to Evans. “Barney Evans and me. Now we’re ready to go, we’re telling you.”

Jacobs nodded. “I’m in.”

“Look, I’m not complaining,” Corday growled. “You know I’m with you, Tony. A guy’s got a right to ask questions.” He settled back. “For that kind of scratch I can even learn to put up with the singer.” He shook his head. “I just hope he can do what you think he can.”

Barney Evans reached into his pocket, brought out a thick sheaf of papers. “This is a contract with Mammoth Studios. Three big pictures this year. By this time next year, this guy will be the hottest thing in films or on TV. There won’t be a single door in Hollywood closed to him. And walking right beside him will be yours truly.”

“I’m sold.” Corday shrugged.

“Another little item.” Evans smiled. “I told you the finance and loan set-up is already paying its own way. We figure we’ll be able to more than triple that business by offering its facilities to our customers at the other end. In that way, no bookie has to carry an account. He turns his receivables into the loan association, we discount them for cash. That way, none of our customers has to take any losses. This they’ll love.”

“How about giving the Oasis the same service? We get hooked for close to a hundred grand every year by wall-paperers and jumpers.”

“Maybe in time we will,” Evans told him smoothly. “But for the time being, the service is for the purpose of reducing any opposition to our moving in and taking over on the books.”

Harry Jacobs nodded vigorously. “I like it. Maybe you’ll want to finance some of our juke boxes and vending machines out there. We could triple the installation.”

Agnelli held up his hands. “Hold it, hold it. They can handle them without interfering with our main business, they’ll do it. But our main job is the book.” He drummed on the end of the table with sausage-shaped fingers.

“One other thing. We got a feeler to bankroll a new set-up operating out of Tia Juana. Heroin. Tons of it and all uncut.”

Jacobs looked around, shrugged. “So can we make a dollar?”

Evans permitted himself a discreet smile. “A lot more than a dollar. But we’ll have to finance the purchase of a fleet of cars. The stuff will be brought in in false-bottomed gasoline tanks.” He took a deep drag on his cigarette, squinted as the smoke drifted up into his eyes. “It’ll all be an aboveboard loan transaction. The cars are being built right now. They’ll be bought in individual sales through a dozen or more secondhand dealers. We’ll provide the financing.”

“I’m for it,” Corday agreed. “If you’re sure of who you’re dealing with below the border. Me, I don’t like to do business with any Mex.”

Evans considered, nodded. “There’s a risk,” he conceded. “But if they start playing games, I’m sure we can find another source of supply. And I think our reputation is sufficiently imposing to discourage any double-dealing.”

Agnelli snorted. “Me, I don’t like it. It means dealing with spikers and hopheads. They ain’t reliable. But I’m willing to go along if you think it’s a good thing.”

Corday nodded. “It’s a good thing, Tony. That Hollywood—you can unload all the white stuff there you can lay your hands on. Am I right, Barney?”

The white-haired man agreed. “There’s a good market and they don’t care what price they pay. As long as the stuff’s available and halfway decent.” He leaned forward and stubbed out his cigarette. “After all, once they’re hooked they have to have a source. And they can’t go out on street corners looking for the man. It’s worth something to them for the convenience and safety.”

“Then it’s agreed.” Agnelli nodded. “You make the deal for the specially built cars.” He scowled. “There’s no way of tracing them back to us?”

“They’ll each be bought separately and by an individual owner. We merely finance the sale contract.”

“Good. Now, about the singer—” The fat man took another noisy swallow from his water glass. “These pictures he’s going to make. There can’t be a hitch.”

“Hardly,” Evans told him. “Our finance company is underwriting the production. In that way we have a lot to say about the cast, the producer. Make sure they put the kid where we want him. On top.”

“How about this manager of his, this guy Brady? He struck me as a pretty snotty guy,” Corday put in. “He could start gumming up the works.”

“He could. But he won’t,” Agnelli told him. “When Evans takes the kid over, Brady steps out—”

“You think Brady’ll stand still for that?” Jacobs asked. “He did a pretty good job of bringing Denton along, and—”

“And he made plenty doing it. So we let him keep drawing his twenty per cent on the kid. Evans will be on the payroll of the loan company. Brady’ll listen to reason. Leave that to me.”

“When do you intend to have a talk with Brady?”

The fat man leaned back. The heavy lids almost covered his eyes.

“I won’t have to have a talk with him,” he told them. “He’ll be coming to have a talk with me. Real soon.”

A week later, a forlorn Mickey Denton followed Brady into the offices of Mercantile Enterprises, Inc. The cool-looking blonde sat behind her typewriter, didn’t bother to get up as they walked in.

“Mr. Agnelli would like you gentlemen to go right in.”

Brady nodded, pushed open the door to the inner office, led the way in. Tony Agnelli sat behind his desk, his eyes half closed, pouty lips glistening wetly.

Mario, Agnelli’s slick-haired bodyguard, sat in a leather chair at the side of the desk. His thin face showed no sign of interest as Brady and the singer pulled chairs up to the desk.

“So you got to see me right away,” Agnelli growled. “So what’s the fever?”

“We’re in trouble, Tony.”

Agnelli opened his eyes. “How can I be in trouble? I been sitting here minding my own business. Me, I got no trouble.” The heavy eyelids descended to film the eyes. “You, you better not have.”

Brady chewed viciously on the unlit cigar. “We just spent five days straight at Internal Revenue. They hit the singer with an \$87,000 claim for unpaid taxes.”

Agnelli scowled. “Him, he’s strictly a nothing. You, you’re supposed to be a smart guy, Brady. So how come you let him play games with Mr. Whiskers?”

Brady shrugged. “I can’t keep an eye on him every second.”

“That’s what you’re drawing your money for,” Agnelli told him coldly. “That’s why we been letting you scoop so much gravy.”

“Look, we made a deal and I’ve been doing my share of—”

The fat man leaned back, touched the tips of his fingers across his midsection. “Going into the music publishing business. That’s part of the deal?”

Brady looked startled, almost dropped his cigar, but made a speedy recovery. “What’s that mean?”

“Pavilion Music.” Agnelli glared at him. “You must think Tony Agnelli’s going soft in the head. You think we don’t check on everybody who’s connected? You think we don’t know who’s Pavilion Music? You could make a real serious mistake, Brady, underestimating Agnelli. A real serious mistake.”

“Tony, the publishing bit was just an idea. If it hit I was going to cut everyone in. You, the kid, and—”

The fat man transferred his attention to Denton. “\$87,000,” he snorted. “You live real good.”

“Oh, sure. And I owe it all to you. A couple of years ago I’m making only fifty bucks a weekend. Now I owe eighty-seven grand. I live real good.”

Agnelli regarded him silently for a minute. “I could let you take a real fall, singer. You think Brady’s the only one I keep tabs on? For fooling with this spic, I could let you take a real fall.”

Denton licked at his lips. “What spic? You mean Ruby? That’s Castri’s stuff, not mine.”

“Castri’s a pimping beard. I catch you messing with that dark stuff again, or if the papers get their hands on it, you’re in trouble, singer. Real bad trouble.”

“You mean it could get worse? I got news for you, mister. I owe eighty-seven grand to the man with the whiskers. Well, I couldn’t raise ten dollars without a co-signer.” He snorted. “And you’re talking about giving me trouble?”

The fat man’s voice became dangerously soft. “What the Internal Revenue’s talking about is only money.” His eyes closed completely. “What I’m talking about, even money couldn’t help.” He opened his eyes, looked at Brady. “You’re stepping out as his manager. Barney Evans takes over.”

“Wait a minute, Tony. You can’t do that to me. I—”

“You’ll get your twenty per cent, just like now. But you we don’t need.” He turned to Mario. “Brady’s leaving. See that he signs the papers before he goes.” He seemed to be going asleep again. “I know what you’re thinking, Brady. There are no records, but a guy like you gets to keep a lot of things in his head. Just don’t forget. One little hole in the head and it all leaks out.”

The color drained from Brady’s face. He pulled the cigar from between his teeth. “You ought to know me better than that, Tony. I’m too smart to—”

“Yeah. That’s what I think. You’re too smart. He’s leaving, Mario.”

The bodyguard got up from his chair. He walked over to where Brady sat staring at the fat man with stricken eyes. “You heard Mr. Agnelli. Let’s go.”

Brady nodded. He got to his feet, started for the door. He stopped alongside Denton’s chair. “Good luck, kid,” he grinned wryly. “You’re going to need it.”

Agnelli waited until the door closed behind Brady and the bodyguard. Without opening his eyes, “From now on, you listen to Evans. He’ll square the rap on the taxes. Then you go out to Hollywood on a picture deal.”

“Look, Mr. Agnelli. I’m cut more ways than hamburger. If any more cuts come out—”

The fat man opened his eyes. “No more cuts. Evans is on my payroll. The taxes”—he shrugged—“we’ll consider that a loan. You’ll be able to pay it off in no time.”

“How?”

“You got a picture deal, right? On top of that, we’re going to cut you in for some action. You can do yourself real good.” Agnelli stirred himself into a more comfortable position, rested his hands on his paunch. “I got friends they got a lot of money to invest. Only they don’t want to show—”

“Why not?”

“I keep telling you. You talk too much. You ask too many questions.”

Denton’s mouth was set stubbornly. “I got a right to know.”

There was a pause, then the fat man grunted. “You got no rights, singer. But just because you’re curious, I’ll tell you. I got a lot of friends got a lot of money they can’t show. It don’t do nobody any good lying in vaults. They want some action with it.”

“Boodle money?”

“It’s money. You put it into action for them, one per cent sticks to your fingers. You won’t have to worry about making reports on profits. That’ll all be paid into Swiss banks. All you’ll have to do is spend it. And I hear you do that pretty good.”

“How do I explain where I got it?”

“You don’t. Who’s to ask? If Internal Revenue gets nosy you hit a fixed race. Or maybe somebody lent you money. Evans will do the talking for you. You won’t have to worry about it.”

Denton grunted. “There’ll have to be an awful lot of fixed races before one per cent does me any good.”

The fat man fixed him with a cold eye. “There only has to be one race fixed, sucker, to make a big killing. If you know about that one race that’s all you need. Only amateurs would try to keep fixing them.”

“That’s all I do out there—pass the money?”

“There may be other things. Evans will lay it out for you. Like I said, singer, it won’t cost you anything for Evans to take things off your hands. But it could get real expensive to you if you decided to take things off his hands. You know?”

Mickey Denton nodded. He had always wanted to go to Hollywood, but now a cold hard core of doubt was forming in the pit of his stomach. He had been in the mob’s minor league up until now. And now they were bringing him up into the majors. He had an unhappy feeling that he might be going out of his class.

## Chapter 23

Mickey Denton sat at one of the rear tables in the lower section at Dino's Lodge on Sunset Strip. The blonde at his side, leading lady of his latest picture, had given up trying to draw him into conversation. She sulkily stared out over the multi-colored carpet of variegated lights that spread out below them.

Two teen-agers approached the table, shoved menus in front of them. "Could we have your autograph, Mickey?" the bolder of the two blurted out. When Denton fumbled for a pen, "We saw your last picture. You were real great, Mickey. You, too, Miss Roberts."

The blonde dragged her attention back from the panorama of Hollywood and Beverly Hills. "Thanks for nothing." She watched Denton scrawl his name across one of the menus. "How come he always gets top billing? You'd think he was—"

"Shut up," Denton snapped at her.

The two kids looked from Denton to each other and back.

"Go powder your nose or something," Denton told the blonde. She debated the advisability of arguing, got up and headed for the powder room at the far end of the bar. "Don't mind her, kids," he told the autograph hunters. "She's been working too hard." He pushed the autographed menus back, watched the kids scuttle back into the inner dining room.

He signaled the waiter. "Here's cab fare. See if you can find a broom for that witch. Make sure she's headed in the right direction."

The waiter nodded, watched while the singer started for the exit without a second look in the direction of the ladies' room.

Denton had found the first year of Hollywood to his liking, but now it was beginning to pall. His first picture had taken twenty days of shooting and despite his misgivings had been well received. His second picture, with Evelyn Roberts as leading lady was now playing the first-run houses along Hollywood Boulevard. While critics admitted that his performance wouldn't make Dean Martin or Sinatra start collecting Social Security, nevertheless it was playing to full houses.

One of the most surprising things about Hollywood from his point of view had been the women. Most of them he had mentally classified as far beyond reach, but after his first party—at which he had arrived with an ingénue and left with a major star—he found they were far more acquiescent than he had ever hoped. By the end of his first month in Hollywood he had compiled a list of the fifteen most desirable targets and now, at the end of his first year, he had a check mark alongside all but one.

Financially, the year had been the greatest. Despite any misgivings he had about Agnelli's program of dredging money out of vaults and into action, it had worked perfectly. There had been a few raised eyebrows when Mickey Denton, the singer, had expressed his intention of investing in television stations and in a Vegas hotel, but there had been no repercussions. The beef with the government had been settled and with Evans handling his affairs there had been no further sessions with Internal Revenue.

He was out of debt, and thanks to his one per cent brokerage on the boodle money, he had a sizable nest-egg laid away. But there were the black moments, like tonight, when a loneliness descended that money couldn't dispel. He was surrounded with back slappers and had increased his entourage. But no one knew better that all of them would be snapping at his heels if he couldn't keep them happy with occasional scraps.

Rocky Castri was still around to do his bidding, to run his errands, to take his abuse during the black moments. Denton wasn't sleeping well these nights and sometimes, in the middle of the night, full of fears and tensions, he would awaken Rocky and send him prowling through Hollywood foraging for delicatessen. Then he would force him to sit up the rest of the night listening to the singer's contempt for "parasites."

Castri had long ago given up any attempt to fight back. The sessions with Ruby seemed to have broken his back finally. Even so, there were still times when Denton thought he saw the stooge watching him with hate-filled eyes. But he knew now that Castri would never leave him—could never give up the softness of the life Denton provided him.

Once, in the blackest of moods, he had gotten on the phone to Aline Sampson in New York, and in drunken sentimentality had begged her to join him. The redhead told him he didn't need anybody but himself, never had. She had hung up on him. He had never tried to contact her again except once when he called to revile her for the things she had said. She hung up on him again.

He thought of Aline again as he pushed his way out of the restaurant to the sloping driveway falling away to the parking lot. Rocky Castri was standing at the curb gossiping with one of the attendants. When he saw Denton walk out, he flipped his butt at the curb, nodded to the doorman and walked over.

“We leaving?”

Denton nodded.

“What about the broad?”

“I’ll sign her over to you.” Denton peered at Castri. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? You don’t mind picking up what I toss away, do you, Rocky?”

Castri shrugged. “Look, Mikey. With something like that, I’m not proud. You don’t want it, I’ll be glad to get it.” He looked toward the exit. “We leaving her here?”

“Yeah. Get the car. She’s tanked up again and getting on my nerves.”

“She didn’t use to drink. She—”

“Well, damn it, she does now and I got it up to here. You gonna stand here arguing or do you get the car?”

Castri shrugged, handed a stub to the parking lot attendant, who loped down after the car. By the time it purred to a stop outside the exit, the door opened and a disheveled Evelyn Roberts pushed her way out of the restaurant. She saw Denton getting into the car, ran over, caught his arm. “Who do you think you are, leaving me like that? I—”

The singer shook his arm free, sent the blonde staggering back. “Get away from me.”

The girl came at him, fingers clenched, going for his face. He swung, caught her on the side of the face with the flat of his hand, knocked her back against the building. Then he slid into the back seat of the car.

An attendant ran up, caught the girl as she stumbled. He pulled her back as Denton’s car zoomed out of the driveway into the street.

“The bastard! The dirty bastard!” the girl moaned.

“Don’t try, Miss Roberts,” the attendant told her. “You haven’t got the vocabulary for him. Let me get you a cab.”

A cab made a U-turn on the boulevard, skidded to a stop at the curb. The attendant helped the blond girl into the back. "Studio Club," he told the driver. He smiled at her as she attempted to repair the damage to her makeup, shook his head at a proffered bill. "It was a pleasure."

The cab zoomed away from the curb, blended into Hollywood-bound Sunset Boulevard traffic. The attendant pushed his cap back, shook his head. "How does that miserable son of a bitch rate a dish like that in the first place?"

There was no one to give him a sensible answer.

Mickey Denton sprawled in the back of his car. He could feel the black mood deepening. He fumbled through his pockets, brought out a cigarette, stuck it in the corner of his mouth.

"You shouldn't have hit her, Mikey," Castri told him from the front seat. His hands were clenched tightly around the wheel. He tried to give all his attention to guiding the big car from the Strip into Beverly Hills. He was trying to smother a wild desire to get his hands on the man on the back seat.

"Somebody ask your opinion? What's the matter, you don't like your meat bruised?"

Castri shrugged. "I'm thinking of you. If a photographer happened to be hanging around there he'd have had a field day."

"That's what I pay you for. To make sure no creep with a camera does bug me." Denton lit the cigarette, leaned his head back against the cushion, blew smoke at the roof of the car. "Where are we going?"

"I just thought we'd drive around a while till you cool off. Evans might get awful sore if he finds out about you clouting the dame right out in the open. He and Lister had a tough enough time squaring the other beef when you cut that kid's face with the champagne glass."

"She shoulda ducked. Besides, that's what they're getting paid for." He peered out the window.

Sunset Boulevard had changed from a street lined with restaurants and night clubs pasted to the side of a hill to a quiet, dimly lit road that skirted large estates, discreetly screened by high hedges and long curving driveways. Here and there Mickey could catch a glimpse of huge Spanish style houses with heavy tile roofs, lights glowing gold and amber through slatted blinds. It only served to make him more restless.

He tried to think of some place he could go, someone he could call. Someone who'd welcome an evening with him as a means of spending an evening, not as a means of gaining a point or an advantage. He tried to disguise even from himself the fact that there wasn't a soul who would welcome a call from him, no one who would be glad to have him drop in.

"Where's all the action in this damn town anyway?" he complained to Rocky. "Hell, it was livelier in Brooklyn."

"You want a couple of broads, I can—"

"Rocky, the pimp," he sneered. "I want broads, I can get any one I want. You know something? There ain't a one I can think of I'd touch with a six-foot pole tonight. They're all alike. They smell good, but they're stinking rotten. Just like us, Rocky. Just like you and me."

Rocky had the familiar tight feeling in the throat he always had when he was alone and dreamed of what he would do to the singer some day. He had to swallow hard to dispel it. He wondered if it was too late to get out from under. Too late to go to Barney Evans or even Tony Agnelli and find some kind of a job, any kind of a job to get the singer off his back.

Sure, he had pimped for Denton. The first few months the singer was in Hollywood, he was like a madman. Nights he couldn't sleep when his fears and insecurity turned into nightmares. His only remedy was women, and more women. By conquering them, he was able to conquer some of his feeling of inadequacy. And it took his mind off Rocky Castri. But now even women couldn't do that, and the singer was on his back full time.

Then there were the low periods when Denton tried to bail himself out with a bottle. The periods of recrimination and drunken sentimentality. More than once Castri wondered if it wouldn't have been better if he'd sailed into Denton the night he humiliated him by moving in on Ruby. Even now he could feel a chill finger of shame down his spine when he remembered the look on the girl's face the nights he shepherded her to the singer's apartment for assignations, the unspoken insults on her tongue as he took her back home.

"Turn around and take me home," the voice from the back seat snapped.

Wordlessly, Castri swung the car right off Sunset onto Doheny, climbed up to Schuyler, took another right to bring him back on Sunset headed in the other direction. The man in the back seat was silent all the way back to Hollywood. Castri made no effort to draw him into conversation.

Mickey Denton had a tenth-floor apartment in an oppressively modern building perched on the side of the hill a mile north of the Bowl. It looked like a waffle, upended, with balconies for every apartment which guaranteed privacy by being impressed into the waffle. He stood on the tiny patio, brooded.

Instead of getting better, the black periods were getting blacker, more frequent. The different-girl-every-night therapy that had worked in the beginning had palled. He'd trade his entire list of conquests for someone to talk to, yet the minute he met a new girl he went at it with only one objective in mind. Talking was not the forte of most of the girls he arranged to date.

A year ago, when making movies was an enjoyable novelty, he could push back the black moods by submerging himself in work. He was the first one on the set and the last to leave, usually accompanied by a member of the cast who'd waited around in his dressing room. Even the late sessions of playing Mickey Denton records in the portable dressing room had lost their appeal.

He flipped his cigarette into the void beyond the railing of the balcony, walked back into the living room. Rocky Castri was sprawled in an upholstered chair, his legs stretched out fully in front of him, contemplating the shine on his shoes.

"Get out," Denton snapped at him. "I got some personal calls to make."

Rocky got up, started for the door. "One of these days when you snarl at me like that, I'm going to get out. And I'm going to keep going," he growled over his shoulder. He punctuated it by slamming the door after him.

"That'll be the day," the singer growled. He walked over to a portable bar, helped himself to a stiff slug of scotch. Then he walked over to the phone, dialed long distance. He gave a number in New York, specified it to be person to person, hung up the phone and settled back to wait.

It took almost twenty minutes to get through. When the phone finally rang, he snatched the receiver off its hook.

"Hello?" Aline Sampson's voice was sleepy, petulant. "Who is this?"

"Mickey, baby." He spoke hastily as though to prevent her from hanging up. "Let me talk to you, baby. You're the only one that understands me. Please?"

There was a pause at the other end. "You know what time it is here, singer? It's after three."

“I know, I know. I just had to talk to you. Look, get on a plane. Come out here. I’ll do anything you say if you’ll just come out here.”

“Uh uh. We’ve gone all over that, singer. There was a guy named Mikey Donelli who might have sold me that bill. But Mickey Denton? Uh uh.”

“Look. I’ll change. It’s not too late. I could—”

“Nobody changes, Mick. You’re what you are because that’s what you want to be. You figured this was what you wanted. I told you it was a short-term loan of everything you got.” The shrug almost came over the wire. “That’s not for me. I almost took that route once. Now I’m glad I missed the connection.”

Denton scowled at the phone. “I’m asking you to come. I’m begging you to come. What do you expect me to do, get down on my hands and knees?”

“It wouldn’t do you any good.”

“That’s it?”

The redhead sighed audibly. “It’s always been it. I never kidded you. If I went out there, I’d be buying myself plenty of grief. You know you have a terrific physical attraction for me. So do I. But that’s not enough. I went that route once and I can tell you it’s not enough.”

“You think you’re so damn indispensable? Who do you think you are?” he flared. “There’s a dozen broads that could give you cards and spades sitting at their phones right now who’d—”

“Call one of them,” the receiver told him coldly. There was a click at the other end.

“Aline! Aline!” Denton pounded on the crossbar.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the impersonal voice of the operator told him. “Your party has hung up.”

He slammed the receiver back on its hook, got up, strode over to the portable bar. Rocky Castri came in at daybreak, undressed him and dumped him on his bed.

## Chapter 24

Harry Jacobs looked out of the window of the heavy limousine, cursed the typical Chicago winter day that had just ended, added another curse for the one that would undoubtedly follow it. He found the scenery depressing, settled back against the cushion.

During the day the street was undoubtedly clogged with heavy trucks, but at this hour of the morning it was deserted; lined on either side by dark, hulking warehouses. For the entire length of the block only three street lamps spilled yellow light into the gutter, light that spread like a puddle from the curbs to the buildings, leaving the alleyways and doorways in deep shadow.

Jacobs watched the silent black buildings float past the car window, tried to remember how the cool desert air felt in Vegas at this time of morning. He remembered the black of the mountain range turning a deep blue, then purple as the sun rose. All that happened in Chicago was that the rising sun exposed the filth that night had mercifully shrouded. He wondered if anything happened to Mitch Corday if he could move in on the Oasis. He decided that kind of thinking could be dangerous—but it was worth keeping in the back of his mind.

The driver pulled to a stop in front of what appeared to be a deserted warehouse.

“This it?” Jacobs sat on the edge of his seat, studied the front of the building with a scowl.

The driver swung in his seat, nodded. “I’ll get the car out of here so nobody gets curious. How soon you want me back?”

Jacobs consulted his watch in the dimness of the back seat. “Give me forty minutes. I’ll stand in the doorway.” He pushed open the door, descended into the street. He waited until the tail light of the car winked its way to the far corner, disappeared around it. Then he turned, crossed the sidewalk to the building. Deep in the shadows he could see a pinpoint of light that glowed and died away.

A tall, bulky man wearing a gray fedora that sat high on his head, its brim parallel to his eyes, stood in the doorway. He was sucking on a

cigarette.

“You Mr. Jacobs?” he asked.

“Welton here?” Jacobs wanted to know.

The gray fedora bobbed. The man turned, rapped at the door. As Jacobs’s eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he could see the other man was big, hulking-shouldered, thick-necked.

After a moment, the door scraped open. The doorman took Jacobs by the arm, led him inside. The door squealed shut.

The beam of a flashlight split the darkness. It was held by a man whose outline Jacobs could barely see. As the light flashed up into his face, Jacobs swore bitterly.

“Sorry, Mr. Jacobs. Just had to make sure,” the man with the flash apologized. “You want to come this way? Welton’s been waiting.” He turned, the flashlight knifed a path of light through the darkness to a flight of metal stairs in the rear. At the head of the stairs there was a small catwalk, then an office which must at one time have had an uninterrupted view of the entire floor of the warehouse.

Benny Welton was sitting at an unpainted desk in the rear of the office. He grinned as Jacobs blinked in the light. “You’re late.”

“You’re lucky we got here at all. You think this place is easy to find?”

“It’s not supposed to be. What’d you expect? Neon lights and a brass band?” Welton nodded to the man with the flashlight. “You and Bunty better keep an eye on the door. I’ll buzz when Mr. Jacobs is ready to go.”

The other man nodded, walked out, carefully closed the door behind him.

Jacobs picked up a wooden-backed chair, dragged it over to the desk. “How about getting down to business?”

The man behind the desk reached down, brought up a valise, dumped its contents on the desk. Ten thick packets of banknotes tumbled out of the valise. “Five hundred thousand,” Welton grunted. “All denominations.” He picked one up, riffled the edges. “Take a look.”

Jacobs reached over, picked up a packet, fingered through it slowly. “Old bills. All of them?”

The man behind the desk nodded. “No sequence, not much chance of the numbers being recorded.”

“Check for marking?”

Welton shrugged. “We tried ultraviolet and black light. Nothing.” He rubbed the heel of his hand along the side of his chin. “Only reason we want to unload is because there’s blood on them. That makes them extra hot and the boys are nervous.”

Jacobs tossed the packet back on the desk, shook his head. “Hot isn’t the word for it. A snatch is bad enough, but when the kid is dead before the payoff—” He shook his head again. “How stupid can you get?”

“So our loss is your gain. We don’t think they’re traceable but it’s worth something to us to be sure. Fifty cents on the dollar.”

“You kidding?” Jacobs snorted. “You just said yourself that scratch could be wired for the big jolt.” He pursed his lips. “Ten cents on the dollar and you’re getting a bargain.”

“Fifty grand? For a snatch that paid off a half million?” Welton started, shoveling the bills back into the valise. “I’d rather take my chances.”

“It’s your skin if you like it fried,” Jacobs told him. “If that stuff is traceable and you start passing it, I wouldn’t want to be sitting in your lap.”

“Thirty-five cents.”

Jacobs studied the face of the other man, decided he wouldn’t go much lower. “Twenty-five.”

Welton shook his head stubbornly. “Thirty.”

The other man got up from his chair, walked over to the window, stared down onto the darkened warehouse floor. Seventy cents on a dollar on half a million was a fast \$350,000 profit on a quick turnover. There was an element of risk, of course. Who knew what the FBI had up its sleeve in new ways to mark money? And Welton must have some idea it was traceable to make such a deal. Still, there were ways—

He turned, walked back to the desk. “Okay, thirty cents on the dollar. That’s a hundred and a half. Right?”

Welton nodded. “A hundred and a half.”

“It’s a deal.”

The mob had learned long ago not to trust the usual means of communication. Telephone wires can be tapped, mail can be x-rayed. So it had developed its own system. Messages were carried from one part of the country to the other by courier. Money was transported from one coast to the other by itinerants who loosely described themselves as “actors” and “actresses.” Usually their baggage consisted mainly of money being shifted for pay-offs or to finance jobs that had been ordered via previous couriers.

Tony Agnelli got word of the availability of the hotel in Seattle from Barney Evans early in March. It was a big property, could be used as the keystone for a chain of luxury hotels—an ideal set-up in which to translate idle boodle money into working dollars. Evans’s blueprint included the building of a series of hotels in various capitals throughout the world, thus giving the mob an even better method of converting its frozen assets.

The following day, couriers set out from New York in several directions. By the middle of April they were back with the necessary go-ahead from interested parties in Chicago, Phoenix and Miami Beach. The courier to Cuba returned to report that his contact wasn’t interested. The casino in which he had sunk most of his assets was slower in paying off than he had expected. The Chicago boys offered to go for three million, the rest to be taken up by Phoenix and Miami. Agnelli received the reports with a satisfied nod. Without investing a dime he’d have a million-dollar equity in a ten-million-dollar operation. His only expense would be the one per cent due the singer. He contacted Harry Jacobs in Chicago, notified him to collect the Chicago boys’ share and to package it for delivery to the Coast.

A few days later, the Chicago nite-life columns announced that Jerri Berg, a local “model” had been tapped for a screen test. She would be leaving for the Coast on the first of May. When she left, Jacobs would arrange that her baggage would consist mostly of the Chicago end of the investment.

Similar plans were being made in Phoenix and in Miami. The only notice Barney Evans needed to identify the couriers was the forwarding of the clippings with the girls’ names outlined in pencil. He would arrange to have them met at the station, and as their “agent” would arrange for their comfort during their brief stay.

Harry Jacobs stood at the window of his suite high in the Hotel Seminole, looked out over Lake Michigan. An April wind was whipping the water into whitecaps, and far out on the lake a small craft was bobbing like a cork. Damn fools, he grunted under his breath, their life couldn’t be very

sweet if they were willing to risk it that cheap. . . . He watched the boat until it was lost in the mist, then turned away from the window.

Although it was still early afternoon, he needed the lights on in the suite. Weather in Chicago was sure hell.

He walked over to a comfortably upholstered chair, dropped into it. From his jacket pocket he pulled a tobacco pouch. The pipe was on the table at his elbow. Absently, he started filling it. He had a decision to make and he didn't have much time to make it.

The boodle money would be arriving by morning and he would have to give his own receipt for it. The schlemiels out on the lake were risking their lives for nothing. He set a higher value on his—he was weighing the advisability of risking it for a half a million. If he substituted the ransom money he'd bought from Welton, would they be able to trace it to him? If they could, and something should go wrong—

He stuck the pipe between his teeth, touched a match to it. On the other hand, who could connect him to the money? Welton? He was only too glad to get rid of the stuff, to forget he ever had it. There was really no way to connect Jacobs with it. It could have come from any of the brokers buying in on the deal.

Jacobs smoked thoughtfully for a moment. A pipe helped a man concentrate at a time like this. He blew the heavy blue-gray smoke at the ceiling, watched it swirl. Suddenly an idea began to take form. Even if something did go wrong—and there was no real reason why it should, Jacobs had not taken Welton's word for it, had subjected bills taken at random from the hot money and subjected them to ultraviolet and black light. But there was always the possibility they had been marked another way. Still, even so—a smart operator might make the situation work for him instead of against him.

He looked out at the foul weather on the other side of the window pane. It might even be used to help him find a way out of this stinking Chicago weather. For good.

Hot money like the ransom money was far more likely to show up in Vegas than in Chicago, and Mitch Corday would be sending a shipment to Evans the same as Jacobs would. If anything did go wrong, Jacobs's out would be to get Agnelli remembering what a sharp operator Corday was and how likely he would be to cut corners. It could actually work out to be killing two birds with one stone—getting rid of the hot money and fixing it

so Jacobs could replace Corday at the Oasis. And get out of this filthy climate.

The longer he thought about it, the surer Jacobs was of his course. Tonight, when he packed the bags Jerri Berg was to carry to the Coast, the ransom money would be packed in as part of the Chicago boodle—and a half million in clean money would take its place in his vault.

## Chapter 25

The Seattle hotel deal was consummated in July and plans were now in the works to add hotels in various cities until the foundation of a worldwide chain could begin.

Mickey Denton was working in the last of the three pictures he had contracted to do for Mammoth. In place of the almost anxious desire to please he had exhibited when he first arrived in Hollywood, he was giving his current director a bad time. He arrived late on the set, was brought up on charges before the Guild for profane language by one of the girl extras, and the grips and assistant director were drawing straws to see who'd be the lucky one to drop a light on him from the catwalk.

The picture was already five days over schedule when Mark Whitehead, the producer, sent for Barney Evans.

"The guy is absolutely impossible, Barney. But more than that, he's costing me money. He comes on the set, louses up his lines. We haven't been shooting a picture, we've been re-shooting it."

Evans smoothed the dark mustache with his thumb. "You think he's doing it deliberately?"

Whitehead bobbed his head vigorously. "Nobody expects him to be a Barrymore and it's everybody's privilege to make a fluff. Him, he abuses the privilege." The producer was a round little man with a shiny face, addicted to outrageously colored shirts. Today he was wearing a red sport shirt—and his complexion almost matched it. "He's on the make for Ann Connell. She won't give him a tumble so he's acting like a spoiled kid."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Talk to him. I've talked until I'm blue in the face. He don't even hear me. He's like a dog in heat."

Evans frowned slightly. "Maybe you've been talking to the wrong one. Why not talk to the girl?"

"She doesn't dig him. He's made a couple of passes and she's told him off." Whitehead shook his head. "She's willing to be civil to him on the set, she says, so we can wrap this turkey up. But that's all."

“Maybe if I talk to her?”

Whitehead shrugged. “It can’t hurt.” He pointed to a small bungalow type structure at the rear of the sound stage. “That’s her dressing room.”

Evans nodded, headed for the girl’s dressing room. As he passed Mickey Denton’s bungalow, he could hear the strains of the singer’s latest record. Rocky Castri was lounging outside. He looked up as the manager went by.

“Whitey talk to you?” Castri wanted to know.

Evans nodded. “What’s with the singer?”

Rocky shrugged. “He’s sulking. Won’t come out. Sits in there and plays his own damn records over and over.” He dropped his voice. “Maybe if you could talk to him, Mr. Evans. He’s driving everybody nuts. Me especially. I’ve seen him bad before. But not this bad.”

“Okay, I’ll handle him. First I want to have a talk with this babe. What’s she like?”

Rocky grinned, pursed his lips. “I don’t blame the singer, myself. But what you can’t have, there’s no use crying over.”

The white-haired man nodded, walked on to the other dressing room. He knocked. After a moment the door opened and Ann Connell stood in the doorway. She looked him over coolly.

“Yes?”

“I’m Barney Evans, Miss Connell. I wonder if I could talk to you for a minute?”

She stood aside. “Denton’s manager, aren’t you?” she asked as he walked in.

The dressing room had a small couch, some chairs and a door leading into a lavatory. Evans looked around, dropped into one of the chairs. “I thought it was time we met.” He looked the girl over, liked what he saw.

She was shorter than he had expected. Her dark hair was cut in a provocative gamin cut, her eyes were big, dark, liquid. Her lips were thick, soft looking. Her eyes were serious as she walked to the couch, dropped onto it.

“I’m glad to know you, of course. I’ve heard a lot about you. But—” She wrinkled her forehead.

“You’re wondering why I’m in here talking to you instead of to the singer?” He brought the silver cigarette case from his pocket, held it out to the girl. When she selected one, he held a light. He lit one for himself, leaned back. “The Mick can be very difficult.”

The girl nodded. “So I’ve noticed.”

“You can help us,” Evans told her. “He’s pretty much of a big kid, Miss Connell. Wants his own way. Things like that. If you’d only go out of your way to be nice to him. At least until the picture is finished.”

Ann Connell frowned. “I don’t think you know what you’re asking. I try to be as considerate of Mickey as I can, but—”

“But he wants you to go out with him. Is that so bad? He’s really not quite as bad as some people would have you believe. He can be quite a guy when he sets his mind to it.”

The girl smiled. “You do a very effective John Alden.”

Evans chuckled. “I wasn’t trying to. I was just asking you not to believe all the things you hear.”

“That’s not it entirely, Mr. Evans. I’ve heard things, sure. But there are other things, things that are not just gossip.” She took a deep drag on the cigarette, let it dribble from between half-parted lips. “I don’t like men who push women around, Mr. Evans.”

The manager scowled briefly. “You mean Evelyn Roberts. There might be two sides to that, Miss Connell. Evelyn had been drinking and—”

“I don’t mean about Evelyn. But did you know that Mr. Denton compiled a list of girls and displays the list as conquests at a drop of the hat to prove his irresistibility? I like billing, Mr. Evans. But not that kind.”

“Kid stuff. Bragging.” Evans grinned at her. “He’s constantly amazed that a kid from Brooklyn can make it the way he has.” The smile faded. “I don’t blame you for not wanting to be included among Mickey’s conquests and if I didn’t think you could take care of yourself, I wouldn’t have suggested that you be nice to him. But it would make life a lot easier if you would.” He nodded his head in the direction of the set. “Whitehead is days over schedule and the wrap-up is nowhere in sight. Mammoth doesn’t care why he’s over budget. Just the fact that he is could finish him on this lot.”

“I’m sorry.”

Evans pursed his lips, chose his words carefully. “There are other people, important people, who would appreciate it. People who might be very helpful to you in turn.” He smiled. “Not that you need help with your talent. But sometimes talent gets you just so far. Then you have to use your head.”

The girl nodded thoughtfully. “You can understand—”

“I do. I understand perfectly. But I’m not asking this for the singer’s sake or for my sake. A lot of other people are being affected.”

Ann shrugged. “What can I do?”

“I happen to know Mickey is catching the late show at the Mo tonight. If you and I were to just happen to drop in—” He shrugged. “We might be able to patch the whole thing up.”

The girl caught her full lower lip between her teeth. “If you think it would do any good?”

Evans grinned at her. “It’s not that bad. We won’t be catching up with him until the late show. We could have dinner at La Rue’s and—”

“You don’t go around making up lists, do you, Mr. Evans?” The brunette returned his smile.

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t know enough names to make any kind of a list.”

Ann Connell studied the icy blue eyes, the dark mustache and the white hair, decided she liked what she saw. “All right. For the good of the company, of course.”

“Of course.”

The bar at the Mocambo was crowded for the last show. On a postage-stamp-sized floor, the season’s comedy team find was finishing a routine that had the packed bistro rocking. Mickey Denton sat perched on a barstool, watching the closing antics of the act. As the lights went up and the comedians scampered off the floor, Denton swung around, picked up his drink from the bar. He had felt like being alone tonight, and yet he didn’t. When Rocky had suggested accompanying him, he’d told him curtly he wanted to be by himself. But the truth of the matter was that he didn’t know what to do with himself when he wasn’t with somebody.

He drained his glass, set it back on the bar. He dropped a bill alongside it, got up and looked around.

He looked to the rear of the club where the south wall was made entirely of glass and looked down on the smears of colored lights that identified Hollywood, Beverly Hills and the rest of the sprawling communities that nestled at the foot of the Hollywood hills. He could feel the black mood closing in on him and he wondered what would be the effect on the production if he were to take a cab to the airport, hop a plane to New York and—

He broke off his reflections to stare at the door. Barney Evans was ushering in the cause of most of his present misery. Ann Connell looked even smaller than usual, with the miniature perfection of a cameo. She saw him, smiled. Denton saw her say something to Evans who looked over and grinned at him.

“Small world,” the singer growled as they joined him at the bar. “I didn’t even know you two knew each other.”

“Like you say. A small world.” Evans smiled at him. He ordered two scotches from the bartender, turned to Mickey. “What are you drinking?”

“Bourbon.”

Ann scrambled up onto a barstool. “Mr. Evans has been spending the better part of the evening telling me I have you wrong, Mickey. It turns out you’re just a nice clean-cut mischievous boy.”

“So?”

She smiled at him. “So let’s bury the hatchet.” She held out her hand.

Denton looked from her to Evans and back. “What’s the gimmick?”

“No gimmick. Miss Connell doesn’t think it’s fair for you two to be feuding when everybody else is getting hurt by it,” Evans told him. “The picture is days over schedule. Whitehead’s tearing his hair and so are a lot of other people. You know who’s financing this production, don’t you?”

The singer nodded sullenly.

“Our mutual friend in New York. I don’t think he’d appreciate the reason shooting is so far behind schedule.”

“I just can’t remember my lines.” Denton scowled.

“Maybe if I helped you memorize them?” Ann suggested.

The singer brightened. “Say, that might be the answer.” Some of the pleasure drained from his face. “Where?”

The girl shrugged. “Your place. My place. It doesn’t matter. Wherever you can work the best.” She picked up her scotch from the bar, took a swallow and studied him from over the rim of the glass. “Mr. Evans has convinced me I’ve been wrong about you. So much so that you can drive me home tonight. If you’d like to.”

Denton’s eyes hopscotched to the white-haired man. “Okay with you, Barney?”

Evans nodded. “I’ve already given Miss Connell my word that you’ll be on your best behavior.”

## Chapter 26

The night they wrapped the picture up, Mickey Denton sprang for a party on the set. He was in an expansive mood, even treated Rocky Castri with consideration.

“Bring yourself a chick, Rock. Live it up,” he invited.

He wasn’t even deflated by the fact that Mark Whitehead had refused to accept his hospitality, had even refused to have a drink with him.

Denton shrugged. “So who needs him? The bum can’t bring his picture in on schedule, he’s got to have a fall guy. So he blames me.” He turned to Ann Connell “Tell the truth, baby. It wasn’t all the singer’s fault, was it?”

She smiled sweetly, declined to comment. “I will say one thing for you, Mickey. Nobody can accuse you of being a coward. Most of the time we were shooting, the grips could have dropped a light on your head with pleasure.”

“So tonight they love me. Right?” He looked around, watched the line forming at the bar that had been set up. “It’s like I always said. You get enough pennies to pitch at them, they forget you walked on their toes. Like Old Man Rockefeller, you know? He robbed them blind, then they end up loving him because he passes out dimes. Right?”

“You’re quite a philosopher.”

“How about a drink?”

“Would you be annoyed if I suggested that we leave?” Ann asked. “In a little while this could get to be real sloppy. I’ve been at these end-of-the-picture brawls. A couple of drinks and everybody tells everybody else what they really think.”

“Where were you figuring on going?”

“I thought maybe you’d like to drive me home.”

“You thought right. How soon can you be ready?”

The brunette consulted the small baguette on her wrist. “Twenty minutes?”

“I’ll have the car out front of the stage.”

Denton watched the pert little figure as she crossed to her dressing room. He rubbed his palms together gleefully, looked around for Castri. He finally located him in a darkened corner of the set with a little blond bit player, signaled for him to leave her for a moment.

“Get the car, pull it up out front. We’re taking Ann home.”

Rocky grinned at him, wiped some lipstick from the corner of his mouth with the side of his hand. “She know it?”

“Sure she knows it. She’s the one asked me.”

“No kidding?” Castri whistled soundlessly. “Don’t tell me the iceberg is finally going to melt?”

Denton grinned crookedly. “It’s always just a matter of time.”

Rocky looked back to the darkened corner where the little blonde was repairing the damage to her make-up. “Look, Mike, I got something really going for me. Mind if I bring her along to—”

The grin faded on the singer’s face. “Sure I mind. Here I’ve been working on this babe without getting to first base. Now I’m in scoring distance and you want to make a convention out of it. Maybe you’d like to sell tickets?”

“Look, don’t get sore. I just thought—”

“Don’t. Your job is to drive. So go on outside and do it.” He turned on his heel before Castri could answer, stalked toward his dressing room.

The thickset man glared after him, moved his lips in a silent curse, then jammed his clenched fists into his pockets and plowed through the crowd toward the exit.

Rocky Castri headed through Coldwater to Sunset, swung left toward the Strip. At Doheny, he headed up into the hills. The road climbed steeply past stucco houses with tile roofs, past modern ranch types that clung to the almost perpendicular lots. Some of the windows were draped, from others yellow geometric shapes spilled light onto the darkened lawns.

“It’s the next house on your left, Rocky,” Ann directed.

He swung the car off the road onto a small circular driveway, stopped in front of a flight of steep steps that led to the house.

Denton got out of the car, looked around. The house was one of the last on the road, looked out over Sunset Strip below and the whole panorama beyond. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

Ann slid out of the car, stood alongside him. She put her hand out. “Thanks for bringing me home, Mick.”

Denton looked at her, his jaw dropped. “Hey, wait a minute. You don’t think I came all the way up here just to—”

“Don’t forget, you promised to be on your good behavior.” The girl smiled at him.

“That was while the picture was being made. It’s finished now.” He caught her by the arm, led her to the stairs, pushed her in front of him. “What kind of a patsy do you take me for?”

The brunette struggled, tried to get free of his grip. He pushed her to the top of the stairs, indicated the door. “You got a key, or do we just kick it down and walk in?”

She glared at him wordlessly, opened her purse, dug into it and brought out a key. “You’re going to regret this, Denton.”

“Sure. I’ll hate myself in the morning. But tonight’s my night.”

She fitted the key to the lock, pushed the door open. Denton started in, stopped dead in the entrance.

“You’re late,” Barney Evans told the girl. He rolled the icy blue eyes from Ann to the singer. “You didn’t have to bring her right to the door, Mick.”

The color drained from the singer’s face. His eyes hopscotched from his manager to the girl and back. “What is this?”

Ann shrugged. “I’d say it was self-evident. I had a date with Barney. I didn’t want to keep him waiting.”

“Why, you dirty little—” Denton raised his hand to backhand the girl. Barney crossed the room in three strides. He caught the singer’s arm, swung him around. Denton threw a right at the white-haired man that caught him on the head, took a stiff right to the body in return. Air rushed out of his mouth. He staggered back, tried to throw another right, but the steam was gone. He was gasping for air as Evans grabbed him by the lapels, slammed him back against the door and sank his right into the singer’s midsection. Denton’s knees buckled, he slid to a sitting position.

“Barney! Look out,” the girl yelled.

Evans whirled to face Rocky Castri who came bounding up the steps. He had his fist cocked, ready to throw, when he recognized the white-haired man. He stopped, looked from Evans to the unconscious form of the singer. He dropped his hands, grinned.

“Some days it don’t pay to get out of bed and some days you get to see a beautiful sight like this,” he said, grinning.

Evans relaxed, the brunette walked over to him, he slid his arm around her shoulder.

“You better get him home. Rock. Stick him under a cold shower and put him to bed.”

Castri winked at him, caught the singer under the arms, dragged him to the steps and down to the car.

Mickey Denton lay flat on his back in the darkened bedroom, his mouth open, snoring lightly. Rocky Castri walked in, caught him by the shoulder, shook him roughly.

“Mike! Mike, wake up.”

Denton shrugged off the hand, twisted onto his side. A thin stream of saliva glistened from the side of his mouth, made a damp spot on the pillow.

Castri shook harder. “Mike! Wake up.”

The man in the bed opened his eyes sleepily, stared around the darkened room. The thin ribbon of light that lined the blinds told him it was still day. He rolled onto his back, glowered at Castri.

“What time is it?”

“Two-thirty.”

Denton slapped the other man’s hand away. “I told you not to wake me before six, for Chrissake. Can’t you do anything you’re told?”

“There’s some guys outside. They know you’re here and they want to see you.”

Denton pulled himself to a sitting position. “What kind of guys?”

“Federal men.”

The singer scowled for a moment, then shrugged. “What the hell they got to bother me for? That’s Barney Evans’s job.” He scowled as the events of the night before came back to him. “The dirty bastard. I hope they—”

“They don’t want to see Evans. They want to see you.”

The singer swore under his breath, pulled himself out of bed, wrapped a robe around himself. He reached to the night table for a cigarette, lit it. Then he followed Castri into the living room.

There were two of them. The older wore a rumpled blue suit, had a stained gray fedora on the couch next to him. He had the long nose and inquisitive eyes of the ferret. His partner stood at the entrance to the little porch, admired the view. He turned around as Denton walked in.

The singer looked from the man on the couch to his partner and back. “You want to see me?” He didn’t wait for an answer, walked over to the portable bar, poured himself a stiff slug. He held the glass up to the two men. His “Join me?” drew two negative responses.

“My name’s Vaught,” the man near the window informed him. He was young, rangy. His face was burned a dark mahogany. When he squinted, it cut white trenches in the tan. “My partner’s Tilden.”

Denton took a deep swallow from his glass, walked over to a chair, dropped into it. “What’s on your mind?”

The younger agent walked over, sat next to his partner on the couch. He brought a folded sheet covered with scribbled notes from his inner pocket.

“We understand you bought into the Hotel New Western in Seattle.” He raised his eyes from his notes. “Price somewhere around seven million.”

The singer made no effort to stifle his yawn. “Look, fellows. You ought to know better than to bug me about it. That’s what I’ve got a manager for. His name’s Evans. Barney Evans. He’s got an office in—”

“We know all about Evans,” the ferret-eyed man told him placidly. “He says he just makes the investments for you.”

“So? He’s the guy you tax guys should—”

Vaught shook his head. “We’re not from Internal Revenue, Mr. Denton.”

The singer looked from the men on the couch to Castri and back. “What the hell is this? You told me these guys were from the government.”

“We are,” Vaught assured him. He reached into his pocket, brought out a plastic card. “Department of Justice.”

“Department of Justice?” Denton’s jaw sagged. “What do you want with me?” He tilted the glass to his lips, drained it, set it down on the floor alongside his chair.

“Just a few answers,” the man in the rumpled suit told him. “Let’s get back to that hotel in Seattle. You bought it?”

“I—I guess so. Look, let me call Evans and—”

“You don’t need Evans to tell you whether you bought the hotel or not, do you?”

Denton shrugged. “Look, I don’t handle any of my investments. You understand. I pay him and he takes care of it for me.” He turned to Castri. “Get Evans on the phone.”

The younger agent re-folded his notes, returned them to his pocket. “That money, Mr. Denton. Where’d you get it?”

“Look, I’m not answering any questions until I know what this is all about.” He turned to Castri. “Well?”

Rocky shrugged. “He doesn’t answer. Should I try Ann’s place and—”

“No.” The singer took a deep drag on his cigarette, reached over, stubbed it out. “Look. I file my income taxes every year and you can see what I make on records and—”

“You didn’t make this money on records or in the movies.”

“You might have to prove that.”

“We might just be able to.” Vaught got up from the couch, walked over to Denton. He pulled a photostat from his pocket. “Take a look at this.”

The singer took the stat, examined it. It was a black and white reproduction of a \$100 bill with a white C clearly superimposed on the black background. He looked up. “So?”

“That’s a bill from the ransom paid in the Cheyney snatch in Arizona last year. The kid was already dead when that money was paid. We didn’t know it so we didn’t have too much time to mark the bills. But we managed to mark some of them.”

Denton could feel the beading of sweat along his hairline. “I still don’t dig what this has got to do with me.”

“That bill was part of the money you paid in the hotel deal. There was a lot more—all marked the same way. All from the Cheyney snatch.”

“You guys must be nuts. You think I had something to do with—”

Tilden shook his head regretfully. “We made sure you didn’t. All we want from you is a statement of where you got the bills.”

Denton shook his head. “I don’t know. I—”

“Look, Denton, you’re a big man. We know all about it. But how often does even a big man like you get his hands on a half million in a lump?” The mahogany colored man’s voice was deceptively soft. “If I were you, I’d try to remember where I got that money.”

The singer looked from one agent to the other. “I can’t just tell you off the top of my head. I—I get money from a lot of sources—my Vegas dates, the movies, records. I—I’ve got to have some time to find out what this is all about.”

Vaught looked to the ferret-eyed man who shrugged. “Sure, think about it. We’ll be back.” He fitted the stained fedora on the back of his head. “We don’t figure you’ll be going any place. We can have that talk any time you’re ready.”

The two men got up from the couch, headed for the door. At the door, the older turned. “But I wouldn’t take too long remembering if I were you.”

After the door had closed behind them, Denton wiped the beaded perspiration from his forehead. He turned to Castri. “Get me a typewriter, some paper and carbon. Then get me on tonight’s flight to New York.”

“New York? You mean we’re—”

“I didn’t say anything about two tickets. I said get me on the flight to New York.”

## Chapter 27

The sun was shining brightly in New York as the big DC-7 taxied up to the debarking platform. Mickey Denton walked out of the cabin, stood at the top of the steps, squinted into the slanting sunlight. Aline Sampson was behind the fence near the exit gate. She spotted him at almost the same moment he saw her.

She waited for him in the lounge, led the way to the little enclosure where the baggage would be delivered.

“Well, we got your wire, O master, and here I am. Wouldn’t it have been just as easy to take a cab and let me get my beauty sleep?” she eyed him curiously.

“Who needs it? Not you.”

“Agnelli know you’re back in town?”

Denton shook his head. “I’m keeping it as a surprise.”

The redhead sighed. “That’s what I was afraid of.” She studied his face, was puzzled by the cockiness. “What gives, singer? That wire of yours didn’t give any details, but I got the feeling something cooks.”

“I’m thinking of getting a new manager. New press agent, too, maybe.” He grinned at her. “You be a good girl and maybe I’ll keep you on.”

“You mean stop being a good girl, don’t you?” She watched the baggage truck unloading suitcases into the enclosure. “I’ve been reading quite a bit about you in the columns. That Ann Connell must be quite a gal.”

“A tramp. She’s shacking up with Barney Evans and they really deserve each other.” He spotted his bags, signaled down a porter who scooped them up. “Where’s your car?”

“Parking lot.”

“Give me your ticket.” He waited while she rooted through her bag, brought up a parking stub, handed it to the porter. “Have the car brought out front, will you?” He added a folded bill to the ticket, drew a full-toothed grin.

“Agnelli can read, too,” the redhead murmured as soon as the porter had shuffled off. “I’d figure right now would be a good time to stay as far away from him as possible. He doesn’t like—”

“I’m sick of caring what he likes and what he doesn’t like. I’m calling for a new deal. For one thing that white-headed bastard out on the coast goes or I do.” He grinned at the frown on her face. “Don’t worry. It won’t be me.”

“I’m not worrying.” She shrugged. “It just figures that throwing around either-ors like that’s no way to break ninety. But then, you probably wouldn’t look good with white hair anyway.” They walked toward the exit. “Any place in particular you want me to drop you?”

“How about your place? I have a couple of hours to kill.”

She shook her head. “Uh uh. Second choice?”

“Agnelli’s office.”

“You sure?”

Denton bobbed his head.

“Okay. It’s your head if you like to wear it with holes in it.”

Tony Agnelli sat behind his desk, fingers laced across his belly, knuckles dimpling. He studied Mickey Denton from half-lidded eyes.

“I don’t remember Agnelli tells you to come east, singer. When I want you—”

“From now on, nobody tells me when to come and when to go, Agnelli —”

“Mr. Agnelli.” Mario, the bodyguard, half rose from his chair, permitted himself to be waved back down by the fat man.

“Wait a minute, Mario. All of a sudden our singer’s got guts. Let him talk.”

The singer turned to Mario, eyed him thoughtfully. “Maybe you better get rid of the meatball, Agnelli. What I’ve got to say you might like to keep real private. The hotel deal money went sour and—”

“Get out, Mario,” Agnelli growled. He never took his eyes off Denton. When the door closed, “What did you say?”

The singer dug a cigarette from his pocket, stuck it in the corner of his mouth. “The money for the Seattle hotel. A big chunk of it was hot. The Cheyney ransom dough.”

The fat man’s mouth hung open, then slowly his jaw hardened. “What kind of a con are you trying to pull, singer?”

Denton shrugged. “Not me. I never touched that money. I never even saw it.” He lit the cigarette. “The FBI were at my apartment yesterday. They know I wasn’t in on that snatch. They want to know where the money came from.” He took a deep drag, blew the smoke in twin streams from his nostrils. “As a special favor to you, I didn’t tell them—yet.”

Agnelli slumped back into his chair, the heavy lids almost hid his eyes. “Nothing?”

“Nothing.” Denton grinned at him. “And in case you were figuring maybe it would be a good idea if I wasn’t in any condition to from now on, I want you to read something.” He dug into his pocket, brought out a folded sheet of paper. He flipped it at the desk.

The fat man grunted, reached out for the paper, unfolded it. He dropped his eyes from the singer’s face to the paper. It was a carbon copy of a statement. Scrawled to the bottom of the page was the name *Mike Donelli* and in parentheses the name *Mickey Denton*.

“That’s a complete statement of the whole operation, Agnelli. Where the money came from, who set up the deal. The whole works.”

The man behind the desk finished reading, threw the paper angrily onto the desk. “So you blow the whistle. You won’t hear it.”

“You don’t understand. I haven’t given that statement to the FBI. Far’s I’m concerned, they don’t ever have to get it.”

“Go on.”

Denton grinned. “Only way they get that is if anything happens to me.” He shrugged. “Then the whole works caves in. You, Evans, Corday, Jacobs—the whole works.” He left the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, squinted as the smoke stung his eyes. “You go for my deal and we all walk away from it and live happily ever after.”

Agnelli settled back, laced the fingers across his middle. “Let’s hear.”

The singer rubbed at his chin. “Somebody has to take a fall. Me, I don’t want it to be me. You, you don’t want it to be you. But somebody has to take

it.”

“You got such a guy?”

Denton took a last drag on his cigarette, stubbed it out. “Yeah. I got the guy.” He rolled his eyes up, met the fat man’s glance. “Barney Evans.”

“Barney Evans.” Agnelli repeated the name with no change of expression. “Why should he take it? He’d sing louder than—”

“I was figuring he wouldn’t be in any condition to sing, Agnelli.”

The fat man considered it. “Barney’s a pretty valuable guy to me, singer.”

“I can do without him.” Denton leaned forward on his chair. “Meanwhile, you figured that one of your boys did cross you? That Cheyney money didn’t just happen to get in there. Maybe Evans was part of it.”

The man behind the desk frowned. He reached for the phone, punched at the button on the base. “Get me Harry Jacobs in Chicago.” He dropped the receiver on its hook, leaned back, drummed on the edge of the desk with thickened fingers. Neither man spoke until the phone buzzed at the fat man’s elbow.

“Harry? That Chicago shipment. From who?”

The voice on the other end chattered for a moment. Agnelli nodded as each name was rattled off.

“None of them,” Agnelli grunted. “They wouldn’t pull anything.”

“Something wrong?” the receiver asked.

“Yeah. Some of the stuff was bad. Real bad.”

Out in Chicago, Harry Jacobs wiped the perspiration from his upper lip with the back of his hand. “It didn’t come from here, Tony. My boys got more good merchandise than they can move without ringing in any bad stuff —”

“Any ideas?”

Jacobs took a deep breath. “How about Mitch Corday? In Vegas you can buy anything for a few cents on a dollar. You know?”

“Lay low. I’ll be in touch,” the receiver snapped. There was a click then Jacobs’s line went dead.

Jacobs took the receiver from his ear, stared at it fearfully. Then he walked to the portable bar near the window and poured himself a stiff slug. He stared out into the heavy fog that had rolled in from the lake, wondered if the sunny weather in Vegas was worth the risk.

After Tony Agnelli hung up the phone, he sank back into his chair, puffed his lips in and out in deep thought. He seemed to have forgotten the singer was in the room.

Denton found another cigarette, lighted it, smoked.

Finally Agnelli looked up. "Corday or Evans."

The singer raised his eyebrows.

"One of them. Corday or Evans," Agnelli said. "That money must have been peddled in Vegas for a couple of cents on the dollar. Evans been down there recently?"

"Every couple of weekends."

The fat man nodded. "You have a proposition. Let's hear."

"Evans goes. I tell the FBI he mixed his hot money in with mine. That's all I know. That's where the trail ends. Who knows where he got it? Like you say, you can buy all kinds of money in Vegas."

"You're a good hater, singer. All because Barney moves in on a tramp you got measured for your bed? You always were a sucker for a dame, singer."

"Somebody's got to take the fall. You got a better idea? I'll listen." He nodded to the typewritten statement. "It won't be me. I've got insurance."

"Evans takes the fall. That's all?"

Denton shook his head. "I want out on my contract. From now on nobody owns Mickey Denton but Mickey Denton. A hundred per cent."

"The boys won't like that."

"I understand you have a lot of influence. Maybe you can persuade them. Co-operation's a two-way street, Agnelli—you got to give a little to take a little." He shrugged. "Me, I think I'm giving a lot. I could come out of this a big hero, turning in the—"

"You could come out of it dead."

Denton shook his head. "Not while that statement is in safe hands. When anything happens to me, like I said the roof falls in on you."

“You lean real hard, singer.”

“I learned from an expert.” Denton got up, brushed the wrinkles out of his pants. “I’ve got to drop by the FBI office pretty soon and give them some kind of a statement. What’ll it be?”

Agnelli sucked his pouty lips in, blew them out. “Evans rang in the hot stuff.” He glared at the man standing opposite. “That’s your story.”

Denton grinned. “And if Evans denies it?”

“He won’t. Unless the FBI knows how to work a ouija board.”

## Chapter 28

Rocky Castri sprawled in the big wing chair in Mickey Denton's apartment, stared out into the early evening haze that hung over Hollywood. Already a few neons were staining the sky with color, but it was too early for most lights.

There was a tap at the door. He got up, walked over, pulled it open. Mario, Agnelli's bodyguard, pushed in, closed the door behind him.

"I thought it was the singer. I been expecting him back."

Mario nodded. "Maybe tomorrow. He's staying over. Tomorrow morning he has a date with the FBI."

Castri licked at his lips. "Agnelli knows?"

"Yeah." Mario walked over to the bar, poured himself a stiff drink. "This Evans creep. Where's his pad?"

"Over in North Hollywood. Why?"

"Get dressed. We're going calling." He added some more liquor to his glass. "I got a message for him. And I'm planning on being on the night plane for New York. So let's get moving."

Barney Evans had the penthouse in the Carter House, one of the North Hollywood's most desirable apartment buildings. The lobby was furnished in modernistic style, with brightly colored couches and chrome chairs complementing the soft, restful pastel carpeting. Rocky Castri led the way to a bank of elevators in the rear, Mario followed a few paces behind.

The elevator swiftly whisked them to the penthouse, the doors slid open noiselessly. Castri knocked on the door.

A small panel slid open.

"It's me, Evans. Castri."

There was a grunt of annoyance inside the door. "Just a minute." After a brief interval, the door opened. Evans stood there, wrapped in a dressing robe made of toweling. "What is it?"

“Got a message for you.” He nodded to Mario. “From Agnelli.”

The frown of annoyance still ridged the white-haired man’s brow as he stepped aside. “Couldn’t it wait until morning? I’m—”

“Can’t wait at all,” Mario told him. He slid past Evans, led the way into the living room. “Nice place you got here.”

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

“Anybody here?”

Evans frowned, shook his head. “What is this?”

“Confidential,” Mario told him. He nodded for Castri to check the two doors leading into the room. Evans stood, balled fists dug deeply into his pockets, watched while Rocky checked the two rooms out.

“Okay. So now you’re satisfied. What’s the message?”

“Agnelli’s giving the singer back his contract. A hundred per cent.”

“That’s crazy.” Evans protested. “I don’t like the creep either. But he’s going like a house on fire. Those last couple of movies made a pot full. This one he just finished is even bigger.” He walked over to the desk, pawed through some papers, came up with a sheet of paper. “He can write his own ticket on a new contract with Mammoth. And his records—” He broke off, stared thoughtfully at Mario. “Agnelli sent you all the way out here to tell me that?” He looked from the small man to Rocky and back. “How come he didn’t phone?”

Mario shrugged. “Who knows?” He looked around. He spotted a large hi-fi set against the far wall. “You got any of the singer’s new sides?”

“Yeah.”

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

Castri nodded. “You got no idea, Mario. They eat out of his hand. Until they meet him. Then strictly no. Right, Barney?”

Evans flipped through several records, put them on the turntable. He ignored the question, turned to Mario. “Here’s his latest.”

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

“Kid’s learned a lot since that first side he cut,” Mario grunted. “You know, I was with the boss first time he seen the kid. Out on the Island.” He shook his head. “I figured him strictly a nothing. Shows how wrong you can be.”

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

Evans shook his head. “The kid’s solid now, Castri. He doesn’t even need Agnelli. Everything he touches turns to money.” He gestured toward the desk. “I got a dozen spots I can put him in. His albums are breaking all records. He’s a louse, but the public likes him.” He shrugged. “If you got that, you got everything.” He turned back to Mario. “That’s why I don’t understand—”

“So I’ll tell you.” Mario flattened the hair over his ear with the heel of his hand. “That dough you passed on the Seattle hotel. Some of the ransom money from that Cheyney snatch turned up in it.”

The white-haired man’s jaw fell. “It couldn’t be. It—”

“The FBI moved in on the kid. They want to know where it came from.”

Evans cursed fluently. “Why didn’t he come to me?”

“Last time you met, you weren’t exactly cordial to him.” Rocky grinned. “I’ll bet his belly’s still sore.”

The white-haired man raked clenched fingers through his hair. “What do we do?” He looked from one to the other. “Who’d it come from?”

“That’s what the FBI wants to know.” Mario consulted his watch. “It’s about eleven in New York now. The singer’s due at the Federal Building at nine tomorrow. That’s only ten hours from now.”

“What’s he going to tell them?”

Mario shrugged. “He can’t tell them where the money really came from. Too many important people might get sore. So he’s going to have to say the money was his.”

“The hot money? He’s got to say where he got it. He must have—”

Mario reached down, turned up the volume on the hi-fi. “He didn’t get it from anybody. It was rung in.” He grinned bleakly at the white-haired man. “You bought it in Vegas and rang it in.” He nodded at Rocky.

Before the white-haired man could answer, Rocky grabbed his arms, pulled them behind him. Evans opened his mouth to scream, the stiff fingers

of the bodyguard smashed into his throat, the scream came out a strangled gasp. Evans's eyes popped, his tongue rolled out of his mouth.

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

As Evans struggled mutely in Castri's grip, Mario sank his fist into his groin. The white-haired man went limp. Castri dumped him into a chair.

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

Mario walked to the small patio that rimmed the penthouse, looked around. The Carter House was set on a high spot, the penthouse screened from any possible witnesses.

"Bring him out."

Castri loaded the semiconscious man on his shoulders, staggered out onto the patio. Evans's mouth was still moving, trying to form words. A stream of saliva glistened brightly on his chin.

Mario stood at the waist-high hedge that rimmed the patio. He motioned for Castri to drop the man at his feet.

"You take his head. When I say go, swing him over."

Castri licked at his lips, nodded. When Mario had a firm grip on the weakly struggling Evans, Castri caught him under the neck. At a signal, they swung him toward the top of the hedge, released their grip.

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

"Nice music," he grunted. "Real nice music."

Castri nodded. "Music to die by."

## Chapter 29

Barney Evans's body was discovered at seven the next morning on the overhang outside the apartment of a fourth-floor tenant who was spending the week up north in San Francisco.

At that very hour Mickey Denton was just finishing a statement to a local representative of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the Federal Building in New York.

"You understand, of course, that you may be required to testify in this matter, Mr. Denton?" the agent told him pleasantly.

"I can only testify to what I told you. The only person who could have substituted that ransom money for my money is Barney Evans. I'm willing to testify to that."

The agent took the statement, glanced through it, nodded. "Fine."

There was a ping on the teletype, the agent walked over, watched the message come through. He frowned, waited until the slug *More to Kum* appeared at the end of a paragraph, tore the sheet out of the machine.

He walked back to the desk where Denton sat. "When was the last time you saw Evans?" he asked.

Denton shrugged. "A couple of days ago."

"Did he know our office out there had been questioning you?"

The singer hesitated for a moment. "Yes." He stood up, opened his jacket, pulled out his shirt, exposed his abdomen. "That was the reason I took off for New York." His body was discolored under the rib cage. "He threatened to have me killed if I talked. This was just a sample."

The FBI man dropped into his chair, frowned. "I wouldn't worry about it." He indicated the message. "Barney Evans is dead."

"Dead?"

"Found his body on a fourth-floor overhang in his building a little while ago. Could be suicide."

Denton sucked the air slowly through clenched teeth. "Suicide?"

The FBI man rubbed the flat of his hand wearily across his face. “No sign of a struggle. He was dressed in his robe.” He flipped the teletype message at his basket. “We’ll be in touch if we need you again.”

Denton got up from the hard wooden chair. “I’m sorry about Evans.”

The man behind the desk nodded. “So are we. Real sorry.” He watched glumly while Denton walked out of the office, closed the door behind him. Then he picked up the phone, asked to be connected with the Los Angeles agent in charge.

That evening Al Lister pushed open the door to his third-floor office on 42nd Street. The prematurely balding man was banging away on the typewriter in his usual corner. At her desk, almost obscured by the evening editions of the papers, Aline Sampson was going through the *Journal American*. She raised her eyes as Lister walked over to the desk.

“Busy?”

She shook her head. “Be right in.”

After Lister walked into the inner office, she took a last look at the covered body pictured on the first page of the second section of the *Journal*, shuddered. She folded the papers, piled them on the corner of her desk.

On the way to Lister’s office, she stopped to study a picture. It showed Mickey Denton in the center, Brady on one side, Lister on the other. Denton was grinning broadly as she imagined he must be doing now.

Inside Lister’s office, she pushed a pile of papers off a chair, pulled it up to the desk.

“Tough about Evans. I wonder if he jumped or if he was pushed.”

She shrugged. “What’s the difference? He couldn’t be any deader.”

Lister nodded. “You know we have no part of Denton any more?” He leaned back, swabbed at his bald spot with his handkerchief. “Nobody has a piece. Not even Agnelli.”

The redhead picked up a paper from Lister’s desk, studied the two-column cut of Barney Evans. The caption read:

Mickey Denton’s Manager Commits  
Suicide; Wanted For Questioning

“Mick was in this afternoon, Al. While you were out.”

The man behind the desk laced his fingers at the back of his neck, leaned back. "I don't suppose he wanted to see me?"

The redhead grinned. "Not exactly. He had a proposition. He wanted me to go back to the Coast with him. Sort of a combination manager and housekeeper. You know? Hold his head, hold his hand and keep the covers up around his neck at night."

"Nothing permanent?"

She shook her head. "He's a free soul. He likes it that way."

"And you want the old ring routine?"

The redhead considered, pursed her lips. "Not necessarily. Mickey isn't a good marriage risk. He might be more fun on a short-term basis."

"But?"

She shrugged. "He's riding too high, Al. Too fast and on a round-trip ticket. The higher he goes the farther he's got to come back down."

"Maybe you could slow him down."

"Not me, Al. He's got everything he wants. He's got a right to fly high. Why should I try to put an anchor around his feet?"

Mickey Denton leaned back in the seat by the window of the TWA jet. He listened to the sure, deep roar of the motors, looked back at the lights of the airport.

Brady had put up a kick about being cut out of his piece of Mickey Denton. It had taken a few hard words from Agnelli to persuade him to go along. Lister had been a lot more resigned and philosophical about it.

He watched the lights growing smaller until they were little dots far below.

The redhead had turned him down cold. He needed her, he knew, but she wasn't buying. Not at his price. And now that he was in the saddle, he never intended to let anybody else set the price.

The hostess came, fussed over him, got him comfortable with a pillow under his head. She made no bones about being thrilled that he was aboard. So were most of the passengers in his section.

So why should he give all that up just for one dame? Even one like Aline Sampson. He turned his mind ahead to Hollywood. Things would be

different now. They'd be dealing with him, not with Barney Evans. There'd be no going behind his back to complain, to make deals. He had them all where he wanted them now. Whitehead, Ann Connell, all of them.

There'd be no Evans to pick the director and costar, there'd be no Evans to hold Agnelli over his head to keep him in line.

He regretted losing Rocky Castri. He was used to depending on him for all details. The Rock was comfortable to have around late at night when Mickey couldn't sleep, when he needed company. But Agnelli was making Castri Mitch Corday's assistant at the Oasis. Mitch hadn't like the idea, had tried to fight it off for over an hour on the phone. But Agnelli, as always, prevailed.

Denton wondered if the gambler had the foresight to realize that from the day Castri set foot in the Oasis, Corday's days were numbered. Already, Harry Jacobs had been alerted to step into the Oasis management as soon as it was deemed advisable to remove Mitch. Idly he wondered who it was that had actually substituted the ransom money—Mitch or Evans. Not that it mattered. Pretty soon both of them would be dead.

He stirred uncomfortably in his seat as he thought about Pop Silvestri, his first manager. He had imagined that the old man would be thrilled to hear from him. He had even offered Pop a hundred and a half to come out to the Coast to handle the details for him. The old man had refused. Mickey knew Pop wasn't making a clear fifty and yet he turned down three times that. You just couldn't figure people.

Like Brady. The bitter things he had to say over the phone. What the hell did he have to complain about? When he tied up with Mickey, he was scratching for pennies. Now he had a big music operation going for him. You sure couldn't figure people.

He stared out into the gathering darkness. You would have thought Rocky would have consulted him before he grabbed the job in Vegas. After all he did for Castri, and the Rock didn't even get on the phone to tell him he wouldn't be there when Mickey got back.

Denton scowled at his reflection in the plane window. The hell with them all. He didn't need anybody. He was Mickey Denton, with three pictures making a pot full, with his albums breaking all records, with a teevee show in the works. And at last he belonged to nobody but himself. He didn't need any of them. Nobody. He had everything he wanted.

He never felt so alone in his life. And scared.

## 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 *Juke Box King* by Frank Kane]