



NEW DETECTIVE

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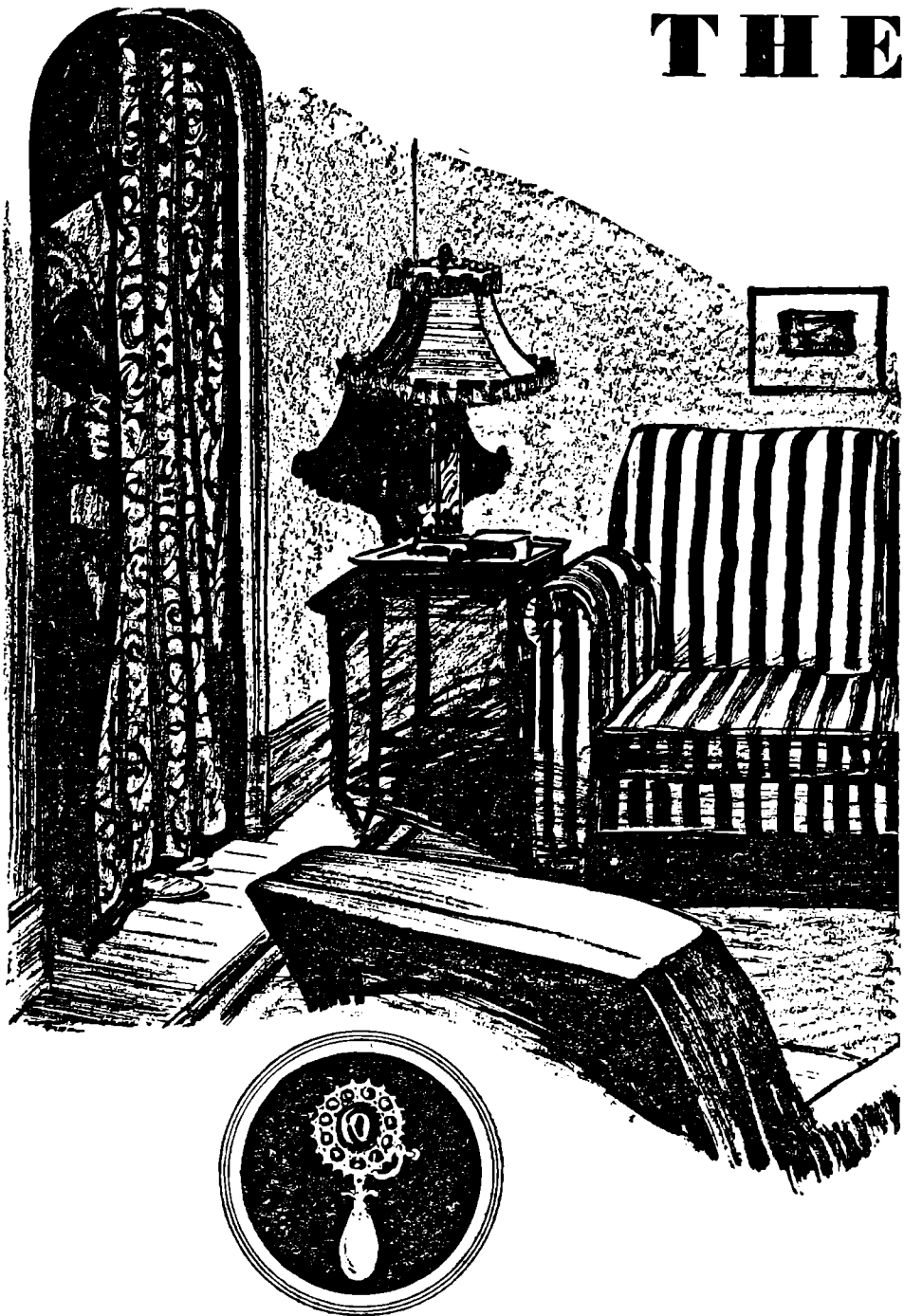
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THE



Hunted, alone, she went out on her dreadful mission—to find a little white stone of death—the one thing that could save her from the chair!

BLOOD STONE

A Novel by Cornell Woolrich

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It could have been a discarded shoe, but then it wouldn't have moved. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Deadly Letter

THE LATCHKEY jammed, and I had to stand there shaking as if I had St. Vitus dance before I could get it to work right. My wrists shook, my arms shook, my shoulders shook, try-

ing to force it around. And above all else, my heart shook with the terror.

I was shaking so it even made the empty milk bottle standing outside the door sing out. I'd accidentally touched it with the tip of my shoe, I guess. The day maid had a note for the milkman curled up in the neck of it, in the shape

of a little funnel. I moved back quickly.

I took the key out, drew a deep breath, and tried again. This time the door opened like pie. There hadn't been anything the matter with the key; I'd been holding it upside down, that was all. I sidled in, eased the door silently closed again behind me—and Mrs. James Shaw was home.

The hall clock chimed four times. They say you can only die once, but I died four times, once for each chime-stroke. Not that I wasn't supposed to be out. I could have even rung the doorbell, and saved myself all that wrestling with the key. But I couldn't face anyone, not even Jimmy, just then. Even if he'd just said, "Have a good time at the night club with the Perrys?" Even if he'd just looked at me, I would have broken down and tried to crawl into his lapel. I needed to be alone, I needed time to pull myself together.

He'd left the light on for me in the hall. He was still up, working away in the library on his income tax report. He had the door closed, but I could tell by the light shining out under the sill of it. He always waited until the last minute, like most taxpayers do, and then he had to sit up all night to beat the deadline on it. That was why he'd had to miss the party and send me out with the Perrys alone.

It was just a coincidence, but I could thank my lucky stars he'd had to finish it tonight.

That was just about the only thing in the whole mess there was to be thankful for. That at least there wouldn't be any trouble between Jimmy and me.

I tiptoed down the hall toward our bedroom, slipped in, closed the door behind me. I gave it the lights and took a couple of deep body-sobs that had been ganged up in me for the past three-quarters of an hour or more.

The glass showed me a golden wreck staggering across the room toward it. All

glittery on the outside: gold-sheath dress, diamonds everywhere there was room to hang them, around my neck, around my wrists, swinging from my ears. Not so glittery on the inside: plenty scared.

I sat down in front of the glass, held my head with both hands for a minute. I could have used a shot of cognac right then, but it would have meant to go out of the room for it, and I might have run head-on into Jimmy out there, taking a bracer himself between exemption lies. So I let it go.

When I got my second wind, the first thing I did was open my gold evening pouch and take out—what I had in it. The style runs to big evening bags this season, and that was a good thing for me. I'd needed a lot of room tonight. The letters made a bulky packet. And the little gun I'd taken along, just to be on the safe side, that took up room, too. The ten thousand dollars in cash didn't take up any room, because I hadn't brought that back with me, I'd swapped that for the letters.

That gives you the whole story. Well, maybe not quite, so in fairness to myself I'd better run over it just once. His name was Carpenter. The letters had been written to him five years ago, three years before I even knew there was a Jimmy Shaw in the world. I should have been safe enough. But he'd made use of a trick to bring them up to date. It was a clever trick. I granted him that.

Here's what he'd done. At the time I'd originally written them, we'd both been at the same seaside resort hotel, only on different floors. I'd had them delivered to him personally by bellboys and what-not, not sent through the mail. In other words he'd received the envelopes sealed and addressed to him in my handwriting, but unstamped and undated by any post office cancellation.

He must have been a careful letter opener, the kind that just makes a neat

slit down the side instead of tearing them ragged. He'd pasted over the slits with strips of thin wax paper, put a brand new stamp on each one, added his present street and city address beneath the name and then sent them back through the mail a second time—to himself. One at a time, over a period of weeks, careful to match the mailing date with the original date inside at the top of the note paper. Get the idea?

Each one had come back to him with this year's date postmarked on the outside, to match the five-year-old date on the inside. I hadn't bothered inserting the year, just the day of the week and the month. He'd had the devil's own luck with those cancellations, too. Not one of them had blurred or smudged; the "1950" stood out clear as a diamond. Then, when he'd gotten them back, he'd peeled off the wax paper.

In other words, he'd turned a lot of gushy but harmless mash notes written to him by a young girl into a batch of deadly, dangerous, incriminating letters written to him by a respectable and socially prominent young married woman with a wealthy husband. And he'd done it by simply sticking stamps on them. What an investment! At an expenditure of three cents a head, he'd gotten back one thousand dollars on each one. There had been ten that were usable; the others either had been signed with my full family name or had things in them that dated them as from that summer.

YOU'D THINK a corny setup like that, which they don't even use in the movies any more, wouldn't go over. I should have refused to pay off, gone straight to Jimmy about it. But it's so easy to be brave until you're face to face with something like that. He'd had me over a barrel. His technique had been beautifully simple and direct. He'd first called me three or four days ago. He'd

said, "Remember me? Well, I need ten thousand dollars."

I'd hung up.

He'd called right back again before I could even move away from the phone. "You didn't let me finish what I was saying. I have some letters that you wrote to me. I thought maybe that you'd prefer to have them back than to have them lying around loose."

I'd hung up again.

He'd called back late that same night, after midnight. Luckily I answered, and not Jimmy. "I'm giving you one more chance. One of them's in the mail already, enclosed in an envelope addressed to your husband. He'll get one every morning, until they're all used up. And the price for the rest'll go up a thousand, each time I send one out. I'm sending the first one to your house and tipping you off ahead of time, so you'll still have a chance to sidetrack it before he sees it. After that, they'll go to his club, where you can't get your hands on them. Think it over. Call me tomorrow at eleven, and let me know what you've decided." And he gave me his number.

I sneaked the letter off the mail tray before Jimmy saw it. I read it over. It should have been written on asbestos. "All night I lie awake and dream of you . . . I'd follow you to the ends of the earth. . . ."

I saw what he'd done. How could I prove I'd written them in 1945 and not 1950? My handwriting hadn't changed. Note paper doesn't show any particular age, especially the deckled gray kind I'd used then and was still using now, with just a crest instead of a monogram. The tables turned. I could hardly wait for eleven to come. I hung around the phone all morning.

When he answered, all I said, breathlessly, was, "That'll be all right. Just tell me where and when."

Tonight had been when. and the flat

I'd just come from had been where. And ten thousand dollars out of my own private checking account had been how much.

At least I'd gotten them all back and it was over. Or is blackmail ever over with? Is it a game that you can ever beat?

There was a fireplace in our bedroom, and I burned the letters in there, one by one; contents and envelopes and spiked cancellations. When the last of them was gone in smoke, I felt a lot better. For about three and a half minutes.

I started to strip off the sparkle, and I opened the little embossed leather case I kept it all in. It was divided into compartments for each variety. The bracelets went into one, the rings into another, and so on. I came to the one for the earrings last. I took the right one off first and pitched it in. Then I reached for the left, and just got air and the bare lobe of my ear. No left earring.

For a minute I sat there without moving, and my face got white and my heart got chilly. Then I jumped up and shook out my dress, and looked all around on the floor. I was just stalling. I knew where I must have dropped it, but I didn't want to let on to myself.

I knew it hadn't been at the club with the Perrys, and I knew it hadn't been in the first taxi, going over to the Other Place. I'd given a sort of shudder just before he opened the door for me, and happened to touch both earrings with my hands. And I knew it hadn't been in the second taxi, from there home, either.

There was only one time I'd moved violently or agitatedly all evening long, and that was over there, when he'd tried to chuck me under the chin after he'd counted over the money, and I'd reared my head back. It must have been right then that it had come off. The catch had been defective anyway; I'd had no business wearing it.

I had to have it back. Jimmy was taking them down with him tomorrow, to have them repaired. I could tell him I'd lost one of them, but that would uncover my movements. And there was an even more important reason why I had to get it back. If I left it with *him*, the whole thing would start over again as soon as he'd run through the ten thousand I'd just given him. He'd simply use it to bleed me some more. It was an easily recognizable piece of jewelry, made specially for me.

I went over to the door and listened first, to make sure Jimmy was still safely in the library. Not a sound, so it looked as if he was. Then I picked up the extension phone we had in the bedroom and dialed the number of Carpenter's place that he'd given me last night, along with his final ultimatum.

Suppose he denied having found it? Suppose he was far-seeing enough to already figure on it coming in handy as a future pledge? I couldn't add anything to the ten thousand, not until next month. My account was down to bedrock. He had to give it back to me!

I kept signaling, and he didn't answer. I knew he must be there. I'd just come from there myself. He might light out the first thing in the morning, but there was no need for him to leave at this ungodly hour of the night. If I was going to sic the police on him, I would have done it before the transaction was concluded, not after. Even if he was asleep, it surely ought to wake him up, the way it was buzzing away at his end.

I hung up, tried it over. No more luck than the first time. It was the right number. I'd used it to notify him of my capitulation. I shook the thing, I squeezed it, I prayed to it. I had to give up finally. I couldn't just sit there listening to it all night. I was good and scared now.

I had to have that earring, even if it meant going all the way back there in person, at this hour. And there was no

place under the sun or the moon I wouldn't have rather returned to than there: a cage of wild lions, a pit of rattlesnakes, a leprosarium.

I took the gun with me once more. I didn't think Carpenter could really be cowed by such a midget, but it made me feel a little less defenseless. I unlocked the door and sidled down the hall. If I could only get out without bumping into Jimmy, then when I came back the second time he would think it was the first time. That I'd stayed late with the Perrys at the club or something.

The light was gone from under the library door! He must have finished and gone out for a walk to clear his head, after battling with those tax blanks all night. That was all to the good, provided I didn't run into him outside just as I was leaving. The milk bottle with its paper funnel was still on lonesome duty.

I made it. I was dying to ask the night liftman, when he brought me down, "Did Mr. Shaw go out just a little while ago?" I forced myself not to. It sounded too underhanded.

I gave the cab driver the address, and slumped back on the seat with a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER TWO

Payoff in Blood

WHEN I got out in front of the sinister looking place I told the driver to wait for me. I looked up the front of it, and I saw just the one lighted window—his. He was up there, and he was still awake. Maybe he'd stepped out for just a minute at the time I'd rung.

I said to the driver, "Have you got a watch on you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, I want you to do something for me. Time me. If I haven't come out in

ten minutes, step over and ring the bell. The one that says 'Carpenter' on it." I smiled insincerely. "Just to remind me. I don't want to stay too long, and I have a bad habit of losing track of the time whenever I go anyplace."

"Yes, ma'am. Ten minutes."

I went in. The entrance door was supposed to work on a spring lock, but somebody had forgotten to close it, so I passed right through without waiting and started the long climb that I'd already made once before. The place was a walkup. I wanted to give him as little advance notice of what had brought me back as possible; my best chance of recovering the ornament without any further strings being attached to it was to catch him off guard, before his crooked mind had been able to go to work on this new situation.

I knocked quietly when I finally got up to the top. It was the only flat on that floor; an extra story must have been added when the building had been converted to multiple tenancy.

He didn't move, didn't make a sound. I'd expected that. Live dangerously, and a knock on the door can make you freeze. I could visualize him standing at bay somewhere in there, holding his breath.

I knocked again. I inclined my head to the seam, said in a guarded voice, "Let me in. It's me again." I couldn't bring myself to use his name. As far as I was concerned he didn't deserve one, only a number. I had sense enough not to use my own.

He still didn't stir. I wrangled the knob in growing impatience, and the door fell inertly back before me.

I ventured in after it, expecting to find him sighting a gun at me. That was the usual trick they pulled, wasn't it? He wasn't in the main room, he must be in the little darkened bed-alcove. Had lain down in there and forgotten to put the light out in here.

I didn't go in there. There was just

a slim chance—a very slim one—that he hadn't found the earring himself yet, that it was still lying around out here unnoticed, and that I might be able to pick it up on my own hook and slip out again without having to accost him. I doubted it very much; it would have been too good to be true. But I started to look just the same.

First I looked all over the sofa where I'd sat riffling through the letters. Then I got down on all fours, gold dress and all, and started to explore the floor, around and under and alongside it. It was a decrepit, topheavy thing and threw a big shadow behind it from the ceiling light.

My groping hand crept around the corner of it, and nestled into somebody else's, in a macabre gesture of a hand-clasp. I whipped it back with a bleat of abysmal terror and sprang away, and at the same time I heard a sharp intake of breath.

I stepped around and look down, and he was lying there. The position of the bulky sofa had hidden him from me until now. Did I say just now he deserved a number? He'd gotten one. And it was up.

One arm was flung out along the floor—the one that I'd just touched. He was lying on his back, and his jacket had fallen open. You could see where he'd been shot; it showed on the white of his shirt. It must have gone into his heart; the hole in the fabric had the bloodied encrustation that surrounded it were around that region. The gun he hadn't had time to use had fallen uselessly over to one side.

My first impulse, of course, was to turn and race out. I fought it down. *Find that earring first*, I reasoned with myself. *You've got to get it back!* It was more vital to recover it than ever. It wasn't just a case of keeping my presence here from Jimmy's knowledge now, it was

a case of keeping it from the police! What was blackmail compared to being dragged into a murder case—and all the avalanches of notoriety that would ensue?

I found myself doing something I wouldn't have believed I had the nerve to do: bending down over him and going through all his pockets. He didn't have it on him. He didn't have the ten thousand cash any more, either, but I didn't care about that; it wasn't identifiable.

I crouched there, suddenly motionless. My hand had just then accidentally, as might have been expected, fleetingly contacted his in the course of my search. The brief touch was repellent, yes, but that wasn't what made me freeze rigid like that, stare unseeingly along the floor before me. It was this: the touch of his clammy skin was already cool, far cooler than my own. My sketchy knowledge of such matters was sufficient to tell me that meant he'd been dead some little time, at least half an hour or an hour. The point was, he'd certainly been dead by the time I'd come into the room just now.

And belatedly, like a sort of long-delayed and not at all funny mental double take, I was just remembering that I'd heard a sharp intake of breath at the moment I'd jolted back and given my own strangled little cry of discovery just now.

If he was dead, he hadn't made the sound. And you can't cry out and still draw in your breath, so I hadn't either.

Not a muscle moved. Just my optic nerves. My eyes traveled over the floor to the arched, doorless entrance to the dark sleeping alcove, and the musty green hanging, bunched together, that hung down on one side of it. It hung perfectly motionless, just as everything else in the place was perfectly motionless—including myself and the dead man on the floor. But it hung just short of the floor—oh, not more than a couple of inches. And I could see the toe of a single shoe stand-

ing there, in the gap. Perfectly motionless, deceptively motionless. If I'd been standing full height I wouldn't have been able to see it; the bottom of the drape would have overhung it. It was only because I was down low on the floor as I was, that my line of vision was able to reach it.

It could have been a discarded shoe of Carpenter's dropped to the floor in there and happening to land upright. Even though it was pointing straight toward me, as if to match an unseen pair of eyes somewhere high over it, looking out through an unsuspected rent in the drape. It could have been, but then it wouldn't have moved.

As if the direction of my eyes had power to lend it motion it shifted stealthily back and was gone.

THERE WAS only one coherent thought in the fireworks display of panic going off inside my head: *Don't scream. Don't move. Someone in there has been watching you ever since you came in. He may let you go, if you don't let on you've spotted him. Work yourself over toward the door, and then break out fast.*

I straightened up. The earring was forgotten, everything else was forgotten. I just wanted out. My feet took a surreptitious step under the cover of the gold dress. Then another. Then a third. Like in that kid's game, where they're not supposed to catch you moving. I was half way over to it now. But even if the maneuvering of my feet couldn't be detected, the position of my body in the room kept changing. That was enough to give me away.

About one more step now. I was just starting to raise my hand unnoticeably in front of me, to tear at the knob and fling myself out, when I heard a click behind me. The sort of a click that a trip-hammer makes when it goes back. My

eyes went around in spite of myself. The drape was out of the way and a man had taken its place. He was holding a gun at about belt-buckle level.

Even if I hadn't met him across a gun—and across a man he'd already killed—the mere sight of him would have thrown a jolt into me. His expression was the epitome of viciousness. You didn't have to wonder if he'd shoot, you only had to wonder when he would. His face was a mirror: it showed me my own imminent death about to take place. He hadn't had to step out and show himself, he could have let me get away without seeing who he was. The mere fact that he had stepped out showed I wasn't going to be permitted to get away alive.

You could hear his breath rasp against his imperfectly shaved upper lip, like something frictioning sandpaper. That was all you could hear in the place, that little sound. You couldn't hear my breath at all; my heart had blown a fuse.

Suddenly he made a move and I thought for a minute the bullet had found me. But he'd only hitched his head at me, ordering me to come closer.

I couldn't; my feet wouldn't have done it even if I'd wanted them to. "No, don't," I moaned sickly.

"You're not getting out of here to pin this on me," he slurred. His lips parted and white showed through. But it wasn't a grin, it was just a baring of teeth. "I want the dough he was coming into tonight, see? I got a line on that, never mind how. Now come on, where it is?"

"I have—" I panted. I couldn't go ahead. I pointed to the still form lying between us on the floor.

Did you ever hear a hungry hyena howl against the moon? That was the inflection of his voice. "Come a-a-a-ahn, what'd you do with it?" Then his jaws snapped shut—still like a hyena's on a hunk of food. "All right, I don't have to ask for it. I can just reach for it!"

But he didn't mean with his fingers, he meant with a bullet. "You've seen me up here now. That's your tough luck." And he said again what he had in the beginning: "You're not pinning this on me."

The gun twitched warningly, getting ready to recoil against the flat hollow of his indrawn stomach, and this was my last minute.

Then instead of going *bam!* it went *gra-a-a-ack!* Like those little flat paddles on sticks that kids swing around to make noise with. And instead of coming from in front of him, it came from behind him, up on the wall of the bed-alcove somewhere. My knees dipped to let me down, and then stiffened and went on holding me up some more.

It startled the two of us alike. But I was able to recover quicker, because I knew instantly what it was and he didn't. It threw him for a complete loss. It was as to cause, and yet it was so close by, one of those sounds that are so indefinite so harshly menacing. It was simply that taxidriver downstairs reminding me my ten minutes was up.

He swung first to one side, then to the other, then all the way around, half-crouched, and the gun went off me completely. I pulled at the doorknob, whisked out, and went down the stairs like a gold streak.

He came out after me just as I reached the first turn. There was a window there and it was open a little both at the top and bottom, in order to ventilate the stairs and halls during the night. He shot down the stairs at me, on a descending line of fire, just as I flashed around the turn and got out of it. It didn't hit me, but it should have hit the window and shattered it or it should have hit the plaster of the wall and ploughed into it. It didn't hit anywhere.

Later, long afterwards, it came back to me that it must have, through some freak

of downward slanting, neatly gone out through that slender inches-wide lower opening without hitting anything. I didn't think of that then. I didn't think of anything then except getting down the rest of those stairs and out to the street.

He didn't fire after me a second time. He couldn't aim at me from where he was anymore. The underside of the stairs over me protected me now. His only chance of hitting me would have been to run down after me and overtake me on the same section of stairs. He still could have done that if he'd tried. Any man is quicker than any woman, particularly a woman in rhumba clogs. But he was afraid of whoever it was that he imagined to be coming up from below, and he was afraid of rousing the house.

I heard his feet go scuffling up the other way, higher still toward the roof.

The entryway was empty when I got down to it. The hackman must have gone right back to his machine after dutifully giving me the summons I'd asked for. He'd even missed hearing the shot. I could tell that by the cheerful matter-of-factness of his opening remark when I streaked out and burrowed into the back of his machine. "Well, I sure brought you down fast, didn't I, lady?" he asked.

"T-take me back uptown," I said.

The guardian milk bottle was still standing there for years on end.

I let myself in and crept down the hall toward the bedroom. I opened the door and stopped short with my hand on the light-switch. Jimmy had come back, and was in there ahead of me, asleep already. I could hear the soft purr of his snoring in the darkness. He evidently hadn't been surprised by my continued absence. He must have thought I was still at the night club with the Perrys. His breathing was so rhythmic, so regular, it almost sounded studied.

I crawled into my own bed in the dark and just lay there. I hadn't got the earring

back. That was almost a minor matter by now. I kept seeing that face before me, viciously contorted, mirroring death to come. As sure as anything he was going to track me down, find me and kill me. My life was forfeit to a murderer's self-preservation. I was the only one who knew he had been up there. I was the only one who knew who had killed Carpenter. He had to get rid of me.

Somewhere, sometime, when I least expected it, death was going to strike out at me. I was on borrowed time.

He would surely get me, unless—I got him first.

CHAPTER THREE

Trail to Murder

THE LIEUTENANT'S name was Weill, I think. I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure of anything, only that I was striking first, protecting my own life in the only way I knew how.

"I am asking that this interview be treated in strictest confidence."

He looked at me patronizingly; I suppose he thought I was going to accuse someone of poisoning someone else's pet pekingese. "You can rely on us," he said.

"I am here to offer you a proposition. I am in a position to give you information which I think you will find not only timely but exceedingly helpful. In return for this, you must not use my name in any shape, form or manner. It means the destruction of my happiness if you do, and I won't risk it. Who I am, who told you this, must not appear on any of your documents or reports or files."

He was still very condescending. "That's a tall order. Are you sure it's something we'd be interested in?"

"You're a lieutenant of the Homicide Squad? I'm very sure, Lieutenant."

He gave me a more alert look. "Very well, I accept your terms."

"*You* do. Yes, but how do I know it won't pass beyond your control? It's a matter that you will have to take others into your confidence about."

"Nothing passes beyond my control in this division if I don't care to have it do so. If, as you say, others have to be taken into my confidence, I can either pledge them as you are pledging me, or keep you altogether anonymous, as 'Mrs. X.' or 'an unknown woman.' Does that satisfy you? I give you my word as a police officer."

I wasn't altogether sure of that, I didn't know enough about them. "I also want your word of honor as a man."

He eyed me with increased respect. "That," he admitted, "is a whole lot more dependable. I give you both." And he took my hand and wrung it once.

I didn't hold back anything, didn't try to cover myself in any way. I told him about the letters, about Carpenter's contacting me, about my first visit there and the payment of the ten thousand cash. ". . . I also took a gun, to make sure the situation wouldn't pass beyond my control. Here it is. You can examine it if you want to make sure it wasn't I who did it." I passed it to him.

He weighed it in his hand, smiled a little. "I don't think it'll be necessary to do that. The slug of a forty-five was taken out of Carpenter's body. This would be the grandson of a forty-five." He fiddled with it, looked up. "Incidentally, did you know it wasn't loaded?"

He could tell by the look on my face I hadn't until then.

He fiddled some more with it. "In any case, it would have been quite a feat to fire it. Where did you get it?"

"Paris, before the war."

"Well, you were badly gypped. Most of the mechanism is missing. It's practically a dummy. All you bought is a lot of artistic pearl nacre and gilt metal in the outward shape of a gun."

I went into the second part of my story, the really pertinent part. If I hadn't known it was that already, the change in his attitude would have told me. He forgot his role of putting a featherbrained society woman at ease, became a police-lieutenant with just an important witness before him. "You'd know this man if you saw him again?" he said sharply.

"All night I saw his face before me."

"You say he held a gun trained on you, before this interruption saved your life. Did you get a good look at it?"

"Quite good." I shuddered.

"Have you a good eye for proportions, for taking in measurements at a glance?"

"Fairly."

He opened a desk drawer, took out a revolver. "This weapon is empty, so don't be nervous. Of course, you were frightened, so maybe it's not fair, but— This is a forty-five here. I am going to hold it just about as you say he held it. Now. Is it the same size as the one he held?"

"No, his seemed heavier, larger."

"But this is a forty-five. Look at it again. Now what do you say?"

I cocked my head. "No. I may be mistaken, but somehow the one he held seemed to be a larger, heavier gun."

He replaced it, looked around in the drawer, finally took out another. "How about this one, then? This is far bigger than a forty-five. This is as big as they come."

I nodded my head affirmatively without a moment's hesitation. "Yes. That's the same size as the one he held."

He put it back in the drawer. "You're a reliable witness. The first gun was a thirty-eight. The *second* was the forty-five." He got up. "I am going to ask you to try and pick him out for us."

THEY WERE all so villainous looking. And yet none of them could approach him in viciousness. Maybe that was because I'd seen him in the

flesh, in full dimension, and not just flat on paper, in black and white. There were two photos of each one, in profile and fullface. I ignored the profiles, concentrated on the fullfaces. That was the way he'd been turned toward me during those few awful moments up there the night of the murder.

I didn't really think I was going to find him. There were so many of them. Looking through this gallery of rogues, you wondered if there could be any honest, law-abiding people left in the world. I even turned to Weill, after the first half hour or so, and asked, "Do you really think you've got him in here?"

"We won't know that for sure until after you're through."

Once I nearly thought I saw him, but when I stopped short and looked more closely at that particular subject, recognition faded. It was just a superficial resemblance.

"Rest your eyes for a minute whenever you feel like it," Weill said solicitously.

They felt infected by looking at so much depravity. I opened them again and went ahead.

Suddenly I got up from the chair. I put my forefinger on the photograph, but not for his benefit yet, simply for my own, to hang onto it. I closed my eyes and held them that way for a moment. Then when I had his face good and clear, burning clear, I opened them. I let them travel down the line of my arm, all the way down to the end of my finger, and the face on the police photograph blended into the one glowing in my mind, without any changes of outline.

Then I turned to Weill. "This is the face of the man I saw up there," I said.

He said again what he'd said before, up in his office. "You're a good, dependable witness. I liked the way you did that just then." He bent forward above my shoulder and read from the data accompanying

the photos. "That's Sonny-Boy Nelson. He's already wanted for murder, three times over. We've wanted him for a long time past."

Back in his office, he finally noticed the change that had come over me since that last remark or his. "What is it, Mrs. Shaw? You seem troubled."

I gestured shakily. "Well, after all, Lieutenant, why did I come here? To assure my own safety, to protect my life. This man saw me up there, just as I saw him. He knows I'm the only one who knows he was up there. He's going to try to kill me. He's surely going to try, so that I won't be able to tell that to anyone."

"Now if he's already been wanted for three murders, and you haven't gotten him so far, my identification makes no difference; you'll simply want him for four murders now, but that doesn't mean you'll get him any quicker than before. And meanwhile, what's to become of me? I'll be living in danger from one minute to the next."

"I'll detail someone to—"

I quickly warded that off with a gesture.

"No, you can't. How could such a thing escape Jim—my husband's notice? He's bound to ask questions, wonder what it's all about. The whole thing would be bound to come out in the end. And that's the very thing I tried to avoid by coming here to you unasked, entirely of my own accord."

He stared at me incredulously. "You mean, given a choice between risking your life in a very real sense, and having your husband learn of your *innocent* involvement in this whole affair, you'd rather take chances on your life?"

"Much rather," I told him very decisively.

I had been afraid not to pay the ten thousand. Now, because I had paid it, I was afraid to have it come out that I had. I was afraid he would think there

must have been something to cover up after all, if I had been so anxious and willing to pay it.

"You're an unusual person," Weill let me know.

"No. I'm not. Happiness is a soap-bubble. Once it's been pricked, just try and get it back together again! This Sonny-Boy Nelson's bullets can miss me. But my bubble can never be repaired again, once it's burst. Even if it means just a stray thought passing through my husband's mind five years from now. 'Where there's smoke there's fire.' I won't take that chance, I won't risk it. Nothing else in life matters to me." I got up and went toward the door.

Then I saw that he had more to say, so I stopped and looked back.

"Well, if you're willing to take the risk that you are, spread out thin, over days and weeks, how about taking an even greater risk, but all at one time? Getting it over with then and there?"

I answered that by coming away from the door, returning to his desk, and re-seating myself acquiescently.

"You said, a little while ago, that your coming here had done no good; that we'd only want him for one additional murder now but still without knowing where to find him. But you're mistaken. If you're willing to cooperate, run the risk that I just spoke of, we will know where to find him. Which is more than we ever knew before."

I saw what he meant. I shook a little, but I lit a cigarette. The cigarette of cooperation.

"Tell me," he said "are there any out-of-the-way places you're in the habit of going to by yourself, entirely unaccompanied by your husband or friends or anyone else? I mean, without departing from your normal routine or habits of life?"

I thought for a moment. "Yes," I said, "there are."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Trap Is Set

JIMMY didn't mind my doing private charity work, going around to a few handpicked cases I happened to know of and doing what I could for them, but he didn't like the parts of town it took me into at times. Above all, he didn't like the idea of my going alone into some of these places. He'd warned me again and again to take someone with me.

I made the rounds only about once a month, anyway. I wasn't a professional welfare worker. I never had more than half a dozen at a time on my list.

Like this old Mrs. Scalento, living alone and too proud to apply to the city for help. She wouldn't have been eligible anyway; she could make enough to support herself when she was well. But right now she was laid up with arthritis or something, and needed tiding over.

I got out of the car outside the tunnel-like black entrance of the rookery she lived in. They never had any lights on the stairs there, but I'd brought a little pocket-flash along in my bag for just that purpose.

I sent the taxi off. I usually stayed up there a considerable time with her, and it was cheaper to get another one when I came out again.

I groped my way down the long Stygian bore that led back to where I knew the stairs to be—from my memory of past visits alone.

Did you ever have a feeling of someone being near you, without seeing anything, without hearing anything move? Animals have that faculty of detection, I know, but that's through their sense of scent. Scent wasn't involved in this. Just some sort of a pulsing that told of another presence reached me. To one side of the battered staircase.

I got the flash out and it shot a little

white pill of light up the stairs in front of me before I'd even realized I'd nudged the little control-lever on. It must have been obvious which direction I was going to turn it in next, by the way it shook and slopped around in my hand.

The voice was so quiet. So reassuringly quiet. It seemed to come from right beside me, my very elbow almost. "Don't turn the light this way, Mrs. Shaw."

Mrs. Shaw. So then I knew what it was.

"Weill's man. Don't be frightened, Mrs. Shaw. We're covering every one of these places you've showed up at tonight. Just act as you would at any other time."

I went on up the stairs, after I'd gotten my breath back and my heartbeat had slowed a little, thinking resentfully, *The fool! The other one himself couldn't have frightened me any worse!*

That was what I thought.

I knocked when I got up to her door, and then let myself in without further ado. I had to; the old lady didn't have the use of her legs.

She was sitting there, propped up in bed, the way I usually found her. She didn't seem glad to see me. Her face always lit up as though I were a visiting angel when I came in, and she'd start to bless me in Italian. Tonight she just stared at me with an intentness that almost seemed to have hostility in it.

She had just this one large, barren room, and then a black hole of a kitchen, without any window at all, leading off from it. I closed the door after me. "Well, how are we tonight?" I greeted her.

She gave an impatient swerve of her head away from me, almost as though she resented my coming in on her, as though I were unwelcome. I pretended not to notice the unmistakable surliness—not to mention ingratitude—of the reception I was getting.

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The air of the room was stagnant, murky; none of these people were great believers in ventilation. "Don't you think it would be a good idea to let a little fresh air in here?" I suggested. I crossed to the window and raised it slightly from the bottom. She glared at me. •

"How's your plant getting along?" I asked her, crouching slightly to peer out at it. I'd sent her over a potted geranium, to cheer her up. She kept it out there on the window ledge.

A look of almost ferocious vindictiveness passed over her face, as I straightened up and turned away. "You no got to worry about it; iss all ri'," she let me know in husky defiance. It was the first remark she'd uttered since I came in.

I tried to win her over. "Have you been using that electric heater? Does it take any of the stiffness out, make you feel any better?"

She said gruffly, "Lotsa bett'. Lotsa bett'."

She had folded her arms across her chest now in a sort of stubborn sulkiness, and she kept jabbing one hand surreptitiously out from underneath the opposite arm. Not toward me, but more—toward the door.

I said finally, in a low, confidential voice, "What're you trying to tell me?"

HER FACE flashed around toward me. She bared her almost toothless mouth in a grin that held frightened supplication in it. "I no tella you noth'. What you hear me say? Do I tella you anything?"

"I'll do my own telling," a new voice said.

Someone had come out of the kitchen and was standing right behind my chair. Its back had been turned that way.

I rocketed to my feet, chest going up and down like a bellows. A hand slipped around from behind me and riveted itself

to my wrist, steely and implacable. The chair crashed over, discarded.

"Remember me?" was all he said.

The old lady, as if released from a spell, began to jabber now that it was too late, "*Signora!* This man he come here early tonight, he say he know you make visit every time on firsta month, he'ssa going to wait for you. I no can make him go 'way—"

He chopped the gun butt around horizontally at her forehead, without letting go of me, and she flopped back stunned on the pillow. I never saw anything more brutal in my life.

He gave it a little dextrous flip, then, that brought his grip back to the heft. "Now let's take up where we left off the other night, you and me."

I saw he was going to let me have the bullet then and there. He swung me around toward him by my arm, and brought the gun up against my side. He wasn't taking any chances this time.

He'd maneuvered me out away from the bed—I suppose so there'd be room enough for me to fall. But that had unnoticeably changed our respective positions now. He was between me and the door. His back was to it, and I was toward it. But I couldn't see it, or anything else, just then. I never even heard it open.

"Drop that gun, Nelson, you're covered three ways!"

• There was an awful moment of suspended motion, when nothing seemed to happen. Then the gun loosened, skidded down my side and hit the floor.

A man's head and shoulders showed up, one at each side of him, and there was a third one overlapping a little behind him.

They said to me, "You must have seen him the minute you got in, to tip us off so quickly—"

"No, I didn't. I didn't see him until just a minute ago."

"Then how did you manage to—"

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"I knew he was here the minute I stepped through the door. I could tell by the frozen expression of her face and eyes she was under some kind of restraint or compulsion. And the air was close with stale cigarette smoke. He'd smoked one or two too many, back there, while he was waiting for me to show up. I knew she never used them herself. But it was too late to back out through the door again, once I'd shown myself; he could have shot me down from where he was. So I stepped over to the window under the excuse of getting some air into the room, and gave that potted plant she kept on it a soundless little nudge off into space."

The man in charge said, "Hold him up here for a couple of minutes, to give Mrs. X a chance to make her getaway from the neighborhood first, before anyone spots her. You see that she gets home safely, Dillon."

"Will she be all right?" I asked, indicating Mrs. Scalento.

"She'll be all right, we'll look after her."

"Poor Mrs. Scalento," I said, going down the stairs with the man delegated to accompany me, "I'll have to buy her another plant."

THE FORMAL identification was brief, and, as far as I was concerned, of about the same degree of comfort as the extraction of a live tooth without anesthesia. Why they had to have it I don't know, since, according to my bargain with Weill, my own identity was to remain unrevealed. It took place in Weill's office, with a heavy guard at the door, to keep pryers—even interdepartmental pryers—at a distance.

"Bring him in."

I didn't raise my eyes from the floor until the scuff of unwilling shoe leather dragged against its will had stopped short.

"Mrs. X. Is this the man you saw in the

living quarters of one John Carpenter, at two-ten East forty-ninth, at about four-thirty A.M. on the fifteenth day of April?"

My voice rang out like a bell. "That is the same man."

"Did he have a weapon in his hand?"

"He had a weapon in his hand."

"Stand up, please, and repeat that under oath."

I stood up. They thrust a Bible toward me and I placed my right hand on it as if we had been in a courtroom. I repeated after the man swearing me in: ". . . the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Then I said: "I solemnly swear that I saw this man, with a weapon in his hand, in the living-quarters of John Carpenter, two-ten East forty-ninth Street, at about four-thirty A.M., April 15th."

Nelson's fatigue-cracked voice shattered the brief silence. "You can't pin this on me! I didn't do it, d'ya hear?"

"No, and you didn't kill Little Patsy O'Connor either, did you? Or Schindel? Or Duke Biddermen, in a car right outside his own front door? Take him out!"

"She's framing me! She done it herself, and then she made a deal with you, to switch it to me!"

They dragged him out, still mouthing imprecations. The closing of the door toned them down, but you could still hear them dying away along the corridor outside.

Weill turned back to me and let his fingertips touch my gloved hand reassuringly for a moment, maybe because he saw that it was vibrating slightly, as an after-effect of the scene of violence that had just taken place. "That's all. That finishes your participation in the affair. You just go home and forget about it."

I could carry out the first part of the injunction all right; I had my doubts about the second.

"But you had a stenographic transcription made of my identification of him just

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now, I noticed," I said a bit uneasily.

"Yes, and I'm also having depositions made out to be signed by those two witnesses I had in the room, regarding what took place here. In other words I'm preparing affidavits of your affidavit, so that it doesn't have to hang suspended in mid-air. But that needn't alarm you. I have the okay of the D.A.'s office on getting around it in this way in your case."

"But in the courtroom, won't he—won't his lawyer, demand that you produce me?"

"Let him. The D.A.'s office is taking that into account, in preparing its procedure. I'm prepared to take the stand in your place, as your proxy, if necessary. And police lieutenant or not, I don't think I'd make the kind of a witness whose testimony is to be lightly disregarded."

He seemed to have taken care of every contingency; I felt a whole lot better.

He shook my hand. "I keep my bargains. You're out of it to stay. All knowledge of you ends with us."

He said to the detective standing outside the door, "Take this lady to the special departmental car you'll find waiting for her outside. Go along in it with her and keep everyone at a distance. Take her to the side entrance of the Kay Department Store."

That was the biggest one in the city. I went in, walked through it on the bias without stopping to buy anything, got into a taxi a moment later at the main entrance, and had myself driven home.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Choice of Corpses

THE WHOLE town had been talking about it for several weeks past, so I wasn't surprised when it finally penetrated even to Jimmy's insulated consciousness. I was only surprised that it

hadn't long before then. But the news of the world, for Jimmy, was only the quotations that trickled out on a ticker tape.

Carpenter's metier of preying on respectable and socially prominent women, which had been uncovered during the course of it, and which the defense was as willing "but for different reasons" to play up as the prosecution, was what gave it the distinction of being above just another underworld killing, I suppose. Anyway, half of the men around town kept whispering that it was the next guy's wife, and the other half looked kind of thoughtful, as though they were doing some mental checking up.

He'd been reading about it one night—that was toward the end, after it had been going on for several weeks—and he started discussing it with me.

I twiddled my thimble-size coffee-cup around disinterestedly, looked down at it. "Do you think there really is such a woman?" I asked idly. "Or are he and his lawyer just making it up, howling for her to try to distract attention?"

He grimaced undecidedly, didn't answer right away. But Jimmy is not the type who is with opinions for long; that's why he is as successful as he is. It came on slowly; I could almost see it forming before my very eyes. First he just chewed his lip in cogitation. Then he nodded abstractedly. Then he gave it words. "Yes, I dunno why, but—I have a feeling they're telling the truth, as mealy-mouthed as they are. I wouldn't be surprised if there *was* some woman up there that same night. The prosecution doesn't deny it, I notice; they just clam up each time. That's what makes me half-inclined to believe—"

They hadn't made use of any of the backstops Weill had prepared, up to this point, so there was still room for legitimate doubt: the affidavits on *my* affidavit; nor had Weill taken the stand to pinchhit for me. Maybe they were saving them for

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a bang-up finish, or maybe they weren't going to ring them in at all, had found they didn't really need them. My chief contribution had been to point out Sonny-Boy Nelson to them, and help them trap him, and that could be safely left out of it without damaging their case any. Otherwise, what could I add? Only circumstantial strengthening to what was already an overwhelmingly strong circumstantial case. They'd even found someone who had seen him—Nelson—run out of the house next door, gun still unsheathed, and the door of Carpenter's apartment and the two roof-doors had been found yawning wide open.

But there was one thing I couldn't get straight in my own mind. I mentioned it aloud to him—although very carefully. "But why do *they*—Nelson and his lawyer—keep harping on this woman? What do they expect to get out of that? I should think it would be the other way around, that it would harm them."

He shrugged. "Evidently they've figured out some way in which they think she can help them. They must have something up their sleeves. I wouldn't know. I can't figure out what goes on in the crooked minds of shady lawyers and their clients." He pitched the paper disgustedly aside, as though the subject didn't interest him any more. He delivered himself of a concluding postscript.

"Anyway, if there is such a woman—and most likely there is—she's a fool. She should have gone to her own husband, whoever she is, and taken him into her confidence, before she got in that deep."

How easy to say, I thought poignantly. "Maybe she was afraid to," I mentioned. "Afraid he wouldn't believe her or would misunderstand—"

He gave me a scornful look, as he got up, as though he thought I was a fool myself, to make a remark like that. "The right kind of a husband," he said, saunter-

ing out to the next room, "understands everything, forgives everything. He takes care of things for her. And above all, he doesn't speak of it."

Ah, yes, I thought, in theory, on paper, how well that works out. But in real life, just try it and see what cain it would raise!

He only spoke of it once again, after that. "I see he got the chair."

"Who?" I asked. I'd known since nine that morning, when the paper came.

"That fellow, what's his name, Baby-Face—No, Sonny-Boy Nelson."

"He did?" I said, in polite echo.

He pretended to snap the light-switch of my room, to hurry me up.

It put me in mind, somehow, of a switch being thrown in a death chamber.

THE MAID came in and said, "There's a man at the door to see you, madam."

Something about it frightened me even before I knew of anything to be frightened about. I started up from the chair. "Who is he? What does he want?"

I saw her staring at me curiously, as if wondering what made me so jittery about such a trivial announcement. I tried to cover it up with a pass of my hand.

"Send him in here."

I knew him by sight right away. I couldn't help wondering, though, how I'd known it was going to be something like this ahead of time. I went over and closed the door. He had sense enough to wait until I had.

"I'm from Weill's office—"

I didn't let him get any further. "He shouldn't have sent you over here like this! I thought he said I was through! What does he want now?"

"Sonny-Boy Nelson is being taken up to the Death House on the three o'clock train. He's splending for a last chance to talk to you before he goes."

The Blood Stone

"Then even he knows who I am! Is that how Weill keeps his bargains?"

"No, he doesn't know your name or anything like that. He just knows that you saw him up there, and it was through you we captured him."

"Can I reach Weill at his office? Get him for me."

"Yes ma'am. The only reason he sent me over instead of calling you himself is he thought somebody else might intercept or overhear the call—here he is, now."

"Weill? What about this?" I asked.

"No, don't go near him, Mrs. X. There's nothing to be gained by it. You're not under any obligation to him."

"Well, then why did you send someone over here to let me know about it?"

"Simply to give you your choice in the matter, to let you know he's been asking for you. But you're free to do as you please about it. If you want my opinion, there's no need for you to see him any further. He's been tried and sentenced. There's nothing you can do for him."

"But he evidently thinks there is, or he wouldn't be asking for me. And if I refuse, I suppose he'll go up there cursing me—"

"Well, let him. They all curse someone, and never the right one—themselves. Put him out of your mind. No use being sensitive about these matters."

But he was used to dealing in them; I wasn't.

"Would there be any risk?"

"Of identification? No, none whatever. I'll see to that personally. But as I said before, if you want my honest opinion, I don't see any necessity—"

I went anyway. Maybe because I'm a woman. Curiosity, you know. I mean, I wanted to hear what he wanted. I had to, for my own satisfaction and peace of mind. Remember, I wasn't thirsting for his blood. My purpose in going to the police in the first place hadn't been to secure

his death. It had been to secure my own life. That had been accomplished from the moment he had been apprehended; he didn't have to be executed to advance my safety any further than it was already.

I didn't think there was anything I could do for him. Weill didn't. But he did. Why shouldn't I at least hear what he thought it was?

I wore such a heavy veil I could hardly see through it myself. Not for Nelson's own sake, he'd already seen my face as plainly as anyone could that night up at Carpenter's, but in order to avoid all risk going and coming from the place. Weill's man went with me as far as the prison building; Weill took over there himself and escorted me into the cell. They didn't keep me outside at the mesh barrier through which prisoners usually communicate with friends and relatives. They took me right into the cell itself, so my presence would be less likely to attract attention.

He reared up hopefully. He looked shadowed already by what was to come. I guess they do. I'd never seen one before.

He said, "How do I know if she's the right one?"

I raised the veil and left it up.

"Yeah," he said, nodding grimly. "Yeah." He turned to Weill. "Why can't Scalenza be here?"

Weill reached to take me by the arm. "No, no lawyers or anybody else. Say what you want and be quick about it, or she leaves with me right now."

He looked at me, this time. "I want to see you alone."

"He thinks I've got you intimidated," Weill said to me caustically. He looked at me for the answer.

"All right," I said quietly.

"I'll be right outside here," he promised, "so don't be worried." He stepped out.

It's hard, I suppose, to make a plea,

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when your whole life has to go into it. "Look," he began awkwardly. "I dunno who you are, but you can save me. You're the only one."

"I can? Why do you call on me? I never said you killed Carpenter."

"I know, I know. But listen to me, will you? Carpenter was killed with a slug from a forty-five. Remember, they brought that out at my trial?"

"I wasn't at your trial."

He rushed on without stopping to listen. "I got a forty-five, yes. They caught me with one on me. But they never proved that the slug they dug out of him was fired from my gun!"

"The papers said they couldn't, from what I recall. That it had gone through, or at least into, a thin cigarette case in Carpenter's pocket. That it wasn't the bullet that had pierced his heart, actually, but a fragment of the case, driven into it by the bullet. That the bullet itself had been flattened out, the markings had been destroyed by the case, so that they couldn't check it by—whatever they call that scientific method of theirs, ballistics or something. Again, why do you call on me? I didn't say you fired at him."

"No, but you didn't say I fired at you. And that's what can save me, that's my only chance!"

"I don't under—"

HE DIDN'T actually reach out and shake me, but he made the motions with his hands. "Don't you see? Don't you see? I didn't have a chance to use my gun at all when they caught up with me; they got me without firing a shot. It was still packed the way it was that night up at Carpenter's when they took it from me. Only one bullet out of it, five still in it. That proves I only fired one shot that night. That shot at you on the stairs. I only thought of that now, after it was too late. If you'll only *tell* them

that I fired after you out on the stairs, with only one bullet gone that'll prove it couldn't have been my shot that went into Carpenter! If you'll only tell them!"

"Whether she does or doesn't, that's not worth a tinker's dam!" Weill's voice suddenly grated in at us from outside the cell-opening. He must have been standing there a little to one side, taking in the whole conversation. He came in again, motioned curtly to me. "Go home, Mrs. X. Go home and forget the whole business! He could have reloaded that gun sixty times over between the time Carpenter was killed and the time we got him!"

"But the people in the building only heard the one shot!" Nelson shrilled.

"Because only one was fired on the outside, where they could hear it; the other one was fired inside Carpenter's flat, where they couldn't. That's no good to you at all!" He took me by the arm, politely but authoritatively. "Come on, Mrs. X. Don't waste any more of your time in here. What a nerve this bird has! He tried to kill you with that very shot he's speaking of; now he's trying to turn that very shot around and use it to his advantage, with your help!"

Back in his office he said to me, "So he got under your skin with that, didn't he? I can tell that by looking at you. That's what he wanted to do."

"But he did fire at me on the stairs," I murmured.

"Then why didn't we come across the bullet imbedded somewhere along them?"

"It may have gone out through the slit of an open window. I passed one, I remem—"

He fanned a hand at me, as if the whole suggestion were ridiculous. "Did you ever deny that he fired at you?"

"No."

"Were you ever even given a chance to say whether or not he had?"

"No."

The Blood Stone

"Then go home and forget about it. I wouldn't let you destroy your home for that rat if I could. His dirty hide's been quadruply forfeited to the State. The whole thing's splitting hairs, in a way, isn't it? They can't execute him, up there where he's going, more than once for one murder. We already had him down on the books for three others.

"If he'd happened to be acquitted of this particular one he was tried for just now, d'ya suppose that would have meant he would have been let go? Not on your life! He would have simply been tried over again for one of the others, and sentenced to death anyway."

THE EXECUTION NOTICE was tiny, and tucked away so far back within the paper you would have missed it a dozen times over unless you happened to be specifically looking for it.

Well, he was gone now. What was the good of wondering if I could have saved him?

And I couldn't have saved him, I saw that now. My evidence wouldn't have been enough to get him off. On the contrary, it might have had quite the reverse effect: even added strength to the case against him. For if he had been willing to shoot me down to keep it from being known that he had been there, didn't that argue that he had far more than just trespassing to cover up? That he had a previous murder to cover up, in fact?

I would only have blackened my whole future, and he still would have been electrocuted tonight.

I went ahead dressing for the evening.

No, no earrings. I didn't have to be told that there was only one earring left. My heart knew that by heart. I picked it up, and there was something the matter with my eyes. There was still another one lying in the box!

Jimmy was dressed, waiting for me out-

side in the other room. I came out to him, box and all; very white. Like a statue.

"Who put this left earring back? I thought I'd lost it."

He looked at it puzzledly himself for a moment. Then I saw his face clear. "Oh, I remember now. Why, I put it back myself. You were out at the time."

I swallowed. "I haven't opened the case since that night I was out with the Perrys."

I could see him trying to think back. "Well, that must have been the time. Whatever night it was, I remember I'd stayed up all night doing my income tax. Then I went out to stretch my legs, get a little fresh air, and just as I got back I ran into the milkman, he was standing there by our door, all excited about something. He came running to me.

"'Mr. Shaw,' he said, 'look what I just found inside the empty bottle at your door. There was a note curled up in the neck of it, funnel-shaped, you know, and that caught it and held it'."

"Then when I went to our room with it, I saw that you hadn't come back yet, you were still out. So I put it back in the box and went to sleep. You must have lost it right on your way out, as you left the door."

He stopped and glanced at me. "You've got the funniest look on your face. What're you thinking about?"

"Oh, nothing."

I WAS LYING awake later thinking about it; living the whole thing through all over again. I remembered now how I'd had to shake my key, trying to get it in the door, the first time I'd come back. That was what had loosened it, made it drop off. And I remembered now, I'd even heard the funny little plink of glass it had made going in the bottle-mouth. Only at the time I thought it was the tip of my shoe had grazed it. If I'd

The Blood Stone

only taken the trouble to bend down and look!

Well, that milkman was an honest man, that was about the only consolation I could derive from the whole thing.

I looked across the room and I saw by the radium clock-dial that the night was nearly gone, and it was about his usual time for covering his route and making a delivery at the door. On an impulse I got up, put something over me, took two ten-dollar bills out of the bureau, and went out to our front door.

I was just in time.

"Bill, here's something for you, for finding that earring of mine, that time." I tried to tuck it into his hand. He wouldn't open it.

"What earring, Mrs. Shaw?"

"You know, the one that had dropped into the empty milk-bottle out here at the door. My diamond earring."

He was an honest man, all right. "No ma'am, I never found any diamond earring of yours. I never found any diamond earring of anybody's. I'd sure remember it if I had."

I managed to utter, "Good night, Bill," and I closed the door rather quickly.

The distance from there to our bedroom wasn't so great. It took me a long time to cover it, though.

I stood looking at Jimmy. His hand was sticking out over the edge of the mattress, the way a person's sometimes does when he is asleep. I reached down and put my own over it and gently clasped it, in a sort of wordless pact, but not strongly enough to disturb him.

Something that he'd once said came back to me. "The right kind of a husband understands everything, forgives everything. He takes care of things for her. And above all, he doesn't speak of it."

And Weill had told me they'd already wanted Sonny Boy Nelson for three other killings; were looking for him anyway.