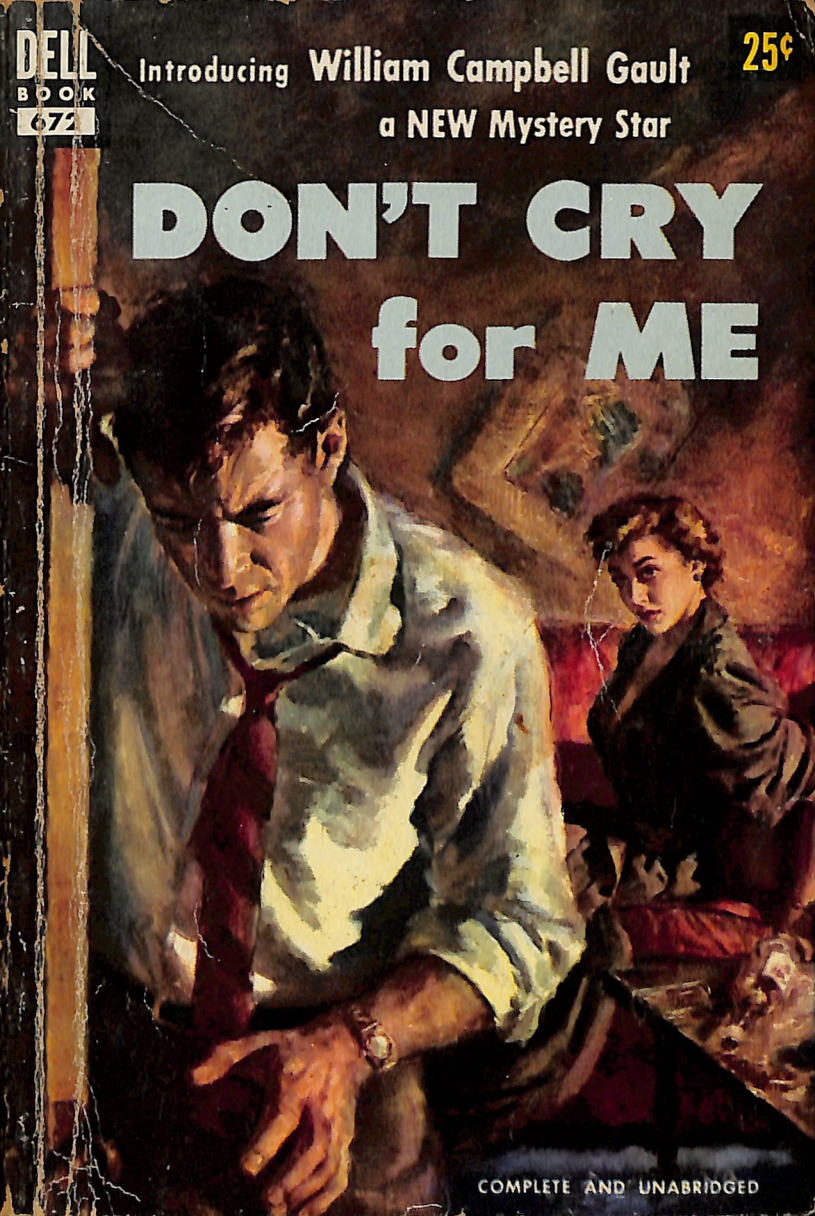
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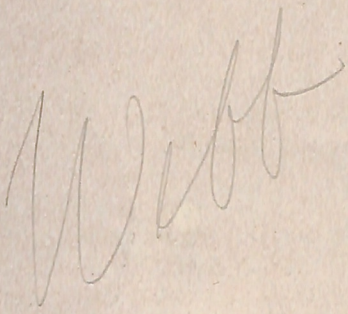

"IT'S NO GOOD IF IT ISN'T FREE . . ."

This was the way Pete figured it, the way he lived and the way he loved. And for a while it worked. The women, and even the dice, seemed to cooperate. He had it — everything — free. It may have been wrong, but to Pete it was good. Too good to last. Something had to happen.

Something did. A two-bit gambler tried for a long-shot . . . and died in Pete's apartment with six inches of steel in his throat.

Then Pete found out that fear was free too, and danger . . . that the easy fun, the easy money and the easy girls, had been exchanged for a nightmare that was his alone. All his, for free. . . .

To all those people
who have learned to say hello,
this book is affectionately dedicated.

DON'T CRY for ME

William Campbell Gault

A DELL MYSTERY

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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS A WARM DAY, I remember, and John sat in that big leather chair of his, looking out the glass doors of his study. There wasn't anything to see out there excepting the deserted patio. But John very rarely looks at me when he's giving me hell.

In his quiet and restrained way he was giving me hell again this warm afternoon. A very solid citizen, John, a great defender of the *status quo. Incorruptible,* I thought, looking at him. *Stuffy, but incorruptible. Handsome, too, in his dignified way, and I'll bet he wouldn't think of looking at another woman. He might as well be homely.*

John's my brother.

"I wonder," he was saying, "if Dad hadn't passed on, just what he'd think of you, Pete."

In John's world people don't die. They "pass on." "I don't know," I said. "He never thought much of me, except at S.C. when I threw the pass that beat the Irish. Dad wasn't my kind of people."

Now John looked at me. You'd think I'd voted the straight Democratic ticket the way he looked at me. "What a nice thing to say. About your *own* father."

"I was always a poor liar," I said evenly. "What did you want me to say?" I took a breath. "He wasn't my kind of people, and neither are you, John. Mother, I don't remember, but from what I've heard, I guess she was more in my line."

John ridged his jaw muscles, like Spencer Tracy. "Mother was a lady, from what *I* remember."

I chuckled. "You wouldn't want me to be a lady, would you, John? What are we quibbling about? I came here to tell you I can't get by on the hundred a week. And you've told me I'm not going to get any more." I stood up. "There's no reason we have to camp in each other's hair. Take care of yourself, kid."

He frowned. "Pete— I— Oh, hell, kid, we're—" He shook his head in irritation.

"Brothers?" I finished for him. "Sure. Always. You give me active nausea, at times, laddie, but I have nothing but the highest regard for you. I almost wish I could be like you. Things would be so much simpler if I were."

He sighed and looked at the rug. "Simpler? Hardly."

"Simpler," I repeated. "The good and the bad, the black and the white, the fair and the foul. It's all straight in your mind, and you can walk the narrow road and feel properly noble. Nothing's straight in my mind. Nothing's that clear."

He stood up now. "When it is, when you know what you intend to do, what you hope to make of yourself, we'll see eye to eye, Pete. Everything will work out."

I shrugged. He came along with me to the front door. There he put a hand on my shoulder. "Don't be a stranger, Pete. You never come here unless it's to ask for something. And you know both Martha and I enjoy you thoroughly."

"I'll be seeing you," I said. "Give my love to Martha. Sorry I missed her."

"She'll be sorry she missed you, too. Pete—be careful, won't you? Keep—our name out of the papers, Pete. It's a good name in this town."

"I'll do my best," I said. "Stay sober, sport."

I went down to the Merc and climbed in. The top was down and the seat was hot. Pete Worden, perpetual soph, convertible type kid. The Merc had Creager heads and pots, and she was a girl who could walk. I was only three payments behind.

John still stood in the doorway of his big, proud home. I waved at him and he waved back, and there wasn't any reason in the world why I should suddenly feel sorry for him. Because he had everything. A nice home, a grand wife, charge of the estate, the respect of everyone who knew him. And all the answers. Why should I feel sorry for John?

I swung the Merc in a U-turn because it was illegal

to make a U-turn here, and it would heckle him. I waved again and headed back Sunset, back toward Hollywood.

John lived in Beverly Hills. Of course.

John belonged to the right clubs and knew the right people. He paid his debts and loved his wife and sent his kids to the right school. And never even noticed his world was dying.

L.A. is not Miami, despite what the chamber of commerce says. But sometimes in the winter, we get a golden day like this, a smog-free, fog-free, visibility-unlimited day, and you're glad you're alive.

I had seven dollars in my wallet and some change in my pocket and the immediate necessity of seeing That Man about the delinquent payments on the Merc. But I was humming, and the Merc was humming, and to hell with all of them today.

I took the wind of Sunset all the way to Hollywood and cut off that on Doheny, heading down the hill. I stopped in front of the paint store and put the top up before cutting the motor.

That's where Ellen lives, above a paint store. Three rooms and bath, and a stone's throw, as she was wont to say, from the Strip, and the rent's cheap enough to make her forget the smell of paint.

She was waiting for me when I got to the top of the stairs. She's got fine, straight legs and a flat tummy and a sort of urchin insolence. She's a little top-heavy, but a girl without sag or simper. We get along very well.

She had her black hair high on her head this hot afternoon, and her dark-blue eyes probed mine. "So—"

"So—no. Emphatically and with gestures. A young man who can't get along on a hundred a week is decadent and degraded and demented. A young man of twenty-nine who won't work and has never worked should consider himself very lucky to—" I shook my head. "He said no."

"Now we'll never get married," she said.

I said nothing, but put one hand on the doorjamb for support.

Her chuckle had an overtone of brimstone. "I was only kidding. I just like to see you flinch."

"My heart—" I said. "You must be careful. Baby, do you think I'm a bum?"

"At times. Why?"

She went over to sit on the big davenport near the fireplace, and I stretched out, my head in her lap. It was cool here and quiet, and there was no smell of paint.

"Why?" she repeated. "Has that brother of yours finally got through to you?"

I thought about it. "Maybe."

"How old is he?"

"John? Let's see. John's—thirty-four."

"And what does *he* do for a living?"

"Why he—well, I mean, he—John sort of—I don't know what to say."

"Sure. He watches the money. The money your dad *earned.* That's easy, to watch it. That's even less work than spending it."

"Less fun, too," I said. "But I mean he's got a couple fine kids, and this solid wife, who works for all these charities, and John's always in the papers, heading this committee and that for this good cause and that. That's what he does, he heads committees."

She put one finger to the tip of my nose, and pushed it about a quarter of an inch to the right. "Who bent your nose?"

"A guy from UCLA, a tackle. And John's got to watch the investments, too. That's work, these days, watching—"

"You'd be almost good-looking if your nose was straight," she said. "I wouldn't have to be apologizing to all my friends about you. I wouldn't have to eat in booths when we went out. Couldn't you get it straightened?"

"Sure could. And you would then be out of my life. You don't think I'd hang around with an old hag like you if I had a straight nose, do you?"

"Huh," she said. "I've seen you with worse."

"And better."

She frowned. "One, maybe. At the most, two. Not counting that forty-seven-year-old starlet from MGM. What was her name?"

"Look," I said patiently, "I asked you if you thought I was a bum. I want to be serious."

"I guess you're a bum," she said. "I guess I am, too. I guess we're a couple of round-heels, and who cares?"

"I do, and you should. Didn't you ever—wasn't there a time when you—oh, dreamed the big dream?"

"No time I remember."

"Level, baby," I said quietly.

No lightness to my lady now, no casualness to her tone. "Oh, Pete, for heaven's sake—what brought this on? I'll make us a drink."

I lifted my head, and she slid out and stood up. For just a second she stood there, looking down at me. Her face was blank.

Then she went over to the liquor cabinet, built into the wall next to the fireplace.

I said, "If I were a gentleman, *I'd* make the drink. It's a great comfort, being a mug."

She said nothing. I heard the ice cubes clink in a glass.

Cool, here, and the thought of John fading, and even the remembrance of the three overdue payments growing dim. Above a paint store in the magic village, and my love mixing a drink.

At ease, and I waited lazily for the sound of the ice on glass again, but none came, nor any other sound. And I got a feeling for some reason, and raised up to look at Ellen.

She was crying. Standing in front of her built-in liquor cabinet with the etched plywood front, quietly crying. No sob or tremor, no hiccup or histrionics, no pretense.

Just the tears rolling down her clear cheeks, the dark-blue eyes swimming, her hands steady on the Formica drain of the cabinet.

I got up quietly and went over to put my arms around her, and a title of Saroyan's came to me, some words of

my old idol. I said, "Hello, baby, this is the world," which was probably corny, but my arms were tight around her, and it was a time she needed that.

Around seven she said, "I've got almost fourteen dollars. We could go some place and get drunk, some cheap place."

"No," I said. The only light in the room came from a street lamp, and the glow of our cigarettes. "Not right away," I went on. "Tell me about the tears now. Tell me about Ellen Gallegher, late of Eau Claire, the girl who cries standing up."

"Forget it, Pete," she said.

"Never," I said, "if I live to be eight hundred and seven years old. Come on. Catharsis, you know."

"A mood," she said. "For heaven's sakes, a mood. Don't you ever have them? A combination of sound and place and memory trick, or something."

"And some nasty words of Pete Worden?"

"Don't be ridiculous. What did you say?"

"I don't remember."

"A girl can't be chirping all the time, like a damned sparrow, you know."

"I know. Did you—were you ever very religious, Ellen?"

Her voice was light. "Now, didn't you put that tactfully? My folks are, my good folks back in Eau Claire. And maybe I was, too, before I read *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man.* Does that answer your tactful question tactfully, Mr. Worden?"

"You probably still are," I said. "You'll probably always be an Eau Claire Gallegher, at heart."

"Yup," she said, and I could see her, in the dimness, leaning forward to put her cigarette out. She stood up then, and went to the front windows. "You know what it was, really? Do you want to know what hit me?"

"Mmmm-hmmm."

"I kept remembering those other girls you had, and the way you glance around when we're out. And I keep won-

dering who's next; who takes your place, Ellen Gallegher?"

I couldn't see her face. I couldn't tell if she was kidding or not. I took the chance she was and said, "Let us not look ahead. Nor back. We have now and it's wonderful at times, but it might get dull over the long haul. I'm hungry; aren't you?"

"Famished. Will we need my fourteen dollars?"

"I have over seven," I told her firmly, "and we will stay well within the limits of that. We will eat spaghetti."

At *Tony's* we ate spaghetti. *Tony's* can be duplicated anywhere west of New York and north of Key West. The Tonys of this world seem to think if you have checked tablecloths and rough, round tables and waiters with cheap and shiny black semi-tuxedos, you got atmosphere peculiar to *this Tony's.*

They also have wives who can cook, which was all they needed in the first place.

Spaghetti Neapolitan, we had. With sausage, that means, and ham and mushrooms and onions. And, of course, garlic.

Wine we had, red and cheap.

After the third glass of that, she said, "You could work, you know. You're not so dumb you couldn't find a job."

"What kind?" I asked her. "I can throw a football, though not up to Waterfield or Van Brocklin, not well enough to get paid for it. And I carried a rifle for four years, but who's paying for that now?"

"The same employer," she said. "Though he's moved his plant. You'll be carrying a rifle yet, if you don't get a job, I'll bet."

"What are you saying?" I asked her. "Get in defense work now, get essential?"

"You certainly must loathe the army, the way I've heard you talk about it."

"I also loathe the time clock, and am not a guy to play it cute. Let us not talk of defense work."

"You could run an elevator or drive a truck, I'll bet.

Or sell sportswear in some ritzy shop. Even with that nose you have a certain flair."

"Relax, Irish," I said. "Have some more wine. Don't fret about me."

"Somebody has to," she said.

"Nobody has to," I told her. "Nobody ever has."

"I'll bet your mother did," she said. "You must have been her favorite."

"Put away your needle. What the hell are you up to?" I realized I'd raised my voice, and people were looking our way. I lowered my voice. "Is this another of your moods?"

She didn't have time to answer. Somebody clapped me on the back and said, "Pete Worden, my bread and butter, my ace in the hole."

It was Jake Schuster, a bookie I knew, a lanky and congenial gent addicted to plaster-faced blondes. He had one with him, and I rose.

"This is Vicki Lincoln," Jake said. "Vicki, this is Ellen Gallegher and Pete Worden."

Vicki could have been named anything, originally. She smiled her dummy smile at both of us and said, "Pleezed-meetcha, I'm sure."

Jake was already pulling up a pair of chairs, so I didn't bother to invite him to join us.

"You must have taken a drubbing, too, eating in a rat-trap like this," he said. "Boy, they murdered me, today."

"Glad to hear somebody's getting into you," I said. "I'd buy you a drink, but who'd pay for it?"

"I would," he said. "What are you drinking?"

"Wine," I told him, "but I think I've had enough." I looked over at Ellen, who didn't seem overjoyed at the company. "We're just about ready to go. We've eaten."

"Go?" Jake said. "Where's there to go? How would you like to come along to a party? And I mean a party. Up in the Valley."

I looked at Ellen, waiting for her to say the no. But she said, "Why not? It's been a long time between parties."

She is a girl I can't always figure. Jake gabbled and the blonde smiled from time to time and Ellen looked around the room, and I had another glass of wine. Then Jake and the blonde worked on their steaks and Ellen smoked a cigarette and I looked around the room.

Except for the lack of neckties, it could have been Cedar Rapids. There was a redhead at a far table near the entrance who looked luscious from this distance.

Ellen said, "She's got thick ankles."

"Who?" Jake asked, looking up from his steak. The blonde continued to eat.

"The girl Pete's considering," Ellen answered. "Slow horses and fast women, that's our Pete."

"He does all right," Jake agreed. "He's never done any better than he's doing right now, for my money, though."

"Thank you, Jake," Ellen said sweetly. "We're thinking of getting married."

"No kddng," Jake said. "Which one's going to work?"

I said nothing.

The blonde said, "Could I have apple pie à la mode?"

"Of course," Jake said. "You can have anything you want, baby."

"Even the new Stude, Jake? Do you mean it, Jake?" Some animation in the plaster face.

"Anything to eat," Jake corrected her. "Will you please stop yapping about that Studebaker?"

Ellen looked at me and past me, a great disinterest in her eyes. My stomach was queasy, with the food and the liquor and the wine, and the blonde's perfume was heavy on the close air. I wanted to get up and walk out. I wanted to climb into the Merc and just drive along the coast highway like I used to in my rod when I was a high-school punk, all alone and full of tomorrow's dreams.

But I sat there, trying not to look at the blonde.

We got out of there eventually, and it was better. The night air was cold, the stars clear as candles.

Jake said, "May as well go in my car. No sense in taking both heaps up there."

"We may want to leave early," I said. "I'll follow you, Jake."

Jake had a Caddy. He was a small man in a big organization, despite his talk about the boys "murdering him." He didn't book the bets he handled, though he tried to give that impression. He worked on commission.

And drove a Cad. I wondered how many payments *he* was behind.

Ellen was quiet, as I followed the Cad's rudder taillights up Cahuenga Pass. Ellen was unusually quiet.

"Thirty-eight cents for your thoughts," I said.

"I was thinking of that girl, that Victoria Lincoln," Ellen said quietly. "Jake's girl. And I'm your girl, currently. I was wondering if I ought to dye my hair."

"This is one of your bad days, isn't it?" I said. "Are you comparing yourself with that calcimined job?"

"We're a lot alike," she said, "if you'd look at it honestly. We both seem to serve the same purpose."

"You're prettier and brighter and you can cook," I said. "I'd like to be an Eau Claire type, Ellen, but I just can't seem to be anything but Pete Worden. I thought that's what you wanted, a Pete Worden."

"It's all I deserve," she said. "I'll snap out of it. Don't worry about me. Don't spoil your fun."

I didn't answer that. Moody, she is, being Irish, and down to fourteen dollars, and heading where?

I said, "If I had a few more bucks, maybe I could parlay it into something. If we're going where I think we're going, there'll be a crap game. And I feel lucky."

"I brought the fourteen," she said. "I thought there was a possibility it might come in handy."

"You'll need it," I told her. "Maybe I can hit Jake for a double sawbuck."

"Take the fourteen," she said. "We'll be partners. I'll string along with you, Champ, until you're licked."

Out Lankersheim to the San Fernando Road, out where the estates are, the big wheels. Producers and stars and oil kings. And racketeers.

It was the place I'd suspected, a sprawling ranch house

set back in a grove of eucalyptus, a simple western home of five bedrooms and five baths, with fifty-foot living-room, with playroom, with kidney-shaped pool and well-lighted patio.

Nick Arnold's place, and Nick was probably Jake's boss. I'd been here before. The parking-area held nothing you could pick up under four grand. Until I brought the Merc into it.

You don't get three nights a year when you can use a patio in this country, but it was lighted just the same. Maybe Nick didn't want anyone to overlook the pool. It was about 55 degrees now.

The host wasn't at the door nor was anyone else. The four of us went into the deserted entrance hall. The smoke hit us there, and the noise, and the under-tinge of alcohol.

In the immense living-room, Nick stood near the fireplace. It was a wide fireplace, with a knee-high hearth of fieldstone, a mammoth thing. But it didn't dwarf Nick Arnold.

He'd been a wrestler and a club fighter. He'd been a night-club operator in Chicago, and had been acquitted on white-slave charges for lack of evidence. He'd fought his way out of Chicago's south side to this, asking no quarter and giving none.

He saw us in the entrance way and came over. "How's it going, Jake?" he said heartily, and chucked Vicki under the chin. "And Ellen," he said, smiling his prettiest, and turned to me.

"How are you, Pete? It's good to see you, boy. Gives some tone to this wing-ding." He held out his hand, and I took it.

Because my name is Worden, Nick's got the idea I'm SOCIETY in L.A. and environs. Class conscious, Nick is. I said, "Glad to be here, Nick."

The living-room was spilling over with people, despite its size. Women in evening gowns and men in tails, three men in tails, without counting Nick. The others wore sport clothes. Informal California living, only the women

in evening wear.

A butler came along with a tray of drinks, and we all grabbed one.

"They're dancing in the playroom," Nick said, "and shooting crap in the garage. Have fun, kids."

"Dancing," Ellen said. "That's my idea of fun. Come on, flat nose. Let's give it one whirl."

We left the others there in the entrance hall, and went into the playroom. The table-tennis tables had been placed up against one wall in there and loaded with food and liquor. There were chairs along the other three walls, and two loud-speakers giving with Lombardo recordings. That's Nick's idea of refined music, Guy Lombardo.

This much I'll give him, he's a good man to dance to, a virtue he shares with Wayne King. We danced.

The lights were dim in the room, and Ellen was close to me, and we dance well together. You're aware of Ellen when you dance with her, because of her topography, but not otherwise.

We said nothing, but she looked more contented and sighed once or twice, and I relaxed some, myself. I could have been back in Santa Monica High, at the Junior Prom. Though I don't remember any gals like Ellen at Santa Monica High.

Running between the rain drops, dum de dum de dum de dum— *I cried for you, what a fool,* da da da da. No jive in Pete Worden, no rumba nor samba nor dipsey doodle. Too young I was to remember the Charleston and too old to take a crack at jitter-bugging. Just a good, serviceable fox trot with rhythm and some grace. And my current love in my arms.

Close your eyes, Pete Worden, and pretend this is the Country Club, and you're a good solid citizen, a foreign correspondent or like that, with a good wife and a couple kids who look like John. A Saturday night dance at the Country Club, and you're going to get pleasantly lit and maybe make a minor pass at some old classmate's wife, and get a bit of hell for it in the morning from your own

beloved, but nothing she'd make a major issue of.

Close your eyes, Pete Worden, and forget the 101,528 people who chanted your name at the Coliseum the day you beat the Irish. Forget Joe Devlin, and the arm he left at Attu. Forget the headlines of today, and the blood of yesterday, and the faces of all the girls you've held in your arms like this.

"Hey," Ellen said, "you look happy, for a change. I'll bet you're thinking of some girl."

"You," I told her. "You're the best dancer from Eau Claire I ever danced with."

She smiled, looking whole and happy again. She put something into my hand and we stopped dancing. It was her fourteen dollars, a ten and four ones.

We were next to the entrance to the living-room, and she stood there a moment looking at me. Then she patted my cheek.

"Luck, Pete," she said quietly. "I'll be waiting."

I watched her head for the big circular davenport near the fireplace, where Jake and Vicki were sitting with Nick. I saw Nick's broad face light up at sight of her, and saw him rise.

I turned and went back through the game room, toward the breezeway that led to the garage.

About nine men in there, nine men and two boys, no women. A four-car garage, though only two cars occupied it at the moment. There was a big table with a walled edge, not a regular crap layout; that would make Nick look unrefined. A table used for the kind of craps you played among friends, not a house game.

The men ranged from thirty to fifty, and they all *looked* solvent, but who doesn't out here? The boys I couldn't place; they looked like college kids, one short and fat with a crew haircut, one tall and thin with horn-rimmed glasses, the grind type.

They stood against the wall, out of the way, talking quietly. I stood in front of them, watching the play.

The fat kid tapped me on the shoulder. "Pardon me, sir, but aren't you Pete Worden?"

I turned to look at him. "That's right."

"I'm Chris Arnold," Chubby said, "and this is my brother, Paul."

"Oh," I said, "Nick's sons. He certainly talks a lot about you boys."

The skinny one, Paul, said, "You'd better shake Chris's hand, Mr. Worden. He thinks football players are something special." Superiority in the tone, contempt in his tone, and no doubt in my mind what *he* thought about football players. Well, maybe he was right.

I shook Chubby's hand, and smiled at Paul. I asked, "You boys play the game?"

"Third-string guard, I am," Chubby said. "Paul's too intellectual for anything like football." He hung onto my hand.

"Too light, too," I said. "My brother was a third-string guard, boy, and a much more worth-while citizen. Keep digging, Chris."

And I turned back to the table, conscious of the scorn in Paul's eyes. Where had the punk been, what did he know? Why should his scorn bother me?

The dice were cold. I followed them through eight hands and saw the coldness of them. A point and fall off. A crap, a natural, a tough point, and fall off. I passed them the first time, covered the man to my right when he shot ten, and watched him come out on a nine.

A four followed the nine, and then a seven. I picked up the twenty, and realized I'd been holding my breath. I could have been through, right there, playing the ten, for it wasn't the kind of game where you shoot four bucks.

The next man shot twenty, but the man to my right wanted all of it, and I let him have it.

I didn't get a chance to fade, all the way around; the man to the left of the shooter always willing to get on. With these dice, fading was the better proposition.

Then they came to me again, and I turned to rub them on Chris's short hair. "For luck," I said, and winked at him, and didn't look at Paul the scholar.

I bounced both of them against the walled edge opposite me, shooting ten bucks. I saw the four hop up while one die spun and spun and spun.

And fell with the three uppermost.

"Shoot the twenty," I said, and turned to rub the dice on the crew cut again.

The man to the left of me said, "If you can cut out the ham, Golden Boy, I'll be glad to cover you."

About my size though thinner, a dark man with a few pockmarks and muddy brown eyes.

"I don't care who fades me," I said. "This is a democracy."

He threw out a pair of tens.

I came out on a four. Well, I'd have fourteen bucks left of Ellen's money. Who makes a four with dice as cold as these? I rolled, and rolled, and no seven showed. I rolled and rolled and a three-one popped up to stare me in the face.

Maybe the dice were changing. A smart man would drag now, but maybe the dice were changing. I'd made a four.

"Shoot the forty," I said.

"I've got it," Brown-Eyes said, "and bounce *both* of them against the wall, huh?"

"One's good enough for my friends," I said, studying him.

"I'm not one of your friends," he said. "Shoot." He put two twenties on top of my tens.

I picked up the dice and Chris said, "Hey, Mr. Worden, aren't you going to rub them on my head?"

"The customers are kicking, Chris," I said. "You gave me my start, boy."

They went out along the felt, and both of them bounced off the opposite wall. One was a five and the other was a two.

I dragged sixty bucks. I said, "Shoot twenty."

Brown-Eyes covered, saying something under his breath. I came out on a nine and fell off two rolls later.

I covered the man to my right, and he came out with

snake-eyes. He'd shot ten, and I reached in to get my money.

"Leave it," he said. "I'm shooting twenty."

I hesitated. I don't like to be told what to do with my money. But I couldn't make enemies all around me. I said, "Shoot. You're loaded."

A pair of sixes came to rest against the opposite wall. It wasn't the best time in the world to chuckle, but I couldn't help it. It had been his idea.

I reached out, and he said, "Leave it. I'm shooting forty."

He was squat and the blue-black of his beard showed under his tanned cheeks. There was a silence all around while I looked at him.

Chris said, "He couldn't make a point with a pencil, Mr. Worden. Ride him to death."

"Shoot," I said.

He put two twenties into the middle, and breathed on the dice in his clenched hand. "Now," he said, and sent them bouncing into the wall.

A two came into view, and then a one. Three craps in a row he'd shot, and I had eighty dollars in the middle of the table.

He stared at the dice for seconds, and then expelled his breath. "That's enough for me," he said, and turned and walked out.

The next man took the dice, and now I was the man to the left of him, and he was shooting fifty, and I took it all.

And won it, and could do no wrong from there in. It was one of those times when you can almost call them as they roll, when you know what you can do and how to do it.

The lad to my left started playing it cagey on the fade, and they began to divide me up. And they began to drift off, to leave the garage.

Until there was just the lad to my left, Brown-Eyes. And I started to sort out my money.

"You quitting?" he said. "I've still got dough."

"I don't play a two-man game," I told him. "What the hell kind of sucker do you think I am?"

He told me what kind, a deletion kind, and I grabbed him by one shoulder, and his left hand went sliding in under his coat.

I don't know if he had a gun in there or not. I know his chin was tilted a little to one side and I brought the right away around from left field.

I caught him very clean and he went back and down, his head hitting the concrete of the garage floor with a horrible thump.

Only Chris was there, and he stood next to me as we both stared at him.

"Who is he, Chris?" I asked. "Is he a good friend of your dad's?"

"I don't know. Is he—is he dead, Mr. Worden?"

CHAPTER TWO

I KNELT BESIDE HIM, and reached under his coat to see if he was loaded, and he was. I took the .32 from the shoulder holster and snapped the cylinder out and emptied it, and put the revolver back into the holster. The cartridges I put into my pocket.

Then I felt for his heart but could feel nothing. I got weak, and faintly nauseated. I reached for his wrist, groping for the artery. Sweat ran down the back of my neck, and I could hear Chris's heavy breathing.

It was there, his pulse, steady and strong. I stood up.

"Dead?" Chris asked.

"Alive," I said. "I'd better tell your dad about it."

"I'll tell him," Chris said, "if you want me to."

I shook my head. "We'll let Brown-Eyes get some sleep. He's harmless now."

He came along with me out to the breezeway and through that to the playroom. The lights were completely out in here now, and the couples still on the floor didn't take many steps.

"You sure caught him on the button," Chris said. "He was asking for it, wasn't he, Mr. Worden?"

"Call me Pete," I said. "I'm not as old as I look, Chris."

"You don't look old, Pete," he said, "but I'm only nineteen."

We moved along the side of the room to the living-room. Nick and his other son and Ellen were sitting there, on a love seat grouping near the glass doors that led to the patio.

Nick grinned at me. "Cleaned them I hear, Pete?"

"Cleaned them," I said. "Nick—I slugged one of your guests."

His eyes went from me to Chris and back. "Which one?"

"Dark man, brown eyes, some pockmarks. I don't know

his name. He had a gun in a shoulder holster." I reached into my jacket pocket and took out the cartridges. "I thought it would be best to unload them. He's still out, Nick."

"Do you know who he is, Chris?" Nick's gaze shifted to his son.

Chris shook his head. "No, Pop. We could go and look."

Nick stood up. "*I* could. But the rest of you stay here."

We watched his broad back disappear into the dark game room. Or playroom, as Nick called it.

Ellen said, "Sit down, tailback, and tell us about your adventures."

"Nothing to tell," I said. I sat down. "I was lucky, just the way I figured I would be."

"You've met Paul?" she asked.

I nodded, and looked at him. He smiled.

"Paul's going to be a writer, an author," Ellen said sweetly.

I was still looking at him, and I saw him color. He said stiffly, "I'm sure Mr. Worden wouldn't be interested in that."

"Why not?" I asked him. "I can read."

Chris said, "You ought to see the verse he wrote for the school quarterly in prep school. Boy, was that lurid."

Paul looked at Chris and said, "Quiet, Meat."

"Sensitive," Chris said. "Poet, you know. Pop makes him get haircuts, though."

Ellen changed the subject. "How much did you make, Mr. Moneybags?"

I smiled at her. "I haven't counted it all. Around thirteen hundred, I'd say."

"Pete—" She stared at me. "Pete, you're kidding."

I shook my head.

"Let's see it. Pete, you're insane—it's—"

"Your lower middle class background is showing," I told her. "Relax, Irish. Pretend you're a lady."

Nick was coming across from the playroom now, and I tried to read his face. It's not an easy face to read. When

he got close enough to notice my gaze, he smiled.

He sat down next to Paul. "Everything's under control. He came to, and I convinced him it would be bright to leave."

"Who is he?" I asked.

Nick gestured with a flat hand. "Forget it, Pete. A nothing, a nobody, a poor loser."

"A poor loser with a gun," Paul said.

This time Nick colored. It must be some deal for Nick, living with that lanky sneer, feeding him and sending him to college and making a pseudo-intellectual out of him.

Up until his wife had died, Nick had been a one-woman man, despite his background. He wasn't anything to burn incense in front of, but he had a reputation for keeping his word and never forgetting a friend.

I said, "I came here with fourteen bucks, Nick. And that was Ellen's. I feel a little on the piker side."

He laughed. "Oh, Lordy. With fourteen bucks. Wouldn't those jerks burn if they knew that? Pete, the money you've lost to Jake, don't apologize for anything."

The money I'd lost to Jake— So Nick was Jake's boss, as I'd suspected. And where was Jake? I looked around the room, but there was no sign of Jake nor the plaster job.

Ellen said, "Could you waltz me around once more, Dream Boat? I've been a long time out of your arms."

"It's dark in there," I said, "but if you're game—" I rose.

Ellen rose, and I saw Nick's eyes, and then he saw me watching him and he looked away. This Ellen was a girl who could have Nick any time she wanted him, I would guess.

Before we got to the playroom she said, "Were you kidding about the thirteen hundred, Pete?"

"I wasn't kidding. I'll take my three payments for the Merc out of it, and you can have the rest. There should be a cool thousand dollars for you."

"Oh, no," she said. "Fifty-fifty, like we agreed. Oh,

Pete, isn't it wonderful?"

It was wonderful. Dancing in the dark, and I could smell her perfume and feel the firm lushness of her and forget about John and the headlines and the brown-eyed man with the .32.

Almost.

There was thirteen hundred and ninety-six dollars in the pile. Two dollars I'd had left of the seven, and fourteen Ellen had given me. That meant I'd won thirteen hundred and eighty dollars. We stacked it on the coffee table in Ellen's apartment, and she insisted we break it down the middle.

To which I agreed, after a token resistance. I stowed it carefully in my wallet, and stood up.

"Going?" she asked, and I nodded.

Her smile was dim. "Bad company I've been?"

"No. Want to get down and make those payments in the morning, and get this in the bank. I'll be seeing you."

"I'll hold my breath," she said, and stood up to kiss me. Then she stood back and looked at me. "You're a dog, you know, a cad."

"I know," I said. "Don't crowd me, kid. Buy yourself some new clothes tomorrow. Give yourself a time."

"I'll look at rings," she said smiling.

"A ring for your nose, if anything. Good night, Ellen."

It was around three, and damp and cold. I cut down to Santa Monica Boulevard and took it all the way to Westwood Boulevard and turned right. There was no traffic; the town was asleep, slumbering under the night mist.

My apartment building's on Westwood, south of Wilshire, small apartments built around a court. I parked on the street in front and walked up on the outside to the second floor, feeling a hundred and seven years old and jumpy.

The wine, I thought. *I hope I never get broke enough again to drink wine.* And I thought of Brown-Eyes for some reason, and I must have had a flash of prescience, because I felt a coldness in my stomach.

One room, kitchenette and bath, with stall shower. Even the GI chicken coops out here have that, stall showers. It's practically the town crest.

I didn't use it tonight; I was bushed. I was asleep in ten minutes.

It was almost noon when I opened my eyes again. Fuzzy in the mouth and some ache at the small of my back, but otherwise whole. I stretched and considered the ceiling which needed a coat of paint. Though not at these rentals, the manager assured me. I didn't spend enough time here, anyway, to worry about it.

I stretched and got up and went into the kitchenette to put a low flame under the bottom half of the coffee maker. Then I had my shower and put on a terry cloth robe and picked up the morning paper outside the door.

It was the *Times,* and my only excuse is that the family had always read it. It is a sort of west coast replica of the *Chicago Tribune* and, at least with the *Trib,* you can read the sport pages. With the *Times,* you need a very strong stomach to read the sport pages.

The headline read: *Threatened UN Forces Begin Mass Retreat From Pyongyang.*

A short time ago MacArthur had considered the whole deal a wrap-up, and whatever can be said about him, he's no lad to make rash statements. The Chinese Commies were now in it up to the hips. And the boys wouldn't be home for Christmas.

I'd missed some Christmases myself. This one wasn't my war. Yet. To hell with the headlines.

The water was bubbling in the coffee maker and I measured the coffee into the upper half of the dingus and put it on. I stirred it as the water came through, let it bubble for a minute in the upper half, and turned off the gas.

A simple way to make a complete breakfast. Three nourishing cups of coffee with sugar but no cream. The cream was sour.

The Rams had walloped the Packers 51 to 14 and were once again in the division lead. For the Bears had

dropped one to their south side friends, the Cardinals, and there'd be a division play-off if the Bears got past Detroit. Tank Younger of the Rams would not be available for the Bear game if it happened. Tank was going into the army. Someone else would have to take care of Sprinkle.

So long, Tank.

A drunken father had beat his two-year-old son to death with the buckle end of a strap. Dorothy Davendish, privately known as Miss Casting Couch of 1950, was complaining that she wasn't getting the kind of roles she deserved. "All they can see is my body," she was quoted. "I want a role I can get my teeth into." A cinnamon roll, that would be. The Christmas decorations were already up on Wilshire, and the merchants were sharpening their pencils.

Unemployment was at a new low, and the aircraft plants were starting to hum. I thought back to Ellen's palaver yesterday afternoon and wondered how serious she'd been about it all. She'd certainly talked marriage enough.

You could do worse, Pete Worden, a lot worse.

I was into the classifieds, now, and here were all the ads of the friendship clubs. Matrimonial agencies was too realistic a phrase; they were now friendship clubs.

Lovely little widow of fifty-eight summers seeks the companionship of a refined elderly gentleman of like interests.

The major interest in a mixed companionship was no longer major with the widow, undoubtedly. The lovely little lady was lonely. And who wasn't?

My phone rang.

It was Jake. "Say, Pete, that Al Calvano called me a few minutes ago. He wanted to know who you were and where you live."

"Don't know the man," I said.

"The guy you slugged last night. He's a rough opera-

tor, Pete. I told him nothing. I called Nick about it, too. You could use protection, chum."

"I could tell the police," I said.

"Why annoy Nick? He doesn't want the police in his business."

"Between my neck and Nick's business, I'll worry about my neck," I said. "I owe Nick nothing."

"Aw, Pete. You know I didn't have to call you. I didn't have to stick *my* nose into it."

"All right," I said. "Quit crying on my shoulder. Tell Nick I would like a man I won't be ashamed to be seen with. One who doesn't talk out of the side of his mouth."

"Sure. One's on the way. Wait for him, huh? You took those boys last night, I hear."

"You heard right. Where did you disappear to?"

"Me and Vickie were holding hands. We're in love. Huh."

"Did you get her the new Studebaker yet?"

"It'd be cheaper to get a new girl. Anything you want at Hollywood Park?"

"Not today, thank you. I'm making the payments on my car and buying a new sport jacket. If I get a tip, I'll call you."

"Yo. Wait for that man now, Pete. You're my meal ticket."

He hung up, and I went over to the closet where I'd hung up my jacket last night. The wallet was there, fat and comforting. Six hundred and ninety-eight dollars and wouldn't the boys at Triangle Loan be glad to see me.

I was shaving when the door chime chimed. Nick's boy? Or Brown-Eyes? I stood there, the razor in my hand, half my face shaved, the other half still lathered.

A few seconds and I went quietly to the door. "Who's there?" I called.

"Nick sent me, Worden."

Would Brown-Eyes know Nick was sending a bodyguard? I doubted it. I opened the door, keeping my body to the right of it.

A squat man, blue-black showing on his cheeks despite

his tan.

"Well," I said. "Johnny Three-Craps. I'll bet you relish your job."

"I'm not fussy," he said. "Nick pays good."

I held the door open wider and he came in. He looked around my modest home and sniffed. "Nick figures you're a big wheel. It beats me."

"I have a renowned brother," I explained. "What's your name?"

"Mike Kersh. Why?"

"In case I want you to bring me a drink or something. Sit down, Mike. I'll be ready in a minute. Sorry I drank all the coffee."

"I'll live without it," he said. "What'd you make last night?"

"Over twenty bucks. What'd you make?"

"Funny fellow," he said acidly. "You heard from Calvano?"

I shook my head. "Rough man I hear."

"When he's hopped up, and he usually is. He knows I work for Nick, though, and he sees us together, he might simmer down. Nick ain't the kind of man a jerk like Calvano would want to buck."

"If he's sane."

Mike shrugged and went over to pick up the *Times* while I went back to the bathroom to finish shaving.

When I came back to the living-room to put on a shirt, Mike was shaking his head. "You a Republican or something, reading a sheet like this?"

"A reluctant Republican," I admitted. "What's your party, Mike?"

"Well, I was a Commie for a while, but I guess I'm a Democrat now. Though them Democrats aren't much above the ward level."

"They never get above the ward level, Mike," I told him. "What soured you on the Kremlin?"

"Come again?"

"The hammer and sickle. What killed the Commies for you?"

"You got to change your mind too much," Mike said. "One day it's an imperialist war and the next it's to kill fascism and the hero of today is a heel tomorrow. You never know where you stand. You argue one way today and you're eating your words tomorrow. It's humiliating. You take a man like Taft—and who would?—but you take him, he keeps believing one way, even when he knows he's wrong."

I put on my jacket and felt for the fat wallet. "Well, I guess you wrapped that up. You ever been on television, Mike?"

"You kill me," he said. "I sure don't understand why Nick wants to keep you alive."

"He probably wants to keep me alive long enough for Jake to get this money away from me, twenty at a time. Yours not to reason why, Mike." I started to open the door.

"Wait," he said, and stood up quickly.

I waited while he came over to edge in front of me. "I'll go through the doors first, and especially this one."

He went through, and I followed his short, broad frame along the rail-guarded catwalk to the stairs. It was after one o'clock now and unseasonably warm.

"That wind from the desert," Mike said. "What do they call it?"

"Santa Ana." The air was dry, almost gratingly dry.

"Where we going?" Mike wanted to know.

"A loan agency to make some payments. Thanks for your contribution last night, Mike."

"That's my standard game, what you saw last night. Why do I stay with it?"

I didn't answer him. Why did I buck the ponies? Why did Dewey run again?

The place was near Pico, a narrow office in a one story building with a big neon sign jutting over the sidewalk: *The House of Cordial Lending.*

It reminded me of rush week at school, and the way they treated you before you took the button. And after, oh, yes, after—

The girl behind the counter in there looked at my coupon book and frowned.

"It's all right," I said, "it's happened before. I'll even go crazy and pay a month ahead."

She was still frowning, looking at the three coupons that shouldn't be in the book. "You realize, Mr. Worden, that your equity in that car vanishes with the first delinquent payment, and—"

"You read the wrong book," I told her. "Look, lady, this isn't the first time. This has happened before."

Her face was very cool, and her voice. "Mr. Worden, I'm not concerned with what happened before. I—"

And then she was looking past me, and staring, staring at Mike Kersh. And he was staring at her, and he looked like they try to make Bogart look.

"Don't blast her, Killer," I said quietly. "She'll get hep before long."

"The dame hadn't ought to argue like that with you, boss. Maybe she don't know who you are, boss."

She continued to stare at Mike as she addressed me. "Perhaps you'd better see our Mr. Gertska?"

I shook my head. Mike shook his head.

She looked down at the book in her hands, and began to tear out the coupons. Her hands were trembling. "Did you say one ahead, Mr. Worden?"

"Check." I opened the fat wallet and began to peel out twenties.

Out in the car again, Mike said, "I'll bet I could do all right in the pictures, you know? With a good agent, I'll bet I'd make it."

I was still chuckling.

"And you with that bend in your horn, that helped," Mike went on. "You ought to get that schnozzle unbent, and you'd do all right with the dames."

"I'll give it some thought," I told him.

"Though with that broad you had last night, I guess you don't need advice— Damn it, that wind's killing me."

I could feel it, too. In my throat and nostrils and sinus. The humidity must be down to nothing.

And here was a bar and a sign in the doorway: *Open.*

I pulled in next to the curb and said, "I'm buying. And I hope they've got something to eat."

It was a long and narrow place, dim and cool. A thin, tall, pale bartender was reading a *Racing Form* at the near end of the bar.

"You got any eastern beer?" Mike asked him.

The bartender named a few and Mike named one, and he set a bottle of it on the bar, and a glass. And looked at me.

"Anything to eat?" I asked him.

"Hamburger."

"Two of them," I said, "and a bottle of that beer while I'm waiting."

There is one thing about this town, almost any place you go they have hamburger sandwiches. And almost all of them are good. I am another Wimpy when it comes to hamburger.

Mike took a good, long pull at his beer, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You remind me of somebody, but I can't remember who," he said. "A killer, this guy was, I seem to recall. You ever kill anybody?"

"Seventeen, one night," I told him.

"Now we're getting funny again."

"No kidding. They gave me a Bronze Star for it, after they counted."

"Oh," Mike said. "Oh, yah. I missed this last one. And never got out of the country in the first one. I guess Nick's kids will be about right for this one shaping up. I'm glad I'm not a Commie any more."

The bartender brought my hamburgers and I said, "Another pair of those," and indicated the bottles.

"I guess I never really was," Mike went on, "but Nick was organizing the taxi drivers in Chi at the time, or trying to, rather, and there were some of them long hairs volunteered. Well, I'm a guy that's seen some rough stuff in my day, but those bastards, Jeez—" He shook his head. "They *eat* that trouble, you know? And talk—They'll make you think black is white when they get

through spieling."

I said nothing.

The bartender said, "If you ask me—"

"Nobody asked you," Mike said, and turned again to me. "So I guess I'm really a Democrat. I think that's what Nick is."

I was thinking of Joe Devlin, who'd lost the arm at Attu. I'd seen worse, after that; the Seventh was a busy Division. But it was always Joe I thought of, because Joe had been a very good man in front of a piano, maybe one of the three best in the world for his kind of music. And now he was a night watchman in a Milwaukee brewery.

"This one I'll buy," Mike said. "And charge it up to Nick. Expenses."

"Make mine whisky," I said.

"Beer for me," Mike said. "You know, Worden, you guys quit too soon. You should have finished it up before you came home, and we could read some good news in the paper."

"You talk too much," I said. "Where were you hiding?"

"Don't blow your top. We got to get along, being together all the time. What you getting so hot about?"

"Forget it," I said. "Let's go. I want to buy a sport coat."

"Just let me finish this beer. Have another shot while you're waiting. On Nick."

I had another shot and he finished his beer, and we went out into the sandpaper dryness again. These spells never last long, only until the wind shifts back to the west again. But they shrivel your skin while they last.

In Hollywood at *Poole's,* I found what I wanted, a brown Harris tweed, neat and gaudy enough. Even Mike approved of it.

Then I cut down on Doheny, down the hill to the paint store. I parked in front and said to Mike, "My girl. Do you have to come along here, too?"

"Here *especially,*" Mike said. "If I was laying for a guy, this is just the place I'd wait."

"I may want to kiss her, or like that. You going to

watch?"

"Unless she's got a friend. You go for this matinee stuff?"

I didn't answer that. I took the box with my sport jacket in it from the rear seat, and we went across the street.

In front of the paint store window Mike paused. "You ever use one of them rollers? Some guys claim they're easier than a brush."

"You are the talkingest man I ever met," I told him. "My *girl's* upstairs, Tiger. What the hell do I care about rollers? Come on."

We went along the steps that led up the side, up the stair-wide corridor that smelled of white lead today. Mike edged in front of me when we got to the top of the stairs. Mike pressed the button and the two-tone chime chimed.

And my love opened the door. In a hand-knit dress, she stood there, her hair low on her neck. A dress that hugged her more prominent charms, a yellow dress that brought out the vivid black of her hair.

"Wow," Mike said quietly.

"New dress," I said.

"Do you like it? I got it this morning. On sale, but still two hundred, Pete. Hand-knit. Do you like it?"

"It does something for you," Mike said.

"And *to* me," I said.

"Come in, boys," she said. "I'm—going out, but I could mix you a drink. I bought some liquor, too, this morning."

"Aren't we rich?" I said.

Mike said, "I'll wait in the car. Everything's all right here, Miss Gallegher?"

"Of course," she said. "What do you mean?" She was frowning.

"Nothing," Mike said. "I'll wait in the car, Worden. No hurry." He went down the steps.

She looked at me. "What's going on?"

I came in and closed the door. "Nothing. Where are you going when you're going out?"

Her face showing nothing, and then showing a smile. "Jealous?"

"I could be, at that. Am I going to kiss you in that yeller dress."

"With that box in your hand? What's in that box?"

"A rag I picked up." I set it against the wall and said, "Come here, Irish."

Her thighs I could feel against mine, her breasts against my chest, and the moist warmth of her rich mouth. And her reserve I could feel, despite all that, and the damnedest, most ridiculous rage went through me, and I pulled away.

My voice I kept even. I tried to keep it casual, but that I couldn't manage. "As it must to all lovers, competition has come to Pete Worden."

"What makes you think so? Would it bother you?" She was standing very straight and looking very cool.

"I guess it would, Irish. But that wouldn't be your worry. That would be mine." I picked up the box. "Who is he?"

"Who is who? What makes you so damned sure?"

"I know you, baby. From your pinkies to your scalp, I know you. Across the breakfast table and at the Troc and in the hay, I know you well. And we never lied to each other."

She didn't say anything for seconds, some moisture in the blue eyes now. Then she said, "Maybe this man you're imagining is only that, in your imagination. And maybe he's a man with more serious intentions. Maybe I wouldn't be crying every night. Maybe if you'd brought a ring instead of a rag I'd never cry again."

"Don't cry for me," I said. "Is this an ultimatum or a kiss-off?"

"It's the first of some overdue needles. You know, damn you, all you have to do is whistle. The only move you have to make is to reach. But while there's these few feet between us, why don't you stop and think for a second?"

"I'm not the thinking type," I said, and turned, my new Harris tweed sport coat in my hand. Turned, and

headed for the door, waiting for her to call me.

Out the door and down the steps. One step, two steps, three steps—a girl doesn't change overnight. Not Ellen. Not that ripe and ready lovely, oh, no, not Ellen—

And then I was at the bottom step and I left the smell of paint behind and I was crossing the street, hot and cold, dry and trembling.

Mike said, "Well, that was a quickie. Where now, pigeon?"

"I don't know," I said. "I could use a drink, couldn't you?"

"Beer's all I drink," Mike said. "I could use a beer."

"I'll tell you what," I said. "We'll get a case of beer and a fifth, and we'll go to my modest domain. You play canasta, Mike?"

"If I got nothing better to do, and it looks like I haven't. Go up to Sunset; I know a guy'll give us a price."

The dry wind blowing, the Merc humming, and Mike quiet. "If you'd brought a ring, instead of a rag—" The girl had a point. But why like this, without a feint or a lead, why the Sunday punch without warning?

And who could it be? Who did she have a chance to meet these past months? And how did she know I wasn't bringing a ring? That, she'd know all right. I'd made myself clear on that.

"To the right here," Mike said. "You can turn on the red."

"Can I, *really?* I've only been driving in this town for fourteen years."

"We're hot again," Mike said. "You would be something to live with, Worden."

"Deletion you," I said.

Mike's voice was suddenly very soft. "I'm short and I'm fat, but when I was your age, I went eight rounds with Mickey Walker. So kind of keep your goddamned temper to yourself, hot-shot. I'm not getting paid for taking your lip."

And I laughed. I said, "Okay, slugger. My girl's got a date. Did you want me to sing Christmas carols?"

"Aw," Mike said. "We could go back, you know. We could wait for the jerk. Between us we could fix him, but good."

"You can't go back, Mike," I told him. "It gives them the edge." And thought, *You can't go home again—*

I gave Mike the money and he went in to get the liquor and the beer. I held the seat forward when he came out, and he stowed it on the back seat, next to my box from *Poole's.*

And we headed for home.

There, as I parked, he said, "You can carry all that, can't you? I've got a feeling—"

"Psychic, huh?"

"Whatever that means. Nick didn't hire me because of my looks. Can you handle all the packages?"

I nodded, stacked them in my arms, and followed him into the court and over to the steps.

Up the steps, Mike in front, and along the railed walk, Mike in front. I was thinking of Ellen. I don't know what Mike was thinking of.

"Key?" he asked.

"I never lock it," I said. "What's there to steal?"

He pushed the door open, and I saw Brown-Eyes again.

Sitting in the worn upholstered chair facing the door. His brown eyes unblinking on the door, his arms along the arms of the upholstered chair. Waiting for us, it looked like.

Watching and waiting, but he made no move. He would never make a move. I recognized the thing protruding from his throat. It was the handle of my steak knife.

CHAPTER THREE

MIKE'S HAND MOVED, and his gun was out. "Come in quick. Close the door."

Which I did. In the first shock, I thought of John. I thought of John's saying, "Keep our name out of the papers, Pete. It's a good name in this town."

Or was.

There was nobody else there. Mike holstered his gun again, expelled his breath, and looked at me.

I couldn't think of anything to say. I stooped and set the beer and the jacket and the whisky on the floor.

Mike went to look behind the open bathroom door and then went to the closet. When he turned to face me again, he said, "We'll have to dump him."

"Dump him?"

"Somewhere. You sure as hell don't want the cops to find him here, do you?"

"That's exactly where they're going to find him, Mike. I don't play cute with the law."

"And then they're in Nick's business again."

"Not necessarily. I don't have to tell them I met this man last night at Nick's. I came home, and here he was. Maybe it's better if I say I came home *alone*. Right?"

Mike was clicking his teeth. "Right. They're going to backtrack, though. But there's nobody was at that shindig last night's going to go yelping to the law. Admit nothing. I'll get to Nick right away, and he'll get his lawyer on it. Admit *nothing*, Worden. Don't let those characters break you down with cigar smoke. Admit nothing."

"Okay, okay. Hell, I'm innocent. What have I got to be afraid of?"

Mike shook his head. "I'll say you're innocent. You're simple, Worden. I'll get to Nick right away."

Mike left, and that brown-eyed bastard sat there, star-

ing at me, as I went to the phone. Who killed him, or why he was killed were questions that never came to mind in the initial shock.

I couldn't find the phone book; I dialed operator and asked for the police.

The body was gone. The reporters were gone, at least from the apartment. The photographers were gone with their incessant flashing.

But Detective-Sergeant Hovde sat in the chair Al Calvano had been sitting in, and I sat on the studio couch. Calvano had had a knife in his throat; the sergeant's knife was in his voice.

"That's some story. That's a wing-dinger."

He was a big man, looked like a Swede. He had short, blond hair and high cheekbones and eyes like Minnesota ice. His short hair seemed to bristle as he stared at me.

"It's my story, Sergeant." I lighted another cigarette, despite the burning dryness of my throat. "Would you like a can of warm beer, Sergeant?"

He shook his head. "Peter Worden—a Worden. John Worden's your brother?"

I nodded, and put out the cigarette. I'd taken two puffs of it.

"You've been in the papers before if I remember right. A couple fights, and for speeding, trying to outrun a traffic officer."

"I did outrun him. I'm not asking for publicity, Sergeant. *I* didn't invite the reporters in and the photographers. *I* don't need their support."

"Smart, too, aren't you? Think your name will take you through anything, don't you? Think it will hush a murder."

I shook my head. "Sergeant, I phoned the police. I'm not what any sensible man would call a solid citizen, perhaps, but this is one of those deals where I can't see that I'm to blame. My only crime was not locking my door."

"How dumb do you think I am?" he asked.

I didn't answer.

"That Calvano was *slugged* first, knocked unconscious. Then the knife was stuck in his throat. What's wrong with my believing you did that much before you got panicky, before your guts gave out and you phoned in?"

"It makes a good story," I said. "You can believe anything you want."

"Unless you got a better one than that wide-eyed horror you fed me before?"

"I haven't got a better one," I said wearily. "I need a drink. If you'll pardon me?"

He neither nodded nor shook his head. I stood up and took the fifth into the kitchenette. I poured out a jolt and looked at it for seconds, and then decided to add water.

I brought it back to the living-room with me.

And the Sergeant was smiling!

"All right," he said. "I'll take one. Just like you've got yours there, with a little tap water."

Now I must walk softly. Now his club was sheathed, and he was going to win friends and influence people. Some ham in this Swede.

I mixed him one like mine and brought it to him. "Thank you," he said with a smile, and crossed his legs.

I went back to the studio couch.

He sipped his drink and nodded. The pose was there but he didn't look at all like a man of distinction.

"Worden," he said, "we're old-timers here. This is *our* town. Until the trash came out, and especially that Chicago trash, this was a pretty damned good town. Oh, we had our own troubles, but they weren't anything we couldn't handle. This imported scum, this foreign trash, is something else. It's *organized,* Worden."

He paused, but I couldn't think of anything a good end man would be proud of, so I said nothing.

"Went to S.C., didn't you? Played football there?"

I nodded.

"I've seen you play, Worden. That's a great school, Southern Cal."

I nodded. Now if he'd start to moan about the Big Ten, he could get a job on the *Times.*

"A school with a tradition, known all over this country, *our* city's school, Worden. *Our* kind of people go there, and *our* kind of people support it. Your dad left them money, didn't he?"

I nodded.

"These people you've been hanging around with," he said, "these people that've been getting you into the papers, dragging your good name in the mud—you don't owe them a damned thing, Worden, not a *goddamned thing.*"

"Right," I said.

He leaned back smiling. "So?"

"So I wish I could have thought of a better story, Sergeant, but the one I told you happens to be the truth."

He pursed his lips. He chewed on a thumbnail. He looked at me and over at the windows, got up and went to the bathroom. I sipped my drink and stared at the rug.

When he came out again, he said, "I didn't figure you were that dumb. I figured you'd be smart enough to watch your own neck at least. Let's go."

"Where?" I asked.

"Where do you think? Let's go. Come on. Move."

I finished my drink and stood up. "Will I need a razor?"

"All you'll need is a different story." He nodded toward the door.

I went out ahead of him and started along the catwalk.

"This time," he called, "you'd better lock the door."

I came back and got out my keys.

"You're not so dumb at that," he said. "You didn't forget to forget the door, did you?"

I had no words.

All the way to the west side station I had no words. Nor did Sergeant Hovde, nor the detective who drove the department car.

Down there my words were confined to name and address and the charge, which was suspicion of murder. And then I heard that clang.

I'd heard it before in my young life, but not with the same finality; there'd been no overtone of murder to it before.

It was around five now, and the hum of traffic outside was steady. The cell smelled of carbolic acid and insecticide. The floor was clean, the cot hard, and I was sick.

Not from liquor or cigarettes or hamburger or Ellen or beer. I was just sick of Pete Worden, who couldn't grow up, who couldn't go out and peddle insurance or real estate or golf clubs and settle down in Westchester or some equally inane section and become another semi-contented nonentity.

The rest of the boys were doing it; who the hell did I think I was? It was time to grow up and be nothing. On the hundred I got from the estate, and with what a job would bring, I'd get by nicely in the middle-class suburbs.

As a matter of fact, if I did get a job and settle down, I'd get my share of the estate from John. And my share was half. I had no idea what that would be, but *his* half kept John in the upper strata, and my half should do as much for me.

And with Ellen I could even take Westchester. There wasn't any sense in kidding myself; the bed and the dice and the bottle were my symbols and the greatest of these was the bed.

They'd made a vulgarity out of the bed with their false shame and their fear-born standards, but name me a higher ecstasy or a truer communion. Shallow, Pete Worden, superficial, unlearned, vulgar, and aggressive.

And in love.

In love, but would I be? Day after day the same girl? In curlers and cold cream, pregnant or with the sniffles, at the country-club dance or the P.T.A. meeting, making the small daily surrenders, making the big and little adjustments that went into the long haul? With my foul

temper, with my insatiable need for affection, could I plod it out without killing it?

I doubted it like hell. Even with Ellen.

I sat in this crummy cell and should have been worrying about my neck. My neck wasn't that important to me and never had been, but Pete Worden was important to me and what was I? Less than nothing. Most of us are, but that wasn't my concern. *Me* was my concern.

I heard footsteps, and then three men came to stand in front of my cell. One was Sergeant Hovde and the other was a cop with a big ring of keys. The third man looked human.

Hovde said, "This is Mr. Jaekels, Worden."

The name I knew. An assistant D.A. out to build up a name for himself and doing it the headline way, convictions of the names, any kind of convictions. A man indicted for robbery, armed, will gladly plead guilty to simple assault. And you've got your conviction—for assault.

"How do you do, Mr. Jaekels," I said.

He gave with the Carnegie smile. "Good afternoon, Mr. Worden. You do love our jails, don't you?"

I didn't think the remark was worth an answer and gave it none.

The cop with the keys opened the door. Jaekels nodded and the others went back the way they'd come. Jaekels came in.

"You're in hot water, you know," he said quietly. "Extremely hot water."

"I am?"

He nodded and sat down on the cot. "In checking back over your afternoon, the police have discovered there was another man with you, and there was something about a disturbance at the Triangle Loan office."

"A gag," I said. "A small laugh in a dull day."

"We'll forget that for the moment. The description of this man leads me to think it could be Mike Kersh."

His eyes were on me, waiting for a reaction to the name. I said, "Mike who?"

"Kersh, Kersh, Kersh."

"That's a strange name," I said. "Mike Kersh-Kersh-Kersh."

"Mike Kersh, the right-hand gun of Mr. Nicholas Arapopulus."

"Don't know either one of them," I said.

"Arapopulus is now Arnold, as so recorded in the Chicago register of deeds office—Nick Arnold."

"Oh," I said, "the big boy. But this Kersh?"

"I explained who he is. It's a strange alliance, Mr. Peter Worden, you and Nicholas Arapopulus. I didn't think he was your kind of people."

"I don't know if he is or not. Because of the name, you mean? Don't tell me you're a snob, Mr. Jaekels, a man on your salary and in politics."

"I can't afford to be, no. But you can afford it to this extent—you don't have to run with mobsters and pimps and bookies and whores. Your friends are pretty fine people, your *real* friends."

I said nothing.

"I wouldn't give a damn if you were some ordinary rich punk. But your war record and your school record and—"

"Save it," I said. "Let's level. You don't give a whisper of a damn about me. You want to nail Nick Arnold and you're using this home, heaven, and mother approach to get me to work with you. Maybe I would if I could, but I'm taking up your time. I've got *one* story, and Sergeant Hovde has a copy of it."

"That's it?"

"That's it, Mr. Jaekels."

He stood up, his eyes grave and thoughtful. "God knows where you're heading, Peter Worden."

"Maybe," I said. "*Maybe* He knows."

"I surely don't," he said.

"Nor I," I told him. "I'll bet you get to be D.A., though. I'm sorry I couldn't contribute to the climb."

"You're even talking like them now," he said. "You've even got the persecution complex. Come see me about the

permit when you want to carry your ray-blaster, Buck Rogers."

I sat down on the cot and lighted a cigarette. He stood outside looking in at me until the man with the keys came again. He didn't say good-by.

They came around with the chow a little after that, but it was nothing I could eat. And where was Nick's lawyer? Or a bondsman, or somebody who worried about Mr. Peter Worden.

It was Martha who came finally. John's wife and my buddy, the girl with the chestnut hair and the boyish figure and the ready ear for even the corniest of my jokes.

She stood outside the cell door and said, "You're nuts, Pete Worden. Why, why, why are you always in trouble?"

"Hi," I said. "Dey framed me, sis. Dey're puttin' da heat on."

"Oh, Pete," she said, and now both hands gripped the bars. "Murder—Pete—what—"

"Where's John?" I said. "Don't tell me he sent you."

"Of course not. He had to go to Santa Barbara this morning, and he's not back yet. Pete, what *happened?*"

"Believe me, Martha, I don't know. I walked into my apartment this afternoon and there was a dead man in my favorite chair. Beyond that, believe me, I don't know a damned thing. But it happened to *me,* and because I'm the kind of drip I am, I'm automatically suspect. If it had happened to John, they'd have apologized and sent somebody in to clean up the mess. Let's not have any more whys and whos now."

"You're lying," she said. "I can tell. You talk too much when you're lying."

"I'm lying very little, Martha. I don't know who killed him or why he was killed."

"How much will it take to release you? How much bond do they want?"

"I don't know. Don't worry about it. Somebody's probably working on that right now."

"One of your—*friends,* Pete?"

"An acquaintance. Don't make noises like my brother."

"I'll be back," she said. "I'm going up to see the desk sergeant."

She turned, and here was the man with the keys coming along the corridor again. Martha said, "How much bond do they want to release my brother-in-law?"

"I've no idea, lady," he said, "but it's already been deposited." He put the key in the lock, and I heard that always refreshing sound of the opening door.

Outside it was cool, it was dark, and Martha's M.G. was parked half a block away.

I got into it groaning, and she said, "No remarks, please. I already have your studied opinion of my baby."

My opinion was that for a hundred dollars I could have picked up a Model A, for another five hundred converted it for her, and for six hundred then, she would have a jalop that would run this puddle-jumper into the ground.

Of course, there'd be no salesman to call the hood the bonnet, nor gas petrol, nor give her double-talk about how she hung onto the road, being a hard sprung job. Any shocks can be set, and if they can't, you can buy used Hartfords for ten bucks.

"And besides," she said, "John says if things go right, he's going to buy me a Jaguar."

"For nine hundred fish," I told her, "I can buy you a Duesenberg, a 1932 job, delivering three hundred and twenty-eight horsepower, just a little more than twice as much as your *new* Jaguar."

"And will it do over a hundred and thirty miles an hour?"

"I don't know. I've got a friend with a Maling conversion on a Merc that's been *electrically* timed on the flats at a hundred and fifty-four miles an hour. You could get that."

"My," she said, "aren't we indignant?"

"Silly, huh? It's just that I loathe snobbery, and particularly the kind of snobbery that makes you think you can *buy* superiority, instead of working for it. Or the kind of misinformed snobbery that comes from reading

the glossy catalogues with the studied understatement."

"Are we wound up," she said. "A murder hanging over your fair head, and we get the hot-rod lingo."

"It wouldn't matter, kid, about others. But you're so damned *genuine*. You're—oh, hell—people."

"Hey," she said. "Hey, thanks. I'd almost believe you if you hadn't been neglecting us so much lately."

I said nothing. The M.G. went along like a cork in a bottle, in and out, snarling and pooping.

Her eyes were on the traffic. "New girl, Pete?"

"Same girl. New attitude. Now, I'm jealous. Me. Gawd."

"That's bad?"

"Possessive? Me? That's bad. A guy can get hooked that way."

"That's bad, too, getting hooked? Like John is?"

"Like John is, that's good. But, Lordy, sis, what am I?"

"The hot-rod kid," she said. "The All-American boy. First string, too, and practically unanimous. Lover of Saroyan, soldier of renown, fatherless, motherless, chip on the shoulder, ants in the pants, drunkard and bar brawler, dying to be loved."

"Not dying, living. Living to be loved, and as Saroyan says, what else is there?"

"Kids," she said. "Wives. Spraying the rose bushes and meeting the mortgage. Playing golf with the boys and dancing with the wife and half-believing that even over this ridiculous world there *could* be some kind of God. And kids again. How our kids love you, Pete."

"Old Uncle Pete, the licentious bachelor."

No words from her, no words from me. The M.G. went bouncing along Sunset, in and out, like a pony back through the Minnesota tacklers.

Up the drive that led to the proud, fine home, and the lights out, the ignition off, and she said, "I hope John's home. I wonder if he's seen the papers."

We went into the dimly lighted entrance hall, and through that to the living-room, and there was no light in John's study.

"I'll bet you're hungry," she said. "I don't think cook's in the kitchen, but I could make you some eggs, and there's probably some ham."

Ham and eggs in the breakfast nook, and toast, and then we sat in the big living-room, listening to some Gillespie, and waiting for John.

The kids were asleep, the traffic on Sunset was muffled by the long lawn and the big trees and the high hedge. How would it be with Ellen, sitting in a living-room like this, listening to the record player, the kids asleep, the day well spent at labor?

It would be all right. It would be great.

Martha said, "Who paid for your bond, I wonder?"

"Don't pry," I said. "They're not part of this life, Martha. They're my other friends."

"They're not friends," she said. "They're just some squirrels that got into your cage by mistake. And this girl—"

"I love her, Martha," I said.

"Now you love her. But for how long?"

"I don't know. Who knows? Is it something they can give you a guarantee on?"

"I've seen you with her. Some build the girl's got, some figure. Generously endowed in the proper places."

"Smart, too, she is," I said. "She's read a hell of a lot more than I have. Sensitive and a good small-town background. I'm not good enough for her."

And then headlights came into the drive, but didn't continue around to the garage. Footsteps on the porch, in the front hall, and then John stood in the entrance way. And he had a newspaper in his hand.

"In the study immediately, Pete," he said.

Martha started to say something, but didn't. I stood up and looked at John for seconds before heading for the study. He stayed behind a few seconds.

Book-lined, this study. Dickens and Thackeray and the Brontës in the fine sets, always in sets, for John. The modern boys in the two-bit editions for yours truly, but the solid and the dull in the gold-lettered sets for John.

He came in and closed the door and said, "What kind of damned mess is it this time? Have you absolutely no regard for *any* of the decencies?"

I turned around to face him but said nothing.

He was white; he was a ragged shred this side of being out of control. As a kid I'd seen him almost kill another lad one frightening day. But he'd learned control not long after and his temper rarely got out of hand now.

"Damn you," he said, "speak up."

"I haven't got anything to say," I told him. "What would you say if you came home and found a murdered man in your living-room? That's what happened to me."

He stared and stared and stared, and when he finally spoke his voice was hoarse. "Are you trying to tell me it was some kind of damned fool coincidence?"

"What do you mean, coincidence?"

"That a man you struck the night before should just *happen* to be found dead in your apartment?"

"Is *that* in the papers?" I asked. "Does it say I struck him?"

"It doesn't say it's true, but the police have received an anonymous call stating that. And the caller said it happened at a party, a party *Nick Arnold* was giving."

"Anonymous calls," I said, "mean nothing. Even to the police."

"Well—" he said.

"Well, what?"

"Is it true, or isn't it?"

"That's none of your business, John," I said.

He took a step forward, and one fist was clenched.

"Don't be foolish, John," I said. "You're not that good. Since I was seventeen I've been too much for you. And don't think I won't hit you back."

He stared some more, and it looked like he wavered there on his feet. Then he said, "Get out. You'd better get a job. You'll not get another nickel from the estate until you do. I don't give a damn if you starve."

Brother talk. My brother, John. Love thy brother. I turned and went out, and Martha was a ghost in the

living-room.

"Pete, wait, Pete– John, in the name of whatever reason you might have left– Pete, wait– John, for God's sake–"

Crying, Pete Worden crying. Twenty-nine years old and that son-of-a-bitch had me crying. Cold outside, no Santa Ana any more. Foggy. I walked down toward the traffic of Sunset no longer crying.

A spell, a quick flash of emotion because he hadn't asked, or tried to understand, or wanted to believe. He'd just walked in with the big stick and thrown his weight around.

He'd get over it. He's solid and too Republican but he's straight and fair and incorruptible, and he loved me, I knew. And wasn't he my idea of what a real citizen should be? He's my boy, my good old third-string guard, like Chris.

I was a long way from home and this is a place where public transportation is practically nonexistent. I watched the headlights going by and then, from across the street, someone called, "Hey, halfback."

A black Lincoln, its lights off, and I couldn't see the face, but the voice had been Mike Kersh's.

I went across and it was Mike. He said, "I was waiting at the station, but you came out with that doll, so I followed you. You sure get the fine numbers, hot-head."

"My brother's wife. Watch your tongue, slugger," I said. "Are you furnishing me with transportation?"

"Yup. We never did get to that canasta game. You didn't break, did you?"

I climbed in. "No, but I don't know why. What do I owe you, or Nick? You're not my kind of people, as I've been told repeatedly all evening."

"I wonder," Mike said, "who phoned the police." The motor was running, and he moved out smoothly into the light traffic flow. "I've been going over all of them, every one, and nothing comes. It don't seem possible."

"Turn right here," I said. "You can turn on the red."

"Still the funny man." He swung the big black beauty

around the corner, and I wondered if I shouldn't go and see Ellen. I wanted to, more than I ever had before. But this might not be the best time.

"You boys are surely concerned about me," I said. "I'm not used to this much attention."

"Maybe Nick figures to work you into the organization."

"I'm not for hire. No canasta tonight, Mike. I'm going to hit the sack."

I knew I wouldn't sleep, but I didn't want any of Mike's corn-fed philosophy this night.

"Damn it," he said. "It just doesn't make sense. And the knife, and arranging the stiff in the chair like that. What the hell kind of deal is it, Worden?"

"I don't know."

"It gives me the shivers," he said.

My laugh was weary. "You? Gives *you* the shivers?"

"That's right, me. It ain't my kind of operation, and I don't like things I can't understand."

"Mike," I said gently, "libraries all over the world are full of things you can't understand."

"That's different. This is in my line. I don't like things I can't understand in my line."

Down Westwood, past the UCLA campus to the village, and past that, past Wilshire with the pretty Christmas decorations, up the slight grade, to park across the street from the Worden abode.

"Want me to come up and case it?" Mike asked.

"No. Thanks for the lift, Mike."

"I ought to come up. You get bumped, and Nick's going to be hot at me."

"I'm not going to get bumped, not tonight. Thanks for the lift."

I climbed out, and the Lincoln moved away like some big cat, purring off into the mist.

There was a party going on somewhere, yackety-yackety-yackety-yackety-yak. It got louder as I climbed the stairs, and reached its peak at the apartment next to mine.

"Reprints and slow reports, and it's only the beginning. We'll see the half-cent days again and worse. You mark my words."

My neighbor and occasional friend, Tommy Lister, writer for the pulps. Science-fiction and sports and murder and the range; you name it, he'll write it. Three months of champagne, Tommy had had, at MGM and how many years of beer? Good boy.

I'd forgotten I'd locked my door and turned the knob without thinking. The door opened.

Somebody was sitting in the upholstered chair, a magazine in her lap. In a yeller dress, her hair low on her neck, smiling at me.

"You gave me a key once long ago. Remember?"

I nodded, not daring to believe. I said, "Ellen, why— Ellen, are we— Ellen, why?"

"Why? You simple boy. Why?"

I locked the door and took my love in my arms.

CHAPTER FOUR

SOMETIME IN THE NIGHT, I thought of John, his face white. And Al Calvano, his face blank, and the anguished cries of Martha Worden. But these were passing images, mere nothings in the glory of the night.

The murmur next door rose and fell, pulsating, in cadence—the pulps will never die, the pulps are dead, the pulps will never die, the pulps are dead, the pulps will never die, di da da da, di da da da da da, di da da da—

In tune with the universe, in cadence with the infinite, together and alone.

In the morning she was shaking me, and she was dressed like a lady again. She said, "You haven't got a damned thing to eat in this place, Peter Lance Worden."

"We can go out and eat," I said.

"We'll eat here," she said. "Get up and get out to the A and P."

I thought of an old gag and said nothing, just looking at her, smiling.

"Don't grin at me, you Tom cat. On your feet."

"Yes, dear," I said. "Didn't you even make the coffee yet? All my other girls have the coffee ready."

"There is no coffee," she said. "Come on. Move."

"You sound like Detective-Sergeant Hovde, but I'll admit you're better looking. Give me time to stretch, will you? And bring me my cigarettes."

"Before breakfast, cigarettes? What kind of animal are you?"

"An old soldier. It's an old army custom."

"You get your own cigarettes. Please, Pete, I'm starving."

I got up, and there were my cigarettes on an end table. And my copy of *Ulysses*. Three paragraphs of that I'd read years ago and realized it was beyond me.

I said, "I see you've been going up against that Joyce again."

"Not me," she said. "Not at that level. I was reading your *Cosmo*. Who can understand *Ulysses*?"

"Tommy Lister," I said. "And Spinoza, too, he can understand and explain. And Sartre, and like that. He's a bright boy."

"Never heard of him," she said.

"Tommy Lister, the famous author, you never heard of him? You should be ashamed to admit it."

She frowned at me. "Author? What did he write?"

"Oh, *This Way to Mars* and *Deadeye Dick's Last Dish of Prunes* and *Tinsel Tailback*. He's prolific and varied, a real master."

"Oh," she said, "him. The lad next door, you mean."

"Right, princess. Give the lady a box of Jars Bars."

"Next door, Pete," and now she was staring at me. "*Next door,* and he reads Joyce, and your book out of the case, and—"

"Here we go again," I said. "A new role for Irish, the girl of many faces. We present her now as the famous woman sleuth who can take any clue, however small, and build it into any conjecture, however ridiculous. Miss Gallegher can be seen at Fox's—"

"Oh, shut up," she said. "Did you tell the police about the book?"

"I never even noticed it until this minute. Look, lovely, Tommy's murders are all confined to the pages of the better pulps. Tommy is a lad who needs help to butter his toast. What do you want for breakfast?"

"Surprise me," she said. "I surprised you last night. It's your turn."

"I'll get eggs," I said.

The Merc waiting patiently at the curb where I'd left it aeons ago. Grind of the starter and coughing into life, and chopping them off, my Merc with the Creager pots and heads and Edson Hot-Shot Coil.

Into Westwood we sallied, where the filling-stations look like churches, and *Sears Roebuck* looks like *Saks.*

Some rhythm to that, despite the night's depletion. Kind of sharp, I was, this dull morning.

What is called "low, early-morning fog, clearing by noon" had taken possession of the village. The home of the Uclans, the hated Uclans, was shrouded in California dew.

At the A&P I got eggs and rolls and orange marmalade and bacon and coffee and cigarettes and butter and frozen orange juice.

Ellen was in the murder chair, reading the *Times*. The headline was toward me, and read: *20,000 Yanks Battling to Escape Mountain Trap*. It was snowing in Korea, and men were dying.

She had the water bubbling in the coffee maker; I measured the new coffee into the top of it, and connected them.

"Don't you want to know whom I was with, yesterday afternoon?" She was cutting the bacon strips in half.

"He couldn't have been much, I've decided."

"Nick Arnold," she said.

"Well, the majors. Am I supposed to be jealous?"

"Aren't you?"

I didn't answer.

She dropped some eggs into the skillet. She was smiling. "I—didn't know—I mean, when he phoned, I— Pete, he wants you to work for him."

I chuckled. "You thought he was going to pitch the fast one, and all he wanted was a messenger. Oh, what a shock to your fine Irish pride."

"Shut up. You know I love you."

"There are times when I suspect it."

"Don't be vulgar."

"Me? Vulgar? You should have heard the verse I was composing on the way to the store. Stuff worthy of Tommy Lister at his best."

"Pete, be serious. Nick's going legitimate."

"And Taft's going Democratic," I said. "What degree of legitimacy is Nicholas Arapopulus considering?"

"Is *that* his name?"

"It was in Chicago. I like it a hell of a lot better than his new one."

"Pete, he was serious. He thinks a lot of you. He says you've got guts and integrity and a good, sharp mind."

"Did you tell him about some of my other virtues?"

She didn't answer. She put the eggs onto a big plate and put them on the table. She put the bacon on another plate, and unwrapped a quarter pound of butter and put that on a smaller plate.

I sat down on the chair closest to the living-room, and she sat across from me. Stormy, she looked.

"We won't fight," I said. "Not this morning."

"I'm sorry I'm here," she said.

"No, you're not. What kind of business is Nick considering?"

"Sports promotion. It wasn't something I could understand completely. He wants to build a stadium in the Valley for one thing. The Valley is the fastest growing area in the world."

"And a stadium the worst bet a man could make," I said. "For heaven's sakes, hasn't he heard of the television? They'll be playing the games in the studios for the cameras before he gets a stadium up. And besides, the government is cracking down; there'll be no stadiums built for some time."

"Well, that's just one of his long-range dreams, anyway. But there are some fighters he owns what he calls 'pieces of' and he'd like to buy into the Rams."

"Honey," I said, "I—" And then stopped. "I mean, would *you* like me to work for Nick Arnold?"

"Yes."

I ate some roll, some egg, some bacon.

"I don't think you want to work for anybody," she said.

I ate some bacon, some egg, some roll.

"What's wrong with Nick, if he's legitimate?"

"I don't know. I'm no saint, I'll agree. But—his kind of money is—dirty."

"How about the thirteen hundred and eighty dollars

you accepted from his friends?"

"I *took* it away from them. I didn't do anything for it, not for them. I was against them, not for them."

"Aren't you kind of confused?"

"You know anybody who isn't? Certain beliefs I hang onto. It must be the dormant Republican in me. I want to get by *my* way."

"The last of the rugged individualists," she said. "What the Lenin lovers call a fascist."

"You aren't that stupid, honey," I said. "Even when it was stylish, I'll bet you didn't think like those pukes."

"We're getting off the subject," she said. "You do that well. Promise me this much, you'll talk to Nick. Even if it's to say no. Would you do that much?"

"That much and more," I said. "I love you, Ellen Gallegher."

"Easy," she said.

"In the clink I thought of you and pictured us in Westchester, in a small home, kids round the door, maybe an apple tree. Would you pour me some coffee, please, dear one?"

She was pouring the coffee when the knock came at the door.

That was undoubtedly Sergeant Hovde, or someone equally obnoxious and official. And wasn't this a pretty scene to greet his bureaucratic eyes? Me and my babe having breakfast after a night in the hay.

Ellen looked at me and I looked at Ellen, and then she shrugged, so I went to the door.

He was about five feet high, and thin. He had big brown eyes and the complexion of an infant and a mind like Einstein, though he peddled it at two cents a word. Tommy Lister.

His heroes are big and strong and fear no living or dead thing. He looked past me, saw Ellen, and gulped. "Sorry, Pete—no idea you had company. Some coffee, and I— Sorry, old fellow—" He started to go back.

"Tommy," I said, "come back here. For goodness sakes, it's Ellen, not one of those other—kind. Come on

in, and have some of our coffee. You and Ellen can talk about Joyce."

He smiled and came in. "Hi, Ellen. I'm talked out, but the coffee—"

I brought over a chair for him. "I'll say you're talked out. The pulps are dead, they'll never die. What earth-shaking decisions did you and your friends arrive at, Mr. Lister?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "Did we bother you?"

"You're not that naïve, Tommy," I said. "You haven't, by any chance, been browsing in my *Ulysses,* have you?"

"*Ulysses?* Yours? My God, what would *you* be doing with that?"

"It holds my window at the right height. Don't be superior, Tommy; I've read your stuff."

"Low blow," he said. "My round. What was all the commotion about in here yesterday afternoon?"

"Murder," I said, and watched him.

And realized Ellen was watching him. All we needed were cigars in our mouths. He looked from me to Ellen and back, and smiled.

"Gospel," I said. "Haven't you read the papers?"

"I never read the local papers. Pete, this isn't one of your horrible gags, I hope?"

"No," I said, "it isn't, unfortunately."

He sipped his coffee. "Who was it? I mean, you're involved, of course, but— What does a person ask in a case like this?"

"He was a mug named Al Calvano," I said, "a dope addict and a killer. According to the papers, I slugged him the night before last at a party at Nick Arnold's house, and I guess I'm the number-one suspect, though I'm currently free."

"Then you're not the number-one suspect," Tommy said. "How did the man die?"

"A knife in his throat. My steak knife."

"Oh, fine. Your prints on the knife, no doubt. What's this about *Ulysses?* Is that a part of it?"

"No," I said. "Ellen gets these Hawkshaw complexes

at times. She reads a lot of mysteries."

Ellen said, "Somebody was reading *Ulysses*, and it wasn't Pete."

"I'll buy the last part of that," Tommy said. "Were you people trying to implicate me in this bloody mess?"

"Ellen was," I said. "She doesn't like you because you didn't play football. She's always talking against you."

He winked at Ellen. "We won't tell him about us—yet, will we? There are so many things we won't tell him."

And now there was another knock, and I went to the door again.

Squat lad with a crew haircut, well washed and likable lad. I said, "Come in, Chris. What gets you up so early?"

"I read about it, Pete. I thought you might be in trouble. I thought maybe I could—well—" And then he saw Ellen. "Hello, Miss Gallegher." And looked at Tommy.

"Tommy Lister, Chris Arnold," I said, and they shook hands, and I added, "Tommy is a famous author," and ducked the swipe he took at me. "That's for the Joyce crack."

Ellen said, "Would you like some coffee, Chris?"

"No, thanks, Miss Gallegher. I've got to be getting to school. I just thought I'd—well, drop around, you know and see if I—" He shrugged.

"I understand, Chris," I said, "and thanks. It's something I'll remember."

"Sure. Well, guess I'd better— So long. Glad to have met you, Mr. Lister."

"Glad to have met you," Tommy said.

The door closed behind the third-string guard.

Tommy held up one finger. "A football player, right? Though not a star."

"Marvelous, Mr. Holmes," Ellen said.

"Typical," Tommy said.

"I wish there were more like him in the world," I said.

Tommy said, "And less like Tommy Lister?"

"No, no. About the same number of those, a sort of top dressing for the less aged stock. I mean, the way he came in here. Somebody he knew only slightly was in

trouble and—and he dropped by to see if there was something he could do."

"Maybe Papa sent him," Ellen suggested. "Where did you check your cynicism, Mr. Worden?"

"About guys like Chris I'm not cynical. I'm Gene Stratton Porter, when it comes to the Chris Arnold type."

"Cynical?" Tommy said. "What a word to use in connection with Pete. Lord, he's one of the Rover Boys."

"Which one?" Ellen asked. "I read the series, but I don't recognize the character."

"Couldn't we talk about something interesting?" I said.

"We're trying to keep it on your level," Tommy said. "Pete, are you in serious trouble? I realize now it's not something to joke about. But you—didn't seem concerned, and I'm sure none of us are going to mourn the kind of victim you described."

"I'm innocent," I answered. "Maybe that's naïve, as I've been told, but I doubt if many innocent men get sentenced."

"That's naïve," Tommy said, "as you've been told. And particularly if there's an ambitious district attorney involved, and if it should happen to go to Jaekels, that qualification would be met."

"Jaekels talked to me yesterday afternoon."

"Great. But you were released on bail."

"I was."

"Then you're being watched, day and night, I'd guess. Is there any more coffee?"

"I'll make some," Ellen said.

"By the law, I'm being watched then, and probably by one of Nick's men. One of his stooges was with me all yesterday afternoon, right up to the time we found the body here. And picked me up last night outside my brother's house."

"I can imagine," Tommy said acidly, "with your distorted views on loyalty, you didn't implicate Arnold or his men."

"You imagine right. Jaekels would like to nail Arnold,

I know, but I gave him no help there."

"Yes. Of course. Is there some compulsion in you that makes you seek the company of this particular species of rodent? Or is it their wit and charm and the tabs they pick up?"

"Walk softly," I told him. "You're speaking of Ellen's friends."

She was measuring coffee, and she turned to look at me. "*My* friends? I didn't even know them until I got on your merry-go-round, mister."

"I *knew* them, but you love them." I looked at Tommy. "And now she wants me to work for Nick."

Tommy said nothing.

Ellen said, "In a perfectly legitimate enterprise."

We were both looking at Tommy, and he frowned. "Am I being consulted or something?"

"Well," Ellen said, "what do you think of it?"

"I'm not getting involved in family quarrels."

"We would like an outside, an—objective opinion."

"I can only speak for myself. And despite my lifelong and future-certain poverty, I wouldn't work for Nick Arnold if he offered me a million dollars a year."

"Or anybody else probably."

"I worked for MGM, much to our mutual dismay, so that charge is unfair and unsound. Pete would have to believe like Nick believes to work for him, and Pete doesn't believe that way."

"How do you know how or what Pete believes?"

"He's typical, too, just like Chris Arnold is. Only Pete got star billing in two highly publicized current attractions, war and football. And can't settle down to being a fan in a camel's-hair coat."

"Adolescent, you mean?"

"A much used and meaningless word. Pete's standards went out with Hoover and his future blew up at Hiroshima. His God I wouldn't know about. He's a rat in a maze."

"He's not alone."

"More or less alone. He hasn't the capacity to—adjust

is the word that comes to mind. But it's really surrender."

I said, "If you two social scientists wouldn't mind, I'd like to get out from under the microscope." I got up and started to stack the dirty dishes in the sink.

They talked and I worked. They argued about Capote and I washed the dishes and made the bed and once again transformed it into the all-purpose couch it masqueraded as. Their voices rose and fell as I ran the carpet sweeper over the much-spotted rug, ran a grimy dust cloth over the less grimy furniture.

Ellen is a girl whose vertical or semi-vertical moments are devoted to the printed page and she was holding her own with the Brain.

He left, after a while, and I was shaving at the time.

She said, "He's certainly opinionated, that one."

I chuckled.

She said, "Are your tails in presentable condition?"

"My what?"

"You heard me. Nick wants us for dinner this evening. Some friend of Paul's, some literary monster, is going to be there and Nick wants us because he thinks we're literate."

"Oh, no. No,no,no," I said. "Damn it, no."

"And why not, beloved?"

"Haven't I had enough of it this morning? Mi Gawd, you know what a fool I am in that knd of yak-fest."

"You can make your three standard remarks about Saroyan and then talk football with Chris."

"And listen to that long-legged sneer insult his father and his brother and any other morons who happen to be present?"

"Are you speaking of dear Paul?"

"Right."

"He's a good boy, and don't run him down in front of Nick or you'll be a man without a future."

"That's what I am. John says not one penny more."

"More than the hundred?"

"No. Not another cent from the estate, no hundred, no nothing until I get a job."

"Well," she said. "That certainly solves your dilemma. You go to work for Nick in a legitimate job and prove to John that you are ready to unburden him of your *half* of the estate."

I said nothing.

"Incidentally," she said, "what is your half of the estate? And who watches your share of it?"

I inspected my face and found no misses. "John is in complete command."

"He's not only playing with his cards, he's writing the rules. For all you know, he's merrily spending your money."

"Irish," I said, "he's not Nick. That's another world where John lives, and they don't play that way."

"I know which Rover Boy you are now," she said. "You're Dick, the fun-loving one."

I soaked my face in cold water and dried it and hung up the towel.

"You haven't answered me about your tails."

"I won't be using them. I'm not going to Nick's for dinner."

"Pete, please. And you can talk to Nick after dinner and give him your answer. I very rarely ask anything of you, Pete, like this, but please, this time."

I sat on the studio couch and lighted a cigarette. Tried to read the paper but gave it up.

"What do married people do during the day?" I asked her.

"The husband goes to work and the wife listens to soap opera, the way I hear."

"You've never been married, eh?"

"My chest is packed."

"How's that again?"

"My hope chest, vulgar. You can drive me home now. Unless you intend to use me some more, as the gag goes."

"Now who's vulgar? Say, you didn't see my new sport coat." I went over and got the box and untied it.

She said it looked fine, expensive and not too California-ish. She said, "And now you can take me home."

"I thought we could go for a drive along the ocean."

"You can. I'm going home."

"Why? Don't tell me you've another date with Nick."

"Why Nick? Don't get so possessive, darling, not without the ring."

"Blackmail," I said. "All right, let's go."

I took her home and didn't go up. I kissed her on the forehead and said it was all right about tonight and to be a good girl, and then I headed for the beach.

The fog had lifted and we were setting a record, three clear days in a row. If a police car had followed me, it had stayed well hidden. I'm rear-vision-mirror conscious with the Merc, and there'd been no sign of the law. Nor Mike Kersh.

Felt better, somehow, upstairs, more at peace with myself, and why was that? Beyond the obvious, why was that? Was it because I intended to accept a job with Nick Arnold and settle down to the semi-respectability of the Arnold angles?

Would that be the final degradation, working for Nick Arnold, or were there some depths beyond that? I came onto the Coast Highway just north of Wilshire and headed north.

A Cad went by me, logging, and I recognized the plaster job and Jake Schuster. I saw her look around, and then Jake slowed the Caddy, waving and pulling over to the curb.

I pulled up behind, and Jake got out to come back to my car. He was wearing a terry-cloth jacket above, and only swimming-trunks and sandals below. His legs looked like sticks, the knees bulging because of the thinness on both sides of them.

"I think I got a boat race lined up, Pete," he said. "I'm not sure about it yet, but when I am, I'll call you. Cash deal, though, Pete. I'm not booking it myself."

"At Hollywood Park?" I asked him.

"Not there. You'll have to look harder than I have to find one there." He took a breath. "How'd you come out down at the station?"

"I don't know. Here I sit."

"Hovde on it, isn't he?"

I nodded.

"He's a bulldog, Pete. He's tough and smart and a worker. Don't be fooled by his looks. And he can't be bought, either."

I said nothing.

Jake ran a finger along the top of my door. "It just doesn't figure. None of it figures. Nick's going nuts on it. Jaekels had him in this morning; did you know that?"

"No."

"You know him, Deputy D.A.? He's out to get Nick, and he's going to stay with it. Well, Vicki's probably chomping at the bit. I'll call you, Pete."

A boat race meant a fixed race and why would Jake Schuster cut me in on a pie like that? I watched his thin legs disappear into the Caddy, and then the Caddy snorted off in her lordly way.

They were all trying to help me, Nick's friends. Jake and Mike and even Nick's new friend, Ellen. It didn't seem logical they were doing it out of their inherent generosity. Except for Ellen.

I went along the drive, just loafing, about thirty, in the middle lane, while traffic went wooshing by on both sides. The day was fine; there was too much traffic.

At Sunset, where Sunset ends, I turned up and took that for about a quarter mile. And here was a road leading off to the left that I know, a twisting road leading up into the hills beyond the Palisades, the Santa Monica Range.

Up and up and up, turning and twisting, the view of the coast line stretching with each higher glimpse, until I was as high as the good part of the road went.

There's a tired gag, "on a clear day, you can see Catalina," and it was visible today. And so was the whole sweep of shore line from Palos Verdes beyond Malibu. The sunlight making the quiet water shimmer, the traffic like beetles on the highway.

It is not all neon and searchlights and cults and barbe-

cues and ritualistic cemeteries and Hedda Hopper, this town of my birth. There isn't really a damned thing wrong with it except the people who inhabit it. And very few of them are natives.

I guess if Sandburg can see some good in Chicago, that dismal, prairie whistle stop, some equally articulate major leaguer will some day go to bat for my town. It won't be one of the cuties, one of the needle-point workers with lace spats, who's afraid to write beyond his clique. It will need a man not lulled by the opium of his own cleverness.

Could I work for Nick Arnold? A millionaire and more, Nick must be; the future would be secure enough. But how frightened he was, currently, because there seemed to be a leak in the organization. The empire could topple if somebody talked. How secure was that kind of future? Assuming I could overlook the ethical angles, how was it from the economic?

That didn't seem important; the ethical was the big decision, and it seemed strange to me that a boozy quiff hound like Pete Worden could hesitate over an ethical decision. If Nick didn't have it, what in hell was my price?

This thinking's a tough racket when you haven't got the equipment. The low-brows can feel and the high-brows can parrot, but the middle-brow has to make his own decisions.

I still hadn't made mine when I drove back to Sunset. Followed by Mr. Saroyan's tiger.

Back to the Worden rattrap, and trying to nap, trying to read, trying to forget the past two days. The upholstered chair seemed to dominate the room, a new symbol to add to the other three.

So the man was nothing, a brown-eyed rodent out of the city's sewers. But the man was dead, and that's important to society, and the reason for his death should be. Men like Al Calvano had always existed, but not at the current level.

I showered. And shaved for the second time that day,

and brought out the tails and the stiff shirt, the white tie, the forty-dollar shoes. Mementos of a happier time, more formal and secure.

That Ellen. In the boudoir, on the beach, or in front of a book she does all right. This dry evening, she looked divine.

The hair high again, the dress black. The shoulders bare, her chief charms only suggesting an emergence, her smile warm.

"My," she said. "You look like—like Boston."

"You don't look like Eau Claire," I said. "How was the afternoon?"

"So-so. And yours?"

"Lonely." I reached for her, but she moved back.

"You'll mess me, tailback. I want to look pretty." Her voice had some tremor. "Drink?"

I shook my head.

She smiled. "I think that's the first time I've ever seen you turn down a drink. What did you do this afternoon?"

"Tried to think. I'm not very good at it. Let's go."

The dry wind blowing from the desert and the Merc talking to herself, and neither of us voluble.

The big house and the lights on again, but the parking-area almost deserted this evening, holding one car.

Nick stood on the front porch talking to a man as we came up the steps. The man was leaving, and he turned to come down as we came up.

Big man, the Scandinavian cop with the high cheekbones, Sergeant Hovde. He looked at me and at Ellen.

"The upper classes," he said. "I'll want to see you in the morning, Worden. Don't go any place."

"I'll be home," I said.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LITERARY MONSTER was no writer, but a critic, a local critic and a teacher of the significant story, a round, short man with a beard and shiny, small brown eyes.

He wore a dinner jacket and black tie and looked at me as though I'd trumped his ace when we were introduced.

For Ellen he had more warmth.

Nick said, "Professor Arranbee has been kind enough to accept Paul as one of his students. He believes Paul has a lot of talent."

Kind enough to accept Paul. What kind of talk is this, Nicholas Arapopulus?

Then Paul was there, and Chris. Paul looking like Dracula in a rented suit, Chris looking like a lodge-bound Elk.

Nick sat at one end of the table and Ellen at the other. At Ellen's end, Paul and the Professor faced each other; at Nick's end, I looked at Chris. That I can stand.

At Ellen's end the talk was sharp and knowing; at this end we discussed S.C.

They'd had a bad season, my alma mater, and the wolves were beginning to howl. Howard Jones had put the Trojans up there, and what would he do if he were alive today?

"I don't know," I said. "Minnesota didn't have such a hot year, maybe the worst in their history. And Bierman's still alive."

"I think it's a leveling off," Chris said. "I think the giants are on the way out."

At the bright end they were discussing Eliot, T.S. At our end we wondered if Detroit could beat the Bears to avert the play-off with the Rams.

"Those Bears," Chris said. "They've got the Rams'

number. They surely haven't got the boys the Rams have."

At the other end somebody mentioned Saroyan, and I cocked an ear. The Professor said, "Being a private, first class is what killed him, I suppose. He certainly hasn't been heard from since."

Ellen said brightly, "Perhaps Pete would like to contribute something here. Pete's a Saroyan fan."

I looked up the table toward her. My lace curtain Irish tonight. I said, "What would you like to know?"

"We'd like to know why Mr. Saroyan is so silent these days?"

"He's not like other writers," I said. "He doesn't write unless he has something to say."

The three of them smiled patronizingly and went back to their level.

What was she trying to do, get me in solid with the new boss?

"Thirty unhappy years from prudery to degradation," the Professor was handing down. "Fitzgerald was the spokesman for the twenties, but who were the voices of the following decades?"

From our abysmal end Nick got into the act. "The twenties weren't unhappy. That was a happy time, believe me. I was there."

The Professor cocked an eye. "Mr. Fitzgerald didn't seem to think so."

"Don't know him," Nick said.

"F. Scott Fitzgerald," his son informed him, his son Paul.

And now Chris entered the fray. "Oh, him. I read him."

Paul smiled. "Did you really? And could we have your opinion?"

Chris's chin was out and he looked at his brother as though he were the first-string guard. "I'd say he was crying in his beer. He didn't live long enough to see some real trouble. Lost generation— How about Pete's generation?"

"How about mine?" Nick said. "I was lucky."

"You were tough, Pop," Chris said. "You knew how to fight."

"And prohibition helped, of course," Paul said.

"Well," Ellen said, "I must say this is spirited, if not enlightening."

She said it fast, but not fast enough to cover the effect of Paul's words. Nick was blushing again.

"Maybe," I said, "we low-brows had better stick to football."

"Or business," Nick said. "Did Ellen tell you, Pete?"

"She told me," I said. "I want some time, Nick, on it. I can't seem to make up my mind."

"I know what you're thinking," Nick said. "There are men with better names and worse records, Pete."

"I know," I said. "I know, Nick. I'm thinking about it, and seriously."

They were taking care of Hemingway, upstairs. They decided he was all right before he started to beat his chest, before he fancied himself as a combination of Hanson Baldwin and Tarzan. They agreed on that and would send it down to the lower echelons.

Chris winked at me and looked up toward the other end. "Professor Arranbee, there's a question that's been bothering me for some time."

"Yes?" The Professor put his chin up and smiled, waiting.

"Do you think the Bears will beat Detroit?"

Professor Arranbee's smile congealed on his face. Ellen studied her water glass and Paul frowned. I hung onto my chair.

"I—uh—" The Professor shrugged.

It was seconds before they got back to the lighter air, to Kafka and Gide and Roney Scott.

They were still talking when the meal was finished and we went into the living-room.

"You play table tennis?" Chris asked me.

"Not for some time. Give me three points and we'll make it two bits a game."

"Three ways," Nick said. "Winner stands up."

Money in the bank, I figured. Hadn't I been the hot-shot of the local USO before they shipped us to more important battles? Money in the bank.

I figured wrong. That Chris. All the shots he had, spin and drive, chop and blast, backhand, forehand any old hand, driving us long and sucking us short, catching us flat-footed and with both feet in the same shoe at times. What asses he made of us, while the quarters rained down on him.

We had our coats off now. We had sweat running down our backs and sides and necks. It got to be an obsession, putting that stocky master down. We should live so long.

As the man said, if at first you don't succeed, try, try again—and then stop making a damned fool of yourself.

"That's enough for me," Nick said finally, and I agreed.

Chris grinned at us. "You wouldn't want me to be third string at everything, would you?"

Then the three civilized members of the party were standing in the doorway. We must have been something to behold, bedraggled and sweaty.

Ellen had her brick house Irish look. "What in heaven has been going on in here?"

I tried to think of an answer with deep social significance, but all I could manage was, "We've been having fun."

Illegal, it must be, the way the three of them looked.

Nick said, "I've been a poor host, I'm afraid. But—"

It probably didn't occur to him that they'd been poor guests.

I said, "Well, I've got to be running along, Nick. I'll let you know about the—the job."

"It's early," Ellen said.

I was putting on my coat, and I didn't look at her. "Is it? You can stay, if you want."

Paul Arnold said, "I'd be glad to drop you off, Ellen, when Chris and I take Professor Arranbee home." And

looked at me. "If Mr. Worden wouldn't mind?"

"She's all yours," I said, not looking at her.

She said, "Are you annoyed about something?"

Now I looked at her and shook my head, and managed a smile. I said to Arranbee, "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Professor," and shook his damp hand.

Chris said, "You play golf, too, Pete?"

"A little," I said. "Six is my handicap."

"We'll have to get together sometime," he said. "We don't belong to a club, but maybe Fox Hills?"

"Any time you're free," I told him. He and Nick and I were walking to the door now.

My girl had stayed in the game room, proud and miffed. I didn't blame her, but there'd been too many sneers today; I wanted to be alone where I could sulk.

I said good night to Nick and Chris and walked out to the parking-area. I stood there for a moment, admiring the clarity of the night's stars, and then climbed into the Merc and turned on the radio.

Kid stuff, emotional adolescence. Don't cry, tailback; that would be too much. The Merc coughed into life and the radio gave with Goodman. The seat next to me looked suddenly deserted, but I didn't want her there. She puts on too many airs when she's vertical.

It was still dry and unusually warm for this town at night. There wasn't anything to do at home and no reason to go there, but I went. I hadn't had a drink all day and wanted none. Was I settling down?

At home I took a shower and put on a robe over my nothingness. I went next door to knock at Tommy Lister's cave, but there was no response.

I came back and tried to get into Maugham, into Marquand, into Irwin Shaw. They had no hooks for me tonight.

All right, sign up with Nick. He's killed and stolen and bought and sold but you're more like him than you are like your own brother. He's more your kind of people than the people you went to school with, grew up with—and broke with.

You haven't any friends, Pete Worden, get wise to yourself. Acquaintances, yes, but no friends. They're either too smug or too smart or too smelly.

I thought of Tommy Lister, who wrote in one world and read in another. He was a sort of friend to me, but was I to him? When his ego's hitting on all eight, he's a man you want to hit. When things were rough for him, and they so often were, he's a stimulating man to be with.

So put him down as one near-friend, and where's another? Martha understood me, but not like she used to, and I had difficulty at times understanding her.

And Ellen? Let us not think of Ellen tonight.

I decided to go to work for Nick. Nick was no worse than a lot of men they were pinning medals on, and he would pay big money.

Around two I fell asleep.

At eight I was awake and it was another gray day, with early-morning fog which might clear by noon.

The *Times* informed me that the navy was standing by to haul the lads who might break out of the trap in Korea. Mr. Truman was annoyed with a music critic, and told him so on White House stationery. Mr. Pegler was quoted as saying, "Let us pray." To whom, Mr. Pegler, the NAM? Or one of our own gods?

Monart Films was scripting another story of the Elder family because the first five had all made money. The fifth of seven articles trying to explain the Trojans' dismal season was as unsatisfactory as the first four had been.

I was on my third cup of coffee when my doorbell rang. It was Sergeant Hovde.

He looked weary and old.

"I made extra coffee," I said. "How about a cup? Sit down, Sergeant, and take off your shoes."

"I'll sit down," he said. "I'll have some coffee."

"And a couple eggs?"

He sat down at the table. "No, thanks. Friendly this morning, aren't you?"

"I always am," I told him. "People keep pushing me around. Isn't it all right if I push back?"

"You're breaking my heart," he said. "I guess you're clear, Worden. Calvano must have died just about the time you were giving Triangle Loan a bad time." He paused. "You and Mike Kersh."

"Glad to hear my alibi is sound." I was heating the coffee and standing in front of the stove, my back to him.

"It's a dumb move, admitting it," Hovde went on, "because it kind of takes the heat off of you. But I figured you're a lad who can't be broken down by pressure."

I said nothing.

"And you haven't any loyalties, so that's working barren ground. You're a pretty hard man to get to, Worden."

I poured him a cup of coffee, and another cup for myself. I sat down and looked at him. "What can I tell you, Sergeant?"

"Whatever will help."

"You spoke of loyalty. I've decided to go to work for Nick Arnold."

He looked at me a long time. "I've got a boy thirteen, Worden. He'll be interested in hearing that. He's got your picture up on the wall in his room. You and Lujack and Waterfield—"

"He's got me in the wrong company," I said. "I was never that good."

"The kid thinks so. I suppose you think this is horse deletion, huh? Maybe some more cop talk?"

"I believe you, Sergeant. And I'm not working for Nick yet. But what can I tell you? I hit Calvano; for a second, when his head hit the floor, I thought I might have killed him. I didn't. Somebody else did that, and I can't see he's any loss."

"No loss, no. But he peddled narcotics, from one-buck reefers to the finest snow. It's a trade any decent man would despise and any decent citizen help to break up."

"You're saying Nick deals in this—stuff?"

"Not any more, and I don't know if he ever did. Calvano didn't work for Nick, and how he got to that party I don't know. Maybe Nick's trying to go legitimate, but his old friends won't let him. It doesn't matter about that. But there must be things you know you haven't told us."

"I'm trying to think if there is, but I honestly can't, Sergeant."

"Jake Schuster invited you to the party?"

"That's right. Miss Gallegher and I met him in *Tony's*, right off Sunset, there. He was with a—Vicki Lincoln."

"I know the girl. Another marijuana lass. How about Jake?"

"If you mean as a murderer, I can't see it. He phoned me that morning to warn me Calvano was gunning for me. And he phoned Nick."

"And Nick sent Mike Kersh and the two of you found Calvano here in that chair."

I studied him before nodding. I said, "Did I just tell you that or did you know Mike Kersh was with me?"

"I knew it. But getting back to Jake, if his girl had sworn off the weed, say, and then Calvano peddled her some more, Jake would be a hot Charlie, right?"

"I don't think she means that much to him. To Jake, a woman is just something you hop into the hay with."

"And you?"

"Let's stay with the murder, Sergeant. What's my attitude got to do with it?"

"Just wondered." He smiled, and for the moment looked less weary. "So we'll figure the killer came here with Calvano. Or else knew Calvano was heading here. Now we've got to find a man like that—" He paused. "Or woman."

"Vicki Lincoln—" I suggested.

"Or the Gallegher girl."

I shook my head. "That's really stretching, Sergeant. Her I know, and would bond."

"You're young," Sergeant Hovde said. "When you get to be my age, you'll realize the only thing consistent

about people is their ability to amaze you. I'm not counting her out. She was shopping at the time, according to her, but there are some gaps in her story."

I didn't argue with him.

"Any more of that coffee?"

There was a half cup which I poured for him.

He ran a hand over the back of his neck. "Take the first half of that theory, that the two of them came here together. There'd be a chance, with that, that somebody in the building might have seen them come, or one of them leave. Or, even if they didn't come together, they might have seen the killer. I'm leaving some pictures with you. I've shown them to everybody but that poet next door. He was only home once, and I didn't have the pictures then."

"Poet?" I asked. "You mean Tommy Lister?"

"That's it, Lister. He said he was the only poet in America *nobody* understood."

I didn't smile.

Hovde rose. "I'll be seeing you again. Thanks for the coffee." At the door, with fine B picture timing, he turned. "I'll say nothing to my boy about your working for Arnold. Not until it's definite."

"It's definite," I said. "Luck, Sergeant."

What had Jake said about him? *He's tough and smart and a worker and he can't be bought—*

I made the bed and did the dishes and turned on my fine four-tube, ten-dollar radio. I looked at the pictures he had left behind.

Vicki Lincoln, Jake Schuster, Nick Arnold, Mike Kersh, Al Calvano, three assorted mugs. But no shot of Ellen Gallegher. Would she ever amaze me?

I had a little over a hundred dollars left of the six hundred and ninety-eight. And no money due from John. Let young Hovde take down the picture from his bedroom wall, a man has to eat.

Was it my fault they made a cult out of a game, those kids? All the kids from ten to fifty, from the idol-worshipers to the coach-crucifiers; they weren't any relatives

of mine. I'd had no publicity agent; the fans and the scribes had built my image. Let the kid put some *real* heroes on his wall. God knows there were enough of them, and none of them could throw a football.

And I realized it was the image Nick wanted, the image the papers had made with their ridiculous ink. Like the studios, Nick wasn't buying the product; he was buying the publicity.

He'd pay for the image, but I'd be spending the money, so that balanced out. *Try to be realistic, jerk.*

The upholstered chair said nothing, standing quietly in the dreary room, outlined by the gray day behind it. Lister, it had held in its lap, and my love, and Al Calvano, and even John. The upholstered chair had no politics, no favorites, no animosities, no frustrations. It had spots, some of which could have been the blood of Al Calvano.

My phone rang and it was Jake Schuster. "Wright's Widow in the fourth at Vista Meadows, a mortal lock."

"The boat race, huh?" I said.

"The boat race. Everything you can borrow, beg, or steal, Pally, right on her nose."

"A filly, Jake?"

"A mare. What can you raise in cash?"

"I can go for a hundred. I've got peanuts above that. You want to pick it up?"

"A hundred? Take it to Manny over at the Ridge Club. He's not one of Nick's boys."

"Okay. Thanks, Jake. What's the gimmick?"

"How's that?"

"Why this softening of the heart? If we're lodge brothers I never noticed it up to now."

"If you can take it away from somebody else, there'll be that much more for me. Because I can always take it from you." He chuckled. "Maybe I like you. Maybe I'm a real soft guy underneath."

"Pardon my ghoulish laughter," I said. "Anyway, thanks, Jake."

Money in the bank. I counted the money in my wallet

once again. I had a hundred and twelve dollars. I looked up Wright's Widow in the *Times,* in the fourth at Vista Meadows.

Nobody thought much of the mare; the probable odds were quoted at twelve to one. The play would decide the final line, of course, but what difference did it make? It was a cinch. I'd never had a cinch. In this uncertain world my first cinch had to come from Jake Schuster.

The *Ridge Club* was a bar and semi-brothel on Pico, not too far from here. It was now ten o'clock and my four-tube radio was bringing me the news from around the world. I turned it off before I went in to shave.

It was still a dull day as I drove over to Pico. The *Ridge Club* had a big barroom and a small dance area off that. It had a fat and jovial bartender and a smaller man in a small office that led off the end of the bar.

The small man's name was Manny and I gave him the hundred. I said, "Wright's Widow, on the nose, the fourth at Vista Meadows."

"You've got it," he said. "Haven't been seeing much of you, Mr. Worden."

"I haven't been betting much," I lied.

"This isn't a boat race?"

"Give me the hundred," I said. "I don't have to bet here."

He smiled. "Kidding. You've got it. Wright's Widow in the fourth at Vista Meadows on the nose."

I went back into the bar and ordered a beer. There was a mirror behind this bar and I could see the room behind me. I could see the girl at the table reading the paper and drinking a cup of coffee.

Black hair and olive complexion. A full, ripe figure, what I could see of it, and I could remember the rest. From high school. We'd lived in Santa Monica from 1934 to 1939 and I'd gone to high school there. This girl had been in my freshman English class and my sophomore geometry class and my junior economics class and my senior physics class. And in too many of my adolescent dreams.

This girl I'd only looked at and dreamed of and trembled over. Because I was a snot named Worden. And her name was Mary Gonzales.

I turned and took my beer over to the table, and she looked up. I said, "Hello, Mary Gonzales."

"Hello, Peter Worden," she said. "I wondered if you'd notice me. You never did in high school."

I sat down across from her. "Like hell I didn't."

"But you never said hello."

"I know. I was young and stupid. Hello, Mary."

"I've read about you since," she said. "Learn anything, quarterback?"

"Nothing. Except to say hello. You're still as beautiful as ever, Mary."

Tears? Not in Mary Gonzales. Some mistiness, maybe, but no tears. "Against Inglewood," she said. "The way you ran and passed. What a god you were, fast and bright. And what a snob."

I said nothing.

"Is it too late, Peter?" she asked. "Is it too late to go upstairs?"

"I'm still in high school," I said. "Aren't you, Mary?"

"No. But maybe it isn't too late."

I thought of Ellen briefly, and thought of Hovde's saying, *And you haven't any loyalties, so that's working barren ground—*

"Let's go upstairs," I said.

For love or money there is in some a capacity to please. But there'd been too many years since high school for her; she couldn't get back. She held me tight and whispered my name and I tried in my mind to build the illusion, to make this something beyond what the snivelers claim it is. There was no sense of communication, no infinite cadence, no flame, no intimation of immortality.

She was just a well-shaped girl in a dreary room, and I was the slob on top.

I knew what the boys meant now, *it's no good unless it's free.* Name me something free today. Even if it's air

you want, they get hot if you don't buy your gas there.

"It wasn't any good, was it?" she asked.

"Let's not talk about it, Mary. Remember Miss Einrie, the freshman English teacher? What a honey, huh?"

"You ought to look her up. They can't all be bad."

"Don't talk like that, Mary."

"All right. Let's go down and have a drink. Or are you hungry? We've got the best chili in town here."

I was hungry and the chili was good. I had a couple of drinks and so did Mary.

She said, "Maybe you shouldn't have gone past the hello."

"Don't needle me. Or yourself. Whatever happened to your little brother, to Manuel?"

"He booked your bet," she said. "You didn't remember *him,* did you?"

"No," I said, "and he doesn't remember me. I've booked with him before, and he never mentioned high school."

"Why should he? It wouldn't change the odds. What are you doing now, Peter?"

"The same as I did in high school. Nothing. I'm—thinking of taking a job."

"It must be nice to be rich," she said.

"Rich? I've got twelve dollars in my pocket, and I won't have that when I leave here. If that horse comes home, I'll be rich. I'll have a big hatful of your brother's money."

She shook her head. "Horses. Horses and football and what else do you know?"

"I know when I'm getting needled. We still aren't friends, are we?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "What are you hanging around for? We're friends. I'm sorry we couldn't get together, but we're friends. Damn it, what are you dragging it out for? Why don't you go?"

"All right," I said and stood up. "So long, Mary. Take care of yourself."

I paid my bill and the bartender looked at Mary, but

she must have shaken her head. Because I was charged only for the food and the drinks.

I didn't look back.

The grayness was lifting and I wondered if the afternoon would bring that damned dry wind again. It clears the air, but it's too steady and too dry. It will drive you batty if it stays around long enough.

Pico to Westwood, and Westwood home. Nothing to do there but read or listen to the radio. I read for a while and listened to the radio for a while and knew there was something missing, but couldn't figure what it was.

It had to do with this place, but what the hell was it?

And then I remembered what it was. Tommy's typewriter. I hadn't heard it for some time. And I remembered the pictures Hovde had left behind.

If Tommy's typewriter wasn't pounding, he wasn't home generally. At his word rate he has to keep hammering it. Well, when I heard the clatter I'd take the pictures over. Maybe he had a doll he didn't want me to see.

Adam's Joy won the first at Vista Meadows. The favorite, and paid 3.40 for a two-dollar ticket my radio informed me. I left it on that station.

I took a shower. I spent a lot of time in there, and then put on the toweling robe and stretched out on the studio couch. What a fancy name for a double-purpose bed, a studio couch. *Though all beds are double purpose,* I thought to myself, in my vulgar way.

Sleepy, I felt, but couldn't doze. I was waiting for the fourth at Vista Meadows. After that I'd doze.

The money horses in the second were announced, no names I knew.

I thought of Mary Gonzales and then of Ellen, and wondered if she'd be civil if I called.

I got up and called, but there was no answer. Maybe Ellen was out, or maybe Nick was there.

Don't be so scummy, Worden. Don't judge others by yourself. I went over to stand next to the window.

The radio squealed, squawked, and died.

What sweet timing. Sinatra it could bring me, but not the results of the fourth at Vista Meadows. I knocked it and prodded a tube here and there and looked for any loose wires inside. Then I checked the plug and the cord.

It was dead, and there wasn't anything I could do about that.

Tommy had a radio. I went next door to knock, but there was no answer. Maybe he was home and didn't want to be disturbed, but this was important business.

I tried the knob and the door opened. I stepped in and started toward his radio near the desk that held his typewriter. And then almost stumbled over him.

The pulps might be immortal, but this contributor was not. Tommy Lister stared at me from the floor. Tommy Lister was dead.

Take off your hats, you bastards.

CHAPTER SIX

A KNIFE, AGAIN. A knife I didn't know this time, looked like the bone handle of a hunting-knife.

He stared, and I stared, and this time it was different. This time I could mourn.

The same killer because Tommy had known him, had recognized him? Tommy didn't read the local papers. But did the killer know it? I was no cop, and I was reading things into it. He was dead; there'd be no fact as important as that.

He was dead, my near-friend, and I was sick and couldn't move. His typewriter silent, his brown eyes staring, blood soaking the whole front of his white cotton shirt.

Dead, and he never got beyond pulp. Dead in this lonely room next to mine. I wondered how long he'd been dead.

I called the police and went back to my place to put on some clothes. I was dressed when the sirens wailed, when they came.

Cops and flash bulbs and neighbors and reporters and yackety, yackety, yackety, yak. Bedlam I was only half aware of, thinking of Tommy, thinking of that hammering machine now silent, and thinking I killed him.

I hit a man and the man comes for me and is killed. And Tommy sees the killer and is killed. Proximity caused your death, Tommy Lister; I lived next door.

Hovde came after the fuss had died down. He came into my apartment and wrinkled his nose.

"I've been vomiting," I said.

He inclined his head in the direction of Tommy's apartment. "Did you show him the pictures?"

"Never got a chance to. I didn't think he was home. I wouldn't have gone in there but my radio went phooey and I had a horse in the fourth at Vista Meadows."

He sat on the studio couch. His Scandinavian face was as hard as glass. "Still going to work for Nick?"

"No."

"Want to pretend you're going to?"

"No."

"Not even to nail the man who killed that sad sack next door, that innocent bystander, that—poet?"

"No."

"You're as bad as the rest of them," he said. "Nick's not going to crack or spring any leaks in the organization. But—"

"There must have been some leak, or you wouldn't have got the phone call the first time," I said. "But I can't work the way you suggested. I can't believe the end justifies the means."

"What's the means—to keep your eyes and ears open, to squeal only if you learn who killed your neighbor. I'm not asking for any more than that."

"I'm not going to work for Nick. The man next door was more than a neighbor, Sergeant. He was a friend. And I feel that if I hadn't hit Calvano, Lister would still be alive. That I've got to live with."

He rubbed the back of his neck and stared at the rug. "Nothing works with Arnold," he said quietly. "Pigeons or rivals or hoses or deals. Nothing works with that organization. He's solid. He picks his boys carefully, boys with old loyalties and no ambitions of their own. Nick's kind of a freak in his world; he can think. The others just hire smart shysters to think for them."

"And Nick," I said, "doesn't know who killed Al Calvano."

The Sergeant stared at me. "What are you trying to give me?"

"The gospel according to Mike. That knife's given Mike the shivers. He can't understand that kind of kill. And Jake told me Nick's going crazy on it."

The Sergeant was still rubbing the back of his neck, a habit of his. "Well," he said. "So— Damn it, it doesn't make sense."

"That's what the Arnold organization is saying," I agreed.

"That brings it back to you," he said. "That puts you right in the middle again."

"Lucky Pierre," I said, "always in the middle. Sergeant, I'm no killer."

He stood up and went to the can. In a minute he came back and went over to look at my radio. He plugged it in and snapped it on and nothing came forth.

He turned to face me. "What horse did you have?"

"Wright's Widow in the fourth at Vista Meadows."

"Who booked it?"

I just looked at him.

"Don't be stupid," he said. "I'm checking you, not the bookie."

"It still puts him in the fire. Some day you'll be looking for bookies and you'll have this."

"Phone him," he said, "and ask him how the race came out. I'll hear his answer."

I couldn't find Manny listed so I looked up the *Ridge Club*. The bartender answered the phone and I told him my name and asked if he'd call Manny to the phone.

Manny's "Hello" and I said, "Pete Worden, Manny. How did my horse finish?" and handed the phone to the Sergeant.

He said, "Thanks," and hung up.

"Well?" I asked.

"Finished out of the money."

The cinch, the mortal lock, the boat race. Oh, yes—

Hovde was looking at me strangely. "Why do I string with you? Why do I believe in a man with your reputation?"

"You don't seem to. You've just finished checking me."

"Routine," he said. "I've checked you a hell of a lot more than that since this nightmare broke."

"That's why you believe in me, then. You've found out I'm clean."

"Clean—that's some word to use for you. Clean." He started to put his hand to the back of his neck and

changed his mind. "Well, you've told me some things. I'm going to back-track on that knife if I can. I'll be seeing you, Worden."

The door slammed behind him.

I had ten dollars and no money coming in. Jake had given me a cinch. Jake was one of Nick's boys and Nick's boys were fixing me up but good. Why? Assuming Jake was lying about what he knew or believed, why pour it to me? To get me down, down low enough to sign on the dotted line?

I wondered, going back in my mind, if that had been an accident, meeting Jake at *Tony's*. There'd been a pattern ever since. The crap game they hadn't figured, but where was that money now? Jake had taken care of it.

Maybe he'd really believed it was to be a boat race. But out of the money, not even close? Don't try to figure it, fall guy.

Somebody rang my doorbell and I said, "Come in."

He came in and closed the door behind him. Wide-shouldered lad with brown hair and horn-rimmed glasses. Art Shadow, one of Tommy's friends. Art Shadow, Westerns.

"Tommy's dead," he said, and I nodded.

"Jesus," he said. "I can't believe it."

I was sitting on the studio couch, and a wave of dizzy nausea shook me for a second.

He went over to sit in the upholstered chair. He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. His hands dangled. He looked lost. "Died before he was born. What a talent gone to hell."

I said nothing. There was a pressure behind my temples.

"Never had a chance," Shadow went on. "Always three jumps ahead of the sheriff." He seemed to sway in his chair, and then I saw it was a trick of my vision. "What does the law think?"

"It's tied up with what happened here; that seems clear." I felt a throbbing in my temples and rubbed them with the heels of my hands. "I—oh, hell—"

"Don't blame yourself," he said. "I think Tommy was asking for it."

The vision of him wavered, and I couldn't see his mouth move, but his voice came through.

"I think he knew who killed Calvano. And I think he was out for the big buck."

"Blackmail? Tommy? Oh, no."

The vision cleared and the honest, earnest face of Art Shadow came into focus. "Tommy, yes. What did he know but money? Who gave him a chance to learn anything beyond it?"

"Tommy?" I said. "What did Tommy know? What *didn't* he know?"

"You don't *know* what you read. You *know* what life teaches you. In our field, there are only two kinds of stories—the salable and the unsalable. Our highest acclaim is a two word sentence—'It sold.' That's what I mean about Tommy and money."

"You're crazy," I said. "You're running off at the mouth."

"You'd like to believe. And so would I. But he told me he had a chance at a real wad and inferred it had to do with this business in here." He shook his head. "I could use a drink."

I went and got the partially empty fifth. "Just tap water, or would you like a beer?"

"Just a nice, clean shot without water and some beer to chase it home. If you don't mind?"

I poured it for him, and he asked, "Aren't you going to join me? It's your liquor."

"I've just tossed my cookies," I said. "I don't want any now."

He rolled the glass in his hands, looking at it. "I can't get used to the idea of his being dead. It won't settle in my mind." He sipped his drink. "Ten million words, and who'll remember him?"

"You will," I said. "I will."

"Ten million words." He smiled. "Tommy said once that critics should be licensed and one of the qualifica-

tions for the license would be that the applicant had to publish two million words first. Then they'd know what they were talking about, almost."

"Don't be bitter," I said. "Think of the guys who drive trucks."

"Yeh, yeh. Or carry rifles. I'm not bitter. Tommy was bitter but I'm resigned."

Literary yak. Every place I went, literary yak, from the pulps to Joyce. Words, words, words, words—

"I could use another drink," he said.

"Drink it up," I said. "I'm going to try and nap. I'm—sick, Art, soul sick."

He looked at his empty glass. "It really hit you, didn't it?"

"That was part of it, only part. Drink it here, or take the bottle with you if you want, Art. Drink to Tommy. I'm sick." I got a robe to cover me and stretched out on the studio couch.

He was standing at the door now. "Maybe you need a doctor, Pete. You look awfully pale."

I shook my head. "See you later, Art." I turned over toward the wall.

I heard the door close. I heard fragments of conversation from the apartment on the other side of me, radio conversation, a soap opera. I had a nagging throb at the base of my skull and alternate fever and chill. My mouth was brassy, my stomach queasy.

I pulled my knees up close to my chest and rubbed at the base of my skull. The Hovde gesture, only my pain was higher, where the skull meets the neck.

Yak-yak-yak, the voices of the radio. Yak-yak-yak, night and day, the knowing and the numb, the informed and the misinformed, the witty and the witless. They all had words, but who had the music?

Tommy Lister had died before he was born, as Art said. And who doesn't? Only about ninety-nine per cent of us at a conservative estimate. Nausea surged in me and I made the bathroom.

But there was nothing to heave.

The yak-yak louder in here, yak for the yuks. Chills, chills, all chills now. I couldn't feel any worse and Art hadn't taken the bottle.

I poured a shot into half a glass of hot water and put her down into the void. Warmth, it had—and reaction? No, not immediately. It had done no harm and brought some warmth.

I went into the bathroom and waited, but there was no reaction except the warmth. I loaded a dry roll with butter and ate it. And stretched my neck and shoulder muscles, and felt some better, physically.

Tommy on the floor, staring. Some wonderment in the dead eyes. Tommy had to be dead before he began to wonder. After the big buck, Tommy? No, they can't all be corrupt. But was it corruption to try and get some money from a murderer? If you were as hungry as Tommy?

What was the old gag? *Go back, you fool. Go back to Tony's in your mind, and trace it forward from there.* Through Jake and Nick and Mike Kersh and Al Calvano, all friends of Nick. And maybe even Ellen had been an Arnold stooge at that time.

Nick, then, the source of all evil.

I wasn't going to vomit any more; my stomach had lost the queasiness and settled down to a rumble. The pressure behind my temples was still there, but it probably wasn't physical.

Theories I had, but how much fact? This much fact: I was down to less than ten bucks. And I wasn't going to John about it. I had enough equity in the Merc, now, to get some money out of that if I grew too hungry. But that would be the last resort, peddling the Merc.

Well, punk, there's nothing subtle about you; play it the only way you know. Somebody's been putting the heat to you, and it looks like Nick. Somebody has been pulling strings and Tommy Lister just died next door because of that. If you think it's Nick, face him. He only weighs about two-eighty.

Christmas decorations practically all the way. From

Westwood to the Valley, and I could hear in my mind the newcomer's complaint: "It just doesn't seem like Christmas without snow." There'd been no snow where He was born, but it just doesn't seem like Christmas without snow, they said.

The magazines had taught them to expect snow around Christmas because all the ads showed snow on the windows or snow on the new skis or around the new Buick. The dream was gone, buried in words and snow. Who'd killed that dream? All the dreams we gullibles had cherished, who'd killed them? And what had they given us in place of the dreams? Words. Bitter words, clever words, words of protest and significance, words they had learned from reading other men's words, who, in turn had learned from other men's words, *ad nauseam.* But no dream.

Tommy Lister had published ten million words and died wondering.

Oh, Lord, if You exist, and there is incontrovertible scientific evidence to the contrary, but if You do, how about a *Word?* Not for the wise or knowing, the bitter or disenchanted, and not through the regular channels. The regular channels are too busy with bingo or major league conversions, amalgamations and new steeples. They took away our rock and gave us words.

A *Word* we jerks can understand, an understandable word for the ninety-nine per cent of us who die before we're born. Please, dear Lord, if You can find the time?

The rush-hour traffic had thinned some, but there was a steady stream on Lankersheim, one of the arteries in the fastest growing area in the world. Buy now and get yours; this area is booming. Nothing down and forty-seven dollars a month to GI's who served their country well and got the proper discharge. A few escrow charges and some waiting and you have eight hundred and fifty square feet of tract home, because you deserve it, having served your country well.

At some small profit to ourselves, of course. We're not in this business for our health.

Growing dark, and some lights on at Nick's. The murmur of the Merc died with a sigh, and I was walking up the flagstone path that led from the parking-area.

Paul came to the door. He was smiling.

"Your dad home?" I asked him.

He nodded. "He and Chris are going around and around in the library. Come on in, Pete."

Words as I came into the living-room, but nothing I could understand though I could feel the heat in them. Chris and Nick going around and around, just out of recognizable hearing.

I sat on a love seat, and Paul sat on the big circular davenport. There was an open book, face down on the coffee table in front of him. He'd been reading, and I wondered what he'd learned.

He said, "Chris wants to quit school and join the army. Dad's furious."

"How about you?" I asked.

"I don't know." Behind the glasses his eyes were grave on mine. "You don't like me much, do you?"

"I don't know you very well, Paul."

"Well enough. I'm standard. A wise punk. I guess nobody likes me much."

"Maybe your IQ's too high," I said. "By the way, what is your IQ, Paul?"

"I don't know. I haven't had a test since I started prep school. I was the highest in the school there." He smiled. "I say, modestly."

The sound of Chris and Nick back and forth.

I said to Paul, "You do a lot of—of sneering. That could be one of the reasons you don't get along with the yuks. They know they're inferior without your telling them."

"Do they? I can't throw a football or bat over .300 or dance or swim or make light talk with the ladies. All I can do is read and sneer."

"That's good training," I said, "if you're going to be a writer. Lots of the boys in the game are making a mint on sneering in print."

"And with reason," he said.

"Some. Why is Chris so hot on joining now? They'll get him soon enough."

"He doesn't want to be 'got,' he wants to volunteer. He says that's important."

"To him, now. But after he's in he'll learn that only the dupes volunteer for anything. When it comes to war, his Uncle Sam will be glad to take the burden of decision away from him."

"Oh," he said, "Chris is—emotional. You know, he's still kind of gullible."

I nodded. "I know. You're not, though, are you?"

"I try not to be. I'm probably just as confused as Chris is, but I don't see any reason for showing it. As Dad would say, what's the percentage in that?"

Hovde had said the only consistency in people was their ability to amaze you. Paul hadn't done that, but he'd shown a new facet.

I said, "You're not as obnoxious as I first imagined, scholar."

He smiled. "Thanks, halfback—or were you a quarterback?"

"Tailback," I said. "Paul, if you can hold back the sneer for one more second, could I give with a bit of real corn?"

"I'm listening."

"There's an old gag, sad and lop-eared, you might not have heard. But it applies, I think, to Professor Arranbee. It's this, 'Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach.' Don't believe everything you read or hear, Paul."

"I don't," he said. "And that's why I'm thinking of joining up with Chris. This one I'd like to see. About this one I'd like to say, 'I was there.' But I think I'd better wait until Dad cools off a bit."

"A good idea," I said.

No more words from the library, and now Chris came into the living-room looking like he'd lost the first round.

"Pete," he said. "Hey, it's good to see you, Pete."

He came over to shake my hand.

"I came to see your dad," I said. "Would you tell him that, Chris?"

"Don't need to," he said. "Walk right in, Pete. You're always welcome with Dad."

Oh, sure. Hell, yes. I went the length of the living-room to the open study door and saw Nick behind a desk in there.

He saw me and stood up, smiling, and I came in. I closed the door behind me.

It could have been John's place in Beverly Hills. Dickens and the Brontës and Thackeray in the gold-lettered sets. All the trappings of the solid citizens at so much a set. Culture for your shelves.

I wasn't smiling, and Nick's faded and his eyes grew thoughtful. He looked like a mountain behind that desk.

I said, "A friend of mine's been killed, Nick."

"So. Lots of my friends have been killed."

"I want to know why, Nick." Who'd said that? Sherwood Anderson.

Nick sat down and gestured that I should. I did, keeping my eyes on his.

"I don't know why," he said. "You mean this man—this—"

"Lister, Tommy Lister. Lived next door to me."

"Hovde was here about it," Nick said. "I don't know why he died, Pete. And I don't know why Calvano died. Nor who killed them. But I mean to find out."

Was he lying? His face open, his voice clean, his eyes steady. But with an operator like this how would you ever know unless you caught him in the lie?

"Let's leave that for a second," I said. "Let's get to me. I seem to sense a pattern in the things that have been happening to me. I seem to feel your fine hand in my life."

"Could be," he said. "Nick moves in a mysterious way. Come to get me?" He paused and smiled. "Or sign up?"

"I'm not signing up," I said. "What in hell do you want me for?"

"You're just the kind of boy I need. Good name, good brain, loyal, tough, honest."

"Honest? What the hell would you do with an honest man?"

"Give him a partnership."

The words went around in my head, making no sense. What kind of talk was this?

He was smiling again. "Not in the whole wad, Pete. Just in the *Arnold Sporting Club*. I'll put about a half million into it to start. There'll be some sugar in it."

That was some plum to dangle in front of a man down to ten bucks. I said nothing.

"Legitimate," he said.

I said nothing.

His smile was now a grin. "You can't have a hell of a lot after that cinch Jake gave you this morning. I'll bet you think I'm some bastard."

"You stagger me," I said. "You're a mountain of bastardy. And Ellen, too, you worked through."

He shrugged. "Ellen's sweet, but even the bright ones love that green stuff. She'd like to see you rich. And she'd like to wear your ring. You can't do any better than Ellen, Pete."

Why didn't he wear horns and carry a pitchfork?

He said, "Legitimate, if anything is. My money's dirty but all big money's dirty, isn't it? What makes it different with me? They played by the rules and I didn't. But they made the rules. That'll be the day I play by another man's rules."

"Some of the rules are still mine, Nick," I said. "I can't go in with you." I took a deep breath. "I could have, yesterday, but not since Tommy Lister was killed."

"I didn't kill him or have him killed."

"How do I know? Don't tell me you wouldn't lie about it if you did. How am I going to know?"

He was silent for seconds. And then, "All right. Listen to this. You want to know who killed them. I want to know. It's worth money to me to know. I'll pay you to try and find out."

"Nick," I said, "what makes you think— Oh, for heaven's sake, what do you think I am, Dick Tracy?"

"Mike will work with you. We know some things the law might not know. Mike will handle the heavy work. I just want you with him in case there's some thinking might be needed."

"You're really spinning that web, aren't you?" I said. "And a fly like Pete Worden can't be worth that much work."

"I even mentioned it to Hovde," he said. "Hovde seems to think a lot of you. I guess everybody does."

"You mentioned that to Hovde?"

"Why not? This town's too big; it's spread too much for the number of cops they've got. I thought it was a good idea."

"What did he think?"

"He laughed at me naturally. He's honest, that Hovde, and he was looking for the angle. So he laughed, until he can figure the angle."

"And what is the angle, Nick?"

"There is no angle."

A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations, Nicholas Nickleby, Oliver Twist, Our Mutual Friend— Just like in John's study. My brother Nick.

"I'm not such a bastard," Nick said.

"I'll buy that for the moment," I said. "I sure can't figure you."

"Who can? That's why I'm rich. Expenses, Pete."

I looked at his desk where he'd thrown some fifty-dollar bills. Six fifty-dollar bills—three hundred fish.

I looked at them, and at him. "Are you buying me? I never have discovered what my price is, Nick, but it would be above that."

"You haven't got a price," he said. "If you did have, I wouldn't be interested in you. That's so you don't go hungry while you're looking for a killer with Mike. Guys like you I don't want to ever see hungry."

"Next week, East Lynne," I said. "What in hell is the angle?"

"You cynical son-of-a-bitch," he said. "Why don't you grow up?"

I leaned forward in my chair.

"Don't get simple," he said. "I could kill you with either hand."

And he could. I knew it, he knew it; flexing my muscles was only an involuntary action, leading nowhere.

I looked at the three hundred again. I said, "We'll pretend Wright's Widow won the fourth today at Vista Meadows."

He laughed. "Pete, Pete, Pete—" He watched me pick up the money. "You want a gun?"

"Not until the army gives me one."

"That," he said, and took a deep inhalation. "Pete—would you talk to Chris? He's got some screwy idea he ought to sign up. Could you tell him how it was, what it will be?"

"Every man's got his own version of it," I said. "I'll talk to Chris, but I'm not much of a lad for advice."

"Just talk to him. Try and see what's driving the kid."

"Were you in either one of them, Nick?"

"The first one. My name was still Arapopulus and I was a sucker for flags and bands."

"You cynical son-of-a-bitch," I said, "why don't you grow up?"

He smiled. "Counter-puncher, aren't you?"

"When did you trade the dream in for the angle, Nick?" I asked him. "When did you join the throng?"

"When I traded the Chev in on the Caddy and changed my name to Arnold." He came around the desk. "Have you been sick, Pete? You look like it's been a bad day."

"It's been one of the all-time-low days. I don't know if I'm still sick or just hungry."

"Eat with us," he said. "I want my boys to look at you."

"Now I know where Mike gets his corn. Okay, I'll eat with you. There'll be no thirty unhappy years from prudery to degradation to listen to, I hope."

"Hey, how about that Arranbee? He sure could sell oil stock, right?"

"That's what he's doing," I said.

"Say," he said, "why don't you call Ellen? Tell her to grab a cab and we'll make a party out of it."

"I tried her this afternoon. I don't know if she's home."

"She's home. Call her."

"Yes, boss," I said.

She wore the yellow dress, this being informal. Her eyes avoided mine at first when she came into the living-room, but I was talking to Chris and I pretended I didn't notice that.

Just being in the room with her I felt better and worse. Better because I knew she wasn't with someone else and worse because I'd been rude to her last night.

Chris was saying, "This is no life, waiting, waiting, wondering what those damned Commies are going to do next. I'd rather be some place where I can do something about it. Talk, talk, talk—what do those bastards do but talk and what do they understand but power? Pop's wasting his money, sending me to college; I'm never going to be his bright son."

"They'll call you when they need you, Chris," I said. "You've got to believe the boys in Washington know what's best. You've got to believe, no matter what your party, that all of them are sincere when they're playing for these kind of marbles."

He looked at me. "Do you believe that, Pete?"

"I believe that."

"You enlisted last time, didn't you?"

"So, I'm punchy."

"I don't think you're punchy," Chris said. "I think we're a lot alike, even if you can't play table tennis. And I'm not punchy. I'm ignorant, but I'm not stupid."

"I'm ignorant, and stupid, too," I said. "Why, Chris, I had a girl would make you drool, up to last night. And then I went and acted like a spoiled child of six and—"

I looked over to where she was talking with Nick and

Paul, but there was no sign she'd heard me.

Chris said, "Do you mean Ellen Gallegher? Hey, that's *my* girl." He almost shouted it.

Miss Gallegher gave no sign.

"I'll play you a game of table tennis for her," Chris said. "Winner take all."

"Give me eleven points," I said.

He only beat me twenty-one to eighteen. I'd made seven points while he'd made twenty-one.

So he sat next to Ellen, with Paul on the other side and I sat next to Nick.

Miss Gallegher was civil as the small talk went here and there while the onion soup went down. Miss Gallegher answered when spoken to by me and spoke without reservation to the others. My lady was still miffed, and be more thoughtful in the future, Mr. Worden. I'm not some tramp you picked up on one of your binges. I can do better than you, if I so desire.

Please don't so desire, Miss Gallegher; I am properly humble, chastened, and miserable. Give me a break, Miss Gallegher.

Paul and Miss Gallegher were discussing Hindemith and throwing the musical terms around with fine abandon. Nick was telling Chris about the fiendish cruelty of first sergeants, past, present, and future. Mr. Worden was eating his filet and broccoli Polonaise and mixed green salad with garlic dressing just as though he hadn't been a sick man a few hours back.

And wasn't heartsick, even now. Speak to me, if only with thine eyes, my Eau Claire beauty. Look my way and smile.

Nope. If she didn't intend to be nice, why had she agreed to come? Because Nick was throwing the dinner, because it was at his house? Or because I was here, and she'd assumed I'd finally sold out, like she'd wanted me to?

Who can understand women? To hell with her. To hell with all women. Feed 'em beans, to hell with 'em. Nuts to you, Miss Ellen Gallegher. Who won the dress

you're so proud of? You and your fine words and graceful phrases. Paul should know you at your best. Hah. Front, front, all front in more ways than one.

"Pete," she said.

"Yes, darling. Yes, honey, sorry, I didn't know you were talking to me. What, dear?"

Her face no colder than a paddle pop. "I was telling Paul about your new sport coat. Where did you get it?"

"At *Poole's.*"

"Thank you."

Back to Paul and dialogue not meant for the ears of Mr. Worden. From sport coats, they went up the ladder to Albright, Shahn, Hopper. I'll bet they didn't even know that Bob Fitzsimmons won the title at thirty-five years of age. Ruby Bob, and what a lad—

After dinner we went into the living-room and relaxed with brandy and Mr. Mozart. *Don Giovanni*—all of it.

The lights were dim and my love at some distance. The escapades of that great seducer and all around rogue, Don Giovanni, came to us from the Capehart, and his final and inevitable destruction left the room thunderously quiet.

Ellen rose and said, "It's been a trying day. I'm afraid I'll have to be saying good night, Nick. And thank you very much."

"You'll take her home, of course," Nick said to me.

"Of course," I said. "If she doesn't mind?"

"I don't mind," she said.

Shaking hands all around, and Chris said, "Don't forget. Golf one of these days."

"Three ways," Nick said. "Half a dollar a hole, double on the birds."

Not a clear night. The stars not visible even up here in the Valley, the fastest growing area in the world. My girl walking silently by my side and my Merc waiting patiently.

"Are we annoyed about something?" I asked.

"No."

I held the door open for her and she got in. I went

around to my side and climbed in. "What were you trying today?"

"Trying?"

"You said it was a trying day. Were you trying a new boy friend, for instance?" The Merc was going down the drive.

She shook her head, staring out through the windshield.

"A new hat, or shoes. You weren't home. I phoned."

"Did you?"

"You—heard about Tommy, of course?"

"Tommy? Tommy Lister? What about him?"

"He was murdered today. Didn't you know that?"

"Pete— Pete— My God, Pete—what is—"

I didn't look at her. "Nick wants me to work on it with Mike Kersh. It sounds silly, but I said I would. But I'm going to talk to Sergeant Hovde about it first."

"Tommy Lister," she said quietly. "Of all people, why Tommy Lister?"

"He probably saw the killer come into my place. One of his friends thinks Tommy might have been blackmailing the killer or trying to."

"Oh, no," she said. "That doesn't—that isn't— No."

Very little dialogue down the Pass, or along Sunset, or down the hill to the paint store. Unusually quiet, both of us.

I pulled around in a U-turn and in front, but left the motor running.

"Well, good night," I said.

"Not here," she said. "This is no place to say good night. Come up and hold me, Pete. Hold me tight. I'm scared, and lonely, and I've been blue."

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN THE MORNING the papers were full of it. The knife angle made it worth the extra ink and the fact that Tommy must have been an innocent bystander. And the universal dread that some kind of human beast was at large in the town, some *special* kind.

This is a town alive with beasts and perhaps the knife wielder epitomized all of them in the public mind. He (or she) could be the symbol for all their enemies, real and imaginary.

The papers would get letters and the police would get letters, indignant letters, fury masking the fear of those who wrote. Indignation clothing their own self-identification with the killer. In an unhappy time, people write a lot of letters to editors.

Ellen said, "Do you remember when papers were fun to read?"

"Just the funny papers. Why was yesterday a blue time?"

"I don't know." She poured more coffee. "I was home all day. I didn't answer the phone."

"Nick knew you were home. How did he know it?"

"I phoned him and asked about you, if you'd called him. I told him I'd be home."

"He offered me a partnership in a business he's going to capitalize at a half million."

Ellen's coffee cup rattled on the saucer. "Pete— A partnership?"

"Right."

"Pete." She stared at me, her thumb and forefinger still on the handle of the coffee cup. Her eyes were asking the big question.

I don't like to lie, but I didn't want to bicker now. I said, "I haven't decided. Maybe he'll up the ante."

Her eyes went past me. "A half million."

"It won't break him. There's plenty more."

Her eyes came back. "What do you imagine he's worth?"

"A few million. Who knows? You could probably get a credit report on him if you knew the right people."

"Don't be nasty. And besides, I don't know the right people."

"Now we're even," I said. "Kiss me good-by. Mike is probably waiting at my place for me right now."

She came with me to the door. "Pete, watch your temper. Be very careful, won't you?"

"Yes." I put my hands on her shoulders. "Where are you heading, Irish?"

"I don't know. The folks keep sending me money. I lie to them, Pete, in my letters. They want me to come home."

I said nothing.

"But I'm not going. Not back there. Be careful, Pete."

"Sure." I kissed her.

Sure, look carefully for a killer with Mike Kersh. Don't stick your neck out; the knife is waiting. Move quietly, like the killer.

Clear day and lots of traffic. Christmas shoppers. I simply won't go above two dollars for Aunt Minnie. Your father can always use shirts and socks, don't be silly. These aren't times to be silly or extravagant, Egbert. These are bad times and socks will serve for your father. Merry Christmas, Father, look at the lovely socks Egbert bought you.

Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.

In Korea, there was snow for Christmas. The boys were sleeping in the snow. In the UN the Bear huffed and puffed and the little Bears mimicked him. Huffed and puffed, smiled and scowled, and uttered but a single word.

The word was *No*. The little Bears learned the word and there were the few *Noes* against the chorus of *Yesses* but the big *No* gave the Bear time. And the blackness of the Bear spread throughout a formerly free

world. And brave men died, resisting that black spread.

And others went yackety, yackety, yackety, yak. Words, to a threat that had changed the meaning of all words, to an organization that had established a new school of semantics.

Merry Christmas.

The Lincoln wasn't waiting in front, nor one of Nick's Caddys. The M.G. was in front.

Martha wore a sweater and skirt, pale green. Martha's face was thin and pale, tilted up to mine.

"I've been waiting two hours. Come home, Pete."

"This is home."

"Out all night, Pete?"

"Are you your brother-in-law's keeper, Martha Worden?"

"We're more than that. You're my brother, Pete. You're my son. You're my boy, Pete."

"You're made in His image, on the distaff side, Martha Worden. But I can't come up to Beverly Hills right now. There's work to be done. I'm going to work."

"For whom, Pete?"

"For the law, more or less. For the anti-killers."

She stared at me, trying to read things I hadn't said in my face with the bent nose.

"Pete, you're all right."

"Nobody's all right. I'm as all right as the next man. Don't worry about me. I've got three hundred and ten dollars in my wallet and a momentary mission. And a sudden hope for the world."

"Hope, Pete? What hope?"

"Hope for a world that still holds Martha Wordens."

Crying, she was. Her fine face tilted up to mine, the clear eyes wet. "You're—driven, aren't you? You're like a—a doomed man."

"Don't cry for me, honey," I said.

Big tires on the pavement, and I turned to see the black Lincoln come to a stop across the street. We watched Mike Kersh climb out and then I heard the M.G. pop into life.

I looked back and Martha's smile was tight. "Your friend, Pete. Take care of yourself. Call us if you need us."

The little car moved away and Mike was standing next to me.

"I've got to shave," I said, "and check the mail. You can come up and read the *Times*."

He was not voluble this morning. He looked puzzled and grim. I'll bet in his younger days he was a terror in Chicago.

Christmas cards in the mailbox. People I remembered dimly and people I knew well. One card from Joe Devlin, the one-armed night watchman in Milwaukee.

He'd scrawled a few words below the Merry Christmas:

This town's knee deep in snow. You lucky stiff.

You're right, Joe, I'm lucky. If you want to cry, cry for Joe Devlin. Or Martha Worden or Tommy Lister. Don't waste your tears; you'll be needing them. Ration them for the worthy.

"A knife again," Mike said. "What kind of people use knives?"

"Scared, Mike?" I asked him.

"I'm—nervous."

We came into my humble abode, and he sat on the studio couch while I prepared to shave.

"You've probably scared a few in your time, too, Mike," I said. "Though not Mickey Walker."

"I never fought him," he said. "Only in my dreams, and there I won. I never scared anybody that didn't have it coming."

I ignored that. "What are your plans?"

"Dope, we've been figuring, Nick and me. We know a guy here and there and we'll bounce 'em around, you and me."

"First," I said, "I talk to Hovde about it."

"You crazy? Nick didn't say nothing about Hovde."

"I'll do the thinking, Mike," I said. "Nick told me

I'd do the thinking."

"I'm going to call him," he said.

"Call him." I had my face warm and wet now, and I was rubbing the lather in.

I heard him call and ask for Nick. I heard him state his case and then, "Okay, Nick, if you think— Okay, Nick, don't get hot."

I whistled as I shaved.

"You think you're something," he said.

"Nick must, too. Unless there's an angle. Call the west side station and see if Hovde's there, Mike."

He looked at the phone. "It would be the first time in my life I ever called the law," he said.

"What do you want, a trumpet flare? Call 'em."

Hovde wasn't there. They didn't know when he'd be in. Yes, tell him Mr. Worden called, Mr. Pete Worden.

Mike looked shaken when he put the phone down. He stared at it as though it were a snake.

"Well," I said, "where to?"

"Downtown," he said, and turned toward the door.

Someone knocked and then opened the door. It was Art Shadow, the Western writer.

"I've been thinking, Pete," he said.

Mike looked at him curiously and I introduced them. Then I asked, "What have you been thinking, Art?"

"That Calvano who was killed. He peddled dope."

"So."

"Tommy inhaled the hemp at times. This Calvano sell reefers?"

Mike nodded. "That was his big item."

"I was thinking there could be a connection," Art said. "Though that's as far as I could think."

"We've been thinking along those lines ourselves," Mike said. "You know the name of the guy Lister bought from?"

Art shook his head. Behind his glasses his blue eyes were thoughtful. "Maybe some of the other boys would know, though."

"Try and get their names, Art," I said. "Drop in or

phone me if you learn anything, won't you?"

He nodded. "I wired Tommy's dad. He's due here this afternoon."

Someone else to remember Tommy. He'd never mentioned his parents to me.

Nobody said anything for a few seconds and then Mike said, "Let's go."

The three of us went down together, and I asked, "Drop you anywhere, Art?"

"Not unless you're going near the *Ridge Club*. Do you know where that is?"

"I know," I said. "It's not on the way, but we'll take you there. Placing a bet, Art?"

"Bet? Oh, no, I never bet. I've got better things to do than bet on the horses."

The Lincoln went purring along, nobody saying anything. I was thinking of what a day yesterday had been. No wonder I'd been sick. Just looking back on it now made me sick.

I asked Mike, "Do you know where the *Ridge Club* is?"

He nodded. "Nick used to have a piece of it."

A piece of it. A piece of a fighter and a piece of a joint and a piece of a crooner or a play or a corporation. Wasn't anything *whole,* any more?

Down Westwood to Pico and stopping in front of the *Ridge Club*. Art said thanks, and we nodded and I tried to look in to see if I could see a girl reading at the table but the place was too dim.

"May as well take Olympic down," Mike said. "That's about the best."

"You can make those minor decisions," I said.

He had no answer. He handled the Lincoln with skill and imagination and care, cutting back on Westwood to Olympic. And heading downtown.

I said, "Vicki Lincoln uses marijuana."

"Vicki—who?"

"Jake's girl. Jake Schuster's girl."

"Oh, that thing. Jake sure picks 'em, eh?"

I didn't answer. Purring along, artery after artery, making the green almost every time. There are people who have lived in Los Angeles for years without ever seeing the downtown section. There wasn't much reason to go down; in the city's four hundred and fifty square miles, each section has a shopping-center, almost equal to downtown. It was more a collection of shopping-centers than a city.

Right off Central, a lopsided building holding a passport photo shop and a pawnshop and a bar. Two-story building of frame, old and tired.

We went into the photo shop. Art studies, seven for a dollar; burlesque queens all over the place. Practical joke gadgets, and undoubtedly, under the counter, the kind of photos that kept the place going.

The girl was stringy and taut faced, her hennaed hair just this side of orange. The sweater she wore was so tight even her lemon-sized breasts were outlined. Dried up, worn out, and her voice a shrill nasal.

"Pictures, boys?" Her smirk grotesque.

Mike shook his head. "I'm a friend of Al's, Lily."

Her eyes seemed to eat him. "Al who?"

"Never mind the sparring, Lily. Who got to him? You'd know."

"Would I? I don't know you." She was backing toward the counter.

"My name is Mike Kersh. I work for Nick Arnold."

Her hands gripped the counter behind her. "Nick Arnold—" Fear and hate in her voice. "And you ask me who killed Al? Why are you asking me?" Her thin body rigid as rock.

"Nick didn't kill him or have him killed. Lily—"

A string of profanity came from her lips, and saliva flecked them.

Mike reached out swiftly and his heavy open hand caught her along the jaw.

She took a sideward step, and then her hand went to her cheek and she stared at him, her mouth open.

"Easy, Mike," I said. "She wants to help. Give her

time to believe in us."

Her eyes came around to me and then grew wider. "I know who you are," she said. "Your picture was in the paper."

I nodded. "I had nothing to do with it, Lily."

Her hand came down from her cheek. "I don't know anything. You put a hand on me again, I'll scream. I'll get the cops."

"Get 'em," Mike said. "Get 'em, if you want. I'll show 'em where you keep the stuff. And the pictures, too. Go ahead, call the cops."

"Why don't you leave me alone?" Her hands were back to the counter again. "I don't know Al's business. Why don't you leave me alone?"

I said quietly, "What made you think Nick should know about it?"

"You hit him at Nick's, didn't you? Nick didn't invite him to the party; he just heard about the crap game and went up there. Nick was mad, maybe, because he wasn't invited. I don't give a damn. He's dead now. I don't give a damn."

I asked, "Was Tommy Lister one of your customers, Lily?"

"Never heard of him. I never heard of nine-tenths of Al's customers. He was out all the time. We weren't married, you know. He's got a wife. Why don't you talk to her?"

"Why should I? Al didn't for five years. Lily, you're playing it dumb." Mike's chin was out. "We're not the law, you know. We pay for what we want to know."

"With a slap in the jaw, you pay."

"So, I'm sorry. You called me names. Did I call you names? We'll pay, Lily."

"I haven't got anything to sell. He said he was going up to Nick's and coming back with a wad. And then we were going to take a little trip. He'd been promising me a trip for six months, since we came back from Mexico. That's all I know. That's every bit of it."

Mike looked at me and I shrugged.

"The law was here," she said. "And I didn't tell them that much."

Mike took a twenty from his wallet. "Okay. Lily, if you really had something, something that would help, you could take a trip to Paris. Nick wants to know about this. You see any of the boys, tell them Nick is paying for information."

Her hand came out for the twenty and snatched it. "If I see anybody. I had enough of the boys. But if I see anybody—" She crumpled the twenty in her small hand.

I said, "Did Al come home after the party?"

She nodded.

"Without the wad?"

She nodded.

"What did he say about that?"

"He didn't have anything to say. He talked like Shorty, here, with his hand. He was good at that."

"And what time did he leave here next morning?"

"I don't know. About nine, I guess. I never saw him after that."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No. And I didn't ask."

"You didn't hear from him after he left?"

"I said I didn't."

"Or about him?"

"Not until the cops came."

"Thanks, Lily," I said, and nodded to Mike.

On the sidewalk he said, "I should have bounced her around some. That bag's not as dumb as she makes out. There isn't much about Al she don't know."

"I think she was telling the truth," I said.

"And about bringing back the dough from Nick's. You knew the guy didn't make any money up there. You got most of his money."

"Maybe he didn't intend to get it that way. Maybe Nick was going to pay him off for something."

We were walking toward the car and Mike stopped to face me. "Hey, who you working for? That didn't sound like you were working for Nick."

"I'm not," I said. "I'm working for me. For me and Tommy Lister. I'm not working for Nick, *yet,* Mike. You want to phone him again?"

He shook his head. "You've sure got him sold. You beat me, Worden."

"That I could probably do, too," I said. "Dream fighter."

"I fought," he said. "Not Mickey Walker, but I fought." He climbed into the Lincoln from the curb side and slid over behind the wheel.

"Ten bucks a round, you fought," I said. "Where next?"

"Santa Monica."

"Then why way down here first? We were right out there."

"I didn't want to buck the afternoon traffic downtown." The Lincoln slid away from the curb. His eyes were on the traffic. "What a sack, back there. What some guys won't bed down with. Jeez."

"She wasn't getting any prize," I answered. "How about you? Were you ever married, Mike?"

He shook his head. "Came close once when I was a kid. Got out of it." He pulled up for a light. "I think that Lily's a liar."

I said nothing. It seemed as though he didn't want me to accept anything she'd said for some reason. And Mike's reasons would be Nick's reasons; he had no other motivation beyond Nick.

He could certainly handle that Lincoln, and I wondered if Nick had ever been in a business where he needed a getaway car. Mike would have been a boy for that.

Making time, catching the lights right, easing that big black job through holes like a master jock, power under perfect command.

I said, "The ring wasn't your forte, Mike. You should have been an auto racer."

"Used to have a Model T with Rajo overheads and Atwater Kent ignition and Stromberg downdraft," he

said, "when I was a punk. Wire wheels, too, and geared up. The old man made me sell it."

"And sent you into the ring?"

"No, that was my idea. That's when I met Nick, when I was fighting prelims."

"Ever get beyond prelims?"

"Some. Semi-windups. I wasn't bad."

Nor good, probably. We were getting out of the thicker traffic now, and the Lincoln went singing along. How many fighters drove Lincolns? Or how many auto racers, for that matter?

My mind went back to Lily, beloved of Al Calvano. And that dirty little shop on that defeated street. Smarting under Al's hand, under Mike's, under the swinging hand of any mug who passed, trying to point up her only defense with a too tight sweater and some henna for the hair. *I'm a woman,* she tried to show; *have some regard for me, mister.*

Vicki Lincoln was a woman, too, technically. I said, "We ought to drop in on Vicki Lincoln, too."

"Why?"

"She could have been one of Al's customers."

"Jake wouldn't like it if we bothered her."

I looked over at him. His face was impassive, his eyes straight ahead. I said, "Jake wouldn't like it? Don't tell me you worry about Jake. He's one of Nick's boys, isn't he?"

"I guess. He's got a temper, too, and he's one of those guys that's narrow-minded about their women. The less trouble the better, with guys like Jake."

I said, "I can't believe she means much to him."

"Maybe not. We'll see."

I had a feeling Mike was steering me as deftly as he was steering the car. It's easy to underrate gents like Mike, an attitude I intended to avoid.

South of Olympic, all shacks. Mexicans and Negroes in the unpainted, leaning hovels they were permitted to occupy in this free country, this brotherly nation.

All shacks, and over half of them with television an-

tennas on the roofs. And a flashy convertible here and there and some hot rods, too. Wolf packs, the law was calling them a few months back, the rod boys. They are not supposed to display the animosity we instilled in them. Take it and smile, you underpaid, underfed, underprivileged brother of mine. Smile, and stay on your own side of the tracks, unless you come over to pay your taxes.

"Well?" Mike said, and I realized the big car had stopped in front of one of the hovels.

"No bouncing, Mike," I said.

He shrugged. "We'll see."

"You heard me." I got out and waited for him to come around from the other side of the car.

He stood next to me a moment as though measuring me. Then he went ahead of me up the worn part of the gray lawn that served as a walk.

A huge and bedraggled palm dominated the yard, one frond broken and dragging, its tip white against the gray lawn. Up onto the slanting porch that held a weathered wicker settee and a rough, redwood, circular table.

A bell button and Mike pressed it, but we couldn't hear it ring. He knocked on the door; he hammered it.

The man who came to the door was small and thin and olive-skinned. He had large and expressive brown eyes which went back and forth between us.

One gold tooth showed as he said, "Nick Arnold's men. What do you want with me?"

"Words," Mike said, and started to walk in.

The man didn't move. "We can talk on the porch."

"I don't want to talk on the porch," Mike said quietly, and started in again.

I put a hand on his shoulder. I said, "We'll talk on the porch, Mike."

He turned to look at the hand, and then his glance came up to mine. "Take your hands off me."

"On the porch, Mike."

He slapped at the hand, and I slid it in to grab his collar. I pushed him up against the doorjamb, and his

head thumped.

He didn't swing. He stared at me, and I saw the real Mike Kersh. His voice was an absolute monotone. "Take your hand away. We'll talk on the porch."

I took my hand away, and it trembled some. The little man said, "I suppose it's about Al Calvano." He said it wearily.

I nodded. "We'd like to know all you can tell us about that."

We stood right near the doorway, and the little man put one hand on the siding of the house. "There isn't much I can tell. Al was more competitor than friend. Last time I saw him was the morning he was killed, and we had words that morning. He was over here in my district. He never tried to sell my customers before. One of my customers told me Al said he was going to quit." The little man paused to look fixedly at Mike. "He said he was going to get some big money."

I asked, "From where?"

The man shrugged and looked out at the street, and at me.

"You had a fight with him?" Mike said. "The police talked to you?"

"They talked to me." He looked from me to Mike.

"Do a lot of business in this neighborhood?"

Now he looked at me. And said nothing.

"I wondered where they got the money," I said.

He shrugged.

Mike rubbed his hands on his thighs. "If I should find out you were lying, I'd come back. Alone. Nothing more to say?"

"Nothing."

Mike turned and went down the steps that led from the porch. As far as Mike was concerned I didn't exist.

The little man said, "Don't turn your back to him. He has a long memory, I've heard."

"Thanks," I said, and left him standing there, dealer in dreams for the downtrodden. He still stood there as I climbed into the Lincoln.

The motor was running, and Mike didn't look at me. When he heard my door slam, he moved the car away from the curb. Silence.

Swinging back toward Olympic, and I said, "The west side station. I'll see if Hovde's in."

He said nothing but nodded.

I didn't give him any conversational openings. But when we climbed out in front of the station, he said, "We're going to tangle, you and me, sometime, Worden."

"I'm afraid so, Mike," I said. "We just don't get along, do we?"

He didn't answer. He followed me into the station, followed my exposed and vulnerable back.

Hovde was in a small room near the head of a corridor. He was seated at a desk and there was a uniformed man standing next to the desk, bending over it, and showing Hovde something.

He looked over the uniformed man's shoulder and his smile was bleak. "What a pleasant surprise."

He nodded at the uniformed man and the man straightened. He only glanced at us before leaving the room. Hovde covered the thing on his desk with an olive-drab square of cloth.

He looked at me. "You phoned this morning?"

I nodded. "Nick wants me to help find a killer. He talked to you about it, didn't he?"

"He did. Now he wants to run the police force. This scum sure gets ideas when they get a few bucks, don't they?"

Mike muttered something.

Hovde's bleak eyes swung to Mike, and he asked, "What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"Continue to. All I want to hear out of you is answers to my questions, if I ask you any questions."

They locked eyes for a moment, like juvenile delinquents, and then Hovde looked at me. "Signed up, eh?"

I shook my head.

He shook his, too. "Buck Rogers. Did you bring your

Junior G-Man badge? Could I see it?"

"So it was dumb," I said. "I guess you're in no mood for company today, Sergeant." I turned to go.

"Wait," he said, and I turned back.

And as I turned back, I saw Mike's gaze directed at the desk top, and I saw a flash of something that could only be recognition in Mike's eyes.

I looked at the desk where Hovde had thrown back the square of cloth. There was a knife on the desk, a bone-handled knife with a chip out of the bone. Looked like a hunting-knife.

It was the knife that had been in Tommy's throat.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HOVDE'S VOICE was low-pitched. "Recognize it, Kersh?"

Mike didn't pause before shaking his head.

Hovde looked at me.

"I think I've seen it before," I said, "though I don't remember the chip out of the handle."

Hovde covered it again with the cloth and looked at Mike. "You can wait outside."

Mike went out.

He inhaled and blew his breath out audibly. "What a man has to deal with in this job." The neck rub, and looking up at me. "We'll pretend you're actually bright, and damned lucky. We'll pretend you get something connected with this kill, or these kills; then what?"

"I tell you. I'm no cop. I'm not that bright."

"No, you're just lippy. What if the finger points at your boss, at Mr. Nicholas Arapopulus?"

"I tell you. He's not my boss—yet."

"Yet."

"All right. He offered me a job, a *partnership,* in a legitimate promotion that's going to be capitalized at a half million. What if he offered it to you, Sergeant?"

"I'd look for the hook."

"Would you? I'm taking up your time again, I guess. And as a taxpayer that hurts. So long, Sergeant. Thanks for the kiss-off." I started to turn again.

"Stand where you are," he said quietly. "I'll tell you when you can go."

"I think," I said, "you'd better lock me up again. And bring whatever damned charges you want. I don't like your lip any more than you like mine, Sergeant."

He didn't say anything, the frozen eyes quiet and thoughtful without evident animosity.

I said, "Yesterday you wanted me to work for Nick. When I said I wouldn't, you were hot about it. Now that

Nick wants me to, now that I'm temporarily working *with* him, you get just as hot about that. I phoned you and Nick knows I phoned you. I can't figure what you want, Sergeant. I don't think anybody can."

He put both flat hands on top of his desk. "You sure can spout, can't you?" Now he smiled. "It's a lucky thing for you I didn't go to UCLA. All right, halfback, stay with it. *And keep in touch with me.*"

"Yes, sir," I said. "Yes, chief."

I could feel his glance follow me out of the room.

I didn't think Mike would still be out there, but he was. Sitting behind the wheel of the black car, smoking a cigarette, and looking straight ahead.

Continuing to look straight ahead as I climbed in, as I closed the door. The Lincoln coming to life, and two words: "Where next?"

"You can drop me off at my place. And then run and cry on Nick's shoulder. I want to be alone for a while."

"Some day," he said, without looking at me, "Nick's going to get fed up with you. And then Mike Kersh is going to find out if you're really rough, or if you just talk rough."

"I'm not rough," I told him tiredly, "but I'm rougher than your dreams, Mike. Relax, and remember your age."

Nothing from him all the way to my apartment. Nothing from him as I climbed from the car. I watched him drive off, and went in and up the stairs, remembering that flash in his eyes, that flash of recognition.

That damned dryness was back; this was ridiculous, the way the desert wind persisted. Dryness was supposed to be good for the sinus, but it wasn't for mine, not this practically zero humidity, this dryness that makes your trousers feel gritty on your legs, that makes your teeth itch. Maybe the dryness was a partial cause for the resentment bubbling in me.

Ache behind my eyes and a lassitude in the knees and the urge to swing on anybody handy. Damn it, this was setting a record; it couldn't keep up. The skin on my hands was like blotting paper.

I stripped down and took a shower, a too hot shower that turned me red, that filled the bathroom with steam. I kept the door open to the other room, letting the steam drift in there.

Some of the ache went away, but none of the lassitude.

I stretched out on the studio couch and considered the ceiling. The image of the bone-handled knife began to form there, and I turned over. I turned over and saw the upholstered chair and started to turn over the other way and didn't.

I didn't want to turn my back to the chair.

Nerves, Pete Worden. It's nerves, when a chair frightens you. Or an old yak artist like Mike Kersh. Or a world that creates Lilys. Nerves, that's all. Headlines and picket lines and looming bread lines and the lines of demarcation. Between the black and the white, the poor and the proud, the mute and the articulate, the hungry and the greedy.

Words, from the radio next door, soap opera. Had Marconi foreseen this, and De Forest and those bright ones? The mechanical and the scientific world is too much with us, late and soon, but don't blame the bright boys, Peter Worden.

They gave us the contrivance; they bestowed the radio on us. But *they* didn't invent Red Skelton. What had Woollcott said? The people of Chicago are just as responsible for the *Tribune* as the people of Germany are for Hitler. Or was it vice versa?

It doesn't matter; this is your world, Mr. Worden, and you had an infinitesimal but definite part in creating it. Take a good whiff of your handiwork. How do you like what you smell?

Lines running on the ceiling, like a television set out of focus, and I closed my eyes. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

"His mother's favorite," Dad was saying to some man outside my range of vision. "Not that she didn't love John, of course, but Pete could just wrap her around his finger. I'll admit I've favored John, probably because of

that. But John *is* more—oh, manly."

The man out of view said, "Fine boy, John. Straight, fine boy. He'll amount to something, that boy."

I turned over, half asleep. And saw Lily in my mind, who'd been promised a trip. Saw Al Calvano in the chair, facing the door, saw Mike's eyes gazing at the hunting-knife. And saw my love.

Go in with Nick all the way and marry the girl, Mr. Worden. And then I thought, if Nick had wanted to kill Al Calvano, or send somebody to kill Al Calvano, he would be smart to pick a spot like this. For I'd slugged Al. And Nick had Mike with me to keep me away from the apartment.

If Tommy hadn't died, I'd probably be a partner right now in the Arnold Sporting Club. But Tommy had died.

My phone screamed at me and I got up, hoping it was Ellen.

It was Nick. "Giving my boy a bad time, Pete?"

"He likes to throw his weight around," I said. "He's got the idea God gave him a brain."

A chuckle. "Hovde seems to think it's a bad move, doesn't he? And maybe it was."

I said nothing, waiting.

"Maybe we'd better forget it," Nick said after a second.

"Okay," I told him. "I'll send the money back, Nick. I'm staying with it."

"Don't be simple," he said. "You don't have to send any money back. What's got into you, boy?"

"A friend of mine's been killed. That's something you can understand, isn't it, Nick? You've a reputation for loyalty."

A silence, quite long, though not necessarily pregnant. "All right. I'll talk to Mike. I'll cool him off. You can get along with him, can't you, if he knows his place?"

"I can get along with anybody who doesn't keep flexing his muscles," I said. "Mike's got the idea he's still in Chicago and full of beans."

Another chuckle, and then, "I'll send him back any time you want him."

"Make it tomorrow morning if he's got some place he wants to go. I can't think of anybody, but I haven't your sources of information."

"Tomorrow morning then." A pause. "Have you heard from Jake Schuster, today?"

"I haven't."

"Can't seem to locate him. Have him call me if he calls you, will you?"

I said I would and hung up. I looked at the upholstered chair, but it had no comments. Jake Schuster wouldn't be likely to call me so soon after the cinch he'd given me yesterday. They all worried about Jake. And Jake seemed to worry about nothing, even his beloved Vicki, though Mike assured me he did.

I phoned Ellen but she didn't answer.

Had I ever been at Vicki's place? I seemed to remember a party at the apartment of one of Jake's girls, long ago. But had that been Vicki? Or one of the previous Vickies?

I looked her up in the phone book but didn't phone her. I dressed in the new sport jacket and a presentable pair of slacks and went out to the Merc.

The Merc had some complaint in her carburetors as she started because I'd been neglecting her. A dry, clear afternoon and I pointed her toward Hollywood.

At a drive-in I stopped for two barbecued beef sandwiches and coffee. With sauce, pickles, relish, and potato chips. With a neat and firm blonde to wait on me, a smiling girl, undoubtedly from Iowa and seeking the Celluoid dream. Biding her time.

This lovely was only one of many; it's a great town for young men on the prowl and old men on the make. They can't hold out forever.

I had a second cup of coffee and drove on, the memory of the blonde lingering and the flavor of the barbecue sauce. Grrrrrrr. Burp.

A triplex, just before the start of the Hollywood Hills section, with some view of the mountains. Three units staggered to the right as one went back, a coral stucco

structure with a well-kept lawn.

The one farthest from the street was Vicki Lincoln's.

Somewhere within the chimes sounded because of my pressure on the button here, and I saw a shadow moving behind the window to my lift.

Then the door opened, and Vicki Lincoln stood there. She was wearing a hostess gown of black velvet, its only ornament a zipper. She smiled and said, "Pete," making two syllables out of it.

Below the plaster face there was a body I'd overlooked before because of the face. I said, "Expecting someone, Vicki?"

"No, why?" And then a shred of meaning to the smile. "Do you mean Jake, you bad boy?"

"No. I meant—because of the—the gown."

"Kidder, aren't you? Come in, Pete." A short pause. "Jake's out of town."

The living-room was almost square, furnished in a honey-tone provincial with Chinese hooked rugs, with a brightly printed and capacious davenport.

On which I sat. She sat at the other end.

"Has Nick called you?" I asked. "He's been looking for Jake."

"Nick phoned this morning. I guess he didn't believe me when I told him Jake was out of town. Isn't it awful about these murders, Pete? You must be worn to a frazzle."

"Just about," I said. "It's awful. I wonder—" I shook my head. "Everything seems to point toward Nick."

"Doesn't it, though? Would you like a drink, Pete?"

"I would, thanks."

She rose slowly, making a rumba of the act. "Bourbon and Seltzer?"

"Fine, thanks."

I lighted a cigarette and looked for an ash tray. There was one on the table to my right. And one of Jack Woodford's reprints. And another two bit novel by a man called Shadow. *Pecos Pals* by Arthur Shadow.

"Jake read Westerns?" I asked her. She was in the

kitchen.

"That's *all* he reads," she said. "Isn't it a shame?"

"You can pay more and get less," I told her. "Woodford one of your favorites?"

"Number one. He knows what's going on in the world."

That he did. I looked the length of the living-room, past the section devoted to dining, into the kitchen. How was it I had never looked below that plaster cast?

"Do a lot of reading?" I asked.

"Lots. Jake wanted to get me a television set, but I don't like wrestlers. They're so hairy and sweaty."

Ellen should see me now, I thought. *Look what is mixing me a drink, my proud Irish beauty.*

Miss Lincoln came from the kitchen with two drinks and handed me one. She lifted hers. "To—us."

"Long may we live," I said, and smiled at her.

She seemed more at ease, more a person here than she did when she was out and facing the world.

She sat on the end of the davenport still warm from her earlier presence, and I took my former seat. I asked, "Get the Stude yet?"

She rattled the ice in her glass. "Not yet. Soon, though."

I sipped my drink.

She said, "Jake's afraid I'll get around too much if I have a car. Jake's awful jealous." She curled her legs up under her. "He wouldn't understand something like this, you dropping in to say hello. He'd think something wrong about it."

"He should know you'd be safe with me."

"Should he?"

I changed the subject. "Do you hear anything around about the murders? Any casual remarks that might have been dropped?"

She shook her bleached and powdered head. "Nick Arnold is certainly worried about it, though, isn't he? He's worried more about it than you seem to be."

"Right."

"And yet, you're the one who found both bodies. Was it—bad, Pete?"

"Bad enough. Did Jake tell you about the horse he gave me yesterday, the cinch bet?"

She shook her head, the blankness on her face undisturbed. "He doesn't tell me much about his business. Something wrong?"

"I don't know. I've been getting a feeling of being crowded lately, of being shoved."

My glass was empty, and she leaned over to take it from my hand. I didn't know what to expect, but it was logical enough. She took it out into the kitchen to mix another. Her perfume lingered.

She brought it back loaded again, and sat a bit closer this time. She said, "You're different—than most of the men I know. You've got—class, Pete."

"Gee, tanks," I said. "You're no slouch yourself, Vicki."

"Are you ever going to marry Ellen, Pete?"

"That's a good question," I said. "Isn't there any Seltzer in this drink? It takes like whisky and ice."

"It's almost all Seltzer. Are you going to—join Nick's organization, Pete?"

I looked at her. "Think I should?"

She shrugged. "We have to eat. Though I guess you've got money, haven't you?"

I shook my head. "Not unless I settle down and be a model citizen. Not unless I get a job. My brother has charge of the family money."

"Oh," she said.

I went on casually. "You know, there could be another tie-up in this business. Calvano sold reefers and Lister smoked them. Maybe this neighbor of mine wasn't just a witness who had to be killed; maybe there was a dope tie-up."

I watched her reaction and saw only a flicker of interest on the stiff face. She said nothing.

"Nobody knows anything," I said, and my speech sounded blurred to me, which was ridiculous on two

drinks. "Nobody seems to give a damn."

"Nobody gives a damn about what, Pete?" Her voice from where?

"About Tommy Lister." I turned to look behind me. "I thought I heard the door open."

"Nerves," she said. "You've been through a lot, Pete. Here."

There was now a fresh drink in my hand. Was the hand trembling? I looked at her, and she was still sitting on the davenport, only she looked about the size of a grasshopper.

"What in the hell is going on?" I said.

"Don't shout, Pete. There's no reason to shout. Are you drunk? What's happened to you?"

I could hear her clearly, but she looked so small. I put a hand out to feel her smallness, and her hand took mine. It was soft and moist and strong, but not small.

Chills, and that horrible sense of loneliness, of puppetry.

"Relax, Pete. Pete, honey, Petey boy, relax—gee, you look about seven years old. Aw, Petey, don't tremble—"

Her arms tight around me, her full body close and comforting. I heard a murmuring and knew they were talking about me; but to hell with them, to hell with all of them. The large and small, the short and the tall, feed 'em beans.

Delirium, I was to learn later, the first phase psychogenic. These clinical evaluations, these learned diagnoses are, of course, based on the patient's later revelation of the events leading up to the state. Hysteria, panic, what have you? It wasn't toxic, not on a few drinks, not yet.

In any event, it was real enough to me. I'll never know what I said or how much of what happened was true. I know she whimpered and the voices from somewhere murmured. I didn't know what *they* were saying, but I knew they were talking about me.

I know she was warm and highly perfumed, and she said she had often dreamed of me. Maybe this was a

dream. There's no way I'll ever know.

Some clarity returned when the room was dim. I was on the davenport and she was on the floor, sitting with her knees up, smoking a cigarette.

I'd like to think what happened then was an accident on her part. Perhaps she had them with her regular cigarettes.

I said, "How about a smoke, lady?"

She gave me one and held the light for me and I inhaled heavily. It was undoubtedly toxic from then on.

I wanted to cut her throat. I loathed her. And then she wasn't there, and I was lost in time, and the voices came back, and I turned toward the door, looking ghostly white in the immeasurable distance.

Hands pulled at me, but I slapped them off and swore, and kept moving toward that white door on the horizon. Tommy, I knew, was behind that door, his typewriter hammering. I could hear it pounding away.

I heard the crash of a small table and stopped to stare stupidly at the floor. A light came on, and I saw the littered cigarettes on the floor and the ash spilling over onto the Chinese hooked rug.

I turned to stare at Vicki, and she stood like a Dali portrait, the white face seeming disembodied, one crooked black arm to the right of the face, the back of her hand to her mouth. To the left of the face and below it, the black robed body of Vicki Lincoln.

She said nothing, staring, her face a death mask.

Someone said, "—always was yellow. That's why he's not a running back. Ya ever see him *run* with the ball?"

Vicki went away; the voice went away. Something burned my hand and I put the thing in my pocket. They weren't taking anything away from *me*.

There was something in my hand, something larger than the thing I'd put into my pocket hours ago. It was a doorknob, I saw, brass, gleaming between my fingers.

Vicki's voice? "Pete, for God's sake, don't go out. You'll be picked up. Pete—"

I turned to look at her, but she wasn't there. It was

dim again, and I was looking at a door. The outside of a door.

I turned around and saw a light, a street light, shining over the Merc. Somebody said, "Home for Christmas? *What* Christmas?"

I looked at a light and it was red, and I was sitting in the Merc waiting for it to change. This part they couldn't accept later. Takes better orientation, better concentration, better continuity of thought than I could possibly have summoned at that time, in this state.

I know the Merc, and the Merc knows me. I know the town. I knew where I wanted to go. I wanted to go home, home to my brother, and there wasn't anybody or anything going to prevent that.

With my people, I had to be with my people. My family, my blood, my own.

Green lights and red lights and Christmas lights, and Pete coming home, the prodigal son.

An amber light, caution, slow down, yellow light. Yellow. *The only thing we have to fear is fear.* I'd been eleven when he'd said that.

A green light; Pete's coming home, open the door, open your arms, open your hearts to this slob.

Up the driveway, and here was a knob in my hand, a doorknob again; I was home. Into the entrance hall; where were my people? Were they out?

I walked across the hall to the living-room, and there they were playing cards, and pausing to look toward the doorway. My people—Nick and Chris and Paul, cozily playing cards.

I swayed—and crashed.

"Heaven only knows why he put it in the pocket of his jacket. Burned out in there and through to the lining. Yes, marijuana. Not completely that, no, though I'm only guessing so far. Delirium is no disease, you know, but a symptom complex and I'm not prescribing a particular treatment until I can get a complete diagnosis. Could be infectious, toxic, traumatic— I know, Mr. Arnold, but we have to wait. If you'll pardon me, please?"

B_1, salt capsules, water, water, water, more salt.

"A delirium might, for example, release a latent schizophrenic or manic-depressive tendency. Doctor Delavarun should be consulted I feel sure."

"He's looking better this morning, isn't he, Pop?"

I opened my eyes and smiled at Chris. "Hi."

"Hi, Pete. Hey, hello!" The clean grin, the white teeth, the crew cut.

"Did the Bears beat the Lions?" I asked him.

"Yup. Play-off, here with the Rams, Sunday. Hey, Pete, you still nuts?"

"Chris!" Nick's voice was sharp and I looked at him.

"It's all right," I said. "I'm not nuts any more. Hello, Nick."

"Hello," he said. "You called me 'Father' when you were—still delirious. Father Nick—and some things not so nice."

"Bring in the contract, Nick," I said. "I'm still weak. What's been happening in the world?"

"Nothing good. I'd better call your brother. He's been worrying about you. And your sister-in-law. She's sure a honey." He went out.

Chris came over to sit on the bed. "Think you'll be all right by Sunday? I'd like to see that Ram-Bear go." A pause. "With you."

"I feel okay. Has Ellen been around much?"

"Nights. She's working days. At *Bullock's*. For the Christmas rush. In lingerie. I mean not *in* it, selling it."

She had finally amazed me. Ellen in lingerie for the Christmas rush.

Chris said, "Your brother sure picked a winner, didn't he? Isn't she something? So natural, so—"

"All wool," I said. "The genuine and unadorned."

He looked at the patchwork bedspread. "What happened to you, Pete?"

"I got unwound. The mainspring let go. Too many things happening for a man of my limited mentality. Chris, keep things simple in your life, as simple as you can."

"That won't be hard. I'm the simple type." He looked up. "Paul's the guy to take that advice."

Paul stood in the doorway, smiling. "What advice? Hello, Pete. Everything's all right now?"

"Fine," I said.

He came over to sit on the other side of the bed. "Are you trying to give Meat the Word?"

"I haven't got it," I said. "Have you, Paul?"

He shook his head, smiling. "I know less than nothing. I didn't even know the Rams were playing in the Coliseum Sunday. Chris was shocked at that ignorance. I've missed some classes, though, with the Professor. I took your advice there."

"Don't take my advice on the literary scene, scholar," I said. "For all I know, Professor Arranbee is a bearded Hutchins. Writing, are you?"

"Nothing you'd want to read. What would you like for breakfast? You can have almost anything you want."

I said I'd like some eggs, and I got them, but they were poached. Toast came with them, and mixed fruit juice, and Nick came with them, bringing the coffee.

He sat on the chintzy chair next to the bed and looked worried. "Where'd you get the reefer, Pete?"

I gave the question some thought and said, "Over at Vicki Lincoln's. It could have been a mistake."

His eyes locked mine. "What the hell were you doing there?"

"I'm not sure. I went there to talk to Vicki, but I got unraveled. What happened to me?"

"I don't know. Blood, indecision, war news, alcohol—who knows what's happening—to all of us?"

I ate some toast, rich with butter.

Nick said, "Why didn't you take Mike along?"

"He was afraid to go there. I guess Jake's got him scared."

"He's got reason to be. Jake's normal unless he gets the screwy idea somebody's moving in on one of his hags. Dog in the manger then. What sent you there? What were you thinking?"

"I don't know. I'm no cop. My instincts, maybe. Thought she might know about Calvano. Was he up here for some kind of payoff, Nick?"

I looked at him as I said this, watching his face. The expression didn't change. "No. But there's talk going around. You know, what keeps me solid with the boys, I never play it rough unless I have to. That's my rep. And now I'm getting out, nobody's going to have a line on me. Nick can go clean and nobody cares. Nobody's hurt."

"And why do you want to go clean, Nick?" I sipped my coffee.

"Why not? It doesn't cost me anything I can't afford to lose. And I'm a family man. I've always been a family man."

The coffee was strong and of good flavor. "And these kills have you worried. Puzzled."

"Scared," he said.

I put the cup on the small table and put my hands quietly on the bedspread. I looked at this two hundred and eighty pound man who'd fought his way out of Chicago's south side to this estate in the Valley. Scared—Nick Arnold? Scared—

I said it. "Scared?"

His gaze met mine honestly. "Aren't you?"

I thought about it. And said, "I must be, the way I broke down."

"Look at it my way," he said. "It's easy to keep things straight if you've got the money. The ones you can't buy you freeze out. Once in a long while it needs a strong arm, but less often than you think. The lines are out to all the right places; everybody's making money, and everybody believes in Nick. And then somebody goes nuts and starts knifing." He paused to breathe audibly. "How do they know it ain't Nick?"

"I see," I said. Father Nick, and the blessings flowing out from the big take. Father Nick, to whom Pete had run in his delirium.

What strange gods are these we have created?

"Thinking, Pete?" His voice soft.

I rubbed my eyes. "And if you go straight, what happens to the lines and all the—businesses your boys have?"

"I've got a man to take my place, a man in Minneapolis. He's just about got two thirds of the old business now."

I smiled at him. "You're national, huh, Nick?"

"Tie-ups," he said, and shrugged. "Guys that haven't got it and need a lay off for the big ones or the ones that look queer." He stood up. "I'm going to get some breakfast myself. The boys will probably be through already. Pete, say nothing to Jake about being with Vicki. Jake can be—unreasonable."

"Right," I said, and thought of Jake's skinny legs and his cordiality and Vicki's plaster face.

The papers were there, one of them the *Times*. A display ad occupying an eighth of a page offered atomic bomb shelters for your back yard of reinforced concrete, properly domed, expertly engineered.

The navy was taking the boys off in Korea, though the loading beachhead was under constant Red attack.

I put the papers away and looked around the room. The bank of windows on the opposite wall faced out onto the patio. All the bedrooms, except for the servants, probably faced on the patio. The furniture in here was spool-bed, rag-rug Colonial, but this was only one room. The others undoubtedly showed a different motif.

Cozy, that was Nick now. Early American Nick, landowner. My fingers moved across the patchwork quilt bought with blood money. Nick having a breakfast with his two sons.

I heard steps coming along the hall and turned my head toward the doorway. A man and his woman stood there staring at me. I had never seen the man's face this serious before, nor the woman's this anguished.

Jake Schuster and Vicki Lincoln.

I held my breath.

CHAPTER NINE

AND RELEASED IT as Jake said, "Hot at me, Pete? I don't blame you if you are."

I smiled at him. "About the boat race? Nick explained it. Good morning, Vicki."

"Morning, Pete. What happened to you?" Fast she said it, the tip-off.

"Jake gave me a cinch," I said, "and it broke my heart. I'm just recovering."

Her face went back to normal, her normal. And so did his.

"Aw, Pete, don't rub it in." They stood next to the bed now, looking down at me. "Whisky, Pete, or women?"

Did Vicki flinch? I said, "Neither. Nerves. Looks like a fine day out."

"Great day," Jake said. "They'll be opening Santa Anita soon."

Small talk, faintly formal. Light talk, while my mind wondered about Vicki. I felt unclean, thinking of Vicki. No girl had ever made me feel that way before. Had it been a dream, or had we shared it?

You couldn't tell by looking at her.

They left after some more oral nothings, and I stretched out and arched my back and felt the old lassitude returning. Door chimes. Talk. Foosteps.

John and Martha. John looking concerned and Martha anxious. John wearing a gray flannel suit and Oxford shirt, Martha wearing the pale-green sweater and skirt again.

"Petey, baby," and she had my hand. John looked faintly uncomfortable, but he stooped to pat my leg where it ridged the bedspread, and he smiled.

He said, "You're going to be all right, Pete." That made it official.

"You poor, sad sack," Martha said. "What hit you?"

"Cheap liquor. You've made a hit around here, Mrs. Worden."

"Everywhere I go," she said, "the sunshine kid." She sat down on the bed, still holding my hand. "Level, mug. What happened?"

"I don't honestly know. You could ask the doctor. I had a couple drinks and a cigarette and came apart at the seams. So help me, that's it."

John said, "What kind of cigarette, Pete?"

A stone in a quiet pool, that remark, and the ripples danced in the room. I looked at him and saw the gravity of his face, and its coldness. It hadn't been a question motivated by concern. It had been a judgment handed down.

"I thought it was a standard cigarette, but maybe it wasn't, John," I said. "Why?"

"I wondered how far you'd gone, Pete."

"Gone *down,* you mean?"

He started to say something, but Martha interrupted. She said, "Wait in the car, John."

He stared at her. She still hadn't looked at him, and she didn't now. Her voice was as quiet as a cobra's glide. *"Wait—in—the—car—John."*

Flushed, he was, staring at her back. Then he turned and left the room.

Her voice was shaky. "He can get so *damned* stuffy. Oh, Pete—"

"Tears again," I said, and tightened my grip on her hand. "He's a good boy, Martha. A real good boy. Some day the world will blow up in his face, and then you can explain things to him. Then he'll be ready to listen."

"Then it will be too late. Oh, Pete—and you so wild. I certainly married into something, didn't I?"

What could I say to that?

She pulled her hand free of mine. "As soon as you're up and around, come home, Pete. I've got your room ready for you. You're good company, and we want you around. I'll see that the allowance starts again."

"I'll give it some thought," I said and put a finger on

the tip of her nose. "Is it bridge or canasta these days?"

"Don't be anti-stuffy. One attitude's as bad as the other." She stood up and smiled down at me. "Lame-brain. Egg-head. Home for Christmas, Pete?"

"I'll have my secretary phone you. The doctor says I'm not permitted any decisions for a while."

She shook her head and sighed. "Well, Mr. Arnold will tell me when you're ready to be moved." She made a face. "As the phrase used to go, he kind of sails for me."

I clucked and winked at her.

Pale greenness getting dimmer, and I was again alone. With my varied thoughts. Nick was scared, but he'd wanted me to quit looking. And if I looked, to take Mike along. My love at *Bullock's* making the Xmas sugar. Somewhere someone laughed, a woman's laughter. Low voices in a hum of undecipherable dialogue, and a splash from outside, from the pool. A car starting up.

I pulled the bedspread as low as my arms would reach and put my palms flat on the mattress beneath me. Co-operation from my flaccid muscles and concentration from my flaccid brain, and here I was, sitting up.

What the hell, I was well! Faint shooting pains in the skull, but I'd had those on my good days. L-shaped now, and I swung my feet around and pushed to the edge of the bed and let my legs dangle.

Here we go again, into the warring world. Up and at 'em, kid.

I stood up. Weak, but not so weak it meant anything other than the atrophy of indolence. The pajamas must have been Chris's; they weren't more than a foot full or six inches too short. My feet looked wan and pale and far away.

Where was my ray-blaster? Where was my Junior G-Man badge? Where was my Hopalong Cassidy suit? This hero is ready to move.

A step. Another, and I stood at the windows. Chris was on the diving-board and his chunky body looked harder than I'd imagined it.

He backed up a few steps and took the hop and the

jump and his bulk was outlined against the back wall of the garage in a perfect full gainer.

I watched him in the water, diving and blowing like a porpoise, and then heard steps behind me.

I turned to face a man I dimly recognized. "Doctor Ziegler?"

He was short and gray and compactly built. "Yes. How do you feel?"

"Fine." I went back to sit on the edge of the bed. "And the other doctor was named Delavarun, if I remember."

"That's correct. I'm not sure you should be up. Get back in there while I take your temperature."

He fussed around me in his clinical way with no bedside manner I could notice. Maybe he didn't like working in this house. Maybe he wouldn't add his dislike to his bill and see that his buddy got his, that noodle specialist. Dr. Delavarun should be consulted, I feel sure—Natch.

He frowned at the thermometer and said, "Almost normal." Why should that make him unhappy? He added, "Don't leave the house and keep warmly dressed when you're out of bed. You've a fine constitution, Mr. Worden."

"Me and the UN," I agreed. "I'm not an habitual marijuana user, Doctor Ziegler."

His smile was bleak. "Of course not. That was only part of it, Mr. Worden." His smile was less bleak. "I'll be on them myself before this next year is out."

Things, it seemed, were tough all over. He left and I found a robe in the closet, and my shoes and socks, and put them on. I went down the long hall to the living-room, and heard the whine of a vacuum cleaner.

A maid was cleaning this end of the living-room. Nick sat at the other end in a huge, green leather chair, staring out the windows toward the pool. His arms were along the arms of the chair and he was perfectly motionless.

A quick, unreasonable chill moved through me, and then his heavy head turned and he was regarding me.

"Should you be up?"

"The doctor says it's all right." I took a chair near by.

Paul had joined Chris in the water. Slat-thin, Paul was, but he moved through the water with the easy grace of a natural swimmer.

"Good kids," I said, and he nodded.

"Paul gives you a bad time, though. He's young."

"He'll learn." Nick's voice was dead, his eyes weary. "He wants to sign up, too, now."

"They'll go soon enough, anyway, Nick. They're increasing the induction requests."

"I know. I know. I want them to finish school."

Nick turned to face me now. "Your brother left before your sister-in-law did. You two don't get along, do you?"

"I guess not. I don't know." I shrugged.

"He's owed me five thousand dollars for two months," Nick said. "I wasn't going to mention it to you, but—Oh, he's so high and mighty."

I was staring at him, and his words still rang in my ears. "John betting? On what?"

"One bet. A horse, early in the season. He doesn't know I booked it; it was—one of my upper-class outlets. But he always paid before, and—"

"Before—" I interrupted. "John's been betting right along?"

"For years. And always paid. Did I tell you something you didn't know?"

"It's—out of character," I said.

"Betting? Who doesn't bet? It's the not paying that's out of character. And I thought maybe you ought to know."

John betting, and Ellen selling lingerie. Now if Nick would be elected president of the local Interior Decorators' Guild, I'd begin to see Hovde's point.

John betting *my* money possibly? Perish the thought. *Now I know which Rover Boy you are—*

I had a feeling of being on the outside, of being on top of a world I had no part in. Around Nick you got the feeling that he was only the enormous and dignified stone façade of a building that looked like a bank but

was in reality a Buchenwald.

What hadn't he seen? What didn't he know? But a knife could scare him. And a thin-legged bookie with a plaster-faced girl friend.

Tommy Lister stared at me from the floor of his apartment.

"You're pale," Nick said. "Sick again, Pete?" He rose to stand next to me.

"A little weak," I said. "Think I'll get back to the sack."

"Want some help?"

"No, thanks. No, I'll be all right." I forced myself not to shrink from the big hand he extended.

The girl was dusting and Nick still stood next to my chair, staring after me as I left the huge room. You'd think I was an old maid in menopause, the things that were bothering me these days.

I relaxed in the spool bed, but sleep was not for me. Chris came in a little later and said he had an eleven o'clock class and was there anything he could get me from the apartment?

I said, "No. I'll be going home soon, anyway, Chris."

He frowned. "Something—wrong, Pete?"

"No. Why?"

"The way you said that, as though—oh, I don't know. See you later." A grin, a wave, and he was gone.

What should I say? That his father's house gave me the creeps? I lay there wishing I knew more or felt less. It isn't tough being an ignorant stupe, but it's tough being a sensitive, ignorant stupe. And in love with a girl who's well-read and blind. Or was I the blind one? Maybe Nick was no worse than the average member of the NAM. I thought he was, but maybe I was still naïve.

Tommy Lister is dead, remember that.

Dr. Ziegler had said I should keep warm, but all the covers on the bed weren't keeping me warm and all the pills in the county wouldn't make me well. Get something you can believe in, Worden, and hang on. And who killed Tommy Lister? His body, that is.

I got up for lunch. I went into the maroon tile bathroom, and here was a fine tub besides the shower, and I used the tub. And the razor somebody had thoughtfully placed there and the fine, monogrammed towels. *A* is for *Arapopulus.*

No shower will ever take the place of the tub for soothing the jumpy body and the itchy mind. It was warm and lunch was on the patio, and Nick was more cheerful. But Mike ate with us, and Mike was morose.

He didn't look at me nor address me directly. We talked about the murders. The trend of our thinking as orally stated rather leaned to the theory that Tommy had died because he was a witness.

I told them what Art Shadow had told me about Tommy's hinting at blackmail.

Nick said smoothly, "There's always an amateur dick popping up among the stiff's friends." He said this too smoothly.

Mike said nothing.

I said, "Let's suppose it's true, that Tommy was going to blackmail the killer. Tommy's ethics I'm not sure of, but there was nothing wrong with his head. The killer would have to be wealthy before Tommy would get that far out on a limb. The killer would have to be able to make the game worth the risk."

Mike said to Nick, "He means a rich guy, like you."

"It makes sense," Nick said.

I went on. "If Tommy got his reefers from Calvano, it's possible he may have talked to him, and Calvano seems to be lippy enough if that dealer in Santa Monica is an indication. Tommy was a great guy for chinning with anybody from a milkman to a madame and it's not unreasonable to think Calvano told him about the long green he had in prospect. Calvano dies and Tommy carries on."

Mike said to Nick, "Ellery Queen," and slanted his head toward me.

Nick said, "Have you ever considered that your buddy may have killed Calvano and then been killed by one of

Calvano's friends?"

"No," I said. "You'd have to believe in one hell of a coincidence to believe that. Remember, Calvano was gunning for me."

"So? And your buddy sees him come in, or maybe he even stops at your buddy's house, to get some dope on you."

"A killer, doing that?"

"All right, this way: Lister sees him come in, knows you're not home, and goes over to find out what's cooking. Calvano might get smart with him, and—" His voice trailed off.

"You're reaching, Nick," I said. "You went over the cliff."

He chuckled. And then he looked at me with his chin lifted. "Suppose you found out for sure I'm the killer, Pete? What would you do?"

"Take it to Hovde. If I got that far. If you didn't send one of your *tough* guys to get me first."

"See?" Mike said. To Nick, of course.

"Your own buddy Nick you'd turn in," Nick said, and laughed. "I'm glad I didn't do it. I'm glad I made Mike handle it."

Mike flushed, and glared at the tablecloth.

"Tommy Lister was my friend," I said.

And suddenly realized he hadn't been, really. And why had I built it up since his death? Was I trying to find an excuse for the animosity bubbling in me? Was I trying to rationalize my resentment?

Beneath the surface of that lunch, the Arnold intrigue was hidden, the things Nick knew and Mike knew, the things that had really happened since that night I'd won thirteen hundred and eighty dollars. They'd tell me just what they wanted me to know, whether it was truth or fiction, by declaration and inference lead me to the picture they wanted me to see.

If they were guilty, individually or together. And if they weren't or one wasn't guilty of murder, but were involved in murder, they wouldn't reveal any part of

their organization just to solve a kill. Murder was only another of the illegal things; it would have no moral implications. One corruption is all corruption; the basic drive was to stay out of jail. And the poorhouse.

Their symbol is everybody's symbol, Peter Worden. The buck is their symbol, the long green; only they violate the rules more often. And as Nick had said, they didn't make the rules.

Mike finished his coffee and stood up. "I'd better get over to Pasadena, Nick."

"Right," Nick said, and Mike left. With no good-by to me.

I said, "Manuel Gonzales one of your—outlets, Nick?"

"Manny? No. When I first came out here we were partners for a while. In the *Ridge Club*. We're still friends. That's why I gave him your bet."

"Manny owns the *Ridge Club?*"

"Not all of it. He's got—associates."

I laughed.

Nick laughed. "I'll be joining Rotary next."

I said, "I think I'll be getting out this afternoon, Nick. Not that I don't appreciate your hospitality, but I've got to get squared around."

"Words," he said, "but you didn't say anything."

I shrugged, and could think of nothing to add.

"Ellen's coming for dinner," he went on. "You'll want to see her."

"All right, I'll come back for dinner. What time?"

"About seven, as soon as Ellen gets here. She's a working girl now, and she'll be hungry. Do you want to pick her up?"

"I guess. Which *Bullock's?*"

"Westwood," he said. "That'll be handy."

That it would. She should have taken over my apartment and she could have walked to work.

The hole in the pocket of my new sport coat was on the inside and led into the lining. The edges of the hole were gummy. My socks had been washed and my underwear. Hotel Arnold, we aim to please. Was there any-

thing Nick didn't think of?

The Merc was in the garage where I'd won the big money, now gone, and where I'd slugged Al Calvano, now dead.

The Merc needed gas, the gauge told me. And valves, her murmur told me. Those Creager heads run a hot motor and are rough on the exhaust valves. So okay, join Nick and buy a Bentley.

Down the drive and down the road and down the pass. Dr. Ziegler would have conniption fits. He would be unhappy. He would add it to his bill.

That was *my* bill. What had I been thinking of this morning? I'd thought of it as Nick's bill. So, maybe I wasn't all there this morning; maybe I'd still thought Nick was Papa. But how easy it was to lean on Nick. How easy he made it. No, he didn't need the strong-arm boys, any more. He'd see that your socks were washed and your bills paid. Peanuts out of the big take.

While the yaks saved up for the television set and looked ahead to the week-end movie. And in the movies they saw crime didn't pay, and the good guy always came out on top, winning Lana Turner. Wham.

Well, Bob Waterfield had won Jane Russell, fair and square. Why couldn't I throw a ball like Waterfield? He'd better be hot against those Bears Sunday, or he'd be eating the ball.

"Check the oil?" the man at the gas station asked, and I nodded.

I checked the tires while he was messing around, and they'd lost none. Butyl tubes.

He still had the hood up when I climbed in behind the wheel again. He was looking at my Creager heads and manifolding and pots.

"Nice," he said. "I'll still take Maling heads."

"I'll take Hall and Evarts," I said, "but I haven't got that kind of money."

He nodded. "Who has?"

Nick has. I paid the man and left. I took my time going back, thinking of Nick, Chris, Paul, Ellen, Mike,

Lily, Hovde, Jake, Vicki, Mary Gonzales, and her brother Manuel. I thought of John and Martha and Jaekels, Professor Arranbee, Art Shadow, Al Calvano.

And Tommy Lister.

You do get around, Mr. Worden. You have so many interesting friends. Travel is so broadening, isn't it? It depends upon the broads, Ma'am, it depends upon the broads.

It didn't seem as dry today, though it was clear. I parked in front and went up the steps and unlocked the door to my domicile. It smelled like a Turkish wrestler's sweat shirt.

I opened the windows and took off my fine sport jacket with the hole in the pocket.

I got out my reconditioned, tank-type electric vacuum cleaner and went over the rug. I found a shirt that was ready for the conversion and dusted the joint. I washed the windows inside. I turned on the radio before I remembered it wasn't working.

I read some Saroyan. Reread some Saroyan. Who was the voice of the thirties? How deaf could they get? And the forties, too. But maybe I was just back in his world. Maybe that's when I'd stopped growing up and started growing down. I am no critic, nor reasonably accurate facsimile thereof. I am just a guy who loves Saroyan and his world.

A knock, and it was the Shadow again.

"Mi Gawd," I said, "what in hell are you in this case, a red herring? Like the butler who always turns and smirks just before he leaves the room. You haunt me, Art."

"I haunt me, too," he said, and looked at the book in my hand. "Saroyan, the man reads."

"Any comments you'd like to make regarding that?" I asked coolly.

"He's a very fine operator. Though he eludes me at times."

"He eludes himself at times. What have you learned, Mr. Shadow?"

He sat down in the upholstered chair. "Nothing. No-

body knows where Tommy got his hemp. Most of the boys have settled for coffee."

I said nothing.

He smiled. "Mary sends her love, Mary Gonzales."

"Nice kid," I said. "You discussed me?"

"You're the metropolitan topic of discussion currently. We talked about a lot of things. You were one of the minor topics. Is there any of that free whisky around?"

There was about a half pint, and I poured him a drink and brought myself a can of beer from the refrigerator and a can for him.

Art didn't gulp, but sipped. "Mary's brother used to be in business with Nick."

"I know."

"Mary said you two went to high school together."

"We did."

"What was she like in high school?"

"Pretty. I didn't know her very well."

Art poured the rest of his shot into the can of beer, and I looked away.

He took a deep draught, and sat there, holding the can in the finger tips of both hands, leaning forward, as was his habit, his elbows on his knees. Light from the window glinted off his glasses.

"She said the police had been there, questioning Manny about the murders. She said she'd like to talk to you when you're up and around."

"Great," I said. "You took your time getting to the business at hand, didn't you? Working by the word or something?"

He colored. "I didn't want you to talk to her. I don't want anyone to talk to her. Isn't that a hell of a situation?" His voice was ragged.

"I've seen worse," I said. "Do you think she knows something about the murders?"

"I don't—oh, call her and ask her."

I phoned, but she wasn't there.

"I wonder where she is," Art said, not looking at me.

"Christmas shopping," I told him. "What'd you buy

her for Christmas, Art?"

"Shut up," he said, and went over to pour some more whisky into his beer.

"Have you talked to Sergeant Hovde lately?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Haven't seen him. What cracked you up?"

"I don't know. You don't happen to know a Jake Schuster, Art?"

He shook his head. "No. Why?"

"He reads your books."

"That makes two, Jake Schuster and Art Shadow."

Feel Sorry For Art Shadow Week, we were having. What the hell was the matter with the jerk; he was alive, wasn't he? He had it better than Shakespeare; he was alive.

I said, "If you're going to be depressing, would you go and depress somebody else, please? I've just come out of a siege of delirium."

"Sorry," he said, and stood up. "Don't let your conscience bother you, if you see Mary. My love isn't reciprocated." He went to the door and out without saying good-by.

He reminded me of one of those Olsen and Johnson skits, where an unidentified character keeps moving through the background.

I went back to Saroyan, but he'd lost his flavor for me at this time. I phoned the station and asked for Hovde, but he wasn't in, and I left my name.

I was restless and I walked over to *Bullock's.* My girl was there on the first floor, showing something in black lace to a girl with a horse's face. Panties, dainty and delicate.

She looked up as I came closer, and smiled, and then shook her head. *Don't come any closer,* the shake said, *this girl's half sold. Don't interrupt the mood.*

She was a thin girl and looked well, if not frequently, bred. I wondered if the panties were for herself. They didn't go with the tweeds, with the sun-tautened face, with the general outdoors look about her. But who can

tell about women?

She bought the panties and they weren't gift wrapped.

She went away and I moved in.

"Darling," I said.

"How do you feel?" Some concern in her voice, but no emotion beyond that.

"Great. Honey, I've been thinking. We ought to get married. Whether I work for Nick or sell insurance—"

"Later," she said. "The buyer's watching. Pick me up at the north entrance at six. You're eating at Nick's, aren't you?"

"Yes. Six? Fine." There was *nobody* watching. I turned on my heel, as they say, and went out.

One day she won't let go of you and the next you could be the tax collector. You never know with Ellen.

I walked. All the way to the UCLA campus I walked, taking my time, enjoying the sun.

In a field to the left of the Boulevard some students were passing a football, kicking it. The season was over except for the pros and the bowl games; these were just students. Way back in the early days of this game I understand the students used to be on the teams. Cynicism. Great game, if you don't take it seriously, if you don't read the sport pages, if your school hasn't any alumni. Great game, if you like it. I always had.

With these profound thoughts stirring in me, I walked back to the village and had a Double Banana Fudge Cream Royale with crushed nuts.

I had a feeling my girl had undergone some change while I was abed; her coolness hadn't been caused by any buyer watching. She could have learned how easy it was to get along without me, if standing on her feet in a department store all day could be called easy. Or she could have realized she was tied to a broken kite, stringing along with me.

When I picked her up at six, at the north entrance, I could almost feel her coolness. She smiled; her voice was friendly, her comments not barbed. But that reserve was there.

For most of the trip we talked of nothing important. It's a long trip from Westwood to Nick's, and this was a bad traffic period. It took time. And she said nothing about the wedding I'd mentioned. A week ago— But this wasn't a week ago.

We were about half a mile from Nick's place when I said, "You aren't the same. What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"I mentioned marriage."

"I know you did. I— They like me there at *Bullock's*. They'd like to have me in lingerie after the holidays."

"So would I. When did this career bug bite?"

"It hasn't, really—but— Oh, Pete, you're never going to settle down. Remember what Tommy said—"

"Tommy's dead. He said a lot of things, and *some* of them are probably true, but he wasn't infallible. I probably won't settle down with Nick, but I'm going to settle down to a job of some kind. It might not be much—"

"That's it," she said, "it won't be much. What are you trained for? Practically thirty years old and what would you do if you didn't accept Nick's offer?"

"To go back to our conversation of some evenings ago, to quote you, I could run an elevator or drive a truck or sell sportswear in some ritzy shop."

"I suppose," she said wearily. "I suppose. Let's not argue now. Let's forget about it for a while."

"My proposal of marriage has been tabled, is that what you're saying?"

"Let's not talk. Don't get yourself all lathered now."

"Okay," I said. "I didn't think I'd ever have to compete with a time clock, that's all. Wait'll you've had a year or so of that grind."

"Don't worry about me," she said. "Relax, Pete."

I was silent, but not relaxed. This was inevitable, this kind of ending to us, I suppose, but that didn't make it any easier to accept. And from where I sat it looked so final.

Chris had three tickets to the Ram-Bear game, he told me as soon as he opened the door to us. "Paul's going,

too. You and I and Paul. You want to go, Ellen? I can get more tickets."

She smiled wearily and shook her head. "It's Gree—it doesn't make sense to me," she said.

"Dames," Chris said, and nudged me. "Who's going to win, Pete?"

"Who always wins?" I said. "The Bears have the Rams' number."

"It's going to be dry and warm, the weatherman says. You wait."

I put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. "Okay. We'll wait."

"Still sick?"

"No. Just—oh, nothing."

Ellen was walking toward the living-room, and he nodded toward her back. "Giving you a bad time? Quarrel?"

"More or less."

"Women," he said. "She's been working pretty hard, Pete. And up here almost every night."

I had had some unsatisfactory evenings with Ellen before, but this was a new record. It wasn't that she was unpleasant, any more than she was unpleasant with the chair she was sitting on. I was another chair, a piece of furniture.

So she'd had a day on her feet and dealing with people. It could have been that. She had very few words for any of us, so it could be that. I kept telling myself.

Mine was the doubtful privilege of escorting her home, and I didn't mention marriage or even love. I didn't mention much of anything except the briskness of the night and wasn't it a hell of a world?

She agreed with me on both of those topics.

I stopped in front of the paint store and said, "Well?" A good all-purpose word.

"Good night, Pete," she said, and lifted her lips.

It was like kissing a sack of wheat.

"Maybe you meant good-by," I said.

"I don't know what I mean. I don't want to talk, not

tonight." She had the door open on her side.

Some impassioned plea? Some hoarse declaration of my yearning? I said, "Good night. Keep your guard up."

The Merc seemed to snicker at me as we pulled away from the curb. A thing of steel, the Merc, without compassion or discernment.

You, Ellen Gallegher, can go to hell. Or come *to hell, rather, for that's where I am.* I tried to tell myself the woods were full of girls, and they were. But not Ellens.

Some mist in the night air now, getting heavier as I came closer to home, closer to the ocean.

It wasn't late, and lights were on in the various apartments. There was a light showing in Tommy's bathroom window. Why not? It was undoubtedly rented again by now.

There was a light on in my apartment; I could see the glow of it through my bathroom window, a light from the main room, the living and bed and study room.

I hadn't locked the door again, and I paused with my hand on the knob. Not another corpse, please, not tonight. Somebody alive, and somebody besides Art Shadow and not in the upholstered chair. And not with a knife.

I'd probably left the light on myself. It had been around six when I left the place. I'd come back here for my car around six. I opened the door.

No knife, not Shadow, no corpse, but in the upholstered chair.

Mary Gonzales.

CHAPTER TEN

SMILING. Looking lovely in a sweater and skirt, a light coat folded neatly in her lap, her fine ankles crossed, her dark hair glowing under the artificial light.

She chuckled. She said, "Thank goodness you're alone."

I closed the door behind me. "Shouldn't I be? Why wouldn't I be?"

"I thought you might have some--bimbo with you. Hello."

"Hello, Mary." Communion? Compulsion? Commercialism? "You had something to tell me?"

She nodded. "That's my excuse. But not my reason, I guess. Am I blushing?"

"No." The urging in me, and I'd thought I was dead. The awareness growing, the big urge.

"I'm back in high school," she said. "It's in geometry class, and you've just said hello. In geometry class, I first noticed you, Peter Worden."

In freshman English, I'd first noticed her, but I was a precocious child.

She said abruptly, "Manny recognized the knife Sergeant Hovde showed him. That's my excuse."

"Whose knife is it?"

She shook her head. "Manny doesn't know. But he's seen it, he told me. He told me, and nobody else, Peter. I'm telling you and nobody else. Because you're in trouble, aren't you?"

"Not too much. Maybe Manny did remember where he saw it, and isn't telling you."

"I don't think so. It was in somebody's house he saw it, but can't remember. He didn't tell the Sergeant that, of course."

"In Nick Arnold's house, maybe?"

"That's the first thing he thought of, but can't place it. I hear a lot of things around that club, and one of them

is you might sign up with Nick Arnold. Don't."

"Why not?"

"Just don't. Stay the way you are, and were, stay strong."

I smiled at her. "You're a sweetheart."

"Yours?"

"For now you are. There's nothing but now, anyway."

She stood up.

Different. Her rich body responsive, demanding, active, rebellious, and rewarding. A sense of complete communication, a surging ecstasy at her artistry, a haven in her warmth. Much different from that room at the *Ridge Club*. Taking all and giving all, demanding, demanding, demanding all. All. All. All.

In the morning she was gone, but I knew it had been no dream. With Vicki it could have been a nightmare, but this had been no dream. Wake up and smile, it's another beautiful day.

It was foggy out and cool.

An idea started crawling around in my mind. It was a ridiculous idea, but it wouldn't go away. I let it crawl.

There was nothing to eat except bacon, and this morning for a change, I was hungry. All. I made coffee and ate bacon, and looked at the funny papers in the *Times*. I took a shower and shaved and decided I was strong enough now to go out for some breakfast.

I went to a place in the village, a place that specializes in thick steaks and thin pancakes. I had ham and eggs. With toast, tomato juice, milk, and coffee.

And then down to the west side station. And Hovde was in. Talking to another detective in the small room with the grimy window. He nodded at me and then ignored me until the other detective had left. I sat in a chair near the window.

"Well?" he said.

"Well, yourself."

"I see you moved in, up at Nick's."

"I was sick, Sergeant."

"So I heard. What have you heard?"

"Nothing of importance. How closely have you checked Jake Schuster and his girl friend?"

"Why?"

"That dope tie-up. Did Calvano only peddle the stuff, or was he an addict, too?"

"Only peddled it, as far as I know. And I think I'd know." He ran the tip of his forefinger along his nose. "Why?"

"Mike Kersh tried to give me the idea originally, that Calvano was an addict."

"*Only* an addict?"

"It's hard to remember, but I think so. At any rate, he didn't tell me the man sold it."

"Let's get back to Schuster's girl friend, that Vicki Lincoln. What's she scared about?"

"I didn't know she was." I smiled at him. "Because she's so pale, you mean?"

"No, that isn't what I meant." His voice was harsh. "She's got the jumping jitters. I know fright when I see it, and she's got it."

I thought, *Maybe she's afraid Jake will find out I was there.* But gave no voice to this thought.

His eyes went past me. "Jake could have been the leak, the anonymous phone call we had. She'd be scared then. Or she could have been the leak."

"Maybe. How about the knife, the hunting-knife? Anybody identify it?"

"Not directly. Mike Kersh recognized it, though, I'd swear."

"So would I," I said.

Hovde stared at me. "What do you mean?"

"The same thing you do. I saw that flash of recognition in Mike's eyes when you showed it to him."

The neck rub. "You did, huh? I thought I might have been reading something that wasn't there. But you noticed it, too."

I'd been thinking, while he'd been talking, and now I said, "Sergeant, this is between us, understand? I don't want it to get back to Jake Schuster. If it gets back to

him, you'd be the man who told him."

"I'm listening," he said.

"I was with Vicki Lincoln the other afternoon; that's where I went into the breakdown, at her place. Marijuana was a partial cause, and I got the reefer from her. By mistake, probably. But that could be why she's scared. Because Jake, I hear, is a very jealous man."

He shook his head sadly. "You sure have some appetite, haven't you? Boy—that—"

"I went to find out if she knew anything," I said. "Don't read anything into it beyond that."

"Playing cop?"

"Guilty. I learned my lesson."

"And nothing else? You've practically moved in, up there. Isn't there any little tidbit you could throw my way, Mr. Worden?"

"Nothing solid." And then the idea started to crawl through my mind again, the absurdity, and I gave voice to it.

He was silent for seconds. And then, "What in hell ever gave you that idea?"

"The evidence, so far, though I didn't realize it until I started checking back. I must have been cataloging the evidence unconsciously and it gave birth to that." I named the angles that stood out.

"But why?" he said. "Why, why, why?"

"That's it. I'm no cop. The same thing that ties it all together. I understand my friend, Mr. Lister, might have been trying for a little blackmail on his own hook. That's just a rumor, but sound enough."

"I could check some of those angles," he said. "You know, at first I thought you were crazy, but looking back—" He slapped his desk. "Damn it, Worden, it's insane."

"Sure," I said. "Don't let it bother you, Sergeant. The whole business is insane."

"That Vicki Lincoln," he said thoughtfully, "was in a private san in Hollywood for a while. And they wouldn't be taking marijuana patients. It's up a couple grades

from that; a very expensive joint. But—" He shook his head. "You sure pulled one out of the hat."

"And Nick?" I asked.

"Was talking to Jaekels at the time Lister must have died. I guess he couldn't be covered any better than that. Look, Worden, I'm not going up against this sanitarium right away. A cop would scare them silly. Stay available, won't you?"

I smiled at him. "Sergeant, I haven't any ray-blaster."

"All right, all right—make me eat my words." Then he smiled. "I'll check these other angles first. I guess I wasn't wrong about you. I guess I know quality when I see it."

"Not when you buy your ties, if that one's any indication. Keep your chin clean, Sergeant," I stood up.

"Now we're tough again," he said. "Now we're nine years old."

"I suppose," I said agreeably. "What were your plans for me, and why should you care if the director of the sanitarium is scared silly?"

"I don't care, unless it should make him clam up."

"There'd be records."

"Records can be destroyed. If there's enough money involved." His voice was dull, almost defeated. "Money can do anything, Worden, *anything*."

I didn't argue with him.

"Everybody's got some price," he went on in his dispirited way. "Though the price tag isn't always showing."

"You used to handle sports, and now you're on editorials," I kidded him.

"Get out," he said. "Go some place. I'll get you when I need you, Worden."

I nodded, winked at him, and went out.

Nobody likes cops, but this Scandinavian was getting to me. So hard he worked, and for what? For the scorn of the yuks and the contempt of the wolves and the security of his pension? There must be some more powerful reason; he'd outgrown his Dick Tracy days.

Go some place, he'd said, and I went. I was a whole

man again, and I went to the Red Cross and lay on the hard cot while they drained off a pint of the Worden's vintage 1950, late season.

Came out again into the dull day and headed toward Beverly Hills. Toward my people's home. I was sane and conscious and knew who my people were, this gray and misty morning.

Sunset is some street. From town to the ocean, Sunset has everything. Was there a connection between my trip to the Red Cross and driving out to Beverly Hills? Money can do anything, but what about blood? What about brotherhood? And, while we're on the topic, what about the blood of Tommy Lister, all over the front of his white cotton shirt? Or the blood staining the snow in Korea? *There's where your brothers are, in Korea, Pete Worden. Get hep, jerk.*

Martha was out in front, pruning some shrubs. In denim pedal pushers and tee shirt. She stood there, smiling at me, the clippers in one gloved hand.

"Welcome home," she said. "Where's your luggage?"

"I'm not moving in yet. John home?"

She shook her head. "He will be for lunch, though. You'll stay for lunch, of course, such as it is."

"Of course. Doing the gardener's work, are you? Mrs. John Worden, popular hostess in the younger married set, photographed in front of her charming Beverly Hills home. Clippers courtesy of Grotz Hardware."

"You're a great sneerer, aren't you? There is no gardener. Nor second maid, Mr. Wiseguy. There is a new austerity regime in the Worden household."

"So?" I said. "Now what?"

She set the clippers on the porch. "Who knows? Taxes. Bad investments. I'm no financier. Have you a cigarette?"

"Two," I said. "Both crumpled. How would you look, smoking a crumpled cigarette, if a photographer should happen by?"

"Shut your big and ridiculous mouth and give me a cigarette."

I gave her one and held a light for her.

She blew smoke in my face and considered me through it. "You're something of a phony yourself, tough guy. Two drinks and a cigarette and they have to put you to bed. What did you want with John?"

"Not with, from. Money. I think I'll go into business."

"Oh?" A faint frown. "Any particular kind of business?"

"Filling-station. What else would I know but grease and gas and motor work?"

"Big future in that, I'm sure."

"I'd like the work. The only kind of future I want is work I like."

"Ambitious, aren't you?" She was sitting on the porch step now. "Is that going to be good enough for Miss Wellshaped?"

I sat down next to her. "Why don't you confine your mothering to your own kids? Look, I'm straightening out like you've always wanted me to. Now that doesn't mean I've softened enough for your mold. Let's not quarrel."

"Right," she said, and patted my hand. "I'll tell cook you're here for lunch." She stood up and left me.

I was still sitting there when the Chrysler pulled into the drive. My brother John had a smile on his face when he came across the drive to where I sat.

"Well, Pete—"

"Well enough. How's by you, John?"

"Oh, we live. Staying for lunch, of course?"

I stood up. "Yup. And some serious talk. I want to go into business, John."

He frowned, as had his wife. "Business? What kind?"

"Filling-station. Service station, some garage work."

He chuckled and put a hand on my shoulder. "Pete, Pete— Whimsey, eh?"

"I'm serious. I'd like it, I think."

His hand was still on my shoulder as we went up the steps. "We'll talk about it after lunch."

Martha had changed to a coarse yellow-linen dress for lunch. The lunch was mostly asparagus on toast, which

was carrying austerity to a new American low, for my money. A can of beans would have been as austere and much more filling.

I sat down hungry, and rose with my hunger unallayed. There had been some small talk with the asparagus, and for some reason it had seemed strained. Martha had looked faintly worried as John and I headed for the study.

There he closed the door and went over to sit behind his desk. Big deal.

The customer's smile, and, "Well, Pete, let's have it."

I let him have it, in my fumbling way. Some corners I'd seen in my prowls, and neighborhoods building up, and my lifetime love for things that go chug-chug. And how I never wanted to work for anybody else.

"But a filling-station—" he began, and shook his head. "Well, we'll look at it purely from the financial standpoint. About how much would you need to start?"

"About eight thousand dollars."

He stood up and went over to stand next to the glass doors that led to the patio. He didn't look at me as he said, "I don't—believe I could raise it, right now, Pete."

"Raise it? Isn't *my* half of the estate that large?"

He turned to face me. "It—it was." He took a deep breath. "Pete, there are some things about the estate I should have told you before this."

He sat down again, laced both hands on top of the desk, and faced me as candidly as an insurance salesman. "I not only handled our estate; I handled the financial affairs of some of our friends. And made some—unwise investments for them. It was only honorable to see that these losses were recompensed. This had to come out of Dad's estate, including what you have a right to think of as your share. It's been rather sadly depleted. You've caught me at a particularly embarrassing time and though—"

Words, words, words and not once did he mention horses. Should I mention horses? He's my brother.

That's what I said. "We're brothers, John. Save the

long words. What you're saying is, there's no eight grand. At the moment."

He smiled. "That's it, in a nutshell. And with these madmen running the country—"

I stood up. Had Truman bet my money on the ponies? I try to be a Republican, but it gets more difficult every day. Since Willkie died.

"Don't apologize, John," I said. "I'll get by."

"Need some money now, Pete? Your allowance—"

"Save it," I said. "If I get in a jam, I'll holler. I'm fairly flush right now. Stay sober, kid."

"What's your hurry, Pete?" He came around the desk. "Are you—angry?"

"Of course not," I said, and ran my fist along his jaw. "I'm almost happy. I'll be seeing you."

We went out together and Martha looked up from her position on the davenport. Her eyes were grave.

John said, "I've talked him out of it for the moment. We'll think of something better than a filling-station for our Pete. I'm going to talk to some of our friends. We'll find an opening."

Yackety, yackety, yak. Martha's eyes remained grave on mine, and was there shame there, was their humiliation? Martha, no. Never feel that way. The Marthas must never know shame nor humiliation.

I smiled at her. "John's trying to make a gentleman out of me. He's been trying for years. Look hopeful, kid; it could happen."

"Luck, Pete," she said quietly. "A lot of luck." Her eyes were still serious.

I got out from under John's hand at the door, and shook it, and walked down to the Merc. The fun loving Rover Boy, Dick—

I drove the Merc down the drive, and there was the Lincoln, parked across the street. Mike Kersh behind the wheel.

He tooted his horn as I pulled onto Sunset. I waved and drove on. In my rear-vision mirror I saw the Lincoln start up and come after me. Just before Bedford he

pulled alongside, blowing his horn, motioning me over to the curb.

I shook my head and waved him on.

A car was coming and he should have dropped back, but he didn't. He goosed the black car and cut in front and toward me. I jerked the wheel toward the curb and jammed the brakes.

The front right wheel went into the curb as he stopped the Lincoln on an angle, blocking me very smoothly.

I got out as he did and started toward him.

"You crazy punk," he said. "Nick wants to see you."

"I don't want to see Nick," I said. "And I'm getting sick of the sight of you. Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Listen," he said, and put a hand on my arm.

I knocked it off.

He smiled. "Well, it's one of our bad days again. Nick wants to see you, junior. I'm to bring you, and I don't much care how I do it." He put his hand on my arm again.

I pushed him. I put the flat of my hand in the middle of his round face and pushed.

What a left hand he had. Hooking in fast, without warning, landing just on the edges of the ribs and almost stopping the spectacle right there.

The left was still in when I threw my right over it. I aimed for his mouth, and that's where it landed. I could feel a tooth break and see the blood dribble from the lip hooked over the sharp edge of that broken tooth.

And I saw the right he threw and came in on it. His right hand went around my neck, and I threw the top of my head into his bleeding mouth.

Then I had him by the collar, and I had the reach. I had him by the collar with my left hand, and I caught him very cleanly with a roundhouse right. I felt him sag, and I let go.

As he went to his knees one of mine went into action. It caught him flush on the tip of the nose, and I heard

another crack, the bone in his nose.

Cars were stopped, and people gaping. But not a cop in sight. I opened the back door of the Lincoln and put him in there and closed the door again.

I should now feel like some depraved beast, but I felt great. I had finally found someone to swing on. I climbed into the Merc and backed it out of the V he'd made with the Lincoln and the curb. I swung her clear and continued down Sunset. No siren, no uniforms, nothing but the soreness in the ribs and that *released* feeling.

Sunset curved here around the Los Angeles Country Club, and I followed the curve. The wind of it to Westwood Boulevard, and turning left.

I didn't go right home. I was still hungry. I went to the pancake and steak spot, and this time I had steak. On Nick, on a part of the three hundred Nick had given me.

Find a killer, he'd said, but I hadn't promised to come when he called.

After the steak I walked over to look at *Bullock's*. Looked at the outside of it and visioned Miss Ellen Gallegher inside, selling lingerie to the carriage and non-carriage trade. I should demand a showdown with her, but I couldn't. I didn't think I could take a final "No" from her as yet.

My brilliant idea that had crawled into my mind this morning, that had been fashioned of a word here and an attitude there, that had been born of nuances and nourished by resentment, this now-voiced absurdity was taking stature in my mind. Starting with an idea, but being built by the check-back.

I had parked in front of the apartment building and was just stepping from the Merc when a familiar Caddy pulled up behind. Jake stared at me unsmilingly as I walked back.

"What's on your mind, Jake?" I asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "Going up to the apartment?"

"Mmmm-hmmm. C'mon along if you've got words. But don't talk too loud. I'm probably no longer what

you'd call an ideal tenant."

He came along with no dialogue. I fished some more cards out of my mailbox, Christmas cards, and some ads from liquor stores.

Walking up the steps I said, "I haven't had a Christmas card from you yet, Jake. And me one of your best customers."

"I'll have Vicki mail you one," he said.

A remark of significance, of protest and bitterness? I kept my face at its dull norm and proceeded up the steps. At my door I paused, wondering what soul-stirring sight would greet me this time.

Nothing but the empty room. We went in, and I closed the door. Jake said, "I know you were over to see Vicki that afternoon last week. She told me you were there."

I looked directly at him. "Was it supposed to be a secret?"

His face was gray and quiet. "What happened, Pete?"

"She slipped me a reefer. Great girl."

"What were you doing there?" He stood just inside the door, his face serious, but no particular belligerence in his attitude.

"I wanted to talk to her about the death of Tommy Lister. Tommy was the lad next door, the lad who was killed."

"I know that. But why Vicki?"

"Hunch. I don't know. Jake, you know more about it than I do. You work for Nick, and you know what's going on."

"Like hell. You work for Nick, too, don't you? You're a damned sight closer to him than I am."

"I don't work for Nick. You could ask Mike about that. I just broke his nose and at least one of his teeth. Would I do that if I were working for Nick?"

"Mike Kersh? You broke his nose?"

"Correct."

"Are you crazy? Holy gosh, Pete— What got into you?"

"He gave me a bum steer on a horse," I said. "And what's your beef, Mr. Schuster?"

His smile was thin. "I don't scare, so stop showing your biceps. Vicki's my beef. You went over to see her because Nick told you to, didn't you?"

"No," I said. "No, I went there to see what I could learn. I didn't know you were out of town. Mike didn't want me to talk to her, and that was lead enough for me."

Jake went over now, to sit on the studio couch. "Mike?"

"Mike. You must have him scared. He said you're jealous, that you'd misunderstand."

"Of Mike, I'd be jealous? That would be something. Look, Pete, Vicki's scared, scared green. Am I making sense to you?"

"A little. Not much. You want to make more?"

He looked at me without answering. Then, "You tell me. You're the crown prince now. You're the fair-haired boy with Nick."

"Maybe I can guess something," I said, "but it's nothing Nick told me. I'm not guessing out loud, not right now. If you feel for Vicki as much as you claim, what's wrong with sharing any of your little secrets with me?"

"Why you?"

"I have the ear of the law, the respect and regard of a guy named Hovde."

He swore. "It'll be a cold day in August when I work with the law. I wish I knew how much truth was in you, Pete."

"You've dealt with grifters and mugs all your life," I said. "That's your trouble. You wouldn't know an honest man when you saw one."

"I never saw one. Damn it, what made you check on Vicki?"

"Hunch, hunch, hunch. And the way Mike was avoiding her, and the way Nick worried when you were out of town." I paused. "What was the name of that sanitarium again?"

The second I'd said it, I realized it had been a mistake. Hovde had mentioned the sanitarium, but not, I was sure, for publication.

Jake's face was rigid and gray, his eyes hard and shiny. "I thought you knew something. Sticking your nose into her history. For who, Pete? Who you working for?" Low, his voice, and raspy.

"For me. For Tommy Lister. For Sergeant Hovde. For all the lambs and against the wolves. Is that a gun in your jacket pocket, Jake?"

He didn't answer my question. "And how much do you know?"

"The more you talk, the more I know. Keep talking, Jake."

His breathing was quick and shallow, his face stone. One hand was picking, picking, picking at the cover of the studio couch.

He had some difficulty speaking. "What's going to happen to her? You know, damn you. You can't fool me with your bull deletion. You're inside all this."

Did he love the woman? He must. Now it was Jake's turn to amaze me. I watched the picking hand, and said nothing.

My phone rang.

I jerked, and Jake's head swiveled toward the sound. I rose and turned my back to him, and walked to the phone.

A woman's voice said, "Tom? Tom, is this you?"

I said, "Hello, Sergeant. Just talking to a friend. Yup. Jake Schuster. No. I'll do that, Sergeant. Thanks for letting me know. So long."

I put the phone in its cradle and watched the drop of sweat running along my wrist. I turned to face Jake.

Anticlimactic. No gun in Jake's hand. His eyes dead on mine. "What'd he want now?"

"A tip on a horse."

"You're a wise son-of-a-bitch, aren't you?"

"You won't come in or stay out, Jake," I told him. "I'm not working with you."

"Nor the law, either, I'll bet. Nor for Nick. Who is it, Worden? Manny Gonzales? He getting big ideas?"

"I told you once," I said. "You only believe what you want to believe, Jake. I'm sick of arguing with you. Beat it. Go some place." I was close to him now, tensed for any move of his.

He stood up, but neither hand was clenched, and neither hand moved toward the jacket pocket.

"I've got a feeling it's Vicki next," he said hoarsely. "If it is, I'll come for you. Everything that's happened since the party has happened right here. You started all of it. If anything happens to Vicki, I'll come for you."

"Do that," I said. "But get out now."

He went out, and the door slammed behind him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I LOCKED THE DOOR, and lay down on the couch. The radio next door, the incessant one, was operating. Jake, the great lover. The bookie with the knobby knees, burning for his love.

I'd locked the door. When had I ever done that before? Only once, and that at Sergeant Hovde's request. What do you fear, Worden? Jake? Mike? Nick? Vicki? Or Ellen's big "No"?

Somebody knocked at my locked door. Not fear, but caution, prompted my "Who's there?"

It was the Scandinavian neck-rubber, the jet-propelled cop.

I opened the door and he came in.

"Checked that Lily and that character you gave me. Things are adding up. Want to go up to Hollywood now?"

"You're the boss, Sergeant." I told him about my tiff with Mike and about Jake Schuster's visit.

"We got a report at the station about your little trouble with Mike. From the Beverly Hills Department. You're a real tough guy, aren't you?" He was smiling, studying me.

"No," I said. "Mike and I don't seem to hit it off. I'd expected I'd hear from Nick by this time."

"Maybe Mike couldn't get to a phone yet. They've got him in the can at Beverly Hills."

"He's going to love me," I said. "Jake seems to think Vicki's next on the list."

"Maybe she is. Let's go."

We went in a department car, and he briefed me as he drove. It certainly wasn't standard police procedure and I wondered if he had an angle in mind.

I asked, "Do all homicide cases get this much of your undivided attention?"

"No. Don't you figure this one's a little unusual?"

"I don't know much about it," I said. "The papers are filled with all kinds of cases, every day."

"Simple cases. Involving jealousy or anger or money. And not showing the fine hand of Nick Arnold. And very rarely involving innocent people."

"Like Tommy Lister, you mean? He couldn't have been so innocent."

"He was until Calvano was killed, if you're guessing right about him. And if you're guessing wrong, he was all the way. And you're kind of innocent yourself."

I agreed with him on that, but not vocally. He wheeled that department car like an Iowa farmer, but the red lights were there even though they weren't flashing, and the lettered identification, which gave us room for error.

"You're sure a busy man, Sergeant," I said. "What drives you?"

"My high salary. Don't forget now, Lawrence Elgin is the man you want. He's the director. Here." He handed me a card.

An engraved business card. *Philip Craven—Attorney-at-law.*

One of the old Colonial places, a former residential showplace from the days of Mack Sennett. Converted to a san, with a small sign to the right of the driveway: *The Elgin Curative Home.*

How corny can they get? Hovde parked the department car about a half block down and killed the motor. I got out.

"Holler if you need me," he said. "You see, if he won't admit this Vicki was ever there, we'll know he's likely to lie about the rest of it. I can get Jaekels to sign anything I need to seize the records if he plays cagey with you. Get what I want now?"

"More or less. I'll probably botch it, but it was your idea."

He was frowning when I left him.

The drive was green macadam with a curve to it, and a parking-space at the far end of it. What kind of attorney would park in the street and walk up? This was a dumb idea.

There was a sign in the upper panel of the huge front door: *Please Enter.* I entered into a long and carpeted hall, and double glass doors to my left held a sign: *Lawrence Elgin—Director.*

I could see through the curtains on these doors and what I saw was a girl at a typewriter in a fairly large room. From the upper regions of the house I heard a low and persistent moan.

I opened the door from the carpeted hall and stepped into the carpeted room.

The girl was thin faced, dark-eyed, and her glasses had yellow rims. Her dress was black and looked expensive. She smiled and said, "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," I said. "Would it be possible to see Mr. Elgin this afternoon?"

"I'm quite sure it would. Your name, please?"

I handed her the card.

She disappeared through a walnut door at the rear of this room, taking my card along. A few seconds and she was back, holding the door open.

"Mr. Elgin will see you now, Mr. Craven."

I went into another carpeted room, and she closed the door quietly behind me. Mr. Lawrence Elgin sat behind a walnut desk in this walnut paneled room. The carpeting was light green, a nubby material. The face of Lawrence Elgin was walnut, his suit a deep-blue flannel. He had a snow-white handkerchief in the breast pocket of his jacket.

His face was all soft lines and gracious curves. Unctuous was the word for Larry. He smiled at me. "A very depressing afternoon, Mr. Craven."

I nodded, and shook the hand he extended. I sat down in the occasional chair on this side of his desk and said, "I'm representing a former patient of yours, Mr. Craven, a Miss Vicki Lincoln."

No surprise on his face. A faint frown, and, "Oh, yes. Red hair she had, didn't she?"

"She may have at the time. It's blond now."

We both smiled at my little joke, and I went on. "My business this afternoon also concerns another former patient of yours." I paused.

He waited, his face bland.

"A girl named Jean Reynolds," I said.

And watched the surprise on his face now. She'd been a former patient, but it wasn't a name he'd been expecting. His surprise at a name he knew was the tip-off to me. He'd been building up his facial defense for another one.

"The names of our patients," he said quietly, "are not something we reveal to every passer-by, Mr. Craven. Perhaps you would be kind enough to tell me just what your purpose is in seeking this information."

"In a moment," I said, and asked about the third name, the name I wanted to know about.

"I don't recognize it," he said. "I suppose I could look it up if I were certain it would serve some important purpose."

"It might solve a murder," I said. "I'm sure you wouldn't destroy any records that might be needed to apprehend a murderer."

It was quiet in the room while he stared at me. I heard the clack of the typewriter from the outer office and thought I heard that moan from upstairs.

He didn't say a word.

I said, "I suppose this is a solvent business. It wouldn't be if Mr. Jaekels should impound your records and throw the whole case to a waiting press, a sensational and eager press. I'm sure the County Medical Society would be leery of you, and what would happen to your consulting staff then? You wouldn't get a medico within a mile of the joint. Be realistic, Mr. Elgin."

His face was grave but not fearful. "What a ridiculous spout of hysterical verbiage. What *are* you trying to say, Mr. Craven?"

"If you don't know," I said, "I've said too much already. I'll see Jaekels about it. I have a detective-sergeant outside, and he'll want to talk to you." I stood up. "Sorry you—" I shrugged.

I was almost to the door when he said, "You still haven't stated the nature of your business."

I turned. "Sergeant Hovde will explain that. There'll be former patients we can question and get the information we need."

"What information?"

"If those three were patients here."

"All three of them could have been. Miss Reynolds was *not* here at the time Miss Lincoln was here, however, so I don't see the connection."

"And the other one you'd have to look up."

"I would. Would you ask the girl in the outer office to come in, please? And wait? Without frothing at the mouth, if possible."

Theatrics he was going through now. He either knew the name or didn't; he wouldn't forget that one and remember the others. When the girl from the outer office came in, he handed her a slip of paper.

"Would you check that name against the file of our former patients? And the dates of admission and release?"

She took the slip and went out quietly.

He leaned back in his chair and considered his nails. He covered a yawn with the back of his hand. Big, poised, important man. Even without the pocket handkerchief.

A few minutes, while neither of us noticed the other, and then the girl came in again. She had the slip in her hand.

Elgin said, "Give it to Mr. Craven, please, Ethel."

She handed me the slip and went out. There were two dates after the name he'd written on the slip. I stood up.

"Thank you, Mr. Elgin," I said.

He nodded, his eyes blank. He didn't get up.

I walked through the carpeted outer office to the car-

peted hall and out to the green macadam drive and down to the department car. I was thinking of Lawrence Elgin all the way; he'd made a deep impression on me. I wondered how long he'd live.

I handed Sergeant Hovde the slip of paper. "The dates are the dates of admission and release, as they say. So?"

"So, either it was easy or you're smarter than you sound." He put the paper in a pocket. "And now Vicki Lincoln?"

"That's up to you," I said. "I've done my good deed for the day and got your wise remark as reward. Nobody's paying me."

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," he said softly. "I didn't know you were sensitive." He pressed the starter button.

I told him to blow it out his stacking swivel, and cringed as he missed a truck, pulling out from the curb.

"Tourists," he said, as the truck cut sharply to the left. "I ought to give him a ticket."

"He ought to give you a split lip," I answered. "Why Vicki, Sergeant? Think she'll break down now?"

"If you rolled your eyes at her she would." He turned right on Vine. "You wanted to play cop."

"Not with her, I don't. That Jake Schuster plays for keeps, I'll bet."

"You got away with it last time. Wasn't it worth it?"

I didn't answer. The traffic was murder; it was close to five o'clock.

The Sergeant's voice was thoughtful. "Maybe we ought to let it simmer a while. Maybe a little fretting wouldn't hurt Miss Vicki Lincoln."

"Maybe she'll get out of town, too," I said. "A trip would be wise for her about now."

"She won't leave town."

"She's being watched?"

He yawned. We were on Santa Monica, heading west.

"What was her vice?" I asked.

"Heroin. What's yours, Worden? Liquor or women?"

"Women. What's yours, Sergeant?"

"The piccolo. And the Rams. Think they'll take the Bears?"

"Stranger things have happened this season. The Rams have the personnel and the Bears have Halas."

"And I've got a bellyache," he said. "I think I'll let Miss Lincoln simmer for a while. I've seen too many of her kind the last couple days."

We had no further dialogue of interest all the rest of the way. He parked in front and said, "I'll come up with you. Just to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

"Sure there isn't somebody waiting with a long knife. Or Mike Kersh with a gun. You did a damned fool thing, fighting with him, I hope you realize."

"Sergeant," I said softly, "I didn't know you cared."

"I may need a stooge again before this thing is over," he said. "C'mon, move."

He came up and there was no one there. He cased the joint like a jealous husband and then said, "I'll get in touch with you. Keep this door locked."

"Yes, sir," I said. "So long, Sergeant. Don't bend your piccolo."

What a dynamo the guy was. What a work horse. I sat on the studio couch and leafed through the *Times*. There was a possibility, a spokesman for the industry stated, that all television production might be halted in 1951 because of the military orders in the industry. An ill wind blowing some good.

It was almost six o'clock, and my love would be walking out of *Bullock's* soon, her feet aching. She would relish a ride. It was a long haul to Hollywood in our town's type of public transportation.

There was no parking-space within two blocks of the joint. I left my car in a filling-station, and gave the attendant a half. I told him I'd be back in twenty minutes at the latest, and walked over to *Bullock's*.

It was later than I'd thought. The employees were pouring out of the north entrance as I came around the corner from Westwood Boulevard. One of the employees

was Ellen. Only she wasn't heading this way.

She was heading toward a Caddy, double-parked just past the entrance. There was a big man behind the wheel, leaning over to open the door on the side opposite him.

I saw Ellen's smile, and I saw her step into the Caddy. And I watched them drive off, Nick Arnold and Ellen Gallegher.

Don't read anything into it, I told myself. *Nick's not for her, despite his millions. Don't make a play out of an act. Ellen's not that greedy. It's just a ride home for a weary girl.*

From the filling-station I could see the traffic down on Wilshire, and it was bumper to bumper. I told the attendant to grease the Merc, to check the transmission and differential, and I'd go and eat. It is one of the things I can always do, lovesick or not.

Had to wait for a place to sit at the restaurant, and waiting, looked around at the people, eating and waiting. Nobody seemed to be very happy, not with a real Christmas happiness. Everybody seemed to be waiting, even the ones who were eating. Waiting for the *Boom.* The economic boom we had with us, but the atomic was yet to make an appearance. Here. The twenties were a boom time, too; but were they this unhappy? I'd been too young to know, but everything I'd read seemed to indicate they were.

Maybe I'd read the wrong people. Outside of Saroyan, that is, who is always happy in that sad way of his. And he dealt with the thirties.

At a table for four, where three were already sitting, I finally got a chair. The three were a man of about thirty-five and his wife of some age around thirty and a little girl. The little girl was about seven, with chestnut hair and a sort of Martha-to-be look about her. She smiled at me.

The others smiled, too, but in a kind of reserved way. I didn't blame them. If you like to talk while you eat, it always seems like you're on a stage if a stranger is pres-

ent. Maybe they liked to talk while they ate.

The little girl said, "What's your name?"

"Pete," I said. "What's yours?"

"Angela. Did you talk to Santa Claus yet?"

"Uh—not yet."

"Well, you'd better hurry. You should see the line there."

"I'll get to him first thing in the morning."

"Angela, you're not eating your dinner," the mother said.

"I'm not hungry," Angela said, and looked again at me. "Did you pray for all the things you wanted?"

"I don't want much," I said. "Men don't need all the things girls need."

"Have you a little girl or a little boy?"

"Angela—" her mother said, and looked at her husband.

"Angela—" he said, and frowned.

"It's all right," I said. "I'm always glad to talk to a beautiful girl." Why didn't they carry the conversational load? Just because their daughter had manners and they'd lost them, why stifle her?

Angela and I got around to quite a few topics in which we shared a common interest and belief. These included the general, all-around satisfaction of paddle pops, parties where the boys didn't all stick in the corners, fat Christmas trees as opposed to the high, thin ones, teachers who smiled and those who didn't, and the thorough obnoxiousness of some relatives.

For really first-rate small talk, it's hard to beat small fry. I was sorry to see her leave before my coffee came. She said good-by as though it was a sad parting, which it was.

Her parents nodded and looked vague and managed what passed in their circle, probably, for smiles. At their age, and they'd never even learned to say hello. Nor good-by.

People were still waiting for seats when I went out. The Merc was greased and ready and had needed no

transmission nor differential lube. It was dark now, and from Santa Monica the searchlights were probing the sky. Advertising searchlights, not anti-aircraft. Yet.

I drove straight south on Westwood, across Wilshire, and I don't know if I intended to go home or not. When I got about a hundred feet from the apartment, my headlights illuminated a Lincoln parked there, a black Lincoln, and if it wasn't Nick's, it was a twin of it. Nobody was behind the wheel, nor any place else in the car I could see.

I drove on. Down to Pico and over to the *Ridge Club*.

Manny wasn't there, and Mary wasn't there. The fat bartender was there and some assorted characters.

I had a glass of beer. I had another, and phoned Ellen. No answer. I had another glass of beer and left.

Drove around and around and around like a sightseeing tourist. Was I afraid to go home? Would you be? Drove all the way out to the Pacific Palisades and saw a movie. It may have been a good movie but there isn't any part of it I remember.

I came out around eleven. I was a hell of a ways from Hollywood, and only a damned fool would make the trip on the doubtful hope of seeing his love. This was a Saturday night and she wouldn't be working the next morning; she'd probably stay out late.

It was eleven-thirty when I pulled up in front of the paint store, and there were no lights on upstairs. I rang her doorbell anyway. No answer.

I went back to the Merc and turned on the radio and slouched down into the cushions. Making time with my girl; I'd fix his little red wagon. The radio gave with *That Thing* and I snapped it off.

I sat, and sat and sat. Headlights swung up off Santa Monica and went by again and again. I turned the radio on again and got a platter program from Long Beach. All Dixieland, brassy and yah-yah, nuts to you music.

Tires screamed from behind and a '36 V-8 with solid top came off Santa Monica and went gunning up the hill. Two kids, teen-agers, laughing like idiots. White-

wall oversize tires, and jeweled wheel rims. Looking like a hot rod, but not hotter than planed down heads and bigger jets would make her. With the money he'd put into the tires he could have got Jessup heads, at least.

Even among the rods there are phonies. Though not so many as in other lines of insanity, and none out on the flats. They had the timer there, and who can kid an electric timer?

Mike had had a Rajo overhead on a Model T block. And grown up into a gunman. An uncle of mine had had a Winfield head on a Model A, and grown up into one of the big boys at Los Alamos. Fred Duesenberg had built the finest, most powerful car ever built in America or the world—and gone out of business. As the twig is bent, so is the twig bent. Something else inclines the tree.

My dad had been a Marmon lover, 371 cubic inches of big six, built in Indianapolis. So had the Stutz been built in Indianapolis, and the Duesenberg, in the shadow of the brickyard, you might say. And where were they all today?

Behind me a car stopped. A hundred and sixty horsepower V-8, the pride of G.M.'s Kettering, the Cadillac, originally designed by Henry Leland and sold to anybody who had the money, unfortunately.

I sat where I was and waited.

I heard footsteps, and then Nick stood next to my open window. "Still in a peeve, son? You really worked on Mike."

I looked away from him over toward the curb where Ellen stood. She was waiting. I looked back at Nick. "Mike was asking for it."

"Am I next?" His voice light.

"You've got all the trouble you can handle without the little I can add, Nick," I said. I reached in and pulled out my wallet. I took all the money out and held it toward him. "This is what's left of the three hundred."

"I don't want it," he said. "Quitting the job?"

"Please take it, Nick."

"Give it to the Salvation Army. Or throw it away.

What's come over you, boy?"

"I'm not here to see you, Nick. I came to see Ellen."

A silence while he looked at me. Ellen still stood on the curb on the other side of the car. He went over and said something to her, something I didn't catch.

She came over to the Merc as he went back to the Cad. She opened the door as his starter ground. She came in and closed the door. The Caddy's lights were on, and then it was going by, Kettering's pride under Arnold's hands. Unpoetic injustice.

The money was still in my hand and I shoved it into my jacket pocket.

"We're unhappy," she said quietly, dully.

"It's showdown time," I said. "Want a cigarette?"

"I guess."

I lighted a pair of them and handed her one. In the dim glow from the street light she looked tired.

I said, "No business of my own, because there's no money for it. I'll have to get a job. It will probably not be much. It will mean a small apartment about the size of the one I now have. Could you take all that?"

"A week ago I could have. Give me some time. Give me at least a couple days. If it's going to be that way, I can work, too, for a while. But I don't know what I want right now. Except to get to bed. Alone. Except to get into a tub."

"Okay. What did Nick want?"

"Company for dinner. What happened between you and Mike?"

"Nothing of importance except an instinctive animosity that flowered. You were—right about John."

"That doesn't make me happy. You've decided not to work for Nick?"

"Yes. Get up and get your bath. Try to think of me as grown up, if and when you think of me. Do we kiss good night?"

"No. I'm—I don't want anybody near me. I feel—smeary. Call me, Pete, but not tomorrow. Tomorrow I want to be alone."

"Okay," I said, and heard her open the door.

When I looked over she was on the curb, the handle of the door still in her hand. "Good night," she said, and closed the door.

She wanted a couple days. She'd waited long enough to hear me pop the question; I guess I could wait a couple days. Some sweet odor lingered in the Merc, neither cigarettes nor any perfume I'd remembered her wearing.

The traffic was fairly heavy. Cow town, Saturday night town. All towns are, it seems, except the little ones, the peaceful ones. Chicago certainly was, and New York.

A thirty-year-old Rolls went by making no sound but the hum of her high-pressure tires. A Buick Roadmaster went by growling. The Merc whimpered, as though impatient, but she knew and I knew what she had. We didn't have to display it. As Gentleman Jim Corbett said on taking a mug's insult, "I know I'm the champion of the world; he doesn't."

Closer to home, and the thought of the Lincoln came, parked in front. How patient was Mike; how long would he wait? Maybe Nick had joined him by now. Maybe they were waiting together.

If they were, they weren't in sight.

I put the Merc away and came back to the apartment and started up the steps. Not consumed by fear by any means, but with a certain uneasiness. Most of the lights were out, including mine.

I didn't pause before opening the door, nor grope hurriedly for the switch. There wasn't any need to; the apartment was empty. A white envelope stared at me from the floor near the door.

There was a note inside:

Pete:
Call me when you come in, no matter what time.

It was signed *Jake* and a telephone number was included. It was a number I dimly remembered. And then

recognized as Vicki's.

I called it, and it rang and rang and rang. But there was no answer. Maybe they were too busy to answer. Maybe they were reading.

I undressed slowly, my door locked. And lay awake a long time, studying the shadows in the room, thinking of them all and re-examining the idea that had crawled into my mind.

I buttressed it with words and all the action previous and since. It must be a better name than Hovde had originally thought. Because he was sold now, and he was a realist. He was a workingman.

Ellen, my lovely, was a working-girl now, thus leaving Vicki's class. Nick, like John, just watched his investments. Nick had been calm enough, standing next to my car when he'd brought Ellen home. But Nick had been a club fighter and they have to be calm. It's not the title, each weekly fight, but only another fifty or a hundred bucks in front of the jeering yuks. Nick would be calm as he snapped your neck, violence without animosity.

To hell with all of them. Except Chris and Martha and Angela and Lily and maybe Sergeant Hovde. To hell with all the rest. I slept.

Dreamed of nothing and woke to a bright room. Another clear day after yesterday's dullness. The *Times* grave and fat outside my door. The radio working in the next apartment. I didn't need a radio with those neighbors. Were they afraid of silence, afraid of their thoughts?

I showered and shaved and dressed with casual care in the fashion of my town. I didn't look at the paper, but went out to the Merc. Hunger growled in me, but I didn't go to Westwood. I ate breakfast in a white-tile spot on Pico, and headed over toward National Boulevard.

In an area north of National and to the east of the Santa Monica Airport, some tract homes had been built for GI's. Two bedrooms and with dining-areas. No fireplaces, but showers in the tubs, and a bit of lawn and a

pride of ownership. Nothing down, and not too much a month on a GI Loan. All sold, but I wanted to get the details.

Sam Riemenschneider had one of them. Sam had been an instrument corporal in a mortar platoon, but I'd known him before that. I'd known him when he'd played left end at Santa Monica High. And I'd known his wife when she'd been junior prom queen. Sam had been her king even then.

I parked in front, and he was watering the lawn. Wearing pants of summer khaki and a sweat shirt, staring at my car.

"Pete," he said. "Hey, you old son-of-a-bitch. Hey, Sally, Pete Worden's here."

He went over to turn off the water as she came out on the small porch, a baby in her arms. "It's about time," she said, smiling.

Sam was wringing my hand. "Oh, he's been busy, Sal, making the headlines. You've sure been going to hell in a hand basket. I thought you were in the clink."

Lanky, he was, and his grip bony and powerful.

"How do you like our addition?" Sally asked.

The baby stared at me without interest, a fat baby, sufficient unto itself.

"Sam Junior," Sam said. "A brat. Only cries at night." He rubbed his hands on the GI pants. "I'll get us some beer."

"Come and look at the back yard," Sally said. "We've got it fenced now and seeded."

I went out to the back yard with the former prom queen while Sam went into the kitchen for the beer. A high redwood fence enclosed this yard, and the grass was high enough to cut. A clothesline, an incinerator, and a partially constructed barbecue pit.

Sally looked as lovely as ever there in her back yard. She didn't look a day past the junior prom, a dark girl, alive and complete.

"On a California Vets' Loan," she said, "you only have to pay three per cent. And you're a California vet, Pete."

I stared at her curiously. "What gave you the idea I was interested?"

"You look a little haggard," she said. "You can't chase blondes forever."

The baby said, "Urk."

Then Sam was coming from the house with three cans of beer. "You'll stay for dinner, huh?"

I took the beer and started to answer.

"He'll stay for dinner," Sally said. "He'd better stay for dinner, the way he's been neglecting us."

I stayed for dinner, a blade roast. With carrots and browned potatoes and Waldorf salad and rolls and ice-cream cake roll. And more beer.

Overhead the planes kept coming in to the Santa Monica Municipal Airport, and out on National the Sunday traffic zoomed and squealed.

After dinner Sam and I did the dishes while Sally put the baby to bed. It wasn't until he snapped on the radio that I remembered. The Rams were playing the Bears today, and I'd promised to go with Chris and Paul.

It was too late now.

The Browns had won their play-off with the Giants, 8 to 3, with the help of Lou Groza's toe. The winner of this one would meet the Browns for the title.

It was 92 degrees at the Coliseum and over eighty-three thousand fans were in the stands. Bob Waterfield had been laid low with a virus infection. His temperature, Friday, had been 104°, the announcer announced. He undoubtedly would not play.

Van Brocklin threw eight incomplete passes in a row. The league's leading passer, but this was definitely not one of his good days.

Thunder from the stands, and Bob Waterfield was coming out to replace Van Brocklin. Woozy, and wouldn't the Bears take care of him? On a statue of liberty, Glenn Davis took the ball from Bob's hand and went sixty-three yards to pay dirt. The first play with Waterfield in there.

It was called back and the Rams penalized.

Natch. Of course.

Sam was hunched forward in his chair. "Those Bears, those damned Bears—"

Sally said, "Relax, my high-school hero, it's only a football game."

He smiled at her and glared at the radio. "Let's get hot, Waterfield. Run 'em out of the park. Chase 'em back to Chicago."

Mr. Waterfield, beloved of Jane Russell, up out of his bed of pain, ran them out of the park. Ably assisted by the greatest array of football talent ever assembled on one club. Mr. Waterfield threw three touchdown passes to Tom Fears and kicked a field goal. A total of twenty-four points for the sick, sad lad.

Mr. Hoerner, Ram fullback, leaving the field on the wrong side was accosted by Coach Halas of the Bears. Mr. Hoerner pulled Mr. Halas's hat down over his ears.

It was a great game. Tempers flared and fists swung and the big, bad Bears were walloped 24 to 14. It's a great game. More people should play it and there wouldn't be so much frustrated animosity in the world. These thoughts I had, full of Sam's beer.

Supper was cold cuts and rye bread and potato salad and cheese and coffee. Some talk after that about escrow and interest and what kind of salary a man needs to qualify for a GI Loan.

Then we were on the porch and saying good night, and I told them quite honestly it had been one of the happiest Sundays I'd ever spent. And they said to make it again, and soon. But I seemed to know even then that I wouldn't.

Driving home in the dark, clear night, thinking of Ellen, and wondering if she'd help me with the back yard, if we got a place like that.

Driving home, and here was the Lincoln in front, waiting.

Somebody was behind the wheel waiting. Somebody who didn't look tall, but looked stocky. Mike Kersh and more trouble?

I parked and went over, and the face turned up to mine, and the voice said, "Hello, Pete. What happened to you?"

Chris Arnold.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I'M SORRY, CHRIS," I said. "So damned many things have happened. I forgot all about it until it was too late."

"Hot at me, too, Pete?"

"No. What do you mean?"

"You fought with Mike, and Pop says you're angry with him. What the hell's going on, Pete?"

"I don't know. We're friends, Chris. No matter what, we'll always be friends."

"I sure hope so, Pete. You know what's going on, don't you? Am I too damned young to know, or something?" His voice bitter.

"Could be," I said. "Some game, huh?"

"Terrific. That Waterfield— Looked like you against Notre Dame."

I rubbed his crew cut. "I'll bet you say that to all the boys. Go on home and hit the sack, rough guy. You didn't make this world."

"Pop did. I don't want to be ashamed of him, Pete." Was the voice breaking? "Pop helped make this world."

"Just a small part of it. And not even the worst part. Chris, get to bed. Be what you're going to be. You should be the most important thing in the world to yourself. And don't feel sorry for yourself. Oh, deletion, I don't know what I'm saying."

"Pete, we'll play some golf. This week. Right?"

"Hell, yes. At a buck a hole. I'll whip your ass."

"Yes?" Looking up at me, grinning, the eyes misty. "We'll see. You wait."

We'll wait, Chris. Until you come back from the wars. If *you come back from the wars. We'll wait. We'll play.* The Lincoln went away, and I went to bed, the end of my Sunday. The Sunday before the Sunday before Christmas. In the year of Our Lord, 1950.

Slept without dreams and wakened to the clamor of the phone, that symbol of our universal communication.

Jake's voice was hoarse. "What the hell's going on, Worden? Hovde's got Vicki in the clink. Where were you yesterday?"

"In Guatemala. What makes it your business?"

"Don't get tough with me, Worden. This is all your damned monkey business."

"Come on up here and I'll get tough with you," I told him. "You ought to be glad she is in the clink. She'll stay alive there."

"That isn't why. Is that why, Pete?"

"I don't work for the police department," I said. "Why don't you ask them?"

A pause, and then his voice more nearly normal. "Would you go down with me to see Hovde?"

"If you want. I'll phone him. Call me back in ten minutes."

He said he would, and the line went dead. I called the west side station, and Hovde was there and I told him about Jake Schuster's call.

He chuckled. "Got him sweating, haven't we? He loves the girl, the way it looks."

"Must."

"Bring him down about one-thirty," he said. "I've some things to set up. Those Rams dood it, eh?"

"Sure did. Are you getting out on a limb, Sergeant, or is this L.A.P.D.S.O.P.?"

"How's that?"

"Standard operating procedure. Aren't you getting awful cute on a layman's hunch?"

"Doesn't it add up like it should? But a conviction, even though we know we're right? Jaekels would scream like a banshee. And besides, you're a collitch man, you're bright."

"I'll be there at one-thirty. With my bookie. Button your pockets."

He told me what to button and hung up. I called Jake, and he said one-thirty would be all right with him. I

made some coffee and listened to the radio next door. Music, for a change.

Shaved, dressed, went to a drugstore for breakfast. Tried to tell myself I wasn't crazy; it all added up and added up right. Would Hovde share my insanity? So we had a killer, but only in our minds. In court, there would need to be more than we had.

Building a case for Jaekels, that jackal. Where does Jaekels hide? Not funny. No puns are ever funny, to me. Too many tricks are done with words, too much blood is spilled.

Shadow hadn't dropped in lately. Maybe he was back to work, back to the pounding typewriter, fashioning Western dreams for bookies and bankers and waiters and wrestlers. And cowboys. Cowboys, a survey showed, were the biggest reader audience Western stories had. Identification with a less humdrum past.

At noon I met Jake, and we drove to the station in the Caddy. Jake said, "I thought you knew more than you'd admit the other day."

"I don't know anything. Have you talked to Hovde since this business started?"

"Twice. You know what I think he wants?"

I nodded.

"All right, then, *you* tell *me.*"

I rubbed my eyes, which ached. "He wants to stake her out, like a woolly white lamb, and hope the wolf will call."

Jake swore.

"Bait," I went on. "Bait for a killer. All she has to say is no. And then wonder when the wolf will call."

"Of all the damned fool ideas. Of all the crazy cop schemes I ever heard—"

"Wait'll you hear him," I said. "It isn't my idea, Jake."

Hovde was in the same room I'd always found him in. But Vicki was with him this time. She was sitting in a chair facing the door, and she stood up as soon as she saw Jake. Her face had never been whiter.

Then she was in Jake's arms and sobbing. Hovde

looked at me and I looked at him, and neither of us shrugged. Hovde went to the window, and I sat in a chair near the end of the desk and lighted a cigarette.

Then we all sat down, and Hovde started his spiel. He made a pretty good speech for a cop. And then, as though on signal, the door opened and Jaekels came in.

I hadn't seen him since that day in the cell, but that was once too often. He shook hands all around, like Santa Claus, and added his bit to the afternoon's festivities.

He made it sound legal. He added the whisper of a threat and the hint of a reward and managed, in a multitude of well-chosen words to annoy all of us, even Hovde.

When he was through, Vicki looked at Jake.

Jake said, "No."

It was refreshing to hear such a simple statement, after all the wordage.

Hovde said, "You don't give a damn about her neck, do you? You talk big, that's all."

Jake didn't answer.

Jaekels said, "Well then, there's nothing more to say. I'm sure I can get Miss Lincoln committed to a sanitarium again, or maybe a few months or years in jail. It depends on the judge."

"You couldn't get her a demerit from her Sunday-school teacher," Jake said. "Now who's talking big?"

Jaekels flushed, and Hovde looked menacing. I smiled.

"Something funny?" Jaekels asked me.

"I was thinking of a gag I heard on the radio this morning," I said.

Jaekels said, "Is it necessary for this man to be present, Sergeant?"

Hovde said, "No, I just keep him around for laughs. You can go home, Worden."

"Thanks," I said, and stood up. "If you get any more tough ones, don't be ashamed to call me in."

Hovde's face was blank as Molotov's. He nodded, and I went out. Into a day of mist and dull sounds, of hurrying people and speeding cars. Hovde probably wanted

me to hang around, but he wasn't my boss, and he hadn't said so.

I drove out to *Bullock's,* Westwood branch. I came into the first floor, but the joint was jumping, and Ellen was being besieged. I went out, again, without her seeing me.

From *Bullock's* to the *Ridge Club.* Mary wasn't there, but Manny was. Sitting at a table, reading a copy of *Time.*

"Let me buy you a drink, sucker," he said, and I sat down across from him.

The bartender brought me a beer, and Manny some kind of cordial in a shot glass, about the only kind of glass approximating the one that fit the drink. He lifted it in a silent toast.

He sipped it and said, "You're getting a lot of ink."

"Not this week. Why did you and Nick break up, Manny?"

"Nick Arnold?" He shrugged. "Nick's no partner. He's a one-man show."

"Tough, too, isn't he?"

"He likes to think. Who is? I knew a deep sea diver once who was scared of dentists. Read about a lion tamer who was afraid of the dark. Everybody's got some soft spot. Most people are scared to death of a fact."

"What are you afraid of, Manny?"

"Boat races." He lifted the glass again and grinned at me. "I hear you and Mike Kersh mixed it."

Word does get around. I nodded.

"He's awful close to Nick, Mike is. That was dumb of you, Peter."

"I'm not the brightest guy in the world," I said. "Jake Schuster ever work with you, Manny?"

"No, but I guess he's going to. We talked about it. Nick out to get him?"

"Why should he?"

Manny looked at his glass. "I don't know. I get a word here and there."

I said, "Everybody but the solid citizens knows every-

thing that's going on in town, don't they?"

"I'm a solid citizen," Manny said. "I'm in the same business the state is. Only I pay taxes on my take."

There was a phone booth in the corner here, and I went into it and phoned the station. Hovde was still there.

His voice was flat. "They saw the light. We convinced them. You made a hit with Jaekels."

"I worry about that. When's the big scheme going into operation?"

"As of now. It's going to be a long day again, I'm afraid."

"Luck," I said. "You're all right, Sergeant. I here and now apologize for all the lip I've given you."

"Good night," he said. "Stay sober."

It was dusk out, and the traffic was going by. I didn't want to tangle with that today; I ate at the *Ridge Club* with Manny. After a while Mary came in with Art Shadow, and we had some more to drink, and a few laughs. And then I felt uncomfortable for some reason, and left. I guess it was Art, and the way he'd stare at times.

Dark, misty night, and I was tension-tired, dead, and without spirit. I went home, full of beer and whisky.

Turned on the light and tried to read the paper, but my eyes wouldn't focus. Turned off the light and lay on the studio couch, and I could see the outline of the upholstered chair. Turned my back to it, but that didn't work.

Lay on my back, staring at the unseen ceiling, and the pictures came to me, all the way back to that night in *Tony's*. From the spaghetti to tonight's chili, all the scenes ran through my mind. I fell asleep.

And sleeping, dreamed. I dreamed of the killer. He sat in the upholstered chair and said quietly, "You were the one who guessed, weren't you?"

I admitted I was.

"How?" he asked. "What made you think of me?" Tall he was, and slim, in the upholstered chair.

"Everything," I said, "but mostly when you turned friendly, when you let down your hair. You overdid it."

"How?"

"Just by doing it. It was out of character. A snob will never admit he's a snob, never, drunk or sober. And you had to tell me you missed some classes; you had to overplay it. You missed some classes, classes you had to miss if you were going to kill Tommy and Al. You said you couldn't do anything athletic, even swim. You had to make it stink; you didn't know how to underplay it. And what would scare Nick, what *one* thing but a threat to his kids? Calvano was no friend of Nick's, but he was at the party to get money. Nobody would go to Nick's house to get money, not from *Nick*. Was he blackmailing you?"

"He was. When I got out of the san, Dad told me if he ever caught me using heroin again I'd go to the san for life. Calvano got me started again, and threatened to tell Dad if I didn't pay him. I tried to get into Dad's safe, but never had a chance. Then when I heard Calvano was looking for you, I came here. I was going to tell you about him. He came in while I was here."

"While you were reading my Joyce."

"I hit him with a book end. Don't the police take fingerprints?"

"Not of everything, but I'm surprised they overlooked a book end. If they did. And what about Tommy?"

"He phoned, told me to come over. I came."

"Making your second mistake. You brought your dad's hunting-knife along. Another clue; with any kind of a break at all through the manufacturer, enough to nail your dad. But your dad was talking to Jaekels at the time. Did Tommy blackmail you?"

"He tried."

"Paul," I said. "Were you—drugged, when you came?"

No answer. Gas rumbled in my stomach, and pain lanced my temple. No answer in my dreams. But my eyes were open, and I never dream with my eyes open.

Dark, and I moved my head very slowly toward the

upholstered chair, my body suddenly rigid. The chair was empty, and my breath expelled audibly.

From the darkness to my left a voice said, "They thought I'd come for Vicki Lincoln. I wonder how stupid they think I am."

I put my hands flat against the corduroy spread of the studio couch, my wet hands. My muscles jerked spasmodically. I couldn't raise myself; all my training told me to lie low. Sweat ran down into my eyes.

I said quietly, "Where are you, Paul? I can't see you."

"Why do you want to? Are you frightened, Mr. Worden?"

I started to edge toward the wall, crowding my back against it. I said, "Only a few people know you were in that san, Paul. And nobody can prove you killed Tommy and Calvano. Don't mess it up now. I'm probably being watched. This would be awful stupid, Paul."

"What would?"

Where had his voice come from? I moved my eyes without moving my head, trying to catch a shadow, a directional sound. My brain was dulled by alcohol, but operating despite all that.

"Your dad must know you left the house," I said. "He'll be following you."

"He wasn't home."

I'd caught it now. From the head of the studio couch, from the direction of the bathroom.

"And besides, he only suspects. He doesn't *know*."

That hadn't come from the direction of the bathroom, damn it. That had come from the direction of the upholstered chair.

The chair was empty. That much I could see.

From my left I heard the scrape of a shoe against wood. The floor was carpeted. What could it be? A foot against— The end table.

Damn it, this was no way to meet whatever was coming. Underneath me the couch creaked as I forced my body toward its lower end. If I couldn't see, he couldn't see.

I kept moving down—and stopped. My foot had hit something, something like a knee. He was standing there at the foot.

I scrambled for the far end and rolled off the edge as he grabbed at my ankle. I felt his hand slide off, and then I was rolling along the floor, and I heard his footsteps and I was on my back, my legs bent, ready for a double kick at anything that came close.

A creak, and something prodded my side, and I rolled, and rolling, grabbed, and caught a leg below the knee. I jerked, and felt him topple, and I swarmed on top, reaching for his arms.

Pain slashed at my forearm, fire and the sticky warmth of blood, and I had that hand in mine, and crawled up toward his face.

I could feel the wiry strength of him as he twisted, could hear his grating breath. I half rose, crouching, trying to locate his face, both my hands now gripping his knife hand.

His other hand scratched at my eyes, and I turned my head, and got his arm over my knee. And put my strength into the jerk, every bit of my weight.

And heard the elbow crack, and heard him scream, and the knife fall to the carpeted floor.

I groped for it, and got up. No sound from him, as I went to the light switch. He was out cold, his arm bent at a ridiculous angle because of the smashed elbow.

I phoned Vicki's apartment where the cops were waiting.

Hovde took me home from the station. It was late, and he was weary, but he said it was cleaned up now, and maybe he'd be able to catch some sleep before another tough one came up. Paul had signed a complete confession.

"Was he—under the influence, Sergeant?"

"It's still a good confession. That would be department business."

"Some business," I said. "If I hadn't been on my toes, you'd still be waiting over there. And if I hadn't been

sensitive, intuitive, and a reader of Chandler, you wouldn't even have had that lead."

"You maybe saved us a couple days," he admitted. He was slowing the car. We were on Sepulveda, and he stopped in front of some apartments. "Come on up. I'll make you a cup of coffee."

"Your wife will love that," I said, "bringing a stranger in this time of the night."

"I haven't got a wife," he said.

"Well, your boy, then, the one with my picture on the wall."

"I haven't got a boy," he said. "Don't tell me you fell for that."

"Et tu, Brute," I said. "Sergeant, you were my last rock. You were one guy I thought I could believe in."

"Believe in yourself," he said. "That's all there is. C'mon, let's go, move."

There are three more bits, having nothing to do with murder. If you only like mysteries and have followed this doubtful one this far, you can get off here. Only remember this, the rest is about Pete Worden, and you're Pete Worden. Three scenes to go.

Ellen. Her apartment above the paint store. Ellen, in sweater and skirt, her hair up. 7:30 p.m. Tuesday.

I sat on the davenport, a drink in my hand. She stood near the windows.

I said, "Well, it's Tuesday. What have you decided?"

"I've decided," she said, and she didn't look at me, so I knew what she'd decided.

"It's no," I said. "I can tell the setting for a no. But would there be a qualification, or even a reason I could argue against?"

She didn't look at me. She continued to look out the window. I don't know what she was looking at. She said, "It's a final no, to you. I'm marrying Nick."

A great and hammering silence moved through the room, though there wasn't any reason I should be surprised. I said, "Wham."

His money she was marrying. Of course. She was smart

enough to know what money meant today. A person can take a lot with money, she knew—now.

I stood up, though it took a bit of doing. I said, "I hope you'll be very happy."

"You do like hell."

"Why not?" I said. "Why should we both be unhappy?"

"Go, please," she said. "I'm sorry, but there's no words that will do you any good. It isn't a quick decision or one I'm going to change. Will you go? Will you get the hell out of here?"

Good-by, my love. Take your fine body and filled mind to that home in the Valley. Preside at Nick's table, scintillate among the bookies, smile at Nick, and buy a new mink when things are dull. Don't ever dream of us, don't ever cry for me. Send your folks money, money from the big take. You've finally left the church. Good-by, my love.

I got through the night with a toss or two and some turns, with the aid of a few small snifters.

Wednesday morning about nine, and I was consuming coffee and the *Times* when the knock came at the door.

Chris. Scene two.

He stared at me. I stared at him. I'd broken his brother's arm at the elbow.

"Pete," he finally said. "Oh, Pete."

He was crying.

I put my arm around him, around my brother Chris. "Pete," he said. "God damn it, Pete."

"We're—all right, Chris? I should have kept my nose out of it. I should have shut my mouth."

He had control. "I had to see you. I wanted to say good-by, Pete. I'm signing up."

"A good idea," I said. "The best all around. Oh, hell, Chris—" Some awful words.

I put an arm around his big shoulders and wished him all the luck there was, and I'd see him again, for sure.

He left, ending scene two, and I sat down to coffee again, and the *Times*. No flavor in either. Joe Devlin,

Blacky Felker, Andy Gelatti, oh, Lord, Lord, Lord— And now Chris Arnold.

Punks, all of them, kids who knew from nothing. Why, always the kids? What's the matter with—

What else? Where else? Who else?.

Some savvy that might help, some things lived through before, some leadership experienced and passed on. And they were what Mr. Arthur Miller so aptly expressed, they were all my sons.

The setting for scene three in this epilogue was a big room, with lots of benches, the benches filled with kids. Kids who didn't know from nothing. I stood in the wide doorway looking, Pete Worden, the unmarried father.

And there was Chris at the other end of the room, in one of the front rows, his back to me, his crew cut one of many. I made my way to him.

He looked up smiling, "Hey, Pete—"

"Why not?" I said, and there was room next to him, and I slid in. "What else am I good for? And who else would keep you out of trouble?"

"I don't want to keep out of trouble," he said. "Don't worry about me, Pete. Hell, we'd never stick together anyway, would we?"

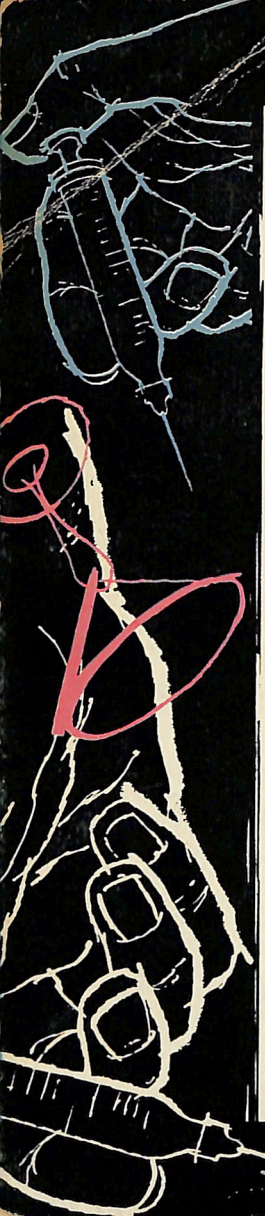
"It could be done," I said. "You grease a first sergeant here and a personnel clerk there. It could be arranged, with luck."

"Maybe? Hey, maybe we could. Pete, how about the quiff? Nobody ever leveled with me about the quiff. Lots of it?"

"All you can handle," I said. "All colors, shapes, and sizes. The world's full of it."

"It's for me then," he said. "I can take the rest." He nudged me. "Buddies, huh, Pete?"

"Buddies," I said.



HE WAS A HEEL . . .

a blue-blood gone bad, a low-brow with class, a bum with an income. He liked low-slung cars and top-heavy girls, and he took his pleasure where he found it. He was the consort of bookies, dope-peddlers, crooks; the buddy of has-beens, tough guys, and junkies. He dreamed the big dream, but played it small . . . free wheeling it down hill all the way, with a crack-up — and murder — at the bottom.

Too many slow horses, too many fast women, and finally, one loaded cigarette; and after that . . . trouble: a woman who wouldn't stay, a dead man's face that wouldn't go away, and an alibi that wouldn't stick . . .

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Don't Cry for Me

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DELL BOOK