



783

"EXCITING . . . AMOROUS . . . MYSTIFYING!"

HARTFORD COURANT

The

Bloody Moonlight

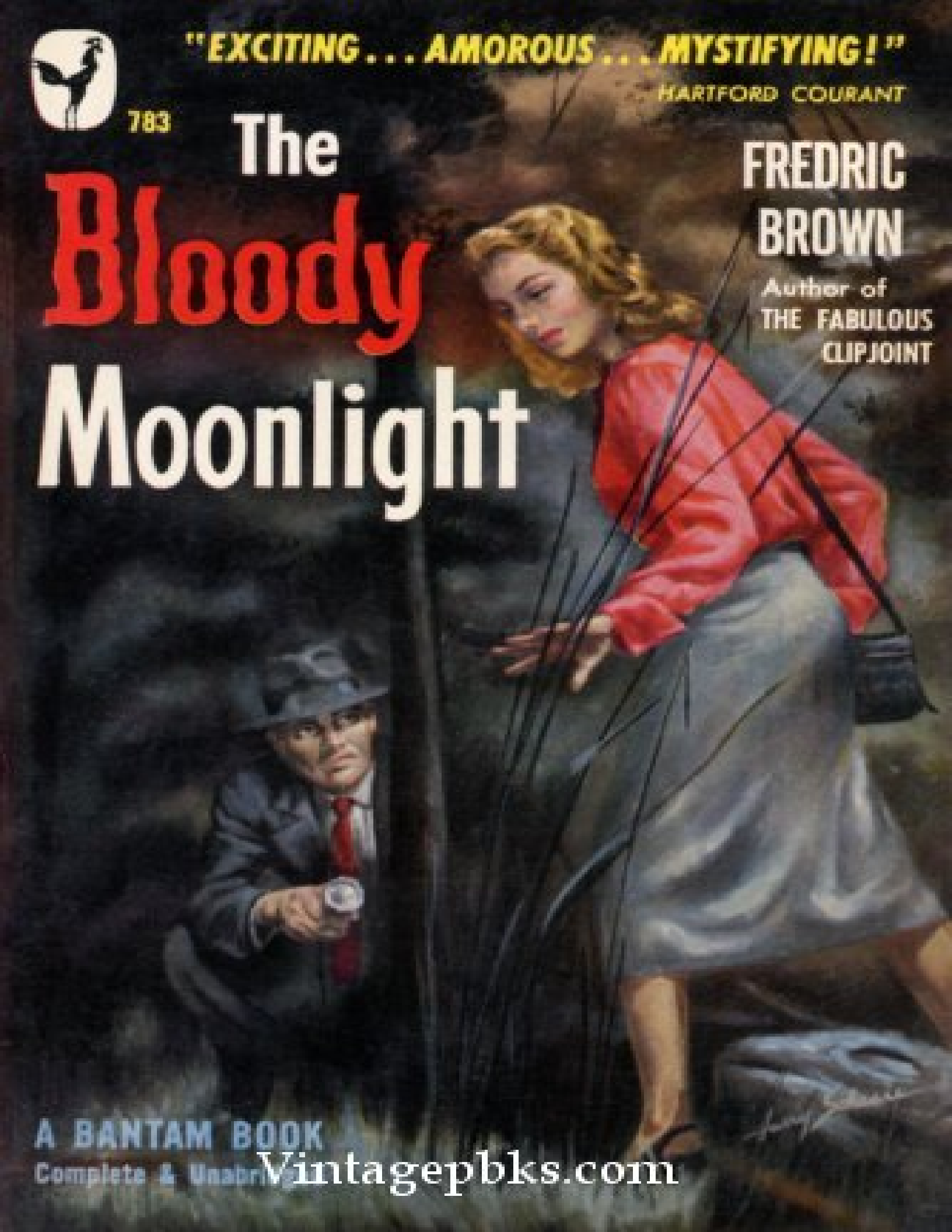
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Author of
THE FABULOUS
CLIPJOINT

A BANTAM BOOK

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Synopsis:

Ed and Am have gotten away from the Carney life. These days, they're working for the Starlock Detective Agency. Ed's first case is a wealthy client trying to sound out whether an investment's worth it. But then he finds a body with its throat cut, and hears some external howling that might just be from a werewolf.

The Bloody Moonlight

By

Fredric Brown

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Chapter 1

IT WAS ALMOST QUITTING TIME when my Uncle Am came into the back room of the Starlock agency, where we both worked. He sat down and put his feet up. He grinned at me and said, "Well, kid?"

"Yeah," I told him, and that about covered it.

I'd been an operative for two days. The first morning I'd read the typewritten book of Instructions for Operatives. In the afternoon I'd gone out to West Madison Street to talk to a bartender whose cousin had skipped town with a car on which he'd made only two payments. He either didn't know where his cousin had gone or he wouldn't tell me. This morning, my second day, Ben Starlock had sent me out with an op who was on a tail job; I was just to go along to learn the ropes. We waited outside the office building where he worked until two-thirty and when he hadn't come out for lunch by then we phoned under a pretext and learned he'd left for the day at eleven. Either we'd missed him or he'd gone out the back way. So we came back to the agency, the other op had got put on something else, and I was still sitting.

And now Uncle Am sat grinning at me like a shortish, fattish Cheshire cat. He said, "Well, Ed, you asked for it."

"Yeah," I admitted. I really had. He'd been with the agency eight months now, since we'd left the carnival, and all that time I'd been dogging him to dog Starlock into taking me on.

Ben Starlock came out of the front office and leaned against the jamb of the door, almost filling the doorway. He was an ex-cop, and looked it. He said, "Am, how'd you like to take a run down to Tremont for two or three days? A gravy run."

Sure," Uncle Am said. "Would the budget on it stand two men? I could take Ed along and show him a thing or two."

Ben shook his head. "One man, three days, is what the client authorized. She put a hundred-buck ceiling on it, counting expenses. Know anything about radio, Am?" Enough to tune in a station. The kid here does. Didn't you tell me you made a set once, Ed?"

“Yeah,” I said. I didn't think it necessary to mention that it had been a crystal set, which has about the same relationship to a modern radio as a toy balloon has to a B-29.

Ben looked at me with new interest. He said, “I wonder,” and then shook his head. Nope, he'd never get out of town. Too good looking. If I sent him around to see the client, she'd keep him.”

Uncle Am said, “He's got a baseball bat he drives the women off with. He could take it along. What's the radio angle, Ben?”

“Guy down in Tremont's got a new gadget he's getting mysterious signals with. Sort of hints they might be from Mars or somewhere.”

“So what's the score?” Uncle Am asked. “What's our angle?”

“Guy in Tremont's an inventor — a little bit screwball, maybe, but not all the way. He's got a small income from stuff he's patented and sold. Now he's got something new, he thinks, and he wants some money from our client to finance some more work on it before he puts it out.

“Our client's a successful businesswoman, with a fair stack of hay. She's a distant relative of the old man, the inventor, lived with him when she was a kid, see? Now he wants five thousand bucks from her, offers her an interest in the new gadget.

“Well, she's done business with us before and she wants us to send an op down there to talk to him and ask questions about him, find out if he's on the beam and maybe got something. There's no suspicion of fraud; it's all in the family. If he's off his rocker, she'll give him some money anyway — five hundred bucks or maybe up to a grand — and write it off for auld lang syne. On the other hand, if he's really got something, well, she could easily raise the five thousand he wants for an interest in it.”

I said, “If there's no question of fraud, I'd say it's more of a case for a radio technician, an expert, than a private detective.”

Ben Starlock said, “Sure, that's how we make our money, turning down cases because somebody else could do it better. Also, in my opinion, the very mention of the word Mars is pretty good proof the guy's a nut and she needn't investigate further. But that's another way not to make money — to give a client the answer for free.”

Uncle Am said, “I'll take it, Ben, if you want. But why not let the kid take a crack at it? He's had a pretty dull couple of days, and besides he does know more about radio than I do.”

Starlock shrugged. He said, "Okay, why not? Listen, Ed, the important thing about a case like this one is to write a good report, one that makes it sound like you did a lot of work. Make the client think she's getting her money's worth. And don't stick your neck out with too strong an opinion; just report what you find out and let her draw her own conclusions. Got that?"

"Sure," I said.

"Then here's the dope. Our client is Justine Haberman, nineteen seven Lincoln Park West; we've done business with her before, so she's okay. I just talked to her on the phone. She wants whatever op is making the trip to drop out to see her this evening and get the details and instructions.

"Take the first train down to Tremont tomorrow — it's a little over a hundred miles. Do the job in two days if you can, not over three at the outside. You won't have to report in here tomorrow morning. And watch the expenses."

"Sure," I said.

"Your train fare'll be about seven bucks. In a little town like that you can get a room for not over three bucks a night, and that'll be two nights if you spend three days on the job. Get by for four bucks a day on meals and that'll make an even twenty-five bucks. Because she's an old client I gave her a rate of twenty-five a day, and if you hold expenses down we can give her three days for the hundred she wants to spend. Got money for expenses, or want to draw some?"

"I got enough," I told him.

He said, "Okay, beat it, then. You too, Am. I won't need you any more today." Which, I thought, was damn generous of him because it was four minutes to five, and five was quitting time.

I told Uncle Am that while we were going down in the elevator and he laughed. He said, "It all evens up, kid. Some days you work five or six hours over, some days you get off five or six minutes early. Let's eat at that place around the corner on Randolph."

We did, and while we ate Uncle Am went into it a little bit more. He said, "You got to look at it from the agency's point of view, too, Ed. It doesn't get paid for the time you sit around on your tail in the back room, but you do. Only way Starlock can even up for that is to make money on you when you are working. And sure, it sounds like penny-pinching to tell you to hold your meals to four bucks a day — but, honestly now, if you

were buying your own meals on your own money, would you pay over that?"

"I guess not."

"So. Look at it this way. The agency is authorized to spend a hundred bucks. Now if that's done on two days' time and fifty dollars' expenses, the agency makes about twenty bucks — figuring your salary plus share of office overhead at fifteen a day. If you get in three days' time and twenty dollars' expenses, the agency makes thirty bucks. Wouldn't you, if you were running an agency, rather make thirty bucks on a deal than twenty?"

"You win, Uncle Am," I said.

"Good, then we can get away from vulgar mathematics. Kid, you talked me into getting you a job at the agency and, God help you, you're a detective now. I want you to make a go of it. If you don't like it and quit, that's okay if you were good at it while you lasted."

"I see what you mean," I told him. "Okay, I *am* going to make a go of it. I'm all right; I just had a bad couple of days, that's all."

"So we'll go home and then you go see this Haberman dame. Then come jack and—"

"You know her?"

"I've met her. Why?"

"What's she like?"

He said, "She's a woman. So you'll get along with her all right. Don't worry about that. But after you get the dope from her come on home and we'll talk it over and I'll give you some steers as to the best way to handle things in Tremont."

We went to our room and played a game or two of cribbage and then it was time for me to put on a clean shirt and head for Lincoln Park West. I figured eight o'clock would be a safe time to get there.

I hadn't expected the address Ben Starlock had given me to be a furnished room over a saloon; I'd figured it to be an apartment building with a doorman and a switchboard, and I'd changed my shirt and shaved so they wouldn't make me use the tradesmen's entrance. It threw me a little off base by being a private home. Not a mansion, just a seven- or eight-room red-brick home set in the middle of a wide and deep lot with plenty of grass and flowers around it, and a driveway that led to a two-car garage at the back. It was a layout that would have been moderately expensive out in a suburb; within spitting distance of the Loop it must have cost plenty.

I rang the bell and a maid answered the door. She beat me to the punch. “You the gen'leman from the detective company?”

I admitted that I was and she showed me to a parlor to the right of the hall and said, “Mizz Haberman be down purty soon.”

I sat and twiddled my thumbs for a while and nothing happened so I got up to look at the phonograph and the shelves of records on the other side of the room. The phonograph was a Capehart and the albums included a little bit of every-thing from Bunny Berrigan to J.S. Bach. You could have started a record store with what was there.

I was still reading labels when I heard a throat cleared behind me and turned around. A tall, thin man stood in the doorway with a glass in his hand as though he was posing for a whiskey ad. He could have been anywhere between thirty and fifty, and he could have had anywhere between one and ten drinks — until he walked farther into the room; then you could tell it had been ten drinks.

He asked, “Want to hear some music?”

“Sure,” I said.

He put the glass down on the Capehart and almost stumbled as he stepped alongside to look at the albums. “Haydn or Khachaturian?” he asked. Drunk as he was, he pronounced Khachaturian as easily as I could have pronounced Kern.

I said, “If you don't mind my being lowbrow, there's an album of Muggsy Spanier records I could do with, the Asch album there.”

“A kindred soul,” he said. “We shall have a piece of Asch.”

He pulled the album from the shelf without getting a good enough grip on it and it slid out of his hand, ricocheted off the corner of the Capehart and landed flat on the floor; I could hear the records crack.

He picked up his glass and took another sip. He said, “Maybe you'd rather have another drink instead?”

I told him, “Thanks, no. Maybe that's enough music, too.”

“You could run it.”

I said, “A Capehart's too complicated for me. I never drove one.”

“Sure you won't have a drink? Oh, I know. You're on duty. England expects every man to do his duty. And Justine — Have you met Justine?”

“No.”

“You shall. Justine expects every man to do her duty. What time is it?”

I told him it was a quarter after eight.

He said, "I must not keep the Duchess waiting. Glad to have met you." He went out and I heard the front door close. I never saw him again.

I put the Muggsy Spanier album back on the shelf without opening it to assess the damage, and I moved the glass he'd left on the Capehart to a glass-topped coffee table where it wouldn't leave a ring, and then I sat down and twiddled my thumbs some more.

After a while I happened to look up at the doorway again and this time a woman stood there. I don't know how long she'd been standing there watching me. I stood up and said, "Miss Haberman? I'm Ed Hunter, from the Starlock agency."

She was tall and blond, and highly polished without looking hard. Her age might have been anywhere over twenty-one. She had eyes that were large and wide apart, like a fawn's. Don't ask me what color they were; I never notice what color people's eyes are. But her hair was the color of straw, although it was arranged more neatly than straw ever is. She had a beautiful figure, and wore a dress of some kind over it but not exactly hiding it. She asked, "Know anything about radio?"

"A little. Not much."

"What's frequency modulation?"

I said, "It's a system of broadcasting in which the frequency of the transmitted wave modulates according to the amplitude and pitch of what's being broadcast. Eliminates static."

"Would you rather have a whiskey sour or a Martini?"

I said, "Isn't that a little like asking, are you still beating your wife? The Instructions for Operatives say one can't drink on duty, but how can one answer a question the way you worded it and remain unsullied? The answer is either."

She leaned back around the doorway and said, "Whiskey sours, Elsie," and then came on into the room. She sat down on the sofa and I sat down again, and looked at her. She was definitely worth looking at.

She asked, "Have you worked for Starlock long?"

"Not very," I admitted. And because I didn't want to say specifically how long not-very was, I asked, "Do you have the letter from this man in Tremont in which he tells you what it is he has?"

"It's at my office, but that doesn't matter; I can tell you everything you have to know. Ready? Got a pencil?"

"I can remember it," I said, "unless there's a lot of technical data."

“There isn't. His name is Stephen — with a p-h — Amory. He lives about two miles outside Tremont, Illinois, on a road that's called the Dartown Road.”

“A farm?”

“It used to be. He gave up farming — in favor of puttering around with his inventions — quite a few years ago and he's sold off all the farm land to his neighbors. Just has an acre or two left that the house stands on. He's a widower now — his wife was still alive when I lived with them for a while, as a child — and he lives there alone except for one man who works for him, Randolph Barnett.”

I wrote the name down, mentally. I asked, “And which end of things does this Randolph Barnett help on? The technical end, or taking care of the house and the acre or two?”

“A little of both. He's had technical training.”

“And what is the exact nature of the invention that Stephen Amory claims to have?”

She frowned at me. “Listen — What's your name?”

“Hunter. Ed Hunter.”

“Listen, Ed, you don't have to question me. Let me tell it my way; then when I'm through, if there are any questions you want to ask, okay.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Stephen Amory is my half uncle; the half brother of my mother. My parents died, both of them, when I was nine. I was sent to live with the Amorys and stayed with them for five years, until I was fourteen. So they were father and mother to me for that while. Then Mrs. Amory died and I came to live with other relatives in Chicago, until — Well, my career after that hasn't anything to do with the business at hand, except that I want you to understand that — that there's no question of fraud involved. He isn't trying to—”

She broke off as the maid came in with a tray that had four whiskey sours. She gave Justine Haberman one and me one and then put the tray down on the coffee table and went out.

I looked at the other two drinks on the tray and Justine said, “Don't be stuffy. Would you rather have milk? Where were we?”

“No question of fraud involved. What has he got?”

“Bumps.” She lifted her drink and took a sip. “He's cagy about just what it is. He says, frankly, that it might turn out to be something big and then

again it might be nothing at all. It has something to do with receiving, not broadcasting, and he did mention frequency modulation. And he said he'd been getting some strange signals on it, something he couldn't identify. He admitted it puzzled him; said he'd used a directional antenna — a loop aerial — on it and that the signals seemed to come from *up*.”

“Such as the moon or Mars?”

She frowned at me. “Did Ben Starlock give you that idea?”

“Well,” I said, “I thought — I mean — didn't you tell him—?”

“Ben Starlock is an ass. I told him as little as possible over the phone so as *not* to get someone off on the wrong foot with a wrong idea. Stephen Amory is not a nut. He has a steady, if small, income from royalties on things he's invented and patented.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Maybe I've read too many science-fiction stories. But I didn't mean to sound sarcastic. Why couldn't there be intelligent life on another planet somewhere? Why couldn't strange signals come from somewhere off the earth?”

“Because — every time he's heard them, they've come from exactly the same angle — seventy-five degrees, approximately. The earth revolves; it doesn't stand still with relation to any other planet, or anything else. Yet the signals always come from the same point.”

I said, “All right, I'm stupid. What's the answer? I agree, then, that it couldn't be Mars or the moon.”

“Quit being stupid. Tell me the answer.”

It was a nasty question, then and there. Because, for one thing, I had a hunch that I ought to know it if I thought things out. I closed my eyes, so that looking at her wouldn't distract me, and I thought hard for a minute.

Then I opened my eyes and said, “Radio waves bounce off the Heaviside layer.

A signal sent upward on a tight directional beam from thirty or forty miles away might bounce off the Heaviside and land in Mr. Amory's lap from an angle of seventy-five degrees. Is that the answer?”

“You go to the head of the class, Ed. What are you working for Ben Starlock for?”

“Money,” I said. “Speaking of which, has your half uncle ever asked you for any before?”

“Never. Not a cent. And — well, I don't know how straight Starlock gave this part of it to you, but I *do* feel that I owe him something. Whatever

your report turns up, I'm sending him some money — a thousand dollars, maybe.

“But he offers me an interest — a fourth interest, to be exact, for five thousand dollars. Now that's a lot of money for me to raise.”

I said, “It would even be a lot of money for me to raise.”

“Don't ever try to be funny, Ed. You're funnier when you don't.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Don't mention it. Would you mind finishing that drink so you can take another, and hand me one while you're at it?”

I did, and she said, “All right, does that finish the business or is there something else you might want to know?”

“Just one thing,” I said. “What am I supposed to do?”

She took three deep breaths — I could count them easily by watching the movement of her breasts — before she answered: “If you were I, Ed, what would you want to know?”

I took a sip of the second whiskey sour and it tasted a little better than the first. I thought it over a minute — her question, I mean, not the whiskey sour — and then I said, “I guess I'd want to know what the score was.”

She laughed, and her laughter tinkled pleasantly. She said, “For a minute you had me worried, asking a question like that. But as long as you could answer it yourself—”

“One thing I can't answer myself,” I told her, “is why you're sending a private detective instead of a radio technician. I'm not one, you know.”

“I know. I've got a Webster, too. I recognized your definition of frequency modulation; I looked it up this morning while I was reading the letter. How many words did you look up?”

I grinned at her. “Fifteen or twenty, maybe, just before I came here. I do know a little bit; I know the difference between a detector and an amplifier, and between a plate and a grid. I just added a few terms to my vocabulary. But you still haven't answered my question.”

She took two sips at her drink before she answered. “In the first place, Ed, inventors don't like to discuss the intimate details of their brain children before they're patented. If I sent a technician down, Stephen Amory would talk to him about it in nice technical jargon, but he wouldn't give him any blueprints or diagrams. When he finds he's talking to a layman — and don't think he won't know — he'll be much more apt to talk freely. One point.

“Another one — is harder to explain. Call it a woman's intuition, or a silly idea, or a hunch. I use them in business, and I get along all right. I've told you I don't suspect fraud, so all right, I don't know what I suspect. If I did know, I wouldn't tell you; I wouldn't want to prejudice you in advance. Does that answer your question?”

“No,” I said, “but it pretty well lets you out of answering it. How recently have you seen your uncle — your half uncle?”

“When he was in Chicago on business for a few days two years ago. He stayed here. The last time I visited there was five years ago. We correspond every once in a while. The letter that came from him this morning was the first one either of us had written in several months. Any more questions?”

“One,” I said, “but an important one. What do I tell Stephen Amory when I talk to him? That I'm a private detective investigating for you? Or do I have to think up some fancy lies to get him to talk to me?”

“You can tell him the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I wrote him this afternoon, after I talked to Ben Starlock, and told him a man was coming down to see him and that I'd decide whether or not to go on on the basis of the report. Just don't mention that I'm advancing him *some* money in any case.”

“Fine,” I said. That made it easy.

“Like some music?”

She didn't look as though she'd bounce records off the phonograph instead of putting them on, so I nodded.

“Beethoven or be-bop?”

“A bit nearer the latter,” I admitted. “Anybody but Muggsy Spanier. Got any with Dizzy Gillespie on 'em?”

She had, and we listened to them over another pair of whiskey sours. Then we played something with a little less esoteric rhythm, and danced to it. I overlooked Rule #1 in the Instructions to Operatives — Never make a pass at a client — and kissed her while we were dancing. It was very nice; one of those kisses that feel as though they may explode any minute, but this one didn't. I very carefully didn't let it. Not because she was maybe ten years older than I; that didn't worry me. But because she had too damn much money. Being a rich woman's toy may be nice work if you can get it, but I don't think I'd like it.

At ten o'clock she said, “Sony, Ed, but I've got to go to a party. Want to come along?”

“I'd better not,” I said. “I've got to do some packing and getting ready, and I want to catch an early train.”

“All right, if you'd rather not. Do you know where you'll be staying in Tremont?”

“Haven't an idea. I don't even know what hotels are there.”

“There are only three. The Tremont House is the best, such as it is. Stay there, please, because I might want to look you up.”

Maybe my eyebrows went up a little, because she went on: “I'm going to St. Louis on business sometime this week, and I'll probably drive. If so, I can go by way of Tremont and see how you're getting on. I might decide you've got enough by then and I might want to authorize further investigation.”

“Okay,” I said. “I'll stay at the Tremont House.”

She said, 'You're a nice kid, Ed.’

I laughed. I said, “Thanks, said he, twisting his hat bashfully.”

“And, damn you, quit trying to act cynical and funny. I told you once you were funnier when you didn't try to be.”

“Yes, ma'am,” I said.

Chapter 2

WHEN I GOT HOME at ten-thirty, Uncle Am wasn't there, but there was a note propped up on our dresser.

“Ed,” it read: “If God spares you and you get home early, I'm down at the corner having a beer.”

“Down at the corner” meant Hymie's place, of course. I went downstairs again and into Hymie's. Uncle Am was at the end of the bar, in the middle of a hot argument about the Cubs. He pretended to do a double-take when he saw me, and then he pulled himself out of the argument and came down to where I'd already ordered a beer apiece for us.

He said, “Well, kid?”

“It's okay,” I told him. “I've got all the dope I need. I'll be able to handle it.”

“What's the score?”

“That's what I'm supposed to find out. Seriously, I can't go wrong. I can even be in the open about what I want to find out.”

“Good. You've got two lucky breaks besides that. First is that you can sleep late tomorrow; I called up for you and found out the first train that will get you to Tremont doesn't leave until ten forty-three, Union Station.”

“And the other break?”

“The name Tremont's been trying to ring a bell in my head ever since Ben mentioned it this afternoon. It finally rang. I know somebody there.”

I said, “A dame, I'll bet.”

“Not the way you mean it. She's — hell, she must be in her sixties by now. She was the wife of the owner of a small carney I was with for a few seasons, quite a few years ago. Caroline Bemiss. She left the carney game when he died and she bought the weekly newspaper in Tremont. If she still runs it — well, in a town that size the editor of the local paper knows everything about everybody. You can learn plenty from her.”

“I'll look her up,” I said. “She'll remember you?”

“Sure. And she's a swell old gal. I saw her a few years ago when the carney I was with that year played three days in Tremont. Only time I was

ever there and all I remember about the town was that it rained all three days.” He grinned. “How'd you get along with our client?”

“Okay. No hits, no runs, no errors. Is she really a lady wolf?”

“I don't know, Ed. I've just been kidding. I met her once, for a few minutes, in Starlock's office.”

“What kind of work does she use the agency for, mostly?”

“Checking up on her managers, whether they're dragging down or not. She runs a chain of a dozen dress shops, eight of them here in Chicago, the others in Milwaukee, Springfield, Gary and St. Louis. Pretty smart businesswoman, I guess.”

“One more beer, before we go home?”

“Sure, Ed. We can take one more.”

And we did, and we went home.

It didn't sound like the prelude to a madman's nightmare.

In the morning Uncle Am reset the alarm for me when he got up at seven, and I slept till nine. I caught the ten forty-three with time to spare. I had to wait an hour and change trains at Streator, and it was almost three o'clock when I got to Tremont. I got a room at the Tremont House for exactly the three dollars a day that Starlock had predicted. I cleaned up from the train trip, and then got right to work. I phoned Stephen Amory.

I explained who I was and what I wanted, and asked when I could see him.

“I'm just leaving, Mr. Hunter,” he said. “Driving over to Dartown on a rather important matter that I can't postpone. Will tomorrow be all right?”

“I'd much rather see you this evening, if you're going to be back in time.”

“Well — If nine o'clock isn't too late, all right. I can promise to be back by then.”

“That'll be fine.”

He told me how to get out to his place, and said if I got there before he got back, it'd be all right because Randy Barnett, who worked for him, would be there to let me in to wait.

I called the only newspaper listed in the phone book and asked for Mrs. Caroline Bemiss. She was out of town and not expected back till the next day.

I went back down to the hotel desk and asked the clerk whether Tremont had anything in the nature of a Chamber of Commerce or a Better

Business Bureau.

He said it had a Chamber of Commerce, but that they didn't have any regular offices; it was just a group of merchants and businessmen who met one evening every two weeks, and that the only paid employee was a secretary who took notes at the meetings and kept their records.

Then he grinned. He said, "And you wouldn't have to look very far for the secretary. I'm it."

Someone came up to the desk for his mail and the clerk gave it to him and then turned back to me. He said, "My name's Seth Parkinson, Mr. Hunter. Can I do anything for you? As secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, I mean."

I showed him my letter of identification as a Starlock operative, and told him I was interested in anything he could tell me about Stephen Amory.

"Credit rating's good," he said. "Solid citizen. Doesn't run any white-slave traffic or peddle dope. What, especially, do you want to know?"

"Mostly, what kind of a man he is, how he stands in the community, what he eats for breakfast, and whether or not he's — well, a little on the screwball side."

Parkinson looked at me thoughtfully. He said, "I don't know what he eats for breakfast. Guess nobody does except Randy Barnett, who lives with him and works for him."

"Maybe I could get by without knowing that," I told him.

He leaned forward on his elbows on the counter. He asked, "Somebody in Chicago thinking of investing in that Martian radio of his? Is that what the investigation's for?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Boiling down your questions, you really want to know whether or not he's a bit insane, don't you?"

"Let it ride at that," I said. "Is he?"

"Well, up to the last month, I'd have said he was sane, except for one kind of screwy thing he did once. And, of course, except for the fact that he's always — since his wife died — lived alone except for Randy Barnett, hasn't made any friends and has acted like a kind of a hermit."

"What's the one screwy thing, up to a month ago?"

"Getting Randy out of jail like he did, after working to get him in."

I said, "I didn't know about that. What happened?"

“Couple of years ago Randy stole some money from him. About three hundred dollars. Claimed afterwards he did it because he had it coming as an interest in something he'd helped Amory with, but anyway he stole it. Amory hit the roof, had him prosecuted and sent to jail — three- to five-year term.

“Then the minute Randy's behind bars, Amory turns around and starts working to get him out again. Spends a hell of a lot more than three hundred bucks getting him out of jail. Gets him out in six months and takes him back to work for him again.”

I waited for something more, and nothing more happened. He was looking at me as though he expected something, so I said, “What's screwy about that? He had a change of heart, after blowing up. More power to him.”

Parkinson looked at me as though I were a bit peculiar, and I looked at him. He wasn't anything very special to look at. He was about thirty or thirty-five, with a long horselike face and sandy hair that somehow managed to make me think of a horse's mane, neatly trimmed though it was. I've never particularly cared for horses.

But I remembered I'd found out only one of the two peculiar things about Stephen Amory, and I asked him what the other was.

“Why, this interplanetary radio of his, of course.”

“What about it?”

“What *about* it?” Again I got that look as though I, along with Stephen Amory, didn't have quite sense enough to come in out of a cloudburst. He'd started gossiping with me as with an equal; now he was wondering. “Why, anybody that'd claim to get Mars on a radio set—”

I asked, “But has he claimed that? As I understand it, he gets directional signals from a diagonally upward direction, but they could be sent from somewhere near here and bounce off the Heaviside layer so as to strike his antenna from that angle. In fact, if they come from the same angle each time he hears them, it's proof that they couldn't come from a planet that's constantly moving with relation to the earth.”

“That's what he's giving out. But then why was he in town yesterday trying to buy a star globe, and getting books on astronomy at the library?”

“He was?”

“Yes, he was. He tried at three stores, and he looked over what they had on astronomy at Klotz's Bookstore. He didn't buy any there; they had only

one book and it must not have been what he wanted, but they had five books on it at the library and he drew three of them. Does that look like he thinks those signals are bouncing off any layers?”

“That was yesterday?” I asked. I was thinking that the letter to Justine Haberman had been written the day before yesterday, Monday, if she'd received it yesterday morning.

“Yes.”

I took out a cigarette and lighted it thoughtfully. Parkinson watched me as though he were going to neigh any moment.

I said, “You mentioned Mars. Is that off the cuff, or has Amory mentioned it? I mean, even if the broadcasts would be coming from off the earth, couldn't it be from Venus or Saturn — or from Proxima Centauri, for that matter?”

He leaned forward mysteriously again. “No, Amory hasn't mentioned Mars. But has he told you *what* the signals were?”

“No. I haven't talked to him yet.”

“Well, they were clicks, just clicks. Every time he heard it, four of them.”

“So?” I said.

“Don't you get it? Four of them. Isn't Mars the fourth planet? Suppose Mars *is* inhabited, and the inhabitants were trying to send a signal to us — wouldn't that be likely to be the first simple thing they'd send? Something that would enable us to identify where they came from?”

I said, very carefully, “It sounds possible. Is that your idea, or Amory's?”

“Mine,” he said proudly.

It took me a full ten seconds to figure out the answer to that one. It wasn't a particularly brilliant answer. It was, “Oh. Well, thanks.” I said it and went on out of the lobby to the street.

Tremont is a main-drag town; all of the business district is along about five blocks of the main street. I walked west along it until the business fronts began to taper off into residences and then I crossed over and walked back east on the other side, with the setting sun at my back and my shadow long before me on the wide sidewalk. I wasn't looking for anything in particular, just getting the feel of the place. I didn't care too much for it, but maybe I was prejudiced, so soon after talking to the secretary of its Chamber of Commerce.

I passed the office of the *Tremont Advocate* and noted, for future reference, where it was.

A few doors farther on I came to a sign that said Public Library. I hadn't been looking for that either, but it gave me an idea, and I turned in.

There was a desk just inside the door, and there was a girl at the desk. There were surroundings — shelves of books, a fat woman reading at a table, two kids at shelves at the back — but all I saw when I first went through that door was the girl at the desk.

I don't know exactly what it was about her. She was pretty, but I'd seen pretty girls before. She had hair that was as black as the ace of spades, and a creamy white skin that looked creamier and whiter because of that jet hair. She wore a simple, starched gingham dress, but somehow she wore it so that you knew there was something pretty wonderful under it. She might have been anywhere from eighteen to twenty-five.

I don't know what it was about her, but she looked up as I came in and our glances met, and I felt a little weak, suddenly, at the knees.

I don't mean it was love at first sight, if there is such a thing, and I don't mean it was sex attraction exactly, either. It was a little of both, though, plus a large helping of something there isn't any name for that I know of.

I stopped at the desk and for maybe three seconds I couldn't think of what I'd come into the library for. All that I could think of was that I was going to be in town only two more days.

Finally I got my tongue unshipped enough to ask her where the books on radio were.

“There are only a few,” she said. “I'll show you.”

That was what I'd hoped. Unfortunately, they were only about five paces away, so I didn't get to take a very long walk with her. She pointed to two books about ten volumes apart and said, “From here to here. That's about all there is.” And I said, “Thanks a lot.”

She walked back to the desk and I watched her walk back and then had to turn toward the books before she turned around and caught me looking at her. I pulled down a book and opened it while I wondered what my next move was. And I realized the answer: draw a book.

I looked closer at the book in my hand; it was Maeterlinck's *Life of the White Ant*. I put it back and looked over the titles of the dozen volumes she'd indicated. I pulled down the newest-looking one of them, glanced hastily through it and decided that it would do.

I took it over to the desk. I said, "My name is Ed Hunter; I'm staying at the Tremont House across the street, just for a couple of days. I'd like to draw this book if I may. I suppose, since I'm a transient, you'll want a deposit so I won't walk off with it." I had my wallet out. "Won't you?"

She said, "I'm afraid you'll have to wait until Miss Willis comes back. I'm not the librarian. She had an errand to do and I told her I'd watch the place for a few minutes. If you already had a card, I could stamp a book out for you, but—"

"She'll be back in a few minutes, then?"

She nodded.

I said, "I'll wait, then," and — without being too obvious about it — I made myself a little more comfortable leaning against the desk. "Will you think I'm fresh if I ask your name? If I were going to live here, I could find it out gradually, but with only two days—" I shook my head sadly.

"Traveling salesman, I take it." She hadn't told me her name, but she sounded amused and not annoyed; that was something.

I said, "Private detective," and got a kick out of saying it. I didn't get so much of a kick out of the look she gave me. I said hastily, "I'm not kidding. Maybe I don't look it, but don't forget a detective isn't supposed to look like one. I work for the Starlock agency, in Chicago."

"Honestly?" She sounded interested.

"Documentary evidence," I said, and showed her my Starlock letter of identification. She read it, too.

"Here on business?" she asked as she handed it back.

I put my finger to my lips and leaned closer to her to whisper. "I'm investigating the FBI," I told her. "It's under suspicion of being a subversive organization. May I question you about it?"

She smiled. "All right."

"First, what's your name?"

That got a laugh out of her, a nice laugh. Also an answer. "Kingman," she said. "Molly Kingman."

"A beautiful name," I told her. "But back to the subject of my investigation, as if that wasn't. Do you know any FBI men?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Why are you afraid?"

That got a laugh out of her too; I was doing all right. I said, "Maybe I'm rushing things, but I'm afraid that librarian will come back any minute and

you'll vanish into thin air or something. My investigation of the FBI leaves me free until the middle of this evening. Free and bored, in a strange town. Could I persuade you to have dinner with me? With a drink or two first, maybe, to fill in the rest of the afternoon?"

"I couldn't possibly. I'm sorry." Her eyes went past me to the window. "Here comes Miss Willis now."

She got up from the desk.

I said, "But — Where, when, how can I see you again?"

"I'll be in here tomorrow afternoon at three, if you really want to see me. Miss Willis has a dentist appointment then and I promised her I'd — Hi, Dorothy. Here's a man wants to take out a new card. I had to have him wait for you for that."

And having entangled me with Miss Willis, Molly Kingman made her getaway. Not that I could very well have chased her down the street, anyhow.

I arranged with the librarian, by leaving on deposit the price of the book, to draw it out. I took it across to the Tremont House and up to my room. Until almost seven o'clock I worked on the radio book, skimming some parts and reading others, refreshing my memory on the little I did know about radio and picking up an additional fact here and there.

I hadn't learned a lot; Molly Kingman's face kept getting in the way. I kept thinking: two days, damn it; why couldn't I have met her in Chicago instead of here, a hundred miles away? I had a hunch maybe I'd be better off never to see her again, rather than to stick my neck out by going back to the library at three tomorrow afternoon. Just the same, I knew I'd be there.

I went downstairs, taking the radio book with me to do a little more reading while I ate. But I decided to hell with it, and just let myself think while I had a hamburger steak at the restaurant next door to the hotel. I knew I should work out a kind of program for handling Stephen Amory, but I didn't quite see how to go about it. What question I'd want to ask him second would depend entirely on how he answered the first one.

It was a quarter of eight and getting fairly dark when I finished eating. I decided I'd walk out to Amory's place; if I took my time walking, I'd get there just about nine.

The book would be a nuisance to carry, though, and I decided I'd leave it at the hotel desk rather than go up to my room.

I went back into the lobby and headed for the desk. The secretary of the Chamber of Commerce was still behind it, and he beat me to the punch.

He said, "There was a phone call for you, Mr. Hunter. Long distance from Chicago. Party left a message when your room didn't answer."

He handed a telephone call slip to me. I read:

"Driving to St. Louis tonight. Will be through Tremont between midnight and one. Please try to be in your room so I can get in touch with you to consult about case. J.H." It was written in a neat Spencerian script that only a schoolteacher or the secretary of a Chamber of Commerce could have achieved.

I looked up from it to Seth Parkinson's face. He said helpfully, "It was a woman's voice on the phone." And then, as though he'd just thought of it, "Say, Amory's got a niece in Chicago by the name of Haberman, used to live with him years ago. Justine Haberman, J.H. Would she be your client in this deal?"

I said, "It's a secret. Don't tell anybody outside of Tremont. Are you going to be on duty at the desk between twelve and one?"

"Oh, no. I'm a few minutes late getting away now. The night man's supposed to be here at seven-thirty. I can give him a message for you, though."

"Okay," I said. "I've got an appointment at nine o'clock and—"

"With Amory?"

"Yes, with Amory. I'll probably be back before midnight, but if I'm not, I'd like anybody who calls for me—"

"You mean Miss Haberman. Or is it Mrs. Haberman? Is she married?"

"I'll ask her and let you know. If she gets here before I get back, have the night clerk tell her I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'll tell him. Are you going to take a look at the radio set tonight?"

I said, "I'll let you read my reports before I mail them in. Oh, almost forgot what I came in for. May I leave this book at the desk, so I won't have to carry it along or take it upstairs?"

"Certainly, Mr. Hunter."

I left the book and went outside. Tremont's main street on a Wednesday evening didn't look much like the Loop and I was glad I'd made the appointment and didn't have to figure out how to kill the evening alone.

I walked west about a dozen blocks to the edge of town and then north two blocks, as Amory had directed me, and found myself at the beginning

of a road. Amory's place would be just two miles out the road and he'd told me the porch light would be on so I couldn't miss it.

It occurred to me, as I started down the road, that I should have bought a flashlight before I started, but it was too late now. Anyway, there was a little moonlight, enough so that I could see the edges of the road. And after I got farther in and my eyes got more used to the dim light, I could see the fences on either side and the vague outlines of trees and an occasional farmhouse or barn.

I passed two farmhouses, and from then on I started noticing the names on the mailboxes, just in case there'd be a slip-up on the porch-light business. I passed a J. Hetterman mailbox and then one marked Barnett. I wondered if they were relatives of the Randy Barnett who worked for Amory.

I went around a turn in the road and over a little wooden bridge, and the moon seemed to be getting brighter. There was a row of trees, an orchard of some kind, to my right, and high thick underbrush under the trees.

I happened to be looking that way as I walked, and — I didn't know at first whether it was my imagination or not — but back there under the trees, just past the edge of the underbrush, I saw a lighter oval that might have been a man's face. It was just about the right height for a man's face.

And at the same time I heard a growl, the growl of an animal. That face might possibly have been imagination, back there in the shadow, but the growl wasn't. I heard it distinctly and it wasn't any sound that a man could have made, not a sane man anyway. It was a bestial, vicious, murderous sound. Something straight out of a horror program on the radio.

With the sound, suddenly the lighter oval that might have been a face wasn't there any more. It wasn't a disappearing trick that would have rated high in the annals of magic — whoever it was needed merely to have taken one step backward into the deeper shadow of the trees to have vanished as he did.

But I didn't chase after him. I was scared stiff; I'd gladly not chase him if he'd not chase me. Whatever was back there under the trees wasn't any business of mine. I had a business date with a man named Stephen Amory and I had to keep on walking to get there in time. In fact, I decided, I'd better walk a little faster. I wanted to run but I didn't let myself.

There was a sharp bend in the road just ahead, a dozen paces from where I'd just seen whatever I'd seen. I looked behind me as I started around

it.

Then I looked ahead as I was part way around the turn, and I saw something lying there just ahead of me, mostly in the road but partly in a shallow ditch between the road and the orchard. It looked like a man, lying on his back. I bent over him. His throat had been torn out.

Chapter 3

SOMETHING WENT UP AND DOWN my spine and made my scalp prickle. What scared me wasn't being alone with a dead body; I'd seen dead bodies — not many, but a few — before. What scared me was *not* being alone with that one. Only twenty steps back, around the bend in the road, someone or something was back there in the darkness of the trees, someone or something that had done this.

I should have touched him, put my hand inside his shirt, but I didn't. Even in that dim moonlight, one look at his throat — or where his throat had been — was enough not to leave any doubt that he was dead. Maybe I should have touched him to guess how long he'd been dead, but I wasn't interested in that just then. I was interested in getting the hell out of there. Fast.

I straightened up and looked behind me, and then I started walking as rapidly as I could walk. I didn't let myself run, but I was ready to start running if I saw anything behind me. And my neck got plenty of exercise from looking back.

I walked about a quarter of a mile and then, around another turn in the road, I saw a house with lights on in a couple of the downstairs rooms and on the front porch. When I got there, it said Amory on the mailbox and I went up on the porch and rang the bell.

A tall man opened the door. He said, "You're Hunter? Come on in. I'm Randy Barnett. Steve ought to be back any minute."

I said, "Can I use your phone right away? There's *a* dead man back the road a way, and I'd better notify he police."

He pointed. "There's the phone. What was it? Auto accident?"

"I don't think so."

"Outside of town? If so, it'll be the sheriff's business, not the police. Let's see, this is Wednesday night, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. I'd sat down by the phone but hadn't picked it up yet.

"Then the sheriff's playing cards with the boys in the back room at Gerry's. Wait a minute; I'll get you the number." He picked up the directory

and thumbed it open. "Six-four-three. Ask for Sheriff Kingman and tell them it's important so they don't give you the brush-off."

I gave the number and while I was waiting, Barnett asked me, "Know who the guy was? Look in his pocket for identification or anything?"

I shook my head and before he could ask anything more I got an answer on the phone and asked for Sheriff Kingman. While I was waiting for him to come to the phone I looked up at Barnett. I said, "Has Kingman got a daughter?"

He nodded and started to say something, but a voice on the line said, "Kingman talking," and I gave my attention back to the phone. I told him who I was, where I was, and what had happened.

He said gruffly, "Okay, I'll be right out. Stay there at Amory's till I get there."

He hung up without waiting for my answer.

Randy Barnett was staring at me wide-eyed when I looked up at him. He said, "His *throat* torn out? Did I understand you to tell Kingman that—"

We heard a car swing into the driveway and stop and a car door slammed. Barnett said, "That'll be Steve."

There were steps on the porch and Stephen Amory came in. He was short and pudgy and cheerful looking behind thick steel-rimmed glasses. He stuck out a hand as I stood up. "You're Ed Hunter. Glad to know you. I'm Amory." And then, as he looked from my face to Barnett's and back again, his own face sobered. "Something wrong?"

I told him what I'd just told Kingman. About finding the body, that is, and how it had been killed; I didn't mention what I'd seen and heard back in the trees. That could come later.

He said, "Well, you look as though you could use a drink. All I've got is some wine. Could you use a glass?"

"Sure," I said. "Thanks."

Barnett went out to the kitchen to get some for us. Amory glanced at his watch. He said, "Well, if you phoned Kingman before I came, he'll be here in a few minutes. I'm afraid this pretty well breaks up our chance to talk tonight."

"Unless he doesn't stay long."

He chuckled. "If I know the sheriff, son, he's going to take you along to sign statements and—"

Randy Barnett, sudden concern on his gaunt face, stood in the kitchen doorway. An unopened bottle of wine was in his hand. He said, "Say, this fellow on the road. Does he look like me?"

"Huh?" I asked stupidly.

"My brother's farm's back that way, the next one back on this side of the road, half a mile. I was wondering—"

"Oh," I said. I thought back, trying to remember the face of the man in the road, but I hadn't noticed his face much.

"We aren't twins," Barnett was saying, "but we look pretty much alike. Same height and build and — Did he have a mustache?"

That I was sure about. "No," I said. "And it's hard to judge when a man's lying down, but I don't think he was as tall as you are. He wore a dark suit — blue, I think, but it's hard to tell colors at night."

"Then it wasn't Buck, Randy," Amory said. "Never wears anything but overalls or work clothes. Hasn't worn a suit in donkey's years."

Barnett said, "Thanks," and vanished back into the kitchen. I heard glasses being taken down from a cupboard.

"I was saying," Amory said, "we may not get a chance to talk tonight, account of this happening. Might as well set a time, in case we don't. Tomorrow afternoon?"

"Could you make it in the morning?"

"Sure. I'll be here all morning. Get here any time after — oh, say eight o'clock. I kind of expected Justine would send someone down here if she was too busy to come down herself. Well, been asking questions about me around town?"

"A few," I admitted.

He chuckled. "They tell you I'm the village idiot?"

"I wouldn't say that. You seem to be pretty well thought of."

"Surprises me a little. No man's a prophet in his own country, you know. Still, people — even around here — believe in money, and they know I *have* made enough on a few little things to keep me eating and to pay Randy's wages. Don't I, Randy?" Randy, coming in with three glasses of wine, said, "Sure, Steve." I took a glass of the wine. It was pretty sweet, but okay.

I said, "Listen, Mr. Amory, there's one question I'd like to ask that you'll have time to answer before the sheriff gets here. This talk about you

thinking the signals you're getting are from Mars — Well, is there anything in it?”

His eyes twinkled, although his face was sober. He said, “That, my boy, is the one question I won't answer tonight.”

I said, “Then there *is* something in it, or you think there is. If it was just gossip, you could say no easily enough. Couldn't you?”

“And I could say yes easily enough, if I thought so.”

“You could, but you wouldn't. I mean if the answer is yes, then you'd want to give your answer in detail and explain why you thought maybe those signals were from — off the earth.”

“The word *Mars* scares you, doesn't it, son? Well, don't worry, those signals aren't from Mars. And, local gossip to the contrary, I don't think they are. Feel better now?” I took another sip of the wine. I said, “Maybe I do, but I don't know why I do. I mean, after all, there could be intelligent life on the planet Mars for all we know. It's an older planet than ours; there's been more time for it to develop there. It's supposed to have a little atmosphere and at least some water. What reason have we got to assume that we're the only intelligent beings in the solar system?”

“No reason at all.”

I looked at him closely. “Do you think we are?”

“I don't think we are.” His face was very sober, very serious now. He leaned forward and tapped a finger on my knee. He said, “Now don't take me wrong and go telling Justine that I'm a crackpot because I agreed with you. Maybe you said that to *see* if I'd agree; I don't think so — you don't look that Machiavellian to me. Anyway, whether it gets Justine to invest any money with me or not, I'm not going to do any lying. Only, as I told you, there isn't time to go into this now. In fact, there's a car coming and it's probably the sheriff.”

He walked to the front door and opened it. I walked to the door and looked out, over his shoulder. A car swung into the driveway and stopped and two men got out and started up to the porch. Behind me, Randy said, “He's got Willie Eklund with him. Willie must have been in the game.”

“A deputy,” Amory said to me, over his shoulder. Then he called out, “Hi, Sheriff, Willie. Come on in.”

We stepped back to clear the doorway, and Sheriff Kingman came in first. He was a big man, not quite middle-aged, but with the beginning of a paunch. He had a face that looked as though it were chiseled from granite

and eyes like a dyspeptic hawk's. By contrast the deputy who came in behind him seemed small, mild and cheerful.

Kingman hadn't bothered to acknowledge Amory's greeting. He said, "You Ed Hunter, the guy that phoned me?" I nodded. "What's wrong, Sheriff? Didn't you find—"

"What was the idea, pulling a stunt like that? What's the gag?" I said, "A quarter of a mile back from here. I don't see how you could have missed it, with headlights. Lying at the left side of the road, coming out from town, most of his body right on the road, his feet off it in the ditch. Come on, I'll show you."

I took a step toward the door, but he put a big hand against my chest. He didn't exactly push me back, but he stopped me.

"Been drinking?" he demanded.

I felt my temper trying to slip, but I hung on to it. I said, "No," and let it go at that.

He leaned forward as though to sniff my breath and Stephen Amory said quietly, "I gave him a glass of wine just now, Jack. You'll have one with us? And you, Willie?"

Kingman didn't pay any attention to the question, but Amory nodded to Randy Barnett and the latter went out to the kitchen.

"What are you doing in Tremont?" Kingman asked me.

"Business," I said. "Business with Mr. Amory."

Again Amory's voice cut in, just a bit sharply this time. "It's all right, Jack. He came down here to see me on business and I know what it's all about. As far as I'm concerned it's not even confidential. But it hasn't got anything to do with a body on a road."

Kingman still glared at me. He said, "I know what he's down here for. He's a God-damn *private detective* from *Chicago*." He managed to make cuss words out of "private detective" and "Chicago" both. "And I know what he's asking around about, or pretending to. Somebody told me there was a private shamus at the Tremont House."

I could guess pretty well who that somebody had been.

Randy came back with two more glasses of wine and gave Willie Eklund, the deputy, one of them while Amory took the other and managed to get it into the sheriff's hand. He said, "Sit down a minute, Sheriff. Relax. We'll get things straightened out."

He got the sheriff into a chair. He was making a game effort to take control of the conversation. He said, “All right, Jack, so Pussyfoot Parkinson has told you exactly what Ed Hunter is in town for. As I said, that doesn't matter because it's no secret. I'm trying to get Justine to invest some money with me; she's entitled to do all the investigating she wants to. Isn't that Seth's Chamber of Commerce's slogan — Before you invest, investigate?”

“That's not what I'm talking about,” Kingman said. “I'm talking about a Goddamn Chicago private shamus coming down here and—”

Amory was winning. He held up a hand and the sheriff stopped. Amory said, “Let's get it sorted out, Jack. You're annoyed on three counts — first, that Ed Hunter here is a private detective; second, that he's from Chicago; and third, that you got called away from your Wednesday night poker game to find a body and the body wasn't there. Now the first and second counts are admitted, but there's nothing Ed can do about them. Not tonight, anyway. So let's stick to the third count.”

Kingman growled, but he took a sip of the wine, and Amory went on. He said, “Let's even leave out the poker game angle and stick to the body. Now, granting for the moment that Ed just might not be drunk or lying — and I'll guarantee he isn't drunk — could you possibly have missed the body if it was still where he says it was?”

“Hell no. We drove slowly all the way, and from Buck Barnett's place to here, the last half mile, we barely crawled. Willie played the spotlight on the edge of the road. Even clear in the ditch, we'd have seen it.”

Amory looked at me. “How good are you on guessing distances, Ed? Could it have been farther back than that?”

I said, “I passed a mailbox marked Barnett before I came to the body. It was about halfway between here and there, I'd say. It was just around a turn in the road — and there was one turn after that, just before I got here to your place.”

He nodded. “Then a quarter of a mile is a good guess; it's just half a mile to Buck's place. Pretty good distance judging for a city boy, Ed. Well, Jack?”

Willie Eklund answered this time. He said, “There wasn't nothing there, Steve. That was right where we were looking hardest, on the left side of the road like he said over the phone. If there'd been a dead chicken there, we'd've seen it. Honest.”

Kingman sipped his wine and glowered.

I said, "I don't understand it. There was a body there." I looked at my watch. "Half an hour ago. And he couldn't have walked off. He was dead."

"Touch him?" Kingman asked.

I shook my head. I wished now that I had; my story would have been stronger. I said, "I didn't have to touch him. His whole throat was torn out. A guy couldn't possibly be alive that way."

Amory said, "Get us some more wine, will you, Randy?" and Barnett got up and went to the kitchen.

Willie Eklund leaned forward in his chair, his face sharp and ferret-like. He said, "He'd have been lying in a pretty big pool of blood, then, I reckon."

I thought back. The deputy was right; being killed that way, he should have been in a pool of blood. But I couldn't remember one. I closed my eyes and tried to visualize the scene; I could remember the dead-white face and the torn throat, black-red in the moonlight, but I couldn't remember a pool of blood. I said, "I didn't notice — don't remember one."

Randy was back with the wine bottle, refilling glasses. He said, "Maybe he wasn't killed there. Maybe the car that hit him dragged him a ways. Say he got caught underneath, by his throat. Through bleeding by the time—" He let it die there; I could tell that he was just making the suggestion to ease things; that he didn't really believe it himself.

Amory asked, "Ed, can you show them the exact spot?"

I said, "Within a few feet. It was just around a curve, a few paces beyond a clump of trees, where I saw—" I hadn't meant to bring that up, but maybe it was better, I figured, that I told the whole truth than part of it. " — where I saw or thought I saw something back in the trees, just half a minute or so before I found the corpse."

Amory seemed the most interested among them. He was the one who asked, "What, Ed? What did you see?"

I told it as objectively as I could, trying to keep my own feelings out of it.

Kingman had slumped down in the chair after finishing his second glass of wine. His eyes were closed and he looked asleep, but I had a hunch that he wasn't — and I'd have felt a bit happier about things if he'd been dogging me with questions instead of acting that way. I took it — rightly, as things

turned out — for such an extreme of disbelief that there wasn't any use asking questions.

Randy was saying, “If there'd been a circus around — if there was any chance that there was a wild animal at large — a tiger, or even a wolf. It could have made a kill, hidden in the trees while Hunter went by, and then dragged the body off the road.”

Willie Eklund looked at Randy. He said, “Say, Randy, that police dog of your brother's — He could tear a man's throat.”

Randy laughed. “Wolf? He wouldn't hurt a rabbit. Gentlest old pooch I ever knew; not even worth a damn as a watchdog. Not that Buck's got anything to watch anyway. But if a tramp comes around, Wolf jumps up and licks his face.”

“Doesn't Buck keep him on a chain most of the time?”

“Sure, so he doesn't run away with whoever goes by. Anybody in a car could pick him up and take him along. Not that he's a specially valuable dog — Buck paid ten bucks for him, as a puppy, ten years ago. But he wouldn't let him go for a thousand now. He's Buck's whole family — Buck thinks more of him than he does of me. Maybe Buck's right in that. Who wants some more wine?”

The sheriff opened his eyes and stood up. He said, “Let's call off this party. Come on, Hunter, you show us the place where this body was.”

Amory put out his hand to me. He said, “Good night, Ed. I'll see you in the morning, I hope.” I said, “Sure, Mr. Amory,” and went out to the car with Kingman and Eklund.

At the car, Kingman said, “You drive, Willie,” and motioned me to get in the back seat, then got in beside me. Eklund pulled out of the drive and headed for town. He asked back over his shoulder, “Shall I stop there?” Kingman said, “Yeah. We'll give the guy every break.”

Willie slowed down as he neared the second bend in the road. He stopped the car before we reached the point where I would have asked him to. He asked, “About here?”

“About twenty feet ahead.”

Kingman said, “You can walk that far. Go ahead and find your stiff, if there's one to find.”

There wasn't; I could see that clearly in the beams of the headlights. But I thought that I might find blood or footprints or marks where a body had been dragged. Even a spot or two of blood would be something.

I got out of the car and walked up the beams, my shadow a mile long ahead of me. I located myself by the edge of the grove of trees and figured just about where I'd come around the bend, and I found the spot — within a yard or two, I felt sure — where the body had been lying.

The headlights gave me pretty good illumination and I bent over and studied the surface of the road. But it was dry and hard-packed, and if there was a mark on it of any kind, I couldn't find it.

I tried a few steps back and looked and a few steps ahead, but then I heard Kingman say something to his deputy and the car crept up beside me. “Find anything?” Kingman wanted to know.

“Not yet.”

“Get in.”

“Okay,” I said, and got in the car. “But I'm coming back tomorrow when there's better light.”

The car started with a jerk that threw me against the back of the seat. Kingman said, “You do that. If you find anything, write me a letter. Of course, though, you may be in jail.”

“On what charge?”

He said, “We're going up to my office right now and talk that over. Save your breath till then.”

“Am I under arrest now?”

“No.”

I said, “Then, if you don't mind, I'd just as soon get out and walk.”

“And get your throat torn out by a werewolf? We'll see that you get back safely. Right now you're not under arrest, but you're being held as a material witness.”

“To what? You don't think there was any crime.”

“If there wasn't, and you got me out here for the fun of it, and admit it, I'll get you ten days for disorderly conduct. Do you admit it?”

“Nuts,” I said.

He said, “You feel that way about it. That's fine. Willie, you drop us off at my office. Then go around and get in the game again if you want to. It's only ten o'clock.”

Eklund said, “Sure. You coming back?”

“I don't know. Tell 'em I may get back or may not. It depends on Little Boy Blue here.”

We were back in town by then, and a couple of minutes later, the car pulled in to the curb in front of a three-story building half a block off the main street.

Kingman got out and said, "Come on." He got me ahead of him going up the steps and at the top of the first flight he said, "Right here." He pulled out a bunch of keys and used one to open a door that said "Sheriff's Department" on it. We went into an office room and across it to a smaller office marked "Private" off the far side.

I kept concentrating on the fact that I had to keep my temper or I'd tell him off and end up in jail. And that would be a glorious fizzle for the first job I'd tried on my own for the Starlock agency. Uncle Am would be right proud of me.

Kingman went around behind his desk, but didn't sit down. He looked at me across the top of it and asked, "First, you packing a rod?"

I almost laughed in his face, but I didn't. I said, "No."

He'd been reaching into the top drawer of his desk and his hand came out with a blackjack in it. Holding the blackjack, he came around the desk toward me. He said, "I'll check that."

I was a good boy. I stood still with my arms lifted slightly out from my body while he held the blackjack cocked in his right hand and ran his left over the places I might have been carrying a gun.

He felt around my lapels for a shoulder holster last, and when he'd finished that, he put his hand inside my coat and pulled out the papers I had in my inside coat pocket. He walked over to his desk to look at them while I stood there and burned.

Not that there was anything there I wouldn't have shown him if he'd asked; there was only my letter of identification from the agency, a personal letter I'd got the day before from a friend back with the carnival and a receipted bill for some phonograph records.

He glanced at the personal letter and the bill and read the Starlock letter carefully. Then he handed them back to me, still with his left hand. The blackjack dangled from his right.

I said, "Now you know all about me." I still held my temper in and kept my voice level. "Listen, Sheriff, I'm as honestly puzzled as anyone by what happened tonight. I did see what I told you I saw. I have no reason to pull a gag on you — and plenty to lose by trying one. You'll admit that, won't you?"

I might as well not have said anything.

He sat back on a corner of the desk, staring at me. He said, "I hate Chicago hoodlums and I keep them out of my county. This is one place they don't hide out when the heat's on in Chi. But there's one thing I hate worse — and that's a Chicago private dick. You chiselers are worse than the hoodlums."

"That's your opinion," I said.

"That's my opinion. I don't know what was back of that stunt of yours tonight. Maybe to pull me out of town while someone else did something in town. I don't know. Maybe it'll come out tomorrow. I'm giving you an order. You stick around till tomorrow night, in case I want you. I won't put the county to the expense of feeding you."

"That's fine," I said.

"But there's one thing I *am* going to do."

He never said what it was; he just did it. The back of his left hand — a hand the size of a small ham — lashed out for my face as he got up off the corner of the desk.

I couldn't duck; I was standing with my back against the jamb of the door. And I hadn't been expecting it.

It rocked my head back against the doorjamb. It hit with a solid clunk that I could hear as well as feel. I tried to get my hands up in time to stop the right that he was throwing, but somehow they wouldn't move fast enough.

I saw the fist coming — he'd dropped the blackjack back on the desk — but the best I could do was get my head turned a little in time to take it on the side of the jaw instead of on the button.

I didn't pass out, but I went groggy. My knees went rubber and I was sliding down along the wall. Just as I hit the floor one of his brogans got me in the ribs and kicked the wind out of me.

He stepped back and I saw he'd picked up the blackjack again.

He said, "That'll do for now. Next time I'll give you a working over. Now get out of here."

I didn't have the breath left to say a word, let alone to get up. I was conscious all right, but I might as well have been tied hand and foot.

He shifted the blackjack to his left hand and grabbed my coat collar with his right. He dragged me across the outer office and into the hallway as

though I was a sack of coal. He reached inside and flicked off the light and then locked the door.

He looked down at me for just a second as though he was worried about me. I didn't want him to be worried about me. I managed to sit up against the wall and I was getting my breath back in gasps.

Apparently he was reassured. He said, "You'll be all right. But next time you try something like that, you won't be."

He went down the stairs and outside. Back, I presume, to his poker game.

Chapter 4

AFTER A LITTLE WHILE, a couple of minutes maybe, I got up. There was a ringing in my ears and my side was still sore where he'd kicked me, but I had my breath back again. Physically, I was all right, or going to be. Mentally, I didn't know. Mentally, I wasn't exactly the same person I'd been fifteen minutes ago. I'd never be exactly the same person again, better or worse, I wouldn't know which, but not exactly the same. The first time you're ever beaten up, especially when it's unjustly and through no fault of your own, does something to you. It's like when your parents die; it's like the first time you ever sleep with a woman. It does something to you; you aren't quite the same after that.

I took off my coat and brushed it as well as I could with one hand while I held it with the other. Then I hung it over the railing of the steps while I brushed off my pants.

I put my coat back on and walked down the stairs. I didn't hang on to the railing, although I was ready to grab it if I had to. I knew I might get dizzy any minute, but it was a point of pride, somehow, not to hold onto that railing as I walked down.

I went out of the door and the cool night air felt good. I wanted to sit down on the steps and rest a minute but I didn't. The trees were high and green and cool over my head as I walked back toward the main street, and through and between them I could see stars in the black sky.

I wondered if one of them was Mars; I was a little drunk. Not remotely because of the little wine I'd had at Amory's. I was drunk with something else entirely. I felt a mile tall, and an inch high, both at the same time.

When I got to the corner I looked at my watch and my watch said seven minutes after ten. I didn't believe it; I held it to my ear to see if it was still ticking — and it was. Less than two hours ago I'd been in Tremont, walking along this same street on my way to the edge of town. I hadn't heard a growl in the dark nor found a man with his throat torn out lying at the edge of a road — and both of those things seemed to have happened weeks ago. What had just happened in the sheriff's office outweighed them a hundred to one; maybe because what happened there had happened to *me*. Funny how a

little thing that happens to you is so much more important than a big one — like being killed — that happens to somebody else.

A block and a half west and I was in front of the Tremont House. I looked around a minute before I went inside; it puzzled me that there were still people on the streets. It seemed to me, after all that had happened, that it must be the middle of the night; I still couldn't accept the evidence of my wrist watch that it was only a few minutes after ten.

I went inside and there was a clerk on duty at the desk whom I hadn't seen before. He was an elderly man with mild, watery eyes and sparse gray hair carefully combed two ways to cover a bald spot on top of his head.

I gave him my room number and got my key, a bit surprised that there weren't any messages in the box — it seemed that I'd been away so long. I asked him if there was a clothesbrush or a whisk broom around that I could use. He said, "The porter has one. I could lend it to you, but I'd have to have it back tonight so it'll be there for him in the morning."

"Fine," I said, "I'll bring it down when I'm through with it."

He got it for me and I took it upstairs. In my room I took my suit off and brushed it thoroughly while I drew water for a bath, and it came out all right; it would have to be pressed tomorrow, but all of the dust came out of it.

My side was getting sorer; there was a sharp pain at one point while I brushed. I took off my undershirt and felt it, and there was a sharp point of pain over one of the floating ribs on the right side. I wondered if a rib was broken, and by the time I'd finished my bath, I thought it was.

I made a phone call to the desk. I asked the little clerk if there was a doctor near by and he said, "There's no doctor has office hours now, but Doc Cordell lives only a block from here; he's probably home."

"You know his number, or shall I look it up and phone it?"

"I know the number. I'll get him for you, Mr. Hunter."

A minute later he phoned back and said Doc Cordell would be around in ten or fifteen minutes.

I finished dressing below the waist, and waited. Pretty soon there was a knock on my door and I let in a tall, sandy-haired man who said he was Dr. Lee Cordell.

He poked around a while and told me that my rib wasn't really broken, but that it was cracked a bit. He had me stand and turn while he put on quite

a few yards of tape. He told me to drop in at his office within a day or two if I was still in town, and took five dollars.

After he left I finished dressing and it was still only eleven o'clock and I had at least an hour to wait before Justine Haberman would call me.

I sat down and tried to think things out about the body on the road and the growl among the trees, but trying to get an answer for any of it was trying to make bricks without straw. Maybe tomorrow there'd be a lead. Maybe someone who lived along that road would be missing; there'd pretty well have to be somebody missing somewhere. From the way he'd been dressed, I didn't think the dead man I'd seen had been a tramp or a hobo. And if he lived around Tremont he'd be missed.

I tried thinking about how I could follow up on it, if someone was missing, but I couldn't do any constructive thinking. The face of Sheriff Jack Kingman kept getting in the way. The real issue, I knew, was between me and Sheriff Kingman and to me that was more important than all the murders that had been committed here since Indians scalped the first white scout. There was a matter between me and Kingman that would have to be settled before I left Tremont, if I had to quit my Starlock job to stay here; if I left here before that was settled only part of me would be going back to Chicago. Part of me would be, and stay, on the floor of a hallway outside the sheriff's office. I wouldn't like that.

I went to the window and looked out. I couldn't see any answer to the problem of Molly Kingman and Sheriff Kingman. I couldn't see much of anything except a building across the alley. And the fact that tomorrow was going to be a hell of a busy day and a hell of a messy one and that I wished Uncle Am was here to grin at me and tell me to take my finger out of my mouth.

I looked out of the window at the building across the alley and I kept seeing Molly Kingman's heart-shaped face, creamy white under the page-boy black hair and her wide eyes and the way they'd crinkled around the corners when I'd joked with her. I wondered how she ever grew to be that way, with a father like hers.

I thought about Stephen Amory and wondered whether he was going to turn out to be a crackpot after all, and I hoped he wasn't. He was too nice a guy for that, and he looked little and funny but not crazy. After all, he'd said he didn't think the signals came from Mars.

And then I realized I was being as narrow-minded as everybody else in this mess. *Why*, in Heaven's name, would I tend to think him a crackpot if he did think those signals came from Mars? Mars could be inhabited; signals could come from there. If so, somebody was going to get them on a receiver someday, and would that person have to be considered a crackpot until proven otherwise? For a minute or two I found myself getting really excited over the possibility — even the bare possibility — that those signals had come from off the earth.

Then I thought about Kingman again, and Molly, and the body in the road, and the thing that growled in under the trees — and my thoughts were going in such wide circles that I decided I'd better quit thinking. I went down to the lobby and got my copy of the radio book from the desk. I sat down and read in it until, a few minutes after twelve, Justine Haberman came in.

I doubt if the dress she was wearing came from one of her own shops; it was so simple that it must have been very expensive. And it made her look like a million dollars, instead of like the mere several hundred thousand she was probably worth.

She stopped a little inside the door and waited when she saw me coming toward her. She smiled at me and said, “Hi, Ed. Mind having a drink somewhere while we talk? I'm dry after driving two hours.”

I said sure, and stashed my book with the desk clerk again, and we went out. The car parked in front was a Cadillac coupe, long and low and rakish. We got in and she drove south past the edge of town and stopped at a roadhouse called The Blue Mill.

We ordered Martinis and sat for a moment listening to a three-piece combo on the stand — piano, guitar and clarinet — that was making pleasing if not profound noises.

Then I remembered what I was supposed to be talking about and I said, “I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I haven't much to report yet. I saw Stephen Amory tonight, but didn't get a chance to talk to him. Something came up. I'm seeing him again tomorrow.”

She was looking at me closely. “Ed, you look a little different somehow. Did you by any chance manage to grow up about three years since last night?”

“It could be.”

“Were you in a fight? One side of your face looks just a trifle puffy — or is that my imagination?”

“I had a fall. Nothing serious. Didn't have anything to do with the case I'm working on for you.”

“Are you in love, Ed?”

I laughed. “That, also, has nothing to do with the case. But seriously, I don't know.”

Our Martinis came. She said, “Tell me something about yourself, Ed.”

“There isn't much. I was born in Gary, Indiana. My mother died when I was pretty young. My father was a printer; he brought me to Chicago when I was thirteen. He died a few years ago, and since then I've been with my uncle, Ambrose Hunter. He's with Starlock now, as an operative. He talked Ben Starlock into giving me a chance. Do you remember him?”

“Your uncle? No, should I?”

“Probably not. He said he met you once, just for a minute, in Starlock's office. He's shortish, about five seven, plump without being fat, has a kind of straggly brown mustache, wears a disreputable-looking black felt hat.”

“I think I remember him. But not the hat; he probably wasn't wearing that in the office.”

“Wouldn't surprise me if he had been. Anyway, that was just the surface. Underneath, he's just about the smartest — and best — guy I've ever met.”

“He and you are pretty close, then?”

I nodded. “He's been a lot of places, done a lot of things. Mostly he's been a carney. After my father died, Uncle Am and I spent a season or so with a carnival. Then eight months ago we came to Chicago and he got on with the agency; he'd been a private detective before, once. I guess I sort of talked him into going back into the business.”

“Because it was something you yourself wanted to do?” I said, “I guess so.”

“And now that you are an operative, how do you like it?”

I grinned at her. “Starlock wouldn't like my telling you this, but I haven't been one long enough to find out. To be exact, I've been an op for three days. The first two days weren't very successful. Today was my third day. I guess I didn't set the world on fire today either.”

“How old are you, Ed?”

“Twenty-one. I generally pass for a few years older than that.” She nodded. “I'd have taken you for twenty-four or five, just looking at you.”

Talking to you puzzled me — both last night and tonight. I mean, sometimes you'd seem to be about eighteen and sometimes at least thirty. Your worst trouble is that you're too good looking. Or maybe I shouldn't have told you that; maybe you didn't know it. You said, by the way, that something came up that prevented you from talking to Amory. What was it?"

"Nothing that has anything to do with him or the invention. I came across a body on the road on my way out there. I had to report it to the sheriff and then go to the sheriff's office with him."

"A body? Somebody killed by a car?"

I decided I might as well tell her the whole story, and I did. That is, I told her everything that happened from the time I started my walk to Amory's to the time I got to the sheriff's office. I skipped what happened after that.

Her eyes were pretty wide when I'd finished. She asked, "And the sheriff doesn't believe you?"

"No. Do you?"

"Don't be silly. You couldn't have imagined something like that, could you?"

"I don't see how. I do wish that I'd touched the body, to be sure beyond any doubt that he was dead. And if I'd got blood on my hand and wiped it on a handkerchief, I'd at least have that to show."

"Ed, there'd *have* to be blood there somewhere. And it's only a few miles from here — a few minutes in the car. You say the sheriff didn't give you time to look very thoroughly. Let's go there."

"Okay," I said. "If you've got a flashlight in the car. I was going to look tomorrow on my way out to Amory's, but tonight would be better."

"*I've* got a flashlight. Yes, tonight would be better. It might rain before morning — it was clouding up about the time I drove into Tremont. Only let's have one more drink; I'm dead tired from driving. And that music isn't bad. Do you dance, Ed?"

I laughed. "Sure. But that's not a guaranteed cure for being tired."

She laughed with me, but she stood up. I caught the waiter's eye and motioned to our glasses and then led her out onto the little dance floor in front of the three-piece combo. I'd forgotten about my cracked rib, but I remembered it when I started to dance. It didn't hurt too badly though; she danced so well and so lightly that I didn't have to hold her tight.

Then we went back to the table and worked on our second Martinis.

Over hers, she asked, "You aren't afraid of very much, are you, Ed?"

I said, "If you mean it doesn't take very much to make me afraid, you're right. I was scared spitless tonight."

"But you didn't run. Or did you?"

"I walked plenty fast. I was afraid to run. When you run, it's asking something to chase you."

"But — you're willing to go back there tonight. I was curious to know if you would be."

"With you to protect me," I said. "You and a big Cadillac. We can run down any tigers or werewolves that come our way."

"Not — not if one jumps us while we're stopped there. Have you a gun, Ed?"

"Of course not. You know what business I came down here on. How could I have anticipated that I might want a gun? Look, do you really want to go there tonight? Maybe you were just asking to see if I had the nerve to. Were you?"

"Partly that, but — Yes, let's do. I think you're a little like me, Ed. When you're afraid of doing something, that's all the more reason for doing it. Of course that isn't courage; it's just damn foolishness. You know that, don't you?"

"Sure."

"But listen, Ed. I don't want you to *walk* out that road any more, even by daylight. That's an order from your agency's client. There must be a place in Tremont where you can rent a car. You do drive, don't you?"

"Yes. But our client, I was told, put a hundred-dollar ceiling on the job, for three days' time. That doesn't leave enough to cover renting cars."

"You tell Starlock — or I will — that the ceiling is off."

"Good," I told her. "In that case, I can even pay for these Martinis and put it on the expense account so our client gets stuck for them."

"I expected you to."

I said, "I was kidding; I don't expect to. And I don't need a car, just to get out to Amory's and back a time or two."

She leaned forward across the table and put her hand on top of mine. She said, "Ed, I'm dead serious about that. I don't want you to take any chances at all on this job. Otherwise I'll call the whole thing off. I'll go see

Uncle Steve myself — although, for certain reasons, I'd rather not do it that way — and make my own decision.”

Her hand felt nice and cool on top of mine. I looked at it and I grinned. She probably wondered what I was grinning about, but I wouldn't ever be able to tell her; I was thinking how different her hand felt from Sheriff Jack Kingman's. The touch of it put a little tingling into my hand that seemed to run all the way through me.

I said, though, “You don't leave me much choice. Ben Starlock would probably fire me if I lost the case the first day I was on it.”

“You know that you don't give a damn about that. I can read you better than that, Ed. You don't give a tinker's damn about Ben Starlock or anybody else — except maybe that Uncle Am of yours — and you'd do things your own way whether Ben fired you or not. Wouldn't you?”

“I'd like to think I would.”

“Go ahead and think it, and don't forget it.”

I said, “All right. In that case, I'll rent a car tomorrow if I decide I want to. I won't take direct orders even from a client. And I'm not going to put these drinks on your expense account. Now fire me. If I'm not fired, let's go hunt tigers. Okay?” She said, “Okay, Ed,” quite meekly.

I paid for the drinks and we went outside — to a fine mist of rain. We looked at it disgustedly and I said, “I guess there's no use going now.”

“Get in the car, Ed. I want to tell you something.”

We found her car in the parking lot beside the roadhouse, and got in. There were little sparkles in her strawblond hair from the mist. She started the engine; it ran so quietly I could barely hear it. She said, “Ed, let's go there.”

“If there was any blood, it'll probably be gone.”

“I want to go. I'm afraid to. And there isn't much to be afraid of, because there's a gun in the glove compartment there. I drive a lot alone at night — when I visit my shops in St. Louis or Springfield or Milwaukee, I generally drive there at night. I drive because I like to be alone at night.”

I said, “I could get out of the car, and walk back.”

“I told you I like you better when you don't try to be funny, Ed. All right, so you don't care whether I like you or not. But we got off the subject. *I'm* going to that place on the road, whether you want to or not. I can drop you off at the Tremont House.” I said, “Now who's being funny?”

She threw the car in gear and headed back for town. She cut around the business district and when we crossed the main street, right at the edge of town, I said, “The road's the second block north of—” and then shut up and felt foolish, remembering that she'd lived there once.

She'd been driving fast until she left the edge of town and turned into the Dartown Road. She slowed down then and said, “Ed, take the gun out of the glove compartment. You hold it. I'll — feel better if you do.”

I didn't tell her that it would make me feel better, too; I just got the gun out of the glove compartment. It was a short-barreled thirty-eight Police Positive revolver, a real weapon, not the little thirty-two with pearl handles that you'd expect a woman to carry. I swung the cylinder to be sure it was loaded and then snapped it shut. I asked her, “Can you shoot this? It's dangerous to carry one in your car if you can't. More dangerous than not having one.”

She said, “I can hit a half dollar at twenty feet with that gun. I wouldn't shoot anything farther than that with it.”

“What would you use for farther than that?”

“An express rifle. I've shot two lions — one at about fifty yards and one at a little over seventy-five.”

“Mountain lions, or—?”

“Real ones, in Africa. Seven years ago, just after I was married. We spent three months there, in the interior.”

The car was barely moving now, although we were only a mile out from town. She said, “Watch carefully, Ed. If you want me to stop, say so.”

I watched carefully through the windshield ahead. The slight mist of rain had stopped. Somewhere ahead, though, there was a red glow in the sky, like a fire.

I said, “You were kidding me, then, about being afraid to come out here tonight.”

“No. I'm not afraid of a lion — not any more than anybody else is; anybody in his right mind is a little afraid. But that's because I know what it is; I know it's a lion. I'm afraid of something if I don't *know* what it is. I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm afraid of them. I'm afraid of vampires and werewolves. And you put shivers down my back, Ed, with that story of yours. Something with a white, oval face, standing man-high and growling like an animal. I'm afraid of it.”

I said, "So am I. But if I'd had a gun and a flashlight, I'd have gone back there to see what it was."

"Why?"

"Just to satisfy my curiosity, I guess. I didn't know then that a corpus delicti was going to walk away on me, and that I'd need a werewolf on a chain to convince a sheriff that I wasn't conspiring to break up his poker game. Say, that's Barnett's place we're passing — Buck Barnett, the brother of Randy, the one who works for your uncle. Do you know him?"

"I remember him, yes. A little queer. I don't mean 'queer' the way we'd mean it in Chicago; I mean off the beam somehow. If I met him now, I could probably tell what's wrong with him. But at fourteen, I just used to be afraid of him."

"You wouldn't be afraid now?"

"Now I wouldn't be afraid even of you, Ed. And you're more dangerous."

I laughed at that. I said, "We're coming to the clump of trees. The orchard, or whatever it is."

"It's a pear orchard; I remember it. Or it was. With all that underbrush, it looks as though it isn't being kept up. That's on Buck's farm; that land originally belonged to Uncle Steve, but he sold it to Buck while I was living there. He was cutting down on his farming even then."

I pointed. "That's about the spot where I saw the face. And stop just before the bend or part way around it. It's just around the bend I found the body."

The car stopped and I said, "Turn out the lights a minute first. Dashboard light too. Let's look at that glow in the sky."

She clicked them off. We could see it clearly through the windshield. She said, "Something is burning, all right. It could be a house or a barn, but it's north of here. If it was west, I'd worry about it being Uncle Steve's."

"How far would you say it is?"

"A mile or so; probably on the next road north. If you want to go see, okay, but let's get this over with first now that we're here." She flicked on the lights again, took a flashlight out of the door pocket on her side, and handed it to me.

I got out of the car and she got out after me. The road was wet from the slight rain, but water hadn't actually washed over the road, and there still might be traces. It hadn't been much worse than dew, I guess.

But there weren't traces that I could find. With the flashlight I went a dozen paces each side of the point where I felt sure I'd seen the body, and there was no faintest sign of blood — or of anything else — that I could find.

Then I said, "You get back in the car; I'm going to look back in the trees where I thought I saw something."

"You won't find anything, but go ahead."

She got in the car and I walked back to where, as nearly as I could place it, I'd seen what might have been the pale oval of a man's face. I stepped across the shallow ditch that was dry and filled with weeds and went in under the trees. I bent down and looked around with the flashlight to see if I could find footprints of either a man or an animal, but I couldn't. The ground was dry and hard-baked there; not a single drop of the slight, fine rain had penetrated the trees to moisten it. But it was so hard that nothing short of a truck would have left a track.

I got back in the car and shook my head. The engine was already purring and she slid the car into gear and we started. I said, "We might as well keep on past Amory's. We're almost there, and there could be a light on."

We were there almost before I'd finished saying it, but the house was dark. She stopped the car and sat for a moment staring out through the glass of the door at the dark and silent house.

She said, "If a light had been on, Ed, I wouldn't have wanted to go in. When I visited there five years ago, I knew I'd never go back again. Being there did things to me; I can't explain what or why. But you can't ever go back to any place where you've been a different person. Do you understand what I mean?"

"I think so," I said. "I went back to Gary once a couple of years ago, after my father died. I went past the house we'd lived in there when I was a kid, and I stopped and put my hand on the gate. A big dog came running out from around the house and wanted to take me apart, just for putting my hand on the gate."

She nodded slowly. "That's why I wanted someone else to see Uncle Steve for me, Ed. You can't ever go back."

"And when you've got enough money, you don't have to try."

She turned and looked at me seriously. "Money isn't anything very much, Ed. It isn't even hard to get, if you've got the knack. I happened to get

a little — I married it — seven years ago when I was your age. And then there was something else I wanted to get away from and I bought a shop. I've worked like hell for seven years and I've got twelve of them now. Now I'm only twenty-eight — that may seem ancient to you — and I've got enough money to sell out and not work any more if I was willing to settle for living on — oh, eight or ten thousand a year. But I'm not willing because I'm used to more. It's a vicious circle and you can't get out of it. Besides, I wouldn't know what to do with myself any more if I didn't work ten or twelve hours a day.”

She started the car again and drove on. I didn't say anything.

The glow of fire in the sky was dying down now; whatever had been burning was either under control or had burned down.

Justine said, “Ed, I'm tired. I've just realized how tired I am. I'm not going on to St. Louis tonight; I'm going back to Chicago. It's less than half as far. How'd you like to take the wheel and drive me back?”

“Fine,” I told her. “Except that I have an early morning appointment in Tremont, and I don't know if I could get a train back tonight; I doubt if I could.”

“Take this Caddy back with you; I've got another car. Then you won't have to rent one. It's only an hour and a half's drive each way. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said. We changed places and I started driving toward Chicago. The Caddy handled like a dream; it ate up miles as though they were inches.

Chapter 5

JUSTINE STIRRED AGAINST ME as I turned the Cadillac onto Lincoln Park West. We'd talked for a while as I drove, but then I'd thought her asleep since we entered Chicago. She knew where we were, though; she said, "Go on in the driveway, Ed. You're coming in for a drink before you start driving back."

I did and we got out of the car. Either the clouds had moved on or we'd driven out from under them. It was a beautiful night again, with the stars out brightly. I looked up at them, wondering if one that was a little reddish-looking was Mars, and then we went up on the porch and into the house. There were lights on in the hallway and in one or two of the downstairs rooms, but I didn't hear any sound. She said, "I won't wake anyone. Come on in the kitchen; I'll fix our drinks." We went back to the kitchen and I got ice cubes out of the refrigerator while she got the other ingredients, and she made us each a highball. It tasted cool and smooth, like she looked. She was sitting on the kitchen table and I was leaning against the refrigerator.

"Ed," she said, "a couple of hours ago I asked you if you were in love. You said you didn't know. What did you mean?"

"I meant that I didn't know."

"How long have you known her?"

"I met her this afternoon; I was with her for about twenty minutes. You don't fall in love in twenty minutes."

"No, I guess you don't."

"And besides, it's going to be complicated. Her father — Hell, let's skip it. I don't want to explain about that part of it."

She laughed. "And when do you see her again?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, I think. I mean, this afternoon."

"Then you can take her for a ride in the Cadillac."

"I'd thought of that," I said.

She looked at me for a moment. Then she said, "Ed, I'd like you to meet my husband."

"Sure," I told her. "I'd like to, sometime."

"Not sometime. Now."

She slid off the edge of the table and said, "Come on." I was puzzled, but I put down my drink and followed her. She seemed to be cold sober; she must be, for this was the third drink she'd had in three hours I'd been with her, and the two Martinis had been a long time before. I didn't get the idea, but I followed her and she went a few steps back along the hall and opened a door that led to steps going down. There was a light on at the bottom of the steps.

I walked down the stairs after her. The back half of the basement was a big rumpus room; one entire wall of it was a well-stocked bar.

In front of the bar a man lay back asleep in an overstuffed chair. He may not have been as well stocked as the bar, but he wasn't far from it. His clothes were expensive, but they were rumpled and soiled; they looked as though he was sleeping in them, and he was. It was hard to guess his age; it could have been anywhere from thirty-five to fifty, or even a little higher. His face was coarse and puffy. It looked as though it might have been handsome once.

Justine said, "Ed, meet my husband. Greg, this is Ed Hunter. He and I are going to bed together pretty soon. Do you mind?"

Apparently he didn't. His head was tilted back, his closed eyelids staring at the light overhead. He breathed a little noisily, his lips puffing out with each breath.

Justine's voice had been bright and hard. When I looked at her I was surprised to see that there were tears in her eyes. She said, "Come on, Ed," and we went back toward the stairs.

Then she said, "Wait a minute," and went back. She knelt down, unlaced his shoes and pulled them off. She turned on a lamp in a corner and then snapped off the ceiling light that was right over his eyes.

Then we went back upstairs. She said, "Put something on the phonograph, Ed, while I fix up another drink."

I figured out how to work the Capehart and put on an album of Jimmy Dorsey records. I started it playing softly, just as Justine came in with our drinks. We sat down on the sofa.

She leaned her head back against my shoulder. She said, "I'm tired, Ed, awfully tired. I was — just talking, down in the basement. I didn't really mean it."

I said, "I know you didn't."

“We'll listen to these records and then I'm going to chase you. But you oughtn't to drive all the way back there tonight, this morning. It's after three; go home and sleep till noon or so first.”

“No,” I said. “I've got something pretty important on for tomorrow morning in Tremont.”

“Morning? I thought your date with — with that girl was in the afternoon.”

“I don't mean that.”

“You don't mean seeing Uncle Steve, do you?”

“That I've got to do too, but this is something a hell of a lot more important.” I laughed. “Sounds like I'm doing a lot of things of my own on your time, time you're paying for. It isn't as bad as it sounds; I'll be working on your end of it, too.”

“What is it you've got to do?”

“Skip it,” I said.

“No, tell me. If it's on my time, I've got a right to know, haven't I?”

“All right. I've got to knock hell out of a guy who knocked hell out of me this evening. But I don't want to talk about it and that's all I'm going to tell you.”

“You're stubborn too, aren't you, Ed?”

“Yes,” I said. “You're a funny kid.”

“Am I?”

“Yes. You'll probably never make any money, but you're going to have a lot of fun. Or maybe you'll step into a trap. You're putting your foot out toward one right now.”

“Right now?”

“Now in general, not this minute. You might fall for this vapid little bobby-soxer you met in Tremont, marry her and — there would go all the things you'd be going to do otherwise.”

I ran my hand over her hair and said, “Nice kitty.”

She laughed and said, “Damn you, Ed, never say that to a woman when it's true. Or what the hell am I doing telling you how to get along with women. You do all right.”

She looked down at her glass and saw that it was empty. “One more drink.”

“I'd better go. Tomorrow *is* a big day.”

She didn't take her head off my shoulder and I couldn't very well shove her away. She asked, "What happened to the Muggsy Spanier album? You were so obviously not serious last night when you said to play any album but that. After you left I looked at it."

I told her what had happened. She said, "That was my husband's best friend. He hates me like poison. Did you think he was a friend of mine?"

"I didn't think."

"I suppose you think now, after what I said to Greg downstairs, that I'm pretty much of a bitch."

"Are you?"

"A little. Not much. If you mean have I been faithful to Greg, of course not. But neither am I promiscuous, Ed. I've had a few affairs, but it's been a long time since I've even had my head on anyone's shoulder. I've just been making money." I said, "It's nice stuff to have. Does your husband—?"

"Greg is faithful, to his bottle. He doesn't know women exist, including me. Do you know that phonograph has been playing the last record over three times now? You didn't fix the automatic shutoff." She took her head off my shoulder so I could get up, and I went over and shut off the Capehart.

She was standing when I turned around. I went over and put my arms around her and kissed her, and she pressed her body against mine in a head-to-toe caress that made even the little of me that wasn't touching her tingle.

Then she stepped back and said, "Good night, Ed. Take good care of the Caddy. And yourself."

I said, "I will. Good night, Justine."

I went out to the car and drove to the rooming house where Uncle Am and I live. I left the car out front, went upstairs and let myself into our room with the key.

Uncle Am sat up in bed and said, "Whozat?" and then light from the hallway showed him who I was and he said, "Hi, Ed. What time is it?"

"Four o'clock. Mind if I turn on the light?"

"Go ahead. How come you're back so soon? Get the job done already? Ben won't be crazy about that. You should have stretched it a couple of days."

"I'll stretch it," I told him. "I haven't started yet."

By that time I had the light on and he'd blinked his eyes and then looked at me. He said, "Wipe that lipstick off," and I did.

He swung his feet out of bed and into slippers. "Now what the hell is this all about?" he wanted to know.

I grinned at him. "Want to change suits," I told him. "I had a fall and got this one dirty."

"That where you got the lipstick?"

"No, that's another story. Which one do you want?"

"I want to know what the devil you're doing back in Chicago."

"Justine was driving to St. Louis and stopped to talk over the case. She decided to come back to Chi instead of driving on. I drove her back and borrowed her car to use on the job. I want to get there in time to get about two hours' sleep."

"Now that you're here, why not get it here? I'll have breakfast with you and then you can drive back and get there by nine. You can sleep from now until seven, and make it."

I had my suit off by then and the trousers of another suit in my hand ready to put them on.

I hesitated. I said, "If I do, we'll get to talking and we'll still be talking two hours from now."

"I won't pump you tonight. Not till breakfast. I promise."

"Okay," I said. Instead of dressing again I stripped down to my shorts and undershirt and turned out the light and got in. I didn't want to change to pajamas because Uncle Am would have seen the tape and asked about it. That part I wasn't going to tell him. Any of the rest that he wanted to know, but not that. That was between me and Sheriff Kingman and was something I had to see through on my own, without even any advice about it.

He said, "Night, Ed. I won't pump you tonight."

"Night, Uncle Am."

"Except about the lipstick. You wouldn't want me to go to sleep wondering about that, would you?"

"I dropped her off at her place. We had two drinks and I kissed her good night. Don't the Instructions for Operatives say you're supposed to kiss a client good night? If they don't, they should."

"I'll tell Ben to put it in," Uncle Am said. "Okay, kid, I'll say just one thing. You've got something on your mind. All right, whatever it is, let it ride till morning. You've got only three hours, so don't think about it tonight. Count sheep, or women, or something, and get right to sleep."

He turned over then and went right back to sleep himself, or anyway pretended to so I wouldn't be tempted to talk.

I knew that was good advice and I did the best I could with it. I thought about Molly Kingman — and not about her father. I tried to remember every word of conversation I'd had with her, every gesture she'd made, every expression that had gone across her face. Especially the way she'd laughed.

But Justine Haberman kept popping into my mind, too. And that made it complicated, so I quit thinking and started doing multiplication tables in my head. I remembered getting up to eight times nine and that was the last I knew until the alarm went off at seven o'clock.

I managed to stall off Uncle Am while we were getting dressed. When we went downstairs he took a look at the Cadillac parked in front and whistled. He said, "Kid, you shouldn't have left that there. If our landlady sees us getting into it, she's going to double our room rent."

"Want to drive it?" I said. "It handles as easy as a roller skate."

"It doesn't look like one. Sure, I'd like to try it. And you've got plenty of driving to do after breakfast."

He got in behind the wheel and drove us east to Michigan Boulevard and south and parked in front of the Blackstone. "Where we going?"

"Breakfast," he said. "You don't think I'm going to park a yacht like this in front of a hamburger stand, do you? Where's your sense of proportion, kid?"

So we went in the Blackstone. Uncle Am was a little disappointed to find that the main dining room wasn't open that early, but we settled for the coffee shop and ordered waffles.

Then he started on me. "Kid, what's the score down in Tremont?"

"Nothing to nothing," I said, "in the first half of the first inning. I haven't seen Amory yet, to talk to."

"Do you mean you saw him to look at?"

"I mean we didn't have time to talk. Something came up."

"Now we're getting somewhere. What came up?"

I said, "I found a body."

"Ed, what is this? A game? Do I have to get it out of you a word at a time, like guessing animal, vegetable, mineral?"

I said, "On the way out to Amory's, I found a body. I called the sheriff and he went after it and didn't find it. He didn't like that."

“Oh-oh. By any chance one of these backwoods sheriffs who don't like private detectives?”

“Well, he likes gangsters better.”

“Ummm. Well, stay as clear of him as you can. That's about all you can do, Ed. What happened to the stiff? Or maybe you made a mistake; maybe he wasn't really dead.”

I told him the rest of it. All except what had happened in the sheriff's office. If I told him that, he might — I didn't think so — advise me to forget it. But more likely he'd insist on going back to Tremont with me and starting in to clean out the sheriff and all his deputies. And that would be even less sensible than what I was going to do. Uncle Am is the smartest guy I know, but sometimes he hasn't very much sense.

He thought it over after I'd finished the story, and then he said, “Ed, you might as well forget it. About the stiff, I mean.”

“I'd be willing to. That is, if it had stayed there.”

“But look, Ed, you're working for Starlock. On another job. You can't legitimately spend more than another couple of days in Tremont, and after that you'd be on your own time.”

“There's that,” I admitted. “Well, for the couple of days I'm there, I'm going to keep my eyes and ears open.”

“Did the guy you found look like a tramp, maybe?”

“No.”

“Then he's bound to be missing.”

“I thought of that. I'm going to get your Mrs. Bemiss going on that angle. Running a newspaper, she'd hear if anybody is missing.”

“Not only that, but be able to tell you his history back to the cradle. Well, Ed—”

“Yeah?”

“Keep out of trouble.”

I grinned at him. “I won't do anything you wouldn't do.”

“That's a hell of an idea for you to get.”

We had a final cup of coffee and then went outside. I wanted to drive Uncle Am to the office in the Caddy but it was only a few blocks and he wouldn't let me. He said that now that I had it heading south on the boulevard, I ought to keep it going that way; there might not be room to turn it around in the Loop.

So I drove south out of Chicago and got to Tremont a little before ten o'clock. I parked the car in front of the Tremont House and went in to ask at the desk if there'd been any messages for me. I thought Amory might have called in connection with my appointment with him.

The secretary of the Chamber of Commerce was on duty at the desk. He said, "No, no messages, Mr. Hunter. Uh — are you keeping the room another day, or checking out?"

"At least one more day."

"The maid tells me you didn't stay here last night; the bed wasn't slept in. So naturally I wondered—"

"Naturally," I agreed.

I walked down the street to the *Tremont Advocate* and went in. A motherly-looking woman with gray hair and gold-rimmed glasses was sitting at a big roll-top desk, correcting some galley proofs. "Mrs. Bemiss?" I asked her. "My name is Ed Hunter."

She looked up at me through the gold-rimmed glasses. Her eyes were nice, kind eyes, but didn't look as though they missed anything. She said, "Sit down, young man. Foley Armstrong."

"What?"

She repeated it a bit impatiently. "Foley Armstrong. That's the answer to the question you were going to ask me. It saves time if I answer it first, doesn't it?" I sat down. "Tell me about him."

"He has — maybe had is a better word — a small farm on the Dartown Road, third place past Steve Amory's, on the other side of the road. Wife and two sons, ten and fourteen. He's forty-three. If your story's true, he'll never be forty-four. He didn't get home last night."

I asked, "Did he start home? What's the last that was known of him?"

"The checkup hasn't been made yet. His wife phoned in this morning, just a little while ago, that he didn't come home last night. So they'll start checking places he might have been, unless he turns up."

I asked, "Would he have been walking home? I mean, if he lived out beyond Amory's, that'd be a pretty long walk. Did he drive a car?"

"Yes, but he left his car at the garage to have a burned-out bearing replaced. He said he'd get a lift home, but maybe he had trouble getting one and decided to walk. He could walk it in an hour."

I nodded slowly. I said, "Thanks, Mrs. Bemiss. But you spoil the fun of being a private detective. You aren't supposed to answer questions before I

ask them. How can I earn my pay?"

She laughed, her eyes twinkling at me through the glasses. "If the grapevine is right, young man, what you're down here to do hasn't anything to do with what happened to Foley Armstrong."

"Do you know what happened to Foley Armstrong?"

"No."

"Then how could either you or I know for sure that it doesn't concern the job I'm here on?"

"Young man, by using that line of reasoning, you could investigate every unsolved crime that ever happened in Calvin County. All on your employer's time. Which is all right by me if you solve them on a Friday."

"Why a Friday?"

"Because the *Advocate* is a weekly and we go to press on Friday night. And the presses roll — or if you want to get technical about it the press shuttles up and down because it's a Miehle vertical — far into Friday night and we distribute early Saturday morning. So what good does it do me if you solve a crime just *after* I go to press? By the next week it's old hat. So you go right ahead and find out about that corpse of yours on the road, provided you do it by tomorrow night. After that, it's too late."

I grinned at her. "If the agency won't pay for my time, will you?"

"You'll get a free copy of the paper. If, and only if, you give me an exclusive on the story. I'd like, for once, to have something happen here and the Chicago and Springfield papers pick it up from me instead of me having to pick it up at the end of the week from them. Now run along and let me work."

I stood up. I said, "Sheasure. Theasanks."

She looked at me sharply. "Where'd you pick up the carney, young man? And who's told you I was with it?"

I said, "I'd have told you that if you'd let me introduce myself instead of throwing information at me before I asked for it."

Her eyes narrowed. "Hunter," she said. "It couldn't be."

"It could," I told her. "Uncle Am told me to see you."

"My God, why didn't you—? Sit down again, young — What's your first name? Ed. Sit down again, Ed. What's Am doing?"

"Working with the same agency I'm with, in Chicago. We were with the Hobart carney last season, but we settled down for a while in Chi."

“*Am Hunter*,” she said. “I’ll be damned. You know I thought you looked human when you walked in here, but Hunter isn’t too uncommon a name and I never thought to connect it with — Say, wait a minute.”

She picked up the phone and gave a number. Then she said, “Sheriff, please...Oh, he is, is he? Well, this is Caroline Bemiss. What’s the latest you’ve found out about Foley Armstrong?” She listened a while and then hung up the receiver after she’d thanked whoever she’d been talking to, and turned back to me.

She said, “Foley was last seen in Hank Crowder’s bar about half past seven. He had a drink and asked Willie Eklund, who lives out that way, if he was going to be driving home soon. Willie said no, he was going to play poker till pretty late, probably. So Foley left, like as not to walk home. If he had, he’d have gone along that readjust a little before you did.”

I nodded. I said, “I’d ask you to describe him, but I’m afraid at the time I wasn’t noticing descriptions. All I could say about him is that he wasn’t unusually tall or short, or unusually fat or thin.”

“He wasn’t, Ed. Look, I’ll get you a photograph. We haven’t one here, but I can probably get one. Do you think you might recognize him from one?”

“I don’t know. It was pretty dark. Dim, I mean. And his face was a bit contorted. It wasn’t a nice way to die.”

“What is a nice one, Ed?”

“If I find one, I’ll let you know. What was the fire last night? I saw red in the sky.”

“A barn burned down. Jeb O’Hara’s. He lives in the West Road. Do you want to solve that, too?”

“Is there anything to solve? I mean, was it incendiary?”

“Probably not, Ed. Barns do burn down, without anybody setting fire to them deliberately. But the sheriff’s going out there to look it over. That’s one of the places they said he’d be when I called his office just now.”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll be seeing you, Mrs. Bemiss.” I stood up.

“Hey,” she called at me as I turned away. “You can’t walk out like that, Ed. We haven’t even started to talk about Am and carneys and God knows what else. When am I going to see you for a good long talk? How about eating with me this evening? I can cook better grub than the Hobart chow top.”

I said, “It’s a deal. When and where?” Got a car?”

“A kind of a jalopy,” I said, “but it runs.”

Then pick me up here at around six-thirty or seven. I work late on Thursdays. Then I can show you where we go.”

“It's a deal,” I said.

I went outside and walked back to the Caddy. I got in behind the wheel and took a long, deep breath and it didn't seem to hurt my cracked rib. My side itched like hell from the adhesive tape but as long as I didn't actually touch the sore spot it didn't really hurt. I could move my arms freely.

I thought: here we go, Ed.

I was scared, but I slid the car into gear and pulled out from the curb and headed west. If the West Road was the next road north of the Dartown Road I could find it without having to ask directions. I found it.

Chapter 6

I DIDN'T HAVE TO ASK directions to Jeb O'Hara's farm; it was about two miles out of town, the same distance as Amory's place, and I could see the ashes of the burned barn right from the road. It must have been a fair-sized barn, from the pile of ashes. Bed of ashes would be a better way of putting it; they were spread over the area where the barn had been, from a few inches to almost a foot thick. They were blowing a little now, but not much; I remembered that there hadn't been any wind to speak of either last night or this morning.

I didn't see Sheriff Kingman anywhere around, nor his car.

I'd gone past the farmhouse itself before I saw the ashes, and the road wasn't wide enough to turn the Caddy around, so I backed it to the driveway and backed in.

A woman came out of the front door of the farmhouse as I got out of the car. I walked toward her and when I was within speaking distance I asked her if Mr. O'Hara was around.

"Down feeding the pigs," she said, pointing out past the place where the barn had been. I looked that way around the corner of the house and saw a man working there; I hadn't noticed him before. "You from the insurance company?"

"No," I said, "but I want to ask him some questions about the fire. Thanks."

I walked around the house and back to the pigpen. A tall man with sandy hair looked toward me, emptied a final bucket of slop into the trough and then came walking back to meet me.

I said, "Mr. O'Hara? I'm Ed Hunter. I'm a friend of Caroline Bemiss, on the *Advocate*. I was talking to her this morning and mentioned I was driving past this way; she asked me if I'd stop and get the details on your fire, for her paper."

He wiped his hands on his faded overalls; I thought maybe he was going to shake hands. But he didn't. He asked, "What do you want to know?"

"Do you know how the fire started?"

"Nope."

“About what time did it start?”

“Not long after midnight. Before a quarter to one, anyway. That's when I woke up and it was blazing like Billy-be-damned.”

“Did the fire wake you?”

“Guess so. Don't know if it was the crackling or the light from it. We sleep on that side of the house and when I woke up, our room was red with the glare from it.”

“How do you think the fire could have started?”

He shrugged. “There's always spontaneous combustion. Could of been that.”

There were footsteps behind me in the gravel and I turned and saw that the woman from the house had followed me. But she spoke to her husband. “Spontaneous nothing, Jeb O'Hara. You know it was a tramp set fire to it.”

I asked her, “What makes you think that, Mrs. O'Hara?”

“Door was open, that's why. Jeb's first thought, naturally, was the stock. We had three cows in that barn. When he sees it's afire he runs downstairs and out, right in his nightshirt and barefoot, to get the door open and the cows out, if they weren't barbecued already. And the door was already open and the cows were out, huddled right in that corner of the fence there.”

I turned back to O'Hara.

He said, uneasily, “It could of happened that way. I mean, say a tramp sneaks in there to sleep and he lights a cigarette up in the haymow and sets fire to the hay. He sees he can't put it out and he gets out of there damn quick and leaves the door open and the cows get out when they smell the fire. Or just maybe he might of been decent enough to run the cows out himself before he beats it. One tramp out of a hundred might do that.”

“Could the cows have got out themselves if he hadn't?” I asked. “I mean, were they in stanchions or fastened in?”

“They weren't in stanchions. In three stalls, and there was a thin board that ran across the front of the stalls, in two slots, that I put up to keep 'em from wandering at night. It was good enough to hold 'em ordinarily, but if a fire panicked 'em, they might of broke it down and got out.”

“Including getting through the door? Could they have broken the latch of that?”

He shook his head. “Nope, I noticed that. I saw that the latch on the door wasn't broken. Somebody'd opened it. And I don't think I'd left it open

myself. I was in the barn last around eight o'clock, and I don't remember especially closing the door — but I'd never left it open all night before.”

“And you didn't last night,” said Mrs. O'Hara decisively. “It was a tramp, and you know it.” There was an I-told-you-so tone to her voice that made me look from her to her husband.

Jeb O'Hara saw what I was wondering and grinned sheepishly. “What Ma means,” he explained, “is that she's been after me for a long time now to get a good watchdog. If we'd had a watchdog on the place last night, maybe a tramp wouldn't of got in our barn last night.”

“No maybe to it,” the woman snapped. “And we'd of had a barn this morning.”

O'Hara said, “I went back to sleep after the fire to that tune, and I ate breakfast to it this morning. I told you I'd get a dog.”

“Now that we haven't got a barn.”

“All right, then, we *won't* get a dog. Which way do you want it?”

I cut in, before things got worse, by asking, “Was the barn insured?”

“Barn itself, yes. But I stand the loss on a loftful of good hay, and a couple hundred dollars' worth of feed. Another couple of hundred in tools.”

“And just plain lucky,” said the woman, “that Harry Ellis borrowed the tractor yesterday, or it'd be worse.”

“How much insurance did you have?”

“Fifteen hundred. Prices the way they are now, it'll probably cost me two thousand at least for a new barn. So I guess I'm out about a thousand.” He looked at the woman. “All because I didn't listen to her and get a dog. Tell Caroline Bemiss to be sure to put that in the article about the fire when she writes it up.”

Before the trouble between them could start over again, I asked, “Mind if I look around a little, over there by the ashes?”

“Guess not. But what for?”

I said, “A crazy idea of mine. Too crazy to talk about unless I see what I'm looking for.”

I walked over by the ashes before they could question me any further. It was going to be a nasty job and I wished now that I'd had the foresight to get a pair of overalls to wear over my good clothes. Being an operative was proving to be pretty hard on my wardrobe.

I walked once around the edge of that rectangle of ashes, looking carefully and not seeing what I was looking for. But lying on the browned

grass at one corner of it was a rake and the ashes in one spot near there had been raked, as though Jeb had been looking for some one particular thing. Probably some metal object whose location he had known and which he had salvaged this morning.

I picked up the rake and started working where he had left off. Working from both sides, I'd be able to work all of the ashes except those in the very middle section. If I didn't find what I was looking for near the outside, I'd just have to wade in and let my trousers get full of ashes.

I keep on raking and got around the first corner by the time the woman made up her mind to come over and see what I was doing. When she got there, I kept on raking gently in the ashes, but I beat her to the punch by asking a question first. I asked her, "Did the fire department come out from town last night?"

"Sure," she said. "Got here just as the fire was over. A barn goes quick once it starts. I phoned for them while Jeb ran out to save the stock — only it was already saved — and they got here in twenty or thirty minutes, but it was all over then."

I said, "Lucky there wasn't any wind."

She nodded. "Threw some sparks all right, but they went straight up, and during the worst of it there was a little bit of a mist of rain, just like I prayed for, and it didn't save the barn — even a cloudburst couldn't of, by that time, but it kept the fire from hurting anything else, like it might."

I kept on raking. "You think the mist of rain was because you prayed for it?"

I didn't ask it sarcastically or skeptically; I was honestly interested if she really thought that. Also, I wanted to keep talking about other things so she wouldn't insist on an answer to the question of what I was looking for in the ashes.

I was really interested in her answer to the question, but we never got around to it. Because just then my rake brought up a human skull out of the bed of ashes. The back of the skull was crushed in, and although it had been visible, right level with the top of the ashes, you couldn't recognize it as a skull from the back. But then the rake turned it over, and there were black, empty eye sockets and the hole where the nose had been, and two rows of blackened teeth.

Mrs. O'Hara gasped a little and called out, "Jeb!"

I lifted the rake very carefully so as not to move or break the brittle skull any more than it was already broken.

Jeb O'Hara had been down at the pigpen again. He came walking toward us.

Mrs. O'Hara called out to him, "Jeb, it was a tramp. I was right. Only he was killed in the fire. Look!"

Jeb didn't say anything until he stood beside us. Then he took a step into the ashes and reached down. I said, "Better not move it. The police wouldn't want it moved, and I turned over the skull already with the rake."

He pulled his hand back and stepped back out of the ashes to stare at me. He said, "Why would the police—?"

"To establish identity, if they can."

"A tramp? How can they establish a tramp's identity?"

I said, "Maybe it wasn't a tramp." He stared at me puzzled, but Mrs. O'Hara didn't seem to have been listening to our conversation. She said, "See, Jeb, I was right. It was a tramp, and if we'd've had a dog—"

"Mayme, shut *up* about that dog! We'll get one, if you'll stop talking about it."

"All right, Jeb. This one must have been drunk, to have started a fire and not even known about it. Yes, he *must* have been drunk because he must have left the barn door open when he went in, instead of opening it on his way out after he'd started the fire. Listen, Jeb, I want a collie. A really good collie; I don't care how much we have to pay to get a good one. I've always wanted a collie, and now that we're going to get a dog anyway, we might as well get—"

"Mayme, shut *up*!"

His eyes hadn't left mine. He said, "Mister, what did you mean, maybe it wasn't a tramp? Who are you, and what gave you the idea of rooting around in them ashes? What's it all about?"

I said, "I'm a private detective. I was telling you the truth, though, about Mrs. Bemiss being a friend of mine, and about my getting the story for her. May I use your phone to call her?"

"Sure, but—"

I said, "A man disappeared last night. Or rather, he didn't get home; he hasn't been seen since early yesterday evening. That's why — one reason, anyway — I said this might not be a tramp."

"I hadn't heard about that. Who?"

“A man named Foley Armstrong.”

“Hell, that couldn't be Foley. I know him damn well, play cribbage with him. But he lives on the next road, the Dartown Road. He wouldn't be going by here, and if he was — drunk or sober — he wouldn't be going into my barn. Besides, it *couldn't* be Foley!”

“Why not?”

“Foley doesn't smoke. If it was him, he wouldn't of set fire to the barn.” I said, “All right, it couldn't have been Foley Armstrong. But, before I call Mrs. Bemiss to tell her about it is there some way we could verify that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is there some way you could be positive, from a skeleton, that that really isn't Armstrong? I mean, if he had false teeth and that man hasn't, or — something like that?”

He said, “Foley hasn't got false teeth. He just had a two-tooth bridge put in, upper front. Second last time he was over to play cribbage, he had the teeth out, and the last time he had the bridge in and was saying they looked swell but he didn't dare eat anything tougher than hamburger with them and —”

“Don't move the skull,” I said. “But take a look at the teeth.” He stared at me a few seconds and then he stepped back into the ashes and bent down. He looked long and carefully at the teeth of the skull.

When he straightened up and looked at me, his face was pretty solemn. He said, “It's Foley. There's a bridge and it's the same two teeth. And he had a gold filling in a lower front tooth. The gold's melted and run, but I can see where it was.”

“That's good enough,” I said. “Can I use your phone? We'll have to call the coroner, too.”

“And the sheriff, I reckon. I don't understand it, Mister. How did Foley Armstrong get in my barn?”

“I don't know,” I told him. I started walking to the house, and the woman followed me. I waited at the door till she caught up and let me in. When I looked back the last time, Jeb O'Hara was kneeling in the ashes, staring incredulously at the skull as though he still couldn't believe what his eyes told him.

Mrs. O'Hara showed *me* the phone. I looked up the *Advocate's* number in the phone book and called it. Mrs. Bemiss answered.

I said, "This is Ed Hunter, Mrs. Bemiss. Reporting from the O'Hara farm. I've got part of your story for you."

"The fire — Foley Armstrong?"

"Yes. Not much left but O'Hara makes identification from the teeth. Not much doubt, even outside of the body, that the fire was incendiary. Whoever set it was decent enough to let the stock out of the barn."

"Anything else?"

"I might solicit a want ad for you. Wanted: good watchdog, collie preferred."

"Ed, is the sheriff there?"

"No. Wait a minute." I turned to Mrs. O'Hara, who was watching and listening. I said, "Sheriff Kingman hasn't been here yet this morning, has he?"

She shook her head, and I relayed the information to Mrs. Bemiss. She said, "He'll be there soon, then. At his office they said he was going several places and that O'Hara's was one of them. You going to wait till he gets there?"

"If he gets here soon enough, yes. I've got a lot of things to do too. Remember what I'm down here for, don't you? Well, I haven't even started on it yet."

"The coroner should be notified, Ed. I'll call him and send him out there to save you calling. I'll call back the sheriff's office, too, just in case he came back. You'd probably better stay there until one or the other of them gets there."

I said, "Armstrong won't run away. Mr. O'Hara will watch him. But all right, I'll stay till somebody gets here."

I hung up. Mrs. O'Hara said, "Listen, young man, when you get back to the *Advocate* office, you run that ad for the collie, just like you said it over the phone. Maybe you thought I was joking about it."

I said, "No, I got the impression you were serious. All right, I'll tell Mrs. Bemiss to run it."

I went out. She followed me as far as the screen door. She said, "You run that ad. Don't ask Jeb about it. Just run it. I'll pay for it."

I said, "I'll run it. But isn't a police dog better than a collie?"

"No." She sniffed. "That Wolf, Buck Barnett's dog. He's a police dog, but he'd help burglars run off with the place."

I said, "Maybe he's an underworld spy in policeman's uniform." She asked, "Huh?" but I didn't answer, for just then the sheriff's car swung into the driveway and stopped behind the Cadillac.

He and Willie Eklund got out, and Kingman stood, arms akimbo, looking over the Caddy. I walked over to them.

Chapter 7

SOMEHOW, HE DIDN'T LOOK AS BIG as last night. Maybe because the Caddy looked bigger.

He turned around and jerked his thumb at it. "That yours?"

"Not mine personally," I said. "I'm driving it."

"What are you doing out here?"

"Making a monkey out of you," I said.

He said, "Wha-at?" and balled his fists, taking a step toward me. I got myself set, in case, but I said, "Business before pleasure, Sheriff. Maybe before we have fun you'd better take a look at what's back there."

I pointed back to the rectangle of ashes that had been the barn. Jeb O'Hara was still back there and when he saw the sheriff turn, he waved to him. Sheriff Kingman said, "Stick around, punk" to me and walked back toward O'Hara. He said, "Watch him, Willie."

I stayed where I was, staring after him. Willie Eklund walked over to me, shaking his head. He spoke softly enough that his voice wouldn't carry to the sheriff. "Son, you're really looking for trouble. You know that, don't you?"

I said, "I wasn't looking for it. I found it anyway. I'm going to see it through."

"You're pretty young, Hunter. You'll learn there are things you just got to take."

"Maybe it's because I'm young. But I haven't learned that yet."

"The sheriff ain't such a bad guy. His bark is worse than his bite." I said, "His bark ought to be peeled off him in strips. Besides, it wasn't a question of bark. He bit me last night."

"Huh?"

"Figuratively," I said. "That's why he got rid of you before he took me up to his office. He didn't want a witness."

The sheriff was back with Jeb O'Hara by then and I started walking back that way. Willie Eklund fell in beside me. He asked, "What's back there?"

“Foley Armstrong,” I said. “What's left of him, that is. And I've got a pretty good hunch that it's also Foley Armstrong that I saw on the Dartown Road, dead.”

“Then how'd he get here?”

I didn't try to answer that one. By that time we were near Jeb and the sheriff. The sheriff had been bending over, looking at the skull, too, and he straightened now and stepped back out of the ashes.

He said, “Jeb says you found that. How'd you know it — he — was there?” I didn't know,” I said. “It seemed like a good place to look for a corpse that I found once before and that was missing. A murder and a fire the same night, about a mile apart — Could be a coincidence, but then again it might not. It wasn't.”

“A murder?”

I said, “An animal might have torn his throat out. No animal carried him into that barn, let the stock out of it, and then fired the barn.”

“Let the stock out of it?”

I said, “Ask Jeb.”

Apparently Jeb had been doing some thinking since he'd told me the story and since I'd found the skeleton. He said, “It does look that way, Sheriff, when I think it over. Way I figured, a tramp set it accidentally, ran out leaving the door open, and the cows got out by themselves. But now — well, if that's Foley, then it wasn't a tramp at all unless a tramp killed Foley and—”

He ran down and I said, “In any case, the fire was set to destroy the corpse. Maybe the murderer didn't know that there'd be a skeleton left in spite of the fire. Or maybe—”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe he didn't care if the skeleton was found, as long as it was only a skeleton. If that's the corpse I found last night, the man's throat was torn out, but I won't be able to prove that from the skeleton. That fire didn't lose the corpse, but it prevents you from telling the manner of Foley's death.”

“We'll ask the coroner about that. Go phone him, Willie.”

I said, “He's already coming. I talked to Caroline Bemiss on the phone and she was going to call him, and your office.”

He glared at me as though I'd had no business doing that. He said, “Got things pretty well under control, ain't you?”

“Not yet,” I said.

He knew what I meant, all right, but he asked it.

I said, "You took me on a sneak punch last night, when I wasn't looking for one. You kicked the wind out of me after I went down. I didn't have a chance."

"The hell you didn't. I didn't—"

"There are witnesses now," I said. "Want to take your coat off and try it fair? Or are you too yellow? Or would you rather apologize for last night?"

He looked at me for what seemed a long time without saying anything and then he slowly started to take off his coat. I took off mine and walked over to the fence with it. I rolled up my sleeves and took my time about doing it, sizing him up.

He was plenty big, but a lot of it was lard. If I could keep away from him until I'd landed a few in that spare tire of his, he'd weaken fast. His arms looked thick and powerful, but they were short; if he'd had reach on me too, I wouldn't have had a chance. His fists looked like oversized cobblestones, but I thought I could keep away from them, given room for footwork.

And age was going to be on my side by at least fifteen years, maybe more. He was pushing forty and looked out of condition; I didn't think he could last for more than five or ten minutes.

I stood back in the open and put up my dukes as though I was going to stand and slug it out, and he walked in confidently. His left arm was up in what he apparently thought was a guard and his right was cocked way back for a haymaker. When I saw that, I knew I had a good chance, in spite of the rib. If he'd really known how to fight, I'd have been in a bad spot.

I put in a light left over his guard and danced back as he swung a roundhouse right that missed by a yard. While he was off balance from the momentum of that wild swing, I stepped in and put a right just above his belt. It wasn't a very hard one; but I was just trying it for size and I was being plenty sure I could get away again.

The right hurt him, but it hurt me, too. It jarred my rib, and I saw I was going to have to be sparing of right-hand punches and use my left most of the time.

He charged in, and I got on my bicycle and went backwards in a circle as he kept coming. I kept flicking short lefts, mostly over his guard but if he brought it up in front of his face I'd throw one in under it to bring it down again. I kept going backwards; I fought him like Walcott fought Louis. But

I had better luck than Walcott did, because the sheriff wasn't in training and Louis was. He got more out of wind every step he took.

I took the pain in my cracked rib and gave him three more rights in his spare tire. Each one when he was off balance after having missed one of those roundhouse swings.

In three minutes or maybe four he was puffing like a locomotive, his eyes looked wild and bloodshot from the exertion, and a trickle of blood was running from his nose down over his mouth and dripping off his chin.

I'd taken only one of his wallops, a backhand left that he probably hadn't intended for a real punch. It caught me alongside the head and it made both my ears ring and my head ache.

I just rode the bicycle for about twenty or thirty seconds after that, but it was almost as effective as though I'd been throwing punches into him right and left. He wore himself out charging.

When he stopped, panting, his tongue almost hanging out, I gritted my teeth against the pain that was going to grab my rib, and buried my hand up to my wrist, almost, in his midriff.

He went "Oooof," and sat down. Not knocked out, not even knocked down, just utterly and completely out of wind.

I was breathing hard myself by then, but I stood there ready, in case he wanted to get up and go on with it.

But it didn't look as though he did.

A dry voice behind me said, "You damned fool." I turned around and Dr. Cordell, the one who'd taped up my rib the night before in my room at the Tremont House, was standing there.

I wondered for a moment what he was doing there and then got my answer when Willie Eklund said, "It's over here, Doc," and I realized that, in addition to his private practice on my rib, Cordell must be the county coroner.

Cordell said, "In a minute," to Eklund. He was watching Kingman get up, and I think he was going to step in and try to stop the fight if he had to.

But he didn't have to try. Sheriff Kingman had had enough for the moment. He got up slowly, his hands at his sides, and he was still fighting for breath. He got enough of it to say, "Sail right, Doc," apparently thinking Cordell was worried about him. He got a handkerchief out of his pocket and held it over his nose to keep from dripping any more blood on his necktie,

and then started slowly over to the watering trough, ten yards away, to wash the blood off his face and to stop his nose bleeding.

Cordell started after him and Willie Eklund said, "Hey, Doc, the stiff's over here."

The coroner looked back over his shoulder and said, "Watch it, Willie, so it doesn't run away." Then he followed Kingman over to the watering trough.

I wiped the sweat off my face and straightened my necktie, and then rolled down my sleeves while I walked over to the fence to get my coat.

Then I joined Willie Eklund, near the corpus delicti. He said, conversationally, "You're a God-damned fool. Getting in a fight with a broken rib. Doc told me; he was going to stop it." He grinned suddenly. "Only you stopped it first." He straightened out his face quickly as the sheriff and the coroner started back toward us from the watering trough.

He said, "You didn't do me any favor, though. He's going to be a tough man to get along with for a week or two, for anybody that works for him. I saw him get beat up once before."

"It should happen oftener," I told him.

"He isn't too bad a guy, Hunter. He's crazy about animals, he's crazy about his wife and daughter; he's got his soft spots."

I said, "He's crazy about private detectives, too, only I mean that literally."

The sheriff and the coroner were coming over now and Eklund didn't answer me. Kingman stopped a few paces away and said, "Hunter." His tone of voice sounded all right and I went over to him and left Eklund to show Cordell what he had to work with.

"Sorry about that rib," Kingman said. "Doc just told me; I didn't mean to be that rough on you."

His way of saying it wasn't quite as apologetic as his words, but it wasn't sarcastic, either. He still wasn't liking me, but I think it impressed him that I'd fought him in spite of the cracked rib. A lug of his type will respect guts more than brains or strength or manners.

I said, "I'll call it even, for five bucks."

"Huh?"

"That's what your coroner charged me last night for taping it up," I told him. "I didn't know he was on the county pay roll, but since he is it ought to be a county job, hadn't it?"

He said, "That's fair enough. Hey, Cordell, will you give this guy his five bucks?"

Bill the county for it."

Cordell turned slowly and looked at him. He asked, "You did that to him?"

Kingman looked uncomfortable. "He fell in my office," he said. The coroner looked at him another few seconds and Kingman's eyes wavered and he got interested in the skeleton that was lying there in the ashes. He asked, "Know who Armstrong's dentist was, Doc? Guess he could make identification for sure, if it's Armstrong."

Cordell took a five-dollar bill out of his wallet and gave it to me. I said, "Thanks," and put it away; I didn't answer the question his eyebrows asked me, and he turned back.

This time he walked right into the ashes and began scraping them away gently. He said, "I'm also going to bill the county for a job of dry cleaning," and went on scraping.

After a while he said, "It's Foley Armstrong, all right. That break in the left humerus, three inches above the elbow. He did that in a fall out of a tree in his orchard, two years ago; I set it for him."

Kingman said, "That's probably good enough. We'll find out his dentist, too, though, just to be sure."

Jeb started for the house. He said, "I'll call Foley's wife and tell her. Okay?"

Nobody answered him so he kept on going.

Cordell straightened up and stepped back. Kingman asked him, "How do you want to handle it, Doc?"

"Guess we might as well have one of the mortuaries come out and get him. Not much I can do."

I asked, "Can you tell what killed him?"

"Don't see how, son, unless — well, that skull is a bit crushed in back. That could have happened after he died, or before. If it was before, it was probably the cause of death."

I said, "I think I did that, with the rake, when I found him."

He nodded. "If that's the case, I can tell easily by the edges. It'll be a completely different type of break if it happened just now, with the bone dried out that way."

“There's no way at all you could tell if his throat had been torn out, is there?”

His eyes widened; he hadn't heard about my story of the night before. He said, “That would really be something, Hunter, if I could tell that.”

There didn't seem to be any point in my hanging around, and it was getting near noon. I asked, “Want me for anything else, Sheriff?”

“Well — you aren't leaving town, are you?”

“Not today.”

“Okay, then. Wait a minute. Now that it looks like there might be something in that story of yours about last night, I'd like to take another look with you, by daylight, at that spot where you say you saw a body. Want to go there with me and show me the exact place again?”

I said, “All right, come on. That's one of the things I was going to do anyway.”

He gave orders to Willie Eklund to stay there and give the mortician a hand, then we walked back to the driveway. He hesitated at the door of his car when I walked on to the Caddy, and asked, “Which way you going from there?”

“To Amory's,” I said.

“Guess we better take both cars, then. I'll be going in town or coming back here, one or the other.” He looked at the Caddy wonderingly and said, “Some boat.” He slammed the door of his car from the outside and came over. “Hell, I'd like to ride in it, even if I got to walk back here for mine. It's less than a mile across the fields — almost three miles the way we got to drive it.”

I thought maybe — now that by-gones were by-gones — I should start getting on the right side of him. I said, “Want to drive it that far? Then we can't get pinched for speeding.”

He said, “Sure,” and got in behind the wheel.

We had to back out on the lawn to get around Cordell's car and his, both of which had pulled in after the Caddy, but he didn't seem to mind doing that.

Once we were on the road, he said, “It sure handles. Wish we had a highway so I could let her out. Say, Hunter, how do you figure this business? I mean, your finding a corpse on the road and then Foley being dead in that barn fire. It makes nuts to me. It doesn't add up.”

“It makes nuts to me, too. Sheriff, you didn't even take that throat-torn-out business seriously enough last night to think about it. Well, if you think about it now, what is there in this county that could kill a man like that? For one thing — pardon my city ignorance, but could there conceivably be a wolf at large?”

“Not in fifty years. And there aren't any mountain lions, and I haven't even heard of a bobcat since I was a kid. Only *wild* animal big enough to kill a man would have to be escaped from a circus or something — and if there was anything like that loose, I'd have heard of it.”

“How about a tame animal gone wild?”

“Well — that's possible.” He swung the car into a side road that cut through between the West Road and the Dartown Road; it was a narrow dirt road and we had to slow down. “And that would be a dog, if it was. But we haven't any killer dogs around that I know of.”

“A good dog can turn killer.”

“Well, yes. But look, an animal — wild or tame — might have killed Foley the way you described, but damn it, no animal could have put him in Jeb's barn and then set fire to the barn.” I said, “So that leaves only one thing.”

“And what's that?”

“A homicidal maniac. A man who isn't a maniac isn't going to kill somebody by biting his throat open. But if the killer was the one who put him in the barn, then the killer was human, and — well, the killer wasn't sane.”

He said, “I've known one homicidal maniac since I've been in office, and I've read about others. But never heard of one who killed that way.”

“Ever read about lycanthropy?”

“No, what's that?”

“A type of insanity,” I told him, “in which the subject gets spells of believing he's a wolf. It's not common, but then it's not exceptionally rare, either. It's the basis of — the truth behind — the superstition about werewolves.” He snorted.

I said, “Sure, werewolves are just a superstition — as far as concerns somebody growing fur and turning into a wolf and leaving wolf tracks and all of that. But a man can turn into a wolf, mentally. He can, while he's insane that way, think like a wolf and kill like a wolf. And if he got sane again after he'd made his kill, he might put the body in a barn and set fire to

the barn so nobody would know *how* the man was killed.” He said, “You’re giving me the creeps.”

I grinned. “I’m giving myself the creeps a lot worse. I’m thinking that if that’s right, then there was a lycanthrope — a homicidal killer who thought he was a wolf — growling at me from ten or twelve feet distant last night. And me alone on a dark country road and unarmed.”

“Why wouldn’t he attack you?”

“Maybe one kill satisfied him. Then again — and this would be my guess — maybe he was partly sane again. Crazy enough to have a growl left in him, but not enough to jump me — except maybe in self-defense, if I’d gone there into the orchard after him.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Because I think he’d already started to move the body. Remember you asked me — or somebody did — if the body had been lying in a pool of blood? Well, it ought to have been if it hadn’t been moved. And it wasn’t.

“In the first place, I don’t remember any blood on the road at the time I’d found the body, and then when I went back to look afterwards, I’d have seen blood if it had been there in any quantity. A little smear or so I might not have seen, but if a man had died by having his jugular torn out, it wouldn’t have been just a little smear of blood.”

“Were you sure of the spot?”

“I think so, but I want to look it over again by daylight.” He said, “Here we are, then. Now’s your chance.”

I’d been so deep in the conversation about lycanthropes that I hadn’t noticed, but he was slowing the Caddy down now and we were only a dozen yards short of the turn in the Dartown Road. I said, “Stop it back here, where the car will be out of our way,” and he did.

He laughed as he got out of the car. He said, “You know, if your story about last night is true — and I’m giving it the benefit of the doubt for now — then you’ve probably set a record.”

“How?”

“You’re probably the only guy who ever found the same body twice. ‘Course you were looking for it the second time. How come, now that I think of it?”

I said, “I knew it had to be somewhere. And when I learned there’d been a barn fire less than a mile away, and the same night, well, it looked like a reasonable chance. And it paid off.”

“It hit the jack pot, yeah. And the thing that makes your story look best is the fact that there's no reasonable way Foley Armstrong would have been in that barn otherwise. It wasn't on his way home, and he wasn't drunk when he left town. I asked around about that.”

I said, “Mrs. Bemiss told me about that.” I was standing now at the point where — as nearly as I could figure it — I'd found the body. I still couldn't see anything.

I said, “I'm going to work on the assumption that he wasn't killed at that exact spot, that he got his bleeding over with somewhere else.”

He was walking up and down the side of the road, looking, too. He said, “That's reasonable. But there's a hell of a lot of somewhere else to look.”

“Not too much,” I said. “Let's assume that he was being dragged or carried to that particular barn, that the killer had already picked his spot; he must have if he was already moving the body. So the place where he died would be in the opposite direction from the barn. Would the barn be about that direction from here?”

I pointed, and he nodded. “That's pretty close. A little more west, maybe.”

“Then he was probably killed on the other side of the road, and back toward town. He'd been dragged or carried this far when the killer heard my footsteps coming just back of the bend. He dropped the body and hid.”

“And growled at you? That wouldn't make sense.”

I said, “Not for a sane man. I told you the only kind of killer I can fit into this pattern — and he isn't a sane man. He's a lycanthrope.”

I walked back toward the car and past it, on the other side of the road. I was watching the shoulder and the ditch particularly, and a dozen paces past the car, I stopped and motioned Kingman to come over. I pointed down to an irregular area in the surface of the dirt shoulder of the road.

He studied it. “Could be. Could be there was a pool of blood there and it soaked in. Well, I'll take a sample back. Cordell ought to be able to tell me if there's blood in the dirt.”

He took a penknife out of his pocket and dug up some of the dirt. He found an envelope in his coat pocket and put some of the dirt into it. While he was doing that I walked farther along the road, but didn't see anything else.

He was pocketing the envelope when I came back. He said, “Well, you going to Amory's?”

I looked at my watch. I said, “I guess not. Think I'll phone him and make an appointment for tonight instead. I've got a date at three—” I took a look at him and decided I'd better not tell him with whom, just yet. “ — and I wouldn't have too much time to spend with him anyway.”

He said, “Okay, if you're going in town, I'll ride with you. Maybe Cordell's left Jeb's by now anyway.”

We got back into the Cadillac, only this time I got under the wheel.

Chapter 8

WE'D BARELY STARTED when Kingman said, "Mind stopping a second here at Barnett's place?"

I stopped in front. I said, "If you're going to talk to Buck Barnett, suppose I could use his phone? I ought to call Amory if I'm not going to see him till evening."

He shook his head. "Hasn't got a phone. But I'll be only a minute. Won't even have to go in. I see him in the barnyard."

He got out of the car and called out, "Hey, Buck." He went on up the walk. A dog, somewhere behind the house, started to bark and Barnett called, "Quiet, boy," to it, and then came to meet the sheriff halfway. The dog quit barking.

Remembering what Justine had said about Buck being a little queer, I noticed him carefully, as well as I could at that distance. There wasn't anything strange about him that I could see. He was tall and gaunt, like his brother Randy, but dressed much more roughly. And the resemblance between them was strong enough that I could see why — when it occurred to Randy that the dead man I'd found might be Buck — he'd asked, "Did he look like me?" Except that Buck was a few years older, as was evidenced by a slight graying of his hair, and that he wore a straggly mustache that was almost a walrus, they did look remarkably alike.

Kingman talked to Barnett for only a minute or two and then came back to the car.

When he got in, he said, "Asked if Wolf — that's his dog — had got loose last night, or if he'd heard any other dog around. He said no to Wolf getting loose, but he said that about half past eight, the dog got a spell of wild barking and he went out to look around to see if some animal was getting at the chickens or something. He didn't see or hear anything and quieted Wolf down and went back in."

"That would have been about the time."

He looked at me earnestly. He said, "Dogs are funny. Now take Wolf; he's not much of a watchdog, I hear. Maybe an animal prowling around, a big animal, say, would get him excited like Buck says he was. I doubt if a

man would — unless — uh — he was maybe one of those maniacs you mentioned, a ly — What was it?”

“Lycanthrope,” I told him. “I don't know. Their smelling like an animal is part of the legendary werewolf stuff, like their sprouting hair and fangs. But dogs have funny senses, things we don't understand. It just could be a dog could sense something as — as mad as that.”

He said, “Maybe whatever it was went toward the house and was going to kill Buck, but the dog scared it away and then it came on up the road and found Foley, and it—”

“Don't call it an *it*,” I said. “You're giving me the willies. A lycanthrope is still a he — or a she. Insane, but human.”

“How do you spell it? I'm going to read up on it.”

He got an old envelope and a pencil out of his pockets and wrote down “lycanthrope” as I spelled it for him. By that time we were getting into town and I asked where he wanted me to drop him.

He said, “I think Cordell'll be back at his office by now. And if he ain't, it's only a block from there to my office and I can walk it. I want to get this dirt to him to see if there's blood in it.”

I took a look at my watch and saw it wasn't one o'clock yet so I said I'd go up with him. I was just as interested in that sample of dirt as he was.

Cordell was in his office; he'd just got there.

He opened the envelope and looked at the dirt, and he said, “If there are only traces of blood here, it'll take a while to find out. But if it's what you think it might be, dirt that's been soaked with blood, under a thick puddle of it, I can let you know in five minutes.”

The sheriff said he'd wait and I said I would too, but I asked if I could use his phone and he gave me permission.

He went into a room back of his office and I used the phone to call Amory. I got Randy and he put Amory on the line.

“Sorry I didn't get there this morning, Mr. Amory,” I told him. “Something came up. When can I see you? Going to be home this evening?”

He said, “Sure, Ed. Be home all evening. What time shall I look for you?”

I asked, “Would nine o'clock again be all right? I'm having dinner with Mrs. Bemiss and I'd like time to talk to her for a while first.”

“Sure, but try not to find any more corpses this time, will you?”

“It's a promise. If I see any, I'll ignore them.”

When I put the phone back on the desk, I noticed that Kingman was deep in an encyclopedia volume he'd just taken down from one of Cordell's shelves of books. I glanced over his shoulder and saw the key letters LY on the corner of the page he was studying, so I knew he was checking up on what I'd told him about lycanthropy. It was something I wanted to read myself, but I didn't want to do it over his shoulder. I could do it later at the library, unless he finished it before the coroner came back.

But he didn't. Cordell came back within a minute, a good two minutes under the five he'd predicted.

He said, “It's blood all right. Dirt soaked with blood. Where did you get it?”

Kingman told him and asked, “Can you tell if it's Foley Armstrong's blood?”

Cordell sat down in the swivel chair behind his desk. He said, “I think I could — if I had a sample of Foley's blood to compare it with. But where am I going to get that? It's something he's pretty short of at the moment.”

Kingman looked blank, and I suggested to him, “There's an off chance you might be able to get a sample out at his house, Sheriff. I mean, he might have had nosebleed in a handkerchief that hasn't been laundered yet; he might have cut himself shaving and got a little blood on a towel, or something like that.”

Cordell said, “It's worth trying, Jack. And if you can't get a sample, see if you can find out from Mrs. Armstrong whether Foley's blood has ever been typed, for any reason. He wasn't ever in the army, was he?”

“Nope. Too young for one war, too old for the next.”

“Too bad. Army records would show his blood type. Find out if he ever had a transfusion, or if he's ever been a blood donor. In either of those cases, hospital records would show the type.”

I said, “But you couldn't identify the blood just by type, could you?” Cordell swung around in the swivel chair to face me. “Might prove that they're *not* the same. I haven't yet, but I can type the blood in that dirt. Let's say it's Type B. Then if we learn Foley's blood is Type A, we'd know the body you saw on the Dartown Road wasn't his, after all.”

“And that,” I said, “would be something. We'd still be missing a corpse. On the other hand, if you find out that that blood and Foley's are the same

type, it strengthens the odds that the body I saw was really Foley's, doesn't it?"

"Yes, of course. Especially if they're both one of the less common types." Kingman said, "Say, Doc, you did check one thing, I hope. That sample — it's *human* blood, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's human blood."

"Okay then, I'll see what I can get at Armstrong's. I'll have to talk to Mrs. A. anyway. Now how about the autopsy? You're going to hold one, I take it?"

Cordell said, "Of course, but all I'll be able to put down is 'Cause of death: unknown.' If Hunter's story is true — and I personally don't see any reason to doubt it now — then the cause of death was a torn jugular. But God and all his angels couldn't prove it from a skeleton. Incidentally, Jack, I'll take care of having Foley's dentist make an official identification. After you left, Jeb remembered that Foley had said Dr. Roberts had made that bridge for him, so you won't have to ask Mrs. Armstrong about that."

Kingman nodded and stood up, and I went out with him. Outside, he turned down my offer of a lift to his office, saying it wasn't worth while to get in for one block.

He said, "You'll have to testify at the inquest. We might as well have it tomorrow to get the testimony down while it's fresh. I'll let you know where and when as soon as it's arranged."

I was feeling pretty good when I parked the Caddy conveniently in front of the library and then went back to the hotel to clean up. It looked as though I'd solved the problem of the corpse on the Dartown Road; solved it, that is, as far as I was concerned. My only interest had been to prove that I'd really found one, and it seemed that I had done that. I'd even gone a bit further by learning who it was. Why Armstrong had been killed, and by whom or what, was strictly the sheriff's business and none of mine. That's what I thought.

And I'd even mollified Sheriff Kingman to the point where we could now talk to one another without glaring. I still didn't like him and I knew he didn't like me, but maybe in time we could even discuss the fact that he had a daughter. And my drive to and from Chicago had shown me that it wasn't so far, after all, if one didn't have to go by train. If I got along all right on my Starlock job, I could buy myself a jalopy and commute.

I got the ashes out of my trouser cuffs and off my clothes and my shoes. It was still a quarter to three, but I went over to the library anyway. Molly Kingman wasn't there yet.

I gave back the radio book and the librarian gave me my deposit on it, and then I went over to one of the tables where I could watch the door. Then it occurred to me that I couldn't sit there without reading something and I went over to one of the shelves. I started to pick a book at random and then remembered there was a subject that I'd like to read up on. I'd given Kingman a lecture on lycanthropy, but all I really knew about it was the meaning of the word.

I found the section on psychology. There were only a few books in it on insanity and abnormal psychology and only one of them listed lycanthropy in the index. I took it back to the table with me. The specific mention of lycanthropy turned out to be only a few paragraphs and one brief case history. It took me only a few minutes to read, even though I kept watching the door for Molly to come in.

Then the door opened and a Kingman came in, but it was the wrong one. It was Sheriff Jack Kingman. For just a second I thought that somehow he'd learned of my appointment and had come to intercept it and tell me off. But he caught my eye and nodded to me, and then went to the desk, and I knew it was just a coincidence that he'd come in. I had a hunch what for.

When the librarian got up from her desk and started leading him to the shelf of psychology books, I knew I'd been right. Also that there was hope of getting him out before Molly came; it was still five minutes before three.

I strolled over to the shelf where Miss Willis was starting to take down books and look through them and asked him if it was lycanthropy he was interested in and he said it was.

"I was just looking it up myself," I told him. "The only book with much on it is this one. I've finished with it, if you want to take it along." I was careful not to mention how little about it there was, lest he decide to read it there.

But it was all right. He said, "Fine. Will you charge it against me, Miss Willis?" and went out with it under his arm.

I breathed again and grabbed a book at random from the psychology shelf and sat down with it.

I looked down and saw that the title of it was *Sex Life of the Unmarried Male*, and had to get up again to change it quickly before Molly Kingman

came in and found me reading it. If I'd known her better it would have been a good gag, but I didn't want to take any chances; time was too short.

I frowned at *Psychopathia Sexualis* and *How to Make Friends and Influence People* and settled for *The Art of Thinking*, which seemed an art that might come in handy sometime, if not right then.

But I'd read only a page when Molly came in. I started to get up, but she caught my eye and shook her head slightly; apparently she didn't want Miss Willis to know that this was a rendezvous. So I went back to my book, if not to the art of thinking, while she talked a moment to the librarian, who then went out.

Molly Kingman took her place at the desk and I went up and asked, "Pardon me, do you have any books?"

It wasn't very clever and she didn't acknowledge it; she just looked at me and made me feel foolish for having said it. I just looked at her and I thought, "This is it," but I didn't say it. I may have shown, though, that I was thinking it, for she reddened just slightly and looked down at the desk instead of at me. I said, "I'm sorry," and she looked up again. "For what?"

"For embarrassing you. I was fresh yesterday, and I started out that way again today, just now. I don't want to be, really."

"You aren't, really. I understand how you mean it."

I wondered if she did, because I didn't. All I could think of was that I had just about one more day in Tremont.

Then two people came in with books to return and I had to step back from the desk. And one woman — damn her — cut further into our time by asking a question that sent Molly from the desk to the card index and then to the shelves.

Anyway, I could watch her walk. Over an open book that I picked up from the desk and pretended to glance through — like as not upside down — I could watch the graceful movements of her body as she walked away, as she stood or bent at the card-index file, as she came back.

There was something about her; a freshness, a sweetness, that made her different from any other woman I'd ever known. It wasn't exactly a matter of beauty; I'd seen women more beautiful than she. Not much more, maybe, but a little more perfect. It wasn't personality, either, although she had that.

I don't know what it was.

She came back to the desk and sat down behind it. I said, "Molly —" and she said, "What?"

I thought it over for seconds and said, "Nothing, I guess."

She laughed. I grinned and said, "I'm a little drunk, maybe. Not from drinking. How long do you have to stay here and play librarian?"

"Half an hour. Dorothy's appointment is just to have the finishing touches put on a filling. But—"

"But what?"

"If you were going to suggest we go somewhere after that, I can't, Ed. I shouldn't have mentioned that I was going to be here this afternoon. I can't — go on seeing you."

It was my own fault; I'd been going too fast. I saw that now.

There was only one out, and that was to backwater, fast. I grinned at her. I said, "I haven't asked you to, yet. What makes you think I might?"

"The way you talked, just now."

"I talk that way to all the girls. Especially when I'm in a town for only a day or so and don't have to worry about the consequences. One advantage of my profession."

"Are you really working on a case here?"

I said, "I thought everybody in Tremont knew about it. It's one of those open secrets. Ask the Chamber of Commerce; his name is Seth Parkinson. He'll tell you."

"What would he tell me?"

"That I'm making a purely open, friendly investigation of one Stephen Amory. That is, if I ever get around to starting it. I'm practicing being a werewolf on the side, and thus far it's taken most of my time."

I'd sidetracked her; she was forgetting to insist that she couldn't ever see me again. She asked, "Why a werewolf?"

"Can't be an ordinary wolf," I told her. "The field is overcrowded. You must have them in droves, even in Tremont."

"What's wrong with Tremont?"

"Too far from Chicago. That's the only thing I can think of at the moment that's wrong with it. See that Cadillac outside, right in front?"

She looked through the glass and nodded.

I said, "Someday I'm going to own a car like that. Then Tremont wouldn't be very far. I might even settle for a jalopy."

She was still looking at the Caddy. She said, "Gee, it would be something to ride in a car like that."

"Let's steal it."

She looked back at me. “Were you kidding, Ed? Is it yours?”

“No, but I'm driving it. Belongs to our client; it's on loan for this job. Maybe if your Dorothy gets back in time, we can take a spin in it.” I lowered my voice. “We can duck the sheriff; he's out on the Dartown Road.”

I got a kick out of the puzzled way she looked at me. I lowered my voice still further. I said, “The Starlock agency sees all, knows all.”

Then a kid came to the desk with an armful of picture books and she turned away from me to stamp them.

When she turned back, I said, “The Starlock agency even knows that the sheriff doesn't like private detectives. But since he is west, we can drive east.”

“But, Ed, someone would see me. In a town this size—”

“So small we can be outside it before anyone sees anything but a maroon streak.”

“But, Ed, it's — it's—”

“It's wonderful,” I said. “A perfect day, soft breeze, bright sunshine, little lambs gambling in the meadows—”

“Gamboling.”

“Not these lambs; they're trying to fleece one another. And the trees are full of birds, but we can keep the top of the car up so you won't need to worry about them. Really, Molly, it is a wonderful afternoon for a short ride out into the country. And here comes your friend Dorothy so you'd better say yes quickly.”

“Where?” She looked past me toward the door and through the glass windows. “She isn't—”

“Not yet, but any moment. So I want to get you persuaded first.”

“It's too risky, Ed. Somebody would be sure to see us. I wish—”

“It's a deal,” I said. “As long as you wish, it shall be done. If you're really that afraid, I'll go out now and drive around the corner, off the main street, and wait in the car. I shall put on a false mustache and disguise the Caddy by painting it with green and white stripes, and I'll pull its hood over its head.”

I heard the door open behind me and looked around; it was the librarian coming back. I said quickly, “Around the next corner, south,” and went out without giving her a chance to answer.

No woman, I thought, could let a conversation end without having had even a chance at the last word.

I drove the Caddy around the corner and parked it. I sat watching the rear-vision mirror and in about three minutes I saw her coming.

She got into the car and I slid it into gear and drove south.

She said, "This is crazy, Ed. I haven't any business doing it."

"Don't consider it a business, then. Let's look at it as a pleasure. Anywhere special you'd like to go?"

"No, nowhere. Just a short drive — a really short one. I've got to be home by five. It is a beautiful day, isn't it?"

"It is now. Look, there really are some lambs in that field; I thought I was kidding." I slowed down the car.

I let it keep on going slowly, after we'd passed the lambs. I turned and looked at her; at the creamy whiteness of her skin, the raven blackness of her hair, the two freckles on her nose, one on either side just below the bridge, the softness of her mouth, the curve of her chin.

I thought: watch yourself, Ed.

I looked back at the road while I was still on it, and something inside me made me want to step on the accelerator and send the Caddy gamboling on two wheels around the next turn.

But I didn't; I drove slowly, and we didn't talk. Just then, there seemed nothing to say and no necessity for saying it. It was enough for the moment to be driving through the bright, warm afternoon sunlight with Molly Kingman beside me. It was everything I wanted just then, and I forgot the reason I was in Tremont — and the fact that I hadn't been doing too well on the job — and I forgot my troubles with her father and the blood on the Dartown Road and the fact that the Caddy wasn't mine. I would have forgotten the time, too, had not Molly reminded me.

And if she said she had to be home by five o'clock, I was going to get her there. I stopped the car, backed it into a little crossroad between fields and turned it around. And just before I started back I put my arm around Molly and kissed her. Just once, and then I started back, driving with one arm around her, but driving carefully because I knew I was a little drunk.

We rode that way in silence till we got near the edge of town and then Molly stirred and moved away from me, toward the other side of the seat. When we crossed the edge of town, she said, "Four blocks more, Ed, and then drop me at the corner. I'll walk from there."

“I'll take you all the—”

“No. Please. And this is the last time we ever do anything like this.”

“Next time,” I said, “we'll do it better.”

“There won't be a—”

“There will,” I said firmly. But I knew better than to argue about it then. For one thing I was so far behind on the job the agency had sent me down to do and I had so many appointments ahead, that I couldn't have set a time myself. “You're in the phone book, aren't you, under Jack Kingman?”

“Yes, but—”

“Hush then,” I said. “Don't spoil a perfect afternoon.”

I stopped the car at the corner. Almost as soon as it had stopped, she had the door open and was getting out. She said, “Good-bye, Ed,” over her shoulder, hurrying away.

I said, “Wait, Molly,” and put out my hand to stop her, but I was too late. She was already walking briskly down the side street away from me.

I watched her go, and then the Caddy took me back to the hotel. All by itself, as far as I know; I don't remember driving it.

Chapter 9

MRS. BEMISS WAS STILL WORKING when I got to her office a little before six-thirty. She said, "Hi, Ed. Read this and don't bother me," and handed me two galley proofs.

I skimmed through part of the first galley — it was the story of Foley Armstrong's body having been found in the ashes of O'Hara's barn — when she interrupted me. "Not so fast there. Read it slowly; I want you to know I spent all afternoon on that. And I want you to tell me if I missed up on any details."

I said, "It's a hell of an opening. Starts right in the middle of things."

"That isn't the lead, youngster. I don't go to press till tomorrow night; by that time the inquest will be the lead, if nothing important comes up between the inquest and my press time. Did you want your name kept out of it, or put in?"

I hadn't thought about that, until now. I said, "I don't suppose it matters, as far as Tremont's concerned. Everybody here knows who I am and what I'm here for anyway. And as long as neither my client on the case nor the subject of the investigation cares, that doesn't matter. But this story will be picked up by the Chicago papers, and Starlock isn't going to like one of his ops getting a lot of ink that way."

She said, "That's what I figured, so I played you down. It'd be tough to keep you out completely, because you're going to have to testify at the inquest, and there's only your evidence that the body was first seen on the Dartown Road. But that's a cutback after I tell how the body was found in the ashes of the barn; see if you don't think the way I handled it will keep you out of trouble in Chicago."

I started over and read the story carefully this time. She'd done a beautiful job of keeping me played down, as good as could have been done without being downright dishonest about it. The body had been discovered by Edward Hunter, 914 Main Street, Tremont, who had been walking along the road to keep an appointment with Stephen Amory, Box 28, Dartown Road. Hunter had notified the sheriff immediately upon his arrival at Amory's.

“Beautiful,” I said, when I'd read that far. “The name won't mean a thing to the Chicago papers, unless I'm identified as a Starlock op.”

She said, “Credit that to your beautiful eyes, and your Uncle Am. It would have made a better story if I'd told who you were instead of just giving your name and your temporary address. The Chicago papers'll use it that way and never suspect you don't live in Tremont. How'd you like a drink?”

“Here?”

“Of course not. Stick those galley proofs in your pocket and come along. I want to get out of this place. Tomorrow night I get an all-night dose of it.”

I followed her to the door and waited until she locked it, then led her to the Caddy. She looked at it and tried to whistle, only she couldn't. She said, “And I thought you were an honest man.”

“Cheer up,” I told her. “It isn't mine. I stole it. Which way do we go?”

We got in and she said, “Up and down the main drag about ten times till everybody in town sees us. Keep the horn blowing. After that, stop across the street and we'll have our drink. The place half a block down, with the Schlitz sign.”

Main Street was wide, wide enough to U-turn a Cadillac. I U-turned and parked in front of the tavern, and we went in. It was a nice, neat, family-atmosphere type of tavern. There were booths with white tablecloths on the tables and we sat down at one.

“What would you like, Ed?” she asked me.

I shrugged. “Anything you're having, short of cyanide or strawberry pop.”

The bartender was looking toward us over the bar and Mrs. Bemiss told him to bring us Martinis. She looked back at me and sighed, with her eyes dancing. “Coming up in the world, Ed. When I was a carney, we used to drink corn liquor out of fruit jars. The rim made a mark across the bridge of your nose that made it look like you wore glasses. Now we drink Martinis.”

“And ride in Cadillacs.”

“And wear corsets. I, that is, not you. Is the car Justine's?”

I nodded. “Do you know her?”

“Slightly. She's a nice girl; I like her. She was smart in getting out of Tremont. Anybody's smart in getting out of Tremont, except me. I like it because I've got the edge on them.”

“You mean the paper?”

“Sure, I can tell 'em off. And don't think I don't. Everybody in town's afraid of me.”

“I'm not.”

“You would be if you lived here. Did you finish those galleys?”

I took them out of my pocket and started over, reading more carefully this time. The bartender brought our Martinis, and Mrs. Bemiss asked me, “Do you like pork chops?”

“Sure. We going to have them here?”

“Of course not. My place, at the edge of town. I got pork chops because I could fry them quickly after we got out there. Getting hungry?”

I said, “Good Lord, *that's* what's wrong with me. I was so busy I forgot to eat lunch. Haven't had anything since breakfast.”

“Then we'll not stay here long. Why don't you read those galleys?”

“Because you've been talking to me.”

“You could tell me to shut up.”

“Shut up,” I said.

“Not that I really would. What carney were you and Am with and what was he running?”

I put the galley proofs back in my pocket; I'd have to read them while she was frying the pork chops. I told her about the carney we'd been with and what we'd been doing since, and we had one more Martini apiece.

Then we drove out to her place, a neat little cottage on the north edge of town. She put on an apron and made me take off my suit coat and look comfortable before she'd let me sit down in the living room to wait while she cooked dinner.

I was halfway down the first galley, for the third time, when she came into the doorway. “Ed, what were you doing this afternoon after you left Jack Kingman, that you were too busy to eat?”

I said, “I'll answer that question while we eat, or afterwards. If I do now, you'll ask another and I won't get these galleys read.”

She sniffed and went back into the kitchen, and pretty soon I began to sniff, too, at the smell of frying pork chops. My stomach was beginning to adhere to my backbone, and those frying chops smelled better than Chanel No. 5 or Nuit de Paris.

Then she was in the doorway again. “Ed, I've got an idea.”

I said, "Save it till we eat, or afterwards, or I won't get these galleys read."

"Ed Hunter, you have a one-track mind."

I didn't answer; I kept on reading. And drooling at the aroma of pork chops. She went back to the kitchen. For a few minutes. Then she was back. "Hope you won't mind eating in the kitchen, Ed. If you do, the hell with you. You can go downtown and eat at a restaurant."

I'd finished the galleys by then. I said, "I'll eat in the coal bin. I'll take a plate of pork chops and go up on the roof and hide behind the chimney. I'll take one out in the backyard and sit under a bush to gnaw it."

"You mean you're hungry?"

I laughed hollowly and said, "That was a hollow laugh. That's how hollow I am."

"Come on then; grub's ready."

I made myself walk slowly into the kitchen and hold her chair before I sat down at the kitchen table with the red checkered cloth, on which was a platter of pork chops and a big dish of mashed potatoes, among other things.

I made myself eat one pork chop slowly before I proposed to her. I said, "Mrs. Bemiss, will you marry me?" I reached for a second chop.

"Not unless you'll quit calling me Mrs. Bemiss and call me Caroline."

"If I married you, you wouldn't be Mrs. Bemiss anyway," I pointed out. I took a bite of the second pork chop and it was crisper and better than the first.

"Good thing for you there aren't any witnesses present. But how do you know there aren't? How do you know I haven't a wire recorder hidden in the cupboard?"

"Have you?"

"No, damn it. Ed, what were you doing all afternoon after you left Jack Kingman?"

"Falling in love."

"Don't be silly. You weren't hungry then. You didn't even know I was going to give you pork chops."

"I'm not being silly now. I was maybe being silly then. I *was* falling in love, Caroline. Not with you."

"You really mean it, Ed? Say — was Justine in town this afternoon?"

I shook my head. By doing that instead of answering, I got another bite down.

She said, “Justine — well, she's a few years older than you, but your driving her Cadillac made me wonder.”

“Made you wonder what? he said nastily,” I said.

That made her laugh and I had time to get another bite down.

She said, “You'll do, Ed. You've got your uncle's tongue, and you're better looking than he ever was. But about this afternoon—”

“I'm dead serious.”

“Tell me about it, Ed. Must be a Tremont girl. Who?”

I said, “I'll let *the Advocate* announce the engagement, if and when. Until then, it's a secret. By the way, I've got a want ad for you. What's my commission?”

“Another pork chop.”

“More than enough,” I said. I told her about the ad for a watchdog that Mrs. Jeb O'Hara wanted run, and gave her the exact wording of it.

“All right, I'll run it this week. But about this girl; you won't tell me who she is?”

“Nope, not even for another pork chop if you had one, and you haven't. If you'd asked that price for the first one, when I was starving, you'd probably have learned.”

“If you keep coming back to Tremont, I'll find out.”

“Sure,” I admitted, “but by then I won't mind your knowing. By the way, now that I'm getting full, what was the idea I refused to listen to while I was reading the galleys?”

“Let's phone Am Hunter to see if he's free, and if he is, let's drive to Chicago in that Cadillac and go night-clubbing. On me. I haven't been night-clubbing in Chicago in fifteen years.”

“It's a wonderful idea,” I told her, “except that I've got to work. I've got an appointment at nine. The very interview I came down here for — and this is the end of my second day on the job and I haven't started yet.”

“There's always tomorrow.”

“But tomorrow is the inquest, among other things. By the way, has the time been set yet?”

“Not that I know of, Ed.”

I said, “All the more reason why I have to see Amory tonight; if I called him to call it off, I couldn't even set a definite time for tomorrow.”

“All right, it was an idea while it lasted. Now would you like some blueberry pie?”

“I’ll propose to you all over again.”

We had blueberry pie, and then coffee and cigarettes, and I wasn’t hungry any more.

I said, “And now the dishes.”

“Absolutely not, Ed. It’s eight o’clock and you’ve got less than an hour. If you were staying all evening I’d let you wipe them for me. But if you’ve got to leave that soon, I’m not going to touch them until after you’re gone. I’ll let you make us a drink, though, before we go back to the other room.”

I found suitable ingredients in the cupboard and the refrigerator and mixed us a couple of tall, cool ones. We took them into the living room.

She said, “Now about the galley proofs, Ed.”

“You’re a good reporter, Caroline. The old fracture Doc Cordell found was on Armstrong’s left arm, not the right one. And one other thing wrong. You said Jeb got the stock out of the barn in time; the stock — three cows to be exact — were already out when he got down there. That’s one reason for being pretty sure that the fire was set.”

“And, in that case, Ed, by someone who was humane, I’d say.”

“Yeah, humane enough to have torn Foley Armstrong’s throat out with his teeth.”

Mrs. Bemiss said, “That’s right. Have you stopped to think that there’s only one person — well, technically two — who would have reasons other than humane ones to have let the cows out of Jeb’s barn?” I hadn’t thought about that, but I did now. I said, “You mean Jeb or his wife?”

“Or Jeb and his wife, if they did it together. Suppose, for some reason, they’d killed Foley, or one of them had—”

I said, “I can’t picture it.” I had a ridiculous momentary picture of Mrs. O’Hara, a long pigtail hanging down on either side of her face, running along the ground on all fours and then leaping at a man’s throat at the side of the road. “Name someone that you can picture doing it,” Mrs. Bemiss challenged me. I said, “Sheriff Kingman,” and then realized that I couldn’t visualize that, either. Kingman wasn’t the wolf type at all. I could see him as a werewolf, maybe, tying a pair of horns on his head or growing a pair of them, pawing the earth and charging someone with his head down.

I told that to Caroline and she laughed and then looked sober again. She said, “Let’s be serious, Ed. This *is* a murder. And it’s serious to me, first

because I run the paper here and it would be a big break for me if I could crack the case, and second because I knew Foley Armstrong and liked him. He was a right guy.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “All right, let’s get back to Jeb O’Hara, for elimination, if nothing else. He lost money on his barn burning down. It was insured, but the insurance didn’t cover the loss; you’ve got that in your story, I noticed.”

“That doesn’t completely let him out, Ed. Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that he had killed Foley. He might be willing — he would be willing — to take a loss on his barn rather than face worse consequences.”

“You mean he might have waylaid Foley on the Dartown Road and then carried him back to his own place? He’d use somebody else’s barn; there are other barns a little nearer than that one. He wouldn’t call attention to himself.”

“The want ad, Ed. Remember? Nearly everyone around there except O’Hara *does* have a dog. Except Stephen Amory, and he wouldn’t want to take a chance on Amory’s, because Amory so often works late at night; he’s as like to be up and working on something at one o’clock in the morning as at one in the afternoon. And one of his workshops is in his barn — that is, in what used to be his barn until he made a workshop out of it.

“Ed, I went around to the surveyor’s office this afternoon and looked at the plat of the land out that way. There are five barns within a mile of the spot where you saw the body. There are watchdogs on hand around three of those barns — all except Amory’s and O’Hara’s. If you rule out Amory’s for the reason I just gave you, that leaves only Jeb’s. The killer didn’t have too much choice. Even if Jeb had been the killer, he’d have faced the same trouble as anyone else, and made the same choice for the same reason.”

I said, ‘You should have been a detective, Caroline. Only you can cook better.’

“Don’t be silly. Anybody can fry pork chops. All right, what’s *your* answer?”

“I haven’t any. It isn’t my problem. My only problem is whether it’s a good bet for Justine Haberman to invest in Stephen Amory’s experimental radio set. And I still think she’d have done better to have sent a technician down here to find that out. But it’s her money if she wants to waste it on a Starlock op.”

“I would have thought so, too, before you said that. Listen, you little dope, has it occurred to you that the two things might possibly be connected?”

“I played with the idea, but I couldn't see how. Unless one of the Martians Amory is supposed to have been communicating with came down here and did the murder. How do we know what kind of teeth Martians have?”

“Ed, make us another drink.”

I went out into the kitchen and made us each another drink and brought them back. I was watching the time so I wouldn't be late to my appointment with Amory.

I said, “How about this Buck Barnett? I saw him only once, at a distance, but from the little I've heard about him, I'd say he's the best prospect around for being off the beam — if we're working on the assumption that the killer is off the beam.”

She took a sip of her drink before she answered. She said, “No, Ed, I'm pretty sure not. Buck is a little simple, maybe, but there's no tendency toward insanity there. I've talked to him and I'd bet on it. It's complicated people who go crazy, not uncomplicated ones. I envy Buck.”

“Envy him? For what?”

“Because he's got everything he wants; he's contented. He likes farming, he likes living alone — all the company he needs is his dog, and he's got that; he's crazy about Wolf. He doesn't dislike people, but he just doesn't seek or need their company. He's on friendly terms with everyone, but passively so; he just doesn't *need* friendships. If I know a man who's got everything he wants out of life, it's Buck.”

“Get along okay with his brother? I take it Randy likes him, because when I said I'd found a body on the road Randy worried for a minute whether it could have been Buck, since it was near his place.”

“Yes, Buck likes Randy. He'd be happy without him, though, I think. When Randy was in jail a while, it didn't break Buck up.”

She leaned forward earnestly, “Ed, people like that are lucky. We people who think we're smart think we're smart because we *want* things. Sometimes we get them, sometimes we don't. But if we didn't *want* them we'd be contented.”

“I think I see what you mean.”

“Are you contented, Ed Hunter?”

“Well — no.”

“You didn't have to stall a second with that 'well,' and you know it. You're too smart to be contented with what you've got. It's people like you who go crazy, not people like Buck.”

“And people like you,” I said.

“I *am* crazy. Anybody who buys a small-town newspaper is crazy. That means I was crazy a long time ago.”

“But you like it.”

“Sometimes. But let's stick to this murder, Ed. If it's true that somebody crazy did it, then I honestly think Buck is out. But that leaves two other pretty good prospects, right in the neighborhood. That's why I said just maybe your job for Justine would fit in with your job for the *Tremont Advocate*.” My job for the *Tremont Advocate*? What's my salary?”

“It's payable in pork chops. But don't forget I told you to solve that murder for me. And by tomorrow night, or it won't do a bit of good. Saturday morning we hit the streets.”

I grinned at her. “Do all small-town papers pay off in pork chops?” I wanted to know.

“Only the good ones. The bad ones are pikers; they pay off in pike. Tomorrow the *Advocate* is going to be a bad paper.”

I tried to figure that out, and gave up. I said, “Translate, please?”

“I'd like you to eat with me tomorrow evening, too, since you're running off so early tonight. But Friday being press night, I eat in town, at the place where we had the Martinis, Charley's. Charley is very good on pike; usually he catches his own and they melt in your mouth. Will you have a pike with me tomorrow night?”

I said, “I'll let you know tomorrow afternoon. Will that be all right? I don't know what my plans will be; I might even be on my way back to Chicago.”

“You'd better not be, until you solve that murder case for me. All right, let me know by six, so I can phone Charley whether to have one pike or two ready.”

“And, unless I've solved your murder case, they're on me. That's in the bargain.”

“It is if you quit looking at your wrist watch. It's only twenty after eight and you can drive from here to Amory's in fifteen minutes at the outside. How about making us another drink?”

I went out into the kitchen and made them, making mine weak this time because I wanted to be sure I'd be sober to talk to Amory. That was the one thing that really worried me, the fact that I'd been two days on the job here and hadn't done the primary thing I was supposed to do.

I brought the drinks back and when I gave Mrs. Bemiss hers, I got back on the job. I said, "A few minutes ago, when you said Buck Barnett wasn't a werewolf, you said there were two other pretty good prospects, right in the neighborhood. You meant Randy Barnett and Stephen Amory, I take it. Didn't you?"

"Yes, Ed. Not that I have the slightest reason to suspect either of them of insanity, but they're the sensitive, complicated type of people we were talking about, the kind of people who can and occasionally do go insane."

"Which is your best bet?"

"Amory's the more intelligent, of course. Therefore the more complicated. He's not a genius, maybe, but he's got a touch of it. And genius is akin to insanity. On that ground, he's the best bet. But I don't think he is."

"Why not?"

"Because Randy is complicated, too. How come he and Buck ever got born of the same parents — even five years or so apart — I don't see. Randy's smart, but he hasn't been able to do anything with his smartness except work for Amory. He might be frustrated. That's a pretty word. Are you frustrated, Ed?"

I said, "You're getting drunk, Caroline. Let's stick to matters at hand and leave me out of this. What makes you think Randy Barnett might be frustrated?"

"The fact that he stole that money from Amory. The time Amory had him put in jail for it, and then turned around and fought to get him out of jail and hired him again, just because he got softening of the heart. And that's something against Amory."

I said, "Softening of the heart is better than hardening of the arteries. How's it something against Amory?"

"I don't mean against him personally. I meant that changing his mind that completely isn't a sign of mental stability. And we're looking for someone who's mentally unstable. Unstable enough to go over the line into lycanthropy."

"And you think Amory could?"

“No, I don't. I don't think Randy Barnett could, either, but there must have been some instability there to make him think of stealing that money.”

“Could Amory have found out he was wrong about Randy's having stolen it? Could that have been the cause of the reversal?”

“No, Randy confessed to it. Didn't even give any excuses for himself, after a while. At first he claimed that Amory had stolen an idea of his and patented it, and then he withdrew that and just admitted he'd stolen the money outright and had no excuse for it.”

I put down my glass empty and said, “I've got to go, Caroline. It's almost a quarter of. But I'll relieve your mind on one count. Randy isn't our lycanthrope.”

“Why not?”

“Because after I saw the killer in the orchard and found the body I walked right to Amory's place and I walked plenty fast. I was a little out of breath myself when I got there. And Randy met me at the door and he was as cool as an ice cube. He couldn't have gone through fields, running, to get there ahead of me and not shown signs of it. It wasn't Randy I saw in the orchard.”

“How about Amory? Had he been there?”

“No, Amory was out. He got there ten minutes or so after I did. Not that that would have given him time to take the body to O'Hara's barn, even in a car, but he could have hidden it off the road and done that later.”

“You're sure about Randy?” She looked doubtful.

“Yes,” I told her. “I'm twenty years younger than he is; he couldn't possibly have beaten me back to Amory's place and not shown signs of it. And you're sure that Buck Barnett wouldn't go crazy and kill someone?”

“As sure as I am of anything, Ed. He's happy, contented; he's got everything he wants. People like that — especially ones without high I.Q.'s — just don't go crazy.”

I said, “That leaves Stephen Amory. And I'm due to see him in fourteen minutes. I'll ask him if he ever kills people by biting their throats out.”

Chapter 10

I WASN'T IN ANY HURRY, driving to Amory's; if I was a few minutes late, so I was a few minutes late. I wanted time to think a while, to straighten out in my mind the things Mrs. Bemiss and I had talked over, about the murder.

I had to tell myself that the death of Foley Armstrong was one thing, the matter of Amory's radio experiments was another. Probably they had no connection and I should get werewolves and barn fires and torn throats out of my mind so I could concentrate on the job at hand.

I turned the radio knob on the dashboard; a little music, I thought, might clear my mind. I was lucky; the station that came on, without my having to change the setting, was a Chicago station playing records, and the record they were playing just then was the old Tommy Dorsey version of *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*. I missed the announcement but I recognized the platter all right. It was a favorite of mine. Tommy's trombone cutting through the rhythm like a knife cutting through butter, mellow as moonlight and smooth as molasses, sweet as honey. Then a trumpet riding in high for a brazen lick that sneered at the tune and the whole silly idea — and then there was the trombone back, skipping over the reed choir like a flat stone skips over water, pouring golden syrup from a golden horn, and the smoke got in your eyes all over again. You've got to be a genius to play a trombone like that. And really to appreciate it, you've got to have tried to play trombone and to have found that you weren't ever going to be better than mediocre at it, as I'd found. But I'd rather play trombone like Tommy than be president.

Then the announcer said, "Hegelman Coffee is richer flavored; yes, Hegelman Coffee is *richer flavored*—" and I got hold of the knob by that time and turned it off.

I turned into the Dartown Road and let the Caddy almost idle along it. I was getting to know that road by now, every turn of it. It was getting as familiar as the palm of my hand, even if I didn't like it as well.

Passing the orchard, I drove slowly. I stared back into the darkness in the trees but I didn't see any white oval of a human — or inhuman — face. I didn't hear any growl, although the engine of that car was so quiet I could

have heard a snake crawling in the ditch. I almost ran off the road at the turn.

It was strange, I remember noticing, how short that last quarter mile — from where I'd found the body to Amory's place — was in the Cadillac, compared to how long it had been when I'd been walking through the moonlight just a few minutes more than twenty-four hours ago. And so much had happened since that it seemed almost impossible that it had been only twenty-four hours ago, instead of twenty-four days. Amory's front room was lighted, but his porch light wasn't on this time. I pulled into the driveway and saw that someone was sitting on the porch steps smoking. It turned out to be Randy Barnett. I said "Hi" to him and asked if Amory was inside.

He said yes, and then chuckled a little. "Afraid you won't get too much sense out of him, though; he's a little tight."

Somehow that surprised me. True, the only time I'd seen Amory he'd offered me some wine and had drunk some himself, but I hadn't thought of him as a drinking man. He hadn't looked the type.

Randy must have guessed what I was thinking. He said, "Steve doesn't, very often. We generally have a nip after dinner, and once in a while he keeps on sipping at it. Once a month, maybe."

I sat down on the step below his and lighted up a cigarette, too.

He said, "Been sitting here wishing I had a drink myself. You don't happen to have a bottle in the car, do you?"

I told him I was sorry I hadn't. I asked, "What's the matter; won't he share it with you?"

"Oh, sure. Wine. Sweet sherry. I can take a glass of that stuff, but if I drank enough to feel it I'd be sicker than a dog." He shuddered a little at the thought of it. He added regretfully, "And that's all there is in the house, to drink. That stuff's all he ever keeps on hand."

I could see his point of view, but it wasn't my business to comment on it.

He said, "Not that I'm a drinker myself, understand. Just once in a while a guy gets the urge. I think I could get drunk tonight, too. Stinking drunk."

He was in the mood for it; his tone of voice told it stronger than his words. I wondered if he and Amory had quarreled, if that was why he was sitting out here on the porch steps alone.

I asked, trying to make it casual, "What's the score on this radio business? Has he really got something?"

"I don't know," he said. "Honestly, I don't know. I'm a technician — a little bit of one, anyway. I'm not a theorist. I can make anything you draw me a diagram of, but I couldn't tell from the diagram whether it was going to work or not. I'd have to make it and try it."

"Hasn't he — or you — made a set with whatever hookup he's cooked up?"

"Oh, sure. A small-scale one."

"Well, does it work or doesn't it?"

"That's a question that's hard to answer. Yes, it works. But there are two units, the broadcaster and the receiver. The question is, though, how it would work on a big scale — with man-sized tubes in the broadcaster and a little distance between them — between the broadcaster and the receiver. Maybe something that works on a small scale at three feet doesn't work worth a damn on a big scale at thirty miles."

"Do you think it would?"

"I don't know. I told you that; I'm not a theorist."

"That's what he needs money for, I take it; to build something big enough to give it a full-scale tryout."

"Not full scale — you wouldn't have to build a broadcasting station. But something bigger than what we've got. It'll take maybe three to five thousand dollars to give it a real tryout. Is that how much he's trying to get from Justine?"

"Yes. Five thousand. Are you prejudiced, or would your opinion be any good as to whether it's a good investment for her?"

"I don't think I'd be too prejudiced. Because I wouldn't answer it. I don't know."

"Let's put it this way; if you had five thousand dollars, would you invest it?"

"That's easy, too. If it was the only five thousand dollars I had, I sure as hell wouldn't. If I had five hundred thousand, I'd think it over. Put it this way; something like this, there's one chance in ten it's got any real commercial possibilities. But if it has, it might pay big. A five-thousand-dollar investment might bring a hundred thousand or more."

"You mean one chance in ten it's got commercial possibilities even if it works?"

“I'd say so, yes. And there's a chance that it might work. I'd say a fairly good chance.”

I said, “Thanks,” and stood up. I crossed the porch and knocked on the door. Behind me, Randy said, “Go on in,” but I knocked again instead, a little louder, and Amory's voice called out, “Come on in.”

I went in. Amory was sitting on the sofa, holding a glass that was now empty. His eyes were wide and owlish and his face had that uncertainty of expression that goes with being drunk. He said, “Hello, Hunter. Ed, I mean. Hello, Ed.” He could talk clearly, but slowly and with exaggerated articulation. “Sit down. Have a drink?” I wouldn't have minded a little sherry, but I knew if I took one, he'd have one with me — and another one might put him over the edge where he wouldn't make sense at all.

I started to close the door but he said, “Leave it open. Hot in here. What'd you say about that drink?”

I said, “Thanks, no,” and because I didn't want to sound stuffy about it, I explained that I'd just had several with Mrs. Bemiss and wasn't up to another one yet.

He nodded agreeably and then called out, “Hey, Randy, haven't you got enough fresh air yet?” and Randy's voice came back, “I'll be in in a minute, Steve.”

I sat down in a comfortable-looking overstuffed chair facing Amory and wondered where to begin. I had a hunch that it was a break for me to find him drunk; people tend to tell the truth much more readily than when they're sober. But I didn't like it, either. Not for my sake, but for his. He was a brilliant man; something about him told me that. Right or wrong on this particular invention of his, he was a little bit of a genius, and you hate to see a smart man drunk, because when you do you know it's because of something inside him that's eating at him. Some kinds of people get drunk just because they like to get drunk, but not people like Amory. He said, “I'm a little sorry, Ed. I mean, I should have stayed sober to talk to you. But maybe you know how it is; once in a while things get too big for you. I got something big after me. You know how big? Thirteen hundred times as big as the earth, Ed. That's pretty big. Thirteen hundred times as big as the earth.”

From the doorway a voice said, “You damn fool, Steve.” I looked and Randy was standing there, looking at Amory.

Amory waved an impatient hand at him. He said, "You're a little man, Randy. You haven't vision and imagination."

"You're trying to talk yourself out of five thousand dollars," Randy told him. "But it's your funeral. I told you not to drink tonight."

They were talking around me now. Amory frowned at Randy. He said, "You cramp my style, Randy. Be quiet."

Randy Barnett looked at him a long moment and then said, "It's your funeral, Steve," and went back out onto the porch. He closed the door after him, as though he didn't want to listen.

Amory looked back at me, and seemed to have trouble focusing his eyes. He asked, "Would you like a drink, Ed?"

"No thanks," I told him. "What is it you're not supposed to tell me?"

"There isn't anything. I want Justine to invest that five thousand dollars, but I want her to know the truth. If she doesn't, then all right; I'll do it myself. I can raise it. Look, you tell Justine I can raise it myself. I got a few bonds put away; I can mortgage this place. I can raise enough, if I sell or mortgage everything I got. See what I mean?"

I nodded; nothing else seemed called for.

He said, "If it flops, I'll be broke, but I'll still have some income. I won't starve. May have to give up this place and having an assistant and live in a little place in town to do my puttering. Do you putter, Ed?" I said, "I putter with a trombone. That's all."

"Nice instrument," he said very solemnly. "Know how it works? I don't mean do you know how to push the slide. I mean, do you know why there are seven positions of the slide? Know the acoustics of it? Know the formula that gives you the optimum diameter of the tubing?"

"I wish I did. I'd like to know. I wish I could tell you to tell me now. But don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm supposed to be working for a client," I told him. "And thus far, I've botched the job. I was given three days to do it, and I'm just starting at the end of the second day."

"But about the trombone. Are you really interested?"

"I really am. But — for another reason — I'm going to be coming back to Tremont, on my own time. I'd honestly like to hear all about it then."

"Fine. Be glad to tell you. Would you like a drink?" I said, "No, thanks. Tell me more about the radio first, anyway."

“Thirteen hundred times bigger than the earth, Ed. That's pretty big. Do you know what I'm talking about?”

I shook my head. “Not Mars, anyway. That's slightly smaller than the earth.”

“Right,” he said. “You're a smart young man. No, I was telling you the truth; there aren't any messages from Mars.” He leaned forward impressively. “Know what I've got, Ed?”

“No.”

“I don't either.” He sat back on the sofa again. “Maybe that's why I'm a little drunk. Because I don't *believe* what I've got, any more than you will.”

“What have you got?”

He stood up, a little too quickly, and almost lost his balance for a moment. Then he recovered his balance and his dignity and said, “Come on; I'll show you. What time is it?”

“About half past nine.”

Good. Then we've got only about fifteen minutes to wait. Come on.” He went through the kitchen and out the back door and I followed him. A flashlight he'd picked up on his way through the kitchen lighted our way through the barnyard — or what would have been the barnyard if he'd been engaged in active farming — and to a wooden structure about the size of a two-car garage. But it didn't have garage-type doors, nor was it exactly a barn, either; it must have been constructed as a workshop.

The door was padlocked and Amory let us in with a key and turned on the lights. Inside, it was like a very messy radio repair shop. Down the center of it was a very heavy built-in workbench. Other benches, tables and shelves at the sides were cluttered, but the main workbench wasn't. There were two contraptions on it, one near either end, looking like — but not quite like — radio sets. They had coils and condensers and tubes, but instead of being mounted neatly behind panels, each part was screwed or tacked down right to the table and the connecting wires between them looked as though a bowl of spaghetti had been poured over the parts.

On two foot-high posts above one of the sets was a businesslike little aerial of four wires strung between insulators. It looked like a miniature broadcasting aerial, and that is what Amory said it was.

Beside the other set was a different type of antenna, about the same size, but in the form of an elongated loop mounted on a rod that could turn and was hinged.

“This the receiver and the receiving aerial?” I asked.

He nodded and flipped a switch that lighted the tubes of the broadcaster and then another that lighted the tubes of the receiver. The directional loop antenna of the receiver was, I noticed, pointing directly at the broadcasting set.

Pretty soon the speaker of the receiving set began to hum. He said, “Carrier wave. I've had a mike on it, but there isn't one now. Anyway, that isn't what I wanted to show you.”

He pulled an old-fashioned turnip of a watch out of his pocket and looked at it. He said, “Ought to start in about ten minutes. First, let me show you something.”

He turned the rod to which the loop antenna was fastened so that the loop no longer pointed directly toward the broadcasting set. The hum in the speaker died down in volume and disappeared completely when the aerial was at right angles to the broadcaster.

“Just wanted to show you it's really directional,” he said. “In a general way, that is; it isn't exact, as a magnetic direction finder would be. But it tells you the general direction the signals are coming from. And the angle.”

He showed me what he meant by the angle by using the hinge in the rod to tilt the loop off the horizontal, and again the signal strength diminished.

He sat down in a chair at one side of the table, and I noticed that he suddenly looked very tired. He'd been talking quite soberly since we'd come out to the workshop, but I could still tell by his eyes, and by the uncertainty of some of his movements, that he was drunk. But it was as though he was fighting very hard to hold back the drunkenness for a while, and succeeding pretty well.

He said, “Okay, Ed. You take over. I want you to try it yourself. First, turn off the broadcasting unit. Leave the receiver switch on.”

I did and asked, “Then what?”

“Use the hinge and tilt that directional antenna to about seventy-five degrees' upward. Can you guess how steep seventy-five degrees is? There's a protractor lying there. That's close enough. Now turn the rod so it points almost due east, that way. Okay, that's close enough, Ed.”

“Now what?”

“Wait and listen.” He got up. “I'm going to get us some wine.” He went out and came back in a few minutes carrying a half-full jug of wine and two glasses.

He said, "Randy's on his high horse tonight. Asked him to come back and he wouldn't. Guess he thinks I'm crazy to let you in on things this way."

"Why?" I asked, while he poured two glasses of wine from the jug. "Because he thinks you'll think I'm crazy and Justine will, too, because you'll tell her, and she won't invest the money."

I took a sip of the wine he handed me. I asked, "Are you crazy?"

"How would I know, Ed? A crazy man usually thinks he's sane, doesn't he? I think I'm sane, but that doesn't prove it. Listen, if somebody else told me he was getting messages from Jupiter, I'd think he was crazy unless he could prove it."

"Jupiter?"

He sat down in the chair again and grinned at me. "Jumped the gun," he said, "I didn't mean to say that. Meant to lead up to it gradually. Must be drunker than I thought."

He chuckled and then the chuckle stopped suddenly and a listening look came into his face. He held up his hand for silence, without speaking.

I listened. At first I wasn't sure I heard the hum from the speaker; it was too faint to be sure. Then it got louder gradually, until I *was* sure. It was the hum of a carrier wave, a little different in pitch from the one that had come from the broadcaster at the other end of the table, and a lot fainter. But there wasn't any doubt at all now that I heard it, or where it came from; I leaned close to the speaker to identify the source of the sound.

Amory said, "All right, Ed. You hear it. Now take a bearing on the *direction* it comes from. And the angle. Play around with that loop antenna."

I did, and every time I turned it very far from the direction and angle in which it pointed, the volume of the signal diminished. It was loudest when it pointed east and west and seventy-five degrees upward. Pointing straight up, at ninety degrees, the signal faded almost completely.

I said, "That seems to be the setting, all right. It comes from that way." And I pointed up and looked up at the low, flat wooden roof. And that gave me a sudden idea. I said, "Excuse me a second. Want to check something." I grabbed the flashlight lying on the table and ran outside. I stepped back from the building and flashed the light toward the roof, and there didn't seem to be anybody or anything on top of it. Nor any trees over it, or near by.

Just beside the door of the workshop, though, I saw a series of rungs that led up to the roof and I stuck the flashlight into my pocket and climbed up. On top of the roof I played the flashlight around — and it was a plain, flat wooden roof, with no gimmicks on it. Not so much as a wire.

And above the roof was air, beyond that was space, and if you looked through the air and the space, there were stars. Nothing in between.

I went down the rungs and into the workshop again. Amory was still sitting there, and the carrier tone was still coming out of the speaker. A little louder, if anything.

He said, “I thought of trying that, Ed. First time I heard it.”

I asked, “Why — Jupiter? What makes you think it comes from there?”

He shook his head. “We’ll talk afterwards. Play with that signal while you got it.”

I looked up at the point of the ceiling to which the directional antenna pointed. It was right over the main workbench, and I got up on top of the bench and found I could reach the ceiling. I examined it carefully. There weren't any wires on the inside, either.

Over the tone of the carrier wave there was a sound like a click, and then three more, equally spaced. Then just the carrier tone again, and I thought it was diminishing a little in volume now.

Amory leaned forward on his chair. He said, “Ed, play with the idea that that signal is being fed into the set in some other way than through the loop antenna. Maybe I've got wires running up the table legs or something.”

“How could I prove you haven't, without dismantling the set?”

“Keep playing with that loop. There isn't any way — that I know of — that I could make the signals strongest when that loop points a certain way, unless the signals really come from that way.”

I asked, “How much longer will that signal last?”

“A few more minutes. It'll taper off gradually, as it started gradually. Those four clicks you heard — that was the mid-point of the broadcast.”

I took hold of the loop again and moved it off direction and back on, and then shuttled it back and forth rapidly while the signal rose and fell in volume. I tried it up and down and sideways, and got the same result. I kept it up while the signal gradually faded away.

Amory said, “Well?”

I said, “Just a minute.”

The speaker was silent again now, although the loop pointed to the east and seventy-five degrees upward. I went to the other end of the workbench and turned on the broadcasting unit there.

In about a minute the tubes had warmed up and there was a very faint hum again in the speaker of the receiver.

It was barely audible until I readjusted the loop and pointed it at the sending aerial. Then the carrier-wave hum was in there loud and clear. I flicked off both switches and looked at Amory. He said, "Bring your glass and flashlight. Let's go upstairs." We went outside and he padlocked the workshop. By "upstairs" I thought he'd meant in the house, but he put the wine jug down and handed me his empty glass, then started up the rungs to the top of the workshop. When he was at the top rung, he leaned back down and said, "Pass me the jug and the glasses, Ed." I did and he put them on the roof and then climbed up himself, and I followed.

There was enough moonlight for him to fill the glasses from the jug. He said, "Roof's clean up here, and no splinters. You can sit down or lie down and not hurt your clothes. I come up here a lot. I like to lie and look at the stars. And daytimes I take sunbaths up here in a pair of swimming trunks."

I said, "I wondered what the ladder rungs were for. It's a good idea." He sat down and took a swig of his wine. Somehow, he'd been getting more and more sober — or seemed to be — ever since I'd come. But now he said, "I'm pretty drunk, Ed." He put his glass down and lay flat on his back, his hands behind his head, looking upward at the stars.

It looked comfortable and I did the same thing myself. There was a breeze, just cool enough to be comfortable, and it was fine lying there staring up into the sky. But it wasn't getting us anywhere. I said, "About Jupiter."

"Know anything about astronomy, Ed?"

"Practically nothing. Read a couple of popular books on it a few years ago, but don't remember anything except a general impression. I never studied it."

"Can you pick out Jupiter up there?"

I remembered which way the antenna had pointed, and I pointed that way, too, to a bright white star — only, of course, if it was Jupiter it wasn't a star but a planet — and said, "That one?"

"That one," Amory said. "Anyway you're pointing in the right general direction and it's the brightest thing up that way."

“Do you really think those signals we heard came from Jupiter? What's the matter with them originating on earth, say fifty miles from here, and bouncing off the Heaviside layer?”

“That's what I thought at first, Ed. Then — well, I went into the theory of that particular type of wave, and I'm pretty well convinced that they wouldn't bounce off the Heaviside layer at all, especially at that angle of incidence — almost perpendicular.

“There was the point that every time I heard that signal it came from the same angle and direction—” I interrupted. “Exactly the same or approximately the same?”

“I'm not sure. Exactly, as far as I've been able to determine with that loop. But a loop like that is a pretty rough way to get direction. I'm going to get a magnetic direction finder and pin it down. Haven't had time yet.

“You see, Ed, I've been working on that broadcaster-receiver down there for six months. But it was only eight days ago that I got that signal for the first time; the time was about ten forty-five in the evening. The direction puzzled me, naturally, but I figured then that it must be something bouncing off the Heaviside. Anyway I tried again the next night and luckily I was ready early, because it came through nine minutes earlier. The next night, about eight and a half earlier, and then eight. Every night a little sooner and I plotted a curve on it. I thought maybe the timing would mean something, and — well, a few days ago I began to get interested in astronomy. Because I began to wonder if something or other was at that point in the sky at each of the times along that curve I'd plotted. And something was. The good old planet Jupiter.” My mind was whirling a little.

I said, “Let me be sure I've got it straight, Mr. Amory. You mean that every time you got that signal the loop antenna was pointing at Jupiter?”

“As near as I can figure it, yes. Approximately, of course. That loop isn't accurate and neither is my celestial mechanics; I'm not an astronomer.”

“The loop always pointed in the same direction, you mean, but it's always been at a time when Jupiter was in that direction that the signals came.”

“Put very succinctly, Ed. And I'm damned if I can write it off as a coincidence. It's happened eight successive nights. I knew what time it was going to happen tonight, five minutes earlier than last night — because that was the time Jupiter passed that point in the sky.”

I was getting dizzy looking up at the stars. I raised myself on an elbow and took a drink of the wine. I looked at Amory lying there, his hands behind his head, his face clearly visible in the moonlight. I studied his face, and wondered.

It wasn't the face of a man who'd try to pull a monumental hoax. It was a round, honest face — and it looked even rounder and more honest now that he'd taken off the steel-rimmed glasses he usually wore. But it wasn't a face that was relaxed or calm; it was the face of a man who'd discovered something so big that even thinking about it scared him a little.

He said, "I'm asking you to keep it confidential, Ed. From everyone but Justine, that is. I figure it's her business to know, but nobody else's. Only Randy and I knew — now you do, so you can tell Justine. But that's as far as I want it to go." I said, "There's a rumor in Tremont about Mars."

He chuckled a little. "My own fault. I asked for books at the library that would give me the positions of the planets. But the rumor will die a natural death if there's nothing more to feed it. Tremont's always full of rumors. I've been suspected of worse than that."

I asked, "Does Randy believe the signals come from Jupiter?"

"No, but he can't give any other explanation of them. Neither can I. Will you pour us another wine, Ed? The more I drink tonight, the soberer I get. I was pretty drunk when you got here."

I didn't want another wine; sherry is too sweet for me to drink much of. I poured him a glass from the jug and lay back down again.

He said, "Thanks, Ed. Are you going to tell Justine I'm crazy?"

I thought that over a while and the more I thought the more mixed up I got — for a while. Then my thoughts began to sort themselves out again and I thought had the answer.

Not that I was right; if I'd been smart enough to have been right then, instead of the next day, there would have been one less murder within the next twenty-four hours.

Not that I wasn't right, as far as my answer went. It just didn't go far enough.

Chapter 11

I THOUGHT I WAS BEING SMART, and I was. Only not smart enough to save Stephen Amory's life.

I said, “No, you're not crazy. From the facts, you've made a logical deduction and I don't see any holes in it. The only thing wrong with it, if anything, is that nobody's ever got radio signals from Jupiter before. But then again, probably nobody has ever had a set with the exact hookup you've got.”

“I'm reasonably sure of that.”

“So,” I said, “that leaves the question of whether you're pulling a hoax. You could be, but I don't see what you'd gain by it. The Jupiter angle is more likely to scare Justine Haberman out of investing than it is to tempt her to do it.”

“So,” he said.

“So what do you know about Jupiter? I don't remember much, but my recollection is that it's not supposed to be a very habitable planet.”

“It would be a pretty uninhabitable one, for earthmen, Ed. It's got a gravity strong enough to squash you flat as a pancake. It's got an atmosphere as thick as tomato soup and not nearly as breathable. If you lived on the surface — if there is a solid surface; we've never seen it — the atmosphere, or whatever it is, is so thick you wouldn't know there was such a thing as light. And the temperature would make the North Pole seem like a jungle. No life — as we know life — would be likely to develop there.”

I said, “I suppose life, of some sort, could develop under those conditions.”

“Possibly. My hunch is — different. Want to hear it, Ed?”

“Of course.”

“Jupiter's got moons, nine of them. Two of them are the biggest moons in the solar system; they're a lot bigger than our own moon; they're bigger than the planet Mercury. Gravitational conditions wouldn't be far off our own; some astronomers think they may have water and air. It's not hard to think there could be life on either of those moons — life not too unlike that on earth. The two moons I mean are the third and fourth ones out from

Jupiter; they're called Ganymede and Callisto. They revolve around Jupiter like our moon does around the earth."

I lay there for a while, just looking up at the sky, thinking.

Then I remembered something — the four click-signals that had come over the radio. I asked him about them.

He said, "It's been that way every time, Ed. What it means, if anything, I don't know. Your guess is as good as mine."

"You or Randy must have mentioned them in town," I said. "Seth Parkinson — the Chamber of Commerce — told me about them before I talked to you. He said there were four clicks to show that the message came from the fourth planet, which is Mars."

Amory laughed. "I told Seth about the clicks, just after I'd heard it once or twice. But I never mentioned Mars. That's his idea; he must have got it after he learned I drew those books on astronomy from the library."

"Did you ever suspect Mars?"

"Not specifically, Ed. I told you that after I convinced myself that those signals weren't bouncing off the Heaviside, I suspected the possibility of them being from some other planet, and looked to see if the same planet had been in the same direction every time I got a signal. I guess I probably looked up Mars first; everyone thinks of Mars when they think of messages from another planet. I guess because it's the nearest planet and the one most like our own."

"What's your guess — if the signals do come from Jupiter or one of its moons — as to the reason for the four clicks?"

"It would be just a wild guess, Ed. If the purposes of the clicks is to give us an indication where the signals come from — well, Callisto, one of the two habitable moons of Jupiter that I mentioned, is the fourth moon. Or possibly the — the senders of the message may think Jupiter is the fourth planet. Mercury, the inner planet, would be an awfully tiny object for them to have discovered from way out there. Just as it took us an awfully long time to discover Pluto, the outer planet. Ed, it's funny, but I'm drunk."

"You don't talk like it." I was exaggerating a little, because I'd noticed that his tongue had been getting a bit thick, but he still talked distinctly as well as sensibly.

He said, "I know I don't talk like it. My mind is okay, but my head is starting to spin. I'd better get to bed, and I'm a little leery about going down

that ladder. Wonder if you'd get Randy for me. If the two of you were at the bottom, you could break my fall if I—”

“Sure,” I said. I went down the ladder and around to the front porch and Randy was still there. I explained to him and he laughed and said, “The damn old fool. All right, come on.”

Between us we got Amory down off the roof safely and he decided he could navigate into the house and get to bed without any more help. He told me not to go back to Chicago without calling him up or seeing him again first, and I promised that I wouldn't.

He went inside and Randy strolled toward the front with me, toward where I'd parked the Caddy.

He looked at the luminous dial of his wrist watch and said, “Only ten forty-five. And I've had a thirst all evening. Think I'll run into town for a quick one. I will if you'll have one with me, anyway. I can't drink alone, as he can.” He jerked a thumb back at the house.

“Sure,” I said. “Get in.”

“I'd better take Steve's car and follow you. I'll have to get back here.”

I told him that I didn't want to make a night of it but that if he meant literally that he just wanted a drink or two, I'd drive him back afterwards. He said that would be fine and got in.

Neither of us felt talkative driving into town. I don't know what Randy was thinking about, but my mind was full of what Amory had just told me — full of the moons of Jupiter and whirling like them.

I let Randy pick the place for us to stop, and it turned out to be a quiet tavern — quiet except for the inevitable juke box, that is — where we had an end of the bar to ourselves.

We ordered, and I took just a short beer because I'd had enough to drink for the evening. Randy downed one shot straight and then mixed a second with soda and worked on it. We talked about nothing much for a while and then nothing much led around to Jupiter.

He said, “That damn old fool. He should have kept his mouth shut, or people will think he's crazy. I wouldn't have told you about that. Now it'll be all over town.”

“Not through me,” I told him. “I'm going to have to report it to Mrs. Haberman, of course, but to no one else. And she isn't going to send word back to Tremont.”

“It'll get out somehow. Things have a way of getting out around here. Around any small town, I guess. Hunter, if you ever want to commit a murder — or swipe a piece of pie — don't do it in a small town. You wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance.”

“You think whoever killed Foley Armstrong will get caught?”

“Yes, I think so. People can put two and two together.”

I looked at him in surprise. “You sound as though you have.”

“I think I have. But it's only a hunch, and if I'm right, the sheriff'll get that same hunch, so I'm not going to stick my neck out. Why should I?”

“Some people would call it civic duty.”

He laughed at that. “Maybe it's civic duty to report any facts you know about a crime. But not any guess you might make — if that guess is based on facts everybody knows.”

I admitted he had something there.

I asked, “Do you think a sane man killed Armstrong? For a sane motive?”

“I'm going to duck that,” *he* said. “Couldn't answer it without telling you what my guess is. Anyway, who knows who's crazy and who isn't? I don't.”

“There are borderline cases, I guess.”

“Sure. I'm probably one, myself. So's Steve. If I knew you well enough, I might find out you were. Sometimes I think most likable people are a little crazy.”

“Maybe you've got something there,” I told him. “Ever see the play *Harvey*?”

“Nope. Heard of it.”

I said, “It's got a swell line in it. Elwood Dowd, who's a little off his rocker and thinks he sees an imaginary rabbit all the time, is a swell guy. The doctor is going to give him an injection that will cure him, and a taxi driver who's waiting for his money wants it first, so he'll get a tip. But the line — the taxi driver says it — is: *'Sure, it'll cure him. But after that he'll be a normal human being, and you know what bastards they are.'*”

Randy put back his head and laughed; it was the first time I'd ever seen him really laugh. It made me almost like him; I hadn't up till now.

Then he finished the rest of his drink and said, “I'll have one more on that. I'll have to read that play if they've got a copy at the library. How about you?”

I told him I'd had enough and would keep on working on my beer. He got himself another highball.

I asked, "Will you give Amory a message for me?" and he nodded. I said, "I promised I'd see him again before I left. I'll have to be around most of the day anyway, I guess, so I might as well stick through tomorrow evening and drive back to Chicago late. And I'd like to hear that signal once more, so I'd like to come out at nine o'clock again. Will you tell him that?"

"Sure."

"And if he can't make it, or the time is inconvenient, ask him to call me at the hotel, or leave word for me if I'm not there, and I'll come out sooner. I can't make a daytime date anyway till I find out what time the inquest is."

"Sure, I'll tell him. But it'll be all right; he'll be home at nine. And sober, probably. I never knew him to get tight two nights running. He's generally sick as a dog the next day after he takes on a skinful like he has tonight."

"He's better off that way," I said. "It's people who wake up ready for another drink who can become alcoholics, I guess. I never do."

"Me, either. Matter of fact, I can't drink much. Three or four drinks is my outside limit. I'm a little drunk right now. Must be or I wouldn't have said that about my having a guess what happened to Armstrong."

"If I buy you another drink then, I might get it out of you."

He shook his head firmly. "Nope. If I had anything to go on besides a guess, I might tell you."

I bought him the drink anyway, and had another short beer myself. He hadn't been kidding about not being able to hold liquor; he was really beginning to show the effects of three drinks. His tongue was already thicker than Amory's had been, and I thought that with another drink or so in him, he might get interesting.

But he got a yen for music rather than for conversation and started putting coins in the juke box. Which would have been all right at that if he hadn't picked cowboy and hillbilly vocals. I wouldn't have minded a spot of jam or a little clarinet marmalade, say by Goodman, but anybody who listens to cowboy ballads is crazy. Or else I am. Well, it served me right for trying to get him drunk to make him talk. I asked for it.

Anyway, I was glad when he finished his drink and said, "We better go." We went out into the clean, quiet moonlight, away from the lone prairies and jangling spurs and mournfully howling coyotes. We got in the car and neither of us talked at all on the way back to Amory's.

I swung into the driveway and stopped, but he didn't make any move to get out of the car. I glanced over at him and he didn't look seriously drunk, although his face was a little slack. I knew he still had something on his mind that he wanted to get off it, so I got out cigarettes and passed him one. I held a match for us and then we sat quietly again for maybe half a minute. Then he said, "Hunter, maybe I gave you a wrong idea."

"About what?" I asked, to help him along.

"Telling you I thought Steve was crazy on account of this Jupiter business. I don't know. It's got me all mixed up."

"It's got me all mixed up, too," I admitted.

"He's too credulous, he's too incautious, he's not — well, he's sticking his neck out."

"Do you know another answer? Not a better one, just *another* one that would account for the facts."

"No, and that's why I'm mixed up. But I don't think I'm God Almighty as he thinks sometimes. Just because I can't see another answer, I don't believe there isn't one. There's some explanation, I think, a lot closer than — than Jupiter. Steve Amory's sold on it, though; he won't even argue. I think he's dead wrong, but I don't think he's crazy. Not about that, anyway."

"What is he crazy about, then? You said at the tavern that he was a little crazy."

"I told you I was talking too much. I try to talk my way out of one thing and talk myself into something else. We've all got our eccentricities."

"What is Amory's?"

"You'd laugh if I told you. Hell, I might as well. It's harmless. Acting."

"How do you mean, acting?"

"I mean acting. Shakespearean roles, mostly, but anything he happens to want to try."

"You mean alone? By himself? Or is there some amateur acting group he plays with?"

"If there *was* one around here, he'd be in it up to his neck, but there isn't. He tried to start one in Tremont ten years ago, but didn't get anywhere with it and gave up. It's a solitary hobby now."

I said, "I don't know that it's any worse than mine. I play trombone."

"I tried to play a horn once when I was a kid in school, but I wasn't any good at it, I guess. Couldn't keep time right. Anyway, now Steve can listen to himself. He's got a wire recorder. No kidding, he'll do a whole scene of

Hamlet, with different voices, and then listen to himself. Not the feminine roles; I've never heard him try that. But he'll put a whole dialogue between, say, Hamlet and Polonius on wire. And then study it. Say, don't tell him I told you that. I shouldn't have. Told you I drank too much; wanted to backtrack on a few things I said and here I go blabbing some more."

I laughed. I said, "I'll keep that off the record; I won't even tell Justine. Anyway, I think it's probably better than collecting stamps. And that wire recorder tempts me. If I had my trombone with me instead of back in Tremont, damned if I wouldn't ask him to let me use it to see how I sound. Except, of course, I'd have to tell him you told me he had one, and — well, I haven't got my trombone anyway."

"Wouldn't be so goofy if Steve just did it verbally," he said. "The wire recorder and all that. He even makes up for the parts. He's got a wardrobe of costumes and a make-up table full of grease paint, wigs and beards. Not to mention a full-length mirror."

That did give me a bit of a jolt. That did seem to be carrying something pretty far for a hobby. Wasn't that going a little past the boundaries of eccentricity?

I tried to picture myself doing it and I couldn't. I tried to translate it to my own eccentricity and it wouldn't quite translate. I might picture myself giving a solo concert in Carnegie Hall, but I wouldn't buy a dress suit wear it alone in my room to complete the picture. Still, it wasn't quite the same thing; costume is a more important part of an actor's role than of a musician's.

I asked him, "And what's your eccentricity? Do you bite out people's throats?"

He chuckled a little. "Not that bad, but worse than Steve's. Anyway you said it was. I collect stamps." He opened the door on his side of the car and got out. "I'd better collect a little sleep now, though. Thanks for the lift and everything."

"I'll see you again before I go?"

"Guess so; I'll probably be around when you see Steve tomorrow evening. So long."

I watched him go up onto the porch and let himself in the door, wondering which he'd *really* been trying to do — defend Amory or prejudice me against him. But there wasn't any proof either way; I'd just be guessing. So I backed the Caddy out of the drive and drove back to town. I

went to the hotel and there weren't any messages at the desk — not that I'd expected any — and went to bed.

It was after one o'clock and I should have gone to sleep right away; I'd put in a busy day after only a few hours' sleep, in Chicago, the night before. But I kept thinking over that busy day I'd put in and the busy day I'd put in before it, and I realized that I'd been doing practically nothing constructive about the case at hand, and getting nowhere.

I still didn't have the faintest idea what I should report to Justine Haberman. If I had to report to her tonight, I'd have had to toss a mess of half-baked ideas into her lap and let her sort them out herself. I was a disgrace to the Starlock Detective Agency, and to my uncle who'd got me the job with it.

How had I spent my time? Restoring my ego after a sheriff had stepped on it. Falling in love with a girl. Messing around with a murder case that was none of my business and, what was worse, getting nowhere with it. Wondering whether Amory, Randy, and various other people might be crazy and overlooking the obvious candidate.

The obvious candidate was a guy named Ed Hunter. Not because I'd fluffed anything on the murder case; I hadn't been trying on the murder case. But on the matter I was supposed to be investigating, I'd forgotten the main point I was supposed to have found out. I'd talked to Amory and I'd talked to Randy Barnett, and I hadn't even mentioned it. What Justine wanted to know wasn't whether Amory's outfit would get Mars or Jupiter or the Pleiades; she wanted to know if it would make any money on *earth*. And I'd asked everything else and listened to everything else, but I'd plumb forgotten to ask what the set was designed to do, what it had that an ordinary A. M. radio didn't have, or that an F. M. radio didn't have. I'd forgotten to ask who might be interested in buying it if it worked as well on a large scale as Amory said it did on a small scale, and for how much.

I felt especially foolish because that was one of the things Uncle Am had drummed into me especially hard when I'd started to work for Starlock. He'd said, "Kid, what you do mostly is ask questions. The trick is to use your brain on what questions to ask. To know the right questions to ask is to have part of the answer already." I'd told him that sounded pretty smart, and he'd grinned and said someone had beaten him to saying it; he thought it was Plato.

Well, that question would *be my first* order of bus with Amory tomorrow night, I decided. Before we got around to listening for the call letters of the fourth moon of Jupiter.

Then I went to sleep and dreamed, and I didn't dream that there was blood smeared on my face, which shows I wasn't much of a prophet.

Nor much of a detective, either, or I'd have guessed what Randy Barnett had guessed about what had happened to Foley Armstrong. Because Randy's guess had been right.

Chapter 12

I'D LEFT A CALL FOR EIGHT, and at eight the telephone yanked me out of bed and away from a dream about Molly Kingman. I said "Okay, thanks" into the phone, and then sat down and tried to remember the dream and I couldn't. I could make up a new one easily enough, but I'd lost that one.

While I was trying to find it, the phone rang again and this time it was Sheriff Kingman's voice. "Hunter? Inquest's at ten. At Smithson's Mortuary; that's on Main Street, a block east of the Tremont House."

"Okay," I said. "I'll be there."

"Listen, I want to brief you first. Can you come to my office at nine thirty?"

"Will I get out again safely?"

That didn't amuse him. He just gave a kind of grunt. I said, "Okay, I'll be there."

He hung up without bothering to answer.

I dressed and went downstairs. While I was eating breakfast, it occurred to me that since the inquest would be held this morning, I could talk to Amory a while this afternoon, even if I was going to see him again this evening, to hear a final message from — wherever the messages came from.

So when I finished eating I phoned Amory.

He said, "I'm sorry, Ed. Going to drive in to Joliet to get some equipment. Leaving some time this morning, in an hour or two, and won't get back till pretty late in the afternoon. Randy's coming along to help me pick it out."

"Okay, Mr. Amory," I said. "It was just an idea, in case you were free. I'll see you at nine o'clock."

It was nine fifteen then; I had just comfortable time to make my appointment with Kingman. That was only a couple of blocks, so I didn't get the Caddy out of the parking lot back of the hotel.

I stood in front of the hotel a couple of minutes, soaking in the bright morning sunshine, and then walked around the block to the sheriff's office.

He wasn't in a good mood; he growled at me after a clerk had sent me into his private office. He growled at me to sit down and then said, "Everything's gummed up. Have to put the inquest off till this afternoon because Cordell's got to do an operation. Says he's got to do this morning."

"You can't have it without him?"

"A coroner's inquest without the coroner? He runs it; I don't. All I get is all the grief."

He opened a drawer and took out a framed photograph of a man with a wide grin on his face. He looked like a nice guy. The sheriff handed it to me and asked, "Ever seen this guy before?"

"Is it Foley Armstrong?" I asked him. "If it is, I can't be positive. Don't forget the body I saw was by moonlight, with the face pretty contorted. If I'd studied it a while — But I didn't, because I didn't guess it wasn't going to stay there."

"You can't make positive identification?"

I shook my head. "This *could* be the man I found. I can't say he isn't."

He thawed out a little, as though my answer was what he'd been hoping for. He said, "Okay, then. I'm not going to call you at the inquest. Stay away from it."

That was a break I hadn't hoped for. I stood up. "Okay. That's fine by me."

"Wait a minute. Not so fast. I want you to make out two depositions and sign them, with Howie — that's the clerk out there — as a witness. He'll type 'em for you if you don't use a typewriter."

"Why two of them?"

"Because, for reasons you needn't worry about, I'm keeping these two things separate. You say you saw a body on the Dartown Road Wednesday night. Okay, I'll let you say it on paper and sign it. But as long as you don't swear that body was Foley Armstrong, I'm going to keep that deposition separate. No reason to gum up the inquest by introducing it."

"But there must be some reason why you don't want to."

"There must be. *I'll* worry about that. Now the second deposition; you just tell how you happened to find the skeleton in the ashes of Jeb O'Hara's barn. That I'll put into evidence at the inquest."

I asked him how I could explain in the second deposition how I happened to be out at O'Hara's poking around in the ashes unless I said it

was because I suspected that maybe that was what had happened to the body I'd found the night before.

He said, "You gave Jeb a good story on that, and it was true as far as it went; I checked with Mrs. Bemiss. You can say she asked you to get her the story on the fire and as a favor to her you asked questions and poked around. She did ask you to get the story for her, didn't she?"

"Yes," I said. "But — her story, the *Advocate's* story, will connect the two."

He frowned. "I talked to her this morning. Asked her to run them as separate stories. She said she was — how'd she put it? — playing you down in both of them anyway."

I thought a moment. "You want an open verdict on Foley Armstrong, instead of a verdict of murder. Is that it? If I could have identified the corpse as Armstrong, by that photograph, then you couldn't have. But I can't, so you think you can get an open verdict. And then, if you don't get the answer, there won't be an unsolved murder on your record as sheriff. Is that it?"

His face was starting to get red — with anger, not because he was blushing. I should have shut up. I said, "The catch with that is that if you don't consider them the same case, you ought to have two inquests. One on Foley Armstrong and one on the corpse on the Dartown Road." "You're crazy, Hunter. There's only your word that—"

"No," I interrupted him. "There's more than my word. There's a corpus delicti. As a sheriff, you know that that doesn't necessarily mean a dead body. It's merely evidence that a crime was committed. And my story plus the blood we found on the Dartown Road — and which Dr. Cordell analyzed as human blood — constitute enough of a corpus delicti to hold an inquest on."

He surprised me by grinning. He said, "If you really think so, I'll hold one. But I'll wait a while till I get more facts. Maybe a week or two. And meanwhile I'll have to hold you as a material witness. I hear you're planning to go back to Chicago tonight. I'm afraid that would put a crimp in your plans."

I surprised myself by grinning back. He had me, pretty neatly, and I didn't mind that kind of fencing with him. Maybe he was human after all. And maybe he had some reason he thought was good for keeping my testimony on what happened Wednesday night out of the inquest on

Armstrong. Or maybe it was just the general caginess all policemen seem to have about giving out information on a crime they haven't solved yet. Maybe it's an occupational disease. I shrugged. 'You win,' I told him. "Where's a typewriter?" In the outer office I made out both depositions, keeping them as brief as I could. Kingman gave them grudging approval and had his clerk witness my signature on each of them.

"You're definitely leaving town tonight?" he wanted to know, and when I told him that I was, after an evening appointment with Amory, he took down my address and phone in Chicago. He said, "Look, this lycanthropy business."

"Yes. What about it?"

"One thing I been wondering, Hunter. How come you happen to know so much about it, offhand? There wasn't much on it at the library, not much in encyclopedias. I been trying to read up on it, because it looks — well, it looks like a good bet. But I can't find much on it. How come you knew all about it?"

"I don't know much about it. I just know what it is. I think I got it in a book on popular superstitions I read once. There was a chapter on werewolves and it told what lycanthropy was and how a few cases of it could have started the belief in werewolves. Just as vampire bats — which do exist — probably started the belief in human vampires — which don't exist."

"Remember the name of the book?"

"Not right now. I'll try to think of it and let you know if I do."

"Yeah. Funny you'd remember the facts and not the name of the book. You know why it's funny?"

I shook my head. I didn't get what he was driving at.

He asked me, "Know what acrophobia is?"

The word was vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place it. I said, "Only the — phobia part. It's an abnormal fear of something."

He nodded. "An abnormal fear of heights. I happen to know what it is because I've got a touch of it. Not much, but a little. A man who's *got* something is pretty likely to have read about it because he's interested. I'll bet not many people know what lycanthropy is. In fact, I know damn well not many of 'em do; I've been asking people. See what I mean?"

"All too well," I said. "But you don't really believe it, or you'd have me in jail right now. Not only that, but you'd have called out the state police or

the national guard and have a regiment of them patrolling the jail.”

He grunted. “More likely you'd have been shot in the process of getting arrested.”

“That's a cheerful thought, too,” I told him.

“Here's another one, Hunter. We never had any lycanthropy in this county till the night of the day you got here.”

I'd been standing up, ready to go, but I sat down again. I said, “Not that I care, Sheriff, but for the sake of the Starlock agency, I don't want you to think something like you're thinking. Is there a good psychiatrist around town?”

“Nope, there isn't. Anyway, I asked Doc Cordell about that; about an examination, I mean. He said no psychiatrist would guarantee a man sane without a long period of examination and observation. Especially if the guy he was checking on was trying to conceal the fact that he was off the beam. And still more if the guy had a type of insanity that hit him in streaks, instead of being a little crazy all the time.”

I stood up again and said, “Well, it was an idea. My intentions were good.”

He walked to the door of the outer office with me. He said, “Maybe I ought to have my head examined for not holding you.” But he stuck out a paw and shook hands with me.

Maybe I should have counted my fingers after that, but I didn't. Anyway, it was an improvement over my previous departure from his office.

I went to the parking lot and got the Caddy. There was a chance that I could catch Amory in time to talk to him at least for a little while. He'd told me at nine fifteen that he'd be leaving in an hour or two, and that had been an hour and a quarter ago. But if I caught him before he left, maybe he wouldn't be in such a hurry to go.

I drove out there and knocked, but no one answered. Curiosity made me try the knob of the front door and then I wished I hadn't, because the knob turned freely and the door opened. I pulled it quickly shut and looked around.

There was a brown and white spotted cow in the field across the road but it wasn't watching me.

I swore at Amory for tempting me by going away and not locking his front door, and I stood there and wondered whether I was going to go in or

not, and knowing damned well that I was. It was too good a chance to check the truth of what Randy Barnett had told me last night about that make-up table and the full-length mirror and the costumes. If Randy had pulled that out of the air, then I'd have to discount everything else he'd told me and do a bit of recasting.

I took another look at the spotted cow and went into the house. I left the door open, feeling pretty sure that I'd hear a car coming in time to get back downstairs and into the front room, and I could say that the door had been open and that I'd just stepped inside to call out and see if anyone was home.

I ran quickly up the stairs and found there were three rooms. The doors of two of them were open and both of them were ordinary-looking bedrooms, so I tried the closed door and found it wasn't locked.

Randy hadn't been lying, or even exaggerating. There was a wire recorder in one corner, on top of a cabinet, open-fronted, full of spools of wire. There was a full-length mirror four feet wide on one wall and the wall opposite was almost hidden by a battery of three wardrobe cabinets. There was a make-up table and a chair in front of it, and shelves over it stocked with boxes and jars and bottles.

I opened one of the wardrobe cabinets and saw that it held a good dozen costumes — a Roman tunic Caesar or Brutus would have worn, a robe that would have served Othello, a black opera cape — The shelf at the top of the cabinet held headgear to match the costumes, a crown, a papier-mache helmet, a top hat and other items. I opened each of the other cabinets for a quick look at their contents and found them pretty much like the first. There were maybe thirty costumes in all. Maybe a psychologist, given time to study them, could have told things about Stephen Amory from his choice of roles and costumes, but I wasn't a psychologist and I didn't have time.

Randy's story, then, had been true. I eliminated quickly the possibility, slight though it seemed, that the costumes and the hobby were Randy's instead of Amory's, by holding up several of the costumes in front of myself and looking into the mirror. All of them were made for a man shorter than I. Randy was taller.

I'd have liked to have played some of the spools on the recording machine, but I couldn't risk taking time for that. I went downstairs, and after a look out the front window to be sure nobody was watching except the cow across the road, I went out and pulled the door shut after me.

I walked around the house to the workshop to be sure the padlock was on the door, and it was. If it hadn't been I could have gone inside to be sure Amory wasn't there, and I could have taken a look around if he wasn't.

So I drove back to town. Everything was okay; there wasn't a thing I had to do — or could do — for the next nine hours except fix things with Molly Kingman so I could see her again, so I could buy a jalopy and drive down to see her about once a week. I wouldn't plan any further ahead than that. With just about enough in the bank to pay for a car, I couldn't plan any further than that. But I had to get things that far along before I left Tremont and that meant this afternoon.

A hundred miles is a long way when you've got to make train connections, but even in a car lesser than the Caddy I could do it in less than three hours each way.

I parked the Caddy in front of the hotel and wondered if I should phone Molly now. No, I decided, it was just noon now. With the inquest set for afternoon, Kingman might be home for lunch. It would be better to wait till about two. Kingman hadn't mentioned what time in the afternoon the inquest would be, but he'd surely be away from home by two, and for the rest of the afternoon.

I thought of seeing if I could have lunch with Mrs. Bemiss and then decided against it; I'd probably be eating with her this evening.

I went to the hotel lobby and there was a letter in my box, which surprised me because I hadn't been expecting anything. I recognized Uncle Am's chicken-track handwriting on the envelope when the Chamber of Commerce handed it to me, and wondered what had come up that he'd be writing me about.

The letter was scrawled on a piece of the foolscap that was kept in the back room at the agency for the operatives' use in writing reports. It was brief:

“Ed

—Should have thought of this while we were talking at breakfast this morning. If, by Friday night when your three days are up, you aren't satisfied with what you've got, let me know and I'll come down. We can put in a little of our own time on Saturday and two heads are better than one, except on a boil. This being your first solo job for Starlock, I want you to make good on it. I'll stay home Friday evening so you can get me by phone.”

Good old Uncle Am, willing to take a busman's holiday to give me a hand.

I wondered if there was anything he could do that I hadn't, and I didn't see what there was. Tonight I could ask Amory the questions I'd overlooked last night, and that was all there was left to do. And yet — I thought about it while I ate lunch at the restaurant.

There was something unsatisfactory about the report I'd have to make, but it took a while to figure out what it was. Then I saw it clearly. It was going to be an indeterminate report. After all the questions I'd asked and all the things I'd done, I still didn't know, in my own mind, whether Amory was a crackpot or a genius.

True, I'd pretty well decided that he wasn't a crook, but then our client had already known, or believed, that.

Tonight, no later than tonight, I'd have to make up my own mind, or admit to myself that I'd failed completely. And yet what could Uncle Am have done that I hadn't, or what could both of us do tomorrow, if I should stay over and send for him, that I hadn't done?

Solve the murder of Foley Armstrong, on the off-chance that somehow it might tie in with Stephen Amory and his invention? That chance seemed pretty slight to me, and even if it wasn't I didn't see how we could even start on it in a day or two. After lunch I went into the library and read a book until two o'clock, partly to kill time until the sheriff would be sure to be away from home, and partly on the off-chance that Molly would come into the library. But she didn't.

At two o'clock I'd served my apprenticeship of waiting. I hunted up a drugstore that had a phone booth, looked up Kingman's number and called it.

Molly's voice said "Hello," and I said, "This is Ed Hunter, Molly. Can I see you this afternoon?"

"Ed!" It was almost a gasp. "You're crazy. To call here."

"I had to, because I'm leaving town this evening. It'll be my last chance to see you. I can't just go back to Chicago without—" There was a click in my ear and the line went dead.

I stared at the phone blankly, wondering whether we'd been cut off or if she'd hung up. And if she'd hung up, why? I hadn't made *that* bad an impression on her; I was sure of that.

I reached into my pocket for another nickel, and then I hesitated. Was she as afraid of her father as all that? Or — another possibility struck me. How much did Kingman talk, at home, about whatever he was working on as sheriff? He'd as much as told me this morning that he suspected me of being a homicidal maniac. Had he given Molly that idea about me? Was that why she'd sounded so afraid? Did she think that possibly I wanted to get her out into the country to bite her throat out? I hadn't, last time.

Well, the least I could do was to make sure that she'd really hung up on me and that it hadn't been an accidental disconnect.

I put in my other nickel and gave the number again. There wasn't any answer. I let it ring until the operator said, "Your number does not answer, sir."

I got my nickel back, looked up the *Advocate's* telephone number, and called it.

I said, "This is Ed Hunter, Mrs. Bemiss," when she answered the phone. "Can I talk to you?"

"Aren't you?"

"I mean, personally. There's something I've got to find out, and it's important to me, and confidential."

"And it can't wait till suppertime?"

"No."

She sighed audibly. "All right. My office is a madhouse on Friday afternoon and I'll be glad to get away for a few minutes if I've got an excuse. Where are you? The hotel?"

"Half a block from it."

"Go to the place where we had Martinis last night. Order a couple for us and tell Charley to use his good vermouth and the Holland gin. I'll be there shortly after you get there."

I went to the place with the Schlitz sign and took a booth.

Her timing was perfect; she got there just as the Martinis came.

Chapter 13

SHE SLID INTO THE SEAT opposite me, and I sat back down. She said, "I hate Fridays. The one day of the week I've really got to work — and usually far into the night. Found anything new on the Foley Armstrong business?"

"No, but I can tell you who the chief suspect is. Me."

"*Did* you kill him?"

"Not that I remember. How come you're not covering the inquest?"

"I am, Ed." She glanced at her wrist watch. "It starts at three. I'll probably go right from here. Kingman tells me he's not going to put you on the stand. That's a break for you."

I said, "I know it is, but — why isn't he?"

"Just the way his mind works, that's all. He can't put you up on the stand without it coming out about why you really went out to Jeb O'Hara's to poke in the ashes. And then too, Ed, I think there's some other reason — something else you might put into the testimony that he wouldn't want there. Did you — uh — tangle with him at any time?"

"Oh," I said. I hadn't thought of that, but now I saw, or thought I saw, the answer. The sheriff was afraid that if I went on the stand I might take advantage of the opportunity to put into the record, under oath, what he'd done to me Wednesday night after I'd reported finding the body, and what I'd done to him Thursday morning.

"Then that's it," Mrs. Bemiss said. "There's an election coming up. And he knows I'd print — and have a perfect right to print — anything that went on public record. What *did* happen?"

I made her promise not to print it before I told her.

She chuckled when I'd finished. "And you even *wondered* why he wanted to keep you off the record. I'm surprised at you, Ed."

"But I wouldn't have brought them up. No point in mentioning either episode, from my point of view. Still, he couldn't have known that." Since we were talking about Kingman anyway, it occurred to me that maybe I could get her talking about the Kingmans, plural, and find out what I wanted to know without giving anything away.

I said, "Tell me some more about Kingman. He's got me curious." Well, he's no prize, Ed, but he's not as bad a guy as your experience with him would seem to indicate. He's got a streak of the bully in him, but I think it's because down inside he's afraid. He feels he has to get the jump on the other guy and put on a show of being tough. He probably tried to bully you verbally first, that night, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't scare, if I'm guessing right. So he did. If not of you, then of that story you'd told him of the corpse with its throat torn out. That's nothing nice to toss into a sheriff's lap, and then when the corpse wasn't there and he thought you were lying to him about it, there was a reaction. And he hates private detectives anyway. He isn't such a bad guy, otherwise."

I grinned. "Never thought I'd hear an ex-carney saying anything like that about a copper."

"Did you pull me away from my work — not that I wasn't glad to be pulled — to tell me that? Or did you really want to know something I can tell you?"

I thought that if I could keep her talking about Kingman I could find out what I wanted to know, without giving anything away.

I said, "I'll get to it in a minute. You've got me interested in Kingman. What is he like personally? Does he beat his wife, for instance?"

"Jack Kingman? He's crazy about her."

"Go on," I said.

"Go on where? What do you want to know?"

I said, "All right, you win. I've met Molly Kingman. Tell me something about her. In fact I'll let my back hair down and admit that I want to know quite a bit about her."

She looked at me for a few seconds across the table, her face grave. Then she asked, "Are you crazy, Ed?"

"She asked me the same thing. Why? Is she so under her father's thumb she's afraid to call her soul her own? Is he that strict with her?"

She closed her eyes for just a second and then opened them again and looked at me. She said, "Molly Kingman is Jack Kingman's wife."

I said, "Oh."

"Ed, how on earth did you get the idea—?"

I said, "Let me think a minute." But I didn't stop to think, because I didn't want to think right then. I kept on talking. "I met her in the library and she introduced herself as Molly Kingman. The sheriff is so much older than — How old is he?"

"Middle thirties. May look a little older, but he's that type. Molly's maybe twenty-four, although she does look younger. I can see how you might have thought — They've been married five years; guess she was about nineteen and he was about twenty-nine. They have a daughter three years old. Molly's mother lives with them; if Molly was in town when you met her, she must have left Jackie — Jacqueline — with Grandma."

I said slowly, "No wonder Molly Kingman thought I was crazy. I said something about Sheriff Kingman being busy and — of course she thought I knew he was her husband. And no wonder she hung up on me when I phoned today. Good Lord."

"You saw her only once, at the library?"

I said, "Twice. Ran into her at the library both times. She was taking over both times to let a friend of hers who's the librarian run out for an errand." I didn't see any point in telling Mrs. Bemiss that the second time I'd seen her had been, more or less, by appointment. Nor that I'd taken her for a ride in the country. Nor that I'd kissed her. I said, "Quit looking at me like that, and go ahead and laugh. I've got it coming."

But she didn't laugh.

"Ed, did you really fall for her? Seriously?"

"How could I have, seeing her only twice? Just enough to know that, given time, I could have fallen."

I wondered if that was true, if I'd been only potentially in love with Molly Kingman. I wouldn't find that out until after the shock had worn off. Right now it didn't hurt. They say it doesn't always hurt right away when you get hit by a bullet, that the pain starts slowly.

Mrs. Bemiss looked at her watch and then called to the bartender to bring us two more Martinis. She said, "Cheer up, Ed. You can't, as you say, have fallen very hard that quickly. Quit looking as though the world had just caved in." I asked, "How do she and Jack Kingman get along?"

"All right, as far as I know, Ed." She leaned forward across the table. "Look, Ed, you're a very attractive young punk. Any matron might be tempted to flirt with you a little, and it wouldn't necessarily mean she has an unhappy home life. Molly must have been flirting a little. That's all."

“Sure,” I said, and then shut up because our drinks were coming. After the bartender had left, Mrs. Bemiss looked at me sharply. “Well, Ed, now that you know—”

“Don't worry,” I said. “Now that I know, that's that. She won't have to hang up on me again.”

“Then here's mud in your eye. Now how's about the Tremont Murder Case? Mean you're going back to Chicago without solving it for me?” I mean that exactly. Honestly, I wouldn't know where to start.” Then what business have you got calling yourself a detective?”

“I've begun to wonder that myself.”

She frowned at me. “You know better than that, Ed Hunter. Suppose you'd been sent down here to investigate that murder instead of Stephen Amory. How would you go about it?”

I said, “I suppose I'd go to Foley Armstrong's place and talk with his wife. I'd learn everything I could about him, especially whether he had any enemies and whether anybody gained anything by his death. I'd trace his movements in town Wednesday afternoon, and ask questions of everybody along the route he must have taken walking home. I'd check his relations with Jeb O'Hara. In other words, I'd do everything that Jack Kingman is probably doing.”

“But I think you'd do it better, Ed. For a plugged dime, I'd hire the Starlock agency to keep you here for a week to do just those things.”

“It'd take more than a plugged dime. It would take a couple of hundred bucks. And I don't think you'd get your money's worth. Don't do it, if you were serious about it.”

She sighed. “I wish I could be; I wish the *Advocate* could do things like that. Well, I've got to run or I'll miss the inquest. Having dinner with me tonight? You don't need to answer; I'm eating here — Charley puts out a passable meal — about six-thirty. If you're here then I know you're coming.” When she left, I moved over to the bar and ordered another drink. Charley said, “She's a great old lady. Hope when I'm sixty-some, I feel as young as she does.”

“I wish I felt that young now,” I told him.

I felt lousy, but I didn't want to talk about it so I went back and put a couple of nickels in the juke box and listened to some Benny Goodman sextet stuff. But for once it didn't give me a lift.

I *did* want to talk, but not with anybody in Tremont. I wanted to see Uncle Am so badly that I seriously considered starting out for Chicago right then in the Caddy. It was three o'clock then; I could get there by six and we could both be back by nine, in time for my final appointment with Amory.

But that would be ducking the issue, and I knew it. It wouldn't alter the fact that I'd made a mess of my first assignment — and of myself in the bargain. I'd missed the boat completely. Sure I should have tried to find out what happened to Foley Armstrong. What the hell business did I have saying it was none of my business? I'd found the body, hadn't I?

Sure it was the sheriff's job, but I had an interest in it too. Maybe a direct one; how did I know for sure that Foley's death didn't tie in somewhere with the matter I was supposed to be working on. And “supposed to be” was right. What had I actually done except talk to Amory once and make an appointment to talk to him a second time? If Ben Starlock wanted to know how I'd spent three days on two interviews — and the second one not necessary if I'd had sense enough to ask the right questions the first time — how was I going to explain it? Yeah, I could tell him I'd been trying to make the sheriff's wife.

And that got me started thinking about Molly again.

I had to think that out, too, and taking another drink wouldn't help, so I got out of the tavern. I got the Caddy and drove out into the country. I found I was taking the same route I'd taken with Molly the day before. And I stopped and turned the car around at the same place, but instead of kissing Molly and starting back, I just sat there in the car and thought it out.

And it hurt, but it was all right. I'd never been in love with Molly; I'd been in love with an imaginary girl that I thought Molly Kingman was. Molly Kingman just happened to have the face and the body and the voice to fit that imaginary girl.

Anyway, I'd never try to see her again or even to talk to her over the phone, to explain. Explaining would make it worse.

So with that off my mind, or at least properly classified and put away in moth balls, I drove back to town. I killed time until a little after six, up in my room, by writing up my reports for Wednesday and Thursday.

Mrs. Bemiss was already at Charley's when I got there. She said, “Hi, Ed. I ordered drinks for us.”

“And what would you have done if I hadn't got here?”

“Drunk both of them, of course. What else? You still planning to leave tonight, Ed?” I nodded. I said, “I’m not proud about what I’ve done here, Caroline, but it’s too late to do anything about it now. If I thought I could do any good, staying over the week end on my own time, I would.”

She sighed. “I guess you’re right, Ed. Wouldn’t do me any good, anyway, unless you could do something about it tonight. Well, Jack Kingman may solve it. He’s not too fast and not too bright, but he might get there. Eventually. You’ve got one big edge on him, though.”

“What’s that?”

She leaned across the table and lowered her voice. “You know you didn’t do it yourself, Ed. Kingman, I think, kind of thinks maybe you did. Only he figures that if you did he can’t prove it because he hasn’t found any evidence against you. And he’s probably just as glad you’re getting out of town, so if you kill anybody else, it won’t be in Tremont.”

She grinned at me. “And besides, he’d be even gladder to have you out of town if he knew you’d been making a play for his wife.”

You are an evil-minded old woman,” I told her. “I was making a play for his daughter, or I thought I was.”

All right, we’ll forget that. And we’ll forget the murder, too. Tell me about Am Hunter and about the carney you two were with.” So I did, and we talked carney while we ate.

At seven thirty she said she had to get back to the paper and work till after midnight getting it to bed. I walked across the street with her and then, because I still had an hour to kill, I strolled around Tremont, taking a final and not too affectionate look at it. I hoped I would never see it again, in spite of Mrs. Bemiss. Tremont, I thought, I’d always remember as the place where I made several kinds of a fool of myself on my first job as a detective.

I wouldn’t even have to drive through town again. My suitcase was in the Caddy; I’d checked out of the hotel before I’d gone to meet Mrs. Bemiss for dinner.

I had one final chance now, in my last interview with Amory, to get things reasonably straightened out so that my report to Justine wouldn’t be too bad. If I put in a constructive three hours now with Amory, I’d at least have three hours to be proud of out of three days.

It was still a little early when I got in the Caddy, so I took my time driving. It was a brilliant moonlit night — a full moon as big as a washtub

hung low over the fields, just above the trees on the horizon. Then the dense darkness of the orchard along the road blotted out the moon, and I slowed down to peer back into the trees, again trying to recapture the elusive picture of just what I'd seen back there Wednesday night. The white oval — had it been a human face? Or could it have been a trick of my imagination? The growl hadn't been, that much I was sure of. And granting that I'd really seen that white oval, it *had* been the right height above the ground to be the face of a man standing there.

But there wasn't anything to be seen there now, and I didn't stop. I kept on, and I glanced at the illuminated clock on the dashboard. It was only twenty minutes before nine; I was too early.

So I kept on going past Amory's place. Not that it would matter if I were a quarter of an hour early for my appointment, but I realized suddenly that I hadn't planned the interview. Last night I'd spent well over an hour with him and had missed asking the most important single question I could have asked. Maybe I'd miss something tonight, and this was going to be my last chance.

Anyway, he didn't seem to be expecting me yet; there was a light on at the back of the house — in the kitchen — but none in the front room. So I didn't turn in at the driveway. I drove on half a mile to the next side road where I could turn the Caddy around; I turned it and then parked along the side of the road and lighted a cigarette.

But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the one question I'd missed asking was the only one that really mattered: What *commercial* possibilities did the thing have? He hadn't designed it to get messages from Jupiter; that, whether fact, fiction or imagination, had been an accidental by-product. But so startling a one that I'd completely forgotten the main point of my inquiry.

But *was* the Jupiter angle a minor point, after all? Commercially, certainly. But—

I'd made up my mind, I thought, and I'd reached forward to turn the ignition key. And then I reached my hand back; it came to me with stunning suddenness what the answer was to the problem of those signals from the sky.

And it was so simple that it put a little chill down my back. It was so simple that it was just dumb luck that I thought of it at all:

A loop antenna, aimed at an angle of seventy-five degrees off the horizontal, points in *two* directions. It points up, but it also points *down*. It points to Jupiter — if the signals come at a time when Jupiter *is* at that angle from us — but it also points to earth. It points to the floor as well as to the ceiling.

I'd looked on the ceiling and the roof for wires that could be acting as a broadcasting antenna, but I hadn't looked under the boards of the floor.

It meant another broadcasting set somewhere, similar to the one on the workbench; that one had been turned off. But the other set could be under the floor, or it could be hidden anywhere else — even in the house — and connected to an antenna under the floor so the signals would seem to come from that direction.

As simple as that, and it would be as simple to prove. I'd have my chance tonight, now. If my hunch was right — and I knew it was — I could call Amory on it tonight, prove my point, and have a report to give Justine that would be worth what she was paying Ben Starlock for my services.

A look at the dashboard clock showed me it was three minutes to nine, time for me to get moving if I wanted to be there by nine. But I decided to hell with it; I'd be a few minutes late. I needed another ten minutes to get my mind adjusted to the new idea that had just lodged there. How — if at all — did this new idea fit in with the death of Foley Armstrong?

Was Stephen Amory more than just eccentric? — was he *crazy*? Amory had been out alone, with his car, at the time Foley Armstrong was killed. He'd been out alone at the time the body had disappeared off the road. He'd arrived at his home Wednesday night well after I'd got there. Not long enough after to have taken the body to Jeb O'Hara's barn, but he wouldn't have had to do that. The body could have been in his car while Sheriff Kingman and I were looking for it. Later in the evening, after Kingman and I were back in town, he could have taken it to O'Hara's barn and fired the barn. It fitted, if Amory was insane.

I got out of the car and walked back of it and along the road; my mind was going in such fast circles that I wanted my body to be in motion, too. I wanted to walk while I thought it out.

Only that turned out to be a mistake, because once away from the car I found I was alone in the moonlight on a country road. I was scared by what I was thinking.

You can sit in a closed car and think objectively about a man mad enough to kill another man by biting his throat, but alone on an empty road, afoot and with your back exposed, you don't think so objectively. Your thoughts won't fall in orderly grooves of reasoning. They gibber at you from behind your back and make you want to turn around and look behind you every second step.

It didn't help, either, when I reached down to pick up a stick of wood lying just outside the shoulder of the road. The stick of wood slithered away quickly into the ditch; it wasn't one.

I gave up; there wasn't time now for me to think things through. I'd have to do that afterwards, or while I was talking to Amory. I went back to the car and drove back to Amory's.

The house looked as it did when I'd passed it twenty minutes or so ago; the only light in the house seemed to be the one in the kitchen.

I went up onto the porch and knocked. A voice — it didn't sound like Amory's — said, "Come on in."

I opened the door that led into the darkened front room and walked to the lighted doorway of the kitchen. That was as far as I got; I stopped dead because there was a body lying on the kitchen floor. It was hard to recognize the face as that of Randy Barnett, but it wasn't hard to tell how he had died. His throat looked worse than Foley Armstrong's had, but maybe that was because I'd seen Foley in moonlight and this was in the bright, pitiless glare of electric light.

I heard a soft sound behind me and tried to duck and turn, too late.

Chapter 14

HOW MIXED UP CAN ONE GET? I knew that I was lying face down on cold, moist earth, and that my hands, even my face, were sticky with mud. I knew that I was in utter pitch darkness, and since I was outdoors that meant someone had either put out the moon or had blinded me. I knew that my head ached terribly and that somewhere, a long way off from where I was lying, there were voices, voices of two people talking, excitedly. I didn't recognize the voices.

But in spite of being that near the threshold of consciousness I was still in the middle of a dream or hallucination in which I was back in Chicago, at Justine Haberman's place. I must already have reported on the case because we weren't talking about it. And everything was going swimmingly except that on the side I was as in an argument with Uncle Am, who wasn't really there except that I was arguing with him anyway. I was arguing with him about whether or not I was being consistent to be doing what I was going to do, with a married woman, when I'd decided I wouldn't touch Molly Kingman with a ten-foot pole because *she* was married. And Uncle Am was laughing at me and saying I didn't know the difference between puppy love and hot pants and it was all right with Justine because I didn't even think I was in love with her or she with me and so whose business was it? And I was trying to think up an answer to that and not getting one. Except that I definitely wasn't worried about Molly Kingman any more and that Justine was very beautiful and very desirable. And maybe the answer was as simple as that.

But through the dream or hallucination, the darkness and the stickiness and the voices kept getting stronger. And my head pounded harder and harder until Justine and Uncle Am and Chicago faded away and I was back in Tremont.

And I was lying on the ground, outdoors. I couldn't remember how I got there or figure out where I was or why it was so dark. Was I blind?

It was that sudden fear that began to snap me out of it. I rolled over and looked up. And my eyes were all right; I could see some little patches of

sky in a few small openings in what must be a canopy of leaves overhead. I was lying under some trees or big bushes.

I sat up and put my hands to my head, gingerly. The back of it was sore to the touch and my whole head ached like hell, but there didn't seem to be any break in the skin or any fracture. Not even a lump or swelling. I must have been hit with something heavy but soft, like a sandbag, that had distributed the force of the blow over a fair-sized area.

Hit and knocked out. But what had happened after that, and where was I now? During the few seconds it had taken me to roll over on my back and then sit up.

I hadn't heard the voices. I heard them again now, and this time I was far enough back toward consciousness to recognize them. One, anyway; it was Sheriff Kingman's. And I thought the other was that of his deputy, Willie Eklund. The voices seemed to come from twenty or thirty yards away; I couldn't understand anything they were saying.

I reached out my hands and one of them touched the bole of a small tree, about three inches in diameter. I used it as a brace and stood up; that brought my head above the level of the high bushes and I could see where I was.

I was in a clump of trees and bushes that I'd noticed before, alongside Amory's house and about twenty yards from it. Now, standing up, I could see the house — brightly lighted upstairs and down. My Caddy was still parked in the driveway and Kingman's car was right behind it.

At first I didn't see either Kingman or Eklund; then the sound of a man retching drew my attention to the end of the porch and Eklund was there, leaning over the rail. That meant he'd found Randy Barnett, all right. But had they caught Amory or was he still at large?

And why, for that matter, did I happen still to be alive? Amory must have sandbagged me while I was looking down at Randy, and he must have dragged me out into the clump of trees and bushes and left me there, but why? Sure he was crazy, but that didn't follow the pattern of his insanity. Why did I still have a throat left?

I couldn't see the front door from where I stood, but I heard Kingman come out of it and cross the porch. He had a flashlight in one hand and a gun in the other. That meant, of course, that he hadn't yet found Amory and was still looking for him.

And that was something I'd gladly help him do, if I found out that my legs still worked. And if Justine's gun and flashlight were still in the Caddy, as I thought they were.

I tried to call Kingman's name, but I should have tried my voice first; it came out more like a frog's croak than one human being calling another's name. But Kingman heard it and swung his flashlight to play on me — and his gun, too.

I pushed through the bushes toward him. I expected the muzzle of his gun to drop as soon as I was out in the open so he could recognize me, but it didn't. Instead, he took a step backwards and raised the gun higher. I saw that the hand that held it was shaking. He yelled “Stop!” and I stopped. And because I didn't want to be shot — and from the look on his face I thought he was going to pull the trigger any second — I raised my hands high.

Kingman said, “Jesus Christ,” and he was so scared that it sounded more like a prayer than like swearing. Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Willie Eklund was over the porch railing and running toward us. He too had a gun and a flash, and both of them bracketed me.

His face looked a little greenish. I thought at first it something left over from his vomiting over the porch railing after he'd seen Randy's throat. But I saw now it was getting greener as he stared at me. He was scared, and getting more so.

I was getting scared, too, mostly because they scared *of me*. From the way they both looked at me, you'd think—

And that was what gave me the idea of looking upward at my raised hands. It wasn't mud they were sticky with. It was wet, sticky blood. It was dark red in the bright white light of the two flashes that bracketed me.

I couldn't see my own face, but I didn't have to, now, to know what it looked like. If the mud on my hands was blood, then the mud on my face — smeared, I realized now, mostly around my mouth — was blood, too.

And I began to see why they were so afraid of me, and I couldn't blame them. I cleared my throat and tried to think of something to say. The best I could do was, “Don't let appearances fool you. I haven't killed anybody.”

It fell flat. I could have got their attention — and maybe all the bullets in their guns — if I'd howled like a wolf. But words weren't going to make them listen.

Eklund was circling around me; Kingman was coming in from the front. A gun jabbed the middle of my back and another prodded my belly button.

If they'd pulled the triggers they'd have shot each other — but it would have been through me and wouldn't have done me any good. I kept very still and tried to think of the right thing to say. My life was like a dime balanced on its edge on a mahogany bar; a little push and it'd fall over, one way or the other. They were both jittery as hell. Well, there was one thing I had to know, and maybe an intelligent question would be better than a statement they wouldn't believe anyway. I asked, “Have you found Amory?”

I might as well have been talking Portuguese.

Kingman said, “Take the pockets on his left side; I'll get the right-hand ones.” Two left hands started frisking me.

Eklund said, “I got it.” Even his voice seemed to have a greenish tint to it. I looked down as his hand came out of my left coat pocket. It held a paper knife with a green onyx handle and a blade that was polished bronze where the metal showed through the blood it was smeared with.

I got just a glimpse of it. Eklund said, “That's Amory's all right; I remember seeing it on his desk in the front room.”

Kingman said, “Put it in the car, Willie. Wrap it up careful. And there aren't any cuffs in the car, but there's some strong cord. Bring it and tie his hands; I don't want to risk driving him back unless he's tied up.”

Willie Eklund went around to the front and Kingman, alone with me, gave me one hundred percent of his attention. He was ready to shoot if I wiggled a finger — -and he could hardly have missed, with the muzzle of his gun pushed into my belly.

I tried to talk to him, but it wasn't any good; he wasn't even listening. I gave up; I'd have to wait until he had me safely back in his office. Then, if he let me wash off the blood so I wouldn't look so frightening to him, he'd start asking questions and I'd have a chance to answer them and be heard.

Eklund came back and got behind me again. Kingman said, “Put your hands together in back of you. Slow and easy.”

I lowered them carefully and felt cord being wrapped around them and knots being tied. I said, “Not quite so tight, Willie. That's cutting off the circulation.”

Willie pulled a new set of turns tighter and tied more knots.

Kingman said, “Take your handkerchief, Willie. And here, take mine. Across his mouth.”

“Huh?” Willie asked. “What for? He's not going to yell for help. If he shoots off his yap what's it matter?”

The sheriff said grimly, “I'm not worried about his voice. I'm worried about his teeth. Even with his hands behind his back — well, you saw a sample, didn't you?”

Cloth was whipped tightly across my mouth and knotted at the back of my neck. It was plenty tight, and I couldn't talk at all with it on; but what worried me was that cord on my wrists. It was pulled in so tightly that it cut off the circulation completely.

Sheriff Kingman took a deep breath and stepped back. He said, “You watch him, Willie, I'm going to phone Doc Cordell to come out here.” He went into the house.

I hoped to hell Cordell would get there quickly. Being a doctor, he might think of taking a look at those cords on my wrists and that might save me from losing my hands. I remembered hearing that ten or twelve minutes is as long as it's safe to leave a tourniquet on, and that after that decomposition — or gangrene or blood poisoning or something — set in and could lead to permanent paralysis or an amputation. And that cord on my wrists was as tight as any tourniquet.

So I stood there and sweated, unable to try to talk Eklund into doing something about it. I stood there for what was probably five minutes but for what seemed like hours. My hands were starting to tingle.

It's funny, maybe, but I wasn't worried about being thought a murderer. I'd stood a good chance of being shot on sight when they first saw me, but now that danger was past and it was only a matter of time before things would be straightened out. I might have a rough night in jail, and being third-degreed — and I didn't look forward to Sheriff Kingman's methods in that respect — but the truth would have to come out. Kingman thought I had lycanthropy, but any psychiatrist — and they'd have to call in one to examine me — would tell him that I wasn't *that crazy*. Once that was proved even Kingman would see I didn't have a possible motive, a sane motive, for killing either Foley Armstrong or Randy Barnett.

And anyway, long before they could put me away for keeps, Amory would give himself away somehow. It had to be Amory, and he had to be as screwy as a bedbug. There wasn't any sane motive that could account for anything he had done — except, possibly, his little plan tonight to throw the blame onto me. And that wouldn't work very long.

Yes, everything was going to be lovely, but the minutes were going by and the cord seemed to be cutting in more deeply all the time.

If they'd only take me to jail! There, surely, they'd untie me. I didn't know it was possible to want to be taken to jail as badly, and in such a hurry, as I wanted then. A window on our side of the house came up and Kingman stuck his head out. He called out, "Cordell'll be here in half an hour. We better not wait. How's *he* doing? Can you get him in the car yourself?" 'Yeah, but I'm not going to drive him in alone."

"Get him in the car. I got to make another call. Say, want me to call your wife and tell her something's come up and you won't be home till pretty damn late?" 'Yeah, do that, Jack. And tell her it ain't a poker game."

Kingman left the window and Eklund's gun prodded me to move, so I went to Kingman's car. He opened the door of the back seat and I got in. Eklund left the door open and stood with one foot on the running board, resting his gun on his knee and keeping the muzzle aimed at me. I could see that his face was still plenty scared.

I tried to talk through the handkerchief to tell him about the cords, but I could only grunt. That scared him worse.

I was sweating plenty. Five minutes, at least, had gone by since I'd been tied. It'd take Kingman at least five minutes more to make two calls. It might take ten or fifteen if he got to talking to someone, or if he ran into a busy line. It would take another fifteen into town, maybe, up to the point where they'd figure it was safe to untie me. That could run to half an hour, and that was at least twice too long. My fingers tingled less now than they had, and that meant they were going numb. I wriggled them behind me to try to keep up a vestige of circulation.

They touched something hard and round, and there was enough feeling left in them to tell that it was a flashlight, an extra one that had been lying in the back seat of the car, and it gave me a desperate hope. If I could get the front screwed off the flashlight and get a good grip on the disk of glass that formed the lens, I might use its rough edge to cut through the cord in time to save my fingers.

Only that would be dangerous in another way; if I got my hands loose and Kingman or Eklund found it out, I might get shot. But if I didn't get loose—

I managed to turn off the front cap of the flashlight by the time Kingman came out. It seemed to me as though it had been fifteen minutes, but maybe it had been only five.

I wanted to yell at him to get going, fast. I had the disk of glass in my hand now, but my fingers were so weak that it was hard to hold. And if I dropped it, it would probably go down between the seat cushion and the back cushion, and even if I didn't drop it, I wasn't sure I could cut the cord with it.

But Kingman wasn't in any hurry. He put his foot on the running board and said, "I called your wife. Told her you might not be home till morning. How do you think we better work this, driving back?"

The deputy said, "I been thinking it over, Jack. Seems to me the safest way is to leave him in the back seat, both of us in the front. You drive and I'll keep my gun on him over the back of the front seat. Or I'll drive and you do it."

Kingman grunted, "I'll drive," and went around the car and got in the other side. Eklund closed the back door and got in front, without taking his eyes or his gun off me for a second.

Without looking at Kingman, he said, "Hey, Jack, the Caddy. If the keys are in it, you better take them along. So nobody runs off with it."

Kingman said, "Yeah," and got out of the car, taking his time about it. I was still wondering whether I should take the chance of cutting that cord, if I still could, or hope that this was the last delay and I'd still get to jail in time.

Kingman came back and said, "They were in the car. I got 'em. Keep a close watch on him, Willie. I hate to have my back to him."

Eklund said grimly, "Mine won't be. Say, Jack, we'll have to tell Buck Barnett about Randy, and he hasn't got a phone. Maybe we better stop and talk to him."

"Sure. Might as well get that over with."

That tore it; I started sawing at the cord with the edge of the glass disk. If they stopped to talk to Buck Barnett, they might be there half an hour. They might think of other places to stop, too, or other things to do before they got around to freeing my wrists.

I could reach the cord at the side of one wrist and I sawed at it as hard as I could. I was sawing my wrist a little, too, but that seemed a minor point. There wasn't an artery there that I could cut, and a little more blood couldn't matter, even if it was my own. I almost lost the glass, then I got a better grip on it and sawed harder, and something gave.

One strand had been cut through, and that was enough. I dropped the glass and moved my wrists gently back and forth until the cord was loose. I could have let it fall off, but instead I caught the dangling cut ends between my fingers and held it on. When they came to untie me and found that I could have been free but hadn't been it would be a slight point in my favor. Anyway, the blood came flowing back into my hands now and it felt as though a thousand needles were being stuck into them. It hurt like hell but I liked it because it meant I was going to have a pair of hands left.

The car stopped in front of Buck Barnett's place. There wasn't any light on, naturally. I don't know how long I'd been out, but even if it was only fifteen or twenty minutes, then it must be ten o'clock by now, and that would be after Buck's bedtime.

Kingman honked the horn a few times and then got out of the car and called up at the house, "Hey, Buck!" A window came up and a voice yelled, "Yeah?" and somewhere in the house a dog started barking.

"Got bad news for you, Buck. Randy got killed tonight! Like Foley did! But we got the bastard that killed them! Sorry as hell to have to tell you about Randy, Buck, but—"

"Wait a minute, Sheriff. Be right down."

"But we gotta—"

"Be there in ten seconds. Wait." He pulled his head in the window and a light went on.

Kingman looked back over his shoulder and asked Eklund, "Everything under control?"

The deputy said, "I haven't taken my eyes off him." And he wasn't lying. Then the front door of Barnett's house opened and he came out onto the porch. He'd pulled on trousers over what was probably a nightshirt, and he'd stuck his feet into boots. He hadn't stopped to comb his hair; it stuck out at a hundred angles. And his scraggly mustache that was almost a walrus looked scragglier than ever.

But what worried me was none of these things; it was the double-barreled shotgun under his arm. His face looked like a death-mask as he came out of that door and toward us. A dog — a big police dog — came out after him and ran alongside him, wagging its tail now and not barking. It looked friendly. He didn't.

Maybe it was only a hunch or a wild idea — but I was just as sure of it as if somebody had written it across the sky in fiery letters. That shotgun

was for me.

When he got near enough to the car so that he could kill me without filling Willie Eklund, in the front seat, with pellets, then that gun was going to go off accidentally in my direction. Maybe he'd claim it was an accident or maybe he wouldn't bother. Probably they wouldn't do anything to him if he didn't pretend it was an accident; hadn't Kingman just told him I'd killed his brother? And Buck was a misanthrope who, I'd been told, loved only two creatures — his dog and his brother.

Kingman might have guessed, too, from the way Barnett was carrying that gun. The stock was under his arm and the muzzle pointed slightly downward, but his finger was inside the trigger guard. So that if he stumbled, the gun muzzle coming up — Kingman must have guessed. He said, “Hey, Buck, take it easy.”

He spoke sharply and as though he meant it, but I noticed that he didn't step in between me and Buck; he took a short step the other way, toward the front end of the car.

I had about ten seconds to live, unless I did something fast.

I let go of the ends of the cord and slid it down off my wrists, and I took hold of the flashlight behind me. Kingman's “Hey, Buck, take it easy” had turned Willie Eklund's head, to see what the sheriff had meant. So, although Willie's gun was still pointed at me, I had time to bring out the flashlight from behind my back and bring it down on the knuckles of Willie's hand. He yelped and dropped the gun.

I got out of the car quickly, on the side away from Kingman and Barnett, and ran to the other side of the road.

Kingman's gun barked once just as I reached the trees on the other side of the ditch, but the bullet didn't hit me. The shotgun didn't go off; Buck hadn't been able to fire because of the car between us.

I ran into the trunk of a tree and nearly knocked myself silly, but I was out of their sight now, back in the shadows of the woods, and I could slow down. I turned, at right angles, toward town, and slid the handkerchief down over my chin so I could breathe better, and kept going.

I heard Barnett's voice, back on the road, call, “Get him, Wolf!” and the dog barked.

Kingman was barking, too, barking excited directions as they crossed the road to come in and get me. I heard him say, “Don't take any chances. Shoot on sight.”

Chapter 15

FLASHLIGHTS STABBED IN among the trees behind me. I had a fair lead on them, but it wasn't going to last long because of those flashlights. My eyes were now used to the dimness and I could see a little, but not well enough to move as fast as they could. And then there was the dog; I couldn't understand why he hadn't got to me, unless it was because he'd never been trained to go after a man and hadn't understood Buck's "Get him, Wolf!" He was barking excitedly now, but back there, with them.

I still had a flashlight in my hand, too, but I didn't dare use it. It worked all right; I'd flicked it once to see. Apparently I hadn't loosened the bulb either by taking off the glass disk in front of it or by rapping Willie Eklund's knuckles with the base. Ahead of me now was a stream of water that had crossed the road through a culvert. It was narrow, only about five feet wide, but there was a fast current in it. There was a break in the trees along the stream and I could see clearly to jump over it and land on a piece of plank that was lying on the far bank.

I turned to look back and saw that they were coming in the right direction, and fast. I could see the winking of their flashlights among the trees.

And it was the flashlights and the board I'd just jumped onto that gave me an idea how to send them off in the wrong direction. I picked up the board, stepped into the stream with it and put it down on the surface of the water where the current was fastest. I held it there with one hand and with the other I flicked the flashlight on and laid it down on top of the board.

It went off with the current and I ducked back among the trees and hid there. I heard Willie Eklund's voice yell excitedly, "There he is!" and they changed direction to head diagonally downstream after it. It was a hell of a relief to hear that pursuit going away from me instead of coming toward me.

And it gave me time to get my breath before I started again, in a direction opposite to the one they'd taken. That meant that I was heading toward Amory's place, and that was all right with me.

The Caddy was still at Amory's. The ignition was locked and I couldn't drive it, but there was still a flashlight and, I hoped, a gun in the car. And my suitcase was in the back seat with some things in it I'd need to make myself look human again. Right now even Uncle Am would probably duck if he saw me.

I got to the edge of the woods and could see the lights on at Amory's, all the lights. I didn't have time to approach cautiously; I ran as quietly as I could, but I ran all the way to the Cadillac. I got the flashlight out of the door pocket and Justine's revolver out of the glove compartment.

The change of clothes could come later. My next — and main — business was with Stephen Amory.

I had the gun ready in my hand as I went up on the porch, walking on tiptoe. I didn't knock.

I opened the door as quietly as I could and stepped inside.

The front room was brightly lighted, now; it had been dark when I'd walked through it an hour or more ago. I looked around it.

And I saw Amory.

He was lying on his back in a corner of the room. At first I thought he might be drunk or asleep and then I saw the red stain on his shirt front.

I went over and touched him and he was quite cold; he'd been dead a long time. In the center of the stain on his shirt front was a long narrow slit in the cloth — just about the size of the bronze paper knife with the green onyx handle which Eklund had taken out of the side pocket of my suit coat.

I'd forgotten about that knife. Rather, I'd had so much else on my mind then and since then, that I'd never thought about it at all.

I thought about it now.

I'd assumed that it had been Amory who'd slugged me from behind while I'd stood in the kitchen doorway looking down at Randy lying on the floor with his throat torn out.

It hadn't been. Amory must have been dead before then, and lying right where he lay now. And one of the little favors that someone had done for me — besides smearing me with blood and dragging me out to the bushes where I'd come to — had been to plant that knife in my pocket. The knife that he'd used to kill Amory with. And what had Eklund said about that knife, to Kingman? — “That's Amory's knife; I remember seeing it on his desk in the front room.”

I went over to the kitchen doorway and Randy's body was lying just as I'd seen it before. Only this time I noticed something I hadn't seen before: there wasn't any pool of blood under him, just as there hadn't been under Foley Armstrong when I'd found him lying in the road. Randy hadn't been killed there in the kitchen.

But that didn't mean anything to me just then. Nothing did.

I was still holding Justine's gun in my hand. I'd carried it there to protect myself against Amory. Now that Amory was dead I might as well put it in my pocket. I did.

And then I remembered that since Amory hadn't killed Randy and himself and slugged me, somebody else must have. And that somebody was still at large, maybe right here in the house. I took out the gun again.

I remembered about Jupiter.

I went through the kitchen, avoiding looking at Randy any more than I had to, and went outside to the workshop where the radio sets were. The door of it was ajar but there wasn't a light on inside. I opened the door the rest of the way and threw the beam of my flashlight in and under the worktable.

Someone had got the same idea I had. Some of the floor boards had been torn up, and there was wiring under them.

I didn't bother going in and trying to trace the wiring. It didn't matter where the other set was. The fact that there had been an antenna under the floor had been a right hunch. Finding the extra set wouldn't tell me whether Amory had operated it without Randy's knowledge or Randy without Amory's — or whether they'd both been in on it.

It was a bright starry night, but I didn't bother to look wonderingly up at Jupiter.

I went back to the kitchen and decided the next order of business was to wash the blood off my face and my hands. I did that, and then I conquered my squeamishness and bent over Randy and very carefully studied that wound in his throat.

It was actually, genuinely torn, and it looked as though it had been done by teeth. Whether human or animal teeth I couldn't tell. Except that, if they'd been human, they hadn't been *very* human to have done something like that.

There didn't seem to be any other marks on Randy except a couple of light nicks on his face that had probably happened while he was shaving;

his face was freshly shaven.

I went back and looked at Amory again and saw something I'd missed the first time. He'd made a fight for it. There were little signs: his clothing was mussed more than it would have been from falling; his hair, what there was of it, was mussed, too; and there were several reddish marks on his face that might have developed into bruises had he not died shortly after receiving them. A bruise takes a while to become dark and if the blood stops circulating before the discoloration develops, it doesn't develop very far.

I heard a car turning into the driveway out front and I ran quickly into the kitchen and out the kitchen door. I got out before Dr. Cordell came in. I knew it was the coroner because I looked into a window as I went around the house and he was already bending over Amory.

He seemed to be alone.

I went back to the Caddy and opened my suitcase. I took out clean, dry clothes and a pair of shoes, but I didn't dare take time to change them there, in sight of the road. Amory's house, with two corpses inside, wasn't a healthful vicinity. Probably the sheriff would be back there shortly.

I didn't tempt myself by seeing whether Cordell had left the keys in his car. Besides, if he heard me drive it off, he'd phone in and they'd be lying for me at the edge of town — and in Dartown, if I went in the opposite direction.

So I crossed the road with the bundle of clothes under my arm, and cut into the fields again. When I was a safe distance back from the road and screened from sight of it by a rise in the ground, I stopped and changed clothes. I left my soiled ones right there; I had more important things to do than to salvage them. I still had to save my neck somehow.

I judged my angle so I'd be cutting across Jeb O'Hara's farm because he wouldn't have that watchdog yet, and I didn't want to tangle with any dogs.

I got to the West Road all right, and walked into town. No car passed me, and nothing happened. But I took a deep breath of relief when I got out of open country and in among streets and houses. I was out of the woods literally, if not figuratively.

I'd been trying so hard to think things out since I'd left Amory's that I was a little punch drunk from the effort. Somehow I knew that now, with the death of Randy by one method and the death of Amory by another, and the fact that my guess about the radio business had been verified, I had all

the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle. But I couldn't fit even two of them together for a start.

There was suddenly a big dog, a German shepherd, on the sidewalk before me. I hadn't noticed it until I was almost abreast of it. Then something, part of an idea, made me stop and look at it.

It didn't like my stopping so suddenly and staring at it. It growled a little, low in its throat. I could see the lithe, smooth strength of it. It didn't show its teeth but I could visualize what they were like. Teeth like those could do to a throat what had been done to Foley Armstrong's and Randy Barnett's.

It growled again, low.

And *that*, I knew for sure now, was the sound I'd heard back in the trees when I'd found Foley's body on the road. A dog growling. A dog, and no human being could have imitated a dog's growl that well.

I said, "Hello, boy," quietly and stood still, and the dog stopped growling. Without moving fast, I stepped closer to it and held out my hand. I didn't reach for his head to pet him; I knew dogs better than that. I held out my hand for him to sniff and he sniffed it. After that it was all right; I patted his head and scratched behind his ears and his tail began to wag.

I stood there with my hand on the dog's neck, without moving, for maybe a full minute. Something began to percolate.

I gave the dog a farewell pat and started walking, fast. Ahead of me I could see the sign of a drugstore that was still open.

I went in and spent a nickel by calling the *Tremont Advocate*.

Caroline Bemiss' voice answered. I said, "This is Ed Hunter."

I didn't realize that could be a big line, but it was this time. Mrs. Bemiss gasped, and then her words fell over themselves. "Ed, where are you?" Are you safe? Are you out of town? Why did you break loose from Kingman?"

"Which question do you want me to answer first?"

"Ed Hunter! Quit quibbling. If you're near Tremont, you're in deadly danger! There are men out hunting for you, ready to shoot on sight. Where *are* you?"

"In Tremont. In a phone booth in a drugstore. First, how much do you know? Do you know Amory's dead?"

"Yes. Kingman called me from Amory's while he was waiting to take you into town. He wanted the fact that he'd captured the killer to make the paper. He told me Amory and Randy were dead and he had you red-handed.

I told him he was crazy to think you had anything to do with it, but he hung up on me. Then just ten minutes ago, from back in town, he phoned me again. He said you'd broken away and that he was organizing a search for you and getting the state police alerted and — that *his* men were going to shoot on sight. Why did you break away, Ed? You'd have been cleared, as soon as all the smoke cleared away. But now—”

I said, “I broke away because I *wasn't* going to be cleared while I was still alive. And it wouldn't have done me any good after I was dead.”

“You mean Kingman was going to *kill* you? After he had you captured?”

“No. I can't explain now. It's too—”

“Was Buck? He said it was at Buck's place you got away. Was Buck going to kill you?”

“No,” I said, “Buck wasn't, either. Nor Willie Eklund. Nor the dog. But just the same I was going to be killed if I didn't break away. Listen, Caroline, have you gone to press yet?”

“Of course not. We don't start rolling till early morning. Hours yet. Do you mean—?”

I said, “I mean. You gave me orders to solve Foley Armstrong's murder, didn't you? I think I'm getting close. I want to keep on working on it.”

“Ed, you're crazy. You can think about that later. Right now we've got to worry about *you*. Where are you?”

I don't know the streets, but the name on the drugstore is Van Kirk. Know it?” Sure. Ed, you stay right there. Stay *in* the booth and pretend you're making more phone calls. I'll borrow a car and be there in five minutes.”

“I can walk to your place.”

“And maybe get shot. *You stay there.*” The receiver banged down on her end of the line.

I held the receiver hook down on my end and pretended to keep talking. She was there in five minutes all right, and I went out with her and got into an ancient gray Chevie.

She said, “This is wonderful, Ed. Just like *The Front Page*. Remember when the reporter hides an escaped murderer from the police so he can get a story from him? I've always wanted to do something like that. And tonight I *am.*”

“I never saw *The Front Page.*”

“You're going to *make* the front page tomorrow, Ed. This is the biggest thing that ever happened in Tremont. I'm sorry, but—”

“Naturally,” I said. “You can't keep it out now.”

We pulled up in back of the *Advocate* office, in the alley, and she said, “Wait here, Ed, till I park the car back where it was and be sure the coast is clear.”

I got out and waited in the dark until she opened the back door of the building from the inside and motioned me in. I followed her along a corridor and into her office.

She pulled down a shade over the glass panel of the door, even though it opened onto a hallway and not the street, and she turned the key in the door.

I said, “Tch, tch. You're going to be compromised, Caroline.”

“No such luck.” She came back and sat down at her desk. “Now we can talk. First, your Uncle Am is on his way here. He'll get in on the one-twenty train.”

“How come?”

She said, “I called him, naturally. When Kingman phoned me from Amory's about half past nine and told me he had you arrested for murder, naturally I called Am. He said he'd take the first train here and I checked later and found there's one out of Chicago at eleven that gets here at one twenty in the morning. It's well after eleven now, so he's on his way.”

“How'd you get his number? I didn't give it to you.”

“No, but you mentioned the address. I got the listing from the Chicago operator. And believe me, Ed, when Kingman called *again* and said you'd broken away and they were hunting you down, I was plenty glad Am was coming. I only hoped you'd still be alive when he got here.”

“You're sure I will be? Kingman knows we're friendly; he knows you think he's crazy for thinking I'm crazy. He might figure you'd hide me out if I came to you.”

She thought that over a minute. Finally she said, “I don't think Kingman's that smart. If he is, all right. He can have you till we get things straightened out. But he'll arrest you peacefully if he arrests you here; I'll guarantee that.”

“And if he doesn't come here?”

“At train time I'll hide you upstairs where Kingman won't find you. I'll go meet Am and bring him here. Then we'll decide what's best to do.” I said, “Aren't you forgetting something, Caroline?”

“What?”

“I told you I thought I was getting close to what happened to Foley Armstrong; and to Amory and Barnett, too, for that matter. And that I wanted to keep on working on it.”

“You're not stirring a step out of this building, Ed Hunter.”

“Mind if I work on it here?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Use your telephone.”

She thought that over. “It's risky, Ed. I know what a small-town telephone switchboard is like, late at night. One operator on, with nothing much to do except listen in if she wants to. I was worried when you called here before, but that was already done and we had to take a chance she wasn't listening in. And she wasn't, or Jack Kingman'd be here by now.”

I said, “Maybe you'll make a call for me, then. You can probably get information easier than I can anyway.”

“Who do you want me to call?”

“I don't know yet. You're going to tell me that. Listen, Caroline, suppose you live in or near Tremont and you want a police dog. In a hell of a hurry. Where'd you get it?”

“From Clement Wilson. He owns a garage here and he's got a German shepherd bitch who had pups three months ago. They'd be just about the right age now.”

I said, “That won't do. You want a full-grown dog, male. And you'd rather not get it right in Tremont, anyway.”

“Then I'd go to the Idlebrook Kennels, on the Springfield Road just past Dartown. About twelve miles from here. They specialize in collies and police dogs. If I wanted a full-grown male in a hurry, I'd buy one of their studs.”

“Twelve miles, huh? And within that radius, or a little more, how many other places are there?”

None. Nothing I know of nearer than Springfield. Unless, of course, you just happened to know someone who had a dog they'd be willing to sell. A private party, I mean.”

I said, “We'll eliminate that. I want you to call up the Idlebrook Kennels.” “At eleven thirty? And start all the dogs barking?” And start all the dogs barking. At twelve miles off, it won't bother us.”

She sighed. “And what do I ask them after they get through swearing at me?”

“Whether anyone bought a police dog, adult, male, tonight. It would have been some time this evening, probably early.” She looked at me for a moment, frowning slightly, then she picked up the phone and made the call. She asked the question and got her answer and then said, “Just a second, please. Hold the line.”

She turned to me. “Yes, a little before eight o'clock. They don't know the man. But he wanted a full-grown male right away, and the older it was, the better.” I said, “Ask if he had a mustache?”

“The dog or the man?”

“Caroline, please.”

She asked it and got the answer. She said, “No, he didn't have a mustache. So it wasn't Buck. Is that what you had in mind?” I said, “That's what I had in mind. Tell the man thanks and hang up.” She told the man thanks and hung up. She looked at me. She said, “Well?” I said, “Do you like to gamble, Caroline Bemiss?”

“On what?”

“On me. On my being right?”

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“Then I'll gamble. Damn you. What do you want me to do now?”

I said, “I want you to call Jack Kingman. If I'm guessing him right, he'll be in his office right now, directing the search for me. If he isn't, maybe you can find him anyway.”

“He'll probably be in his office.”

“I don't want him to know I'm here. You throw him off the track on that by being worried about me and whether he's got me yet. Make it convincing. You can do it, can't you?”

“Don't try to teach your grandmother to suck eggs, Ed. I can talk Kingman into doing whatever I want him to do. Ever hear of the power of the press?” I said, “I love you, Caroline.”

“If I were forty years younger you wouldn't dare say that.”

“I'll bet I would.”

“Come to think of it, I'll bet you would, too. But I've got Jack on the line now and I've convinced him you aren't here — or, let's say, I've kept him from guessing that you are. Then what?”

“Get him to come around here. And to bring Buck Barnett.”

“What reason can I give him for that?”

“I’ll leave that up to you. Are you smart enough to do it?”

She glared at me. “Ed Hunter, you can be just as aggravating as Am Hunter ever could. And get your own way just as easily. Yes, I’m smart enough to do it. You want him to bring Molly, too?”

“Touche,” I said. “No, he doesn’t have to bring Molly. He’ll probably bring Willie Eklund, but that’s all right.”

“You want them to come here. And then what?”

“I’ll crack your case for you. If I’m right.”

“If? And if *not*?”

I grinned at her. “You said you’d gamble on that. I’m calling your hand.”

“Damn you, Ed Hunter. Why I ever—” She grabbed the phone, and then turned before she lifted the receiver.

She said, “Tell me first. Who’s the murderer? Must be Buck, but I don’t see how or why he’d — Is it Buck?”

“No.”

“Not Kingman. He hasn’t got the guts — Or wait a minute. If a man’s crazy, he doesn’t have to have guts.”

“That’s right,” I said. “But nobody in this case is crazy. Quite a few of us — including me but definitely — are a little off the beam in one way or another. But not crazy, Caroline. Not a lycanthrope in sight.”

“Then it *isn’t* Kingman.”

“That’s right.”

“Nor Willie.”

“Nor Willie.”

“Nor Buck? Buck *is* a little crazy.”

“A little. He never killed anyone that I know of.”

She let go of the phone and opened the bottom drawer of her desk and took out a pint bottle of whiskey. She said, “I’ll do it, but I’m going to have a drink first. Can you use one?”

“I can use one.”

She got two glasses and poured two sizable ones, and we downed them. Then she glared at me again. “You won’t tell me?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Caroline.”

If Buck didn’t do any of the murders, or Kingman, or Willie, then *you* or *I* must have. Because you said you’d crack it tonight and surely you’re going

to have the murderer here.”

“Am I?”

She said, “God damn you, Ed Hunter.” She picked up the phone and called Kingman's office.

Chapter 16

AFTER A WHILE I BEGAN to sweat a little, thinking of the chance I was taking.

Not that I was worried about being wrong. The pieces of that jigsaw were so crazily shaped that once you saw a position in which they interlocked, that position had to be right.

What worried me was the chance I was going to take — any minute now — of getting shot before I had a chance to prove that I was right. Kingman and Eklund still thought I was a homicidal maniac. They were going to be scared stiff of me, maybe so scared that they'd draw and shoot even if I had the drop on them.

Mrs. Bemiss was working — or pretending to work — at her desk. The door was unlocked and the shade was up. I was back in the far corner, behind a filing cabinet. I couldn't be seen from the door or from the half of the room in which Mrs. Bemiss' desk stood.

I heard a car stop out in front of the building.

Car doors slammed, and then there were footsteps in the hallway. As the door opened and they came in, I could tell by the footsteps that there were three of them. I didn't stick my head out to look; it would be Kingman, Eklund and Buck.

I heard their footsteps stop and Kingman's voice say, “Well, Caroline, what is it? What's the idea?”

The palm of my hand that held Justine's gun was sweaty. Because, if they were in the right position now, I was going to take my gamble. But I looked first. I stuck my head out.

It wasn't good. They were all three on the far side of Mrs. Bemiss' desk. She, with her back toward me, was between me and them. I couldn't make a move while they were that way, because I couldn't cover them with her in between. That was bad, but she'd realize it; she'd make some excuse to get up and move out of the way.

But she didn't. What happened next wasn't in the libretto at all. She said, “I got something to show you, Jack.” She reached down and opened a

drawer. Her hand came out of it holding a gun and she pointed the gun across the top of the desk and said, "Put your hands up, all three of you."

Kingman put his hands up, slowly, and so did the others. Kingman said, "Are you crazy, Caroline?"

She said, "I just don't want you to be crazy, Jack, and try to shoot Ed Hunter when you see him. Come on, Ed, and take their guns."

I got up from behind the cabinet. I saw Kingman's arms jerk when he saw me, but he kept them up. Eklund's face started to get that greenish look again. Buck stared at me impassively.

I went over to them and took their guns. Kingman's and Eklund's, that is; Buck didn't have one. I went over him carefully to be sure. His shotgun was probably left in the car if he still had it with him.

Mrs. Bemiss said, "Better lock the door again, Ed, and pull down the shade."

I tossed Kingman's and Eklund's guns into the open drawer of the desk and then took care of the door.

Kingman was glaring at Mrs. Bemiss now; he seemed madder at her than at me.

I said, "You can put your hands down now, all of you. And better sit down. This is going to take some explaining."

Kingman said, "You're damn right it is." He stalked to the sofa and sat down with what he hoped was injured dignity. After a second the other two joined him. Three in a row they sat there, and I put Justine's gun back in my pocket but kept my hand on it.

I sat down on the desk and Mrs. Bemiss sat down behind it.

She said quietly, "Go ahead, Ed."

I took a deep breath. I had a hunch I was going to need it. I said, "Listen, Sheriff Kingman, it's partly my fault that you got off on the wrong foot on this business. I pulled a boner and started telling you about lycanthropy. There isn't any madman in this case. Several people who acted screwy, yes. But the murder was done by a reasonably sane man."

I had Kingman's interest. He said, "Which murder? There were three of them."

I said, "There was only one *murder*. And even that may have been in self-defense; I've got a hunch it was. But then the killer tried to frame it on me and have me killed. It's a crazy story, Sheriff, but when I'm through I'll give you proof. Will you listen with an open mind?"

“Go ahead.”

I said, “First, let's get out of the way what happened to Foley Armstrong. He was killed by a mad dog.”

“A mad dog!”

“Yes. There hasn't been any madman in this mess, but there's been a mad dog. A dog can go mad, not necessarily with hydrophobia, although it may have been that for all I know, and suddenly turn vicious, become a killer. That's what happened Wednesday night, sometime after eight o'clock and before nine. The dog was Buck Barnett's Wolf, and he killed Armstrong. Probably broke loose just as Armstrong was passing Buck's place on foot, or a minute or so after. He chased Armstrong up the road or ran up the road after him and killed him. At the place where we found the bloodstains in the mud.

“Buck Barnett must have heard him break loose and Buck followed up the road to bring him back. Got there just after Wolf had killed Armstrong. And although the dog had gone crazy, Buck still had enough control over him to manage him. He got the dog under control and started to move the body when he heard me coming along the road. He took Wolf back into the trees and held his collar till I went by. It was Buck's face I saw back there, but it was Wolf growling. And after I went on—”

“Why would he have moved the body?”

I said, “So the dog wouldn't have to be shot. That dog was one of two creatures in the world that he loved — the other was Randy. And besides that, he may have feared a suit for damages that would have cost him his farm. For one of those reasons, or both, he took the body to O'Hara's barn and set fire to the barn. Then there wasn't any evidence to show that Armstrong had been killed by a dog.”

“There was your story.”

“But you didn't believe it. Maybe he counted on that. I don't know exactly how his mind worked. I'm just telling you what he did. Randy guessed it, incidentally. He told me Thursday night that he knew what had happened to Foley, but he wouldn't tell me what because it was only a guess and he didn't have proof. But he knew his brother well enough to figure out what had happened.” Kingman said, “Wolf was with us tonight. He didn't act mad or vicious.” I said, “I'm coming to that. But something comes first. Amory and his radio. I don't know what it had as a set, but the messages he thought he was getting from Jupiter — it was Jupiter, not Mars — were a

fake. Randy had been faking them. I can show you how, out at Amory's place.

“Randy was all set to make a sap out of Amory. He timed those messages, which seemed to come from a certain angle upward, so each time one came Jupiter was in that direction from earth. It took Amory about a week to get enough readings to be sure what planet it was, and then he went overboard and believed it. He was getting ready to announce it, I imagine, and then — well, he'd have made of himself the biggest fool this side of Jupiter. Randy would have pulled out his wires and kept his mouth shut, and Amory would be the butt of the biggest joke of the year. And he'd never even know that Randy had done it.”

I stopped to take a breath and Mrs. Bemiss said, “Have a drink, Ed. You must be running dry.” She handed me the bottle and I took a quick sip and handed it back to her.

Kingman said, “You're making sense. You're telling me things that could be. But what proves them?”

I said, “The proof is in this room. You'll get it. Back to Amory. Some time early this evening he found Randy's trick wiring. Maybe he found it accidentally or maybe he suddenly got an idea and verified it, and he—”

“Wait a minute,” Kingman said. “Why would Randy have done that?”

“Why but a grudge for Amory's having put him in jail for stealing. Some people are like that. When Amory took him back after he got out of jail, he still had the grudge and waited until he could make a fool out of Amory without — he thought — getting caught. He showed that grudge in another way by trying — very subtly, pretending to favor Amory — to make me believe Amory was a crackpot.

“But anyway, early this evening Amory found what was being done to him. Amory had a temper, I understand, and my guess is that he went after Randy to kill him with the first weapon at hand — that paper knife. Only Randy was stronger than Amory and the killing was the other way. Or maybe it wasn't self-defense. Maybe Amory threatened him with jail again and Randy killed him cold-bloodedly.” I had Kingman's full attention now and I speeded things up a little. I said, “After the killing Randy realized he'd have to clear out and run away. He went over to Buck's probably to get money from Buck to run away with.”

“And Wolf killed him?”

“No,” I said. I slid the gun out of my pocket, ready for trouble. There might be some now. I said, “No. Randy found Buck dead. The dog had got so mad it turned on its own master. Randy found Buck dead.”

That tore it, for Kingman. He stood up, glaring at me. He said, “And I was listening to you.” He took a step toward me and Mrs. Bemiss said sharply, “Sit down, Jack.” Kingman stopped coming.

I looked around Kingman and said, “Willie, lean over and pull off Randy's mustache, will you? It's detachable.”

And that was what tore it, for Randy. He gave Kingman a push as he stood up and sent Kingman into me, almost knocking me off the desk. He gave Willie Eklund a shove in the face that sent him off the sofa and onto the floor.

Then he bolted for the door and was breaking out the glass when Mrs. Bemiss, taking careful aim, shot him in the leg.

After Kingman had phoned for an ambulance and while Willie Eklund was doing what he could for Randy Barnett, I had to tell Kingman the rest of it. And it was more pleasant now, not having to hold a gun on him.

I said, “Randy found Buck dead. I don't know how he found Wolf, but if Wolf was alive, he shot him and buried him. Because when he found Buck dead, he realized he could change places with Buck and be in the clear.

“He took Buck back to Amory's, put some of his own clothes on him, shaved him and darkened up his hair a little, and that was all there was to that. Finding him there at Amory's, in Randy's clothes, without his mustache, no one would guess Buck wasn't Randy. Then, using Amory's make-up facilities, he gave himself a mustache and fixed himself up to look like Buck. He put on some of Buck's clothes — probably not the ones Buck had been killed in because they'd be bloody.

“Oh first, before the make-up business, he took Amory's car to the Idlebrook Kennels and bought himself a stand-in for Wolf. He had to have a police dog, to make it look good. Otherwise, he'd have had to explain what had happened to Wolf. Did you notice anything strange about the dog's actions tonight?”

Kingman said, “Yes. You mean his not taking orders from Buck — I mean, from Randy — when Randy tried to sic him on you, and then to get him to track you down. Yeah, and that was a slick trick you pulled with the flashlight floating on the board.”

“Thanks. Yes, that's what I meant about the dog. That was one of the things that put me on the right track after I found Amory was dead. I didn't even know that when you were chasing me.

“But we're out of order. Okay, so Buck is in Randy's shoes now and Randy's in Buck's. And everything's fine because he can sit tight in Buck's place and not be fried for murder nor on the lam. Except that, some time before nine o'clock, he saw the hole in his plan.”

“And what was that?”

“It needed a fall guy. All those corpses around — that made three of them, although Randy had done only one murder — were going to cause a hell of a lot of investigation.

“His switch with Buck wouldn't be detected, ordinarily. They looked so much alike, in spite of a few years' difference, that the change in clothes and in the mustache — well, you never gave it a second thought, did you?”

“Now you mention it, I noticed some funny things Buck — I mean Randy — did. But I didn't think of 'em at the time.”

That's what I mean. But in a long, close investigation of three murders, he couldn't keep up a masquerade like that. It would hold up only as long as everything seemed out in the open. So he needed a fall guy, to end the investigation right away.

He knew you already suspected me, and he knew I'd be at Amory's at nine o'clock to keep my appointment. So he simply lay for me there, in the dark front room, and sandbagged me.

Then he put the knife in my pocket, smeared me up with blood, and left me outside to come to. And then — Say, Sheriff, how come you and Eklund were there?”

Kingman said, 'Yeah, he did that, too. Called my office about eight and says this is Randy Barnett talking and if I'd be out there at nine thirty he'd tell me what happened to Foley Armstrong. He said not to come before then.”

I shook my head wonderingly. I said, “He sure put in a busy few hours. And he almost got away with it. If you'd shot me in arresting me, as he hoped you would, he'd probably have got away with it. But — thank God — you didn't.”

“And then,” Kingman said, “I gave him another chance when we stopped at Buck's, thinking to tell Buck that Randy was dead. I think he was going to shoot you with that shotgun.”

“That's why I had to make a break. By the way, where's the Caddy?”

“Over at my office. Come on over and I'll turn it over to you. But don't get out of my sight till I call off the search and the state police, or you'll never get anywhere in it. And look, Hunter, I'm sorry as hell. Shake hands?”

I shook hands with him, and I still had all my fingers afterwards.

I was waiting when the one-twenty train pulled in at one twenty-six. Uncle Am got off and looked at me in surprise. He said, “What the hell, kid? I thought you were under arrest.”

I grinned at him. I said, “That was three hours ago. Two hours ago I escaped and got hunted over the countryside with bloodhounds. Now I'm the hero of Tremont. I can even walk down the street without getting shot at.”

He looked at me closely. “Kid, you sound punch drunk. Would a drink help?”

“Caroline's waiting for us to have one with her. She didn't come here with me to meet you because she's got a hell of a big story to write up. She goes to press in an hour or so. But she said if we left without taking her out for a drink she'd come to Chicago and shoot both of us.”

Uncle Am said, “Well, I don't want to get shot. Do you?”

I said I didn't either, so we got Mrs. Bemiss and took her to Charley's for a drink and we had several. She said that if the paper got out late, the hell with it; it'd be worth waiting for, for the first time since she'd been running it.

Uncle Am got the high lights of the story over those drinks, and I filled in the details while we were driving back to Chicago in the Caddy.

He said, 'You did almost as well as I could have done myself, kid. But how's about the main point of the job you were sent down to do? Is the radio any good?’

“I don't know,” I told him, “but it doesn't matter if I don't. Kingman had found Amory's will when he was searching Amory's place, and he says Justine is his only heir. So she's *got* the radio, and she can have it vetted by a technician whenever she gets around to it.”

“My God,” Uncle Am said, “you've even got the answer to that. And how do you like being a private detective now?”

I thought that over. I said, “It's got its moments, but I wouldn't want them to happen too often. I'll settle now for a lot of dull routine work and

sitting on my fanny in Starlock's back room. Right now I want to be bored stiff for a long time.”

He chuckled. Neither of us said anything for a few minutes and by that time we were getting into the outskirts of Chicago.

I said, “I’ll drop you off, Uncle Am. Then I got to take the Caddy back.”

“Tonight? It’s too late, Ed, unless—”

I said, “I phoned Justine while I was waiting for your train, and gave her the main facts. She said to come right around whenever I got back, no matter what time it was.” He grunted. “You should have told me that. I’d have done the driving and let you save your strength.” I caught his eye in the Caddy's rear-vision mirror and we grinned at one another.