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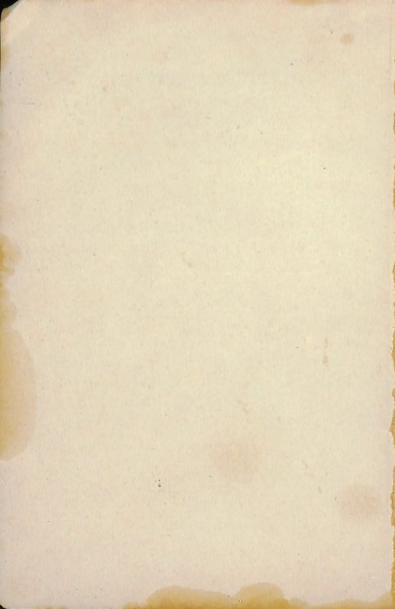
WAS HE WOLF, LION . . . OR LAMB?

STAB in the DARK



Complete Novel

LOUIS TRIMBLE



FOLLOW IN A DEAD MAN'S FOOTSTEPS!

Paul Knox, secret agent for the U.S. Government, had been around. But never had he seen anything as vicious as this new twist in the blackmail racket. Wealthy and prominent people were being exposed to international scandal, the kind that could give not merely themselves but their nation a black eye, and it had to be stopped. Further, it was known that the criminal ring was about to expand.

But when Paul found his only contact had been stabbed through the eye with an icepick, he realized several things: first, his own life was in immediate peril; second, he could trust no one on either side of the law; and third, with no more leads to follow, his only hope was a STAB IN THE DARK.

**Turn this book over for
second complete novel**

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PAUL KNOX

He knew all the angles, but almost got thrown by the curves.

CORA DEANE

She was a smart gal, who knew shorthand and the art of the Mickey Finn.

JOCK DYLAN

He wanted his name in the paper. It got there—in the obituary column.

NAT TINSLEY

She had a male name, a female body, and the heart of a cold-blooded gambler.

MADDY KEEHAN

He knew how to make a guy confess—just use the rubber hose.

LEO AUFFER

He was a wealthy playboy, until a killer played him for keeps.

Stab in the Dark

LOUIS TRIMBLE

ACE BOOKS

A Division of A. A. Wyn, Inc.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N. Y.

STAB IN THE DARK

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NEVER SAY NO TO A KILLER

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Printed in U.S.A.

CHAPTER ONE

A CLASS A, big city hotel was a complicated place. Just how complicated Cora Deane had never realized until she had come to work in one. She paused now in the dark corridor with its dank, water-stained plastered walls and peered ahead through the gloom.

She was two levels down. Two levels beneath the lobby and the restaurant and bar and other expensive services that the Hotel Winton offered to its public. She smiled faintly at her own thoughts, aware that she was letting them run through her mind simply to keep up her courage.

And there was nothing to be afraid of really. She kept telling herself that, over and over, almost with each reluctant step forward. This was a metropolitan hotel; she was in the sub-basement, a place of gloomy storage rooms, of corridors lighted by dim, wire-bracketed bulbs. Because it was gloomy and silent, cut away from all the noise and movement that she associated with the hotel, that didn't mean she had anything to fear.

But it was different, and no matter what she told herself—she was afraid.

She walked on, letting the dim lights from above guide her. To her left a corridor ran to the bakery. She knew it was that because she could smell the fresh bread. She went on past, into deeper gloom. What had she been told? Third corridor on the right, small room at the end on the left side.

But why down here? She asked herself the question for the dozenth time and, as before, had no answer. Why not more openly? In the bar, perhaps. Or in the coffee shop. Or even in his room. No one would have suspected anything. Off duty she had the right to go anywhere in the hotel that she chose.

She couldn't see where such a meeting would have aroused any comment. Certainly not as much as if she were found wandering down here, well out of her own territory.

But those had been the orders and she was in no position to disobey them.

Not that she wanted to disobey them, of course. This was what she had waited for so eagerly. Now, with the third corridor visible just ahead, she hurried. She should not. Her high heels wobbled dangerously on the uneven and occasionally damp cement of the floor. As she turned into the narrower corridor, the swish of her full skirt echoed sibilantly in her own ears. With an effort, she swallowed back a sudden desire to run—to run away from the empty dimness behind and toward the meeting ahead.

There was the end of the corridor, a door on either side. The one on the left was closed; the one on the right was open perhaps two inches. She put a hand over the knob of the closed door. The lock clicked back but the door stuck a little. Almost fretfully, she gave a little thrust and the door swung inward sharply, nearly pitching her into the dark room.

There was no light, no light at all. She thought bewilderingly, "I'm early," although she knew that if anything she was late.

Her hand groped for the light switch, found it, and pushed. The light came on, a big bulb hanging from the center of the ceiling. Momentarily the brightness was blinding.

And then she could see again. But only for an instant. Only long enough to glimpse the person sprawled in the center of the floor. Not long enough to scream. She could not have screamed anyway. The steely hardness of fingers came too swiftly to clamp themselves about her throat. Before her eyes were fully adjusted to the light, long before her mind had fully absorbed what she had seen, blackness came down, blotting out everything.

CHAPTER TWO

PAUL KNOX fidgeted in the easy chair, comfortable but impersonal as all hotel furniture, and stared unseeingly at the blank television screen. From there his eyes moved to the bed, to the dresser, to his luggage on the rack, to the desk, and back to the television screen. He shifted his position.

It was always this way at the beginning of a job. First the planning, then the actual moving in and beginning—and then the let down while he readjusted himself, oriented himself. He hadn't expected it to be so difficult since on this case he was returning home. But three years had made a lot of changes; he found it even harder than working in a strange place.

Take this hotel, for example. When he had left, the Winton was fairly new, certainly the fanciest place in town. It still looked new and still was the fanciest place in town. But it was different for him. He had never been a paying guest here before. His visits to the Winton's rooms had been strictly business—on those rare occasions when it had been necessary for the hotel to call in the police.

This was definitely different. Now he wore hand tailored gray flannel instead of long-lasting ready made serge. Now when he put his feet up, he could look at thirty-five dollar shoes instead of police brogans. Not that he couldn't have afforded better, but it made things easier when he wore the same as others in the same salary bracket.

In some ways the old had been better, in other ways not so good. Certainly now he had more freedom from routine and could live more the type of life he liked to live. But the old comradeship was gone. Now he knew only a small percentage of the men he worked with and he knew none intimately. Some were little more than names—and they were scattered all over the country, all over the world.

Thinking of comradeship, he reached out a hand for the phone to call Mel Beeker. He had intended waiting until

Beeker was off duty, but his restlessness was too great. And so was his nostalgia. Of all the men he had worked with, he wanted to see Beeker most. Nine years together from rookies into plain clothes. They had moved up fast, both of them. They had started as two college trained cops laughed at by the old timers, but laughed at less as test after test pushed them up the ladder, and as a cleaned up city regime proved that a cop could be smart as well as big and tough.

The operator said, "Your order, sir."

He hesitated briefly, recalling the number. Someone was standing by the switchboard, close to the operator, because he heard a man's voice say softly but distinctly, "Make a complete record of all calls—in and out."

Knox cradled the telephone softly, his lower lip out thoughtfully. The phone rang almost immediately. "Your order, sir? You rang?"

"I only wanted a drink but I changed my mind. Think I'll have a bath first." He hung up and rose.

Something was going on. Something that might or might not touch him. Probably not since it was a homicide matter. If it wasn't homicide, then he had lost his sense of hearing. He could have sworn that was Maddy Keehan's voice he had heard. And so far as he knew, Maddy Keehan was still working under Mel Beeker.

He took the elevator down from ten to the lobby and strolled casually into it. It looked much the same as it had when he had checked in an hour before. He received the same too casual glances from the ever present women who hung around such lobbies. Even the best of them, got the same faint, hopeful smiles when his eyes met those glances, and then the pout as he looked away again.

It looked much the same except for Maddy Keehan. When Knox was in the middle of the lobby he could see him standing by the telephone switchboard. He stood as usual with his solid legs slightly spread, his squat, long-armed body bent a little forward. He was looking directly at Knox.

He walked up. "Hello, Maddy."

"Damn," Keehan said in his gravelly voice. He saw Knox's hand and shook it without much enthusiasm. His eyes took in the two hundred dollar suit, the careful grooming, the out of place tan. Out of place because here in the northwest there wasn't enough sun in the winter to turn an albino pale pink.

"Trouble?"

"Don't we always?" Keehan asked.

"Where there's Keehan, there's Beeker. How is he?"

"Mel? Busy." Keehan looked uneasy.

I'm getting a brush off, Knox thought. It angered him a little. "I can at least pay my respects."

"He'll be up."

Up? Then something had happened in the basement. Knox said, "If you see him, tell him I'm in the coffee shop grabbing a sandwich." He started in that direction, turned before he reached the coffee shop doors, and mounted two steps that took him onto a second level that ran the length of the rear of the lobby. He went through doors into the men's room. It had two entrances, with the second opening onto a corridor that led to the side entry of the hotel. Off this corridor another ran to the service entrance on the alley and the freight elevators. Knox remembered it better now than when he had lived here. He should: he had studied the floor plan of the hotel thoroughly before making this trip.

He went out the side entrance, along the corridor, to the right, past the alley entrance, and down the stairs that ran alongside the service elevators. The first basement was a hodgepodge—kitchens, cleaning shop, storerooms for immediately needed goods, a couple of rooms where non-resident help could rest. Knox stopped and listened. There was no particular sound that seemed out of place. He continued on down.

A uniformed patrolman was at the foot of the stairs. He put out a hand. Knox said, "Lieutenant Beeker. Keehan said he was. . ." He stopped, not quite making a full lie out

of it. He was disturbed now; doing this was more than wanting to see Beeker, more than just idle curiosity. Something fairly big was in the wind, or Beeker and Keehan and cops guarding stairways wouldn't all be in on it.

"Yeh?"

"Yeh," Knox said. He didn't smile "Detective-Lieutenant Knox, resigned." He walked on by the cop and was three steps away when the resigned part sank in.

"Hey, you."

Knox kept on walking. The cop yelled. Another one popped out of a corridor on the left. Along with him came the smell of baking bread. The man stopped him none too gently.

Knox said, "Hello, Peddy. Still in harness."

He was a man going gray and heavy but there was strength in his grip. He dropped his hand and grinned. "Paul, be-damned. Where did you show up from?"

"California sunshine," Knox said. "Keehan gave me to understand that Mel is down here."

Peddy had an embarrassed look on his face. "I don't think the Lieutenant wants to be disturbed, Paul."

The way he said "the Lieutenant" surprised Knox. Always before it had been Mel or Loot. Knox said, "What's going on?"

Peddy just looked blank. Knox knew that if he was to get past this point and see Beeker, he would have to bring out his letter from the Commissioner. He didn't like it. He hoped to save that for later, when he might really have need of it. But it was obvious that he wasn't getting any cooperation from the department. Those three years he had been gone had changed a lot of things.

He showed Peddy the letter. It was brief, succinct. Members of the city force were to give any and all aid and cooperation necessary to Paul Knox, the bearer of the letter. The Commissioner's signature was even bolder and more definite than usual.

Peddy handed back the letter. "Third corridor on the

right, down to the end, Paul. The Lieutenant can tell you what he's doing."

Flushing a little at Peddy's clipped tone, Knox walked with his easy, long stride down the dim corridor, made his turn, and went to where light streamed from an open door at the far end. He had to pass two more uniformed police. But neither of them gave him any trouble when he said, "Peddy sent me on to see Lieutenant Beeker."

Beeker was standing just inside the doorway to the lighted room. As usual, he was dressed in well cut clothes that looked as if he had slept in them. He was a big man, taller than Knox, and a good deal heavier. His bigness was the kind that later would go to thickness in the middle, giving him a paunch. But now he was well under forty and he looked all shoulders and chest. He moved his bulk with surprising grace and quickness. Seeing Beeker again reminded Knox of the times he had tried to stop the man on the football field. They were rueful memories.

He said, "Hello, Mel."

Beeker's craggy face did not light up as Knox had expected. There was no handshake, no backslap, no anything. Knox had expected this to be easy, the renewal of an old friendship. But it wasn't that way at all. He thought he knew Mel Beeker, but this man before him was almost a stranger. Hard. Angry. A man with a lot of weight on his shoulders.

Beeker stared at him. "What are you doing—slumming?"

Knox could have expected the crack but that didn't mean he had to like it. There was a handful of men in the room, a doctor, two photographers, some fingerprint boys. They glanced up and then away, embarrassed.

Knox said evenly, "If you weren't so big and in such good shape, I'd sock you for that."

"I'm busy," Beeker said.

Knox looked past him at the body he was busy with. It lay on its side, back to him. It was that of a man, a medium-sized man dressed neatly in an expensive, soft blue suit, the bottoms of custom made shoe soles showing

beneath bright, clocked socks. There was a crushed hat half under one shoulder, an overcoat puddled near on the floor. The room was full of chairs as well as men. Chairs of all sorts. It was obviously a storeroom for them. But from the doorway half into the room there was an aisle perhaps six feet wide. The man lay curled crosswise in this aisle. Knox could not see how he had died.

"Who is it?"

"See you later, Paul."

Knox took out his letter and handed it to Beeker. He hated this worse than he had showing it to Peddy.

Beeker handed it back, his eyes bleak. "Dough'll do anything."

"Think it your way," Knox said. He had himself under control because he had to be that way. He wished he didn't, wished that he could show Beeker what he, Knox, thought of an attitude like that.

Beeker shrugged. "All right. It's Leo Auffer. He was a guest at the hotel here. We identified him by some cards in his wallet, although most of his things have been cleaned out. His money, anyway."

He paused and glared at Knox. "Someone stabbed him in the eye with what looks like an icepick. Then to make sure, they pulled it out and jabbed three more times in the belly. He's dead."

"The first one got him," the doctor said unnecessarily.

Knox scarcely heard him. He had been well schooled to hide his thoughts but this news jolted him. He said faintly, "Auffer?"

"Know him?" Beeker was all cop, his voice jabbing the question at Knox as if he might be a suspect.

"I've heard of him. Who hasn't?" Leo Auffer, five million dollars anytime he wanted to cash in a handful of his assets. Those were the really liquid ones. Auffer, the international playboy, one time tennis champion, yacht race champion, world traveler who made films of exotic places, wrote books about them, gave lectures about them—and thus had access to areas few men could go into with

impunity. Leo Auffer lay dead in a dirty storeroom in a hotel basement.

Leo Auffer, who was Knox's sole contact here, and the man he had come from the West Indies to see, Paul Knox swore. It was soft but heartfelt.

CHAPTER THREE

KNOX was conscious of Beeker looking curiously at him and he shrugged. "Hell of a way to die," he said in explanation. It was lame but the news had hit him too hard for him to have the control he should.

"Yeh." Beeker turned to the doctor. "Got it wrapped up yet?"

"I'll guess," the doctor said. He was a young man, a little nervous appearing, but when he started talking he sounded competent enough. "He hasn't been dead two and a half hours nor less than an hour. That's a guess, but after I whittle on him, I'll bet I don't change my mind by fifteen minutes."

Beeker looked at his watch. "It's four now. That means between one-thirty and three, if you're right." He pulled at his lower lip.

Knox calculated back. He and Auffer were to have met at five. But he couldn't see how anyone could have known about that. It was absurd to think Auffer had been killed to keep him from making his contact. As far as Knox knew, this didn't even have a connection with the case. That was as far as he knew; it had no relation to the way he felt. The way he felt, there was a connection.

Then there was the other operative, D-13, whoever that might be. Auffer's first contact was to have been with D-13, and then he was to bring the results of D-13's work plus his own and hand everything over to Knox. That was to be the end of Auffer and of D-13 as far as this case was concerned. Sometimes Knox regretted the way World-Circle worked a big case like this, splitting the work and

the information until it was almost time to close in. Usually it worked very well but its weakness was obvious in times such as this.

Knox thought angrily, "So now I don't know a damned thing more than I arrived with."

He was conscious of Beeker's stare again, "Anyone tagged for it yet?" he asked casually.

"Nobody."

"Who found him?"

"A maintenance man," Beeker said. "He came down to get a chair for one of the lobby secretaries. Her's broke. He found it and reported in—let's see, about forty-five minutes ago."

"What was Auffer doing down here?"

Beeker glared at him. "You're the bright boy. You tell me."

Knox felt as if he had been spit on. He merely shrugged and stepped aside. Beeker started out and he tagged along. One of the fingerprint men said, "If there's anything here, we haven't found it. There's too much and that's mostly old."

"How about the floor?"

"Nice dust for footprints," the man said, "but there's too much there too. A lot of elephants have been tramping around in here."

Beeker ignored him and plowed straight across the hall. The door there was closed. He opened it and reached in, flipping on the light. Knox was looking into a room almost filled with tables. They, like the chairs, were of all sizes and shapes, stacked one on top of the other whenever it was feasible, making except for some access lanes, a room solid with tables.

A lone one not far from the door caught Knox's eye. It had a protective pad on its top and that was pushed back so that half of the surface was exposed. Conspicuous on the shiny top were a pair of what looked to be very expensive, very fancy with lace trim, step-ins. On the floor beside the table was a fifth of medium priced bourbon.

"Empty," Beeker said.

"Both of them," Knox observed dryly. "Fresh empty?"

"The fifth is. I can only guess at the other."

"Why show me this?" Knox asked.

"The letter you got says to give you cooperation. I'm cooperating. What have we got here? Maybe some punk working for the hotel with a dame. He's real busy and Auffer walks in. He gets panicky like some guys will. Auffer winds up dead."

They went out. Knox followed Beeker until they were in the corridor leading to the lobby. Then Beeker stopped. "How about you going in and telling Maddy to come here. And the manager, if you can find him. Too many cops in the lobby'll start someone talking."

Knox let his eyebrows go up. "Another hush-hush one, huh?"

"Where the Winton is concerned, we keep it that way if we can."

It was better for Knox too. He nodded and started for the lobby. They wouldn't be able to keep it quiet long, of course. The newspapers were too sharp for that. And then as soon as they started asking questions, someone would begin to figure things out. But the longer they kept it under wraps, the easier it would be both on the police and on the hotel.

Knox delivered his message to Keehan and then sought the manager in his office behind the desk. It was a nice cubbyhole, done in opaque glass and filled with modernistic furniture. The manager was a tall man with a face like an injured spaniel. He looked sadly at Knox.

"Lieutenant Beeker wants you to meet him in the back hallway."

"I didn't get the name," the manager said.

"Knox, I'm a guest here." He added what was no secret, since it was on his registration card. "I'm also an investigator for World-Circle Agency."

The manager said, "Oh, dear."

"Relax," Knox said. "I'm here on a missing persons case."

As far as I know, it has nothing to do with your hotel. I'm just a friend of the Lieutenant, that's all."

The manager still didn't look happy as they went across the lobby. Knox left him halfway and turned into the men's room. He came out through the other door and went back to where Beeker and Keehan were waiting. He arrived simultaneously with the manager.

Beeker was saying to Keehan, "Get the meat boys down. Have them use the service entrance there. If any newspaper guy is sniffing around, stall him off. Then see if you can find out anything about Auffer's movements. Work on the help."

"What about the guests?"

Beeker glared at him. "In a thousand room hotel what chance do you have? Anyway, hands off until you get a good lead. Then go easy."

You always had to tell Keehan to go easy, Knox thought. That was why he had never made it beyond detective sergeant and never would. His idea of questioning was five knuckles, of subtlety a snarled accusation. At home he was soft, a mark for his wife and kids. On the job he was bitter, almost brutal.

Keehan grunted and turned away. Beeker looked at the manager. "I don't know any more than before. All I can say is that we'll keep it quiet—if possible. But when it suits us to, we'll open it up."

"I appreciate it, Lieutenant. The less publicity, the better."

"I'll be questioning some of your employees. I'll try to interfere with their routine as little as possible."

"Thank you."

Knox watched him go, thinking that Beeker could still be considerate after all his years as a policemen. Considerate but tough when it counted. He got more results than Maddy Keehan.

Beeker turned to Knox. "Where are you staying here?"

"Ten-zero-five. Come on up and tell me about it."

"With that letter you got, I should say, 'Yes, sir, Mr. Knox. Gladly.'"

"Go to hell," Knox said. This time he led the way, taking Beeker up by the service elevator. Once in the room, Beeker surveyed it, grunted, and reached for the phone. He cocked an eyebrow at Knox.

"Go ahead. And when you're through, order up something to drink."

Beeker called his office and detailed some men to come in quietly and work over Auffer's room. He left word where he was and then told the operator, "Send up a big pot of coffee, make it thick. Two cups."

Knox lit a cigaret, not offering Beeker one since he didn't smoke. "Get it off your chest, Mel. What's with you and Keehan?"

"Maybe we're jealous," Beeker said. "But we aren't. Maybe we didn't like it when you quit the force just because you got left a lot of dough."

"I always had dough—enough."

"You didn't throw it in our faces. You wore what we wore, acted like we did."

"Is it my fault I had a rich uncle?"

"You had him before. A rich father too. But even so you were a good cop, all cop. One of the best. You'd have gone all the way up, Paul." For the first time there was emotion in his voice, not just gravelly dislike. "And you threw it up for what—to become a playboy peeper!"

Knox grimaced. He hadn't heard his profession dubbed that before, nor spoken of in such a nasty tone. He said, "I work for the most reputable firm of private detectives in the world." He saw Beeker's expression and got up, his irritation showing now in his voice.

"You don't like private detectives; neither do I. But World-Circle is a little different, Mel. If you'd stop and think, you'd realize that. We don't take divorce cases, guard wedding gifts, or grift for anyone. What's wrong with it?"

"It just isn't my idea of being a cop," Beeker said.

There was a rap on the door and a wizened, red-headed bell-hop appeared with a large pot of coffee and accessories on a wheeled cart. Knox signed the check, dropped a dollar onto the service plate and waved the boy away. When the door had closed, Beeker said, "Sure, we get the mean and the stinking and the rotten. But it has its points. You and I, we went into this with our eyes open. We were a little idealistic, maybe, but still pretty wise. I still like to think I'm doing some good. The administration is solid. I want to help keep it that way."

"How solid?" Knox asked.

Beeker grimaced as he poured coffee. "All right, the rats are gnawing at the foundations again. But we'll keep them off."

So that was part of what was bothering him, Knox thought. The old political pressures were building up as they did every few years. He said, "And you're sore because I'm not here to help."

"Maybe. I don't like to think of a guy with as much as you had to offer traveling around tracing babes in mink who ran off with Count so-and-so or tracing Count so-and-so because he ran off with the babe's jewelry. Nuts."

"Nuts," Knox agreed. "It can get boring. Waiting, watching. And it gets dirty. I meet as many gooks as you do. Some of them nastier than this town ever saw. And they're all the same, no matter what languages they speak. They've got the gutter in them—the dirty ones."

"I'm weeping for you."

Knox thought, I need him. He needed Mel Beeker more than ever now that Leo Auffer was dead. And obviously the Commissioner's letter wasn't going to be enough. Beeker would give him just the bare amount of help he had to and no more. But the little things, the things in his mind, unofficial, sometimes only half crystallized, these were the things Knox wanted and had hoped to get. But Beeker wouldn't be giving them to him, not the way he felt now.

Knox watched Beeker adulterate his coffee with three

spoons of sugar. He said, sipping, "What did I do the first six months after I resigned here, Mel?"

"I heard you went big game hunting. In the Mexican jungle."

"I've never seen a jungle—yet," Knox answered quietly. He added, "I spent six months when I hardly saw the sky. Six months without a movie, a date, a drink in a public bar, a meal in a restaurant."

Beeker grinned. "Sounds like some of the army hitches we had."

"In some ways, the same. Anyway, listen. I applied for this job two years before my uncle died. The okay came through about the time his money did. Maybe it was all coincidence, maybe it helped. I'm a much freer agent than a man who has to depend on a salary."

Beeker sucked noisily at his coffee. "You're talking down the wrong end of the tube, telling me this."

"Six months," Knox said, "and then they put me in the open. World-Circle is careful. It trains all its operatives, but it trains some of us more than others." He could see Beeker's interest pick up a little. "There are those who do the straight work—the hunting for Count so-and-so that you mentioned. And then there are the others, and specially trained ones. We go where we're sent and work for whom we're told. We're a private outfit but we're about as nationalistic and private as the United Nations. With our contacts and our mobility, we can get places a lot of government agencies can't."

Beeker finished his coffee and stood up to pour a second cup. "What are you trying to tell me, Paul?"

Knox took out his billfold, removed a card from its holder, and handed it to Beeker. The card identified him as a licenced operative of the World-Circle Agency. The card had his picture, a good likeness, his thumb print, his name, and the address of the United States office out of which he worked.

He said, "Turn on that lamp and hold the card close to

the bulb." He heard Beeker's snort. "It sounds like hocus-pocus," Knox admitted, "but there's a reason."

He directed Beeker who held the card near the lamp bulb. When the plastic was warm, Beeker squeezed the edges of the card and one end came open. From it he drew a very thin, opaque strip of flexible material. Beeker stared at this for some time. It showed Knox's face and print again. It gave his number, D-8, and it was stamped temporary and gave a date. Superimposed over everything was the seal of the United States and the name of its most top secret agency printed beneath it. Beeker handed back the card.

Knox replaced one card in the other and put it back in his billfold. "That's my only protection," he said. "Without it, I could hang for all the agency would do. Or the government, if I didn't have it."

Beeker looked into Knox's face, grinning ruefully. "I'm sorry, Paul. Damn it, I made you tell me. That means you need me."

"More since Auffer died," Knox said. "I needed you before it happened but I need you more now."

"The Commissioner knows?"

"Not much. Not as much as you do. He got a letter from Washington but it did more ordering than telling."

"Me and my suspicious brain," Beeker said. A hell of a friend I turned out to be."

Knox realized how acutely uncomfortable Beeker was. He said, "Forget it, Mel. If you've had political pressure on you lately, I don't blame you for getting sore at that letter." He gave Beeker an understanding smile and let the matter slide.

"How much can you tell me?" Beeker asked.

"As much as you can promise to sit on—tight," Knox answered. And there's a favor. Whatever I do, look the other way, if you can't, make a pretense of hauling me in. I have to do unorthodox things sometimes—the fact that World-Circle operatives will risk doing the unorthodox is what makes us valuable at times. Occasionally it backfires

and we pay for it." He grimaced. "Like the thirty days I spent in the French pokey once. It wasn't any fun but it was better than the one in Spain."

"I'll do everything I can," Beeker agreed.

Knox said, "Auffer was supposed to have been here for about the past two weeks. He was to have picked up some information from another contact, pass it and what he had gathered on to me and leave. I was to take over and finish the job."

Beeker showed his surprise. "Auffer was—one of you?"

"For fifteen years," Knox admitted. He got in when Europe was cracking apart. His playboy jaunts were good cover—good enough so that he isn't even openly connected with World-Circle like I am. I go around as a simple operative looking for missing persons, stolen bonds and the like. Auffer, as far as most people knew, wasn't connected with anything."

"Then he wouldn't have carried a card?"

"He'd have carried the little, inside card," Knox said, "but where he kept it, I don't know. I didn't know him too well. He worked on bigger stuff. Until recently, I've been strictly small time—learning the business."

Beeker waited. Knox fell silent, debating how much he should tell Beeker. If he gave it to him the wrong way, Beeker might get an attack of civic pride and blow the whole thing apart. On the other hand, he reminded himself, Beeker was no fool, and if anyone could be trusted, he could.

Knox said, "A little obscene matter has been moved into town here."

Beeker snorted. "And World-Circle gets called in on that?"

"World-Circle and two or three government departments of this country, Canada, and a couple of Caribbean nations," Knox said. "This is movie stuff, Mel. A lot of it is stag show stuff, of course, but some of it is what you might call collector's items. Real, high class pornography."

Beeker said, "Even so . . ."

Knox took the time to light a cigaret. "I'll be brief. Some bright boy had an idea a few years back. He formed an organization to take pictures of prominent people when they didn't know their pictures were being taken. There are certain groups of the wealthy who forget that they're under the same rules and regulations as other mortals. There are other groups who forget it occasionally—like when they go on vacations far from home.

"A few of these pictures were taken with the subject aware of it. But what little we've recovered shows that in every such case, the person was too drunk to really be responsible. Most of the stuff was taken without the subject knowing what was going on. I should say subjects," he corrected himself. He made a distasteful face. "I won't go into it, Mel, except to say that if any of it ever got loose—well, you'd be surprised whom it would hurt."

"What's the point," Beeker said. Then he stopped, staring at Knox. "You mean these people get first chance to buy the movie rights, as it were."

"Exactly. And there's no hocus pocus. They get the negative, all the prints. Once they pay, they're safe enough. Already a few deals have been made, enough so that the customers are satisfied. The word gets around, the next customer knows that he'll be satisfied too."

"High powered blackmail."

"Very high powered," Knox agreed. "There's still about two million dollars riding around loose, waiting to be sold."

"Two million bucks."

"Which are worth a lot of francs and pesetas and other assorted currencies," Knox said, "what with the power of the dollar on some money markets."

Beeker poured the last trickle out of the coffee pot. "In a way I had to know this, Paul. In a way, I'm sorry I learned about it. Finding Auffer's murderer is my responsibility, and there's no doubt in my mind that it's connected to this."

"Nor mine, now," Knox said. "That blows your caught-in-the-act-of-love theory to hell."

"Seems to." Beeker grinned. "Now we haven't any explanation for those panties, have we."

Knox said, "That can ride. Does what I've told you help at all?"

"I'll do a little quiet checking with the Vice boys and see if they're any rumors of new stag shows floating around."

"That's part's a sideline," Knox said. "Whoever moves into an area—as this one has been moved into—brings a load of that kind of stuff and dumps it with the local hoodlums. It pays expenses. It's also a protection in case the big stuff is found. Then there'd be a claim that everything was in the same pot—the cheap and the high priced." He added thoughtfully, "But so far we've found out that the local operators haven't any idea who is behind the stuff. In other words, the smart boys are keeping the two as separate as possible for their own safety."

"Logical," Beeker said. He pushed out his lip and pulled at it. "Just two questions, Paul. First, why not let these big shots pay up and get rid of the stuff that way? Second, why would anyone choose an out of the way burg like ours to do business in?"

Knox said, "The answer to the first is that we can't always be sure that the stuff will end up in the right party's hands. There's always the chance of a slip. Take, for example, someone politically exposed. Then, there are some of the kind I mentioned who feel they're beyond us humans. A few of them don't want to pay. Unfortunately, we can't let them take it on the chin. There's liable to be an international backfire if we do."

"Oh," Beeker said, "it goes that far, does it."

"It goes all the way," Knox agreed. "Answering your second question, Auffer was here because we're almost certain that the big boys covering this area are here. We're moving all at once—in the U.S., in Latin America, and in certain parts of Europe. And," he added, "in Canada. And it's through here that the Canadian stuff will go."

He spread his hands. "And that's what I know, Mel. Auffer's job was to find the big boy—or boys—turn the in-

formation over to me and fade. Then, if they had suspected him, they'd stop. I was to move in and clean it up."

"And you have no idea who he was after?"

"He didn't when he came," Knox said. "If he did earlier today, he didn't get a chance to tell me." He looked steadily at Beeker. "That means I have to do weeks of work to get up to the point where I'm supposed to come in.

"And all that the one report we got from Auffer told us was that things were moving. We have to jump fast or there won't be anything to land on."

CHAPTER FOUR

BEFORE BEEKER left Knox's room, a phone call came for him. Knox watched his expression as he grunted at whatever was being told him. He slammed the phone down.

"They've gone through Auffer's things," he told Knox. "Your friend Auffer might have been living in a vacuum for all the good it did."

Knox couldn't help grinning. "What did you expect, Mel, the name of the murderer?"

"Something after what you told me," Beeker answered.

Knox said, "Auffer was a careful man with reports. He made few of them until the job was cleaned up." He looked squarely at the Lieutenant. "Even in our organization, there've been leaks. Not many, but there's always the chance."

Beeker started for the door. "Sometimes I wish I could work that way."

Knox waited until he had the door open. "By the way, Mel, if Leo Auffer did write down anything he planned to base a report on, you'd probably need a microscope or a magnifying glass to find it. There's a story at headquarters that he was laid up in a hospital once and he spent the time teaching himself to engrave his name on the head of a pin."

"Then I'll go over his belongings with a magnifying glass," Beeker said.

"Including what he was wearing," Knox said.

Beeker thanked him for the coffee and walked out. Left alone, Knox contemplated the blank television screen again. But it held even less interest than before. Rising, he began to prowls the room restlessly.

He disliked a job where he had to wait and let things come to him. And as this one stood now, that was just what he faced—waiting for Beeker's police machinery to turn up something. Knox was basically aggressive; he preferred to go out and stir up matters. At times, he was aware, this bordered on impatience, an attitude that had more than once caused him trouble.

But in this case, he told himself, it was more than impatience—it was common sense. There was the pressure of time, and unless Beeker's examination did bring up some notes made by Auffer—something Knox did not think likely—that pressure would grow stronger by the hour. He felt a little as if he were in the jaws of a nutcracker.

Knox went downstairs and surveyed the lobby. The hotel detective, a retired policeman named McEwen, was standing by the desk, talking in a low voice to the room clerk. Knox ambled over and tipped him a grin.

"Still at it, Mac."

McEwen shook his head. "I heard you were paying to stay here, Paul." He surveyed Knox's suit and pursed his lips for a whistle. "That must be a fancy private job you've got."

"I just got born to the right people," Knox said. He decided they had made enough conversation. With McEwen so friendly, he decided to move in a little closer.

"All this excitement makes me wish I were back in harness."

McEwen tried to look blank and only succeeded in looking a little more sly than usual. "What excitement? Everything's quiet here."

"Like it should be in a well run hotel," Knox agreed dryly. "Where'd Keehan go?"

McEwen jerked a thumb. "In the back office, asking questions. . ." His mouth dropped open foolishly and he looked around as if to see whether the clerk had caught him stepping into such a simple trap. But the clerk had drifted off.

Knox said, "It looks like they've squeezed you out again, Mac."

McEwen reacted as Knox expected. "Don't they always? What good's a hotel dick?" He looked as if he wanted to spit.

"You find him and then get cut out," Knox said, pressing it.

McEwen tasted the bait a little more, liked it, and said, "Not me. And if I had, it wouldn't make no difference. Beekers shut this one up tight—but tight. And is he being careful! Poor Jock—Jock Dylan, the guy that found him—is in being sweat. What the hell, is it his fault if some fat-fannied stenographer busts a chair and he has to go get another one?" He made another face, even more sour. "They're even grilling the girl. What's she supposed to have done, busted the chair on purpose so Jock could go down and bump the guy off?"

Knox grinned. McEwen was in fine form. Since leaving the force for the softer job at the Winton, he had spent most of his time complaining of lack of cooperation and of the general stupidity of the department. Knowing him for one of the old regime, Knox was pretty sure it was the other way around on both counts.

Now he said, "They have to act like they're heating someone's tail, Mac. How about a beer?"

"On duty," McEwen said. He sounded regretful. "Later, maybe." He started away and then turned. "Hey, how'd you know about the trouble?"

"I saw Mel and Maddy Keehan. Don't they mean trouble?"

A couple followed by a luggage-loaded bellhop claimed

McEwen's attention. He nodded, accepting the explanation. Knox drifted off, feeling a sense of futility. He hadn't got much out of McEwen, but then he suspected that McEwen didn't have much to give. Going to the newsstand, he idly thumbed through a few magazines, now and then glancing at the people in the lobby. This D-13 should be around somewhere. He cursed the system that kept the operatives so carefully apart. As far as he knew, D-13 didn't even suspect that he was here, maybe didn't even know that he was supposed to be here. There was a chance that it was the other way, of course. And then, if he was lucky, D-13 would possibly contact him since he was a World-Circle operative.

Or, he thought, sourly, he could wait for someone else to get killed and decide that was D-13. He made a face and left the newsstand. D-13 sounded like something out of a cloak and dagger job. Knox wished it were, instead of a very real and, to him, very important person.

He stopped his prowling. Since there seemed nowhere to go, no place to make a definite start, he decided to make one for himself. Repeating his earlier jaunt, he went into the basement. Now there were no police on guard to stop him. There was nothing but the dimly lighted corridor with the two doors, shut, at its end. Knox didn't think Beeker had missed much; he seldom did. But there was always the bare chance, and this gave him something to do.

Opening the door where the body had been, he flipped on the light and stood a moment blinking. There was no body now, only the faint chalk lines where it had lain. The police had left few other signs except to smudge up the dust on the cement floor more than it had been before.

Knox stayed in the doorway. "If I was a maintenance man. . . ."

He tried to reconstruct the scene. The man coming down the corridor, opening the door, switching on the light, his eyes adjusting and focusing on the body. There was something missing. After a moment, Knox got it. The broken chair. He should have been carrying that. Had he dropped

it or set it down and taken a good one before going up and reporting? It was a question that might be worth asking the man, Knox decided.

Turning, he went across the hallway and into the room where the tables were stored. There was no sign of either the whiskey nor the panties except for a slightly damp ring left where the bottle had been set. Knox looked down at it and as he did so, noted the various tracks made in the dust of the floor. Besides those that were obviously police brogans, he saw the scuff of smaller oxfords and the dual mark of feminine high heels. The outlines of all the prints were too blurred to be of much use to the police but the pattern they formed interested Knox.

Both the marks of the oxfords and the high heels went from the table to the door and back again. What interested Knox was that some of the prints of the high heels going from the table to the door had obviously been made before the same shoes had made prints going from the door to the table. He could tell by the overlap with the oxfords.

Without any more to go on, it didn't seem to mean much, but he stored it away in his mind and bent to make a more thorough examination. Humming, he tiptoed to the door, opened it about two inches, and crouched down that he might see into the room opposite. Then he straightened and peered down at the position of his feet. He noticed that the oxfords made clear prints in that same spot; there was no sign of the high heels.

Knox felt the old familiar surge of excitement that came to him whenever something began to click. He flung both doors open so that the combined light from the rooms streamed into the corridor. The cement here was less dusty and more thoroughly trampled than that in the rooms, but with an effort he could make out those distinctive prints, the small sole, the gap, then the spike of the heel. They went out from the table room, across the corridor and into the chair room and then they returned. But as before, those

going from the table seemed, in some cases, to have been made before those going to it.

Knox could conclude but one thing. The woman who had worn those shoes had left the room before she had entered it.

Still humming, Knox trailed the prints down the corridor until they were lost in dimness. He returned to the table room and studied the prints there. Finally he closed both doors, having shut off the lights, and went away, cursing policemen with big feet.

Even so, his humming had taken on a happier note by the time he reached the lobby. For the moment he had forgotten Auffer as an individual, forgotten the personal in the pure pleasure of the problem. It had always been that way with Knox, and it was one of the reasons for his success—his ability to be objective. He had made friends and lost them in this work; once he had been very close to a woman who had turned out to be on the other side. Now he seldom thought of that, preferring to keep it in the back of his mind where it lay a warning to the future. But despite all of his friends, he had managed to look at his work as if he were outside, not implicated. He could do so now, for the moment at least. There would come the time when what had happened to Leo Auffer would begin to needle him, bringing the anger. But when he had work to do, he usually managed to control his emotions.

In the men's room, he washed up and let the porter brush the dust from his trousers. He was handing over his tip when the door opened and a man in coveralls walked in. He ran a bowlful of water and plunged his face into it.

The porter clucked and handed him a towel as he straightened up. "I hear they gave it to you rough, Jock."

"Back and forth and sideways." The man snorted into the towel.

Jock. The maintenance man. Knox shook hands with himself. Here was one small piece of luck, anyway. This would

save him some time locating the man. He said, "So you're the one who found him, huh?"

A young face with features a bit too heavy for handsomeness, a round head capped with curly, sandy hair, and with two pale blue eyes peering out on either side of a beaked nose emerged from the towel and surveyed Knox.

"Found who?"

"Yeh," the porter agreed, "found who?"

Knox opened his mouth, shrugged, and turned away. Keehan had obviously put the fear of God—or of his own big fists—into the hotel staff. It occurred to him with sudden force that as valuable as this hush-hush method of investigation might be, in some ways it was going to put painful limitations on him.

CHAPTER FIVE

KNOX returned to the lobby and idled there until he saw Jock come out of the washroom and turn toward the service entrance. He moved then, going out the side door and to the alley. He was in time to see Jock climb into a dilapidated coupe. Walking easily, he intercepted the car at the mouth of the alley.

"One minute," he said.

Jock peered at Knox, outlined only by the backwash of headlights and a dim street lamp. He looked as if he wanted to slam the car into gear and get out of there. Knox was ready and let a ten dollar bill come into sight.

Jock relaxed. "Yeh?"

Knox grinned. "I'm not one of Beeker's boys. But I have got a proposition. It's worth a few bucks to you."

"I haven't got anything you want, mister."

"Okay," Knox said. "I'll buy you a drink and let you tell me about nothing." Knox waited, watching Jock's expression. The strong chill of evening had come down over the city and he shivered a little, wishing he had his over-

coat. But there was no time to go get it now. He thought he had this man and he wanted to hang on to him.

Jock looked more at the bill than at Knox. He said, "Climb in. I'll always take ten for saying nothing about nothing."

Knox went around the car and let himself down on the lumpy seat. "Name your spot."

They drove four blocks toward the industrial section, turned onto a more quiet business street and pulled up before a place labelled Hod's Tavern.

Knox saw the other car when they got out. He had been conscious of the headlights behind them because he was always aware of such things. But they did not imprint themselves forcibly on his mind until the coupe had turned off the main boulevard. Now he glanced at the other car, casually, watching it drift on by, neither fast nor slow. It was a late model Ford. Beyond that he couldn't tell much in the bad light.

He said nothing to Jock, just followed him into the tavern, noisy now with on the way home drinkers. The place served beer and something called local wine, nothing else. Jock ordered two on draft, and they went to a booth where they could be served. Knox took a position where he could watch the door easily. Before their beer arrived, two men came in. One was in overalls. He took a place at the bar and chatted familiarly with some of the men there. Knox dismissed him.

The other man wore a business suit, dark, conservative. He was smallish with wispy gray hair combed carefully over a balding head. It showed when he took off his homburg hat and sat at a front table. He did not look around but simply ordered a beer, lighted a cigaret, and then stared at nothin. Knox did not dismiss him.

After their beers came, a third man entered and caught Knox's interest. He was as big as Beeker but he walked with a rolling gait that threw his heavy shoulders forward, making him look shorter. He had a thick-featured face, the nose askew, the eyes showing scar tissue. He took a seat

at the end of the bar where it curved to meet the wall. From there he could easily survey the entire room.

Knox might not have thought much about him except that he recognized the man. His name was Eddie Pillow and he was a hangover from the rum running days of Prohibition. When the old city administration fell, it was rumored that he had gone to South America. Knox was surprised to see him walking openly in the city.

He turned his attention to Jock. "I'm a writer. I'm doing a feature story for a magazine on what happened today. We may never get a chance to print it, but if the clamps ever come off, then we can. I get paid big if it goes, so why not cut you in on it?" He reached again for his pocket.

"Why me?"

"Why not? You found him."

Jock's pale blue eyes looked into his beer. "Said who?"

Knox felt as if he were cheating. Taking this man was too easy. He made little effort to be subtle. "Beeker told me. We're friends from way back."

Jock sampled some of the beer. "Then let Beeker tell you the rest of it," he said reasonably.

"I want an eye witness account," Knox said. "I won't break the story until the cops give an okay. Then you'll get a spread—how you felt when you found him, what you did, the works." He paused and sipped his beer. It was green.

"That is," he went on, "if you want it that way. Pictures, too, maybe."

Jock bought it. Knox could see him puffing a little. "A big magazine? Like *Life*?"

"More like the *Post*," Knox said.

"And it's q.t. until it's okay with the cops? I don't want any trouble with that Keehan."

"You won't have any trouble. This story won't break until I get an okay," Knox assured him. "It'll have Beekers' views and Maddy Keehan's too. When they can talk, then it's safe for you to."

Jock seemed impressed that Knox could call Keehan by

his first name. He was obviously much more worried by the sergeant than by Beeker himself. He said, "I got but one story to tell. Listening to that Keehan, you'd think I was covering for somebody. I told it to him this way and that's the only way I can tell it—and not lie."

He sounded sorry for himself. Knox slipped ten more across the tabletop. "Take this for a starter. Go ahead."

Jock sounded a little as if he were reciting. "This Deane dame, a public stenographer—one of those that works out of the lobby—calls me a little after three. She has a busted chair and how can she type with a busted chair. I look it over and see that it'll take some fixing. One of the big screws that hold the springback on has worked loose and gouged itself a hole in the wood. She tried to fix it and only made it worse. I have to plug the hole and put the screw back in. That takes more equipment than I carry with me, so I hoist the chair and go down for another."

He paused and tasted some more of the beer. "I leave the chair in the workshop and go on to the storeroom. It's dark-like. When I turn on the light, I'm half blind for a minute. When I can see, I start into the room for the chair. And there's this guy with his back to me. I got to him. What the hell—I think he's one of that crummy kitchen crew snoozing off a load." He paused and refreshed his throat again.

"Sure," Knox said, "anybody would."

"That's what I tell Keehan. Anyway, I get one hand down and then I can see the blood. It's on his face. I guess it came from his eye. Then I see this icepick in his gut. That does it. I leave fast."

"What about the chair?"

Jock grinned shamefacedly. "You know, I have that chair in my hands like a club. I don't even know it until I'm in the elevator. So I deliver it and then I make my squawk to McEwen."

"You didn't see or hear anything or anyone?"

"No, I told that to Keehan but. . ."

"But you were moving too fast." Knox grinned and started

to get up. "It's a good story; I'll buy it. If we can use it, there'll be a few more ten spots. Okay?"

Jock's expression agreed that it was okay. Knox deliberately kept his back to Eddie Pillow, feeling the man's eyes on him and not liking it. If this was something Pillow was mixed up in, he hoped that Jock didn't get stepped on as a routine measure. Jock didn't know very much, Knox felt sure. Not that he believed the man one hundred per-cent. There was two small points in Jock's story that Knox hadn't liked, that he wanted to check. But he didn't think they were worth causing Jock trouble over.

Knox dropped money for the beers on the table, ordered another for Jock and started for the door. His eyes went casually to Pillow, who was looking elsewhere now, and then on to the wispy-haired man. He wasn't noticing Knox either. Knox went on out into now cloudy darkness and looked for a cab.

He saw none and started for the corner and the main boulevard. He stopped for a traffic light and turned right, giving a backward glance at the tavern. He was in time to see Pillow's bulk going the other way, and to see the little man poised at the door, scowling up at the clouds that had began to spit a fine, misty rain.

Knox decided to walk. He hadn't walked in one of the northwest's cool and somehow not wet rains for three years. He had gone halfway to the hotel when headlights picked him up, held him briefly, and then went on past. He had a glimpse of the car as it slowed for a corner. It was the Ford and Eddie Pillow was driving it.

It was another block before Knox made out the little man treading along a half block behind. He debated whether to have some fun now or let it ride a while. He decided to let it ride and continued walking. Reaching the hotel, he stopped to buy an evening paper before going up to his room. It gave him time to see the little man come doggedly into the lobby, glance too casually his way, and then plow on through to the coffee shop. Grinning, Knox went to the elevator.

In his room, he called the operator. "Is there a stenographer available at this hour?"

"I may be able to get one, sir. There's an extra charge after five."

"That's all right," Knox said. "See if Miss Deane can do some work for me. I like the way she handles my affairs."

He hung up, lit a cigaret, and waited. Within five minutes his phone rang. There was a husky feminine voice on the other end. "This is Cora Deane. I understand you wanted some typing done."

"Paul Knox here," he said. "I'm sorry to trouble you at this hour, Miss Deane, but I have some important reports." He let it hang.

She sounded confident, not diffident. "I'll be glad to. Only I've had a trying day. I'd like to rest and have my dinner before I start to work again. Would later do?"

Knox liked her voice. He said, "That's fine. Say a couple of hours?"

She said a couple of hours and hung up. Knox looked at his watch and decided to have a drink to get rid of the taste of Hod's beer. The telephone caught him as he started for the door. It was Mel Beeker.

"I have something you might be able to use, Paul."

"Anything gratefully received."

Beeker said, "In his two weeks here, Auffer made friends with a pair called Tinsley. A father and daughter. They moved into the penthouse suite about three months ago, took a year's lease on it."

Knox whistled. Beeker grunted. "Yeh, you know how we have to handle that kind of dough. Anyway, we did what checking we could. Tinsley claims to be a retired mining engineer who struck it down south of the border some time ago. He's also a sports fan and does a good deal of betting. He was here for the racing season and now he's back and forth to California for racing and football."

"Alibis for the time, I suppose?"

"As good as we could check. But you never know."

"Thanks, Mel."

"If anything opens up. . . ." Beeker said in a faintly plaintive voice.

Knox debated briefly and decided to be generous. "I saw Eddie Pillow tonight, Mel. When did he get back into town?"

"I didn't know he was." Beeker swore softly. "Pillow and that new crew of politicians."

"You mean the old crew dressed in new clothes," Knox said. "I thought of that. And of the little deal your Vice squad may look into. Pillow isn't the kind to let anything—clean or dirty—bother him."

"So I know. Thanks, Paul."

Knox hung up. He hadn't said anything about his interview with Jock. Holding out that way made him feel like a heel, but he had learned on his job that the best thing was to take all he could get and pay as little as possible for it. He started for the door again. This time he made it.

CHAPTER SIX

PALMING A five dollar bill, Knox sought out the wizened, red-haired bellhop. Knox got him alone and studied him thoughtfully. For all of his dried up appearance he was not old. Knox guessed him to be in the neighborhood of forty, the type of man who, with a little less self indulgence along the way, might have been a jockey. He was small and wiry but with a protruding pot stomach that hinted at too much beer.

Knox said, "How much does it cost me for you to keep your mouth shut?"

The bellhop looked at him as if trying to remember the size of the tips Knox handed out. He grinned a little. "That depends on what you want kept quiet."

"I want to know where the workshop it. Then forget I asked."

"Hell, that won't cost anything."

Knox gave him the five dollars. "Insurance," he said.

The bellhop took it quickly. "First basement, to the right at the foot of the stairs. Right across from the service elevator. You could have found that out for yourself."

"Sure," Knox said, "but I might want to buy something else later."

This time the bellhop's survey was more thoughtful. He nodded. "The name is Carl. I live here, in one of the employee rooms, in case you need anything when I'm off duty. Okay?"

"Okay," Knox said. He walked off, humming softly. Finding a cooperative bellhop had always been a paying policy, he discovered some time ago. And this one he judged to be the handiest type—the kind who was willing to cut things as fine as he dared for a few dollars. A man like Carl would, for his own financial health, have his finger on the pulse of as much as he could that went on in the hotel.

Knox walked to the first basement, turned right, and went through the unlocked door of the workshop. The room was empty at this time of the night; tools and equipment were locked away and only a few items that needed repairing stood around where they could be taken. Knox passed up a radio, two tables, and a coffee stand before he found what he sought.

The stenographer's chair lay on its back on a far corner of a waist-high workbench. Knox went to it and began an examination. He was no carpenter but it didn't take a carpenter to see that Jock had described the trouble correctly. A large wood screw that helped hold the spring-controlled back to the frame of the seat lay loosely in its socket. Using one of his keys, Knox worked the screw out and looked at the hole.

At first glance it looked as though someone had tried to work the screw deeper into the hole and had succeeded only in gouging out the wood. The second look told Knox what he had suspected—that if the stenographer had tried to fix the chair, she had worked hard at it to make the hole that big. There seemed little point in that unless she,

or someone else who had access to the chair, had wanted a maintenance man to go down to the storeroom.

Knox gave the broken chair a third, thorough look, decided that it had taken more than the screw to gouge the hole, and was about to turn for the door, when the light went out. He stood motionless for the fraction of time that it took for the door to slam. It had happened too fast for him to see anything. And now he stood in thick, windowless darkness. It was almost a reflex action for him to drop to the floor.

He moved crab-like along the floor, parallel to the workbench, working himself around the corner and toward the door. But it didn't open. Nothing happened; there was no noise, nothing. Puzzled, Knox rose to his feet and eased cautiously up to the door. He put out a hand, found the knob and turned.

The door came open, pushed from the other side. Knox dropped the knob and tried to step back. A bright light, funneled from a powerful flash, struck him in the eyes. Involuntarily, he put up a hand. He tried to twist aside, to move out of range but he wasn't fast enough. The hiss of something heavy coming through the air reached his ear just before the blow caught him on the temple. The bright light went away. The floor came up and caught him hard across the back. But he felt nothing.

Knox wanted to sneeze. It took him some time to realize why. His face was pressed into a dusty cement floor. He sneezed. The pain went up through his head and that brought him awake. He sat up. He was still in the storeroom, the door to the corridor open letting in faint light. Swearing, he got to his feet and put a hand to his head.

He felt like hell. At first all he could do was lean against a workbench and swear, both at himself and whoever had tricked him. That was what made him mad—letting himself be tricked in such a simple fashion.

After a few moments, he found that he could navigate again, and he turned on the light. He looked for the chair.

From where he stood it appeared just the same, undisturbed. But Knox could think of no other reason for an attack on him than that he had been snooping around that chair and so he went to it.

His examination was brief. One glance told him all that he needed to know. It was a stenographer's chair and it had a loose screw in the back. But it was definitely not the same chair. Someone had made a substitution. Only, Knox thought with faint pleasure, they had made it too late. It took more than a blow on the head to drive away the memory of what he had seen.

He left the room and sought the service elevator. It took him to the tenth floor. From there it was easy to reach his room without being seen. In the room, Knox looked down at his suit, covered with dust and wood shavings. He peeled it off and went into the bath. There was a small, purple lump visible when he pulled back the hair at his temple. It was sore but the skin was not broken. He decided that he would live.

A shower made him feel a good deal better. So did another suit. When he was ready to return to the lobby, he glanced at his watch. It surprised him to find that just a little over an hour had passed since he had made the appointment with Cora Deane. He had been out more briefly than he thought.

The bellhop Carl was nowhere in sight when Knox reached the lobby. He decided to let the little session he had planned with the man go for now and sought McEwen. When he found him, Knox used his best leer.

"There's a dish in this hotel I'd like to get acquainted with, Mac. But she lives in the penthouse so it has to be subtle."

McEwen looked hungrily at Knox's breast pocket. Knox brought out his billfold. McEwen said, "You mean the Tinsley dame." He shrugged. "I like mine meatier but then. . ." He stopped and gave Knox a sly grin. "Or is it her old man you want to meet?"

Knox let his expression indicate that McEwen had found

him out. "A little bet now and then makes things interesting," he murmured.

He had evidently hit the right note, and he thanked Beeker for having provided the information. McEwen nodded. "They're in the bar, on the terrace, right now. How do you want to work this?"

Knox let him see twenty dollars. "I want it quietly noised around that I'm looking for a fat bet on Saturday's football game here. If that gets me the knockdown, I'll double this. Maybe more."

McEwen took the bill and did a conjuring act with it. If he was surprised at Knox's eagerness to spend money just to make a bet, he said nothing about it. His comment was, "Tinsley's the guy to see. I understand he'll take a flyer on anything that gets room on the sport pages. It's a hobby with him."

Knox left the rest of it up to McEwen and drifted off to the bar. He glanced casually around as he entered, spotted two groups of people, either of which might be the ones he sought, and then took a seat about the center of the terrace. From where he sat, Knox could see either of the tables he had looked at before. His view was mostly of the colored neon that ran up and down the organ tubes as the organist gave out his version of soft evening music.

Knox ordered a double rye and water and let it further soothe the pain in his head and the bruise to his pride. He waited quite awhile. McEwen was definitely being subtle; it took twenty minutes before a waiter appeared at Knox's elbow.

"Pardon, sir, but are you the Mr. Knox who was in the Riviera yacht races last year?"

Knox admitted it. The waiter said, "There's a gentleman, a Mr. Tinsley, who wondered if you would be so kind as to discuss it with him. He's quite interested."

Knox looked interested but not too interested. "I'd be glad to," he said. He rose.

The Tinsleys, Knox discovered, were the couple he had

thought less likely to be they. The table also contained a tall, sleekly dark young man that Knox had seen occasionally in the lobby. He rose to leave as Knox approached.

Tinsley had a voice as rich as an organ. "I'm Gerard Tinsley, sir. My daughter, Natalie, and Thomas Catlin."

"Paul Knox," Knox said unnecessarily. He shook hands with both men, finding Tinsley's grip a little too firm, Catlin's a little hesitant. Catlin murmured an excuse and departed. Knox sat down in his chair and looked over his prey.

Tinsley looked very much the retired mining engineer. He was a well set up man with a mane of gray hair and a gray mustache that gave his tanned countenance a distinguished cast. His daughter looked equally healthy and as well tanned but not quite as athletic. She had a slender, almost boyish figure. Her hair added to that impression. It was very dark, cut short, and worn brushed back to expose two small and handsome ears and a fine neck. At first glance the dark dinner dress she wore seemed almost prim in comparison to some of those worn by women at other tables. But a second glance made Knox realize that the dress actually revealed a good deal more figure than it concealed. He guessed that Natalie Tinsley's slender figure was a very well proportioned one.

It was her face that struck him most forcibly. She was not a beautiful woman, but her tanned skin was stretched over the most finely molded bone structure he had ever seen. Her eyes were too large, her nose too small, and her mouth too generous for beauty, but taken altogether the ensemble of her features created a handsome and very attractive picture. Added to that, there was a vivacity, a pixie-like quality in her expression that captured him completely.

"What were you drinking?" Tinsley asked.

"Rye and water," Knox said. "This is very kind of you. I was growing bored."

Natalie Tinsley laughed. "Oh, Dad will make you pay for

it. He'll question you to death." Both her laugh and her voice were deep and well modulated.

It went smoothly, almost too smoothly to suit Knox. They were a charming couple, he had to admit. Tinsley knew his sports and so did his daughter. They were obviously widely traveled and, equally obviously, both gamblers from down deep inside. Knox admitted having made and won a modest wager on the yacht race. The talk veered to horses, in which he expressed less interest, and then to football.

"I like the University this year," Knox said. "As underdogs they should pay a lot for a little."

"Do you prefer points or odds?" Tinsley asked. His face was a little florid from three drinks. Natalie, Knox noticed, was still on the same one she had had when he arrived.

"Both if I can get them," Knox said. They all laughed. He added, "In this case, I'll take odds. No points. How does the betting stand about now?"

"With no points, about three and a half to one," Tinsley said. "But you'd be throwing away good money. I've watched that California bunch play. They're headed for the Rose Bowl."

"Maybe it's misplaced loyalty," Knox said with a smile. "But I have a feeling. . ." He let it hang there.

Tinsley nibbled, tasted, and bit. "Well, if you insist on spending your money, let's make a private bet. Why give the bookmakers everything?"

"You name it," Knox said.

"Your thousand to my thirty-five hundred."

"Rain or shine," Knox agreed.

Before they parted, he made a side bet with Natalie Tinsley on which team would make the first touchdown. He excused himself shortly after; it was time to see Cora Deane.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN PAUL KNOX was under voting age someone had caustically told him that he had a way with women. He didn't quite know what the term meant at the time and he was far too interested in school athletics to find out. Later he came to accept the fact that many women looked at him more speculatively than they did other men. He did not try to find out why; he was now too interested in his work. Still later he made use of it as an asset.

At thirty-three, he was still a bachelor. Twice there had been women he could have given up his freedom for. One of them he disliked thinking of; the second he had respected too much to subject to the strain a traveling detective's wife would have to undergo. She did not think it fair either, and they had parted amicably. When he was in New York, she was always available for a drink, dinner, and conversation. It made a pleasant arrangement.

Yet despite his experience, Knox never failed to be somewhat surprised at the ease with which he was accepted by a woman. He found Cora in the coffee shop looking thoughtfully at the desserts on the menu. The hostess obligingly pointed her out, took Knox's dollar, and discreetly retired to other customers. He went to the booth.

"Miss Deane?"

Her head came up. He had the impression of nice features. Nothing blatantly beautiful, but nice. Wide gray eyes, as gray as his own, a good nose and jawline and chin. What he could see of her figure indicated that it was on the full blown side.

The flicker of annoyance that rose in her eyes faded out as she surveyed him and became merely questioning. Then her glance became definitely interested. "Yes?"

"I'm Paul Knox. I got tied up and haven't eaten yet. Do you mind if I join you for a bite now?" His smile was engaging.

"As long as we don't talk business, I'd be delighted," she said.

"I didn't have business in mind," he said.

The waitress came. She ordered cheese and fruit and coffee. Knox suggested that she have a brandy to accompany the rye that he ordered. She agreed and when it came, he lifted his glass to hers.

"To less crime."

Her glass stopped at the edge of her lips. "That's an odd toast."

"But an appropriate one."

She sipped her brandy and set it down. "I thought we weren't going to discuss business."

"Is crime business?"

She said quickly, almost tartly, "You're Paul Knox. You spent nine years on the police force here. Since then you've worked for World-Circle detective agency. Isn't crime business?"

He had to laugh. "Did you go out of your way to find that out?"

"I always check a client who wants evening work," she said sweetly.

"You win that round," he admitted. "Let's talk about something else. Saturday's football game, for instance."

"I've only been here a month," she said. "I'm not very familiar with this part of the country."

"Then let's talk about where you came from."

"Kansas," she said. "A long time ago."

Not too long, he thought. She was still under thirty judging by the tautness of skin under her chin and on her neck. It was that area, he had found, where a woman often revealed encroaching age. He found it hard to tell on Cora Deane, however, as she wore a very high-necked blouse beneath the jacket of her dark gray suit.

"And then?"

She shrugged. "Around. I went to school, traveled, worked here and there. A year in New York. Time in Washington. Two years overseas."

"Single?"

"At the moment."

She was casual and quick and revealed nothing. Knox had planned to use similar tactics to those he had used with Jock, but he saw now that they weren't going to work. He wondered just how he could best approach this self-possessed young lady.

He was still wondering when Tom Catlin came into the coffee shop and walked up to their table. He nodded at Knox and then turned his dark eyes on Cora Deane. He was too well manicured a man for Knox's taste.

"Occupied all evening, Cora?"

She could have answered him tartly. The question was somehow insolent. Knox shifted on his seat, watching her, waiting for the rejoinder he expected from her. Instead she smiled.

"I seem to be." There was no sting to the words. "Mr. Knox, Mr. Catlin. Mr. Catlin is in the insurance business."

"We've met," Knox said.

"I check on branches of our company," Catlin said to Knox. "So don't worry about me trying to sell you insurance." He was easy in his manner but Knox disliked his voice and the possessive way he studied the girl.

He said, "Will you be free after ten tomorrow?"

"I believe so, Tom."

Catlin nodded as if that settled everything and went on. Knox could not help thinking of the first name basis the two were on, the rudeness she had accepted. He said, "More than a business contact, I presume."

"Not really. But we came at about the same time. I've done a good deal of typing for him. He should have brought his own stenographer. It would have been less expensive."

Knox was irritated. He could not seem to get under Cora Deane's layer of aplomb. "Maybe he hopes to take one away with him," he said.

"That's the impression I get," she answered. "And it might be easy work and interesting—traveling about the country, staying a month here, a month there. Tom does a lot of his

work at informal company get-togethers. They might be interesting too."

"They might," Knox agreed. He gave up. "What company does Catlin work for?"

"Grand Union. The headquarters are in the east."

Knox finished his meal by the time Cora Deane wound up her cheese and fruit. Leaving, they went into the level that was a step above the lobby. Cora Deane stopped at her desk.

"Here or in your room, Mr. Knox?"

"My data is in the room."

She opened her desk, took out a shorthand notebook and pencil and locked the desk again. He said on the way up, "I understand you had chair trouble today."

Her glance was amused. "A good deal of it the way things turned out. But the guests aren't supposed to know these things."

"I'm a special guest," he said.

In the room, Knox waited until she had seated herself at the desk, pencil poised, and then he dropped into the easy chair and lit a cigaret. "First, I want you to jot down some notes. I may sound like I'm rambling, but just take verbatim what I say."

He crossed his legs. "Point one, What is the significance of the coincidence of a broken stenographer's chair and the discovery of a body in the chair storeroom? Point two, What. . ."

Knox paused very briefly. Cora Deane was writing pot-hooks steadily. When he paused, she wrote on a bit and then glanced at him, her pencil held ready.

Knox said, "Correction. Point two, Questions to ask the public stenographer, Miss Deane. Did the screw work loose from the chair suddenly or had it been working loose for some time? What instrument did Miss Deane or someone unknown use to make the screw hole larger? Can Miss Deane account for her presence at her desk throughout the afternoon? Did Miss Deane. . ."

He stopped because she did. She said quietly, "The police

did much better. They didn't try to be subtle or—cute."

Knox grinned. "And did they get the answers?"

"There are no answers," she replied tartly. "I explained that if the chair was working loose before that I wasn't aware of it. When I noticed it, I made an attempt to tighten the screw with my typewriter screwdriver. I only succeeded in making the hole so big that I needed another chair. It was, as you said, coincidence."

"And can Miss Deane account for her presence. . ."

"Miss Deane had a coffee break in the middle of the afternoon. Business was slack. She chose to leave her desk."

"And went where?" Knox asked.

She looked directly at him. "I'm not under obligation to answer these questions, Mr. Knox. In fact, as I understand the police, the case is supposed to be kept quiet for the time being."

"Those are Beekers' orders," Knox agreed. "I can get the information from him but I prefer it first hand."

She shrugged. "I have nothing to hide. I took my coffee break by going downstairs and lying on the rest room divan. No one came," she added, anticipating him. "I have no—alibi. But since I didn't know the dead man, I don't see where I need one."

That didn't set with Knox. It was hard to be in the same place with Lee Auffer for two weeks and not notice him. He let it pass for the moment.

"Quite right," he murmured. "So we have you taking a coffee break."

"I fell asleep," she said. "I woke up to find my skirt badly wrinkled. I have a room here, one of the small ones in the back that are provided for the help that wish them. I went there and changed into this suit. I felt so sticky that I showered first. When I returned to the desk, the chair broke. I called Jock. That's all I know."

"What was the color of your dress?" Knox asked.

She looked puzzled. "Navy blue. Does that matter?"

He studied her gray suede shoes. "You wore these shoes with it?"

She still seemed puzzled. "No, blue gabardine." Her eyes glinted. "Is that a clue, Mr. Detective?"

"It could be." Knox was acting partly on hunch, partly on the feeling that she was not telling him as much as she could have. "Shall we go to your room?"

Puzzlement gave way to indignation. "We shall not!"

Knox was grinning again. "I want to see your shoes and your dress, Miss Deane. If you prefer, I can get Lieutenant Beeker here to make the request. I just thought you'd prefer it this way. Unless, of course, you have reason to keep them out of sight."

She rose stiffly. "No reason." The notebook shut with a snap. "I don't understand this, Mr. Knox. I don't know what your interest is. And I dislike being blackmailed by threats of the police."

"Blackmail only exists where there is fear on the part of the victim," Knox murmured. "Let's call it something nicer."

"And you suggest?" She was walking toward the door, her head high, her back stiffly angry.

"Courtesy on your part," he suggested.

She did not answer but marched to the elevator. When it stopped at the second floor, she got off. Knox continued on to the lobby and then doubled back up the stairs. She was standing at a bend in the corridor.

"Thank you," she said. "That was considerate."

"I always try to be considerate of my victims," Knox said.

Silent again, she led the way to a door marked 207-E, and let him in. The room was almost a cubbyhole, wide enough for the bed and dresser. It had a tiny bath with a shower instead of a tub. There was also a small closet. It was neat.

"You pay for this, I presume?"

"Naturally." She opened the closet door and brought out a navy blue dress with a flaring skirt. He took it and asked for her blue gabardine shoes. She produced them.

They were high-heeled. Knox turned them over. His finger flicked a tiny piece of stone-like material out of one thin

sole. His fingers, brushing the sole, came away covered with faint dust. There was a streak of it along one side of the left shoe. He handed them back.

"You changed your underthings after bathing, of course?"

Her flush almost embarrassed him. But she recovered enough to say sharply, "No, I removed them before I bathed."

"And put on others afterward?" If she could play, he could too. He chuckled inside, thinking that whatever charm he might have for women, he was losing it rapidly with this one.

"I did."

"May I see them, please?"

"I've known some strange people," she observed. "I've met all types. I've read Havelock Ellis and Kinsey too. But this is the strangest case I've come across." She stepped out of the closet.

"Very strange," he agreed with a straight face. He walked around her, reached into the closet, lifted out a nearly empty laundry bag and upended it. A slip, brassiere, a pair of sheer hose fell out. He shook the bag and a garter belt joined the small pile. He felt in the bag and found nothing more.

"You don't wear—er, panties?"

"Yes. Shall I prove it?"

Knox sat on the edge of the bed and brushed vaguely at a dusty line on the skirt of the blue dress. "Shall we return and continue our work?"

"Mr. Knox, I've been more patient than with anyone else I can think of. I think it's time to say good night."

"Why—are you more patient with me, I mean?"

She shook her head. "I don't know." They stared at one another. Then, suddenly, she laughed ruefully.

"You have me and I know it. How you did it, I don't know. I thought I could handle myself but suddenly I'm caught. And there's not a thing I can do about it."

"You're a good sport," he admitted. "Let's skip the work and have another drink."

"First," she said, "I want to know—now that you've caught me—just where I stand. What is this all about?"

"Miss Deane," he said gravely, "all that I know for sure is that you left your panties across the hall from the chair storeroom."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BAR was half empty. It was Thursday, a slack night, and now it was raining hard outside. Few people came off the street to enjoy drinks with the soft background of organ music. Knox chose a table in a dim corner of the terrace.

"Pink Lady or Alexander or some such thing?" he asked.

She laughed softly. "You've been taking out the wrong kind of stenographer, Mr. Knox. I'll have bourbon or rye with water."

He ordered rye for them both and then looked somberly at her. "Miss Deane, frankly you have some explaining to do."

She showed irritation again. "I don't follow you. I haven't done anything."

"You lied to the police."

"Don't you think it put me in an awkward position," she said, "to find my—underthings missing."

The drinks came. Knox paid and waited until the waiter had gone. "Let me reconstruct something," he said. "Then perhaps you'll see what I mean."

"Go ahead." She was stiff, formal.

"At the hour of your coffee break you went downstairs, but you went to the second level, not the first. You went to the chair storeroom. You opened the door, turned on the light and saw—the dead man. There's a gap at this point. The next thing I can feel sure of is that you were across the hall, in the room where the tables are stored. You walked out of there a little dazed. You went to your room, bathed and changed, put on a high-necked blouse and returned

to work. You fixed the chair so that Jock would have to go get another. That way the body could be discovered without your being implicated."

She said nothing for a moment. And then, "Why do you make a point of my blouse?"

"Because I think you were choked and that there are bruises on your throat. I think you were carried across the hall."

"By the murderer?"

"Yes," Knox said. "And I don't understand why you were let live."

"Maybe because I didn't see the person who choked me."

"It's your turn now," he said quietly.

"You were right," she admitted. "I did go downstairs and I did find a body. But before I could do anything, someone caught me by the throat. I must have fainted. When I came to, I was across the hall. I felt sick. It was dark and I was alone. I got up and opened the door and—and ran."

"Do you think someone or something scared your attacker off?"

"I don't know what to think," she said.

"And while you were unconscious, your panties were removed."

She said with a kind of grim humor, "They aren't panties. At the price I paid, they become lingerie." Then she added more seriously, "That must be the way it was. I didn't know they were gone until I reached my room."

"Do you think it was a sex crime?"

"Definitely not," she said. She was flushing a little. "I'm sure it wasn't. Yet—why would he take my underthings?"

"He?"

"I don't think a woman could have choked me so easily nor carried me. I'm no lightweight."

He agreed, guessing her at five feet six or seven and weighing a hundred and thirty pounds or more. It was well distributed weight but that wouldn't make her any easier to carry.

He said, "And you have no other ideas?"

"None."

"Why did you go down there in the first place?"

She made a ring on the tabletop with her glass. "Because I thought I'd find another chair myself. The screw was loose in mine before. And—well, I'd never been down there. I was curious."

It was a lie. She did it well, but he knew it was a lie. There were a number of things about Cora Deane's story that didn't satisfy Knox. He said, "Let's start over. Why did you go down there?"

She flushed but not from embarrassment this time. "I told you."

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

"Would you have—and then try to explain why you didn't report the murder?"

"If you knew it was a murder, why didn't you report it?"

"I told you. I was sick, frightened. When I woke up, I became panicky. I'm not proud of it, but that's what happened. And after I'd changed, I decided I would be better off out of it. I hate publicity."

He said, "Logical enough," without too much conviction in his voice. "Did you get a good look at the body?"

"I barely saw it when—he caught me."

"Then how did you know it was murder?" he demanded. "Jock thought the man was drunk when he first looked."

"Drunk! With his face smashed in like that?"

Knox took a deep, steadying breath. He looked carefully at her but she was not lying now. That he would swear to. He drained his glass.

"Just one more thing, Miss Deane. How did you—fix the chair?"

"I took my screwdriver—the one for my typewriter—and wriggled it around in the hole a little." Her glance was questioning.

He said, "And this evening after I called you and made the appointment, what did you do?"

"I rested, as I told you I intended. Then I came down and had dinner."

She was quite frank now. He had the feeling that she was relieved, as though she had passed a test. He said, "Can you explain why someone would take enough interest in the broken chair to steal it?"

"Steal it?" She shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Knox, that just doesn't make sense."

He put a hand to the small lump on his temple. "My getting hit on the head does." He told her briefly of his encounter in the workshop. She continued to stare at him while he talked, her expression growing more and more puzzled. He had the feeling that she was a good actress, and yet he had no basis for accusing her of engineering the theft of the chair.

He said finally, "Thank you, Miss Deane." He rose. "If you'll make out a bill for all the time I've taken—tomorrow, of course." With a quick bow, he walked off.

He walked slowly, his eyes flickering without apparent interest around the room as he went toward the door. He saw Tom Catlin watching him from a position at the bar, saw the man's eyes go past and up to where Cora Deane was sitting. Then he left his stool and started toward her. Knox kept going.

He was almost at the door when he saw the small, wispy-haired man who had trailed him—or Jock—to and from Hod's tavern. He was drinking bottled beer, nursing it carefully, his hair slicked, his appearance just slightly out of place as though he were a little uneasy in such plush surroundings. Knox had a second urge to stop and have some fun but again he had too much on his mind and reluctantly he passed up the opportunity and went on out.

In his room, he ordered up a pot of coffee. He sat at the desk, a sheet of hotel stationery before him. With a pencil, he began to write rapidly, making brief notes, drawing diagrams, making a time schedule. The coffee came and he drank a cup absently, smoking and staring at what he had written.

He was full of food and rye whiskey but he drank the coffee doggedly, knowing that it would key him up a little. He had the feeling that this night might not be spent sleeping. Something was moving, something he had to get his finger on before it moved too fast and too far.

He said aloud, "Drunk! With his face smashed in like that?"

But Leo Auffer hadn't had his face smashed in, merely run through with an ice pick. If it wasn't Leo Auffer she saw, who was it then?

A good many possibilities occurred to Knox. Leo could have been the one to drag Cora Deane away—if he had found it necessary to dispose of someone. But why the fifth of whiskey? Why take off her underpants? That wasn't like Leo Auffer. For all of his playboy exterior, he had been a serious and conscientious workman, Knox knew. On a job, he never fooled around, seldom did the unexpected.

Knox swore softly. If there were two bodies—and it certainly sounded like it—where was the first one? And how long had Cora Deane lay in the table storeroom? Or had she? An icepick made a good woman's weapon. His thoughts centered around the idea that she had gone downstairs deliberately to commit murder. It was a possibility, and the weapon certainly argued in favor of premeditation. Ice-picks were not common items to be found at random in hotel basement storerooms. But the question remained. Why?

He swore again. If he could locate D-13, he might get somewhere.

He went back to work, scribbling again. The coffee pot was empty and despite it he was beginning to yawn. His watch said that it was after midnight, closer to one a.m. He had left Cora Deane shortly before ten. He shook his head but the sleepiness persisted. He debated taking a cold shower, wished that he could call Mel Beeker and exchange some of his ideas. Only, he remembered dopily, he had not kept Beeker fully informed of his activities. The Lieutenant wouldn't appreciate that when he found out.

The telephone jangled, bringing Knox's head up as it drooped toward the desk. On the third ring, he lifted it. "Knox here."

It was Mel Beeker's voice, "Paul? I'm coming up."

Knox said, "I was just wishing I could call you only I thought I might disturb your beauty sleep."

Beeker's laugh was short and unpleasant. "Sleep. Hell! And if you're thinking of getting any, forget it. I said I was coming up."

Knox was finally awake enough to realize that Beeker was burned about something. "Is that wise—coming here?"

"Maybe not wise," Beeker said, "but it's sure as hell necessary. Or maybe you'd rather come to the station. That's where you belong."

Knox pursed his lips in a silent whistle. "Take it easy," he said. "Don't blow out the phone line. And how about Connie's? No one pays any attention to anyone going in there even at this time of night."

"You sound like you think this is a social call," Beeker growled at him. "This is murder, friend, and right in your lap."

CHAPTER NINE

CONNIE'S was the city's one first class all-night restaurant. In the middle of a district of exclusive shops, it was now surrounded by darkened store windows. Both the booths and the counter were well filled with after-theater customers and with those who had migrated from the recently closed bar. It took Knox a few moments to find an empty booth at the rear. When he did, he ordered coffee and a sandwich, wanting neither, and sat back with a first edition of the morning paper to wait for Beeker.

There was nothing about Leo Auffer in the paper. The murder might not have occurred as far as news was concerned. Beeker had so far done a better job than Knox expected in keeping the affair quiet.

He was scanning the sport page when he heard heavy footsteps. Beeker came up, slid his heavy body into the booth, looked at Knox's untouched sandwich and coffee and ordered the same. Knox folded the paper and set it beside him.

"All right," Knox said. "You're sore. Give it to me straight."

"I intend to," Beeker said. "There's been another murder and Maddy Keehan thinks maybe you had a hand in it."

The service was quick at Connie's and Beeker's sandwich arrived. He took a huge bite and gulped coffee after it. His mouth emptied, he said, "Tell me about you and Jock."

There was a bad taste suddenly in Knox's mouth. "Not him, Mel?"

"Him," Beeker said morosely. He added more sugar to his coffee. "Stabbed in the eye and then in the middle. There's a carving knife sticking out of his belly right now."

Knox got mad. He was mad at whoever had done it and he was mad at himself. And he decided to be mad at Keehan while he was about it.

"What makes old rubber hose think I had a hand in it?" he demanded. "Since when have I gone in for knives?"

"You were playing patsy with Jock earlier," Beeker told him. "We had a man on him, so we know you went to a tavern and pumped him. Then not long ago he's found dead." He bit into the sandwich again, not looking as if he enjoyed it too much. "Poor bastard. He was watching TV and went into the kitchen for a beer. His wife was busy looking and swears she heard nothing. She couldn't have if it'd been a gun what with all the shooting and hollering going on in the program. But she got worried when two commercials went by and he didn't come back. She found him in the kitchen—the shiv through his chest, the beer spilled all over the floor.

"When was this?" Knox demanded.

"Just before midnight. They were looking at the late show."

"And where was the man you had on him?"

"Outside in front across the street." Beeker shook his head. "Hell, we were looking for a contact, if anything. We didn't think the dope was in any danger. It was easy. Whoever did it came up the alley, went in the back porch, opened the door—which Mrs. Dylan swears she locked tight earlier—and waited. That's all there was to it. Jock walked right into it."

Knox's hand shook a little when he lit his cigaret. "So you and Maddy have it doped out that my interest in him caused it."

"You sure as hell didn't hide that interest," Beeker pointed out. "And remember, you told me Eddie Pillow is around. Is that where you saw him, when you were with Jock?"

Beeker had a good cop's gimlet eye and he was using it on Knox now. Knox said, "That's it, Mel."

"Damn it, why didn't you come to me for the information? Keehan had him for over an hour this afternoon. He wrung him dry."

"What a cop gets out of a man and what someone else gets might be two different things," Knox said. "And then there's the old one about what you don't get. You expect something and it doesn't come. Or a couple of items don't fit—things like that are sometimes worth as much as a straight answer."

"Go on," Beeker said. "And when you get through telling me that, tell me what else you've been up to."

Knox had thought about this on his way down. He knew that Beeker would ask for it, and he wasn't yet sure just how much information he wanted to hand over. On the other hand, he had to have Beeker's cooperation.

He said, making himself sound reluctant, "I hate to pass anything on that might waste your time, Mel, but if you want to listen, okay."

"I *want* to listen—to everything you have to tell me."

Knox tasted his cold coffee and pushed it aside. Beeker helped himself to Knox's sandwich, having finished his own. Knox said, "I got the same thing out of Jock that

Keehan probably did. Only there were a couple of places that his story didn't jell for me. Is that the way Maddy felt about it?"

Beeker snorted. "You know him. They're either guilty or they aren't. He decided Jock was on the level."

"All right," Knox said, "try these on for size. How could anyone without being deliberate about it gouge such a hole in the chair that a little larger sized screw wouldn't bite and hold? That's the first point. In other words, why didn't Jock just get a little bigger screw and put it in."

"Because the hole was all gouged cockeyed," Beeker said. "I saw the chair. The girl made a mess trying to fix it herself."

"Sure," Knox said. "I saw the chair too." He shook his head. "Point the second. Jock delivers the chair before he goes to McEwen and reports the murder. That was odd. If he was in such a panic as he claimed, why didn't he dump the chair when he hit the lobby level and run straight to McEwen?"

"The dame wanted a chair," Beeker growled in imitation of Maddy Keehan. "The guy had chivalry." He shrugged and said in his normal voice, "People do funny things under shock, Paul."

"I know," Knox said. "I told you it might be a waste of time. But let's add one more thing. Earlier tonight, I went down to the workshop to look at the chair. I saw what you saw. And then someone turned out the light on me and sapped me. When I came to, that chair was gone and a different one had been substituted. To me, that makes Jock's little chivalrous gesture seem queer."

Beeker said, "Sapped you—who?"

"If I knew," Knox said, "I might have a lead to go on."

"Just to get a chair?"

"It seems so, doesn't it."

"That Deane dame . . ." Beeker began musingly.

"I had dinner with the Deane dame, as you call her."

"We know that. You also had a drink with the Tinsleys. And you had the Deane girl in your room."

"Strictly business."

"I'm glad to hear that. Then you had a drink with her and left her some hours ago."

Knox grinned. "Who's being covered?"

"Both of you," Beeker admitted. "Maddy put a tail on you."

"Then you know that I went to my room and worked after leaving the bar. I was there until you called."

Beeker said irritably, "We know you're clean, damn it. But now, after what happened to Jock, we'll have to keep a double check on the girl."

"What am I, the kiss of death?"

"Could be," Beeker said. Having nothing more to eat, he sat and moodily tugged at his lower lip. Then, with a sigh as though succumbing to a temptation he couldn't resist, he ordered more coffee. He said, "This hocus pocus about the chair bothers me, Paul. Maybe the girl didn't tell us everything she knew."

Knox had found that in most cases working with the police was an advantage. They had the organization and the facilities to check things no individual could. But there were times when police routine became a handicap. He hesitated now, not sure yet just how this was going to shape up. There were a lot of questions about Cora Deane that he wanted answered, but he wasn't sure that he wanted the police to have those answers—yet.

He said, "If she didn't tell you everything she knew, she didn't tell me either. I confronted her with the business of the chair. She claimed she did it all with her little screwdriver."

"And you getting sapped—did you tell her about that?"

"Yes. I don't think she even believed me."

Beeker shrugged. "Well, these things take time. I've got a good man on her. If she isn't on the level, she'll trip up sooner or later."

Knox was glad to leave it at that. Beeker's coffee came. He sugared, sipped and then leaned forward. "Paul, frankly, we're stumped on Aufer and now on Jock. But you came

here for the same purpose as Auffer. If there's anything that will help, I want it."

"Auffer had all the dope," Knox reminded him.

"I know. I know. How about the Tinsleys?"

Knox spread his hands. "Nothing yet—if there's anything there. It may have just been a social acquaintance with Auffer. They're his kind of people." He told of his conversation and his bet.

Beeker whistled. "A thousand dollars you toss off—like that!"

Knox said, "If it pans out, I can put it on my expense account." He paused, considering just how much more to tell Beeker. Finally, he said, "Here's all I have, Mel. When I took Jock to the tavern, two guys tailed me. One was Eddie Pillow and he drives a late model Ford. The other guy I never saw before." He described him.

"We have a check on Pillow," Becker said. "He may be a lead or he may have just been suspicious that you're back in town."

"And he may be connected with smut peddling," Knox said.

"Wouldn't that mean that someone was on to your reason for being here—if Eddie was put to following you?"

"If that's it, I'm not very useful," Knox confessed. "But it's possible that he was put onto Jock, not me."

"Then you think Jock was somehow tied up with what you're here for?"

"It's possible, if Eddie is."

"He might be worth a real check then," Becker agreed. "And the other one?"

"He was in the bar tonight," Knox said. "But whether he wants me or Cora Deane now, I don't know."

"Probably you," Becker said. "Despite the business of you getting sapped over the chair, I can't see how she's tangled in with things."

Knox didn't see either, but he wasn't going to dismiss her so lightly. He could not get over the idea that she was playing her cards her own way, and playing them

very close to her handsome chest. The result of his scribbles indicated that in more ways than one. The trouble was that he didn't know which way was the right way. And as he saw it, knowing that could make a great deal of difference right now. The difference between success and failure on this job for Knox himself.

After a pause, Beeker said, "At any rate, I'll have him checked on."

Knox was thoughtful. "Why not let him ride a while, Mel? Maybe I can find out more if he's free to operate."

Beeker snorted. "Who do you think I'd put on him, someone in uniform? I'll use Mousy Riley. He was staked out at Jock Dylan's place but there's no point in keeping him there now."

Knox said, "We don't know for sure, of course, but we have to assume that Jock's death is connected with the case I'm on."

Beeker looked puzzled. "I was talking about Mouse Riley."

"So am I," Knox said. "If we go on the assumption that Jock was killed because he learned something—or they thought he learned something—then I suggest you keep Mouse Riley on the Dylan house—and add a few men. An outfit like that won't take any chances, Mel. How do they know what Jock might have told his wife?"

"I hadn't thought of that one," Beeker confessed. "Have it your way, Paul."

Knox felt like hell about Jock, but he felt a little better to know that Mouse Riley—so called because he was a silent nonentity as a shadow—would be watching Jock's wife. And now that he was alerted for possible physical danger to her, the chances of anyone doing to her what they did to Jock were slim.

"Did she have anything to say?" Knox asked. "Did Jock tell her anything?"

Beeker gave him a sour grin of understanding. "Meaning, have I been holding out on you. No, not that she told us. She did say that her husband came home full of what

happened. That's natural, of course. He showed her the money you'd given him. The idea of being written up in a magazine had him all puffed up."

Knox felt worse than ever. "The poor bastard," he said. "He was getting out of his league."

Beeker went on, "She said that at the same time he acted a little strange. I guess she knows him pretty well. She thought he might be holding something out on her."

"He was holding out on me," Knox said. "Now that he's been killed, I'm more sure of it than ever."

Beeker shrugged. "That's all. About fifteen minutes before he went into the kitchen for his beer, he got a telephone call. He wasn't gone long and when he came back to the TV show, all he said was the hotel had called. Mrs. Dylan was wound up in the movie and didn't think much about it."

Knox said, "Still she made a point of it."

"Not until we asked her if there had been any calls."

"Uhm," Knox said. "How do you figure it, Mel? The murderer called Jock, made a date for a few minutes later, and Jock used the beer as an excuse to go out to the kitchen to see whoever it was."

"That's the way I see it," Beeker said. "The back door was open. Mrs. Dylan swears she locked it, and I imagine she did. It's one of those lock and bolt affairs that couldn't be opened except from the inside."

"Doesn't that establish pretty well that Jock had found out something?" Knox asked. "He tried to put the heat on someone and got stabbed for his pains."

"The way I see it," Beeker agreed. He paused while he looked around for more to eat. Everything was cleaned up. Sighing, he said, "Here's one more item, Paul. Auffer was stabbed in the belly with an icepick, but it was something else that got him in the eye. Almost like a pick blade but thinner and shorter from what the Doc could tell. And the same instrument got Jock in the eye."

"Why the eye?" Knox wondered.

"Answer that and we may know a murderer," Beeker said.

It was a statement that Knox was to remember.

CHAPTER TEN

IT WAS late when Knox returned to the hotel. The bar was closed; the grill and restaurant were dark. The coffee shop had a skeleton staff and no customers as far as Knox could see. Only the desk clerk and a lone bellhop were in the lobby.

Sleepily, he started for the elevators. He was about to enter the one still in service when the front doors opened and Natalie Tinsley and her father came in. She waved at him. "Paul—Mr. Knox."

"Paul is fine," he said when they reached him.

Her father smiled with the faint fatuousness of the slightly inebriated. "Hope you had a better evening than we did. A damned boring party."

"I just took a turn in the air," Knox said. "It helps me sleep."

Natalie Tinsley half pouted, making herself look more like a young boy than ever. "Oh, not yet, don't go to bed. I've been screaming bored all evening. Come and have a nightcap with us and tell us about your. . ." She broke off.

Knox said, puzzled "My what?"

The elevator doors slid shut and they started upward. "You will stop a minute, won't you?"

He was a good deal more awake than he had been a few moments ago. Being called Paul by someone like Natalie Tinsley and on such short acquaintance interested him. So did their well-timed appearance. Knox wasn't ready to go so far as to say that it had been more planned than providence, but he was willing to speculate on the idea.

"I'd be delighted," he said honestly. He was not only interested in their interest in him but, he had to admit,

Natalie Tinsley was nice to look at, very nice, and she wore an intriguing scent. And then a nightcap wouldn't do any harm.

"Delighted," he repeated.

The elevator took them to the penthouse, depositing them in a small foyer that had two doors opening from it. One, Knox knew from his study of the floor plan, led to the foyer, the other to a bedroom and bath that could be cut off from the rest of the suite if necessary. The Tinsleys, however, had the entire penthouse—living room, two bedrooms and baths, small dinette, kitchenette, and bar.

The living room Tinsley showed him into was sumptuously furnished but still contained the impersonal aura of a hotel. Their three month's occupancy had left little impression as far as Knox could see. Knox slipped out of his overcoat and let Tinsley hang it in the closet along with his own and Natalie's wraps.

Knox said to her, "About my—what?"

Her full mouth worked into a quick, doubtful smile. "Did I talk out of turn? I was going to say, about your being a detective. Or is it a secret?"

Knox shook his head. "If it were, it would be a poorly kept one."

"Tom Catlin told us."

"It's no secret," Knox said. "I'm just a minor cog in a big machine. It's something that gives me an excuse to travel and keeps me from getting too bored. Although it isn't always very exciting work."

"No international spies?" She was laughing up at him, standing a little distance away. It made a charming pose, one that impressed itself strongly on Knox. Her gown, now that he could see her standing and without a wrap, showed that his previous impression had not been wrong. She was exquisitely proportioned. And with laughter lifting her lips and cheeks and sparkling from her enormous dark eyes, she had a beauty that was partly physical and partly one of personality.

Knox looked toward her father who was at the liquor

cabinet. "Hardly," he said casually. "I work for a private agency. The most exciting thing I do is trace missing persons."

"I still think it's exciting, and I want to hear all about it."

Tinsley came over with drinks. "So do I." He stifled a yawn. "But I can't keep up with this younger set." He drained his glass, a straight shot. "And since we're flying to California for the races tomorrow, I'll say good night."

It was a little too pat. Knox wasn't sure that he liked being left alone with Natalie Tinsley right now. It must be his weariness, he thought. He seemed to have little ability to handle himself at the moment. She was damned attractive in her unorthodox way.

There was nothing he could do. Murmuring good night to Tinsley, he let Natalie lead him to a divan with a curved coffee table before it. She turned off all the lights but a soft lamp and adjusted the radio to soft music. Then she returned to the couch and picked up her drink. Knox wondered what was in her mind, fixing an obvious set up like this.

He sipped at his drink. It was good rye. "I imagine your friend Catlin would like to be here," he said.

"Tom? He's a stick-in-the-mud. All he knows is insurance. He won't even bet ten dollars with me on the game. Besides, he's too busy with one of the stenographers that work here. They went up to his room quite late tonight. To do some work, of course."

He could feel her glancing from the side of her eyes at him. He said amusedly, "It's quite possible."

"I'm not being catty," she said. "It's true. All Tom does think of is insurance."

Knox doubted that, thinking of Catlin when he had spoken to Cora Deane. He said, "You mentioned his not betting. You like to gamble, don't you?"

She half turned toward him, her lips parted, her eyes shining. She seemed very young at that moment, but at the same time he got the strong feeling that she was anything but a child. He had guessed her before at about twenty or

twenty-one. Now he somehow had the impression that she would be nearer twenty-five.

"I love it," she said. "It's the fun of life to me. I'll gamble on anything."

"Be careful. A broad statement like that can lead to trouble."

"But I mean it. And I never welch on a bet."

Knox was puzzled. With most women he could tell when he was being extended an invitation. But with Natalie Tinsley, he wasn't sure. She might be as ingenuous as she appeared. If it were a come on—which he doubted—it was a little too crass to fit her.

She was still looking at him. her lips parted as if from the excitement of talking of gambling. Taking a cigaret, he put one end between her lips and flicked his lighter into flame.

She inhaled deeply and then took the cigaret away, laughing. "That could have been a beastly trick."

Knox just grinned and lighted a cigaret for himself. He wanted to bring the subject around to Leo Auffer and he wondered at the best way to provide an opening. But she was obliging; she did it for him.

"I think we have a mutual friend, Paul. You don't mind my calling you Paul?"

"As old drinking friends, no. Who's this lucky mutual acquaintance?"

"You must have met Leo Auffer if you were in the Riviera races."

"Sure, I know him. Not well but enough to admire him. He sails a mean sloop."

"Dad and I just met him recently—here."

Knox let himself look surprised. "Leo was here?" He laughed. "What on earth for? He's a sunshine hound. What's he doing here in November?"

"What are you doing here for that matter?" She put out a slim, unvarnished finger and touched the tip to his cheek. "From your tan, I'd say you were a sunshine hound, too."

The touch did things to Knox despite himself. There was electricity in her nearness and downright shock in her touch. He had the feeling that she drew women as well as men. She was that kind of a personality.

He said, "I'm on a job."

"Detecting!"

He chuckled at her excitement. "In a minor way. I'm on a Missing Persons case. More or less routine, I think."

"Anyone important? Anyone we might know?"

"If it were, I couldn't tell you," he said. "But the answer is no. It's one of those war bride fiascos." It was not an improvised story; he had concocted it some time before for just this sort of contingency. "A G.I. married this girl and sent her home to his family. When she knew her way around and had enough of his money, she disappeared. It doesn't happen often, of course, but there are some who will do it."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed.

He said, "But we were talking of Leo. When was he here? I'm sorry I missed him."

"The last two weeks," she said readily. "He was here to look over the Hydroplane course for the races next summer. He's going in for speedboat racing now."

"And he'll get himself killed doing it," Knox said. "I wish now I'd come a few days earlier. I could have seen him. It's been quite a while."

"He just left today—I mean yesterday."

Yesterday was correct, Knox thought. The clock stood at well after three. "Did he say where he was going?"

She made another face, a little girl's pout of a face. "He didn't even say good bye. He just left. I called this evening and they said he'd checked out."

Knox said casually, "That's Leo. He gets a notion and off he goes. Was he staying here?"

"Of course. Where else is there in this city?"

Knox looked around at the penthouse, lush, out of place in a country that was still not fully out of its log cabin phase. "Where indeed," he murmured.

He lifted his drink, forgotten for some time. The ice was nearly melted. They sipped in silence for a moment. Then Knox made a move to rise. "I'd better be going. You invited me for a nightcap, not the night."

"But it's early yet. I'm not at all sleepy."

"You have a plane to catch."

"I can sleep on it." She stubbed out her cigaret.

"I have work to do," Knox said. "And I can't sleep on the plane." He grinned. "And despite your father's compliment, I'm not a part of the younger set any more."

She made no further protest but saw him to the door. "Sometime, mister, can I go detecting with you?"

He looked down into her face, the strangely mature face with the child's expression. He couldn't resist it. Lifting his hand, he ran his fingertip gently down her cheek and along the fine line of her chin. He just wanted to touch her, to see if she was real.

"Sometime," he said. "Good night, Natalie."

"Good friends call me Nat."

"Maybe we can get to be good friends." He closed the door gently behind himself.

Going to the elevator, he moved slowly, considering how much he had learned—if anything. Not a great deal, he decided, but if there was anything here, he wouldn't find it out too easily. The Tinsleys were not the kind of people to be hurried. Nor the kind, he felt, one could fool easily.

On the other hand, he told himself, they might be wholly innocent. As he had decided before, they were the type Auffer would acquaint himself with. Their coming here in the fall and staying into November could be for a wholly innocent reason. Lots of people did things that were quite difficult for others to understand. That didn't necessarily make them suspicious.

He had to grin at himself. In a few more moments, he would be writing Natalie Tinsley and her father off as beyond suspicion.

"Careful, Knox," he murmured aloud, "that girl is dynamite."

It was a poor analogy, he decided, because when he was with her, he was the one who felt like exploding.

The elevator came and he went down to his floor, laughing at himself. But it was not particularly amused laughter. It had been a long time since he had met anyone who affected him as Natalie Tinsley did. As short as their acquaintance had been, he knew that he was going to be very unhappy if he did find out that she was on the other side.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KNOX HAD his key in the door when he decided that he could no longer postpone a task he had been ignoring up to now. He disliked doing it; it was the kind of thing that he never enjoyed. But it had to be done and he could think of no better time than now.

Turning from his door, he went to the stairs and down two flights, along the corridor, and stopped before eight-o-eight. This had been Leo Auffer's suite and, as far as he knew, the police order that it remain unoccupied was still in force.

It took three tries with his set of keys before he got the door open. He slipped in, shutting the door quietly behind him, and stood listening intently. There was no sound other than those usual early morning sounds that seep in from the streets below. A car went by. In the near distance, a truck rumbled across the viaduct. Far out, a ship's fog-horn hooted. That made Knox wonder if it wasn't fogging in now that the rain had stopped.

He waited a moment more to be sure and then went into the living room. He didn't expect to find much. Beeker had said the place was clean, and Beeker was a careful man. On the other hand, the police would not have looked for the same things he was interested in. There was always the chance of finding something that would have little significance to anyone but himself.

He was not surprised that they had left Auffer's things here. Knox found them as Leo Auffer himself must have left them when he went into the basement in the afternoon. The drawers in the dresser were filled with his underwear and shirts, the closet held four suits, robe, slippers, and pajamas. In the living room there was a highball glass with a little water in the bottom, an ashtray with half a dozen butts in it. Knox poked around. All of the cigaret stubs were Auffer's brand, imported Turkish, very expensive, and very nauseating to Knox. One had lipstick on it and this Knox looked at for some time. It could be Cora Deane's if she had come up to work for Auffer. It could be Natalie Tinsley's. There was no law against her visiting. Or it could have belonged to someone else.

This was getting him nowhere. He looked into the desk and found nothing in it but the usual impersonal hotel stationery. He tried the bedroom again. There were two large and expensive suitcases in the back of the closet. They were unlocked and empty. Knox worked on them for some time but the lining in both was solid. If Auffer had concealed anything, he had not done so in the obvious places.

Knox stood in the center of the bedroom and swore softly at his own helplessness. He wished that he had worked more with Auffer. In a way he was glad that he had not known the man better; it made this less personal, easier to face objectively. On the other hand knowing Auffer's habits would make the job a lot easier in some respects.

He prowled into the bathroom. The medicine chest yielded the usual items—a toothbrush and paste, odorless body powder, an electric razor, lotion, some hair oil in a tube. Knox grunted. For all of his wealth of luggage, Auffer seemed to have lived as impersonally as the hotels he frequented.

Knox was about to examine the items in the medicine chest more closely, motivated by the faint hope that Auffer had used one of them as a place to conceal some records or his data, when a faint noise stayed his hand. He drew

it back from the electric razor and stood motionless, his head cocked.

The noise came again. A too careful sound. A footstep on carpeting, the tick of metal against metal. Someone was at the door in the hallway.

He moved swiftly now, switching out the lights as he went through the bedroom and living room and into the entrance hall. It was completely black in here now, the draperies loosely drawn against the early morning darkness of outside.

He stopped by the door, pressed against the wall. When the door swung open, it covered him. A thin beam of light came in through the crack that formed as the door swung back. Knox looked through the slit. He had a glimpse of only two men. Maddy Keehan stood there, accompanied by a sleepy-looking and half dressed McEwen.

Keehan reached a hand in and snapped on the light switch. He jumped forward, in a kind of elephantine dance, his gun out. "Watch this door!" He rushed on into the living room, turning on lights, swung around and lumbered into the bedroom. To Knox it was absurd, but it was also typically Keehan.

Knox took advantage of it. He stepped around the door and put a hand out to McEwen. The hand contained a fifty dollar bill. McEwen's eyes came open; he was suddenly wide awake. The bill disappeared.

Knox whispered, "Tell you later, Mac," and then he was past, going down the hall. He stopped at a turn in the corridor and glanced back. McEwen was standing as he had been, guarding the door sleepily.

Knox went on up the stairs and paused on the landing to catch his breath. He wasn't sure just how far he could trust McEwen, but he knew that the man preferred almost anyone to the members of the present police department. And he definitely preferred bills, big bills, to any glory that might rub off on him if Keehan should make an arrest.

Knox knew that in the long run he could talk himself out of trouble if Keehan should arrest him. But right now he

had neither the time to waste nor the desire to let Keehan push him around.

He had been a fool for turning on lights so blithely. He was sure that Beeker had not ordered the room watched. That would have been Keehan's idea, part of his often quoted "the murderer always returns to the scene of the crime" theory. And since Keehan had been watching Auffer's room rather than the actual spot of his death, Knox was quite sure that he was operating on the theory of a thief. Knox felt faintly sorry for well known members of the local underworld since Keehan was undoubtedly using his spare time to work them over, one after the other.

Knox grinned as an idea came to him. He would give Keehan something to chew on. Walking around to the service elevator, he took it down to the lobby floor and walked through the side corridors to the men's room and from there into the lobby. His idea was to be seated there when Keehan came fumbling back downstairs.

Only now the lobby was not quite as deserted as it had been. There was a lounge in addition to the clerk and the bellhop. It was the wispy-haired man. He was deep in an easy chair, yawning slightly and looking now and then at his watch. He had the redline edition of the morning paper in his lap and occasionally he glanced at it.

Knox forgot about Keehan. Seeing the thin-haired man made him remember Jock and he got mad all over again. Whether or not this man had had anything to do with Jock's death, Knox did not know, but he was willing to take a little time to find out.

He walked across the lobby, slowing as he neared the desk to call to the clerk, "If you'd keep that newsstand open a man wouldn't have to go out for cigarets." He made his voice a little slurred.

The clerk just grinned. Knox walked on by, through the doors, and into the night. The street was empty now but for a police car across the street. It was probably Keehan's. The weather was definitely foggy as he had suspected. It was a thinnish fog here but down the hill in the direction

of the waterfront it was a thick, opaque blanket that made the pre-dawn darkness even darker. Knox started for that heavier fog.

It wasn't long before he heard the footsteps padding along behind him. He kept going, ambling along, but once he reached the thicker fog, he stepped up his pace until he reached a main North-South arterial. Here he stepped sideways, around a corner, letting the deep darkness of a theater entry swallow him.

The other steps came on, hesitated, turned. Knox made out the shadowy figure of a man as it passed him. The man went on for a few feet, turned, and started back. He returned to the corner and continued the route Knox had started and now Knox was doing the following. He was a half dozen steps behind when the man crossed the street, and he stayed that distance as they dropped down the hill.

Where the hill sloped sharply down to the waterfront, a foot viaduct took off, bridging the truck highway and ending in the second story of a ferry dock. It was still and empty, a mere blob in the foggy darkness ahead. Knox paused, listening to the footsteps as the man ahead crossed the viaduct.

Now Knox hurried, trotting down the steep sidewalk that led past bleak warehouses and down to the truck highway. It was empty and he crossed it, swinging wide to escape the radiance from a sodium vapor lamp, and then he was tiptoeing up steps that led to the ferry dock end of the viaduct.

He paused once, listening for the other man. He heard him, not yet quite across the viaduct. He moved on, reached the top of the stairs and, still moving quietly, ducked into the doorway of the ferry dock waiting room. The big doors were shut but there was sufficient room in the recess for him to stand unobserved.

The thin-haired man walked into it—almost too easily. Knox heard his footsteps coming closer, and then he was there. Knox put out a hand, touching the roughness of a tweed overcoat. The man gasped and tried to jump back.

Knox tightened his grip and moved in. He felt for an arm, got it, and moved it up the man's back, his other hand at the same time going around the man's throat.

"Take it easy," he cautioned, "and nobody gets hurt."

There was a gurgle he took for assent and he eased up on the pressure. The voice that came through was thin and colorless like its owner. "I haven't anything. You're wasting your time, mugging me."

Knox pulled him deeper into the shadow of the entryway. "I'm playing a different game," he said cheerfully. "Who hired you to tail people?"

The man wriggled and then groaned as the pressure from the hammerlock pulled at his arm muscles. "You're crazy," he said. "I'm not tailing any body."

"Sure," Knox agreed. "You weren't tailing a hotel maintenance man named Jock, for instance."

"Never heard of him." He didn't sound as if he were making much effort to be convincing.

"You didn't put the finger on him so that he got killed tonight?"

There was a gasp, quickly clipped off. "I tell you I don't know what you're talking about."

"What did the girl you were watching do after I left the bar tonight?" Knox went on. His voice was still soft, cheerful, but there was nothing soft about the grip he had on the man's arm.

"Listen, mister, you got me mixed up with someone else." There was a whine in the voice now.

Knox put on a little more pressure. "I could make this tough," he said. "Damned tough, if that's the way you want it. Or maybe you'd rather the cops asked you these questions. There's a big sergeant named Keehan that would love to have you downtown. He'd really enjoy it."

"I don't know what . . ."

Knox was so busy figuring out his next move that he only heard the padded footstep when it was too late. There was the whispering sound of a crepe sole on cement. Knox moved as the meaning of that sound impinged on his brain.

Twisting to his left, he brought the thin-haired man around to where he had been standing. But he hadn't moved soon enough. He stepped directly into the sharp, ugly swishing of a blackjack.

The blow took him alongside the neck. His muscles went loose with the shock. The thin-haired man slipped free and swung around with a hard fist that caught Knox under the breastbone. He tried to move again, this time to the side, lashing out with his hands in the darkness.

A hand knocked his hat from the side of his head. He reached up angrily. The sap whispered through the air, catching him behind his now uncovered ear. He grabbed at the thick air in front of him, grabbed at nothing. He scarcely felt the cement when it rose up and hit him in the face. His last thought was bitterness at the ease with which he had let himself be suckered.

CHAPTER TWELVE

KNOX didn't like where he was, neither the feel nor the smell of it. The floor where he lay smelled like ancient fish and it wouldn't hold still. It kept pitching around making the mess that was his stomach feel even worse. He tried to open his eyes and nothing happened. He tried to lift a hand and it was as though he were paralyzed. He made an effort to swallow and that was useless. It took him a few moments to figure out that he was bound and gagged and that his eyes were taped.

"He's wriggling," a cultured voice said in a pleased tone.

"Took him long enough." He recognized the colorless voice of the thin-haired man. "You hit too hard, Toll."

"This is the kind you have to hit hard," the cultured voice said. "Sometimes, Binks, I don't think you have the temperament for this kind of work."

"I got my job; I do it," the colorless man retorted. "It doesn't include liking to hurt people."

"We're all different, Binks. And as for hurting him,

why not? What have we here—a private operative working for World-Circle. He may know something that will be to our advantage. If so, we want him to talk, don't we?"

"You might ask him before you kick him around."

"I was merely testing to see if he was playing possum, Binks." The cultured voice lost its amiability and became slashing. "If you prefer to do something else, leave."

Binks still sounded unhappy. "My orders were to shadow, that's all. Nobody pays me for this kind of thing."

Toll just laughed at him. It was the kind of sound that Knox didn't like. The kind of sound made by a man who enjoyed making things suffer. Now Knox understood why his ribs hurt as they did.

A foot caught him in the side, making him grunt in surprise. Toll laughed again. "See, he's awake now. Pull out that gag."

Knox felt hands fumbling at him. Then his mouth was free and he could swallow again. His jaws hurt and he worked them a moment in silence. With an effort, he rolled onto his back.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked.

"You," Toll said. "You—to wake up."

"I'm awake," Knox said. "Let's get at it."

"He's awake. He wants to get at it," Toll mocked.

Knox said coldly, "Your repartee is on the level of a ten-year old. I imagine your mental processes are too."

He heard an angry breath being sucked in, and a repressed giggle that could only have come from Binks. "Try that on for size, professor," the colorless voice said.

Toll sounded furious, less under control. "Get out of here. You wanted to go—now go!"

"No," Binks said. "I've changed my mind. If there's any killing done here, I want to know about it, not be framed for it."

"You're a fool. No one is killing anyone."

He sounded quite sincere. Knox felt a little better. He also was slightly puzzled. Since hearing Toll, he had been building a theory that the man had a hand in Leo Auffer's

death. He said nothing, just let the two of them fight it out.

But they apparently had reached an agreement. Knox heard a footstep, then a hand smashed against his mouth, driving his lips against his teeth.

"That's what I mean," Knox said. "Your actions are on a ten year old level too."

The hand caught him again, on the cheekbone this time. He had an idea the blow had drawn blood.

"Shut up," Binks said. "The professor is touchy about his brains."

Toll didn't answer this time. He was apparently taking time out to light a cigar. Knox could smell it. Despite the churning of his stomach, it made him want a cigaret badly.

Toll said suddenly, "What are you doing here—in this city?"

"Working on a case," Knox said readily. "A Missing Persons."

"Who?"

"What's that to you?"

He expected it and got it—another fist to the face. This one slid as he rolled his head. There didn't seem to be much damage.

Binks said, "Cut that out. Can't you see he's the kind that slugging won't loosen up? Let me try."

"I want answers to my questions—straight answers."

Knox thought how he would like his hands free and two minutes with Toll. He lay listening to sudden heavy breathing, to a grunt and then swearing from Toll.

"Damn it, Binks, you were hired to shadow—as you said. Leave this to me."

"I said quit it," Binks told him. From the sound of authority, Knox guessed that he held a gun. He certainly wasn't man enough to hold off Toll otherwise. From the feel of the blows and the sound of the man moving about, Knox pictured him as about Beeker's size.

"Now," Binks said, "you're on an MP for World-Circle. Maybe we can help. Who is it?"

Knox picked one of the names Leo Auffler had been known to use. "Fellow named Ronald Heegan. Small, gray-ing, close to forty, rich."

There wasn't a sound. Knox thought for a minute that the pair had stopped breathing. On his back as he was, he had been busily testing the knots around his wrists, concealed under him. They were a hurried job and he was making progress. But now he stopped, afraid the scrabbling of his nails would be heard in the silence.

Toll said suddenly, "That could be anyone. You, Binks."

"I've watched Binks play tail all evening," Knox said. "I got tired of it and moved in on him. I don't know what you two think I'm mixed up in, but you're wrong."

He rolled a little, making himself more comfortable, and at the same time getting a little slack in the rope on his wrists. He talked to cover the sounds he made as much as anything. "This Heegan is wanted by his wife. What's he to you?"

"Nothing," Toll said quickly. "But I don't believe you. World-Circle doesn't mess with that kind of a deal."

"It does when there's a couple million riding on it," Knox answered.

"You were talking to the maintenance man and the stenographer at the hotel today," Toll said accusingly.

"Why not? I had a tip Heegan had been staying there." Knox kept his voice cool. "And I thought maybe the guy that got killed was him."

"Was it?" This came from Binks.

"I don't know," Knox said. "Nobody'd tell me anything." It was hot in here. He could feel the sweat running down his face. He had placed the location now. They were on a fishing boat. That explained the smells and the movement. They were docked somewhere. But right now that didn't matter. Getting free did, and that was hard work.

"He's trying to mislead us," Toll said suddenly. "Let me have him again. I'll find out what he's after."

"I'm tired of watching you beat on him."

"I won't. I have more subtle methods when I need them."

"I told you," Knox said. "Do you want me to make up a story so you'll be happy? I can throw in jewel thieves and smuggling rings if it makes you any happier."

"Smuggling what?" Toll's voice was so tight that Knox almost forgot that he had been sarcastic.

He said quickly, "You name it. If that's the way you want to play, name whatever you want." He had one hand free now and he was wriggling the fingers to restore the circulation. The other hand had rope on the wrist but it was usable. He made his voice mocking, "I'll tell you all the fairy tales you want if it's going to please that muscle-bound mentality of yours."

Toll hit him again. He had expected it. He had wanted it. He heard the sucked in breath, the footstep. The hand caught him on the side of the head as he rolled away from it. His own hands came up and found a wrist. He pulled, hard. A huge weight dropped on him, half kicking his breath out. He rolled again and brought up both knees. He felt the satisfactory sensation of his kneecaps driving into belly muscle. He heard the gagging grunt.

"Get off him," Binks squealed. "He's free."

It was such an obvious remark that Knox would have laughed if he hadn't been so busy. He had one hand loose. With the other, he was gripping Toll by the shirt-front, holding him close. Toll was trying to hit him, but Knox wasn't allowing him much room to swing.

With his free hand, Knox ripped the tape from his eyes. That hurt. So did the light that poured down into them suddenly. Then he could see and he had a glimpse of Toll, of a lean, gaunt face, an intellectual face, the eyes in it dark and wild, hair mussed now, graying and heavy.

Knox was as happy to hit a man with graying hair as anything else. He heaved up, handicapped by tied ankles. Toll went backwards just enough for Knox to get the heel of his hand under the man's chin. Knox thrust. Toll's head went back sharply. He made a gagging sound.

"Get away," Binks said.

Knox had a glimpse of the man from the corner of his

eye. He was dancing around, a large gun in his hand. He held it by the barrel, looking for a place to strike.

Knox kept working, taking wild, hurting swings from Toll for the privilege of bending the man's head back farther and farther. Then Toll's neck was where Knox wanted it. He wriggled his left arm free and brought the edge of his palm against Toll's adam's apple. He let loose. Toll flopped on his side, making a great gagging sound, and lay beating his fists on the deck as he sought air.

Knox got his legs under himself and pushed. Binks had a free shot now and he swung the pistol. It came down on Knox's arm as Knox fell toward him, reaching out in a tackle. Knox felt the numbness travel from his shoulder to his elbow. Then Binks was down, on his back. He opened his mouth once.

Knox thought at first he had broken his hand and then he thought he had broken Binks' jaw. Binks was out, not twitching a muscle. Knox rolled off, unlashed his ankles and rubbed at them. He got a hand on the gun. He was still sitting and rubbing when Toll found his breath and pushed himself to his feet.

Knox said amiably, "Now it's my turn to play."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TOLL LOOKED at Knox and at the gun in his hand and staggered to a table hinged to one of the cabin's bulkheads. There was a bottle there along with a water carafe and some glasses.

Knox said, "No. Stand still. I'm not Binks. I'll use this."

Toll stood still. Knox had his first really good look at the man. He was not big like Beeker. His weight had come from his height and his heavy bone structure. He was a big man, all joints, but there was little meat on him. He had rounded shoulders from an obviously permanent stoop.

"I want a drink," Toll said.

"I'll shoot you first in the kneecaps," Knox said in a pleasant tone of voice. "Shut up and sit—right there."

Toll sat on the floor. Knox got to his feet and tested his balance. It was adequate. He glanced at Binks. He was still on his back, motionless. Knox walked toward Toll, humming softly. Toll lifted huge hands in a protective gesture. Knox feinted at Toll's face with his left. When Toll turned to avoid the blow, he exposed the side of his head. Knox cracked the gun barrel down beside his ear. Toll fell sideways, not out but too dazed to have any resistance in him.

"I don't like sadists," Knox said to him. "Not even when they're educated." He went to work using the ropes he had been tied with. He laced Toll's wrists and ankles, putting his wrists behind his back and then running a cord from them to the ankles so that Toll was tied in a bow. He did the same with Binks. Then he went through their pockets, dumping everything in two heaps. Toll had confiscated his wallet and keys. He took them.

Knox got himself a drink of water from the carafe, gargled and spit into a little corner sink. He smelled the whiskey in the bottle, judged it drinkable, and took a deep pull. That helped. He went to a porthole and drew back a curtain. It was growing light outside but all he could see was whitish, furry fog.

Drawing water from the sink tap, he poured a pitcherful on each man. Then he went to the bunk where he had piled the contents of their pockets and began his examination.

Toll's first name was Jacob. He carried a local driver's licence and a liquor licence. If he worked, his wallet contained no signs of it. Outside of his identity cards, he carried fifty dollars.

Knox looked over his take from Binks. He had been carrying nearly five hundred dollars. His wallet also revealed a permit for the gun, a California driver's licence, and another card with his picture and thumbprint on it. This guaranteed him to be a legally licenced private detective and was made out by the State of California. His address was in Los

Angeles, and his first name was Albion. Knox worked over Binks' wallet some more and found some receipts with Los Angeles addresses. On the back of one was scribbled the telephone number, Merkle 3-4220. As far as Knox knew, this city was the only one with that exchange. He kept the receipt and returned everything else to the wallet.

Both men were beginning to look more alive now. Toll was shaking off his stupor and wriggling as he made an effort to sit up. When he found how he was tied he began to swear at Knox. An education was a wonderful thing, Knox thought. He had never heard such an erudite collection of obscenities before. Knox ignored him and helped Binks' recovery with another carafe of water. When Binks showed less glaze in his eyes, Knox put the whiskey bottle to his lips and helped him drink.

Binks twisted his head and wriggled his jaw. "Jeez."

"Who hired you?" Knox asked amiably.

"Go to hell."

"You're in no position to talk big." Knox shifted the gun, letting it point at Binks' midriff. "I can shoot you and claim self defense. I have the marks from Toll's fists and the cuts inside my mouth from the gag to prove it. Want to see how I can get away with murder, Binks?"

Binks began to sweat a little. "I don't know," he said. "That's the so-help-me truth. I was just hired like you. It was by phone and I got expense money and a retainer in the mail, cash."

Knox was tempted to believe him. He said, "What about your playmate here?"

"I was told to look him up when I got here. I did and he said to keep an eye on the Deane dame. I did and he pulled me off and put me on the guy in overalls. Then the dame again. I don't know what the hell it's all about."

"You were following me, not her tonight."

"Toll was in the lobby with me when you tried to sucker me out. We just set up a trap for you."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Binks said. "Ask him."

Toll had given up swearing and was rolling around trying to free himself. But Knox had taken his time on the tying job. He wasn't having any success. Knox went to him and held out the bottle. Toll looked surprised and then suspicious, but he stayed still long enough to gulp a little of the whiskey.

"I want to be sure you're wide awake," Knox told him. "As I told Binks, I can commit murder and get away with it. If you're awake, it'll hurt more when I shoot you."

Toll showed his fear plainly. He swallowed and ran his tongue around his lips. "What do I know?" he demanded almost plaintively. "Nothing. I get my orders by telephone. I get paid by cash in the mail."

Knox was willing to believe Binks but not Toll. He said, "What's your business?"

"I'm a private cop, like you."

"Where's your licence?"

"I—I left it home."

Knox sighed and cocked the gun, sighting it for Toll's kneecap. "You claim to be an educated man. That doesn't give you the right to think me a fool. Now let's start over."

"All right. I do whatever comes along. Right now, this has come along. I'm doing it."

"What is 'this'?"

"I was given orders to give Binks orders. He told you what they were. Then I was told to watch you and find out what your interest was."

"My interest in what?"

"The Deane woman. Jock Dylan."

He was too eager to talk now. Knox said, "Who owns this boat?"

"I do," Toll said. "I was thinking of doing some charter work."

"It smells more like fish."

"It was reconverted," Toll said. "It's for cruising now."

"Where'd you get the cash?"

Toll said stiffly, "I earned it working at the airplane plant."

"And picked up a thirty thousand dollar rig—like that." Knox grunted his skepticism. "Who do you take orders from?"

"I don't know. I just call in."

"What do you call, Merkle 3-4220?"

Toll's nod was too quick. "I ask for Mitch."

Knox smiled gently. "I'll try that number—and ask for Mitch. I'll do it when I've got you with me. And if anything happens, I'll have things fixed so you'll be handed over to Mel Beeker and Maddy Keehan. Especially Keehan. You'll like him."

From the expression on Toll's face, Knox decided that he already knew Keehan. Knox wondered what would happen if he should ask for Mitch. He would probably end up with an icepick in the eye.

Knox said, "There's no point in my sticking around since you don't know anything." He covered a yawn. "I'll be seeing you." He started for the door and had his hand on the latch when Toll yelled.

"You can't leave us tied like this!"

Knox looked back, his expression puzzled. "Why not? It won't be for long. Keehan will have a squad car here for you as soon as he gets my call."

Toll said, "Wait a minute, Knox. Wait just a moment."

"I've waited long enough. I'm tired."

"No," Toll said. "Don't go. Listen to me. We can make arrangements. Arrangements suitable to both of us."

Knox waited, looking, not speaking. Binks was silent. He didn't look nearly as worried as Toll. Knox thought that was probably because he didn't know Keehan as well.

"I'll tell you what I know," Toll said eagerly. "I'll tell you everything that I know."

"And what do I do?"

"Let us loose," Toll said. "Just let us loose. We'll leave town. Go away from here. I swear it."

Knox glanced at Binks. "What do you say?"

"California, here I come," Binks said. "I don't know about him, but I'm ready to leave any time."

Knox grunted and went to where the little man lay. Grabbing him by the collar, Knox dragged him across the floor to the door. He opened it and looked up and down a short corridor. It was empty. Leaving Binks for a moment, he made a quick trip of exploration. There was a galley at the bow end, a tiny bath and a smaller cabin opposite the one he had been in. Opening the door to that cabin, Knox hauled Binks in there. He left him in darkness and returned to Toll.

"I'm listening," Knox said. He poured himself a light drink and mixed it with water.

Toll licked his lips. "I was working in the airplane plant, being rehabilitated. . ."

"What were you sent up for?"

Toll looked sulky. "A stupid confederate of mine slipped or I wouldn't have been sent up." He stopped, saw Knox's waiting expression, and added, "I was simply relieving the gullible of their money."

"Confidence game?"

"That's what the police called it. Bunko artist." He sounded injured. "A crude term."

"Naturally," Knox said. "You're an artist."

"I am."

The man was obviously slightly mad. And he had an exaggerated opinion of his own ability. If he had been a bunco artist, he also would fancy himself as an actor. It was, Knox thought, something worth knowing. But he was tired of this. He said, "That's enough background. Now talk—and I want all of it."

"I was working," Toll said. "I received a telephone call. A man's voice asked me if I wanted a more lucrative position. All I had to do was move into the hotel and watch a certain person. I did, for two weeks. I reported every day by telephone."

"Who was this certain person?"

"A man named Leo Auffer."

"You say you watched him for two weeks. Why did you stop?"

Toll wasn't the actor he thought he was. His hesitation was obvious. "He apparently left the city."

"I'm not the most patient man in the world," Knox said.

Toll said, "He was killed yesterday."

"By whom?"

"I wish I knew," Toll said.

Knox snorted at him. "That's the truth, I swear," Toll insisted. "This is exactly what happened, Knox. In the afternoon, Auffer came out of the coffee shop and went into the men's room. I followed him. He went out the side entrance, to the rear, and down into the second basement. I lost him at first. I thought he was in the first basement. By the time I was certain he had gone on down, quite a while had passed. So I don't know what he was doing during that period."

"What is this leading up to?" Knox asked curiously.

"I prefer to tell the story in my own way," Toll said.

Knox shrugged. Toll went on, "When I did succeed in locating him, he was at the end of a corridor. He was coming from a door at one side and going into a door across from it. He was carrying a woman. I couldn't see too clearly but I distinctly saw her skirt and legs. Unfortunately, he saw me."

"You don't know who the woman was?"

"No. I didn't see her that clearly."

"Then?"

"Then," Toll said readily, "I tried to get away from him. But he had a gun. I was halfway down the corridor when he came behind me and ordered me to stop. Since I never carry a lethal weapon, I was handicapped. I had to allow him to come up to me. I thought he would question me but he seemed to have something else more important to do. He struck me with the gun. When I awakened, I was in a closet filled with brooms and cleaning implements. I assume he planned to return to me and was killed before he had the opportunity."

"I can see Keehan believing that one," Knox said.

"It's the truth."

"I don't doubt it," Knox said. He was sure that Toll would have concocted a better story than this if he were lying. He made a shrugging motion. "So you were hired to follow Leo Auffer. And you were told to have Binks check on Cora Deane."

"Yes, that's substantially correct."

"Hired by whom?"

"I don't know," Toll said. "I took orders by calling that telephone number you somehow procured."

"What if I call and ask for Mitch?"

"That's a signal that something is wrong."

"Then who do I ask for?"

"No one. I just ring and wait. When the phone is answered, I don't say anything until I'm spoken to."

Knox didn't like that but he had other questions to ask and he deferred it for the moment. "What is Eddie Pillow doing in this?"

Toll looked blank. "Eddie Pillow?"

Knox shrugged again. "Why were you following Auffer? Why was Cora Deane being followed by Binks? What is all this?"

"I don't know," Toll said. "Truly, I do not know."

He was almost convincing. Knox tried again, "Who killed Leo Auffer?"

"I don't know that either. I didn't."

And, Knox thought, he was afraid the police would think he did. A man with a record was always suspect.

Knox went to Toll and worked on his knots a little. Straightening, he said, "An hour's exercise will get you loose. Then start running."

"I fully intend to."

Knox didn't believe him. He wished now that he had not made the bargain, that he had turned Toll and Binks over to Mel Beeker and let him get the information. But it was too late now. He only hoped Beeker wouldn't find out about this. If he did, Knox knew that their relationship would be more than strained; it would probably become non-existent.

Turning out the light, he crossed the hall to begin questioning Binks. He looked for a moment at the puddle of rope on the floor, shrugged, and went up on deck. Binks was apparently a better escape artist than Knox had suspected.

Daylight was in full swing when he reached the deck. He looked around, checking the location of the little pier where the fishing boat was moored. He saw that he was in the northern part of town, an area devoted to fishing. The street the pier led to was only a block from one cluttered with restaurants, grog shops, and fishing supply houses. There was little business at this hour and this time of year.

A short hike took him to a bus line. The bus let him off a block from the hotel. He went to his room wearily, the idea of sleep more alluring at the moment than that of food. His room was dark with the curtains drawn against the foggy morning. He flicked on the light and then stopped, his hand still in the air.

Cora Deane lay on his bed, fully clothed except for her shoes. She was sound asleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Knox turned off the overhead light and switched on a lamp away from the bed. Only the edge of the light reached Cora Deane, but it was enough for Knox to make out the softness of her profile in sleep, the steady rise and fall of her full breast, the outline of her full thigh and long leg.

He turned away, took his pajamas and robe from the closet, and went into the bath. A quick view in the mirror there showed that his suit badly needed cleaning and pressing and that there was a little rehabilitation to be done on his face. He removed the morning stubble with the electric razor and then stood under a warm shower until the tension and some of the bruises Toll had given him began to be less painful. As he dried, he studied himself again in the

mirror. There was one dark spot on his ribs, a pair of lumps on his head, a cut on his lip, and two small bruises left on his cheek. All in all it was not too bad. It could have been a good deal worse.

Robe and pajamas on, he returned to the bedroom. The girl was still sleeping. Knox lit a cigaret and stretched out beside her. She had her head on one pillow and a piece of the other gripped in her hand. This he pried free and slipped behind his head. The movement caused her to stir.

"Don't hog everything," Knox said cheerfully. "A guest should always be as considerate as she would wish her own guests to be. Emily Post."

She came awake. Her eyes opened wide. Her head came off the pillow. "Morning," she said in a fuzzy voice.

"Been waiting long?" Knox asked.

She said surprisingly, "Since the cat had kittens." Her voice was no longer fuzzy.

Knox said gravely, "What color were they?"

"Two black, one calico."

Knox blew a smoke ring, letting it float away undisturbed. "I had that half figured out when I got involved in something else. When I saw you here, I was pretty sure that I was right."

"It had to be you," she said. "I knew that Auffer wasn't the end of it and no one else made sense. But I couldn't be sure that you weren't just sent by World-Circle on a Missing Persons."

"You still can't," Knox said. "Not until we check."

Rising, he got his billfold and brought out his World-Circle card. Taking her purse from the floor beside the bed, she handed him a card similar to his own. He snapped on the reading lamp over the bed and for a moment both were gravely involved in testing the other. She was definitely D-13.

When his card was back in his billfold and hers in her purse, he stretched out on the bed again. "Did you have to come to my room like this?"

"I learned," she said, "that suite eight-o-eight is empty. That was Leo Auffer's room. It frightened me, that and. . ."

Knox interrupted, "Is that so strange?"

She looked oddly at him. "Don't you see. He hasn't been around since the murder. If his room is vacant, where did he go? He wouldn't have left without contacting me."

Knox realized that she didn't know Auffer was dead. The police had not revealed the fact during their questioning. He said, "Maybe Auffer was the man you saw dead."

"Heaven's no! He wouldn't have been caught—dead in the suit that man was wearing. Anyway, the man was bigger and heavier."

"Then you know Leo?"

She rose from the bed and went into the bathroom. She left the door open while she combed her hair and put lipstick on. "I knew him, of course. I've been here a month."

"And yesterday was the contact?"

"I had orders to meet him yesterday. When I was supposed to be through. That's why I went downstairs, to meet him."

Knox couldn't understand it. If Auffer had been here two weeks, why had he chosen such a place as the store-room for their meeting? But then, he remembered, Auffer often had tended to be overly careful. He shook his head. This explained Cora Deane's lies of yesterday but it didn't explain Auffer's action too well.

He said, "What were you working on?"

"Tom Catlin and the Tinsleys," she said. She came back to the bed and sat on the edge, smoothing her skirt over her knees. "When I first came, my orders were just to play the stenographer and keep my eyes open. The Tinsleys seemed a good bet and I worked on them. Then he came and told me to concentrate on Catlin."

She gave him a quick smile. "That was easy enough. He'd been hanging around and giving me a lot of stenographic work that wasn't really necessary."

Knox let her go on as she told him what she had found

out about the Tinsleys. It checked with Beeker's information and, unfortunately, added nothing to it. She said finally, "I really have so little information to give Auffer. But maybe he can make some use out of it."

"It's a little late for that," Knox said somberly. "He's dead."

She was reaching for his cigarets on the nightstand when he spoke. Her hand stopped and slowly her head came around so that she was looking at him. It seemed to take her some time to comprehend his meaning. "Dead?" she said finally. "How?"

He gave her the cigaret and lit it for her. Then he gave her the story. He told her about Jock. She was silent for some time.

"But what does it mean?"

"Maybe that he was working on an angle neither of us know about," Knox said. "And I may have a lead." He told her of his encounter with Binks and Toll.

She nodded at his description of Toll. "I've seen him around. But I never noticed the other one—Binks."

"You weren't supposed to," Knox said. "He's hard to see unless you're looking for him."

She was wide-eyed. "Do you think they'll go after us as they did Leo Auffer?"

"Why did they go after him—if they did? Is there a leak in the company?"

The idea seemed to horrify her. "Oh, no. There hasn't been since the war."

"Not as far as we know," Knox agreed. "But I'm taking no chances. Until we're both clear-headed enough to think this through, I'm keeping you in sight."

Color flared into her cheeks. "Are you insinuating that I . . ."

Knox realized that the words had had a double meaning. He grinned apologetically. "I'm too tired to think straight. I mean, I'm keeping you in sight so the same thing that happened to Leo won't happen to you."

"Or you," she said. She smiled. "I guess I'm tired too. I'm sorry I got mad."

Knox looked at his watch. It was past eight. "Can you break that ten o'clock appointment with Tom Catlin?"

"It wasn't vital," she said.

"Then you'd better call and break it. Unless you're less tired than you look, you wouldn't be able to handle him anyway."

She had to grin. "He handles easily enough. I've had two propositions and a hand on my knee. But that's as far as he's gone." She yawned. "But you're right." She looked longingly at the softness of the bed. "Where do I sleep?"

"Right here. It's a double bed." He saw the expression on her face. "Wear my robe. Put a dresser drawer between us if you think you need it. Me, I'm going to sleep. Do I have to spell out the word?"

She flushed. "I'm sorry."

He took the robe and handed it to her and crawled beneath the covers. She went into the bath. Knox had a vague, half asleep memory of her coming out, engulfed by the robe, and of her setting his traveling alarm clock before turning out the light and climbing in beside him. Later he thought he heard her rise and go to the telephone, but he wasn't sure. He slept as if he were trying to cram two nights' worth into a few hours.

When Knox awoke, his first conscious thought was that he was not alone. He sat up quickly, the glaze of sleep gone from his eyes. There was no one visible in the room. The shades were drawn so that only a little of the still foggy daylight crept in around them, but it was enough to relieve the dimness and show him that only the furniture stood about. He turned his head toward the night stand. His clock said that it was just past noon. Then he looked down.

Cora Deane slept with the covers thrown back, his robe having been warmth enough. She lay twisted, her hair spread over the pillow, her face soft in repose. The

robe had come apart during the night, exposing one shoulder and her full, deeply cleft breasts. Down in the cleft, holding her breasts slightly apart, he could see the soft leather sheathe that held the slim, sharp weapon World-Circle issued to all its feminine employees. The company also provided training in its usage.

Knox could not resist a grin. Most of the women of World Circle that he knew wore their sheathe on their leg or under their arm. But then Cora Deane was particularly well endowed to conceal hers where she wore it now. He could not help wondering if she had thought him such a danger to her virtue that she had kept it on.

Remembering her embarrassment of the day before, he reached over and tried to draw her robe together. The movement brought her eyes open. She was smiling as if she had been having a pleasant dream. Knox remained motionless, his hand on the robe.

"Good morning," she murmured.

"I—you needed fixing," he said lamely. He was embarrassed not for himself but for her.

But a few hours sharing a bed with a man seemed to have given her a different attitude. She laughed softly and stretched. Knox let loose of the robe and turned to get out of bed.

Cora Deane pulled the robe around herself and giggled. Knox looked at her with a half scowl. "What's so funny?"

She said innocently, "Doesn't World Circle's motto translate as Ethical In All Ways?"

"That's the way I read it."

She giggled again. "Yesterday when you were questioning me about my lingerie, I was beginning to doubt it. Now I'm quite sure that it's right."

Knox stalked off to the bath, embarrassed now for an entirely different reason.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KNOX ordered a double breakfast sent up. He stressed the fact that it was for one person, not wanting to have McEwen snooping around to see whom he was keeping in his room. While he waited, he went into the bath and shaved and bathed. Still wearing his pajamas, he returned to the other room in time to intercept Cora as she started for the door to answer the bellhop's knock.

"In there," he said, indicating the bathroom. As she disappeared, he opened the door. Carl, the wizened bellhop, was there with the breakfast cart.

Knox glanced around and saw the two crushed pillows on the bed, one with a smear of lipstick on it. Casually he went to the bed and flipped up the covers. He sat down, watching Carl wheel in the tray and set it up by the window. His eyes fell on a cigaret Cora had been smoking. It was in an ashtray on the dresser. There was lipstick on it too. Cursing women who wore make-up to bed, Knox jumped up, got the cigaret, and put it in his mouth. Smoking on an empty stomach made him slightly dizzy and so he sat down again.

If Carl noticed anything amiss, he kept the knowledge from his expression. It was blank as he looked at Knox. "Anything else, sir?"

Knox said, "Who'd you tell that I wanted into the work-room yesterday?"

"Nobody," Carl said earnestly. "Why would I?"

"Maybe to get a bigger tip than I gave you," Knox said sourly.

"I swear I didn't."

"Someone," Knox said, "knew I was there. He came down and clipped me on the head."

"Jeez!"

It sounded as false as a stuffed brassiere. But one look

at Carl told Knox he wouldn't get anywhere. He said, "Okay, maybe I was followed."

"I had my eye on the corridor," Carl said. "I didn't see anyone go down."

"Unless they went through the men's room," Knox pointed out.

"That could be. I'm sorry as hell, Mr. Knox. . ."

Knox rubbed the still slightly sore bump on his head. "So am I," he said. He rose and went to his coat for his billfold. He signed for the breakfast and gave Carl his usual fat tip. "I suppose," he said casually, "the Tinsleys have already gone."

This was one Carl could answer. "No, sir. They decided not to go. I just took coffee up a little before I came here."

"Good," Knox said. He watched Carl start for the door. If the man was conscious of a woman's presence, he still gave no sign.

Carl said, "If there's anything else I can do for you, sir."

Knox made himself look slightly embarrassed. "Well, it's Friday night. If there's anything interesting going on. . ." He let it hang, planning to follow it up later.

Carl grinned, gave a grotesque half wink, and went out. Knox locked the door, hearing the shower start up as he did so. Stubbing out the cigaret, he surveyed the food. It was exactly what he had ordered—orange juice, bacon and scrambled eggs, toast and coffee, all of it in double proportion. He was still trying to figure out how to divide it for two people when there was only service for one when Cora Deane came out of the bath. She had her hair pinned in an upswept hairdo that was attractive if a bit ragged from haste. She wore his robe but now when it parted, he could see her slip under it.

"Here, let me," she said. Taking a water glass, she put a knife in it and then poured in coffee. She pushed the toast onto the bacon plate, put half the scrambled eggs on the toast plate, poured coffee in the cup for Knox,

used another water glass for half the orange juice, sat down and began to eat.

"I'm not the domestic type," Knox said. He joined her. Since she took the water glass of coffee, he gave her the fork and took the spoon for his eggs. He felt much better when his plate was empty. Dividing the last of the coffee, he lit a cigaret and leaned back with a sigh.

"It's one o'clock," he told her.

She nodded. "I got up just before ten and phoned. I hope you didn't hear me. I took it in the closet to keep from waking you. I didn't have much sleep but I feel rested."

"Same," he said laconically. He flicked ash from his cigaret. "By the way," he began casually, "I went down and examined that chair last night. What did you gouge the hole with?"

She smiled. "You're determined, aren't you? I used a knife."

"You didn't happen to want to hide that little job?"

"Hide it?" Then she stopped smiling. "Oh, you mean what you said to Carl. Do you think I hit you?"

"Someone with an interest in the chair did," Knox said. He told her about the attack and the substitution.

She shook her head, her expression uncomprehending. "I can't imagine. I'd forgotten all about it, to tell you the truth. The trick seemed to work. That was all that concerned me."

"It's just one of a number of things that don't make sense," Knox said. "That and Jock being killed—and why Toll is so interested in me. Why they were interested in you—enough to have you shadowed."

"I don't like that," she said. "I thought I was doing a good job."

"I doubt if they know you're World-Circle," he said. "But if you showed an extra interest in someone, they just might want to know why."

"No one but the Tinsleys and Catlin." She smiled. "Of course, if suspicions are correct, that's enough, isn't it?"

He agreed that it was. "By the way, how about Catlin?"

"He seems to be just what he claims—an insurance inspector. He's quite thick with the Tinsleys. As for background, he seems straight enough. Eastern college, insurance through fraternity connections, worked his way up. Unmarried."

Knox rubbed a hand over his freshly shaven jaw. "How about the letters you did for him and the Tinsleys?"

"Strictly business, all of them." She frowned. "Really, I feel like I'm cheating the company. I found out so little."

"It might be little to us," he said. "It might have been a lot to Leo Auffer." He swore feelingly. "Our one hope seems to hinge on Auffer's having sent in a report to the home office."

"And if he didn't?"

"Then we're back at the beginning, aren't we?" Knox stubbed out his cigaret and lit a fresh one. "We'll have to find out who the dead man you saw was, who dragged you across the hall, the meaning of that panties-whiskey bottle routine. . ."

"Who's at Merkle 3-4220," she added.

"Who really owns that converted fishing boat," Knox went on. "And where Binks is. The rest of the day we can relax."

"And where do I fit into this?"

"You," Knox said, "had better stay right here."

She looked stubborn. "What good am I here? Two of us on this are better than one, especially if Leo Auffer did not send in a report."

"I doubt it," he said morosely. "Right now I have the feeling that we're about as secret as last week's football scores. And after what happened to Jock and Leo, I don't want to take any chances with you."

"Taking chances is my job."

Knox growled at her but he knew that he was wasting his breath. Short of tying her into a package and mailing her to the home office, he knew that he would not get rid of her. He had met determined feminine operatives before. Then she surprised him.

"I can pack up and leave, of course."

"Good."

She laughed at him. "Ostensibly, that is. Then when I come back, I'll have a free hand."

Knox said that he didn't get it. "You'll see," she told him. Going into the bath, she finished dressing and then returned. Picking up her purse, she went to the door.

"I'll go down the back way, pack, and leave. I'll call the hotel from the bus depot."

He didn't like it but he didn't have time to play nursemaid to her right now either. He said, "Call me when you get to your room and when you're ready to leave. And from the depot."

Before she could get the door open, the telephone rang. Knox lifted the receiver. "Knox speaking."

"Knox, this is Merkle 3-4220." The voice was cultivated and obviously being strained through a thin cloth as a disguise. It had that fuzzy sound.

"Howdy, Mitch."

There was a moment of silence at the other end. Then the voice said, "I called to suggest you go somewhere else and enjoy the scenery. This is a bad time of year here."

"How're Binks and Toll?" Knox wanted to know.

"You're much too soft," the voice said.

Knox settled in a chair as if for a long conversation. "By the way, who was that you killed here yesterday?" He could see Cora standing, still poised, her eyes fixed on him, her expression one of wonder.

"I *heard* Leo Auffer got killed."

"I mean the one before Auffer."

There was silence again. Then, "If anyone but Auffer got killed in that hotel, Auffer did it, not us. Now be a smart boy, Knox, and go play somewhere else. You aren't close to anything and before you get close, it'll be over. Save yourself some trouble and go away."

"Not until I've seen tomorrow's football game," Knox said.

"It's your neck."

"That's right," Knox said amiably, "and I'll see that you don't get a chance to stick an ice pick into it."

The connection was broken at the other end. Knox hung up and turned to Cora Deane. "That," he said, "was old familiar—the anonymous warning given by the disguised voice."

She nodded, swallowing as if her throat were very dry. "I know. I got one early this morning. That's the main reason I came to your room."

"What time did you get the phone call?"

She seemed to be trying to recall the exact time. "I was in a sound sleep," she said, "but I don't think it was over forty minutes before you came."

That checked with what he had suspected. It had been time enough for Binks to have called the Merkle number after he had got free. But that didn't explain how Mitch—as Knox had dubbed the suave voice—knew that Cora Deane was connected with the case. His own usefulness and hers were both obviously more limited than ever now. Mitch was probably right. He should go somewhere else, have the company send in another operative.

But there was a stubborn streak in Knox. It had nearly cost him his life more than once. It probably would again—this time, he thought, if he weren't careful.

He said, "You'd better go, Cora. And don't come back."

"I don't intend to," she assured him. "Not as Cora Deane."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHILE KNOX waited for Cora Deane's phone call, he sat down and stared moodily at the blank television screen. He wasn't looking at it or at anything in particular; he was letting his mind work over what little he knew. He sorted things into three categories—those points he was sure of, those he was in doubt about, and those that just might mean something. The first category was far too small.

He could call Beeker and break it open that way. But he hesitated, knowing that no matter how well meaning Beeker might be, the very nature of a police department would mean a certain amount of leakage. And even though Knox himself was known now, he still hoped to catch his quarry and what they had intact.

Thinking of the police reminded him of Maddy Keehan and that recalled his unfinished job in Leo Auffer's room. What had been Leo Auffer's room, he amended. He doubted if he would find anything but he had to make sure. It wasn't the nature of World-Circle to train an operative to ignore a line of investigation because he doubted its validity.

He was pacing the floor restlessly when the telephone rang. It was Cora Deane. "I'm ready to go."

He swore at her. "You were to call when you got to the room."

"How many calls do you think it would take for the operator to get suspicious?"

Knox told her what the operator could do. Cora clucked her tongue at him. "Anyone would think you were passionate over me, Mr. Knox."

"The name is Paul," he said testily. "Call me from the depot."

She was laughing at him when she hung up. Knox stayed by the phone, glaring at it. He hoped that she wasn't quite as blithe as she sounded. Otherwise, she might walk right into them. Of course, they might not bother her since she was heading out, not into town.

In less than ten minutes the phone rang again. Knox snatched at it before it could stop. "Knox here."

"I'm at the depot. The bus is leaving in five minutes."

Knox started to tell her to take care of herself but she had hung up. Cradling the phone, he stubbed out his cigaret and left the room. He used the stairs, stopping at eight and going down the hall to Leo Auffer's suite. The door was open and he could hear the sound of a vacuum sweeper. He had to step back as a maid came into view, her arms full of laundry.

"This room is vacant now?" Knox asked. He made it sound as if he had just happened by.

"Yes, sir. It'll be ready in an hour or so." Dark eyes were indifferent peering over the laundry.

Knox said, "I've been waiting for a suite. I wonder if I could look at it?"

"Certainly, sir." The maid stepped around him went on her way. Knox went in, stepping over the vacuum cord and turning toward the bedroom. The girl with the vacuum cleaner was at the far end of the living room. Knox went on to the bath. The medicine chest was empty. He backtracked into the bedroom, sweating softly.

Auffer's suitcases were on the bare bed. The closet and the dresser drawers were empty. Everything had been neatly packed and was probably waiting to be sent to headquarters where it would be held until sent for by the company or Auffer's relatives.

Knox listened. The vacuuming was still distant. Quickly, he tried the smaller suitcase. Without keys, the maid had been unable to lock the bags. The lid came up easily. The one thing Knox had not checked, the toiletries, was on top in the leather case. Knox lifted it and unzipped it quickly. Everything was there, razor, toothbrush, all of it.

The vacuuming died. Knox dropped the lid of the bag shut and snapped it. Hearing footsteps, he put the toiletries case in the the top dresser drawer. He was walking toward the living room when the maid appeared, pulling the cleaner behind her.

He repeated his story. She nodded with indifference, looked at the bags on the bed, and lifted the bedside telephone. She called down. "Gert? I'm ready here in eight-o-eight for them to pick up the baggage."

Knox watched helplessly at she plugged in the cleaner and began to work on the bedroom. He left after she began to stare at him. He was in the living room when a bellhop appeared, took the two bags, and carried them off. The maid was still working over the bedroom.

Much longer, Knox knew, and his story would begin

to show leaks. There was a limit to how long a person could 'look over' a room. Then he had an inspiration. Using the desk telephone, he called the room clerk.

"This is Knox," he said. "If eight-o-eight isn't rented yet, I'd like to have it."

It was that easy. He told the maid he was having his things brought down, went upstairs and packed quickly, leaving his suits to be carried. Putting in a call for a bellhop, he returned to the suite with a small bag in his hand.

The maid looked at him oddly. "Just putting my mark on the place," he assured her. Taking underwear from the bag, he laid it neatly in the top dresser drawer, effectively covering Leo Auffer's toiletries case. Giving the maid a dollar, he strolled out. When he was alone, he patted the sweat from his forehead.

His next attempt was less successful. He wanted another look at the sub-basement and he was halfway along the corridor leading to the service entrance when a voice called him.

"Mr. Knox."

It was McEwen. Knox offered up a smile he didn't think he had in him. "Hi, Mac."

"Going anywhere special?"

"Looking for you," Knox said. "I thought I heard your voice back here."

"Me?" McEwen's rough features were innocent. He shifted his cigar to the other side of his mouth. "What for?"

Knox reached for his billfold. "A little debt," he said. "That bet we made paid off—for you."

McEwen took the fifty dollars and tucked it away. "I get lucky like that every once in a while," he said. He rubbed his chin. "Want to talk about it?"

Knox thought that one over. He said, "Sure, Mac. Let's use your office."

It was a cubbyhole behind the auditing department. McEwen played host well, waving Knox to a chair and

setting out two glasses and a bottle of good whiskey. "Water?"

"This stuff is too good to cut," Knox said in a voice that complimented McEwen's taste in liquor. He lit a cigaret and sipped at the whiskey. "It's this way," he went on. "I'm on a Missing Person's case. I had a tip that this Aufer might know something about her. Then he gets killed and there goes my lead."

McEwen nodded solemnly. "Tough."

"I hoped there might be something in his stuff," Knox said. "That's what I was doing last night."

"Keehan would have hung you if he'd caught you there," McEwen said.

"Thanks to you, he didn't," Knox said.

"Always glad to do a pal a favor," McEwen said magnanimously.

"I appreciated it," Knox answered. "Now I want another one."

McEwen was obviously thinking of the two fifties he had earned. "Anything—short of murder."

"I want a look around downstairs," Knox said.

McEwen thought that over. "Let's go." He heaved himself to his feet, tossed away his cigar butt, and selected a fresh one. "But they went over that pretty carefully."

Knox agreed they probably had. But still one never knew. He wasn't too pleased to have McEwen along, breathing down his neck, but at least it gave some sort of official sanction to the affair. They checked the chair store-room first and Knox found nothing of interest. He took more time in the other room, noticing that the tables did a better job of screening the back of the room from someone at the front than the chairs did. He was looking for something in particular, and logic told him this was the place to find it.

McEwen looked around the room, chuckling. "This is where they found the empty fifth and the dame's panties, huh?"

"This is it," Knox agreed. He crouched down and started

peering. He saw faint scuffmarks as if tables had been dragged to one side and then replaced. Sighing, he rose.

"Let's start moving this stuff, Mac."

McEwen didn't get it but when Knox began pushing tables around, he pitched in and helped. There was a few remnants of footprints on the floor of the passageway they made between the tables but they were well dragged out; too much so to be of use, Knox decided after one close look. He kept shifting tables.

He found it near the back, two rows of tables over from the center, neatly hidden. It could have lain there until a stench brought an investigation if he hadn't been so determined.

McEwen looked down at the body. "Jeez! How in hell did you know this was back here?"

There was no suspicion in his voice. "Because this is the one your stenographer Cora Deane saw," Knox said. He told McEwen just enough for the remark to make sense. "If you want to wait, Mac, I'll go up and call Beeker."

"I'll call."

"I'll give you the credit," Knox said. He lowered his voice although they were very much alone, not counting the dead man. "I have a little chore to do first."

McEwen accepted a smaller bill than the fifty he had recently received, nodded conspiratorilly, and let Knox go. Knox went to the lobby on the double and called Beeker from there. Then he got the number of Catlin's room from the clerk and put in a call on the house phone. Catlin was in. He was, in fact, in bed with a very bad headache.

Knox said, "This is something personal, Catlin. The police are on their way. I thought you'd like to talk to me first."

"Police?" Catlin sounded annoyed and then faintly frightened as Knox said, "Cora Deane isn't around anymore, by the way."

Catlin was very eager to have him come up. He met Knox at the door. He was in a robe and pajamas. His bed was mussed and there was a water carafe and a bottle

of headache tablets on the stand beside it. Catlin himself looked peaked, dark circles under his eyes and little color in his face. His handsome sleekness was gone under obvious pain.

Knox said, "Sorry to interrupt you at a time like this but I thought it might be important."

"What has Cora Deane to do with the police?"

"Did I say she had anything to do with them?"

"You intimated." He was beginning to bluster a little.

Knox grinned. He did not like Catlin's type, the sleek, foot under the table, hand on the knee romeo. He said, "It must be your conscience doing the intimating, Catlin."

"Who are you?"

Knox told him. Catlin shrugged. Knox said, "I'm here on a Missing Person case. A woman. You seem the best subject around here for questioning when it comes to unattached women."

Catlin took it as a compliment and preened a little. Then Knox said, "And that brings me to Cora Deane. You were the last person to see her, I think."

Catlin said, "We had a drink together after you left her in the bar. Then we came up here and had another drink. Then she left. Hell, a dozen people must have seen her since."

"No one did."

"She called me at ten this morning."

Knox said, "Get very far last night?"

Catlin opened his mouth, closed it, and looked sullen. Knox thought, "He's hiding something." He said, "What time did she leave last night?"

"I don't remember. I was asleep." He looked slightly smug again.

Knox rubbed at his chin. He had come here in the first place to get a line on Cora Deane. He knew that he would have to tell Becker about her now that the other body had been found, and he had wanted as much ammunition as he could get. But this sounded like it might backfire.

"You mean she went to bed with you?"

"Is that your business?"

"She's disappeared," Knox said. "There's a dead body in the basement." He didn't add that it had probably been dead a good twenty-four hours. He added, "Murdered."

Catlin became even paler. "Are you saying that she killed someone?"

"Not the way this one was killed. It was a man."

Catlin got up. The sudden movement made him wince. He sat down again, holding his head. "Are you intimating that I . . ."

"Maybe it was her other boyfriend," Knox said softly.

He thought at first that Catlin would hit him, headache or not. But the anger drained out of him as rapidly as it had come. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked incomprehendingly at Knox.

"You think I—I . . ."

"We don't think anything," Knox said. He stressed the *we* and left it up to Catlin to decide who was meant. After a pause, he added, "Yet."

"It wasn't me," Catlin said. He had turned the color of a half ripe avocado. "I swear it wasn't me. I haven't been out of this room since—since I came up with Cora last night."

"She's gone. How can you prove it?"

Catlin took a headache tablet and gulped a full glass of water. "Listen, I don't want it noised around—I mean about her being here so late."

"If it doesn't bear on the case, It'll be confidential."

Catlin swallowed more water. He tried a cigaret and stubbed it out, making a face of distaste. "All right, I'd had a couple at the bar. Then I had one with her downstairs. We came up and had a couple. I guess I was feeling it a little. You know how it is. A guy gets a tingle on and he's got a good looking girl. . . ."

"That he's been on the make for," Knox added for him.

Catlin let it go. "I made a pass. I guess Cora was feeling her drinks a little too. She wasn't—well, hot about it, but

she seemed as if she could be made interested. I—well, I remembered sitting on the edge of the bed with her. We were kissing and then. . .”

“Then?”

“Then I don’t remember. I woke up when she called me at ten this morning. I felt terrible, sick, headache, awful. I guess I had more than I thought. But it never hit me before that way.”

Knox stubbed out his cigaret. “Sick to your stomach? A head full of hammers right behind the eyes? A bad taste in your mouth?”

“I still feel that way—exactly that way,” Catlin said.

Knox started for the door. “Order up a tomato juice with worcestershire sauce in it. If that doesn’t make you throw up, try some mustard and warm water, and a dose of salts. Clean yourself out, Catlin.”

He offered a pleased grin. “My friend, someone slipped you a very fat mickey.”

He went out, no longer grinning. A lot of good he would do Cora Deane if he told Beeker that she went around giving men mickeys. But from the look of Catlin and from his description of what happened, she undoubtedly had. And, Knox was sure, she also had a good reason for it.

But that was beside the point. Beeker wasn’t going to like it when Cora’s story came out, no matter how Knox explained it. He wasn’t going to like it at all.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BEEKER definitely didn’t like it. He was even more unhappy than Knox expected. When Knox returned to the storeroom, he found both Beeker and Keehan there. McEwen had just finished making his report on the discovery.

“You get around,” Keehan said to Knox. “Why’d you bring Mac down here, for protection?” He shifted his squat

weight as if he were about to enter a prize ring. "You pay him to tag along?"

Knox looked past Keehan to Beeker. "Send him away, Mel, before he finishes making a fool of himself."

Keehan reached for a piece of Knox's coatfront. Knox stepped back, his expression no longer relaxed, his eyes frankly hostile. "I'm not one of your two-bit hoodlums, Maddy. Keep your hands to yourself."

"By God, you got tagging along with that Jock and he gets killed. You mess with the Deane girl and she disappears. Now you just 'find' this body." Keehan was wound up. "For my money, you go downtown and. . ."

"Who disappeared?" Knox cut in. He wondered how the police had learned of Cora's going so quickly.

Beeker said, "Shut up, Maddy. Go start things rolling. And let's keep this one under wraps until we know where we stand."

"I know where we stand," Keehan said. "I. . ."

"Shut up and get going."

Knox had never heard Beeker quite that abrupt with a subordinate. Apparently Keehan never had either. With a grunt of surprise, he turned and stalked out. Beeker said, "Mac, you'd better go help him. So that things are kept quiet. My men can come in from the back like yesterday."

McEwen faded. It was obvious that he wanted as little as possible to do with Beeker when he was in a mood like this. When his footsteps had receded, Beeker hoisted a hip onto one of the tables and looked at Knox.

"Well, Paul?"

Knox said, "What's this about Cora Deane disappearing?"

"She blew, that's all. The hotel got a call from her from the bus depot. Said she was leaving."

"And that's my fault?"

"Keehan thinks so. I'm asking."

Knox said, "She spent the night with me—innocently, Mel." There was no smile of derision, no flicker of dis-

belief, nor any sign of acceptance. Beeker was simply listening.

"I came in late and found her in my room. She's World-Circle and she was supposed to contact Auffer yesterday. She got scared and came to me, figuring I might be the new contact."

"So?"

"So," Knox said, "we swapped notes. I told her to go and she said she would."

"You told her to go! The police told her to stick around."

"She was being shadowed, and her life was threatened. After Jock, what did you expect me to do?"

"Threatened by whom?"

Knox explained about the two anonymous phone calls. Beeker said, "Nuts."

Knox's eyebrows went up. "I'm lying, Mel?"

"I didn't say that. But since when does a phone call make a World Circle operative tuck in tail and run?"

"It doesn't," Knox admitted. "Cora said she'd be back. That's all I know."

"And if she isn't back?"

"Then you can contact the home office. The company only protects its employees to a point."

Beeker wasn't happy. "Let's drop it for now. What's this about you finding the body?"

Knox told him the story Cora Deane had given him. "You can see why she kept quiet. Working for our outfit, sometimes you have to clam up until you know where you're going."

"So I notice," Beeker said sourly. "When did you learn this?"

"This morning," Knox said. It was a lie, but not much of one. And, he figured, it wouldn't hurt to pacify Beeker a little.

Beeker grunted at him. The men came and Knox stood to one side while the body was photographed in position, chalk marks made, the usual routines gone through. The doctor moved in and took over.

He said, "About twenty-four hours. "I'm guessing, of course."

Beeker looked at Knox. "About right, isn't it?"

"I'd say so," Knox agreed.

The man had died by obvious means. A heavy object had hit him squarely in the face, crushing his skull and the frontal bone structure of his face along with it. It made recognition difficult. It also made Knox slightly ill.

"What hit him?" Keehan asked, moving alongside Beeker.

"I pack a mean wallop, didn't you know?" Knox said.

Beeker put a hand on Keehan's shoulder. "Be quiet, damn it." He said to the doctor, "I want to get into his pockets."

"Help yourself."

It was grisly business. Beeker came up with an assortment of change, some keys, a large flat wallet of the note case type, and a comb. The wallet contained over three hundred dollars in cash, a snapshot of a woman slightly under middle age, dark and Spanish looking, some identity cards—liquor permit, dishwasher's union card, driver's licence—and in the other side a sheaf of glossy four by six photographs that made even the hardened Maddy Keehan whistle.

Beeker called McEwen in and showed him the contents of the wallet. "From here?"

"I'd say so," McEwen admitted. "But they come and go, these guys." He shuffled through the pictures. "Jeez! Where'd a dishwasher get the dough to buy them?"

"Where'd he get three hundred bucks?" Keehan growled.

Beeker said, "Go bring someone from upstairs who might know who this guy is."

Knox remained silent. The photographs made things obvious to him. He was sure they did to Beeker as well. The kitchen man came down and he not only knew, but he was positive. "Sure, that's Manuel Salas. I been calling for two days to find out why he didn't come to work." He turned away, his face green. Beeker shoved the pictures under his nose.

"He go for this stuff much?"

The kitchen man wasn't interested. "We all seen them. He carried a different batch every week."

"What'd he do, peddle them?"

"Hell no. He wouldn't. He just told us where we could get some like 'em and where there was stag movies these were made from."

"Yeh, where?"

The kitchen man looked uncomfortable. "I went once, down in the south end." He gave an address. "Then I tried to take a friend and the place was empty. I never asked Salas no more."

Beeker moved alongside Knox. He said, "A floating show with Salas one of the contacts."

"Hotels are good places," Knox said. He was thinking of Carl and his hint to the bellhop. "I'll do a little feeling around myself. Let me have a couple of those pictures, will you?"

"I want 'em back."

Knox said, "Do you think I intend to keep them, for Crissake?"

Keehan moved near them and Knox became quiet. Beeker told the kitchen man to go back to work and keep his mouth shut—completely shut. Then he sent Keehan off to look for the murder weapon.

Beeker scowled at Knox. "If this guy was one of them, why get rid of him along with Auffer?"

"My guess is they didn't," Knox said. "Auffer was to meet Cora Deane down here. I think they got wind of it and put Salas on Leo. Probably one of those in a hurry things. Salas was to hold Leo until a first class trigger-man could come down and take over. Or maybe Salas did it on his own. Maybe Leo started questioning him and he got scared."

"You're saying Auffer killed this Salas before he got it himself?"

"That's my guess," Knox said. "Salas probably attacked him and Leo had to fight."

"Then when the Deane girl came down, who dragged her off by the throat—if anyone did?"

"I saw the marks on her neck. I can't answer that, Mel. If I could, I'd have the one who murdered Leo."

Beeker shook his head. "If Auffer did kill this guy, what did he use, a sledgehammer?"

Keehan answered that. He found the murder weapon thrown to the rear of the chair storeroom. It was a wooden mallet, the kind a chef would use pounding big steaks. There was no doubt after one look at the blood and bone and hair stuck to it. The handle had been wiped clean of prints.

Knox wasn't surprised. As he saw it, Leo Auffer had had to take it away from Salas. In defending himself, he had hit too hard. He might have made that mistake; he wouldn't have been foolish enough to leave his fingerprints on the mallet too.

When Beeker and Knox were alone, Beeker said, "Paul, I want to open this one up. We're getting nowhere keeping them under wraps."

That was the one thing Knox was afraid of. He wanted this one kept as tight as Auffer's death—for the time being. Ideas were beginning to simmer in his mind. He said, "You've got Jock to work on in the open, haven't you?"

Beeker snorted. "Jock, Salas, Auffer—they're all part of the same parcel. And where are we getting with Jock?"

"How about Eddie Pillow?"

"We've got a pick-up out for him," Beeker said. "We also asked a lot of questions around here, but with the help only, as usual. Until we open up Auffer's death, we can't touch some of these high-priced guests."

"Thinking of the Tinsleys?"

"And this Catlin, since they seem to be the ones Auffer was friendliest with. And your girl Friday, Cora Deane. We couldn't find her today to question her."

Knox had to grin. "I had her occupied." Then the grin faded. "The Tinsleys claim to have been at a party last night. I came in during the rarified hours and they were

right behind me. When you're ready, they should be easy enough to check."

"When I'm ready," Beeker glared at Knox. "And Catlin, what was he doing late last night?"

"Playing pattycake with Cora Deane, according to him." He told Beeker about his conversation with Catlin. He expected a reaction from Beeker and when it came, he was ready.

"So she gave him a mickey. What for, so she could go out and kill Jock?"

"Sure," Knox said. "And she beat Salas' face in with a mallet, dragged him into the back of that room after juggling all those tables, then stabbed Leo Auffer, and hit me on the head when I sniffed around the chair she gimicked."

"All right," Beeker said. "So she had a reason for what she did. Can you supply that too?"

Knox shrugged. "Maybe it was a good chance to search Catlin's room."

"She didn't tell you about that?"

"No," Knox said. He shifted the conversation to something that right now worried him more than Cora Deane. "Give it a little while longer, Mac. This Salas and his pictures might be the break I need."

Beeker was going to be stubborn about it. Knox could see that by the expression on his face. Knox said, "Before you say no, listen to what happened to me this morning—early." He sketched his encounter with Binks and Toll.

Beeker was grinning when Knox finished. He said, "You sure have it tough, Paul. Every time you try to hold out on me, something comes up and you have to spill." Then the grin went away. "So you let them go? Why?"

"Why not," Knox asked defensively. "I swapped that for information. And a pair like that can be picked up anytime."

"Sure, just like we picked up Eddie Pillow. 'Hell, they might be a thousand miles away by now.'"

"Toll said the boat was his," Knox reminded him. "Be-

sides, he's in touch with this Mitch. That makes me think he's in with the upper crust."

"Maybe he is the upper crust," Beeker suggested.

"Toll probably thinks he could be," Knox said, "but I doubt it. He might have the brains but he hasn't the finesse. There's too much emotion in him. He's too vulnerable. No, Mel, whoever is running this show is a different kind than Toll—someone slick and smart and about as emotional as that mallet that killed Salas. And dangerous," he added.

Beeker grunted. "So because you got beat up you think you're closer to a solution?"

"This Salas thing gives me an idea," Knox said. "It makes me think Leo Auffer was a lot closer to winding it up than I thought. What little we know about the previous operations of this outfit doesn't include violence. But now there is violence. That means, to me, that they have a weakness somewhere—and Leo had his finger on it.

"But," he went on, "I don't want just the small fry like Salas. You could get the Vice Squad and clean that sort of thing out in a few days. You can do that later, too. I want the big boys. And I want the stuff. If I don't get both, where am I? World Circle's job is only partly to get the men behind this. We also want to fix things for the sake of those individuals—stupid as they have been—whose indiscretions can cause them a lifetime of misery."

"I know," Beeker said. "I'm a big city cop, Paul. I've seen what pornography can do in a small way, not only to adolescent minds but to supposedly adult ones. You don't have to tell me." He glowered at Knox. "All right, I'll keep it as quiet as I can. But damn it, Paul, my investigation is hamstrung until I can come out with the news that Auffer is dead."

"Okay," Knox said, "let's find Auffer dead. But not here. Not near the hotel."

Beeker gaped at him. Knox plunged on, improvising as he went, and the more he talked the better the idea sounded. "We can fish him out of one of the lakes or the

Sound, can't we? Then you can ask questions of the Tinsleys and Catlin without the hotel being connected. Why," he added enthusiastically, "give me the body. I'll plant it for you."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GIVING Beeker a chance to let the idea simmer in his mind, Knox made a date to see him in an hour in the suite, and took off. He had coffee and a sandwich in the coffee shop while he worked out the details of this latest idea in his mind. He was pleased with it. Every now and then a spur of the moment plan would come to him, and he seldom ignored them without a close look. Working under pressure as he was, he was willing to grasp anything.

He left the coffee shop humming, the details nicely settled to his satisfaction. His reverie was interrupted by a commotion taking place at the desk and he turned to see what was going on.

A woman teetering on extremely high heels, her hair dyed an amazing red blond, and her body encased in a too tight suit that showed bulges Knox was sure she would not want shown, was yammering at the desk clerk. Behind her was a bellhop, loaded with a half dozen bags, two hat boxes, and a small and very excitable Pomeranian dog.

"But I did make a reservation," the woman said in a raucous voice. "I wired from Minneapolis three days ago. Mrs. Renfrew. Mrs. Adele Renfrew. Come now, you must have a record."

"Did you get a confirmation, Mrs. Renfrew?" The clerk was polite but obviously wishing for the presence of someone with more authority.

"Certainly not. I assumed. I have never yet needed a confirmation. Not in New York or Paris or—anywhere. Why should I here?"

If the clerk hadn't been so obviously harrassed, Knox would have enjoyed the scene. Mrs. Renfrew, who looked

fortyish and obviously wanted to look fifteen years younger, was a type Knox had always liked seeing in action—as long as he was merely a spectator. Whether or not she had made a reservation was beside the point. She would have her room before she was through.

The clerk seemed to realize that he was fighting a battle he could never win. With a sigh, he went through his cards and came up with one. "I'm very sorry, Madame, but until Monday I can give you only a small room. The football game here tomorrow has us filled up."

Mrs. Renfrew was displeased. She said as much. Then with a gesture meant to be gracious but which nearly took off the end of the clerk's nose, she yielded. "I shall have to accept it, I suppose."

Woman, dog, and bellhop loaded with baggage surged toward the elevator. The strident voice, having conquered the hotel, now turned itself onto the dog. "You just behave, Paulsy. Mama will have to leave you alone for a while, but she'll come and see you later. Promise to be good."

Knox glanced at her more closely when she mentioned the dog's name. Then he strolled over and joined her in the elevator. The dog was wriggling in her arms now, sniffing. The woman offered Knox a smile. Her mouth was too heavily made up and the smile looked more like a red slash with rough edges. "Isn't he darling?"

Knox put out a tentative hand for the dog's head. Paulsy sniffed and then licked Knox's finger. Mrs. Renfrew squealed. "Oh Paulsy likes you! And he makes so few friends."

"Perhaps because we have the same name," Knox said. He was studying Mrs. Renfrew without making himself obvious. He also wanted to hear more of her voice. He could be wrong, of course, and in that case he would feel a complete fool.

"Oh, is your name Paulsy too?"

Knox could see the back of the bellhop's neck. It was growing red. He said hastily, "Paul. Just Paul."

The elevator stopped and both the operator and the bellhop began unloading luggage. Momentarily Mrs. Renfrew and Knox were left alone at the rear of the elevator. Her voice reached his ears, a different voice now, coming from lips that barely moved. "I'm in six-fourteen. When can I come see you?"

"I'll call," Knox murmured. He leaned against the rear of the cage as Mrs. Renfrew, still holding a struggling dog, teetered away on her absurd heels.

"This," the operator observed as he took Knox on up, "should make for a real week end."

Knox could only agree with him. Once in his room, he set Mrs. Renfrew aside for more immediate matters. He took Leo Auffer's toiletries kit from the dresser and spread everything on the bed. He was well along, the paste squeezed from every tube, and the labels detached where possible to see if there was writing on the back of any, when Beeker arrived. Hastily, Knox returned everything to the drawer, piled underwear on top, and went to let Beeker in.

Knox ordered up the inevitable coffee for Beeker and they sat in the living room waiting for it. Beeker looked around and whistled. "Get cramped upstairs?"

"I needed breathing space," Knox said.

"I thought you were going to throw a roller skating party." Beeker seemed wholly uncurious about Knox's reason for changing rooms. Knox hoped he put it down to the whim of a man with money and then forgot it. He wasn't yet ready to tell Beeker that among his other recent sins, he had burgled Leo Auffer's suitcases.

"Where is Auffer now?" Knox asked bluntly.

"In the morgue."

"Can you get him out by saying you want another autopsy?"

"I can get him out," Beeker said. He looked unhappy. "But I don't know that I'm going to."

"Look," Knox said earnestly, "think what it'll do to the morale of our big boys if Auffer suddenly turns up—but

not at the hotel. Besides," he went on persuasively, "it will take the newspapers off your neck. This way they can't say you held out on them because they won't know you did."

"If it slips," Beeker said, "it can cause one hell of a lot of trouble."

"It won't slip," Knox assured him. "I've got it figured out so that no one in the department can get burned too badly. And so that if there is trouble, it'll be my neck. Listen, will you?"

"I'm listening," Beeker said. He did, all the way through the oversized pot of coffee that arrived. When Knox was finished, he sighed. "All right, Paul. I don't like it but I can see your point. But if Maddy Keehan should catch you. . ."

"I know," Knox said, "this is one time you can't call him off."

Beeker's smile was a mere baring of his teeth. Knox said hastily, "And, Mel, how about getting me some information on that Merkle number and on the fishing boat?"

Beeker went to the telephone. "If the boys are on the ball, I should have that information by now." He put in a call to his office, spoke briefly, and then listened, jotting notes on a sheet of paper on the desk. Hanging up, he turned to Knox.

"The Merkle number is a pay station in a joint called Maroney's Bar. And that happens to be about a half block from the end of the pier where the fishing boat is moored."

"Better than I expected," Knox said.

"The boat," Beeker went on, "is registered to Albert Toll. It's also his address."

Knox swore out of relief. This was even neater than he had hoped. Beeker said, "Toll has a record, all right. Bunco artist. The girl he was working with got scared and talked."

"What about his background?" Knox asked.

"That," Beeker said, "is the nicest part of all. Until three years ago, he was a college professor. His last job was as

guest lecturer at the University of Havana, Cuba. He also did a lot of traveling and studying in various parts of Europe."

"It's beginning to fit," Knox said. "Maybe he's a bigger shot than I gave him credit for. Anything else?"

Beeker looked positively smug. "He was raised in this part of the country. His father was a Pilot. Toll worked his way through University sailing on cruise ships that go up the Sound and into the Straits of Georgia. He's qualified as an apprentice pilot. Or was. With his record, I don't know now."

"A guy with all that background and he got a little too eager for easy money," Knox said. "He probably figured that his brain power raised him a notch above the wage slave."

Beeker shrugged. "I don't pretend to understand his reasons. Now as for Binks, he's clean. A small time private operative from California. Divorce cases have always been his speed up to now."

"Any trace of Cora Deane?" Knox asked with a shade too much disinterest.

Beeker gave him a quick look and then glanced at his notes. "She hopped a bus for the east but she wasn't aboard when the bus got to Moses Lake today. That means she got off probably at Ellensburg. We've got an alert out. We'll get her."

"Uhm," Knox said. He didn't amplify it. "That's it?"

"That's it so far." Beeker looked at the empty coffee pot and got to his feet. "I don't like this, Paul, but I can't see any other way to be able to question people about Auffer without blowing it wide open."

"When we're on trial," Knox said with a grin, "I'll testify to your reluctance."

"Thanks." Beeker went toward the door. "And remember, I'm your pal and the commissioner is your pal—but just to a point. If you keep on holding out, I swear I'll let Keehan have you."

"Maddy's just frustrated," Knox said. "He wants someone to hit."

"He may get that someone," Beeker said darkly. He went on out.

When Knox was certain he had time to reach the lobby, he went to the phone and made two calls. The first was to Mrs. Renfrew. He said, "This is eight-o-eight. I'm in for a while." He hung up and called the penthouse.

To the deep voice that answered, Knox inquired if it belonged to Gerard Tinsley. It did and Knox identified himself. "I was wondering if you and Natalie might have a drink before dinner with me?"

"Delighted, Knox. I'll let you ask Natalie herself."

In a moment he heard her voice, pleasantly husky, lazily indolent as if she might be stretched out on a chaise longue, completely relaxed. "Hello, Paul."

"I've just invited you and your father for a drink. And dinner," he added, "if you aren't tied up."

"I'm not. I can tie up Dad, if you want."

"Not for dinner," Knox said. "Let it wait until after dinner."

"Oh, us alone? Are we going detecting?"

"That's the general idea," Knox admitted. He was glad that she had met him half way. "I you want to."

"I'd love it."

"Just say for the record that we're going dancing."

"Uhm, I love mysteries. What do I wear, sneakers and old slacks?"

"Hardly, not for dancing."

They chatted inconsequentially for a moment. Knox set the time for the drink and dinner and hung up. He sat motionless for some time mentally working out a time schedule for the night. He saw that he would have to cut things pretty fine. Maybe too fine. But there was no way around it, that he could see. He was frowning over the problem when the knock came at the door.

Mrs. Renfrew was there minus dog. Paulsy, she explained, was in a belhop's care. Otherwise, he might cramp her mobility.

She looked around as Beeker had. "You don't get this on a World-Circle expense account?"

"I could," Knox said. "It was Auffer's room."

"I know it. Why didn't I think of that?" She smiled as if the make-up on her face might crack if she made too much of an effort. "You should see your expression, Paul. Don't you like Mrs. Renfrew?"

"It's a little overdone."

"Not really," she said. "Anyway, it's the only disguise I have. I played the part in a college play." She laughed shortly and then became serious. "I suppose the police are looking for me?"

"From here to Moses Lake."

"I got off the bus at Ellensburg, rented a dressing room and changed my clothes and hairdo. I took a bus to Yakima and a train from there. I changed again on the train and gave myself a dye job. It was rather awkward but I came out as Mrs. Renfrew."

Knox said, "They figured you got off in Ellensburg. It won't take Beeker long once he gets a lead."

She looked down at herself and giggled. "Do you think he'll suspect anyone so lumpy?"

Knox had no time to waste kidding with her. He said, "They found who the man you saw dead was." He told her about it and added his theory that Auffer might have killed him."

"Does that mean Auffer was the one who tried to strangle me?"

"If it does, it makes no sense," Knox answered. He went on, outlining the remainder of his talk with Beeker but not mentioning his plan with the body.

She looked shocked. "You mean that—that policeman thinks I might have killed Leo Auffer?"

"He's toying with the idea," Knox admitted. "Especially since you gave friend Catlin a mickey."

"If he knew it was a mickey, he's smarter than I gave him credit for," she said.

"Then it was you. Why?"

"That's a silly question coming from you," she answered. She sounded irritated. "What would you have done if you wanted, say, to search the penthouse and you were alone in it with Natalie Tinsley and she was pawing you and there was no way to get rid of her so you could search?"

Knox grinned. "Find anything?"

"Nothing. He's either very clever or he's just what he says—an insurance representative." She shook her head. "But I don't really think that, Paul."

"You don't like him, do you?"

"Especially not after last night!" She rubbed her hands over her arms. "He's too sleek, too much the I'm a real find for a poor stenographer' type. No thanks."

"That doesn't make him guilty of this kind of crime."

"Nor does it make the Tinsleys guilty because they're gamblers. But you seem to think they might be in it."

"Because Leo contacted them. I feel the same way about Catlin."

"If they're so wealthy," Cora said, "why would they take a chance?"

"Gambling makes strange bedfellows," Knox said. "And then, money doesn't always start people off, Cora. It might be adventure, a desire for thrills, maybe even indulgence in a different type of gambling. In this case a gamble for life or freedom."

"Against what, money selling dirty art?"

Knox realized that she wouldn't have been given the background of the case. Only, as far as he knew, Leo Auffer and himself had that. "Big money selling dirty art, Cora. Two million dollars plus on this phase of the job alone." He told her about it.

She looked faintly ill beneath her make-up. "That's monstrous," she whispered. "If I'd known. . ."

"What more could you have done."

"Nothing more," she admitted. "I couldn't have done anything that I didn't do. Only—now I feel more than ever as if I'm cheating. I learned so little."

"Maybe you can do more now."

"Have you a plan, Paul? Anything to start on?" She sounded eager, as if hoping for atonement.

"I have a date with the Tinsleys," Knox admitted. "Papa and daughter for dinner. Daughter afterward."

"Business or pleasure?"

"Pleasant business," he said. He laughed a little at the tartness in her tone.

"And what do I do?"

"A little second story work for me," he said. "You looked over Catlin's room, now try the penthouse."

"While you have them at dinner?"

"That's right."

"It'll be easy if I can slip up there. That's the hard part."

"Do the best you can," Knox said. He hoped that the assignment would keep her out of trouble for the evening. He thought that she was fairly safe if her disguise held up. He saw her to the door and watched her wobble away on her absurdly high heels. Just before leaving, she reached up and touched her fingertips to his cheek.

"Don't forget the company motto tonight, Paul. Ethical in All Ways."

Knox closed the door and went to the telephone. "Send Carl up with a rye and water," he ordered. He sat down. Now all he could do was wait and hope that this hunch was worth something.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KNOX signed for the rye and water and then carefully laid a ten dollar bill on the check. He said, "What do you do for amusement here since they cleaned the town up?"

Carl looked at the ten dollars. "A couple of night clubs have pretty good shows. There's the burlesque house, the bars."

Carl kept looking at the money. Knox said, "I'm not a cop any longer. I'm asking for myself. This sitting around

is getting boring." He dropped a five on the ten and took the photographs from Salas out of his pocket.

"Someone slipped me these the other day. He told me to ask you about them."

Carl looked at the pictures, then at the money. He licked his lips. "Who was it?"

Knox didn't like the tone of voice but he could hardly blame Carl for being cautious and a little edgy. After all, Knox had been a policeman here at one time. He said, "One of the kitchen help I met while I was nosing around downstairs. Spanish looking type."

Carl blurted, "That was Salas. He's dead. Somebody beat his face in."

"Christ," Knox said. He looked down at the pictures. "On account of these?"

He was worried, afraid that Carl's having the news might queer this whole end of his plan. But Carl relieved him fast enough. "I doubt it," he said. "He probably was horsing around with some dame. He had a way with them."

Knox brought the subject back to the pictures by holding one to the light. "So I see."

Carl rubbed his hands on his trousers. "You want those? I know where you can get some better ones."

Knox tossed the pictures on top of the money. "Is that what this Salas meant?" He sounded disappointed. "He didn't say much, but I got the idea there was a live show where these came from."

Carl took the pictures and the money. "Nah. It's movies."

"No live show, huh?"

"Not in this town."

"Well," Knox said. He sounded hesitant. "Hell, that's better than nothing. Better than sitting around here or straining myself to pick up some chippie in a bar."

Carl took out his wallet, placed the money inside, tucked the pictures away somewhere in his uniform, and took a small calling card from the wallet. He put a mark in one corner. "With the card, it'll cost you twenty-five. Without it, you'd never get in."

Knox took it. "What's the mark for?"

"To show you got it from me," Carl said. He still sounded a little worried. "If anything should happen, don't let this kick back on me."

"Hell, no."

Nodding, Carl took the signed check and went out. Knox looked the card over. It said, *Pleasure Enterprise*, and gave an address in the northwest part of town. That surprised Knox. He had suspected something in the south end or even out of the city. Then he remembered the kitchen helper's remarks about a traveling show. Still, if so why go to the trouble of printing a card?

It was one he couldn't answer, just as he couldn't answer the question about Carl's attitude. He had a strong feeling that the bellhop had been acting a part, that his reluctance was feigned. It was nothing tangible but it made him wonder just how Carl would have got the card to him if Knox hadn't asked.

It was nearly time to meet the Tinsleys. Knox put the card carefully away in his billfold and rose to change his clothes. He picked another flannel, this one charcoal. He wore dark shoes and as dark a tie and shirt as he thought he could get by with. He sorted the items from his other suit on the bed, chose some of them to go into the charcoal, added a few things from one of his suitcases, and went downstairs.

He waited only a moment and then the Tinsleys appeared. Tinsley was in a business suit but Natalie was wearing something that looked like a cross between a dinner gown and a cocktail dress. Whatever it was, it looked good on her. As she had last night, she made an asset of her boyish figure, of a slenderness that many a woman would have padded out. She came toward him, a hand outstretched, her features that reminded him of a kitten in a delighted smile.

"See, I'm all ready."

Knox looked down on the short-cut, dark hair coiffed tonight in a kind of calculated wildness. His eyes went on

past the straight nose, the full mouth, a surprisingly determined chin, the length of her slender, sheathed figure. "I see," he said dryly.

He greeted Tinsley with a handclasp and then escorted them to the bar. Natalie and her father preferred bourbon to rye, otherwise he found them delightful companions. "I was surprised to hear you hadn't flown to California after all," Knox said. "Pleasantly surprised, as it turned out."

"I got a report they had a wet track," Tinsley said. "Neither one of us do well with a wet track."

"So we went back to sleep," Natalie admitted. She smiled at Knox. "And besides, we wanted to be sure and make the game tomorrow. I want to take the money we win from you and buy myself something with it."

The conversation might have continued in the same fashion, aimless, telling Knox very little, except that a sudden squeal brought them all out of the intimacy of their conversation. Mrs. Renfrew stood by their table. Knox could not suppress a shudder. She wore an evening gown that tended to emphasize her lumpiness.

"Paulsy," she said. "Mr. Paulsy, we meet again."

Tinsley and his daughter both turned a bewildered look on Knox who was sitting with his mouth open. He came awake and rose. "The name is Knox," he corrected. "Paul Knox." He introduced the Tinsleys. "And this is Mrs. Renfrew, a new guest. She has a dog named Paulsy. That's how we got acquainted."

Natalie looked her over with frank amazement. "How interesting."

Mrs. Renfrew smiled with her heavily made up lips. "Isn't it. Mr. Paulsy—no, Mr. Knox was so sweet. Paulsy—the dog, I mean—just loves him."

Tinsley was on his feet by this time. He looked at Knox and Knox shrugged his helplessness. Tinsley said with faint hope in his voice, "We're just having a before-dinner drink, Mrs. Renfrew. Won't you join us?"

"I'd love to," she said. If she noticed Tinsley's resigned

expression, she gave no sign. Taking the chair Tinsley drew out for her, she giggled. "That's what I really came for, of course. When one is alone, it gets lonesome. Don't you think?"

Natalie said, "Er—yes. Are you traveling, Mrs. Renfrew?"

Mrs. Renfrew turned from ordering a drink called a Rum Hound and nodded. "Back and forth. Up and down. And once crosswise."

"I don't quite understand," Tinsley said doggedly.

Mrs. Renfrew engulfed him with her smile. "But it's very simple. I'm simply devoted to the Minnesota football team. I used to be engaged to one of the assistant coaches and I follow the boys everywhere. I just know they all think of me as a mascot."

Knox thought, Oh no. He hoped that she could carry her bluff about football because Tinsley was obviously taking the bait. He said, "Minnesota isn't playing here."

"I'm scouting for them. They do play the University. I'm a sort of unpaid spy."

Tinsley sounded almost jovial. "Well, I could help you on that. I've checked on the local club pretty thoroughly." He began discussing the team technically. Knox listened just long enough to hear Mrs. Renfrew give as good as she took—and now he knew what she must have been reading in her spare time—and then he turned to Natalie.

"Natalie . . ."

"My close friends call me Nat," she reminded him.

"Am I a close friend yet?"

"Since we're going de—out together, of course you are." She put a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide.

"They can't even hear us," Knox said. He let his smile warm her. "All right, Nat then. I was going to suggest that they might like to have a private pre-game dinner over their end runs and trap plays and that we go somewhere else. There's a fine Chinese restaurant I know about."

"Love it," she said. With a quick motion, she drained her glass and rose. "We'll leave you two in the huddle. So glad to have met you, Mrs. Renfrew."

"I am too," Mrs. Renfrew said. "Your brother is so charming. He knows a lot about *my* team."

"Down to the last dollar," Natalie assured her. Taking Knox's arm, she walked away, ignoring her father's look. Knox glanced back once. Tinsley and Mrs. Renfrew had their heads together and he was drawing a play on a bar napkin. Knox no longer wondered just how she would get into the penthouse, but he did wonder what she would do after she got there. Not even football would make Tinsley let her search the apartment. Then he remembered Catlin. He hoped Tinsley's hangover from a mickey wouldn't be quite as damaging.

"Do we take my car or yours?" Natalie asked as they went through the lobby.

"Yours, by all means," Knox said. "I haven't one here."

Her car was in the drive-in garage, a long, sleek sports job that fit her somehow. She drove it expertly, twisting through the thinning evening traffic as he directed her out the through town boulevard. They turned west after leaving the central area, wound up a hill, and stopped at a restaurant that looked out over the Sound. The fog had lifted, although it remained cloudy, and the lights of the islands shone like faintly radiant strings of precious stones in the distance.

"It's very nice," she said. "I've never been here."

"Another drink?"

"Not tonight." She was very serious. "I want my wits about me. I've never detected before."

"I hope it doesn't bore you," Knox said. He took a deep breath. "By the way, part of this you'll have to do—alone. You don't mind?"

"Uhm," she said. She leaned toward him conspiratorially. "Will I be alone long?"

"Not long," Knox assured her.

Natalie settled back, looking satisfied. Then she turned her attention to the menu as if it were the most important thing in the world at that moment. Knox liked that quality about her. She seemed able to direct her attention to the

affairs of the moment, put things in their proper place and perspective, and thoroughly enjoy herself with whatever she was doing. She had the zest of youth for things, yet she could be fully mature when necessity arose.

They ate well and not too rapidly. When he had finished the last of his coffee, he glanced at his watch and rose. "Now we start." He felt her arm tuck into his. She squeezed. Then she tilted her face up. Knox could not help wondering if anyone could be as naive as she appeared at that moment. She was, he decided, a consummate actress. She would bear a deal of watching.

Knox directed her to drive east toward the lake and then south again. When they were on the street where Jock Dylan had lived, he had her go slowly while he scanned house numbers. He was also looking for police, but if Becker had a man there, Knox saw no sign of him. Three houses past the one where Jock lived, he told her to pull up to the curb.

"It's that house back there across the street. The one with the curtained view-window. I want you to watch it for me. Can you do that?"

"Just sit here and watch it?"

"Not quite, although that's what a lot of detecting consists of. If anyone goes in or comes out, get as good a description as you can. There's a porchlight so you should get a fair look. And if a little man, a little mouse of a man, appears—follow him. If you aren't here when I get back, I'll know you followed him. I'll meet you in the hotel bar."

"Where are you going, Paul?"

"I can tell you better when I get back." He started to open his door and stopped, turning inquiringly when a hand fell on his arm.

She said, "I'm a little scared, Paul. Being alone like this."

Somehow he couldn't see her as the helpless type. He said only, "You're safe enough. Just don't take any risks."

"It—it might not be safe. Don't you think we should sort of say good-bye in case anything happened to one of us?"

It was a little girl's appeal, and she did it very well.

Knox said almost seriously, "I think we should." He took the hand that was on his arm and drew her toward him. His other arm curved around her shoulder. The crown of her head came to rest against him. She turned so that her lips were up. Her eyes were nearly closed.

Knox kissed her. She had, he discovered, a most kissable mouth. Her lips were full and warm. And she did not clutch at him nor strain against him with a manufactured fervor as did some women he had known. The kiss was competent and friendly, with no particular hint or promise in it.

"Thank you," she murmured, drawing away. "I feel quite comforted."

Knox wondered if the subtle way she had located his gun was what comforted her or if she was merely laughing at him. He laughed back, silently. She was carrying something along her leg that was more than stocking or stocking supporter. He wished he had time to investigate more closely. With a grin he slid out of the car and started for the boulevard a block away. He wiped his lips with his handkerchief as he went.

Within five minutes he had a taxi. It took him to a garage he had contacted earlier. There he picked up the rental panel truck he had ordered and started off. He drove rapidly but carefully, checking his watch every now and then. He had little time to spare and he came up behind headquarters on the dot. Blinking his lights once, he drove on. A car with the lines of an ambulance started up behind him and followed. Knox let it go ahead at a stop light and dropped two car lengths behind it.

The car stopped on a dark street, half of houses, half of vacant lots. The driver got out, lighted a cigaret and strolled off down the block. Knox drew up alongside the other car, saw that the seat was empty and then backed around so that his rear was against that of the other. Getting out quickly, he opened the panel doors, opened those on the other car, and hastily slid a blanket shrouded figure from one to the other. He shuddered a little. Even as objective as

he could be about Leo Auffer, the job was an unpleasant one.

He took a brief moment to use his pencil flash and make sure that it was Leo Auffer, and then he climbed beneath the wheel and drove away. In the rear view mirror, he saw the driver of the other car start back. The only sign of recognition was the arc of the cigaret as it was flipped away.

Knox was halfway to his destination when he realized that the other driver had not been Mel Beeker. He had had to enlist the aid of someone else. Knox hoped Beeker had got the right man. It would not be a happy situation if whoever it was turned out to be too close a friend of Maddy Keehan.

Knox drove more slowly now, not wanting to risk being stopped. When he reached the waterfront, he slowed even more, glancing at the pier where Toll's fishing smack was moored. The whole area was dark except for the faint street light and the dull neon announcing Maroney's bar. One street over there were many lights. Knox kept away from that area, slipping down the street that ran before the piers and backing to the one he wanted.

Climbing out, he made a quick survey. Toll's boat looked tenantless. A hasty check showed him that he was right and he hurried back to the truck.

As small a man as Auffer had been, he still was no lightweight. And he made an awkward bundle as Knox carried him onto the deck. Laying the body aside, he attacked the door to the companionway with his set of keys. It yielded after a small argument and he went into close, musty darkness, a pencil flashlight in his hand. The ship was definitely empty. Returning, he carried the body down, laid it beneath a pile of gear in a forward locker, and returned the way he had come.

He drove away humming. If this worked out as he planned, there would be an interesting situation. A very interesting situation. His next job was to play the part of the anonymous telephone voice when he tipped off the Treasury department that a certain converted fishing smack was carrying smuggled goods. But that was for the morning. Right now, he had to finish tonight's work.

The panel truck returned, he had a taxi take him to where Nat should be waiting. Her car was gone. He ordered the taxi on to the hotel. He walked quickly to the bar, surveyed it, and then stood foolishly staring at the half filled room.

She was not there either.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Knox telephoned the penthouse from the lobby. He was a little surprised when Tinsley answered. He sounded quite normal, hardly under the influence of a mickey. He also sounded irritated at being disturbed and Knox could not help wondering if Cora's mickey in this case wouldn't be something a little more subtle than chloral hydrate.

Knox hitched his voice up an octave. "Miss Tinsley, please."

She wasn't there. The telephone banged. Knox lifted his eyebrows. Cora had never affected him that way, not even when she was playing her own quite handsome self. But then tastes differed, he realized. Tinsley might like bulges.

Knox looked in the coffee shop, in the grill, in the dining room, and a second time in the bar. He tried the room clerk and drew a blank. Miss Tinsley had not been in. He saw McEwen coming toward him. It was too late to duck away.

"How's everything going, Paul?"

"Slow," Knox said.

McEwen licked his heavy lips. "I see you're making time with the Tinsley babe."

"Blame me?" Knox matched his leer. He wanted to test the resiliency of McEwen's paunch.

"Not my type. Not enough meat." He coughed. "You need any more help, Paul—get in trouble or anything, you know where to call."

"I'll remember," Knox said. At fifty dollars a throw, he

added to himself, McEwen would be a real help. He started off, bothered more than usual by McEwen. The man seemed sly tonight. As a rule McEwen couldn't be sly. He was too obviously greedy for that. Knox dismissed it, knowing that he was under pressure, and that to yield to the temptation to smear McEwen's cigar on his face wouldn't help at all.

He was on his second round when a bellhop paged him to the telephone. It was Maddy Keehan. "Paul? I got a dame down here that says she's working for you."

Knox said, "What kind of dame?"

"Expensive. Skinny type with dark hair."

"Name of Natalie Tinsley?"

"Says her name is Matty O'Harry. What kind of monicker is that?"

"Blarney Irish," Knox said. "Ask her again."

There was a moment of silence and then Keehan's gravelly voice, "Name's Tinsley."

Knox said with a lot of satisfaction. "She's the one that lives in the hotel penthouse, Maddy."

Keehan's friendliness slipped away. He sounded savagely happy. Knox guessed that Beeker wasn't around. "And she's working for you? Since when do society dames work for private peepers?"

"She's working for me tonight," Knox said. Keehan's tone of voice wasn't helping the temper McEwen had ruffled. And he was irked with Nat. He didn't know what she had done to get herself at the station but it was throwing his schedule off. If he hadn't needed her, he would have left her there for a while.

He said, "What did she do, for God's sake?"

"She tailed Mousy, that's what. And he couldn't duck her."

Knox had to laugh. "Maybe that's why I hired her, Maddy. No amateur could do that well." It was funny; it was also something to think about. "Maybe you'd better hire her; you could use a few good shadows."

"I don't like the way you work," Keehan said. "I don't

like your smart cracks. I don't like you, Paul. Not since you came back."

"Mutual," Knox said. "What's this leading up to?"

"You do your job and I'll do mine," Keehan told him. "I mean stay out of this case. Find your missing dame and go away."

"Am I in your case?" Knox asked in surprise. "Because Mac and I found that body?"

"Look," Keehan said savagely, "your lady friend tailed Mousy from Jock Dylan's place. What was she doing there."

"Not looking for Jock," Knox said. He was getting impatient. "Send her over here, Maddy. Tell me your troubles tomorrow."

It was no way to talk to a man you wanted a favor from, he knew. But he was getting fed up. And then he didn't think Keehan would dare hold Natalie Tinsley. He had the idea that she could talk her own way out if she wanted to.

"I hope I get the chance to do more to you than tell you something," Keehan said. He slammed down the receiver, making Knox's ear ache.

Knox was working on a lemonade in the bar when a bell-hop came and told him that Miss Tinsley was outside in her car and would he join her, please. He paid for the information and went out. He got in the car beside her without a word. She drew away from the curb.

They rode in silence. Then Knox lit a cigaret and turned, putting it between her lips. She said in a small voice, "Which way?"

Knox burst out laughing, not just because she looked so crest-fallen but because of her costume. Somewhere she had got hold of a dark turtle-necked sweater and dark slacks. She had a bulky jacket over the sweater and rubber-soled shoes that looked too big on her slender feet.

"Where did you get those?"

"I had them in the car. I changed while I waited at that place."

"And even in this outfit Keehan could tell you were

expensive." Knox grinned. "He has better taste than I thought. Why?"

"Why the clothes or why did I get arrested?"

"Both." He lit a cigaret for himself. "Keep going north and angle toward the waterfront."

She said, "Well, a dinner dress seemed a silly sort of thing to go detecting in so I put these in the car in case I should need them. As for getting arrested, how did I know that little man I was following was a policeman and that the alley he led me to was behind the police station?"

"Did he lead you or try to shake you?"

"He tried to dodge me at first but my car is faster. Then I think he deliberately led me there."

Knox laughed aloud. He saw that he had hurt her feelings and he said hastily, "I'm sorry, Nat, but you followed the cleverest shadow in the department. They were a little peeved at your ability."

"I did that?" She sounded pleased in a simple way. "Then you should hire me more often."

"I should," he agreed. He lapsed into silence, thinking about her ability at shadowing. It was not usually something that came to a person without training.

Nat said, "By the way, that man I followed was the only person I saw."

Knox understood then. Mousy had seen her watching and had deliberately gone to Jock's house as a test. He had probably led her enough to get her licence number and then had tried to shake her. Not being able to do that, he had drawn her in to be picked up.

"And what did you do?" she wanted to know.

"I reconnoitered," Knox said. "We have a couple of calls to make. Can you stand a tough place?"

"If you're with me."

"I will be. Do you shock easily?"

"Not that I know of. You can swear at me if my getting arrested caused any trouble."

"Not that," Knox said. "It's not that personal."

"Gee, boss, dis is mysterious an' excitin'."

"It could be," Knox agreed without smiling.

"I can manage," she said. Knox glanced sideways at her. The competence in her tone was pronounced. He watched her as she drove. As if catching seriousness from his tone, she had dropped her girlishness. He was sure that she was right, she could manage and manage very well. The more he saw of Nat Tinsley, the more he liked her, and the more he liked her, the unhappier he became.

He had her park around the corner from Maroney's tavern. He watched her now as he had watched her when they went to Jock's. If she knew anything of what was going on, if she had any connection with this place, none of it showed in her expression. She looked around as if she had never seen a place quite like it. Once more she was slipping into her naive role.

Maroney's was primarily a tavern for fishermen. Not the kind for rich sports but one for commercial fishermen who make their living the hard way, on the cold waters of the Sound and in Alaska.

Nat said out of the side of her mouth, "Is dis de tough jernt, boss?"

Knox took her elbow and steered her toward the rear. "This is it," he assured her. There was a telephone booth at the back. The booth beside it was occupied. Knox installed Nat in the one next to that. He was interested in the occupants of the last booth. He had only a quick glimpse of a scarred, somewhat battered face before it dipped into a mug of beer. But he had seen enough to recognize Eddie Pillow. He was not surprised to hear the thin voice of Binks coming from the other seat.

"Beer or fortified wine," Knox asked Nat.

"Beer, please."

Knox ordered; then he rose, excused himself, and started for the telephone booth. He did not look around but he was conscious of eyes on him—those of the bartender and the aproned waiter who had taken their order. He tugged at the closed door of the booth. It refused to give.

The bartender called, "Sorry, bud, that's out of order."

Knox saw no point in arguing about it. Turning, he walked back to his booth. He stared squarely at Binks. Binks stared back. Knox said, "I'll see you around when I'm not so busy."

"Pleasure," Binks said. Eddie Pillow did not even look up from contemplating the foam on his beer.

Back in the booth, Knox lifted his beer glass. "To the brewery. May it have kept this long enough to ripen it."

It was drinkable. Nat half emptied her glass, set it down, and removed a delicate line of foam mustache from her upper lip. "What are we here for, Paul?"

"Just checking. I don't think there's anything here for us, but let's hang around long enough for another beer and see."

He signalled the waiter. He came forward and leaned on the table with both ham-sized hands. "Look, mister, the lady here makes some of the guys self-conscious. Sorta restricts 'em, if you get what I mean."

Nat pushed out her chest. Under the loose, heavy turtle-neck sweater there was little effect. "Well! This is the first time I ever been run out of a joint for bein' a lady."

Knox had a slight fit of coughing. When he recovered, he rose, indicating that she should go with him. The bartender looked slightly bewildered but clung to his argument.

"They just ain't sure, that's all. Please, lady. Our beer ain't no different from anybody else's around here."

They went. Outside, Knox said, "That was one of the sweetest heave ho's I ever had."

Nat said, "What's the matter with me? Didn't I do it right?"

Knox surveyed her. "Sure, you did just fine. You look all of fifteen in that rig, and about as tough as sweet Sally Simple."

"I can be tough." She sounded too indignant for it to be real.

Knox said earnestly, "I'm sure you can."

"And now what, Paul? Do we prowl now?"

Knox looked at his watch. "It's too early." It was just a little after eleven. He wanted the tavern closed before he returned to the fishing boat.

"Right now," he said, "I think we'll take in that show."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THEY WEREN'T far from the address on the card Knox had got from Carl. When Nat was within a half block, on a dark sidestreets, Knox had Nat pull up to the curb.

"This is as far as we go," he said. "And you'd better change back to your dinner dress. I think it will get us in easier."

Nat looked around at what was obviously a warehouse district, dark and empty at this hour of the night. "What kind of a show goes on in a neighborhood like this?"

"Detecting has all sorts of angles," Knox told her casually. Opening the car door, he slipped out and stood with his back to Nat.

"Detectives in books would be panting after me in the back seat," Nat said. He heard the car door slam and then the rear door open and close. Her voice came again, but muffled, so that he knew she was pulling the sweater off over her head.

Still muffled, her voice came loudly enough for him to understand. "Don't be such a damned gentleman. I'm stuck in this thing."

She was, Knox discovered. Pulling off a turtle neck sweater in the limited head room offered by the rear of a low slung sport car was obviously quite different from putting it on in the same space. Nat had somehow got the sweater to a point where the smallest part of the neck was across her mouth and nose, her arms half out of the sleeves, and her body bent nearly double with her back against the top.

Knox surveyed the situation, then opened the door, and catching where he judged her armpits to be, pulled and

steered her until she stood on the sidewalk. He located the hem of the sweater and pulled. Nat said, "Yurp," and when the sweater came off put one hand to her nose and the other to her right ear.

"You nearly took me apart."

Knox said hastily. "Get back in there. Why didn't you tell me you didn't have anything on under that?"

As he turned away, she popped back into the car and slammed the door. "I forgot, Paul. Honest I did. You see, my dress doesn't allow for anything under it sort of." There was more wriggling, grunts, and then she stood beside him, once more in the dress.

"You can look now."

"I didn't mind looking before," Knox said honestly. "But there's a time and place for everything." He went to the car and began locking the doors.

"Wait, I want my bag. I have to comb my hair."

They were finally ready to go and started down the street. Nat walked sedately with her hand on Knox's arm, her high-heeled shoes making pleasant music echoing from the empty-windowed buildings about them. Knox liked her alongside. She was neither tall nor short; just a comfortable height. He liked her faint perfume and the light touch of her hand on his arm. He reminded himself that this was strictly business, that there were a number of factors that he could not ignore, factors that might well make Natalie Tinsley accessory, at least, in murder. But he found his shell of objectivity threatening to crack. He could not forget her pleasantly different kiss. Nor could he forget the brief glimpse he had had of her slender, lovely figure.

He walked along in silence, arguing with himself, until, by the time they reached the corner and a small, dilapidated looking tavern, he felt a little better, a little more secure.

The address of the tavern matched that on the card. Knox ushered Nat inside. It was a quiet place, as grubby on the inside as on the outside. Only a few customers were seated at the bar. There was a doorway at the end with the

sign "Booths for Ladies" over it. The door was closed. Knox headed that way, his card in his hand.

A man wearing a dirty apron moved forward out of darkness. "This part's closed." He was big, with an ugly bigness of feature, and a good deal of his weight in a barrel around his middle.

Knox handed him the card and stood waiting. Beside him, he could hear Nat's breathing. It was rapid as if she were frightened and making an effort to hold herself in.

"Yeh?"

Knox followed the card with some money. The man turned aside to peer at the bills. He put them away and opened the door. "Straight ahead," he said. He sounded grudging.

They went straight ahead, past two rows of empty booths, through a door marked "Private," and down a flight of steps to a cement-floored corridor that turned left for some distance and ended before a doorway curtained off by black velvet. Beyond they could hear the scratchy sounds of a bad movie soundtrack. There was occasional deep laughter from the audience.

"Paul . . . ?"

"Easy, Nat," he whispered. His fingers found her wrist and squeezed. "It'll be okay."

Knox pushed the curtain aside and eased open the door that was behind it, at the same time letting the curtain drop into place behind them so that none of the dim light from the corridor would fall into the room. Since it had been quite dim in the hallway, it took only a short while for their eyes to accustom to the flickering gloom of the room they were now in.

It was small, built like an amateur theater, the rows of seats each slightly elevated by risers from the row before it. The screen showed back a sixteen millimeter film.

Nat was staring, her fingers tight over Knox's. Then, abruptly, she drew her hand away. "Is this your idea of a joke?"

"Shuddup!"

Knox said, "Let's get out of here." The bad sound track was spewing forth language more commonly found on toilet walls. He had no desire to see any more of the picture and he was sure that Nat wanted no further part of it. Knox had not lived the most sheltered of lives. At one time during late adolescence, he had had normal curiosity, had taken in his share of burlesque, and had even made the rounds in Paris while at college. He had contacted vulgarity and obscenity during his life as a policeman, but he could never remember anything as vicious, as degrading, as sickening as what he heard and saw here so briefly. And he doubted if the concern had stopped with this. Some of the stuff they handled probably made this look gentle.

They backed hastily into the hallway. Steps sounded on the inside of the door before they could get more than a few feet away. Knox put Nat ahead of him. "Start walking, keep walking."

"Paul . . . ?"

"Later," Knox said. The door opened, the curtain was lifted, dropped back into place. A man said, "Wait a minute," and Knox turned to look into the barrel of a thirty-eight. He stopped. Nat stopped too.

The man was tall and thin, his complexion pasty, his eyes too bright in his lean, lined face. Knox thought, now I have a hophead on my hands.

"The lady didn't like it," Knox said. "We're going out for air."

"How'd you get in here?" He came a step closer, not letting the gun waver from the direction of Knox's midriff.

"With a card and fifty bucks."

"Where'd you get the card?"

"The guy that gave it to me marked his sign on it," Knox said. "What's the difference?"

"You don't look like the kind that comes here. I don't like it." The man was breathing shallowly but hoarsely. "Lift your mitts, friend, and let's see who you are."

Nat said, "Paul . . . ?" again.

"Get out of the way," he murmured to her. "This guy might play rough."

The man came another step forward. "Turn around."

Knox turned, his hands out slightly and halfway up. He was looking for the opening, waiting for the moment when the man got close enough and just the slightest bit careless. From the corner of his eye, Knox saw Nat take a backward step and then go sideways. She had one hand in her purse and when the hand came out, it was holding a little twenty-five.

Knox dropped to the floor, letting himself fold up like a loose sack. He rolled when he hit, ready to tackle the man. He heard the spat of Nat's twenty-five and then there was no need for him to do any tackling.

The man swore viciously. The sound of the shot and of his voice were drowned by the burst of laughter from the audience. His gun went out of his hand, clattering against the cement wall of the corridor. He looked stupidly down at his fingers. They were growing redder as blood ran from his wrist down over them.

Knox went for the thirty-eight, got it, and was on his feet. "You're too nosy," he said. "Now you turn around."

The man swallowed, opened his mouth as if to yell, and then sullenly presented his back to Knox. Knox cracked the barrel of the gun deftly behind his ear and watched him slide to the floor. Then he grinned at Nat. "Thanks. That was neat work."

"There may be some more of it to do," she said. "Someone's coming from up front."

Her voice was quiet, cold and hard with no trace of fear. Knox could not help a surprised glance. She sounded angry, bitter. He noticed how steady she was, how competently she handled the little gun. She had her profile to his as she stared up the corridor. She was leaning slightly forward with her weight distributed so that she could shift easily and quickly in any direction. She looked like someone who had done this sort of thing before.

The footsteps grew louder and soon the bruiser who

had collected the cards and money appeared. He saw them standing, holding the guns, the thin, pasty man on his face of the floor. He said, "What is this . . . ?" and stopped, lifting his hands in the air. "A stick-up?"

"Kidnapping," Knox said cheerfully. "Come down here and come easily. Hands out from your sides."

He came. Knox circled him, moved in when he was directly in front of Nat and her gun. With quick pats, Knox found a gun. He removed it. He found a knife, too, and took that. He said, "Now hoist skinny over there and let's get going."

Nat looked at Knox. "Paul, do you think it's wise?"

"Necessary," Knox answered. "If you don't want in on this part, you can check out." He saw the wary look in her eyes. "I won't think any the less of you for it. This could be messy."

She glanced down at the gun in her hand. "It seems to me that I'm already in on it. And it couldn't get much messier—after what I saw in there. It's your show, Paul."

Knox accepted that. He directed the bruiser to carry the skinny man ahead of them along the corridor. "And what's the best way out of here?" he asked. He punctuated the question with a gentle nudge from the nose of the thirty-eight.

"The way you came in," the man said.

Knox poked him a little harder. "You wouldn't want me to ask that question again, would you?"

"All right," the man said. Instead of going up the stairs, he went left through another door, along an equally dimly lighted hallway, and out into an alley that Knox guessed was behind the warehouse.

By turning left they came onto the street where Nat had parked her car. There Knox had the bruiser roll the skinny man in the back seat and climb after him. Knox got in front with Nat. She put her twenty-five away in her purse and he turned, holding the thirty-eight so that the man in the back was aware of it.

"Head for where we started," Knox said. "Stop right in front of the pier. Keep your motor running."

"Aye, aye, Captain." She gave him a sideways look and a faint grin. He noticed the brightness of her eyes, the color in her cheeks. She looked like an excited boy despite the fancy dress she wore.

At the pier, Knox motioned the men out. The lean one was awake by now and he staggered under his own power. Both men acted as if they wanted to convince Knox of their desire for complete cooperation. Knox marched them ahead of himself, down the now fog-enshrouded pier.

He said, "Right here. Just step on board and . . ."

"On board what?" the bruiser asked.

Knox felt the pit of his stomach go down fast. There was nothing at the moorage but inky, motionless water.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

NAT TINSLEY watched Knox herd the pair back into the car. "What now, Paul?"

"Make a phone call," he said wearily. "Can you watch this pair?"

She touched the twenty-five now lying in her lap and the thirty-eight Knox had placed on the seat beside her. "As long as you want."

"If I don't move now," he said, "I don't move at all. So hang on." He strode away, feeling a thousand years old. It was a block and a half to a tavern where he found an enclosed pay telephone. He used three dimes before he located Beeker.

"Mel," he said, "the damned boat's gone."

Beeker sounded indifferent. "I'll send an alarm on it. But it will be morning before anyone starts looking."

"Auffer was on that boat," Knox said. He removed the receiver from the proximity of his ear until the explosion subsided. When it did, he explained succinctly, adding his information on the stag show.

"I'm sorry," he said when he finished giving directions. "That boat being gone puts me in one hell of a spot, but it puts you in a worse one. If the stuff is on it, they'll be bound for the San Juan's to make a transfer. Or maybe they'll drop it on one of the Canadian islands. We've got to do something now, not in the morning."

Beeker answered briefly and then hung up. Knox hurried back to where Nat waited. He would tell her to go, he decided; there was no use involving her in this further. He hadn't found out a great deal, bringing her with him. In fact, he was somewhat bewildered by the turn the affair had taken. If Tinsley were in on this, Knox could not see his taking off without his daughter. Nor, on the other hand, could he see Tinsley letting the film go without himself. It was, Knox told himself, definitely a dilemma.

Knox saw the car and he saw Nat. She was still at the wheel. Only now she was facing forward and bent over as if napping. Knox broke into a run. He jerked open the door. "Nat?"

His hand touched her. She slid toward him. She was loose, boneless. He said, "Jesus," in a sick voice and caught her as she half fell from the car. His hand found her breast, cupping it. Relief at the steady throbbing of her heart knocked everything else temporarily from his mind.

He kept her in his arms, rocking her gently back and forth, murmuring without realizing it, "Nat, honey. I'm sorry. I was a damned fool to leave you with a pair like that. Wake up, Nat honey, please."

He stopped muttering. He was looking into a wide open pair of eyes. Lips curved up in a faint smile. "My head hurts."

Knox swallowed and tried to remember what he had been saying. Her head might hurt but she was definitely fully conscious. Her arms were no longer limply hanging but around his neck. The eyes were very wide and very close, the smiling lips were a fraction from his.

Knox kissed her, gently, as he might kiss a hurt child, and then deposited her on the seat of the car. He said with

a voice that required effort to be held steady, "Hold still and let me feel."

"You did," she remarked. "But go ahead. I like it."

Knox ignored her and ran his fingers at the back of her head. He found the lump. It wasn't large but it was definitely tender; she moaned softly.

"Paul," she said in a contrite voice, "I let them get away . . ."

"To hell with them," he said savagely. "What did they hit you with?"

She spoke slowly now as if trying to recall. He had the feeling that she was acting. Before, whatever he had murmured to her had caught her enough by surprise so that she forgot momentarily. Now she was acting. He could not help thinking it; he did not want to think it.

She said, "I was facing them, kneeling on the seat, and they started to offer me money to let them go. I told them how vicious and beastly they were for showing such filth as that movie, and the thin one started to laugh. Then he began to cough. He coughed so hard that he bent over. His friend began to pound him on the back. Suddenly he stopped and said, 'Easy, it's only a dame.' I fell for it and started to turn and look. One of them hit me with something. The thin one must have had it in his pocket."

Knox looked closely at her. "You're a little pale but I think you're okay. Can you drive home?"

"I can but I'd rather you did."

"I have to wait for the cops," Knox said. "After I get rid of them, I'll come to your place. You'll be feeling better then and I'll tell you all about it."

She was pouting again. "Do I have to leave you?"

"I don't want you in this mess."

She did not answer except to lift her hands and touch his cheeks. After a moment, she said, "I'm sorry. It's my fault, isn't it?"

"Hardly. Losing that pair isn't important. We'll get them again."

She pulled him gently toward her. Her eyes were bright,

her lips full and soft and no longer smiling when they touched his. Knox felt his own hands tighten on her shoulders, although he knew that there was no time for this. He wanted to back away, to tell her to go while she could. But this kiss was different from the other she had given him, from the one he had given her. This was a lot more kiss; there was a lot more of Natalie Tinsley in it.

The sound of a siren keened through the air. Knox thrust her back. "Drive, damn it."

She smiled, flicked a hand, and then the powerful car was gone. Knox was standing in the same place when Beeker drove up. By the time Beeker was out of the car and beside him, Knox had his lipstick tinted handkerchief back in his pocket.

"I lost them," Knox said. "But they should be back at the show."

"Captain Fogarty of the Vice Squad is on that one," Beeker said. "That isn't our business—unless we can hook the stag shows into murder."

"There really isn't a damned thing that can be made public, is there?" Knox admitted.

"Just that dead dishwasher talking about the stags. That isn't enough for me to horn in on—yet."

Knox thought about it. He said, "Hell, what's the difference now? Whoever is running this show has me tagged and Cora Deane tagged. They had Leo tagged—I don't know how. Go ahead, Mel, and blow it open. Yell to the coastguard. Maybe we can get that boat stopped."

"All right," Beeker said. "And what else have you got for me?"

Knox told him about his trip to the tavern. He pointed to it not far away. "I saw Binks in there tonight," he added casually.

Beeker swore at him. "Now you tell me!"

They went together, on the run, the driver of the police car swinging in behind them. By the time they arrived, closing time was being announced. The proprietor was hang-

ing up his apron. The waiter was vaguely mopping at the counter. No one else was in sight.

"Police," Beeker said.

The proprietor stopped looking as if he wanted his bungstarter from behind the counter. Knox said, "Where's the little squirt who was parked in the back booth earlier?"

"How should I know?" the waiter said. "I don't nurse every guy that comes in for a beer."

Knox walked to the phone booth, grabbed the door, and pulled. The door came open. He barged in, lifted the receiver, and dropped in a dime. The line was dead. He slammed the receiver back and stood still, fighting the anger that was crawling up in him, the impatience that he knew was making him lose his head. He stood there, in the close box, taking deep breaths. He could hear Beeker's questions but he made no sense out of them.

Beeker or the waiter or the proprietor sneezed. Knox stepped into the room. "*Gesundheit*," he said viciously.

Beeker gaped at him. "What the hell you sore about, swearing at me?"

Knox suddenly felt silly for his own bad temper. "I just said *Gesundheit* when you sneezed."

"Nobody sneezed," Beeker said. He looked at Knox as if Knox might be a little off at this hour of the night.

Knox said, "The hell. . . ." He stopped, went back into the booth, and glared at it. The wall with the seat attached was against the back of the tavern. Knox put a shoulder against it and pushed.

Someone shot a gun. Knox heard the bullet whine through the pebbled sheet iron of the booth wall and tear out the other side. He left the booth in one jump.

"You damned fool!" A muffled voice shouted.

Beeker was coming toward Knox, drawing his gun. The proprietor was moving behind his counter, followed by the waiter. Knox said, to the driver of the police car, "Those guys want to play."

They stopped wanting at the sight of the police pos-

itive. Knox watched Beeker as he stopped and glared at the waiter. "Where is it, friend?"

"Try this," Knox suggested, pointing to a door that opened at the end of the bar.

"That's a storeroom," the waiter said.

Knox tried the door. It was locked. Beeker pushed him aside and used his gun on the lock. The door swung open and Beeker went in carefully but without fear.

"Take it easy," a familiar thin voice said. Knox, a half step behind Beeker, stopped. Binks stood there, his hands held high. There was no one else in sight.

"Where's the marksman?" Beeker demanded.

Binks jerked his head vaguely. "He blew out the back. I told him he was a damned fool. I told him not to shoot."

"This is Binks," Knox said unnecessarily to Beeker.

"I'll take him along with that pair in the other room," Beeker said. "And put out an alarm when he tells me what his pal looked like."

"Eddie Pillow most likely," Knox offered.

"No," Binks said. "He blew with Toll. He was a tall, skinny guy with a pasty face and the needle habit. I don't even know his name."

"My pal from the stag show," Knox said to Beeker. He looked at Binks. "Well, what do you do now? They've all gone off and left you, taken a boat ride."

Binks nodded. He looked unhappy. "Don't I know it. I'm glad they've gone. I was just waiting for the coast to clear so I could go home. I was hired to tail, not to mess in something like this. I don't like guys that shoot guns through walls. I'm clean. I want to stay that way."

"I've got a kidnapping charge against you," Knox told him. "If you want me to press it, clam up. If you want to go home, talk." He said in an aside to Beeker, "If he knows anything, he'll talk. He's not much force in this."

"That's the way it is," Beeker agreed. "The way Knox just said it."

"I don't know anything," Binks said. "All I want to do is get out of this and go home."

Knox said, "Who's Mitch? Who plays the fancy voice on the telephone?"

"I thought it was Toll," Binks said. "But now I'm not sure."

He pointed to where a telephone cord went into the wall that had the booth on the far side. There was a table and chair there and a telephone on the table. "Toll gimmicked the pay phone somehow so that you can't call out. But incoming calls can be taken in here."

"And naturally it hasn't been reported out of order," Knox said. He looked at Beeker. "A cute gag that would work only until the company sent out a man to collect its nickels."

"They figured on being done before that," Binks said. He was neither sullen nor eager. "Anyway, Knox, calls came in here but they didn't go out. Whoever this Mitch is, he talks from somewhere else."

Beeker jerked a thumb at Binks. "Go along with the others. I'll find out later how much you can remember." He let the driver herd Binks out with the proprietor and the waiter and then turned to Knox. "What's on for you now, Paul?"

Knox spread his hands. "I don't feel like swimming after the boat. I'll go back to the hotel and get some rest while you start whatever wheels are needed. The coastguard should be able to find it."

"On a dark, foggy night—sure." Beeker ran a hand wearily over his face. "Got any more information for me?"

Knox flushed at his tone of voice. It was in his mind to tell Beeker about Mrs. Renfrew but he decided against it. He couldn't see where it would help at this point.

They parted, Knox taking a cab back to the hotel. He was tired; he wished he had a drink. But, he knew, in his present state that wouldn't really relax him. And what he needed was some way to relax. He was keyed, tight and the fact that he could do little but wait now didn't help. Nor did his realization that a lot of this might have been avoided had he gone about it a different way. While he was busy spreading bait and pulling in minnows, the big fish had swum away. The coastguard might be lucky and find

the boat before it crossed into foreign waters. Knox wasn't feeling sanguine about the prospect.

Because there was really nothing else that he could think of to do, he turned to a prospect that, at the moment, he disliked. He called Nat.

She said, "I've been waiting."

Knox sprinted for the elevator. Something in her tone of voice had lifted him, if only momentarily. Going up, he thought, I could be wrong about her. It was wishful thinking, perhaps, but he wanted to be wrong about her. Wrong as hell. He wanted Nat Tinsley to be what she made herself out to be—nothing more.

Nat had changed into a housecoat, floor length, tight-waisted, with a flaring skirt. She looked less boyish and somehow older, very feminine and sophisticated. She looked good to Knox. So did the drink she had mixed and put in his hand before he was out of his overcoat.

She led him to the couch, lit two cigarets, gave him one, and they settled back with a half cushion width between them.

"Where's your father?" he asked.

She gave him a half smile. "I don't play nursemaid to Dad, Paul."

Knox made a grin out of the question that jumped to his lips. "The last I heard he was with Mrs. Renfrew. If I were you, I'd worry."

Nat shrugged and drew deeply on her cigaret. "I'm more worried about you. I don't understand much of what happened but it doesn't seem—safe."

The exhilaration was still with Knox. He temporarily ignored the opening her words gave him and said, "My job isn't always safe, Nat. But right now it doesn't look too dangerous."

She was persistent. Almost, he thought, as if she wanted him to force the issue. "What did you do after I left, Paul?"

He told her about the abortive raid. Then he said, because he had to know sooner or later, "So we caught Binks. Toll got away on the boat."

She looked blank. "Who are Binks and Toll? Am I supposed to know them?"

He wanted to believe her. He wanted badly to believe her. He said, "Binks is the little guy that followed Jock around. Jock got killed. Toll is one of the voices at Merkle 3-4220."

If it made sense, her expression didn't admit it. She put out a hand, letting her fingertips brush his forehead. "Paul you're tired. I should let you go to bed. But I'm selfish, I guess, and I'm too curious. Start at the beginning."

Now that he had started, he would finish it this way. He took a long pull at his drink and set down the glass. "It begins," he said, "with Leo Auffer. He's dead." Lifting the glass, he finished the rye.

Nat was staring at him, her cigaret halfway to her lips, her eyes wide and questioning. "Leo—dead?"

"Murdered," Knox said shortly. "Like Jock. Just like Jock." He told her about it, leaving out nothing except his identity and Cora's and Leo Auffer's. He detailed the scene on the boat with Binks and Toll and his own investigations in the basement. Then he leaned back and waited for her to say something.

"But why?" she demanded. "Why Leo? What does it mean, Paul, What has it to do with your missing war bride?"

She was good, he thought. She was the best actress in this sort of thing he had ever come across. If, he added, she were faking all of this. He tried again. "There is no war bride. That's a cover up. It's all connected with blackmail and obscene pictures like those we saw tonight."

"They were horrible." She tried to smile. "I thought at first you were trying to be funny. I got mad. Then I realized—when that man came out—there was more. A lot more. But I don't understand—about the blackmail."

He told her that too in short, hard words that left her pale as the picture grew clearer. She whispered once, "How awful," but outside of that he knew no more of what he wanted to know than when he had started.

"It's a nasty business," Knox said. "But it's almost over—one way or the other."

"I hope so," she said. She was playing with her half empty glass. "I don't understand, Paul. If whoever it is knows that you're investigating this, why didn't they kill you too? What would one more murder mean to them?"

Knox looked straight at her. "That's one I haven't an answer to—yet. I have an idea, but . . ." He left it hanging and rose.

She came up too, her hand on his arm. "Paul. . . ." Her voice was soft, her eyes fixed on his. At that moment she was completely appealing. His protective objectivity disappeared, was swept away by her nearness. He felt her touch through the cloth of his coat; he was conscious only of her. Her hands lifted, rested lightly on his cheeks. "Paul . . ."

He took a deep breath, fighting himself. At that moment he hated his job and everything about it. At the same time he hated himself. With an effort that took more strength than he thought he had, he caught her wrists and pulled her hands away.

"Thanks, Nat. Thanks for your help tonight." Gently he maneuvered her until they were at the door. "And don't worry, Nat. It will all work out."

She did not look at him now but down, at some point by her feet. "I hope so, Paul. But be careful. Don't —don't take any chances."

"No," Knox agreed, "I won't take any chances. There really aren't any now. The coastguard has been alerted for Toll's boat." He opened the door and went out. He left her standing there, looking after him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BACK IN his suite, Knox called Mrs. Renfrew. He received no answer. He inquired and the desk clerk told him that

Mrs. Renfrew and Mr. Tinsley had gone out together a few hours before. They hadn't returned yet.

Nor would they, Knox knew. They wouldn't return unless the fishing boat decided to come back. He asked for some coffee and sandwiches to be sent up and then he sat down to wait for Beeker to call him.

He didn't wait long. To take his mind off Nat Tinsley, he thought about Beeker, and his conscience rose up and snarled at him. With a sigh, he succumbed and put in a call for the Lieutenant. When they were connected, Knox said, "I just found out that Mrs. Renfrew—" He stopped and detailed Mrs. Renfrew—"is Cora Deane, Mel. She and Tinsley are both gone. On the boat, I suspect."

"Then you have an operative still on the case," Beeker said. "You can relax." Knox winced at his sarcasm. Beeker went on, "Can she handle it if things get tough?"

Knox said in a low voice, "She could handle it—if she were real lucky."

Beeker said, "Oh." There was a silence, then talking in the background. His voice came in stronger. "Paul, the vice squad found nothing but a warehouse where you sent them. They turned the place inside out. Fogarty is sore as hell."

Knox said, "The devil with Fogarty. Does he think they run those shows like Saturday matinees? Tell him to kick the walls down too. They aren't fools."

"Okay," Beeker said. He sounded faintly amused. "I got the Coastguard, Paul. They've gone to work."

Knox didn't want to talk any longer. He was getting over being mad and tired; now he was getting sick. Sick from helplessness and a rising feeling of tension that made his head feel like the inside of a triggered bomb. Muttering something about waiting here for further news, he hung up.

The coffee and sandwiches came. He found that he wasn't really hungry but he managed to eat half a sandwich and drink all of the coffee. He thought about calling Nat Tinsley again and he had to fight hard before the idea went away. He kept remembering what she had looked like in that

brief moment he had glimpsed her slim, smooth body. He kept remembering her eyes and her voice and her touch just before he had left moments ago. He rose and forced himself to think of something to do.

He realized how completely disorganized he was when he remembered that he had never finished his check of Leo Auffer's toiletries kit. Going into the bedroom, he got it from the drawer and dumped the contents on the bed. With savage violence, he took a knife and ripped apart the leather case. There was nothing. The squeezed out tubes lay wrinkled and empty, mocking him. He took the bottles into the bath, emptied them, peeled off the labels, squinted into the caps. He threw the remains into the wastebasket.

He found what he sought in the razor, and he stood for some time cursing his own stupidity. It was a tiny piece of paper covered with miniscule writing, and it had been placed under the felt pad that lined the inside of the metal head guard.

The tiny, folding magnifying glass that Knox carried was barely enough to help his tired eyes make out the writing Auffer had put on the paper. Knox made no effort to do a thorough job of deciphering Auffer's cryptic notes. The first few words told him that these were to have expanded later into a full report. Then names came out and struck him: "Tinsley directing. Toll running for Tinsley. About to break this. Arranged contact for sub-basement. Deane. Am being played but can make it boomerang and clean it up today." The date was that of Auffer's murder. One more. "Fishhead picked."

Knox put the paper away and began pacing the floor. Auffer's notes had done little but confirm his suspicions. It still proved nothing about Nāt, but one way or the other, he was glad he had said to her what he had. Again he thought of calling her. Right now, he had an idea, she would tell him if he asked. It was too late to matter one way or the other.

He pushed the idea aside again, recognizing it for what it was—an excuse to see her. The last phrase that had

caught his attention came back to his mind. "Fishhead picked." It was so senseless on the surface that he wondered how anyone but a native or a person very familiar with this area could ever decode it. But Knox had not been raised on the Sound for nothing. Fishhead was an island, a mere dot of land, on the edge of the San Juan archipelago. It was across the line, on the Canadian side.

Knox knew now what he had to do. Now that he was sure, he had no intention of calling Becker. It might be foolish and it might cost him the case, but it was a chance he had to take. The kind of chance the World Circle office would understand.

His watch said that it was five a.m. Picking up the phone book, Knox went to work. He found what he wanted and put in his call. It took some time; it was the thirteenth ring before there was an answer.

Knox said, "I want to charter a seaplane to take off at dawn."

The half asleep voice came to life. "For how long?"

"All day if necessary," Knox said. He listened, talked, made the arrangements, and hung up. Going into the bedroom, he stripped down. Putting himself under a cold shower until he was thoroughly miserable, he rubbed himself dry, and dressed in a loose flannel suit and sneakers. He took his gun out of the case where he kept it, made a careful check, and dropped it into the coat pocket. He still had a few moments and he used the time to run his razor over his whiskers. Grabbing up an overcoat and soft hat, he left the suite.

A brief breakfast at Connie's helped waken him some more and then he took a taxi, arriving at the seaplane anchorage at the south end of the lake just as the sky began to lighten. The pilot was a red-haired young man, stocky, with a wide grin and a competent way of handling himself and his plane that Knox liked. He took orders and asked few questions. His name was Riggs.

Knox said when they were up. "We'll head straight for

Fishhead island. I'm looking for a converted fishing boat that should arrive just about the time we do."

Morning spread out, clear above and with a light mist on the water. By the time they were over the Strait and could see the Canadian mainland as well as the Peninsula to the southwest, the islands began breaking into sight, blending westward into the big mass of Vancouver Island itself.

"Isn't that it," Knox said.

"Off to the left," Riggs said. "All by itself, what there is of it." He went into a wide sweeping turn. "Now what?"

"There's a bay on the north," Knox said. "Not much but maybe enough for you to put me down."

"Sorry," Riggs said. "How long would I have a license if I started running people over borders?"

Knox showed him his World Circle card. "This is a government affair, too, by the way. But to save your neck, get as low as you can and go as slow as you can. If you lose me, that's no fault of yours. Then hightail it to Friday Harbor and report—to the Coast Guard."

"I don't like it," Riggs said. It was logical for him not to want to jeopardize his living. But on the other hand, Knox did not feel like making a detailed explanation. He said:

"Let's go down and take a look, anyway."

Riggs gave him a slantwise grin and started for the island. There were two bays, actually, opposite one another. Both showed clearly as they dropped toward the dot of rock and timber that made up the island's surface. On the north bay, the larger, the fishing boat rode gently at anchor. Riggs dropped so low that both he and Knox could see a man on deck, focusing binoculars on them. Another man appeared. There was the glint of light on a rifle barrel. A star blossomed in the glass at Rigg's side.

Riggs swore and they went up and away fast. "By God," he said, "you weren't kidding." He looked mad. "Who are those guys?"

"No one you want to tangle with," Knox told him.

"It's my plane, now it's my war." Riggs glared down. "Where do you want to be dropped, friend? And shall I come with you?"

"You can do more at Friday Harbor," Knox said. He had an idea that it was Toll using the rifle—or Eddie Pillow. One or the other. He thanked them.

Riggs began to work back down. Knox stripped, put his clothes into a bundle, wrapped them in a piece of dirty canvas lying in the ship, and waited by the door.

Riggs chose the south bay under Knox's direction. His pontoons touched the water, skipped, slowed. "Now!"

The ship began to swing away, ready to lift. Knox felt the cold air like an ice bath and pushed with his legs. The water slanted up over him, colder than the air. He jumped to take advantage of the movement of the plane and he didn't go in too far, but far enough so that he was glad when he broke water and saw daylight. He held his bundle high, dripping on the outside, hoping that it had stayed comparatively dry on the inside.

He could hear the ship roaring up and away. The sandy beach of the island looked a long way off from where he was. He started for it, awkwardly holding the bundle up with one hand.

It wasn't over fifty yards. Any more, he thought, and he wouldn't have made it. Fifty yards was a long way in such numbing water. Then when he staggered onto the sand, the breeze was colder than the water had been and he made himself run for the scant protection of a patch of timber.

Once behind the bole of a solid looking douglas fir, he opened the bundle. Little water had seeped in so that his undershirt was dry enough to use as a towel. He was giving himself a good rub with it when a pleasant voice turned him around.

"This is a strange way to come calling, Paul."

It was Cora Deane and she was looking him over with obvious approval. She wore a sweater and slacks and was herself, with no trace of Mrs. Renfrew. Her hair was caught

up in a scarf. In her hand she held a thirty-two, and it was pointing casually but definitely at him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"GOOD MORNING," Knox said. His teeth were chattering. He dropped the soggy undershirt and reached for his shorts. He put them on and then got his shirt. "How are you doing, Cora?" His voice was casual, as if he had expected this.

The gun lowered. "It's about sewed up." She smiled at him. "I'm glad you didn't get any wrong ideas, Paul. I need your help."

He finished dressing, found his coat with the gun and his cigarets dry, having been protected by his trousers. They slapped damply against his legs. He lit a cigaret and inhaled with pleasure.

"You took a hell of a chance," he said. "What happened?"

She showed her teeth in a wide smile. "Tinsley isn't as old as he might be," she said. "It didn't take him long to find out some of Mrs. Renfrew's lumps weren't real."

"And he's letting you run loose?" Knox had to light another cigaret as Cora plucked his from him.

"Why not? He thinks I'm helping him." She paused and added, "I am—right to where we want him."

Knox bent to tie his shoes. "The coastguard is on its way—I hope. How do we play this?"

Cora waved her gun. "I was sent to bring you in. Let's do it that way."

"How many are there?"

"Just three," she said. "Tinsley and Toll and a mug named Eddie Pillow."

He was sure Eddie Pillow was with them. His knowledge of the area from his rum running days plus Toll's navigation abilities would be invaluable to Tinsley.

"All right," Knox said. "I go in behind your pea shooter. And then what?"

"They'll be relaxed with you caught, won't they?" she

asked. "Some time today the contact will be made—here. We have to get them before that happens, while they're only three. It'll be easy if they're relaxed."

Knox swallowd. He wanted a drink of water. "If they aren't?"

She hefted the gun. "I still have this."

"And this," he said. He gave her his gun. "If you don't take it, they will." He watched her lift her blouse, exposing a line of smooth flesh, and tuck the gun into the waistband of her slacks. She let the blouse drop loosely.

"Maybe by tonight we can celebrate, Paul." Her eyes still held a good deal of interest when she studied him.

"The sooner the better," he said. "Let's get going."

They started walking. Knox went ahead and when they were close, moved with his hands held out from his sides. They dropped over a rise down toward the beach where the boat rode gently at anchor. There was a dinghy drawn on the shore. Cora waved him into it and he rowed them out. He climbed aboard with his hands obviously away from his pockets.

Toll stood there with the rifle. Tinsley was apparently unarmed. Pillow was nowhere in sight. Knox nodded affably. "Could I trouble someone for a glass of water?"

"Of course." Tinsley might have been in his suite at the hotel. "Cora, dear, get Paul something to drink. He looks chilled."

Knox stepped toward Tinsley. "Do you want to search me so I can put my arms down?"

"No," Tinsley said in the same courteous tone, "I want you to remove your clothing. It's damp anyway, I'm sure."

How neat, Knox thought. Nothing made the average person more ineffective than nudity, even partial nudity. Cora turned her back and started below deck. With a shrug, Knox stripped down to his shorts. The chill air of the morning, although not as windy on this side of the island, blew icily over him.

At a sign from Tinsley, Toll picked up Knox's clothes and went through them. He tossed them aside, in a heap on the

deck. "Clean," he said. He shook his head. "Doesn't it strike you as strange that he'd come here unarmed?"

Tinsley considered it. Knox rubbed his arms with his hands and shivered. Tinsley said, "No, not really." He turned to Knox. "Go down into the cabin—the starboard one, I believe it is. Cora will bring you something to drink there."

Knox went. After he had the door closed, he could hear someone walking just outside the door. There was the sound of voices, the words too soft for him to understand. Tinsley and Cora were talking, he could tell that much. He looked around. There was little here to help him. The place had obviously been stripped clean of anything that might be of use as a weapon. But it was warm and that mattered most to Knox at the moment.

The door opened and Cora came in with a glass of water and a large mug of coffee. There was rum in the coffee; he could smell its fragrance in the rising steam.

Knox gulped some of the water to take away the salt flavor of his dip in the Sound and then sipped at the coffee. It felt good going down, spreading warmth where he needed it most. He looked at Cora who was regarding him with the same unabashed interest she had on the other side of the island.

"Where's Leo?" he asked.

"Leo?"

Knox said, "I left him here last night. On that bunk."

She looked blank and shook her head. Knox explained briefly. "Just a gag that didn't work," he admitted. "Well, give me my gun and let's get to work. The Coastguard will be along soon—or some Canadian law—and we don't want to give them all the credit."

Cora drew up her blouse and took out the gun. She gave it to Knox slowly. "Be careful. They aren't fools."

Knox dropped the gun onto the bunk behind him. "Neither am I," he said. They were close together and he put out a hand, cupping it at the back of her neck. "I like you better this way than as Mrs. Renfrew."

She didn't try to pull away from him. "Hasn't the coffee warmed you enough, Paul?" She was laughing as she said it. Knox kissed her, feeling the smile on her lips smooth out. Her arms came up and went around him. He could feel the coldness of the thirty-two she still held in one hand. The fingers of the other dug into his bare back as she pressed herself tightly against him.

Then, suddenly, she drew back. "Hadn't we better wait until it's over before we celebrate, Paul?"

Knox sounded regretful. "I suppose we had." He was caressing her arms, his hands down near her wrists, his fingers close to the gun she held. He wasn't surprised when the door opened.

Toll stood there. He held a forty-five in his hand. It looked far more dangerous than the rifle. Knox felt as if he were looking into the muzzle of a cannon. The slug, he thought, could go through Cora and into him with no effort at all.

"Very touching," Toll murmured. "I told Tinsley he was a fool to trust you, Cora."

Cora did not even look toward him. "Don't be a fool," she said tartly. She stepped aside, leaving Toll a clear shot at Knox. "And get out of here until you decide what to do."

"We've decided," Toll said. "There's no point in keeping Knox around any longer. And what's one more. . . ."

Knox could see Cora Deane's training come out. She turned on Toll with a swift smoothness that only a good deal of practice could have given her. She was readying to shoot as she turned, and her bullet caught Toll in the mouth, knocking him backward, against the door, stopping the flow of words from his mouth. "Very neat," Knox murmured. "Very neat, indeed. And now it's two against two."

"That's right," Cora said softly. She walked to the door where Toll lay sprawled. Bending, she drew him aside enough to get the door open. She called.

"Gerard!"

Tinsley's voice came down the companionway. "Is

everything all right, Cora? What has that fool Toll done?"

"It's all over," Cora replied. "The damned fool!"

Knox saw her step forward, through the door. He yelled her name and jumped for her, but he was too late. The roar of her gun was loud in the confined space below deck. Then there was another gunshot. Knox swore and kicked Toll's body aside and got the door fully open.

Cora stood just beyond the doorway, swaying, a surprised look on her face; the gun lay at her feet. Knox looked and saw daylight at the top of the stairs to his left. Gerard Tinsley was sprawled halfway down, and Eddie Pillow framed against the light, a forty-five like Toll's in his hand.

Knox grabbed Cora and pulled her back into the room as Pillow's second shot boomed and the bullet smashed against the galley door beyond. Knox slammed the door and then helped Cora to a chair. "What the hell. . . ."

She was crying in a mixture of pain and rage. "I only tried to wing him, Paul. But I saw that Eddie Pillow and got excited. I think I killed him."

"And a lot of information along with him," Knox said. But he wasn't thinking of that. He bent and looked at Cora's wound. The forty-five slug had caught her low in the shoulder, not far above the swell of her breast. Quickly, he carried her to the bunk, then took off her blouse and went to work with what he had at hand.

The bullet had done a lot of damage, he could see. A heavy slug like that was bound to tear things when it hit, he thought. He staunched the flow of blood, not speaking, working as swiftly as he could. He straightened when he was done and looked into her face. It was very white and still. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was shallow. She was unconscious.

Leaving her that way, Knox took Toll's forty-five and opened the door. Tinsley lay where he had fallen, sprawled grotesquely on the stairs. Eddie Pillow was nowhere in sight. Knox shouted his name and his head appeared cautiously against the sky. He still held the gun.

"Give it up, Eddie," Knox said. "The coastguard is on its way. Give it up and take any break you can get."

"To hell with you!" Pillow shouted. He fired the gun again. Knox drew back as it lifted. But not far enough. He heard the slug rip wood, felt a faint pin prick. When he looked at himself, he saw that a large splinter had imbedded itself in his left arm. He started to draw it out, winced, and left it there.

"You're just making it tough on yourself," Knox shouted.

From the bed, Cora said weakly, "He's a killer, Paul. Like Toll. He killed Jock and Toll killed Leo. I found that out. Be careful of him, Paul."

Knox twisted his head and forced a smile. "Go back to sleep, Cora."

There was the sound of a motor. Knox kicked shut the door and went to the porthole. It faced out to sea. He could make out the seaplane just before it passed from his range of view, and not far away, coming fast, was an official looking cutter. He went back to the door.

"They're coming, Eddie."

His answer was another bullet, and another. He did not try to answer Pillow's shots. There was no need to be a hero at this moment. Then he heard footsteps overhead. Pillow was running back and forth, seeking a way out of this.

Knox took advantage of Pillow's having left the head of the stairs and started for the deck. The splinter in his arm felt awkward but oddly it did not pain too much. He tried not to disturb it, knowing that pulling it out would start the blood flowing.

He reached the deck in time to see Eddie Pillow poised at the rail. "Hold it, Eddie!"

There was a gasp behind Knox, a half choked sound, suddenly interrupted by a gunshot. Knox saw Eddie Pillow look surprised, then half lift himself up before he went over the rail and down into the water. Knox turned.

Cora Deane half leaned, half lay against the door edge. She had picked up her thirty-two and now it hung limply

from one hand. Her face was twisted with obvious pain. "You're too trusting, Paul. You made a target of yourself."

Knox's throat was dry. "Thanks, Cora." He moved, catching her as she slumped. Swearing softly, he carried her down to the cabin and put her back on the bunk. His own gun still lay there where he had tossed it. He left it alone. There was nothing he could do now for Cora, nothing but get a doctor. He had something that needed doing. He did it and then went on deck to wait for the cutter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BEEKER was the first man aboard. Knox showed him the pile of empty film cans. He said, "The rest of it is over the side, Mel. Maybe it's destroying evidence but you can understand."

"Sure," Beeker said. He was looking at what else lay in the hold with the cans. "Stowed them with Leo Auffer's body," he said wonderingly. "What were they saving it for?"

"Because they weren't sure what it was doing here," Knox said. "Tinsley was a careful man in some ways—or he would have had me shot out of hand when I first came aboard. It's a refrigerated hold and he just stowed it here until an idea for disposal came to him. My guess, anyway."

"Good enough," Beeker said. He jerked his head toward the cabin where Cora lay being patched by a medical assistant from the cutter. Knox already had his splinter out and his arm bandaged. He was also dressed; he felt a good deal less conspicuous.

"You say that she shot all three of them?"

Knox led him to the cabin. Cora was awake again, her pain lessened under a slight sedative. Her eyes were clear and she smiled when she saw Knox.

"You might say that she saved my life," Knox said. He looked somberly from her to Beeker. "She gambled and

lost, Mel, but she was smart enough to copper her bet when she saw a chance." He smiled. "That's something Tinsley would appreciate. You see, when she picked me up across the island, I mentioned the Coastguard coming—I did it on purpose. She was smart enough to know that they were licked, and so she shifted back to my side. She did it well, too, Mel, making it look as if she had been with them under cover all of the time."

From the bunk, Cora cried, "Paul!"

"I'm sorry, Cora, but that's the way it is. You didn't have to shoot Tinsley or Eddie Pillow. Pillow was going and he couldn't have got away. Tinsley isn't the type to kill. If he had been, he would have had me shot out of hand when I came aboard. Toll was the only physically dangerous one, really. But you killed all three, knowing that they could talk and upset your little retreat back to our side."

He shook his head at Becker. "I should have taken care of her, Mel. World Circle likes to take care of its own. But I'm no executioner. I couldn't even let her bleed to death when I had the chance."

"Paul! Are you mad?"

He turned fiercely on her. "Don't worry, I can prove it. Leo wrote it down. I have that. I know that he was planning to turn your defection back on you after he learned you'd sold out to the other side. That's why his hocus pocus in the sub basement. Only you were too quick for him. Salas had moved in on Leo and got his face smashed for his efforts. Leo caught you and dragged you across the hall to pump what information he could out of you. He was under pressure since Salas, at least, knew enough to try and get him.

"Only, as I said, you were too quick. Or you used that look you have that promises so much and he dropped his guard. Enough so that you could pull out your little skewer and let him have it in the eye. The same as you did Jock after phoning him and making a date. Jock wasn't fooled by that chair trick and you thought you had to shut him up."

He looked away from her. "I don't know, Mel, but I'd guess that Cora finds it easy to kill. Maybe only after she killed Leo did she find how easy a solution it was. Maybe she's been that way. But it's easy for her. Her only trouble is dressing things up too fancy. Like she did setting up the fifth of whiskey and her panties in the table storeroom. Red herrings, she thought. Just foolishness, really. And using an ice pick on Leo and a knife on Jock after sticking them. Hoping to draw attention from the eye wounds, and only making them stand out more."

"Toll killed Leo, Paul. He told me so," Cora said.

Knox said, "Pardon me, Mel, but if you'll come here." He walked toward Cora, Beeker beside him. She had a sheet up over her since her blouse was gone. He pulled it down and pointed to the deep cleft in her breasts. Half covered by her brassiere was the leather sheathe. Knox reached down and got a hand behind her and twisted. The brassiere came free and the sheathe with it. The slender handle of the slim weapon it held showed now. Knox drew the sheet up as Cora swore ineffectually at him.

"Try this on those wounds for size," he said. He pointed to his gun. "She was helping me, all right. There's my gun she returned. But she was still playing it safely. She returned it to me empty."

"It adds up," Beeker agreed. His face was flushed. He turned the knife over in his hands. "You say she killed Jock, too? But she was with Catlin."

"She gave him a mickey," Knox said. "She used the poor guy to keep me occupied and maybe Leo. Then when she wanted to get at Jock, she used him as an alibi. It's probably the last time he'll mess with strange stenographers in hotels."

"My God," Beeker said. "Five people. My God."

Cora was crying. Knox shut his lips tightly and started out. "I hope it won't be too messy—on World Circle, I mean."

"She won't live long enough," Beeker said. "Telling

her that you knew was the same as killing her, Paul. She has no reason to get well now—except to hang. With that slug having chewed her up, there wasn't much chance anyway. Now. . ."

"I know," Knox said. "But it's hell to feel glad about it."

Riggs and his seaplane, stubbornly determined to finish the charter job, waited for Knox. Telling Beeker he would see him later, Knox went for the dinghy to row out to the ship.

Beeker said, "Business at the hotel, Paul?"

"Loose ends," Knox said. He kept his expression from Beeker.

Beeker waited until he was in the little boat. Then he called, "By the way, Fogarty and his men found a sliding wall in that warehouse. They've got everything, film, cameras, the men. One of them was a Winton bellhop named Carl. He's sore as hell at you."

"I'm crying," Knox said. He looked toward the waiting plane.

Things were winding up. He considered the case as he flew toward the city. By the time he arrived at the anchorage, had Riggs paid off with a fat bonus thrown in, and was at the hotel, the last bit had dropped neatly into place. His report and Auffer's would clean everything up at this end, he decided. The hard part to write would be that about Cora. He hadn't decided what to say yet about Natalie Tinsley.

He tried calling her from the lobby. There was no answer. The desk clerk looked surprised when he inquired. "Miss Tinsley checked out very early this morning, Mr. Knox. I thought you knew."

"What about luggage?"

"Why that went two days ago."

"All prepared," Knox said half to himself. He went up to his room. His arm hurt. He was hungry and he was tired. It was just past one in the afternoon but he felt as if he had been awake and moving for weeks rather than

days. He looked at the blank television set, wondering if the game would be on. That reminded him again of Nat. That hurt too, her going without anything. It was understandable, but it hurt.

There was a knock at the door. A bellboy, a new one to Knox, had an envelope in his hand. On the face was written Knox's name and room number. He paid for it and shut the door. It was thin.

Inside there was only one thing, a ticket to the football game. Knox stared at it for some time. Then, grinning, he hurried to change his clothes.

Knox was in his seat, a good one high up and near the fifty yard line, the kind of seat Tinsley would have bought, when he saw her coming. He had his lunch in his lap, three hotdogs and two cups of bad coffee. He nearly spilled it getting up. Then he changed his mind and sat down again, not looking even when she settled in the seat beside him.

"Thanks for the ticket, Nat."

"Give me one of those," she said. She took a hotdog and a cup of coffee away from him. "You're a pig, Paul."

He turned to smile at her. She had mustard on her mouth and hotdog in it. She chewed industriously. In a suit and fall coat, with a small hat perched on her boyish cut hair, she looked the personification of someone dressed for football. She even wore a mum on the coat with the initial of the California team on it.

"No I'm not," he said. "I'm satisfied with what I've got. I don't want any more."

"Thanks, Paul."

"Your father's dead, Nat. I'm sorry."

"Cora Deane?"

"Yes," he said. "Cora."

"I'm glad you know," she said. "Father never would have killed anyone or had them killed." Suddenly she dropped her quiet tone, and although she talked lower

there was an intensity in her voice Knox had never heard before.

"Believe me, Paul. I didn't know. Dad didn't know all of it, I'm sure. With us it was a big adventure. And because we had everything, there wasn't much left but adventure—the thrill of being hunted, you could call it. It's been fun and it's been profitable. But this was ugly. I—I didn't even know what we were doing until after you told me, Paul. Believe that, please. I don't know how Dad ever got mixed up in something so vile except that he owed certain people a lot of favors."

"The kind you repay or get killed for refusing," Knox guessed.

"That kind," Nat agreed.

Out on the field, the teams were lining up for the kick-off. Knox looked that way but spoke to Nat, his voice as low as hers. "I believe you, Nat, because I want to believe you. But I still don't know why you came. To tell me?"

"To tell you. To learn how you felt about me. I knew that if I found you here, you'd won and that Dad was—through."

"I'm sorry, Nat."

"I don't know if I am or not," she said. "Later I might blame you for what happened to him."

"And hate me."

Her hand touched him, and the feel of her reminded him of too many things. "No," she said. "I'm not that illogical."

"What will you do now, Nat?"

"Go on," she said. "There's still nothing left but the adventure. The excitement. I'll go on gambling and—and taking risks. Can you understand that, Paul?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I don't like it but I can understand it."

She stirred. "Paull"

He looked. The university had the ball and on the first play of the game, a halfback broke loose and went the

distance for a touchdown. In the midst of the roar that rose from the packed stadium, Knox heard her say, her lips close to his ear, "Here's the hundred I owe you, Paul. I never welch on a bet."

People were hammering at one another around them. Knox took advantage of the excitement and caught her to him. Their lips met. He tasted mustard and didn't mind a bit.

"Nat, Nat," he whispered.

She drew away as people about them settled down into their seats. Beside her, Knox stiffened.

"Nat, Beeker's coming. I left word for him where I'd be. He's not looking for you but. . ."

She said, "I have to go anyway, Paul. My transportation is waiting for me." She smiled. "If you win the thousand, I'll send it to you."

"And if you win it?"

"Just wait," she said. "I'll come and see you some time."

"I'm supposed to go to England next, I heard by the grapevine."

"I love England," Nat murmured. There was another roar from the crowd. Knox looked toward the field. When he looked back, she was gone.

He found his last hotdog, still wrapped, on the floor. He picked it up, unwrapped it, and settled back to wait for Beeker. He thought, that's all I seem to do—wait for him.

Beeker settled beside him. "This seat vacant, maybe?"

"For the rest of the game," Knox said. "Hold mine and I'll go get you some hotdogs."

Beeker began to open a sack. "I brought my own. I thought I might stay for a while." He began to eat. "I thought I saw Natalie Tinsley as I came down this way."

"In this crowd?" Knox asked. He took one of Beeker's hotdogs. He was very hungry and now, not at all tired.

"I could be wrong," Beeker said. "I probably was."

They sat comfortably together and watched the game.