

---

# Compliments of a Fiend

**Fredric Brown**

This page formatted 2004 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- [Chapter 1](#)
  - [Chapter 2](#)
  - [Chapter 3](#)
  - [Chapter 4](#)
  - [Chapter 5](#)
  - [Chapter 6](#)
  - [Chapter 7](#)
  - [Chapter 8](#)
  - [Chapter 9](#)
  - [Chapter 10](#)
  - [Chapter 11](#)
  - [Chapter 12](#)
  - [Chapter 13](#)
  - [Chapter 14](#)
  - [Chapter 15](#)
  - [Chapter 16](#)
  - [Chapter 17](#)
- 

## Chapter 1

*Upon Dec. 2, 1919, Ambrose Small, of Toronto, Canada, disappeared... and left more than a million dollars behind....*

Before I looked into the case of Ambrose Small, I was attracted to it by another seeming coincidence. That there could be any meaning in it seemed so preposterous that, as influenced by much experience, I gave it serious thought. About six years before the disappearance of Ambrose Small, Ambrose *Bierce had disappeared. Newspapers all over the world had made much of the mystery of Ambrose Bierce. But what could the disappearance of one Ambrose, in Texas, have to do with the disappearance of another Ambrose, in Canada? Was somebody collecting Ambroses?*

—The Books of Charles Fort

UNCLE AM DIDN'T GET HOME that night. At quitting time he'd been out on a case and I'd been sitting around the office—the Starlock Detective Agency office, where both of us worked—with nothing to do, so I'd gone on home to our rooming house, figuring he'd show up by six o'clock and we'd go out together to eat. But he didn't show up by seven and I was so hungry that I didn't wait any longer; I walked over to Clark Street and had myself a barbecue special.

Estelle Beck, who rooms where Uncle Am and I do, was behind the counter; she'd been too busy to talk when I'd ordered, but things slacked off and she came over about the time I was finishing. She said, “Hi, Eddie. Haven't seen you for a few days.”

“Can't eat barbecue all the time,” I told her.

“I don't work here all the time. I get off at one-thirty.”

“Pass my bedtime,” I said. “I get up at half past seven in the morning. And if I took you out at half past one, I wouldn't get to bed before four o'clock. Or would I? Don't answer that; I might be tempted.”

She made a face at me. “More coffee? And where's Am tonight?”

I said, “Yes to the first question. I don't know, to the second. Guess he's working late.”

“Or maybe the Ambrose Collector's got him.”

“Huh?” I said. But she'd gone away with my coffee cup to refill it, and I had to wait till she got back to ask, “Who's the Ambrose Collector?”

“Nobody knows.”

“Fine,” I said. “And why does he collect Ambroses?”

“Nobody knows that either.”

“Lovely,” I said. “But do you know that two new customers have come in and are waiting for you, and the boss is glaring at you? Want to be fired?”

“Yes. I really do.” But she moved down the counter to wait on the new customers.

I watched her over my coffee and wondered whether I was being a fool or being sensible. Uncle Am and I had known Estelle a long time; she'd quit the carnival the same season we'd quit it and had come to Chicago when we had. We'd been in touch with her ever since, but it had been only for the last few months that we'd been in the same rooming house. Anyway, maybe it was because I knew Estelle too well, and liked her too well, to want anything casual with her—and I felt that I was a long way from wanting any alliance that was permanent, or might turn out to be permanent.

But, sitting there watching her, I wondered if Uncle Am was right in telling me how crazy I was to figure things that way.

And thinking of Uncle Am, of course, made me wonder if he was home yet, so I downed the rest of my coffee, waved so long to Estelle, and headed home.

Uncle Am still wasn't in and it was nearly eight o'clock, so I walked back downstairs and knocked on the door of Mrs. Brady, our landlady. I asked if there'd been any telephone calls for me and she said there hadn't.

So I went up to our room. It was the second floor front, a nice big room, even for two people; I got out my trombone to kill a little time. I played softly—as softly as you *can* play on a trombone. A few scales to limber up, and then I put a phonograph record on the portable—a Dizzy Gillespie bop disk—and tried to bop along with it.

There was a knock on the door. I reached over and shut off the phono and called out, “Come in.”

The door opened and our next-room neighbor, Chester Hamlin, leaned limply against the doorpost. He was stripped down to an undershirt, trousers and slippers.

He said, “You play that thing like Jimmy Dorsey.”

“You mean Tommy Dorsey,” I said.

He grinned. “Do I?”

“You'd better,” I said. “Is that all you want?”

He held up his hand and I noticed there was a screwdriver in it. He asked, “You any good with one of these things?”

“I know the system. The end of that thing has a squared blade. There's a slot in the end of the screw. You put the blade in the slot and turn. Clockwise, I think.”

“That sounds complicated. Would you show me?”

I sighed and put the trombone down on the bed. I followed him into his room. He pointed to the closet door. "Been trying to put a hasp for a padlock on that thing and I can't even get the screws started. I can turn 'em in once they start, but how do you get 'em started? The wood's hard."

I looked at him pityingly. "Ever think of trying a nail and a hammer? You drive the nail part way in and then pull it out again."

"Hell, I never thought of that. I did try hammering the screws in to start them, but that didn't work. Got a heavy nail I could use?"

"Not loose," I said. "But there are lots of nails in our closet we hang stuff on; you could pull one out and then put it back. But you've probably got a dozen or so in your own closet."

He shook his head. "Pulled them out in threw them away yesterday when I was rigging up the closet for a darkroom. Keep all my clothes in that wardrobe now. Got a pretty nice setup in there, now. Take a look."

He opened the closet door and flicked on a light inside. I stepped in and looked around; it really was a nice darkroom setup. The closet was bigger than ours, about seven by four feet.

Looking over my shoulder, he said, "I've got nails; I forgot the ones that hold that picture wire I used to hang prints on. I can use one of them and put it back. How do you like the layout?"

"Swell," I told him. "You must have a lot of money sunk in all this stuff."

"About two hundred bucks. It's not a cheap hobby. Costs more than playing a trombone. But it makes less noise."

"Shhh," I said, and stood listening. Somebody was coming up the stairs and I wanted to see if it was Uncle Am coming home. The closet wall was right against our room and I could have heard if he went in there. But the footsteps went along the hall instead and started up to the third floor.

I said, "I thought maybe that was my uncle, but I guess it wasn't. Hand me the hammer and I'll pull one of these nails for you."

He did, and I did, and then I sat down on the bed and watched him put the hasp for the padlock on the outside of the door.

"How come on the outside?" I asked him, while he was tightening the last screw. "I should think you'd want a bolt on the inside, if anything, so nobody'd open the door while you're working in the dark."

“I’m not worried about that. I can bolt the door of my room from the inside. It’s just that I don’t want anybody—Mrs. Brady or the cleaning woman or Mrs. Brady’s kid—to mess around in there.”

“You’re missing a bet. Some of those chemicals are poison, aren’t they?”

“Sure. That’s another reason.”

“I still think you’re missing a bet,” I said. “If Mrs. Brady’s kid messes around in there, he might drink some of the poison.”

Chester Hamlin grinned. “You almost tempt me, Ed. Say, going to play trombone any more this evening?”

“Hadn’t thought about it. Why? You want me to?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. But the way you were half-sitting, half-lying on the bed, when I opened the door, ought to make a good pic. Looked like you had the trombone wrapped around your neck or something. And I got some new fast film today I’d like to try out on a flash shot. I’ll waste a bulb or two on it if you’re game.”

“Okay, why not? I’ll run off a tune or two while you’re tooling it up. Just walk in when you’re ready.”

I went back to our room and started playing again, as I’d been doing when Chester had interrupted me, except that I didn’t bother to start the phono again. And I held my position, but quit playing, when Chester opened the door a few minutes later. He set up his tripod and camera in the doorway. He said, “Go ahead and play; there isn’t any sound track on this film so it won’t matter.”

“Not with the door open,” I told him. “I’m getting away with murder to be able to play this thing at all in a Chicago rooming house.”

“Put it back to your mouth and look like you’re playing. Push the slide way out; that’s it. Now roll your eyes up toward the ceiling and look soulful.”

The bulb flashed.

He was moving the tripod a few feet to get a different angle on a second shot when I heard the phone ring downstairs. I got up quick and went past him for the head of the stairs. The call might be from Uncle Am.

I heard Mrs. Brady’s voice saying “Hello” as I got to the top of the step, and waited. I heard her say, “I don’t know. Just a moment,” and then she called out “Mr. Hunter!” That meant the call was for Uncle Am; Mrs. Brady called me Ed.

But I ran on down the stairs and said, "I'll take it, Mrs. Brady. Uncle Am isn't home yet, but I'll take it."

She handed me the phone and I said into it, "This is Ed Hunter speaking. My uncle isn't home yet; can I take a message?"

The receiver said, "This is Ben Starlock, Ed. Hasn't Am phoned you?"

"No," I told him. "And I've been getting worried about him. He must be working late on whatever case he's working on, but he's always called me sooner than this whenever that's happened. Or is he on a tail job, where he can't get to a phone?"

"He isn't on any job, exactly, Ed. But he was supposed to phone me a long time ago. It's almost nine o'clock and I expected a call from him by seven at the latest."

"How come, if he wasn't working on a case? Was it something personal, Mr. Starlock?"

"No, nothing personal. And he wasn't working on a case, but he was supposed to see a client—a prospective client—and talk over with him something the client wanted done. When he'd done that, he was supposed to call me."

"What time was this?"

"He left the office a little after four o'clock, just before you came in, Ed. He was to talk to this prospective client and then phone me. At the office, if he got through talking to him before five o'clock. Otherwise, he said he'd phone me at home between six and seven."

"You're home now?"

"Been here all evening. And it isn't like Am not to do something he said he'd do. I got curious enough to phone him."

"Maybe he took on the case," I suggested, "and had to start work on it right away. And maybe it was a tail job and he can't get at a phone without losing the subject."

Ben Starlock said, "He wouldn't have taken on the case without consulting me. That was understood. The client understood it, too; he'd just wanted a preliminary interview with Am, and then he was going to come in the office tomorrow and arrange things. I didn't even quote him a rate."

"You've got this client's address, if you sent Uncle Am to see him. Have you phoned to see if he got there all right and what time he left?"

"Don't want to do that unless I have to, Ed. Makes us look damn foolish to be checking up on one of our own operatives. And it's still early in the evening. If we don't hear from him pretty soon, though, I'll start checking up."

“Well, I'm getting worried, Mr. Starlock,” I said. “Maybe he had trouble finding this guy he was to talk to, or something like that, and that would account for his not having called you yet, but that doesn't explain his not calling me. He knew I'd come home from work and wait for him so we could eat together.”

“You mean you haven't eaten yet?”

“I went out to eat when he didn't get home by seven. But there wasn't any call for me while I was gone; I checked on that.”

“You're staying in? You'll be there?”

“Sure. Unless you want to give me the name and address of this client; I can go around and check up—sort of from the outside, if you don't want me to barge in.”

“No, not yet, Ed. Let's take it easy for a couple of hours. If he hasn't phoned either of us, or hasn't come home, by eleven o'clock, we'll start checking. Okay?”

“I guess so,” I said. Eleven sounded pretty late to me.

“All right, let's hang up then. He may be trying to call one or the other of us right now, and we're keeping both phones busy. So long, Ed.”

“Okay. And if I hear from him I'll call you right away, and vice versa. So long, Mr. Starlock.”

I went back upstairs. Chester Hamlin had his camera set for another shot and was sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for me. He took a look at my face as I came in and asked, “Something wrong?”

“I'm a little worried,” I admitted. “Don't know where Uncle Am is. He's a few hours overdue.”

“Hell, don't worry about Am. He can take care of himself.”

“Sure he can. But—

“He carries identification, doesn't he?”

I nodded.

“Then if he was in an accident or anything, you'd have heard. Maybe he's hanging one on. Or picking up a blonde. How's about posing again for one more shot of Young Man With a Horn?”

I wasn't in the mood for it, but then again there wasn't anything else I could be doing, so I let him shoot me again, same pose but from a different angle.

He closed the door after him when he went back to his room, but I went over and opened it again. I wanted to be sure to hear the phone if it rang.

I managed to kill a little time polishing up the trombone and putting it back in its case and then I sat down to read the evening paper. When you're an operative for a detective agency, you read at least one newspaper a day, and you read all the local news—particularly criminal and political stuff—carefully and read retentively. Usually I'm pretty good at that, but just then I couldn't concentrate. I kept listening for the phone to ring, and it didn't.

I gave up trying to concentrate after a while, and read the funny page and then glanced at the Sports to see how the Cubs were doing. I looked at the chess problem, but either it was too hard for me or I couldn't concentrate hard enough on it, or both. I turned to the stock exchange listings and looked at the number of advances, declines and unchanged listings—not that I owned any stocks or cared about them, but because I was mildly curious about whether Dane Evans' hunch on the numbers game had been any good. Dane, who was head clerk at the Starlock Agency, was a numbers addict; that day he'd bet a dollar on 444 and I was mildly curious to see whether he'd hit. He hadn't.

I looked out of the window a while and then looked at my watch again and it was only nine-forty. The time was going unbelievably slowly.

I gave up trying to keep from worrying, and let myself worry and wonder what could have happened to Uncle Am.

The phone rang only once; I was at the foot of the stairs by the time Mrs. Brady answered it, but the call wasn't for me. She said “Just a minute, please” into the phone and then turned to me. “It's for Karl Dell, Ed. Will you knock on his door, so I won't have to yell up?”

I said sure, and went back upstairs. I knocked on Karl's door—his room is the other side of Chester Hamlin's—and told him he was wanted on the phone.

He didn't talk very long on the phone, and when he came back upstairs he walked on past the door of his room and stood in the doorway of ours. He said, “You told me once you played poker, didn't you, Ed?”

“A little,” I admitted. “Uncle Am's the real poker player in our family. He can lose ten times as much as I can, in half the time.”

He said, “That was Peewee Blain on the phone; you met him once up in my room. He said they're getting up a game—dime limit—not at his room, but within a few blocks of here. Want to sit in for a while?”



"I'd better not," I said. "I'm waiting for a phone call."

"Something wrong, Ed? I—I feel that there is." He came on into the room and sat down on the arm of the easy chair.

"I hope there's nothing wrong," I said. "I *am* a little worried about my uncle. He hasn't shown up, or phoned."

"Is he working?"

"Yes and no. He was supposed to see someone late this afternoon, but that shouldn't account for his being this late—not without phoning to let me know he was going to be late."

Karl Dell leaned forward, put an elbow on his knee and cupped his chin in his hand, staring at me. He asked what I knew he'd probably ask. "Can I be of any help, Ed? I know you don't believe in astrology, but—damn it, whether or not you believe in it doesn't alter the fact that it's a science. A proven science. I can't guarantee to tell you where your uncle is or what's happened to him, but I'd like to try."

"I would be wasting your time, Karl."

"Maybe not. If I can *get* something, it'll be a chance for me to prove to you what we've only argued about before. And I *might* find out where he is, and if I don't, what have you got to lose? I don't do it professionally; I won't charge you anything." It was a tough one to answer without hurting his feelings, but suddenly I got the answer to it. And it was true. I said, "I just remembered, Karl; I don't know Uncle Am's birthday. He doesn't like getting birthday presents and cards, and won't tell anyone when it is."

"You're kidding me."

"No, I'm not. I know how old he is: forty-three. And I think his birthday is in January because around Christmas he was forty-two, and about the first of February I remember someone asked him how old he was, or it came up somehow, and he said he was forty-three."

Karl said, "January—that would make him Capricorn if he was born before the twentieth; Aquarius if he was born after that."

"Probably Capricorn," I said. "He's got quite a bit of goat in him, and he prefers beer to water so he'd hardly be Aquarius."

"I know you're just kidding, Ed. You can't interpret the signs of the zodiac that literally; they don't mean that at all. But you are right that without a specific birth date—and preferably the hour and minute of the day and the place of birth; all that makes a difference, you know—I couldn't make a good enough horoscope to be much help in

finding some specific point. Of course I might get a cross reference from *your* horoscope; anything that happens to him would affect you, too. But I'll admit that it's a pretty slim chance that I'd get anything definite enough to be helpful." I said, "Let's skip it, then."

"All right. But is there anything else I can do? I don't mind missing the poker game; I'm not too crazy about playing tonight anyway. You going out looking for him if he doesn't show up?"

I looked at my watch and said, "Not for almost an hour. If he isn't home by eleven, I'll start doing something about it. But I think I'll have company—our boss. He'll want a hand in things if anything's really happened to Uncle Am."

Karl nodded. "I'd be a fifth wheel in that case. Okay, I'll tool along and play poker. In a few minutes, that is; they aren't going to start till ten-thirty, and it's only a few blocks."

"Going to win?" I asked him.

"How the hell do I—" He broke off, and grinned. "I see what you mean. As a matter of fact, this is a moderately lucky day for me; I probably will come out ahead. But things like that can be foretold only in a general way. Particularly poker."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well—for one thing, I may be better off in the long run to lose a few dollars than to win."

"Sounds like rationalization to me," I said. "But that wasn't quite what I meant. I meant why did you say particularly poker?"

"Because poker isn't entirely a matter of luck; it's a matter of judgment of the value of your cards compared to the other guy's cards. And you can have luck, in the sense of getting good hands, and still lose in the long run if you use poor judgment on how to bet the cards."

"Then astrology would be more helpful in playing roulette? Look, I'm not trying to heckle you; I'm honestly curious to get your point of view."

He grinned. "Even though you think it's wrong? Yes, astrology would be more helpful in roulette, because—except for the help that astrology could give you— that's pure chance. If a player played only on days what were favorable days for him, he ought to be able to beat the law of averages and the house percentage— in the long run, of course."

"Then why aren't all astrologers rich?"

"For one reason, Ed—I know this may sound silly to you—anyone deeply enough interested in the spiritual things of life to become an astrologer would recognize that

living from gambling wouldn't make him really happy in the long run. It's not real; it's not constructive; it doesn't contribute to the welfare and progress of the world. That may sound idealistic to you, but it's sound. Astrology is a guide to a good way of life, and it would be a false guide if it showed a man how to live a life that isn't constructive."

I said, "That doesn't sound silly to me. I wouldn't want to make a living that way myself. But I wouldn't mind knowing a few lucky numbers, so I could pick up enough capital to make a living the way I'd like to."

"You don't like being a private detective? I thought you did."

"I do. But I'd rather work for the Hunter Agency than for Starlock. Uncle Am and I are trying to save up enough dough to go into partnership on an agency of our own, but it's tough going. I guess we like to spend money too well to enjoy saving it. Anyway, the bank account is a long way short of the mark."

He looked at me very seriously for a moment and then said, "Maybe I can help you on that."

"How? I don't get it."

"I'd better not tell you now. I'd better go if I'm going to make that game on time. Look, you want the address? I mean, if your uncle shows up and is all right, then maybe you'll want to come and play a while."

"Thanks, but I'd better not. Be pretty late by the time I got there, and I have to get up early."

"Okay, Ed. Maybe you're saving money. Got a hunch I'm going to take the boys tonight."

At the door, he turned. "Uh—I hope your uncle shows up okay, Ed."

"I guess he will," I said, and then as he started to close the door, I told him, "Leave it open, Karl. I want to be sure to hear the phone if it rings."

After I heard Karl Dell go out the door downstairs, I began to wonder again how time could go so slowly. It wasn't quite half past ten.

A few minutes later the phone rang, and I got downstairs in nothing flat and answered it before Mrs. Brady did.

But it wasn't Uncle Am; in answer to my hello, Ben Starlock's voice said, "That you, Ed?"

"Yes. Heard anything?"

“No. I guess you're worried, and I'm getting that way myself. Shall we start checking up now instead of waiting another half hour?” Swell. Shall I meet you somewhere, or what?”

Not right away. Let's see what we can do with a few phone calls first. Suppose you call—No, wait. I'd better call our client—or prospective client—first. It just could be that Am is still with him or that he can tell us what the score is. You hang up, Ed, but stick by the phone; I'll call you back in a minute or two.”

I said “Okay” and hung up. I sat down on the bottom step of the stairs for a minute or two and then went back and stood by the phone.

So when it rang I was right there.

Starlock said, “Ed, it isn't so good. Now wait; I don't mean I've got bad news. But there isn't any such guy registered at the hotel.”

“He gave you the hotel address this afternoon,” I said. “Maybe he could have checked out since.”

“No, I asked that. I don't like the looks of it, Ed. How about meeting me down at the office? I can think better there and we can use it as a base for operations. I imagine we can do more on the phone than otherwise, till we get lead or an angle to dig in on.”

“Fine, Mr. Starlock. How soon?”

“Half an hour if I take a cab. You can walk it in that, so you won't need to hurry.”

But I wanted to hurry; I wanted to do something right away, only I couldn't even get into the office until he got there with the key. I said, “Isn't there something I can do first, to get us started, before I meet you?”

“Not a thing, Ed. Let's not get excited on this; let's get together and dope out what we're going to do, before we go off half-cocked.”

“All right,” I said. “But give me something to be doping out. What hotel was this alleged client supposed to be staying at?”

“The Gresham, just a few blocks from the office. He said Room four-eighteen.”

“And gave a name?”

“Yes. An odd one, now that I come to think about it. And his first name was Ambrose, like your uncle's.”

“And his last name?”

“An odd one—Collector,” Ben Starlock said. “Ambrose Collector.”

## Chapter 2

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH and said, “All right, Mr. Starlock. I'll see you at the office in half an hour.”

I hung up the phone and deliberately made myself stand there and count ten slowly before I moved.

That way, I didn't rush out and leave loose ends. I knocked on Mrs. Brady's door and told her that if Uncle Am phoned she should tell him to phone the Starlock office and if no one answered there to keep trying. I went upstairs and wrote the same thing in a note, so if he came home instead of phoning he'd get that message even if Mrs. Brady didn't see him coming in.

I put the note where he couldn't miss it and tried not to think that he'd probably never see it.

And I held myself to a normal pace as I went down the stairs out into the night. At State Street I caught a cab and gave the driver the address of the barbecue place on Clark where Estelle worked. Outside, I told him to wait, that I'd be out in a minute.

Estelle looked up, surprised, when I came in. She was off duty for the moment, eating a sandwich on the stool at the far end of the counter.

I hurried back to her and didn't waste time on any preliminaries. I said, “That gag you pulled tonight about an Ambrose Collector, 'Stelle; where'd you get it? What's it about?”

Her eyes got wide as she looked at me. “I—What do you mean, Eddie?”

“Early this evening,” I said patiently, “I told you Uncle Am hadn't got home. You said maybe the Ambrose Collector got him.”

“It was just a joke, Eddie. Isn't he home yet?”

“He isn't. What about the Ambrose Collector? It was a joke, but where did you hear it? You didn't make it up, out of a clear sky, did you?”

“N-no. *Somebody* mentioned an—an Ambrose Collector to me recently, but I can't remember who it was.”

“It's important, 'Stelle. Try hard.”

“It had something to do with a book somebody was telling me about. But I can't remember who—

“You've *got* to.”

“I—I *can't*, Eddie. I'll think of it later, maybe, but—” She looked at me helplessly. “Can you get off work now? It's nearly eleven; the rush ought to be over by now, hadn't it?”

“Sure.” She got up off the stool. “I'll get my coat and tell the boss. He's back in the kitchen.”

She was back in less than a minute, a light coat thrown over her uniform.

In the cab, on the way to the office, I told her what little I knew thus far, and it made me realize how little that little was.

She squeezed my arm suddenly. She said, “Eddie, maybe—

“Maybe what? Go ahead and say it.”

“No, it's wrong. I was going to say maybe Uncle Am was being funny, playing a joke on you and your boss. But—no, he wouldn't be, not that way.”

I thought it over. “No, he wouldn't,” I said. “He's got a screwy sense of humor all right—one that might tie in with the idea of an Ambrose Collector, whatever an Ambrose Collector is, but he wouldn't play any joke that would worry me this much. Could it have been Am, though, who mentioned the Ambrose Collector to you? That part of it sounds like him.”

She shook her head slowly. “No, it wasn't Am. I—I'll think of it, Eddie. I almost had it, then.”

I opened my mouth to tell her to keep trying, and then shut it again. She'd think better if I didn't talk to her.

In spite of my stopover for Estelle, we got to the office ahead of Starlock. The elevator operator—the redheaded one with whom I'm usually on friendly and kidding terms—gave us a funny look, obviously wondering—or not wondering—why I was taking a girl up to the office at that time of the evening.

I gave him back a glare for the funny look, almost hoping he'd crack wise so I could tell him off or take a poke at him; I wasn't feeling on friendly or kidding terms with anyone right then.

We waited in the dim corridor outside the office door for only a few minutes before Ben Starlock got off the elevator. He's got a good poker face and managed not to seem surprised at my having a girl with me.

I introduce them and then, as Starlock was opening the door with his key, I said, “I didn't take time to tell you on the phone, but when you said the guy who called you used the name Collector—Ambrose Collector—it rang a bell. I'd heard of an Ambrose Collector earlier this evening—from Estelle here. That's why I brought her.”

Starlock closed the door and turned to stare at Estelle.

She said, “I can't remember where; I've been trying to. It was in the back of my mind—from somewhere—and when Eddie told me, while he was eating, that Am hadn't come home yet, I said maybe the Ambrose Collector's got him. But I'll keep trying; I'll think of it sooner or later.”

Starlock nodded. “I'm sure you will, Miss Beck. Want to go in the back room—the ops' room—and sit there alone for a while to see if it comes to you?”

Estelle looked at me and I could see she didn't want to, yet.

I said, “Let's let her in on it, Ben”—it was the first time I'd ever called him by his first name—“while we compare notes and put together what little we've got to go on. Maybe something about your conversation over the phone will give her an idea.”

Starlock looked at me a moment and I could see what he was thinking, so I said “It's all right. Am and I have known 'Stelle for years; she was at the carnival we were with and quit and came to Chicago the same time we did. She's okay, and she knows how to keep her mouth shut.”

He frowned a little, but he said, “Okay, Ed, if you say so,” and opened the door of his private office.

We went in and Starlock gave Estelle a chair and then sat down behind his desk. The swivel chair creaked in agony as he leaned back and put his hands behind his head, staring over us at the transom of the door. He looked—even to a small pimple above the bridge of his nose—like an oversized, benign Buddha.

I'd sat down, too, but I stood up again. I knew he was thinking, but I wanted to be in on what he was thinking about, so I said, “Do it out loud.”

Starlock said, “Be patient, Ed. Jane's on her way here; I phoned her just before I left, and she'll be here in a few minutes.”

“How come?” I asked. Jane Rogers is Starlock's secretary.

“Partly to take notes. I think I can still repeat that conversation almost word for word, and I want to get it down that way while I remember it. And then I want her to stay by this phone, all night if necessary. We may be going out together or separately and if it's the

latter we want to be able to keep in touch through Jane. And then, too, I left word at home to tell Am to call here if he called there. Did you do the same at the rooming house?"

I nodded, glad I'd had sense enough to stop and count ten after the phone call, so I'd thought about that, and leaving the note. I told Starlock about the note, and just as he was saying "Good," Jane came in.

Starlock must have told her what the score was, because she didn't ask any questions. She said "Hi" to us and got her notebook right away.

Starlock said, "Take every word of this conversation, Jane. You'll have all night to transcribe it, after we leave. And you're going to be the first one to talk. Can you talk and write what you're saying in shorthand at the same time?"

"I guess so."

"All right, try it. You answered the phone when that call came at four o'clock. Tell us every word of it you can remember, every little detail about it."

Jane nodded. "It was just about one minute before four o'clock; I know because you'd told me I could— But you know about that."

"Ed doesn't," Starlock told her. "And anyway we want it in the record."

Jane looked up at him and then down at her notebook again. "You'd told me I could leave at four because of my appointment with the dentist, so at one minute of four I was conscious of the time; I was putting the cover over my typewriter when the phone rang."

It was strange, somehow, to listen to her talking and to watch the flying tip of her pencil, to know the two were coordinating; it was almost as though the pencil was doing the talking.

"I picked up the phone," she said, "and said 'Starlock Agency.' A man's voice said 'Ben Starlock, please.' I didn't recognize the voice; I don't know whether or not I'd know it if I heard it again. I don't think I would. I mean, it was a fairly average voice, if you know what I mean by that; there wasn't anything special about it to remember."

"Anything about the inflection you can remember?" Starlock prompted. "Yes; he spoke confidently, as though he knew you and expected to be put through to you right away. 'Ben Starlock, please.' Well, you know my instructions on phone calls, but Ed doesn't, so I'd better put that in. I'm not to put any call through to you without knowing who's calling, and if there's any doubt whether you might want to talk to them, I say, 'Just a moment, please,' and then ask you, so they can't hear, if you want to talk to them."

"So I said, 'Who is calling, please?' He said, 'My name is Collector, Ambrose Collector.' I wasn't sure I'd heard him just right even though he'd said it twice; I guess because I'd



never heard of anyone with that name. So I asked him, 'Will you spell that, sir?' he said, 'C-o-l-l-e-c-t-o-r. I'd like to talk to Ben Starlock about a job I might want him to handle for me.'

“So I said, 'Just a moment, please,' and put my hand over the mouthpiece of the phone and told you that a Mr. Ambrose Collector was on the line and wanted to talk to you about a job he might want you to handle for him. And you looked up from whatever you were doing and said, 'Okay, Jane, put him on.' But before I did, I asked you if you wanted me to stay and take notes on the conversation and you shook your head and said, 'No, you run along; it's four o'clock.' So I switched the call to your phone and heard you say 'Starlock speaking,' and I didn't listen to any more of the conversation; I put on my coat and hat and left.”

Starlock said, “Good report, Jane.” He leaned back in his chair again, staring at the transom. “I said, 'Starlock speaking.' A masculine voice—and I can't describe it any better than you did, Jane—said, 'My name is Collector, Mr. Starlock. I'm looking for a detective agency that can handle a certain job for me.' I asked him what kind of a job it was; he said—in effect; I'm not sure of the exact words—'It's rather too complicated to explain over the phone, Mr. Starlock. It's an honest, legitimate job. But it hinges on your being able to furnish an operative with a certain qualification. Yours is the third agency I've tried.'

“I asked him what the special qualification was and he said he needed a man with lots of carnival experience, one who'd traveled with a lot of carnivals and knew a lot of people in that game.”

Starlock closed his eyes and then opened them and was looking at me. He said, “If it was a put-up job to get Am, then that insistence on a lot of experience was to eliminate you, Ed. You spent one season with the carnival, but Am was in it for years. You see what I mean.'

I nodded.

He said, “I told him we had an operative who filled the bill very well, who'd had ten years or more experience as a carnival concessionaire.”

“Did you mentioned Uncle Am's name?” I asked.

“Not then. He said—I'll try to get his exact words here—'That's swell. Is he there? Is he free now?' Am was in the back room, so I said yes, he was free. He said, 'I'm staying in Room four-eighteen at the Gresham Hotel. I wonder if it would be possible for your operative to drop in a few minutes now so I can talk to him and see if he'd fill all the requirements—if he's really the type of man I want.'

“I told him I was sorry, but that wasn't our way of doing business; that he'd have to come in and talk the case over with me and that if I accepted it, he could then talk to the operative.

“He said, 'I wish you could make an exception in this case. It's this way: I'm going back to Milwaukee tonight and because of some other phone calls I've got to make, I won't be able to come to your office today. But if I could see this operative and convince myself that he's the man for the job, then everything will be set in my mind. I'll be back in Chicago Friday, day after tomorrow, and I can see you then and give you the case, and a retainer. It'll be a fairly long job, and I'm prepared to spend several thousand dollars on it if necessary.'”

“Bait,” I said.

Starlock nodded. “Yes, bait. I see that now. But—as I saw it then—what did I have to lose? It was after four; Am was through with the job he'd been working on—a skip-trace matter—and I wasn't going to be sending him out on anything else today, so there was nothing to lose. And maybe—however slight the chance— a several thousand dollar bit of business to gain. If it was trap, Ed, it was a beautifully baited one.”

“And you walked into it?”

“It looks like I sent Am into it. I said, 'All right, I'll send the operative—his name is Ambrose Hunter—over to talk to you, but you understand that he isn't authorized to accept the case; that will have to *be* handled through me.' And he said, 'That's fine, Mr. Starlock. I'll be here waiting for him.'”

Starlock stopped for so long that I asked, “Was that all the conversation?”

“Yes, except that he said good-bye and I said good-bye. And then I called Am in from the back room and told him about it and sent him around. The Gresham's only a few blocks and I figured he might be through talking to the guy by five. I told Am not to commit himself on anything but to find out, if he could, what the job was all about and whether the guy seemed to be on the level, and to phone me as soon as he was through talking to him—here at the office if it was before five, or at home this evening if it was after.”

I asked, “Why did you want to know before tomorrow morning?”

“So I could plan assignments. We've got a case starting tomorrow that I'd have put Am on otherwise—but I didn't want to if this thing looked really good. This other case might take a week or two—a shadow job—and I didn't want to start Am on it if there was a good chance I'd have to pull him off in a few days. In that case I was going to put you on the tail job and keep Am on the skip-trace angles. And I wanted to know tonight because I always plan out my next day's arrangements in the evening.”

Starlock's swivel chair creaked again as he leaned forward and turned to face Estelle. He said, "That's all we know on this end, Miss Beck. Does it help you remember where you heard—whatever it was you heard?"

Estelle's face was white and her eyes wide and scared. She said, "I—I'm afraid it doesn't."

Starlock said, "Ed, while Jane's taking notes, put your conversation with Miss Beck on the record—just exactly what it was she said about an Ambrose Collector. Maybe it'll help her remember."

The few things she'd said, and I'd said or asked, about the Ambrose Collector were so vivid in my mind that I was able to repeat them word for word, and Jane took them down.

Starlock said thoughtfully, "Sounds like it might be a lead to something, but God knows to what. Miss Beck, now that you've heard everything we know, don't you think it would be a good idea for you to go off by yourself, in the back room, and just concentrate on trying to remember?"

"All right, I'll try."

"Fine. Ed, you show her back there and turn on the light for her. And shut the door so our conversation won't distract her."

I put my hand on Estelle's shoulder and she stood up. We got as far as the doorway and then stopped and turned when Starlock said, "Just a minute."

His swivel chair creaked protestingly. "Miss Beck, when you think of something—or when you give up for the night and want to go home—come back. Ed and I may be out by then; if so, tell Jane here anything you've got to tell, and we'll get it from her. Okay?"

Estelle nodded.

"If you decide to go home, and Ed and I are gone at the time, take a cab. The agency will pay for it; Jane will give you the money. And do us this favor; go right home and to bed when you decide to leave, and maybe it'll come to you while you're trying to go to sleep. That's sometimes when people do their best remembering. And if it does, telephone right away. Jane will be at that phone all night, whether we're here or not."

Estelle said, "I don't think I'll go to sleep till I think of it. I don't think I'll be able to."

I let her to the back room and turned on the light. Estelle started for the chair in the far corner, the one Uncle Am always sat in. I wished that she'd taken a different one, but I didn't want to tell her. She looked pale and scared enough as it was. Her eyes looked enormous and her mouth was a bright scarlet against the whiteness of her face.

She said, "Oh, Eddie, I feel so awful not to be able to think of something that ought to be so easy—and when it's so important."

I patted her shoulder. I said, "Don't take it that way, baby. Maybe it isn't important at all. Pretend it isn't, and just relax. Don't try too hard; that's probably what you're doing. Think about something else for a while. Maybe it would help to read a magazine; there's a stack of them on the table there. And give us a smile."

She tried, but it was a weak, frightened smile.

I leaned over and kissed it.

I said, "Don't worry, 'Stelle. Uncle Am's too smart a customer to let any Ambrose Collector collect him. He's all right."

I wished that I'd been able to believe what I was telling her.

I didn't give her a chance to answer; I went out and closed the door behind me.

Jane Rogers was dialing a number on the telephone. I heard her ask if Harry Dickson was there, and I wondered who Harry Dickson was. I looked at Starlock, but couldn't catch his eye; he was watching Jane.

Then Jane said, "Just a moment, please," and nodded at Starlock. He picked up his own phone and said, "This is Ben Starlock, Harry. How's everything?"

I bent over Jane's desk and asked, "Who's this Dickson character, Jane?"

She was looking down at her typewriter, although there wasn't any paper in it, and didn't look up at me. She said, "Mr. Starlock knows him. He's on nights at the morgue."

I said, "Oh," and walked over to the window. It's a window on an air shaft and all I could see in it was my own reflection standing there in silhouette against the lighted room, a rigid shadow with no face; perhaps it was just as well I couldn't see my face.

I heard Starlock say, "Listen, Harry, I want to give you a description—"

He gave it and then there was a long wait. I found myself almost wishing Uncle Am would be there. Then we'd *know*. Because if he wasn't dead, then somebody had him. A madman? An Ambrose Collector? A fiend? I remembered a typographical error I'd made once when I was an apprentice printer five years before. I'd been setting the type for a "Compliments of a Friend" ad for a church bulletin; I'd left out the second letter of the last word: Compliments of a Fiend. It had been funny then. I shivered a little....

### Chapter 3

HE WASN'T AT THE MORGUE.

Starlock's round face is pretty dead-pan, but I could see relief in it when he put down the phone. I don't know whether I felt any relief or not; I was pretty numb just at that moment.

We were sure, though, that Uncle Am wasn't at the morgue. I'd heard the way Starlock had checked into it; identified or not identified, no body that remotely could have been Uncle Am had been reported since four o'clock that afternoon.

I'd turned back from the window and he'd swiveled his chair around to face me. He said, "Any ideas, Ed?"

"Some pretty vague ones," I told him. "One point—the guy called here at four. Do you think he knew Uncle Am was here and free to be sent over to the Gresham?"

"I'd say he probably did know, Ed. Otherwise, he was taking a long-shot chance of getting him. You ops average maybe an hour a day in the office here, and that means that unless he knew Am was here, he was taking a chance no better than one out of eight of getting him. I think we can assume he specifically wanted Am, don't you?"

I said, "I think we can. First, from his asking for an op with an unusual kind of experience, a kind that Uncle Am has. Second, from his calling himself the Ambrose Collector—even though he disguised it as a proper name. But what I'm leading up to is that the call was probably put through from a phone right near here. I'd say he knew Uncle Am by sight and was watching the entrance of the building here—or following Uncle Am. And when he saw him enter the building, he allowed time for him to get up to the office, and then put in his phone call."

"Sounds logical, Ed. I don't think we could use the phone call angle—there are a thousand phones within a block of here that he could have used—dozens of public ones in booths. But I think you've got something there in that way we can say he knew Am by sight as well as by name. The phone call came just a few minutes after Am came in. It looks more like timing than coincidence."

He got up from behind his desk and started pacing back and forth between it and the door.

He said, "I think we may as well go over to the Gresham. I don't expect to get anything there, especially as they've probably changed shifts between four o'clock and now, but we can try. We can find out who *is* in Room four-eighteen, even though I think we can assume Am was probably intercepted by someone before he got that far."

"Intercepted how?"

“How would I know? Maybe right in the entrance of this building, by the man who made the phone call. Maybe in the lobby of the hotel. But I've got a hunch that he never got as far as Room four-eighteen. If he was supposed to get that far, the registration of Room four-eighteen would have been in the name Am was supposed to ask for. That's why I don't really expect to get anything at the hotel— although we'll try, of course.”

He leaned against the side of the doorway, almost filling it. He said, “Unless you've got a better idea, Ed. Can you think of any other lead?”

“Only Estelle. The poor kid is beating her brains out back there right now; she'll think of where she heard that Ambrose Collector business. It's only a matter of time. Of course we can go to the hotel first and then come back; she'll still be here unless she's thought of the answer, and then Jane'll have it.”

Starlock said, “I like the way she's taking this. She must like Am a lot. Well, anything before we go?”

“How about the hospitals? And the police?”

“Jane's got orders to work on the hospitals, starting as soon as we leave. The police— well, I'd like to get just a little more than we have right now before we turn it over to them, Ed. They won't take it too seriously yet; you know that. After all, Am's been missing only about eight hours.”

I tried to look at it from the point of view of the cops, and saw that he was right. They'd just assume that Uncle Am was hanging one on or had strayed from the fold and they wouldn't start any checking till morning. But I said, “There's Bassett—Captain Bassett. He knows Am well enough to take this seriously.”

“Sure, Bassett would. And a couple of others—but all ones on the day shift. Unless you insist, Ed, I'd rather let the police angle go until tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let's go, then.”

He took his hat down off the stand and said, “You're on your own, Jane, as long as you stick by that phone, after you call the hospitals and type up those notes. And use the unlisted phone for the outgoing calls so you won't block any possible incoming ones.”

“All right, Mr. Starlock.”

“And send out for coffee and sandwiches whenever you want to; Corey's is open all night, and they deliver.”

We took the elevator down and were lucky enough to catch a cab right outside. I'd have just as soon walked a half-dozen blocks myself, but Starlock yelled at the cab and it pulled in to the curb.

In the cab, he asked, "How you set on sleep, Ed?"

"I'll be all right."

"That isn't what I asked. Are you ahead or behind?"

"A little behind," I admitted. "I was up late two nights in a row. But don't worry; I'm good for all of tonight—and tomorrow too."

He grunted. "Wish I was still your age. Well, here we are."

The Gresham is a medium-sized Loop hotel, medium-priced and medium quality. We crossed the lobby, almost deserted by now, and walked up to the desk. A single clerk was on duty behind it, back of him a girl chewed gum at a switchboard.

Starlock said, "A little while ago I called and asked if you had a Mr. Collector registered here and was told you hadn't. Was it you I talked to?"

"I don't recall it. About how long ago was that?"

"An hour and a half ago, about ten-forty."

"Oh, then you probably talked to Mr. Blake, the night manager; he relieves me at the desk between ten and eleven. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," Starlock said. "Who is in Room four-eighteen?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to talk to Mr. Blake for information of that kind. Unless—"

"No, we're not the police. Private detectives." Starlock flashed his buzzer. "Is Blake in?"

"One moment." The clerk said over his shoulder, "Dotty, get Mr. Blake; put him on the desk phone."

When the phone on the desk rang, he picked it up and talked briefly. When he put it down, he pointed to a door marked "Private." He said, "That's Mr. Blake's office; go right in."

We went in. A sour-faced man with patent-leather hair was doing something at a big mahogany desk. I didn't like his looks and I didn't like his voice when he said, "Well, gentleman?"

But we sat down across the desk from him and Starlock explained what had happened—enough of it, anyway, to justify the question he was leading up to. He said, "We'd like to have two things. First, the names and addresses of whatever clerks were behind the desk

this afternoon between four and five o'clock, and second, we'd like to know who is in Room four-eighteen."

The manager frowned. "I'm afraid I can't supply either point of information, gentlemen. There were two clerks on duty at the desk at that time, but you can talk to them tomorrow when they're on duty again. As for giving out information about one of our guests, that is definitely against our policy."

Starlock said, "This may be a serious matter, Mr. Blake. Possibly it's kidnapping, or even murder."

"Then you should report it to the police. If the information in question is requested officially, I can't refuse it, of course. Otherwise, it is definitely against our policy to give such information."

Starlock stood up slowly. "If you feel that way about it, Mr. Blake, we'll have the information requested officially."

He went out and I followed him. Outside the door I put a hand on his arm and stopped him. I asked him, "Are you going to let that son of a bitch get away with that?"

"What else can I do, Ed? I'd love to slap him down, but he could sue me out of my shirt if I did. Anyway, we'll get the information tomorrow, or the police will— if Am hasn't shown up by then."

"But there's a chance—even a slim one—that it'll help us to have tonight?"

"Well, yes. But—"

"Mr. Starlock," I said, "I quit. As of now."

He grinned at me, knowing what I meant. I wanted to grin back, but couldn't make it; I was too mad. Not at Starlock, of course. And I didn't want to grin anyway; I wanted to stay mad.

I went back in the door marked "Private" and closed it behind me. The sour-faced man looked up, and he must have guessed why I'd come back. But he guessed too late; I had hold of his wrist before his hand reached the button on the corner of his desk.

And then I was around behind his chair with the wrist twisted up behind his back. And I thought of the idea of his yelling before he did, and my other hand was clamped tight over his mouth. Just long enough for me to say, 'You can yell if you want to, but by the time anybody gets here, you'll have a broken arm—to start with.'

I took my hand off his mouth. He didn't yell.



I said, "Listen, I'm *not* a Starlock operative. The man who was kidnapped—or murdered—is my uncle and the best friend I've got. I'm going to find him and I'm not going to let any hotel rules or regulations get in the way. I want the names and addresses of those two clerks, or I'm going to beat the hell out of you here and now. At least I'll have a plenty good start at it by the time any help gets to you. Shall I start now?"

"This is going to get you in plenty trouble, young man."

"I'll count to three; then I let go of your arm and start swinging. One. Two—

"Their addresses are in the file box on the corner of the desk; I don't know them offhand. Their names are Wallace Corrigan and Henry Everest." I let go of his arm, but kept on the side of him that kept him from reaching for the buzzer button on the phone without reaching pass me, and I let him look up the clerks' addresses. Neither of them had telephones but I noticed that both addresses were fairly close in.

"Who's in four-eighteen?" I asked him.

"I don't know. We've got hundreds of rooms here. And the cards on current registrations are at the desk."

"Call the desk and ask," I told him. "Get all the information you can on him. And be careful what you say."

I pushed the desk phone toward him and I pushed him, chair and all, back a little so I could keep my eyes on his.

I handed him the phone and let him do his talking, and he kept in line. When he put it down, he said, "Name is Richard Bergman. Registered from Cleveland, been here three days. That's all the registration card shows."

I took a deep breath and straightened up. I said, "All right, Mr. Blake. Thanks. I'm going now, and you can call the police, if you want to. My name is Ed Hunter if you forgot it since Mr. Starlock introduced me when we came in here. And maybe you can get me a day or two in the jug on a charge of threatening physical violence, even though it's only your word against mine. But if you do, I'll be looking you up, afterwards. On your way home some morning."

I went out without looking back at him. If he had a gun in a drawer, he didn't shoot me in the back with it. And I didn't think he'd phone the police.

Ben Starlock was leaning against the pillar in the lobby, watching the door. I nodded to him and we went outside. He asked, "Get it all? And will there be—repercussions?"

“I got it, and I don't think so. Wait a minute; I want to write down some names and addresses before I forget them.” I took out my notebook and pencil and put down the information I'd got from the hotel manager.

I told Starlock the name of the man registered in four-eighteen and asked if it meant anything to him. He shook his head. “He probably hasn't anything to do with it. Am was probably picked off on his way out of our building or on his way into the hotel, before he got to the desk to ask for Mr. Collector.”

“Picked off how?” I wanted to know. “That isn't easy to do in the Loop.”

“Someone who knew him could do it. Get him in a car on some pretext or other. Did you find out how long this Richard Bergman has been at the Gresham?”

“Three days; he registered from Cleveland, no street address.” If he was connected with—with whatever happened, he'd have checked out by now. If he's still there—”

We were passing a tavern that was still open. I said, “Let's go in here and phone him. That's easy enough to check.”

We stopped walking. Ben Starlock rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He said, “I don't know whether that's a good idea or not. But let's have a drink anyway. And we can phone the office from here; if there's nothing new there, we can go look up those hotel clerks without having to go back to the office first.”

We turned back and went into the tavern. I saw a closed-door type of phone booth at the back and asked, “Shall I make the call to the office?”

Starlock's hand pulled me toward the bar. “Let's think this out first, Ed, about whether we should phone four-eighteen. I don't think we should. If he's there, he's probably okay, but there's just a chance he isn't—that he is tied in with Am's disappearance, but that he's sitting tight. And a phone call at this time of night, even if we play it for a wrong number, might scare him off.”

“I guess that's right. But what if he skips out anyway during the night and we lose him?”

The bartender came over to us and Starlock ordered two straight ryes, without asking me what I wanted. But that was all right with me. After the bartender had poured them and walked away, Starlock said, “I don't think he will, Ed. If he was going to skip, he'd have done so early this evening, before Am would be missed. If he's still there now, he'll still be there in the morning. And in the morning I'll put two ops on him—one to tail him around if he leaves the hotel. The other to check up on him from the outside. I'll phone Cleveland, too—the Carson Agency or the Pinkertons—to check up if a guy by that name really lives there, and what makes him tick.”

I asked, “Have we got two ops free tomorrow?” I asked because I remembered that we'd been pretty busy, and the Starlock Agency isn't a big one; there are only seven regular ops, five besides Uncle Am and myself.

“Ed,” Starlock said, “we've got every man we've *got* free, if there's any angle on this business we can put him on. The hell with anything else we've got on hand.”

“That's swell of you, Ben,” I said.

“Swell of me, hell. Your uncle's one of the best guys on earth, but I'd throw the whole agency on the deal *if anybody* working for us got monkeyed with. I'd call in every man we have tonight, if there was anything to go on, but so far there's so damn little that you and I and Jane can handle it. And speaking of Jane— Want another drink before you phone her?”

“You can order it for me,” I told him. “I'll drink it afterwards.”

I went back to the phone booth and called the agency. When Jane's voice answered, I said, “This is Ed. Anything doing?”

“Yes, Ed. Miss Beck just remembered where she heard that Ambrose Collector business; she just came in to tell me about it. She's here; want to talk to her?”

“Yes.”

Estelle's voice came on the wire, excited. “It was Karl Dell, Eddie. It was Karl Dell who was talking about the Ambrose Collector!”

I took a deep breath. I said, “Stay there, 'Stelle. We'll be right around. We're only a few blocks away.”

I hurried back to Ben Starlock; the bartender was just pouring our drinks.

## Chapter 4

I SAID, “COME ON, BEN,” and pulled at his arm as I went past him. I might as well have pulled at the trunk of a tree as I walked past it; Starlock didn't move an inch and the jerk brought me up short and almost threw me off balance.

He said, “Don't get excited, Ed. Drink your drink; don't waste it.”

“But Estelle's remembered.”

“That's fine. Now relax; we'll leave in sixty seconds, and sixty seconds isn't going to make any difference. Drink your drink and calm down; you get places faster if you don't run, and you're in better shape to do something after you do get there.”

I picked up my shot of rye and downed it. A little too fast. I choked and almost exploded.

Starlock said, "You see what I mean."

He drank down his own drink neat, and neatly. He said, "If you're ready to walk and not run to the nearest exit, we'll stroll back to the office and talk it over with your friend."

I was over choking by then and I had to grin at him. I picked up my chaser and took a few sips on it—slowly. Then I said, "Okay, let's go. And we'll crawl there if you say so."

"That's better. Come on, then."

Outside, we looked both ways for a cab and there was none in sight and we started walking.

Starlock asked, "Did you find out what Estelle remembered? Or just that she did remember?"

"I didn't get the details. But she heard about the Ambrose Collector from a guy named Karl Dell. He rooms where Am and I do; Estelle rooms there, too. He's kind of a nut."

"What kind?"

"Astrology," I said. "He eats and sleeps it; he'll talk your arm off about it. He wanted to use it tonight to find out what happened to Uncle Am."

"Tonight? You were with him tonight?"

"For twenty minutes or so, around ten o'clock." I told Starlock about the phone call and the poker game that I hadn't gone to.

"Know where the poker game is? I mean, is there any chance of finding this guy Dell—after we talk to your friend and get the details—before he gets home from the game?"

"I don't see how," I said. "All I know is that it's a few blocks from where we live. But it's after midnight now, and he said he wasn't going to play very late."

Starlock said, "That's what they all say. What is he outside of being an astrologer?"

"Sells insurance for the Harrison Mutual. The kind they call industrial insurance, where they collect a dime or a quarter a week on a regular route."

"What's he like personally, Ed?"

“Fairly nice, when he isn't boring you to death riding his hobby. For short periods, anyway; he's a little too much of an eager beaver to wear very well. He makes friends and influences people. You know the type.”

“That doesn't completely give me what I want,” Starlock said. “Let's put it this way: Can you picture him having anything to do with Am's disappearance?”

I thought that over for almost half a block, and even then I didn't stick my neck out too far. I said, “I don't think so. If he's a phony, he's a pretty consistent one and a pretty clever one. I don't think he's crooked—but I do think he's a little screwy.”

“Screwy enough to collect Ambroses?”

“I don't think so. Let's see what Estelle has to say. Maybe, even if it was Karl who mentioned that, it'll be a lead in an entirely different direction. Let's hold judgment.”

Starlock said, “Maybe that's smart,” and we didn't talk any more until we got back to the office.

Estelle looked much calmer than she'd sounded over the phone. Even so, her eyes were still shining with excitement. She was talking almost before we had the door closed.

“Eddie, it was about a week ago; I was right on that. Karl took me to a movie that evening—my evening off, Tuesday evening, so it must have been eight days ago. And it was a double feature; one of the pictures was 'Cuban Holiday' and that was the one we wanted to see and we got in just at the start of it. Then the B picture was 'The Case of Edward Dean.' Have you seen it?”

“No. Go on.”

“It wasn't very good. We saw about a fourth or a third of it, and Karl thought it was even worse than I did, and I didn't think much of it. So we left before it was over. But the picture was what led up to his mentioning the Ambrose Collector, so I had to start out with it. The picture—'The Case of Edward Dean'—started out with a man, Edward Dean, disappearing. With no motive at all, up as far as we saw in the picture. I mean, he didn't have any reason for disappearing himself; he had everything to lose. And nobody had any reason for kidnapping or killing him.

“After we, Karl and I, left we stopped in to have a drink—I don't remember the place, but it was on Randolph in the Loop, I think; I guess that doesn't matter anyway—and the picture had made me a little curious so I asked Karl what he thought had happened to Edward Dean in the picture.”

Starlock said, “Just a second,” and glanced at Jane, whose pencil was flying over the lines in her shorthand notebook. “Getting all this, Jane? She's going like a runaway train.”

Jane smiled up at him. 'Yes, Mr. Starlock. I've got it all anyway; she gave it to me while we were waiting for you to get here. I'm just doing this for a double check, in case she adds anything.' Starlock nodded at Estelle to go ahead.

She started a sentence back. "I asked Karl what he thought had happened to Edward Dean in the picture and he said, 'Maybe the Edward Collector got him.' I asked him what he was talking about—not knowing yet whether he was kidding or whether I'd miss something in the part of the picture we saw, and he grinned and said, 'Well, there's an Ambrose Collector. Why couldn't there be an Edward Collector too?'"

"By that time I knew—or I thought then—that he was kidding, so I asked, 'Who is the Ambrose Collector?' just like you asked me when I mentioned him early this evening, and Karl said, 'Nobody knows *who* he is. All anybody knows about him is that he collects people named Ambrose.' And, just like you asked, I asked, 'Why does he?' so Karl said, 'Nobody knows why. He just does.' So I laughed and we got to talking about something else. The other picture, I guess."

"And that was all that was said about it?" I asked her.

"Every word, Eddie. I forgot all about it, until tonight you said Uncle Am hadn't come home yet. And it was only around seven o'clock so that wasn't anything to worry about and you didn't seem worried about it either, so I just said, 'Maybe the Ambrose Collector got him,' without even remembering where I'd heard about it. But I knew, when you asked me afterwards, that I *would* remember if I kept on trying. And I wasn't leaving here till I did, if it took me a week."

Ben Starlock smiled her. He said, "I'm afraid you would have, young lady. You'd have distracted my operatives, sitting in the back room there and looking like a fugitive from the Follies."

"But feeling like a fugitive from Information, Please. Oh, Eddie, I felt so awful, feeling that maybe what I knew was important to you, and not being able to remember."

"You did a swell job of getting all the details when you did remember, 'Stelle," I said.

"And is it important? Does it mean something?"

I didn't know how to answer that one. I looked at Starlock. I guess he didn't know, either.

He said, "Maybe it means something, maybe it doesn't. It'd be a hell of a coincidence if both what Karl Dell said and what the guy who got Am called himself over the phone both came out of a clear sky."

"Too much of a coincidence for me," I told him, "I'd rather swallow the fact that Jonah swallowed the whale."

Jane said, "It was the whale that swallowed Jonah, Ed." Jane is a wonderful stenographer, but we sometimes wonder how she finds her way back to the office after lunch every day.

Starlock sat down on a corner of his desk. He said, "Ed, even if it turns out to be a dud, we've got to follow it. So I think we'd better split forces. You know this Karl Dell; you can handle him. Take Estelle home and talk to Karl; if he isn't home from the poker game, you might as well wait for him. There's nothing else to do except see these two desk clerks from the Gresham. I can do that. Not that I expect to get anything out of them. I don't think Am got as far as the desk of that hotel."

"You might find out something about the guy in four-eighteen, Richard Bergman. Maybe they know something about him personally."

He nodded. "Maybe. It won't hurt to try. Although if Am didn't get as far as the desk to ask for that room number, then it's odds-on that the Ambrose Collector picked that number out of the air; in which case Bergman doesn't mean anything to us. But we'll let that go till tomorrow, except for what the clerks may know."

"All right," I said. "And we'll keep in touch through Jane. I'll phone in as soon as I've seen Karl Dell, whether what he says mean anything or not. Ready, 'Stelle?"

She was. We went down together and all took the same cab, since one of the addresses I'd given Starlock was on Division just west of Dearborn and he could take that one first and drop us off en route.

I was glad to see a crack of light under Mrs. Brady's door. I knocked and asked her if there had been any phone calls for either me or Uncle Am.

She shook her head. "Is something wrong, Ed?" She asked.

"I don't know," I told her. "Do you happen to know if Karl is home yet?"

"No, I don't, Ed. I've had my radio going most of the time, and even when I have it turned down soft like that, I don't hear people coming and going."

"You would have heard the phone ring, though, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes. I can always hear the phone. I'm sure there weren't any calls for you or your uncle while you were out. There was only one call, and that was for Chester."

"Is he home?"

"Yes, but he's probably asleep by now. The call was an hour ago and he came down in a bathrobe over his pajamas to answer it."

I thanked her and Estelle and I went on up to the second floor. There wasn't a crack of light under any door. We knocked on Karl Dell's door and there wasn't any answer.

I said to Estelle, "I wish I knew whether he's *a* light or heavy sleeper. I hate to wake up the whole house by knocking loud."

"Let's try our keys, Eddie. Maybe one of them will open it."

It sounded like a good idea; the locks on all the rooms are ordinary ones and the keys are practically skeleton keys. I tried mine first and it wouldn't work, but Estelle's did. I reached in and turned on the light. The room was empty; the bed made. Just the same, I didn't take any chances of his being there but not wanting to see us. I looked in the closet and even under the bed.

But Karl wasn't home, hiding or otherwise, so I turned out the light and locked the door again.

I went into our room to look around and to be sure Uncle Am hadn't been there. It would have been wonderful to find him in the bed, asleep. Even dead drunk, out like a light; not that I'd ever seen him that way. Uncle Am does his share of drinking, but he knows how to handle it. I've never seen him past the cheerful stage.

But he wasn't in our room, drunk or sober, dead or alive. And the note I'd left for him was still there.

Estelle was still in the doorway. She said, "Shall we wait in here, Eddie? If we leave the door ajar, we can hear anyone on the stair."

"Don't you want to go to bed?" I asked her.

She lowered her eyes in mock modesty. "Why, Eddie," she said. "This is so sudden."

It would have been funny any other time. Or intriguing. But I gave her a quick grin and let it go at that. I said, "If you want to wait till Karl comes home, okay, sit down and relax. I'm going to phone Jane and keep her posted."

I went downstairs and phoned the office. Ben Starlock, Jane said, hadn't phoned in yet. I told her Karl Dell wasn't home and that I was waiting for him. I told her I wouldn't phone again until I'd talk to him, but that if anything important came up meanwhile, she should phone me.

She said, "I've finished phoning hospitals, Ed. He isn't at any of them."

"That's good," I said, and then wondered if it was. If he was in a hospital, injured anywhere short of fatally, at least I'd *know*.



I went back upstairs. Estelle was lying back in the overstuffed chair, her eyes closed. But they opened and asked a question as I came in.

“Nothing yet,” I told her. “Starlock hasn't phoned in; he's barely had time to get to the first guy he was going to see. Are you sure you're not tired, Estelle?”

“Of course not. What time is it?”

“Not quite one o'clock.”

“Why'd I be tired then? I'd still be working for another half hour if I was at the restaurant. And I never get to sleep before three or so. And I sleep till almost noon. Besides—well, I just couldn't sleep tonight anyway.”

I sat down on the arm of the chair; she leaned her head against me and I reached across it and patted her shoulder.

She said, “*I am* tired, though, Eddie. Not sleepy, but tired. I hated being a waitress.”

“Hated?”

“Yes, I quit tonight. Sam wouldn't let me off when I asked him. Oh, I suppose if I'd gone to a lot of trouble to explain *how* important it was and had argued him into it, but— Well, I guess I wanted an excuse to quit anyway.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Not even think about it for a few days. Just rest up and forget I ever *was* a waitress. Then—well, maybe I'll try to get into modeling. That's hard to get into, but it pays better and the hours are better.”

I said, “I guess you've got what it takes.” But I wasn't guessing; Estelle had been with the posing show at the carney and she did have what it took.

“And if I can't get into modeling—well, it's September now, so I'll have to take something for the winter, clerking or something, and in the spring I'll probably go with a carnival again.”

I said, “That's a hell of a life for a girl, 'Stelle. You don't want to do that.” She didn't answer.

That left me rather out on a limb. But the phone rang, and I ran down to answer it. I got there just as Mrs. Brady was opening her door. I said, “It's probably for me, Mrs. Brady,” and took down the receiver.

I said, "Ed Hunter speaking," and Jane Rogers' voice said, "This is Jane, Ed. Mr. Starlock just phoned. He's talked to one of the two clerks and the clerk doesn't remember anyone having asked for four-eighteen late this afternoon. And he couldn't identify the photograph of your uncle."

"Has Starlock got a photograph?"

"Yes. You must have been in the back room when I was getting it for him from the file."

"But how—?" And then I remembered that my application for work with the agency had required a photograph to be clipped to it. Uncle Am's application would have been the same. So I said, "Okay, Jane. Anything else?"

"No. And the clerk didn't remember who was in four-eighteen or the name Richard Bergman. Mr. Starlock's gone on to find the other clerk."

I said, "Okay, Jane. And the man I'm waiting for isn't home yet, so I'm sitting tight. So long."

When I put the receiver back, I saw that Mrs. Brady was still in the doorway. She said, "Ed, something *must* be wrong. Has something happened to your uncle?"

"We don't know where he is," I told her. "We *are* worried; we're trying to find him." I turned to go to the stairs, but she said, "Ed Hunter!" in so commanding a tone that I had to stop. She said, "You come in and tell me about it. Maybe there's something I can do to help. And anyway, if you're up this late, I can give you a cup of coffee. And if you won't drink it, I can pour it down your neck. I was just making some."

"Coffee sounds good," I admitted. "But can I have a cup for Estelle too? She's waiting with me."

"Bring her down."

I started to turn and then hesitated. I said, "We'd better not, Mrs. Brady. I'm listening for—someone to come in. And in your place, back in the kitchen anyway, we couldn't hear even if we left the hall door open. Tell you what, I'll tell Estelle to keep guard and then I'll come down and get coffee for both of us. And let you pump me."

I ran up and told Estelle and then went back to the main floor again. Mrs. Brady had left her door open so I walked in and went back to the kitchen. She'd exaggerated in saying she was just making some coffee; she hadn't started yet. She was just putting fresh coffee into the percolator as I walked into the kitchen. She waited until she had it on the stove and then said, "Now tell me, Ed."

I didn't give her any of the details, just that Uncle Am was so far overdue that even our boss was worried and that he and I were working on different angles trying to locate him. And that Estelle was helping, too.

“And what about Karl Dell? How does he come into this? Almost the first thing you asked when you came in before was whether Karl was back yet.”

I didn't want to explain something that I didn't know how to explain anyway, so I thought fast and came up with something a little more believable than the truth. I said, “Karl was talking, early this evening, about going to a poker game; he asked me to go with him. Uncle Am likes to play poker and I thought he might have been coming in as Karl was leaving and have gone to the game with him.”

She said “Oh,” as though that made sense—which is more than could have been said for the truth. She went on, though. “Ed, I don't quite trust Karl Dell. I don't know why but—sometimes he gives me the creeps, some of the things he says. What's the matter with you and Estelle?”

It was such an abrupt change that “Huh?” was the best I could do. She just looked at me without answering, so I had to explain it. “What do you mean, Mrs. Brady?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean. That girl's head over heels in love with you and has been every since I've known the two of you. She came here because you and your uncle did, and you know it. And what's wrong with her?”

“What do you mean, what's wrong with her?”

“Nothing's wrong with her, that's what I mean. She's the prettiest girl I know. And I'm pretty sure you're not in love with anybody else—not even yourself. And she's crazy about you and what more than that do you want?”

I opened my mouth and then closed it again because nothing came out of it. I didn't know the answer to that myself. Even telling Mrs. Brady that it was none of her business wasn't the answer and didn't have anything to do with the answer.

She said, 'You're afraid of the fact that she *is* in love with you, Ed. You figure you don't want to get married yet, so you're afraid of her. If she was some little floosie who didn't give a damn about you, you'd be panting outside her door every night.’

I grinned at her and said, “Why, Mrs. Brady.”

The coffee was starting to percolate and I got cups and saucers from the cupboard. I got three, but she told me to put one back because she was going to turn in. She had, then, made the coffee just for Estelle and me.

When it was ready, I watched while she poured two cups for us, and thanked her.

When I was helpless with a cup in either hand she patted my shoulder before she opened the door for me. She said, “I shouldn't have jumped you, Ed, when you're worried about your uncle. Come down some other time and I'll take a switch to you.”

“That'll be fine,” I said. “Thanks, Mrs. Brady.”

“And don't worry about Ambrose Hunter. He's all right, wherever he is. I'll bet on that.”

At one-fifteen in the morning, I'd have bet against it—not that I wouldn't gladly have lost my bet. Uncle Am is a pretty smart cookie, but he hadn't been looking for trouble or for Ambrose Collectors. And no matter how smart you are, it doesn't help counteract a blackjack over your head or a gun in your ribs.

But I said, “Sure, he's all right, I guess. If you're going to turn in, don't worry about the phone, Mrs. Brady. I'll get it if it rings again.”

I went upstairs with the coffee, a cup in each hand; and it's a good thing that the phone didn't ring while I was on my way up or I'd probably have dropped both cups in my hurry to answer it.

## **Chapter 5**

ESTELLE WAS LEANING BACK in the overstuffed chair as I came in. Her eyes were closed as though she were asleep and there was a faint smile on her lips. I stood there a moment, a cup of steaming coffee in either hand, looking at her as though I'd never really seen her before.

Not that I hadn't seen her often enough. Even on the stage of the posing show at the carney, in nothing but a G-string and a bit of net. And then there had been the night we'd wandered off the carney lot into the woods—but I'd been in love with Rita, then, and it hadn't meant anything to me. I hadn't thought it had meant anything, much, to Estelle.

But now I wondered. Her reason, I knew, for leaving the carney hadn't been because Uncle Am and I had left it; it had been because a guy she didn't like—that none of us liked—had taken over the management of it. I'd figured that she liked both Am and me and I knew that was part of the reason why she'd picked Chicago when we had. And she lived her own life here; she went out with other men.

But I had a sudden hunch, standing there, that our Irish landlady was right, down the line. Not only about Estelle, but about me—about my being afraid of something too big for me to keep casual—about my being too selfish to risk being jarred out of what had been a comfortable groove.

And now, suddenly, that groove was gone.

Estelle opened her eyes and said, “Hi, Ed. Going to stand there till the coffee gets cold? I wasn't asleep.”

“I was just looking at you,” I told her. “Maybe I never saw you with your eyes closed before.”

I handed her one of the cups of coffee and then I pulled up the hassock and sat down on it to sip mine; it was still too hot to drink. I asked her, “You're sure you didn't doze off? If you're not sure, Karl might have come in. I was back in Mrs. Brady's kitchen; I wouldn't have heard him.”

I'm sure, Ed. I didn't close my eyes till I heard you coming.”

“Why did you then?”

She laughed. 'You'd never seen me with my eyes closed before. Maybe I wanted you to. You got up early this morning, didn't you, Eddie?”

“Usual time, seven-thirty. Why?”

“Karl might play poker all night, for all you know. Why don't you take a nap, and I'll wake you when he comes in. I won't close my eyes; promise.”

“I couldn't sleep.”

“You'll be sorry tomorrow. And it might be important that you feel fresh and not tired tomorrow.”

That made a lot of sense; right then I wasn't doing anything but worrying. I didn't even have any facts to think about and to try to build into something. I was just waiting for Karl Dell and I could do that as well asleep.

I said, “Maybe you've got something there, 'Stelle. Soon as I finish my coffee, I'll rest a little anyway, even if I can't sleep.”

I took another sip; it was still too hot to drink down. Then I remembered something I wanted to do because I might forget to do it in the morning; I wanted to get some pictures of Uncle Am and have them in my pocket, as Ben Starlock had one in his.

I went to the dresser and got a stationery box that held the few photographs we had—all of them just snapshots—and picked out the two that showed Uncle Am pretty well. Both of them were taken at the carnival, one of Uncle Am standing in front of his ball-game concession, the other showed him sitting in the doorway of Hoagy's trailer on the lot at Louisville with Hoagy sitting beside him and both of them with beer bottles in their hands.

Marge Hoagland had taken both snapshots, and it gave me a turn to realize that Marge was dead and that Hoagy was dead—and that I didn't know where Uncle Am was, except that if he was all right there wasn't any logical explanation why he hadn't come home or phoned. Marge and Hoagy both dead and now Uncle Am— —Cut it out, I told myself. But I put the picture of Uncle Am and Hoagy back into the box and just kept out the one of him alone in front of the booth.

It looked most like him, anyway. He was grinning and he had on the sloppy black slouch hat—like the one the Shadow wears—that he always wears and that I've always kidded him about. And the sun was low, so the brim of it didn't shade his eyes and they showed up well, the little crinkles around the corners of them and the tolerant amusement in them. And his biggish nose didn't shade or hide the brown, scraggly mustache that's as much a part of him as his right arm. Yes, it was a better photograph for identification than the passport-sized portrait Starlock had. Of course, there was nothing on it from which to judge his height, but I could supply that. I remembered how I had described him to somebody once: “shortish, fattish, and smartish.”

And he hadn't changed a bit since that snapshot was taken, except that—aside from the black slouch hat—he dressed a bit more neatly now than he used to on the carney lot.

I put the snapshot into my billfold and went back to the hassock and my coffee. It was plenty cool by now.

Estelle must have been watching me. She said, “He's really like a father to you, isn't he, Ed?”

“Yes,” I said, and I wanted to let it go at that because this was something I'd never told Estelle about, but I found myself going on. “I never really got to know my own father—until it was too late, until after he was killed. Then I got to know Uncle Am and he pulled me through that and—well, together we found the guy who'd killed my father.”

“Your father was—murdered, Ed?”

I nodded. “Uncle Am took me back to the carney with him, and—well, you know what happened there. The business about Hoagy and Marge. That, and the business about my father, showed me that Uncle Am and I clicked in some funny way when it came to detective work. We fitted somehow; together we were a hell of a lot more than the sum of what we were separately. And he'd been a private detective before he went with the carney and I talked him into going back into it and getting me a job along with him with the same agency. I even dreamed of having an agency of our own someday, 'Stelle—Hunter and Hunter.’”

“That would be nice, Ed. But why do you say 'dreamed'; you haven't changed your mind about it, have you?”

I didn't want to put into exact words why I'd used the past tense. I didn't even want to think why I had. And then it occurred to me that I'd feel better if I did put things into words instead of trying to keep them at the back of my mind.

I said, "Let's face it, 'Stelle. It's one-thirty, and if Uncle Am were all right, he'd have been in touch with us hours ago. What alternatives are there? He isn't in a hospital. He wouldn't just *stay* out when he'd know we'd be worrying about him, would he? Some people might, but not Uncle Am. And something might have come up that would have kept him away from a phone for an hour or so—but not for eight hours, 'Stelle."

She reached over and put her hand on mine. She said, "I got a hunch, Ed, that he's all right."

But I could tell from the tone of her voice that she didn't really believe it herself. Neither the hunch part, nor the rest of it.

I said, "I haven't any hunch. I'm just figuring the odds. And the odds are pretty bad, 'Stelle. But what I was starting to say, before, was that I talked him into this. That's what hurts."

"Talked him into what? I don't understand."

"Into being a private detective again, 'Stelle. If I hadn't heckled him into it, he'd still be a carney. And still be alive—if he isn't."

"That's silly, Ed. Blaming yourself. Anyway, how do you know what happened— if anything *has* happened, really—had anything to do with his being a detective?"

"You mean it could be some personal grudge? That's silly and you know it. Uncle Am hasn't an enemy on earth, unless it's one he made on some case he's worked on."

The phone rang. I nearly broke my neck getting down the stairs to answer it.

It was Ben Starlock. He said, "Didn't get much, Ed. I'm heading back to the office. This Dell is still out?"

"Yes. You said you didn't get much; what did you get?"

"The second desk clerk—Everest—didn't identify Am's picture or remember anyone asking for four-eighteen at the desk, but he does remember Richard Bergman, the guy *in* four-eighteen. Says he's stayed at the hotel before and always registers under the same name and from Cleveland, but he thinks the guy is from New York and he thinks he's in the numbers racket."

"Thinks or knows?" I asked.

“Someone told him so, but he doesn't remember who. About a month ago, Everest says, this Bergman was staying there a few days and Everest was talking to someone at the desk, someone else who was staying there and he doesn't remember who, when Bergman walked through the lobby, and this guy made some crack—Everest doesn't remember the exact words—about the New York numbers rackets moving into Chicago.”

I asked, “Has Uncle Am been working on any job connected with the numbers racket?”

“No. I don't take that kind of work, Ed. One other thing: I fixed it with Everest to check on slips for outgoing phone calls from four-eighteen. I slipped him twenty, and as soon as he starts work at nine tomorrow, he'll look and see if any outgoing calls were made from four-eighteen yesterday. Incoming calls won't show. Neither will the phone numbers—unless on long-distance calls—but it could be interesting to know if he made a local call, from his room, a few minutes before four o'clock. Anyway, Everest will phone the agency the minute he gets a chance to check the slips in the morning.”

“Good,” I said. “And that reminds me I forgot to get the name and address of the girl who'd have been on the switchboard this afternoon. One of us ought to talk to her.”

“I got it from Everest, Ed. But we can't see her until tomorrow. Everest knows her fairly well; she's a cousin of his and he got her the job. And tomorrow's her day off and she went up to Racine this evening to spend the night with some friends there; she'll be back sometime tomorrow.”

“Could we phone her?”

“Everest knows the people and says they haven't got a phone. And I don't think it's important enough for one of us to go to Racine and back tonight. After all, Ed, were pretty sure the guy in four-eighteen hasn't anything to do with it. I think both the hotel and the room numbers were picked out of the air, and somebody got Am before he ever got there.”

“I think so, too. What are you going to do next, Ben?”

“Go back to the office. I'll check up on what kind of job Jane's been doing on the hospitals and everything, and then I think I'll catch a few hours' sleep in the back room unless something develops. How's about you, Ed? Is there any way you can fix it so you can sleep a little and still know when this Dell character comes home? You know what poker games are; he may be out till five or six o'clock.”

“I think I can,” I told him. “Estelle will watch for me; and she can sleep as late as she wants to tomorrow, and says she isn't sleepy now.”

“Okay, Ed. You catch sleep, then, and I won't call you up again unless something important develops. Use your own judgment on whether to call me up after you've seen Dell. You may get a lead or you may get nothing.”



I said, "I'll call the office in either case, or come in. But I won't have Jane wake you up unless it's something we can get our teeth into."

"Attaboy, Ed. So long."

I went back upstairs and, since Estelle knew everything that had happened up to then, I told her everything Starlock had told me over the phone.

"All right, Eddie," she said. "And now you lie down on the bed and take a nap."

"All by myself?"

"All by yourself. I'm going to turn out the light so you can really sleep, and I'll leave the door ajar and move a chair so I can see through it out into the hallway. And I'll keep my eyes open so I won't fall asleep. Not that I'm sleepy."

I slipped off my shoes and lay down. Estelle clicked off the light and a moment later her lips were on mine. I put my arms around her and pulled her down; I kissed her hard.

She laughed a little. "I'm just kissing you good night, Eddie. Don't get ideas; you've got to sleep."

I pulled her closer, but she said, "I mean it, Eddie."

And she did. Because she said the one thing that stopped me cold: "Don't forget *why* you've got to sleep."

"Okay, 'Stelle," I said. And then, "Do you remember that night at the carnival?"

"Yes. I thought *you'd* forgotten it, Eddie."

Then her lips brushed mine lightly; she pulled away. I heard her move the chair and then dim light from the hallway became less dim as she widened the crack in the door.

I closed my eyes, knowing that I couldn't sleep, knowing that there wasn't any use trying and that the harder I tried the less use there'd be. I didn't even try not to think about Uncle Am; I just let myself go, and I must have gone to sleep within five or ten minutes for I don't remember lying there thinking for any longer than that.

Then Estelle was shaking my shoulder gently and sudden bright light hurt my eyes as I rolled over.

Estelle said, "Karl's home. He just came in."

I sat up. "What time is it?"

“Ten minutes to four. You slept a little over two hours.”

I asked, “Did you say anything to Karl?” I slid my feet off the bed and started tying my shoes.

“No. When I heard him coming up the stairs I pulled the door shut, all but half an inch, just enough to make sure it was him and he was going into his room. Are you going to let me come with you when you talk to him, Eddie? I think you should, in case he denies saying what he said to me, or tries to remember he doesn't remember.”

“Right. Come on, before he gets undressed.”

We went out into the hallway and I knocked on the door just past Chester Hamlin's.

Karl opened the door a few inches. He said, “Hi. Ed. What—?”

“Estelle and I have to talk to you for a few minutes, Karl. It's damn important.”

He'd started to open the door until I mentioned Estelle and he looked past me and saw her. He pulled it part way shut again, then, and said, “Just a second till I pull on a bathrobe. Mostly ready for bed.” A few seconds later, in bathrobe and slippers, he pulled the door wide and said, “Come on in. Haven't you heard from your uncle yet, Ed?” We went in. I said, “No. And it's something in connection with that, Karl, that I want to ask you about. What's this business you mentioned to Estelle about an Ambrose Collector?”

He put back his head and started to laugh and then sobered suddenly as I took a step toward him and he saw the expression on my face. He stopped laughing so suddenly that it nearly choked him.

“I'm sorry, Ed,” he said. “About your uncle being missing and all that. But the Ambrose Collector business is just a gag, more or less. You've never read Charles Fort?”

“No. Who's Charles Fort?”

“I can't tell you in a sentence. Sit down.”

Estelle took a chair and I sat down on the bed. Karl had turned to the bookcase. He bent down and pulled out a thickish book and handed it to me. The title was *The Books of Charles Fort*.

I didn't open it; I looked back at Karl to let him explain.

He said, “You can borrow it if you like, and I think you'll like reading it, Ed, but it hasn't anything to do with your uncle; I'll tell you enough to show you that.

“Charles Fort was a New York newspaperman who died about twenty years ago. He was either a screwball or a genius, and plenty of people think he was a genius; people like Ben Hecht and Tiffany Thayer, and Carl Sandburg and Sherwood Anderson. They organized a Fortean Society and published a periodical. I don't know whether it's still running or not.”

“But what did he write about?” I asked.

“Damn near everything. He believed that *science*, orthodox science, especially astronomy and meteorology, was screwy, that it had gone off the beam somewhere and led us astray. He gathered facts—mostly in the form of news clippings from everywhere—of things that didn't fit in with the current opinions of the scientists and are therefore ignored or explained away. Rains of frogs, rains of fishes, mysterious appearances and disappearances, werewolves, spaceships, sea serpents, earthquakes and meteors, Martians and mermaids. It's damned fascinating stuff, Ed.

“Take something that happened comparatively recently—this flying disk business. That would have been meat and drink for Charles Fort. And has it ever been satisfactorily explained? Of course not. Only he's got thousands of unexplained things like that in his books, just as mysterious as the disks. And also never really explained.”

I said, “It sounds interesting as hell. Where does an Ambrose Collector come in?”

“That's one of Fort's little jokes. In the fourth and last of his books, *Wild Talents*, he's discussing mysterious disappearances. He mentions the disappearance of a man named Ambrose Something-or-other in Canada—a particularly mysterious disappearance because if the man just walked off he left more than a million bucks behind him and didn't even take a clean collar. Then he correlates that, tongue in cheek I think, with the disappearance of Ambrose Bierce, the author, in Texas a few years before, and asks 'Was somebody collecting Ambroses?'“

“That part I want to read,” I said. “You say it's in the—fourth book, is it?” I picked up the volume from beside me on the bed.

“Yes, *Wild Talents*. That's the omnibus edition, all four of his books in one volume. And it's indexed in the back. Look under Ambrose Bierce in the index, since I don't remember the other Ambrose's last name, and you'll find it. And by all means take the book along.”

“Thanks, Karl.”

“But—what started all of this? Your uncle's name is Ambrose, sure, but good God, Ed, Fort was kidding about an Ambrose Collector. And that was a long time ago, anyway.”

I told him about the phone call that had pulled Uncle Am out of the Starlock office and the name the caller had used.

Karl whistled softly. "He must be someone who's read Charles Fort, but I'd hate to guess how many people in Chicago have read him. Thousands. Anyway, he must have a macabre sense of humor."

I said, "When I find him, I'll find out how macabre his sense of humor is. I'll peel his skin off in strips and see how hard he laughs."

I stood up, and because I'd sounded overdramatic, even to myself, I asked, "How went the poker game?"

"Not so hot." He grinned ruefully. "Which is a perfect build-up to can you let me borrow a fin till Friday?"

I handed it to him but couldn't resist saying, "The astrology fell flat on its face, then?"

"Matter-of-fact, it didn't. I was fifteen bucks ahead up to midnight. If I could have quit then, I'd have been all right. This is Thursday, the fourteenth, and not an especially good day for me." He glanced at the clock on the bureau. "Especially it'll be a tough day after only three hours' sleep." Estelle laughed. "Not hinting that you want us to leave, are you, Karl?" He grinned. "Not you, Estelle. You may stay as long as you like." But she followed me out.

In the hallway, she put her hand on my arm. She said, "I'm sorry, Eddie." I didn't know what she was talking about; I asked her.

"That the Ambrose Collector is only something out of a book. I thought maybe I was giving you a real lead."

"That's not your fault, 'Stelle," I told her. "I guess I hoped for a little more out of it than we got, but—well, it's something. And maybe so soon after waking up I'm a little stupid and I'll see more in it later. Anyway, I suppose I might as well phone the office and report in."

I went down a few steps and then hesitated, wondering if it wouldn't be just as well to go right around to the agency instead of phoning.

Estelle said, "Go ahead and phone, Eddie, and if Mr. Starlock doesn't know of anything you can do now, get some more sleep. I'll stay awake and listen for the phone." I didn't make up my mind about that just then; I went down to the phone without arguing the point and called the office. Jane interrupted me as I started to give her a message. She said, "Here's Mr. Starlock, Ed; he must have heard the phone ring and come in from the back room. I'll let you talk to him."

A second later Starlock's voice said, "I was just dozing, Ed, and the phone waked me. What's the score?"

“Afraid we struck out.” I told him the little we'd got from Karl Dell. “Not so good,” he admitted. “All we know is that whoever got Am must have read Charles Fort.”

I said, “Or heard someone talk about him. I mean, Estelle had heard of the Ambrose Collector without even having read Charles Fort.”

“Look, Ed, maybe that's an angle. There's one other thing we are pretty sure about—the guy who got Am must have known Am by sight. Did you ask Dell who, besides Estelle, he might have mentioned the Ambrose Collector business to? To anyone else around at your rooming house, for instance, besides Estelle? I think we can rule Estelle out.”

“I know we can,” I told him. “No, I didn't ask Karl that. I'll ask him. Then what? Shall I come down to the office?”

“Not a thing you can do here, Ed. I've put in all the routine calls I could think of, with all results negative. I've even called the police and given them a report so if anything comes to them, we'll get it. Not that they'll *do* anything on it tonight, probably.”

“What time shall I come in?”

Starlock said, “Make it eight. I phoned the boys and three of them are coming in at eight. By that time I'll have assignments for them.”

“You're sure there's nothing I can do now?”

“Not a thing, Ed. See you at eight.”

I went back up the steps. Estelle was sitting on the top step waiting for me, and I sat down beside her. I told her what Starlock said.

“Good,” she said. “Then you've got about two hours to sleep before you have to leave for the office. I'll stand watch.”

I shook my head. “Not in the mood for it, 'Stelle. I'll feel better now if I stay awake.”

“All right, Eddie. Can I help you stay awake?”

I laughed. She put her head on my shoulder and said, “Tell me what's funny.”

“I was thinking,” I said, “of what Uncle Am would tell me to do.”

“He's a pretty smart guy, Eddie.”

I said, “I think so, too.”

She whispered, “My room?” Go ahead up. I want to ask Karl one more question.”

I kissed her and she tiptoed up to the third floor while I rapped on Karl Dell's door. He called out for me to come in and I found he hadn't locked the door. The room was dark and he was in bed, but I could tell by his voice that he hadn't yet gone to sleep.

I said, "Sorry, Karl, but I've got to ask one more question. And it might be important."

"Shoot, Ed. Come on in."

I went in but didn't turn on the light. I asked him, "Have you ever mentioned this Ambrose Collector business to anyone besides Estelle?"

"Ummm—I may have, Ed. I read Charles Fort for the first time ten years ago, when I was in my teens. I don't specifically remember, but I may have."

"Let's put it this way, then. Have you ever mentioned it to anyone around here? Anyone in the rooming house, anyone who may have known my uncle?"

"That I can say for sure, Ed. I haven't. I've lived in Chicago only a year and I'm sure I hadn't mentioned it to anyone here. The night I had a date with Estelle I'd just happened to have been reading that particular chapter; I hadn't thought about it for years before that."

"Okay," I said. "Thanks, and sorry I bothered you."

I pulled the door shut, and because he might be listening I went into my room first and waited a moment before I tiptoed up to the third floor.

Estelle's door was open and her light was on, but she wasn't there. I sat down in the easy chair and opened the Charles Fort book, which I'd been carrying under my arm. The sound of water running in the shower down the hall told me I had a few minutes to wait.

I looked under Bierce in the index and found the passage Karl had referred to. The Canadian Ambrose had been Ambrose Small and I read the account of his disappearance; the circumstances really were puzzling. And I read:

"Before I looked into the case of Ambrose Small, I was attracted to it by another seeming coincidence. That there could be any meaning in it seemed so preposterous that, as influenced by much experience, I gave it serious thought. About six years before the disappearance of Ambrose Small, Ambrose Bierce had disappeared. Newspapers all over the world had made much of the mystery of Ambrose Bierce. But what could the disappearance of one Ambrose, in Texas, have to do with the disappearance of another Ambrose, in Canada? Was somebody collecting Ambroses? There was in these questions an appearance of childishness that attracted my respectful attention."

I put the book down and snorted a little. What did the guy mean by "appearance" of childishness? It was just damn silly to connect two disappearances six years and a

thousand or more miles apart just because of a coincidence of first names. Was he crazy or trying to be funny? Or both?

And then I realized that I had no business trying to judge that one passage in the book out of context, without knowing the writer's general style and purpose.

And then I forgot about Charles Fort, for Estelle was in the doorway, barefooted, wearing a bathrobe.

She grinned at me and said, "Hi, Eddie," and then closed the door and turned out the light. A second later she was in my lap and the bathrobe had been lost somewhere between the door and me.

## Chapter 6

STARLOCK HAD TOLD ME to get to the office by eight, but it was only a few minutes after half past seven when I got there. Jane, looking sleepy, was typing on a yellow telegraph blank; she pulled it out of the machine and used the switch that summoned a Western Union messenger from downstairs in the building.

She said, "Hi, Ed," and saw me glancing curiously at the telegram. "To the Carson Agency in Cleveland. Telling them to make a quick check on Richard Bergman and to wire us results."

"Anything new?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "Not on the incoming end, Ed. We've put out a few hooks, as Mr. Starlock calls them."

The door to the back room opened, and Ben Starlock came in, rubbing his eyes. He said, "Hi, Ed. You're early. Early enough to have a cup of coffee with me before the boys get here. Everything caught up, Jane?"

"Yes, Mr. Starlock."

"Can you stick it out till nine o'clock, Jane?"

"Longer than that, if you want me to."

"Just till we can get an employment agency to send someone over, Jane. I doubt if any of them open before nine, but if you want to start trying sooner, go ahead. Tell them to send the best they've got—and one that's willing to take some overtime. We're going to have someone here—at least someone who can take messages—twenty-four hours a day till we find Am."

"And you want me to work nights?"

“If you will, Jane. And you can take twelve-hour shifts for a while? I don't know how long this will be—but I hope not long.”

“Sure, Mr. Starlock.”

“Good. Then when another girl gets here, you go home for twelve hours and then come back and relieve her. Come on, Ed, let's have a quick cup of coffee and get back here by eight.”

We went to the lunch room just around the corner.

He asked me if I'd asked Karl Dell the question he suggested, and I told him what Karl had told me—that he didn't remember having mentioned the Ambrose Collector to anyone in Chicago except Estelle.

I asked him, “Why do we need another stenographer? Couldn't Dane take care of the office days?” I meant Dane Evans, whose title is head clerk although he's the only clerk in the office, and who handles the bookkeeping and billing.

Ben said, “I'm going to throw a lot of extra work on Dane, and I want him free to handle it. I'm going to let him do all the talking with clients and handle whatever ops will still be working on regular stuff, so I'll be completely free to concentrate on finding Am. And with all that besides his regular work, he'll have his hands full. He'll be able to break in the new girl, but he'll need her help on the things he can show her how to do.”

He glanced at his watch. “Well, almost eight. We'd better get back.” When we got upstairs everyone was there. Everyone except Milt Eames, who's been working on a job way up in Minnesota. There was Joe Streator, Emil Krazka, Art Wheelan and Bill Rogers, who's Jane's brother. Four ops besides myself. And Dane Evans, the head clerk.

None of them had gone to the back room yet; they were all sitting or standing around the office.

Ben said, “Listen, you all know what's happened, except the details. And you're going to know them. Nobody's going to be working in the dark on this.

“I'm going to start by having Ed brief you on everything that's happened up to now. Go in the back room for that. And while that's going on, I'm going to call the police and start the machinery going.”

I led the way to the back room and the four ops and Dane Evans followed me. I started talking and gave them everything, starting with the phone call at four o'clock.

Ben Starlock opened the door before I'd finished, but he motioned me to go ahead, and stood there leaning in the doorway till I was through.



Then he said, "Pretty good job, Ed. I don't think you missed anything. All right, boys, this is first. Do any of you know anything that might tie in with this? That even might possibly tie in with this?"

Nobody answered, and after seconds, Ben said, "Okay, but if any of you remember anything later, however slight, however improbable, that might have a bearing, don't sit on it. Come to me with it right away. Maybe something Am might have said to one of you. Maybe anything; I don't know what it might be."

He looked around at all of them. Then he said, "Regardless of facts, has anybody got any ideas? Any suggestions?"

Nobody said anything for a minute and then Joe Streater said, "I suppose this is so obvious you've thought of it, but for what it's worth, Ben, has Am worked on anything lately that might have made him any enemies?"

Ben said, "I haven't remembered anything, and I've been trying. But that's your job, Dane, as soon as we break this up. Go through the time records and list every job that Am's worked on since he's been here that has a criminal angle—even as criminal as a car skip. Dig out the files on them and put them on my desk."

Dane Evans nodded.

Ben said, "I just called the police and reported. I gave it to Missing Persons as a formality and to get it on the records so if anything's reported to them, we'll get it.

"Then I called Inspector Andrews and told him about it. And I put the screws on him. It isn't a Homicide job—anyway we hope to hell it isn't—but I got him to put a man on it, and the man we want because he's a friend of Am's. Cap Bassett. He's on his way around here are right now."

He looked at me. "Any questions you want to ask 'em, Ed, before we start the ball rolling?"

I said, "It probably doesn't matter much, but I'm curious about one thing. Have any of you ever heard—before this morning—of the Ambrose Collector? Or of Charles Fort?" Dane Evans said, "I've heard of Charles Fort, I think. Isn't one of his books *The Book of the Damned*?"

"That's the first one he wrote," I said. "The Ambrose Collector gag—or whatever it is—is in the fourth and last one, *Wild Talents*."

Dane nodded. "Then I'd heard of Charles Fort—I read *The Book of the Damned* some years ago. But I hadn't heard of the Ambrose Collector. Shall I get those files, Ben?"

Starlock nodded, and moved out of the doorway to let Dane Evans past him. Slim as Dane is, Starlock is so heavy that Dane couldn't have got past him without squeezing.

Ben said, "First order of business is this Richard Bergman, the guy in four-eighteen at the Gresham. I'm going to put two of you boys on him, one to tail him and one to put the finger on him and to ask questions about him."

He pointed to Joe Streater and Emil Krazka. "You do the tailing, Joe. And you, Emil, the talking. There's a day clerk by the name of Everest. I slipped him a twenty last night and he'll cooperate with you. Maybe you can fix it with him to point out Bergman when he comes through the lobby. Or maybe if that doesn't look good, Emil, you can go up and see him on a wrong-room pretext and finger him for Joe. And then get everything you can out of Everest—and everybody else, including even the maid who does his room. And follow any leads you get. Right?"

Joe and Emil stood up. Ben said, "Get money from Dane on your way out. Draw a hundred apiece. If slipping ten or twenty to a maid or bellboy or anybody gets you something you wouldn't get otherwise, don't pinch pennies. And, Emil, after he's gone out, get a look in his room if you can swing it. You can get a maid to risk her job for fifty bucks, if you let her watch while you look around so she knows you're not swiping anything."

Joe asked, "What if he's gone out already when we get there?"

"I don't think he will have. This clerk Everest that I gave money to phoned here while I was talking to the police on our unlisted line, and Jane held him for me till I could talk. He gave me the dope on outgoing phone calls from four-eighteen yesterday—which is that there weren't any—and I asked him to check with the maid on whether he was still in or not. He called me back on that and said he'd talked to the maid on that wing of the fourth floor and she said he was still in and seldom left his room much before noon."

Emil Krazka grinned. "Sounds like you're getting your money's worth out of that twenty, Ben. And if the desk has already asked the maid about Bergman, I'll bet you my buzzer will get me in his room without any fifty bucks. I'll give her ten if she's good-looking."

When Joe and Emil had gone, Ben Starlock asked me, "Any ideas, Ed? Anything you can suggest for Bill or Art to do?"

Art Wheelan said, "Maybe this sounds screwy, Ben, but is anyone looking into the angle of whether maybe there *is* an Ambrose Collector?"

"What do you mean, Art?"

"A nut. A nut who reads this Charles What's-his-name. In other words, has anybody else by the name of Ambrose disappeared recently?"

Ben Starlock looked up at the ceiling. He said, "It sounds screwy all right, Art, but you've bought yourself a job. Go to some newspapers and get their files on disappearances. Concentrate on out-of-town cases."

"Okay. But why out-of-town ones?"

"I can get the local ones easier and quicker than that, that's all. No use your wasting time on it. I'll ask Bassett to ask Missing Persons to run down their lists for Ambroses; it'll take 'em only minutes. But nobody's got a tabulated list from all over the country or even Illinois." Art said, "Right, Ben," and left.

"Only one other angle I can think of, Ed," Ben said, "and it's one I think you can handle better than Bill here. I mean, you already know the guy. So unless you've got any other ideas for Bill—" "I haven't," I said.

"Then, Bill, I guess you might as well carry on with what you were working on yesterday. It's about the least unimportant of the things were working on, and you were already on it."

At least the Starlock Agency would have one operative working on a job it would get paid for, I thought. Ben was surely throwing everything possible back of finding Uncle Am; I had no complaint on that score.

I asked, "What is it you want me to do?"

"It's a long shot, but why not check up on Karl Dell? Do you know for sure that he's on the up-and-up and really works for an insurance company, and really played poker yesterday evening?"

"Guess I don't really *know* any of those things," I admitted. "I mean, I never phoned him at work or anything like that. But what reason would *he* have had for collecting Uncle Am?"

"What reason would *anybody* have had? But somebody did."

There wasn't any answer to that, not that I knew of then, anyway. I said, "Okay, shall I wait for Bassett first?"

"Not unless you want to. He'll want to talk to you later, I guess, but I can give him everything we've got so far. And then I'll spend the rest of the morning going through those files Dane's digging up. Say, you and Am must talk over whatever you're working on, don't you?"

"Most of the time," I admitted.

"Can you recall anything he's worked on that might have led to—uh—this?"

"I've been trying to think," I said. "There are two guys he helped put away last year. You know which two I mean. But they're both still in jail, and one of them was an embezzler and the other was a forger—both of them loners, not members of a gang or anything."

Ben nodded. "I'll make sure neither of them's been sprung. Or let Bassett check; he can get it easier and quicker."

I used the phone in the back room to call Harrison Mutual, and Karl Dell was there; he'd just got in and hadn't started on his rounds yet. I asked if I could meet him somewhere, and he said, "Sure, Ed. You're calling from the Starlock Agency? That's in the Loop, isn't it?"

I said yes and told him where. He said, "Then you're only a few blocks away. Why not walk around here? I'm in a sales meeting but it'll be over in ten minutes and then I can talk to you. Any news on your uncle?"

"Not yet," I told him. "Okay, Karl, I'll be around by the time you're out of the meeting."

Bassett—Captain Frank Bassett of Homicide—came in just as I was leaving. I'd have stuck around a while if I hadn't told Karl I'd be there right away, but as it was I just said "hi" to him and said I'd see him later.

The sales meeting was still on when I got to the Harrison Mutual; I sat in the outer office for about ten minutes and then Karl came out. He had his hat on and carried his brief case. He said, "Let's find a better place to talk than this. I haven't got a private office."

He said, in the elevator, "I could use a drink, Ed. I'm a little hung over from only a couple of hours' sleep last night and a lot of beer during the poker game. A drink'll help wake me up; I feel logy."

"Guess one wouldn't hurt me either," I said.

The place we went into had just opened and had no customers and only one bartender polishing glasses at the far end of the bar. He brought us a shot and chaser apiece and went back to his polishing. I paid for the drinks; in view of what I was going to say to Karl, it seemed the least I could do. Besides he'd borrowed five bucks from me, so I knew he must be nearly broke.

He downed his shot neat and, before he took the chaser, pulled the old gag about "God, that was good!" while he shuddered and made a horrible face. Then he said, "What's on your mind, Ed? Changed your mind about astrology? I thought after you left last night—your uncle's birth date must be on the records at your agency. He must have made out an application when he started there, didn't he?"

"I guess he did," I said, "but that isn't what I wanted to talk about, Karl. I— uh—" For once in my life, I got completely stuck. It hadn't seemed silly to talk to Starlock about

checking up on Karl Dell, but it seemed silly now. And when Ben and I had discussed it I hadn't really known for sure that Karl worked for Harrison Mutual, and I knew that now. Connecting him with Uncle Am's disappearance simply because he'd mentioned a paragraph in Charles Fort to Estelle a week ago seemed utterly ridiculous. He said, "What is it, Ed?"

I decided to throw the blame on Starlock. I said, "Listen, Karl, Ben Starlock—that's my and Uncle Am's boss—asked me to check up on you. I know it sounds silly, but he thinks there might be more than a coincidence in— Well, about all we know about the guy who got Uncle Am is that he must know Uncle Am personally and that he knows about that passage in Charles Fort. You fit both qualifications."

"But why? I mean, what would / have against your uncle?"

"Not a thing that I could even guess, Karl. But then neither has anyone else that we know of. Anyway, I think Starlock's crazy. And that's why I thought it'd be easier and quicker to come to you and level with you and see if you'd let me ask you a few straight questions and get straight answers, and that would be that."

He laughed a little. He said, "I'll be damned. That's a new approach. I've read a lot of detective stories, but I never read about a detective using that angle in talking with the suspect. What you want? An alibi?"

"Mainly that, yes. It would help if you'd tell me what you were doing between four and five o'clock yesterday afternoon. And where you were playing poker last night."

"I'll make you a bargain, Ed."

"What kind of a bargain?"

"Won't cost you a penny and it'll take about two minutes of your time. I *want* to help you, Ed. I like your uncle, and even if I didn't, I like you. Giving you the information you want won't help you at all. But I can help you, maybe, if you give me a chance to use astrology, see?"

"All right, then. I want you to get me your uncle's birth date so I can cast a horoscope for him. I'm not guaranteeing that I'll get a thing for you, Ed, but there's a chance. It'll be a hell of a lot better chance if I have the hour and minute, but I'll do what I can from the date and year. And I want *your* birth date too, in case I can get a cross reference. And if you get any suspects in the case—outside of me; I know my own birth date—I want their dates if you can get them. But mainly your uncle's. Fair enough?"

"You want it now?"

"Why not? The sooner the better. You can phone from here."

I sighed and got off the stool. I said, "You told me it wouldn't cost me a penny, but here goes a nickel already." But I went back to the phone booth and made the call.

I asked Jane, who apparently hadn't been relieved yet, for Dane Evans. But Ben Starlock's voice came on the line instead. He said, "Jane recognized your voice, Ed, so I'm hornin' in. What's up?"

"Nothing. I just wanted Dane to get me Uncle Am's birth date off his application blank. I'll explain later, but it's not important."

"Birth date?" Starlock laughed. "I get it. Didn't you tell me Karl Dell is nuts about astrology?"

"I did. And he won't talk unless I give him what he wants. And I don't know. Uncle Am's always been cagey about birthdays—not about how old he is, but about when his birthday is. Anyway, can I have it?"

"Sure, Ed. Just a minute."

I waited a minute. Then Dane Evans' voice came on and gave me the date and year. He said, "Is that all, Ed, or do you want to talk to Ben some more?"

"That's all, Dane. Thanks."

"Say, Ed, if your friend's any good, I'd like to meet him some time. Maybe he could help me pick a policy number. I've been missing all over the lot."

I didn't know whether he was kidding or not, so I said, "Sure, Dane. 'Bye," and went back to Karl at the bar. I gave him the date Dane had given me.

"No hour?"

I asked patiently, "Have you ever seen an application blank that asks what hour of the day you were born?"

He said, "They ought to," and he wasn't kidding.

I didn't want to get into arguing about astrology any more, so I said, "All right, you've got your price. Now, where were you between four and five o'clock yesterday afternoon?"

"Home with a headache. I started getting one about noon and by three-thirty it was so bad I left my territory and went home. Got there about four and lay down and dropped off to sleep after a while. I slept till eight and felt fine when I woke up. Went out to eat and it was after I got back that the phone call came about the poker game, and I decided to go and asked you if you wanted to come along."

“Let's stick to the four-to-five stretch,” I said. “Can anyone prove you were in your room?”

“Well—Mrs. Brady can prove I was home at four. I thought I had aspirins in my room, but found I was out of them. I got home at—well, maybe a few minutes before four o'clock. And when I found I was out of aspirins I went down and borrowed two from Mrs. B. But from then on till eight, I was alone in my room; don't know how I could prove it.”

I said, “If Mrs. Brady can verify that and if the time is right, you're in the clear. Whoever got Uncle Am had to be busy from a little before four o'clock until— well, quite a while after. If you're in the clear for four o'clock on the head, you're clear all the way. How about the poker game?”

He gave me the address and phone number of Peewee Blain, who'd called him, and the name and address where the game had been. And the names of four others who'd played, and the addresses of two of the four. He didn't know where the other two lived.

I wrote it all down in case Starlock thought the poker game should be checked on, but it looked to me as though Mrs. Brady was the only witness I'd have to check—anyway, if she remembered the time when Karl had been down for the aspirins.

I asked him a few questions about how long he'd been with Harrison Mutual and a few things like that, mostly to satisfy Starlock if he wanted more. Me, I was sold that Karl was pretty well eliminated.

I offered him another drink, but he turned it down; I was just as glad because I didn't really want another myself. He said he'd better get going over to his territory, which was west of Halsted Street, and wanted to know if I'd be home in the evening so he could see me on the horoscope deal. When I told him I hadn't the slightest idea when I'd be home, he made me promise that I'd knock on his door whenever I got in, no matter what time it was or whether his light was on or not.

“I'll eat on the way home, Ed; I'll get there by six, and I won't make any calls this evening. I'll work on the horoscope from six on, and I'll have everything I can get within a couple of hours from then. Well, I've got to run.”

He didn't run, but he walked fast toward Randolph Street where he could get a streetcar over to his territory. I went the other way and went to our bank to draw some money. I was getting low and wanted to have plenty of cash for anything that might come up, and I didn't want to get it as expense money from Starlock. He was already spending plenty and I felt that this was my business even more than his. He could cover expenses for the other ops, but I'd take care of my own. I drew a couple of hundred bucks, which was all the checking account would stand without putting it under the required minimum. If I needed more than that, I'd have to cash in some of our bonds. Luckily, for convenience, we had both the bank account and the bonds under our joint names.

That had been Uncle Am's idea, and it had been a good one as far as our saving money for an agency of our own was concerned. He'd said, "Kid, if I keep my own money separate, I can't hang onto it as well. Knowing that if I lose money in a crap game half of what I'm losing is yours is going to keep me out of that crap game." And it worked the same for me, too. I'd think twice about buying a new suit or something if I knew that half the money was going for it was Uncle Am's. We'd found we each spent less and saved more if we pooled our dough. And we had an understanding that if we ever split up for any reason we'd divvy fifty-fifty on whatever we had. Which would have been a break for me because although we each spent about the same amount, Uncle Am made more than I did at the agency—since he was an experienced operative and I was still more or less of a cub.

From the bank I took a cab home. Before I knocked on Mrs. Brady's door, I went up to our room to be sure Uncle Am hadn't come home, but everything was as I'd left it. I'd known it would be, but I had to look.

Mrs. Brady came to the door in a dressing gown, looking sleepy. I said I hoped I hadn't waked her and she said, "It's all right, Ed; I should have been up an hour ago. It's half past nine. Any word of your uncle?"

"Not yet," I told her. "What I want to ask is, do you know what time it was when Karl Dell came home yesterday afternoon?"

"Ed, you were waiting for Karl Dell to come home last night, weren't you? What's wrong? You suspect him of having something to do with whatever happened to your uncle?"

I don't think so," I said. "But I'm trying to eliminate the remote possibility. Do you know what time he came home?"

"Well—not what time he came home, exactly. But I know when it was that he came, down here to borrow some aspirin tablets. It was four o'clock."

"Are you sure of the exact time?"

"Yes, Ed. There are two radio serials I always listen to in the afternoon; one comes on at three-thirty and the other at four. And Karl came right between them, during the advertising and station identification at four o'clock. I remember hurrying to get the aspirins so I wouldn't miss the start of the second one—and I didn't, either." I said, "Then I'll answer your question about Karl more definitely, Mrs. Brady. I know he didn't kidnap Uncle Am. The guy who did that couldn't possibly have been here at four o'clock. He had to be outside the building the agency is in or outside the Gresham Hotel, or somewhere in between. And not likely somewhere in between because he couldn't have been positive which way Uncle Am would have walked."



"I'm glad, Ed. Not that I'm specially crazy about Karl, but I'd hate to think that one of my tenants was a—a crook." I went back to the office.

Starlock was sitting at his desk, leaning back with his hands clasped behind his head. I sat down in the chair in front of the desk. "Anything?"

"Nothing. Dell is out. He's alibied as of four o'clock."

"How good an alibi and how close is the time?"

I told him. He said, "Good work, Ed. Then that's one angle we can write off completely. Unless we'd assume a conspiracy with your landlady in it. I don't know her. How silly would it be?"

"Utterly."

"I'll take your word for it. So there's no use checking that poker alibi. It doesn't mean anything. And he wouldn't have given you all those names and addresses and phone numbers, anyway, unless it's on the level. All right, so Karl Dell is scratched at the starting post and that's off our minds. Bassett was just here."

I said, "He got here just as I was leaving. I'd have stayed except that I'd made an appointment with Dell. But I guess you gave him everything I could have."

Starlock nodded, still with his hands behind his head. He said, "Including something I didn't even know I had to give him. That I didn't remember, that is. It seems like a remote chance, but—

He quit talking and started thinking until I had to prompt him. Then he said, "Bassett knows a little about the guy in four-eighteen. Richard Bergman. He's got something to do with the numbers racket. Know much about numbers, Ed? Ever play them?"

"A few times for small amounts. Just for the hell of it; I know the odds are against you."

Starlock said, "Damn near everybody seems to do it for small amounts, and plenty of them for big dough. It's a billion-dollar business these days. There are people who make a living just selling tip sheets telling others what numbers to play."

"But what's the lead?" I asked. "You mean just that Bergman is in the policy game?"

"No, except that that ties in vaguely with something that happened a few days ago. Heard of Augie Grane?"

"Runs a night club on South State Street?"

“Yes, except that the night club is only a front, more or less. I mean, he makes a small fraction of his income from it; actually he runs one of the numbers games here in Chicago, one of the five or six big ones. His head man in running the numbers is Toby Dagon. A tough boy, by the way.

“Monday Augie Grane and Toby Dagon were in here and offered me a job. At first glance, it looked okay to me and I was going to take it. I was going to put Am on it—they wanted the best op I had, and that's Am—so I called him in from the back room to sit in on the conversation. Then I had a sober second thought and turned the job down. They didn't like it.”

“Did Am have anything to do with your turning it down?” I asked.

“No, definitely not. He'd hardly opened his mouth; I'd just called him in to listen in, so he'd be ready to start on it. They didn't like my turning it down—anyway, Toby Dagon didn't—but if they'd wanted to get seriously mad at anybody, it'd have been me and not Am. And it was my own fault; I should have realized right away that it was something I didn't want to get into. If I'd turned down the job when they started to talk, it would have been better.”

“What was the job?” I asked him.

“Somebody's been beating the racket, and they can't figure how. But Augie Grane says they've been paying out more than the percentages would indicate. Not enough to break him—or even to make him lose money. But he's making less than he should. He wondered if somebody had the fix in; if some outfit was managing to beat him in some way he couldn't figure out, or what. He wanted me to put an op or two at checking things, especially watching his own ticket men.”

I said, “I should think he'd use his own boys for that.”

“He said he thought a detective agency could do better. And he was frank in saying he thought he could trust us more than any of his own men. And he had a point there.

“From our point of view, it wouldn't have been dishonest—it might have been skirting the law a bit, but no more than the police do, for that matter. And he offered to pay me our regular rates, win or lose, and a nice bonus if we put our finger on what was wrong. It looked good to me—until, while we were all talking, I began to realize what I was letting myself in for.”

I nodded. “You mean if you found out for them who was doing the rooking, they'd take care of the rookers their own way and that'd make you an accessory before the fact, in a way, for giving them the information they'd act on.”

“Guess you're smarter than I am, Ed. Took me twenty minutes to see that, and by that time they thought I was taking on the job, although I still hadn't specifically said I would.

But still I don't see how that would tie in with what happened to Am. It wouldn't give them anything against him. Unless—”

“Unless what?”

“Unless they approached him privately and asked him to take on the job on the side. And if they had, I don't think he'd have done it.”

I said, “I know he wouldn't. If they had approached him, he'd have turned them down. He wouldn't take a case behind your back. Even an honest one. That's out.”

“That's what I told Bassett, and he agreed with me. I don't think there's any squarer guy in Chicago than your uncle, Ed. But I remembered about that interview and I told Bassett about it, for what it's worth, when he asked me if we'd ever done any work for any of the numbers boys. And he asked that because, when I told him about Richard Bergman being in four-eighteen, he knew Bergman was connected with numbers.”

I asked, “Any reports on Bergman yet?”

“Emil phoned and said he was still in his room. Emil went up there—with a pass key he got from Everest—and went right in the room, playing he was a drunk who'd got in the wrong room with a key that happened to work. Bergman was just getting up, he said. Now Emil's waiting out of sight in a corner of the lobby for Bergman to come down, and he'll finger him for Joe so Joe can tail him. Emil'll report in after that.”

I said, “Numbers racket or no numbers racket, Ben, I can't see Bergman as having anything to do with it. If he had, the last thing on earth he'd have done would be to give a wrong name and his right room number to you over the phone. Especially as he had no reason to give the right room number if Uncle Am wasn't going to get that far anyway.”

Starlock said gloomily, “I agree with you, Ed. I'd give a thousand to one that Bergman hasn't anything to do with it. I wouldn't have two men on him if I had any other leads.”

“What's Bassett working on?”

“He said he'd checked into the Augie Grane-Toby Dagon angle, and also get some more on Bergman. Also the routine things to get the police machinery going all the way down the line. He wanted to talk to you, and I didn't know when you'd be in so he said he'd call in once in a while till he caught you.”

“What can I do meanwhile?” He looked at me. “I don't know, Ed. I don't know a God-damned thing you can do.”

## Chapter 7

HE GOT UP ABRUPTLY from his chair and went over to the window. He stood there looking out and talked without turning his head.

He said, "It's the damnedest thing, Ed. Here I've got an agency with six men— counting you and me—available. I've managed to get three of them on what I know are wild-geese chases. Two checking up on a guy who couldn't have anything to do with it and one looking through newspapers for other missing Ambroses! We let you try what looked like might be a lead and you proved it wasn't in less than two hours. This agency right now is like a car with the wheels going like hell—and the axles up on blocks so it isn't moving an inch."

"That's the way my brain feels," I told him.

"There's only one practical thing you can do, Ed. You didn't get much sleep last night, did you?"

"A couple of hours."

"Then, damn it, get some sleep. A break on this is going to come sooner or later. It might come this evening and it might give you enough to do to keep you up forty-eight hours straight. And right now, while there's nothing *else* you can do, lay in a supply of sleep. If you have to hit yourself over the head with a blackjack to do it."

I didn't want to sleep, but what he said made sense.

He said, "There's a cot in the back room; I had it sent around while you were out. I wasn't thinking about your sleeping now when I got it, but you might as well use it as waste time going home."

"Okay," I said.

"What I had in mind in getting the cot back there is that we're going on a twenty-four-hour basis. I mean, besides the office. Someone's going to be in the office—and awake—to answer the phone all the time. And someone—you or me, or an op, if we're somewhere else—will be in that back room ready to follow up anything that comes in. If you catch sleep today, you can be the night shift tonight, so get going."

I went into the back room, took off my coat and shoes and lay down on the cot. A minute or two later I thought of something and went back to Starlock's office. He was sitting as he was when I'd come in half an hour ago, leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head, thinking.

I said, "I thought of something I can do. Look"—I gulped a little—"suppose Uncle Am was killed last night. They could have dropped the body off somewhere outside of Chicago, anywhere within a couple of hundred miles, or even more. But wherever it was,

it ought to be in the morning papers some town around here. I could go down and get morning papers for all the surrounding towns and look through them, just in case.”

“That's police routine, Ed, and Bassett's seeing that it's done. They don't have to use newspapers, either; they get direct reports on the teletype. You'd be wasting your time.”

He was so obviously right that I didn't argue. I went back and lay down on the cot again. I tried not to think, but that kept me awake. So I let my mind alone and, after a while, it let me alone.

It was two o'clock when I woke up, and I was hungry. I remembered that I hadn't eaten any breakfast except one doughnut with the coffee I'd had with Starlock before eight o'clock. I put on my shoes and coat and went into Starlock's office.

He said, “You must've got some sleep, Ed. That's good.”

“Anything new?”

“Well—nothing on the constructive side. Bassett called; he's mostly oiling the gears over at headquarters, talking Missing Persons into taking a more than routine interest, stuff like that. Also, he saw Toby Dagon. Tried to see Augie Grane, but Augie wasn't down yet; he sleeps late, I guess.”

“How about Toby?”

“Bassett says Toby's alibied—according to Toby. He hasn't checked it yet, but says it looks good and will probably stand up. And it doesn't look like a rigged-up alibi either, Bassett says. He's decided he's fairly sure neither Augie Grane nor Toby has anything to do with it.”

“And Richard Bergman? Anything new on him?”

“Well, Emil reported in. Bergman left the hotel at noon; Emil fingered him for Joe, and Joe followed him. No report from Joe yet; probably won't be unless he loses Bergman or follows him back to the hotel.”

“Bergman's going back?” I asked. “I mean, he didn't check out?”

“No, he didn't check out. After he left, Emil managed to get into the room for a look around. Found nothing of interest; if Bergman has any papers with him, they're in his pocket. Just clothes—one big Gladstone bag of them. Couldn't get any more information about him at the hotel than I got from Everest last night. Went around to headquarters to check with the boys there.”

“Looks like a blank,” I said. “I still don't see how he could have anything to do with it.”

Starlock nodded gloomily. "Afraid you're right, Ed. God damn it, if we only had something that *did* look as though it might lead somewhere— Oh, your friend was here. Estelle Beck."

"You mean she phoned? Or came in?"

"She came in. Wanted to know if there was anything she could do. Said she'd quit her job last night anyway and wanted to know if there was any place she could maybe get herself into."

"Ummm," I said. "Well, the Augie Grane business looks like a thousand-to-one shot, but if he can use another waitress in his night club, what's to lose. She might pick up something."

"That's what I told her," Starlock said.

"Did she go there?"

"It's too early. Later, early this evening when they're getting ready to open." He shrugged. "She won't get anything, but what's to lose if she's looking for a job anyway and does happen to find one there? She's a swell looker, Ed."

"When can I see Bassett?"

"Said he'd phone in again. I'll put you on if you're here, or make a date for you if you're out."

"Out doing what? Is there anything I can do?"

"Feed your face, I guess. It's after two and you haven't had lunch it. Aren't you hungry?"

I admitted that I was. I went down to the lunch room on the corner and fed my face. When I got back, a Western Union boy was just leaving.

Starlock was opening the telegram. He said, "From Cleveland," and I walked around and read it over his shoulder:

"SUBJECT MAINTAINS HOME HERE. TRAVELS MOST OF TIME. CONNECTED NUMBERS RACKET, BELIEVED LIAISON MAN AMONG BIG SYNDICATES. POLICE RECORD GAMBLING CHARGES, SEVERAL COUNTS, TEN TO FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, TWO CONVICTIONS BUT FINED ONLY, NO JAIL SENTENCES. NO ARRESTS IN TEN YEARS. SCALE OF LIVING INDICATES INCOME TEN TO TWENTY THOUSAND YEAR. SHALL WE CONTINUE? IF SO, WHAT ANGLE? CARSON."

Starlock looked up at me. "Think we should tell them to go ahead, Ed? And, as Carson asks—if so, what angle?"

"I don't know," I told him. "Even if Bergman does tie in somewhere, I don't see what more they could get in Cleveland."

"I don't either. But I would like to know a little more about what Carson means by liaison. Think I'll call him; he can give us more over the phone than he could put in a telegram." He raised his voice, "Maude."

I looked around and saw that a new girl was sitting at Jane's desk. Starlock said, "By the way, Maude, this is Ed Hunter. Ed, Maude Devers. Maude, will you get me the Carson Detective Agency, Cleveland, Ohio, on the phone. Get Claude Carson personally."

Maude nodded to me, said, "Yes, Mr. Starlock," and got busy on the phone.

Starlock said, "Bassett phoned for you while you were out, Ed. He was going to be tied up in red tape most of the rest of this afternoon, he said, and wanted to know if he could see you this evening. I made a dinner date for you, six o'clock in the Blackstone lobby. Buy him a couple of drinks and a good dinner."

"Sure," I said.

Maude said, "I have Cleveland, Mr. Starlock."

"Okay, Maude," Starlock picked up his phone. "Ed, if you want to listen in, take the other phone. Save me telling you."

I sat down on a corner of Maude's desk and picked up her phone. I heard Starlock say "Hello," and a voice, "Carson speaking."

"Starlock, Claude. About the wire you sent. I think it's enough—all you can get there that will be any good to us, but maybe you can fill in a detail or so. Exactly what do you mean by liaison man? Is it a new angle?"

"The way I get it, Ben, is that it's an angle he worked out for himself. He doesn't work for any one of the big operators in numbers, but for any of them that'll hire him. My informant says he gets about fifty a month apiece from the big boys who're on his list, and less from the smaller ones. He tries to keep them from stepping on one another's toes."

"How? I mean, has he got torpedoes back of him?"

"No, nothing like that. Just moral suasion. If one of them tries to chisel on another, or offer bigger odds or something, he tries to talk him out of it. And what he says throws

weight, not because of anything he himself might do about it, but because he can line up the whole—uh—

“Racket?” Starlock said.

“Industry, Ben. He can line up the boys against any one of them that steps too far out of line. They can put on—well, call it economic pressure. More effective than torpedoes, in the long run.”

“Exactly how, Claude? Pretend I'm stupid. I think I know what you mean, but give it in words of one syllable. Say I'm running a policy game here in Chi. I step out of line by offering bigger odds, unfair competition. What happens to me— after our subject tries to talk me out of it and I tell him no dice?”

“You pay protection, don't you? Well, so do the other boys in Chicago, and collectively they pay a lot more than you do and swing more weight. They swing pressure back of their dough, and yours doesn't mean so much any more. Your slip men start getting picked up oftener; you pay more fines. Maybe your headquarters get raided and you pay a big fine or two. Maybe your best customers get heckled and maybe rumors go around that you're going broke and wouldn't be able to pay off if somebody gets lucky. You start losing money. If you've got any sense, you get back in line.”

Ben said, “Sounds good. Sounds like our subject is a pretty clever guy.”

“He is. And he's clever enough not to push any of it too far.”

“Sounds like a glorified public relations man,” Ben said. “No, not that—inter-industrial relations man. You don't think he'd go in for any rough stuff, huh?”

“Hell, no. He's got a cinch as long as he doesn't. His whole job is to try to hold down the rough stuff. The numbers boys are smoother than—well, say the old-time bootleggers. If somebody'd coordinated the bootlegging business there'd have been a lot of lives saved. Such as they were.”

“Sounds to me like more than a ten-twenty thousand a year angle, Claude.”

“Probably is. I said that's the scale he lives on. Maybe he's making fifty thousand or a hundred and has sense enough not to splash it. If he acted too rich some of his clients might get the idea he was chiseling somewhere. He's got to be above suspicion. And above violence, even as an accessory. If that gets out of hand, his job is through, so he'd try his best to prevent it.”

Ben said, “I've got the picture. Thanks, Claude. Send me a bill but don't go wild on it; I'm not working for a client. This one is on the house.” Ben put the receiver back on the hook and looked across to me. “Sound like anything to you, Ed?”



“Like less and less,” I said. “Don’t see where he could possibly have a motive for kidnapping Uncle Am. And if he did have, the last thing on earth he’d do would be to give you his right room number over the phone. I think we can wash him off— unless Joe Streater or Emil Krazka get something that might tie him in again.”

Starlock sighed heavily. “Trouble with us, Ed, is we haven’t even got anyone to suspect. Except maybe Crane and Dagon—and that’s damn thin. The only thing against them is that they *met* Am in my office. But all he did was listen in; I did the talking. Unless they approached him on the side—

I said, “If they did, he’d have turned them down. I’m sure of that. And that wouldn’t give them anything against him personally—not enough to kidnap him, anyway.”

“But just the same,” Ben said, “we’ll keep that angle in mind. What we just learned about Bergman— Think about it a minute, Ed, and see if you come up with the same idea I have.”

I thought it over. I said, “There’s this. Augie and Toby would know Bergman, naturally. Granting them a motive for doing something to Am, they might have something against Bergman, too; they might want to involve him by giving his room number. But there’s one big hole in the argument. Big enough to drive a squad car through.”

“What is it?”

“They involve themselves just about as much. If they gave Bergman’s room number to tie him in, they’re tying in the numbers game and their contact with Uncle Am. And indirect as the lead is, if Bergman’s innocent and they’re guilty, they’re taking a bigger risk than he is.”

Starlock laughed shortly, without humor. He said, “It boils down to this, Ed. We’re pretty sure what we’re trying to dig into hasn’t a damn thing to do with what happened to your uncle, but we haven’t got anything else to dig into, so we dig anyway.”

“Shall I go around and dig into Crane and Dagon personally?” I asked. “Not until after you’ve talked to Bassett. Then if you want to go night-clubbing tonight, and if nothing better offers, go ahead.”

“What can I do now?”

“Frankly, Ed, not a damn thing. But I know that’d drive you nuts, so here, take this stack of files. Cases your uncle worked on. I’ve been through them and get nothing. Take them into the back room, where you’re out of my hair, and go through them again, huh? Did you sleep in your clothes last night?”

“Well—” I said, “more or less.”

“Get out of here by four o'clock so you'll have time to go home and clean up before you meet Bassett. Not that you look bad, but you're going to the dining room at the Blackstone and you may be going to a night club later.”

“Goody. Can I wear my new crepe de Chine formal?”

“Get the hell out of here.”

I got the hell out of there and took the files into the back room. I worked over them until four o'clock and got nothing that looked like even a remote possibility. Starlock was still in his office and still, or again, staring into space with his hands clasped behind his head. “Anything?” I asked.

“Not worth mentioning. Emil came in. He'd found out from a copper friend of his pretty much the same thing about Bergman that we got from Cleveland. Not as much detail, but what there was was the same.”

“Then we wasted money on the Carson Agency.”

“I wouldn't say that, Ed. From two sources, I believe it better. Listen, here's the setup for tonight. I sent Emil home for some time off and told him to get back here at nine; he'll sleep here in the back room, ready in case anything happens. And Jane gets here at nine; after sleeping all day, she'll be awake to answer the phone.”

“Are you sure Emil will sleep?”

Ben Starlock said, “I don't care who does what to whom, as long as one of them was awake. I'm going to stay here till nine when they come in; then I'm going home and cut off my underwear and take a bath. I'll sleep by my phone and be ready if anything breaks.”

“And what about me?”

“You're on your own. If you don't get any better ideas after talking with Bassett, go on home and see what Karl Dell can work out in horoscopes. Damn if I don't think he's got as good a chance of getting something as we have.”

“Maybe more,” I said. “Okay, and I'll go night-clubbing later. Any other suggestions?”

“Beat it,” he said.

I went home. I took a bath, shaved, and put on my best suit. I worked fast and it was still only five o'clock when I finished, so I went up to the third floor to see if Estelle was home. She wasn't.

I wanted to talk to someone, so I went back down and tried Karl Dell's door and then Chester Hamlin's. Neither of them was home, but as I started down the stairs to the street floor, Karl came in.

He said, "Hi, Ed. Any news?"

I shook my head.

"Took off a little early," he said. "I've eaten already, and I'm set to get a quick start. Won't take long. You going to be around a while?"

We went to his room. I said, "Not long. I've got an appointment."

"You'll be back here later?"

"Sure," I said.

He cleared off his writing table and started getting astrology books from his bookcase. He said, "Listen, Ed, I found out one thing at noon, just glancing in a pocket ephemeris I always carry in my brief case and making a quick calculation. Your uncle's got a grand trine."

"Is that good?"

"It's wonderful. I'm pretty sure it means he's okay. Bad things, really bad things, don't happen to people who have a grand trine."

"You mean they live forever?" I asked him.

He laughed. "All right, be skeptical if you want to, Ed. I'm used to it. Now sit down and read a book while I really get going on this."

But I didn't want to read a book, so I left. I walked into the Loop slowly and managed to get to the Blackstone only ten minutes early. But Bassett was early, too; he came in only a minute or two after I did.

He looked a little out of place in the Blackstone lobby, but not much. I don't mean that he looked like a copper; he didn't. He looked much more like—well, an underpaid bookkeeper or a clerk behind a cigar counter. Just average height and no heavier than I. Faded reddish hair and faded freckles. His eyes looked tired and watery behind shell-rimmed glasses, as though he hadn't slept well for weeks. But Bassett's eyes always look that way.

He said, "Hi, Ed." And, knowing what I'd be wondering, he added quickly, "Nothing new. Shall we go right to the dining room, or shall we have a drink first?"

“Let's have a couple first,” I said. “It's on the agency, so it's for free.” I let him think that so he wouldn't argue over the checks, as he might if he knew I wasn't going to bill Starlock for it. We strolled across the lobby and into the bar.

Estelle was sitting there on a bar stool, a thin-stemmed glass in her hand. I walked toward her and was going to say something when she happened to look up and our eyes met in the mirror behind the bar. She started a little, and then shook her head very slightly and turned to say something to the man sitting beside her. So I kept on walking past her and past the man, without looking at him, down toward the far end of the bar. I was in the lead, Bassett just behind me. When I was only a step past Estelle the man who was with her, I heard Bassett's voice behind me say “Hello, Augie.” I kept on going, hoping Bassett wouldn't stop either. And he didn't.

## Chapter 8

I WENT A SAFE DISTANCE down the bar, past another couple, before I stopped. Bassett beside me, said what I thought he'd say, but we were safely out of hearing so it was all right.

“That's Augie Grane, Ed. Ben tells me there's a remote suspicion he might have something to do with your uncle disappearing. I don't think so, myself. But do you want to meet him?”

“Not yet,” I said.

“Okay. Jeez, but that's a gorgeous little piece with him. You have to be rich, I guess, to get next do something like that.”

I wanted to laugh, and I wanted to get dramatic and say ‘You are speaking of the woman I love!’ But then again it wasn't exactly funny, and I wasn't really sure whether I loved Estelle or not.

So I just said, “That's Estelle Beck. That's why I don't want to meet Augie now.”

Bassett whistled softly. “The girl Ben was telling me about? The one that rooms with you and Am?”

“The one Ben told you about. She doesn't exactly room with me and Am. That would be—what do you call it? Polyandry?”

“You know what I mean. In the same building.”

I just nodded, because I was wondering whether it was just coincidence that Estelle and Augie Grane had happened to come to the bar at the Blackstone, or whether she'd learned from Ben Starlock where my appointment with Bassett was and had come here on purpose so I'd see her with Augie. I made a mental note to ask Ben, just out of curiosity.

The bartender came up to serve us, and when Bassett ordered a cognac, I took the same. When the bartender had poured our drinks and gone, I said, "I'm glad you ordered something we could drink down and not have to work on, Frank. Let's move on."

"Okay, Ed, but you said a couple of drinks. Now you're chiseling."

"We'll get another somewhere else. Let's not eat here; 'Stelle and Augie may be going from here into the dining room, like we were going to do. I just want to stay clear of them."

But why? I mean, what have you got in mind about Augie that makes any difference whether he sees you here or not? You don't have to talk to the girl or she to you if she's working on him under cover."

I just don't want him to connect us at all. It might be dangerous for Estelle. She may have suggested coming here for a drink—and then he sees you here and knows you're working on the case, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but—"

"He just might figure she brought him here for a reason—because you were coming. That's why I'm glad you didn't stop to talk to him when we went by just now. And if he notices me with you—which I don't think he has yet—and then later finds out who I am, well—"

Bassett grimaced. "All right, all right. We'll go to a hamburger stand then. And here I had my mouth set for a good dinner; wish we'd gone to the dining room first." He tossed down his cognac.

I grinned at him. "No hamburger tonight, Frank. There's a little French restaurant a block from here that'll charge us even more than the dining room here would. And we can get drinks there, too. I've never been there but Uncle Am went with a client once and has been raving about it ever since."

"Can I have a filet mignon?"

I said, "Sure, with whipped cream on it. Now let's get out of here. And one at a time. Grane couldn't have noticed us come in together because I was past him before you spoke. So you go out first and I'll join you in the lobby in a minute. Don't stop to talk to him unless he stops you."

Bassett nodded and went out; the man sitting next to Estelle didn't look around. I gave Bassett half a minute while I pocketed my change and then went after him. I took a quick look at Augie Grane as I walked past him, managing to get a front view in the bar mirror without catching his eyes. He didn't look at all as I'd expected him to. He was a bit plump but not really fat, and a bit thin on top but not really bald. He looked about forty, about

Uncle Am's age, and he had the same kind of round, cheerful face that Uncle Am has. He didn't look like a racketeer or even like a night club owner. He looked rather like a nice guy.

I was almost safely past them when Estelle caught a glimpse of me in the mirror. She turned quickly and said, "Eddie," and I had to stop and turn. I felt like kicking the stool out from under her.

She said, "Eddie, I'd like you to meet my new boss. I'm going to be a cigarette girl at the Blue Croc; this is Mr. Grane, who owns it."

Augie turned and stuck out a hand. "Glad to know you," he said. "I didn't get the last name."

That wasn't odd, because no one had mentioned it. Maybe Estelle thought I'd want to give a phony one. But if I did and later he learned who I was it would be worse for Estelle than if I gave the right one.

So I gave the right one. I couldn't tell whether it registered or not; there wasn't any reaction in his face. But then Hunter is a common enough name; even if Bassett had been asking him questions about an Ambrose Hunter only hours ago, he wouldn't necessarily connect it with me.

I said something about being late for something and got away from them. Estelle called out for me to drop in at the Blue Croc later if I was free.

Bassett was waiting in the lobby. I grimaced at him, and then told him what had happened.

He said, "I don't think it matters much, Ed."

"As far as I'm concerned, no. But Estelle has an in and might be able to get something for us, working at the Croc. Now, as soon as Augie finds out who I am, Estelle's goose is cooked as far as finding out anything is concerned."

"Sure, Ed, but I don't think there's anything to find out at the Blue Croc anyway. I'll tell you about it while we eat—and, say, we might as well eat here now. Or is this frog place really better?"

"I don't know," I said, "but let's eat there anyway. I'd feel even more foolish now if Augie saw us eating together. He'd *know* that I'd tried to duck meeting him."

We went to the French place. There was a bar, but we took a table right away and ordered our drinks from the waiter.

Bassett said, "I want to pump you, Ed; that's what we're together for. But first I'll tell you the little I managed to get so far. It all adds up to that we haven't got even a glimmer of what looks like a real lead.

"First, let's take Augie Grane. I talked to him. I think he's clear. He hasn't much of an alibi for yesterday around four o'clock, but I don't think that matters. For one thing, Augie isn't a killer. For the kind of racket he's in, he's a nice guy. He's a bit annoyed at Ben Starlock for taking so long to turn down the business he offered him, but that's understandable. He remembers Am vaguely; knew that an operative was listening in on the conversation with the idea of working on the case, but didn't remember Am's name until I mentioned it. Says the last thing on earth he'd have done is approach Am on the side—says one man wouldn't do him any good anyway. And I believe him, Ed."

It made sense; I believed it, too.

I said, "All right, let's scratch Augie. One thing, though; if he finds out Estelle is a spy from our camp, would that be safe for her?"

Sure, Ed. He certainly wouldn't do any more than fire her. I doubt he'd even do that. Especially if he's in the clear on this, and I'm sure he is." Bassett grinned. He said, "I wish that gal was trying to worm some secrets out *of me*. It'd be fun, even if I knew what she was doing. / wouldn't fire her; I'd lead her on."

"Let's leave you out of this and stick to Augie. Is Estelle safe with him?"

"She's safe if she wants to be safe. I mean, he isn't going to kill her or rape her. He'll probably make passes at her. Who the hell wouldn't?"

"Okay," I said, and tried not to wonder how far Estelle might go in trying to get into Augie's confidence. Maybe I was afraid to wonder.

Bassett said, "Now this other guy, this Toby Dagon, is a different breed of monkey. I wouldn't trust him any farther than I could throw the Blackstone Hotel. And we've never got anything on him, but he *is* a killer. I'd bet on it. He's got a killer's eyes.

"But he works for Augie, and the way I get it, Augie holds him down and won't let him do any rough stuff. He wouldn't have done anything to Am on Augie's orders, Ed, but if he had anything personal against him—

"You talked to him?" I asked.

"Yeah, I talked to him. He's got a pretty good alibi. I checked it and it seems to hold up. Besides, there's no way he could have had anything against Am, personally. No motive whatsoever. And besides, I can't see him having the imagination to pull something like that Ambrose Collector gag. Anything he did, he'd do straight, not fancy. If you ever meet him, I think you'll see what I mean."

I sighed. "All right," I said. "It looks thinner and thinner that we might be able to tie in Augie Grane or Toby Dagon. What have we got left? Richard Bergman. What about him?"

"That's still thinner, Ed. What possible reason could he have for doing anything to Am? The only way this Bergman gets in is that the Ambrose Collector had to give some room number and he made up four-eighteen. Am never got there anyway, so it doesn't matter what number he gave. The way I see it, it really clears Bergman; why would he have given his own room number?"

I nodded. I wanted to ask him where that left us, but I knew the answer. It left us chasing our own tails.

We decided on one more drink before dinner and suddenly, just after we ordered the drink, I remembered something. I said, "I'd better phone the agency, Frank. They don't know where we are; if anything comes up, they'll be trying to reach us at the Blackstone."

I found the phone booth and called. I didn't recognize the voice that answered and thought I had the wrong number until I remembered that the new girl would still be there and Jane wouldn't get down for a while yet. I told her who I was and asked if Starlock was there.

She said, "He's here; he's talking on another line. Will you wait a minute?"

I said I would, and I did. Ben Starlock's voice came on. "Ed? There's a call for you on the other phone. Karl Dell. I was just trying to get out of him what he wants so he wouldn't bother you while you're with Bassett. But he wants to talk to you personally, so—

"Is he home? I guess he is; he was there when I left. If so, Ben, tell him I'll phone him as soon as I'm through talking with you. Tell him to stay by the phone; I'll be calling in a minute."

Starlock said, "Okay, Ed," and was gone from the line half a minute and then back "Guess you'd better call him right away, Ed; he sounded pretty excited about something."

"Astrology," I said. "He probably added Uncle Am's birth date to a transit of Mercury and got the latitude and longitude of where Uncle Am is now. But I'll call him. Listen, Ben, the reason I called in is to let you know where you can reach me. Bassett and I aren't eating at the Blackstone. Were at Chez Julliard, on Madison."

"Okay, Ed. Don't spare the horses. Anything new?"

"Only that Estelle got on at the Blue Crocodile, as cigarette girl. And apparently Augie Grane hired her personally. Anyway, they're having cocktails at the Blackstone."



“Oh. So that's why you aren't eating there. That Estelle's a good kid, Ed. Wish I could take her on as a full-time femme op.”

I knew he wouldn't want to if I told him about the bone-head stunt she'd done in introducing me to Augie, but I didn't want to go into that over the phone. I'd have to tell him if the question of my talking to Augie came up, but there wasn't any point in it otherwise. So I just said I'd better call Karl Dell and then get back to Bassett, and hung up.

I called home and Karl must have been waiting at the phone because he answered right away. He said, “Listen, Ed, I've got something damn important. I don't want to tell you over the phone, but can I see you right away? Your boss said you're eating dinner with the police captain—can I grab a cab and come there?” He did sound excited. I said, “Won't it keep, Karl? I'll come home right after we eat. Or can't you tell me now?”

“I—I'd rather not tell you over the phone. But it *is* important, Ed. Or it might be. And it isn't astrology, exactly.”

“What do you mean?” I asked him.

“Well—I hit a lucky number and it made me remember something. I mean it was a lucky number *because* it made me remember something. Where are you? I'd rather tell you about it personally.”

I began to think about if it was something he remembered, even if astrology had made him remember it, I wanted to hear it. And if it turned out to be nothing important, I could buy him a drink and get rid of him. So I said, “We're at Chez Julliard, Karl.”

“That's on Madison, isn't it? I'll grab a cab and be there in fifteen minutes.”

“I'll have a drink waiting for you,” I said. “What'll it be?” Anything. I don't care.” The receiver clicked in my ear.

I went back to the table and told Bassett about it.

He said, “Well, Ed, I hope it's something. We can use it. Say, Ben told me you managed to clear this Karl Dell. How come, and how?”

I told him about Karl's having been home—and at Mrs. Brady's door within seconds of four o'clock. And how Mrs. Brady happened to be sure of the exact time. “That clears him all right,” Bassett said. “The Ambrose Collector had to be a busy little bee from a few minutes of four o'clock until some time after. Probably for a long time before four, for that matter.”

“How do you figure that?”

“He timed his call just after Am came in—and it wouldn't have worked otherwise. He must have been either following Am or else watching the entrance of the building for Am to come in.”

“Sure,” I said. I glanced at my watch and said, “Well, it's a little after half past six. You'll be meeting him shortly. Ready for another drink? I promised Karl one.”

We caught the waiter's eye and ordered again, three drinks this time. I took a chance on ordering cognac for Karl; anyway, there wouldn't be any ice in it to melt if he was a little later than he'd predicted.

Bassett said, “Might as well see what he has before we order dinner, huh? But I'm getting hungry. Hope it's nothing that— Come to think of it, I hope it *is* something that keeps us from eating. If it's that important, it'll *lie* important.”

I hoped so, too. But I said, “How about this pumping you were going to do. Might as well start that while we're waiting.”

“Okay, Ed. You know about what I want. You start talking, and I'll interrupt when I think of a question.”

I knew what he wanted and I felt pretty sure that none of it was going to be any good. I started talking about what little I knew of Uncle Am's early life and how he and I got together—and stuck together—after my father's death. About the carnival, our coming to Chicago, who our friends were and what we did with ourselves outside of working hours—and during working hours, for that matter.

Bassett interrupted with questions and I answered them as well as I could. After a while he shook his head. “There's nothing there, Ed. Say, isn't it about time that guy got here?”

I looked at my watch and it was a quarter after seven. I said, “Unless something held him up. Maybe he didn't start right away. Although I got the impression that he would, and he said he'd take a cab. Shall we have another drink?”

He shook his head. “Not before we eat. I'm beginning to feel those. Sure he knows where the place is?”

“Yes,” I said. “I said Chez Julliard and he said 'On Madison, isn't it?' So he must know it.”

“Why don't you call home and be sure he left?”

I was sure Karl would have left before then, but I went to the phone and called Mrs. Brady. She hadn't seen Karl at all, but she called upstairs and didn't get an answer. She asked me if there was any news about Uncle Am and I told her there wasn't.

The phone booth was near the front door and when I left it I strolled to the door and watched through it for a few seconds to see if Karl was coming.

I went back to the table and told Bassett, “Karl isn't there now, but Mrs. Brady didn't see him so she doesn't know what time he left.”

“He'll be here any minute, then. Damn, I'm getting hungry.”

“Let's order,” I said. “If Karl brings us a lead that's worth following, and following in a hurry, so what's the price of a dinner? Through asking me questions?”

“That's all I can think of now. What time is it?”

I looked at my watch and said, “Seven twenty-six. It was almost an hour ago that I talked to him. He could have walked here in half an hour.”

Bassett sighed and stood up. “I'll check,” he said. “If he had an accident or anything, the report might be in by now. You sure, though, he just didn't decide to do something else? Is he a dependable type of guy?”

“Without knowing him very well, I'd say he was, Frank. And he sounded plenty excited and seemed to think that what he had was pretty important.”

Bassett went to the phone booth and stepped inside. His call seemed to take quite a bit of time; two or three minutes later he stepped out of the booth, still with the receiver in his hand, and motioned to me.

I got there fast. I said, “Something about Uncle Am? Or—?”

“No. Karl Dell, maybe. Describe him, Ed.”

I said, “Five-eleven, under thirty, slender build, slightly wavy brown hair, brown eyes. Wore a light-brown tweed suit at five o'clock, probably wouldn't have changed it. Light-blue shirt, dark-blue solid-color tie—

“Hold it,” Bassett said. “That's plenty.”

He stepped back into the booth and didn't close the door. He said, “Yeah, that's the guy. Karl Dell, Karl with a K.” He gave the address and said, “Yeah, I've got someone here with me who can identify him. Where's the body?... Okay, we'll go there, but first we're going around to the guy's home address, want to get whatever's there while it's hot. Probably get there about the same time you do.”

He hung up.

I asked, “An accident?”

Bassett shook his head.

## Chapter 9

I DIDN'T ASK FOR DETAILS until I'd managed to pay the check for the drinks and we'd got out of Chez Julliard and into a taxi.

Then Bassett said, "I checked Traffic first; there weren't any accidents that would fit. So I called my own department. Got Andrews and asked him if there'd been anything in the last hour. And something had just come in. Guy found killed and robbed in a parked car, way out on Howard Avenue."

"Howard Avenue!" I said, surprised. Howard Avenue is half an hour's drive north of our rooming house, in the opposite direction from the Loop.

"Yeah. He was down on the floor of the car in the back seat. Hit in the head, probably with a pistol butt, although it could have been a hammer or jack handle or something else heavy and hard. His wallet was gone; all they had was a description and the monogram D on his belt buckle. And the horn going like all hell."

I said, "Does it *have* to be Karl? I mean, there are lots of people in a city the size of Chicago that would fit that description."

Bassett said, "That height-weight-age stuff, yes. But the clothes fitted, too. Light-brown tweed, light-blue shirt, dark-blue solid-color tie. And belt buckle monogrammed D. And on top of that, Karl Dell was missing. Don't kid yourself, Ed. It's him."

I knew it was, I guess; I'd just been looking for a loophole. Then I remembered what Bassett had said about the horn. I asked, "What did you mean about the horn blowing like hell?"

"The button was jammed and the horn going. And that can mean either one of two things. Either the killer was heading out of town with the body and blew his horn for a crossing or to pass somebody or something and the button stuck. And he couldn't keep on driving with his horn blowing and a dead body in the car so he swung in to the curve and jammed on foot. Either that or he parked the car there with the body in it and for some reason or other wanted the body to be found right away, so he got out of the car, reached back in and pushed the button so it jammed, and then walked away."

That would have been risky," I said. "Someone might have noticed him walking away from the car, if the horn on the car was going."

Bassett said, "Murder's always risky. If he jammed the horn on purpose, he had a good reason for doing it. But my guess is that the horn jammed on him while he was driving and he had to abandon the corpse and the car before he got wherever he was going with them."

“They traced the license number of the car?”

“Not *yet*; they're doing it. But the car will turn out to be stolen, Ed. If it was the killer's own car he'd never have abandoned it with a corpse in it, not even if the horn button was stuck. He'd have to stay with the car and try to get the horn stopped before someone got a look in the back seat.”

“Who's going to be in charge?” I asked.

Bassett said, “I am. When I told Andrews that Dell was tied in with what I was already working on, he said, 'All right, Captain, it's your baby.' I was just working on your uncle's case unofficially anyway.”

“Why unofficially?”

“I'm with Homicide. Am's just a Missing Persons case, Ed, until—

He didn't finish it, but he'd started to say *until his body is found*. Not unless, but until.

Our taxi made good time. We got home before whoever else Andrews was sending got there.

We went upstairs first before trying Mrs. Brady's. Karl's door was closed and locked. Bassett was going to shoulder it down, but I told him Mrs. Brady had a duplicate key and there wasn't any use breaking the lock, so he said okay. I went into our room, just for a look around; I don't know why. Surely by now I'd given up hope of finding Uncle Am there, casually asleep in bed or reading the newspaper in his favorite chair. The room was just as I'd left it.

Bassett was starting down the stairs and said, “Come on, Ed.” I said, “Just a second, Frank. I'll see of Chester's home. He may have seen something.”

I knocked on Chester Hamlin's door and when there wasn't any answer, I tried the knob and found the door wasn't locked. I stuck my head inside and looked around. Chester wasn't there, but his hat and coat were thrown on the bed; he'd been home, probably he was down the hall in the bathroom. But he could wait until we'd seen Mrs. Brady and got the duplicate key from her, so I joined Bassett on the stairs and went down them and I knocked on Mrs. Brady's door.

When she opened it, I got the worst over right away. I said, “Mrs. Brady, I've got bad news. Karl Dell has been killed.”

Her face turned a bit paler than I'd ever seen it, but otherwise she took it pretty well. She asked, “You mean—?”

I nodded. I knew the question she hadn't asked was whether he'd been murdered, and she knew that I knew. I said, "This is Captain Bassett, Mrs. Brady, of the police. May we have a key to Karl's room?"

"Of course, Ed." She keeps her duplicate keys hanging on a little rack just inside her door, so she could reach it for us without having to leave the door.

I asked, "When did you see Karl last, Mrs. Brady?"

"Why—the time you asked me about, Ed. Yesterday at four o'clock when he borrowed the aspirins. I haven't seen him today at all."

I said, "He was here for an hour and a half. I saw him at five o'clock, when I left he'd just got home and was going to work on some astrology. And he was still here at half past six because I talked to him then on the phone."

"I didn't see him, Ed. I've been in my kitchen most of the time, though. I wouldn't have seen him. You say you talked to him on the phone here? I didn't answer it."

"He did. He was waiting by the phone for me to call because he'd just called the agency and I'd just called there and—well, that's complicated. Anyway he answered the phone the first time it rang, so that's probably why you didn't hear it."

"Of course. I probably wouldn't if it only rang once. Maybe Chester saw Karl. You want to ask him, Ed? He's here; he had dinner with me. He's in the kitchen now, drying dishes."

I said, "Sure, I'd like to talk to him; I was looking for him upstairs. But first—

how long has he been here?"

"Oh, about an hour, I guess. A customer of his gave him some perch, two nice ones. He couldn't cook them himself so he stopped in on his way home and—

"When would that have been?" I interrupted.

"At least an hour ago. He asked me if I could use them. Well, I hadn't started supper for myself; I was just getting ready to. So I asked him if he'd eaten yet and he hadn't so I just fixed the fish for both of us."

I looked at my watch and saw that it was seven forty-five; if Chester Hamlin had been there an hour, he couldn't possibly have been the driver of the car in which Karl had been found killed. Not that I had any reason for suspecting Chester anyway, but he did room between me and Karl, and having an alibi wouldn't hurt him any and would save us worrying about him as a possibility.

So I asked, "You're sure it was a full hour?"

"Well—I didn't look at the time, Ed, or if I did, I don't remember. But we cooked dinner, ate it, had coffee afterwards, and washed the dishes—or most of them. It must have been almost an hour."

"Thanks," I said. "Could we come in and ask Chester if he did see Karl?"

"Of course, Ed." She stepped aside and we went in and walked through to the kitchen. Chester was wearing a kitchen apron of Mrs. Brady's and had a dish towel in his hand.

He said, "Hi, Ed. Say, I developed those pics of you playing trombone and they're pretty good. Show 'em to you later. Any news of your uncle?"

I shook my head. "Have you seen Karl, Chester?" I asked him.

"Good Lord, isn't he home yet? You were waiting for him last night, weren't you?"

"I saw him when he got in last night. I mean, did you see him at all today?"

"No. Why?"

"What time did you get home?" I asked him.

"Oh—about an hour ago. I didn't notice exactly. Why, Ed? Is something wrong?"

"Yes," I said. "Karl's dead. This is Captain Bassett of Homicide, Chester. We're trying to find out what happened. Did you go upstairs when you came home an hour ago, or did you come right in here?"

"Well, both. I mean I stopped at Mrs. Brady's door here on my way in, to give her the fish that somebody gave me today. She asked me if I'd eat them with her and I said sure. But I went up to my room and left my coat and hat there, then I came down here." "You left your door unlocked?" "Yes, I guess I did. I thought I'd be in the building."

"And you have been ever since?"

"Sure. I've been in here ever since."

There was knocking on Mrs. Brady's door; it was two men from the Homicide Department. We, Bassett and I, joined them out in the hall. Bassett introduced me to them; their names were Jerry Dix and Tom Keyes.

"Well," Bassett said, "guess we'll have to have an identification. Jerry, will you drive Ed around and have him take a look? Tom and I will start working on Dell's room upstairs."

Jerry Dix took me in his car to the mortician's place on Howard Avenue where the body had been taken. It was Karl Dell all right. I signed a paper making identification of the body and Dix drove me back.

We went upstairs and found Bassett and the other detective going through the books in Karl's bookcase, leafing through every book. Bassett looked up and I nodded.

“Any ideas, Ed?”

“How's about eating?” I asked him. I'd left my appetite at the mortuary but I knew he must be starving by now.

He said, “When we didn't eat at the Blackstone, Ed, I had a hunch we'd end up eating hamburgers. Want to go out and get some?”

“Sure,” I said. I checked with Dix and Keyes and found they'd already eaten.

I went around the corner and came back with a bag of hamburgers. Bassett was still working on the books in the bookcase, but neither of the other detectives was there.

He grabbed a hamburger out of the bag and sat down on the edge of the bed. He took a big bite and talked around it. He said, “I've got Keyes interviewing the landlady, digging out everything she can remember about Dell. He already talked to this Chester Hamlin. Didn't get much; seems he knew Dell only very casually.”

“Probably about as well as I did,” I said. “I don't know much about him.”

“We'll get to that later. And Jerry's making the rounds of the other roomers here to see if he can get any dope, either on Dell in general or his movements today.”

I said, “I don't think there's any doubt of his movements up to half past six when I talked to him on the phone. I was with him this morning around nine and then he went to work in his territory. I presume you'll check that, but I think you'll be able to trace what calls he made.

“And he came home at five because I saw him then. He'd already eaten and he started right in on casting horoscopes. Presumably he kept at it until about twenty-five after six when he phoned the agency—as it happened, at the same time I phoned there from Chez Julliard. And presumably he left right away—he'd have to, because the body was found at seven-twenty and a good half hour's drive from here. Allowing some time for him to be picked up and killed, he couldn't have been around here very long after I talked to him on the phone.”

Bassett nodded and reached for another hamburger. He said, “One thing new. We got a report on the car. It was stolen from only a block from here. Don't know exactly when;



the owner parked it at five and didn't miss it until eight. What do you know about this Chester Hamlin?"

"Not much," I said, "except that he's a salesman of some kind and does photography for a hobby. And he's in the clear on Karl Dell. He was eating dinner with Mrs. Brady at the time the killer was abandoning the car on Howard Avenue, damn near ten miles away. If he's telling the truth—and I don't see any reason to doubt it—he got home fifteen minutes or so after Karl left here. But even if that's not true, his alibi is still perfect."

"Wonderful filet mignon," Bassett said. "Well, I've been through everything in this room, including the handwriting on the wall, and it all adds up to the fact that Karl Dell was an insurance salesman with astrology for a hobby. From what correspondence we found, his nearest relative is a maiden aunt in Detroit. And that checks with what information Harrison Mutual has on him; we got the branch manager to go down to the office and meet a man we sent over there for a look at Dell's application."

"Get anything else from it?"

Bassett shrugged. "Nothing that matters. You underguessed his age; he was thirty-four. Never been married. Got a fair-sized chunk of savings in the form of ten- and twenty-year endowment policies in his own company. The aunt in Detroit's the beneficiary, so she's the only one who gains by his death. And I doubt if she killed him."

"So do I," I said.

"Especially as she's in Detroit. Headquarters called her up long-distance to notify her. She's coming here, incidentally, to take care of funeral arrangements and stuff. What time is it, Ed?"

"About a quarter after nine," I told him. And that reminded me; Starlock had been going to stick around the office until nine; I'd forgotten to call him and keep him posted. He didn't even know that Karl Dell had been killed.

I told Bassett what I was going to do and went downstairs and called the office. Jane answered and when I asked about Starlock she said, "Maybe he's home by now, Ed. I got down at half past eight, half an hour sooner than I was supposed to, and he left when I got here. If he went right home, he'd be there by now."

I called Starlock's home phone and he answered. I told him about Karl Dell. He said, "I was just getting ready to cut off my underwear and take a bath, Ed. If there's nothing hot to follow up, Ed, I'll go ahead and take that bath before I come down and—"

"Why should you?" I interrupted him. "I mean why should you come down, Ben? There's nothing you can do—at least nothing that Bassett and the police aren't doing. Bassett's in charge and has men helping him."

“What are you doing?”

“Just getting in Bassett's way, I guess.”

“Then why don't you grab a cab and come out here, Ed? At least I want to hear all the details before I turn in, so I can sleep on it. We'll talk it over and if we can't think of anything constructive to do tonight, then I'll get some sleep.”

“Okay,” I said. “I'll tell Bassett and be right out.”

“While you're talking to Frank, Ed, tell him there's one new development—on the negative side. Richard Bergman's in the clear—as far as Am's concerned.”

“Who says?” I asked.

“Judge Haberman. Bergman was down at the courthouse yesterday afternoon arranging bail for a couple of numbers peddlers that got pinched. He often fronts for the boys he represents on things like that; part of the way he earns his money.”

“How'd you happen to find that out?”

“Joe Streater. Joe tailed him around from the time he left the hotel this noon till about three-thirty he lost him in the courthouse; he was back there again doing the same thing. But he went in an office through one door and came out another in another hallway and Joe lost him. He doesn't think Bergman knew he was being tailed or shook him off deliberately; it was just one of those things that can happen.

“But while he was tailing him Joe saw that Bergman knew a lot of people at the courthouse and Joe knew some of the same ones. So when he lost Bergman he figured he might as well ask questions about him, and he came up with the fact that Bergman was there yesterday afternoon too. And at about the same time Am was being collected, so that lets him out completely.”

I said “I'll tell Bassett—not that he thought Bergman had anything to do with it anyway. And I'll see you in half an hour if I can get a cab right away.”

I went up and told Bassett what we'd learned about Richard Bergman and he said “Good. I didn't want to waste time on him anyway, and I guess I'd have had to ” He laughed without any humor. “You know what's wrong with this business, Ed is that everybody's got an alibi. And a good one; none of them look like the rigged-up ones. I don't see how this numbers business ties in anyway; I think we're on a wild-goose chase. There's no *motive* in it, Ed. We won't get to first base until we find somebody that had a *reason* for—for doing something to Am.”

“Unless it's a psychopathic fiend,” I said.

“Psychos aren't that fancy, usually. I mean that Ambrose Collector angle. Unless—God damn it, unless somebody picked up an idea from this Charles Fort and really *is* collecting Ambroses. Hell, it's the nearest thing to a motive we've come across yet.”

“Ben Starlock wants me to go out to his place and talk things over,” I said. “That okay by you?”

“Sure, Ed. I don't know anything else you can do. Going over to the Blue Crocodile tonight?”

“Probably. Unless something better comes along. If I go, I'll go right from Ben's place. And I'll keep in touch with the agency—there'll be someone there all night—so if anything comes up will you get in touch with me through them?”

He said he would and I left. I caught a cab over on State Street and got to Starlock's place a few minutes before ten.

He'd had his bath and was in slippers and pajamas, ready to turn in. He looked dead tired.

“Want a drink, Ed?” he asked me.

I did, but I said that I'd probably end up at the Blue Croc and have to have some drinks there as an excuse for hanging around so I'd better save my capacity.

“That's smart. Well, I'm going to have one. Did you buy Frank a good dinner?”

“Sure,” I said. “Hamburgers. He ate four of them and by that time he was so hungry they probably tasted better than a steak would have at six.”

He laughed and poured himself a drink from a bottle on the table. He carried it across to a chair and sat down, throwing his legs over the arm of it. His pajamas were black silk ones and they made him look more than ever like a benevolent Buddha.

He must have noticed I was looking at them and he smiled. “I didn't buy them, Ed. They were given to me. But let's get going. Start with the time you left the office.”

When I finished, he sat staring at the ceiling for a while and then he looked at me. He said, “Ed, it doesn't look good. You know what I mean.”

I nodded. I knew what he meant all right. He meant that it looked like one chance in a hundred that we'd ever see Uncle Am again, alive. Karl Dell's being killed meant that someone was playing for keeps.

He said, “It's thirty hours now, and we haven't got a lead left, not a one. All we've managed to do is eliminate just about every possibility we've managed to think of. We're starting over again—except that we don't know where to start.”

“There's one thing new now,” I said. “The cops are in it with both feet. They've got a murder, and if they solve it they'll find Uncle Am in the process. Karl got killed by whoever kidnapped Uncle Am.”

Starlock said, “Let's face it, Ed. Am wasn't kidnapped—any more than Karl was.” He took a swallow from the drink in his hand. “It's going to hurt you less when he's found than if you won't believe it until then.”

“I'll admit the probability. But if Uncle Am was killed and his body hasn't been found, it was hidden pretty well. And if the killer went to the trouble of hiding one body, why didn't he hide Karl's so that would look like just disappearance too?”

“The horn button, Ed. I think he was taking Karl's body to dispose of it, probably the same way he disposed of Am's, and the horn button on the car he was using got stuck so he had to pull it to the curb and get away quick.”

That made more sense than I wanted to admit. I asked him, “Anything new come up at the office?”

“Nothing important. Art Wheelan came back after digging in newspaper morgues all day. The only guy named Ambrose who'd disappeared that he found was an Ambrose Guerry of Indianapolis, six months ago. I phoned the police there and found the guy had been located and brought back—it was just an abandonment case, it turned out. And this gal who was on the switchboard at the Gresham yesterday afternoon and then went to Racine is back in town and I talked to her. She didn't remember anything about calls to or from Bergman's room. A complete blank—not that it matters since we know now that Bergman was at the courthouse at four. And I canvassed the other detective agencies in town to see whether Grane and Dagon had approached them to do the work I turned down from them. They had been to one agency and were turned down there too. That was before they came to me and they probably gave up then on the idea of getting a legitimate agency to handle it. Anyway, it makes it look more like the deal was on the level if we weren't the first agency they came to. Ed, I can't see any tie-in with Auggie Grane or Toby Dagon.”

“Neither can Bassett,” I said. “Neither can I, for that matter. But I'm going to the Blue Croc just the same when I leave here, unless you've got some better idea for something I can do.”

“ Guess I haven't, Ed.

I stood up realizing I'd stayed too long already. Starlock must be dead for sleep.

He drank the rest of his drink and got up too. He asked, “Got a gun with you, Ed?” I shook my head. He went over to a cabinet and got out a thirty-two automatic in a shoulder holster. He said, “Put this on, Ed.”

“But I won't—

“Put it on ” he said. “Karl Dell would probably have liked to have one sometime early this evening. And you might get an idea, Ed. Like the one Karl Dell got.”

I took off my coat and put on the shoulder holster.

## Chapter 10

THE BLUE CROCODILE was a medium-sized night club, medium expensive. Not the best in Chicago, but a long way from being the worst. On a Thursday night, it wasn't crowded but there was enough business so you didn't have to feel sorry for Augie Grane. There were seventy or eighty people in a place that would hold a hundred comfortably and held half again that many on big nights. There was a five-piece combo—Harry Hart's outfit; I had some of his records—playing pretty fair stuff and there were about a dozen couples dancing.

When the headwaiter walked up to me as I came in, I said, “Table for two. My friend will be here later.” If he noticed me after that, he'd think I was being stood up, but that was better than attracting attention by being a lone wolf. He led me to a table for two that was probably the worst table in the place; it was farthest from the dance floor and a post blocked view of the combo, but that was all right with me. I hadn't come to hear the music. Come to think of it, I didn't know why I had come at all, unless it was just to see Estelle.

And she must have seen me come in, for she came toward me the minute the headwaiter left. She looked beautiful as hell in an evening gown that had, I'd guess, a dozen square yards of material in the skirt and a scant square foot of it above the waist. It was a beautiful gown and it had cost money. I wondered if she'd had it before or if it had come with the job. Or if Augie had bought it for her. But since they'd met only that afternoon, either he or she had worked pretty fast if that was the case. Then I caught her eyes and felt ashamed of myself for wondering.

As she reached my table she made her eyes and smile impersonal and said, “Cigarettes, sir?”

I had a fresh pack and didn't need any; I started to say no, and then noticed that she had a package of them in her hand, held just above the tray, and that there was a folded slip of white paper that she was holding against the under side of the package with her finger; she tilted the pack slightly so I could see the note.

So I nodded and put a dollar bill in the tray and she put the cigarettes down on the table with the note under them. She said “Thank you, sir” without even asking if I wanted any change and walked away.

I shoved the cigarettes into my coat pocket and palmed the note but I couldn't read it just then because the waiter came up. I ordered a whiskey and soda and a club sandwich; my trip to the mortuary had killed my appetite temporarily and I'd eaten only one hamburger to Bassett's four, and now I was getting hungry again. I also asked him to direct me to a phone booth; I figured I'd better call the agency and let Jane know where I was.

In the phone booth, the first thing I did was to unfold Estelle's note. There were only two words: "Hi, Eddie." I didn't know whether to laugh or swear.

I put the note in my pocket and called the agency. I told Jane where I was but told her not to try to reach me there unless it was very important, that if she should want me she should ask for Estelle and Estelle would get word to me.

Then I called home and found that Bassett was still there, in Karl's room. He came to the phone.

"Getting anything?" I asked him.

"Not a damn thing, Ed. I've been over that room twice now, and I'm calling it a night. You calling from Starlock's home?"

I told him where I was. I said, "You got cheated on that dinner tonight, Frank. Why not come to the Croc and let me make it up to you on some drinks, and see a floor show?"

"Like to, Ed, but it's pushing one o'clock and I'm dead tired. And tomorrow's another day. I want to get an early start."

"Any plans?"

"I'll start out from Karl's office, find out what calls he was scheduled to make on his insurance route and see if he made them. I'll try to account for all his time up to when he got home and you saw him at five. You say he said then that he'd already eaten something? Got any idea where he usually ate?"

"There's a barbecue place on Clark just south of Ohio," I told him. "Estelle used to work there. He ate there fairly often, but maybe just because Estelle was there; I don't know. But it's the only place I can suggest."

"Sounds like a fair chance. If he ate that early, he wouldn't be eating a heavy meal, and a barbecue sandwich sounds likely. I'll check there anyway. How are things at the Blue Croc?"

"Quiet," I said. I told him about Estelle passing me a note and what the note had said. He laughed.

He said, "Oh, by the way, Ed, does the number four-twenty mean anything to you?"

“Not that I can think of. Why?”

“That's the last thing Karl wrote down on the paper he was doing his astrology homework on. Starts with a chart at the top and then a lot of stuff, mostly in symbols and '420' was the last thing he wrote down. Exactly what was it he told you about a number over the phone?”

“He said it was important and that it wasn't astrology exactly. I asked what he meant, and he said he hit a lucky number—in his figuring, I guess he meant—and that it was lucky because it made him remember something. And that's all he said about it; he wanted to know where we were, and I gave in and told him Chez Julliard.”

“Then I guess four-two-oh is the lucky number he was talking about. What do you suppose it is, a hotel room?”

“Damned if I know. Or maybe it's a lucky number to play in the numbers game. But it must have some significance besides that if it made him remember something.”

“Well,” Bassett said, “it couldn't have been a lucky number for *him*. Another thing I'll do tomorrow is have an expert on astrology look over what Karl was doing and see what he can make of it. There might be a lead there, although I don't see how.”

“Nothing to lose trying,” I agreed. “Say, Frank, when I left the mortuary the coroner's physician was expected any minute but hadn't got there yet. Have you heard from him?”

“Sure. Nothing we didn't know. Except that he was hit twice in almost exactly the same spot. First one probably killed him, but the killer made sure with an extra one. And from the size and shape of the wound he thinks it was the butt of a revolver—oval shaped, not narrow and rectangular like the butt of an automatic or round like a hammer. No other marks on the body.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said. “Sure you don't want to come here for a drink or two?”

“I'll take a rain check, Ed. Want to be on the job by nine tomorrow and if I go there now I won't get home till three or four. Give my love to Estelle. And to Augie, if you talk to him. Is he there? Or Toby?”

“Haven't seen Augie, but I've been here only a few minutes. Toby Dagon I don't know.”

“Be careful if you do meet him. He's a tough boy, Ed. Well, I'll see you sometime tomorrow. 'Night.”

I went back to my table; the drink was there but the sandwich not yet. They always make you wait at least an hour for food in a night club, so you'll drink more meanwhile.

The floor show was starting and I turned to watch what little I could see of it from the bad table I had. Or at least I pretended to watch it. I was really thinking about the number four-twenty and trying to make some sense out of it. I couldn't. It could be or mean a lot of things, but no one thing seemed any more likely than another.

Estelle came over and stood leaning against the post that blocked my view of the orchestra and I watched her instead of the floor show. She was better to look at anyway. I began to wonder how late she had to work tonight.

And I wondered, too, why she pretended to ignore me and not to know me, after introducing me to Augie Grane at the Blackstone. Once she'd done that, she might as well talk to me here. Especially since we'd practically ruled out Augie and Toby as suspects anyway. She wasn't looking at me, but she must have read my mind, because just as I was thinking that, she came over to my table. She put her tray down on the floor beside the chair across from me and sat down. She smiled at me and said, "Hi, Eddie."

"You said that once," I told her. "On paper. Shall I write you a note back, or can I just say 'hi'?"

"But not in that tone of voice. Are you mad at me, Eddie?"

"Not exactly," I said. "In fact, maybe I love you a little bit. And I don't mind the note business if you want to play. But why did you introduce me to Augie this afternoon?"

"Because it didn't matter, Eddie, and I wanted to show you that. He's nice. I like him. And he didn't have a thing to do with your uncle."

"How do you know? Did he tell you?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, Eddie." She leaned forward across the table. "Honest, Eddie, it's all right."

"I suppose it is," I admitted. "Bassett tells me Augie's a good guy and is in the clear, and Bassett generally knows what he's talking about. But I'm curious *why* you talked to him about it? What did you have to gain?"

"I didn't at first, Eddie. Not until after we saw you at the Blackstone. I came here this afternoon and asked for a job and Mr. Dagon wasn't here—he or Augie do the hiring—and they sent me in to see Augie."

"Do you mean Mr. Grane? Sounds like you know him pretty well."

"I do, Eddie. I mean—I don't mean anything wrong. He's really nice and I like him and he seems to like me. I don't know, we had just hit it off right away. He told me I was too beautiful to be a waitress—that's what I applied for—and that they needed a cigarette girl because theirs had just left to get married or something and did I want that. He told me



that I'd make twice as much as a cigarette girl because nearly always when someone buys cigarettes they just give you a dollar bill and don't want change."

"Especially if you don't give them any," I said.

She laughed. "Oh, I'm supposed to offer change. I didn't, just to get your goat." I said, "Never mind my goat. Get back to why you told Augie Grane whatever you told him."

"Don't sound so cross, Eddie. When I said all right, I'd be a cigarette girl, he told me I'd need an evening gown or two and wanted to know if I had them, and I had to admit that I didn't—not ones good enough to wear here, anyway. So he said he'd advance me the price of two of them and I could pay him back out of my earnings. He took me around to Saks and helped me pick out two; this one was a hundred and a quarter and the other one was only a hundred. Like it?"

"It's gorgeous. But won't it take you a long time to pay for them."

"Oh no, Eddie. I don't get any salary here, but I'll be making over a hundred a week just in tips. Why, I've made fifteen dollars already tonight and this is just a Thursday night, and it isn't over yet. I'll probably average twenty a night, six nights a week, and I'll pay back fifty a week and still have about seventy left and I'll have the two gowns paid for in a month or so. And I'll probably buy a new gown an average of once a month after that, but I'll still be way ahead."

"You're figuring on keeping the job then?"

"Why not, Eddie? It's more money than I ever made before. I might still decide to go back to the carney next spring, but I can't now anyway—it's September and too late in the season—but by that time I'll have a nice stake saved up. I was thinking of modeling, but this is easier and I think I like it better."

I couldn't see any holes in it, although I didn't like it somehow. But she'd got off the track again about telling me why she'd told Augie, and I reminded her.

"Oh," she said. "Well, after we'd bought the gowns, we went to the Blackstone for a drink. We'd been there about half an hour before you came. And by that time, I knew Augie well enough, Eddie, that I was *sure* he wasn't a murderer or a kidnaper or anything. So I thought it over while you and whoever you were with—"

"That was Frank Bassett," I said. "Captain, Homicide Department."

"While you and he were having a drink, I thought it over, and when you started to leave I decided to introduce you."

I said, "I guess it doesn't matter. But I still don't see what you had to gain."

“I guess I just wanted you to meet Augie because I liked him. Anyway after you left he repeated the name Hunter and said that the police had just been asking him about a man named Hunter. And he went ahead and told me all about it, and it all fitted exactly what you'd told me and I could *see* that he wasn't in the slightest guilty about it or he wouldn't have been talking that way about it.

So I told him the truth about who you were and about why I'd taken the job. And he laughed and said that was all right with him as long as I made a good cigarette girl and all he wanted to know was would I stick to the job. And I told him I would, if it turned out I made as much in tips as he said I would. And I will, judging from thus far tonight. A little more, maybe. He said I'd make at least a hundred and, from tonight, I'm guessing at least a hundred and twenty.”

“Have you met Toby Dagon?” I asked her.

“Just slightly. I don't like him. He gives me the creeps. And Augie said he doesn't like him personally either, but that he's a good manager for the numbers game—I take it that Dagon really runs it and Augie just backs it financially and doesn't handle the details at all.”

I said, “Everybody seems to like Grane. Nobody seems to like Dagon. I guess everybody can't be wrong.”

“While we were eating—Augie took me to dinner after we'd had a few drinks—I asked Augie whether this Dagon could have had anything to do with your uncle. He said no. He said the police had asked him what he'd been doing at four o'clock, so he guessed that was the time of the disappearance or whatever. And that if that's right, he knows Toby didn't do it because Toby was doing some business in Gary yesterday afternoon and he knows Toby was still there at half past four because he talked to him on the phone then, long distance. And besides, he says Toby Dagon wouldn't have any *reason to* have anything against your uncle. They just met casually that once in Starlock's office.”

It occurred to me that I might be able to establish one more alibi and—if Estelle gave it—one I could be really sure of. I asked, “How long were you and Augie together after I saw you around six o'clock tonight?”

“Why, about two hours, I guess. It must have been another half hour before we went to eat, and then *we* spent at least an hour eating and then we came over here and made sure the gowns had been the delivered—

That was more than enough for an alibi on Karl Dell's murder, I thought. And then it suddenly came to me that Estelle didn't even know about Karl.

I told her, and it hit her hard, harder than I'd thought. After I'd finished she sat there white and shaken.

I said, "I'm sorry, 'Stelle; I should have broken it more gently, I guess. I didn't know you especially liked Karl."

"I—I didn't, Eddie. I don't mean I disliked him. I was out with him a couple of times, three, I guess—once dancing and twice to shows, but we were just friends. But—

"But what, 'Stelle?"

"Your uncle, Ed. I guess all along I've been hoping that this didn't amount to anything; that it was just a joke of some kind, that he was all right somewhere and would come back and explain it. I was sure of it, Eddie. But now—

I patted her hand and wished I could think of something encouraging to say. I couldn't.

I felt that way myself. I guess that in my case trying to solve the problem as a problem, to figure out what had happened, had kept me from thinking too much that Uncle Am must be dead.

She said, "I want a drink, Eddie. Will you buy me one?"

I caught my waiter's eye and ordered two drinks for us. Estelle downed hers and a little of her color came back. She said, "Thanks, Eddie. Before I forget, Augie wants to see you."

"To see *me*?" I asked. "What about? If he doesn't know anything, as he says he doesn't—"

I don't know what he wants. He didn't tell me. But he asked if you were coming home tonight, and I told him that I hoped you would. And he said to ask you to him if you did. He's in his office, I guess. I'll show you where." The waiter brought my club sandwich just then and I told Estelle I'd go to see as soon as I'd finished it. She told me she'd better not sit too long and I should see her when I'd finished eating.

I did and she led me up some steps to the second floor and along a corridor to a door marked "Private," and knocked. Augie Crane's voice called out for us to come in and Estelle opened the door.

She said, "Here's Ed Hunter, Augie." And to me, "See me again before you go, will you, Eddie? I'd better go back downstairs." I nodded and went into Augie Crane's office.

## Chapter 11

AUGIE WAS SITTING BEHIND THE DESK, and I knew the guy sitting on a corner of it must be Toby Dagon. I hadn't met anyone thus far who liked Toby Dagon. I didn't like him either.

He was younger than Augie Grane, maybe about thirty-five. He was well dressed and wasn't bad looking. I couldn't put my finger on what I didn't like about him. I mean, his eyes weren't too close together; he happened to be smiling and his teeth weren't pointed; there weren't any horns sticking out of his sleek black hair. But I felt uneasy being in the room with him. He was a killer. I can't explain how I knew, but I'd have known even if Bassett hadn't told me.

Augie said, "Hello, Ed. This is Toby Dagon." Toby stuck out a hand and I shook it; it wasn't cold or clammy and the handshake seemed genuine, but I was just as glad to let go.

Augie said, "Sit down, Ed," and pointed to a chair. Toby said, "You're wasting your time, Augie, but it's okay by me."

"You don't have to listen," Augie said. "You know what I'm going to tell him. And what have we got to lose?"

Toby shrugged. "Nothing, I guess, but the time you're wasting. And telling people your business."

"Everybody knows my business, Toby."

Toby stood up. "Okay, Augie. It's a thousand-to-one shot, but thousand-to-one shots pay off sometimes. We've been paying off on them. Well, I'm going to run along and catch that new canary. If you want me for anything, I'll be at the usual table."

At the door he said, "Glad to meet you, Hunter," and then he went on out.

Augie Grane swiveled his chair around to face me. He pushed a humidor across the desk and said, "Cigar, Ed? Or would you like a drink?"

"No thanks to the cigar," I said, "and I'll take a rain check on the drink." I wondered what he was leading up to.

He said, "Ed, you're trying to find out what happened to your uncle. Right?"

I just nodded.

"And I'm trying to find out what's happening to my numbers business. I think we can help each other."

"How?" I asked him. "I mean, according to what you told Frank Bassett, there can't be any connection between the two. Or were you lying to Frank?"

"Bassett was not frank enough with me, Ed. He told me the only way he was led to me was that talk Toby and I had with Starlock and your uncle in Starlock's office. This

afternoon, your friend Estelle told me a little more about it and I learned for the first time the fact that the man who kidnapped your uncle gave a certain room number at the Gresham. I don't believe in coincidence. Do you?"

"Not too far," I admitted. "But where's the coincidence? Maybe I'm dumb, but I don't see it."

Augie Grane leaned forward across the desk. He said, "I mean that Richard Bergman is here because I sent for him, and I sent for him to handle the very thing I was talking to Starlock and his operative—your uncle, I'm told—about. When Estelle Beck told me that—well, things looked different."

I whistled softly. He said, "I'll tell you all about it, but first, how much do you know? Who Bergman is?"

I told him what we'd learned about that and he said, "That's pretty straight. I've been paying Bergman a hundred a month for almost two years. I don't know why I didn't think of him first when things started to go wrong, but I guess I was dumb. Maybe I was dumber, since numbers is outside the law, to even try to get a detective agency to work on it for me. But when Starlock and one other agency turned me down flat, I suddenly remembered Bergman. And I phoned him and he came right away. And somebody gave *his* room number when they kidnapped your uncle." I asked, "How long has—whatever's been going on been going on?"

"About a month, maybe a little longer. It's cost me about thirty thousand bucks so far. That isn't much, but I don't like it." I said, "I wouldn't say thirty thousand dollars isn't much."

"Ten times that might break me, Ed, but not thirty. And here's another angle. You find out what outfit is gypping me, and I'll gave you five thousand. And cheap at the price."

I asked first, "Did you make that offer to my uncle?"

"No, Ed. I never saw your uncle except that one day at the office. Neither did Toby."

I said, "Sorry, but I can't take it. I'm working for Starlock, and he turned the job down. So how can I take it on my own?"

"You're not taking any job, or even any proposition. I'm not even asking you to work on it. I'm just telling you that *if you* find out, I'll gave you five grand. Bonus, for free. A Christmas present. What's wrong with that?"

I didn't see what was wrong with it myself, on those terms. Except that it would be too good to be true. It would mean that Uncle Am and I, adding that much to what we already had, could go ahead and start our own agency. If Uncle Am were still alive, that is.

I asked, "What makes you think I might find out, without even trying?" He smiled. "Frank Bassett tells me you're a smart kid. Estelle doubles that in spades. She thinks you're brilliant. So I think you might find your uncle, or what happened to him. And I don't think it was any coincidence that Bergman's room number got used. I think when you find the guy who got your uncle, you'll find the guy—or the syndicate—who's costing me a thousand bucks a day."

"A guy," I said. "Not a syndicate."

"How do you figure that?"

"Did Estelle tell you about the Ambrose Collector angle?" I asked. He nodded. I said, "That's why. Somebody with a macabre sense of humor. A syndicate hasn't got a sense of humor. Of course, some other numbers outfit might be *back* of him, paying him to do whatever he's trying to do."

"Smart figuring," he said. "Well, is it a deal?"

I didn't want to commit myself that definitely. I wasn't going to digress any from my main point of investigation, I told him, but if it turned out that looking for what I was looking for would lead me to the information he wanted, I didn't see what was wrong with that.

He said, "Good. We'll have a drink on that. Whiskey?" I nodded and he picked up the phone. It must have been a direct connection with downstairs for he gave the order without giving a number first.

I said, "If you want me to find the answer, I don't suppose you'll mind my asking questions. First, do you know a Karl Dell?"

"No. Ought to, if he's in numbers. Is he?"

"Insurance," I said, and let it go at that. "Does the number four-twenty mean anything to you?"

"Ummm, no. Except that it's close to four-eighteen and that's Bergman's room at the Gresham."

I hadn't even thought of that angle. Four-eighteen would be along the same corridor as four-twenty. Someone in four-twenty could easily step out to intercept a man heading for four-eighteen. But Uncle Am wouldn't have gone upstairs without asking at the desk, and he hadn't gone to the desk, if the desk clerk was telling the truth. And if the Ambrose Collector had planned to intercept him at that point, he'd have told Starlock, "Have your operative come right up to the room when he gets here." That wouldn't have sounded suspicious, and in the absence of such a suggestion, people always ask at the desk before they go up to a room. Uncle Am would have, I felt sure.

But I filed away the idea for later consideration and went back to my questioning. I said, “You told Estelle that Dagon had an alibi—that he was in Gary at the time my uncle was being kidnapped. Do you mind if I check up on that?”

He shrugged. “Not at all. Can't say I blame you for wanting to. Toby doesn't make a good impression. But it happened that I saved his life once, and got him out of trouble another time, and he's intensely loyal to me. He wouldn't do anything I didn't know about, or have any private motives.”

“All right,” I said, “but what's his alibi?”

“He called me long distance at four-thirty. From what little I've learned from Frank Bassett and Estelle Beck, I gathered that the mur—kidnaper would have to be pretty busy for a while from four o'clock on. At least not able to be in Gary at half past.”

“That's right,” I told him. “But how do you know the call came from Gary. I mean, even if a female voice said 'Gary calling,' it could have been Dagon—with the help of a girl friend—from a phone in the Loop.”

“Well, I suppose it could, except for one thing. And that is that he wanted some dope that I had to look up, so I called him back. About ten minutes later.”

“Where was he?”

“At the Melton Hotel, in Gary. I don't mean he was staying there; he went early in the afternoon and came back that evening. But when he called me from a lobby phone there and that's where I called him back. Had him paged.”

It sounded airtight, unless Augie was lying. And I didn't think he was. But I made a mental note to ask Bassett whether he'd had anyone check at the Melton Hotel to see if the page boy there remembered paging a Mr. Dagon about that time.

A waiter came up just then with our drinks—or, more specifically, with a bottle and accessories. Augie told him to leave, and poured drinks for us himself. He said, “By the way, did you come right up, or spend some time downstairs?”

“I was there a little while. Couple of drinks and a sandwich.”

“What table?”

I told him where it was and he said, “When you go back down there'll be a better table for you; I'll phone Georges when you go. And there won't be any bill.”

I said, “I hadn't planned on staying. But the price seems right.”

He grinned and handed over my drink. I decided that I liked Augie Grane—not because he was making my bill on the house or because he was offering me what looked like a doubtful chance to make five thousand dollars. Just because he was a likable guy. I knew now what Estelle had meant, and why she'd talked so freely to him. Here I was doing the same thing myself. I imagine you find very few men who make big money in something like the numbers racket who manage to remain likable.

Maybe, I thought, Toby Dagon was the reason for it. To deal with the kind of people you have to deal with in a racket takes toughness, and it was Toby who had it and Toby—whose life Augie had saved once—who fronted for the numbers. I played for a minute with the idea that maybe Toby did pretty damned unpleasant things sometimes without letting Augie know about it, maybe even things like kidnapping Uncle Am.

But that wouldn't hold water. Toby couldn't have rigged that alibi without Augie's help. Augie had called him back at Gary and Toby had been there; and surely Augie would know Toby's voice on the phone.

He said, “Here's bumps, Ed. Or better, here's to your finding your uncle.”

After we'd drunk to that, he said, “Anything else I can tell you, while we're talking?”

“Well,” I said, “if this ties in with numbers, then I ought to know how numbers banks work. How would another bank go about making you lose money—except by canceling out your protection. And it isn't that, I take it.”

“It isn't that. No more arrests than usual.” He frowned. “That's the catch, Ed; I don't know how it's being done. It isn't the fix. You know how the fix works—or used to work?”

“Not exactly.”

“All big numbers banks, Ed, paid off on the basis of figures that appear in the newspapers every day. Some use Clearinghouse figures, some use the U.S. Treasury Department figures, some Pari-Mutuel odds on certain tracks. We use stock advances, declines and unchangeds. The final digit of each of the three figures. Say the stockmarket page shows that forty stocks advanced, seventy-two declined and eight hundred and six remained unchanged, then the figure we'd pay off on for that day is naught-two-six. And the customers can see the figures tabulated in the paper and check whether they win or not.”

“And you pay five hundred to one if they hit?” I asked.

“Yes. Sure, the actual odds are a thousand to one, but don't forget the ticket seller's commission, the overhead and all we pay for protection. I run an honest bank, and my profits are about ten per cent of the play. That is, they were until recently.”

I said, “You were going to tell me about the fix.”



Oh, yes. Well, back a ways when the game wasn't so well organized, one bank used to break another occasionally by getting a stooge into the copy room or composing room of the local newspaper and having him doctor the figures that the opposition bank paid off on once in a while. Once in a while would be enough at five-hundred-to-one odds. The tip would go out what the figure was going to be, and the bank would pay off plenty that day.

That works best, of course, in a city where there's only one newspaper, or maybe two; it's tough to pull in a town like Chicago or New York, because if the papers didn't all agree, it'd be spotted quick. And even so, I protect myself against that. I get my pay-off figures right from the horse's mouth, from New York by telegraph, to check with the newspapers. And those figures can't be fixed at the source, either; there too many checks and rechecks on them and too many people watching them."

"How bad is your percentage off? It couldn't just be a run of bad luck, could it?"

"Not for this long. We're a small bank, as numbers banks go. We just work the territory right around here, south part of the Loop and immediately south of the Loop. Our average gross take is about ten thousand dollars a day, so by the law of averages our pay-off should be five thousand. For over a month now, it's averaged six.

"I told you my net profit is ten per cent—that's based on the pay-off being average. With the pay-off that much higher, I'm almost exactly breaking even. For the last month, that is. And by the law of averages—and that's the highest law of any gambler, Ed—I'm out thirty thousand bucks that I should have made."

I asked, "What would you do if you hit a really bad day, a lot of people plunged on a certain number and the number hit and you had to pay off, say, a hundred thousand bucks for that one day?"

"I'd pay it, naturally. But I'd close down the bank until and unless I found out who was biting me and how."

I said, "I suppose you'd have checked up on Toby Dagon. But is there any way he could be gypping you?"

"I'm not stupid, Ed. I checked up, naturally. I don't think Toby would do it, but I couldn't overlook the possibility. There's no way I can find that he could beat the system. You see, Ed, the way we've got it set up, Toby and a ticket seller and a customer would all three have to be in cahoots to beat the game.

"We tabulated the pay-offs, and there've been about as many through tickets sold by one seller as by another. That would mean they'd *all* have to be in cahoots, not only with Toby, but with the winners of the tickets. And you can't have that many people in on a conspiracy, Ed, without it leaking out. One of the ticket sellers would have figured he'd make more money coming to me and talking. And he would have, too. I can't figure it

being from the inside, Ed—but damn if I can figure it from the outside either. If it was easy, I wouldn't be offering five grand for the answer. Have another drink?"

"One more," I told him. "Want to explain how the ticket-selling system works? And the pay-off system?"

"I think Toby could explain it better. Not that I don't know it, but I'd rather have you get it from him. But listen, just to avoid argument—between Toby and me, I mean—don't tell him about the five grand I offered you for an answer. He was mad as hell because I offered that much as a bonus to Bergman if Bergman got the answer for me." Augie grinned. "Toby's sort of the watchdog of my treasury. Sometimes I think he worries more about my money than I do. He gets mad if I get generous."

"To anyone else?" I asked.

"There's no question of generosity between us, Ed. He works on a straight percentage of my net. And I told you what my net's been the last month. That's why Toby's even more worried than I've been; I still have the profits of the Blue Croc. Toby's living off his capital, and I don't think he's got much. But he won't take anything from me, even though I've offered."

He stood up. "Come on, I'll take you down to Toby and tell him to give you the dope you want. Unless he's left."

We went out and down the stairs and stood in the arched doorway to the main room looking around. The headwaiter came over to us—or to Augie, rather. "Toby leave?" Augie asked him.

"Yes, sir. He had just one drink after he came down and then left; he said to tell you he was going right home, sir, if you wanted to reach him."

"Okay," Augie said. "Georges, this is Ed Hunter. Take him to a good table while I phone Toby. And there's no bill whenever Ed leaves."

Georges bowed slightly and took me to a good table at ringside; he got a waiter for me right away this time, shanghaied one who was in the middle of serving dinner at an adjacent table. I hated to disappoint him, so I ordered two drinks of the same brand Augie had served us upstairs.

Augie got back about the time the drinks got there, which was only about two minutes this time. He sat down across from me and picked up his.

He said, "Skoal, Ed. Toby just got home. He's tired and wants to turn in, so I made an appointment for you to see him, here, at ten in the morning. That okay with you?"

“Sure,” I said. There wouldn't be anything I could do tonight with whatever information I got from Toby anyway.

Augie grinned. “He said if you want to see him tonight, he'll come back down, but I gather he wouldn't be any too happy about it. I'm to call him back if you want him back here tonight.” I said, “He'd love me if I did. It's half past one.”

And Toby seldom stays this late. He has to get down early in the morning—ten o'clock.”

Ten o'clock didn't sound early to me until I remembered that Toby probably worked a lot later than I did, that is when I was working normal hours.

Augie put down his glass and stood up. “Got to get back upstairs. Glad you came around, Ed. And stay as long as you like.”

Estelle, with her cigarette tray, was standing by the doorway to the hall, and I saw him stop and talk with her for a moment.

She came over to my table. She said, “Cigarettes, sir?”

“Haven't opened the last pack yet,” I told her. “I had some; you shanghaied me into buying them by flashing that note under the pack. And a damn important note it was.”

She grinned impudently. “Was it, Eddie?”

“Maybe it really was, at that. I'd rather have you say 'hi' to me than have long conversations with a lot of other people I know.”

She gave me a smile for that, and sat down, putting her tray on the floor again. She said, “Augie told me to entertain you for a while. He says he likes you, Eddie.”

“That's nice,” I told her. The orchestra was just starting up. “Shall we dance? Can that be part of the entertainment?”

“Sure, Eddie, but—I don't like to talk while I'm dancing. So tell me first—did Augie tell you anything important? Anything that will help you, I mean.”

I'd been wondering about that myself. I said, “It seemed important then, but I'm wondering. He thinks there's a connection between Uncle Am 's disappearance and the numbers racket.”

“Why?”

I told her why, and it seemed pretty thin when I told it. It was something of a coincidence, I mean, that Bergman's room number had been used, but not too much of a coincidence. And as a noncoincidence, it didn't make sense unless Uncle Am himself had

been involved in the numbers racket. More so, that is, than just by having heard the conversation in Starlock's office. And he wasn't involved more than that, or he'd have told me.

Estelle looked a little disappointed. She said, "I hoped it was something better than that, Eddie. He was so definite about wanting to see you. I thought maybe he had a real lead for you. And he seemed to be so interested in what I was telling him, after I mentioned Richard Bergman. Could this Bergman have been the— the kidnaper, Eddie?"

I told her why he couldn't have been.

By that time, we used up two of the set of three numbers for dancing, but we caught the third. It was a slow, blue waltz, and it was good music. Harry Hart's combo is famous for the way they can paint a waltz blue. I'd probably have heard more of the music, though, if Estelle hadn't been quite so soft against me, and if she'd had a back in her evening gown.

When we got back to the table, I asked Estelle when she got through.

"I don't know yet, Eddie. I forgot to ask anybody. When the club closes, I guess, but I forgot to ask when that was. But you'd better not wait for me. Have you been up and going all day?"

"I caught a couple of hours' sleep in the back office at the agency," I told her.

She said, "Then you'd better go home and get some sleep, Eddie. Maybe I'll see you when I come home."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe."

I didn't argue. I knew she was right that I should get some sleep, and it was pushing two o'clock already.

I decided to walk home; I wanted to think out what Augie Grane had told me, to see if I agreed with him that maybe there was a connection between the numbers racket and Uncle Am 's disappearance. I thought about it, but the more I thought, the thinner it got.

The only way it made sense was that Uncle Am might have been picked almost at random in an attempt to discredit Richard Bergman or to get Bergman arrested so he wouldn't be in the way of whoever was taking Augie Crane's number bank. That didn't make much sense, and if that *was* the motive, bad timing had been used. The kidnaper would have picked a time when Bergman wasn't so thoroughly alibied, if he'd wanted to plant a crime on him.

I headed for the agency; it would be only a block out of my way, and I wanted to put what Augie had told me on record there. Unimportant as it seemed now, it ought to go down in black and white. I thought of what happened to Karl Dell before he'd been able to tell me whatever it was he'd wanted to tell. And both Bassett and Starlock would be asleep by now and the information didn't seem important enough to make me want to wake either of them.

Jane was reading a love pulp magazine when I went into the office. She put it down and looked up questioningly.

I shook my head. "Nothing important, Jane," I told her. "But I thought I'd better make a report in case—in case I'm late getting down in the morning." I'd started to say in case something happened to me, but that would have sounded foolish.

"Want me to take it in shorthand, Ed?"

"If you don't mind," I told her. She got her notebook ready and I dictated a report of everything that had happened since I left the office. Even about Karl Dell's murder. I'd told Starlock everything I knew about that—except for the number four-twenty that Bassett had asked me about afterwards over the phone—but I thought it would be a good idea to have it in a regular report while it was all fresh in my mind.

While I was finishing the report of my conversation with Augie, Emil strolled in from the back room, blinking his eyes against the light. "Thought I heard voices," he said. "Anything up, Ed?"

I started to say no, and then remembered that he wouldn't know about what happened to Karl Dell, so I told him briefly and told him he could read my report when Jane had typed it.

When I left the office I decided I'd done about all the thinking I was capable of doing that night anyway, so I took a cab the rest of the way. I was dead tired, and I was feeling, slightly, all the drinks I'd had at the Blue Croc. I didn't regret them, though, because I knew they'd help me go to sleep. It was about a quarter to three when I got home.

As I started up the stairs I heard footsteps in the hall above, and a police detective, one I didn't know, was waiting for me at the head of the stairs. The door to Karl's room was open and a light was on, so I knew he'd been stationed there for the night and was checking everybody that came in.

I told him who I was and he nodded. "Captain told me about you," he said. "Said you're working with us on it. Anything new?"

I decided he wouldn't be familiar enough with the case, probably, to make anything of my conversation with Augie, so I just shook my head. I asked him if Bassett had told him about Estelle Beck.

“Got a list of tenants, and that's one of the names on it. She's the only one that isn't in by now, and I'm supposed to question any of them that come in late.”

“She's working late at a night club,” I told him, “and I'll vouch for her. She'll be along sometime between now and morning.”

“Okay, I won't third-degree her then. It's lonesome as hell sitting around in there. Want to come in and talk a while?”

I told him I'd like to, but that I had to get up early and had better get some sleep. He said, “Sure. Well, 'night then,” and went back into Karl's room, leaving the door ajar so he'd be able to hear anyone who came in.

I wondered how Estelle would handle that, if her “maybe” meant what a woman's maybe generally means. I thought of calling her up to tell her that the place was guarded, and then decided not to.

I went into my room and turned in. I must have gone to sleep the second my head hit the pillow.

But I sleep pretty lightly and the sound of voices in the hallway outside— Estelle's voice and the detective's—woke me up. I looked at the luminous dial of my watch and saw that it was almost five o'clock. Dim gray light of early morning was already coming in the two big front windows.

I heard a scraping sound from the direction of the door and rolled over in bed to look. A folded piece of paper was being pushed under the door. As I got out of bed and went to get it, I heard Estelle's footsteps going on up to the next flight of steps to the third floor.

I took the note over to the window where I could read it without having to turn on a light. It read: “Hi, Eddie. Augie asked me to marry him. Should I?”

I put on a bathrobe and slippers and went out into the hallway. The detective was outside Karl's room the second my door opened, but when he saw it was me, he grinned at me.

He said, “I suppose that note was something important about the case that you want to talk over with her, huh?”

“It could be,” I said. “Would it have to go in your report if I went upstairs?”

He shook his head. “But I thought you were too tired to talk. I wanted you to come in and talk to me.”

I said, “I *am* too tired to talk.”

He chuckled and went back into Karl's room. And this time he closed the door, although I heard him open it again after I reached the top of the flight of stairs.

## Chapter 12

STARLOCK HAD TOLD ME NOT to get down before eight o'clock, so I didn't get until a few minutes before then. Starlock was already there; he must have been there for at least ten minutes because he'd just finished reading my report.

He put it down and said, "Nice work, Ed."

"But I'm afraid it doesn't get us anywhere," I told him. "The more I think about it the less I think of it."

"Probably. But I'm going to have another look at that angle of it. And a talk with this Richard Bergman."

I'd put in the report that Grane had offered me five thousand bucks if I found out what was going wrong with his numbers bank. I asked Starlock what he thought about it.

He said, "The only thing wrong with that would be your trying to get it. If Augie's right that it's part of the answer to what happened to Am, then you might get it without trying. Only trouble is, I can't see that Augie's right. It's too thin."

"I think so too, now. Should I call off my ten o'clock date with Dagon?"

Starlock grimaced. "If we had a lot of other hot leads for you to chase down, I'd say yes. But if you don't do that, what better idea have you got?"

I admitted that I didn't know.

He said, "As far as the money's concerned, I can't see anything wrong with your taking it if it's a by-product of what we're really working on. But don't hold your breath till you get it."

I said, "I won't. What you think about checking Dagon's alibi in Gary?"

"Again on the grounds that we've got nothing better to do, I suppose we might as well. I'll send Emil out there. He got a good night's sleep here, says the only time he woke up was when you came in. I sent him down for some breakfast when I got here. He'll be back pretty soon and you can give him Toby's description."

"A photo would be better. Maybe Bassett would get us one."

Starlock shook his head. "Frank said that Toby Dagon's never had a conviction. He's been picked up often enough, but it never stuck. So he hasn't been mugged or printed."

“Anything I can do before ten?”

Stick around. Bassett's on his way here. He went to headquarters first, but he'll be here any minute.”

Bassett came about five minutes later. He read my report first, skimming over the first part that covered the time I'd been with him and reading carefully what I'd learned at the Blue Croc.

Emil Krazka came in about the time he finished. Starlock told him to wait a minute and then told Bassett what we had in mind for Emil to do, and asked if he had any suggestions.

Bassett said, “I phoned that hotel in Gary yesterday afternoon. Their call sheet shows that a Mr. Dagon, except they had it Dragon, was paged at four twenty-five. I had them put the call boy on the phone and talked to him; he remembered it because of the name 'Dragon,' the way they got it. Call was answered, but about all the description he could give me was that the guy was somewhere between twenty and sixty and between five and six feet tall and didn't walk with crutches or a cane. If you want to go to some trouble, though, I know how you might get a better check than that.”

“How?”

“Dagon was in some trouble a few years ago and one of the evening papers, I forget which, ran a picture of him. Not a posed shot; one of their own photogs must have got a sneak shot of him. I didn't figure it was worth the trouble, what with Dagon not having any motive we can figure out anyway, but if you want to have one of your ops canvass the evening papers, he'll find that pic in one of their morgues. And the call boy in Gary might identify the pic, even if he couldn't give a description.”

Starlock said, “Emil, you've read Ed's report, haven't you, and got all the dope?”

“Sure.”

“Get going, then.”

Emil got going. Bassett said he was going to start out at the Harrison Mutual, get what he could on Karl Dell's route and see what he could do toward retracing Dell's calls from the time he had left me yesterday morning to the time he'd got home—five o'clock. He admitted he didn't expect to get anything, because whatever had happened that had led to Karl's death had probably happened after he'd seen me at five. But it was routine that had to be done. He started out to do it.

I asked Starlock again if there was anything I could do before time for me to keep my date with Toby Dagon.



He said, "Not unless you want to go through those files again, the cases Am worked on. I've been through them with a fine-tooth comb, though, and you went through them once yourself. Oh, and by the way, Bassett checked upon those two guys in the jug—the only ones who might conceivably have had a down on Am because he helped put them there. They're both still doing time."

"Okay," I said. "I'll kill time with these files until time to see Toby. After Toby, what? I mean, unless I do get something from him that looks worth following up."

"I'm leaving about the same time you are, Ed; I'm going to the Gresham to have a talk with Richard Bergman. Too early now, but if he isn't up by ten, I'll wake him up. Then let's both come back to the agency and meet here. We'll have lunch together and—unless something better to do has come up—we'll both go over to the courthouse and make a hundred per cent sure on Bergman's alibi for Wednesday at four."

I took the files in the back room and spent an hour studying them, with no more luck than I'd expected to have, and then it was time to go to the Blue Croc, so I did. It was closed, of course, but I found the service entrance and rang the bell. A janitor opened the door after a minute and I said I had an appointment to see Toby Dagon. He asked me my name and when I told him he said, "Sure, Mr. Dagon's expecting you. Know where his office is?"

"I know where Mr. Crane's is; is it the same one?"

"Right next to it, west."

He let me go up by myself. I found the right door and knocked. Toby's voice sang out and I went in. It was a little swankier office than Augie's. Toby Dagon sat behind a big mahogany desk. Two other men were in the room, both standing in front of the desk. I judged that they were ticket peddlers turning in reports and money.

He looked over as I came in and said, "Hello, Hunter; just a minute," and then turned back to the men. "Guess that takes care of you, Joe. And Slim, if you want me to go out with you and make that pay-off this morning, wait outside in the hall. Or go in Augie's office; you can sit down in there."

The peddlers didn't pay any attention to me at all. One of them went out the door I'd come in, and the other went through a connecting door into what would be Augie Crane's office.

Dagon said, "Okay, Hunter, sit down. Now exactly what is that you want?" This is Crane's idea, not mine," I told him. "He thinks there may be a tie-in between your outfit's losing money lately and what happened to my uncle, Ambrose Hunter."

"Do you think so?"

“Frankly, no,” I said. Then aren't you wasting your time?”

I think I am. But I haven't got any better way to waste it that I know of. Crane might be right for all I know.”

Dagon shrugged. “For all I know, too. I don't see where the hell your uncle would fit in, but then again I'm up the creek on even guessing why we're losing money. Unless the odds have been running against us. And it's damn unlikely they'd go against the percentages that long. I don't mind admitting I'm worried about it.”

“But you still don't agree with Grane.”

He ran a hand over his hair. “No, I don't. I think it was a crazy idea even to think about getting a detective agency. I think it's a crazier one to tell details of our business to a private dick. But Augie's the boss. He said to level with you. What do you want to know?”

I said, “Just the mechanics of the thing. How tickets are handled and how payoffs are made. What a ticket looks like. Maybe the simplest way would be for me to buy a ticket. Do you sell them? Retail, I mean.”

“Well, yes and no. I don't handle them, but a lot of the customers from downstairs—the Blue Croc—know who I am and want tickets and I sell them. But that's not the usual thing, and I don't take the peddler's commission, just my cut on the net. You say you want to buy a ticket now to find out how it works?”

“Why not?”

“Since Slim's in the next room, I'll let him sell it to you.” He raised his voice, “Slim.”

The man who'd gone into Augie Crane's office came back and Dagon told him to sell me a ticket.

“Sure,” he said. “How much?”

“What denominations do you sell mostly?”

Slim looked at Dagon and Dagon nodded. Slim said, “From two bits to twenty bucks. Most of them fifty cents or a dollar, some two and five bucks. Not many over a fin.”

I took a five-dollar bill out of my wallet. I said, “Make mine a fin. That'll pay me two thousand five hundred if I hit?”

“That's right. Five hundred to one on any size bet.” Slim took tickets from his pocket, picked one that was printed FIVE DOLLARS. I saw that it was double, with carbon-paper backing on the top part. It also had a serial number and a printed date, today's date.

He pocketed my five and held out the slip. He said, "You write whatever number you pick, from triple zero to nine ninety-nine on here. Or I can write for you."

I said, "You write it." I was going to give the "lucky number" that Karl Dell had figured out through astrology. I wanted to watch Toby Dagon's face. That number might mean something to somebody, since it had got Karl Dell killed. I made sure my hand was ready to make a quick dive toward the shoulder holster Ben Starlock had given me. I didn't want to join Karl Dell if I could avoid it.

I pretended to hesitate as though trying to think of the number at random. I looked away and then back and caught Toby's eyes. I said, "Make it four-two-oh. Four hundred and twenty."

Nothing happened except the scrape of the pencil writing down the number. There wasn't the slightest flicker of surprise or anything else in Dagon's eyes or in the muscles of his face. And he couldn't have been that good; the number didn't mean anything to him.

Slim tore the slip at the fold and handed it to me and pocketed the other half; we each had a record that showed—in print—the date, the amount of the bet, and the serial number, and—in Slim's writing, although it could have been mine—the number I'd chosen.

Dagon said, "Okay, Slim. Go on back in Augie's office. I'll see you in a few minutes." When Slim had gone, I said, "So far, so good. Now what happens?"

"Slim turns in his slips to me before a deadline—safely ahead of the time when the New York Stock Exchange closes for the day. He turns back the unsold ones as well as the stubs on the ones he sold. I give him a supply for the next day. He pays—less his cut—for the ones he sold."

"And if four-twenty hits, what would I do?"

"Well, if you'd bought the ticket in the ordinary way, you'd go to Slim—if you were one of his regular customers, you'd know where to reach him. And he'd arrange the pay-off."

"Not make it?"

"Not on over a fifty-cent bet. Most of the boys carry enough money to pay off a two-bit bet—that's only a hundred and twenty-five—or a fifty-cent bet. A buck or more—five hundred bucks or more pay-off—they make a pay-off appointment. That is, the peddler and I go around together to see the mooch and pay him. We check his stub against the one the peddler turned in, and they've got to match. He makes sure it's a serial number he sold on that day and we both check that the numbers match. If it's okay, I pay-off."

It looked reasonably foolproof to me. The way it worked out, it would take a three-way conspiracy involving the customer, the peddler and Toby, to gyp the bank. That could be done once or twice for big amounts, but not consistently for smaller ones. But three

twenty-dollar bets would account for the thirty thousand dollars that Augie Crane's numbers bank was out, by the law of averages. I asked him about ten-and twenty-dollar bets.

He said, "In the last month, we haven't, as it happened, had to pay off on any twenty-dollar ones. We don't sell many. Twenty bucks is a big bet at five-hundred-to-one odds. We've paid off on three ten-dollar ones in a month—but that's within the law of averages; we sold close to fifteen hundred ten-buck tickets, so—well, technically, one and a half of them should have hit and three did. That can happen easily. Next month, maybe no ten-bucker will hit."

"Then you'd say most of your loss—or lack of profit anyway—has been because too many of the smaller tickets have been hitting the right numbers?"

"That's right. Mostly the one, two or five denominations. And maybe Augie told you this, but not too many of them through any one seller. All along the line."

"Does Augie Crane ever handle any of the pay-offs direct? Or go with you on any appointments for pay-offs?"

"He didn't used to. But since things have been going sour, I've talked him into going along on some of the appointments for pay-offs—spot checking. I mean, letting him pick out which ones to go along on, or to go out and pay off himself instead of me."

"And he's done that?"

"Fairly often, the last couple of weeks."

That meant, I thought, that Augie wasn't quite as trustful of Toby as he had seemed. Augie hadn't told me about that.

I tried to think of something more that I wanted to know, but I couldn't. Not anything that there'd be a chance of getting a straight answer to, anyway.

So I stood up and said thanks, and I folded my numbers ticket and put it in my pocket. It was worth two and a half thousand dollars, maybe. Mathematically, until the New York Stock Exchange advances and declines were figured for today, it was worth two dollars and a half.

For no particular reason, except that it was too early to have lunch with Starlock, I waited across the street and a few doors down until I saw Dagon and Slim come out of the service entrance of the Blue Croc. If they'd gone afoot and not too far, I might have followed them. But they got in a car and drove off. It was an old jalopy that must have belonged to Slim because he did the driving, and anyway if Dagon had a car it would have been new and swanky. He wasn't the jalopy type. It was only seven blocks back to the office so I walked. I got there a little after eleven and Starlock wasn't back yet. I

checked with Maude, the new day-shift steno, to make sure that nobody had called in and that nothing had happened.

I started for the back room just as the phone rang, and it was Emil Krazka phoning in from Gary. I told Maude I'd take the call, since Starlock wasn't there.

Emil said, "It's on the up-and-up, Ed. The page boy recognized the picture, so I guess Toby Dagon was here in Gary at the time Am was being picked up."

"Okay, Emil," I said. "Guess it's all right for you to come in. The boy were sure?" "Yep. He picked the right picture out of half a dozen of them. I have to take back the pic of Dagon, so I borrowed half a dozen in all. Listen, while I'm here, want me to find out what he was doing in Gary?"

"I don't see that it matters, as long as we know for sure he was there."

"Okay Ed. I'll take the pictures back to the newspaper before I come in. Might as well eat first before I report. Tell Ben I'll be there by one or one-thirty." I told him I would, and went on into the back office. Joe Streator was there, playing the same kind of solitaire Starlock and I had tried our hands at, going through the files of cases Uncle Am had worked on.

He said, "Hi, Ed. Say, there's at least one file missing here. There ought to be an incomplete one. Am couldn't have had time to write up a report on whatever he was working on Wednesday. He was out all day till he reported in about four, and Ben sent him over to the Gresham only a few minutes after he got in."

I said, "Starlock said he reported verbally on it and that it wasn't anything important. But I'll ask him more about it; I'm having lunch with him this noon. I don't think there could be anything in it, though."

"Probably not, but why not?"

"Because Starlock isn't that dumb. He knows what Uncle Am was doing, and if there was anything dangerous about it, he'd have been the first one to think of it. But I'll ask Starlock more about it. Thanks for the idea."

Since Joe was working on the files, I went back to the main office and talked to Dane Evans, the clerk, about numbers. I had him tell me how and where he bought his tickets and how the deal was handled. It wasn't exactly like the Grane-Dagon system, but it wasn't too different. Dane played almost every day, but usually only a quarter or fifty cents. Once in a while a dollar if he had a strong hunch on a number. But apparently his hunches weren't good; the only time he'd hit had been on a quarter bet. I made him figure back and he decided that in the last couple of years he'd spent about two hundred and fifty dollars on numbers and had got exactly a hundred and twenty-five back.

He admitted cheerfully that those were exactly the odds he was bucking, but he grinned and said, "Don't forget though, Ed, that maybe I got a hundred and twenty-five dollars' worth of excitement out of it, over two years."

I showed him the five-dollar ticket I'd bought on four hundred and twenty, and he whistled. "You're really plunging, Ed. But I don't blame you. I bought two dollars' worth myself, and it's the first time I've ever gone over a buck."

For just a minute I started to get excited, thinking I had something, and then I remembered that the lucky-number calculation of Karl Dell had figured in the report I'd dictated to Jane last night; naturally, Dane would have read a copy of that report. And how could I blame him for betting two dollars on Karl's number when I'd bet five myself? Of course I had the excuse that I wanted to buy a ticket anyway to see how the system worked, but I could have bought a two-bit one just as easily.

Starlock came in just before twelve, and I told him about the call from Gary. He told Joe Streater to stick around until Emil reported in and then to go to lunch. When he left, he said, "Let's have a good lunch, Ed. I'm feeling lousy and maybe some good grub will pep me up. Get anything interesting from Dagon?"

"Nothing that seems to mean anything," I admitted.

"I got a large dose of that myself, from this Bergman. Grane must have told him to level with us if we came to him. Anyway, he sounded as though he was leveling, and what he told me fitted everything else we learned about him and Augie and the numbers banks in general. God damn so many honest people. If somebody'd only tell us something that *didn't* fit in with something somebody else told us, then we'd know one of them was lying and we'd have something to get our teeth into. And speaking of that, how'd you like a steak?"

We went to the restaurant where Bassett and I had almost, but not quite, had dinner the night before, Chez Julliard.

History didn't repeat itself; we ordered lunch, got it, and ate it without interruption. Starlock said, "Bassett said he'd drop around to the office about five. Let's both take him to dinner here, Ed, after we're through talking. Speaking of which, did you turn in an expense account on the hamburgers you bought last night and whatever spending you did at the Blue Croc?"

I said, "I couldn't spend anything at the Croc. It was on the house. And as for the hamburgers, I guess I'll cover the cost of them if this hits."

I showed him the ticket I'd bought and he laughed. He said, "I've got a couple of bucks' worth of that myself, but you really plunged. Dane put down two bucks for me, and two for himself, and I think some of the other boys came in. It's going to be a bad day for the numbers banks if Karl Dell had anything on the ball. I guess we've all got a little

superstition somewhere down in us, huh? Me, two dollars' worth; you, five dollars' worth."

I defended myself against that by explaining that I wanted my bet sizable because I wanted to watch Dagon's face for a reaction when I gave the number. He grinned at me. "A good answer. So I'll prove you're lying in your teeth, Ed, by offering you three bucks cash for that five-buck ticket. I'll Jet you get out from under, since the only reason you bought it was to watch Toby's face and you've already done that."

I put the ticket back in my pocket and admitted that I'd been lying in my teeth. And it surprised me to learn that I had been; I'd really thought I wasn't superstitious.

I asked him if we were still going around to the courthouse to check on Bergman's alibi.

He grimaced. "It's silly, Ed, to do it, but I suppose we might as well. Bergman sold me that he was on the level. But what else have we got to do? Unless Bassett comes up with something and—unless it's damn hot and he phones us sooner— we won't know about that until five o'clock. I'd rather go over to the courthouse and waste time there than sit around the office and go nuts."

I admitted that I would, too. But I remembered what Joe Streater had mentioned and asked him what Uncle Am had been working on up to four o'clock Wednesday, the day he'd disappeared.

He shook his head. "There's nothing in it, Ed. I'll show you the file on it—all of one page—when we get back to the office. But there's nothing in it."

## Chapter 13

STARLOCK PHONED THE OFFICE again to be sure there wasn't anything, and isn't So we went over to the courthouse and he showed me what a really rough job of checking was. We found four people who'd talked to Bergman Wednesday afternoon, and they all remembered that it was late in the day. But Starlock didn't quit until we found someone who was sure of an exact time-exact within five minutes, anyway. And the time was a quarter after four, so that was that.

We went back to the agency and found that nothing had happened there. Two copys — Emil and Joe—were doing nothing in the back room; the others were working on other cases. Nobody was working on finding Uncle Am; there weren't any angles left to work on. You can't just go out and walk up and down the street to look for a man who's disappeared. I told Ben that since both of us were around, he might as well let Emil and Joe start on other jobs, but he wouldn't. He said, "Ed, a break has to come sooner or later. One man can't disappear and another get killed without making a splash and some ripples. Some of those ripples are about due to reach us. I want plenty of men around, so we can hit several angles of it all at once the minute we get a lead."

“What can I do? Now, I mean.”

“Go back and play rummy with Joe and Emil. Unless something breaks sooner, there's nothing either of us can do till Bassett comes in around five. And it's half past three now.”

I said, “Okay, but tell me about the job Am was working on Wednesday up to four o'clock. You said you would when we got back here.”

He sighed and said, “Okay, sit down. It was just a car-skip case for Bartlett Finance Company. Guy named Thomas Reynal had them finance his purchase of a used car eight months ago. Amount of financing was only three hundred bucks, which means it probably cost only about five hundred and he paid a couple of hundred cash—we got the figures on that but I don't remember them exactly.

He was paying twenty-five a month plus interest on the balance, which would have paid it off in a year. He paid for eight months, so he owed only a hundred plus interest. But he skipped town with the car and Bartlett Finance told me to have an op put in one day's work on it to see if we could trace him. Mostly as a matter of principle; they hate to have a guy beat them.”

I said, “He must have had some other reason for skipping; he wouldn't have done it just for the car—or else he'd have done it sooner.”

That's what Am found out. It was an abandonment case. Basically, the guy was skipping out on his wife, not with the car. He just took the car along.”

“And the bank account?”

“Didn't have any, Am said. But he borrowed money from several people the day before he left. And he took along practically all his clothes in two suitcases—his wife was out, working, when he left.”

“Any possibility at all,” I asked, “that it wasn't just an abandonment case?”

“Am said not, Ed. And he put in a full day on it—up to four o'clock. He talked to Reynal's wife first, then checked a lot of his acquaintances and contacts, and he says there isn't any doubt at all.”

“Wife swear out a warrant for abandonment?”

“No, she decided it was good riddance. Says he was a no-good, anyway, and she's going to divorce him and let it go at that.”

“Did he quit a job?”



Starlock said, "Ed, you can't make anything out of it. No, he didn't quit any kind of a job. He hadn't worked at all for nearly a month."

"What did he work at when he worked?"

"I don't know, Ed. I suppose Am found out and it would have been in his report when he'd have written it up, but he didn't mention that. He went out on the job at eight-thirty and came in at four, or a few minutes of. He came in my office and I asked him, 'Any luck?' and he said, 'Not a bit,' and told me what I've just told you. He went on into the back room and was going to write up his report between then and five. But the call from the Ambrose Collector came right after that and I called him back into my office before he started the report."

"You're sure he didn't start it?"

"Yes, when I called him in to tell him about going over to the Gresham, I asked him whether he had and he said no, that his fountain pen seemed to be on the blink and he was trying to get it to feed right and hadn't started writing yet."

"Did he leave his notes on the case, whatever he was going to write up the report from?"

Ben shook his head. "If he took any notes, they must have still been in his pocket."

I asked, "Have you reported to Bartlett Finance on it? And are they going to pay you for the day's work he put in, without a detailed report?"

Starlock said, "Glad you reminded me, Ed. I forgot all about it, but I might as well call them and tell them what Am told me. I can tell them what happened, and I won't bill them for the day's work since I can't give them an operative's report. But I might as well keep their good will by giving them Am's conclusions, and for free."

"They in a hurry on it?"

"I guess not. Don't see why they would be, for a skip of only a hundred bucks."

"Then don't call them yet, Ben. You might as well collect on it, because I'm going to do that job over again tomorrow. Unless some better lead comes in, anyway I'm going to start out at the same time Uncle Am did, and I'll take things in the same order—go to the guy's wife first and find out what names and contacts she gave him, and follow them down just as he would have. I can probably find most of the places he was Wednesday and what time he was at each."

Starlock thought a moment. He said, "Guess there's nothing to lose doing that, Ed. Unless, as you say, something else breaks between now and tomorrow morning. Maybe I should have thought of doing that myself. Guess I would have if Am hadn't reported verbally and said that he hadn't got anything on the guy he was looking for. I still don't

see how working on a hundred-buck car-skip case could have led to—whatever happened.”

“I don't see, either,” I admitted. “And that case seems simon pure and simple, all right. But suppose, in working on it, he happened to run into something else that *was* important?”

Starlock looked doubtful. “I think he'd have mentioned it to me when he came in. We talked for a couple of minutes. But okay, Ed, unless there's a break sooner, you go out and look for Thomas Reynal tomorrow. And use your own judgment, but I'll tell you how I'd work it if I were doing it.”

“How?”

“I wouldn't be looking for your Uncle Am; I'd just be looking for Reynal. Admit— when you're talking to the wife or anybody else Am talked to—that another op talked to them, but say the guy quit his job flat without turning in a report and that you've got to do the job over again. In case they remember Am's name as Hunter, use a different name for yourself, and pretend your sole interest is in Thomas Reynal. That way—if Am *did* stumble across something—you'll be more likely to stumble across it yourself than if you go around asking questions about Am.”

That sounded sensible to me and I agreed. I asked Ben for the file on Thomas Reynal, so I could copy down whatever dope Uncle Am had had when he'd started out on the case Wednesday morning. He told me to get it from Dane Evans and I did.

I took it into the back room. Emil and Joe were playing rummy on one of the two tables, so I took the other and copied from the file folder into my pocket notebook.

There wasn't much to copy. The only thing in the folder was a single sheet of the foolscap Ben keeps on his desk for taking notes of telephone conversations when he doesn't have Jane listen in to take shorthand notes. A few lines in Ben's handwriting read:

“Bartlett—Thos Reynal, 682 S Briwick Apt 7—last emp Kennel Bar, S Clark, mar. no ch.—38 Chev ser 1987-B6729 Lie 341-294—pr. 500, fin. 300, bal due 100 plus int and pen, refs Jas. Jennings, same ad, Apt 2, bro-in-law, Wm Demminton atty Corwin bldg. 1 day auth.”

That was all there was, so I copied it word for word and abbreviation for abbreviation. Uncle Am had probably done the same thing Wednesday morning.

I took the file back to Dane. Through the door to Starlock's office I could see that he was just sitting and staring at the ceiling, so I went in again. I said, “I copied the file notation word for word. Was there anything besides? Anything you didn't bother to write down but might have told Uncle Am when you gave him the notes?”

“Not that I remember; did you turn back the file?”

I said, “Here's all that was in it. Only difference is that this is my handwriting instead of yours.” I showed him the page in my notebook, and he studied it.

He said, “Guess the only thing I didn't write down was that the guy had skipped the last payment and they phoned him. His wife answered and said he'd skipped town and that she didn't know where he was and didn't give a damn. I think I told that to Am; outside of that he didn't have anything or know anything that isn't here.”

“Okay,” I said. I put my notebook back in my pocket. “Sure there isn't anything I can do between now and whenever Bassett gets here.”

“Yes, Ed. You can get out of my hair. Go back and play cards with Joe and Emil.”

He sounded impatient and I decided that maybe I had been heckling him too much. And what he suggested was as good as anything I could think of, so I went back and made Joe and Emil switch from gin rummy to a three-handed variety so I could sit in.

It was several hands later that Emil was dealing and happened to look at his wrist watch. He said, “Four-twenty. And that reminds me and I think we can find out. Wait a minute.”

He put down the deck without finishing the deal and went out. Joe Streater said, “Dane's got a friend on a newspaper; he can phone and find out. You got a ticket on four-twenty Ed?” I nodded.

Joe said, “I got half a check and Emil put down a buck. Five hundred for him, if it hits; two hundred fifty for me. And it's funny, neither of us believes in astrology. I don't *expect* it to hit. It's just that—well, what the hell is fifty cents if I lose it? But two hundred fifty bucks if I win—well, you can't say what the hell is two hundred and fifty bucks, can you?”

“Or two and a half thousand.”

Joe whistled at almost exactly the pitch Dane Evans had used when I'd told him about my five-dollar ticket. He said, “Gripes, you really back a hunch. Come to think of it, why didn't I— Emil came back, shaking his head sadly.

Joe said, “But on second thought, I'm glad I didn't. Did we come close, Emil?”

“Not a figure the same. Nine hundred thirty-two. We missed by only—uh— five hundred and twelve. Well, I see I'll have to win my dollar back from you guys.”

He sat down again and finished dealing. I didn't pick up my hand right away because I'd just thought of something and I wanted to keep on thinking about it. We'd all thought of four-twenty as a number and we'd all subconsciously tied it in the numbers game because

the numbers game had kept trying to get itself involved in our guesses as to what might have happened to Uncle Am. But four-twenty could be a *time*, twenty minutes after four.

And twenty minutes after four could have been the time something had happened to Uncle Am. It was just about the time he'd arrived outside the Gresham if he'd walked there from the agency.

Karl could have thought of it as a time when he'd written it down, even though he hadn't put in a point or colon and had written just the figures.

But even if that was right, I didn't see how four-twenty as a time could have meant anything to Karl Dell that would have led him to get me on the telephone and would have made him sound so excited about having something important. If he hadn't said "It's not astrology, exactly." I could have thought he'd calculated twenty minutes after four as the time that whatever had happened to Uncle Am had happened. And that wouldn't have been a bad guess. But it couldn't have been that, or he wouldn't have said—

I was going in circles, so I picked up my cards and tried to concentrate on the game. But I made a mental note to bring up the possibility of four-twenty being a time instead of a number when I talked things over with Starlock and Bassett at dinner.

I played until a quarter of five when Bassett got there and then I went into Starlock's office.

From Bassett's face I didn't have to ask him whether or not he'd got anywhere; he looked tired and discouraged.

He ran a hand through his faded red hair. "Well," he said, "I found just about every call Karl Dell made yesterday. He followed right down his collection list and everybody I talked to that he saw noticed that he was in a hurry. Just made his collections and didn't try—as usual—to sell some more insurance. He was probably rushing to get home early and do his homework in astrology.

I even found where he ate both meals. One of his collection calls was at a restaurant on Halsted and he timed that for about noon and ate there. A quickie; the guy said he couldn't have been in the place over fifteen or twenty minutes, collecting and eating both. And your guess was right, Ed, as to where he ate the second time. He was at the barbecue place on Clark where Estelle used to work at about four-thirty. He had a barbecue sandwich and coffee and that would get him home about five when you saw him coming in. His whole day is covered. We know everything he did up to the time he phoned the agency here at twenty-five minutes after six and then you phoned him back at six-thirty."

That reminded me about times, and I told them what I'd thought of—the possibility of four-twenty being a time rather than just a number.

Bassett said, "I think it was. We dug up an astrologer and gave him the paper that Dell had been working on. He says Dell's methods aren't orthodox—he must have worked out a system of his own that isn't the usual one. He couldn't make much out of it, but he did say that he thought Dell's calculations had brought him to a time when something had happened and that four-twenty was probably twenty minutes after four o'clock, p.m."

"On Wednesday?" Starlock asked.

"He wouldn't stick out his neck on that. Said he couldn't make out any definite indication of a day of the week or of the month. He said Dell's system was screwy anyway. He's taking Am's birth date and starting a horoscope of his own. Says *he'll* try to get something for us. Well—it looks like he's got a chance of beating *me* to it. I haven't got a God damn thing left to work on. What have you guys been doing besides sucking your thumbs?" We told him, and it didn't sound like much.

He grunted and said we were doing a swell job in eliminating what possibilities and suspects we did have.

He said, "I was thinking of suggesting that," when we told him I planned tomorrow to retrace Uncle Am's calls on the day he disappeared. But he added gloomily, "That's what I did today on Karl Dell. And a lot of good it did me."

We went to Chez Julliard and had a wonderful dinner but none of us enjoyed it much.

We broke up after that and Starlock told me to go home and get a good night's sleep for a change, and said that he'd do the same thing. It sounded like as good an idea as any.

But when I got to my room it was only eight o'clock and I didn't feel like turning in that early, or like reading either. It occurred to me that Estelle must have a night off once a week and that this could be it, so I went up to her room to see and she wasn't there.

When I came back down I saw that Karl Dell's door was closed and locked, and there wasn't any crack of light under it. Apparently the police weren't guarding it any more.

There was a crack of light under Chester Hamlin's door, so I knocked. I wasn't crazy about Chester, but I didn't feel like sitting around alone.

He seemed glad to see me and asked me in. He said, "Say, Ed, let me show you those two shots of you playing trombone. They came out swell."

He showed them to me and they were good photography and one of them was funny. My face was hidden behind the bell of the trombone and about all you could see was my feet, my hands and the slide and bell of the tram.

He said, "Ed, I bet I could sell that shot somewhere. You won't mind if I try, will you? Your face doesn't show, so nobody could tell who it is."

I told him I didn't mind.

“Still no news at all on your uncle, Ed?”

When I told him there wasn't, he wanted to know if there was anything he could do and I thanked him and said there wasn't.

“Don't you think, Ed, that after this long no news is good news? I mean, if anything has happened to him, wouldn't you have heard by now?”

I said, “Something did happen to him. It's only a question of what, Chester.”

“I—I have a hunch he's all right, Ed. I've never told you this, but I'm a little—clairvoyant. You don't believe in that, though, do you?”

I shook my head. I wondered how many people were a little screwy that way. Karl Dell with astrology, now Chester Hamlin coming up with the idea that he was clairvoyant.

I said, half-seriously, “Better not push that hunch, Chester. Look what happened to Karl Dell. Or did you know why we think he was killed?” I remembered that they kept that part of it out of the papers. As far as the news stories told it, the murder of Karl had been merely a robbery—“although police are investigating the case in search of other possible motives.”

He said, “I thought there was a connection, Ed. A detective was here last night asking questions about Karl. And he asked things about your uncle, too, so I figured they thought there was a connection—but that's natural with them both living on the same floor of the same building. Is there more than that?”

I admitted that there was, but said I'd better not talk about it. Since the police hadn't given it out to the papers, apparently they wanted to keep it to themselves.

To change the subject, I picked up the pictures Chester had taken of me and admired them again.

He said, “If I sell that one, Ed, you've got a drink coming for being my model. And come to think of it, why shouldn't I buy you the drink anyway? Feel like going over to State Street for a little while?”

I was going to say no, and then wondered why I shouldn't and said that I would. It was still too early even to try to go to sleep and maybe a few drinks would make me sleepy. They didn't. Not right away, anyway. They made me drunk. Maybe because I was overtired and had been worried stiff for over two days now. I know I've drunk much more and felt it much less.

I'm even a little fuzzy as to exactly how many places we dropped into, but they were all on State Street and within a dozen blocks of where we started.

We didn't talk about Karl Dell or Uncle Am; we talked about trombone playing and photography, and when Chester began to get a little tight, he talked about clairvoyance but it turned out he thought even less of astrology than I did. I remember that, although we avoided current issues, we did get onto the subject of crime in general at one time, and I remember Chester saying how much he hated murder and starting to say something about a brother of his and then getting sidetracked.

Chester turned out to be a swell guy, once you got to know him. A little on the screwball side on just the one topic. I remember once he wanted to go get a crystal ball that he had somewhere—I got the idea that it wasn't in his room—and wanted to try to find something in it to reassure me about Uncle Am. I think I tried to get him to use the bald head of a guy sitting in a booth across from the bar, but he said that wouldn't work.

Yes, the Ambrose Collector turned out to be a swell guy. He took me home and poured me onto the bed, and I guess he must have taken off my shoes because I don't think I did it myself.

## Chapter 14

I WOKE UP IN THE MIDDLE of the night and something was hurting my shoulder and one side of my chest. I rolled over and found I was lying on the bed fully dressed and it was the thirty-two automatic in the shoulder holster that had been causing the trouble. I'd been lying on it.

I got up and put on the light. It was two o'clock, so I couldn't have slept long; I don't know what time we got home, but it could hardly have been before midnight. My suit was as rumpled as though I'd slept in it for twelve hours instead of two; I'd have to wear another one in the morning and send that one to the cleaners.

My head didn't feel so good, but my stomach seemed to be all right. I got undressed and into pajamas and went back to bed; this time I didn't wear the shoulder holster.

I felt a bit ashamed for myself for having got drunk, but there wasn't anything I could do about it now, except go back to sleep. I could get five more hours of it and still be at the office by eight o'clock. If, that is, Estelle didn't knock on my door on her way upstairs when she got home two or three hours from now.

I lay there thinking about Estelle. I wondered if I wanted to marry her, and the answer was that I did and I didn't. I loved her, but I just wasn't sure I was ready to get married yet. I wondered to what extent she'd been kidding about Augie Crane wanting to marry her. I'd assumed she was just kidding, and hadn't mentioned it when I'd gone upstairs last night after she'd left the note under my door. Now I began to wonder if she *had* been kidding. It just could be. Of course Augie, with his money, could have his pick of a lot of

women. But few of the ones he'd come in contact with were as beautiful as Estelle, and fewer were as fresh and sweet and honest. It just could be that Augie had fallen like a ton of bricks, hard enough to propose honest matrimony instead of making a pass at her. Someone, I think Bassett, had told me Augie was a widower.

Well, even if Estelle hadn't been kidding, she couldn't be considering it seriously. Not if I could believe what Mrs. Brady had told me—and the evidence of my own senses for the last couple of nights.

I lay there wondering if she'd knock on my door—and hoping that she would— until I fell asleep again.

But it was the alarm clock that woke me, at seven.

There was a folded note under the door and I made for it as soon as I'd shut off the alarm. It read, “Good night, Eddie. If sliding this under the door doesn't wake you up, then you'd better sleep.”

I swore at myself for having slept so soundly. It had been the damn drinks; usually I sleep very lightly.

But the drinks had done no other harm. I felt all right, and my head was clear. The inside of my mouth was dry, but a drink of water took care of that.

I got dressed, and it was the start of the third day of the search for Uncle Am. It was going to be the last day, but I didn't know that.

I strapped the holster on. After sleeping on the gun, I checked the magazine and the chamber and made sure that the safety was on before I put it in the holster. I don't like guns, and I felt foolish packing one.

I didn't guess that I was going to shoot—and kill—with that one before the day was over.

I didn't guess a lot of things.

Starlock wasn't down yet when I got to the office, but he came in a few minutes later. He said, “You look fresh, Ed. See what a good long night's sleep will do. How do you feel?”

“Swell,” I told him. “Ben, have you any idea where Am started Wednesday morning? Whether he saw the wife first, or what?”

He thought a moment. “He didn't see the wife first, because he phoned her from here to see if he could make an appointment. And the call got her out of bed; it turned out she worked nights and slept late. But she took it all right and made an appointment to see him later, I don't remember just when.”



"I don't want to miss her," I said. "Got any idea what shift she works on or how late she sleeps?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't call before eleven, though. Am called her about nine. That's when he started on the case; you're an hour ahead of him."

"Did he call anyone else after that, before he left?"

"Not that I remember. He must have gone around to see the other references without trying for appointments. You might as well do the same thing; none of them is very far."

I took out a notebook and studied the notations I'd made in it. Aside from his wife and the employment reference—the Kennel Bar—I had only two names. One was a brother-in-law and all I had for him was a home address, a different apartment in the same building as the wife; the other name was that of an attorney in the Corwin Building, only a few blocks away. Today was Saturday and that meant there was only about an even chance that he'd be coming to his office at all.

I asked Starlock, "You know if Uncle Am used the name of the agency on this? Or did he say he was with the finance company?"

"Probably the finance company, Ed. I think that's what he always used on car skips unless there was some reason to the contrary. On Bartlett jobs, anyway; they don't mind if we use their name."

It was too early to start, but I felt I'd get the willies sitting around, so I went into the outer office to get out of Starlock's hair and looked up William Demminton, the attorney in the phone book. There was a home phone listed too, but the address was out to hell and gone and I hoped he'd be coming down to the office so I wouldn't have to go way out there.

I tried calling the office and—as I expected at only a few minutes after eight—there wasn't any answer. I called the home phone, hoping I wouldn't be waking him up and got a break. A woman—his wife, I presume—answered and said that Mr. Demminton had just left to go to the office, and that he'd be there by half past eight, or not much after that.

That meant I could get an earlier start than I'd hoped for. I could leave the agency in ten minutes or so, and I thought of a way to kill that much time. I called Bassett and asked him if he'd have someone check the files to see if there was any record on Thomas Reynal.

"Sure, Ed," he said. "Shall I call you back or want to hold the line?"

I told him I'd hold the line and I held it for about five minutes. Then Bassett's voice said, "Yeah, there's a record, Ed. Four convictions. Six months for statutory rape in 1942. Suspended sentence for ten days, and a fine, in 1944, for petty larceny. Made him serve

the suspended sentence when he was picked up only a month later on two charges at once—drunk and disorderly and inmate of a disorderly house. A whorehouse, to you.

“Nothing more till last month. He lost his license as a bartender—and God knows how he got one in the first place, with a record like that; he must have greased somebody's palm plenty—for serving drinks to minors. And there was a fine of one hundred bucks, too. That's all.”

“Nice guy,” I said. “Thanks a lot, Frank.”

“Is that the car skip Am was working on Wednesday?”

“Yeah. I guess the finance company was lucky. They got two hundred out of the three hundred bucks they financed on the deal. Guess it was such a small deal, as car financing goes, that they didn't investigate him much if any.”

“They going to swear out a warrant on him?”

I said, “Probably they're waiting till they get the report from us on the day's time they authorized. Well, thanks, Frank.”

“Keep me posted if you get anything, Ed.”

I told him I would.

I walked over to the Corwin Building, taking my time, and got there at eight-thirty on the head. Demminton wasn't there yet, but he showed up within a few minutes. I let him get the door unlocked and then followed him in and told him who I was and what I wanted.

He looked at me a little strangely. “One of your men was here only a few days ago,” he said. “Not that I mind, but did you get your wires crossed?”

I told him the story I had ready, that the investigator who'd seen him Wednesday had quit without notice and without turning in a report, that we were sorry but we had to do the work over again.

“All right, come in. I came down early this morning because I have some piled-up work, but I guess I can give you a few minutes, and it can't take longer than that.” We went through an outer office into an inner one, and he waved me to a chair at one side of his desk and sat down across from me.

He said, “I'll tell you just what I told the other man your company sent. I've known Reynal for about three years, but never very well. When I got to know him, he was tending bar at a place on Dearborn Street near Goethe. I lived around the corner on Goethe; I was a bachelor then. It was a nice little bar that he worked in and I spent a fair amount of time there, evenings. Tommy and I did quite a bit of talking, and I liked him.

“We knew one another fairly well—as well as a bartender and a customer ever get to know one another without having contact except across the bar—for about a year. Then, two years ago, I got married and moved away from that neighborhood. I didn't see Tommy for about a year after that and then he came into my office—he'd known, of course, that I was a lawyer—and wanted me to handle a minor legal matter. His car had been in a collision with another car; the other driver was suing him and he claimed it was the other driver's fault and wanted me to file a countersuit.”

“Whose fault was it?” I asked him.

Demminton spread his hands. “It was one of those things—no witnesses and one driver's word against the other's. I filed a countersuit for him, not because I expected to win it but just as a bargaining point in settling out of court. And that's the way it wound up—the other man's attorney agreed to withdraw his suit if we withdrew ours. No hits, no runs, no errors.”

“And that was the last time you saw Reynal?” I asked.

“Yes. That is, about six months ago. The matter I handled for him took that long. I didn't mean it took much time—all in all I didn't spend over a day's time on it—but it dragged out for six months before we—called it a draw.”

“He paid you?”

“No. I sent him a bill for fifty dollars—I made it reasonable because I knew he didn't have much money if any—but he never paid it.”

“You made no effort to collect?”

He shrugged. “It wouldn't have been worth it, for that amount. Possibly eventually I'd have sold it to a collection agency that buys up bad accounts. Now that he's skipped town, even such an agency wouldn't give me a nickel for the account.

“Did you know that he'd skipped town before—uh—our other representative was here?”

“No. That was my first intimation of it. I sent him a bill for fifty dollars about six months ago. And a statement on the first of the month ever since. I haven't heard from or of him since the case was settled.”

“And yet you gave him a favorable reference?”

He frowned. “I told exactly the truth, as you'll see if you consult your records. I said that I'd known him between two and three years, that he was at that time a client of mine, and I knew nothing against him.”

“You've no idea where he would have gone when he skipped town?”

“No, except that he used to talk a lot about California; he'd been there once and said he'd like to live there again. But he didn't mention any specific town that I remember. And that, young man, is everything I can tell you about him. We had no mutual friends, nothing in common except the conversations at the bar I told you about, and the accident case I was handling for him at the time he used me as a reference.”

I thanked him and stood up. Then, as though it were an afterthought, I said, “I nearly forgot, Mr. Demminton. The boss asked me to ask you how our other investigator acted—the one who was here Wednesday. Did he seemed normal while he was here?”

“Normal? Just what do you mean? And what does it matter, if he quit working for you?”

It might matter if we're ever asked to give him a reference. It was a funny thing; he'd worked for us for three years, and then all of a sudden Wednesday afternoon he telephoned in and said he was quitting and leaving town and that we should mail his check to General Delivery, New York. He never sent in a report—which is why I'm having to do this over again—and never made any explanation. You can see why our company is curious.”

Hmmm. I can, at that. Well, he acted perfectly normal while he was here. Very pleasant person; I liked him.”

This would have been his first call, I imagine. Do you have any idea where he intended to go from here, who he was going to see next?”

Demminton shook his head. “Not an idea. I remember that he was here early, not much after nine o'clock. I told him just what I've told you. And that's all; I wouldn't have the slightest idea where he went from here.”

I thanked him and left. I learned nothing except that, so far, I was in Uncle Am's footsteps and about half an hour ahead of him.

There were three leads left: the wife, the brother-in-law who lived in the same building, and the bar—the Kennel Bar—where he'd been employed last. I had one new lead now, through Demminton, the fact that from three years ago to two years ago, he'd been employed at a bar on Dearborn near Goethe. But that didn't look like a very hot lead. It had been some time ago, and I didn't think Uncle Am would have bothered with it—at least not until after he'd seen the others.

The wife was out, since he'd phoned her and made a later appointment, and that left the brother-in-law and the bar on South Clark Street. I decided in favor of the bar, not only because it was the nearer, but because it was odds-on that Uncle Am would have wanted to kill two birds with one stone when he went to the apartment building, so he'd have waited until time, or nearly time, for his appointment with the wife.

I figured he'd have walked over to Clark Street and taken a streetcar south—it was about twelve blocks—so I did the same thing.

I got there about a quarter after nine and the place wasn't open yet. I went into a little greasy-spoon restaurant next door to it and asked the man behind the cash register if he knew what time the bar next door usually opened.

“About ten o'clock, usually,” he said. “Place in the next block usually opens earlier, if you want a drink. Think it's open now.” I said, “Guess I'll wait here. Could I have a cup of coffee?”

“Sure.” He went back to the urn and drew it. I sat down on the end stool of the counter, nearest the register, and he brought it to me there.

I took the snapshot of Uncle Am out of my pocket and put it down on the counter. “Ever seen this man?” I asked him.

He bent over the picture. “Looks familiar. Think he was in here not long ago.”

“Wednesday, maybe? Three days ago, about this time?”

“Sure, that's it. He asked the same question you did. About the bar next door. I told him it opened at ten and he said he'd have a cup of coffee, just like you did. Only he didn't have so long to wait; it was pretty near ten at the time. Only I'm not sure it was Wednesday.”

I was, so I didn't worry about that. So far, I was on the trail all right, only now I'd lose whatever time advantage I'd had on Uncle Am. I'd have to wait longer for it to be ten o'clock so the Kennel Bar would open up.

I asked him, “Know a bartender who used to work next door by the name of Tommy Reynal?”

“There was one named Tommy, I don't know his last name. Why? You a cop or something?”

“Private detective. What do you know about this Tommy?”

“Nothing much except that he—and the bar, too—got in trouble about a month ago selling drinks to minors, I think. They both got fined and Tommy lost his license or something. I guess Perry was worried he might lose his tavern license, too, but he didn't. Hell, he shouldn't have. He wasn't around when it happened.”

“Still,” I said, “he's legally responsible for what his employee did.”

“Well, he paid a fine. Hell, I don't think it was Tommy's fault, either, for that matter. A lot of kids are a year or two underage look older than they are. Only-Are you working for the license commission or bureau or whatever it is?”

He seemed friendly to Tommy Reynal, so I thought I'd get further if I took a tack that favored Tommy too. I said, “No, I work for a private agency, and we're looking for Reynal because a firm of lawyers we're working for have some news for him, to his advantage. Only he moved away and they can't find him.”

“You mean an estate or something? Did he inherit some money?”

He wouldn't quite have believed something that simple, so I made it a little more complicated for him. I said, “It isn't an inheritance, although they represent an estate. It's about a sale of property; they need his signature to quiet title.”

I didn't say the signature might be worth a few dollars, or a few hundred; I left that to his imagination.

He said, “Well, I guess you're telling the truth. That's just about what the other guy said, the guy whose picture you showed me. Only why are they sending two of you on the same job?”

“No reason,” I said, “except that he missed. They thought they'd take another try and see if I could get a lead he didn't get.”

“How come you showed me his picture and asked me if he was here?”

I had to take time out to shovel a spoonful of sugar into my coffee on that one. I said, “As a matter of fact, the guy missed so completely that they asked me to check up if he'd really seen as many people as he said he did, or if he was just building up a nice report. They asked me to check up on his work because he's new with our agency.”

“Oh. Yeah, he talked to me all right. Only I couldn't tell him anything, because I knew Tommy only from having a few drinks next door once in a while. Haven't heard anything about him since he left there—month ago, or whenever it was.”

If he went out of town, you don't know where he might have gone?”

“Nope. Not an idea. He never talked about his personal affairs or anything, the few times we did talk. I never even knew his last name.”

Another customer came in, then, and the proprietor of the restaurant went down to the middle of the counter to wait on him. I sipped my coffee and wondered if there was any constructive use to which I could put the half hour I still had to wait.

I decided there was. I went over to the telephone booth on the opposite side of the restaurant and used the directory to look up the number of the brother-in-law who lived in the same building as the wife. Nine-thirty was too early to call her, since I knew that she worked nights, but it wouldn't be too early to call him.

I called him.

I gave him a name and said I was with the Bartlett Finance Company, and could I see him to talk to him about his brother-in-law.

He said, "I guess so. But I told everything I knew about him to the other guy your company sent a few days ago."

I told him I'd like to see him anyway and that I'd explain why when I got there. I asked him how late his sister slept, and he said she generally got up about ten. So I made an appointment to see him about ten-thirty and asked him, if he saw his sister sooner than that, to try to fix it so she'd stay around so I could talk to her about eleven o'clock. He said he would.

I thought I might be able to get one more thing out of the way in the twenty minutes or so I still had to kill before the Kennel Bar opened, so I opened the classified directory to the taverns and ran a finger down addresses looking for one that was on Dearborn around 1300 north. There were a good many pages of taverns, but I was lucky; I found one on the third page that looked like about the right address. I called the number and it was.

I used a simple credit-reference pretext and found that yes, a Tommy Reynal had been employed there once, for about a year and a half. He didn't remember the dates, but it would have been up to a year and a half or two years ago. He sounded a little cagey when I asked him why Reynal had left. He said, "We just didn't get along," and I didn't press the point; probably he'd decided that Reynal was dragging down too much out of the register but hadn't been able to prove it, and he couldn't very well say so now without proof.

I didn't care about that anyway. I thanked him as though that was all I wanted to know and then started after what I really wanted.

I said, "I'm sorry we had to bother you again. But our man who talked to you Wednesday forgot to ask you why he left."

"Huh?" He said. "What man of yours?"

"One of our investigators," I said. "This is the superintendent speaking. One of our men called there some time Wednesday to make a routine check." I laughed a little. "Maybe he told you a different story as to why he was asking, but that's all in the game."

“Nobody was here Wednesday asking about Tommy. Nobody's asked me anything about him for a long time. Last time was almost a year ago. Some finance company. He was buying a car, and they were just checking his employment record.

“You're sure?” I said, as though I didn't believe him. “If that's right, I'll have to call the investigator on the carpet for making a false report. He said he was there, and we can't let our employees get away with anything like that.”

“Well, I don't want to get a man in trouble. But he wasn't here. I know for damn sure because I lost my bartender Monday and haven't found one I want yet and I've been running the place all by myself. Nine in the morning till one at night; I even eat here.”

I thanked him and hung up, sure now that Uncle Am hadn't gone there, or even phoned. There was no real reason why he should have, but I wanted to be sure.

It was ten minutes of ten and I went outside and next door to make sure the bar hadn't opened a little early. It hadn't, so I went back to the restaurant and had another cup of coffee, and then went next door again and it was open.

## **Chapter 15**

THE KENNEL BAR looked as you'd expect a place called the Kennel Bar to look. Pictures of dogs all over the walls. A doghouse in one corner, great Dane size, big enough for a man to crawl into on all fours, and probably more than one drunk had done it. They even used the old gag of having a picture of a dog on the door of each of the two washrooms—a pointer on one and a setter on the other. But the proprietor apparently did not trust his customers' knowledge, either of dogs or puns, for the doors also bore the more conventional designations MEN and WOMEN. If I'd owned the place, I'd have made them more in keeping: STUDS and BITCHES. And I'd have made the customers lap up their drinks out of dog dishes.

But I didn't own the place; the big bald-headed man behind the bar did; anyway he said he did and I had no reason to doubt him. I gave him the same song and dance I'd given the attorney, pretending first to be interested in Thomas Reynal. And I was, to the extent that I didn't want to miss any leads Uncle Am might have got, and followed.

But I didn't get any leads. Reynal had worked there, all right, for about four months, up to a month ago, but he hadn't seen Tommy since, didn't have the faintest idea where he was or what he was doing, except that it wouldn't be tending bar anywhere unless he was doing it without a license.

So I led around to the other investigator who'd been here three days ago, at the same time of day, and went into the story about his having walked off the case and the job and out of town and about my company wondering why.



The bald man shrugged. “Looked and sounded all right to me, and asked me the same questions you did and I told him the same thing.”

“Do any drinking while he was here?” That seemed a logical question to ask.

“He had one drink and bought me one. That's all.”

That sounded like a hint, so I did the same thing, to keep him talking in case he might remember something.

But it was wasted money. He didn't know anything about Reynal's wife or friends or his life outside of the hours he'd spent behind the bar. He'd like him all right, but hadn't got to know him personally at all. He'd neither heard of or from him since he'd left—at least not until the other man from the finance company was in a few days before and said Tommy had skipped town.

No, he didn't know where the other investigator had gone next, but like as not it would have been to the place where Tommy used to live, because that was only a few blocks away. No, he'd never been there but he had the address written down somewhere if I wanted it. He knew it wasn't far because Tommy always walked to work.

I plugged away with a few more leading questions that failed to lead anywhere. I felt pretty sure Uncle Am hadn't got a lead here.

It was only a quarter after ten when I left the Kennel Bar, so I walked from there to 682 South Briwick. It was a four-story building with a plumbing-supplies store on the ground floor. The stairway to the flats above was at the back of an areaway. Twelve mailboxes in the short hallway at the foot of the stairs indicated that there'd be four flats on each of the three floors above. Number two, then, the brother-in-law's place, would be on the second floor and number seven, where Reynal had lived, would be on the third.

I climbed to the second floor and rang the bell of number two. A stocky man in an undershirt and with his hair tousled and at least a day's growth of beard on his face opened the door. “You the guy from the finance company? Come on in.”

He led the way along a hall past a kitchen where a woman was washing dishes into a sitting room with well-worn upholstered furniture. He sat on the arm of the sofa and waved me to a chair.

He said, “I told the other guy all I know, but go ahead and ask anything you want. I hope you find the son of a bitch.”

I told him I was sorry but that it wasn't a matter of asking extra questions; that I had to repeat the work of the other investigator. I gave him the same story I'd given Demminton and the man at the Kennel Bar.

He said, “The guy looked all right to me. And nothing happened to him here that'd make him do something like that. He didn't even turn in a report?”

He sounded curious and I figured I might as well find out what I could about Uncle Am before we got onto the subject of Thomas Reynal.

I said, “Our company's wondering what did happen, so I've been trying to trace his movements—along with doing the work he did over again. What time did he get here?”

“Just about this time. He was here maybe half an hour and then went upstairs to talk to Madge. I don't know where he went after that. He didn't say, unless Madge gave him something that he went after.”

“Is she awake now?” I asked.

“Yeah, having breakfast. I dropped up just before you came and told her you were coming and would drop in there after you left here. She said to make it around eleven if you could; she wants to go out before noon.”

It almost scared me to realize how close my timing and sequence of calls was coming to Uncle Am's.

But I pulled my mind away from that and started asking questions about Reynal, pretending I was interested in finding him so I'd ask the same questions Uncle Am would have asked, and come up with the same leads. Not that I expected to find Reynal. Uncle Am is good; if he'd reported to Starlock that Reynal had really skipped without leaving any loose ends behind him, then Reynal couldn't be found in one day's work.

Jennings was telling me that Reynal was a no-good, that he drank too much, although he wasn't an alcoholic, that he got mean when he drank, and that he gambled away most of the money he earned when he worked.

It seemed a remote connection, but I pricked up my ears at that. I asked, “Did he play the numbers?”

“Not that I know of. Oh, maybe he bought a dime or a quarter ticket once in a while if he felt lucky or had a hunch on a number or dreamed of it, or something. He was pretty superstitious. But the ponies were what he went in for. His big betting was on the ponies.”

“Would you say it's likely, then, that he headed for somewhere where there's a track? One where they're running now—or were a month ago when he skipped?” Jennings rubbed a hand over his jaw. “Doubt it. He never cared to watch 'em run, just to bet on 'em. Never knew him to go to a track.”

“Do you know where he did his betting?”

“Cigar store somewhere in the Loop, but I don't know just where. Offered to take me there, but I never cared much for the ponies. Oh, back when he and Madge were first married and we were friendly, I used to let him place a bet for me once in a while if he said he had something hot. A buck or two if I happened to have it to spare.”

“Is there any way I could find out where he placed his bets? A cigar store in the Loop is pretty vague. Would your sister know?”

“Don't think so. Why? What would that matter?”

“I might be able to find out if he made killing just before he left. Generally when a man skips town, it's because he just made some money, or the opposite— run up debts over his head. But there's always something that sets him off at that particular time. Maybe he's wanted to for a long time, and then something happens that either makes it possible for him to run or makes it necessary.”

Jennings' hand scraped over his chin again. He said, “Sounds sensible, but damn if I know which. He wasn't any *more* in debt than usual. Madge was working, so he was eating. Of course, he'd just lost his job and his license, and that may have set him off. He could have got another job—outside of bartending—here, though, as easily as anywhere else.”

“You don't think he could have hit a big bet?”

“Don't see how he was in any position to place any big bet. Nothing over ten bucks or so, and that wouldn't get him a fortune, even on a long shot. Bookies don't pay track odds on long shots.”

I said, “He could have hit big with a small bet on numbers. Even five bucks would have got him twenty-five hundred.”

“Odds are two to one against you on numbers. You got one chance in a thousand of hitting and they pay only five hundred to one. He knew and played percentages, so he knew that. Numbers is all right for chicken feed, for the fun of it, but a guy who bets five bucks on a number is a damn fool.”

“I guess so,” I said. “And you wouldn't say he was one?”

“No, you got to give him that. He was a pretty shrewd cookie.”

I asked, “Besides the possibility of his hitting on a bet, how much money would he have had to light out on?”

“Not any fortune. Less than a hundred bucks. Like a sap, I lent him fifty bucks. Told me he had a good job lined up and needed fifty bucks to get it.”

“Maybe he used the fifty to place a bet on a horse, and the horse came in. That would give him capital.”

He shook his head. “Nope, he lit right out with the fifty. No time to make a bet and collect. He came down here one evening at eight. I'd just got home from work—I work a twelve-to-seven shift—and gave me the story about the job. It was payday and I had two weeks' pay, so I had that much cash. He knew that, of course.

“He left with it and said he was going over to cinch the job. Madge came home right after that; it was her day off and she'd been out but wasn't working. And when she went in the flat, she found all his clothes were gone. He must have had 'em in the car and been on his way, practically, when he hit me for the fifty. And twenty bucks Madge had in the cupboard, toward the rent, was gone, too.”

He looked at me and grinned. “Tell you one thing. He isn't hanging around Chicago. He knows I'll take that fifty bucks out of his hide if I ever run into him. I'd rather do that than have my fifty back. Come to think of it, I guess the fifty was a good investment.”

Something in the way he said it made me ask, “Did you suspect he might be using it toward skipping out?”

“Well—a little. He sounded pretty convincing about needing the fifty for a job; he was a good talker. But it did come to me that just maybe the son of a bitch was thinking of skipping instead, and I guess I figured it would be worth it if he did. It convinced Madge what a bum he was and she's getting a divorce now. Yeah, I guess that's worth fifty bucks.”

“Not that it's any of my business,” I said. “But if you feel that way about it—and I don't blame you—why are you willing to help us find him?”

His face hardened. “Because I'm hoping you'll put him in jail for running off with the car. Madge won't swear out a warrant. I tried to on the fifty bucks, but they said if he borrowed it, all I could do would be to sue him. But your finance company can jail him all right.

“Even so, I wouldn't want him found if I was still worried about Madge. But she's okay now; she'll go ahead and divorce him even if he comes back on his knees.”

That made sense and I decided I'd better get down to brass tacks, so I asked him who some of Reynal's friends had been and got out my notebook and a pencil ready to take down names—and addresses, if he knew them.

He said, “Well, he didn't have any really close friends. He knew a lot of people, naturally, tending bar. I know names of some of the guys he used to pal around with, but he didn't tell any of them where he was going, I'll bet. He wouldn't have been that dumb. But if

you want, I can give the names of everybody I know of that he knew. It won't get you nowhere."

"How many names did the other investigator take down?" I asked.

"Three. I told him three guys."

"I'd like those, even if it won't do any good. I mean, even if they can't tell me anything about Reynal, I want to find out whether the other investigator saw them. We're also trying to find out what happened to him and why he left town so suddenly."

He gave me the three names. Addresses of two and the place where the third worked.

I asked him if he'd told our other investigator anything he hadn't told me, especially anything that might have been a lead he could have followed down.

Jennings shook his head. He stood up. "Hate to rush you," he said, "but it's eleven; I got to shave and get ready to beat it. I start work at twelve and it takes me a while to get there."

"Sure," I said. "And thanks a lot." I started toward the hallway and then turned. "Did the other man from our company talk to Mrs. Jennings?"

His hand scraped across his chin again. "Didn't exactly talk to her. I called her in once to tell her to give him the name of a fortuneteller she went to and that Tommy went to once, too, when she told Tommy about him. Or maybe more than once, I don't know."

He waved toward the kitchen. "You ask her about it, huh? I got to start getting ready."

I went along the hallway to the kitchen. Mrs. Jennings turned away from the sink, drying her hands, and I stood in the doorway. I told her what I wanted.

She said, "Oh, yes. His name is Ramah Singh. S-i-n-g-h. He's wonderful. He told me everything about myself the first time I went to him. I don't know how he does it, but he's wonderful."

"A Hindu?" I asked.

"Well—I don't know. He doesn't look like one, but he wears a turban around his head. He speaks perfect English, but I think he said he studied in India or somewhere."

"And Reynal went to see him?"

"He said he did. I found him—Mr. Singh, I mean—through a friend of mine about three months ago. He lives about ten blocks from here, on Barr Street. I don't remember the number but it's just around the corner off Polk; you go over the Polk Street bridge. I tried

to get Jim to go, and Madge, but they wouldn't. But Tommy said he would, and later he said he did. But he never told me what Mr. Singh told him and I don't know if he went more than once."

It didn't seem to mean anything except that Uncle Am might possibly have gone there. It didn't seem likely. But I asked, "Did our other investigator write down the name and address?"

"I don't think so. Not while I was telling him, anyway."

I thanked her and went on out. I went up to the next floor and rang the bell of Apartment seven.

The woman who answered the door and asked me in looked to be about thirty, quite a bit younger than her brother. Also quite a bit less intelligent. She didn't exactly look stupid, but she came close. Her face might have been pretty had there been more animation and intelligence in it. She already had twenty to thirty pounds more weight than she needed and in ten years she'd look more like a cow than a cow does.

She took me into the living room to talk, and she talked. I didn't have a chance to say much; I managed to get across my explanations of why the investigation was being made over again, but I wouldn't have needed to. She was perfectly glad to tell everything a second time.

I learned everything that I'd learn from Jennings over again and a lot of domestic and intimate details besides. But nothing that sounded at all helpful in locating Tommy Reynal—or Uncle Am.

After about three quarters of an hour of it, I started bearing down on what I really wanted to know, which was what leads she had given Uncle Am which he might have decided were worth following down. I knew now, for sure, that he'd seen all the people who'd been mentioned in Starlock's notes before noon. He hadn't got back to the agency till four, so he must have spent three hours following leads he got from Mrs. Reynal and her brother.

Mrs. Reynal wasn't as good at specific remembering as she was a general talking, but I kept bearing down and finally came up with two points. One was the name and address of a fairly close friend of Tommy's whom Jennings hadn't mentioned. She was pretty sure that the other investigator had written that down.

The other was the fact that he had an uncle—the only relative she'd ever heard him mention—by the name of Charles Reynal, who was in the real-estate business in Jacksonville. She thought Tommy would likely have headed for either California or Florida, because he always hated Chicago weather. And if he went to Florida, he might get in touch with his uncle there. She thought she'd told that to the other man from the finance company, but she couldn't be sure. I felt sure that she had, for Uncle Am wouldn't

have missed asking if Reynal had any relatives anywhere, and that would have brought it out.

That was at least something I'd have to give to the finance company for the day's work they'd authorized. They could write to the police at Jacksonville to watch out for the car and for Tommy Reynal.

It was a little after twelve when I got away from Mrs. Reynal. I doubt if Uncle Am could have done it any sooner, so we were still even. He'd have probably eaten lunch next, so I did the same thing. Maybe even in the same restaurant, because it was only a block from Mrs. Reynal's place. I might possibly have found out by showing the snapshot of Uncle Am, but it didn't seem worth the trouble. And I think it would have scared me a little if I'd found out that he really had eaten there.

Before I even ordered lunch I went to the phone and called the agency. Ben said nothing had come in and nothing had happened. He wanted to know how I was coming. I told him I was doing swell on finding out where Uncle Am had been and when, but that none of it seemed to be leading anywhere or to have any possible connection with what had happened after he got back to the agency.

He said, "Stick with it, Ed. The more I think of it, the more I think you had an idea there. I mean, tracing everything he did up to the time he reported in. We should have done that even sooner."

When I left the phone I took one of the booths at the side instead of sitting at the counter. I wanted to look over my notes, the names and addresses, and plan out my afternoon's work. Uncle Am would probably have done the same thing while he ate.

I had four names down, probably the same ones Uncle Am had taken. If Jennings' and Mrs. Reynal's memories were correct, he'd not made notes of any others.

Three of the four were on the near south side, all within a radius of a mile or so. Those three Uncle Am would have seen in person, or at least tried to. The other address was way west, almost out to Cicero.

When I finished eating, I went back to the phone book and looked for Harvey Spengler, the one who lived far west. He wasn't listed so I called Information and gave them the address and found there was a phone listed and got the number. I called it.

Apparently it was a rooming house; Spengler wasn't there, but they thought he'd just going out to eat and would be back pretty soon.

I picked the nearest of the other addresses and walked there; the guy's name was Albert Burgoyne. I learned that he worked on Saturday afternoon, so he wasn't home. I got the address of the haberdashery shop where he worked, and learned that he'd been working

Wednesday afternoon too. The shop wasn't far; a Clark Street car would take me there in five minutes or so.

But first I stopped in a drugstore and tried the phone number for Spengler again. This time I got him.

The finance-company line doesn't go so good over a telephone. People clam up unless you're talking to them face to face.

So I said, "This is Jay Wheeler talking. Could you tell me where I can get in touch with Tommy Reynal?"

"No, I haven't seen Tommy for over a month. Who is this?"

"Jay Wheeler. Met you with Tommy once. I took some money for him. Not much, but I want to get it off my books."

"Money for what?"

"A bet," I said. "A little over a month ago he gave me five on a nag and it came in. Thirty-four bucks and sixty cents. He never came around to get it, so maybe he didn't know he hit. And I don't like unpaid bets on my books; I'd rather get it off. You don't know where he is?"

"I heard he skipped town. So I guess you're in that much dough. Unless you want to give me twelve bucks of it. He owes me twelve bucks."

I just laughed. I asked, "No idea where he'd have headed for?" I knew that wasn't a good question because, in character, I wouldn't have asked it. But he didn't notice.

"Not unless it's California. But I'm wondering now if he *did* skip. Another bookie called me a few days ago and damn if he wasn't holding a winner for Tommy, too. More than yours. Damn if I see why he wouldn't have waited to collect any money he had coming."

I thanked him and hung up. It was funny—Uncle Am having used exactly the same pretext I'd thought of. It was funny, but I didn't want to laugh. Anyway, one name was off my list.

I took the streetcar to the haberdashery. I got there at half past one and was told that Albert Burgoyne was out to lunch; that he was due back at two o'clock.

I decided that it would be better to wait around than to try to make either of my remaining two calls, so I strolled down to the corner and killed half an hour with one bottle of beer. Also I called the agency to make sure nothing had come in.



At two I went back to the haberdashery. Burgoyne had just come in. I gave him the finance-company story and asked him if he knew where Tommy Reynal was.

He frowned and hesitated for a few seconds. Then he said, "Sure, I know where Tommy is."

## Chapter 16

IT WAS THE LAST THING ON EARTH I'd expected him to say. It nearly floored me. Hadn't Uncle Am been here? Jennings had said he'd taken down the name. Actually, I didn't give a damn where Tommy Reynal was. I wanted to skip that and ask right away about Uncle Am. But I had to stay in character, so I curbed my impatience and asked him where Reynal was.

"In Louisville, Kentucky. Staying at the Kentucky House, under the name of Tom Reynolds; he changed his name a little, but not much. I got a letter yesterday."

"From him?" I asked.

"Hell, no. From a cousin of mine in Louisville, makes deliveries for a big liquor store. He was here in Chi for a couple of weeks about a year ago, and he and Tommy met once. He wrote me that a few days ago he had some liquor to deliver to a Tom Reynolds at the Kentucky House. He said the name reminded him of having met a Tommy Reynal here and when he took the liquor up to the guy's room, it was Reynal. He says Reynal didn't recognize him—they'd met only the once, and he might not have been sure about recognizing Reynal if it hadn't been for his taking a name so close to his own. Anyway, on account of the change of name he didn't say anything; he wrote me instead."

"You say you got the letter just yesterday?"

"Yeah, and I was still trying to remember the name of your company. Another guy was here a few days ago, Wednesday I think. Or was that a different outfit that's after Tommy too?"

I told him it was the same one and gave him the usual line about the other investigator and why we were curious about him. I asked him what time he'd been there and how he'd acted.

"About this time or little later. He acted okay, didn't seem screwy or anything if that's what you mean. I'd have told him about Reynal if I'd known then. But he didn't leave a card, and I couldn't remember his name or the name of the finance company. What'll you do about Reynal? Bring him back?"

"That's up to the company," I said. "I don't know whether they'll extradite or not, but they'll at least repossess the car."

I wish they'd repossess the twenty-five bucks of mine he ran off with. That's why I'm glad to give you the dope. I thought he was a friend of mine, but it isn't like he just owed me the money and walked off. It was worse than that. He borrowed it the day before, so he must have been planning to skip out. Probably borrowed everything he could from everybody, knowing he'd never have to pay it back."

"I guess he did," I said. "Were there any more details in your cousin's letter?"

"No, that's all. But I know the Kentucky House; I lived in Louisville once. It's a fairly nice place. Not swanky, but he isn't on his uppers if he's staying there. And it isn't a transient hotel; they rent places by the month, bachelor apartments. So he's probably still there if he was there a few days ago. But that's all I can tell you."

I thanked him and went back to the subject of Uncle Am and asked if he knew just what time he'd come here, explaining that we were trying to trace everywhere he'd been that day.

"He got here while I was out to lunch, somewhere around half past one. I know because when I got back the boss told me someone had been in to see me about half an hour ago, and he'd told the guy to come back after two. I'd say he got back two-fifteen; I'd been working fifteen or twenty minutes when he came back."

"Have any idea where he went from here?"

"He asked me if I knew a Tex Wilkins who was another friend of Reynal's and when I said I did, he asked me if I knew whether Tex would be working that afternoon. All he had on him was the address of the hash house where Tex is a counterman, and he didn't know what shift."

"Good," I said. That was one of my two remaining names. "And was Tex Wilkins working then, and is he now?"

"Yeah, until four o'clock. He works seven in the morning till four in the afternoon, every day but Sunday."

I thanked him again and left. Tex would be next on my list, as he had been on Uncle Am's but first I went back to the place where I'd killed half an hour with the bottle of beer and called the agency again. Starlock said, "Hi, Ed. Got something?"

"On Uncle Am, no. But I got a hot lead on Thomas Reynal. Thought I'd call in right away so you can pass it on to Bartlett Finance while it's hot. They'll probably want to phone Louisville police right away."

I told him what Burgoyne had told me about Reynal and explained that Uncle Am hadn't missed the boat, that Burgoyne had got the news after he'd talked to Uncle Am.

Starlock said, "Nice work, Ed. I'll phone Bartlett. But I wish you'd got something about Am instead of about Reynal."

"So do I. Well, I've got two calls to go. I'll be in before five."

The restaurant where Tex Wilkins worked was on South State. I took a Clark Street car to the right latitude and walked over to State.

I tackled Wilkins with the same approach I'd used on the others, not telling him that I already knew where Reynal was. I didn't want to miss any leads that he might have given Uncle Am and that Uncle Am might have followed up.

But he didn't know anything about Reynal, hadn't seen him for almost two months. He'd heard Reynal had skipped town, but that was all. Yes, another investigator had been here a few days ago, but he hadn't been able to tell him anything. No, he hadn't mentioned any specific contacts or people whom the other guy might have traced down; he was sure of that.

He thought it was about three o'clock that the man had been there, but he wasn't sure; it might have been a little earlier.

I thought three o'clock was a good guess; I'd been fifteen minutes ahead of Uncle Am at the haberdashery, and it was a quarter of three now.

I had only one address left, a man named Gaines. It was over a dozen blocks so I took a cab.

He wasn't home, but I talked my way inside the door and got the information I needed from his wife. It didn't help.

Mr. Gaines had been out of town on Wednesday, too, when another man from a finance company had called to see him. He was a traveling salesman and was away from Chicago over half the time. She knew almost less than nothing about Thomas Reynal; she'd heard her husband mention him and knew they were friends—but she didn't think they were very close friends—and that was all. She'd never met Reynal, and didn't recall her husband having spoken of him recently. She hadn't even known that Reynal had left town until the other investigator, in asking the same questions, had mentioned it. And she hadn't talked it over with her husband because, he hadn't been home since Wednesday; he was on a selling trip in Minnesota and would be gone another two or three days.

Aside from the fact that it had been in the afternoon, she didn't know when the other investigator had been there until I jogged her memory a little by asking if it hadn't been about half past three. Then she remembered that it was after she'd been out shopping for the day, so it must have been at least that late.

And I knew it couldn't have been later because Uncle Am had been back at the agency before four o'clock.

I thanked her.

I walked back over to Clark Street slowly, trying to think if there was any possible angle I might have missed. I hated to go back to the agency; there'd be nothing to do there.

I looked at my watch and saw it was three o'clock. If I went back now, I'd get there just about half an hour before Uncle Am had. I'd been every place he'd been, as far as I could figure and from ten o'clock on I'd been just about even with him, time for time, except for fifteen minutes I'd gained by seeing Burgoyne at two o'clock instead of two-fifteen or so, and the fifteen minutes I'd saved by taking a taxi between my final two calls, instead of walking or taking a streetcar as Uncle Am would have.

That second fifteen minutes was easily enough explained, but what had happened to the first fifteen? Uncle Am had reached the haberdashery, just as I had, at about half past one and he had found that Burgoyne was out to lunch and would be back at two. But he hadn't returned until two-fifteen or two-twenty. What had he done during the three quarters of an hour?

I'd killed my half hour between one-thirty and two by dropping in at the corner tavern and having a beer. Uncle Am might have done the same thing, but it was unlike him to overstay and be fifteen minutes late unless there was some reason for it. He had a watch that kept good time.

That fifteen minutes nagged me. It kept me from starting back to the agency and turned my steps north on Clark Street instead. I was only a couple of blocks from the haberdashery and from the tavern where I'd killed half an hour waiting for Burgoyne to come back from lunch.

I walked the two blocks and went back into the tavern. I showed the bartender my snapshot of Uncle Am and he didn't remember ever having seen him, although he'd been working, he said, on Wednesday afternoon.

I covered a few blocks either way on Clark Street, trying three other taverns and two restaurants. No dice. I even tried a drugstore on the chance that he might have stopped there for a coffee or a coke. And because that drugstore was the last place likely for him to have dropped into, I ordered a coke at the fountain and sat down to think things over.

If Uncle Am hadn't dropped in anywhere to kill time waiting for the end of Burgoyne's lunch hour, then I had three quarters of an hour of his time to account for, not just fifteen minutes. And if he'd been just killing time, he'd have dropped in somewhere. He wouldn't just have walked around for forty-five minutes. Uncle Am wasn't that crazy about walking.

There was a Chicago street map on the magazine rack. I bought it and unfolded enough of it to show the Loop and the near south side and put it down on the soda fountain. I took a pencil and traced my own route from office to the point where I was now. And Uncle Am's route must have been just about the same, up to the point where he'd talked to the wife of the traveling salesman. He must have gone back to the office from there.

But where could he have gone during those forty-five minutes from one-thirty until two-fifteen? Had he picked up a lead that I'd missed?

I put an X where the haberdashery was and stared at it and then around it. Crossing Clark only a few blocks away I saw Polk Street, leading to the Polk Street bridge. Who had said to me, "You go over the Polk Street bridge"?

Mrs. Jennings, telling me about the wonderful fortuneteller, Ramah Singh. On Barr Street, just off Polk.

It hadn't looked worth following up, the name of a fortuneteller that Reynal had been to once. I hadn't figured that Uncle Am would give it a second thought. But it was only ten minutes' walk from here. And maybe he *had* given it a second thought when he'd discovered at the haberdashery that he had some time to kill, and had realized that he had nothing to lose by going there.

I put the map in my pocket and went out of the drugstore. I headed for Polk Street and across the bridge. When I reached Barr Street I started looking at mailboxes in buildings near the corner. In the third building I tried I found one with the name *Ramah Singh* on it, for Number six. No ad, of course, saying he was a seer or mystic, just the name *Ramah Singh*.

I went up rickety stairs to the second floor and found the door of Number six. There wasn't any name on it, but a white card in one corner of the frosted-glass pane said, "Walk In," so I walked in.

It was the waiting room; there was another door beyond. There was a worn sofa on one side of the room and a few other pieces of furniture including a small bookcase on the other side. I walked over to the bookcase and glanced at the spines of the books; they were all on occult subjects.

Beyond the inner door I heard faint voices and I walked nearer to it and I could hear them more loudly but couldn't make out anything that was being said, only that it was a woman's voice and a man's and the man was doing most of the talking, probably with the woman asking questions or agreeing.

I strolled back to the bookcase and picked out a book at random. It was called *The Geometry of the Soul*, and I put it back where I'd found it. I looked over the other titles, wondering whether there were any books by Charles Fort, but there weren't. All the titles sounded equally screwy to me, so I picked another out at random and opened it to the

flyleaf. It was inscribed *Ramah Singh* in heavy pencil, but another name has been erased under it. I wondered idly what Ramah Singh's real name was and picked another book to see if he'd missed. The flyleaf of that one was torn out, probably because it had been inscribed in ink that couldn't be erased. I put it back in the bookcase and didn't bother looking at any of the others. I went across the room and sat down on the sofa.

It was only another minute before the inner door opened and a woman came through it. I didn't know her. And to this day I don't really know what she looked like, but after a quick glance at her face just to be sure she wasn't someone I knew, my eyes went to the turbaned man who stepped into the doorway as she came through.

It was Chester Hamlin.

He didn't seem surprised to see me. I don't know how much surprise showed in my face, but he winked at me over the woman's head, apparently a signal for me not to say anything until she was gone. So I waited until the outer door closed after her, and then Chester beat me to the punch.

He said, "Come on in, Ed. I rather thought you might come here."

He stepped back into the inner room and I followed him. It was smaller than the outer room, and was dimly lighted. There was a carpet on the floor but the only furniture was a small table with a straight chair behind it and a more comfortable chair in front of it. There was a black cloth on the table and a madball—a three-inch crystal sphere—lay on a bunched piece of black velvet in the middle of the table. There were no other trappings, unless you counted Chester's turban, and aside from the turban he was neatly dressed in ordinary clothes.

But the setup, because of its very simplicity, was more effective than most elaborate layouts would have been.

He took the straight chair behind the table and sat down, but he looked across at me and not at the crystal ball. He said, "Sit down, Ed. I know what you want to know, and I'll tell you without you having to ask. If it had *meant* anything, I'd have told you sooner. I feel bad about not having told you, but it might have got me into trouble and it wouldn't have done you any good. It still won't, but"—he shrugged—"you're here now."

I said, "Uncle Am was here Wednesday afternoon."

"Yes. He came here to ask me about a Thomas Reynal who'd been here to see me—professionally. I told him what I could, but I don't think it helped him any."

I asked, "Did you try the crystal ball?"

He took it seriously. "I offered to. I *might* have seen something in it, but he just laughed at the idea—like you did last night when I offered to use my clairvoyance to see if I could

help you find your uncle. I can still try—here and now—if you can put yourself in the right frame of mind to work with me, in rapport. If you sit there looking and feeling skeptical, I won't be able to get anything.”

He was right on one point; I didn't feel in rapport. I felt a little cold and a little suspicious. I don't know exactly what I was suspicious of, but I was trying to figure that out.

He said, “Ed, I've been clairvoyant all my life. I'm going to level with you. I guess I haven't any choice, but to tell you the whole thing. I've been a—well, call it fortuneteller, all my life since I got out of school. Nine years, to be exact. And, God damn it, Ed, it's genuine. I *am* clairvoyant and I *do* see things in that crystal. And I've really helped plenty of people.

“I'll admit I've faked, too. It isn't something you can turn on and off like a faucet, and plenty of times nothing comes, and I have to make up things, harmless things, because you've got to tell a mooch something. And you've got to use a name like Ramah Singh, because who'd believe anything a guy named Chester Hamlin told him?

“I've used a dozen names, Ed, because there's one sad thing about being a clairvoyant—it's illegal, most places, to do it for money. Whether you're real or a faker, like I'll admit a lot of them are, and I am once in a while when I have to be. But I've learned one thing in nine years—and that is to keep my real identity and the identity of my current professional name separate. Any day the police can come around here and tell me to move on, and I'll have to close this place and start somewhere else under another name. But they won't know I'm Chester Hamlin, so I won't have to start *all* over again; I'll still have a base of operation.”

He shrugged. “I suppose you'll tell them now. I suppose I can't blame you, Ed.”

I said, “Let's stick to Uncle Am for a moment, Chester. What time was he here?” I knew what time Uncle Am had been here, but I wanted to see how well his story fitted.

“It was right after I went out to eat—rather, after I came back. I generally get hungry about one o'clock. I think—let's see—Wednesday I must have got back about a quarter of two. And he was here—in the outer waiting room, I mean, sitting on the sofa. I brought him on in here to talk, and I guess we talked fifteen or twenty minutes. I told him the little that I actually *knew* about Thomas Reynal; I could have told him more, but he didn't want it. Things I'd seen about Reynal in the crystal, I mean. And I asked him to keep my secret over at the rooming house, and we talked about that and he said he would.”

It fitted. The times, in particular. Ten minutes' walk from here to the haberdashery. Uncle Am would have been waiting here for him if he came back at a quarter of two, and if they'd talked about twenty minutes then he'd have got back to the haberdashery to see Burgoyne at about quarter after two. And he had.

I said, “You should've told me.”

“Damn it, Ed, I would have if it would have helped you. But how would it? Your uncle told me why he was looking for Reynal—the guy had skipped town with a car and the finance company had hired your agency to find him. And how could that have anything to do with whatever happened to your uncle? And I *know* his stopping here couldn't have had anything to do with it.”

I dug deeper. “How did he happen to come here?”

“He told me, so I happen to know. Reynal's sister-in-law told him that Reynal had come here; she'd sent him. Incidentally, what he really wanted was tips on horse races.”

“Did you give them to him?”

“In this racket, Ed—if you've got to make a living out of it—you give a man what he asks for and wants. But—unless it's something that really *comes* to you and you know is true—you make it ambiguous, so he can't call you too closely on it. Frankly, I don't remember exactly what I told Reynal except that it was strictly off the cuff. I didn't like him. He impressed me as a small-time crook. Anyway, I couldn't really get anything for him, so I stalled him along. Maybe he thought what I told him the first time was pretty good because he came back for more. But not after that, so maybe he lost money on the way he interpreted the guff I gave him on his second visit.”

“Which was when?” I asked.

“I don't remember exactly, Ed. Maybe two months ago. I do remember that the two times he came here were only a few days apart, though. And after that, he didn't come back.”

He started to tell me minor details of things he'd told Thomas Reynal, but I wasn't interested in them. I'd found Reynal, and I was interested only in Uncle Am. And Uncle Am hadn't gotten any leads here, not any that he'd followed down, anyway. I had his whole day accounted for now, up to the time he got back to the office.

So I said, “Shut up, Chester. Let me think.”

I thought, but I didn't get anywhere. It didn't add up to anything more than a coincidence. A coincidence that Chester Hamlin should be a fortuneteller and that, in the course of hunting a car skip, Uncle Am should have talked to Chester because Chester had looked into the crystal for horse-race tips for the guy Uncle Am was looking for—and hadn't found.

I couldn't make anything more out of it. Uncle Am had said he wouldn't give Chester away—or at least Chester said that Uncle Am had said that, and I saw no reason to disbelieve him. It's what Uncle Am would have said, and meant. Uncle Am had done fortunetelling himself once, way back when, with the carnival.



But I'd think some more about it, when I was alone again, and maybe I'd see something I'd missed.

I stood up and said, "Okay Chester."

"You won't give me away on this, will you?"

I said, 'Yes and no. I'll tell Starlock, naturally. And I'll tell Bassett—he's the man from Homicide who's in charge of this. But he's interested only in murder, not in heckling fortunetellers. I'll ask him not to pass the word down the line to whatever department would heckle you. He's a good guy, so you don't need to worry about that. I won't tell Mrs. Brady or anyone else around the rooming house.'

"Thanks, Ed. Thanks a lot."

I walked back to Clark Street slowly, thinking. I had covered Uncle Am's day perfectly. None of it seemed to mean anything, not even finding that he'd seen Chester Hamlin, alias Ramah Singh. I couldn't see any motive in that.

But just the same, I decided, I was going to look for one. And while the looking was good, before Chester got home.

I caught a cab on Clark Street and took it home to the rooming house. I decided to try my own key on Chester's door before I asked Mrs. Brady for a pass key. I remembered that all the keys were pretty much alike in that Estelle's had opened Karl Dell's door without any difficulty.

Mine opened Chester's door almost as easily.

I closed the door behind me and looked around, wondering what I was looking for and where to start. The closet he'd padlocked on account of the darkroom chemicals was probably the best bet, but I'd have to take off the hinges of the door to get into it, or pull off the padlock, hasp and all, with a crow bar.

I'd take the easier things first. My eyes lighted on the bookcase and I remembered the one at Ramah Singh's waiting room and walked over to glance at the titles. There weren't any books on the occult in this one, just the ordinary assortment of books you'd expect a man of moderate intelligence to collect; historical novels, plays, a few mysteries, a smattering of nonfiction books on a variety of subjects.

I pulled one of them out and opened it to the flyleaf, as I'd done with two or three of the books in the waiting room. It read Chester Hamlin all right but— like the books in the waiting room—there was an erasure under the name.

What other name had he used? I was curious. He wouldn't have erased a professional name like Ramah Singh to put his own name instead, because he wouldn't, in all

probability, ever have kept his books on other than the occult subjects in any office he had. He said he'd always kept his professional and personal identities apart.

I held the book up to the light to see if I could read what the erased name had been, but couldn't.

I put that book back and started systematically at the left side of the top row to see if the name had been changed in all of the books. After I'd tried a few and found that it had, I held each book upside down and shook it before I put it back. Often people leave things in books and forget them.

Chester had.

In about the eighth book I tried, an old envelope had been left as a bookmark; it had slid down out of sight so it didn't show when the book was closed. But it fell to the floor when I shook the book upside down.

I picked up the envelope. I never got around to noticing the return address or postmark, or even the address at which Chester had received it. All I saw was the name of the addressee:

Chester Dagon.

It took me all of a second to drop the book and the envelope and to get to the closet door, ready to try to break it down with my bare hands, but a lot of things went through my mind in that second. Toby Dagon, killer. Chester's starting to say something, in his cups, about having a brother who—

I forced myself to stand and think calmly for another second, and I remembered watching Chester put the screwdriver and hammer away after putting the padlock hasp on the door. The screws had been short ones; I was sure with a screwdriver and hammer I could pry the hasp off by pulling the screws right out of their moorings.

I got the screwdriver and hammer from the bottom dresser drawer. I put the screwdriver against the top edge of the hasp and began driving it down with the hammer, between the hasp and the wood.

It was because of the noise I was making that I didn't hear the door to the hallway open and close. The first I knew that I wasn't alone in the room was a voice behind me.

“Go right ahead,” it said.

I swung around. Toby Dagon, Augie Crane's righthand man, was standing only a few feet away with a gun in his hand. A forty-five automatic that looked as big as a cannon and was aimed right at my solar plexus.

I had the hammer in my hand; I could have swung it or thrown it, but he could have pulled that trigger in a hell of a lot less time, and he couldn't have missed me at four feet.

He said, "Go right ahead and open it. Save me the trouble."

## Chapter 17

I KEPT MY HANDS CAREFULLY at my sides. I said, "The key would be easier, wouldn't it?"

Toby Dagon said, "I haven't got the key. Go ahead. You were doing fine." There was amusement in his voice, but not in his face. Especially not in his eyes. You can see eyes like them in any fish market, or maybe I'm being unfair to dead fish. Well, I wanted in that closet worse than he did. I'd been fairly sure before; I *knew* now.

I turned back and started work with the screwdriver and hammer again. I didn't try to be quiet about it; in fact, I made as much noises as I could, hoping to attract attention. But it wasn't going to. When you drive a nail into a wall to hang a picture on, nobody calls the police, I wasn't succeeding in making any more noise than that.

I got the blade of the screwdriver driven down behind the hasp and tried to pull it. I couldn't, so I wedged the nail-pulling side of the hammer head back of the screwdriver handle and used the leverage of the hammer handle, and the screws started to pull out. I dropped the hammer, hoping it would make a louder noise than it did, and pulled the hasp the rest of the way out with the screwdriver. I dropped the screwdriver, too, and jerked the door open. Uncle Am was there all right; and he was alive. That was the first thing I made sure of. His chest moved as he breathed.

He was tied up and gagged, but that was an extra precaution because he was drugged, too. But he was alive.

It took knowing that to make me remember the spot he and I were in right now, with Toby Dagon and a forty-five automatic right behind me.

I knew part of the score now; not all of it, but enough to know that Chester had called Toby after I'd left and that Toby had come around here to finish off Uncle Am and get him out of Chester's room before I did too much thinking. And I'd thought just fast enough to stick my head into a rattrap. He'd finish me off, too. My ace in the hole, if any, was the gun in my shoulder holster. Apparently Toby hadn't even suspected I might be carrying one, or he'd have relieved me of it before he'd told me to go ahead and take off the padlock. Only his gun was in his hand, aimed at the small of my back, and mine was still in the holster.

He said, "Okay, you found him. Drag him out of there and into his own room."

I didn't need a blueprint of the rest of it. As soon as I'd dragged Uncle Am into our own room—safely out of Chester Dagon's—the butt of the barrel of the gun would come down on my head and kill me—as Karl Dell had been killed—and then the same thing would happen to Uncle Am.

There wasn't any percentage in that. I might as well turn around, drawing my gun as I turned, and try to shoot before he did. I'd have a chance in a thousand. But if I made him shoot me now, he wouldn't get away with what he hoped to get away with.

A forty-five makes a hell of a noise. It brings immediate results in more ways than one. He'd have no more than an odds-on chance of making a getaway at all; he certainly wouldn't dare take time, after shooting a cannon like that, to drag both me and Uncle Am into our own room. And if he had to leave us in Chester's room anyway, he'd have nothing to gain by finishing off Uncle Am. Chester would be no better off with two corpses in his room than one corpse and one unconscious man.

It takes a hell of a lot of time to explain something like that, but it doesn't take any time at all for it to flash through your mind when you're on a spot like that one. And it took nothing flat for me to realize that if I were going to take a gamble like that, I might as well use my head to reduce the odds as much as I could.

I stepped into the closet and started to bend over Uncle Am, reaching down with my left hand and trying to look, from behind, as though I was reaching with both hands. I kept my right elbow close to my side, but reached up, as I bent down, through the lapel of my coat and got the gun.

The safety was on and I got my thumb on it, but I didn't dare risk the click it would make until I was ready to pull the trigger. But I got it out of the holster, and at the same time I bent over farther, stepped astraddle of Uncle Am slid my hand inside his coat, which wasn't buttoned, and under his armpits. Toby might have got a glimpse of the gun as I did that, but I didn't think he would. He didn't. The light in the closet was dim, the gun was black, and I moved my hand fast and naturally, covering most of the movement with my body.

And, astraddle of Uncle Am and with my hands inside his coat and under his armpits, I partly lifted and partly dragged his shoulders across the doorsill of the closet until I was facing Toby Dagon. Now all I'd have to do would be to lift my arm and fire the gun, snicking off the safety as I brought it up, and I might have a reasonable chance, even though his gun was already aiming at me.

But I got an even better break. He said, "Hold it. Wait," and backed away from me toward the door, opening it with his left hand. Naturally he'd want to be sure nobody was in the hallway or coming up or down the stairs before we took Uncle Am from one room to another.

He opened the door a few inches. He didn't stick his head out, but stood there listening. The gun was still pointed at me, but he turned his head slightly to put his ear nearer the crack of the door. His eyes weren't directly on me.

I wasn't going to have any better chance than that. Maybe it isn't in the best Long Ranger tradition to start shooting at a man who isn't looking directly at you, but just at that moment I was more interested in keeping Uncle Am and myself alive than in being sportsmanlike about the way I did it.

I straightened up and fired, snicking off the safety en route. He was looking at me when I pulled the trigger; the click of the safety gave him time to do that. But he didn't have time to pull the trigger of that forty-five caliber cannon in his hand. Maybe he started to pull it, but lost interest when he died.

I don't mean that my shooting was good, but it worked. It was the first time I'd ever fired a pistol from the hip and I shot high. I aimed for his chest and the bullet went in right below his left eye. But it killed him just as dead, and probably even more quickly, than if I'd hit him where I was aiming.

He fell with a thud that seemed to shake the whole room.

I stood there, trying not to jitter. I opened my mouth to give a yell for Mrs. Brady, but I heard a lot of footsteps coming—the shot had sounded like a blockbuster—so I bent down and got the gag off Uncle Am and started untying him.

Then I had to go to the door to help open it because Toby Dagon was lying against it holding it shut and was bleeding all over his brothers floor. I dragged him aside and got the door open. Mrs. Brady was there, and the others behind her.

I said, "I've got Uncle Am, Mrs. Brady. Will you finish untying him?—and don't worry about the other guy in the room. He won't bother you. I've got to phone for an ambulance."

I knew Mrs. Brady would be able to handle things. She'd been a trained nurse once, so she wouldn't scream at the sight of a dead body, and she'd be able to do more for Uncle Am than I would.

I ran down the stairs and got Bassett on the phone. First I got him to start a police ambulance on the way and then when he came back on the line and said it would be there in minutes, I gave him the main facts quickly.

I said, "Put out a call for Chester right away. You'd better stay there and keep things moving. I've got an idea that he's somewhere waiting for Toby. You met him; you can describe him all right. Get a squad car on it."

Bassett said, "Yes, Inspector. I'll be busy on that, then, so you better call your boss, if you haven't. Good work, Ed."

I called Starlock and gave it to him fast. He said he'd be right around. I told him I might not be here, that I was going along with Uncle Am in the police ambulance if they'd let me ride or follow in a taxi if they wouldn't.

I went to the foot of the stairs and asked Mrs. Brady how Uncle Am was. She called back, "He's fine, Ed. Not conscious, but his breathing and heart are okay. Only he needs a shave pretty bad."

I grinned and went back to the phone. I might as well see if Augie Grane really meant what he'd said about five thousand bucks. I called him and told him who I was.

I said, "Toby Dagon was gypping you, Augie. With the aid of his brother Chester, who was a fortuneteller in your neighborhood, using the name of Ramah Singh. Chester picked the mooches; I'll give you the details later."

"Where's Toby?"

"Dead," I said. "I shot him. There's a pickup order out for Chester."

"Might give you a tip, then, Ed. Toby got a call here half an hour ago. He left right after, but he made an outgoing call first. I didn't hear the conversation, but I just happened to overhear him giving the number. He was calling the municipal airport. If they were going to run off together—

"Thanks," I said. I didn't mention the five grand; that was up to him, now that I'd given him what he wanted. I didn't have any legal claim to it; it would be just his word against mine, so I wouldn't dun him for it.

I heard the siren of what must be the police ambulance, but I went ahead and called Bassett back anyway. I told him there was a good chance he'd find Chester Dagon in the waiting room at the municipal airport.

I hung up in time to show the ambulance boys the way up to Chester's room to get Uncle Am. They let me ride along on the way to the hospital.

I waited in the waiting room there for a few years and then a doctor came out and told me that they were gradually bringing him out of it, but he wasn't fully conscious yet but ought to be pretty soon. He said there wouldn't be anything wrong with him once he came around, except that he'd be weak for a few days from the effects of having been kept doped for three days. I could probably see him for a while, the doctor said, as soon as he was fully conscious, and that shouldn't be more than an other hour or so.

Before that hour was up, Bassett came in and Augie Grane was with him. Augie smiled and handed me an envelope. He said, "Here are those tickets I promised you, Ed. Frank here let me listen in while Chester was singing. I got the story, all of it. Frank will tell you." He said he couldn't stay, and left.

Bassett said, "We got Chester at the airport, and he talked. He talked plenty to clear himself and blamed Karl Dell's murder on Toby, says he didn't want Dell killed. But he was accessory and he'll take a plea on that and on kidnapping your uncle. And you know, Ed, I think he probably saved Am's life. Toby would have killed him. Here's how the whole mess started:

"Toby had been gypping Augie, slightly, for a long time. He had a system that was foolproof except that he could work it only on a small scale. He had the numbers tickets printed and numbered in duplicate—the printer thought it was part of the system. Toby kept one set. Once in a while he'd get a friend of his, somebody he could trust to split with him afterwards, to buy a moderate-sized ticket. It didn't matter which peddler he bought it from or what number he wrote down on it. But he'd call Toby and tell him the serial number of the ticket he bought, see?

"And after the numbers had come up the next day, Toby would take the duplicate of that ticket and write the winning number on it. He'd switch the carbon, the stub, for the one the peddler had turned in. Then he'd give the original—with the winning number—to the friend. Friend takes it to peddler and the serial number checks as a ticket he sold, and when it comes to pay off, the number on his ticket matches the winning number on the stub that the peddler thinks is the one he's turned in to Toby. After the pay-off, the friend splits with Toby. That the way you'd figured it?"

"Just about," I said. "I wondered how he worked one thing, but getting the tickets printed in duplicate answers it. Go on."

"So the only trouble is, he had to do it on a small scale and he wanted a killing. Trouble was picking the right guys—and enough of them—to front for him and split with him. So he figured out working in his brother who's a fortuneteller. Chester opened shop in the neighborhood where Augie's syndicate does their business. And he was a natural for picking the right guys. A fortuneteller, talking to someone who'll open up to him, can pick guys with just enough larceny in their souls and not too much. Guys who'll go in a deal like that and keep their mouths shut about it. Chester took his time picking them and didn't make a single mistake.

"They were just getting going good and were about set to make a big killing. They'd lined up half a dozen of Chester's best picks and were going to have half a dozen or more big hits—ten- and twenty-dollar tickets paying plenty—all on the right number the same day. Augie would have paid up, even though he closed down his numbers business. And he never would have known what hit him. They had things lined up and the day was set—Monday, day after tomorrow. Meanwhile, Chester was keeping on lining up more mooches for the big day and the big killing.

And Toby was working with Augie to find out where Augie's money was going to. And keeping Chester posted as to everything they were doing. Chester knew all about Richard Bergman and he knew all about Augie and Toby's trip to Starlock and who they talked to there. So he knew Am had met Toby and knew that Augie was being taken."

I said, "And then Wednesday afternoon Am walked into Chester's fortunetelling setup looking for information on Tommy Reynal, who'd skipped with a car. And Reynal had been one of Chester's mooches; he had skipped town and abandoned his wife after he'd got his cut on a winning ticket. But I don't see why Uncle Am's walking into his office scared Chester. And it must have."

"Because Chester was out when Am went in. And when Chester came back, he found Am reading a book out of the bookcase; it happened to be a book by this Charles Fort, not the omnibus addition, but just one of his books, *The Book of the Damned*."

"After Am had left, Chester got worried and looked in the book and found he'd forgot to change his inscription in it. It was inscribed *Chester Dagon*. And he knew that if Am knew he was named Dagon—which is a pretty unusual name—and since Am had talked to Augie and to Toby Dagon, Am would put two and two together any minute and get the score about what was happening to Augie's money. And he could have gone to Augie and got plenty for that little bit of information. And he thought, from something Am had said while there were talking, that Am *had* seen the name in the book he'd been reading in the outer office."

"So he doped out a plan. All on his own; he knew if he told Toby, Toby would simply kill Am. And Chester says he hates murder."

"He told me that once," I said. After I said it, I realized that it had been only last night, but it seemed like a long time ago.

"And he knew if he could get Am out of circulation for five days, through Monday, he and Toby would have made their big killing and have lit out, so it wouldn't matter if Am got the answer. So he figured out a way to get Am out of circulation for five days. You know most of that, except one thing."

"Go ahead," I said. "There might be two things."

"He went around and a rented car and parked it outside the building the agency is in until he saw Am go in. He gave him time to go upstairs and then, from a phone booth right in the building downstairs, he put in the call to Starlock—and you know all the details of that call. And—"

I interrupted. "But why did he get so elaborate about *it*? The Ambrose Collector business, and using Bergman's room number?"



“He used Bergman's room number because Bergman was working with Augie to find out how Augie was being gypped. He thought if he could get Bergman in hot water with the police, Bergman would have less chance of getting anywhere with what he was trying to do.

“He got the Ambrose Collector business because the book he'd caught Am reading had been Charles Fort—only not the particular book that had the Ambrose Collector thing in it, so he knew Am hadn't read that—they'd talked a little about Charles Fort while Am was there; I guess he was fishing to see whether Am had seen the inscription and Am must said something that made him think he had.

“Anyway, after Charles Fort had already reared his head because of the book with the inscription, it probably tickled his sense of humor to collect an Ambrose, using the name Ambrose Collector to do it. He says it wasn't that, though, that he wasn't being funny. He says he hoped we'd figure a mad fiend—or anyway a crank—had done it and using that screwy angle would help us think so. He was being as clever as hell.”

I said, “And now comes one thing I *don't* know. How did he collect Uncle Am when he came out of the building?”

“Easiest thing he did. Soon as Am showed, he got out of the car and ran toward him, pretending he'd just swung in to the curve, and said you'd had a bad accident—been hit by a car—and they'd brought you home because it happened near there and you had identification showing the address, and the doctor was there now and— Well, he got Am in the car and drove him home and kept feeding him details that sounded logical enough, so Am wouldn't get suspicious.

“Maybe there were things about it that sounded thin—like why he would have driven down for Am instead of phoning—but I guess Am would have been so worried about you and getting there in a hurry that he didn't see any of the slight holes in what Chester was feeding him.”

I said, “And when they got upstairs at the rooming house, he hit Am with a sap, I suppose.”

“Right. And stashed him temporarily under the bed and then, that evening, while you were just starting to worry about Am, he had you help him put the padlock on the closet he was going to keep Am in for the five days he'd have to keep him.”

“You can't say it wasn't a macabre sense of humor that prompted *that*,” I said. “Having *me* help fix the padlock!”

“He says it wasn't. He says he wanted you to get a look inside the closet while it was still empty so you wouldn't think of that padlocked closet in connection with Am after you'd found he was really gone and not just late getting home.”

"I didn't," I admitted. "And all the while he's been gone, I've been sleeping six feet from him!" I thought of something even worse than that and slapped my forehead with the palm of my hand. I said, "And he was under the bed, Chester's bed, while I was watching Chester put on that padlock. And I sat *on* the bed. I was *sitting* on him."

Bassett grinned. "We get to Karl Dell. How much have you doped out by now about what happened to him?"

I said, "I know what, but not why. You tell it."

Okay. Wednesday he gets home around four with a headache, as he told you, and lay down to take a nap. That was at four. At four-twenty—this is guesswork because Karl can't ever tell us—he heard Am and Chester come in. He recognized Am's voice, and—

"Four-twenty!" I said. "That number cost me five bucks." He laughed. "It costs me only four bits. I guess I'm not a plunger like you. How much for Starlock?"

"Two bucks. Go on. Let's not think what saps we were about that number."

"That's all for Wednesday, except that he must have forgotten about it. That's all for then. Skip to early Thursday evening and when he's in his room working out by astrology what happened to Am. Some combination of calculations—an unorthodox one according to the astrologer who looked over his work—gave him four-twenty. Probably as a time, and maybe he thought four-twenty was the time something happened to Am—which would have been fairly close to right.

"But thinking about four-twenty the day before, he suddenly remembered that while he'd been lying down in his room at about four-fifteen or four-twenty he'd heard Am's voice while Am was coming up the stairs. He knew Am had come home from the office and hadn't been alone. And, astrology or no astrology, he knew that would be damn important information for you so he ran right down to the phone and called Starlock. And Starlock had you call him back from Chez Julliard.

"But meanwhile Toby Dagon was in Chester's room, talking to Chester. I'd seen Toby by then and he knew something was up; he wanted to check with Chester, to see if Chester knew what went on and took a chance coming to Chester's room. Chester told him what he'd done—and he says Toby first wanted to kill Am but he wouldn't give him the key to the closet, and finally he made Toby see that now that he had Am safely put away, it was safer that way than to kill him and have a body on their hands."

I said, "But while they're talking, they hear Karl run downstairs as though something is up; they open the door a crack or come out on the landing and hear his conversation over the phone."

"Right. And he's got that four-twenty, and they know that's about the time Chester got Am home and conked him, and Chester knew—had found out afterwards—that Karl had

been home, in his own room, at the time. They knew Karl had something that would lead us to Chester—as it would have.

“Said Toby walks down the steps and just as Karl hangs up after talking to you, Toby sticks a gun in Karl's ribs, takes him back upstairs to Chester's room. Chester's scared stiff by this time and does what Toby tells them—but swears he didn't know Toby was going to kill Karl. But that's guff, not that it matters. Anyway, Toby tells Chester to go swipe a car and park it in front. Chester does. Then they take Karl downstairs—Toby with the gun in his coat pocket walking behind Karl. Toby tells Chester to get in front and drive and he and Karl get in back. They drive a block or two and then Toby tells Chester to pull in and stop. Chester does; he looks around and Karl's gone. Then he looks down and Karl's on the floor in the back seat. He said he thought Karl was only knocked out, but he was probably dead already.

“Toby tells Chester to go home right away and establish an alibi, get with someone who'll vouch for him and stay with them. He'll take care of Karl. So Chester walks home, picking up those fish at a market en route, and offers them to Mrs. Brady, knowing she'll ask him in to help eat them. Which she does. And that's why Chester was eating dinner with Mrs. Brady at the time the car with Karl in it was being abandoned ten miles away.”

I said, “Then Toby jammed the horn button on purpose. So Chester's alibi was solid.”

“Right. He took a little chance walking away from a car with a stiff in it after he'd reached back in and jammed the horn button, but it made sure the car would be found right away, while Chester was alibied.”

“It fooled us all right.” I said.

“That it did. Say, Ed. That envelope Augie gave you. Did he really kick through with—

I took the envelope out of my pocket and opened it. There were five new dollar bills in it—dollar bills with three zeros after the dollar. They were beautiful examples of engraving.

I took one out and handed it to Bassett. I said, “Maybe they're counterfeit. I'd better let a policemen try to pass one first; he's less likely to get in trouble for it.”

Bassett looked at the bill and then at me as though he didn't believe either of us. Then he looked as though he was going to cry. He said, “Jesus God, and my wife needs an operation that's going to cost six hundred bucks and I've been going nuts about it. But, Christ, Ed, *you* cracked the case. I was sitting on my fanny at the office when you called and told me. You don't have to split it with me.”

I said, “Call it a bribe. Uncle Am and I are going to start our agency pretty soon. We'll need a friend at headquarters.”

He said “Jesus God” again and it didn't sound like swearing. He put the bill in his pocket.

He took out a cigarette and lighted it and his hand shook just a little. He said, “There's only one angle left I don't figure, and Chester can't either. Why did Toby go back to Chester's room? The jig was up anyway and he had nothing to gain. Chester was waiting for him at the airport and they'd have taken the next plane out after Toby got there. Why did he go back? To kill Am for the fun of it?”

“Not exactly that,” I said. “But Toby was tougher than Chester. He hadn't given up yet. When Chester called him and gave him the low-down on my having been to his office, and said the game was over and they'd better lamb, Toby probably said okay and told Chester to go out to the airport and wait for him.

“But Toby hadn't given up yet. He thought I might do just what I did, head for home to look over Chester's room. And he figured if he caught me there, he could kill Am and me both, put us in our own room—and these still wouldn't be any lead to Chester or to him. If what he had in mind to do had worked—and it damn near did—he'd have gone out to the airport and brought Chester back instead of lamming with him. And if they could have sat tight for two more days they could have lammed with four or five times as much money as they had.”

Bassett sighed. “I should have thought of that. Say, Ed, I can't wait much longer. I'm going to check at the desk and have them phone upstairs. Wait a minute.”

He went away and came back in a few minutes. He said, “The doc says about another half hour. I better scram instead of waiting; tell Am I'll be in to see him tomorrow morning.”

“Sure, Frank.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. Starlock said to give you his love and congratulations. He was there when we questioned Chester. He said he'd have to go back to the office and start catching up on some of the work he'd got behind on and you should call him after you've been able to talk to Am. And he'll be around to see Am this evening sometime.”

Bassett left, and after half an hour—at a little after six—they told me I could go upstairs and talk to Uncle Am. That he was okay, but weak, and that I could stay up to half an hour or so, but not any longer than that.

The doc was coming out of the room as I got there and I talked to him a minute outside. He said Uncle Am would have to stay at the hospital for four or five days and ought to rest at home for another week after that before he'd be really fit to go back to work.

Uncle Am looked up and grinned at me as I came in. They hadn't shaved him yet; he still had over three days' growth of beard and his scraggly mustache was scragglier than ever. But his eyes and his grin were the same.

He said, "Hi, Ed. What the hell happened? They said you'd explain it."

I grinned back at him. "Nothing much happened," I said. "You got kidnapped. We got the guy who got you. I had to kill a guy, but it wasn't the one who kidnapped you. But he'd murdered someone else. We're out three days, but we're ahead three thousand bucks, after I give a grand to Starlock."

He closed his eyes and then opened them again. He said, "Now I understand everything. Except what happened and where I was."

"You were two feet from our room, most of the time. Once I sat on you, but neither of us knew it."

And then, at the look on his face, I decided I'd better tell it straight. I made it as brief as I could, but it still took me nearly half an hour to tell the story. Several times he interrupted me with questions, and once I interrupted myself to ask him one:

"Uncle Am, *did* you see the inscription on the flyleaf of that book in Chester's office?"

"Sure, Ed. Chester Dagon. And the Dagon part sounded familiar to me, but damn if I could remember where I'd heard it recently. I'd plumb forgot the name of the hood who was with Augie Crane at the agency. So it didn't mean anything to me then, but it might have, later."

I went on, and ended up with the three grand we'd have left after I cut Starlock in. Starlock deserved cutting in more than Bassett did, because he'd put most of the agency on it for three days and, all in all, it must have cost him nearly five hundred bucks for the three days. But then, on Bassett's side, was the fact that we'd need his help when we started our agency, and Starlock would be only a competitor.

I said, "Well, with three thousand plus what we've saved already, think we can make it?"

"Sure, kid. How about tomorrow morning?"

"In two weeks. You're going to rest that long, and I should give Ben that much notice and that much help; he got behind on his other work and I can't just walk out on him."

"Okay, kid. And I suppose we'll have to call it Hunter and Hunter." A nurse appeared in the doorway and told me my time was up. I said "Just a second" to her and then turned back to Uncle Am, honestly puzzled. I said, "What do you mean, we'll *have* to call it Hunter and Hunter? What's a better name?"

He grinned at me. "It would work only if we were going to specialize in collections, and we're not. But if we were, we could just use my first name. The Ambrose Collection Agency."

Uncle Am was feeling better. I didn't worry about leaving him. I started for the agency and then remembered Estelle; I hadn't had time to think about her since the excitement started. It was only seven o'clock and she might be home getting ready to go to the Blue Croc. I called and Mrs. Brady answered. I asked if Estelle was there. "Annie doesn't live here any more," she said. "Huh? This is Ed, Mrs. Brady. I'm talking about Estelle." Its a song, Ed. I guess you were just a kid when it was popular and don't remember it. 'Annie Doesn't Live Here Any More.' You must be the guy she waited for."

"Listen, Mrs. Brady, what are you talking about?"

"She's moving, Ed. She isn't here right now. But all her stuff isn't gone, so she'll be back. Want to leave a— Wait a minute, Ed. Here she is. Just came back to get the rest of her stuff."

And then Estelle's voice was on the phone. "Eddie? It's wonderful. Your finding Am and everything. I'll be around to the hospital tomorrow to see him; guess they won't want visitors tonight, huh?"

"Listen, 'Stelle, I'd like to celebrate tonight, after I see Starlock. Any chance of your getting the evening off? Or shall I pick you up after work?"

There was a slight hesitation. Then she said, "No, Eddie. I mean, neither. I'm— not working tonight. I'm going to marry Augie. We're driving up to Waukegan."

For seconds I didn't say anything. She hadn't been kidding about Augie at all.

I said, "But, 'Stelle, I—I love you." It felt funny to say it, but I said it.

She said, "Maybe you do, Eddie. A little. But not enough. I—I loved you for a long time, Eddie. I'm glad what happened did happen. Maybe it made those awful three days easier for you. And—well, let's not talk about it any more. Good-bye, Eddie."

The receiver clicked gently in my ear.

I fumbled another nickel out of my pocket and dialed the number again.

Mrs. Brady's voice said, "Ed?" and when I said yes, she said, "She'll be on her way back down in a minute or two. Just hold the line."

I held the line and pretty soon Estelle's voice said, "Yes, Eddie?"

"Will you marry me, Estelle?"

"Thanks, Eddie. But no. No thanks, Eddie."

Again the receiver clicked gently in my ear.

It was a long walk to the agency, but I wanted to think, so I walked. I was happy and unhappy at the same time, and all mixed up. But I knew Estelle was right; I'd found too late that I loved her, and I hadn't loved her enough. If I had, I'd have thought of marrying her sooner, a long time ago.

She was dead right.

But knowing it didn't make me feel too much better. I felt like hell.

Then I remembered Uncle Am and I would have our own detective agency, and I felt a little better. The stars were coming out. I looked up at them and remembered a story I'd read once in a science fiction magazine; the story was called *Pi in the Sky*, and in it the stars had moved across the sky and formed words. I thought they ought to do that tonight. If there was anything in astrology, they ought to get moving and spell out *Hunter and Hunter*, right now.

But they didn't.

And then, after a moment—behind my eyes if not before them—they did. And everything was all right.

More than all right. I left the streets and walked across the building tops, and then across the sky.