

The Long Goodbye

by Raymond Chandler

(Adapted book. Advanced level)

Chapter 1. Bus to Las Vegas

The first time I saw Terry Lennox he was sitting in a Rolls-Royce in front of a fancy restaurant, and he was very drunk. He had a young man's face but his hair was white as snow. You could see he was drunk by looking at his eyes; otherwise he looked like any young man who had been spending too much money in a place that was there to take your money.

There was a woman beside him. Her hair was a pretty dark red and she had a distant smile on her lips.

'I have a wonderful idea, darling,' the woman said, trying to be nice. 'Why don't we take a taxi to your place and get your little car out? It's a wonderful night for a ride up the coast.'

The man said 'Awfully sorry, but I don't have it any more. Had to sell it.' He spoke clearly.

'Sold it, darling? What do you mean?' She slid away from him, but her voice slid even further.

'I had to. Had to eat.'

'Oh, I see.' A piece of ice wouldn't have melted on her now.

Right then, the car door seemed to open itself and the young man fell off the seat and landed, sitting, on the ground. So I went over and stuck my nose in their business, although it's always a mistake to interfere with people who are drunk. I picked him up and put him on his feet.

'Thank you so much,' he said politely. I thought I heard an accent.

'He is so English when he's drunk,' she said in a hard voice. 'Thanks for catching him.'

'I'll get him in the back of the car,' I said.

'Sorry, mister, but I'm late for an appointment.' She started to drive off. 'He's just a lost dog,' she added. 'Perhaps you can find a good home for him.' And then she was gone. And the guy was asleep in my arms.

I carried him to my car. He was heavy. As I put him in the front seat, he woke up and thanked me again, and went back to sleep. He was the politest drunk I'd ever met. While I drove, I looked at him once in a while. The right side of his face was one big scar that the doctors had worked on. They hadn't failed but they hadn't succeeded either.

I was living that year in a house on Yucca Avenue in the Laurel Canyon area. The rent was low, partly because the owner didn't want a written agreement, and partly because of the steps. She was getting old and they were too steep for her.

I got him up them somehow. Inside, I put him on the sofa and let him go back to sleep. He slept for an hour. When he woke up, he looked around and at me, and wanted to know where he was. I told him. He said his name was Terry Lennox and that he lived in Westwood, alone. His voice was steady. He said he could handle a cup of coffee.

When I brought it, he asked me why he was here. I told him he had passed out outside a restaurant and his girl had driven off and left him. He said he couldn't blame her.

'You English?' I asked.

'I lived there once. I wasn't born there.'

He finished the coffee and I drove him home. He didn't say much on the way, except that he was sorry. He had probably said it so often that it was automatic.

His apartment was small and empty. There was a little furniture but no personal items at all. It didn't look like a place where anybody lived. He offered me a drink. I said no. When I left, he thanked me again, but not as if I had climbed a mountain for him and not as if it was nothing at all. He was shy but very polite. Whatever he didn't have, he had manners.

Driving home, I thought about him. I'm supposed to be tough but this one bothered me. I didn't know why, unless it was the white hair and the scar and the clear voice. There was no reason I should see him again, though. He was just a lost dog, like the woman said.

* * *

It was a month later when I did see him again, about three blocks from my office. There was a police car stopped in the middle of the street, and the men inside were staring at something on the kerb. That something was Terry Lennox - or what was left of him. His shirt was dirty and open at the neck. He hadn't shaved for four or five days. His skin was so pale that the scar hardly showed. It was obvious why the policemen were looking at him, so I went over there fast and took hold of his arm.

'Stand up and walk,' I said. 'Can you do it?'

He looked at me and nodded slowly. I wasn't even sure he recognized me. 'I'm just a little empty,' he said.

He made the effort and let me walk him to the street. There was a taxi there. I opened the back door and got him inside. The police car pulled up. A cop with grey hair asked me, 'What have we got here?'

'He's not drunk,' I said. 'He's a friend.'

'That's nice,' the cop said sarcastically. He was still looking at Terry. 'What's your friend's name, pal?'

'Philip Marlowe,' Terry said slowly. 'He lives on Yucca Avenue in Laurel Canyon.'

The cop stared at us both. He was making a decision. It took him a little while. 'OK. Get him off the street at least.' The police car drove away.

We went to a place where you could get hamburgers that you could actually eat. I fed Lennox a couple and a bottle of beer and took him to my place. An hour later, he was shaved and clean, and he looked human again. I made two very mild drinks and we talked as we drank.

'Lucky you remembered my name,' I said.

'Not only that,' he said. 'I looked up your phone number, too.'

'So why didn't you call? I live here all the time.'

'Why should I bother you?'

'Looks like you ought to have bothered someone.'

'Asking for help isn't easy,' he said. 'Especially when it's all your own fault.' He looked up with a tired smile. 'Maybe I can stop drinking one of these days. They all say that, don't they?'

'It takes about three years.'

'Three years?' He looked shocked.

He turned and looked at the clock and changed the subject. 'I have a suitcase worth two hundred dollars down at the Hollywood bus station. I could get money for it. Maybe not two hundred dollars, but enough for a bus ticket to Las Vegas, and I could get a job there.'

I didn't say anything.

'A man I knew well in the army runs a big club there. His name's Randy Starr.'

Something must have shown on my face. 'Yes,' he continued, 'he's part gangster but they all are, and the other part of him isn't bad.'

'I can give you the bus fare and some extra,' I said.

He shook his head.

'I want you out of my hair,' I explained. 'I've got a feeling about you.'

'You have?' He looked down into his glass. 'We've only met twice. What sort of feeling?'

'A feeling that next time we meet, I'll find you in worse trouble than I can get you out of. I don't know why I have this feeling, but I do.'

He touched his scar gently. 'Maybe it's this. Makes me look like trouble, I suppose. But I got it honestly.'

'It's not that,' I said. 'It's this. I'm a private detective and you're a problem that I don't have to solve. But the problem's there. Maybe that girl didn't drive away that time just because you were drunk. Maybe she had a feeling, too.'

He smiled faintly. 'I was married to her once. Her name is still Lennox. I married her for her money.' When he saw my face, his smile disappeared. 'You're wondering why I didn't ask her for help. Did you ever hear of pride?'

'You're killing me, Lennox.'

'My pride is different. It's the pride of a man who has nothing else. Sorry if it bothers you.'

It bothered me and he bothered me, too, although I couldn't understand exactly why. Any more than I knew why a man would starve and walk the streets before he'd sell a suitcase. Whatever his rules were, though, he played by them.

I went down to the bus station and got his suitcase for him. When I came back, he said he had called his pal in Las Vegas. 'He was sore at me because I hadn't called him before.'

'It takes a stranger to help you,' I said, and put a hundred dollars in front of him. 'And take the suitcase with you. You might need to sell it later.'

'I don't want it,' he said. 'If you like, you can keep it for me.'

He changed his clothes and we went out for dinner. No drinks. Afterwards, he caught the bus and I drove home thinking about this and that.

* * *

At nine-thirty, the telephone rang and the voice that spoke was one I had heard once before.

'Is this Mr Philip Marlowe?'

'It is.'

'This is Sylvia Lennox, Mr Marlowe. We met for a moment one night last month. I heard afterwards that you had been kind enough to take Terry home.'

'I did that.'

'I've been a little worried about him. Nobody seems to know where he is.'

'I noticed how worried you were the other night,' I said. 'He's on a bus to Las Vegas.'

'Las Vegas?' This news seemed to cheer her up. 'How sweet of him. That's where we were married.'

'I guess he forgot that,' I said, 'or he would have gone somewhere else.'

Instead of hanging up, she laughed. It was a pretty laugh. 'Are you always as rude as this to ladies?'

'I don't know that you are a lady. The man was living in the streets. He had no money, none at all. You could have found him if you'd really wanted to. He didn't want anything from you then and he probably doesn't want anything from you now.'

'That,' she said coolly, 'is something you know nothing about, Mr Marlowe. Good-night.'

She was completely right, of course, and I was all wrong. But I didn't feel wrong then. I just felt angry.

Chapter 2. An Englishman's Drink

Three days before Christmas, I got a cheque on a Las Vegas bank for one hundred dollars. A note came with it. He thanked me, wished me a Merry Christmas, and said he hoped to see me soon. The surprise came at the end. 'Sylvia and I were married again. She says not to be angry with her for wanting to try again.' I read the rest of the story on the society page of the newspaper.

'All are happy with the news that Sylvia and Terry Lennox have remarried at Las Vegas, the darlings. Sylvia is, of course, the youngest daughter of millionaire Harlan Potter. And what does Daddy think of the marriage? One can only guess. Potter is one person who never, ever, gives interviews.'

Well, I thought, if he wants her money, let him take it. I just didn't want to see him again. But I knew I would - if only because of the suitcase.

It was five o'clock on a wet March evening when he walked into my little office. He looked changed: older, more serious, but calmer, too. Like a man who had learned a hard lesson.

'Let's go to some quiet bar,' he said, as if he had seen me ten minutes before. We didn't shake hands. We almost never did. Englishmen don't shake hands all the time like Americans do and, although he wasn't English, he had their manners.

We went to Victor's. On the way, I said something stupid about his new life and he said that if he wasn't happy, at least he was rich. And he said that he wasn't having any trouble at all handling his drinking these days.

'Perhaps you were never really drunk,' I said.

At the bar we drank gin and lime, an Englishman's drink. Lennox said they didn't know the right way to make them here. I wasn't interested in talking about drinks, so I asked him about his pal in Las Vegas. Down my street, I said, Starr was known as a tough customer.

'Randy? In Las Vegas, he's a straight businessman. You should drop in and see him next time you're there. He'll be your pal.'

'Not too likely. I don't like gangsters.'

'That's just a word, Marlowe. We have that kind of world. The wars gave it to us and we're going to keep it. Randy and I and another guy were all in a little danger once together. It's different for the three of us.'

'So why didn't you ask him for help when you needed it?'

He finished his drink and signalled for another. 'Because he couldn't refuse. I didn't want to beg from him.'

'You begged from a stranger.'

He looked me straight in the eye. 'Strangers can keep going and pretend not to hear.'

When he finished the second drink, he drove me back to the office.

From then on, it became his habit to drop in around five o'clock. We usually went to Victor's. I didn't understand why he enjoyed being with me instead of being in his big expensive house. I asked him about that once.

'Nothing for me at the house,' he said, drinking his usual gin and lime.

'Am I supposed to understand that?'

'A big film with no story, as they say in the film business. Sylvia is happy enough. But not with me. In our circle, that's not too important. You see, the rich don't really have a good time. They never want anything very much except maybe someone else's wife, and that's a pale desire compared with the way a butcher's wife wants new curtains for the living room. Mostly, I just kill time. A little tennis, a little swimming.'

I told him it didn't have to be the way it was. He said I should wonder why she wanted him, not why he wanted to be there.

'You like having servants and bells to ring,' I said.

He just smiled. 'Could be. I grew up as an orphan with no money.'

I began thinking I liked him better drunk, hungry and beaten and proud. That night, he would have told me the story of his life if I'd asked him. If I had asked, and if he had told me, it might have saved a couple of lives. It might have.

* * *

The last time we had drinks together was in May. It was earlier than usual and the bar was nearly empty.

'I like bars at this hour,' he said. 'I like to watch the man fix the first one of the evening. I like to taste it slowly. Alcohol is like love. The first kiss is magic.'

Then he started talking about her. 'I feel sorry for Sylvia. She's so terrible, but I think I like her. One day, she'll need someone, and no one else will be there. And I'll probably make a mess of it.'

'What's this about?' I asked.

'She's scared. I don't know of what. Maybe her father. He's a cold man. He doesn't even like her. If she annoys him too much, something might happen to her.'

'You're her husband,' I pointed out.

'Officially. Nothing more.'

I couldn't listen to this. I stood up and dropped some money on the table. 'You talk too much, and it's always about you. See you later,' I walked out.

Ten minutes later I was sorry, but ten minutes later I was somewhere else. I didn't see him again for a month. When I did, it was early in the morning. The doorbell woke me up. He was standing there, looking like hell. And he had a gun in his hand.

The gun wasn't pointed at me; he was just holding it.

'You're driving me to Tijuana to get a plane at ten-fifteen. I have a passport but I don't have transportation. I'll pay you five hundred dollars for the ride.'

I stood in the door and didn't move to let him in. 'How about five hundred dollars plus the gun?' I asked.

He looked at it and then dropped it in his pocket.

'Come on in,' I said, and he came in and fell into a chair.

'I'm in trouble,' he said.

'It's going to be a beautiful day. Cool, too. Yeah, I guessed you were in trouble. Let's talk about it after coffee. I always need my morning coffee.'

He followed me into the kitchen. I poured him a big drink from a bottle off the shelf. He had to use two hands to get it to his mouth.

'Didn't sleep at all last night,' he said weakly.

I poured him another drink and he drank this one with one hand. When he finished it, the coffee was ready.

I sat down across from him. Without warning, his head came down on the table and he was crying. He didn't seem to notice when I took the gun from his pocket. I smelled it. It hadn't been fired.

He lifted his head and said 'I didn't shoot anybody.'

I held up my hand. 'Wait a minute. It's like this. Be very careful what you tell me if you want me to help you. I can't be told about a crime you've committed, or a crime you know has been committed. Not if you want me to drive you to Tijuana.'

He looked straight at me for the first time since he had come in. 'I said I was in trouble.'

'I heard you. I don't want to know what kind of trouble. It's a matter of law. I can't know.'

'I could make you drive me. With the gun,' he said.

I grinned and pushed the gun across the table. He didn't touch it. 'I'm a man who sometimes has business with guns. I'd look stupid trying to tell the police I was so scared I had to do what you told me to.'

'Listen,' he said, 'they won't even look in the bedroom until midday. She won't be there. The bed will be too neat, so they'll look in the guest house. Servants always know what goes on.'

'And when they see her,' I said, 'they'll think she's drunk, right? And that's the end of the story. That's all I want to hear. You're sick of it all; you've been thinking of leaving for some time.'

'I called her father last night,' Lennox said, remembering. 'I told him I was leaving.'

'What did he say?'

'He was sorry. He wished me luck. Oh yes, he also asked me if I needed money. That's all he ever thinks about.'

'Did you ever see her with a man in the guest house?' I asked suddenly.

He looked surprised. 'I never even tried.'

'OK, so this is how it is. You came to me this morning and wanted a ride to Tijuana. You couldn't bear life with her anymore. Where you went was none of my business. We are friends and I did what you asked me.'

'How does it sound?' He looked at me hopefully.

'Depends on who's listening.'

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'Your type's always sorry, and always too late. I've still got that suitcase of yours. You need luggage. It'll look better.' I got it from where I'd kept it and put some things in it. Nothing used, nothing marked. Then I got the car out, locked up, and we left.

We didn't have much to say to each other on the way down. The border people had nothing to say to us either. When we reached the airport, the plane was there but no one was hurrying.

Terry went to get his ticket and came back. There were only a few people waiting with us.

'OK. I'm ready,' he said. 'This is where I say goodbye.'

We shook hands. He looked tired, very tired.

'I owe you,' he said, 'but you don't owe me. We had a few drinks together and I talked too much about me. I left a five-hundred-dollar bill in your coffee jar.'

'I wish you hadn't.'

'I'll never spend half of what I have.'

'Good luck, Terry. Go, get on the plane. I know you didn't kill her.'

He stared at me. He turned away, then looked back.

'I'm sorry,' he said quietly, 'you're wrong about that. I'm going to walk slowly to the plane. You have plenty of time to stop me.'

He walked. I watched him. He went through a door. He was outside now. He stopped there and looked towards me. He didn't wave. Neither did I. Then he went up the steps into the aircraft. The engines started and that big silver bird began to roll away. The dust rose in clouds behind it. I watched it lift slowly into the air and disappear into the blue sky, going south. Then I left.

Chapter 3. Simple Justice

It was two in the afternoon when I got home and they were waiting for me.

'You Marlowe? We want to talk to you.' This one was grey-blond and looked hard. His partner was tall, handsome and just looked nasty. They both had watching-and-waiting eyes. They showed me their badges.

'Sergeant Green, Central Homicide. This is Detective Dayton.'

I went on up and unlocked the door. You don't shake hands with the police.

They sat in the living room and Green did the talking.

'Man named Terry Lennox. You know him, right?'

'We have a drink together once in a while. He lives in Encino, married money. I've never been there.'

I filled my pipe. 'This is where I ask you what it's all about and you tell me that you ask the questions, right?'

'That's right. So you just answer them.'

I don't know, I guess I was tired. Maybe I felt a little guilty. 'I don't have to say anything.'

Dayton spoke up. 'Answer the questions, Marlowe. Just co-operate. It's healthier.'

Right away I didn't like him. His voice was a hard don't- fool-with-me voice. I went to the book shelf and took down the big state law book. I held it out to him. 'Find me the part that says I have to answer your questions. There's no such law.'

'Sit down,' Green said impatiently. 'Lennox's wife has been murdered. Ugly job. Murderer used something blunt. Must have hit her more than a dozen times. Husband is missing. We find your telephone number in his desk, marked with today's date. She'd been seeing other men. We found that out, too.'

'Terry Lennox wouldn't do anything like that. He's known about the other men for a long time.'

'He's not going to tell us anything, Sergeant,' Dayton said. 'He's read that law book. He thinks the law lives in the book. Don't you, Marlowe?'

I said nothing. I wasn't going to help him.

'Stand up,' he said.

I started to get up. I was half way up when he hit me. I sat back down and shook my head. Dayton was smiling; Green was looking away.

'Let's try again,' Dayton suggested. I didn't move or speak. If I stood up, he'd hit me again. But if he hit me again, I'd hurt him. He couldn't hit me hard enough to stop me from hurting him next time.

'That was stupid,' Green said to Dayton. 'That's just what he wanted. A good reason for not talking.'

I nodded. 'Terry Lennox is my friend. Maybe you have enough evidence. In court, I'll answer questions. But not here. Not now. You're not a bad guy, Green. Your partner has psychological problems, that's all. And if he hits me again, he'll have medical problems, too.'

They had no choice. They put the bracelets on me and took me in.

* * *

At the station, I still didn't feel like talking. But now the person I wasn't talking to was a captain.

'Thinks he's tough,' the Captain said. 'We could change that.' He didn't sound as if he really cared. 'Guess we'd better. You can talk now.'

I didn't say anything. He reached for the coffee cup on his desk. I was in a chair facing him. The bracelets were on tight. That's the way he wanted them. But when he threw the coffee at me, I was faster than he was. Most of it missed.

'Doesn't like coffee. Look, pal, you've got some information that I want. Saying nothing at all is no good.'

'If I tell you what you want,' I asked, 'will you take the bracelets off?'

'Maybe, maybe not. Tell me first.'

'If I say I haven't seen Lennox today, would that satisfy you?'

'It might.' But he was losing patience. 'If I believed you.'

'I'd like to talk to a lawyer. How about that?'

The Captain laughed. It was a short, ugly laugh. He leaned across the desk and hit me with a hand of stone. There was thunder inside my head. When he spoke to me again, the words seemed to come from far away.

'I used to be tough but I'm getting old. You take a good blow, Marlowe, and that's all you'll get from me. We have younger, stronger guys for this work. OK, you won't talk to me but you'll talk to them. I promise you that.'

The telephone rang. Green handed it to the Captain.

'Yes, sir,' the Captain said, 'he's here. Really? Is that an order?' His face was red and getting redder. 'Fine, sir.' He put the telephone down with a bang. He was shaking with anger when he turned to speak to me. 'The DA wants you for himself. You're his headache now.'

He told Green to get me out of there. Before we reached the door, however, one of those stone hands and we stopped.

'You've got something to say, right? Your type always does. Say it.'

'Yes, sir,' I answered him politely. 'You probably didn't intend to, but you've done me a favour. You've solved a problem for me. No man likes to betray a friend but I wouldn't even betray an enemy to you. I might have told you something before you hit me; now I wouldn't tell you what day of the week it is.'

Green marched me out. I spent the next three days in jail. It wasn't so bad. It was quiet and it was clean. No one bothered me.

On the third day, a guard unlocked my door in the middle of the morning. 'Your lawyer is here. And don't throw that cigarette on the floor.'

He took me to the conference room. A tall man with dark hair was standing there looking out of the window. He turned and waited for the door to close. He took out a fancy cigarette case and looked me over.

'Sit down, Marlowe. Cigarette? My name is Endicott. Sewell Endicott. I've been told to help you. It won't cost you anything. I guess you'd like to get out of here.'

I sat down and took one of his cigarettes. He lit it for me. I asked him who had sent him. He wouldn't tell me.

'I guess that means they caught him.'

He shook his head. 'If you mean Lennox, and of course you do, no, they haven't caught him.'

'If they haven't got Terry, why are they holding me?'

He frowned. 'I think I can help you get out of here, so let's work on your problems and not Terry's. Don't you want my help?'

No, I told him, I didn't. When a clever lawyer gets you out of jail before the police are ready to let you go, people talk. They say unkind things.

'Listen,' I said, 'I'm not in here for Lennox. I'm in here for me. I'm in a business where people come to me with troubles. Troubles they don't want to share with the police. That's why I'm not talking. You can tell Terry that.'

'I see your point,' Endicott said, 'but I have to tell you, I'm not in contact with Lennox. If I knew where he was, I'd have to tell the police. I'm a lawyer, and that's the law.'

'You believe in the law?'

The question annoyed him. 'The law,' he said, 'is not justice. It's just a half-broken machine. If you push the right buttons and you're lucky at the same time, you might get some justice. Now, do you want my help or not?'

I still didn't. 'I'll wait a few more days. If they catch Terry, they won't care how he got away. And if they don't get him, they'll want to forget it all fast. By the way, why haven't any reporters been in to see me? I thought the old man, Harlan Potter, owned nine or ten newspapers. With all that money and power, he should be able to make this into a real party.'

Endicott looked at me coldly. 'You're strange, Marlowe. You know so little. All that money and power can also buy a lot of silence.'

He opened the door and went out. The guard took me back and locked me in again.

I had said I would wait a few days, but it turned out I didn't have to. A few hours later, another guard came and took me to see someone in the DA's office.

We went through the door without knocking. A fat man with a square chin and stupid eyes was pushing something into the drawer of his desk. The guard left, and I pulled a chair over and sat down.

'I didn't say you could sit down,' the man said sharply.

I took out a cigarette.

'And I didn't say you could smoke,' he shouted at me.

I lit my cigarette.

'Take another drink from that bottle in the desk,' I said. 'It'll make you feel better.'

He waited a minute. Then he said, 'A tough guy, huh? Some hard guys come in here, but that's not the way they leave. They leave here small. I want a full statement from you.'

'I get so tired of it,' I said, looking into those stupid eyes.

'Tired of what?'

'Hard little men in hard little offices talking hard little words that don't mean a thing. You think a few days in here is going to make me cry on your shoulder? Forget it. And forget the threats. If you're big enough, you don't need them, and if you need them, you're not big enough to scare me.'

The fat man played with some papers on his desk. Then he looked up, smiling. 'It doesn't really matter if you don't talk. We've found your friend.'

I didn't believe him, and I let him know it.

'Believe me. Believe me, too, that we have people that saw you with him at Tijuana Airport. You want the whole story? Lennox got off the plane in Mazatlan. He disappeared for about an hour. Then a tall man with black hair and dark skin and a scar, maybe a knife scar, booked to Torreon under the name of Silvano Rodriguez. He was too tall to be so dark. The pilot turned in a report on him. The police were too slow in Torreon but they followed him to a little mountain town called Otatoclan. He rented a hotel room there. He was wearing a gun, too, but that's not unusual in Mexico. But the police were right behind him, see? They found him in the hotel.'

I laughed. 'That's a terrible story. Lennox is too smart to try to be a Mexican in Mexico. You don't know where he is. That's why you want my statement.'

He took the bottle out then and had a drink. Then he picked up one of the papers from his desk, grabbed a pen, and signed it. 'I've just set you free. Want to know why?'

I stood up. 'If you want to tell me.'

'The investigation's finished. Lennox finished it. He wrote a full confession this afternoon in his hotel room in Otatoclan. Then he shot himself.'

I stood there looking at nothing. The fat man watched me nervously. I think he thought I might hit him. I didn't. I just walked out and closed the door. I closed it quietly as if on a room where someone had just died.

* * *

I met a friend downstairs on my way out. He wanted to know why I was there, so I told him. Morgan is a reporter, and he gave me a ride home because he is my friend and because he is a reporter.

'Very neat, don't you think?' he asked, after he had listened to my story.

'You think this isn't straight?'

'Two things. Harlan Potter is a very rich man who hates having his name in any newspaper, even his own newspapers. So the trial would have annoyed him. Now Lennox is dead and there's not going to be a trial. Convenient for Potter.'

He continued after a minute. 'Then, there's a chance that the poor fool had a little help shooting himself.'

I didn't think he had needed help. He hadn't thought much of himself lately. But maybe Morgan wasn't all wrong.

Before he dropped me off, he had one more thing to suggest. 'If I were a clever reporter instead of a stupid one, I'd think maybe he didn't kill her at all.'

It was something to think about, but I was too tired to think. I went in and made some coffee, drank it and took Terry's five-hundred-dollar bill out of the coffee jar. I brought in the newspapers that were on the front steps and read about Lennox. There was even a short story about me.

One thing bothered me, though - the way she'd been killed. I was still sure Terry couldn't have done that. But no one was going to explain it to me, because no explanation was necessary

now. The murderer had confessed and he was dead. It was good work either way. If he had killed her, it was simple justice. If he hadn't, that was fine, too. He couldn't deny it now.

Chapter 4. Letter from a Dead Man

The next morning, I was back at the office, business as usual. When I thought about Terry, I tried not to let it hurt, but I still felt I owned a little piece of him, so it did.

The bell and the telephone rang at the same time. I answered the telephone first.

'Mr Marlowe? This is Sewell Endicott.'

'Good morning, Mr Endicott.'

'Glad to hear you're free. I guess it's over, but if they bother you again about this, call me.'

'The man's dead,' I said. 'They won't bother me again. They have their confession.'

'Yes, I know,' he said. 'I'm flying to Mexico today to look at the body for them. But let me give you some advice before I go. Don't be too certain they won't make trouble for you. Private detectives aren't their favourite people. And stubborn private detectives, well...' He hung up without finishing the sentence.

I opened my office door. The man had let himself into the waiting room. He was sitting by the window, reading a magazine. He looked quite comfortable. He had thick, dark hair and was very brown from the sun. His clothes probably cost more than I earned in a couple of months.

He threw the magazine onto the low table. 'The stuff they write these days.'

'What can I do for you?'

He looked at me for a moment and then laughed. 'A hero on a bicycle.'

'What?'

'You, Marlowe. A hero on a bicycle. Did they hurt you much?'

'Why do you care?'

He didn't answer. Instead he stood up and walked into my office. I followed him.

'You're a little man. Look at this place. You don't make much money, do you? A cheap little man.'

I let him talk and sat down behind my desk.

'That's it. You're a cheap guy. Cheap feelings. Have a few drinks with somebody and suddenly you're his pal. You have nothing. A hero on a bicycle.'

He leaned over the desk and slapped me. It didn't hurt, and I didn't move.

'You know who I am, Cheapie?'

'Your name is Menendez. They call you Mendy.'

'Yeah, that's right.' He took a gold cigarette case out of his pocket and lit a brown cigarette with a gold lighter.

'I'm a big bad man, Marlowe. I make a lot of money. I have to make a lot of money, so I can pay the men I have to pay so I can make a lot of money. I have a house in Bel Air that cost ninety thousand and that was before I fixed it up. I've got a beautiful wife and my children go to private schools. My wife likes diamonds. I've got six servants. Five cars. What do you have, Marlowe?'

'Why don't you tell me what you want?'

He put out his cigarette and lit another.

'Let me tell you a story. In the war, there were three guys in a hole. It was cold, very cold. It was snowing. Randy Starr, Terry Lennox and me. Something lands right in the hole but it

doesn't explode. The Germans had a lot of tricks. Sometimes you think it won't explode and then three seconds later you're wrong. Anyway, Terry grabbed this one and jumped out of the hole. He was quick. Very quick. He threw it and it exploded in the air. A piece got him on the side of the face. Right then, the Germans attacked and we had to run. We left him; we thought he was dead. The Germans found him and had him for a year and a half. They did a good job on his face but they hurt him too much. That's why his hair was white.

'Randy and I spent money to find him. He'd saved our lives. All he got from his share was half of a new face. And then, when he's really in trouble, he doesn't come to us. He comes to you, Cheapie. That makes us mad, see? I could've helped him. Instead he's dead, and you think you're a hero.'

I shook my head. 'No, I don't.'

'Of course you do. The story is over, Marlowe. Even if-' he stopped in the middle of the sentence.

'Even if Terry didn't kill her,' I said.

'If that's the way Terry wanted it, then that's how it stays. See you around, Cheapie.'

I felt old and tired. I got up slowly and picked up his cigarette case from my desk. 'You forgot this,' I said, going towards him.

'So what? I've got a dozen,' he said. He didn't even reach for it.

'How about a dozen of these?' I asked, moving in fast and close, and hitting him as hard as I could in the stomach.

He fell back against the wall making the sounds a cat makes when it's sick. Then, very slowly, he straightened up. I patted his cheek gently. He didn't push my hand away.

'I didn't think you had the courage,' he said weakly.

'Next time bring a gun.'

'I got a guy to carry the gun,' he said. 'Maybe you'll meet him one of these days.' He walked out slowly.

* * *

After that, nothing happened for three days. Sylvia Lennox was buried. The press was not invited to the funeral, and her father, as usual, gave no public statement.

In the afternoon of the third day, the telephone rang and I found myself talking to a man named Howard Spencer, a New York publisher who said he had a California problem. We agreed to meet in the bar of his hotel the next morning. I needed the job because I needed the money - or thought I did, until I got home and found a letter.

The envelope was covered with Mexican stamps. I recognized the handwriting in the address. I was holding a letter from a dead man. I opened it and read.

It didn't start with my name; it just started.

I'm sitting in a hotel room in a town called Otatoclan. There's a mailbox just below the window and when the boy comes with the coffee I ordered, he is going to mail this letter for me. I'm going to watch him put it in the box, and then I'll pay him.

I can't mail it myself because I can't leave my room. They're outside, waiting for me. I want you to have this money because I don't need it and the police would steal it if I kept it.

Maybe you think I didn't kill her. It doesn't matter, though. Her father and her sister were always good to me. A trial would hurt them. I don't want that. I don't care what happens to me. I'm disgusted with my life.

I've written a confession. You read about this in books, but you don't read the truth. The truth is, I feel sick and very scared. But I'm going to do it anyway. So forget it and me. But first drink a gin and lime for me at Victor's. After that, forget the whole thing. Goodbye.

That was all. That and a five-thousand-dollar bill. I looked at it carefully. I had never seen one before. Lots of people who work in banks haven't, either. Menendez probably had a dozen.

* * *

I met Mr Howard Spencer at eleven the next morning. I was early and he was late. While I was waiting, I looked at the people who come to a hotel bar at eleven in the morning. There were two young men with a telephone at their table. They took turns making calls and shouting at each other and at the people they called. There was a man sitting at the bar who was telling the story of his life to no one in particular, a long, sad story.

I had almost become tired of waiting when a dream in a white skirt walked in. There are blondes, and blondes. Different kinds. I know; I've studied the subject. There are blondes who read big, long books and write poetry. There are blondes who like parties and laugh loudly at all the jokes, even the old ones. There are blondes, too, who marry millionaires and live on the south coast of France and kiss their husbands good-night downstairs.

But this one was not any of these kinds. She was unique. She was quite tall, and had eyes like a summer sky. She smiled gently at the old waiter who pulled out a chair for her. I just held my breath and watched. I was still watching when a man's voice said, close to my shoulder, 'I must apologize for being so late, Mr Marlowe. I'm Howard Spencer.'

I had trouble tearing my eyes away from the dream to look at him.

He was about forty-five years old, wearing a suit that was fine for Boston but all wrong for California. He was carrying an old leather case.

'Two new books in here,' he said, patting the leather. 'I'm sure they are awful. But I don't suppose you care about publishers' problems.'

'I could,' I said, 'if it has anything to do with the job.' I admired the way Spencer was looking right at me, not giving any attention to the blonde.

He ordered drinks and explained the job. One of his authors lived out here, a man named Roger Wade. I knew the name but hadn't read the books. Apparently everyone else did, though, because Wade was one of Spencer's biggest writers. Except that Wade had been having a bad period lately. He drank too much, Spencer said, and went a little crazy sometimes. He had hurt his wife. More important to Spencer, however, he had also stopped writing. All that Spencer wanted was for me to save the wife from the writer, the writer from himself, and a half-finished book from the bottle in Wade's desk. That's all.

It was interesting. It was also impossible. I told him that what he needed was a male nurse, not a detective. I couldn't stop a man from drinking, and if the wife was living with him, I couldn't protect her, either. Not day and night.

'Your answer is no, then?'

'I'm sorry, Mr Spencer. I don't think I'd be able to help.'

Suddenly, a voice that was not Spencer's said, 'You're wrong, Mr Marlowe. I'm sure you could help.' It was a voice like honey.

I looked up into a pair of violet eyes.

'He doesn't want to help, Eileen,' Spencer said.

She smiled. 'I disagree.'

I stopped staring long enough to answer. 'I didn't say I wasn't interested, Mrs Wade. I just don't think it would work. I'm sorry.'

I thought she would argue but she didn't. She gave me her card in case I changed my mind, thanked me, and left. Just like that. I sat down, grabbed my whisky, and watched her walk out of the hotel. What a walk!

When she had gone, Spencer turned to me, something new in his eyes.

'Nice,' I said, 'but you should've looked at her once or twice while we talked. She's much too pretty to ignore.'

Spencer went red in the face. 'She's married, Mr Marlowe.'

I smiled. 'That doesn't make her ugly, Mr Spencer.'

We did not shake hands when he left.

* * *

That night I received a telephone call from Green.

'Thought you might want to know. They buried Lennox down in Mexico today. Some lawyer took care of it.'

Endicott, I thought. 'Thanks for telling me, Sergeant. Anything else?'

'Just this. Lennox is buried and so is the rest of it. Leave it alone.'

Sweet dreams to you, too, I thought.

Chapter 5. Dr Verringer's Farm

Next morning, the bell rang just as I finished shaving. I opened the door and looked into a pair of violet eyes again. She was wearing a brown suit this time.

'Come in, Mrs Wade. Like a cup of coffee?'

She came into the living room and sat down. 'Thank you. Black coffee, please.'

I brought the coffee in my good cups. They were the only two in the kitchen that matched.

'The last time I had coffee with someone was just before I went to jail,' I said. 'I guess you knew I'd been to jail, Mrs Wade.'

She nodded. 'They thought you helped him escape, didn't they? He must have been insane.'

I filled a pipe and lit it. 'Yes, he must have been. He was badly hurt in the war. But I don't think you came here to talk about that.'

It took a little more conversation and another cup of coffee to find out what the problem was. Roger Wade was missing. Spencer hadn't told me because Spencer didn't know. This was Mrs Wade's little secret. Apparently, Wade did this often. But this time his wife was worried. Something was wrong, she said.

'Mr Spencer said the same thing, Mrs Wade. He thought it might be some hidden guilt that makes your husband drink so much. What do you think?'

She said she didn't know. She added that if Wade had a secret, even a bad secret, something criminal, for instance, she wouldn't care. She just wanted him back.

'Let's say I say yes this time,' I asked her, 'where would I start? Do you have any idea where he is?'

'Yes and no,' she replied after thinking. 'He's at some doctor's place, I'm sure. He goes to them when he's been drinking heavily, and they help him stop. For a few days, at least. But I don't know these doctors.'

She did, however, have a note she found in her husband's desk. He had written 'I do not like you, Doctor V, but right now you're the man for me.'

We had finished all the coffee. 'Please,' she begged, 'find Roger and bring him home.'

How could I refuse a lady like that twice? I couldn't. I said I would try and she thanked me and left.

No matter how clever you think you are, you have to have a place to start from; a name, an address, something. All I had was the letter V. So I did what I do when I need help; I called a friend and asked.

George Peters worked for a big detective agency but he hadn't forgotten the old hard times. Sure, he said, he could give me ten minutes if I came to his office.

He hadn't changed much with the years. He was still thin, he was still all smiles, and he was still a busy man.

'What can I do for you?' he asked from behind a desk like a football field.

'I'd like to see your file on the doctors in the hotel business. You know, the ones where you go when no one knows where you are. I've got a missing man who's probably trying to stop drinking. He's rich and his wife is worried.'

Peters found the file and we looked at it together. There were three names and addresses under the letter V. I copied them down.

'Thanks, pal. I'll do the same for you one day.'

'Forget it,' Peters said. 'By the way, I heard something about your friend Lennox that might interest you. One of our men knew a guy in New York five or six years ago. He's certain it was Lennox, except his name wasn't Lennox then. It was Marston. Of course, he could be wrong.'

I said I doubted it was the same man.

'Our man thinks it was. He's in Seattle now, but I can have him call you when he returns, if you want.'

'Sure. Why not?' And I left to check on the doctors.

If you are an honest doctor in California, you might get rich or you might get poor; if you are a dishonest doctor, you are going to make money. I had three names: Varley, a bone doctor; Vukanich, ear, nose and throat; and Verringer, who called himself Doctor but didn't say of what.

I started with Vukanich, an unpleasant character who pretended not to understand that I wanted more than an examination. He did not seem to be my man anyway. He had nothing more than a small office. Not fancy enough.

Varley was in another class. He ran a private hospital and was very friendly. He smiled when he said he couldn't help me, and he smiled as he asked me why I was looking for Wade here. I explained that the hospital was on a list of places where certain things had happened in the past, things involving the police. Dr Varley became suddenly less friendly. We ended our conversation there, but I had already seen enough of Varley's hospital. He took care of the old and the weak. He wasn't tough enough to handle real trouble. I crossed him off, too, and went to find Dr Verringer.

His place was out in the hills. I liked that, and not just because the air was cleaner there. I liked a place where people wouldn't bother to look for a man. I got there just as it was getting dark.

Verringer had a farm, with a circle of small buildings surrounding the main house. This time I decided not to be polite. I drove past the front gate, parked off the road and came back on foot.

I climbed the fence behind the farm and went slowly towards the lights of the buildings. It was dark and I had a pocket torch but I didn't want to use it. I was carrying a gun, too, and I didn't want to have to use that either.

I stopped at the edge of an empty swimming-pool. I heard a door open so I hid.

A light went on outside the main house, a single bright light that made a circle in the dirt between the buildings. Into this circle stepped a cowboy, dressed like a movie cowboy, with an enormous hat, a pair of silver guns at his side, and a rope that he swung over his head. He played with the rope for a few minutes and then practised taking his guns out of his gunbelt as quickly as he could. He was fast. He was also obviously a little crazy. When he'd finished his game, whatever it was, he went back into the house. The light went out as he went in.

There was another, smaller light on in one of the buildings far from the big house. I walked over, moving as quietly as possible. I didn't want to be in the cowboy's movie tonight, because his guns just might have been loaded.

I reached a window of the hut. It was now dark enough to look in without being seen. There was one man on a bed and another on a chair. They were talking. The man on the bed was angry but he was so weak that his shout was no louder than a whisper. The other man was speaking calmly and patiently.

The man on the bed said, 'I already paid you and I paid you well. You got six hundred dollars. And that was too much.'

The man in the chair didn't disagree. He only said, 'You called me, remember? I came to you in your hour of need. I told you it would be expensive. You insisted. I want another five thousand dollars, Wade.'

'I was drunk,' Wade said. 'I would've promised you anything.'

You'll write me a cheque, my friend. Now, at once. Then you'll get dressed and Earl will take you home.'

Wade laughed. 'A cheque? Sure, I'll give you a cheque.'

The doctor smiled. 'You think you can call the bank later and tell them not to accept it. But you won't. Earl will drive you home.'

'No, thanks. That boy's insane. Crazier every time I see him.'

Verringer shook his head. 'Earl isn't normal, I know, but I have ways of handling him.'

'That's what you think,' a new voice said, and Earl came through the door in his pretty cowboy suit.

'Keep that monkey away from me,' Wade shouted, and this time it was not a whisper.

Earl didn't like the description. He started for Wade. Verringer jumped between them and was pushed roughly aside by the cowboy. I ran for the door and came into the room with my gun out. Earl spun around, forgetting Wade. The doctor was picking himself up off the floor.

The cowboy came right at me. He didn't touch his guns and he didn't seem to see mine. I fired through the open window over the bed. Earl stopped, looked at the hole in the window screen, and looked back at me, smiling. 'That's a real gun, isn't it? Oh, boy.'

'Take the gunbelt off. Slowly.'

Earl kept his smile. 'OK. Only these aren't real guns, you know.' He took the belt off and put it down. Wade grabbed a gun.

'He's right. They're toys.'

Earl gave Wade a dirty look but then he noticed the doctor, who was leaning against the wall, rubbing his head.

'Sorry,' Earl said in a small voice.

The doctor patted Earl gently on the shoulder and smiled. I pulled Wade out of there while I had the chance. Verringer watched us leave and said nothing until we were almost too far to hear him, and then he called out.

'You promised me, Wade. Five thousand.'

I put Wade in my car and we started for home. His home first.

He wanted to talk. I couldn't stop him.

'You were great back there. Who are you?'

I told him. I explained that his wife had hired me.

'Whatever she's paying you, it isn't enough.'

'She isn't paying me, Mr Wade,' I told him, 'you are. I'd like the money from you. Seems better that way.'

Wade agreed. Then his thoughts turned to the doctor. 'You think I should pay him the five thousand? He took good care of me. He's not a bad guy. Tries to keep Earl from killing himself, from killing everybody else. Don't know why he bothers. He let his business go to hell because of that crazy boy. I don't understand that. And I'm the big writer, supposed to understand people. Should I give him the money?'

I told him I didn't have an opinion either way.

'You don't like me, do you, Marlowe? Wait a minute. Marlowe. I know you. You were mixed up with Lennox, weren't you?'

I said I had been. Wade nodded. He knew them, he said, Terry and Sylvia. He knew her better than he knew him, he said. He asked me questions I didn't want to answer. He was just a job and that's what I told him. When we reached his house, he went straight in. I was going to drive off but she came out. To thank me.

'You found him. I knew you would. Come in and have a drink,' she offered.

'Some other time.' I lit a cigarette and she smoked a little of it.

'You knew Sylvia Lennox,' I said. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

She looked surprised. 'The woman that was murdered? I didn't know her personally. I knew the name, that's all. I should go in, Mr Marlowe, and see if my husband needs anything.'

'I need something, too,' I said, and I pulled her to me and kissed her. She didn't help me and she didn't fight me. She just let me do the whole job myself.

'You shouldn't have,' she said when I released her. 'But still, thanks for the other work you've done.' And she walked away and went into her nice house without stopping at the door to wave. I waved, though. I waved at the closed door and then I went home, too.

Chapter 6. Empty Like a Glass

The next day was just another day at the office. A giant came in and told me someone was trying to poison his dog. He suspected the lady next door. He wasn't happy when I told him I couldn't help, but at least he didn't hit me with my desk.

A woman with a face like a sad story came in because she thought the girl she lived with was robbing her. She wanted me to come over and scare the girl. She left as disappointed as the giant.

Then a man came in with the oldest story in the book; a young wife who had taken the money and run. He didn't want the money. He wanted his wife back. I could help him, and I did. It was easy enough. I didn't get rich on it, but why should I care? I was a man with a five-thousand-dollar piece of government paper in my pocket.

Three days later, Eileen Wade called to invite me over for drinks the next evening. Foolish curiosity made me say yes. Foolish curiosity also made me re-read Terry Lennox's letter after I hung up. It reminded me that I hadn't had the gin and lime at Victor's he'd asked me to have.

The bar was almost empty when I got there. Terry would have been pleased. I was surprised to hear the woman in front of me order the same drink. She wasn't English, either. I might have found out more about her if I hadn't noticed I was being watched. I approached the man straight on.

'You're watching me. If I sit here next to you, it will make your job easier.'

'Sure, pal, sit where you want.'

'You're one of Mendy's boys, right? A little guy with no name.'

He didn't like the conversation. 'I got a name. And I'm not one of the boys, I'm his number one. More than you can say, Marlowe.'

'You're supposed to watch me. OK, watch me leave.'

I paid for the drink and went out the door. The boy came out right behind me. There might have been trouble if this enormous man hadn't got out of an enormous car and picked the boy up with one huge hand.

'I keep telling you cheap gangsters. Stay away from my favourite places. You spoil my appetite.'

The giant threw my watcher against the outer wall of the bar with the one arm that had been holding him, and Mendy's number one boy hit it hard and stayed there until the giant disappeared into Victor's.

'What was that?' I asked as the boy found his feet.

'Big Willie Magoon. A policeman. He thinks he's tough.'

'You mean he isn't sure?' I asked him politely. The boy ignored me and limped away into the Hollywood night.

When I reached the Wade house the next afternoon, the party had already begun. I parked my old car between two new expensive ones and walked in. A Mexican in a white coat opened the door for me, liked my name, and let me in.

It was the same party everybody has. People were talking too loud and not listening at all. Everyone had a glass in his hand, and the glasses were all half-empty.

Eileen Wade came up and said she was very glad I could come. Her husband wanted to see me, she added. He hadn't joined the party because he hated parties. He was in his study, she said. The Mexican took me to see him. He also warned me that Senor Wade was very busy.

Wade was busy lying on a sofa. There was a pile of yellow paper next to the typewriter on his desk.

The Mexican left and Wade sat up. 'Good of you to come, Marlowe. Did you have a drink or two?'

I said no and asked him how his work was going.

'Fine. It just comes out. That's how it is when it's good. If it's hard work, it's bad writing.'

He said this almost angrily so I was kind enough to disagree. 'It was hard for Flaubert, and his stuff's good.'

'Oh, God, an intellectual detective. Well, I hate intellectuals. I'm not drinking and I hate everyone. I hate you, too.'

'I understand,' I said. 'You need somebody to insult. Go ahead. When it begins to hurt, I'll let you know.'

Wade laughed. 'I hate myself, too. And my terrible books that sell and sell. So how can you help me?'

'Maybe I don't want to help,' I said.

'Let's have a drink. Because I like you.' He was laughing again.

'Not in here, pal. Not you and me alone. I don't want to have to watch you take the first one.'

'You know, Marlowe, I think you could help. Why don't you come and live here and keep me safe from harm and tell me all about Flaubert?'

I shook my head. 'I couldn't stop you.'

'Try it. I could finish the miserable book. I have to finish it. If I can't finish things I start, I might as well be dead.'

I didn't want to listen to this kind of nonsense.

'You did as much for Lennox,' he said suddenly.

I walked right up to him and gave him a hard stare. 'I got Lennox killed. That's what I did for Terry.'

Wade said I was talking like a fool. He cursed at me but without much feeling. I couldn't really help anyway, he said, telling me what I already knew. It was something personal, he said.

'About your wife?'

'I don't think so. I think it's about me. Forget it, though. Let's go out and have that drink and see all those nice people who do want to watch me have that first one.'

The party was louder than before. Wade said hello here and there and then headed for the bar. As Candy, the Mexican, mixed our drinks, I saw a face I knew. It was the woman from Victor's, the one who had ordered the gin and lime. Wade gave her a real smile.

'Hello, Linda. This is Philip Marlowe. Marlowe, this is Linda Loring. You have something in common.'

If she recognized me from the night before, she didn't show it. She extended her hand. 'Hello, Mr Marlowe. What Roger won't say is that I'm Sylvia Lennox's sister. And I know who you are.'

Her hand was cool and she didn't let me keep it for long. As she took it back, a thin man with a neat beard and a very white face came up to us. He ignored me and gave Wade an ugly look.

Linda Loring said 'My husband, Mr Marlowe.'

He didn't even look at me. He was giving all his poisonous attention to Wade. 'I have something to say to you, Wade. Stay away from my wife.'

Wade seemed amused. 'You're my guest today, Dr Loring, so all I'll say is that I think you've misunderstood something.'

Loring found a glove in one of his pockets and slapped Wade across the face with it. The writer didn't move a muscle. 'Very dramatic, Doctor. Next time, why don't you do it when I have a chance to answer the challenge? It would be more interesting. Right now, I think you're looking for the door. Candy will show it to you.' Wade turned back to the bar. 'Candy, the doctor is leaving.'

Loring grabbed for his wife's hand, but she was too quick. 'I'm not leaving,' she said. 'You are.'

Loring raised the glove again but Wade stepped between the husband and wife. 'We don't do that here, Doctor.'

'Don't we?' Loring asked sarcastically, but he put the glove away and left. Candy shut the door behind him. I picked up my drink and looked around for Wade, but he had disappeared. No wonder he didn't like parties. I took a walk out to the terrace and settled into a soft chair facing the lake. A minute later, Eileen Wade was sitting next to me. She wanted to know if I had accepted Roger's offer to stay with them. I told her I hadn't. I said that if she wanted to help her husband, she should find him a good psychiatrist.

She looked surprised. 'A psychiatrist? Why?'

'I'm not an expert, but I think your husband does have a secret, a secret he has buried so deep inside himself that he can't find it. Maybe something he did when he was drunk. So he drinks to find it. Unless he just drinks because he can't write anymore.'

She frowned. 'It's not that. Roger has a great amount of talent. His best book is still inside him.'

'Then maybe it's something between the two of you.'

She answered immediately. 'No. I love my husband. Not the way a young girl loves, perhaps, but I do love him. A woman is only a young girl once. The man I loved then is dead. He died in the war. His initials, strangely enough, were the same as yours. They never even found his body. Sometimes I even think I see him. At a party or in a restaurant. It's silly, I know, but we were very much in love. That crazy love that doesn't happen twice.'

She wasn't looking at me anymore. She was staring at the lake. I looked back at the house and Wade was there in the doorway.

I joined him. He had had more than that first drink.

'How's my wife, Marlowe? Did you give her another kiss?'

I said I was leaving.

'Go ahead. But I'll tell you what the doctor told me. Stay away from my wife, Marlowe. Because it isn't any good. She's not there, see? Empty, like a glass. Did she tell you about her old love? The one that died in Norway but they never found? Be careful, Marlowe. People do disappear.'

I walked away from him. As I passed the bar, Candy called to me.

'Senor, one drink left. You want it?'

I told him to drink it but he said he was a beer man. He said that's how the Spanish were. He said that he was very Spanish, and that he had the knife to prove it. He didn't need me to help him take care of his boss.

'You're doing such a good job, Candy. Who brought him home?'

I speak enough Spanish to know what he called me. He didn't hold the door for me when I left.

Chapter 7. Pretty Necklace Around a Pretty Neck

For a week, the Wades left me alone. I did what I do for a living. Then I got a call on a Thursday night from Wade. His voice was bad. He was breathing hard. 'I'm in terrible shape, Marlowe. I'm losing control. Can you come over quickly?'

I said I would, and then the telephone went dead. I shouted into it but there was no reply. I was in my car a minute later, and drove like a bullet through the streets and up into the hills where they lived. I imagined Wade throwing his wife down the stairs. I imagined him beating on her locked door. I drove even faster. When I got there, Eileen Wade was standing in the open front door in a pretty dress, nice and cool, smoking a cigarette. If there was any excitement around her, I'd brought it with me.

'Where is he?'

'He had a fall,' she said calmly. 'He cut his head on something. There was only a little blood.'

'That's nice,' I said. 'Where is he now?'

She looked at me quietly and then she pointed out at the darkness towards the lake. 'Out there somewhere. You find him. I've had enough.' And she went into the house.

He was right where she had pointed, lying on his stomach. The back of his head was sticky. I talked to him but he didn't answer. I tried to lift him, dropped him, tried again and got him across my back. He was as heavy as stone. I made it into the house and dropped him on the sofa. My back screamed as I straightened up.

Mrs Wade came in and said she'd called her doctor. He hadn't wanted to come, she said. This confused me until she explained that Loring was her doctor.

He showed up fifteen minutes later, took a glance at Wade's cut, and said there was no danger. He put his hat back on and started to leave.

'I can't get him upstairs alone, Doctor,' I said.

'Then leave him where he is,' Loring said coldly. 'You might wash his head, too. He's not my patient.'

'I'm not asking you to treat him, Doctor. I'm asking for some help in getting him to his bedroom,' I said, beginning to get angry.

'And just who are you?' he asked sharply.

'My name's Marlowe. We were introduced last week. All I want is. . .'

He interrupted me. 'I'm not interested in what you want.' He started for the door but I stepped in front of it.

'Just a minute. You're a doctor and this man needs help. I can't get him upstairs alone. What do you say?'

'Get out of my way,' he said through his teeth, 'or I shall call the police. I'm a professional man, and as a professional. . .'

This time I interrupted him. 'As a professional man, you're a sack of dirt.' I stepped out of his way. He went out like a storm. Perhaps he hadn't brought his glove this time. Instead, his eyes smacked me as he went through the door.

In the end, Candy came home, and we carried Wade up the stairs together. The Mexican wanted to know what I was doing there. I didn't like his curiosity and told him so. He showed me his knife. Candy didn't like me. I couldn't understand why; I'm very easy to like. He asked me if I had hit Wade. I told him his boss had fallen and that he wasn't hurt badly. The knife disappeared. We undressed Wade and put him to bed. Candy went to change. I washed the cut and Wade opened his eyes.

'What happened?'

'I'd say the usual. Except you also fell and cut your head this time. It's not serious. Why don't you get some sleep?'

'Sleep,' he said, 'what's that?'

'Maybe a pill would help. Got any?'

He said there were some in the drawer. They were Mrs Wade's pills, and they were strong. Loring's name was on the plastic bottle. I gave Wade one and he swallowed it dry. He was quiet for a while and then he said slowly, 'I remember something. Do something for me. I wrote some crazy stuff. I don't want Eileen to see it. It's on the typewriter. Tear it up for me.'

I said I would. Then I thought he had fallen asleep until he opened his eyes again and asked 'Ever kill a man, Marlowe?'

'Yes.'

'Nasty feeling, isn't it?'

'Some people like it,' I said.

'How could they?' he asked, and then he was asleep for real. I waited a minute and then I turned out the light and left him.

I went downstairs. Eileen wasn't there, so she must have been up in her room. I wondered about that. Didn't she want to know how her husband was? Or was she just too tired of the trouble he caused? Maybe she didn't love him as much as she said she did. About that I didn't know. No one can see into someone else's heart, not even a good detective.

I went to his study and found the papers. I began reading them. He was right, it was crazy stuff.

He wrote about the moon watching him and wanting to scream and Verringer. He wrote bad things about Verringer, but in a kind way. Then he said he was a rose and talked about a woman who was sleeping in complete silence and that was wrong, he wrote, because you always make one sound or another when you sleep. Then he said he had given Candy too much money, he ought to have killed him instead. 'A good man died for me once, why not that insect in his stupid white jacket?'

Then he began to come out of whatever bad dream he was having and he wrote that he had to call someone, he was in a bad way. And that was the end. That's where he stopped writing.

I didn't tear the papers up. I folded them and put them in my pocket. I stood there looking out of the window at the calm dark lake. Then I heard a shot.

Her room was empty so I kept running. She was in his room, and they were struggling. Before I could help her, she had pulled the gun from his hands. She fell against me as she pulled the gun free, and I held her. She was crying.

'Roger, how could you?'

'I saw someone. He had a knife. I grabbed the gun from the drawer here,' he pointed to the little table where I'd found the pills, 'and I shot. But it must have been a dream, because no one was there.'

It was a miserable story from start to finish. The gun hadn't been in the drawer. I had seen the pills, some papers, a set of keys. But no gun. And she just wasn't strong enough to have taken the gun from him unless he wasn't really fighting. It had all been a performance. He wanted sympathy, I guessed. Poor Roger is trying to kill himself, he wanted her to think.

'Go back to bed,' I told her. 'He won't do it again.' I took the gun. She gave me a hard look and then walked out.

'You were just playing,' I told him when she had left. 'You don't want to die.'

'I guess I don't,' he said.

'What good man died for you?' I asked him.

At first, he didn't understand, and then he remembered.

'I told you, it was crazy stuff. I was drunk.'

'And isn't Candy taking your money because he knows something he shouldn't?'

He closed his eyes and repeated 'It was just crazy stuff.'

I closed the door and came back and sat on the bed and said 'You can't keep running. Candy does know something. What is it, a woman?'

His eyes were still closed. 'Maybe you believe that fool doctor.'

I took a wild guess. 'No, he's wrong. It wasn't his wife, it was her sister Sylvia.'

Wade opened his eyes wide.

'Is that why you're here?' he whispered, and I knew I had guessed right. 'You leave me alone,' he said. 'I'm not the first husband to do what I did.'

I didn't ask him just what he had done.

'It's been hell,' he said.

'That's obvious. The interesting point is why.'

I gave him another one of his wife's pills and watched him fall asleep again. When he was finally in dreamland, he looked half-dead. He wasn't going to hurt anyone tonight. Maybe he had never hurt anyone at all.

I went down the hall but at the top of the stairs I stopped because Eileen was standing in the doorway of her room.

'He's gone back to sleep,' I said.

'I knew you would return,' she said softly. Her voice was changed. 'Even after ten years, I haven't stopped waiting.'

Wonderful, I thought. Now she's crazy, too.

'Come in and shut the door,' she whispered, and went into her room. I followed her in because it seemed like a good idea. She threw herself into my arms. 'It's always been you,' she said, and I knew she wasn't talking to me.

I might have done the wrong thing but Candy saved me. I heard his footsteps stop at the door and I jumped and opened it and he ran down the stairs. When I came back to the room, all I saw was a crazy woman talking to herself. I closed the door and went down to the study and found Wade's bottle and poured myself a big drink. Then I poured another. I lay down on the sofa there and soon the bottle was empty and I fell asleep, too.

I woke up with a head like a dead tree, and the first thing I saw was Candy. He wasn't smiling. He asked me if I wanted coffee.

'Sure. Thanks.'

'Slept down here? She threw you out?'

'Whatever you say, pal.'

He laughed at me. 'You don't look so tough this morning.'

He brought me my coffee. I drank it, I had more, smoked a cigarette and then I was OK. I mean I was still alive. When Candy came to take the empty cup, I asked him 'How much are you getting for your silence? I bet less than two hundred.'

He smiled a bad smile. He still didn't like me. 'Maybe you give me two hundred so I don't say what I saw last night.'

'You didn't see anything. There was nothing to see. Now get out of here, Candy, because I'm waking up.'

I went to the living room. She was there and she was surprised to see me. 'I didn't know you were here, Mr Marlowe.'

She was hard to believe. I walked over closer to her. She was wearing something strange on a chain around her neck. It was some kind of army badge. I asked her about it.

'I had a peculiar dream last night,' she said. 'Someone I used to know came to see me. That's why I'm wearing this.' She touched the badge gently. 'He gave it to me.'

'I had a peculiar dream, too,' I said, looking right at her, 'but now I'm awake and I don't dream when I'm awake. What I'm saying is I don't think I'll come here again. There's something wrong here. Very wrong.'

'Oh, Roger will be fine in a day or two. You'll see.'

'No, he won't,' I said. 'If you want to help him, you'll get him the right kind of doctor - and quick. But,' I added, not caring that it was nasty, 'I don't think you really want to help him.'

I left her there in her living room, her husband upstairs sleeping a drugged sleep, her pretty necklace around her pretty neck, and her pretty violet eyes full of anger at what I had said. I drove home down a beautiful road and saw nothing beautiful.

Chapter 8. The Smell of Gunsmoke

At home, I had a long shower, shaved, changed into fresh clothes and began to feel clean again. I read a story in a magazine that was good but not great. At midday my telephone rang.

It was the Doctor's wife. She said she had to see me. I told her I'd meet her at my office. I stopped for a sandwich on the way so she was already there when I came in. I never remember to lock up.

'You don't even have a secretary,' she said.

'No, I don't. Why, are you looking for a job?'

'You couldn't pay me enough,' she said.

'You're wrong. I've got money. I've got a five-thousand-dollar bill.' I took it out of my safe and she looked at it carefully.

'You got this from Terry Lennox. He used to carry it around. A good luck piece or something. You drove him to Tijuana. You also don't think he killed my sister. Did he give you a list of her special friends, is that it? Is that why you've been at the Wade's, holding Roger's hand? Because you think maybe Roger killed Sylvia when he was, I don't know, drunk and crazy?'

'I met the Wades because a New York publisher wants a book finished, Mrs Loring. Terry gave me no list, no names. And yes, I was supposed to help Wade but I can't.' That was all the explanation she deserved.

But there was a question I wanted answered, too.

'I saw you at Victor's the other night. You were having a rather unusual drink, I noticed. Could it be that you don't think Terry killed your sister?'

'What I think doesn't matter,' she said. She meant it, too. 'I didn't come here to talk about Terry Lennox in any case. I came to invite you to my house.'

'Why?'

'Someone would like to talk with you.'

I had a strong feeling who that someone would be. 'The old man?'

She frowned. It was a pretty frown. 'I don't call him that, Mr Marlowe. Will you come?'

I said yes. Even a cat can look at a king.

We went in her car. The driver was a black man in his middle fifties who even opened our doors when we stopped in front of her house, which was just about the ugliest piece of

architecture I had ever seen. It looked like a sandcastle that a little boy builds when he's mad at his parents. Mrs Loring saw my expression and smiled. 'Horrible, isn't it? My father gave it to me as a wedding present. My husband loves it.'

We went in. Someone opened the door for us and then vanished. From the hall we entered a room that was at least seventy feet long. At the far end, a man was sitting, waiting. He gave us both the same cold stare.

Mrs Loring made the introductions and apologized just in case we were late.

'Tell them to bring the tea,' he said. 'Sit down, Mr Marlowe.'

I sat down and we looked at each other without talking at all until the tea came.

'Two cups,' Harlan Potter commanded as his daughter poured. 'You can have your tea in another room, Linda.'

She smiled weakly and left. I took out a cigarette.

'Don't smoke, please. It bothers my health.'

I had to believe him, although he certainly didn't look sick. He was a long way over six feet and nearly as wide as he was tall. His hair was not yet grey. His voice seemed to come from the next room. So this is what a hundred million dollars looks like, I thought.

He didn't even touch his tea. He just talked. He said he knew who I was, what I was, and what I had done for Terry. He went on to say that my investigation was interfering in his private life. I told him I wasn't investigating anything at the moment. He disagreed.

'Perhaps you think Roger Wade is involved in my daughter's death. Forget that idea. Forget you even know Roger Wade. I don't read his books myself,' he said, 'but I have been told that they are quite childish. As childish as whatever strange ideas you may have.'

I explained again how I had come to meet Wade. I told him about Menendez, too, but he said the name meant nothing to him. I asked him what I could do to make him happier.

'All I want is peace and quiet, Mr Marlowe. I pay good money for it, and I expect it. We live in a dirty world where everyone wants to hear terrible stories about the rich and the powerful. I repeat; I pay money to keep my life private. How much do you want, Marlowe?'

'Nothing, I don't want your money. If I get rich, I might become like you.'

He laughed. Then he stood up and I saw just how much over six feet he was. He was very big. When he shook my hand, my fingers cried.

'Just don't be a hero, young man. It's not a very clever role for a clever man.'

Mrs Loring's driver took me home but wouldn't accept the dollar I tried to give him. So I tried to give him a book of poetry, but he said he already had that book.

Life left me alone again for another week and then I got two telephone calls in one morning, and I was back into what Harlan Potter had clearly told me to stay away from.

The first caller was Roger Wade. He wasn't crying for help this time; he was inviting me to lunch. I accepted.

The second call was from that friend of George Peters. He was back in town. He said he didn't know if it would help now, but he was sure he had seen Terry Lennox in New York a few years back, and that his name then had been Paul Marston. He added that Marston had been wearing a British Army badge.

With this new information I decided to talk to someone who was supposed to know what was going on. I telephoned Green at Homicide. He wasn't pleased to hear from me.

'War record? You don't listen, do you, Marlowe? The investigation is over. But if you can't sleep nights worrying about it, I'll tell you. Lennox had no war record.'

I told him Mendy's story.

'Mendy is a gangster. He is also a liar. And you're a fool to believe him.'

He didn't give me a chance to tell him what I thought he was. He just hung up.

I drove to Wade's house at noon. It was too hot to be a nice day. Even the wind was hot.

The house was cool, though. Wade took me into his study. A pile of papers next to the typewriter impressed me.

'The book?' I asked.

'Yes, and it's rotten. I'm not a writer anymore. I'm someone who used to write. Want a drink?'

'A soda, please.'

'Very clever. I think I'll have one, too.' He rang a bell and Candy came.

'Two sodas, and we'll have lunch in an hour,' he told the Mexican.

'It's Thursday, boss. My day off, remember?'

'Then just make us some sandwiches.'

'I'm not the cook, boss.'

Wade gave him a narrow look. 'I'm having lunch with my friend. The cook is off today.'

'You think he's your friend,' Candy said, glancing at me, 'maybe you should ask your wife.'

'Watch your mouth, little man,' Wade warned, suddenly angry. 'Remember who pays you.'

Candy smiled. 'OK, boss, I'll get lunch.' He left for the kitchen.

'But what are you paying him for?' I asked Wade.

'You're going to start that again?'

'And the good man that died for you? Let me tell you. Terry Lennox. Candy knows you were seeing Sylvia, so you pay him.'

Wade asked me, 'You think I killed her?'

'I'm not looking for her killer. What's driving you insane is that you don't know. You were drunk and you don't remember. That's how it was.'

He was going to say something but Candy came in carrying the sandwiches and two bottles of beer. Wade looked at the beer and shook his head. 'Get me a real drink, Candy.'

The Mexican said there was only beer and that he was leaving now; he reminded Wade again that it was his day off.

'So go. I'll get the stuff myself.'

They left the room together and then Wade returned a minute later with a bottle of whisky and a glass. He filled it, drank, then filled it again.

'Where's your wife?' I asked him as he put the bottle and the glass down on his desk.

'Why? Are you in love?' The whisky was already at work.

'I ask because I don't want to leave you alone, now that you're going to fall to pieces again. I wouldn't want you to shoot the ceiling again.'

He looked at me with deep worry in his eyes. 'I really did that, didn't I? You know, I can't remember.'

'That's your whole trouble,' I told him. 'Is the gun still in the desk?' I had put it there that night. Today, I didn't want him in the same room with it.

'I don't know where it is, but it's not in the desk,' he said. 'Look for yourself.'

I did, and it wasn't there. Eileen must have hidden it from him.

'Now that you've had your look around,' he said, the whisky in charge once more, 'why don't you leave me alone? I'm tired of your face.'

I took my sandwich to a table and some chairs outside. It was a little hotter here, but it was nicer than being with Wade. I watched a boat zip up and down the lake. The people in the boat were laughing. They were talking to each other but I couldn't hear anything except the loud roar of the boat's engine. After I finished my sandwich, I went back and put my head in at the door of the study.

'Go away,' Wade said, and shook the half-empty whisky bottle at me.

I went back outside to wait for someone to come home and keep an eye on the fool. The boat continued to roar along the shore of the lake. I walked down to get a closer look. The man behind the wheel waved at me. Maybe he didn't know he was wrecking a nice quiet afternoon and maybe he knew and didn't care. I walked back to the house. The boat moved down the lake and took its awful noise with it. At the top of the garden steps, I heard the doorbell ringing. I went in and opened the door for Eileen Wade.

'Oh, Mr Marlowe. I thought it was Candy or Roger. I forgot my key.'

'It's Candy's day off.'

There must have been something in my voice.

'Is anything wrong?' she asked.

'Well, a little drinking is being done. He's in his study. Probably asleep by now. And I must get going.'

'Oh, don't go. Stay and have some tea.'

I don't know why I said yes. I didn't want any tea.

She took off her jacket. 'I'll just look in and see if Roger is all right.'

I watched her cross to the study door and open it. She looked in for a moment and closed the door and came back.

'Yes, he's asleep. I have to go upstairs, but I'll be right back down.'

She went up and I heard her door close. I went to the study. If he was sleeping, he wouldn't need whatever was left in the bottle. I opened the door.

There was perfect silence and a strong smell of gunsmoke in the room. Before I was half-way to where he lay on the sofa, I knew he was dead.

Chapter 9. The Kiss of Death

Beside him on the sofa was the gun. It was bloodstained. The side of his head was more than bloodstained.

I touched his wrist. It was warm but he was quite dead. I looked around for a note but there wasn't one. They don't always leave notes. I wondered why I hadn't heard the shot and then I remembered the boat. He must have waited until the boat was passing, and then fired the bullet. Why would he wait for the boat? I didn't like that but nobody cared what I liked.

I went out and closed the door. She was in the kitchen making our tea. I didn't say anything except that I didn't take sugar or milk. She said she'd learned to drink tea in London, during the war. When she met that man - but she stopped the story there and changed the subject.

She started talking about her husband - something would have to be done to help him. I said it was too late. She didn't understand that remark at first, then she glanced towards the study.

'Is ... is there something wrong in there?'

I nodded. She ran out of the kitchen and by the time I reached her she was kneeling by the sofa.

I left her there with him and called the police. A cop was at the house within five minutes. When I took him to the study, she was still kneeling by the body.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but you really shouldn't touch anything.'

'It's my husband,' she said angrily. 'He's been shot.' She looked right at me. 'I think he did it,' she said, pointing.

It wasn't a nice thing to say, but I got lucky. The police detective who showed up ten minutes later was my friend Bernie Ohls. He was my friend but that didn't mean he didn't have to think about it first.

'You were here with him alone, right? She says you knew where the gun was. Although it looks more like suicide right now. And you're maybe too clever to be the only person around when you kill someone. Maybe, but I think you would have done it differently.'

'Thanks, Bernie. You're right, though; I would have.'

'So it looks good for suicide. Except that Wade was rich, his beautiful wife is upstairs crying for him, and I can't see why he'd want to kill himself. If you know ... if you know anything, you'd better be ready to talk. I'll see you later. Maybe sooner.'

As it turned out, I had time to go home, change, have a nice dinner out and come home again before Ohls called. The message was simple: come to the sheriff's office and don't bother stopping to buy flowers.

The Wade house was in Idle Valley, outside the city border. Idle Valley had its own sheriff, and he was investigating Wade's death. In theory, the sheriff ran his own office, but the sheriff was as stupid as he was honest, and he was very honest. He looked great in photographs and he was almost as big as the horse he rode in the annual Idle Valley Festival, but the horse was cleverer. The sheriff knew it and he let his captain, a man named Hernandez, do the real police work. It was Hernandez and Ohls who threw the questions at me. How did I first meet Wade? When? What work did I do for him? I told them the truth, but I didn't tell everything. Then we reached the part that most interested Hernandez.

'The night that Wade fired a gun in his bedroom you went into Eileen Wade's room and you were in there together for some time with the door shut. How long would you say you spent in there?'

'About three minutes.'

Hernandez shook his head. 'I suggest you were in there for a few hours,' he said coldly.

I looked at Ohls but Bernie wouldn't look at me.

'Three minutes,' I repeated.

'Get that servant in here,' Hernandez said.

Ohls went out and came back with Candy.

I knew what was coming. Candy told his story in a low nasty voice. He said he'd seen me go into the bedroom and that he had come up the stairs and listened at the door and heard whispers. He said I didn't come out for a long time.

When he had finished, he gave me a hard look and I could see hate in his eyes.

The captain said 'Take him out.'

'Just a minute,' I said. 'I'd like to ask him a question.'

Hernandez didn't like that but he let me.

'Where were you when you saw me go into her bedroom?'

'I was cleaning up the glasses at the bar.'

'And you saw me go into her bedroom and close the door?'

Candy said yes.

'You're lying. You can't see that door from the bar. I'm four inches taller than you and when I stood at the bar at the party, I couldn't see more than the top edge of that door.'

Candy did not deny this. He said nothing at all. Hernandez asked 'What about how long you were in the room?'

I said that was my word against Candy's, and I reminded them that Candy had just lied. He could believe either of us, I told him. Hernandez sent Candy out. Then he told me I could go home but that I'd have to come back the next day to sign the statement I'd made. He even shook my hand when I left. I guessed that meant he believed me.

* * *

A few days later, they closed that investigation, too. It was suicide, they said.

Ohls came over that afternoon. It was over but that didn't mean he had to like the answer.

'Wade was a writer, Marlowe. That's what bothers me. He wrote books, he wrote notes to himself, he wrote all the time. And then he kills himself and he doesn't even write a goodbye. It seems wrong.'

I pointed out that Wade had been drunk. That didn't satisfy Bernie.

'There's the boat, too. Why would you care if anyone heard the last shot you'd ever fire? Or the wife who forgets her keys and has to ring the bell to get in when she could have walked around to the back of the house and come in from the garden? I've been a policeman too long and it just doesn't smell right. I would swear she did it except there's no motive. She could have divorced him and still made a fortune.'

He talked for an hour about the Wades, and for an hour I talked about them, too, but all my talk couldn't cover up the fact that I wasn't telling him everything. He left angry; angry at everybody, including me.

I talked to someone else the next day who wasn't any happier about Wade's death than Bernie was, but for different reasons. Howard Spencer called from New York to say he'd been informed of the suicide, and that he'd heard I was somehow involved. I found myself explaining everything again. I was getting tired of apologizing for what Wade had chosen to do. In fact, the more I thought about him, the less I liked this dead man. Spencer said he was going to fly in one day soon; we said we'd talk then, although I had nothing more to say.

Roger Wade was dead and so was Terry Lennox, but there was a difference; I still cared about Terry. I called Mendy to get some facts straight.

'Mendy, this is Marlowe.'

'Hello, Cheapie, how are you.'

'Haven't you heard? Another friend of mine killed himself. They're going to call me the Kiss of Death from now on. I also have a question. About Paul Marston.'

'Never heard of him,' Mendy said immediately.

'No games, Mendy. That was the name Lennox used in New York and probably before there.'

'So?'

'There are no army records under either name. That story of yours was all a song.'

Mendy didn't like being called a liar. 'I never said where it happened. Take my advice and forget the whole thing. You were told. Now stay told.'

'Some types scare me, Mendy, but you're not one of them. Ever been to England?'

He ignored my question. Instead he said 'Big Willie Magoon wasn't scared, either. Seen the newspapers? Maybe he's still not scared but I doubt it. He's in the hospital and he's going to be there a long time.'

'I don't want to talk about Magoon. I want to talk about England and you and Randy Starr and Paul Marston.'

There was a short silence on his end of the line. Then he made up his mind. 'OK, Cheapie. I tell you the whole story and then your curiosity dies, right? Otherwise you do. We were with the British. It happened in Norway, in November 1942. Now you know it all. Now you can rest your tired brain.'

He hung up. I went out and bought a newspaper and read about poor Magoon. Of course, Mendy had promised me worse, because Magoon was a policeman, a dirty cop but still one of the boys, and gangsters don't like to kill policemen. They don't care about private detectives, though. Some days it seems no one does.

Except perhaps another private detective. I called George Peters and asked him to help. He said he would. 'I know a few good people in England. You'll get what you want.'

* * *

He didn't disappoint me. When Howard Spencer called the next Friday, I had it all.

He was staying at the Ritz-Beverly Hotel, and he suggested we meet in the bar. But I wanted to talk in private, so I went to his room instead.

He had it nice. The room was big, and the view was good. He ordered our drinks over the telephone.

'Now, Mr Marlowe, what can you tell me before I see Mrs Wade?'

'Nothing.'

He looked at me with surprise. 'I mean concerning Roger Wade's death. I understand you were there.'

I nodded. 'I'd like to come with you to see Mrs Wade,' I said.

Spencer shook his head. 'I don't think she wishes to see you. She blames you, in part, for what happened, I think.'

'She told the police I killed him. I know she doesn't want to see me. That's why I want to go with you. I want a witness to what I have to say to her, too.'

'What are you going to say?'

'You hear it in front of her or not at all,' I said.

'Then not at all. Eileen has suffered enough. I won't take you there to bother her more.'

That made sense. He wanted the book that Wade had been working on. He wanted to save Eileen Wade from more pain. I said that these were fine aims but I didn't share them. All I wanted was a clearer picture. I told him the details that had bothered Ohls.

'My God,' he said, 'the police don't think Eileen did it, do they?'

I didn't tell him the investigation was closed. I just gave him a tired smile and let him do his own thinking.

'You want to talk to her, and you want a witness. I hope to God you're crazy, but I'll do it,' he said finally.

Chapter 10. A Big Noise About Small Things

The drive to Idle Valley was long and hot, as always. I expected the heat but Spencer was shocked.

'This heat, this dust. I thought California was supposed to have beautiful weather.'

I told him it would be cooler by the lake.

'It was a mistake for Roger to move here, you know. Wrong environment entirely. Too many parties, this awful heat, no wonder he didn't feel like writing. A writer needs things to think about; and not just what he's going to wear to the next good time.'

I didn't have a chance to disagree with him because we had reached the house. Spencer was out of the car as soon as I had parked, and he rang the bell as soon as he got to the door. Candy, wearing his white jacket and his usual frown, let the publisher in and then closed the door as I approached. I rang and he put his head out.

'Get lost. Or do you want trouble?'

I pushed right past him. He reached for me but Eileen Wade was standing there and he stopped.

'Hello, Howard,' she said warmly to Spencer. 'I'm so sorry you missed lunch. And I didn't know you were bringing Mr Marlowe.'

Spencer said simply 'He wants to talk to you.'

She was surprised. 'Does he? I can't imagine why but do come in and sit down.'

Spencer went at once to the study for the pages Wade had written. I sat in an uncomfortable silence with Eileen Wade until I noticed that she was wearing that badge again. She had just handed it to me when Spencer returned with his pile of papers.

'It's the badge of an English Army group, the Artists' Rifles they were called. The man who gave it to me was lost right afterwards, in Andalsnes in Norway, in 1940.'

'And you were in love with him,' I said.

She admitted it proudly.

'And he had my initials.'

'His name was quite different,' she said coldly, 'and he is dead. Dead.'

I handed the badge to Spencer. He took it without showing interest. 'I've seen it before,' he said.

'Just help me. The picture on it is a long knife that points down and there's a pair of wings, too. The writing on it says "Who dares wins".'

Spencer was unimpressed. 'I fail to see what you are trying to say.'

'This badge she says she was given in London in 1940 didn't exist then. It was created years later. And the Artists' Rifles never fought in Andalsnes.'

Spencer put the badge down gently on the table and pushed it towards Eileen. He said nothing.

'I know that,' Eileen said.

'There must be some mistake,' Spencer offered.

I gave him a hard stare. 'That's one way of putting it,' I said.

'Another way is to say I'm a liar,' Eileen said angrily. 'That I never met a man named Paul Marston, that he never existed, that I bought this badge in a shop somewhere. Would that explanation satisfy you, Mr Marlowe?'

I said the shop would, but not the first part. There had been a Paul Marston once. She had certainly met him. In fact, she had done more than that. I took a folded paper from my pocket.

'She's forgotten a few dates, years, that's all,' Spencer said. 'I don't see why you're being so tough with her.'

I smiled, but not from joy. 'She's forgotten a lot more than that.' I waved the paper from my pocket. 'In August 1942, Eileen Victoria Sampsell and Paul Edward Marston were married.'

In a sense Mrs Wade is right. Marston never existed because that was just a name he used. In the army you have to have permission to get married. In the army, Marston had another name.'

Spencer was very quiet now. He stared, but not at both of us. He stared at her. She had to say something. 'Howard, he's dead, it doesn't matter. And Roger knew. And he didn't care.'

Spencer did the right thing as he saw it. He believed her. 'Let's forget it. Marlowe made a big show out of a badge and the marriage. That's all.'

She had him on her side now. She said 'Mr Marlowe makes a big noise about small things, but when it comes to saving a man's life-'

'And you never saw Paul Marston again,' I said.

'How could I when he was dead?'

'He was not reported dead. He might have been taken prisoner.'

'There was an order not to take prisoners,' she said in a cold, sad voice.

'That's enough, Marlowe,' Spencer interrupted. 'I think it's time we left.' He began packing up the papers into his leather case.

'If that's what you want, Mr Spencer. But do you think I came here to tell Mrs Wade she was wearing the wrong badge? I began with Marston long before I met Mrs Wade. When I started, my Paul Marston was still alive.'

'Marston is not such an unusual name,' Spencer said. 'There must be many Paul Marstons.'

'Maybe. But how many Paul Marstons would you say had big scars on their faces and snow-white hair? How many that saved the lives of two gangsters? Marston wasn't just Marston, Spencer. He was also Terry Lennox.'

* * *

I didn't expect anyone to jump up and scream and nobody did. There is, however, a kind of silence that is almost as loud as a shout and I had it all around me now. I sat in it for a full minute and then I turned to Eileen.

She sat leaning forward. Her face was pale. When she spoke, her voice was as empty as the voice on the telephone that tells you the time, minute after minute without changing.

'I saw him once, Howard. We didn't speak. He was terribly changed. When I saw him he was with that awful woman. And I was married to Roger. We were lost to each other. Even if I hadn't been married, I couldn't have forgiven him for marrying her. That horrible woman. I didn't care that Roger went around with her; he was just my husband. Paul was much more than that to me or he was nothing. In the end he was nothing.'

She wasn't talking to me but I said, 'I wouldn't say he was nothing.'

'Less than nothing. He knew what kind of woman she was and still he married her. Then he couldn't stand it and he killed her and ran away and killed himself. Nothing.'

'He didn't kill her,' I said, 'and you know it.'

She looked at me in surprise. Spencer made a funny sound in his throat.

'Roger killed her,' I continued, 'and you also know that.'

'Did he tell you?' she asked quietly.

'He didn't have to. He would have told me sooner or later. It was driving him crazy.'

She shook her head. 'No, Mr Marlowe, what was driving him crazy was that he didn't know. He was so drunk when he did it that he couldn't remember afterwards. He tried to remember because he knew something was wrong. Perhaps that memory came back to him at the very end.'

Spencer couldn't believe a man could kill and forget it. Eileen smiled a very sad smile.

'I was there, Howard. I saw him do it.'

She's going to tell us, I thought. She can't stop herself now. And she talked, and we listened. She had followed Roger to Sylvia's guest house. An argument started between Roger and Sylvia. Eileen watched from the shadows. Roger came outside, Sylvia ran after him. She tried to hit him with a small stone vase she was holding. He took it from her and he hit her. Then he hit her again, and she fell down and he kept hitting her. Before Eileen ran, she saw him pick Sylvia's body up and carry it back inside.

'When Roger came home that night I was terrified. He was covered in blood and still blind drunk. I took his clothes off him as if he were a child, and put them in an old suitcase. He went right to sleep and I drove to Chatsworth Beach on the other side of the lake and threw the suitcase in. When Roger woke up, he remembered nothing. He never said a word about the clothes. I guess he never even noticed they were missing.'

Spencer was working on something while he listened and now he had it ready. 'Wait a minute. You knew Roger had killed Sylvia and yet you had me hire Marlowe, or try to hire him, to find out the terrible secret that was bothering your husband. That doesn't make sense. Unless...' He gave her a strange look, as if seeing her for the first time, 'Unless the idea was that Marlowe would find the truth and maybe tell Wade that the whole world would have to know. So Roger would take that gun and do just what he did anyway.'

She looked at Spencer with tears in her eyes. 'That's horrible, Howard. You know I could never-'

'I don't know,' Spencer said coolly. 'But you know. Did you?'

'Did I what?' she asked.

'Shoot Roger,' he said calmly.

'You're horrible. He was my husband. I forgot my key, I came in, he was already dead.'

Spencer shook his head. 'I've stayed here a dozen times, Eileen, and I've never known the front door to be locked.'

She stood up. 'Howard, take the book and go. Call the police if you think I killed Roger. But don't ever come back here.'

I wanted one last answer.

'Wait a minute, Mrs Wade. Let's finish the job. We're all trying to do the right thing. That old suitcase you threw in the lake at Chatsworth Beach - was it heavy?'

'Yes, it was.'

'So how did you get it over that high fence? They close the gate there after dark.'

She thought about it. 'The fence. I had a hard time with the fence but I got it over.'

'There isn't any fence,' I said.

'Isn't any fence?' she repeated.

'And Sylvia Lennox was killed inside the guest house, on the bed. And there are other details you missed.'

She said nothing, she just walked away. We watched her go up the stairs. We heard her bedroom door close.

'What was that about the fence?' Spencer asked. He looked like a man who'd just fought a battle. He was tired in that way.

'A bad joke. I've never been near Chatsworth Beach. It might have a fence and it might not.'

'I see,' he said unhappily. 'But she didn't know, either.'

'Of course not. Which means she killed them both.'

Then something moved behind me and Candy was standing there. He was playing with his knife again but this time he wasn't thinking about giving me the blade.

'I'm sorry, Senior,' he said to me. 'I was wrong about you. She killed the boss.' He looked at his knife again.

'No,' I said. I stood up and held out my hand. 'Give me the knife, Candy. To the cops you're just a Mexican servant. They'd arrest you for it and love it. They've made a mess of this from start to finish, and they'd use you to make people forget that. You'd spend the rest of your life in jail.'

He put the knife in my hand. 'Only for you I do this.'

I put the knife in my pocket. Candy asked what would happen now. I said we'd do nothing, but Spencer insisted we had to do something. He mentioned calling the police.

'Tomorrow. Or let them catch her themselves. We don't have enough proof. The truth is not legal proof. If it was, we wouldn't have lawyers.'

In the end Spencer said he'd do whatever I thought was best. He was OK, he was doing fine, but this wasn't something he knew about. It wasn't books.

We left. As I walked out, I handed Candy back his knife. 'Don't do a thing. Nobody trusts me but I trust you, Candy.'

'Thank you, Senior. I trust you, too.'

I returned Spencer to his hotel and went home. I watched the clock and the hours went slowly. I fell asleep very late and the telephone rang in the middle of my first dream.

'Yes?'

'This is Candy, Senior. The lady is dead.' It's a hard word, dead, and when he said it he made it sound like stone. 'She took some pills, I think.'

'Have you called the police?'

'Not yet,' he said.

'Call them. Was there a note?'

'Yes, a letter.'

'Give it to them when they come. And tell them everything and this time only the truth, right?'

'Yes, Senior. I'll call them right now.'

CHAPTER 11. A Little Trap

I hung up and took a shower and shaved. I dressed quickly because I knew I didn't have much time. I was tying my shoes when my time ran out.

'Hello, Marlowe,' Bernie Ohls said when I picked up the telephone. 'Come down here and suffer.'

It was different this time. It was another suicide but this was the real thing. They were not happy with me but there was nothing they could threaten me with. Hernandez listened to my story and this time he didn't make any suggestions as to what else I might want to say. There was Eileen Wade's full confession, too, but the DA didn't want it because he had already believed another confession to the Lennox murder. The sheriff's office, on the other hand, liked the confession. They liked it because they didn't like the DA. Dr Loring showed up because she had been his patient and she had killed herself with his medicine. We were not glad to see each other. After the doctor left, I was told I could go, too. Ohls took me out through another room.

He pointed out a small pile of papers on a desk. 'Copies of the confession. It would be terrible if someone took one of them. The DA doesn't want this to become public.'

Then he went out into the hall to get some air, leaving me alone. He came back a minute later.

When we were out in the sunlight, I asked him 'You don't like the DA, do you, Bernie?'

Ohls smiled. 'I like everybody. I even like you. Not everyone does, though, and in a few days fewer people will like you, I think. I hope you still carry a gun.'

'I do,' I said, 'but it doesn't always help. The newspapers said that Willie Magoon was carrying two of them the night they put him in hospital.'

'That's right,' Ohls said. 'It would be a good idea to remember that.'

When I got home, I called Morgan, the reporter who'd given me the ride home from the police station that other time. We had a long conversation. He tried to persuade me not to do it, but he couldn't, and he was still a reporter and he wanted the story. He did warn me, though.

'When we print this confession, you're going to be the least popular person in town. The DA will know sooner or later where it came from. Potter will be so angry he might forget he's a gentleman. And Mendy will be angry, too, because he told you to leave it alone, and Mendy doesn't even pretend to be a gentleman.'

It was all true, and his advice was good advice.

'Print it, Morgan,' I said, and I read the whole letter to him from the copy I'd taken from the Sheriff's office.

It came out the next day, on the front page. The DA called it lies but the newspaper sold very well.

Bernie Ohls came over and we had another bad time together. He wondered why I hadn't called him with what I'd had against Eileen Wade. He said maybe I wanted her dead. I said I had just wanted her to take a long look at what she had done to two good men.

'You think you're a clever monkey, don't you, Marlowe?'

'What do you want me to say?'

'Nothing. It's too late. The hard boys will come for you. And it's very quiet here. Dark and quiet.'

'Why are you even here, Bernie? We were friends once but you can't really be friends with a cop, can you? Not a tough old one like you.'

He finished his beer and left. The day ended with some good songs on the radio.

* * *

The next day the DA made a full statement attacking Morgan's newspaper and he said a lot of pretty things about poor Mrs Wade and still the newspaper held to its position. I went to my office and did nothing special, nothing that I can remember, until the workday was over. I ate at a restaurant on the way home. I drove up Locust Avenue and it was as empty as usual. I parked and went up all my steps. I would have unlocked the door but it was already a few inches open.

'Come on in, Cheapie,' a familiar voice said. 'Welcome home.'

If I had taken my gun out right then I could have shot him. But I stood still a moment too long and someone slipped out of the bushes and pushed me through my own doorway.

Mendy was wearing another expensive suit and the same nasty smile. I didn't see him at first, though, because I was looking at the other man sitting in the corner of my living room. He had a gun lying across his knees and he was so brown from the sun that there in the half-dark I couldn't see his face at all.

Mendy wanted my attention. The man that had pushed me reminded me of that in a soft place on my arm. The pain disappeared very quickly but with it went the muscle in my arm. I looked at him. He was a big Mexican. He was tough. There is nothing tougher than a tough Mexican, just as there is nothing gentler than a gentle Mexican, or more honest than an honest Mexican, or, above all, nothing sadder than a sad Mexican, This guy was one of the hard ones. They don't come any harder anywhere.

Mendy stood in front of me. I was very interested in the gun in his right hand, and it looked interested in me.

'You didn't listen, Cheapie.' He hit me with the gun. It hurt.

'You shouldn't have to do this yourself,' I said, surprised that my mouth still worked. 'You should have some boys do it for you. Like you did to Willie Magoon.'

He smiled again. 'No, Magoon was business. He tried to push me. He bought that big car of his with my money and then he tried to push me. You, Marlowe, are personal. You embarrassed me professionally. I can't let you do that.'

I shook my head. 'There's more to it than that. What happened? Your friend Lennox was innocent but you never moved a finger to prove it, and then I came and did the work you should have done. He saved your life and you didn't do anything. Because you're no friend, and you're not big, you're just a loud boy who can't think of anyone but himself.'

His face froze and he lifted the gun to hit me again. I didn't think; I didn't have a plan. I was just tired of being hit. I kicked him full in the stomach. As he went down, I hit him again, with my knee. Then I waited to be shot, and nothing happened. I looked around. The hard one was standing by the door, watching me. He didn't even bother to look at Mendy, who was now lying on the floor, gasping.

At last, the man in the chair moved. He stood up, put his gun away, and laughed. 'Don't kill him, Marlowe, we need him alive.'

That was when Bernie Ohls walked in, whistling.

'Hello, Marlowe. You've cut your face.' He gestured at Mendy, who was still on the floor. 'Take this soft baby out of here,' he ordered the laughing man.

'He's not soft,' I said. 'He's hurt. Anybody can be hurt. Was Willie Magoon soft?'

'No,' Ohls admitted. 'And now we've got the words from Mendy's own mouth about Magoon. Because gangsters can't touch policemen in this town. It's against all the rules. We will remind Mendy of that. It worked well, this little trap. A few cuts on your face, but I'd say you deserved them.'

They led Mendy away and left me alone in my dark, quiet house. I thought about it for a few minutes and then I made a telephone call.

'Marlowe? I know that name. Right, a friend of Terry's. How can I help you?' He had a businessman's calm voice.

'You can tell me about Mexico, Mr Starr. I just had a visit from Mendy and I don't think he was mad at me for ... something in the newspaper. It was Mexico. Something is wrong here. The confession Lennox wrote was false. How many other lies are there? He wrote me a letter which was mailed by someone. Who?'

Randy Starr said 'I have no idea, Mr Marlowe.'

'I think you should find out, Mr Starr. If you don't, someone else will.'

'You, Marlowe?' He didn't sound like the calm businessman now.

'Not me. A man so big you could get hurt if he sneezed. So find out, Mr Starr.'

The next day I went to see the lawyer who had been to Mexico to watch them bury Lennox. He was surprised to see me but was not unfriendly.

'You're a stubborn one, aren't you, Marlowe? Still digging?'

'Yes, Mr Endicott, still digging. I wonder if you could give me a few minutes?'

'Why not?' he said.

'Can I assume that you were representing Harlan Potter when you came to see me in jail?'

Endicott nodded.

'I suppose Potter is very unhappy with me these days,' I continued, but to my surprise the lawyer said he wasn't.

'Mr Potter blames his son-in-law, Dr Loring. He feels that if that Wade woman hadn't been using those drugs that the doctor gave her, none of this would have happened.'

'He's wrong. You saw Terry's body in Otatoclan, didn't you?'

'I did indeed.'

'He didn't look the same, did he?'

'You mean the colour? No, he was darker, much darker. His hair was black. But the scar was still there and we took his fingerprints. There's no question it was him.'

I asked him the next question twice before he understood it. 'A mailbox? No, I don't remember seeing a mailbox.'

I showed him Terry's letter. He read it slowly.

'I wonder why he did it,' he said when he had finished reading.

'Why he sent the letter?'

'No, of course not. Why he confessed and killed himself. As for the mailbox, perhaps he saw something that looked like one. Otatoclan isn't a modern town.'

'I know,' I said. 'I looked it up. A population of one thousand, no good roads, a small local airport, one hotel. Not a place you'd find a mailbox.'

Endicott was trying to understand. 'What do you think it would mean if there wasn't a mailbox?'

I said I didn't know. What I didn't say was that I was sure I would find out one day.

Chapter 12. The Long Goodbye

A month went by in which I learned nothing new. Then I came into the office one day and found a stranger waiting for me. A tall, well-dressed Mexican. He sat by the open window smoking a brown cigarette that smelled strong. He was wearing his black hair longer than we do north of the border. He was also wearing green sunglasses. He stood up politely.

'Senor Marlowe?'

'What can I do for you?'

He handed me a folded piece of paper and told me in Spanish that it was an introduction from Senor Starr of Las Vegas.

'Let's speak English,' I said, 'if you speak English.'

'Of course I do,' he said. He didn't have much of an accent, but he spoke in the American Spanish way, stressing every second or third word in his sentences.

I unfolded the paper and read 'This introduces a friend of mine, Cisco Maioranos. I think he can help you. S.'

'Let's go into my office, Senor Maioranos,' I said, and held the inner door open for him. I smelled perfume as he went past me. He had a thin, neat moustache. He looked delicate and

harmless. Except he probably wasn't as delicate as he looked, because he had knife scars on both cheeks.

'You wish to know about Senor Lennox,' he said as he sat down. 'I was working at the hotel in Otatoclan.'

'You don't look the type.'

'Sometimes life is difficult,' he said.

'Who mailed the letter to me?'

'I mailed it,' he said. He took out a cigarette case and offered it to me as he lit another cigarette for himself.

'I don't like Cuban cigarettes, thank you. You mailed the letter?'

'That's correct. The boy was afraid to go up to the room because there was a policeman outside the door. A cop, as you say. So I went up and he gave me the letter.'

'There was a lot of money in that letter, Senor Maioranos. You should have looked inside.'

'The letter was not open,' he said coldly. 'I am an honest man.'

'I apologize. Continue please.'

'I went into his room with the coffee. He was holding a gun. The letter was on the table. He told me to take it and go. He gave me some money. Naturally, I gave it to the boy later.'

'I was on my way down the stairs when I heard the shot. I hid the letter and came right back. The police were in the room. Senor Lennox was dead.'

I asked him if the hotel had been full.

He thought for a moment. He lit another Cuban cigarette.

'No,' he said, 'it was not full. Perhaps six or seven guests.'

'Americans?' I asked.

'Yes, two American hunters. One of them spoke border Spanish, I think.'

'Did they go near Lennox's room at all?'

'Why should they?' It wasn't an answer but I couldn't see his eyes because of the sunglasses, so I didn't know why he hadn't answered.

'Well,' I said, standing up, 'it was nice of you to come here. You can thank Randy for me. And you can tell him, too, that next time he can send somebody that knows what he's talking about.'

He stared at me hard. I looked at those knife scars again. He had not always been a polite man in a hotel. He did not like being doubted.

'Let's try this,' I said. 'The two Americans were two men named Menendez and Starr. They did go into Lennox's room. Lennox knew they were there. He knew why. He wrote me that letter because he felt guilty. He had tricked me and a man like Lennox doesn't like tricking his friends. By the way, did you put the letter in the mailbox?'

Maioranos frowned. 'Mailbox? Otatoclan is not Mexico City, Senor. There is no mailbox.'

'No, there isn't. And there was no coffee. You did not bring Lennox anything. You did not go into his room. The Americans did. One of them took a gun and shot Lennox. He shot him very carefully, so that the bullet did not go into Lennox. It gave him a nasty wound but it did not kill him. The idea was to fool the lawyer that would come down. So when he came, Lennox was drugged and packed in ice and the lawyer saw him in a dark room. The fingerprints were real enough but Lennox wasn't dead. The Americans paid the Mexican policeman, of course. They must have paid a few people. Isn't all this possible?'

Maioranos seemed to be thinking it over.

'Possible, yes. Policemen everywhere have to eat. Otatoclan is far away from the cities and no one asks too many questions there. It is all possible except for one thing, Senor.'

'What's that?'

'If it is true, then I am a liar. Then I did not go in and give him his coffee and take his letter.'

'You were already in there, pal - writing the letter.'

The tall Mexican took off his sunglasses. Nothing can change the colour of a man's eyes.

'I suppose it's a bit too early for a gin and lime,' he said.

They had done a wonderful job on him in Mexico. Why not? Their doctors, painters, architects, are as good as ours, sometimes better. They had changed his nose. They couldn't take the scar off, so they gave him another, on the other cheek. Knife scars are not uncommon south of the border.

'How close did I come?' I asked.

'Close enough. A few details wrong, but they are not important. We had to work very quickly. I was supposed to be followed to Otatoclan of course. Mendy didn't want me to write you, but I insisted.'

'You knew who killed Sylvia?'

He didn't give me a straight answer. 'It's tough to let a woman be arrested for murder - even if you never really loved her.'

'It's a tough world,' I said. 'Was Potter in this with you?'

He smiled. 'I don't think so. I'm not sure, but I think he believes I'm dead. Who would tell him otherwise - unless you did?'

'Don't worry. We don't have tea together any more. Have you heard that the police have Mendy?'

He smiled again. 'They had him. He's in Mexico now. He's not as bad as you think. He has a heart.'

'So does a snake.'

'How about that gin and lime?'

I got up without answering him and went to my safe. I opened it and took out the five-thousand-dollar bill. I put it on the desk in front of him. 'I enjoyed playing with it. But it's yours now.'

He looked at it but he didn't touch it.

'I've got plenty of money,' he said. 'You could have left things alone.'

'I know. After she had killed her husband she might have done more wonderful things. He was nothing special, anyway. Just a man. He knew what happened, too, and he tried hard to live with it. He wrote books. You may have heard of him.'

'I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I was frightened and I ran. If I'd stayed, I wouldn't have had a chance. What should I have done?'

'I don't know.'

'She was crazy. She might have killed him anyway.'

I agreed that she might. He smiled, thinking that fixed things between us. 'So let's go have a drink. Let's go to Victor's.'

'No time right now, Senor Maioranos.'

'We were good friends once, weren't we?' he asked unhappily.

'Were we? I forget. It seems to me it was two other guys who were friends,' I said quietly. 'Take back your money. It has too much blood on it.'

'You need the money.'

'How would you know?'

He picked the bill up and put it in his pocket. He bit his lower lip with the very white teeth you can have when you have brown skin.

'You remember I gave you a chance to call the police, to have me stopped, don't you?' he said suddenly.

'I'm not sore at you,' I said. 'You're just that kind of guy. For a long time I tried to understand you. You had good qualities but there was something wrong. You made your own rules. You were a nice guy but that was just luck, I think. You liked your gangsters as much as you liked honest men. Maybe the war did it to you but maybe you were born that way.'

'Don't you understand?' he said sadly. 'I couldn't have told you more than I did. You wouldn't have stood for it.'

'That's as nice a thing as was ever said to me.'

'You call them gangsters. I was in trouble, and they know about trouble. They owed me for the one right thing I did in my life. When I needed them, they were there. And for free. You're not the only one in the world who can't be bought, Marlowe.'

He took one of my cigarettes and had a little trouble lighting it.

'I can be bought, Terry. You bought a lot of me. For a smile and a nod and a few drinks in quiet bars here and there. It was nice while it lasted. So long, pal. I won't say goodbye. I said it to you when it meant something, when it was sad and lonely and final.'

'I came back too late,' he said. 'The doctors took a long time on my face.'

'You wouldn't have come at all if I hadn't been asking some difficult questions.'

I saw tears in his eyes. He put his green glasses back on quickly. 'They didn't want me to tell you anything.'

'I'm not judging you, Terry. I never did. You're a nice guy in many ways. It's just that you're not here any more. You've been gone for a long time. You've got nice clothes and you smell nice and you have a pretty little moustache.'

'That's just an act,' he said almost desperately.

'But you like it.'

'An act is all there is. There isn't anything else. I'm hollow inside. I've had it, Marlowe. I had it long ago. Well - I guess that's all we have to say.'

He put his hand out. I shook it. 'So long, Senor Maioranos.'

He said, 'Goodbye,' and walked out. I watched the door close. I listened to his footsteps. Did I want him to stop, to come back, to make me change the way I felt? Well, he didn't. That was the last time I saw him.

I never saw any of them again - except the cops. No way has yet been invented to say goodbye to them.

- THE END -

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