The Big Sleep

Paula Hopkins
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A tribute to Raymond Chandler
by
Paula Hopkins
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Chapter 1 - Intimate Encounter

It was about thirteen o’clock in the morning, mid-October, with the sunlamps not yet at full output and a look of cold hard rain in the distance over the dome supports. I was wearing a powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt and tie, black wingtips and black socks with dark blue chocks on them. I was neat, clean, closely-shaved everywhere and sober, and I didn’t care which surveillance systems knew it. I was everything the well-endowed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four trillion dollars.

The main hallway of the Sternwood place was over ten stories high. Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Siberian Mastodons, there was a huge animated display panel showing a guy in powered space-armour rescuing an alien-looking lady who was tied to an alien-looking tree and didn’t have any clothes on but did have some very long and conveniently revealing hair. The spaceman had pushed up the face-plate of his helmet to be sociable, and he was sucking at one of her taut hard nipples. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to fiddle with the animation controls and make sure they got it together good and proper. He didn’t seem to be really trying.

There were French doors at the back of the hall, beyond them a wide sweep of emerald grass to a white garage, in front of which a slim silver cyborg, still basically human but with shiny black legs, was dusting a maroon ground car. Beyond the garage were some decorative trees genetically engineered to form immense, twisted, erotic shapes. Beyond them a large icehouse with a domed roof. Then more trees and beyond everything the visibly-curved, uncomfortable line of the dome foundations.

On the spinward side of the hall a free staircase, tile-paved, rose to a gallery with a translucent force-field railing and another piece of animated erotica. Large powered chairs with rounded red seats had backed themselves into the vacant spaces of the wall around about. They didn’t look as if anybody ever sat in them. In the middle of the antispinward wall there was a big empty fireplace with a gold screen, and over the fireplace a marble mantel with angels and satyrs coupling energetically at the corners.

Above the mantel there was a large static portrait, and above the portrait two laser-seared or moth-eaten Space Rangers pennants
crossed in a plexiglass frame. The portrait was a stiffly posed job of an officer in full regimentals of about the time of the Second Jovian War. The officer had neat black mustachios, hot hard coal-black eyes, and the general look of a man it would pay to get along with. I thought this might be General Sternwood’s grandfather. I could hardly be the General himself, even though I had heard he was pretty far gone to have a couple of daughters still in their dangerous first century.

I was still staring at the hot black eyes when a door opened far back under the stairs. It wasn’t the butler droid coming back. It was a girl.

She looked twenty, although that means nothing these days, small and delicately put together. She wore nothing at all and walked as if she was floating. Her hair was a fine tawny wave. Her eyes were slate-grey, and had almost no expression when they looked at me. She came over near me and smiled with her mouth and she had little sharp predatory teeth, as white as fresh orange pith and as shiny as porcelain. They glistened between her thin taut lips.

“Tall, aren’t you?” she said.

“I didn’t mean to be.”

Her eyes rounded. She was puzzled. She was thinking. I could see, even on this short acquaintance, that thinking was always going to be a bother to her.

“Handsome too,” she said, “And I bet you know it.”

I grunted.

“What’s your name?”

“Rogers,” I said, “Doghouse Rogers.”

“That’s a funny name.”

She licked her lips and turned her head a little and looked at me. Then she lowered her lashes until they almost cuddled her cheeks and slowly raised them again, like a retro theatre curtain. I was to get to know that trick. That was supposed to make me roll over on my back with all four paws in the air.

“Are you a prize-fighter?” she asked, when I didn’t.

“Not exactly, I’m a sleuth.”

“You’re making fun of me.”
She tossed her head angrily, and the rich colour of it glistened in the rather dim light of the big hall. Then she giggled with secret merriment. She slipped her hand into my trouser fly as if it wasn’t there, and ran her sharp nails down my chest and belly. She undid my belt and sank to her knees in front of me and cupped my balls in both hands. I stiffened almost immediately. She took my dick into her mouth and sucked it slowly, savouring it in her mouth like a baby with a comforter. She was so good. She forced her mouth over my raging erection, thrusting my cock deep into her throat again and again.

“You’re cute,” she gasped, while coming up for air, a string of saliva joining her mouth to my dick.

I didn’t say anything. So the butler chose that convenient moment to come back though the French doors and see her sucking me.

It didn’t seem to bother him. He was a tall, thin, silver machine, from the beginning of the century before last or the end of the one before that. He moved with the fluid grace of old smart machines that have been very well cared for. He walked slowly across the floor towards us as the girl suckled at me. She sprang up, leaving me rock-hard and frustrated. She flashed across the room and up the stairs before I could draw a long breath and let it out.

The butler said robotically: “The General will see you now, Mr. Marlowe.”

I readjusted my clothing and nodded at him.

“Who was that?”

“Carmen Sternwood, sir.”

“You ought to wean her off cocks. She looks old enough.”

He looked at me with mechanically inhuman politeness and repeated what he had just said.
Chapter 2 - Icehouse Encounter

I followed the robot butler out of the French doors and along a smooth red-flagged path that skirted the far side of the lawn from the garage. The cyborg chauffeur was now working on a big black and chromium in-system spacecraft, head and shoulders inside some inspection panel. I wondered idly why the rich would employ humans - or near equivalent - to perform tasks much more easily done by machines.

The path took us along to the side of the icehouse and the butler opened a door for me and stood aside. It opened into a vestibule that was as cold as an icebox. He came in after me, sealed the outer door, opened an inner door and we went through that. Then it was really cold. Even the heating inserts in my clothing were barely able to deflect the penetrating chill.

Hulking black monoliths, row after row of cryogenic equipment filled the place, sheeted with frost. Pipes and heavy cables snaked across the floor. The archaic apparatus was scarcely visible, the gloom more enhanced than abated by a handful of low-emission light sources and a galaxy of status indicators, reassuringly green for the most part. My breath froze into clouds of sharp ice crystals instantly and I could feel the crunch of frozen water vapour under my feet.

The butler did his best to get me through without tripping on loose power feeds, and after a while we came to a clearing in the middle of the museum collection. Here, in a space of hexagonal anti-slip medical tiling, an old-fashioned deep-sleep casket lay open, and in the casket an old and obviously dying man watched us come in with black eyes from which all fire had died long ago, but which still had the coal-black directness of the eyes in the portrait that hung above the mantel in the hall. The rest of his face was a leaden mask, with the bloodless lips and the sharp nose and the sunken temples and the outward-turning earlobes of approaching dissolution. His long narrow body was wrapped in a life-support tabard, moving noiselessly to support his breathing. His thin claw-like hands were folded loosely, purple-nailed. A few locks of dry white hair clung to his scalp, like Martian lichen fighting for life on a bare rock.

The butler stood in front of him and said: “This is Mr Marlowe, General.”
The old man didn’t speak or move, or even nod. He just looked at me lifelessly. I wondered how much movement he was capable of, and how much of that was actually the intervention of the medical machinery.

Then the old man dragged his voice up from the bottom of a well and said: “Brandy, Norris. How do you like your brandy, sir?”

“Any way at all,” I said.

The butler went away softly clicking between the life-support machinery. The General spoke again, using his strength as carefully as an out-of-work cyborg concubine uses her last power cell.

“I used to like mine with champagne. The champagne as cold as Europan icebergs and about a third of a glass of brandy beneath it. You may turn up your heaters, sir. It’s too cold in here for a man with blood in his veins.”

To keep his heart going at all in this temperature, his blood must already be mostly ethylene glycol. I set my clothing’s heating to maximum and felt automatically for a cigarette and then stopped. The old man caught the gesture and smiled faintly.

“You may smoke, sir. I like the smell of tobacco.”

I lit the cigarette and blew a lungful at him and he sniffed at it like a terrier at a rat-hole. The faint smile pulled at the shadowed corners of his mouth.

“A nice state of affairs when a man has to indulge his vices by proxy,” he said dryly, “You are looking at a very dull survivor of a rather gaudy life, a cripple paralysed and maintained in near-stasis by this ancient life-support machinery. I can be warmed only infrequently, each minute of consciousness etching at what remains of the cells in my brain and my body.”

I stared at him with my mouth open, breathing steam. The crushing cold was like a pall around us. The old man nodded carefully, as if his neck was afraid of the weight of his head. Then the butler came back through the icy monoliths with a heated trolley, mixed me a brandy with lemon and hot water in an insulated cup, and softly went away again among the machines.

I sipped the steaming drink. The old man licked his lips watching me, over and over again, drawing one lip slowly across the other with a funereal absorption, like an undertaker dry-washing his hands.
“Tell me about yourself, Mr Marlowe. I suppose I have a right to ask?”

“Sure, but there’s very little to tell. I’m a hundred and thirty-three years old, went to college Earth-side once and can still speak English if there’s any demand for it. There isn’t much in my trade. I worked for Arnold Wilde, the Outer System Habitats Attorney, as an investigator once. His chief investigator, a man named Bernie Ohls, called me and told me you wanted to see me. I’m unmarried, after two attempts, because I’ve found I don’t like policeman’s wives.”

“And a little bit of a cynic,” the old man smiled. “You didn’t like working for Wilde?”

“I was fired. For insubordination. I test very high on insubordination, General.”

“I always did myself, sir. I’m glad to hear it. What do you know about my family?”

“I see from the nets you are a widower and have two daughters, both pretty and both wild. Once of them has been married three times, the last time to an ex-arms dealer, who went in the trade by the name of Rusty Regan. That’s all I read, General.”

“Did any of it strike you as peculiar?”

“The Rusty Regan part, maybe. But I always got along with arms dealers myself.”

He smiled his faint economical smile. “It seems I do too. I’m very fond of Rusty. A big curly-headed Irishman, actually from Old Earth, with sad eyes and a smile as wide as Saturn’s Rings. The first time I saw him I thought he might be what you are probably thinking he was, an adventurer who happened to get himself wrapped up in some velvet.”

“You must have liked him,” I said, “You learned to talk the language.”

He moved his thin bloodless hands against the casket. I put my cigarette stub out and finished my drink.

“He was the breath of life to me - while he lasted. He spent hours with me, shivering with the cold, drinking brandy and hot water by the litre and telling me stories of the Martian revolution. He had been an officer in the Separationists. It was a ridiculous marriage, of course,
and it probably didn’t last a month, as a marriage. I’m telling you the family secrets, Mr Marlowe.”

“They’re still secrets,” I said, “What happened to him?”

The old man looked at me woodenly. “He went away, a month ago. Abruptly, without a word to anyone. Without leaving a message. Without saying goodbye to me. That hurt a little, but he had been raised in a rough school. I’ll hear from him one of these days. Meantime, I am being blackmailed again.”

“Again?”

He brought his hands up clutching a brown envelope in them. “I should have been very sorry for anyone who tried to blackmail me while Rusty was around. A few months before he came - that is to say, about nine or ten months ago - I paid a man named Joe Brody five million dollars to let my younger daughter Carmen alone.”

“Ah,” I said.

He moved his thin white eyebrows. “That means what?”

“Nothing,” I said.

He went on staring at me, half frowning. Then he said: “Take this envelope and examine it. And help yourself to the brandy.”

I took the envelope from his hands. It was addressed to General Guy Sternwood, machine printed in italics in a mock-antique style. The envelope was slit. I opened it up and took out a brown card and three slips of stiff paper. The card was thin brown linen, mechanically printed in gold: “Arthur Gwynne Geiger.” Very small in the lower left corner: “Geiger’s Counter. Rare Media and Antique Books.” I turned the card over. More of the slanted printing on the back: “Dear Sir; In spite of the legal uncollectability of the enclosed, which frankly represent gambling debts, I assume you might wish them honoured. Respectfully, A. G. Geiger.”

I looked at the slips of smart white paper. The surface of one of them swirled with encrypted data which resolved after a moment into a human-readable message: “On demand, I promise to pay to Arthur Gwynne Geiger the sum of One Hundred Thousand Dollars with interest. Value received. Carmen Sternwood.”

I mixed myself another drink and sipped it and put the exhibits aside.

“Your conclusions?” the General asked.
“I haven’t any yet. Who is this Arthur Gwynne Geiger?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“What does Carmen say?”

“I haven’t asked her. I don’t intend to. If I did, she would bat her eyelashes at me and look coy.”

I said: “I met her in the hall. She did that to me. Then she sucked my dick.”

Nothing changed in his expression. His clasped hands rested on the cryogenic casket, and the cold, which made me feel like an excursion on Pluto without a spacesuit, didn’t seem to affect him.

“Do I have to be polite?” I asked. “Or can I just be natural?”

“I hadn’t noticed that you suffer from many inhibitions, Mr Marlowe.”

“Do the two girls run around together?”

“I think not. I think they go their separate and slightly divergent roads to perdition. Vivian is spoiled, exacting, smart and quite ruthless. Carmen is a precocious child who demands things her way. Neither of them has any more moral sense than a cat. Neither do I. No Sternwood ever has. Proceed.”

“They’re well educated, I suppose. They know what they’re doing.”

“Vivian went to good schools of the snob type and to college on Earth. Carmen went to half a dozen schools of greater and greater liberality, and ended up where she started. I presume they both had, and still have, all the usual vices. If I sound a little sinister as a parent, Mr Marlowe, it is because my hold on life to too slight to indulge in any Twentieth Century hypocrisy.”

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, the life-support machinery wheezing suddenly. The he opened them again.

“I need not add that a man who indulges in parenthood for the first time at the age of two hundred and fifty-four deserves all he gets.”

I sipped my drink, feeling the warming fluid deep in my throat. The pulse in his lean grey throat throbbed visibly and yet so slowly that it was hardly a pulse at all. An old man two-thirds dead and still determined to believe he could still take it.
“Your conclusions?” he asked suddenly.

“I’d pay him.”

“Why?”

“It’s a question of a little money against a lot of annoyance. There has to be something behind it. But nobody’s going to break your heart, if it hasn’t been done already. And it would take an awful lot of chisellers an awful lot of time to rob you of enough so that you’d even notice it.”

“I have pride, sir,” he said, his voice as cold as the room itself.

“Somebody’s counting on that. It’s the easiest way to fool them. That or the police. Geiger can collect on these notes, unless you can show fraud. Instead of that he makes you a present of them and admits they are gambling debts, which gives you a defence, even if he had kept the notes. If he’s a crook, he knows his onions, and if he’s an honest man doing a little loan business on the side, he ought to have his money. Who was this Joe Brody you paid the five mill to?”

“Some kind of gambler. I hardly recall. Norris would know. My butler.”

“Your daughters have money in their own right, General?”

“Vivian has, but not a great deal. Carmen has some from her mother’s will. I give them both generous allowances.”

I said: “I can take this Geiger off your back, General, if that’s what you want. Whoever he is whatever he has. It may cost you a little money, besides what you pay me. And of course it won’t get you anything. Sugaring them never does. You’re already listed in their database of nice names.”

“I see.” He shrugged his wide sharp shoulders, the assisting machinery humming. “A moment ago you said pay him. Now you say it won’t get me anything.”

“I mean it might be cheaper and easier to stand for a certain amount of squeeze. That’s all.”

“I’m afraid I’m rather an impatient man, Mr Marlowe. What are your charges?”

“I get twenty-five thousand a day and expenses - when I’m lucky.”

“I see. It seems reasonable enough for removing morbid growths from people’s backs. Quite a delicate operation. You realise that, I
hope. You’ll make your operation as little of a shock to the patient as possible? There might be several of them, Mr Marlowe.”

I finished my second drink. The cold didn’t get any less cold with the brandy in me. The General folded his hands and blinked at me.

“Can I make a deal with this guy, if I think he’s within hooting distance of being on the level?”

“Yes. The matter is now in your hands. I never do things by halves.”

“I’ll take him out,” I said, “He’ll think a bridge fell on him.”

“I’m sure you will. And now I must excuse myself. I am tired.”

He reached out and touched a keypad on the edge of the casket. He closed his eyes, opened them for a brief bright stare and settled back in his box. The casket lid dropped slowly with a hiss and a puff of ice crystals. He wasn’t in a position to give me any more attention.

I went off among the hulking machinery, opened the two doors and stood outside in the October air getting myself warm. The chauffeur and the in-system cruiser had gone away. The butler came along the red path with smooth light steps and his back straight. He stopped about two metres away and said gravely: “Mrs Regan would like to see you before you leave, sir. And in the matter of money the General has instructed me to transfer to you whatever amount seems desirable.”

“Instructed you how?”

He looked puzzled, as far as a robot can ever look puzzled. “Ah, I see, sir. You are, of course, a detective. Using his keypad.”

“You handle his money?”

“I have that privilege.”

“That ought to save you from second-hard spare parts. No money now, thanks. What does Mrs Regan want to see me about?”

His electric blue eyes gave me a smooth level look. “She has a misconception about the purpose of your visit, sir.”

“Who told her anything about my visit?”

“Her surveillance monitors the icehouse. She saw us go in. I was obliged to tell her who you were.”

“I don’t like that,” I said.
“Are you attempting to tell me my duties, sir?”

“No. But I’m having a lot of fun trying to guess what they are.”

We stared at each other for a moment. He gave me an icy blue glare and turned away.
Chapter 3 - Missing a Husband

This room was too big, the ceiling was too high, the doors were too tall and the white carpet that went from wall to wall looked like a fresh fall of snow at Titan’s north pole. There were full-length mirrors and crystal doodads all over the place. The windows stared towards the darkening dome supports. They were going to start the rain machines soon. There was pressure in the air already.

I sat down on the edge of a deep soft chair which had scuttled up behind me and looked at Mrs Regan. She was worth a stare. She was trouble. She was stretched out on a chaise-longue, with her clothes off. I stared at her legs and breasts. They seemed to be arranged to stare at. The calves were beautiful, the ankles long and slim and with enough melodic line for a tone poem. The breasts were perfect globes anointed with taut nipples surrounded by darker circles that seemed to stare back at me. She was tall and rangy and strong-looking. He head was against an ivory satin cushion. Her hair was black and wiry and parted in the middle and she had the hot black eyes of the portrait in the hall. She had a good mouth and a good chin. There was a sulky droop to her lips and the lower lip was full.

She had a drink. She took a swallow from it and gave me a cool level stare over the rim of the glass.

“So you’re a private detective,” she said, “I didn’t know they really existed, except in historical novels. Or else they were greasy little nerds hacking around the information networks.”

There was nothing in that for me, so I let it drift with the current. She put her glass down on the flat arm of the chaise-longue and touched her hair. She said slowly: “How did you like Dad?”

“I liked him,” I said.

“He liked Rusty. I suppose you know who Rusty is?”

“Uh-Huh.”

“Rusty was earthy and vulgar at times, but he was very real. And a lot of fun for Dad. Rusty shouldn’t have gone off like that. Dad feels very badly about it, although he won’t say so. Or did he?”

“He said something about it.”
“You’re not much of a gusher, as you, Mr Marlowe? But he wants to find him, doesn’t he?”

I stared at her politely though a pause. “Yes and no,” I said.

“That’s hardly an answer. Do you think you can find him?”

“I didn’t say I was going to try. Why not try the Missing Persons Bureau? They have the organisation and the technology. It’s not a one-man job.”

“Oh, Dad wouldn’t hear of having the police brought into it.”

She looked at me smoothly across her glass again, emptied it, and pressed a button set discreetly into the arm of the chaise-longue. A maid came into the room by a side door. It was a servitor of not very recent construction with a spherical body supported by three elegantely-jointed legs, a pair of tentacle arms and no obvious means of sensing the world around it. It looked like an antique, carefully looked after and retained more for prestige rather than function. Mrs Regan waved the empty glass at it and it mixed another drink and handed it to her and left the room, without a sound, without an indication that it had noticed my presence.

When the door shut Mrs Regan said: “Well, how will you go about it then?”

“How and when did he skip out?”

“Didn’t Dad tell you?”

I grinned at her with my head on one side. She flushed. Her hot black eyes looked mad.

“I don’t see what there is to be cagey about,” she snapped, “And I don’t like your manners.”

“I’m not crazy about yours,” I said, “I didn’t ask to see you. You sent for me. I don’t mind you drinking your lunch out of a Scotch bottle. I don’t mind you showing me your tits. They’re wonderful tits and it’s a pleasure to make their acquaintance. I don’t mind if you don’t like my manners. They’re pretty bad. I grieve over them during the long winter evenings. But don’t waste your time trying to cross-examine me.”

She slammed the glass down so hard that it slopped over on an ivory cushion. She swung her legs to the floor and stood up with her eyes sparkling fire and her nipples hard as diamond. Her legs were
slightly open and her pussy lips snarled at me. Her knuckles were white.

“People don’t talk to me like that,” she said thickly.

I sat there and grinned at her. Very slowly she closed her mouth and looked down at the spilled liquor. She sat down on the edge of the chaise-longue and cupped her chin in one hand.

“My God, you big dark handsome brute!” she said, “I loathe masterful men. Simply loathe them.”

“Just what is it that you’re afraid of, Mrs Regan?”

Her eyes whitened. Then they darkened until they seemed to be all pupil. Her nostrils looked pinched.

“That wasn’t what he wanted with you at all,” she said in a strained voice which still had shreds of anger clinging to it,” About Rusty. Was it?”

“Better ask him.”

She flared up again. “Get out! Damn you, get out!”

I stood up. “Sit down!” she snapped. I sat down. I flicked a finger at my palm and waited.

“Please,” she said, “Please. You could find Rusty - if Dad wanted you to.”

That didn’t work either. I nodded and asked: “When did he go?”

“One afternoon a month back. He just flew away in his car without saying a word. They found the car in a private garage somewhere.”

“They?”

She got cunning. Her whole body seemed to relax. Then she smiled at me winningly. “He didn’t tell you then.” Her voice was almost gleeful, as if she had outsmarted me. Maybe she had.

“He told me about Mr Regan, yes. That’s not what he wanted to see me about. Is that what you’ve been trying to get me to say?”

“I’m sure I don’t care what you say.”

I stood up again. “Then I’ll be running along.” I went over to the tall white door I had come in at. When I looked back she had her lip between her teeth and was worrying it like a Martian ratter at the fringe of a rug.
I went out, down the staircase to the hall, and the butler drifted out of somewhere to open the door for me.

“You made a mistake,” I said, “Mrs Regan didn’t want to see me.”

He inclined his silver head and said politely, “I’m sorry, sir. I make many mistakes.” He closed the door against my back.

I stood on the step breathing cigarette smoke and looking down a succession of terraces with flowerbeds and sculpted trees to the high iron fence with gilt spears which hemmed in the estate. A winding driveway dropped down between retaining walls to the open iron gates. Beyond the fence the hill sloped for several miles to the base of the dome. Beyond the transparent enclosure I could just barely see the rings of Saturn and the glinting structures of the gas planet mining operations from which the Sternwoods had made their money. Most of the pumping stations were idle, mothballed, and invisible at this distance. But a few were still producing, flaring, firing magnetic containment vessels each containing a few grams of antimatter to the power stations. The Sternwoods, having moving inside the habitat, no longer risked containment failures or targeting errors, but they could still look out of their front door and see what had made them rich. If they wanted to. I don’t suppose they would want to.

I walked down a brick path from terrace to terrace, followed along inside the fence and so out of the gates to where I had left my rickshaw under a palm tree on the street. Thunder was crackling around the dome now and the sky above was purple-black. It was going to rain hard. The air had the damp foretaste of rain. I put the top up on the carriage before we started downtown.

She had lovely tits, and legs too. I would say that for her. They were a couple of pretty smooth citizens, she and her father. He was probably just trying me out; the job he had given me was a lawyer’s job. Even if Arthur Gwynne Geiger, Rare Media and Antique Books, turned out to be a blackmailer, it was still a lawyer’s job. Unless there was a lot more to it than met the eye. At a casual glance I thought I might have a lot of fun finding out.

As we rode downtown, I did a little superficial research on the networks, searching for Famous First Edition Books. Half an hour of it made me need my lunch.
Chapter 4 - Product Introduction

A. G. Geiger’s place was a store frontage on the spinwards side of the boulevard. The entrance door was set far back and the windows were heavily screened, so I couldn’t see into the store even with artificial aids. An animated signboard over the door read: “Geiger’s Counter” cycled with pictures of a lot of oriental junk. I couldn’t tell if it was any good, not being a collector of antiques, except unpaid bills. The entrance door was heavily armoured and I couldn’t see through that either.

A building entrance adjoined it on one side and on the other was a glittering credit jewellery establishment. The jeweller stood in his entrance, teetering on his heels and looking bored, a tall handsome white-haired man wearing lean black clothes, with about nine carats of diamond on his right hand. A faint knowing smile curved his lips when I turned into Geiger’s place.

The door opened automatically while I stood there and closed softly behind me. I walked on a thick blue rug that paved the floor from wall to wall. There were blue leather easy chairs with smoking stands next to them. A few sets of tooled leather bindings were set out on narrow tables, between bookends. There were more bound volumes and ancient disks in glass cases on the walls. Nice-looking merchandise, the kind a rich promoter would buy by the metre and declare it to be a family heirloom. At the back there was a grained wood-effect partition with a door in the middle of it, shut. In the corner made by the partition and one wall a woman sat behind a small desk with an antique data terminal sat on it.

She got up slowly and swayed towards me in a tight low-cut black dress that didn’t reflect any light. She had long thighs and she walked with a certain something I hadn’t often seen in bookstores. She was an ash blonde with greenish eyes, beaded lashes, hair waved smoothly back from ears in which large jet-black buttons glittered. Her fingernails were long and silvered.

She approached me with enough sex appeal to stampede a businessman’s lunch and tilted a finger a stray, but not very stray tendril of softly glowing hair. Her smile was tentative, but could be persuaded to be nice.

“What was it something?” she inquired.
I had my sunglasses on. I put my voice high and let a bird twitter in it. “Would you happen to have a Ben Hur 1860?”

She didn’t say “Huh?” but she wanted to. She smiled bleakly. “A first edition?”

“Third,” I said, “The one with the erratum on page 116.”

“I’m afraid not - at the moment.”

“How about a Grand Theft Auto 1999 - the full set, of course?”

“Er - not at the moment,” she said harshly. Her smile was now hanging by her teeth and eyebrows and wondering what it would hit when it dropped.

“You do sell antique books and media?” I said in my polite falsetto.

She looked me over. No smile now. Eyes medium to hard. Pose very straight and stiff. She waved silver fingernails at the glassed-in shelves. “What do they look like - grapefruit?” she enquired tartly.

“Oh, that sort of thing hardly interests me, you know. Probably has knock-off disks and cheap printing done in China. The usual vulgarity. No. I’m sorry, no.”

“I see.” She tried to jack the smile back up on her face. “Perhaps Mr Geiger - but he’s not in at the moment.”

Her eyes studied me carefully. She knew as much about rare books as I knew about handling a flea circus.

“He might be in later?”

“I’m afraid not until late.”

“Too bad,” I said, “Ah, too bad. I’ll sit down and smoke a cigarette in one of these charming chairs. I have rather a blank afternoon. Nothing to think about but my trigonometry lesson.”

“Yes,” she said, “Ye-es, of course.”

I stretched out in one chair, which had sidled up behind me as I spoke. I lit a cigarette with the lighter from the smoking stand. She still stood, holding her lower lip in her teeth, her eyes vaguely troubled. She nodded at last, turned slowly and walked back to her little desk in the corner. From behind the terminal she stared at me. I crossed my ankles and yawned. Her silver nails went out to the
keyboard on the desk, didn’t touch it, dropped and began to tap on the desk.

Silence for about five minutes. The door opened and a tall hungry-looking man with a cane and a big nose came in neatly, the door shutting behind him quietly, marched over to the corner and placed a wrapped parcel on the desk. He took a wallet with gold corners from his pocket and showed the blonde something. She pressed a button on the terminal. The tall man went to the door in the panelled partition which opened barely enough for him to slip through.

I finished my cigarette and lit another. The minutes dragged by. Horns tooted and rickshaws grunted on the boulevard. The roar of an intersystem spaceship taking off. The blonde leaned on her elbow and cupped a hand over her eyes and stared at me behind it. The partition door opened and the tall bird with the cane slid out. He had another wrapped parcel, the shape of a large book. He went over to the desk and paid cash money. He left as he had come, walking on the balls of his feet, breathing with his mouth open, giving me a sharp side glance as he passed.

I got to my feet, nodded to the blonde and went out after him. He walked spinwards, swinging his cane in a small tight arc just above his right shoe. He was easy to follow. He was wearing a coat resembling a rather loud piece of tartan, with shoulders so wide that his neck stuck up out of it like a celery stalk and his head wobbled on it as he walked. We went a block and a half. At the next junction I pulled up beside him and let him see me. He gave me a casual, then a suddenly sharpened side glance, and quickly turned away. We crossed the street and made another block. He stretched his long legs and had twenty metres on me at the corner. He turned right. Fifty metres up the hill he stopped and hooked his cane over his arm and fumbled a leather cigarette case out of some hidden pocket. He put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it, looking back. He saw me watching him from the corner, and straightened up as if somebody had booted him from behind. He almost raised dust going up the block, walking with long gawky strides and jabbing his cane into the pavement. He turned left again. He had at least half a block on me when I reached the place where he had turned. He had me wheezing. This was a narrow tree-lined street with a retaining wall on one side and three bungalow courts on the other.

He was gone. I loafed along the block peering this way and that. At the second bungalow court I saw something. It was called ‘The La
Baba’, a quiet dim place with a double row of tree-shaded bungalows. The central walk was lined with Venusian cypresses trimmed short and chunky, something the shape of the oil jars in Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. Behind the third jar a loud-patterned edge moved.

I leaned against a tree in the parkway and waited. The thunder in the dome supports was rumbling again. The glare of lightening was reflected on piled-up black clouds off to anti-spinward. A few tentative raindrops splashed down on the pavement and made spots as large as antique pennies. The air was as still as the air in General Sternwood’s icehouse.

The sleeve behind the tree showed again, then a big nose and one eye and some sandy hair. The eye stared at me. It disappeared. Its mate reappeared like a woodpecker on the other side of the tree. Five minutes passed by. It got him. His type are half nerves. I heard a cigarette lighter and then whistling started. Then a dim shadow slipped along the grass to the next tree. Then he was out on the walk coming straight towards me, swinging the cane and whistling. A sour whistle with jitters in it. I stared vaguely up at the dark sky. He passed within five metres of me and didn’t give me a glance. He was safe now. He had ditched it.

I watched him out of sight and went up the central walk of ‘The La Baba’ and parted the branches of the third cypress. I drew out a wrapped parcel and put it under my arm and went away. Nobody yelled at me.
Chapter 5 - Personal Services

As I walked back to the boulevard I made a few net enquiries on Mr Arthur Gwynne Geiger. He lived on Lunar Terrace, a dome-side street off Axis Canyon Drive. I chanced my pre-paid phone account and put in a call just for fun. Nobody answered. In the local classified sections on the nets, I noted a couple of bookstores within blocks of where I was.

The first I came to was on the spinwards side, a large lower floor devoted to up-to-the-minute media, programs and entertainment, a modest selection of old-fashioned but new print books on the mezzanine. It didn’t look the right place. I crossed the street and walked two blocks hubwards to the other one. This was more like it, a narrow cluttered little shop stacked with books from floor to ceiling and four or five browsers taking their time putting thumb marks on the frayed covers. Nobody paid any attention to them. I shoved on back into the store, passed through a partition and found a small dark-skinned woman reading a thick and ancient law book at a desk.

I flipped my wallet open on her desk and let her look at the hologram pinned to the flap. She looked at it, took her glasses off and leaned back in her chair. I put the wallet away. She had a fine-drawn face and high cheekbones. She stared at me and said nothing.

I said: “Would you do me a favour, a very small favour?”

“I don’t know. What is it?” She had a smoothly husky voice.

“You know Geiger’s Counter, the store across the street, two blocks anti-spin?”

“I think I may have passed it.”

“It’s a bookstore,” I said, “Not your kind of bookstore. You know darn well.”

She curled her lip slightly and said nothing. “You know Geiger by sight?” I asked.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know Mr Geiger.”

“Then you couldn’t tell me what he looks like?”

Her lip curled some more. “Why should I?”

“No reason at all. If you don’t want to, I can’t make you.”
She looked out through the partition door and leaned back again. “That was a sheriff’s badge, wasn’t it?”

“Honorary deputy. Doesn’t mean a thing. It’s worth a ten-buck cigar.”

“I see.” She reached for a packet of cigarettes and shook one loose and reached for it with her lips. I held a flame for her, a match gripped at the tips of my fingers. She thanked me, leaned back again and regarded me through smoke. She said carefully:

“You wish to know what he looks like and you don’t want to interview him?”

“He’s not there,” I said.

“I presume he will be. After all, it’s his store.”

“I don’t want to interview him just yet,” I said.

She looked out through the open doorway again. I said: “Know anything about rare old books?”

“You could try me.”

“Would you have a Ben Hur, 1860, third edition, the one with the duplicated line on page 116?”

She pushed her aged yellow law book to one side and reached a modern hand-held net terminal onto the desk. She prodded the screen a few times, found her page and studied it. “Nobody would,” she said without looking up, “There isn’t one.”

“Right.”

“What in the worlds are you driving at?”

“The girl in Geiger’s Counter didn’t know that.”

She looked up. “I see. You interest me. Rather vaguely.”

“I’m a private detective on a case. Perhaps I ask too much. It didn’t seem much to me somehow.”

She blew a soft grey smoke ring and poked her finger through. It came to pieces in frail wisps. She spoke smoothly, indifferently. “In his mid first century, I should judge. Medium height, fattish. Would weigh seventy-five kilos. Fat face, Charlie Chan moustache, thick soft neck. Soft all over. Well dressed, affects a
knowledge of twentieth-century books, computers and games, and hasn’t any. Oh yes. His left eye is prosthetic.”

“You’d make a good cop,” I said.

She put the terminal back on an open shelf at the end of her desk, and opened the aging law book again. “I hope not,” she said. She put her glasses on.

I thanked her and left. The rain had started. I ran for it, with the wrapped parcel under my arm. My rickshaw was on a side street pointing at the boulevard almost opposite Geiger’s place. I was well sprinkled before I go there. I tumbled into the carriage and activated the privacy screens and wiped the parcel off with my hand. Then I opened it up.

I knew what it would be, of course. An antique media format, bound in clear plastic, the insert printed in garish colours on cheap paper. The label was larded with arty photographs. The photos and disk content alike were a voyeur’s choice of BDSM. Men and women, couples and larger groups, every one bound and gagged, bitten and beaten, penetrated in every orifice with toys and tools and phalluses. The media was not at all new. It probably dated from pre-Exploration days, back on Earth. Dates were printed on a thin slip of paper, in and out dates. A lending library of elaborate, antique smut.

I closed up the case and rewrapped the parcel and locked it up under the seat. A racket like that, out in the open on the boulevard under seventeen kinds of surveillance seemed to mean plenty of protection. I sat there and poisoned myself with cigarette smoke and listened to the rain and thought about it.
Chapter 6 – Lion’s Den

Artificial rain filled the gutters and splashed knee-high off the pavement. Big police cyborgs with carapaces that shone like gun barrels had a lot of fun carrying giggling boys and girls across the bad places. The rain drummed hard on the roof of the rickshaw and the fabric top began to leak. A pool of water formed in the foot-well for me to keep my feet in. It was too early in the fall for rain like that, whatever the engineers at Climate Central said.

I wound up the heating controls in my clothing and made a dash for the nearest drugstore and bought myself a half-litre of Whisky. Back in the rickshaw I used enough of it to keep warm and interested. I was long over-parked, but the cops were too busy carrying kids and blowing whistles to bother about that.

In spite of the rain, or perhaps even because of it, there was business done at Geiger’s Counter. Very nice ground cars and sleek flyers and even a few robot rickshaws stopped in front and very nice-looking people when in and out with wrapped parcels. They were not all human.

He showed about twenty-seven o’clock. A cream-coloured convertible dropped out of the sky in front of the store. I caught a glimpse of the fat face and Charlie Chan moustache as he dodged out of it and into the store. He wore a green leather raincoat and patent galoshes. I couldn’t see his prosthetic eye at that distance. A tall and very good-looking boy came out of the store and rode the convertible around the corner and came back walking, the rain glistening on the transparent umbrella that sheltered him.

Another hour went by. It got dark, the sunlamps having been on their lowest setting all day, and the rain-clouded lights of the stores and brothels were soaked up by the black street. Intra-system spacecraft roared arrogantly overhead, their exit from the dome marked by maroon flashes from the force-field airlocks. At around twenty-eight-fifteen the tall boy came out of Geiger’s Counter and went for the cream-coloured convertible. When he had it in front Geiger came out and the tall boy held the transparent umbrella over Geiger’s bare head. He collapsed it and handed in into the vehicle. I nudged the rickshaw robot with the side of my foot, waking it with a jerk.
The convertible roaded out, turning west on the boulevard, which forced my bot to make a U-turn, the manoeuvre barely causing a ripple in the automated flow of the traffic. I was two block behind the convertible before my rickshaw driver got into the groove. I hoped Geiger was on his way home. I caught sight of him two or three times and then made him turning spindle-wards into Axis Canyon Drive. Half-way up the grade he turned left and took a curving ribbon of wet concrete which was called Lunar Terrace. It was a narrow street with a high bank – part of the dome foundations – on one side and a scattering of large low houses built down the slope on the other side, so that their roofs were not very much above road level. Their front windows were masked by hedges and shrubs. Sodden trees dripped all over the landscape.

I nudged the rickshaw robot to speed up and passed him as he turned, picked off a house number as I went by and turned at the end of the block. He had already stopped. The convertible’s lights were tilted at the garage of a large house with a square box hedge so arranged that it masked the front door completely. I watched him come out of the garage with his umbrella energised and go in through the hedge. He didn’t act as if he expected anyone to be tailing him. Lights went on in the house. My bot drifted the rickshaw down to the next house above it, which seemed empty. I parked, told the rickshaw bot to shut down, had a drink from my bottle, and sat. I didn’t know what I was waiting for, but something told me to wait.

Another army of sluggish minutes dragged by. Images of Carmen Sternwood ran though my mind, her mouth massaging my dick, taking my whole length as if it were nothing. Inevitably, I grew hard again. Then I thought about Mrs Vivian Sternwood’s tits, smooth and round and just begging to be touched. I jerked myself off in a few swift strokes, finishing the job the girls had started, imagining spurting on Vivian’s breasts. My head thumped once on the padded seat of the rickshaw.

Two ground-cars and another rickshaw came up the hill and went over the crest. It seemed a very quiet street. At a little after twenty-nine, more bright lights bobbed through the driving rain. It was pitch black by then. A ground car dragged to a stop in front of Geiger’s house. The door opened and a woman got out. A small slim woman wrapped in a transparent force-field rain-shield. She went in through the box maze. Behind her, the soft voice of non-sentient house automation, a closing door, silence.
I found a focussed light source under the seat and stepped out of the rickshaw, went down-grade and looked at the car. A maroon ground car, nice condition. A standard systems interrogation burst revealed it was registered to Carmen Sternwood. I went back to my rickshaw again and sat and sat. The fabric top dripped on to my knees and my stomach burned from the whisky. No more cars came up the hill. No lights went on in the house before which I was parked. It seemed like a nice neighbourhood to have bad habits in.

At twenty-nine-twenty a single flash of hard white light shot out from Geiger’s house like a wave of Jovian lightning. As the darkness folded back on itself and ate it up a thin tinkling scream echoed out and lost itself among the rain-drenched trees. I was out of the rickshaw and on my way before the echoes died.

There was no fear in that scream. It had a sound of a sexually pleasurable shock, an accent of drunkenness, an overtone of pure idiocy. It was a nasty sound. It made me think of smart machines in antiseptic white and barred windows and hard narrow cots with plastic wrist and ankle straps fastened to them. The Geiger hideaway was perfectly silent when I hit the gap in the hedge and dodged around the gap that masked the front door. There was a retro iron ring in a lion’s mouth for a knocker. I reached for it, took hold of it. At that exact instant, as if somebody had been waiting for the cue, three shots boomed in the house. There was a sound that might have been a long harsh sigh. Then a soft messy thump. And then rapid footsteps in the house – going away.

The door fronted on a narrow run, like a footbridge over a gully, that filled the gap between the house wall and the edge of the bank. There was no porch, no solid ground, no way to get around to the back. The top entrance was at the top of the flight of metal stairs that rose from the alley-like street below. I knew this because I heard the clatter of feet on the steps, going down. Then I heard the sudden whine of a starting ground-car. It faded swiftly into the distance. I thought the sound was echoed by another ground-car, but I wasn’t sure. The house in front of me was as silent as a cryogenic vault. There wasn’t any hurry. What was in there was in there.

I straddled the fence at the side of the runway and leaned far out to the draped but unshielded french windows and tried to look in at the crack where the drapes came together. I saw light on a wall and one end of a media storage rack. I got back on the runway and took all of it and some of the hedge and gave the front door the heavy shoulder.
This was foolish. About the only part of an unshielded Habitat residence you can’t put your foot through is the front door. All it did was hurt my shoulder and make me mad. I climbed over the railing again and kicked in the French window, reaching through to open the mechanical bolt that fastened the window to the sill. The rest was easy. There was no top bolt. The catch gave after a little attention. I climbed in and pulled the drapes off my face.

Neither of the two people in the room paid any attention to the way I came in, although only one of them was dead.
Chapter 7 - Sex and Drugs

It was a wide room, the whole width of the house. It had a low beamed ceiling and brown plastic walls decked out with strips of Chinese embroidery and Japanese prints in black lacquer frames. There were low bookshelves; there was a thick pinkish rug in which a Venusian gopher could have spent a week without showing his nose above the nap. There were floor cushions, bits of odd silk tossed around, as if whoever lived there had to have a piece he could reach out and thumb. There was a broad low divan in rose tapestry, an old one, not animated. There was a big carved lamp on a pedestal, two other standing lamps with jade-green shades and long tassels. There was a black desk with carved gargoyles at the corners and behind it a yellow satin cushion on a polished black chair with carved arms and legs. The room contained an odd assortment of odours, of which the most emphatic at the moment seemed to be the pungent aftermath of small-calibre projectile propellant and the sickish aroma of a cocktail of drugs.

On a sort of low dais at one end of the room there was a large bench of black polished wood on which Miss Carmen Sternwood was lying. Her body was limp and her legs splayed, her wrists and ankles were bound with twisted hemp to steel shackles set into the corners of the bench. Her head lolled, her small bright teeth shining between her parted lips. Her eyes were wide open. The dark slate of the iris had devoured the pupil. They were mad eyes. She seemed to be unconscious, but she didn’t have the pose of unconsciousness. She looked as if, in her mind, she was doing something very important and making a fine job of it. Out of her mouth came a low moaning noise which didn’t change her expression or even move her lips.

She was wearing a pair of jade earrings. They were nice earrings and had probably cost a couple of hundred thousand dollars. She wasn’t wearing anything else. She had a beautiful body, small, lithe, compact, firm, rounded. Her skin in the lamplight had the shimmering lustre of a pearl. Her breasts didn’t have the raffish grace of Mrs Regan’s breasts, but they were very nice.

Around the bench on the floor of the dais was an impressive collection of sex toys: dildos and gags and whips. Judging by the marks on Carmen’s body, they had been used extensively and inventively during the last hour or so. A vibrator oozed its way from
between her pussy lips and fell with a soft thud onto the bench, revealing a butt-plug still impaling her ass.

I stopped looking at her and looked at Geiger. He was on his back on the floor, beyond the fringe of the pink rug, in front of a thing that looked like a director’s chair. Next to the chair was a tall spindly contraption, its multiple silvery arms supporting a battery of lenses and lights and microphones. The lenses were aimed at the naked girl on the bench. The recording machine was fused, overloaded, bent and smoke-blackened in several places.

Geiger was wearing Chinese slippers with thick felt soles and his legs were in black satin pyjamas and the upper part of him wore a Chinese embroidered coat, the front of which was mostly blood. His prosthetic eye shone brightly up at me and was by far the most lifelike thing about him. At a glance none of the three shots I heard had missed. He was very dead.

The destruction of the recording machine was the sheet lightning I had seen. The crazy scream was the drugged and bound girl’s reaction to it. The three shots had been someone else’s idea of how the proceedings might be given a new twist. The idea of the lad who had gone down the back steps and slammed into a car and raced away. I could see merit in his point of view.

A couple of brandy glasses rested on a black lacquer tray on the end of the black desk, besides a pot-bellied flagon of brown liquid. I took the stopper out and sniffed at it. It smelled of vintage cognac. Next to the glasses was a small mirror on which lines of cocaine had been laid out, two already snorted. I had never tried the combination but it seemed to go pretty well with the Geiger ménage.

I listened to the rain hitting the roof and the windows. Beyond was no other sound, no cars, no siren, just the rain beating. I went over to the bench on the dais. Miss Sternwood smelled of brandy at a distance of several feet. The low moaning noise was still coming from her and a little drool oozed down her chin. I untied her wrists and ankles and knocked aside the vibrator between her legs and eased out the anal toy. I slapped her face. She blinked and stopped moaning. I slapped her again.

“Come on,” I said brightly, “Let’s be nice. Let’s get dressed.”

She peered at me, her slate eyes as empty as holes in a mask.

“Go to hell,” she said indistinctly.
I slapped her around a little more. She didn’t mind the slaps. She had been slapped plenty before now. They didn’t bring her out of it.

“Get dressed,” I said.

Her hands waved, wandered aimlessly for a moment before she found the clothes on the couch. She struggled into a tight green dress and flat black shoes.

“Let’s take a little walk,” I said, “Let’s take a nice little walk.”

We took a little walk. Part of the time her earrings banged against my chest and part of the time we did the splits in unison, like an erotic dance couple. We walked over to Geiger’s body and back. I had her look at him. She thought he was cute. She giggled and tried to tell me so, but she just bubbled. I walked her over to the divan and spread her out on it. She hiccuped twice, giggled a little and went to sleep. I stuffed her little clasp bag in my pocket and went over to the articulated recording robot and looked at it closely. The cameras were frazzled all right, but the slot for the removable memory was empty. I looked around on the floor, thinking he might have got it out before he was shot. No memory. I didn’t like this development.

I went into a hall at the back of the room and investigated the house. There was a bathroom on the right and a locked door, a kitchen at the back. The kitchen window had been jimmed. The screening was gone and the place where the lock had been pulled out showed on the sill. The back door was unlocked. I left it unlocked and looked into a bedroom on the left side of the hall. It was neat, fussy, woman-ish. The bed had a flounced cover. There was perfume on the triple-mirrored dressing table, beside a handkerchief, some loose money, a man’s shaving set, an electronic key-holder. A man’s clothes were in the closet and a man’s slippers under the flounced edge of the bed cover. Mr Geiger’s room.

I took the key-holder back to the living-room and went through the desk. There was a locked security box in the deep drawer. I used one of the keys on it. There was nothing in it but an old-fashioned blue leather book with an index and a lot of printed code, in the same slanting printing that had written to General Sternwood. I put the notebook in my pocket, closed the box and locked it up, pocketed the keys and tried to rouse Miss Sternwood. It couldn’t be done. I swung her over my shoulder like a rag doll and carried her out to her car. I went back and put out all the lights and shut the front door, dug her keys out of her clasp bag and started the maroon ground car. We went
off down the hill without lights. It was less than ten minutes’ drive to
the Sternwood mansion. Carmen spent them snoring and breathing
brandy fumes into my face. I couldn’t keep her head off my shoulder.
It was all I could do to keep it out of my lap.
Chapter 8 - Home, James

There was a dim light behind narrow leaded panes in the side door of the Sternwood mansion. I stopped the ground car under the porte-cochere and emptied my pockets out on the seat. The girl snored in the corner, her hands lying limp in her lap. I got out and rang the bell. Steps came slowly, as if from a long dreary distance. The door opened and the silvery robot butler looked out at me. The light from the hall reflected from his polished metal casing.

He said: “Good evening, sir,” politely and looked past me at the ground car. His head swivelled back to look at my eyes.

“Is Mrs Regan in?”
“No, sir.”
“The General is frozen, I hope?”
“Yes, sir. We keep him chilled most of the time now.”
“How about Mrs Regan’s servitor?”
“It’s here, sir.”

“Better get her down here. The job needs a robot’s touch. Take a look in the car and you’ll see why.”

He took a look in the car. He came back. “I see,” he said, “The servitor is on its way down now.”
“I’m sure the old machine will do right by her,” I said.
“We all try to do right by her,” he said.
“I guess you’ll have had practice,” I said.

He let that one go. “Well, good night,” I said, “I’m leaving it in your hands.”

“Very good, sir. May I call you a cab?”
“Absolutely not,” I said. “As a matter of fact I’m not here. You’re just seeing things.”

He nodded sagely a time or two. I turned and walked down the driveway and out of the gates.

Ten blocks walking, winding down curved rain-swept streets, under the steady drip of the trees, past lighted windows in big houses
in ghostly enormous grounds, vague clusters of eaves and gables and lighted windows high on a hillside, remote and inaccessible, like witch houses in a forest. I came out at a service station glaring with wasted light, where a bored human attendant in a white cap and a dark blue windcheater sat hunched on a stool, reading a screen. I started in, then kept going. I was as wet as I could get already. And on a night like that you can grow a beard waiting for a taxi. And taxi drivers remember.

I made it back to Geiger’s house in something over half an hour of nimble walking. There was nobody there, no vehicle on the street except my own rickshaw in front of the next house. The rickshaw robot looked as inert and dismal as a moorland granite outcrop. I dug my bottle of rye out of it and poured half of what was left down my throat and got inside to light a cigarette. I smoked half of it, threw it away, got out again and went down to Geiger’s. I unlocked the door and stepped into the still warm darkness and stood there, dripping quietly on the floor and listening to the rain. I groped to a lamp and lit it.

The first thing I noticed was that a couple of strips of embroidered silk were gone from the wall. I hadn’t counted them, but the spaces of brown plastic stood out naked and obvious. I went a little farther and put another lamp on. I looked at the robot recording machine. At its foot, beyond the margins of the pink rug, on the bare floor another rug had been spread. It hadn’t been there before. Geiger’s body had. Geiger’s body had gone.

That froze me. I pulled my lips against my teeth and leered at the blasted cameras on their slender stalks. I went through the house again. Everything was exactly as it had been. Geiger wasn’t in his flounced bed or under it or in his closet. He wasn’t in the kitchen or bathroom. That left the locked door on the right of the hall. One of Geiger’s keys activated the lock. The room inside was interesting, but Geiger wasn’t in it. It was interesting because it was so different from Geiger’s room. It was a hard bare masculine bedroom with a polished wood-effect floor, a couple of small throw rugs of classical design, two straight chairs, a bureau in dark grained wood with a man’s toilet set and two black candles in quarter-metre high candlesticks. The bed was narrow and looked hard and had a maroon batik cover. The room felt cold.

I locked it up again and went back to the recording machine. I knelt down and squinted along the nap of the rug to the front door. I
thought I could see two parallel grooves pointing that way, as though heels had been dragged. Whoever had done it had meant business. Dead men are heavier than broken hearts.

It wasn’t the law. They would have been there still, just about getting warmed up with their forensic samplers and their cameras and their cheap cigars. They would have been very much there. It wasn’t the killer. He had left too fast. He must have seen the girl. He couldn’t be sure she was too drugged and dazed to see him. He would be on his way to distant planets. I couldn’t guess the answer, but it was all right with me if somebody wanted Geiger missing instead of just murdered. It gave me a chance to find out if I could tell it leaving Carmen Sternwood out.

I locked up again, kicked the robot rickshaw to life, said, “Home, James” and rode off to a hot shower, dry towels and a late dinner. After that I sat around the apartment and drank too much hot toddy trying to crack the code in Geiger’s blue indexed notebook. All I could be sure of was it was a list of names and addresses, probably of the customers. There were over four hundred of them. That made it a nice racket, not to mention any blackmail angles, and there were probably plenty of those. Any name on the list might be a prospect as the killer. I didn’t envy the police their job when it was handed to them.

I went to bed full of whisky and frustration and dreamed about a man in a bloody Chinese coat who chased a naked girl with jade earrings while I ran after them on spindly silver limbs and tried to take pictures with a camera with no memory.
Chapter 9 - Cruiser Crash

The next morning was bright, clear and sunny. Presumably the climate technicians had changed their minds about autumnal rain. I woke up with an asteroid miner’s glove in my mouth, drank two cups of coffee and went through the news nets. I didn’t find any reference to Mr Arthur Gwynne Geiger in any of them. I was choosing my clothing when a call came in. It was Bernie Ohls, the Outer System Habitats Attorney’s chief investigator, who had given me the lead to General Sternwood.

“Well, how’s the boy?” he began. He sounded like a man who had slept well and didn’t owe too much money.

“I’ve got a hangover,” I said.

“Tsk, tsk.” He laughed absently and then his voice became a shade too casual, a cagey cop voice. “Seen General Sternwood yet?”

“Oh-huh.”

“Done anything for him?”

“Too much rain,” I answered, if that was an answer.

“They seem to be a family things happen to. A big cruiser belonging to one of them is floating about in the Asteroid Belt.”

I held the edge of the table tight enough to crack it. I also held my breath.

“Yeah,” Ohls said cheerfully. “A nice new in-system cruiser all messed up, penetration damage and full of vacuum... Oh, I almost forgot. There’s a guy inside it.”

I let my breath out so slowly that it hung on my lip. “Regan?” I asked.

“Huh? Who? Oh, you mean that ex-runner the eldest girl picked up and went and married. I never saw him. What would he be doing out there?”

“Quit stalling. What would anyone be doing out there?”

“I don’t know, pal. I’m dropping down to look see. Want to go along?”

“Yes.”
“Snap it up,” he said. “I’ll be in my hutch.”

Shaved, clothing selected and donned, and lightly breakfasted, I was at the Hall of Justice in less than an hour. I rode up to the fifty-seventh floor and went along to the group of small offices used by the OSHA’s men. Ohls’s was no larger than the others, but he did have it to himself. There was nothing on his desk but a couple of packaged lightweight protection suits, a cheap terminal and one of his feet. He was a medium-sized blondish man with stiff white eyebrows, calm eyes and well-kept teeth. He looked like anybody you would pass on the street. I happened to know he had killed nine men - three of them when he was covered, or somebody thought he was.

He stood up and pocketed the suit-packs and a flat tin of cheap cigars, jiggled the one in his mouth up and down, and looked at me carefully along his nose, with his head thrown back.

“It’s not Regan,” he said. “I checked. Regan’s a big guy, as tall as you and a shade heavier. This is a young kid.”

I didn’t say anything.

“What made Regan skip out?” Ohls asked suddenly. “You interested in that?”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“When a guy out of the arms trade marries into a rich family and then waves goodbye to a pretty dame and a couple billion legitimate bucks - that’s enough to make even me think. I guess you thought that was a secret.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Okay, keep buttoned, kid. No hard feelings.”

He came around from the desk tapping his pockets.

“I’m not looking for Regan,” I said.

He fixed the lock on his door and we went to the official launch pad and got into a small blue ship, all boxy angles and bulges that looked as if they had been added after the vessel was built.

It was two billion kilometres from Saturn’s orbit to the Belt in a fast transfer ellipse. Ohls made the run in three-quarters of an hour. At the end of that time we slewed to a stop in front of a slowly-twisting asteroid, too small and irregular to have a name. We slowly rounded the tumbling rock.
“There she is - by the power barge,” Ohls said, pointing at the screen with one of his toy cigars.

The barge was a massive black recovery craft, blazing with lights from several opened hatches showing spaces large enough to swallow Ohls’s ship without even noticing. Something was being hauled into one of the openings, a large black and chromium in-system spacecraft showing no running lights and with a nasty-looking absence where the nose should be. Men in spacesuits were crawling over the surface, even as the recovered ship docked and the hatches began to close.

Ohls nudged his ship and we docked at an exterior port and walked a quarter mile to the bay where the damaged craft was.

Ohls said hello to a deputy in green khaki and a man in a plain black suit. The barge crew of three men leaned against a guard rail, one of them still peeling off pieces of space armour. That would be the one who first went into the twisted wreck.

We looked the cruiser over. The front section was almost completely missing, vaporised by the collision. The passenger compartment was mostly intact, but the glass of two ports was shattered. The interior looked like a blizzard had struck it, paper and personal items everywhere, thrown about by a violent depressurisation.

The driver was draped around the control console with his head at an unnatural angle to his shoulders. He was a slim dark-haired kid who had been good-looking not so long ago. Now his face was bluish-white and he had the pop-eyed look of one who had been exposed to a hard vacuum. His cybernetic legs lay still, winking red lights. On the left side of his forehead there was a dull bruise that stood out against the whiteness of the skin.

Ohls backed away, made a noise in his throat and put a match to his little cigar. “What’s the story?”

The uniformed man pointed up at a large screen overhanging the dock. It showed the slowly rotating asteroid just outside. The rock twisted to show a new crater surrounded by a slew of debris, a slowly expanding cloud of fragments the asteroid’s gravity was too weak to retain.

“Went in there. Must have clipped it pretty hard. There are a few pieces of the nose a million miles away, which makes it around ten last night. Maybe nine-thirty. That’s consistent with what we can read in
the logs in the autopilot, which is pretty screwed. She shows on the radar when some tourists come by this morning, so we get the barge to reel her in and we find the dead guy.”

The plain-clothes man scuffed at the deck with the toe of his shoe. Ohls looked sideways along his eyes at me, and twitched his little cigar like a cigarette.

“Drunk?” he asked, of nobody in particular.

The man who had been removing segments of his spacesuit went over to a bucket and cleared his throat in a loud hawk that made everybody look at him. “Got clogged,” he said, and spat. “Not as much as the boy friend got, but some.”

The uniformed man said: “Could have been drunk. Showing off all alone in the middle of the Belt. Drunks will do anything.”

“Drunk, hell,” the plain-clothes man said. “The autopilot’s set on a collision course and the guy’s been sapped on the side of the head. Ask me and I’ll call it murder.”

Ohls looked at the man in the spacesuit. “What do you think, buddy?”

The man in the spacesuit looked flattered. He grinned. “I say suicide, Mac. None of my business, but you ask me, I say suicide. First off, the ship was sealed from the inside, so no-one except the deader could have set the autopilot. Then he hit the rock with plenty of speed, dead-on. He could have hit his head when the cabin burst.”

Ohls said: “You got eyes, buddy. Frisked him?” he asked the deputy. The deputy looked at me, then at the crew further up the dock. “Okay, save that,” Ohls said.

A small man with glasses and a tired face and a black bag came down the steps onto the deck. He picked out a fairly clean spot on the deck and put the bag down. Then he rubbed the back of his neck and stared at the wrecked cruiser, as if he didn’t know where he was or what he had come for.

Ohls said: “There’s your customer, Doc. Dived into the rock last night. Around nine to ten. That’s all we know.”

The small man looked in at the dead man morosely. He fingered the head, peered at the bruise on the temple, moved the head around with both hands, felt the man’s ribs. He lifted a lax dead hand and stared at the fingernails. He let it fall and watched it fall. He stepped
back and opened his bag and took out a terminal pad displaying a DOA form and began to write on it.

“Broken neck’s the apparent cause of death,” he said, writing. “Which means he wasn’t breathing vacuum for very long. Which means he’s due to start getting stiff pretty quick now he’s in the air. Better get him out of the ship before he does. You won’t like doing it after.”

Ohls nodded. “How long dead, Doc?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

Ohls looked at him sharply and took the little cigar out of his mouth and looked at that sharply. “Pleased to know you, Doc. A coroner’s man that can’t guess within five minutes has me beat.”

The little man grinned sourly and put his pad in his bag. “If he ate dinner last night, I’ll tell you - if I know what time he ate it. But not within five minutes.”

“How would he get that bruise - falling?”

The little man looked at the bruise again. “I don’t think so. That blow came from something covered. It had already bled subcutaneously while he was alive.”

“Blackjack, huh?”

“Very likely.”

The little ME’s man nodded, picked his bag off the deck and went back up the steps where he had come from. A robot ambulance trolley was backing into position near the cruiser. Ohls looked at me and said: “Let’s go. Hardly worth the ride, was it?”

We went back through the recovery barge to the port where we had docked and got into Ohls’s ship. He wrestled it from the couplings and blasted back in the direction of Saturn, from here a mere bright light with no vestige of rings showing.

Ohls cocked his chin at me and said: “Know him?”

“Sure. The Sternwood chauffeur. I saw him working on that very cruiser out there yesterday.”

“I don’t want to crowd you, Marlowe. Just tell me, did the job have anything to do with him?”

“No. I don’t even know his name.”
“Owen Taylor. How do I know? Funny about that. About a year or so back we had him in the cooler on an underage sex rap. It seems he run Sternwood’s hotcha daughter, the young one, off to Venus. The sister ran after them and brings them back and had Owen heaved in the icebox. Then next day she comes down to the Habitat Attorney and gets him to beg the kid off with the prosecutor. She says the kid meant to marry her sister and wanted to, only the sister can’t see it. All she wanted to do was to kick a few high ones off the bar and have herself a party. So we let the kid go and darned if they don’t have him come back to work. And a little later we get the routine report on his prints back from Earth and he’s got a prior back in Indiana, attempted hold-up six years ago. He got off with a six months in the county jail, which is where he got the cybernetic legs. We hand that to the Sternwoods and they keep him on just the same. What do you think of that?”

“They seem to be a screwy family,” I said, “Do they know about last night?”

“No. I gotta go up against them now.”

“Leave the old man out of it, if you can.”

“Why?”

“He has enough troubles and he’s sick.”

“You mean Regan?”

I scowled. “I don’t know anything about Regan, I told you. I’m not looking for Regan. Regan hasn’t bothered anybody that I know of.”

Ohls said: “Oh,” and stared thoughtfully at the screens. For the rest of the ride back to our habitat he hardly spoke. He dropped me off downtown. I ate noodles with chopsticks at a counter for lunch and glanced at the afternoon news screens and couldn’t find anything about Geiger in it.

After lunch I walked spinwards on the boulevard to have another look at Geiger’s Counter.
Chapter 10 - Tail Job

The lean black-eyed credit jeweller was standing at his entrance in the same position as the afternoon before. He gave me the same knowing look as I turned in. The store looked just the same. The same terminal glowed on the small desk in the corner and the same ash blonde in the same black suede-like dress got up from behind it and came towards me with the same tentative smile.

“Was it - ?” she said and stopped. Her silver nails twitched at her side. There was an overtone of strain in her smile. It wasn’t a smile at all. It was a grimace. She just thought it was a smile.

“Back again,” I said airily, and waved a cigarette. “Mr Geiger in today?”

“I’m afraid - I’m afraid not. No - I’m afraid not. Let me see - you wanted - ?”

I took my dark glasses off and tapped them delicately on the inside of my left wrist.

“That was just a stall about those first editions,” I whispered. “I have to be careful. I’ve got something he’ll want. Something he’s wanted for a long time.”

The silver fingernails touched the blonde hair over one jet-buttoned ear. “Oh, a salesman,” she said. “Well - you might come in tomorrow. I think he’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Drop the veil,” I said. “I’m in the business too.”

Her eyes narrowed until they were a fain greenish glitter, like a forest pool far back in the shadow of trees. Her fingers clawed at her palm. She stared at me and chopped off a breath.

“Is he sick? I could go up to the house,” I said impatiently. “I haven’t got forever.”

“You - a - you - a,” her throat jammed. I thought she was going to fall on her nose. Her whole body shivered and her face fell apart. She put it together again slowly, as if lifting a great weight, by sheer will power. The smile came back, with a couple of corners badly bent.

“No,” she said. “No. He’s out of town. That wouldn’t be any use. Can’t you come in tomorrow?”
I had my mouth open to say something when the partition door opened a quarter-metre. The tall dark handsome boy in the jerkin looked out, pale-faced and tight-lipped, saw me, shit the door quickly again, but not before I had seen on the floor behind him a lot of yellow plastic packing crates lined with bubble-wrap and packed loosely with books. A man in very new overalls was fussing with them. Some of the Geiger Counter’s stock was being moved out.

When the door shut I put my dark glasses back on again and nodded at the blonde. “Tomorrow, then. I’d like to give you a card, but you know how it is.”

“Ye-es. I know how it is.” She shivered a little more and made a faint sucking noise between her bright lips. I went out of the store and spinwards on the boulevard to the corner and onto the street to the alley which ran behind the stores. A small black truck with blank sides and no lettering on it was backed up to Geiger’s place. The man in the very new overalls was just heaving a box up on the tailboard. I went back to the boulevard and along the block next to Geiger’s and found a taxi standing at the kerb. The driver, a fresh-faced kid with a cybernetic arm, was reading a horror story on a roll-up screen. I leaned in and showed him a K-bill: “Tail job?”

He looked me over. “Cop?”

“Private investigator.”

He grinned. “My meat, Jack.” He rolled up the screen and tucked in away in a cubby-hole and I got into the cab. We went around the block and pulled up across from Geiger’s alley.

There were about a dozen crates on the truck when the man in overalls closed the doors and lifted tailboard and got in behind the controls.

“Take him,” I told my driver.

The man in overalls gunned his motor, shot a glance up and down the alley and ran away fast in the other direction. He turned left out of the alley. We did the same. I caught a glimpse of the truck turning anti-spinwards and I told my driver to close in a little. He didn’t or couldn’t do it. I saw the truck two blocks away when we got to the junction. There was a lot of traffic and the fresh-faced kid tailed him from too far back. I was telling him about that without mincing words when the truck, now far ahead, turned hubwards again. When we got to the turn the truck had vanished.
The fresh-faced kid made comforting sounds at me through the
panel and we went up the hill at ten kays looking for the truck behind
bushes. Two blocks up, there was a tongue of land on which there was
a white apartment house with a basement garage opening. We were
going past that and the fresh-faced kid was telling me the truck
couldn’t be far away when I looked through the arched entrance of the
garage and saw it back in the dimness with its rear doors open again.

We went around to the front of the apartment house and I got out.
There was nobody in the lobby, just an automated reception machine
on a desk. I looked the names it displayed over. A man named Joseph
Brody had Apartment 405. A man named Joe Brody had received five
million dollars from General Sternwood to stop playing with Carmen
and find some other little girl to play with. It could be the same Joe
Brody. I felt like giving odds on it.

I went around an elbow of wall to the foot of tiled stairs and the
shaft of the elevator walled in a transparent tube. Through the glass, I
could see the top of the elevator was level with the floor. Beside the
shaft was a door labelled “Garage.” I opened it and went down narrow
stairs to the basement. The elevator door was jammed open and the
man in new overalls was grunting hard as he stacked heavy crates in it.
I stood beside him and lit a cigarette and watched him. He didn’t like
me watching him.

After a while I said: “Watch the weight, bud. It’s only tested for
half a tonne. Where’s the stuff going?”

“Brody, four-o-five,” he said. “Manager?”

“Yeah. Looks like a nice lot of loot.”

He glared at me with pale white-rimmed eyes. “Books,” he
snarled. “Fifty kilos a box, easy, and me with a forty kilo back.”

“Well, watch the weight,” I said.

He got into the elevator with six crates and the door shut behind
him. I went back up the steps to the lobby and out to the street and the
cab took me down-town again to my office building. I gave the fresh-
faced kid too much money and he gave me a dog-eared business card
which for once I didn’t drop into the recycle bin by the elevator bank.

I had a room and a half on the seventh floor at the back. The half-
room is an office split into two to make reception-rooms. Mine had
my name on it and nothing else, and that only on the reception-room. I
always left this unlocked, in case I had a client, and the client cared to sit down and wait.

I had a client.
Chapter 11 - Unexpected Visitor

She wore brownish speckled tweeds, a mannish shirt and tie, hand-carved walking shoes. Her legs were just as long as the day before, but she wasn’t showing as much of her breasts. Her black hair was glossy and her dark eyes tracked me as I came in.

“Well, you do get up,” she said, wrinkling her nose at the faded red settee, the two odd semi-easy chairs neither of which moved themselves any more and the boy’s size library projector with the venerable magazines on its screen to give the place a professional touch. “I was beginning to think perhaps you worked in bed, like Marcel Proust.”

“Who’s he?” I put a cigarette in my mouth and stared at her. She looked a little pale and strained, but she looked like a girl who could be persuaded to function under a strain.

“A French writer in ancient times, a connoisseur in degenerates. You wouldn’t know him.”

“Tut, tut,” I said. “Come into my boudoir.”

She stood up and said: “We didn’t get along very well yesterday. Perhaps I was rude.”

“We were both rude,” I said. I unlocked the communicating door and let it open itself for her. We went into the rest of my suite, which contained a rust-red carpet, not very young, five green removable media safes, three of them full of habitat climate. There were three near-walnut chairs, the automation still functioning in two of them, the usual desk with the usual battered terminal, cigarette case and ashtray, and the usual squeaky swivel chair behind it.

“You don’t put on much of a front,” she said, sitting down at the customer’s side of the desk.

“Neither does anyone else,” I said, “You can’t make much money at this trade, if you’re honest. If you have a front, you’re making money - or expect to.”

“Oh, you are honest?” she asked and opened her bag. She picked a cigarette out of a black enamel case, lit it with a pocket lighter, dropped case and lighter back into the bag and left the bag open.

“Painfully.”
“How did you ever get into this slimy kind of business then?”

“How did you come to marry a gunrunner?”

“My God, let’s not start quarrelling again. I’ve been trying to get a message to you all morning.”

I had left my messages recording, to be picked up later.

“How about Owen?”

Her face tightened sharply. Her voice was soft. “Poor Owen,” she said. “So you know about that?”

“A man from the OSHA took me down to the Belt. He thought I might know something about it. But he knew much more than I did. He knew Owen wanted to marry your sister - once.”

She puffed silently at her cigarette and considered me with steady black eyes. “Perhaps it wouldn’t have been such a bad idea,” she said quietly. “He was in love with her. We don’t find much of that in our circle.”

“He had a police record.”

She shrugged. She said negligently, “He didn’t know the right people. That’s all a police record means in this rotten crime-ridden system.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

She bit her index finger at the first joint, looking at me with steady eyes. “I didn’t come to see you about Owen. Do you feel that you can tell me what my father wanted to see you about?”

“Not without his permission.”

“Was it about Carmen?”

“I can’t even say that.” I opened the cigarette box, picked up a cigarette and snapped a light to it. She watched the smoke for a moment. Then her hand went into her open bag and came out with a thick white envelope. She tossed it across the desk.

“You’d better look at it anyway.”

I picked it up. There was a stutter of machine-readable characters across the front, an address for the delivery. No quick way of confirming what it was. I opened the envelope and drew out the shiny hologram plate that was all there was inside.
It was Carmen laid on Geiger’s wooden bench on the dais, roped and bound in her earrings and her birthday suit. A dildo was pressed between her pussy lips, a different one than I had taken from her. Her eyes looked even a little crazier than as I remembered them. I put it back in the envelope.

“How much do they want?” I asked.

“Five mill - for the removable memory. The deal has to be closed tonight or they’ll send the stuff to some scandal site.”

“The demand came how?”

“A message, a woman’s voice, anonymised, about half an hour after this thing was delivered.”

“There’s nothing in the scandal site angle. The net judges would take it down in five minutes. What else is there?”

“Does there have to be something else?”

“Yes.”

She stared at me, a little puzzled. “There is. The woman said there was a police jam connected with it and I’d better lay it on the line fast, or I’d be talking to my little sister through a detention force field.”

“Better,” I said. “What kind of jam?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is Carmen now?”

“She’s at home. She was sick last night. She’s still in bed, I think.”

“Did she go out last night?”

“No. I was out, but the servitors say she wasn’t. I was down-town, playing roulette at Eddie Mars’s Cypress Club. I lost my shirt.”

“So you like roulette. You would.”

She crossed her legs and lit another cigarette. “Yes. I like roulette. All the Sternwoods like losing games, like roulette and marrying men that walk out on them. The Sternwoods have money. All it has ever bought them is a rain cheque.”

“What was Owen doing last night with your cruiser?”
“Nobody knows. He took it without permission. We always let him take a ship on his night off, but last night wasn’t his night off.” She made a wry mouth. “Do you think - ?”

“He knew about the bondage holo? How would I be able to say? I don’t rule him out. Can you get five mill in cash right away?”

“Not unless I tell Dad - or borrow it. I could probably borrow it from Eddie Mars. He ought to be generous with me, heaven knows.”

“Better try that. You may need it in a hurry.”

She leaned back and hung an arm over the back of the chair. “How about telling the police?”

“It’s a good idea. But you won’t do it.”

“Won’t I?”

“No. You have to protect your father and your sister. You don’t know what the police might turn up. It might be something they couldn’t sit on. Though they usually try in blackmail cases.”

“Can you do anything?”

“I think I can. But I can’t tell you why or how.”

“I like you,” she said suddenly. “You believe in miracles. Would you have such a thing as a drink in the office?”

I unlocked my deep drawer and got out my office bottle and two shot glasses. I filled them and we drank. She snapped her bag shut and pushed her chair back.

“I’ll get the five mill,” she said. “I’ve been a good customer of Eddie Mars. There’s another reason why he should be nice to me, which you may not know.” She gave me one of those smiles the lips have forgotten by the time they reach the eyes. “Eddie’s blonde wife is the lady Rusty ran away with.”

I didn’t say anything. She stared tightly at me and added: “That doesn’t interest you?”

“It ought to make him easier to find him - if I was looking for him. You don’t think he’s in this mess, do you?”

She pushed her empty glass at me. “Give me another drink. You’re the hardest guy to get anything out of. You don’t even move your ears.”
I filled the little glass. “You’ve got all you wanted out of me - a pretty good idea I’m not looking for your husband.”

She put the drink down very quickly. It made her gasp - or gave her an opportunity to gasp. She let a breath out slowly.

“Rusty was no crook. If he had been, it wouldn’t have been for change. He carried fifteen million dollars, in bills. He called it his mad money. He had it when I married him and he had it when he left me. No - Rusty’s not in on any cheap blackmail racket.”

She reached for the envelope and stood up. “I’ll keep in touch with you,” I said.

She tapped the white envelope against her knuckles. She said: “You still feel you can’t tell me what Dad - “

“I’d have to see him first.”

She took the holo out and stood looking at it. “She has a beautiful little body, hasn’t she?”

“Oh-huh.”

She leaned towards me. “But you prefer mine, don’t you?”

She dropped her bag and wriggled her fingers and her clothing slid off on the floor. She stood there, naked, staring steadily at me. I put out my cigarette and reached for her.

I fucked her twice that afternoon, once on the desk and once leaning on it. She knew everything about sucking cock and riding me in her ass. I made it difficult for her, holding out as long as I could and making sure she came too, both times. She was energetic and surprisingly imaginative, moaning dirty words which degenerated into screams as she reached orgasm.

As I sat panting, spent for the second time, she said: “You like it when I do you a favour or two?”

I said: “I still can’t tell you anything about the General’s instructions, you know.”

She pulled on her clothing back on in a few deft movements, laughed sharply and went half-way though the door, then turned her head to say coolly: “You’re as cold-blooded a beast as I have even met, Marlowe. Or can I call you Phil?”

“Sure.”
“You can call me Vivian.”

“Thanks, Mrs Regan.”

“Oh, go to hell, Marlowe.” She went on out and didn’t look back.

I let the door shut itself. I felt a little hot, flushed and sticky. I put the whisky away in the desk and washed my dick, then rinsed out the shot glasses and put them away.

I put in a video call to the OSHA office and they put me through to Bernie Ohls.

He was back in his cubby hole. “Well, I let the old man alone,” he said. “The butler said he or one of the girls would tell him when he was next awake. This Owen Taylor lived over the garage and I went though his stuff. Parents on Earth. I messaged them to find out what they want done. The Sternwood family will pay for it.”

“Suicide?” I asked.

“No can tell. He didn’t leave any notes. He had no leave to take the cruiser. Everybody was home last night but Mrs Regan. She was down-town at the Cypress Club with a playboy named Larry Cobb. I checked on that. I know a ‘bot on one of the tables.”

“You ought to stop this flash gambling,” I said.

“With the syndicate we got on this rock? Be your age, Marlowe. That bruise on the boy’s head bothers me. Sure you can’t help me on this?”

I liked his putting it that way. It let me say no without actually lying. We said good-bye and I left the office, rode a taxi down to the Hall of Justice to get my rickshaw out of the parking lot. There was nothing on any of the nets about Geiger. I took another look at his blue notebook, but the code as just as stubborn as it had been the night before.
Chapter 12 - Lost Property

The trees of the upper side of Lunar Terrace had fresh green leaves after the rain. In the cool afternoon sunlight I could see the steep drop of the hill and the flight of steps down which the killer had run after his three shots in the darkness. Two small houses fronted onto the street below. They might or might not have heard the shots.

There was no activity in front of Geiger’s house of anywhere along the block. The box hedge looked green and peaceful and the shingles on the roof were still damp. I got my rickshaw bot to drive past slowly, while I gnawed at an idea. I hadn’t looked in the garage the night before. Once Geiger’s body slipped away I hadn’t really wanted to find it. It would force my hand. But dragging him to the garage, to his own ground-car and driving off into one of the hundred odd lonely airlocks around the Habitat would be a good way to dispose of him for days or even weeks. That supposed two things: a key to his car and two in the party. It would narrow the sector of search quite a lot, especially as I happened to have his personal keys in my pocket when it happened.

I didn’t get a chance to look at the garage. The doors were shut and sealed and something moved behind the hedge as I drew level. A woman wearing a green and white coat with soft blonde hair stepped out of the maze and stood looking wild-eyed at my rickshaw, as if she hadn’t heard it coming up the hill. Then she turned swiftly and dodged back out of sight. It was Carmen Sternwood, of course.

I went on up the street and got my rickshaw bot to park and walked back. In the pseudo-daylight it seemed an exposed and dangerous thing to do. I went in though the hedge. She stood straight and silent against the locked front door. She looked strained. There were purple smears under her eyes and her face was gnawed white by nerves.

She half smiled at me. She said: “Hello” in a thin brittle voice.

“Remember me?” I said, “Doghouse Rogers, the man that grew too tall.”

She nodded and a quick jerky smile played around her mouth.

“Let’s go in,” I said, “I’ve got a key. Swell, huh?”

“What?” she stuttered.
I pushed her aside and applied the key to the door and let it swing open and pushed her through it. I let the door shut again and stood there sniffing. The place was horrible by daylight. The Chinese junk on the walls, the rug, the fussy lamps, the fused recording bot - all this in the daylight had a certain stealthy nastiness.

The girl and I stood looking at each other. She tried to keep a cute little smile on her face but her face was too tired to be bothered. It kept going blank on her. The smile would wash off like water on sand and her pale skin had a harsh granular texture under the stunned and stupid blankness of her eyes. A whitish tongue licked at the corners of her mouth. A pretty, spoilt and not very bright little girl who had gone very, very wrong, and nobody was doing anything about it. To hell with the rich. They made me sick. I picked out a cigarette and rolled it between my fingers and pushed some books out of the way and sat on the end of the black desk. I lit my cigarette, puffed a plume of white smoke and watched the girl for a while in silence. Carmen stood in front of me, like a bad girl in the Principal’s office.

“What are you doing here?” I asked flatly.

She picked at the hem of her clothing and didn’t answer.

“How much do you remember of last night?”

She answered that - with a foxy glitter rising at the back of her eyes. “Remember what? I was sick last night. I was home.” Her voice was a cautious throaty sound that just reached my ears.

“Like hell you were.”

Her eyes flickered up and went down quickly.

“Before you went home,” I said, “Before I took you home. Here. Tied to that bench” - I pointed to it - “You remember all right.”

A slow flush crept up her throat. That was something. She could blush. A glint of white showed under the clogged grey irises.

“You - were the one?” She whispered.

“Me. How much of it stays with you?”

She said vaguely, “Are you the police?”

“No. I’m a friend of your father’s.”

“You’re not the police?”

“No.”
She let out a thin sigh. “What do you want?”

“Who killed him?”

Her shoulders jerked, but nothing more moved in her face. “Who else knows?”

“About Geiger? I don’t know. Not the police, or they’d me camping here. Maybe Joe Brody.”

It was a stab in the dark but it got her. “Joe Brody! Him!”

Then we were both silent. I dragged at my cigarette.

“Don’t get clever, for God’s sake,” I urged her, “This is a spot for a little old-fashioned simplicity. Did Brody kill him?”

“Kill who?”

“Oh, Christ,” I said.

She looked hurt. Her chin came down a centimetre. “Yes,” she said solemnly, “Joe did it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head, persuading herself that she didn’t know.

“Seen much of him lately?”

Her hands went down and made small white knots. “Just one or twice. I hate him.”

“Then you know where he lives.”

“Yes.”

“And you don’t like him anymore?”

“I hate him.”

“Then you’d like him for the spot.”

A little blank again. I was going too fast for her. It was hard not to. “Are you willing to tell the police it was Joe Brody?” I probed.

Sudden panic flamed all over her face. “If I can kill the bondage holo angle, of course,” I added soothingly.

She giggled. That gave me a nasty feeling. If she had screeched or wept or even nosedived to the floor in a dead faint, that would have been alright. She just giggled. It was suddenly a lot of fun. She had had her holo taken being fucked in every hole and somebody had
swiped the media card and somebody had bumped off Geiger in front of her and she was drunker than a Martian sports bar, and it was suddenly a lot of nice clean fun. So she giggled. Very cute. The giggles got louder and ran around the corners of the room like rats in the wainscotting. She started to go hysterical. I slid off the desk and stepped up close to her and gave her a smack on the side of the face.

“Just like last night,” I said, “We’re a scream together. Rogers and Sternwood, two stooges in search of a comedian.”

The giggles stopped dead, but she didn’t mind the slap any more than last night. Probably all of her boyfriends and dominatrix got around to slapping her sooner or later. I could understand how they might. I sat down on the end of the black desk again.

“You’re name isn’t Rogers,” she said seriously. “It’s Philip Marlowe. You’re a private detective. Viv told me. She showed me your netsite.” She smoothed the cheek I had slapped. She smiled at me, as if I was nice to be with.

“Well, you do remember,” I said. “And you came back to look for that hologram and the media and you couldn’t get into the house. Didn’t you?”

Her chin ducked up and down. She worked the smile. I was having the eye put on me. I was being brought into line. I was going to yell “Yippee” in a minute and ask her to suck my cock.

“The holo’s gone,” I said, “I looked last night, before I took you home. Probably Brody took it with him. You’re not kidding me about Brody?”

She shook her head earnestly.

“It’s a pushover,” I said. “You don’t have to give it another thought. Don’t tell a soul you were here, last night or today. Not even Vivian. Just forget you were here. Leave it to Rogers.”

“Your name isn’t -“ she began, and then stopped and shook her head vigorously in agreement with what I had said or with what she had just thought of. Her eyes became narrow and almost black and as shallow as paint on a spaceship hull. She had had an idea. “I have to go home now,” she said, as we had been having a cup of Chai.

“Sure.”

I didn’t move. She gave me another cute glance and went on towards the front door. She had her hand on the knob when we both
heard a car coming. She looked up at me with questions in her eyes. I shrugged. The car stopped, right in front of the house. Terror twisted her face. There were steps and then the bell rang. Carmen stared back at me over her shoulder, her hand clutching the door knob, almost drooling with fear. The bell kept on ringing. Then the ringing stopped. A key feeped at the door and Carmen jumped away from it and stood frozen. The door swung open. A man stepped through it briskly and stopped dead, staring at us quietly, with complete composure.
Chapter 13 - Diamond Guy

He was a grey man, clothing all in silver-grey except for his polished black shoes and two scarlet diamonds in his grey satin shirt collar that looked like the diamonds on roulette layouts. His hair was grey and as fine as if it had been sifted through gauze. His thick grey eyebrows had that indefinably sporty look. He had a long chin, a nose with a hook to it, thoughtful grey eyes that had a slanted look because the fold of skin over the upper lid came down over the corner of the lid itself.

He stood there politely, one hand touching the door at his back. He looked hard, not the hardness of the tough guy. More like the hardness of a well-weathered horseman. But he was no horseman. He was Eddie Mars.

He pushed the door shut behind him and smiled at Carmen. He had a nice easy smile. She licked her lips and stared at him. The fear went out of her face. She smiled back.

“Excuse the casual entrance,” he said. “The bell didn’t seem to rouse anybody. Is Mr Geiger around?”

I said: “No. We don’t know just where he is. We found the door a little open. We stepped inside.”

He nodded and touched his long chin with his thumb and forefinger. “You’re friends of his, of course?”

“Just business acquaintances. We dropped by for a book.”

“A book, eh?” He said that quickly and brightly and, I thought, a little slyly, as if he knew all about Geiger’s books. Then he looked at Carmen again and shrugged.

I moved towards the door. “We’ll trot along now,” I said. I took hold of her arm. She was staring at Eddie Mars. She liked him.

“Any message - if Geiger comes back?” Eddie Mars asked gently.

“We won’t bother you.”

“That’s too bad,” he said, with too much meaning. His grey eyes twinkled and then hardened as I went past him to open the door. He added in a casual tone: “The girl can dust. I’d like to talk to you a little, soldier.”
I let go of her arm. I gave him a blank state. “Kidder, eh?” he said nicely. “Don’t waste it. I’ve got two boys outside in a ground-car that always do just what I want them to.”

Carmen made a sound at my side and bolted through the door. Her steps faded rapidly downhill. I hadn’t seen her car, so she must have left it down below. I started to say: “What the hell?”

“Oh, skip it,” Eddie Mars sighed. “There’s something wrong around here. I’m going to find out what it is. If you want holes in your belly, get in my way.”

“Well, well,” I said, “A tough guy.”

“Only when necessary, soldier.” He wasn’t looking at me anymore. He was walking around the room, frowning, not paying any attention to me. I looked out above the broken pane of the front window. The top of a car showed over the hedge. Its motor idled.

Eddie Mars found the flagon and the glasses and the mirror. He sniffed at one of the glasses, then at the powder on the mirror. A disgusted smile wrinkled his lips. “The lousy pimp,” he said tonelessly.

He looked at a couple of books, grunted, went on around the desk and stood in front of the little silver recording robot. He studied it, dropping his glance to the floor in front of it. He moved the small rug with his foot, then bent swiftly, his body tense. He went down on the floor with one grey knee. The desk hid him from me partly. There was a sharp exclamation and he came up again. His arm flashed under his coat and a black laser pistol appeared in his hand. He held it in long brown fingers, not pointing it at me, not pointing it at anything.

“Blood,” he said. “Blood on the floor there, under the rug. Quite a lot of blood.”

“Is that so?” I said, looking interested.

He slid into the chair behind the desk and hooked the data terminal towards him and shifted the laser to his left hand. He frowned sharply at the terminal, bringing his thick grey eyebrows together and making a hard crease in the weathered skin at the top of his hooked nose. “I think we’ll have some law,” he said.

I went over and kicked at the rug that lay where Geiger had lain. “It’s old blood,” I said, “Dried blood.”

“Just the same we’ll have some law.”
“Why not?” I said.

His eyes went narrow. The veneer had flaked off him, leaving a well-dressed hard boy with a laser. He didn’t like me agreeing with him.

“Just who the hell are you, soldier?”

“Marlowe is the name. I’m a sleuth.”

“Never heard of you. Who’s the girl?”

“Client. Geiger was trying to throw a loop on her with some blackmail. We came to talk it over. He wasn’t here. The door being open we walked in to wait. Or did I tell you that?”

“Convenient,” he said. “The door being open. When you didn’t have a key.”

“Yes. How come you had a key?”

“Is that any of your business, soldier?”

“I could make it my business.”

He smiled tightly. “And I could make your business my business.”

“You wouldn’t like it. The pay’s too small.”

“All right bright eyes. I own this house. Geiger is my tenant. Now what do you think of that?”

“You know such lovely people.”

“I take them as they come. They come all kinds.” He glanced down at the laser, shrugged and tucked it back under his arm. “Got any good ideas, soldier?”

“Lots of them. Someone gunned Geiger. Somebody got gunned by Geiger, who ran away. Or it was two other fellows. Or Geiger was running a cult and made blood sacrifices.”

The grey man scowled at me.

“I give up,” I said. “Better call your friends downtown.”

“I don’t get it,” he said, “I don’t get your game here.”

“Go ahead, call the cops. You’ll get a big reaction from it.”

He thought that over without moving. His lips went back against his teeth. “I don’t get that, either,” he said tightly.
“Maybe it just isn’t your day. I know you, Mr Mars. The Cypress Club. Flash gambling for flash people. The local law in your pocket and a well-greased line downtown. In other words, protection. Geiger was in a racket that needed that too. Perhaps you spared him a little now and then, seeing he’s your tenant.”

His mouth became a hard white grimace. “Geiger was in what racket?”

“The smut media and porn book racket.”

He stared at me for a long level minute. “Somebody got to him,” he said softly. “You know something about this. He didn’t show at the store today. They don’t know where he is. He didn’t answer the phone. I came up to see about it. I find blood on the floor, under a rug. And you and a girl here.”

“A little weak,” I said. “But maybe you can sell the story to a willing buyer. You missed a little something, though. Somebody moved his books and media out of the store today - the nice materials he rented out.”

He snapped his fingers sharply and said: “I should have thought of that, soldier. You seem to get around. How do you figure it?”

“I think Geiger was rubbed. I think that is his blood. And the books being moved out gives a motive for hiding the body for a while. Somebody is taking over the racket and wants a little time to organise.”

“They can’t get away with it,” Eddie Mars said grimly.

“Who says so? You and a couple of gunmen in your car outside? This is a big habitat now, Eddie. Some very tough people have checked in here lately. The penalty of growth.”

“You talk too damn much,” Eddie Mars said. He bared his teeth and whistled twice sharply. A car door slammed outside and running steps came through the hedge. Mars flicked the laser out again and pointed it at my chest. “Open the door.”

The knob rattled and a voice called out. I didn’t move. The muzzle of the laser looked the mouth of the main habitat airlock, but I didn’t move. Not being laser-proof is an idea I had had to get used to.

“Open it yourself, Eddie. Who the hell are you to give me orders? Be nice and I might help you out.”
He came to his feet rigidly and moved around the end of the desk and over to the door. He opened it without taking his eyes off me. Two men tumbled into the room, reaching busily under their arms. One was an obvious pug, a good-looking pale-faced boy with a bad nose and one ear like a club steak. The other man was slim, blond, deadpan, with close-set eyes and no colour to them.

Eddie Mars said: “See if this bird is wearing any iron.”

The blond flicked out an old-fashioned projectile weapon with a short barrel and stood pointing it at me. The pug sidled over flat-footed and felt my pockets with care. I turned around for him like a bored beauty modelling an evening gown.

“No gun,” he said in a burry voice.

“Find out who he is.”

The pug slipped a hand into my breast pocket and drew out my wallet. He flipped it open and studied the contents. “Name’s Philip Marlowe, Eddie. Lives at the Hobart Arms. Private licence, deputy’s badge and all. A private investigator.” He slipped the wallet back in my pocket, slapped my face lightly and turned away.

“Beat it,” Eddie Mars said.

The two gunmen went out again and closed the door. There was the sound of them getting back into the car. They started its motor and kept it idling once more.

“All right. Talk,” Eddie Mars said. The peaks of his eyebrows made sharp angles against his forehead.

“I’m not ready to give out. Killing Geiger to grab his racket would be a dumb trick and I’m not sure it happened that way, assuming he has been killed. But I’m sure that whoever got the books knows what’s what, and I’m sure that the blonde lady at his store is scared batty about something or other. And I have a guess who got the books.”

“Who?”

“That’s the part I’m not ready to give out. I’ve got a client, you know.”

He wrinkled his nose. “That -‘ he chopped it off quickly.

“I expected you would know the girl,” I said.

“Who got the books, soldier?”
“Not ready to talk, Eddie. Why should I?”

He put the laser down on the desk and slapped it with his open palm. “This,” he said. “And I might make it worth your while.”

“That’s the spirit. Leave the gun out of it. I can always hear the sound of money. How much are you clinking at me?”

“For doing what?”

“What did you want done?”

He slammed the desk hard. “Listen, soldier. I ask you a question and you ask me another. We’re not getting anywhere. I want to know where Geiger is, for my own personal reasons. I didn’t like his racket and I didn’t protect him. I happen to own this house. I’m not so crazy about that right now. I can believe that whatever you know about all this is under glass, or there would be a flock of cops squeaking shoe leather around this dump. You haven’t got anything to sell. My guess is you need a little protection yourself. So cough up.”

It was a good guess, but I wasn’t going to let him know it. I lit a cigarette and dragged on it and flicked ash at the burnt-out camera bot. “You’re right,” I said. “If anything has happened to Geiger, I’ll have to give what I have to the law. Which puts it in the public domain and doesn’t leave me anything to sell. So with your permission I’ll just drift.”

His face whitened under the tan. He looked mean, fast and tough enough for a moment. He made a movement to lift the laser. I added casually: “By the way, how is Mrs Mars these days?”

I thought for a moment I had kidded him a little too far. His hand jerked at the gun, shaking. His face was stretched out by hard muscles. “Beat it,” he said quite softly. “I don’t give a damn where you go or what you do when you get there. Only take a word of advice, soldier. Leave me out of your plans or you’ll wish your name was Wong and you lived on the Moon.”

“Well, that’s not so far from Earth,” I said. “I hear you had a pal came from there.”

He leaned down on the desk, frozen-eyed, unmoving. I went over to the door and opened it and looked back at him. His eyes had followed me, but his lean grey body had not moved. There was hate in those eyes. I went out and through the hedge and up the hill to my rickshaw and got into it. I told the bot to turn around and drive up over the crest. Nobody shot at me. After a few blocks I turned off,
told the rickshaw bot to go to sleep and sat for a few moments. Nobody followed me either. I drove back downtown.
It was ten minutes to seven when I got my rickshaw bot to drop me off near the apartment house where I had tailed the truck. A few windows were lit and recorded music was bleating at the dusk. I rode the elevator up to the fourth floor and went along a wide hall carpeted in green and panelled in ivory-coloured plastic. A cool breeze blew down the hall from the open screened door to the fire escape.

There was a small pushbutton beside the door marked ‘405’. I pushed it and waited what seemed like a long time. Then the door opened noiselessly about thirty centimetres. There was a steady furtive air in the way it opened. The man was long-legged, long-waisted, high-shouldered, and he had dark brown eyes in a brown expressionless face that had learned to control its expressions long ago. Hair like steel wool grew far back on his head and gave him a great deal of domed brown forehead that might at a careless glance have seemed a dwelling-place for brains. His sombre eyes probed at me impersonally. His long thin brown fingers held the edge of the door. He said nothing.

I said: “Geiger?”

Nothing in the man’s face changed that I could see. He brought a cigarette from behind the door and tucked in between his lips and drew a little smoke from it. The smoke came towards me in a lazy, contemptuous puff and behind it words in a cool unhurried voice that had no more inflection than the voice of a robot travel agent.

“You said what?”

“Geiger. Arthur Gwynne Geiger. The guy that has the books.”

The man considered that without any haste. He glanced down at the tip of his cigarette. His other hand, the one that had been holding the door, dropped out of sight. His shoulder had a look as though his hidden hand might be making motions.

“Don’t know anybody by that name,” he said. “Does he live around here?”

I smiled. He didn’t like the smile. His eyes got nasty. I said: “You’re Joe Brody?”
The brown face hardened. “So what? Got a problem, brother, or just amusing yourself?”

“So you’re Joe Brody,” I said. “And you don’t know anybody named Geiger. That’s very funny.”

“Yeah? You got a funny sense of humour, maybe. Take it away and play on it somewhere else.”

I leaned against the door and gave him a dreamy smile. “You got the books, Joe. I got the sucker list. We ought to talk things over.”

He didn’t shift his eyes from my face. There was a faint sound in the room behind him, as though a metal curtain ring clicked lightly on a metal rod. He glanced sideways into the room. He opened the door wider.

“Why not, if you think you’ve got something?” he said coolly. He stood aside from the door. I went past him into the room.

It was a cheerful room with good furniture and not too much of it. French windows in the end wall opened up on a wide balcony and looked across the dusk at the dome supports. Near the windows a closed door in the spinwards wall and near the entrance door another door in the same wall. This last had a plush curtain drawn across it on a thin brass rod below the lintel.

That left the antispinwards wall, in which there were no doors. There was a davenport backed against the middle of it, so I sat down on the davenport. Brody shut the door and walked crab-fashion to a tall oak-effect desk studded with square nails and decorated with a large old-fashioned terminal. A cedar-wood box with gilt hinges lay on the desk. He carried the box to an easy chair midway between the other two doors and sat down. I waited.

“Well, I’m listening,” Brody said. He opened the cigar box and dropped his cigarette stub into a dish at his side. He put a long thin cigar in his mouth. “Cigar?” He tossed one at me through the air.

I reached for it. Brody took a gun out of the cigar box and pointed it at my nose. I looked at the gun. It was a black Police Special. I had no argument against it at the moment.

“Neat, huh?” Brody said. “Just kind of stand up a minute. Come forward just about two metres. You might grab a little air while you’re doing that.” His voice was the elaborate casual voice of the tough guy in old flat-screen movies. Movies have made them all like that.
“Tsk, tsk,” I said, not moving at all. “Such a lot of guns around the habitat and so few brains. You’re the second guy I’ve met within hours who seems to think a gat in the hand means a world by the tail. Put it down and don’t be silly, Joe.”

His eyebrows came together and he pushed his chin at me. His eyes were mean.

“The other guy’s name is Eddie Mars,” I said. “Ever heard of him?”

“No.” Brody kept the gun pointed at me.

“If he ever gets wise to where you were last night in the rain, he’ll wipe you off the way the network admins wipe a website.”

“What would I be to Eddie Mars?” Brody asked coldly. But he lowered the gun to his knee.

“Not even a memory,” I said.

We stared at each other. I didn’t look at the pointed black slipper that showed under the plush curtain on the doorway to my left.

Brody said quietly: “Don’t get me wrong. I’m not a tough guy, just careful. I don’t know hell’s first whisper about you. You might be a lifetaker for all I know.”

“You’re not careful enough,” I said. “That play with Geiger’s books was terrible.”

He drew a long slow breath and let it out silently. Then he leaned back and crossed his long legs and held the gun on his knee.

“Don’t kid yourself I won’t use this heat, if I have to,” he said. “What’s your story?”

“Have your friend with the pointed slippers come on in. She gets tired of holding her breath.

Brody called out without moving his eyes off my stomach. “Come on in, Agnes.”

The curtain swung aside and the green-eyed, thigh-swinging ash blonde from Geiger’s store joined us in the room. She looked at me with a kind of mangled hatred. Her nostrils were pinched and her eyes had darkened a couple of shades. She looked very unhappy.

“I knew damn well you were trouble,” she snapped at me. “I told Joe to watch his step.”
“It’s not his step, it’s the back of his lap he ought to watch,” I said.

“I suppose that’s funny,” the blonde said.

“It has been,” I said. “But it probably isn’t any more.”

“Save the gags,” Brody advised me. “Joe’s watching his step plenty. Put some lights on so I can see to pop this guy, if it works out that way.”

The blonde snicked on a light in a big square standing lamp. She sank down into a chair beside the lamp and sat stiffly, as if her girdle was too tight. I put my cigar in my mouth and bit the end off. Brody’s gun took a close interest in me while a snapped on a flame and lit the cigar. I tasted the smoke and said:

“The sucker list I spoke of is in code. I haven’t cracked it yet, but there are about five hundred names. You’ve got twelve boxes of books and media that I know of. You should have at least five hundred items. There’ll be a bunch more out on load, but say five hundred is the full crop, just to be cautious. If it’s a good active list and you could run it even fifty per cent down the line, that would be one hundred and twenty-five thousand rentals. Your girl friend knows all about that. I’m only guessing. Put the average rental as low as you like, but it won’t be less than a Kay. That merchandise costs money. At a Kay per rental you take one hundred and twenty-five million and you still have your capital. I mean, you still have Geiger’s capital. That’s enough to spot a guy for.”

The blonde said: “You’re crazy, you goddamn egg-headed - !”

Brody put his teeth sideways at her and snarled: “Pipe down, for Chrissake. Pipe down!”

She subsided into an outraged mixture of slow anguish and bottled fury. Her silvery nails scraped on her knees.

“It’s no racket for bums,” I told Brody almost affectionately. “It takes a smooth worker like you, Joe. You’ve got to get confidence and keep it. People who spend their money for second-hand sex jags are as nervous as dowagers who can’t find the rest room. Personally, I think the blackmail angles are a big mistake. I’m for shedding all that and sticking to legitimate sales and rentals.”

Brody’s dark brown stare moved up and down my face. His gun went on hungering for my vital organs. “You’re a funny guy,” he said tonelessly. “Who has this lovely racket?”
“You have,” I said. “Almost.”

The blonde choked and clawed her ear. Brody didn’t say anything. He just looked at me.

“What?” the blonde called. “You sit there and try to tell us Mr Geiger ran that kind of business right down to the main drag? You’re nuts!”

I leered at her politely. “Sure I do. Everybody knows the racket exists. If a thing like that has to exist, then right out on the street is where all practical coppers want it to exist. For the same reason they favour red light districts. They know where to go to flush the game when they want to.”

“My God,” the blonde said. “You let this cheese-head sit there and insult me, Joe? You with a gun in your hand and him holding nothing but a cigar and his dick?”

“I like it,” Brody said. “The guy’s got good ideas. Shut your trap and keep it shut, or I’ll slap it shut for you with this.” He flicked the gun around in an increasingly negligent manner.

The blonde gasped and turned her face to the wall. Brody looked at me and said cunningly: “How have I got that lovely racket?”

“You shot Geiger to get it. Last night in the rain. It was dandy shooting weather. The trouble is he wasn’t alone when you whiffed him. Either you didn’t notice that, which seems unlikely, or you got the wind up and panicked. But you had nerve enough to take the memory out of the camera bot and you had nerve enough to come back later on and hide his corpse, so you could tidy up on the books before the law knew it had a murder to investigate.”

“Yah,” Brody said contemptuously. The gun wobbled on his knee. His brown face was as hard as a piece of carved wood. “You take chances mister. It’s kind of goddamned lucky for you I didn’t bop Geiger.”

“You can step off for it just the same,” I told him cheerfully. “You’re made to order for the rap.”

Brody’s voice went rough. “Think you’ve got me framed for it?”

“Positive.”

“How come?”
"There’s somebody who’ll tell it that way. I told you there was a witness. Don’t go simple on me, Joe.”

He exploded then. "That goddamned little hot pants!" he shouted. "She would, goddamn her! She would - just that!"

I leaned back and grinned at him. "Swell. I thought you had those bondage images of her."

He didn’t say anything. The blonde didn’t say anything. I let them chew on it. Brody’s face cleared slowly, with a sort of greyish relief. He put his gun down on the end table beside his chair but kept his right hand close to it. He knocked ash from his cigar on the carpet and stared at me with eyes that were a tight shine between narrowed lids.

“I guess you think I’m dumb,” Brody said.

“Just average, for a grifter. Get the pictures.”

“What pictures?”

I shook my head. "Wrong play, Joe. Innocence gets you nowhere. You were either there last night, or you got the bondage materials from somebody that was there. You know she was there, because you had your girl friend threaten Mrs Regan with a police rap. The only ways you could know enough to do that would be by seeing what happened or by holding the memory and knowing where and when it was recorded. Cough up and be sensible.”

“I’d have to have a little dough,” Brody said. He turned his head a little at the green-eyed blonde. Not now green-eyed and only superficially a blonde. She was as limp as a freshly-killed rabbit.

“No dough,” I said.

He scowled bitterly. "How’d you get to me?"

I flicked my wallet out and let him look at my hologram. "I was working on Geiger, for a client. I was outside last night, in the rain. I heard the shots. I crashed in. I didn’t see the killer. I saw everything else.”

“And kept your lip buttoned,” Brody sneered.

I put my wallet away. "Yes,” I admitted. "Up till now. Do I get the memory or not?"

“About these books,” Brody said. “I don’t get that.”

“I tailed them here from Geiger’s store. I have a witness.”
“That punk kid?”

“What punk kid?”

He scowled again. “The kid that works at the store. He skipped out after the truck left. Agnes doesn’t even know where he flops.”

“That helps,” I said, grinning at him. “That angle worried me a little. Either of you ever been in Geiger’s house, before last night?”

“Not even last night,” Brody said sharply. “So she says I gunned him, eh?”

“With the memory in my hand I might be able to convince her she was wrong. There was a little drink and drugs being done.”

Brody sighed. “She hates my guts. I bounced her out. I got paid, sure, but I’d have had to do it anyway. She’s too screwy for a simple guy like me.” He cleared his throat. “How about a little dough? I’m down to dollars. Agnes and me gotta move on.”

“Not from my client.”

“Listen.”

“Get the memory, Brody.”

“Oh, hell,” he said. “You win.” he stood up and slipped the gun into his side pocket. His left hand went up inside his coat. He was holding it there, his face twisted with disgust, when the door buzzer rang and kept on ringing.
Chapter 15 - Unanticipated Arrival

He didn’t like that. His lower lip went in under his teeth, and his eyebrows drew down sharply at the corners. His whole face became sharp and foxy and mean.

The buzzer kept up its song. I didn’t like it either. If the visitors should happen to be Eddie Mars and his boys, I might get chilled off just for being there. If it was the police, I was caught with nothing to give them but a smile and a promise. And if it was some of Brody’s friends – assuming he had any – they might turn out to be tougher than he was.

The blonde didn’t like it. She stood up in a surge and chipped at the air with one hand. Nervous tension made her face old and ugly.

Watching me, Brody jerked a small drawer in the desk and picked an antique bone–handled automatic pistol out of it. He held it at the blonde. She slid over to him and took it, shaking.

“Sit down next to him,” Brody said, “Hold it on him low down, away from the door. If he gets funny use your own judgement. We ain’t licked yet, baby.”

“Oh, Joe,” the blonde wailed. She came over and sat next to me on the davenport and pointed the gun at my leg artery. I didn’t like the jerky look in her eyes.

The door buzzer stopped humming and a quick impatient rapping on the door followed it. Brody put his hand in his pocket, on his gun, and walked over to the door and opened it with his left hand. Carmen Sternwood pushed him back into the room by putting a little antique revolver against his lean brown lips.

Brody backed away from her with his mouth working and an expression of panic on his face. Carmen shut the door behind her and looked neither at me nor Agnes. She stalked Brody carefully, her tongue ticking out a little between her teeth. Brody took both hands out of his pockets and gestured placatingly at her. His eyebrows designed themselves into an odd assortment of curves and angles. Agnes turned the gun away from me and swung it at Carmen. I shot my hand out and closed my fingers down hard over her hand and jammed my thumb on the safety catch. It was already on. I kept it on. There was a short silent tussle, to which neither Brody nor Carmen
paid any attention whatever. I had the gun. Agnes breathed deeply and shivered the whole length of her body. Carmen’s face had a bony scraped look and her breath hissed. Her voice said without tone:

“I want my pictures, Joe.”

Brody swallowed and tried to grin. “Sure kid, sure.” He said it in a small flat voice that was a much like the voice he had used to me as an electric scooter is like a ten-ton truck.


“Hey, wait a minute, Carmen,” I called.

Blonde Agnes came to life with a rush. She ducked her head and sank her teeth in my right hand. I made more noises and shook her off.

“Listen, kid,” Brody said, “Listen a minute -”

The blonde spat at me and threw herself on my leg and tried to bite me. I cracked her on the head with the gun, not very hard, and tried to stand up. She rolled down my legs and wrapped her arms around them. I fell back on the davenport. The blonde was strong with the madness of love or fear, or a mixture of both, or maybe she was just strong.

Brody grabbed for the antique revolver that was so close to his face. He missed. The gun made a sharp rapping noise that was not very loud. The bullet broke glass in a folded-back french window. Brody groaned horribly and fell down on the floor and jerked Carmen’s feet from under her. She landed in a heap and the little revolver went skidding off into a corner. Brody jumped up on his knees and reached for his pocket.

I hit Agnes on the head with less delicacy than before, kicked her off my feet, and stood up. Brody flicked his eyes at me. I showed him the automatic. He stopped trying to get his hand into his pocket.

“Christ!” he wined. “Don’t let her kill me!”

I began to laugh. I laughed like an idiot, without control. Blonde Agnes was sitting up on the floor with her hands flat on the carpet and her mouth wide open and a wick of metallic blonde hair down over her right eye. Carmen was crawling on her hands and knees, still hissing. The metal of her little revolver glistened against the baseboard over in the corner. She crawled towards it relentlessly.
I waved my share of the guns at Brody and said: “Stay put. You’re all right.”

I stepped past the crawling girl and picked the gun up. She looked at me and began to giggle. I put her gun in my pocket and patted her on the back. “Get up, angel. You look like a Pekinese.”

I went over to Brody and put the automatic against his midriff and reached his Police Special out of his side pocket. I now had all the guns that had been exposed to view. I stuffed them into my pockets and held my hand out to him.

“Give.”

He nodded, licking his lips, his eyes still scared. He took a memory stick out of his breast pocket and gave it to me.

“Sure this is all?”

He nodded again. I put the memory device in my own breast pocket and turned away. Agnes was back on the davenport, straightening her hair. Her eyes ate Carmen with a green distillation of hate. Carmen was up on her feet too, coming towards me with her hand out, still giggling and hissing alternately. There was a little froth at the corners of her mouth. Her small white teeth glinted close to her lips.

“Can I have it now?” she asked with a coy smile.

“I’ll take care of them for you. Go on home.”

“Home?”

I went to the door and looked out. The cool night breeze was blowing peacefully down the hall. No excited neighbours hung out of doorways. A small gun had gone off and broken a pane of glass, but noises like that don’t mean much any more. I held the door open and jerked my head at Carmen. She came towards me, smiling uncertainly.

“Go on home and wait for me,” I said soothingly.

She nodded and slipped past me into the hall. She touched my cheek with her fingers as she went by. “You’ll take care of Carmen, won’t you?”

“Check.”

“You’re cute.”
“What you see is nothing,” I said. “I’ve got a Balinese dancing girl tattooed on my right thigh.”

Her eyes rounded. She said: “Naughty,” and wagged a finger at me. Then she whispered: “Can I have my gun?”

“Not now. Later. I’ll bring it to you.”

She grabbed me suddenly around the neck and kissed me on the mouth. “I like you,” she said. “Carmen likes you a lot.” She ran off down the hall as light as a thrush, waved at me from the stairs and ran down the stairs out of my sight.

I went back into Brody’s apartment.
Chapter 16 - Partners in Crime

I went over to the folded-back french window and looked at the small broken pane in the upper part of it. The bullet from Carmen’s gun had smashed the glass like a blow. It had not made a hole. There was a small hole in the plastic wall which a keen eye would find quickly enough. I pulled the drapes over the broken pane and took Carmen’s gun out of my pocket. It was an antique, like most shooters these days, a .22 calibre with hollow-point cartridges. It had a pearl grip and a small round silver plate set into the butt was engraved: “Carmen from Owen.” She made saps of all of them.

I put the gun back in my pocket and set down close to Brody and stared into his bleak brown eyes. A minute passed. The blonde adjusted her face with the aid of a personal make-up kit. Brody fumbled around with a cigarette and growled: “Satisfied?”

“So far. Why did you put the bite on Mrs Regan instead of the old man?”

“Tapped the old man once. About six, seven months ago. I figure maybe he gets sore enough to call in some law.”

“What makes you think Mrs Regan wouldn’t tell him about it?”

He considered that with some care, smoking his cigarette and keeping his eyes on my face. Finally he said: “How well do you know her?”

“I’ve met her twice. You must know her a lot better to chance on that squeeze with the memory.”

“She skates around plenty. I figure maybe she has a couple of soft spots she don’t want the old man to know about. I figure she can raise five mill easy.”

“A little weak,” I said, “But it’ll pass. You’re broke, eh?”

“I’ve been shaking two dollars together for a month, trying to get them to mate.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“Insurance. Free-lance home-working.” He waved a brown hand in the direction of the antique terminal on the desk.
“When you open up, you open up. The books here in your apartment?”

He snapped his teeth. Confidence was oozing back into his manner. “Hell, no. In storage.”

“You had a man bring them here and then you had a storage outfit come and take them away again right afterwards?”

“Sure. I don’t want them moved direct from Geiger’s place, do I?”

“You’re smart,” I said admiringly. “Anything incriminating in the joint right now?”

He looked worried again. He shook his head sharply.

“That’s fine,” I told him. I looked across at Agnes. She had finished fixing her face and was staring at the wall, blank-eyed, hardly listening. Her face had the drowsiness which strain and shock induce, after their first incidence.

Brody flicked his eyes warily. “Well?”

“How’d you come by the holos?”

He scowled. “Listen, you got what you came after, got it plenty cheap. You done a nice neat job. Now go peddle it to your top man. I’m clean. I don’t know nothing about any holos, do I, Agnes?”

The blonde opened her eyes and looked at him with vague but uncomplimentary speculation. “A half smart guy,” she said with a tired sniff, “That’s all I ever draw. Never once a guy that’s smart all the way around the course. Never once.”

I grinned at her. “Did I hurt your head much?”

“You and every other man I ever met.”

I looked back at Brody. He was pinching his cigarette between his fingers, with a sort of twitch. His hand seemed to be shaking a little. His brown poker face was still smooth.

“We’ve got to agree on a story,” I said. “For instance, Carmen wasn’t here. That’s very important. She wasn’t here. That was a vision you saw.”

“Huh!” Brody sneered. “If you say so, pal, and if -” he put his hand out palm up and cupped the fingers and rolled the thumb gently against the index and middle fingers.
I nodded. “We’ll see. There might be a small contribution. You won’t count it in millions, though. Now were did you get the memory device?”

“A guy slipped it to me.”

“Uh-huh. A guy you just passed in the street. You wouldn’t know him again. You never saw him before.”

Brody yawned. “It dropped out of his pocket,” he said.

“Uh-huh. Got an alibi for last night, poker pan?”

“Sure. I was right here. Agnes was with me. Okay, Agnes?”

“I’m beginning to feel sorry for you again.”

His eyes flicked wide and his mouth hung loose, the cigarette balanced on his lower lip.

“You think you’re smart and you’re so goddamned dumb,” I told him. “Even if they don’t throw you out of an airlock, you have such a bleak long time ahead of you, inside.”

His cigarette jerked and dropped ash on his waistcoat.

“Thinking about how smart you are,” I said.


“Okay.” I stood up and went over to the tall oak desk and took his two guns out of my pockets, laid them side by side on the desktop so that the barrels were exactly parallel. I started for the door.

Brody called: “Hey!”

I turned and waited. His cigarette was jiggling like a doll on a coiled spring. “Everything’s smooth, ain’t it?” he asked.

“Why, sure. This is a free habitat. You don’t have to stay out of jail, if you don’t want to. That is, if you’re a citizen. Are you a citizen?”

He just stared at me, jiggling the cigarette. The blonde Agnes turned her head slowly and stared at me along the same level. Their glances contained almost the exact same blend of foxiness, doubt and frustrated anger. Agnes reached her silvery nails up abruptly and yanked a hair out of her head and broke it between her fingers, with a bitter jerk.
Brody said tightly: “You’re not going to any cops, brother. Not if it’s the Sternwoods you’re working for. I’ve got too much stuff on that family. You got your holos and you got your hush. Go and peddle your damn memory device.”

“Make your mind up,” I said. “You told me to dust. I was on my way out, you hollered at me and I stopped, and now I’m on my way out again. Is that what you want?”

“You ain’t got anything on me,” Brody said.

“Just a couple of murders. Small change in your circle.”

He didn’t jump more than a centimetre, but it looked like a metre. The white cornea showed all around the tobacco coloured iris of his eyes. The brown skin of his face took on a greenish tinge in the lamplight.

Blonde Agnes let out a low animal wail and buried her head in a cushion on the end of the davenport. I stood there and admired the long line of her thighs.

Brody moistened his lips slowly and said: “Sit down, pal. Maybe I have a little more for you. What’s that crack about two murders again?”

I leaned against the door. “Where were you last night about seven-thirty, Joe?”

His mouth dropped sulkily and he stared down at the floor. “I was watching a guy, a guy who had a nice racket I figured he needed a partner in. Geiger. I was watching him now and then to see if he had any tough connections. I figure he has friends or he don’t work the racket as open as he does. But they don’t go to his house. Only dames.”

“You didn’t watch him hard enough,” I said, “Go on.”

“I’m there last night on the street below Geiger’s house. It’s raining hard and I’m buttoned up in my convertible and I don’t see anything. There’s a car in front of Geiger’s and a rickshaw a little way up the hill. That’s why I stay down below. There’s a big cruiser parked down where I am and after a while I go over and take a gander at it. It’s registered to Vivian Regan. Nothing happens, so I scram. That’s all.”

He waved his cigarette. His eyes crawled up and down my face.

“Could be,” I said. “Know where that big cruiser is now?”
“Why would I?”

“In the Sheriff’s airlock. It was recovered drifting in the Asteriod Belt this morning. There was a dead man in it. He had been sapped and the cruiser set for automatic.”

Brody was breathing hard. One of his feet tapped restlessly. “Jesus, guy, you can’t pin that one on me,” he said thickly.

“Why not? This cruiser was down back of Geiger’s according to you. Well, Mrs Regan didn’t have it out. Her chauffeur, a cyborg named Owen Taylor, had it out. He went over to Geiger’s place to have words with him, because Owen Taylor was sweet on Carmen, and he didn’t like the kind of games Geiger was playing with her. He let himself in the back way with a jimmy and a gun and he caught Geiger taking holographs of Carmen without any clothes on, bound to a bench and with a dildo up her ass. So his gun went off, as guns will, and Geiger fell down dead and Owen ran away, but not without the memory stick with the holos Geiger had just taken. SO you ran after him and took the memory device from him. How else would you have got hold of it?”

Brody licked his lips. “Yeah,” he said, “But that don’t make me knock him off. Sure, I heard the shots and saw this killer come slamming down the back steps into the cruiser. He roaded it out. I took off after him. He hit the bottom of the canyon and went spinwards, then skidded off the road and had to stop. I came up and played copper. He had a gun but his nerve was bad and I sapped him down. So I went through his pockets and found out who he was and lifted the memory, just out of curiosity. I was wondering what it was all about and getting my neck wet when he came out of it all of a sudden and knocked me out of the cruiser. He went straight up. He was out of sight when I picked myself up. That’s the last I saw of him.”

“How did you know it was Geiger he shot?” I asked gruffly.

Brody shrugged. “I figure it was, but I can be wrong. When I had a look at the images on that memory stick, I was pretty damn sure. And when Geiger didn’t come down to the store this morning I was plenty sure. So I figure it’s a good time to move his books out and make a quick touch on the Sternwoods for travel money and blow for a while.”

I nodded. “That seems reasonable. Maybe you didn’t murder anybody at that. Where did you hide Geiger’s body?”
He lifted his eyebrows. Then he grinned. “Nix, nix. Skip it. You think I’d go back there and handle him, not knowing when a couple of car-loads of law would come dropping out of the sky? Nix.”

“Somebody hid the body,” I said.

Brody shrugged. The grin stayed on his face. He didn’t believe me. While he was still not believing me the door buzzer started to ring again. Brody stood up sharply, hard-eyed. He glanced over at the guns on the desk.

“So she’s back again,” he growled.

“If she is, she doesn’t have her gun,” I comforted him. “Don’t you have any other friends?”

“Just about one,” he growled. “I got enough of this puss-in-the-corner game.” He marched to the desk and took a gun. He held it down at his side and went to the door. He put his left hand to the knob and twisted it and opened the door about half a metre and leaned into the opening, holding the gun tight against his thigh.

A voice said: “Brody?”

Brody said something I didn’t hear. The two quick reports were muffled. The gun must have been pressed tight against Brody’s body. He tilted forward against the door and the weight of his body pushed it shut with a bang. He slid down the door. His feet pushed the carpet away behind him. His left hand dropped off the knob and the arm slapped the floor with a thud. His head was wedged against the door. He didn’t move. The gun clung to his right hand.

I jumped across the room and rolled him enough to get the door open and crowd through. A woman peered out of a door almost opposite. Her face was full of fright and she pointed along the hall with a claw-like hand.

I raced down the hall and heard thumping feet going down the steps and went down after the sound. At the lobby level the front door was closing itself quietly and running feet slapped the pavement outside. I made the door before it was shut, clawed it open again and charged out.

A tall figure in a leather jerkin was running diagonally across the street between the parked cars. The figure turned and flame spurted from it. Two heavy hammers hit the stucco wall beside me. The figure ran on, dodged between two cars, vanished.
A man came up beside me and asked: “What happened?”

“Shooting going on,” I said.

“Jesus!” He scuttled into the apartment house.

I walked quickly down the pavement to my rickshaw and got in. I motioned to the bot to pull out from the car and drive down the hill, not fast. No car started up on the other side of the street. I thought I heard steps, but I wasn’t sure about that. I rode down the hill a block and a half, got the rickshaw robot to turn at the intersection and started to back up. The sound of a muted whistling came to me faintly along the pavement. Then steps. I got the bot to double-park and slid out between two cars and went down low. I took Carmen’s little revolver out of my pocket.

The sound of the steps grew louder, and the whistling went on cheerfully. In a moment the jerkin showed. I stepped out between the two cars and said: “Got a light, buddy?”

The boy spun towards me and his right hand darted up to go inside the jerkin. His eyes were a wet shine in the glow of the round streetlights. Moist dark eyes shaped like almonds, and a pallid handsome forehead with wavy black hair growing low on the forehead in two points. A very handsome boy indeed, the boy from Geiger’s Counter.

He stood there looking at me silently, his right hand on the edge of the jerkin, but not inside it yet. I held the little revolver down at my side.

“You must have thought a lot of that queen,” I said.

“Go fuck yourself,” the boy said softly, motionless between the parked cars and the two metre retaining wall on the inside of the pavement.

A siren wailed distantly coming up the long hill. The boy’s head jerked towards the sound. I stepped in close and put my gun into his jerkin.

“Me or the cops?” I asked him.

His head rolled a little sideways as if I had slapped his face. “Who are you?” he said.

“Friend of Geiger’s.”

“Get away from me, you son of a bitch.”
“This is a small gun, kid. I’ll give it you through the navel and it will take three months to get you well enough to walk. But you will get well. So you can walk to the gas chamber.”

He said: “Go fuck yourself.” His hand moved inside his jerkin. I pressed harder on his stomach. He let out a long soft sigh, took his hand away from the jerkin and let it fall limp at his side. His wide shoulders sagged. “What you want?” he whispered.

I reached inside the jerkin and plucked out the automatic. “Get into my vehicle, kid.”

He stepped past me and I crowded him form behind. He got into the rickshaw.

“Sit back, kid.”

I slid in next to him. I said: “Let the prowl car pass up the hill. They’ll think we moved over when we heard the siren.”

I put Carmen’s gun away and leaned the automatic against the boy’s ribs. I looked back around the roof of the rickshaw. The whine of the siren was very loud now. Two red lights swelled in the middle of the street. They grew larger and blended into one and the car rushed by in a wild flurry of sound.

“Let’s go,” I said to the rickshaw bot.

We started off down the hill.

“Let’s go home,” I said, “To Lunar Terrace.”

His smooth lips twitched. “You’re a simple-minded lad. What’s your name?”

“Carol Lundgren,” he said lifelessly.

“You shot the wrong guy, Carol. Joe Brody didn’t kill your queen.”

He spoke three words to me and slumped in the corner of the rickshaw.
Chapter 17 - Rest in Peace

The bright curve of Saturn’s Rings glowed through the mist and the translucent dome among the high branches of the trees on Lunar Terrace. A music player sounded loudly from a house low down the hill. The robot swung the rickshaw over to the box hedge in front of Geiger’s house and then shut itself down without prompting. The boy sat looking straight before him, with both hands in his lap. No light showed through Geiger’s hedge.

I said: “Anybody home, son?”

“You ought to know.”

“How would I know?”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“That’s how people get to need prosthetic teeth.”

He showed me his in a tight grin. Then he kicked the door open and got out. I scuttled out after him. He stood with his fists on his hips, looking silently at the house above the top of the hedge.

“All right,” I said. “You have a key. Let’s go in.”

“Who said I had a key?”

“Don’t kid me, son. Geiger gave you one. You’ve got a nice clean manly little room in there. He shooed you out and locked it up when he had lady visitors. He was bisexual, a husband to women and a wife to men. Think I can’t figure people like him and you out?”

I still held the automatic more or less pointed at him, but he swung on me just the same. It caught me flush on the chin. I backstepped fast enough to keep me from falling, but I took plenty of the punch. It was meant to be a hard one, but the boy had no iron in his bones, whatever he looked like.

I threw the gun down at the kid’s feet and said: “Maybe you need this?”

He stooped for it like a flash. There was nothing slow about his movements. I sank a fist in the side of his neck. He toppled over sideways, clawing for the gun and not reaching it. I picked it up again and threw it in the rickshaw. The boy came up on all fours, leering with his eyes too wide open. He coughed and shook his head.
“You don’t want to fight,” I told him. “You’re giving away too much weight.”

He wanted to fight. He shot at me like a spaceship from a launching catapult, reaching for my knees in a diving tackle. I sidestepped and reached for his neck and took it under my arm. He scraped the dirt hard and got his feet under him enough to use his hands on me where it hurt. I twisted him around and heaved him a little higher. I took hold of my right wrist with my left hand and turned my right hipbone into him and for a moment it was a balance of weights. We seemed to hand there in the misty light, two grotesque creatures whose feet scraped on the road and whose breath panted with effort.

I had my right forearm against his windpipe now and all the strength of both arms in it. His feet began a frenetic shuffle and he wasn’t panting any more. He was ironbound. His left foot sprawled off to one side and the knee went slack. I held on half a minute longer. He sagged on my arm, an enormous weight I could hardly hold up. Then I let go. He sprawled at my feet, out cold. I went to the rickshaw and got a pair of handcuffs out of a compartment and twisted his wrists behind him and snapped them on. I lifted him by the armpits and managed to drag him in behind the hedge, out of sight from the street. I went back to the rickshaw and woke the bot and told it to move thirty metres up the hill.

He was still out when I got back. I unlocked the door, dragged him into the house, shut the door. He was beginning to gasp now. I switched a light on. His eyes fluttered open and focused on me slowly.

I bent down, keeping out of the way of his knees and said: “Keep quiet or you’ll get the same and more of it. Just lie quiet and hold your breath. Hold it until you can’t hold it any longer and then tell yourself that you have to breathe, that you’re black in the face, that your eyeballs are popping out, and that you’re going to breathe right now, but that you’re sitting strapped in the chair in the clean little gas chamber and when you take that breath you’re fighting with all your soul not to take it, it won’t be air you’ll get, it will be cyanide fumes. And that’s what they call humane execution in our habitat now.”

“Go fuck yourself,” he said with a soft stricken sigh.
“You’re going to cop a plea, brother, don’t ever think you’re not. And you’re going to say just what we want you to say and nothing we don’t want you to say.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“Say that again and I’ll put a pillow under your head.”

His mouth twitched. I left him lying on the floor with his wrists shackled behind him and his cheek pressed into the rug and an animal brightness in his visible eye. I put on another light and stepped into the hallway at the back of the living-room.

Geiger’s bedroom didn’t seem to have been touched. I opened the door, not locked now, of the bedroom across the hall from it. There was a dim flickering light in the room and a smell of sandalwood. Two cones of incense ash stood side by side on a small brass tray on the bureau. The light came from the two tall black candles in the quarter-metre high candlesticks. They were standing on two straight-backed chairs, one on either side of the bed.

Geiger lay on the bed. The two missing strips of tapestry made a X over the middle of his body, hiding the blood-smeared front of his coat. Below the cross his black-pajama’d legs lay stiff and straight. His feet were in the slippers with thick white felt soles. Above the cross his arms were crossed at the wrists and his hands lay flat against his shoulders, palms downs, fingers close together and stretched out evenly. His mouth was closed and his Charlie Chan moustache was as unreal as a cybernetic hairpiece. His broad nose was pinched and white. His eyes were almost closed, but not entirely. The faint glitter of his prosthetic eye caught the light and winked at me.

I didn’t touch him. I didn’t go very near him. He would be as cold as Titan ice and as stiff as a board.

The black candles guttered in the draught from the open door. Drops of black wax crawled down their sides. The air of the room was poisonous and unreal. I went out and shut the door again and went back to the living-room. The boy hadn’t moved. I stood still, listening for sirens. It was all a question of how soon Agnes talked and what she said. If she talked about Geiger, the police would be here any minute. But she might not talk for hours. She might even have got away.

I looked down at the boy. “Want to sit up, son?”
He closed his eyes and pretended to go to sleep. I went over to the desk and called up Bernie Ohls’s office. He had left to go home. I called his home. He was there.

“This is Marlowe,” I said. “Did your boys find a gun on Owen Taylor this morning?”

I could hear him clearing his throat and then I could hear him trying to keep the surprise out of his voice. “That would come under the heading of police business,” he said.

“If they did, it had three empty shells in it.”

“How the hell did you know that?” Ohls asked quietly.

“Come over to 7244 Lunar Terrace. I’ll show you where the slugs went.”

“Just like that, huh?”

“Just like that.”

Ohls said: “Look out of the window and you’ll see me coming around the corner. I though you acted a little cagey on that one.”

“Cagey is no word for it,” I said.
Chapter 18 - Interview with the HA

Ohls stood looking down at the boy. The boy sat on the couch leaning sideways against the wall. Ohls looked at him silently, his pale eyebrows bristling and stiff.

He asked the boy: “Do you admit shooting Brody?”

The boy said his favourite three words in a muffled voice.

Ohls sighed and looked at me. I said: “He doesn’t have to admit that. I have his gun.”

Ohls said: “I wish I had a thousand dollars for every time I’ve had that said to me. What’s funny about it?”

“It’s not meant to be funny,” I said.

“Well, that’s something,” Ohls said. He turned away. “I’ve called Wilde. We’ll go over and see him and take this punk. He can ride with me and you can follow on behind in case he tries to kick me in the face.”

“How do you like what’s in the bedroom?”

“I like it fine,” Ohls said. “I’m kind of glad that Taylor kid went into that asteroid. I’d hate to have to send him to the death-house for rubbing that skunk.”

I went back into the small bedroom and blew out the black candles and let them smoke. When I got back to the living-room Ohls had the boy up on his feet. The boy stood glaring at him with sharp black eyes in a face as hard and white as cold animal fat.

“Let’s go,” Ohls said and took him by the arm as if he didn’t like touching him. I put the lights out and followed them out of the house. Ohls got the boy into his cruiser and I kicked my rickshaw bot awake. I followed Ohls’s twin exhausts down the long curving hill, taking it easy to give the robot a chance to keep up. I hoped this would be my last visit to Lunar Terrace.

Arnold Wilde, the Habitat Attorney, lived in a white frame house the size of a palace, with a red sandstone porte-cochere built on to one side and a couple of hectares of soft rolling lawn in front. It was one of those old-fashioned houses which it used to be the thing to move bodily from old Earth when people emigrated. Wilde came from an
old Californian family and his grandfather had probably been born in
the house when it had stood in the foothills around Los Angeles.

There were two vehicles in the driveway already, a big private
criuser and a police cutter with a uniformed pilot who leaned smoking
against the rear carapace and admired Saturn’s rings. Ohls went over
and spoke to him and the pilot looked in at the boy in Ohls’s cruiser.

We went up to the house and rang the bell. A household
automaton - much more modern than the Sternwood’s butler - opened
the door jerkily and led us down the hall and through a huge sunken
living-room on the far side of it. The robot knocked at a door and
stepped inside, then held the door wide and we went into a panelled
study with an open french door at the end and a view of dark garden
and mysterious trees. A smell of wet earth and flowers came in at the
window. There were large dim oils on the walls, easy chairs, books
and a smell of good cigar smoke which blended easily with the smell
of wet earth and flowers.

Arnold Wilde sat behind a desk, a middle-aged plump man with
clear blue eyes that managed to have a friendly expression without
really having any expression at all. He had a cup of black coffee in
front of him and he held a dappled thin cigar between the neat careful
fingers of his left hand. Another man sat at the corner of the desk in a
blue leather chair, a cold-eyed hatchet-faced man, as lean as a rake and
as hard as the manager of a loan office. His neat well-kept face looked
as if it had been shaved within the hour. He had the long nervous
fingers of a man with a quick brain. He looked ready for a fight.

Ohls pulled a chair up and sat down and said: “Evening, Cronjager.
Meet Phil Marlowe, a private eye who’s in a jam.” Ohls grinned.

Cronjager looked at me without nodding. He looked me over as if
he were studying a museum hologram of a long-dead animal. Then he
nodded his chin about a centimetre. Wilde said: “Sit down, Marlowe.
I’ll try to handle Caption Cronjager, but you know how it is. This is a
big habitat now.”

I sat down and lit a cigarette. Ohls looked at Cronjager and asked:
“What did you get on that killing?”

The hatchet-faced man pulled one of his fingers until the knuckle
cracked. He spoke without looking up. “A stiff, two slugs in him.
Two guns that hadn’t been fired. Down on the street we got a blonde
trying to get into a car that didn’t belong to her. Hers was right next to
it, the same model. She acted rattled so the boys brought her in and
she spilled. She was in there when this guy Brody got it. Claims she
didn’t see the killer.”

“That all?” Ohls asked.

Cronjager raised his eyebrows a little. “Only happened about an
hour ago. What did you expect - a notarized description of the
killing?”

“Maybe a description of the killer,” Ohls said.

“A tall guy in a leather jerkin - if you can call that a description.”

the arm on him for you. Here’s his gun.” Ohls took the boy’s
automatic out of his pocket and laid it on a corner of Wilde’s desk.
Cronjager looked at the gun but didn’t reach for it.

Wilde chuckled. He was leaning back and puffing from his
dappled cigar without letting go of it. He bent forward to sip from his
coffee cup.

“There’s a couple more deaths involved,” Ohls said, pinching the
soft flesh at the end of his chin.

Cronjager stiffened visibly. His surly eyes became points of steely
light.

Ohls said: “You heard about a cruiser being recovered from the
Asteroid Belt this morning with a dead cyborg in it?”

Cronjager said: “No,” and kept on looking nasty.

“The dead cyborg in the cruiser was chauffeur to a rich family,”
Ohls said. “The family was being blackmailed on account of one of
the daughters. Mr Wilde recommended Marlowe to the family
through me. Marlowe played it kind of close to the chest.”

“I love private dicks that play murders close to the chest,”
Cronjager said. “You don’t have to be so goddamned coy about it.”

“Yeah,” Ohls said. “I don’t have to be so goddamned coy about it.
It’s not so goddamned often I get a chance to be coy with a city
copper. I spend most of my time telling them where to put their feet so
that they won’t break an ankle.”

Cronjager whitened around the corners of his sharp nose. His
breath made a soft hissing noise in the quiet room. He said very
quietly: “You haven’t had to tell any of my men where to put their feet,
smart guy.”
“We’ll see about that,” Ohls said. “This cyborg I spoke of that’s breathed vacuum in the Belt shot a guy last night in your territory. A guy named Geiger who ran a dirty media racket in a store downtown. Geiger was living with the punk I got outside in my cruiser. I mean living with him, if you get the idea.”

Cronjager was staring at him levelly now. “That sounds like it might grow up to be a dirty story,” he said.

“It’s my experience most police stories are,” Ohls growled and turned to me, eyebrows bristling. “You’re on the air, Marlowe. Give it to him.”

I gave it to him.

I left out two things, not knowing just why, at the moment, I left out one of them. I left out Carmen’s visit to Brody’s apartment and Eddie Mars’s visit to Geiger’s in the afternoon. I told the rest of it just as it happened.

Cronjager never took his eyes off my face and no expression of any kind crossed his as I talked. At the end of it he was perfectly silent for a long minute. Wilde was silent, sipping his coffee, puffing gently at his dappled cigar. Ohls stared at one of his thumbs.

Cronjager leaned slowly back in his chair and crossed one ankle over his knee and rubbed the ankle-bone with his thin nervous hand. His lean face wore a harsh frown. He said with deadly politeness:

“So all you did was not report a murder that happened last night and then spent today foxing around so that this kid of Geiger’s could commit a second murder this evening.”

“That’s all,” I said, “I was in a pretty tough spot. I guess I did wrong, but I wanted to protect my client and I hadn’t any reason to think the boy would go gunning for Brody.”

“That kind of thinking is police business, Marlowe. If Geiger’s death had been reported last night, the books could never have been moved from the store to Brody’s apartment. The kid wouldn’t have been led to Brody and wouldn’t have killed him. Say Brody was living on borrowed time. His kind usually are. But a life is a life.”

“Right,” I said. “Tell that to your coppers next time they shoot down some scared petty larceny crook running away up an alley with a stolen chip.”
Wilde put both his hands down on the desk with a solid smack. “That’s enough of that,” he snapped. “What makes you so sure, Marlowe, that this Taylor boy shot Geiger? Even if the gun that killed Geiger was found on Taylor’s body or in the cruiser, it doesn’t absolutely follow that he was the killer. The gun might have been planted - say by Brody, the actual killer.”

“It’s physically possible,” I said, “but psychologically impossible. It assumes too much coincidence and too much that’s out of character for Brody and his girl, and out of character for what he was trying to do. I talked to Brody for a long time. He was a crook, but not a killer type. He had two guns, but he wasn’t wearing either of them. He was trying to find a way to cut in on Geiger’s racket, which naturally he knew all about from the girl. He says he was watching Geiger off and on to see if he had any tough backers. I believe him. To suppose he killed Geiger in order to get his books, then scammed with the pornographic holograms Geiger had just taken of Carmen Sternwood, then planted the gun on Owen Taylor and pushed Taylor into an asteroid, is to suppose a hell of a lot too much. Taylor had the motive, jealous rage, and the opportunity to kill Geiger. He was out in one of the family craft without permission. He killed Geiger right in front of the girl, which Brody would never have done, even if he had been a killer. I can’t see anyone with a purely commercial interest in Geiger doing that. But Taylor would have done it. The porno hologram business is just what would have made him do it.”

Wilde chuckled and looked along his eyes at Cronjager. Cronjager cleared his throat with a snort. Wilde asked: “What’s this business of hiding the body? I don’t see the point of that.”

I said: “The kid hasn’t told us, but he must have done it. Brody wouldn’t have gone into the house after Geiger was shot. The boy must have got home when I was away taking Carmen to her house. He was afraid of the police, of course, being a homosexual, and he probably thought it a good idea to have the body hidden until he had removed his effects from the house. He dragged it out of the front door, judging by the marks on the rug, and very likely put it in the garage. Then he packed up whatever belongings he had there and took them away. And later on, sometime in the night and before the body stiffened, he had a revulsion of feeling and thought he hadn’t treated his dead friend very nice. So he went back and laid him out on the bed. That’s all guessing of course.”
Wilde nodded. “Then this morning he goes down to the store as if nothing had happened and keeps his eyes open. And when Brody moved the books out he found out where they were going and assumed that whoever got them had killed Geiger just for that purpose. He may even have known more about Brody and the girl than they suspected. What do you think, Ohls?”

Ohls said: “We’ll find out - but that doesn’t help Cronjager’s troubles. What’s eating him is all this happened last night and he’s only just been brought into it.”

Cronjager said sourly: “I think I can find some way to deal with that angle too.” He looked at me sharply and immediately looked away again.

Wilde waved his cigar and said: “Let’s see the exhibits, Marlowe.”

I emptied my pockets and put the catch on his desk: the three notes and Geiger’s card to General Sternwood, Carmen’s memory device and the blue notebook with the code list of names and addresses. I had already given Geiger’s key to Ohls.

Wilde looked at what I gave him, puffing gently at his cigar. Ohls lit one of his own toy cigars and blew smoke peacefully at the ceiling. Cronjager leaned on the desk and looked at what I had given Wilde.

Wilde tapped the three notes from Carmen and said: “I guess these were just a come-on. If General Sternwood paid them, it would be through fear or something worse. Then Geiger would have tightened the screws. Do you know what he was afraid of?” He was looking at me.

I shook my head.

“Have you told your story complete in all relevant details?”

“I left out a couple of personal matters. I intend to keep on leaving them out, Mr Wilde.”

Cronjager said: “Hah!” and snorted with deep feeling.

“Why?” Wilde asked quietly.

“Because my client is entitled to that protection, short of anything but a Grand Jury. I have a licence to operate as a private detective. I suppose that word ‘private’ has some meaning. The Habitat police has two murders on its hands, both solved. They have both killers. They have the motive, the instrument in each case. The blackmail angle has got to be suppressed, as far as the names of the parties are concerned.”
“Why?” Wilde asked again.

“That’s okay,” Cronjager said dryly. “We’re glad to stooge for a shamus of his standing.”

I said: “I’ll show you.” I got up and went back out of the house to my rickshaw and got the book from Geiger’s store out of it. The uniformed police pilot was standing beside Ohls’s vehicle. The boy was inside it, leaning back sideways in the corner.

“Has he said anything?” I asked.

“He made a suggestion,” the copper said. “I’m letting it ride.”

I went back into the house, but the book on Wilde’s desk and opened up the wrappings. Cronjager was talking into a communication device. He hung up as I came back in.

Wilde looked through the book, wooden-faced, closed it and pushed it towards Cronjager. Cronjager opened it, looked at a page or two, shut it quickly. A couple of red spots the size of coins showed on his cheek-bones.

I said: “Look at the dates at the front.”

Cronjager opened the book again and looked at them. “Well?”

“If necessary,” I said, “I’ll testify under oath that that book came from Geiger’s counter. The blonde, Agnes, will admit what kind of business the store did. It’s obvious to anyone with eyes that that store is just a front for something. But the Habitat police allowed it to operate, for their own reasons. I dare say the Grand Jury would like to know what those reasons are.”

Wilde grinned. He said: “Grand Juries do ask those embarrassing questions sometimes - in a rather vain effort to find out just why habitats are run as they are run.”

Cronjager stood up suddenly. “I’m one against three here,” he snapped, “I’m a homicide man. If this Geiger was running indecent media, that’s no skin of my nose. But I’m ready to admit it won’t help my division any to have it washed over in the news. What do you birds want?”

Wilde looked at Ohls. Ohls said: “I want to turn over a prisoner over to you. Let’s go.”
He stood up. Cronjager looked after him fiercely and stalked out of the room. Ohls went after him. The door closed again. Wilde tapped on his desk and stared at me with his clear blue eyes.

“You ought to understand how any copper would feel about a cover-up like this,” he said. “You’ll have to make statements of all of it - at least for the files. I think it may be possible to keep the two killings separate and to keep General Sternwood’s name out of both of them. Do you know why I’m not tearing your ear off?”

“No. I expected to get both ears torn off.”

“What are you getting for it all?”

“Twenty-five thou a day and expenses.”

“That would make fifty thousand dollars and a little robot fuel so far.”

“About that.”

He put his head on one side and rubbed the back of his left little finger along the lower edge of his chin.

“And for that amount of money you’re willing to get yourself in trouble with half the law enforcement of this system?”

“I don’t like it,” I said, “But what the hell am I to do? I’m on a case. I’m selling what I have to sell to make a living. What little guts and intelligence I was born with and a willingness to get pushed around to protect a client. It’s against my principles to tell as much as I’ve told tonight, without consulting the General first. As for the cover-up, I’ve been in police business myself, you know. They come a dollar a dozen in any big habitat. Cops get very large and emphatic when an outsider tries to hide anything, but they do the same things themselves every other day, to oblige their friends or anybody with a little pull. And I’m not through. I’m still on the case. I’d do the same thing again, if I had to.”

“Provided Cronjager doesn’t get your licence,” Wilde grinned. “You said you held back a couple of personal matters. Of what import?”

“I’m still on the case,” I said, and stared straight back into his eyes.

Wilde smiled at me. He had a frank daring smile. “Let me tell you something, son. My father was a close friend of old Sternwood. I’ve done all my office permits - and maybe a good deal more - to save the old man from grief. But in the long run it can’t be done. Those girls
of his are bound to hook up with something that can’t be hushed, especially that little blonde brat. They ought not to be running around loose. I blame the old man for that. I guess he doesn’t realize what the solar system is today. And there’s another thing I might mention while we’re talking man-to-man and I don’t have to growl at you. I’ll bet that the General’s afraid his son-in-law, the ex-gunrunner, is mixed up in this somewhere, and what he really hoped you would find out is that he isn’t. What do you think of that?”

“Regan didn’t sound like a blackmailer, what I heard of him. He had a soft spot where he was and he walked out on it.”

Wilde snorted. “The softness of that spot neither you nor I could judge. If he was a certain sort of man, it would not have been so very soft. Did the general tell you he was looking for Regan?”

“He told me he wished he knew where he was and that he was all right. He liked Regan and was hurt the way he bounced off without telling the old man good-bye.”

Wilde leaned back and frowned. “I see,” he said in a changed voice. His hand moved the stuff on his desk around, laid Geiger’s blue notebook to one side and pushed the other exhibits towards me. “You may as well take these,” he said. “I’ve no further use for them.”
Chapter 19 - Phoning Mars

It was close to twenty-seven o’clock when I told the rickshaw bot to go to sleep and walked up to the front of my apartment house. The armoured door was on the lock, so I had to get my keys out. Inside, in the square barren lobby, a man put a sheet of disposable printout down beside a potted palm and flicked a cigarette butt into the tub the palm grew in. He stood up and waved his arm at me and said: “The boss wants to talk to you. You sure keep your friends waiting, pal.”

I stood still and looked at his flattened nose and club steak ear.

“What about?”

“What do you care? Just keep your nose clean and everything will be just fine.” His hands hovered near the upper buttonhole of his open coat.

“I smell of policemen,” I said. “I’m too tired to talk, too tired to eat, too tired to think. But if you think I’m too tired to take orders from Eddie Mars - try getting your gat before I shoot your good ear off.”

“Nuts. You ain’t got no gun.” He stared at me levelly. His dark wiry brows closed in together and his mouth made a downward curve.

“That was then,” I told him. “I’m not always naked.”

He waved his left hand. “Okay. You win. I wasn’t told to blast anybody. You’ll hear from him soon.”

“Too late will be too soon,” I said, and turned slowly as he passed me on his way to the door. He opened it and went out without looking back. I grinned at my own foolishness, went along to the elevator and upstairs to the apartment. I took Carmen’s little gun out of my pocket and laughed at it. Then I cleaned it thoroughly, oiled it, wrapped it in a piece of flannel and locked it up. I made myself a drink and was drinking it when the phone rang. I sat down at the table and pressed the receive button.

“So you’re tough tonight,” Eddie Mars’ s face said on the screen.

“Big, fast, tough and full of prickles. What can I do for you?”

“Cops over there - you know where. You keep me out of it?”

“Why should I?”
“I’m nice to be nice to, soldier. I’m not nice not to be nice to.”

“Watch carefully and you’ll see my teeth chattering.”

He laughed dryly. “Did you - or didn’t you?”

“I did. I’m damned if I know why. I guess it was just too damn complicated enough without you.”

“Thanks, soldier. Who gunned him?”

“Read it on the nets tomorrow - maybe.”

“I want to know now.”

“Do you get everything you want?”

“No. Is that an answer, soldier?”

“Somebody you never heard of gunned him. Let it go at that.”

“If’s that’s on the level, some day I may be able to do you a favour.”

“Hang up and let me go to bed.”

He laughed again. “You’re looking for Rusty Regan, aren’t you?”

“A lot of people seem to think I am, but I’m not.”

“If you were, I could give you an idea. Drop in and see me down at the Club. Any time. Glad to see you.”

“Maybe.”

“Be seeing you then.”

The screen died and I sat glaring at it with a savage patience. I then punched the Sternwood’s number, and the silver face of the robot butler appeared on the screen. His suave voice said: “General Sternwood’s residence.”

“This is Marlowe. Remember me? I met you about a hundred years ago - or was it only yesterday?”

“Yes, Mr Marlowe. I remember, of course.”

“Is Mrs Regan home?”

“Yes, I believe so. Would you -”

I cut in on him with a sudden change of mind. “No. You give her the message. Tell her I have the holos, all of them and the memory device, and that everything is all right.”
“Yes. Yes.” The voice seemed to shake a little. “You have the holos and the memory device, and everything is all right. Yes sir. I may say - thank you very much, sir.”

The phone rang back in five minutes. I had finished my drink and it made me feel as if I could eat the dinner I had forgotten all about. I went out leaving the phone ringing. It was ringing when I got back. It rang at intervals until half past midnight. At that time I put my lights out and opened the windows and yanked the power cord from the telephone and went to bed. I had a bellyful of the Sternwood family.

I read all of the net news accounts over my eggs and bacon the next morning. Their accounts of the affair came as close to the truth as news stories usually come - as close as Mars is to Saturn. None of the three connected Owen Taylor, pilot of the Asteroid Belt Suicide Cruiser, with the Lunar Terrace Exotic Bungalow Slaying. None of then mentioned the Sternwoods, Bernie Ohls or me. Owen Taylor was ‘chauffeur to a wealthy family’.

Captain Cronjager got all the credit for solving the two slayings in his district, which was supposed to arise out of a dispute over the proceeds from a black market communications service maintained by one Geiger in the back of his bookstore. Brody had shot Geiger and Carol Lundgren had shot Brody in revenge. Police were holding Carol Lundgren in custody. He had confessed. He had a bad record - probably at high school. Police were also holding one Agnes Lozelle, Geiger’s secretary, as a material witness.

It was a nice write-up. It gave the impression that Geiger had been killed the night before, that Brody had been killed about an hour later, and that Captain Cronjager had solved both murders while lighting a cigarette. The suicide of Owen Taylor got little coverage. There was a photo of the cruiser in the airlock of the recovery craft, and something covered with a cloth lying on the decking beside it. Owen Taylor had been despondent and in poor health. His family lived on Titan, and his body would be shipped there. There would be no inquest.
Chapter 20 - Missing Persons

Captain Gregory of the Missing Persons Bureau laid my card down on his wide flat desk and arranged it so that its edges exactly paralleled the edges of the desk. He studied it with his head on one side, grunted, swung around in his swivel chair and looked out of his window at the barred top of the Hall of Justice half a block away. He was a burly man with tired eyes and the slow deliberate movements of a night watchman. His voice was toneless, flat and uninterested.

“Private dick, eh?” he said, not looking at me at all, but looking out of his window. Smoke wisped up from the blackened bowl of a briar pipe that hung from his eye tooth. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m working for General Guy Sternwood.”

Captain Gregory blew a little smoke from the corner of his mouth without removing the pipe. “On what?”

“Not exactly on what you’re working on, but I’m interested. I thought you could help me.”

“Help you on what?”

“General Sternwood’s a rich man,” I said. “He’s an old friend of the HA’s father. If he wants to hire a full-time boy to run errands for him, that’s no reflection on the police. It’s just a luxury he is able to afford himself.”

“What makes you think I’m doing anything for him?”

I didn’t answer that. He swung around slowly and heavily in his swivel chair and put his large feet flat on the bare linoleum that covered the floor. His office had the musty smell of years of routine. He stared at me bleakly.

“I don’t want to waste your time, Captain,” I said and pushed my chair back - about ten centimetres.

He didn’t move. He kept on staring at me out of his washed-out tired eyes. “You know the HA?”

“I’ve met him. I worked for him once. I know Bernie Ohls, his chief investigator, pretty well.”
Captain Gregory reached for the ancient terminal that broke the smooth space of his desktop and pressed a button. “Get me Ohls at the HA’s office.”

He sat with his hand on the terminal keyboard. Moments passed. Smoke drifted from his pipe. His eyes were heavy and motionless like his hand. The terminal beeped and he reached for my card with his left hand. “Ohls? Al Gregory at headquarters. A guy named Philip Marlowe is in my office. His card says he’s a private investigator. He wants information from me … yeah? What does he look like? … Okay, thanks.”

He released the terminal key and took his pipe out of his mouth and tamped the tobacco with the brass cap of a heavy penknife. He did it carefully and solemnly, as if that was as important as anything he would have to do that day. He leaned back and stared at me some more.

“What do you want?”

“An idea of what progress you’re making, if any.”

He thought that over. “Regan?” he asked finally.

“Sure.”

“Know him?”

“I never saw him. I hear he’s a good-looking Earthman in his second century, that he was once in the gun-running racket, that he married General Sternwood’s older daughter and that they didn’t click. I’m told he disappeared about a month back.”

“Sternwood oughta think himself lucky instead of hiring private talent to beat around in the tall grass.”

“The General took a big fancy to him. Such things happen. The old man is crippled and lonely. Regan used to sit around with him and keep him company.”

“What you think you can do that we can’t do?”

“Nothing at all, in so far as finding Regan goes. But there’s a rather mysterious blackmail angle. I want to make sure Regan isn’t involved. Knowing where he is or isn’t might help.”

“Brother, I’d like to help you, but I don’t know where he is. He pulled down the curtain and that’s that.”

“Pretty hard to do against your organisation, isn’t it, Captain?”
“Yeah - but it can be done - for a while.” He touched a key on the terminal and spoke: “Get me the file on Terence Regan.”

Captain Gregory and I looked at each other in some more heavy silence. The terminal flickered and beeped and Captain Gregory put a pair of heavy horn-rimmed glasses on his veined nose and browsed the pages in the file slowly. I rolled a cigarette around in my fingers.

“He blew the 16th of September,” he said. “The only thing important about that is it was the chauffeur’s day off and nobody saw Regan take his car out. It was late afternoon, though. We found the car four days later in a garage belonging to a ritzy bungalow court near the Spinside Towers. A garage man reported it to the stolen car detail, said it didn’t belong there. The place is called the Casa de Oro. There’s an angle to that I’ll tell you about in a minute. We couldn’t find out anything about who put the car in there. We print the car but don’t find any prints that are on file anywhere. The car in the garage don’t jibe with foul play, although there’s a reason to suspect foul play. It jibes with something else I’ll tell you about in a minute.”

I said: “That jibes with Eddie Mars’s wife being on the missing list.”

He looked annoyed. “Yeah. We investigate the tenants and find she’s living there. Left about the time Regan did, within two days anyway. A guy who sounds a bit like Regan had been seen with her, but we don’t get a positive identification. It’s goddamned funny in this police racket how an old woman can look out of her window and see a guy running and pick him out of a line-up six months later, but we can show hotel help a clear photo and they just can’t be sure.”

“That’s one of the qualifications for good hotel help,” I said.

“Yeah. Eddie Mars and his wife didn’t live together, but they were friendly, Eddie says. Here’s some of the possibilities. First off Regan carried fifteen mill, packed it into his clothes all the time. Real money, they tell me. Not just a top card and a bunch of hay. That’s a lot of jack but this Regan might be the boy to have it around so that he could take it out and look at it when somebody was looking at him. Then again maybe he wouldn’t give a damn. His wife says he never made a dollar off old man Sternwood except room and board and a shiny car his wife gave him. Tie that for an ex-runner in the rich gravy.”

“It beats me,” I said.
“Well, here we are with a guy who ducks out and has fifteen mill in his pants and folks know it. Well, that’s money. I might duck out myself, if I had fifteen mill, and me with two kids in high school. So the first thought is somebody rolls him for it and rolls him too hard, so they have to take him out of an airlock and plant him in gas-giant atmosphere. But I don’t like that too well. Regan carried a gat and had plenty of experience using it, and not just in a greasy-faced gun-running mob. I understand he commanded a whole brigade in the Jovian troubles back in 2322 or whenever it was. A guy like that wouldn’t be white meat to a heister. Then, his car being in that garage makes whoever rolled him know he was sweet on Eddie Mars’s wife, which he was, I guess, but it ain’t something every poolroom bum would know.”

“Got a picture?” I asked.

“Him, not her. That’s funny too. There’s a lot of funny angles to this case. Here.” He pushed a shiny printed hologram across the desk and I looked at a face that was more sad than merry and more reserved than brash. Not the face of a tough guy and not the face of a man who could be pushed around much by anybody. Straight dark brows with strong bone under them. A forehead wide rather than high, a mat of dark clustering hair, a thin short nose, a wide mouth. A chin that had strong lines but was small for the mouth. A face that looked a little taut, the face of a man who would move fast and play for keeps. I passed the print back. I would know that face, if I saw it.

Captain Gregory knocked his pipe out and refilled it and tamped the tobacco down with his thumb. He lit it, blew smoke and began to talk again.

“Well, there could be people who would know he was sweet on Eddie Mars’sfrau. Besides Eddie himself. For a wonder he knew it. But he don’t seem to give a damn. We check him out pretty thoroughly around that time. Of course Eddie wouldn’t have knocked him off out of jealousy. The set-up would point to him too obvious.”

“It depends how smart he is,” I said. “He might try the double bluff.”

Captain Gregory shook his head. “If he’s smart enough to get by in his racket, he’s too smart for that. I get your idea. He pulls the dumb play because he thinks we wouldn’t expect him to pull the dumb play. From a police angle that’s wrong. Because he’d have us in his hair so much it would interfere with his business. You might think a
dumb play would be smart. I might think so. The rank and file wouldn’t. They’d make his life miserable. I’ve ruled it out. If I’m wrong, you can prove it on me and I’ll eat my seat cushion. Till then I’m leaving Eddie in the clear. Jealousy is a bad motive for his type. Top-flight racketeers have business brains. They learn to do things that are good policy and let their personal feelings take care of themselves. I’m leaving that out.”

“What are you leaving in?”

“The dame and Regan himself. Nobody else. She was a blonde then, but she won’t be now. We don’t find her cruiser, so they probably left in it. They had a long start on us - fourteen days. Except for that car of Regan’s I don’t figure we’d have got the case at all. Of course I’m used to them that way, especially in good-class families. And of course everything I’ve done has had to be under the hat.”

He leaned back and thumped the arms of his chair with the heels of his large heavy hands.

“I don’t see nothing to do but wait,” he said. “We’ve got notices out, but it’s too soon to look for results. Regan has fifteen mill we know of. The girl had some, maybe a lot in rocks. But they’ll run out of dough some day. Regan will use a credit chip, drop a marker, write a letter. They’re in a strange place and they’ve got new names, but they’ve got the same old appetites. They got to get back into the fiscal system.”

“What did the girl do before she married Eddie Mars?”

“Torcher.”

“Can’t you get any old professional pictures?”

“No. Eddie must have had some, but he won’t loosen up. He wants her let alone. I can’t make him. He’s got friends in this habitat, or he wouldn’t be what he is.” He grunted. “Any of this doing you any good?”

“You’ll never find either of them. Saturn’s clouds are too close.”

“What I said about my chair cushion still goes. We’ll find him. It may take time. It could take a year or two.”

“General Sternwood may not live that long.”

“We’ve done all we could, brother. If he wants to put out a reward and spend some money, we might get results. The habitat don’t give me the kind of money it takes.” His large eyes peered at me and his
scratchy eyebrows moved. “You serious about thinking Eddie put them both down?”

I laughed. “No. I was just kidding. I think what you think, Captain. That Regan ran away with a woman who meant more to him than a rich wife he didn’t get along with. Besides, she isn’t rich yet.”

“You met her, I suppose?”

“Yes. She’d make a jazzy weekend, but she’d be wearing for a steady diet.”

He grunted and I thanked him for his time and information and left. A grey ground car tailed me away from the habitat management offices. I gave it a chance to catch up with me on a quiet street. It refused the offer, so I shook it off and went about my business.
I didn’t go near the Sternwood family. I went back to the office and sat in my swivel chair and tried to catch up on my foot-dangling. There was a gusty wind blowing in at the windows and the dust from the air-conditioning of the hotel next door was down-draughting into the room and rolling across the top of the desk like tumbleweed across the Martian desert. I was thinking about going out to lunch and that life was pretty flat and that it would probably be just as flat if I took a drink and that taking a drink all alone at this time of day wouldn’t be any fun anyway. I was thinking this when Norris called up. In his carefully polite robotic manner he said that General Sternwood was not very often warmed but that certain items in the news had been read to him and he assumed that my investigation was now completed.

“Yes, as regards Geiger,” I said. “I didn’t shoot him, you know.”

“The General doesn’t suppose you did, Mr Marlowe.”

“Does the General know anything about those holograms Mrs Regan was worrying about?”

“No, sir. Decidedly not.”

“Did you know what the General gave me?”

“Yes, sir. Three notes and a card, I believe.”

“Right. I’ll return them. As to the holograms I think I’d better just destroy them.”

“Very good, sir. Mrs Regan tried to reach you a number of times last night.”

“I was out getting drunk,” I said.

“Yes. Very necessary, sir. I’m sure. The General has instructed me to send you a cheque for five hundred thousand. Will that be satisfactory?”

“More than generous,” I said.

“And I presume we may now consider the incident closed?”

“Oh, sure. Tight as a time vault with a busted lock.”
“Thank you, sir. I am sure we all appreciate it. When the General is next warmed and conscious - possibly tomorrow - he would like to see you in person.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll come out tomorrow and drink some more of his brandy, maybe with champagne.”

“I shall see that some is properly iced,” the old robot said, almost with a smirk in his voice.

That was that. We said goodbye and closed the connection. The coffee shop smell from next door came in at the windows with the hot air but failed to make me feel hungry. So I got out my office bottle and took the drink and let my self-respect ride its own race.

I counted it on my fingers. Rusty Regan had run away from a lot of money and a handsome wife to go wandering with a vague blonde who was more or less married to a racketeer named Eddie Mars. He has gone suddenly without good-byes and there might be any number of reasons for that. The General had been too proud, or, at the first interview he gave me, too careful, to tell me the Missing Persons Bureau had the matter in hand. The Missing Persons people were dead on their feet on it and evidently didn’t think it worth bothering over. Regan had done what he had done and that was his business. I agreed with Captain Gregory that Eddie Mars would have been very unlikely to involve himself in a double murder just because another man had been fucking the blonde he was not even living with. It might have annoyed him, but business is business, and you have to hold you teeth clamped shut around this habitat to keep from chewing on stray blondes. If there had been a lot of money involved, that would be different. But fifteen mill would’t be a lot of money to Eddie Mars. He was no two-bit chiseller like Brody.

Geiger was dead and Carmen would have to find some other shady character to play exotic games with. I didn’t suppose she would have any trouble. All she would have to do was stand on the corner for five minutes and look coy. I hoped that the next grifter who dropped the hook on her would play her a little more smoothly, a little more for the long haul rather than the quick touch.

Mrs Regan knew Eddie Mars well enough to borrow money from him. That was natural, if she played roulette and was a good loser. Any gambling house owner would lend a good client money in a pinch. Apart from this they had an added bond of interest in Regan. He was her husband and he had gone off with Eddie Mars’s wife.
Carol Lundgren, the boy killer with the limited vocabulary, was out of circulation for a long, long time, even if they didn’t throw him out of an airlock. They wouldn’t, because he would take a plea and save the habitat money. They all do when they don’t have the price of a big lawyer. Agnes Lozelle was in custody as a material witness. They wouldn’t need her for that, if Carol took a plea, ad if he pleaded guilty on arraignment, they would turn her loose. They wouldn’t want to open up any angles on Geiger’s business, apart from which they had nothing on her.

That left me. I had concealed a murder and suppressed evidence for thirty-two hours, but I was still at large and had a five-hundred-thousand-dollar cheque coming. The smart thing for me to do was to take another drink and forget the whole mess.

That being the obviously smart thing to do, I called Eddie Mars and told him I was coming down to his Club that evening to talk to him. That was how smart I was.

I got down there about twenty-six, under the hard high light of Saturn that lost itself in the top layers of the evening mist. The Cypress Club was at the far end of the habitat, a rambling frame house that had been transported wholesale from Earth by a rich man, and had later become a hotel. It was now a big dark outwardly shabby place in a thick grove of Venusian Cypresses at the edge of the dome, which gave it its name. It had enormous scrolled porches, turrets all over the place, stained glass trims around the big windows, big empty stables at the back, and a general air of nostalgic decay.

Eddie Mars had left the outside much as he found it, instead of making it over to look like a movie set. I left my rickshaw on a street with dim streetlights and walked into the grounds along a damp gravel path to the main entrance. A doorman in a double-breasted guards coat let me into a huge dim silent lobby from which a white oak staircase curved majestically up to the darkness of an upper floor. I checked my coat and waited, listening to music and confused voices behind heavy double doors. They seemed a long way off, and not quite of the same world as the building itself. Then the slim pasty-faced blond man who had been with Eddie Mars and the pug at Geiger’s Counter came through a door under the staircase, smiled at me bleakly and took me back with him along a carpeted hall to the boss’s office.

This was a square room with a deep old bay window and a stone fireplace in which a real log fire burned in defiance of atmospheric
management regulations. It was wainscoted in walnut and had a frieze of faded damask above the paneling. The ceiling was high and remote. There was a smell of cold sea.

Eddie Mars’s dark sheen-less desk winked discreet lights at me. It didn’t belong in the room, but neither did anything made after 1900. His carpet had a Florida suntan and a china tea set on a copper tray sat in the corner of the shiny bar-top. I wondered who that was for. There was a door in the corner that had a time-lock on it.

Eddie Mars grinned at me socially and shook hands and moved his chin at the vault. “I’m a pushover for a heist mob here except for one thing,” he said cheerfully. “The local johns drop in here every morning and watch me open it. I have an arrangement with them.”

“You hinted you had something for me,” I said. “What is it?”

“What’s your hurry? Have a drink and sit down.”

“No hurry at all. You and I haven’t anything to talk about but business.”

“You’ll have a drink and like it,” he said. He mixed a couple and put mine down beside a red leather chair and stood cross-legged against the desk itself, one hand in the side pocket of his midnight-blue dinner jacket, the thumb outside and the nail glistening. In dinner clothes he looked a little harder than in grey flannel, but he still looked like a horseman. We drank and nodded at each other.

“Ever been here before?” he asked.

“Once or twice. I don’t get any kick out of gambling.”

“Not with money,” he smiled. “You ought to look in tonight. One of your friends is outside betting the wheels. I hear she’s doing pretty well. Vivian Regan.”

I sipped my drink and took one of his monogrammed cigarettes.

“I kind of like the way you handled that yesterday,” he said. “You made me sore at the time but I could see afterwards how right you were. You and I ought to get along. How much do I owe you?”

“For doing what?”

“Still careful, eh? I have my pipeline into headquarters, or I wouldn’t be here. I get them the way they happen, not the way you read them on the newsnets.” He showed me his large white teeth.

“How much have you got?” I asked.
“You’re not talking money?”

“Information was the way I understood it.”

“Information about what?”

“You have a short memory. Regan.”

“Oh, that.” He waved his glistening nails in the quiet light from one of those antique bronze lamps that shoot a beam of light at the ceiling. “I hear you got the information already. I felt I owed you a fee. I’m used to paying for nice treatment.”

“I didn’t ride down here to make a touch. I get paid for what I do. Not much by your standards, but I make enough. One customer at a time is a good rule. You didn’t bump Regan off, did you?”

“No. Did you think I did?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.”

He laughed. “You’re kidding.”

I laughed. “Sure, I’m kidding. I never saw Regan, but I saw his holo. You haven’t got men for the work. And while we’re on that subject don’t send any more gun punks with orders. I might get hysterical and blow one down.”

He looked through his glass at the fire, set it down on the end of the desk and wiped his lips with a sheer white handkerchief.

“You talk a good game,” he said. “But I dare say you can break a hundred and ten. You’re not really interested in Regan, are you?”

“No, not professionally. I haven’t been asked to be. But I know somebody who would like to know where he is.”

“She doesn’t give a damn,” he said.

“I mean her father.”

He wiped his lips again and looked at the handkerchief as if he expected to find blood on it. He drew his thick grey eyebrows close together and fingered the side of his weather-beaten nose.

“Geiger was trying to blackmail the General,” I said. “The General wouldn’t say so, but I figure he was at least half scared Regan might be behind it.”

Eddie Mars laughed. “Uh-huh. Geiger worked that one on everybody. It was strictly his own idea. He’d get notes from people
that looked legal - were legal, I dare say, except that he wouldn’t dare sue on them. He’d present notes, with a nice flourish, leaving himself empty-handed. If he drew an ace, he had a prospect that scared and he went to work. If he didn’t draw an ace, he just dropped the whole thing.”

“Clever guy,” I said. “He dropped it all right. Dropped it and fell on it. How come you know all this?”

He shrugged impatiently. “I wish to Christ I didn’t know half the stuff that’s brought to me. Knowing other people’s business is the worst investment a man can make in my circle. Then if it was just Geiger you were after, you’re washed up on that angle.”

“Washed up and paid off.”

“I’m sorry about that. I wish old Sternwood would hire himself a soldier like you on a straight salary, to keep those girls of his home at least a few nights a week.”

“Why?”

His mouth looked sulky. “They’re plain trouble. Take the dark one. She’s a pain in the ass around here. If she loses, she plunges and I end up with a fistful of paper which nobody will discount at any price. She has no money of her own except an allowance and what’s in the old man’s will is a secret. If she wins, she takes my money home with her.”

“You get it back the next night,” I said.

“I get some of it back. But over a period of time I’m a loser.”

He looked earnestly at me, as if that was important to me. I wondered why he thought it necessary to tell me at all. I yawned and finished my drink.

“I’m going out and look the joint over,” I said.

“Yes, do.” He pointed to a door near the vault door. “That leads to a door behind the tables.”

“I’d rather go in the way the suckers enter.”

“Okay. As you please. We’re friends, aren’t we, soldier?”

“Sure.” I stood up and we shook hands.

“Maybe I can do you a real favour some day,” he said. “You got it all from Gregory this time.”
“So you own a piece of him too.”

“Oh not that bad. We’re just friends.”

I stared at him for a moment, then went over to the door I had come in at. I looked back at him when I had it open.

“You don’t have anybody tailing me around in a grey ground car, do you?”

His eyes widened sharply. He looked jarred. “Hell, no. Why should I?”

“I couldn’t imagine,” I said. I thought his surprise looked genuine enough to be believed. I thought he even looked a little worried. I couldn’t think of any reason for that.
Chapter 22 - Winning Streak

It was about twenty-six-thirty when the little orchestra got tired of playing a low-voiced prettied-up rumba that nobody was dancing to. The players were made up like Mexicans, yellow sashes and wide hats. The gourd player rubbed his finger tips together as if they were sore and got a cigarette into his mouth almost with the same movement. The robot players sat motionless, holding their instruments in the position they had last adopted. The human band members, with a timed simultaneous stoop, reached under their chairs for glasses from which they sipped, smacking their lips and flashing their eyes. Tequila, their manner said. It was probably mineral water. The pretence was as wasted as the music. Nobody was looking at them.

The room had been a ballroom once and Eddie Mars had changed it only as much as his business compelled him. No chromium glitter, no indirect lighting from behind angular cornices, no fused glass pictures, or chairs in violet leather and polished metal tubing, none of the pseudo-Twentieth Century circus of the typical habitat night trap. The light was from heavy crystal chandeliers and the rose-damask panels of the wall were still the same rose-damask, a little faded by time and darkened by dust, that had been matched long ago against the parquetry floor, of which only a small glass-smooth space in front of the little Mexican orchestra showed bare. The rest was covered by a heavy old-rose carpeting that must have cost plenty.

It was still a beautiful room and now there was roulette in it instead of measured, old-fashioned dancing. There were three tables close to the far wall. A low bronze railing joined them and made a fence around the croupiers. All three tables were working, but the crowd was at the middle one. I could see Vivian Regan’s black head close to it, from across the room where I was leaning against the bar and turning a small glass of Bacardi around on the granite.

The bartender leaned beside me watching the cluster of well-dressed people at the middle table. “She’s picking them tonight, right on the nose,” he said. “That tall black-headed frail.”

“Who is she?”
“I wouldn’t know her name. She comes in here a lot though.”
“The hell you wouldn’t know her name.”
“I just work here, mister,” he said without any animosity. “She’s all alone too. The guy was with her passed out. They took him out to his car.”

“I’ll take her home,” I said.

“The hell you will. Well, I wish you luck anyways. Should I gentle up that Bacardi a little or do you like it the way it is?”

“I like it the way it is as well as I like it at all,” I said.

“Me, I’d just as well drink space-sickness medicine,” he said.

The crowd parted and two men in evening clothes pushed their way out and I saw the back of her neck and her bare shoulders in the opening. She wore a low-cut dress of dull green velvet. It looked too dressy for the occasion. The crowd closed and hid all but her black head. The two men came across the room and leaned against the bar and asked for Scotch and soda. One of them was flushed and excited. He was mopping his face with a black-bordered handkerchief.

“Boy, I never saw such a run,” he said in a jittery voice. “Eight wins and two stand-offs in a row on that red. That’s roulette, boy, that’s roulette.”

“Its gives me the itch,” the other one said. “She’s betting a mill at a crack. She can’t lose.” They put their beaks in the drinks, gurgled swiftly and went back.

“So wise the little men are,” the barkeeper said. “A mill a crack, huh. I saw an old horse-face on Titan once -”

The noise swelled over at the middle table and a chiselled voice rose above it saying: “If you will just be patient a moment, Madam. The table cannot cover your bet. Mr Mars will be here in a moment.”

I left my Bacardi and padded across the carpet. The little orchestra began to play a tango, rather loud. No one was dancing or intending to dance. I moved through a scattering of people in dinner clothes and full evening dress and sports clothes and business suits to the end table on the left. It had gone dead. Two croupiers stood behind it with their heads together and their eyes sideways. One moved a rake back and forth aimlessly over the empty layout. They were both staring at Vivian Regan.

Her long lashes twitched and her face looked unnaturally white. She was at the middle table, exactly opposite the wheel. There was a disordered pile of money and chips in front of her. It looked like a lot
of money. She spoke to the croupier with a cool, insolent, ill-tempered
drawl.

“What kind of a cheap outfit is this, I’d like to know. Get busy and
spin that wheel, high pockets. I want one more play and I’m laying
table stakes. You take it away fast enough, I’ve noticed, but when it
comes to dishing it out you start to whine.”

The croupier smiled a cold polite smile that had looked at
thousands of boors and millions of fools. He said gravely: “The table
cannot cover your bet, madam. You have over sixteen million dollars
there.”

“It’s your money,” the girl jeered. “Don’t you want it back?”

A man beside her tried to tell her something. She turned swiftly
and spat something at him and he faded back into the crowd red-faced.
A door opened in the panelling at the far end of the enclose place made
by the bronze railing. Eddie Mars came through the door with a set
indifferent smile on his face, his hands thrust into the pockets of his
dinner jacket, both thumbnails glistening outside. He seemed to like
that pose. He strolled behind the croupiers and stopped at the corner
of the middle table. He spoke with lazy calm, less politely than the
croupier.

“Something the matter, Mrs Regan?”

She turned her face to him with a sort of lunge. I saw the curve of
her cheek stiffen, as if with an almost unbearable inner tautness. She
didn’t answer him.

Eddie Mars said gravely: “If you’re not playing any more, you
must let me send someone home with you.”

The girl flushed. Her cheekbones stood out white in her face.
Then she laughed off-key. She said bitterly:

“One more play, Eddie. Everything I have on the red. I like red.
It’s the colour of blood.”

Eddie Mars smiled faintly, then nodded and reached into his inner
breast pocket. He drew out a large wallet with gold corners and tossed
it carelessly along the table to the croupier. “Cover the bet in even
millions,” he said, “if no one objects to this turn of the wheel being
just for the lady.”
No one objected. Vivian Regan leaned down and pushed all her winnings savagely with both hands on to the large red diamond in the layout.

The croupier leaned over the table without haste. He counted and stacked her money and chips, placed all but a few chips and bills in a neat pile and pushed the rest back off the layout with his rake. He opened Eddie Mars’s wallet and drew out two flat packets of million-dollar bills. He broke one, counted six bills out, added them to the unbroken packet, put the four loose bills in the wallet and laid it aside as carelessly as if it had been a packet of matches. Eddie Mars didn’t touch the wallet. Nobody moved except the croupier. He spun the wheel left-handed and sent the ivory-coloured ball skittering along the upper edge with a casual flick of his wrist. Then he drew his hands back and folded his arms.

Vivian’s lips parted slowly until her teeth caught and glittered like knives. The ball drifted lazily down the slope of the wheel and bounced on the chromium ridges above the numbers. After a long time and then very suddenly motion left it with a dry click. The wheel slowed, carrying the ball around with it. The croupier didn’t unfold his arms until the wheel had entirely ceased to revolve.

“The red wins,” he said formally, without interest. The little ivory-coloured ball lay in Red 25, the third number from the Double Zero. Vivian Regan put her head back and laughed triumphantly.

The croupier lifted his rake and slowly pushed the stack of million-dollar bills across the layout, added them to the stake, pushed everything slowly out of the field of play.

Eddie Mars smiled, put his wallet back in his pocket, turned on his heel and left the room through the door in the panelling.

A dozen people let the breath out at the same time and broke for the bar. I broke with them and got to the far end of the room before Vivian had gathered up her winnings and turned away from the table. I went out into the large quiet lobby, got my coat from the check girl, dropped a coin in her tray and went out on the porch. The doorman loomed up beside me and said: “Can I get your car for you, sir?”

I said: “I’m going for a walk.”

The scrollwork along the edge of the porch roof was wet with the fog. The fog dripped from the Venusian Cypresses that shadowed off into nothing. You could see a scant handful of metres in any direction.
I went down the porch steps and drifted off through the trees, following an indistinct path that skirted the edge of the dome. There wasn’t a gleam of light anywhere. I could see a dozen trees clearly at one time, another dozen dimly, then nothing at all but the fog that hovered around the Plexiglas in this season. I circled to the left and drifted back towards the gravel path that went around to the stables where they parked the cars. When I could make out the outlines of the house I stopped. A little in front of me I had heard a man cough.

My steps hadn’t made any sound on the soft moist turf. The man coughed again, then stifled the cough with a handkerchief or a sleeve. While he was still doing that I moved forward closer to him. I made him out, a vague shadow close to the path. Something made me step behind a tree and crouch down. The man turned his head. His face should have been a light blur when he did that. It wasn’t. It remained dark. There was a mask over it.

I waited, behind the tree.
Chapter 23 - Not as it Seems

Light step, the steps of a woman, came along the invisible pathway and the man in front of me moved forward and seemed to lean against the fog. I couldn’t see the woman, then I could see her indistinctly. The arrogant carriage of her head seemed familiar. The man stepped out very quickly. The two figures blended into the fog, seemed to be part of the fog. There was dead silence for a moment. The man said:

“This is a gun, lady. Gentle now. Sound carries in the fog. Just hand me the bag.”

The girl didn’t make a sound. I moved forward a step. Quite suddenly I could see the foggy fuzz on the man’s head. The girl stood motionless. Then her breathing began to make a rasping sound, like a small file on soft plastic.

“Yell,” the man said, “and I’ll cut you in half.”

She didn’t yell. She didn’t move. There was a movement from him, and a dry chuckle. “It better be in there,” he said. A catch clicked and a fumbling sound came to me. The man turned towards my tree. When he had taken three or four steps he chuckled again. The chuckle was something out of my own memories. I reached a pipe out of my pocket and held it like a gun.

I called out softly: “Hi, Lanny.”

The man stopped dead and started to bring his hand up. I said: “No. I told you never to do that, Lanny. You’re covered.”

Nothing moved. The girl back on the path didn’t move. I didn’t move. Lanny didn’t move.

“Put the bag down between your feet, kid,” I told him. “Slow and easy.”

He bent down. I jumped out and reached him still bent over. He straightened up against me breathing hard. His hands were empty.

“Tell me I can’t get away with it,” I said. I leaned against him and took the gun out of his overcoat pocket. “Somebody’s always giving me guns,” I told him. “I’m weighed down with them till I walk all crooked. Beat it.”

Our breaths met and mingled, our eyes were like the eyes of two tomcats on a wall. I stepped back.

“Okay,” he said thickly.

The fog swallowed him. The faint sound of his steps and then nothing. I picked the bag up and felt in it and went towards the path. She still stood there motionless, a grey fur coat held tight around her throat with one had on which a ring made a faint glitter. Her dark parted hair was part of the darkness of the night. He eyes too.

“Nice work, Marlowe. Are you my bodyguard now?” Her voice had a harsh note.

“Looks that way. Here’s the bag.”

She took it. I said: “Have you a car with you?”

She laughed. “I came with a man. What are you doing here?”

“Eddie Mars wanted to see me.”

“I didn’t know you knew him. Why?”

“I don’t mind telling you. He thought I was looking for somebody he thought had run away with his wife.”

“Were you?”

“No.”

“Then what did you come for?”

“To find out why he thought I was looking for somebody he thought had run away with his wife.”

“Did you find out?”

“No.”

“You leak information like a network announcer,” she said. “I suppose it’s none of my business - even if that man was my husband. I thought you weren’t interested in that?”

“People keep throwing it at me.”

She clicked her teeth in annoyance. The incident of the masked man with the gun seemed to have made no impression on her at all. “Well, take me to the garage,” she said. “I have to look in at my escort.”

We walked along the path and around a corner of the building and there was light ahead, then around another corner and came to a bright
enclosed stable yard lit with two floodlights. It was still paved with brick and still sloped down to a grating in the middle. Cars and other craft glistened, and a man in a brown smock got up off a stool and came forward.

“Is my boyfriend still blotto?” Vivian asked him carelessly.

“I’m afraid he is, miss. I put a rug over him. He’s okay, I guess. Just kind of resting.”

We went over to a big gleaming ground-car and the man in the smock pulled the rear door open. On the wide back seat, loosely arranged, covered to the chin with a plaid robe, a man lay snoring with his mouth open. He seemed to be a big blond man who would hold a lot of liquor.

“Meet Mr Larry Cobb,” Vivian said. “Mister Cobb - Mister Marlowe.”

I grunted.

“Mr Cobb was my escort,” she said. “Such a nice escort, Mr Cobb. So attentive. You should see him sober. I should see him sober. Somebody should see him sober. I mean, just for the record. So it could become a part of history, that brief flashing moment, soon buried in time, but never forgotten - when Larry Cobb was sober.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I’ve even thought of marrying him,” she went on in a high strained voice, as if the shock of the stick-up was just beginning to get to her. “At odd times when nothing pleasant would come into my mind. We all have those spells. Lots of money, you know. A vast space-yacht, a place on Earth, a place on Venus, a place on Titan, places dotted here and there all over the system probably - just a good Scotch bottle apart. And to Mr Cobb a bottle of Scotch is not very far.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Does he have a driver to take him home?”

“Don’t say ‘yeah’. It’s common.” She looked at me with arched eyebrows. The man in the smock was chewing his lower lip hard. “Oh, undoubtedly a whole platoon of drivers. They probably do squads right in front of the garage every morning, buttons shining, harness gleaming, white gloves immaculate - a sort of West Point elegance about them.”

“Well, where the hell is this driver?” I asked.
“He drove himself tonight,” the man in the smock said, almost apologetically. “I could call his home and have somebody come down for him.”

Vivian turned around and smiled at him as if he had just presented her with a diamond tiara. “That would be lovely,” she said. “Would you do that? I really wouldn’t want Mr Cobb to die like that - with his mouth open. Someone might thing he had died of thirst.”

The man in the smock said: “Not if they sniffed him, miss.”

She opened her bag and grabbed a handful of paper money and pushed it at him. “You’ll take care of him, I’m sure.”

“Jeeze,” the man said, pop-eyed. “I sure will, miss.”

“Regan is the name,” she said sweetly, “Mrs Regan. You’ll probably see me again. Haven’t been here long, have you?”

“No’m.” His hands were doing frantic things with the fistful of money he was holding.

“You’ll get to love it here,” she said. She took hold of my arm. “Let’s ride in your car, Marlowe.”

“It’s a rickshaw. I left it out on the street.”

“Quite all right with me, Marlowe. I love a nice walk in the fog. You meet such interesting people.”

“Oh nuts,” I said.

She held on to my arm and began to shake. She held me hard all the way to the rickshaw. She had stopped shaking by the time we reached it. I woke the bot and it drove us down a curving lane of trees on the blind side of the house. The lane opened up onto the main drag. We passed under ancient streetlights and after a while there was a town, buildings, dead-looking stores, a service station with a light over a night bell, and at last a drugstore that was still open.

“You’d better have a drink,” I said.

She moved her chin, a point of paleness in the corner of the seat. I motioned the bot to pull into the kerb and park. “A little black coffee and a smattering of rye would go well,” I said.

“I could get as drunk as two sailors and love it.”

She got out close to me, brushing my cheek with her hair. We went into the drugstore. I bought a half-litre of rye at the liquor
counter and carried it over to the stools and set it down on the cracked marble counter.

“Two coffees,” I said. “Black, strong and made this year.”

The clerk glared at me. He had a washed-out blue smock, was thin on top as to hair, had fairly honest eyes and his chin would never hit a wall before he saw it.

Vivian Regan reached into her bag for a packet of cigarettes and shook a couple loose. She held them towards me. I lit the cigarettes and handed one to her. The clerk drew two cups of coffee from a tarnished metal urn and set them in front of us. He looked at the bottle of rye and muttered something under his breath. He went and stood at the display window with his back to us and his ears hanging out.

I unscrewed the top of the whisky bottle and loaded the coffee. The clerk turned suddenly and walked back behind the counter and went in behind the little glass window of the prescription counter.

We sipped our loaded coffee. I looked at Vivian’s face in the mirror back of the coffee urn. It was taut, pale, beautiful and wild. Her lips were red and harsh.

“You have wicked eyes,” I said. “What’s Eddie Mars got on you?”

She looked at me in the mirror. “I took plenty away from him tonight at roulette, starting with five mill I borrowed from him yesterday and didn’t have to use.”

“That might make him sore. You think he sent that loogan after you?”

“What’s a loogan?”

“A guy with a gun.”

“Are you a loogan?”

“Sure,” I laughed. “But strictly speaking a loogan is on the wrong side of the fence.”

“I often wonder if there is a wrong side.”

“We’re losing the subject. What has Eddie Mars got on you?”

“You mean a hold on me of some sort?”

“Yes.”

Her lip curled. “Wittier, please, Marlowe. Much Wittier.”
“How’s the General? I don’t pretend to be witty.”

“None too well. He didn’t get warmed up today. You could at least stop questioning me.”

“I remember a time when I thought the same about you. How much does the General know?”

“He probably knows everything.”

“Norris would tell him?”

“No, Wilde, the Habitat Attorney, was out to see him. Did you destroy those pictures?”

“Sure. You worry about your little sister, don’t you - from time to time.”

“I think she’s all I do worry about. I worry about Dad in a way, to keep things from him.”

“He hasn’t many illusions,” I said, “but I suppose he still has pride.”

“We’re his blood. That’s the hell of it.” She stared at me in the mirror with deep, distant eyes. “I don’t want him to die despising his own blood. It was always wild blood, but it wasn’t always rotten blood.”

“Is it now?”

“I guess you think so.”

“Not yours. You’re just playing the part.”

She looked down. I sipped some more coffee and lit another cigarette for us. “So you shoot people,” she said quietly, “You’re a killer.”

“Me? How?”

“The news reports and the police fixed it up nicely. But I don’t believe everything I read.”

“Oh, you think I accounted for Geiger - or Brody - or both of them?”

She didn’t say anything. “I didn’t have to,” I said, “I might have, I suppose, and got away with it. Neither of them would have hesitated to throw lead at me.”

“That makes you just a killer at heart, like all cops.”
“Oh, nuts.”

“One of those dark deadly quiet men who have no more feelings than a butcher has for slaughtered meat. I knew it the first time I saw you.”

“You’ve got enough shady friends to know different.”

“They’re all soft compared with you.”

“Thanks lady. You’re no sweet muffin yourself.”

“Let’s get out of this rotten little place.”

I paid the check, put the bottle of rye in my pocket, and we left. The clerk still didn’t like me.

We drove away through a series of little dank suburbs that backed up on the foundations of the dome. A yellow window shone here and there but most of the houses were dark. The tyres sang on the moist concrete of the boulevard, offset by the slap of the robot’s feet. The world was a wet emptiness.

We were close to a major stanchion before she spoke to me for the first time since we left the drugstore. Her voice had a muffled sound, as if something was throbbing deep underneath it.

“Drive down by the column. I want to look at the stars. It’s the next street on the right.”

I nodded to the bot and we slid up a slope with a high bluff on one side. That way the fog was almost gone. There was a paved strip of highway that bordered the Plexiglas of the dome. Cars were parked along the pavement, facing out of the habitat, dark.

The rickshaw braked against the kerb and the bot turned itself off with a click.

“Move closer,” she said almost thickly.

I edged towards her into the middle of the seat. She had slipped out of the fur coat. Her eyes were closed, her face was dim. Then I saw that her eyes opened and flickered, the shine of them visible even in the darkness. She bent forward, without a sound, her hands urgently fumbling with the fastenings of my trousers.

“Fuck me hard, you beast,” she said.

She released my cock from its constraints and it sprang up as if it were on pneumatic pistons. She pounced on it as if she was a cat after
a bird, and pressed her mouth over the end. She took me deep into her throat and held it there for a second, then drew away using both hands to rub her saliva into my dick.

“Killer,” she said softly, then could she speak no longer, my raging erection filling her mouth.

I reached for her breasts, releasing the globes from the soft fabric of her over-dressy evening gown. Her back arched as I squeezed her nipples, first gently, then harder. She released by dick from its moist prison and hitched the dress up over her waist and swung her leg over my lap. She guided my dick inside her in one smooth movement, holding her pussy lips apart with long-nailed fingers. She bounced and writhed, making little noises that got increasingly louder. She strained against me until she came, hard and long and loud. I spurted inside her, feeling my juices gush and mingle with hers.

I held her against me until the shivering of her body had stopped. After a long time she pulled herself away enough to say: “Where do you live?”

“Hobart Arms.”

“I’ve never seen it.”

“Want to?”

“Yes.”

“What has Eddie Mars got on you?”

Her body stiffened in my arms and her breath made a harsh sound. Her head pulled back until her eyes, wide open, ringed with white, were staring at me.

“So that’s the way it is.” she said in a soft dull voice.

“That’s the way it is. Fucking is nice, but your father didn’t hire me to sleep with you.”

“You son of a bitch,” she said calmly, without moving.

I laughed in her face. “Don’t think I’m an icicle,” I said. “I’m not blind or without senses. I have warm blood like the next guy. You’re easy to take - too damn easy. What has Eddie Mars got on you?”

“If you say that again, I’ll scream.”

“Go ahead and scream.”
She jerked away and pulled herself upright, tugging her dress down and slipping her breasts into the bodice.

“Men have been shot for little things like that, Marlowe.”

“Men have been shot for practically nothing. The first time we met I told you I was a detective. Get it through your lovely head. I work at it, lady. I don’t play at it.”

She fumbled in her bag and got a handkerchief and bit on it, her head turned away from me. The tearing sound of the handkerchief came to me. She tore it, with her teeth, time after time.

“What makes you think he has anything on me?” she whispered, her voice muffled by the handkerchief.

“He let’s you win a lot of money and sends a gunpoke around to take it back. You’re not more than mildly surprised. You didn’t even thank me for saving it for you. I think the whole thing was just some kind of an act. If I wanted to flatter myself, I’d say it was at least partially for my benefit.”

“You think he can win or lose as he pleases?”

“Sure. On even money bets, four times out of five.”

“Do I have to tell you I loathe your guts, Mister Detective?”

“You don’t owe me anything. I’m paid off.”

She tossed the shredded handkerchief out of the window. “You have a lovely way with women.”

“I liked fucking you.”

“You kept your head beautifully. That’s so flattering. Should I congratulate you, or my father?”

“I liked fucking you.”

Her voice became an icy drawl. “Take me away from here, if you will be so kind. I’m quite sure I’d like to go home.”

“You won’t be a sister to me?”

“If I had a razor, I’d cut your throat - just to see what ran out of it.”

“Caterpillar blood,” I said.

I kicked the rickshaw bot, and it drove us back to the boulevard and so on into town. She didn’t speak to me. She hardly moved all the way back. We drive through the gates and up the sunken driveway
to the porte-cochere of the big house. She jerked the fur around her shoulders and was out of the rickshaw before it had quite stopped. She didn’t speak even then. I watched her back as she stood against the door after ringing the bell. The door opened and the silver face of Norris looked out. She pushed past him quickly and was gone. The door banged shut and I was sitting there looking at it.

I nudged the bot. We turned back down the driveway and home.
Chapter 24 - Second Time Lucky

The apartment house lobby was empty this time. No gunman waiting under the potted palm to give me orders. I took the elevator up to my floor and walked along the hallway to the tune of recorded music behind a door. I needed a drink and I was in a hurry to get one. I didn’t switch the light on inside the door. I made straight for the kitchenette and brought up short in one or two metres. Something was wrong. Something on the air, a scent. The shades were down at the windows and the street lighting leaking in at the sides made a dim light in the room. I stood still and listened. The scent on the air was a perfume, a heavy, cloying perfume, intermingled with the intimate smell of a woman.

There was no sound, no sound at all. Then my eyes adjusted themselves more to the darkness and I saw there something across the floor in front of me that shouldn’t have been there. I backed, reached the wall switch with my thumb and flicked the light on.

The bed was down. Something in it giggled. A blonde head was pressed into my pillow. Two bare arms curved up and the hands belonging to them were clasped on top of the blonde head. Carmen Sternwood lay on her back, in my bed, giggling at me. The tawny wave of her hair was spread out on the pillow as if by a careful and artificial hand. Her slaty eyes peered at me and had the effect, as usual, of peering from behind a barrel. She smiled. Her small sharp teeth glinted.

“Cute, aren’t I?” she said.

I said harshly: “Cute as a Martian rock-hound on Saturday night.”

I went over to a floor lamp and pulled the switch, went back to put out the ceiling lamp, and went across the room again to the chessboard on a card table under the lamp. There was a problem laid out on the board, a six-mover. I couldn’t solve it, like a lot of my problems. I reached down and moved a knight, then pulled my coat off and threw it somewhere. All this time the soft giggling went on from the bed, that sound made me think of rats behind the wainscoting in an old house.

“I bet you can’t even guess how I got in.”
I dug a cigarette out and looked at her with bleak eyes. “I bet I can. You came in through the keyhole, just like Peter Pan.”

“Who’s he?”

“Oh, a fellow I used to know around the poolroom.”

She giggled. “You’re cute, aren’t you?” she said. She eyed me with very round and naughty eyes.

“I’m all wet,” she said, after I had smoked and stared at her for a minute.

“By God,” I said, “it was right at the back of my mind. I was groping for it. I almost had it, when you spoke. In another minute I’d have said ‘I bet you’re all wet’.”

“You’re cute.” She rolled her head a little, kittenishly. Then she took her left hand from under her head and took hold of the covers, paused dramatically, and swept them aside. She was wet all right. She lay there on the bed in the lamplight, naked, her legs splayed apart, the moisture on her pussy lips glistening like a pearl. She rubbed her lips with the fingers of one hand and slipped a single digit inside herself to show me. The Sternwood girls were giving me both barrels that night.

I pulled a shred of tobacco off the edge of my lower lip.

“That’s nice,” I said. “But I’ve already seen it all. Remember? I’m the guy that keeps finding you without any clothes on and a dildo in your ass.”

She giggled some more and covered herself up again. “Well, how did you get in?” I asked her.

“The manager let me in. I showed him your card. I’d stolen it from Vivian. I told him you told me to come here and wait for you. I was - I was mysterious.” She glowed with delight.

“Neat,” I said. “Managers are like that. Now I know how you got in tell me how you’re going to go out.”

She giggled. “Not going - not for a long time. I like it here. You’re cute.”

“Listen,” I pointed my cigarette at her. “Don’t make me dress you again. I’m tired. I appreciate all you’re offering me. It’s just more than I could possibly take. Doghouse Rogers never let a pal down that way. I’m your friend. I won’t let you down - in spite of yourself.
You and I have to keep on being friends, and this isn’t the way to do it. Now will you dress like a nice little girl?”

She shook her head from side to side.

“Listen,” I ploughed on, “you don’t really care anything about me. You’re just showing me how naughty you can be. But you don’t have to show me. I knew it already. I’m the guy that found -”

“Put the light out,” she giggled.

I threw my cigarette on the floor and stamped on it. I took a handkerchief out and wiped the palms of my hands. I tried it once more.

“It isn’t on account of the neighbours,” I told her. “They don’t really care a lot. There’s a lot of stray broads in any apartment house and one more won’t make the building rock. It’s a question of professional pride. You know - professional pride. I’m working for your father. He’s a sick man, very frail, very helpless. He sort of trusts me not to pull any stunts. Won’t you please get dressed, Carmen?”

“Your name isn’t Doghouse Rogers,” she said. “It’s Philip Marlowe. You can’t fool me.”

I looked down at the chessboard. The move with the knight was wrong. I put it back where I had moved it from. Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn’t a game for knights.

I looked at her again. She lay still now, her face pale against the pillow, her eyes large and dark and empty as rain barrels in a Martian drought. One of her small five-fingered thumb-less hands picked at the cover restlessly. The other moved under the covers, between her legs. There was a vague glimmer of doubt starting to get born in her somewhere. She didn’t know about it yet. It’s so hard for women - even nice women - to realize that their bodies are not irresistible.

I said: “I’m going out in the kitchen and mix a drink. Want one?”

“Uh-huh.” Dark silent eyes stared at me solemnly, the doubt growing larger in them, like a Venusian rock snake stalking a young black beetle. Her hands were still now, both of them.

“If you’re dressed when I get back, you’ll get the drink. Okay?”

Her teeth parted and a faint hissing noise came out of her mouth. She didn’t answer me. I went to the kitchenette and got out some Scotch and soda-water and mixed a couple of highballs. I didn’t have
anything really exciting to drink, like nitro-glycerine or distilled tiger’s breath. She hadn’t moved when I got back with the glasses. The hissing had stopped. Her eyes were dead again. Her lips started to smile at me. Then she sat up suddenly and threw all the covers off her body and reached.

“Gimme.”

“When you’re dressed. Not until you’re dressed.”

I put the two glasses down on the card table and sat down myself and lit another cigarette. “Go ahead. I won’t watch you.”

I looked away. Then I was aware of the hissing noise very sudden and loud. It started me into looking at her again. She sat there naked, propped on her hands, her mouth open a little, her face like scraped bone. The hissing noise came tearing out of her mouth as if she had nothing to do with it. There was something behind her eyes, blank as they were, that I had never seen in a woman’s eyes.

Then her lips moved very slowly and carefully, as if they were artificial lips and had to be manipulated with clockwork automation.

She called me a filthy name.

I didn’t mind that. I didn’t mind what she called me, what anybody called me. But this was the room I had to live in. It was all I had in the way of a home. In it was everything that was mine, that had any association for me, any past, anything that took the place of a family. Not much: a few books, pictures, terminal, chessmen, old letters, stuff like that. Nothing. Such as they were they had all my memories.

I couldn’t stand her in that room any longer. What she called me only reminded me of that.

I said carefully: “I’ll give you three minutes to get dressed and out of here. If you’re not out by then, I’ll throw you out - by force. Just the way you are, naked. And I’ll throw your clothes after you into the hall. Now - get started.”

Her teeth chattered and the hissing noise was sharp and animal. She swung her feet to the floor and reached for her clothes on a chair beside the bed. She dressed. I watched her. She dressed with stiff awkward fingers, but quickly at that. She was dressed in a little over two minutes. I timed it.

She stood there beside the bed, holding a green bag tight against a fur-trimmed coat. She stood there for a moment and hissed at me, her
face still like scraped bone, her eyes still empty and yet full of some jungle emotion. Then she walked quickly to the door and opened it and went out, without speaking, without looking back. I heard the elevator lurch into motion and move in the shaft.

I walked to the windows and pulled the shades up and opened the windows wide. The night air came drifting in with a kind of stale sweetness that still remembered rocket exhausts and the streets of the habitat. I reached for my drink and drank it slowly. The apartment house door closed itself down below me. Steps tinkled on the pavement. A car started up not far away. It rushed off into the night with a whining of motors. I went back to the bed and looked down at it. The imprint of her head was still on the pillow, the moisture from her small corrupt body still on the sheets.

I put my empty glass down and tore the bed to pieces savagely.
Chapter 25 - Tall Story

The climate technicians had decreed it had to rain again the next morning, a slanting grey rain like a swung curtain of crystal beads. I got up feeling sluggish and tired and stood looking out of the windows, with a dark harsh taste of Sternwoods still in my mouth. I was as empty of life as a lunar plateau. I went out to the kitchenette and drank two cups of black coffee. You can have a hangover from other things than alcohol. I had one from women. Women made me sick.

I showered and shaved and dressed and got my raincoat out and went downstairs and looked out of the front door. Across the street, thirty metres up, a grey ground car was parked. It was the same one that had tried to trail me around the day before, the same one I had asked Eddie Mars about. There might be a cop in it, if a cop had that much time on his hands and wanted to waste it following me around. Or it might be a smoothie in the detective business trying to get a noseful of somebody else’s case in order to chisel a way into it. Or it might be the Bishop of Phobos disapproving of my nightlife.

I went out back and got my rickshaw from the garage and drove around the front past the grey ground car. There was a small man in it, alone. He started up after me. He worked better in the rain. He stayed close enough so that I couldn’t make a short block and leave that before he entered it, and he stayed back far enough so that other cars were between us most of the time. I travelled down the boulevard and parked in the lot next to my building and came out of there with my raincoat collar up and the raindrops tapping icily at my face. The grey ground car wasn’t moved. Nobody got out of it. I reached it and jerked open the door on the kerb side.

A small bright-eyed man was pressed back into the corner behind the wheel. I stood and looked in at him, the rain thumping my back. His eyes blinked behind the swirling smoke of a cigarette. His hands tapped restlessly on the thin wheel.

I said: “Can’t you make your mind up?”
He swallowed and the cigarette bobbed between his lips. “I don’t think I know you,” he said, in a tight little voice.

“Marlowe’s the name. The guy you’ve been trying to follow around for a couple of days.”

“I ain’t following anybody, doc.”

“This jalopy is. Maybe you can’t control it. Have it your own way. I’m now going to eat breakfast in the coffee shop across the street, orange juice, bacon and eggs, toast, honey, three or four cups of coffee and a toothpick. I am then going up to my office, which is on the seventh floor of the building right opposite you. If you have anything that’s worrying you beyond endurance, drop in and chew it over. I’ll be oiling my machine gun.”

I left him blinking and walked away. Twenty minutes later I was airing the overnight cleaning robot’s oily smell out of my office and opening up a thick rough envelope addressed in a fine old-fashioned handwriting. The envelope contained a brief formal note and a large mauve cheque for five hundred thousand dollars, payable to Philip Marlowe and signed, Guy de Brisay Sternwood, by Norris R. That made a nice morning. I was making out a bank slip when the buzzer told me somebody had entered by two by four reception room. It was the little man from the grey ground car.

“Fine,” I said. “Come in and shed your coat.”

He slid past me carefully as I held the door, as carefully as if he feared I might plant a playful slap on his minute buttocks. We sat down and faced each other across the desk. He was a very small man, not more than one metre six and would hardly weight as much as a butcher’s thumb. He had tight brilliant eyes that wanted to look hard, and looked as hard as oysters on the half-shell. He wore a double-breasted dark grey suit that was too wide in the shoulder and had too much lapel. Over this, open, a tweed coat with some badly worn spots. A lot of foulard tie bulged out and was rain-spotted above his crossed lapels.

“Maybe you know me,” he said. “I’m Harry Jones.”

I said I didn’t know him. I pushed a flat tin of cigarettes at him. His small neat fingers speared one like a trout taking a fly. He lit it with the desk lighter and waved his hand.

“I been around,” he said. “Know the boys and such. Used to do a little gun-running down-system. A tough racket, brother. Riding the
scout ship bristling with armaments and a wad on your hip that would choke a black hole. Plenty of times we paid off four sets of privateers before we hit Earth orbit. A tough racket.”

“Terrible,” I said.

He leaned back and blew smoke at the ceiling from the small tight corner of his small tight mouth.

“Maybe you don’t believe me,” he said.

“If I don’t,” I said. “And maybe I do. And Then again maybe I haven’t bothered to make my mind up. Just what is the build-up supposed to do to me?”

“Nothing,” he said tartly.

“You’ve been following me around for a couple of days,” I said. “Like a fellow trying to pick up a girl and lacking the last centimetre of nerve. Maybe you’re selling insurance. Maybe you knew a fellow called Joe Brody. That’s a lot of maybes, but I have a lot on hand in my business.”

His eyes bulged and his lower lip almost fell in his lap. “Christ, how’d you know that?” he said.

“I’m psychic. Shake your business and pour it. I haven’t got all day.”

The brightness of his eyes almost disappeared between his suddenly narrowed lips. There was silence. The rain pounded down on the flat plastic roof over the lobby of the building next door. His eyes opened a little, shined again, and his voice was full of thought.

“I was trying to get a line of you, sure,” he said. “I’ve got something to sell - cheap, for a couple of C notes. How’d you tie me to Joe?”

I opened a letter and read it. It offered me a six months’ correspondence course in fingerprinting at a special professional discount. I dropped it into the waste basket and looked at the little man again. “Don’t mind me. I was just guessing. You’re not a cop. You don’t belong to Eddie Mars’s outfit. I asked him last night. I couldn’t think of anybody else but Joe Brody’s friends who would be that much interested in me.”

“Jesus,” he said and licked his lower lip. His face turned white as paper when I mentioned Eddie Mars. His mouth drooped open and his cigarette hung to the corner of it by some magic, as if it had grown
“Aw, you’re kidding me,” he said, at last, with the sort of smile the operating-room sees.

“All right. I’m kidding you.” I opened another letter. This one wanted to send me a daily newsletter from Earth, all inside stuff, straight from the cook-house. “I suppose Agnes is loose,” I added.

“Yeah. She sent me. You interested?”

“Well, she is a blonde.”

“Nuts. You made a crack when you were up there that night - the night Joe got squibbed off. Something about Brody must have known something good about the Sternwoods or he wouldn’t have taken the chance on that picture he sent them.”

“Uh-huh. So he had? What was it?”

“That’s what the two hundred kays pay for.”

I dropped some more fan mail into the basket and lit myself a fresh cigarette.

“We gotta get off this rock,” he said. “Agnes is a nice girl. You can’t hold that stuff on her. It’s not so easy for a dame to get by these days.”

“She’s too big for you,” I said. “She’ll sit on your face and smother you.”

“That’s kind of a dirty crack, brother,” he said with something that was near enough to dignity to make me stare at him.

I said: “You’re right. I’ve been meeting the wrong kind of people lately. Let’s cut out the gabble and get down to cases. What have you got for the money?”

“Would you pay it?”

“If it does what?”

“If it helps you find Rusty Regan.”

“I’m not looking for Rusty Regan.”

“Says you. Want to hear it or not?”

“Go ahead and chirp. I’ll pay for anything I use. Two C notes buys a lot of information in my circle.”

“Eddie Mars had Regan bumped off,” he said calmly, and leaned back as if her had just been made a vice-president.
I waved a hand in the direction of the door. “I wouldn’t even argue with you,” I said. “I wouldn’t waste the oxygen. On your way, small size.”

He leaned across the desk, white lines at the corners of his mouth. He stubbed his cigarette out carefully, over and over again, without looking at it.

“I’m not kidding,” he said.

“Beat it. Don’t bother me. I have work to do.”

“No you don’t,” he said sharply. “I ain’t that easy. I came here to speak my piece and I’m speaking it. I knew Rusty myself. Not well, well enough to say ‘How’s a boy?’ and he answered me or he wouldn’t, according to how he felt. A nice guy though. I always liked him. He was sweet on a singer named Mona Grant. Then she changed her name to Mars. Rusty got sore and married a rich dame that hung around the joints like she couldn’t sleep well at home. You know all about her, tall, dark, enough looks for a Derby winner, but the type would put a lot of pressure on a guy. High-strung Rusty wouldn’t get along with her. But Jesus, he’d get along with her old man’s dough, wouldn’t he? That’s what you think. This Regan was a cockeyed sort of buzzard. He had long-range eyes. He was looking over into the next solar system all the time. He wasn’t scarcely around where he was. I don’t think he gave a damn about dough. And coming from me, brother, that’s a compliment.”

The little man wasn’t so dumb after all. A three for a dollar grifter wouldn’t even think such thoughts, much less know how to express them.

I said: “So he ran away.”

“He started to run away, maybe. With this girl Mona. She wasn’t living with Eddie Mars, didn’t like his rackets. Especially the side lines, like blackmail, bent rockets, hideouts for hot boys from down-system, and so on. The talk was Regan told Eddie one night, right out in the open, that if he ever messed Mona up in any criminal rap, he’d be around to see him.”

“Most of this is on the record, Harry,” I said. “You can’t expect money for that.”

“I’m coming to what isn’t. So Regan blew. I used to see him every afternoon in a bar downtown drinking Irish whiskey and staring at the wall. He don’t talk much any more. He’d give me a bet now
and then, which is what I was there for - to pick up bets for Puss Walgreen."

"Go on," I said levelly.

"Well, about the middle of September I don’t see Regan any more. I don’t notice it right away. You know how it is. A guy’s there and you see him and then he ain’t there and you don’t see him until something makes you think of it. What makes me think about it is I hear a guy say laughing that Eddie Mars’s woman lammed out with Rusty Regan and Mars is acting like he was best man, instead of being sore. So I tell Joe Brody and Joe was smart."

"Like hell he was," I said.

"Not copper smart, but still smart. He’s out for the dough. He gets to figuring could he get a line somehow on the two lovebirds he could maybe collect twice - once from Eddie Mars and once from Regan’s wife. Joe knew the family a little."

"Five mills’ worth," I said. "He nicked them for that a while back."

"Yeah?" Harry Jones looked mildly surprised. "Agnes ought to have told me that. There’s a frail for you. Always holding out. Well, Joe and me watch the news reports and we don’t see anything, so we know old Sternwood has a blanket on it. Then one day I see Lash Canino in the bar. Know him?"

I shook my head.

"There’s a boy that is tough like some guys think they are tough. He does a job for Eddie Mars when Mars needs him - trouble shooting. He’d bump a guy off between drinks. When Mars don’t need him he don’t go near him. And he don’t stay in this habitat. Well it might be something or it might not. Maybe they got a line on Regan and Mars has just been sitting back with a smile on his puss, waiting for the chance. Then again it might be something else entirely. Anyway I tell Joe and Joe gets on Canino’s tail. He can tail. Me, I’m no good at it. I’m giving that one away. No charge. And Joe tails Canino out to the Sternwood place and Canino parks outside the estate and a ground car pulls up beside him with a girl in it. They talk for a while and Joe thinks the girl passes something over, like maybe dough. The girl beats it. It’s Regan’s wife. Okay, she know Canino and Canino knows Mars. So Joe figures Canino knows something about Regan
and is trying to squeeze a little on the side for himself. Canino blows and Joe loses him. End of Act One.”

“What does this Canino look like?”

“Short, heavy set, brown hair, brown eyes, and always wears brown clothes. Even wears a brown suede raincoat. Drives a brown convertible. Everything brown for Mr Canino.”

“Let’s have Act Two,” I said.

“Without some dough, that’s all.”

“I don’t see two hundred thousand in it. Mrs Regan married an ex-gunrunner out of the joints. She’d know other people of his sort. She knows Eddie Mars well. If she thought anything had happened to Regan, Eddie would be the very man she’d go to, and Canino might be the man Eddie would pick to handle the assignment. Is that all you have?”

“Would you give the two hundred grand to know where Eddie’s wife is?” the little man asked calmly.

He had all my attention now. I almost cracked the arms of my chair leaning on them.

“Even if she was alone?” Harry Jones added in a soft, rather sinister tone. “Even if she had never run away with Regan at all, and was being kept now in this very habitat in a hideout - so the law would keep on thinking she had dusted with him? Would you pay two hundred thou for that, shamus?”

I licked my lips. They tasted dry and salty. “I think I would. Where?”

“Agnes found her,” he said grimly. “Just by a lucky break. Saw her out riding and managed to tail her home. Agnes will tell you where that is - when she’s holding the money in her hand.”

I made a hard face at him. “You could tell the coppers for nothing, Harry. They’ve got some pretty good brain scanners down at Central these days. If they killed you trying, they still have Agnes.”

“Let ‘em try,” he said. “I ain’t so brittle.”

“Agnes must have something I didn’t notice.”

“She’s a grifter, shamus. I’m a grifter. We’re all grifters. So we sell each other out for a dollar. Okay. See if you can make me.” He reached for another of my cigarettes, placed it neatly between his lips
and lit it. He puffed evenly and stared at me level-eyed, a funny little hard
guy I could have thrown from home plate to second base. A
small man in a big man’s world. There was something I liked about
him.

“I haven’t pulled anything in here,” he said steadily. “I come in
talking two Kays. That’s still the price. I come because I thought I’d
get a take it or leave it, one right gee to another. Now you’re waving
cops at me. You oughta be ashamed of yourself.”

I said: “You’ll get the two hundred grand - for that information. I
have to get the money myself first.”

He stood up and nodded and pulled his worn little tweed coat tight
around his chest. “That’s okay. After dark is better anyway. It’s a
leery job, buckin’ guys like Eddie Mars. But a guy has to eat. The
book’s been pretty dull lately. I think the big boys have told Puss
Walgreen to move on. Suppose you come over to the office, Fudwider
Building. You bring the money, I’ll take you to Agnes.”

“Can’t you tell me yourself? I’ve see Agnes.”

“I promised her,” he said simply. He buttoned his overcoat,
nodded again and strolled to the door. He went out. His steps died
along the corridor.

I went down to the bank and deposited my five-hundred-thousand-
dollar cheque and drew out two hundred in currency. I went upstairs
again and sat in my chair thinking about Harry Jones and his story. It
seemed a little too pat. It had the austere simplicity of fiction rather
than the tangled woof of fact. Captain Gregory ought to have been
able to find Mona Mars, if she was that close to his beat. Supposing,
that is, he had tried.

I thought about it most of the day. Nobody came into the office.
Nobody called me. It kept on raining.
Chapter 26 - Poisoned Deal

At nineteen the rain had stopped so that the climate technicians could take a coffee break, but the gutters were still flooded. On the main boulevard downtown the water was level with the pavement and a thin film of it washed over the top of the kerbing. A traffic robot in shining black rubber from boots to helmet sloshed through the flood on its way to the shelter of a sodden awning. My rubber heels slithered on the pavement as I turned into the narrow lobby of the Fulwider Building. A single light burned far back, beyond an open once-gilt elevator. A case of prosthetic teeth and dental appliances hung on the mustard-coloured wall. I shook the rain off my coat and looked at the flickering display of the building directory next to the case of teeth. Numbers with names and numbers without names. Plenty of vacancies or plenty of tenants who wished to retain anonymous. Cut-rate cyborg conversions, shyster detective agencies, small sick businesses that had crawled here to die: online schools that would teach you to be a robot technician or a screen writer, if the network inspectors didn’t catch up with them first. A nasty building. A building in which the smell of stale cigar butts would be the cleanest odour.

The elevator stank of warm piss and stale beer and cheap cigarette smoke. I went past it, the clandestine air of the building prompting me, found the fire door and pulled it open. The fire stairs hadn’t been swept in a month. Bums had slept on them, eaten on them, left crusts and fragments of greasy printed paper, matches, a gutted imitation-leather pocket-book. In a shadowy angle against the scribbled wall a pouchled ring of pale rubber had fallen and had not been disturbed. A very nice building.

I came out at the fourth floor sniffing for air. The hallway had the same mustard walls and the same memories of low tide. I went down the line and turned a corner. The name: “L. D. Walgreen - Insurance” showed on a dark pebbled glass door, on a second dark door, on a third behind which there was light. One of the dark doors said: “Entrance”.

A glass transom was open over the lighted door. Through it the sharp birdlike voice of Harry Jones spoke, saying:

“Canino? … Yeah, I’ve seen you around somewhere. Sure.”
I froze. The other voice spoke. It had a heavy purr, like a small fusion generator in a basement. It said: “I thought you would.” There was a vaguely sinister note in that voice.

A chair scraped on linoleum, steps sounded, the transom above me squeaked shut. A shadow melted from behind the pebbled glass.

I went back to the first of the three doors marked with the name Walgreen. I tried it cautiously. It was locked. It moved in a loose frame, an old door fitted many decades past, made of low-grade plastic and shrunken now. I reached my wallet out and slipped out a thick hard rectangle of plastic, an old-fashioned credit card. A burglar’s tool the law had forgotten to proscribe. I put my gloves on, leaned softly and lovingly against the door and pushed the knob hard away from the frame. I pushed the card into the wide crack and felt for the slope of a spring lock. There was a dry click, like a Titan icicle breaking. I hung there motionless, like a lazy fish in the water. Nothing happened inside. I turned the knob and pushed the door back into darkness. I shut it behind me as carefully as I had opened it.

The lighted oblong of an uncurtained window faced me, cut by the angle of a desk. On the desk, a bulky terminal screen took form, then the metal knob of a communicating door. This was unlocked. I passed into the second of the three offices. Rain rattled suddenly against the closed window. Under its noise I crossed the room. A tight fan of light spread from a centimetre opening of the door into the lighted office. Everything very convenient. I walked like a cat on a mantel and reached the hinged side of the door, put an eye to the crack and saw nothing but light against the angle of the plastic.

The purring voice was now saying quite pleasantly: “Sure, a guy could sit on his fanny and bitch what another guy done if he knows what it’s all about. So you go and see this peeper. Well, that was your mistake. Eddie don’t like it. The peeper told Eddie some guy in a grey ground-car was tailing him. Eddie naturally wants to know who and why, see.”

Harry Jones laughed lightly. “What makes it his business?”

“That don’t get you no place.”

“You know why I went to the peeper. I already told you. Account of Joe Brody’s girl. She has to blow up-system, she ain’t got the fare. She figures the peeper can get her some dough. I don’t have any.”
The purring voice said gently: “Dough for what? Peepers don’t give that stuff out to punks.”

“He could raise it. He knows rich people.” Harry Jones laughed, a brave little laugh.

“Don’t fuss with me, little man.” The purring voice had an edge, like sand in the bearings.

“Okay, okay. You know the dope on Brody’s bump-off. That screwy kid done it all right, but the night it happened this Marlowe was right there in the room.”

“That’s known, little man. He told it to the law.”

“Yeah, but here’s what isn’t. Brody was trying to peddle a pornographic hologram of the young Sternwood girl. Marlowe got wise to him. While they were arguing about it, the young Sternwood girl dropped by herself, with a gat. She took a shot at Brody. She lets one fly and breaks a window. Only the peeper didn’t tell the coppers about that. And Agnes didn’t neither. She figures it’s space-cruiser fare for her not to.”

“This ain’t got anything to do with Eddie?”

“Show me how.”

“Where’s this Agnes at?”

“Nothing doing.”

“You’ll tell me, little man. Here, or in the back room where the boys can play with the scanning machines.”

“She’s my girl now, Canino. I don’t put my girl in the middle for anybody.”

A silence followed. I listened to the rain lashing the windows. The smell of cigarette smoke came through the crack of the door. I wanted to cough. I bit hard on a handkerchief.

The purring voice said, still gentle: “From what I hear this blonde broad was just a shill for Geiger. I’ll talk it over with Eddie. How much did you tap the peeper for?”

“Two centuries.”

“Get it?”

Harry Jones laughed again. “I’m seeing him tomorrow. I have hopes.”
“Where’s Agnes?”

“Listen - ”

“Where’s Agnes.”

Silence.

“Look at it, little man.”

I didn’t move. I wasn’t wearing a gun. I didn’t have to see through the crack of the door to know that a gun was what the purring voice was inviting Harry Jones to look at. But I didn’t think Mr Canino would do anything with his gun beyond showing it. I waited.

“I’m looking at it,” Harry Jones said, his voice squeezed tight as if it could hardly get past his teeth. “And I don’t see anything I didn’t see before. Go ahead and blast and see what it gets you.”

“A lunar concrete overcoat is what it would get you, little man.”

Silence.

“Where’s Agnes?”

Harry Jones sighed. “Okay,” he said wearily. “She’s in an apartment house at 28 Court Street, up on Bunker Hill. Apartment 301. I guess I’m yellow all right. Why should I front for that twist?”

“No reason. You got good sense. You and me’ll go out and talk to her. All I want is to find out if she’s dummying up on you, kid. It it’s the way you say it is, everything is jake. You can put the bite on the peeper and be on your way. No hard feelings?”

“No,” Harry Jones said. “No hard feelings, Canino.”

“Fine. Let’s dip the bill. Got a glass?” The purring voice was now as false as a prostitute’s eyelashes and as slippery as a whore’s pussy. A drawer was pulled open. Something jarred on plastic. A chair squeaked. A scuffing sound on the floor. “This is imported stuff,” the purring voice said, “Nothing synthesized here.”

There was a gurgling sound. “Moths in your ermine, as the ladies say.”

Harry Jones said softly: “Success.”

I heard a short sharp cough. Then a violent retching. There was a small thud on the floor, as if a thick glass had fallen. My fingers curled against my raincoat.
The purring voice said gently: “You ain’t sick from just one drink, are you pal?”

Harry Jones didn’t answer. There was laboured breathing for a short moment. Then thick silence folded down. Then a chair scraped.

“So long, little man,” said Mr Canino.

Steps, a click, the wedge of light died at my feet, a door opened and closed quietly. The steps faded, leisurely and assured.

I stirred around the edge of the door and pulled it wide and looked into the blackness relieved by the dim shine of a window. The corner of a desk glittered faintly. A hunched shape took form in a chair behind it. In the close air there was a heavy clogged smell, almost a perfume. I went across to the corridor door and listened. I heard the distance clang of the elevator.

I found the light switch and light glowed in a dusty plastic fitting that clung to the ceiling. Harry Jones looked at me across the desk, his eyes wide open, his face frozen in a tight spasm, the skin bluish. His small dark head was tilted to one side. He sat upright against the back of the chair.

A bell clanged at an almost infinite distance and the sound came buffeted by innumerable walls. A brown quarter-litre of whisky stood on the desk with the cap off. Harry Jones’s glass glinted against a castor of the desk. The second glass was gone.

I breathed shallowly, from the top of my lungs, and bent above the bottle. Behind the charred smell of the bourbon another odour lurked, faintly, the odour of bitter almonds. Harry Jones dying had vomited on his coat. That made it cyanide.

I walked around him carefully, and pressed a button on the terminal that stood dead-centre on the desk. The screen lit up dimly, glowing green that made the pallor of Harry Jones’s skin more ghastly yet. I called Information. A machine voice answered.

“Can you give the number of Apartment 301, 28 Court Street?”

“One moment please.” The droning voice came to me borne on the smell of bitter almonds. “The number is 27-918-555-4308. It is listed under Glendower Apartments.”

I thanked the voice. The terminal had grabbed the number as it was spoken and I pressed the button to make the call. It rang three
times, then it was answered. Recorded music blared along the circuit
and was muted. A burly male voice said: “Hello.”

“Is Agnes there?”

“No Agnes here, buddy. What number you want?”

I reeled off the number of the screen at him.

“Right number, wrong gal. Ain’t that a shame?” The voice
cackled.

I hung up and went back to Information and got the number for the
Glendower Apartments. I called the manager’s number. I had a
blurred vision of Mr Canino driving fast through the rain to another
appointment with death.

“Glendower Apartments, Barry Schiff speaking.”

“This is Guy Wallis, Police Identification Bureau. Is there a girl
named Agnes Lozelle registered in your place?”

“Who did you say you were?”

I told him again.

“If you give me your number, I’ll -”

“Cut the comedy,” I said sharply, “I’m in a hurry. Is there or isn’t
there?”

“No. There isn’t.” The voice was as stiff as a breadstick.

“Is there a tall blonde with green eyes registered in the flop?”

“Say, this isn’t any flop -”

“Oh, can it, can it!” I rapped at him in a police voice. “You want
me to send the vice squad over there and shake the joint down? I
know all about Bunker Hill apartment houses, mister.”

“Hey, take it easy, officer. I’ll co-operate. There’s a couple of
blondes here, sure. Where isn’t there. I hadn’t noticed their eyes
much. Would yours be alone?”

“Alone with a little chap about one-sixty, fifty kilos, sharp black
eyes, wears double-breasted dark grey suit and tweed overcoat. My
information is Apartment 301, but all I get there is the big razzoo.”

“Oh, she ain’t there. There’s a couple of robot salesmen living in
three-o-one.”

“Thanks. I’ll drop around.”
“Make it quiet, won’t you? Come to my place direct?”

“Much obliged, Mr Schiff.” I hung up.

I wiped sweat off my face. I walked to the far corner of the office and stood with my face to the wall, patted it with a hand. I turned around slowly and looked across at little Harry Jones grimacing in his chair.

“Well, you fooled him, Harry,” I said out loud, in a voice that sounded maniacal to me. “You lied to him and you drank your cyanide, like a little gentleman. You died like a poisoned rat, Harry, but you’re no rat to me.”

I had to search him. It was a nasty job. His pockets yielded nothing about Agnes, nothing that I wanted at all. I didn’t think they would, but I had to be sure. Mr Canino might be back. Mr Canino would be the kind of self-confident gentleman who would not mind returning to the scene of his crime.

I put the light out and started to open the door. The terminal beeped jarringly on the desk. I listened to it, my jaw muscles drawn into a knot, aching. Then I shut the door and put the light on again and went across to it.

“Yeah?”

A woman’s voice. Her voice. “Is Harry around?”

“No for a minute, Agnes.”

She waited a while on that. Then she said slowly: “Who’s talking?”

“Marlowe, the guy who’s trouble to you.”

“Where is he?” she said sharply.

“I came over to give him two hundred grand in return for certain information. The offer holds. I have the money. Where are you?”

“Didn’t he tell you?”

“No.”

Perhaps you’d better ask him. Where is he?”

I can’t ask him. Do you know a man named Canino?”

Her gasp came as clearly as though she had been beside me.

“Do you want the two C’s or not?” I asked.
“I want them pretty bad, mister.”

“All right then. Tell me where to bring it.”

“I…” Her voice trailed off and came back with a panic rush. “Where’s Harry.”

“Got scared and blew. Meet me somewhere - anywhere at all - I have the money.”

“I don’t believe you - about Harry. It’s a trap.”

“Oh, stuff. I could have had Harry hauled in long ago. There isn’t anything to make a trap for. Canino got a line of Harry somehow and he blew. I want quiet, you want quiet, Harry wants quiet.” Harry already had it. Nobody could take it away from him. “You don’t think I’d stooge for Eddie Mars, do you angel?”

“No-o, I guess not. Not that. I’ll meet you in half an hour. On Calypso Boulevard, beside the spinwards entrance to the parking lot.”

“Right,” I said.

I pressed the button to cut off the connection. The wave of almond odour flooded me again, and the sour smell of vomit. The little dead man sat silent in his chair, beyond fear beyond change.

I left the office. Nothing moved in the dingy corridor. No pebbled glass door had light behind it. I went down the fire stairs to the second floor and from there looked down on the lighted roof of the elevator. I pressed the call button. Slowly the car lurched into motion. I ran down the stairs again. The elevator was above me when I walked out of the building.

It was raining hard again. I walked into it with the heavy drops slapping my face. When one of them touched my tongue I knew that my mouth was open and the ache at the side of my jaws told me it was open wide and strained back, mimicking the rictus of death carved upon the face of Harry Jones.
Chapter 27 - Take the Money

“Give me the money.”

The motor of the grey ground-car throbbed under her voice and the rain pounded above it. The lights of downtown, under the centre of the dome, glowed fitfully through the downpour, violet and green reflected from a million windows. Her black-gloved hand reached out and I put the bills in it. She bent over to count them under the dim light of the dash. A bag clicked open, clicked shut. She let a spent breath die on her lips. She leaned towards me.

“I’m leaving, copper. I’m on my way. This is a get-away stake and God knows how I need it. What happened to Harry?”

“I told you he ran away. Canino got wise to him somehow. Forget Harry. I’ve paid and I want my information.”

“You’ll get it. Joe and I were riding Foundation Boulevard Sunday before last. It was late and the lights were coming up and the usual mess of cars. We passed a brown convertible and I saw the girl who was driving it. There was a man beside her, a dark short man. The girl was blonde. I’d seen her before. She was Eddie Mars’s wife. The guy was Canino. You wouldn’t forget either of them, if you ever saw them. Joe trailed the convertible from the front. He was good at that. Canino, the watch-dog, was taking her out for air. A kilometre or so spinwards of Realito a road turns towards the dome foundations. That country’s as bare as hell’s back yard and smack up against the dome there’s a general chemical plant, one of the few that still works, mostly. Just off the highway there’s a small garage and paint-shop run by a guy named Art Huck. Hot car drop, more likely. There’s an imported frame house beyond this, and beyond the house there’s nothing but the foothills and the bare rock outcrop of the dome supports, and the chemical plant further on. That’s the place where she’s holed up. They turned off on this road and Joe swung around and went back and we saw the convertible turn off the road where the frame house was. We sat there half an hour looking through the cars going by. Nobody came back out. When it was quite dark Joe snuck up there and took a look. He said there were lights in the house and recorded music was playing and just the one vehicle out in front, the convertible. So we beat it.”
She stopped talking and I listened to the swish of tyres on Calypso Boulevard. I said: “They might have shifted quarters since then but that’s what you have to sell - that’s what you have to sell. Sure you know her?”

“If you ever see her, you won’t make a mistake the second time. Good-bye, copper, and wish me luck. I got a raw deal.”

“Like hell you did,” I said, and walked away across the road to my rickshaw.

The grey ground-car moved forward, gathered speed, and darted around the corner. The sound of its motor died, and with it blonde Agnes wiped herself off the slate for good, as far as I was concerned. Three men dead, Geiger, Brody and Harry Jones, and the woman was riding off in the rain with my two hundred thou in her bag and not a mark on her. I kicked my rickshaw bot and rode on down-town to eat. I ate a good dinner. Forty kilometres in the rain is a hike by robot-powered rickshaw, and I hoped to make it a round trip.

I rode on hubwards, across the river, as much an artificially contrived feature as the dome’s weather. The tumbling rain was solid while spray in the bot’s headlights. I hoped its infrared sensors were working, I could hardly see anything through the rickshaw’s windshield. But not even the drenching darkness could hide the flawless lines of the robot-tended food plantations wheeling away like endless spokes into the night.

Ground-cars and convertibles passed with a tearing hiss and a wave of dirty spray. It was not a night for flying. The highway jerked through a little township that was all packing houses and sheds. The groves thinned out and dropped away and the road climbed and it was cold and the black done foundations crouched closer and sent a bitter wind whipping down their flanks. Then faintly out of the dark two holo projectors showed up high in the air, the message between them read “Welcome to Realito”.

Imported frame houses were spaced far back from a wide main street, then a sudden knot of stores, the lights of a drugstore behind fogged glass, the fly-cluster of cars in front of a theatre, a dark bank on a corner with a clock sticking out over the pavement and a group of people standing in the rain looking at its windows, as if they were some kind of a show. I went on. Empty fields closed in again.

Fate stage-managed the whole thing. Beyond Realito, just about a kilometre beyond, the highway took a curve and the rain fooled the
robot and we went right over the shoulder. The right rickshaw tyre let go with an angry hiss. Before the bot could stop the left one went with it. The bot slammed to a stop, mostly on the shoulder, and I got out and flashed a spotlight around. I had two flats and one spare. The flat butt of a heavy galvanised tack stared at me from the right tyre. The edge of the pavement was littered with them. They had been swept off, but not far enough off.

I snapped the flash off and stood there breathing rain and looking up a side road at a yellow light. It seemed to come from a skylight. The skylight could belong to a garage, the garage could be run by a man named Art Huck, and there could be a frame house next door to it. I tucked my chin down in my collar and started towards it, then went back to unstrap the robot ownership certificate from the rickshaw side bar and put it in my pocket. I leaned low in the rickshaw. Behind a weighted flap, directly under my right leg as I sat in the vehicle, there was a hidden compartment. There were two guns in it. One belonged to Eddie Mars’s boy Lanny and one belonged to me. I took Lanny’s. It would have had more practice than mine. I stuck it nose down in an inside pocket and started up the side road.

The garage was a hundred metres from the highway. It showed the highway a blank side wall. I played the flash on it quickly. “Art Huck - Repairs and Painting.” I chuckled, then Harry Jones’s face rose up in front of me, and I stopped chuckling. The garage doors were shut, but there was an edge of light under them and a thread of light where the halves met. I went on past. The frame house was there, light in two front windows, shades down. It was set well back from the road, behind a thin clump of trees. A car stood on the gravel drive in front. It was dark, indistinct, but it would be a brown convertible and it would belong to Mr Canino. It squatted there peacefully in front of the narrow wooden porch.

He would probably take her out for a spin once in a while and sit beside her, probably with a gun handy. The girl Rusty Regan ought to have married, that Eddie Mars couldn’t keep, the girl that hadn’t run away with Regan. Nice Mr Canino.

I trudged back to the garage and banged on the wooden door with the butt of my flash. There was a hung instant of silence, as heavy as the artificial thunder the climate boys like to crank out now and again. The light inside went out. I stood there grinning and licking the rain off my lip. I clicked to spot on the middle of the doors. I grinned at the circle of white. I was where I wanted to be.
A voice spoke through the door, a surly voice: “Wha’d’ya want?”

“Open up. I’ve got two flats back on the highway and only one spare. I need help.”

“Sorry, mister. We’re closed up. Realito’s a kilometre spinwards. Better try there.”

I didn’t like that. I kicked the door hard. I kept on kicking it. Another voice made itself heard, a purring voice, like a small generator behind a wall. It said: “A wise guy, huh? Open up, Art.”

A bolt squealed and half of the door bent inward. My flash burned briefly on a gaunt face. Then something that glittered swept down and knocked the flash out of my hand. A gun had peaked at me. I dropped low where the flash burned on the wet ground and picked it up.

The surly voice said: “Kill that spot, bo. Folks get hurt that way.”

I snapped the flash off and straightened. Light went on inside the garage, outlining a tall man in overalls. He backed away from the open door and kept a gun levelled at me.

“Step inside and shut the door, stranger. We’ll see what we can do.”

I stepped inside, and shut the door behind my back. I looked at the gaunt man, but not at the other man who was shadowy over by a workbench, silent. The breath of the garage was sweet and sinister with the smell of hot paint.

“Ain’t you got no sense?” the gaunt man chided at me. “A bank job was pulled at Realito this afternoon.”

“Pardon,” I said, remembering the people staring at the bank in the rain. “I didn’t pull it. I’m a stranger here.”

“Well, there was,” he said morosely. “Some say it was a couple of punk kids and they got ‘em cornered back here in the hills, backed up against the foundations.”

“It’s a nice night for hiding,” I said. “I suppose they threw the tacks out. I got some of them. I though you just needed the business.”

“You didn’t ever get socked in the kisser, did you?” the gaunt man asked me briefly.

“Not by anyone your weight.”
The purring voice from over in the shadows said: “Cut out the heavy menace, Art. This guy’s in a jam. You run a garage, don’t you?”

“Thanks,” I said, and didn’t look at him even then.

“Okay, okay,” the man in the overalls grumbled. He tucked his gun through a flap in his clothes and but a knuckle, staring at me moodily over it. The smell of the hot paint was as sickening as ether. Over in the corner, under a drop light, there was a big new-looking ground-car with a paint gun lying on its fender.

I looked at the man by the workbench now. He was short and thick-bodied with strong shoulders. He had a cool face and cool dark eyes. He wore a belted brown suede raincoat that was heavily spotted with rain. He leaned his back against the workbench and looked me over without haste without interest, as if he were looking at a slab of cold meat. Perhaps he thought of people that way.

He moved his dark eyes up and down slowly and then glanced at his fingernails one by one, holding them up against the light and studying them with care. He spoke around a cigarette.

“Got two flats, huh? That’s tough. They swept them tacks, I thought.”

“I skidded a little on the curve.”

“Stranger in town, you said?”

“Travelling through. On the way to the city. How far is it?”

“Forty kilometres. Seems longer this weather. You came the long way round?”

“Any law against it?” I asked him.

“Huh? No, sure not. Guess you think we’re nosey. Just on account of that heist back there. Take a jack and get his flats, Art.”

“I’m busy,” the gaunt man growled. “I’ve got work to do. I got this spray job. And it’s raining, you might have noticed.”


I said: “It’s a robot rickshaw. Both tyres gone. You could use the spare for one spot, if you’re busy.”

“Take two jacks, Art,” the brown man said.
“Now listen -” Art began to bluster.

The brown man moved his eyes, looked at Art with a soft quiet-eyed stare, lowered them again almost shyly. He didn’t speak. Art rocked as if a gust of wind had hit him. He stamped over to the corner and put a rubber coat over his overalls, a sou’wester on his head. He grabbed a socket wrench and a hand jack and wheeled a dolly jack over to the doors.

He went out silently, leaving the door yawning. The rain blustered in. The man in brown strolled over and shut it and strolled back to the workbench and put his hips exactly where they had been before. I could have taken him then. We were alone. He didn’t know who I was. He looked at me lightly and threw his cigarette on the concrete floor and stamped on it without looking down.

“I bet you could use a drink,” he said. “Wet the inside and even up.” He reached a bottle from the workbench beside him, wedged into a clutter of robot spares, and set it on the edge and set two glasses beside it. He poured a stiff jolt into each and held one out.

Walking like a dummy I went over and took it. The memory of the rain was still cold on my face. The smell of hot paint drugged the close air of the garage.

“That Art,” the brown man said. “He’s like all mechanics. Always got his face in a job he ought to have done last week. Business trip?”

I sniffed my drink delicately. It had the right smell. I watched him drink some of his before I swallowed mine. I rolled it around on my tongue. There was no cyanide in it. I emptied the little glass and put it down beside him and moved away.

“Partly,” I said. I walked over to the half-painted ground-car with the big metal paint gun lying along its fender. The rain hit the flat roof hard. Art was out in it, cursing.

The brown man looked at the big car. “Just a panel job, to start with,” he said casually, his purring voice still softer from the drink. “But the guy had dough and his driver needed a few bucks. You know the racket.”

I said: “There’s only one that’s older.” My lips felt dry. I didn’t want to talk. I lit a cigarette. I wanted my tyres fixed. The minutes passed on tip-toe. The brown man and I were two strangers chance-met, looking at each other across a little dead man named Harry Jones. Only the brown man didn’t know that yet.
Feet crunched outside and the door was pushed open. The light hit pencils of rain and made silver wires of them. Art trundled two muddy flats in sullenly, kicked the door shut, let one of the flats fall over on its side. He looked at me savagely.

“You sure pick spots for a jack to stand on,” he snarled.

The brown man laughed and took a rolled cylinder of fifty-dollar coins out of his pocket and tossed it up and down on the palm of his hand.

“Don’t crab so much,” he said dryly. “Fix those flats.”

“I’m fixing them, ain’t I?”

“Well, don’t make a song and dance about it.”

“Yah!” Art peeled his rubber coat and sou’wester off and threw them away from him. He heaved one tyre up on a spreader and tore the rim loose viciously. He had the tube out and cold-patched in nothing flat. Still scowling, he strode over to the wall beside me and grabbed an air hose, put enough air into the tube to give it body and let the nozzle off the air hose smack against the whitewashed wall.

I stood watching the roll of wrapped coins dance in Canino’s hand. The moment of crouched intensity had left me. I turned my head and watched the gaunt mechanic beside me toss the air-stiffened tube up and catch it with his hands wide, one in each side of the tube. He looked it over sourly, glanced at a big galvanised tub of dirty water in the corner and grunted.

The teamwork must have been very nice. I saw no signal, no glance of meaning, no gesture that might have a special import. The gaunt man had the stiffened tube high in the air, staring at it. He half turned his body, took one long quick step, and slammed it down over my head and shoulders, a perfect ringer.

He jumped behind me and leaned hard on the rubber. His weight dragged on my chest, pinned my upper arms tight to my sides. I could move my hands, but I couldn’t reach the gun in my pocket.

The brown man came almost dancing towards me across the floor. His hand tightened over the roll of coins. He came up to me without sound, without expression. I bent forward and tried to heave Art off his feet.

The fist with the weighted tube inside it went through my spread hands like a stone though a cloud of dust. I had the stunned moment
of shock when the lights danced and the visible world went out of focus but was still there. He hit me again. There was no sensation in my head. The bright glare got brighter. There was nothing but hard aching white light. Then there was darkness in which something read wriggled like a germ under a microscope. Then there was nothing bright or wriggling, just darkness and emptiness and a rushing wind and a fall as of great trees.
Chapter 28 - Holding Silver-Wig

It seemed there was a woman and she was sitting near a lamp, which was where she belonged, in a good light. Another light shone hard on my face, so I closed my eyes again and tried to look at her through the lashes. She was so platinumed that her hair shone like a silver fruit bowl. She wore a green knitted dress with a broad white collar turned over it. There was a sharp-angled glossy bag at her feet. She was smoking and a glass of amber fluid was tall and pale at her elbow.

I moved my head a little, carefully. It hurt, but not more than I expected. I was trussed like a turkey ready for the oven. Handcuffs held my wrists together behind me and a rope went from them to my ankles and then over the end of the brown davenport on which I was sprawled. I moved enough to make sure it was tied down.

I stopped those furtive movements and opened my eyes again and said: “Hello.”

The woman withdrew her gaze from some distant mountain peak. Her small firm chin turned slowly. Her eyes were the blue of mountain lakes. Overhead the rain still pounded, with a remote sound, as if it were somebody else’s rain.

“How do you feel?” It was a smooth silvery voice that matched her hair. It had a tiny tinkle in it, like bells in a doll’s house. I thought that was silly as soon as I thought of it.

“Great,” I said. “Somebody built a refuelling station on my head.”

“What did you expect, Mr Marlowe - Orchids?”

“Just a plain pine box,” I said. “Don’t bother with bronze or silver handles. And don’t scatter my ashes in a sunward trajectory. I like the worms better. Did you know that worms are of both sexes and that any worm can have sex with any other worm?”

“You’re a little light-headed,” she said, with a grave stare.

“Would you mind moving this light?”

She got up and went behind the davenport. The light went off. The dimness was a benison.
“I don’t think you’re so dangerous,” she said. She was tall rather than short, but no bean-pole. She was slim, but not a dried crust. She went back to her chair.

“So you know my name.”

“You slept well. They had plenty of time to go through your pockets. They did everything but embalm you. So you’re a detective.”

“Is that all they have on me?”

She was silent. Smoke floated dimly from the cigarette. She moved it in the air.

“What time is it?” I asked.

She looked sideways at her wrist, beyond the spiral of smoke, at the edge of the grave lustre of the lamplight. “Twenty-two seventeen. You have a date?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. Is this the house next to Art Huck’s garage?”

“Yes.”

“What are the boys doing - digging a grave?”

“They had to go somewhere.”

“You mean they left you here alone?”

Her head turned slowly again. She smiled. “You don’t look dangerous.”

“I thought they were keeping you a prisoner.”

It didn’t seem to startle her. It even amused her. “What made you think that?”

“I know who you are.”

Her very blue eyes flashed so sharply that I could almost see the sweep of their glance, like sighting lasers. Her mouth tightened. But her voice didn’t change.

“Then I’m afraid you’re in a bad spot. And I hate killing.”

“And you Eddie Mars’s wife. Shame on you.”

She didn’t like that. She glared at me. I grinned. “Unless you can unlock these bracelets, which I’d advise you not to do, you might spare me a little of the drink you’re neglecting.”
She brought the glass over. Bubbles rose in it like false hopes. She bent over me. Her breath was as delicate as the eyes of a fawn. I gulped from the glass. She took it away from my mouth and watched some of the liquid run down my neck.

She bent over me again. Blood began to move around in me, like a prospective tenant looking over a house.

“Your face looks like a collision mat,” she said.

“Make the most of it. It won’t last long even this good.”

She swung her head sharply and listened. For an instant her face was pale. The sounds were only the rain drifting against the walls. She went back across the room and stood with her side to me, bent forward a little, looking down at the floor.

“Why did you come here and stick your neck out?” she asked quietly. “Eddie wasn’t doing you any harm. You know perfectly well that if I hadn’t hid out here, the police would have been certain that Eddie murdered Rusty Regan.”

“He did,” I said.

She didn’t move, didn’t change position a centimetre. Her breath made a harsh quick sound. I looked around the room. Two doors, both in the same wall, one half-open. A carpet of red and tan squares, blue curtains at the windows, a wallpaper with bright green pine trees on it.

She said softly: “Eddie didn’t do anything to him. I haven’t seen Rusty in months. Eddie’s not that sort of man.”

“You left his bed and board. You were living alone. People at the place where you lived identified Regan’s holo.”

“That’s a lie,” she said coldly.

I tried to remember whether Captain Gregory had said that or not. My head was too fuzzy. I couldn’t be sure.

“And it’s none of your business,” she added.

“The whole thing is my business. I’m hired to find out.”

“Eddie’s not that sort of man.”

“Oh, you like racketeers.”

“As long as people will gamble there will be places for them to gamble.”
“That’s just protective thinking. Once outside the law you’re all the way outside. You think he’s just a gambler. I think he’s a pornographer, a blackmailer, a hot car broker, a killer by remote control and a suborner of crooked cops. He’s whatever looks good to him, whatever has the cabbage pinned to it. Don’t try and sell me on any high-souled racketeers. They don’t come in that pattern.”

“He’s not a killer.” She frowned.

“Not personally. He has Canino. Canino killed a man tonight, a harmless little guy who was trying to help somebody out. I almost saw him killed.”

She laughed wearily.

“All right,” I growled. “Don’t believe me. If Eddie is such a nice guy, I’d like to get to talk to him without Canino around. You know what Canino will do - beat my teeth out and then kick me in the stomach for mumbling.”

She put her head back and stood there thoughtful and withdrawn, thinking something out.

“I thought platinum hair was out of style,” I went on, just to keep the sound alive in the room, just to keep from listening.

“It’s a wig, silly. While mine grows out.” She reached up and yanked it off. Her own hair was clipped short all over, like a boy’s. She put the wig back on.

“Who did that to you?”

She looked surprised. “I had it done. Why?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Why, to show Eddie I was willing to do what he wanted me to do - hide out. That he didn’t need to have me guarded. I wouldn’t let him down. I love him.”

“Good grief,” I groaned. “And you have me right here in the room with you.”

She turned a hand over and stared at it. Then abruptly she walked out of the room. She came back with a kitchen knife. She bent and sawed at my rope.

“Canino has the keys to the handcuffs,” she said. “I can’t do anything about those.”
She stepped back, breathing rapidly. She had cut the rope at every knot.

“You’re a kick,” she said. “Kidding with every breath - the spot you’re in.”

“I thought Eddie wasn’t a killer.”

She turned away quickly and went back to her chair by the lamp and sat down and put her face in her hands. I swung my feet to the floor and stood up. I tottered around, stiff-legged. The nerve on the left side of my face was jumping in all its branches. I took a step. I could still walk. I could run, if I had to.

“I guess you mean me to go,” I said.

She nodded without lifting her head.

“You’d better go with me - if you want to keep on living.”

“Don’t waste time. He’ll be back any minute.”

“Light a cigarette for me.”

I stood beside her, touching her knees. She came to her feet with a sudden lurch. Our eyes were only centimetres apart.

“Hello, Silver-Wig,” I said softly.

She stepped back, around the chair, and swept a package of cigarettes up off the table. She jabbed one loose and pushed it roughly into my mouth. Her hand was shaking. She snapped a small green leather lighter and held it to the cigarette. I drew in the smoke, staring into her lake-blue eyes. While she was still close to me I said:

“A little bird named Harry Jones led me to you. A little bird that used to hop in and out of cocktail bars picking up horse bets for crumbs. Picking up information too. This little bird picked up an idea about Canino. One way and another he and his friends found out where you were. He came to me to sell the information because he knew - how he knew is a long story - that I was working for General Sternwood. I got his information, but Canino got the little bird. He’s a dead bird now, with his feathers ruffled and his neck limp and a pearl of blood on his beak. Canino killed him. But Eddie Mars wouldn’t do that, would he, Silver-Wig? He never killed anybody. He just hires it done.”

“Get out,” she said harshly. “Get out of here quick.”
Her hand clutched in midair on the green lighter. The fingers strained. The knuckles were as white as snow.

“But Canino doesn’t know I know that,” I said. “About the little bird. All he knows is I’m nosing around.”

Then she laughed. It was almost a racking laugh. It shook her as the wind shakes a tree. I thought there was puzzlement in it, not exactly surprise, but as if a new idea had been added to something already known and it didn’t fit. Then I thought that was too much to get out of a laugh.

“It’s very funny,” she said breathlessly. “Very funny, because you see, I still love him. Women…” She began to laugh again.


She took two steps back and her face set hard. “Get out, you! Get out! You can walk to Realito. You can make it - and you can keep your mouth shut - for an hour or two at least. You owe me that much.”

“Let’s go,” I said. “Got a gun, Silver-Wig?”

“You know I’m not going. You know that. Please, please get out of here quickly.”

I stepped up close to her, pressing against her. “You’re going to stay here after turning me loose? What for that killer to come back so you can say sorry? A man who kills like swatting a fly. Not much. You’re going with me, Silver-Wig.”

“No.”

“Suppose,” I said, “your handsome husband did kill Regan? Or suppose Canino did, without Eddie’s knowing it. Just suppose. How long will you last, after turning me loose?”

“I’m not afraid of Canino. I’m still the boss’s wife.”

“Eddie’s a handful of mush,” I snarled. “Canino would take him with a teaspoon. He’ll take him the way the cat took the canary. A handful of mush. The only time a girl like you goes for a wrong guy is when he’s a handful of mush.”

“Get out!” she almost spat at me.

“Okay.” I turned away from her and moved out through the half-open door into a dark hallway. Then she rushed past me and pushed past to the front door and opened it. She peered out into the wet blackness and listened. She motioned me forward.
“Goodbye,” she said under her breath. “Good luck in everything but one thing. Eddie didn’t kill Rusty Regan. You’ll find him alive and well somewhere, when he want to be found.”

I leaned against her and pressed her against the wall with my body. I pushed my mouth against her face. I talked to her that way.

“There’s no hurry. All this was arranged in advance, rehearsed to the last detail, timed to the split second. No hurry at all. Kiss me, Silver-Wig.”

Her face under my mouth was like ice. She put her hands up and took hold of my head and kissed me hard on the lips. Her lips were like ice, too.

I went out through the door and closed it behind me, without sound, and the rain blew in under the porch, not as cold as her lips.
Chapter 29 - Shoot in Cuffs

The garage next door was dark. I crossed the gravel drive and a patch of sodden lawn. The road ran with small rivulets of water. It gurgled down a ditch at the far side. I imagined Canino driving back jauntily through the rain, alone, having left the gaunt and sulky Art and the probably stolen car in a safe place. She loved Eddie Mars and she was hiding to protect him. So he would find her there when he came back, calm beside the light and the untasted drink, and me tied up on the davenport. He would carry her stuff out to the car and go through the house carefully to make sure nothing incriminating was left. He would tell her to go out and wait. She wouldn’t hear a shot. A blackjack is just as effective at short range. He would tell her he had left me tied up and I would get loose after a while. He would think she was that dumb. Nice Mr Canino.

The raincoat was open in front and I couldn’t button it, being handcuffed. The skirts flapped against my legs like the wings of a large and tired bird. I came to the highway. Cars went by in a wide swirl of water illuminated by headlights. The tearing noise of their tyres died swiftly. I found my rickshaw where I had left it, both tyres fixed and mounted, so it could be driven away, if necessary. They thought of everything. I got into it and leaned down sideways into the footwell and fumbled aside the flap that covered the secret compartment. I got the other gun, stuffed it up under my coat and started back. The world was small, shut in, black. A private world for Canino and me.

Half-way there the headlights nearly caught me. They turned swiftly off the highway and I slid down the bank into the wet ditch and flopped there breathing water. The car hummed by without slowing. I lifted my head, heard the rasp of its tyres as it left the road and took the gravel of the driveway. The motor died, the lights died, a door slammed. I didn’t hear the house door shut, but a fringe of light trickled through the clump of trees, as though a shade had been moved aside from a window, or the light had been put on in the hall.

I came back to the soggy grass plot and sloshed across it. The car was between me and the house, the gun was down at my side, pulled as far around as I could get it, with pulling my left arm out my the roots. The car was dark, empty, warm. I peered in at the door. The keys hung on the dash. Canino was very sure of himself. I went
around the car and walked carefully across the gravel to the window and listened. I couldn’t hear any voices, and sound but the swift bong-bong of the raindrops hitting the metal elbows at the bottom of the rain gutters.

I kept on listening. No loud voices, everything quiet and refined. He would be purring at her and she would be telling him she had let me go and I promised to let them get away. He wouldn’t believe me, as I wouldn’t believe him. So he wouldn’t be in there long. He would be on his way and take her with him. All I had to do was wait for him to come out.

I couldn’t do it. I shifted the gun to my left hand and leaned down to scoop up a handful of gravel. I tossed it against the screen of the window. It was a feeble effort. Very little of it reached the glass above the screen, but the loose rattle of that little was like a dam bursting.

I ran back to the car and got on the running board behind it. The house had already gone dark. That was all. I dropped quietly on the running board and waited. No soap. Canino was too cagey.

I straightened up and got into the car backwards, fumbled around for the ignition key and turned it. The warm motor caught at once. It purred softly, contentedly. I got out of the car again and crouched down by the rear wheels.

I was shivering now but I knew Canino wouldn’t like that last effect. He needed that car badly. A darkened window slid down centimetre by centimetre, only some shifting of Saturn’s reflected sunlight through the dome showed it moving. Flame spouted from it abruptly, the blended roar of three swift shots. Glass starred in the car. I yelled with agony. The yell went off into a wailing groan. The groan became a wet gurgle, choked with blood. I let the gurgle die sickeningly, on a choked gasp. It was nice work. I liked it. Canino liked it very much. I heard him laugh. It was a large booming laugh, not at all like the purr of his speaking voice.

Then silence for a little while, except for the rain and the quiet throbbing motor of the car. Then the house door crawled open, a deeper blackness in the black night. A figure showed in it cautiously, something white around the neck. It was her collar. She came out onto the porch stiffly, a wooden woman. I caught the pale shine of her silver wig. Canino came crouched methodically behind her. It was so deadly it was almost funny.
She came down the steps. Now I could see the white stiffness of her face. She started towards the car. A bulwark of defence for Canino, in case I could still spit in his eye. Her voice spoke through the lisp of the rain, saying slowly, without any tone: “I can’t see a thing, Lash. The windows are misted.”

He grunted something and the girl’s body jerked hard, as though he had jammed a gun into her back. She came on again and drew near the lightless car. I could see him behind her now, a side of his face, the bulk of his shoulder. The girl stopped rigid and screamed. A beautiful thin tearing scream that rocked me like a left hook.

“I can see him!” she screamed. “Through the window. Behind the wheel, Lash!”

He fell for it like a bucket of plutonium. He knocked her roughly to one side and jumped forward, throwing his hand up. Three more spurts of flame cut the darkness. More glass scarred. One bullet went on through and smacked into a tree on my side. A ricochet whined off into the distance. But the motor went quietly on.

He was low down, crouched against the gloom, his face a greyness without form that seemed to come back slowly after the glare of the shots. If it was a revolver he had, it might be empty. It might not. He had fired six times, but he might have reloaded inside the house. I hoped he had. I didn’t want him with an empty gun. But it might be an automatic.

I said: “Finished?”

He whirled at me. Perhaps it would have been nice to allow him another shot or two, just like a gentleman of the old school. But his gun was still up and I couldn’t wait any longer. Not long enough to be a gentleman of the old school. I shot him four times, the antique revolver straining against my ribs. The gun jumped out of his hand as if it had been kicked. He reached both hands for his stomach. I could hear them smack hard against his body. He fell like that, straight forward, holding himself together with his broad hands. He fell face down in the wet gravel. And after that there wasn’t a sound from him.

Silver-Wig didn’t make a sound either. She stood rigid, with the rain swirling at her. I walked around Canino and kicked his gun. I walked after it and bent over sideways and picked it up. That put me close beside her. She spoke moodily, as if she was talked to herself.
“I - I was afraid you’d come back.”

I said: “We had a date. I told you it was all arranged.” I began to laugh like a loon.

Then she was bending down over him, touching him. And after a little while she stood up with a small key on a thin chain.

She said bitterly: “Did you have to kill him?”

I stopped laughing as suddenly as I had started. She went behind me and unlocked the handcuffs.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I suppose you did.”
Chapter 30 - Uncompleted Puzzle

This was another day and the sunlamps were shining at full power again.

Captain Gregory of the Missing Persons Bureau looked heavily out of his office window and the barred upper floor of the Hall of Justice, white and clean after the rain. Then he turned ponderously in his swivel chair and tamped his pipe with a heat-scarred thumb and stared at me bleakly.

“So you got yourself into another jam.”

“Oh, so you heard about it.”

“Brother, I sit here all day on my fanny and I don’t look as if I had a brain in my head. But you’d be surprised what I hear. Shooting this Canino was all right, I guess, but I don’t figure the homicide boys pinned any medals on you.”

“There’s been a lot of killing going on around me,” I said. “I haven’t been getting my share of it.”

He smiled patiently. “Who told you this girl out there was Eddie Mars’s wife?”

I told him. He listened carefully and yawned. He tapped his gold-studded mouth with a palm like a tray. “I guess you figure I ought to have found her.”

“That’s a fair deduction.”

“Maybe I knew,” he said. “Maybe I thought if Eddie and his woman wanted to play a little game like that, it would be smart - or as smart as I ever get - to let them think they were getting away with it. And then again maybe you think I was letting Eddie get away with it for more personal reasons.” He held his big hand out and revolved the thumb against the index and second fingers.

“No,” I said. “I didn’t really think that. Not even when Eddie seemed to know all out our talk here the other day.”

He raised his eyebrows as if raising them was an effort, a trick he was out of practice on. It furrowed his while forehead and when it smoothed out it was full of white lines that turned reddish as I watched them.
“I’m a copper,” he said. “Just a plain ordinary copper. Reasonably honest. As honest as you could expect a man to be in a world where it’s out of style. That’s mainly why I asked you to come in this morning. I’d like you to believe that. Being a copper I’d like to see the law win. I’d like to see flashy well-dressed mugs like Eddie Mars spoiling their manicures in the asteroid quarries, alongside the poor little slum-bred hard guys that got knocked over on their first caper and never had a break since. That’s what I’d like. You and me both lived too long to think I’m likely to see it happen. Not in this habitat, not in any habitat half this size, in any part of this wide, colourful and beautiful system. We just don’t run our worlds that way.”

I didn’t say anything. He blew smoke with a backward jerk of his head, looked at the mouthpiece of his pipe and went on:

“But that don’t mean I think Eddie Mars bumped off Regan or had any reason to or would have done it if he had. I just figured maybe he knows something about it, and maybe sooner or later something would sneak out into the open. Hiding his wife out at Realito was childish, but it’s the kind of childishness a smart monkey thinks is smart. I had him in here last nigh, after the HA got through with him. He admitted the whole thing. He said he knew Canino was a reliable protection guy and that’s what he wanted him for. He didn’t know anything about his hobbies or wanted to. He didn’t know Harry Jones. He didn’t know Joe Brody. He did know Geiger, of course, but claims he didn’t know about his racket. I guess you heard all that.”

“Yes.”

“You played it smart down there in Realito, brother. Not trying to cover up. We keep a file on unidentified bullets. Some day you might use that gun again. Then you’d be over a barrel.”

“I played it smart,” I said and leered at him.

He knocked his pipe out and stared down at it broodingly. “What happened to the girl?” he asked, not looking up.

“I don’t know. They didn’t hold her. We made statements, three sets of them, for Wilde, for the Sherriff’s office, for the Homicide Bureau. They turned her loose. I haven’t seen her since. I don’t expect to.”

“Kind of a nice girl, they say. Wouldn’t be one to play dirty games.”

“Kind of a nice girl,” I said.
Captain Gregory sighed and rumpled his mousey hair. “There’s just one more thing,” he said almost gently. “You look like a nice guy, but you play too rough. If you really want to help the Sternwood family, leave ‘em alone.”

“I think you’re right, Captain.”

“How you feel?”

“Swell,” I said. “I was standing on various pieces of carpet most of the night, being balled out. Before that I got soaked to the skin and beaten up. I’m in perfect condition.”

“What the hell did you expect, brother?”

“Nothing else.” I stood up and grinned at him and started for the door. When I had almost reached it he cleared his throat suddenly and said in a harsh voice: “I’m wasting my breath, huh? You still think you can find Regan?”

I turned around and looked him straight in the eyes. “No, I don’t think I can find Regan. I’m not even going to try. Does that suit you?”

He nodded slowly. Then he shrugged. “I don’t know what the hell I even said that for. Good luck Marlowe. Drop around any time.”

“Thanks, Captain.”

I went down out of the City Hall and got my rickshaw from the parking lot and drove home. I lay down on the bed with my coat on and stared at the ceiling and listened to the traffic sounds on the street outside and watched the sunlight move slowly across a corner of the ceiling. I tried to go to sleep, but sleep didn’t come. I got up and took a drink, although it was the wrong time of day, and lay down again. I still couldn’t go to sleep. My brain ticked like an antique clock. I sat up on the side of the bed and stuffed a pipe and said out loud:

“That old buzzard knows something.”

The pipe tasted as bitter as lye. I put it aside and lay down again. My mind drifted through waves of false memory, in which I seemed to do the same thing over and over again, go to the same places, meet the same people, say the same words to them, over and over again, and yet each time it seemed real, like something actually happening, and for the first time.

I was driving hard along the highway through the rain, with Silver-Wig in the corner of the rickshaw, saying nothing, so that by the time
we reached the city we seemed to be utter strangers again. I was getting out at an all-night drugstore and phoning Bernie Ohls that I had killed a man at Realito and was on my way over to Wilde’s house with Eddie Mars’s wife, who had seen me do it. The bot was pulling the rickshaw along the silent, rain-polished streets and up under the porte-cochere of Wilde’s big frame house and the porch light was already on, Ohls having called ahead that I was coming. I was in Wilde’s study and he was behind his desk in a flowered dressing-gown and a tight hard smile and a dappled cigar moved in his fingers and up to the bitter smile on his lips. Ohls was there and a slim grey scholarly man from the Sheriff’s office who looked and talked more like a professor of economics than a cop.

I was telling the story and they were listening quietly and Silver-Wig sat in a shadow with her hands folded in her lap, looking at nobody. There was a lot of telephoning. There were two men from the Homicide Bureau who looked at me as if I was some kind of strange beast escaped from the circus. I was riding again in the rickshaw, with one of them beside me, to the Fudwider Building. We were in the room where Harry Jones was still in the chair behind the desk, the twisted stiffness of his dead face and the sour-sweet smell in the room. There was a medical examiner, very young and husky, with red bristles on his neck. There was a fingerprint man fussing around and I was telling him not to forget the latch of the ransom. (He found Canino’s thumb print on it, the only print the brown man had left to back up my story.)

I was back again at Wilde’s house, signing a printed statement his robot secretary had run off in another room. Then the door opened and Eddie Mars came in and an abrupt smile flashed to his face when he saw Silver-Wig, and he said: “Hello, Sugar,” and she didn’t look at him or answer him. Eddie Mars fresh and cheerful, in a dark business suit, with the fringed white scarf hanging outside his tweed overcoat. Then they were gone, everybody was gone out of the room but myself and Wilde, and Wilde was saying in a cold, angry voice: “This is the last time, Marlowe. The next fast one you pull I’ll throw you to the lions, no matter whose heart it breaks.”

It was like that, over and over again, lying on the bed and watching the patch of artificial sunlight slide down the corner of the wall. Then the phone rang and it was Norris, the Sternwood’s robot butler, with his usual untouchable voice.
“Mr Marlowe? I telephoned your office without success, so I took the liberty of trying to reach you at home.”

“I was out most of the night,” I said. “I haven’t been down.”

“Yes, sir. The General would like to see you this morning, Mr Marlowe, if it’s convenient.”

“Half an hour or so,” I said. “How is he?”

“He’s warmed up, sir, but not doing badly.”

“Wait until he sees me,” I said, and hung up.

I shaved, changed clothes and started for the door. Then I went back and got Carmen’s little pearl-handled revolver and dropped it into my pocket. The sunlamps were so bright that it danced. I got to the Sternwood place in twenty minutes and drove up under the arch at the side door. It was eleven-fifteen. The birds in the ornamental trees were crazy with song after the rain, the terraced lawns were as green as the Martian flag, and the whole estate looked as if it had been terraformed into existence about ten minutes before. I rang the bell. It was five days since I had rung it for the first time. It felt like a year.

A robot servitor opened the door and led me along a side hall to the main hallway and left me there, saying that Norris would be along in a moment. The main hallway looked just the same. The portrait over the mantle had the same hot black eyes and the spaceman in the animated display still wasn’t getting anywhere untying the naked alien from the tree.

In a few minutes Norris appeared, and he hadn’t changed either. His silver carapace was as polished as ever and he moved as if he had been recently and carefully serviced. I followed him out of the french doors and along the smooth red-flagged path to the icehouse. We reached the outer lock door and Norris opened and shut it around me, and did the same for the inner door. Then he stood aside and I picked my way over the trailing cables and past the hulking cryogenic machines to the ancient deep-sleep casket.

General Sternwood was propped up on pillows. His bloodless hands were clasped on top of the cover. They looked grey against it. His black eyes were still full of fight and the rest of his face still looked like the face of a corpse.

“Sit down, Mr Marlowe.” His voice sounded weary and a little stiff.
I pulled a chair close to him and sat down. I ignored the cold seeping through my clothing. He stared at me silently for a long minute. He moved a hand, as if to prove to himself that he could still move it without the direct intervention of the medical machinery, then folded it back over the other. He said lifelessly:

“I didn’t ask you to look for my son-in-law, Mr Marlowe.”

“You wanted me to, though.”

“I didn’t ask you to. You assume a great deal. I usually ask for what I want.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You have been paid,” he went on coldly. “The money is of no consequence one way or the other. I merely feel that you have, no doubt unintentionally, betrayed a trust.”

He closed his eyes on that. I said: “Is that all you wanted to see me about?”

He opened his eyes again, very slowly, as if the lids were made of uranium. “I suppose you are angry at that remark,” he said.

I shook my head. “You have an advantage over me, General. It’s an advantage I wouldn’t want to take away from you, not a hair of it. It’s not much, considering what you have to put up with. You can say anything you like to me and I wouldn’t think of getting angry. I’d like to offer you your money back. It may mean nothing to you. It might mean something to me.”

“What does it mean to you?”

“It means I have refused payment for an unsatisfactory job. That’s all.”

“Do you do many unsatisfactory jobs?”

“A few. Everybody does.”

“Why did you go to see Captain Gregory?”

I leaned back and hung an arm over the back of the chair. I studied his face. It told me nothing. I didn’t know the answer to his question - no satisfactory answer.

I said: “I was convinced you put those Geiger notes up to me chiefly as a test, and that you were a little afraid Regan might somehow be involved in an attempt to blackmail you. I didn’t know
anything about Regan then. It wasn’t until I talked to Captain Gregory that I realised Regan wasn’t that sort of guy in all probability.”

“That is scarcely answering my question.”

I nodded. “No. That is scarcely answering your question. I guess I just don’t like to admit that I played a hunch. The morning I was here, after I left you, Mrs Regan sent out for me. She seemed to assume I was hired to look for her husband and she didn’t seem to like it. She let drop however that ‘they’ had found his car in a certain garage. The ‘they’ could only be the police. Consequently the police must know something about it. If they did, the Missing Persons Bureau would be the department that would have the case.”

“I didn’t know whether you had reported it, of course, or somebody else, or whether they had found the car through somebody reporting it abandoned in a garage. But I know cops, and I knew that if they got that much, they would get a little more - especially as your pilot happened to have a police record. I didn’t know how much more they would get.”

“That started me thinking about the Missing Persons Bureau. What convinced me was something in Mr Wilde’s manner the night we had the conference over at his house about Geiger and so on. We were alone for a minute and he asked me whether you had told me you were looking for Regan. I said you had told me you wished you knew where he was and that he was all right. Wilde pulled his lip in and looked funny. I knew just as plainly as though he had said that by ‘looking for Regan’ he meant using the machinery of the law to look for him. Even then I tried to go up against Captain Gregory in such a way that I wouldn’t tell him anything he didn’t already know.”

“And you allowed Captain Gregory to think I had employed you to find Regan?”

“Yeah. I guess I did - when I was sure he had the case.”

He closed his eyes. They twitched a little. He spoke with them closed. “And do you consider that ethical?”

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

The eyes opened again. The piercing blackness of them was startling coming suddenly out of that dead face. “Perhaps I don’t understand.”

“Maybe you don’t. The head of a Missing Persons Bureau isn’t a talker. He wouldn’t be in that office if he was. This one is a very
smart guy who tries, with a lot of success at first, to give the impression he’s a middle-aged hack fed up with his job. The game I play is not spillikins. There’s always a large element of bluff connected with it. Whatever I say to a cop, he would be apt to discount it. And to that cop it wouldn’t make much difference what I said.”

“When you hire a boy in my line of work it isn’t like hiring a window-washing robot and showing him eight windows and saying: ‘Wash those and you’re through.’ You don’t know what I have to go through or over or under to do your job for you. I do it in my way. I do my best to protect you and I may break a few rules, but I break them in your favour. The client comes first, unless he’s crooked. Even then all I do is hand the job back to him and keep my mouth shut. After all you didn’t tell me not to go to Captain Gregory.”

“That would have been rather difficult,” he said with a faint smile.

“Well, what have I done wrong? You robot Norris seemed to think when Geiger was eliminated the case was over. I don’t see it that way. I’m not Sherlock Holmes of Philo Vance. I don’t expect to go over ground the police have covered and pick up a broken pen and build a case from it. If you think there is anybody in the detective business making a living doing that sort of thing, you don’t know much about cops. It’s not the things that they overlook if they overlook anything.”

I paused again, shivering, the silence broken only by the wheezing hiss of the life-support machinery.

“I’m not saying they often overlook anything when they’re really allowed to work. But if they do, it’s apt to be something looser and vaguer, like a man of Geiger’s type sending you his evidence of debt and asking you to pay it like a gentleman. Geiger, a man in a shady racket, in a vulnerable position, protected by a racketeer and having at least some negative protection from the police. Why did he do that? Because he wanted to find out if there was anything putting pressure on you. If there was, you would pay him. If not, you would ignore him and wait for his next move. But there was something putting a pressure on you, Regan. You were afraid he was not what he had appeared to be, that he had stayed around and been nice to you just long enough to find out how to play games with your bank account.”

He started to say something but I interrupted him. “Even at that it wasn’t your money you cared about. It wasn’t even your daughters.
You’ve more or less written them off. It’s that you’re still too proud to be played for a sucker, and you really liked Regan.”

There was a silence. Then the General said quietly: “You talk too damn much, Marlowe. Am I to understand you are still trying to solve that puzzle?”

“No. I quit. I’ve been warned off. The boys think I play too rough. That’s why I thought I should give you back your money - because it isn’t a completed job by my standards.”

He smiled. “Quit, nothing,” he said. “I’ll pay you another million dollars to find Rusty. He doesn’t have to come back. I don’t even have to know where he is. A man has a right to his own life. I don’t blame him for walking out on my daughter, or even for going so abruptly. It was probably a sudden impulse. I want to know that he is all right wherever he is. I want to know it from him directly, and if he should happen to need money, I should want him to have that also. Am I clear?”

I said: “Yes, General.”

He rested a little while, relaxed in the gentle grip of the casket’s systems, his eyes closed and dark-lidded, his mouth tight and bloodless. He was used up. He was pretty nearly licked. He opened his eyes again and tried to grin at me.

“I guess I’m a sentimental old goat,” he said. “And no soldier at all. I took a fancy to that boy. He seemed pretty clean to me. I must be a little too vain about my judgements of character. Find him for me, Marlowe. Just find him.”

“I’ll try,” I said. “You’d better rest now. I’ve talked your ass off.”

I got up quickly and walked across the cluttered floor and out. He had his eyes shut again before I opened the inner lock door. His hands lay limp. He looked a lot more like a dead man than most dead men look. I shut the door quietly, opened the outer door and went back to the main house.
Chapter 31 - Shoot to Kill

The robot butler appeared in a ballet of smooth movements. I said: “What do you think of him?”

“He’s not as weak as he looks, sir.”

“If he was, he’d be ready for a burial in space. What did this Regan fellow have that bored into him so?”

The butler looked at me levelly with a robotic lack of expression. “Youth, sir,” he said, “And the soldier’s eye.”

He paused then added: “If I may say so, sir, not unlike your s.”

“Thanks. How are the ladies this morning?”

His shining silver body mimed a shrug politely.

“Just what I thought,” I said, and he opened the door for me.

I stood outside on the step and looked down the vistas of grassed terraces and trimmed trees and flowerbeds to the tall metal railing at the bottom of the gardens. I saw Carmen about half-way down, sitting on a stone bench, with her head between her hands, looking forlorn and alone.

I went down the red brick steps that led from terrace to terrace. I was quite close before she heard me. She jumped up and whirled like a cat. She wore light blue slacks. Her blonde hair was the same loose tawny wave. Her face was white. Red spots flared in her cheeks as she looked at me. Her eyes were slaty.

“Bored?” I said.

She smiled slowly, rather slyly, then nodded quickly. Then she whispered: “You’re not mad at me?”

“I thought you were mad at me.”

She giggled. “I’m not.” When she giggled I didn’t like her any more. I looked around. A target hung on a tree about ten metres away, with some darts sticking to it. There were three or four more on the stone bench where she had been sitting.

“For people with money you and your sister don’t seem to have much fun,” I said.
She looked at me under her long lashes. This was the look that was supposed to make me roll over on my back. I said: “You like throwing those darts?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That reminds me of something.” I looked back towards the house. By moving about a metre I made a tree hide me from it. I took her little antique pearl-handled gun out of my pocket. “I brought back your artillery. I cleaned it and loaded it up. Take my tip - don’t shoot it at people, unless you get to be a better shot. Remember?”

Her face went paler. She looked at me, then at the gun I was holding. There was fascination in her eyes. “Yes,” she said and nodded. Then suddenly: “Teach me to shoot.”

“Huh?”

“Teach me how to shoot. I’d like that.”

“Here? It’s against the law.”

She came close to me and took the gun out of my hand, cuddled her hand around the butt. Then she tucked it away quickly inside her slacks, almost with a furtive movement, and looked around.

“I know where,” she said in a secret voice. “Down by the old power station.” She pointed off down the hill, towards the dome foundations in the distance. “Teach me?”

I looked into her slaty blue eyes. I might as well have looked at a couple of bottle tops. “All right. Give me back the gun until I see if the place looks all right.”

She smiled and made a mouth, then handed it back with a secret naughty air, as if she was giving me a key to her room. We walked up the steps and round to my rickshaw. The gardens seemed deserted. The sunshine was as empty as a headwaiter’s smile. We got into the rickshaw and drive down the sunken driveway and out though the gates.

“Where’s Vivian?” I asked.

“Not up yet.” She giggled.

We drove on down the hill through the quiet opulent streets with their faces washed by the rain, then bore spinwards. We reached the place she meant in about ten minutes.

“In there.” She leaned out of the window and pointed.
It was a narrow dirt road, not much more than a track, like the entrance to some foothill ranch. A wide five-barred gate was folded back against a stump and looked as if it hadn’t been shut in years. The road was fringed with tall eucalyptus trees and deeply rutted. Trucks had used it. It was empty and sunny now, but not yet dusty. The rain had been too hard and too recent. We followed the ruts along and the noise of habitat traffic grew curiously and quickly faint, as if this were not in the habitat at all, but far away in a daydream land. Then the oil-stained beam of an anti-matter containment vessel handling crane stuck up over a branch. I could see the old steel cable in the block. The crane probably hadn’t moved in a year. Containers were no longer being delivered here, the egress airlock was closed and unpowered. Half a dozen empty vessels lay in a ragged pile. There was the stagnant, old-scummed water of the old cooling sump iridescent in the sunlight.

“Are they going to make a park of all this?” I asked.

She dipped her chin down and gleamed at me.

“It’s about time. The smell of that sump would poison a herd of goats. This the place you had in mind?”

“Uh-huh. Like it?”

“It’s beautiful.” I directed the rickshaw bot to pull up beside the loading platform. The hum of the traffic was a distant web of sound, like the buzzing of bees. The place was as lonely as a churchyard. Even after the rain the tall eucalyptus trees still looked dusty. They always look dusty. A branch broken off by the wind had fallen over the edge of the sump and the flat leathery leaves dangled in the water.

I walked around the sump and looked into the pump-house. There was some junk inside it, nothing that looked like recent activity. Outside a big wheel in stained grey plastic was tilted against the wall. It looked like a good place all right.

I went back to the rickshaw. The girl stood beside it preening her hair and holding it out in the sun.

“Gimme,” she said, and held her hand out.

I took the gun and put it in her palm. I bent down and picked up a rusty can.

“Take it easy now,” I said. “It’s loaded in all five. I’ll go over and set this can in that square opening in the middle of that big plastic wheel. See?” I pointed. She ducked her head, delighted. “That’s
about ten metres. Don’t start shooting until I get back beside you. Okay?”

I went back around the sump and set up the can in the middle of the wheel. It made a swell target. If she missed the can, which she was certain to do, she would probably hit the wheel. That would stop a small slug completely. However, she wasn't going to hit even that.

I went back towards her around the sump. When I was about three metres from her, at the edge of the sump, she showed me all her sharp little teeth and brought the gun up and started to hiss.

I stopped dead, the sump water stagnant at my back.

“Stand there, you son of a bitch,” she said.

The gun pointed at my chest. Her hand seemed to be quite steady. The hissing sound grew louder and her face had the scraped bone look. Aged, deteriorated, become animal, and not a nice animal.

I laughed at her. I started to walk towards her. I saw her small finger tighten on the trigger and grow white at the tip. I was about two metres away from her when she started to shoot.

The sound of the gun made a sharp slap, without body, a brittle crack in the sunlight. I didn’t see any smoke. I stopped again and grinned at her.

She fired twice more, very quickly. I don’t think any of the shots would have missed. There were five in the little gun. She had fired four. I rushed her.

I didn’t want the last one in my face, so I swerved to one side. She gave it to me quite carefully, not worried at all. I think I felt the hot breath of the powder blast a little.

I straightened up. “My, but you’re cute,” I said.

Her hand holding the empty gun began to shake violently. The gun fell out of it. Her mouth began to shake. Her whole face went to pieces. Then her head screwed up towards her left ear and froth showed on her lips. Her breath made a whining sound. She swayed.

I caught her as she fell. She was already unconscious. I pried her teeth open with both hands and stuffed a wadded handkerchief in between them. It took all my strength to do it. I lifted her up and got her into the rickshaw, then went back for the gun and dropped it into my pocket. I climbed in, kicked the bot to life, and drove back the
way we had come along the rutted road, out of the gateway, back up the hill and so home.

Carmen lay crumpled in the corner of the carriage, without motion. I was half-way up the drive to the house before she stirred. Then her eyes suddenly opened wide and wild. She sat up.

“What happened?” she gasped.

“Nothing. Why?”

“Oh, yes it did,” she giggled, “I wet myself.”

“They always do,” I said.

She looked at me with a sudden sick speculation and began to moan.
Chapter 32 - The Big Sleep

The old servitor let me into the long grey and white upstairs sitting-room with the ivory drapes tumbled extravagantly on the floor and the white carpet from wall to wall. A holo star’s boudoir, a place of charm and seduction, artificial as a prosthetic leg. It was empty at the moment. The door closed behind me with the unnatural softness of a hospital door. A breakfast table on wheels stood by the chaise-longue. Its silver glittered. There were cigarette ashes in the coffee cup. I sat down and waited.

It seemed a long time before the door opened again and Vivian came in. She was in oyster-white lounging pyjamas trimmed with white fur, cut as flowingly as a summer sea frothing on the beach of some small exclusive island back on old Earth.

She went past me in long smooth strides and sat down on the edge of the chaise-longue. There was a cigarette in her lips, at the corner of her mouth. Her nails today were copper-red from quick to tip, without half-moons.

“So you’re just a brute after all,” she said quietly, staring at me. “An utter callous brute. You killed a man last night. Never mind how I heard it. I heard it. And now you have to come out here and frighten my kid sister into a fit.”

I didn’t say a word. She began to fidget. She moved over to a slipper chair and put her head back against a white cushion that lay along the back of the chair against the wall. She blew pale grey smoke upwards and watched it float towards the ceiling and come apart in wisps that were for a little while distinguishable from the air and then melted and were nothing. Then very slowly she lowered her eyes and gave me a cool hard glance.

“I don’t understand you,” she said. “I’m thankful as hell one of us kept his head the night before last. It’s bad enough to have a gunrunner in my past. Why don’t you for Christ’s sake say something?”

“How is she?”

“Oh, she’s all right, I suppose. Fast asleep. She always goes to sleep. What did you do to her?”
“Not a thing. I came out of the house after seeing your father and she was out in front. She had been throwing darts at a target on a tree. I went down to speak to her because I had something that belonged to her. A little revolver Owen Taylor gave her once. She took it over to Brody’s place the other evening, the evening he was killed. I had to take it away from her there. I didn’t mention it, so perhaps you didn’t know.”

The black Sternwood eyes got large and empty. It was her turn not to say anything.

“She was pleased to get her little gun back and she wanted me to teach her how to shoot and she wanted to show me the old power station where your family made some of its money. So we went down there and the place was pretty creepy, all rusted metal and old plastic and silent cranes and greasy scummy sumps. Maybe that upset her. I guess you’ve been there yourself. It was kind of eerie.”

“Yes, it is.” It was a small breathless kind of voice now.

“So we went in there and I stuck a can up on a wheel for her to pop at. She threw a wing-ding. Looked like a mild epileptic fit to me.”

“Yes.” The same minute voice. “She has them once in a while. Is that all you wanted to see me about?”

“I guess you still wouldn’t tell me what Eddie Mars has on you?”

“Nothing at all. And I’m getting a little tired of that question,” she said coldly.

“Do you know a man named Canino?”

She drew her fine black brows together in thought. “Vaguely. I seem to remember the name.”

“Eddie Mars’s trigger man. A tough hombre, they said. I guess he was. Without a little help from a lady I’d be where he is - in the morgue.”

“The ladies seem to -” She stopped dead and whitened. “I can’t joke about it,” she said simply.

“I’m not joking, and if I seem to talk in circles, it just seems that way. It all ties together - everything. Geiger and his cute little blackmail tricks, Brody and his pictures, Eddie Mars and his roulette tables, Canino and the girl Rusty Regan didn’t run away with. It all ties together.”
“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Suppose you did - it would be something like this. Geiger got his hooks into your little sister, which isn’t very difficult, and got some notes from her and tried to blackmail your father with them, in a nice way. Eddie Mars was behind Geiger, protecting him and using him for a cat’s paw. Your father sent for me rather than paying up, which showed he wasn’t scared about anything. Eddie Mars wanted to know that. He had something on you and he wanted to know whether he had it on the General, too. If he had, he could collect a lot of money in a hurry. If not, he would have to wait until you got your share of the family fortune, and in the meantime be satisfied with whatever spare cash he could take away from you across the roulette table.”

“Geiger was killed by Owen Taylor, who was in love with your silly little sister and didn’t like the kind of games Geiger played with her. That didn’t mean anything to Eddie. He was playing a deeper game than Geiger knew anything about, or that Brody knew anything about or anybody except you and Eddie and a tough guy named Canino. Your husband disappeared and Eddie, knowing everybody knew there had been bad blood between him and Regan hid his wife out at Realito and put Canino to guard her, so it would look as if she had run away with Regan. He even got Regan’s car into the garage of the place where Mona Mars had been living.”

“But that sounds a little silly taken merely as an attempt to divert suspicion that Eddie had killed your husband or had him killed. It isn’t so silly, really. He had another motive. He was playing for a billion or so. He knew where Regan had gone and why and he didn’t want the police to have to find out. He wanted them to have an explanation of the disappearance that would keep them satisfied. Am I boring you?”

“You tire me,” she said in a dead, exhausted tone. “God, how you tire me!”

“I’m sorry. I’m not just fooling around trying to be clever. Your father offered me a million dollars this morning to find Regan. That’s a lot of money to me, but I can’t do it.”

Her mouth jumped open. Her breath was suddenly strained and harsh. “Give me a cigarette,” she said thickly. “Why?” The pulse in her throat had begun to throb.

I gave her a cigarette and lit a match and held it for her. She drew in a lungful of smoke and let it out raggedly and then the cigarette
seemed to be forgotten between her fingers. She never drew on it again.

“Well, the Missing Persons Bureau can’t find him,” I said. “That’s not so easy. What they can’t do it’s not likely that I can do.”

“Oh.” There was a shade of relief in her voice.

“That’s one reason. The Missing Persons people think he just disappeared on purpose, pulled down the curtain, as they call it. They don’t think Eddie Mars did away with him.”

“Who said anyone did away with him?”

“We’re coming to it,” I said.

For a brief instant her face seemed to come to pieces, to become merely a set of features without form or control. Her mouth looked like the prelude to a scream. But only for an instant. The Sternwood blood had to be good for something more than her black eyes and her recklessness.

I stood up and took the smoking cigarette from between her fingers and killed it in an ashtray. Then I took Carmen’s little gun out of my pocket and laid it carefully, with exaggerated care, on her white satin knee. I balanced it there, and stepped back with my head on one side like a window-dresser getting the effect of a new twist of a scarf around a dummy’s neck.

I sat down again. She didn’t move. Her eyes came down millimetre by millimetre and looked at the gun.

“It’s harmless,” I said. “All five chambers empty. She fired them all. She fired them all at me.”

The pulse jumped wildly in her throat. Her voice tried to say something and couldn’t. She swallowed.

“From a distance of about two metres,” I said. “Cute little thing, isn’t she? Too bad I had loaded the gun with blanks.” I grinned nastily. “I had a hunch about what she would do, if she got the chance.”

She brought her voice back from a long way off. “You’re a horrible man,” she said. “Horrible.”

“Yeah. You’re her big sister. What are you going to do about it?”

“You can’t prove a word of it.”
“Can’t prove what?”

“That she fired at you. You said you were down there around the power station with her alone. You can’t prove a word of what you say.”

“Oh that,” I said. “I wasn’t thinking of trying. I was thinking of another time, when the shells in the little gun had bullets in them.”

Her eyes were pools of darkness, much emptier than darkness.

“I was thinking of the day Regan disappeared,” I said. “Late in the afternoon. When he took her down to that old power station and put up a can somewhere and told her to pop at it and stood nearby while she shot. And she didn’t shoot at the can. She turned the gun and shot him, just the way she tried to shoot me today, and for the same reason.”

She moved a little and the gun slid off her knee and fell to the floor. It was one of the loudest sounds I ever heard. Her eyes were riveted on my face. Her voice was a stretched whisper of agony. “Carmen. Merciful God, Carmen! Why?”

“Do I really have to tell you why she shot at me?”

“Yes.” Her eyes were still terrible. “I’m - I’m afraid you do.”

“Night before last when I got home she was in my apartment. She’d kidded the manager into letting her in to wait for me. She was in my bed, naked. I threw her out on her ass. I guess maybe Regan did the same thing to her sometime. But you can’t do that to Carmen.”

She drew her lips back and made a half-hearted attempt to sneer. It made her, for a brief instant, look like a frightened child. The lines of her cheeks sharpened and her hand went up slowly like an artificial hand worked by wires and its fingers closed slowly and stiffly around the white fur at her collar. They drew the fur tight against her throat.

“Money,” she croaked. “I suppose you want money.”

“How much money?” I tried not to sneer.

“Fifteen million dollars.”

I nodded. “That would be about right. That would be the established fee. That was what he had in his pockets when she shot him. That would be what Mr Canino got for disposing of the body when you went to Eddie Mars for help. But that would be small
change to what Eddie expects to collect one of these days, wouldn’t
it?”

“You son of a bitch!” she said.

“Uh-huh. I’m a very smart guy. I haven’t a feeling or a scruple in
the world. All I have the itch for is money. I am so money greedy that
for twenty-five thou a day and expenses, mostly fuel and whisky, I do
my thinking myself, what there is of it; I risk my whole future, the
hatred of the cops and of Eddie Mars and his pals, I dodge bullets and
eat saps, and say thank you very much, if you have any more trouble, I
hope you’ll think of me, I’ll just leave one of my cards in case
anything comes up. I do all this for twenty-five thou a day - and
maybe just a little to protect what little pride a broken and sick old
man has left in his blood, in the thought that his blood is not poison,
and that although his two little girls are a trifle wild, as many nice girls
are these days, they are not perverts or killers. And that makes me a
son of a bitch.”

“All right, I don’t care anything about that. I’ve been called that by
people of all sizes and shapes, including your little sister. She called
me worse than that for not getting into bed with her. I got five
hundred thousand dollars from your father, which I didn’t ask for, but
he can afford to give it to me. I can get another million for finding Mr
Rusty Regan, if I could find him. Now you offer me fifteen million.
That makes me a big shot. With fifteen million I could own a home
and a proper car and four suits of clothes. I might even take a vacation
without worrying about losing a case. That’s fine. What are you
offering it to me for? Can I go on being a son of a bitch, or do I have
to become a gentleman, like that lush that passed out in his car the
other night?”

She was as silent as a stone woman.

“All right,” I went on heavily. “Will you take her away? Somewhere far off from here where they can handle her type, where
they will keep guns and knives and fancy drinks away from her? Hell,
she might even get herself cured, you know. It’s been done.”

She got up and walked slowly to the windows. The drapes lay in
heavy ivory folds beside her feet. She stood among the folds and
looked out towards the quiet darkish foothills and the irregular
foundations of our whole world, of the habitat itself. She stood
motionless, almost blending into the drapes. Her hands hung loose at
her sides. Utterly motionless hands. She turned and came back along
the room and walked past me blindly. When she was behind me she
cought her breath sharply and spoke.

“He was in the sump,” she said. “A horrible decayed thing. I did
it. I did just what you said. I went to Eddie Mars. She came home
and told me about it, just like a child. She’s not normal. I knew the
police would get it all out of her. In a little while she would even brag
about it. And if Dad knew, he would call them instantly and tell them
the whole story. And some time that night he would die. It’s not his
dying, it’s what he would be thinking just before he died. Rusty
wasn’t a bad fellow. I didn’t love him. He was all right, I guess. He
just didn’t mean anything to me, one way or another, alive or dead,
compared with keeping it from Dad.”

“So you let her run around loose,” I said, “getting into other jams.”

“I was playing for time. Just for time. I played it the wrong way,
of course. I thought she might even forget it herself. I’ve heard they
do forget what happens in those fits. Maybe she had forgotten it. I
knew Eddie Mars would bleed me white, but I didn’t care. I had to
have help and I could only get it from somebody like him. There have
been other times when I hardly believed it all myself. And other times
when I had to get drunk quickly, whatever time of day it was. Awfully
damn quickly.”

“You’ll take her away,” I said. “And do that awfully damn
quickly.”

She still had her back to me. She said softly now: “What about
you?”

“Nothing about me. I’m leaving. I’ll give you three days. If
you’re gone by then, Okay. If you’re not, out it comes. And don’t
think I don’t mean that.”

She turned suddenly. “I don’t know what to say to you. I don’t
know how to begin.”

“Yeah. Get her out of here and see that she’s watched every
minute. Somewhere else in the system, Earth, maybe. Promise?”

“I promise. Eddie -”

“Forget Eddie. I’ll go see him after I get some rest. I’ll handle
Eddie.”

“He’ll try to kill you.”
“Yeah,” I said. “His best boy couldn’t. I’ll take a chance on the others. Does Norris know?”

“He’ll never tell.”

“I thought he knew.”

I went quickly away from her down the room and out and down the tiled staircase to the front hall. I didn’t see anybody when I left. Outside the bright gardens had a haunted look, as though small wild eyes were watching me from behind the bushes, as though the sunshine itself had a mysterious something in its light. I got into my rickshaw and drove off down the hill.

What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump, orbiting a cold gas giant, or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Vacuum and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of that nastiness now. Far more a part of it than Rusty Regan was. But the old man didn’t have to be. He could lie quiet in his cryogenic machines, with his bloodless hands folded within the chilly covers, waiting. His heart was a brief uncertain murmur. His thoughts were as grey as ashes. And in a little while he too, like Rusty Regan, would be sleeping the big sleep.

On the way downtown I stopped at a bar and had a couple of double Scotches. They didn’t do me any good. All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig and I never saw her again.

The End