The DARK BLOND

by Carleton Kendrake

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CHAPTER LX

I LOVE him more than I love life."

"Suppose I should tell you that he is in great danger? Would you be willing to do anything you could to help?"

"Anything," she said.

"I want to bait a trap," he told her. "Will you help me?"

"How can I help you?"

His eyes stared steadily into hers. "You," he said, "are to be the bait. I want you to go to that apartment house. I want you to knock on the door of the various apartments and begin asking questions."

"But," she pointed out, "the apartment is vacant now. No one is there and they won't come back after the lights have been there."

"But," he told her, "Norman didn't leave that apartment house. They could hardly have carried him out and he wouldn't have left voluntarily without having joined you in the cab."

"Then you think he's somewhere in the apartment house?"

"I'm virtually certain of it."

"And you believe my story?"

He nodded solemnly. "Yes," he said. "I'm going to have my men around to the hotel and pick up the suitcase and your notebook with Delapoil's confession as he had dictated it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well," he said, "I'm going to be in charge of the squad of men who will surround that apartment house. I'm going to send you in there—perhaps to your death. At any rate, into great danger, but it's the only way to save Norman."

She set her lips into a firm line of determination. "Let's start," she said.

Sergeant Mahoney stopped the car in front of the apartment house. "I have been thinking," he said, "about Gentry. You say that he tried a key in apartment 309 and it wouldn't work?"

"That's right."

"Then, until he got to apartment 309 he must have thought the key was going to work."

"Yes. Why?"

"In that event," he said, "he must have used the key to get into the apartment house. In other words, he must have opened the outer door with that key."

She stared at him, her forehead showing lines of bewilderment.

"In other words," Mahoney said, "someone gave Gentry a key to apartment 309. That someone had another apartment in the house and must have given Gentry the key to that apartment instead of apartment 309. Such keys would open the door of the apartment house itself. The regular knocks were merely a signal so the conspirators couldn't be surprised by anyone with a pass-key."

Millicent recognized the logic of his remarks. "Good heavens, yes! And perhaps that other apartment is there . . ."

"Exactly," he interrupted. "Now that apartment must be on the third floor. Norman was carried from apartment 309. He would never have left it voluntarily. They would hardly have taken him up or downstairs."

Sergeant Mahoney stepped from the car, rang the bell of the apartment marked, "MANAGER." At the third ring a speaking tube rattled. A woman's voice said, "If this is a tenant who's forgotten a key, I'll open the door. If it's someone who wants an apartment, come back at a decent hour."

"It's the police," Sergeant Mahoney said. "Open the door and meet us in the corridor with a pass-key."

A moment later the door buzzed open. Sergeant Mahoney pushed his way into the apartment house. Millicent saw a big, blond woman with a stern, frightened face, hugging a kimona about herself.

Sergeant Mahoney showed her his badge. "Give me a pass-key," he said.

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She handed him the pass-key. Sergeant Mahoney escorted Millicent to the elevator, slid back the door of a cage, pressed the button for the third floor.

"When you get to that floor," he said, "get out and run up and down the corridor screaming, 'Norman, where are you?' After that, no matter what happens, act naturally—that is, be frightened. Don't let on that you know the police have the place surrounded. For your information, I have men placed where they can come to your rescue whenever I give the signal, but I don't want to do that until I've got some incriminating evidence."

She nodded.

"Good luck," he told her, stepped from the elevator and let the door close.

As the closing door made the electrical contact, the elevator lurched upward. It jolted to a stop at the third floor. Millicent saw a deserted corridor. She screamed, "Norman, Norman! Where are you?" and ran the length of the corridor.

Some man shouted through a closed door, "Pipe down. I want to sleep."

A door opened. A strange man stepped into the corridor.

"Are you looking for the man who was hurt in apartment 309?" he asked.

"Yes," Millicent said, and such was her eagerness to locate Norman that for the moment she entirely forgot she was bait for a death trap.

"I found him in the corridor," the man said. "He was unconscious. I took him in here and have been waiting for him to regain consciousness so I could find out what happened. He's not badly hurt."

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Millicent ran swiftly to the door of the apartment. The man stood to one side. Looking past him, Millicent saw a couch. On the couch, covered by a blanket, lay Norman Happ. There was a gash on his forehead on which dry blood had encrusted. His eyes were closed.

"Norman!" Millicent screamed.

Norman shouted, "Run, Millie. Call the police!"

A woman's voice screamed an epithet, a gun roared.

Norman Happ had flung himself off the couch as he called his warning. Millicent saw that his hands were tied behind his back as he dove, head first, to the floor. A bullet ripped the davenport where his head had been. Another bullet tore through the upholstering, ripping cloth, sending up a shower of dust and exposing wire springs.

The strange man who had stood in the doorway struck at Millicent's head with a blackjack. Somehow—she did not know how—she avoided that blow and sped toward Norman Happ.

Through an open door which led to the kitchenet she saw Dick Gentry, an automatic in his hand, his lips twisted into an evil leer, taking deliberate aim at Norman Happ's struggling figure.

Millicent screamed, lunged forward. The gun roared. She heard the impact of a bullet striking something solid as, with a savagery which surprised her, she flung herself upon Dick Gentry and realized she was holding his wrist, struggling with him for the automatic.

"You little she-devil!" he exclaimed, as her teeth sank into his hand. "Take that!"

He kicked at her. The gun roared again. Something struck her in the side with numbing force. She heard a terrific oar, felt Dick Gentry grow suddenly limp. Sergeant Mahoney's voice, sounding deadly ominous, said, "Make a move and you'll get the same dose. Stick 'em up!"

Millicent broke free as Dick Gentry collapsed to the floor. She saw Sergeant Mahoney cutting at Norman's bonds with a clasp knife, saw the strange man with his hands high above his head.

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Millicent ran to Norman, screaming, "Are you hurt?"

(To Be Continued)

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