

The voice on the telephone seemed to be sharp and peremptory, but I didn't hear too well what it said – partly because I was only half-awake and partly because I was holding the receiver upside down. I fumbled it around and grunted.

'Did you hear me! I said I was Clyde Umney, the lawyer.'

'Clyde Umney, the lawyer. I thought we had several of them.'

'You're Marlowe, aren't you?'

'Yeah. I guess so.' I looked at my wrist watch. It was 6.30 a.m., not my best hour.

'Don't get fresh with me, young man.'

'Sorry, Mr Umney. But I'm not a young man. I'm old, tired and full of no coffee. What can I do for you, sir?'

'I want you to meet the Super Chief at eight o'clock, identify a girl among the passengers, follow her until she checks in somewhere, and then report to me. Is that clear?'

'No.'

'Why not?' he snapped.

'I don't know enough to be sure I could accept the case.'

'I'm Clyde Um –'

'Don't,' I interrupted. 'I might get hysterical. Just tell me the basic facts. Perhaps another investigator would suit you better. I never was an FBI man.'

'Oh. My secretary, Miss Vermilyea, will be at your office in half an hour. She will have the necessary information for you. She is very efficient. I hope you are.'

'I'm more efficient when I've had breakfast. Have her come here, would you?'

'Where is here?'

I gave him the address of my place on Yucca Avenue, and told him how she would find it.

'Very well,' he said grudgingly, 'but I want one thing very clear. The girl is not to know she is being followed. This is very important. I am acting for a very influential firm of Washington attorneys. Miss Vermilyea will advance you some expense money and pay you a retainer of \$250. I expect a high degree of efficiency. And let's not waste time talking.'

'I'll do the best I can, Mr Umney.'

He hung up. I struggled out of bed, showered, shaved, and was nuzzling my third cup of coffee when the door bell rang.

'I'm Miss Vermilyea, Mr Umney's secretary,' she said in a rather chintzy voice.

'Please come in.'

She was quite a doll. She wore a white belted raincoat, no hat, a well-cherished head of platinum hair, bootees to match the raincoat, a folding plastic umbrella, a pair of blue-grey eyes that looked at me as if I had said a dirty word. I helped her off with her raincoat. She smelled very nice. She had a pair of legs – so far as I could determine – that were not painful to look at. She wore night-sheer stockings. I stared at

them rather intently, especially when she crossed her legs and held out a cigarette to be lighted.

'Christian Dior,' she said, reading my rather open mind. 'I never wear anything else. A light, please.'

'You're wearing a lot more today,' I said, snapping a lighter for her.

'I don't greatly care for passes this early in the morning.'

'What time would suit you, Miss Vermilyea?'

She smiled rather acidly, inventoried her hand-bag, and tossed me a manila envelope. 'I think you'll find everything you need in this.'

'Well – not quite everything.'

'Get on with it, you goof. I've heard all about you. Why do you think Mr Umney chose you? He didn't. I did. And stop looking at my legs.'

I opened the envelope. It contained another sealed envelope and two cheques made out to me. One, for \$250, was marked 'Retainer, as an advance against fees for professional services'. The other was for \$200 and was marked 'Advance to Philip Marlowe for necessary expenses'.

'You will account for the expenses to me, in exact detail,' Miss Vermilyea said. 'And buy your own drinks.'