

# Death Ends the Scene

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He floundered around and fell down, cursing me, when I conked him.

*That washed-up movie-director was going to knock himself off in order to give his no-good bride a double-indemnity payoff—and, Dan Turner, trying to do a couple of good deeds, found himself facing a murder rap with some very hard gunsels making it tough!*

**Y**OU COULD have flattened me with a spoonful of puffed wheat that night when I opened the special-delivery letter and five hundreds fell out. I hadn't piped that much lettuce in a month of Wednesdays, and the gorgeous green centuries made me drool like a pup with a pork chop. Then, when I took a slant at the message enclosed with the moolah, I nearly swallowed my bridgework in a gasp of flabbergasted stupefaction. The handwritten scrawl said:

*Dear Dan Turner:*

*By the time you receive this I'll be knocking myself off. I'm up to my throat in gambling debts that I can't pay, the heat's on me and I'm just about at the end of my string. My life-insurance policies are big enough to pay what I owe, but that wouldn't leave anything for Lorette. She'd be a pauper. On*

*the other hand, the policies all contain double-indemnity clauses. If I die accidentally they will be worth twice as much. . . .*

When I'd read that far I felt my glimmers bulging like squeezed grapes. I turned the page over, scanned the rest of the screwy contents:

*. . . Which would leave Lorette comfortably fixed. Therefore I plan to shoot myself, and I want you to come to my home as soon as you receive this letter. I want you to take away the gun I've killed myself with. That way, it will look as if I had been murdered, which constitutes accidental death, as far as insurance is concerned. Just remove the gun, that's all. The five hundred I enclose herewith will pay you for your time and trouble. Be sure to destroy this note.*

At the bottom of the page was a shaky signature: *Yours in memory of the old days*

*when we had a lot of fun around town together, Jeff Emory.*

LAMPING that monicker, Jeff Emory, made the short hairs prickle at the nape of my neck; a sudden dry tightness seized me by the gullet and my crockery started chattering like dice in a washtub. In all my years as a private eye here in Hollywood I'd never bumped into a nicer guy than this Emory bozo. A top director back in the days of silent pix, he'd made the switch to talkies with very little trouble; stayed right in there pitching when scores of his contemporaries fell by the wayside, their fame forgotten. Jeff's mind was malleable and he had an elastic capacity for keeping himself hep to changing trends, modern methods, new techniques. Microphones didn't daunt him, they merely intrigued him into learning how to master their use. Where plenty of silent directors came a cropper over the new-fangled sound track, Jeff took it in his full stride and maintained his position on top of the heap. Or at least close to the top.

Then, just two years ago, disaster had smitten him. His wife died.

Fiftyish, he'd been married to her since they were barely out of their teens: one of those childhood romances that last a lifetime. Grief gripped him and wouldn't let go. He took to belting the bottle, got saturated in Scotch and stayed plastered so long he became a confirmed lush. His protracted benders showed in his work; whereupon the next time contract-renewal day rolled around, his studio dropped his option and canned him off the lot.

After that it was the old Hollywood story of a guy highballing down the slippery skids. From the major studios Jeff dropped to the lesser independents, then to the quickie outfits on mythical Poverty Row. Presently nobody would hire him; he was through, washed up, a has-been. He also lost his home, his cars, his savings—and a dizzy little brunette frail entitled Lorette Marlowe helped him on his

headlong slide downhill to hell.

All this stuff flashed through my think-tank as I took a horrified hinge at the poor sodden slob's special-delivery letter. On my mental movie screen I saw a rapidly unreeling montage of recent events; scenes I thoroughly disliked even in retrospect. For instance there was Jeff meeting the Marlowe skirt while on a hell-roaring brannigan—meeting her and falling for her, too drunk to realize she was nothing but a predatory she-male vulture seeking a bankroll to sink her hooks into. Any bankroll would do, even a waning one like Emory's. She batted on him like a leech, flattered him, fed him the come-on; vamped him until he genuinely believed he'd found somebody to take the place of his departed wife. Sober, I don't think he'd have looked twice at any such trash as Lorette Marlowe. Fried, he married.

And she took him to the cleaners.

Within three months of the honeymoon he was flat broke. In a desperate effort to keep up with Lorette's spending he began gambling, bucking the floating crap games around town. He was shooting at the moon when he tried it, and he fired nothing but blanks. Maybe he'd have quit while he was still solvent if it hadn't been for Lorette. She kept egging him on, needling him, telling him his luck was bound to change sooner or later.

And she was right. His luck *had* changed—it got worse. Unless there was something phony about the special-delivery letter that he'd just sent me, Jeff had finally reached the jumping-off place. The thought gave me the jim-jams.

I LEAPED across my living-room, grabbed up my phone and dialed it so fast the wheel spat sparks; listened while the ringing signal buzz-buzzed in the receiver. The number I was calling was Emory's rented bungalow this side of Beverly, and I felt a weight as heavy as a hearse lifted off my shoulders when I heard the connection being completed and a weary

masculine voice say: "Hello?"

"That you, Jeff?" I yeepled.

"Yes. Who—"

I caterwauled: "Dan Turner this end, and what was the idea of scaring me that way?"

"You mean my letter?"

"Damned right I mean your letter."

"Apparently you received it."

I was getting sore. "Yeah, and—"

"With the money," he cut in.

I said: "Sure, with the money. And it put the ice cubes up my neck a mile and six furlongs. You crazy, drunken idiot, if this is your idea of a practical joke—"

"What makes you think it was a joke?"

"You're alive, aren't you?" I said. "And you claimed in your letter you'd be defunct when I read it. Therefore—"

He interrupted me again. "Don't jump to conclusions, Hawkshaw. I meant every word of it." His tone got somber. "For me there's no other way out. I've got the gun in my hand right now. I'm getting ready to pull the trigger."

"Now wait!" I yodeled frantically.

"Wait for what? Nothing you can say would change my mind, Dan. This is it. The big payoff."

"Ix-nay!" I said. "Hold it! Don't do it yet. Not until we've had a chance to talk things over."

"What is there to talk about? I'm the same as dead right now. You're practically speaking to a corpse. I explained how the matter stands, Sherlock. I wrote you the details."

"You did no such damned thing," I said, sparring for time. I figured the longer I kept him occupied with conversation the better chance I'd have to argue him out of his suicidal notions. "All you said in the letter was that you're up to your throat in gambling debts and want Lorette to collect double indemnity on your insurance."

"That's right."

"No, it's wrong," I fired back at him. "In the first place a gambling debt isn't legal.

Consequently it isn't collectible. Nobody can sue you for it, nobody can force you to pay it."

"Not in court, perhaps. There are other kinds of force, though. Tougher kinds."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I picked the wrong crowd to shoot dice with. The guy I owe money to is Ben Bradborough. Benny the Greaseball."

I stiffened. "The hell you utter!" I choked. This Bradborough bozo he mentioned was one of the hardest characters in Hollywood: an importation from Chicago by way of Las Vegas, with a rep for being as slick with a roscoe as he was with the galloping dominoes.

**I**N THE past year Benny had established himself solidly in the movie colony, first by booking bets on horse races and then expanding his activities to include high-stake card games, crap sessions, a weekly Chinese lottery, and a high-grade variant of the numbers racket. From the start he had made two things plain. First, he always paid off when he lost. Second, he always collected whenever he won, which was extremely frequent.

His dunning methods were direct, if not diplomatic. He had a staff of hoods on his payroll, tough muggs who were plenty handy with brass knucks and blackjacks. When you lost dough to Benny the Greaseball you either kicked through with it or you earned a load of lumps.

"So that's the score," I said over the phone to Emory. "You're on the nut to Bradborough and you're scared he'll take it out of your hide."

Jeff's voice had a quaver in it. "Worse than that, Hawkshaw. He's got Lorette."

"What?"

"He kidnaped her this afternoon."

"You're kidding," I said.

He made a dry, rasping sound in his throat. "Two of his gunsels snatched her right out of our backyard patio while I was over on the Strip getting drunk. When I came home she

was gone. I got a telephone message a little later. First they let her talk to me a minute. That was to prove they really had her. Then Bradborough himself came on the line. He told me he'd give me twenty-four hours to pay up. Or else."

"Or else what?"

"Or else he'd send Lorette back to me—in little pieces."

"He wouldn't dare," I said.

"You don't know Ben Bradborough."

The hell of it was, I *did* know Bradborough. Not only by hearsay, either; I'd met him a couple of times and I realized he was meaner than a cobra. I said: "Jeff, look. I'm, going to tell you something for your own good. I don't want you to get sore."

"Tell me what?"

"You're deliberately planning to sacrifice your own life for Lorette's sake. Right?"

"It shapes up about like that, yes."

"She isn't worth it," I said flatly. Then, before he could go into an indignant routine I added: "It's time you learned the facts of life, pal. You're old enough. And right now you sound sober enough—which, for you, is something of a minor miracle in recent months. When you married Lorette Marlowe you hooked up to a tramp. She's heartless, soulless and a cheap, chiseling tomato. A gold digger. A mink on the make."

He erupted: "Why, damn you—!"

"All right, hate me," I said. His peevishness was a good sign. If I riled him enough he might forget his plans for knocking himself off. I went on: "She never loved you. She never cared one solitary damn for anything except what dough you had left. Everybody in town knows that. Everybody but you. And now you talk about rubbing yourself out for that kind of dame!"

"I don't have to listen to your—"

"Aw, horse chestnuts," I rode right over his snarls of resentment. "If you want to be a sap, help yourself. Go ahead and put a slug through your skull. It's no skin off me. I'll tell

you this much, though, you needn't expect me to come out there and get rid of the cannon. I refuse."

He calmed down a trifle. "You can't do that to me, Dan. Didn't I send you five hundred dollars for the favor?"

"You can have it back and stuff it," I said. I figured I had him on the run, now. "If I took your geetus and did what you wanted me to do, I'd be compounding a felony by helping rook the insurance company. I'd also be guilty of suppressing evidence, causing the cops to fumble around investigating a murder that hadn't happened. My neck would be in a sling if they ever found out I had pulled a shenanigan like that."

"Your neck," his words had sneers festooning them. "Your precious lousy neck. But what about Lorette's neck? Benny Bradborough's got her and he'll kill her unless I pay him what I owe him, and I can't pay it; I haven't got it. The only way I can get it is by dying. So it can come out of my insurance. Then he'll turn her loose so she can get the insurance and pay him off. But that would leave her with nothing, Not a nickel. All right, if the policies pay double—"

"Maybe that's what she's jockeying for," I said.

"She?"

"Lorette. Maybe she wasn't kidnaped at all. Maybe she's in cahoots with Bradborough. Things like that have happened, you know: errant wife and secret boy friend conspiring to abolish hubby and make a profit on his demise."

"You stinking, dirty-minded foul ball!"

I said: "Have it your way. Anyhow, you'd better stay alive long enough to let me give you back your five yards. I want no part of this suicide scenario, savvy?" Then I hung up on him and went hurtling to the door; blammed out of my apartment and raced hellity-blip down to the basement garage where my jalopy was moored.

TEN seconds later, I was roaring up the ramp to the street under forced draft. I fed my clattering cylinders a charge of ethyl and headed for Emory's wigwam as fast as the wheels would go without peeling all the tires off.

The theory I entertained was simple and effective—I hoped. By dishing Jeff a helping of ugly innuendoes I had worked on his temper, brought it to the boiling point. For a while he would be seething like oatmeal in a hot pot; and as long as he seethed he would probably forget about killing himself. With luck, I might reach him before his mood changed and he started thinking again about self-destruction. Then I could jump him, take his gat away from him, and put him under violent restraint. Maybe I would have to bop him loose from his senses, I realized; but any way you looked at it, a good stiff punch on the jaw was better than a hole in the head.

Behind me, a siren sounded.

I fervently damned the motorbike bull whose glaring red spotlight winked on as he started after me. Sure I was playing merry hell with the speed laws; my speedometer showed sixty and it was still climbing. But I was trying to save a guy's life; and I needed all the velocity I could muster. It would do me no good, though, to stop and explain this to the motorcycle minion. Such a course would, kill too much time—and might kill Jeff Emory if he actually built up enough courage to pull the trigger on himself before I reached him. Moreover, the cop probably wouldn't believe me if I did spill him the story. He might even haul me to the jug, just on general principles. Policemen are suspicious by nature anyhow, particularly late at night.

So I jammed my throttle to the floorboards, coaxed every last ounce of propulsion from my vee-eight power plant. Motorcycle or no motorcycle, I began widening the distance that separated me from the thundering gendarme who was whooshing along in my wake. His siren screamed upward,

shrilly soprano, and he tried to focus his crimson spot so it would reflect into my glims from my rearview mirror. I tilted the mirror upward on its ball swivel. That fixed that.

Then, when a nice wide intersection loomed ahead of me, I used compression to brake my speed a trifle; went into a right turn on two wheels and a prayer. Then I gunned my motor again.

Behind me, the motorcycle hero walloped around the corner and evidently miscalculated the maneuver. I heard his tires screeching into the upper register and tipped down my mirror; watched his reflected image go into a hair-raising skid. His bike spun dizzily and he fought it like a whirling dervish with the hotfoot. By the time he got squared away I was long gone.

Not that it did me any good as far as my mission was concerned. Five minutes later I was jingling Emory's doorbell—and getting no response. Then I discovered the portal to be unlatched and barged inside; saw I was too late.

Emory lay sprawled on the threadbare rug, a gat in his right duke and a tunnel through his ticker. He was deader than a fried parsnip.

THE ROOM was small and mean and shabby, with the kind of furniture that always seems to go with a rented stash: miscellaneous pieces, unrelated, unmatched, and clashing as much as shoddy stuff can ever clash. You walked in, saw your surroundings and promptly forgot them in the greater shock of lamping Jeff's cadaver on the floor, his glims wide and glassily staring at the ceiling but not seeing it. The corpse was all that counted. Nothing else registered. The emphasis was strictly on death.

I said: "Damn!" and moved toward the ex-director's remnants; stooped over and rammed a finger against the artery in his neck. No pulse. I tried his wrist and again threw snake-eyes; his flesh was starting to cool, although rigor mortis hadn't begun setting in. There

wasn't much leakage of gore from the puncture in his bellows, but internal bleeding would account for that. And he was just as dead as if he'd been floating in gallons of his gravy.

"You fool," I whispered gently. "You dopey idiotic fool, bumping yourself for the sake of a frail like Lorette."

He didn't hear me, though. He was past listening to lectures; his troubles were over. Kneeling, I tentatively touched the heater that lay loosely in his right hand. The fingers, still limber, hadn't a very good hold on the weapon and it fell from his clutch when I stirred it; made a tiny thudding noise on the carpet. Then I heard another sound behind me: a quick muffled hissing, as of a swiftly indrawn breath.

I straightened up, pivoted—and blinked as I beheld a disheveled brunette wren entering the room from somewhere in the rear of the wigwam. She was a diminutive doll with hair the color of midnight in a coal mine, a complexion like cream on peaches, and a figure that had all the right things in the right places. Her stems were daintily tapered in sheer nylon hose, her curves were emphasized by a form-fitting emerald wool frock that had got torn here and there, as if in a struggle, and her widened grey peepers were doing an excellent job of registering shocked horror as she copped a hinge at Emory's lifeless husk. She lifted a hand to her kisser, drew another hissing breath and stood rooted in her tracks as if petrified.

I said: "Well, Lorette, you're a widow."

The jane who had married Jeff for his dwindling bankroll snapped out of her trance, favored me with a glare that contained distilled hate. "Murderer!"

"Hey, what the hell?" I strangled.

She moved a step toward me. "You killed him!"

"Are you out of your mind?" I said indignantly.

"You killed him! I saw you! I saw you

putting that gun in his hand to make it look like suicide!"

That attitude fried my tripe to a crisp. "Lay off, sister," I growled. "The guy dutched himself. Moreover, he did it for you—a circumstance greatly to be deplored. He was meat for the undertaker when I arrived here a minute ago."

"You were putting the gun in his hand."

I said hotly: "I was doing no such damned thing! I merely commenced to inspect the cannon and it fell out of his fingers. That was what you saw, and stop needling me."

"You murdered him. You cheap two-bit flatfoot, you killed him! You shot my husband!" Her voice started keening upward into a high register, hysterically. "You—you—"

I was tired listening to that brand of sheep-dip. I barged over to her, fed her something to shut her up: a stinging slap ferninst the features that whacked her noggin to one side as if it were on ball bearings. She staggered backward, swayed, lurched and opened her yap; gave vent to a banshee screech.

A guy came catapulting into the room.

**H**E was young and muscular, topping my six-foot-plusage by at least two inches and weighing a good two hundred and ten versus my own one-ninety. In addition to all this solidly packed beef he was as handsome as the statue of a Greek god and twice as proud of it, if you could judge by the way he had his golden hair waved. Somebody had paid out copious money for the sport threads he was wearing, though I doubted the dough had come from his personal wallet. He looked like a bozo who might accept handouts from dames and consider he was doing them a vast favor.

He lamped just as I was about to dish Lorette another spank on the chops to quiet her down, and he wasted no time plunging at me. "Why, damn your eyes!" he yodeled. "You woman-beating hound, I'll tear you

apart!" Then he made a wild pass at me with a roundhouse right.

It was a sucker punch. It's always a sucker punch if you lead with your right—unless you're left-handed. This guy wasn't. Panting with righteous wrath and extreme exertion, he swung at my wattles with a haymaker that would have demolished me all the way to my cornerstone if it had landed.

It didn't land.

I stepped inside the blow, let it wind harmlessly around me and repressed a sneeze brought on by the wind of its passing. Then I jolted him with a casual uppercut that traveled no more than six inches but rocked him back on his heels like a teeter-totter toy. "So you want to play rough, hunh?" I said, and corked him again; caught him full on the button.

He fell on his posterior, floundered around, cursed me with a sincerity somewhat diluted by the mushiness of his diction. Then, unexpectedly, he grabbed wildly for my ankles; got them and yanked my brogans out from under me. Down I went with a loud, thunderous crash.

I was lucky, though. I landed on the handsome ginzo full force; squashed the air out of him the way you'd squeeze a sponge. This caused him to lose a lot of his truculence, and I drained off all he had left by taking deliberate aim and hitting him soundly in the elly-bay. He curled up and imitated an anchovy. He also lost an interest in further fisticuffs. He hadn't enough breath to say he surrendered, so he did the next best thing; closed his eyes and played possum.

None of which answered the problem presented by the diminutive brunette Emory chick. She was still screeching at the top of her tonsils, and now she picked up a heavy glass vase; started to bat me with it. I couldn't have that; it might fill my scalp full of splinters. I surged from horizontal to vertical, eluded the vase, smacked it out of her grasp and closed in on her, pinioned her. I said: "Hell's bells and shortening bread, baby, it's

impolite to start a riot when your husband is freshly defunct. Have you no respect for the dead?"

"You k-killed him!" She panted, squirming in my arms. "And . . . and n-now you've k-killed my b-brother!"

"Your brother? You mean Handsome Whozit with the golden tresses? Is he your brother?"

"Y-yes. And you . . . you—"

"He's not croaked," I told her. "I just knocked a little sense into him, was all."

She kept wiggling and, struggling, not that it bought her anything. "Let me g-go! I'm going to call the police and tell them—tell them you murdered Jeff!"

**F**ROM the front doorway a resonant voice said in ominous accents: "You don't have to call the police, lady. You've already got the police." It was a harness copper in the leather tunic and black puttees of a motorbike bull, and he had a nasty expression on his much. He also had a big black .38 on a .44 frame in his fist, and he was aiming it at me. "Thought you could get away, eh?" he rasped.

"Who, me?"

He nodded, and his kisser was a thin firm line. "You. Quite a stunt you pulled, busting all the speed regulations and ignoring my siren when I took out after you. Maybe you thought you'd lost me. But you didn't. I had your tag numbers and I cruised back and forth every block in the neighborhood. Sure enough I seen your coupe parked out in front of this house."

"Watch your grammar," I said. "Saw, not seen."

He let that one go by him without even taking a cut at it. "I also heard a woman screaming. So I come in. And I find you've rubbed somebody out. Guess that was why you was in such a hurry. Murder hurry."

I said: "That's a pack of damned nonsense. You mustn't believe everything a hysterical jessie tells you. Besides, if you want the lowdown, it wasn't a kill at all; it was a

suicide. And this very dame is the one who stands to gain by it.”

The cop gave me the fish-eyed focus but looked as if he yearned to hear more. Lorette choked and yeped something unintelligible at me. And then, behind my back, the handsome character—the bozo she claimed was her brother—got up off the floor and played me a filthy trick. He hit me on the skull with a sledgehammer.

Anyhow it felt like a sledgehammer, although later I found out he merely used a metal-pedestal smoking stand. Regardless of the weapon’s nature, it did the business. A sudden blinding explosion of pain flashed through my grey matter, like nuclear fission blowing up. Neon lights pinwheeled in my glimmers and lassitude coursed into all my nooks and crannies, followed by abrupt blackness. I dropped like a pool ball in the corner pocket and became very useless indeed.

**R**AW ROTGUT snapped me out of my swoon. It was cheap corn whisky, the kind they age three weeks in wood chips and bottle before the fire goes out. I felt a corrosive flame searing my interior to a charred mass of blisters and sat up breathing smoke. Long before I got my optics open I knew who was rendering me this liquid first aid. It was my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide detail. Nobody but Donaldson could possibly be addicted to such distilled essence of pestilence.

Sure enough he was leaning over me, his beefy mush expressing concern for my welfare and his gaze jealously regarding the amount of alcoholic poison he was measuring into my kisser. I swatted the flask aside and moaned: “Cease firing! All hands stand by to abandon ship!” Then I reached up, touched the top of my dome where I’d been conked by Lorette Emory’s brother. I had a lump there the size of third base and my headache would have plagued an elephant. In a feeble tone I added: “Go away. I’m a sick dick.”

“Good,” Dave said heavily.

I goggled at him. “Good? What’s good about being knocked colder than December in Siberia?”

“I meant I’m glad you’re still alive,” he rumbled. “For a few minutes I was afraid you might not survive to stand trial.”

“Trial? Me?”

“You. For bumping Emory.”

I swayed dizzily to my feet; blinked at him. “Somebody’s absolutely nuts,” I remarked with considerable rancor. “I think it’s you.” Then I peered foggily around the room; piped a medical examiner inspecting Emory’s remainders while a pair of white-jacketed morgue-wagon orderlies impatiently twiddled their fingers as they waited to pick up their wicker basket-load and get going with it. In addition, the diminutive Emory cupcake and her blond brother were present, as well as that interfering motorcycle cop and several other assorted arms of the law. It was the motorbike copper, undoubtedly, who had put in the bleat to homicide headquarters, thereby bringing Donaldson and his satellites onto the scene; but I couldn’t savvy why I should be facing a croakery charge in the face of obvious evidence that Emory’s demise was suicide. It didn’t make sense.

Then, abruptly, I remembered how Jeff’s widow had ankled into the room, piped me touching the roscoe in his dead fingers, and leaped to the conclusion that I was the responsible party. She’d accused me of the kill, and probably had repeated her accusations when Donaldson arrived.

“So that’s it,” I grunted.

Dave narrowed his peepers at me. “That’s what?”

“You’ve been listening to Lorette.”

“I took her preliminary statement, yes. She claims she found you planting a gun in her husband’s hand after you’d shot him.”

“Did she see me shoot him?”

“She didn’t have to. What she did see was more than plenty.” Dave made a grim mouth.

I said: "Wait. Let's get this straightened out right now. To begin with, Jeff was already among his ancestors when I got here. I was merely looking him over at the time Lorette pranced in and started making cracks. And in the second place, he killed himself. Which I can prove," I added, giving the brunette widow a sardonic leer. "And that will be just too bad for you, toots," I lipped at her. "Financially, anyhow. Because you won't get double indemnity on his insurance policies—in case that was what you were expecting."

**S**HE started to say something right back at me, but Donaldson ungallantly cut in ahead of her. "Hold on." He favored me with a sour glower. "What's this about suicide and insurance?"

"Just that," I responded promptly. "Jeff was in debt. He owed Ben Bradborough copious scratch."

"Bradborough? Benny the Greaseball?"

"The same," I said. "Jeff had been losing to him at dice. The debt got top-heavy and Benny made demands. He backed up these demands by pulling a trivial job of snatchery, to wit, he kidnaped Lorette and held her for what you might laughingly call ransom. I mean he told Jeff to pay up or else Lorette would suffer a very dire fate."

Donaldson's pan slowly turned a deep apoplectic purple. "Now wait a minute!" he caterwauled. "It's bad enough I've got a kill on my hands without you hauling an abduction to complicate the case. What the hell are you trying to, do, confuse me?"

"Not at all. Ask the lady herself. Me, I'm just an innocent bystander repeating what Jeff told me in a telephone conversation." To show my indifference I set fire to a gasper; astonished myself by blowing a smoke ring on the first try.

Dave whirled on the brunette frail, "Is this true?"

"Yes. At least I was kidnaped."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know."

"Do you mean to stand there and tell me?"

"All I'm telling you is that two men came into my patio this afternoon and forced me to go with them," she said. "They threatened me with guns and put me in a car and blindfolded me and took me somewhere."

"Where?"

She made a vaguely uncertain gesture.

"I don't know. A house—a big house from what I saw of it. They held me captive, and later they let me talk to Jeff on the phone. They made me tell him I was a prisoner, then they took the phone away from me and put me in another room."

I said: "That was the phone call Jeff told me about. Ben Bradborough was putting the pressure on him, demanding payment of his gambling debt or Lorette would suffer the consequences. Then Jeff got this wacky suicide idea."

"Oh. Back at that, hunh?" Dave beetled his shaggy brows at me. "Okay, give us a tell. Not that I guarantee to believe one damned word of what you say."

I shrugged elaborately. "Make it easy on yourself. Anyhow the story-line goes like this: Jeff had some life insurance. He figured if he kicked the bucket, his policies would pay his debts. Benny the Greaseball would then have to turn Lorette loose so she'd be able to collect the insurance and pay off. In brief, Jeff had the idea his own death would fix everything. Then he carried it a step farther. If his suicide could be made to look like murder it would mean the policies would pay double indemnity, thereby yielding Lorette a tidy nest-egg over and above those gambling IOU's. Am I boring you, pal?"

"A little. But keep on talking."

"There isn't much else to it," I said. "He sent me a note outlining all this stuff. He asked me to come here and get rid of the roscoe he was going to shoot himself with, thus leaving a weaponless corpse to puzzle the cops so it would be considered a murder, not a

suicide. All right. I phoned him, begged him to reconsider. He said I was wasting my time. Then I drove over here—and arrived too late. He was already extinct when I barged in; whereupon his widow showed up and accused me of croaking him.”

**D**AVE scratched his chin-stubble, which emitted rasping noises. “Hmm-m-m,” he growled. Then he said to Lorette: “You claim two unknown characters kidnaped you, hey?”

“Yes.”

“Then what are you doing here now?” he barked at her. “If you were snatched, how did you get away from the snatchers?”

“Jack rescued me.”

“Jack?”

“My brother,” she said, and pointed to the handsome blond guy standing beside her. “Jack Marlowe.”

Dave surveyed this husky specimen with obvious dislike, which was a normal masculine reaction; your average man instinctively resents the brand of classic good looks flaunted by the Marlowe character. In Dave’s case the dislike visibly became distrust. “Tell me about this rescue, mister.”

“Of course,” Marlowe said easily. “Jeff called me up and said Lorette had been kidnaped by Ben Bradborough. I asked him what he intended to do about it and he gave me an evasive answer. Naturally I didn’t like that. I couldn’t possibly guess he was planning to resolve the situation by committing suicide. He didn’t so much as hint that when he talked to me.”

“And, so?”

“And so I suggested that he get in touch with the police. But he said it was too risky. Lorette might get hurt, he argued. Her kidnapers might harm her if we brought the cops in on it. He told me he had a better idea. I realize, now, that he meant he intended to shoot himself. But I didn’t know it then. I was disgusted by what I thought was his cowardice.”

Dave lifted a lip. “You should be writing for radio. Your dialogue has such lovely syntax.”

“As a matter of fact I *am* a radio writer,” Marlowe said with asperity. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. Keep talking. What’s with this rescue routine?”

The blond guy made a disparaging mouth. “It was nothing, really. I happen to know where Bradborough lives. I went to his house and got in. I had to use a little persuasion,” he added, and blew on his knuckles in a reminiscent way. “Lorette was in a rear room, locked in. It wasn’t a very strong door.”

“So you took her out, eh?”

“I took her out.”

“Just like that.”

“Just like that.” Marlowe nodded. “And brought her home. When we got here, Jeff was dead and Turner was leaning over him, as if placing a gun in his hand.”

I snarled: “I was doing no such damned thing, bright-eyes.”

“Perhaps not. Perhaps my sister made a mistake when she accused you. The point is, you slapped her. Gentlemen don’t slap ladies. So when the motorcycle arrived I took advantage of the situation and knocked you unconscious.”

“Very chivalrous of you,” I growled at him. “Remind me to get even when the opportunity comes.” Then I turned to Donaldson. “So that’s the setup,” I said. “Clear as glass. No confusion. Emory’s death was suicide and everything else is explained.”

**B**EFORE Dave could answer this, the medical examiner finished his inspection of Jeff’s husk and wrote something on a notebook page; tore out the page and slipped it to a plainclothes copper. The copper, in turn, handed it to Donaldson, who read it and let out a yelp of fury. “So everything’s explained, hey?” he yodeled at me. “Emory’s death was suicide, was it?”

“Yeah.”

“Then how come there’s no powder burn around the wound? Why is it the dermal nitrate test shows negative on both hands? That proves he didn’t fire a gun. The paraffin test never lies, wisenheimer. Moreover, the doc says from the course the bullet took it couldn’t have been self-inflicted—unless Emory was double-jointed and had an arm five feet long, which he hadn’t. So let’s hear you explain that.”

I felt a shiver leapfrogging down my spine. I goggled. “If that report is right, it means—”

“Correct. It means he was murdered.”

In a dazed tone I said: “But he couldn’t have been. I talked to him on the phone and he told me he intended to kill himself. I received a special letter from him to the same effect. The letter where he asked me to get rid of the roscoe for him.” I fumbled in my inside coat pocket.

No dice. No letter.

Donaldson’s glims narrowed: “Show me.”

“I must have left it home,” I said. “I went out of my apartment stash in such a hell of a hurry—”

“Don’t try to sell me that hogwash, hot shot.”

“Now look,” I said peevishly. “I’ve been leveling. Just give me a chance to go home and get the letter for you.”

“Shut up. You’re under arrest. I don’t believe there was any such letter. You’ve been lying like a gas meter.”

“Meaning you think I drilled Emory?”

“I don’t think anything at all.”

“That I’ll buy,” I sneered.

He sneered right back at me with compound interest. “Thinking is for college professors. I’m a homicide cop. My job is to make arrests and find out the truth—the hard way, usually. Okay, I’m making arrests right now. Three of them. You first. And this Jack Marlowe citizen. And Mrs. Emory. All right, boys,” he snapped at his minions. “Take them downtown and we’ll sweat them a while to see

which one cracks first. And flash out a pickup order on Benny Bradborough.”

A harness bull sidled toward me with handcuffs, jingling metallicly in his mitts. Others made for Lorette and her blond brother. The two morgue orderlies were now depositing Emory’s carcass in the wicker basket, and for a moment there was quite a lot of movement in the room.

Then there was even more movement. I was the ginzo doing the moving. I stuck out my left brogan, tripped the cop who was barging at me with the bracelets. He gave issue to a loud yell of indignation and fell clumsily on all fours with a jar that shook him to his foundations. Another brass-buttoned hero, seeing this, rushed into action and stumbled over his fallen colleague; went skidding on his trumpet. Things became somewhat chaotic, particularly when Donaldson and two morgue orderlies leaped for me and collided in a triple-pretzel tangle. This was my golden opportunity and I seized it by the forelock.

I scrambled.

**I** DASHED out in the foggy night with my hip pockets dipping confetti; gained the sidewalk in a blur of motion. My bucket was parked at the curb with the key in its ignition lock, but I considered it a bad risk; my license plates were too familiar to Donaldson and it would take him practically no time at all to put out a short-wave reader on me. I had no yen to go gallivanting thither and yon with all the prowl cars within fifty miles on the lookout for me; that would be bucking impossible odds. So I hunched down and made with the feet; started running like a rooster eluding the farmer’s hatchet.

Damned if I knew why, though. The faster I sprinted, the less I was able to rationalize it. Naturally I had a conditioned reflex against being flung into the jug; no private snoop enjoys a sojourn behind bars, especially if he’s got a rep for staying on the right side of the

law. But aside from this wholly natural disinclination to be pinched, I had no genuine reason for taking it on the lam. I knew I wouldn't have been held very long in durance vile; a smart mouthpiece could get me sprung before you could whistle Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. As for having Emory's murder pinned on, me, that was just plain poppycock. I couldn't even be sure it really was a murder. In spite of the medico's findings I knew I'd had a letter from Jeff stating he intended to liquidate himself; and he had later confirmed this when I phoned him.

That letter was what I needed now. In a sense, it would clear me; or at least it would show why I had dashed to Jeff's tepee in such a hurry. Running and reasoning simultaneously, I concluded that this was why I had powdered from custody. Dave, by refusing to let me go home for the suicide note, had forced my hand. Now I was determined to get it come hell or high tide. Then I'd go to headquarters and flaunt it under his smeller; dare him to install me in the bastille.

Somewhere in the distance behind me, footfalls pounded and a motor whirred under the urging of its starter; coughed and choked and came alive with a clattery roar. Gears clashed. The roar grew louder, coming toward me, overtaking me as I sprinted through the fog. And it seemed to me I recognized certain characteristic rattles and wheezes of the oncoming car.

It was my own coupe.

I said: "What the hell?" and angled toward the curb; discovered I was at an intersection. The cross street was an arterial avenue with a stop sign. I paused there.

Psychology, it's wonderful. My bucket came blamming toward the intersection—but when it hove into view of the stop sign, the driver slapped on his brakes and screeched to a partial halt. Through a rift in the drifting mist I caught a hinge at him; tensed as I tabbed his wavy yellow hair and Greek-god

profile. He was Lorette Emory's brother, Jack Marlowe; and quite obviously he had torn a leaf from my book by lamming from the law. You didn't need a crystal ball to savvy what had happened. Taking advantage of my own escape and the ensuing confusion, he'd busted loose and glommed my chariot for a fast getaway. And yet, because habit is such a persevering thing, he was slowing for a stop sign.

That was just dandy. I ducked forward, scuttled over the curb and made a catlike grab for the coupe's spare; hoisted my tonnage onto the rear bumper and clung there without Marlowe realizing he had acquired a stowaway. He shifted into second, gunned the everlasting tripes out of the motor and took off like a stone from a slingshot. I had to hang on with hands, teeth and toenails or I'd have been sailing through the atmosphere looser than a kite with a cut string.

Pasted to the stern of my thundering kettle, I tried to savvy the Marlowe character's escape caper. Why did he fear temporary arrest?? What guilt lay so heavily on his conscience that he would risk the wrath of Dave Donaldson by sneaking a scam? What was he afraid of?

**M**AYBE he wasn't afraid of anything. I reflected. After all, I had done the very same thing—and there certainly was no sense of guilt involved. Why, then, should I be suspicious of Marlowe? Perhaps he had a legitimate reason for what he was doing. The reason might even be important enough to justify him in swiping my jalopy. At least I was now in a position to keep a glim on him, see what was cooking.

He drove fast, but not far. About eight or ten blocks farther along, he swung left; parked. This was a quiet residential street lined with houses in the forty- to fifty-thousand-buck bracket; neo-Georgian Colonial two-story stashes for the most part, with pillared porticoes, wide rambling sweeps

of barbered lawn, and detached garages in the rear; garages, but no servants' quarters and damned few swimming pools. Strictly upper middle class without too much ostentation.

Marlowe dragged anchor in front of a cream-white corner house; hopped out and started up the moderately tilted driveway. The gravel under his tootsies made whispering, crunching sounds as he walked; but as I shadowed him I used the grass and kept as silent as an eel swimming in melted butter.

Presently my quarry gained the front portal of the igloo and thumbed the bell button. I was right behind him, cloaked in darkness and fog but, near enough to pipe everything that took place. A moment passed. Then the door opened cautiously and Marlowe said in a stage-whisper: "Is Benny in? I've got to see him."

Benny, I thought. Could that be Ben Bradborough, Benny the Greaseball?

The answer came soon enough. The portal closed, but a moment; later it opened again and I heard a voice I recognized. It was a scratchy, rasping voice, curiously strained in character, as if a former injury had left permanent scar tissue on the vocal cords. You got the impression that the guy had to make a definite physical effort when he talked, like pushing the words through a meat grinder.

It was Bradborough, sure enough. I'd faced him more than once over a crap table, and there was no mistaking the way he husked: "Well, what the hell do you want now?"

"Ben, I want in," Marlowe answered nervously. "I want to have a talk with you. In private."

"What about?"

"We're in a jackpot, Ben. Something slipped. Bad."

"What slipped? And how bad?"

"The cops are saying Jeff didn't kill himself. They're claiming it was murder, not suicide."

"What?"

"So help me."

"But damn it to hell—"

"The heat's on you, Ben."

**B**RADBOROUGH widened the door opening. I could see him now. I could lamp the sudden ferocity of his expression, the taut anger that crawled across his mush and froze there. He was a sawed-off, chunky ginzo with the shoulders and long dangling arms of an ape or a heavyweight wrestler. But he tapered down to a jockey-sized middle, and his legs were absurdly short and skinny. It was as though some crazy surgeon had sliced him in half at the belt line and then fastened him to the lower section of a schoolboy, giving him a sort of deformed appearance that made you shiver instinctively the first time you encountered him. His map didn't dispel the illusion much. It was craggy and lumpy, as if roughly carved from granite by a sculptor whose chisel had skidded.

"What the hell do you mean, the heat's on me?" he said to Marlowe without moving his lips.

"I mean the cops have got your name and there's a pickup out on you."

"Why?"

"I told you. They claim Jeff didn't shoot himself. Some smart monkey of a police doctor says it was murder. There's a private snoop named Dan Turner mixed up in it somehow. He spilled about you snatching my sister, and—"

Benny the Greaseball stiffened visibly. "Damn your lousy rotten soul, Marlowe. You got me into this. It's what I get for listening to your crackpot schemes! You and your clever radio plots. I should have known it wouldn't work. Not in real life. For a microphone, maybe. But with the chips down, no. Well, I'm not taking any murder fall. Not alone anyhow. You've pulled your last trick, you heel." There was suddenly a cannon in the chunky gambler's grasp: a short-barreled Magnum, from the look of it. He aimed it at

Marlowe's clockworks.

"Hey, no—no, don't!" the yellow-haired guy yeped. "Hell, I'm trying to do you a favor and this is the thanks I get."

"A favor!" Benny grunted.

"Sure. There's a car at the curb. It's hot. I stole it—just for you. So you could make tracks. I knew you couldn't use any of your own cars; the cops will be watching for your numbers. But a bent job, well, maybe its theft won't be reported for a while. I mean you can use it to get out of town and then ditch it. I risked my own freedom to get it for you."

"Nuts." Benny cocked his rod.

Marlowe argued desperately. "Look, Ben. The way it is right now, they think maybe you bumped Jeff because he owed you dough and wouldn't pay. That's bad. But suppose you pull your freight. Suppose you beat it. Okay, a guy like you, with your connections, you can rig an alibi somewhere. Say in Glendale, or Pasadena, or down in San Berdoo. You can frame it so it will look as if you'd been out of town all night, since maybe this morning. That puts you in the clear. It cools the heat. If you've got an alibi they can't crack, how can they pin a murder on you that happened here in Hollywood this evening? Use your skull, Ben."

"I'm listening," the sawed-off gambler said. He lowered his gat a trifle. "But that don't mean I'm buying what you're trying to sell."

"You've got to buy it!" Marlowe's voice was wheedling, fawning and fearful all in the same breath. "It's the only way we'll come out with whole skins, Ben. Look, what good would it do you to blast me now? You're already wanted for one kill—"

"A kill which I don't know from nothing about."

"All right. Okay. But if you shoot me, then you'll really be in a jackpot. Put that gun away and listen to me."

WITH patent reluctance, Bradborough thrust the fowling-piece in to his coat pocket but kept his fist on it there, so you couldn't miss the menacing bulge it made. "I been listening. I don't like what you're saying." Watching him, I could tell he was beginning to waver, Marlowe was about to sell him a bill of goods.

"I don't like it either," Marlowe said, and used a sleeve to mop sweat off his forehead. "It'll all straighten up, though, as soon as you rig yourself this alibi you're going to need. I'll admit I gave you a bad steer on that kidnap angle. But I didn't know it was bad when I suggested it to you. How could I guess how it'd turn out? We got crossed somewhere, I don't understand, how, exactly, but it was a cross-up. And I need time to move around and see how it happened. Anyhow you'll, get your money. That much I'm sure of. Jeff told that private gumshoe, Turner, he wanted you to get paid. He told him so on the phone. And Lorette knows it, too. So naturally she'll see to it that you're satisfied. But what good's it going to do you if you let yourself get pinched on a homicide rap? You've got to scram, Ben. Fast."

It was a long speech, and apparently convincing. Benny mulled it over briefly, then nodded a jerky nod. "I'll head for a joint I know in Fontana, a real-estate guy who fronts for me down that way. Come on inside with me a minute till I pick up some geet for traveling expenses. All I got in my kick is small change." And he took Marlowe's arm, conducted him indoors.

He came out again directly with a topcoat on, but the Marlowe lad wasn't with him. There were two possible explanations for this. Marlowe might have ducked out the back way, powdered while the powdering was possible. Or else Benny the Greaseball, in a spirit of mistrust, might have locked him up somewhere in the stash; decided to hold him hostage. Anyhow the yellow-haired ginzo didn't show. I wondered about it, but I was in

no position to make any investigations just then. I had other fish to fry.

Bradborough ankleed past me, obviously unaware I had the eye on him. Making straight for my heap, he slid under the wheel. It was a tight fit for his bulky torso, although his short stems had some trouble reaching down to the pedals. He managed it, however; kicked the starter and stirred life into the engine.

Bending far over, I raced to the curb. Sprinting, I felt for the .32 automatic I always tote in a shoulder holster for emergencies; this, I reflected, was an emergency of the first water. But I didn't have my shooting-iron. Apparently I'd been disarmed back at Emory's tepee while I was unconscious from that swat on the steeple dealt me by Jack Marlowe. Maybe it had been Marlowe himself who'd pulled my fangs. Or the motorcycle cop. Hell, for that matter it might have been Dave Donaldson; he has a habit of filching my rod when I'm knocked senseless. There are times when it inconveniences me considerably, and this was one of the times.

It was too late now, though to stay my headlong plunge. Heater or no heater, I was committed to a course of action and couldn't back out. I careened to my car, snatched the door open, bounced my heft onto the seat alongside Ben Bradborough and poked my extended thumb deep into his short ribs. "I'm Dan Turner, private op," I announced curtly. "And this roscoe you feel isn't loaded with marshmallows. One wrong move and I blow your giblets all the way to Pasadena."

Oddly enough, he believed me.

**H**E MADE a gurgling sound in his gullet, like sewage going down a faulty drainpipe, and stiffened at the controls before he'd got my bucket in motion. "Who?" he choked.

I said: "Never mind the small talk. Are you packed?"

"I . . . I . . . yeah, I—"

"That's nice. Never lie when somebody's

got the drop on you." I reached out, fanned him, found where he was carrying his cannon and relieved him of it. It was a snub-nosed gat with nice balance and a reassuring heft in your mitt. I felt much better when I had it. I felt very swell indeed. "Now drive," I said.

"Wh-where t-tuh-to?"

"Straight ahead until I tell you to turn. And take it easy. I don't want any crackups in this fog. After all, new cars are hard to get and repair bills come high."

"I don't get it," he jittered, gearing into low and feeding a shot of ethyl where it would do the most good. "First you jump in on me and stick me up and frisk me for my rod without even saying why. Then you moan about cracking up a kettle which it don't even belong to you."

"But it does," I said casually.

He damned near sent us scooting up a palm tree. "Hunh?"

"You heard me," I said. "This jalopy is mine."

"But . . . but—"

I said: "I know. Marlowe told you he glommed it for your special benefit. But he didn't tell you he knew the owner. And he didn't tell you the owner was an extremely tough shamus—namely, me." I made with a cardonic chuckle. "I was eavesdropping. I heard the whole routine. And I'll tell you something else. I'm red-hot with the cops just now. There's a dragnet out for me. Every prowling heap in town is on the lookout for this particular coupe."

"No!"

"Yeah. And Marlowe was hep to that fact. Therefore, when he argued you into using this wagon for your getaway he knew you'd be a cooked goose before you drove five miles."

"The lousy stinker!"

I said: "In other words, he was jobbing you."

"You don't have to draw me no picture, gumshoe. I get it onna first bounce. Why, that crumb!"

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said thoughtfully. “Maybe it was his way of making sure you’d be nabbed for the Emory kill. After all, Marlowe was in no position to make the pinch personally.”

Benny saw an alley and drove into it; parked. “Now wait a minute. Leave us talk this over. Inna first place, I got nothing whatever to do with no Emory kill. Kindly unnastand that. I admit he owed me money, lotsa money. I also admit I was trying to scare a payoff outa him.”

“How? By sending some gunsels to threaten him? And maybe one of them had an itchy trigger finger and drilled him on a sudden impulse?”

The gambler shivered a little. “Nothing like that. Nothing at all. Look, suppose I tell you the whole story.”

“Do, by all means.”

He drew an uncertain breath into his bellows. “Like I say, Emory owed me a pile of scratch. He’d been losing to me at dice and giving me his markers. So when I tried to collect he kept stalling me. I was just about ready to sic some of my boys on him and push him around.”

“Your usual collection method,” I said.

“Yeah. But then this Marlowe, which is Emory’s brother-in-law, he come to me with a scheme. Look, he sez, look, Ben, it won’t do you no good to give Jeff lumps. Why don’t you hit him where it’ll really hurt? So I sez okay, tell me how to do it. And he sez, all you gotta do is hang the snatch on Jeff’s wife. I sez are you crazy, asking me to kidnap your own sister? And he sez hell, Ben, you won’t hurt her. All you do is grab her, see, and then phone Emory to let turn know you got her. Tell him to either pay up or she gets creamed. That will scare him so bad he’ll probly cash in his life insurance or anyhow borrow on it, so’s he can ransom her.”

I said: “Was Lorette in on this shenanigan?”

“Naw, she was just the goat. The first thing she knowed about it was when my boys snatched her and blindfolded her and brung her to my house. Matter of fact she put up such a hassle we had to be a little rough with her. Tore her clothes some. In a genteel way, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” I said.

HE went on: “So I done like Marlowe told me and phoned Emory. I sez to him Jeff, I sez, you better kick through with that green stuff you owe me or you’ll get your wife back in installments, an arm or leg at a time. So he moaned around a while and sez don’t do nothing like that, Ben. He sez: I’ll pay you. I’ll see to it you get your money, he sez. I’ll fix it right away, he sez. So it looked like Marlowe’s scheme was a good one and was gonna work just fine.”

“Try to come to the punch line,” I suggested.

“Yeah. Well, tonight Marlowe comes barging to my house, He’s in a lather, see? He tells me, he sez: that crazy dope of a Jeff Emory bumped himself off. He sez: I guess he done it so’s Lorette could collect his insurance. I got to take her home right away, he sez, so she can take care of the details. You got to let me pull a rescue act, he tells me. And I sez okay, you can take a poke at one of my boys to make it look good. Which he done. Then he opens the room where I got Lorette, see, and yanks her out and they scam. Me, I think that’s the end of it. But no. After while he come back and tells me the cops are saying Emory didn’t croak himself but was murdered—”

“That conference I heard,” I said. “Including Marlowe advising you to make a getaway and frame an alibi for yourself. Incidentally, what did you do with him when you took him indoors?”

“Who, me? I didn’t do nothing. I just left him there.”

“With orders for your muggs to keep him under wraps?” I inquired. “Holding him hostage, so to speak?”

“Now why would I do anything like that?” Benny the Greaseball asked sulkily.

I said: “It might be your way of coppering your bets. You’re playing with dynamite and you probably realize it may blow up in your face any minute. If that happens, perhaps your gunsels have orders to arrange Marlowe’s violent demise by way of revenge.” I studied him as I said this, and sensed I’d scored a bull’s-eye. I could tell by the way he flinched.

Nor did he try to deny the guess I’d made. “So okay, I got him salted down. Now I suppose you’re gonna make me go back home and turn him loose. I sure been playing in lousy luck all the way through this deal. I must be jinxed.”

“Sometimes jinxes can be bought off,” I remarked.

He squirmed around, blinked at me. “Meaning what, gumshoe?”

“Name a number,” I said.

“What number?”

“Whatever sum you happen to be carrying in your wallet. Preferably a large round figure.”

“I got a grand on me.”

“I can use a grand very nicely,” I said. “It will just pay for the service I’m about to render you.”

“Service? What service?”

“Professional, naturally. I’m going to produce a letter, written by the late Emory, stating he intended to extinguish himself. That should throw a very hefty monkey wrench into the law’s effort to prove Jeff was murdered.”

Benny gulped noisily. “You mean you got a letter like that? It ain’t a fake?”

“I’ve got a letter like that. It’s in my apartment stash. Come on, pay me and let’s get started.”

He fumbled for his billfold, found it, opened it, extracted a sheaf of twenties and fifties thick enough to upholster a casting

couch. “You wanna count it, copper?”

“No, I’ll take it as it is. And don’t call me copper. I’m not. I’m a private man!” I stuffed the lettuce into my own wallet. “Drive, chum. And don’t spare the horsepower!”

He backed my jalopy out of the alley, headed it into the drifting fog. “Where to?”

I MENTIONED my address and we went there in great haste. Just to stay on the safe side, though, I kept the Greaseball ginzo covered with his own bets throughout the trip as well as during our subsequent ride in the self-serve elevator which wafted us to the third floor of the apartment building where I hang out. As a matter of fact, I still had a bead on him as I marched him ahead of me along the corridor to my personal portal. Then, suddenly, I jabbed the gat’s muzzle against his spine.

He stopped in his tracks, looked around. “Wh-what—?”

“My door,” I whispered. “It’s open. It shouldn’t be. There’s a light on inside. That’s wrong too.”

“You mean maybe somebody’s in there clouting the joint?”

“That, or the cops.” As I gave utterance to this brief bit of whispered dialogue, luck dealt me a very nasty card off the bottom of the desk. I sneezed.

It was a loud sneeze. But it wasn’t as loud as the flat, spanking bark of a roscoe coughing *Ka-pow!* from within my threshold. A slug slammed by me; nipped into Ben Bradborough and knocked him floundering as if an unseen hand had wiped his short gams from under him. Toppling, he fell against me and I lost my own balance; joined him in a trip to the carpet. At this dizzy juncture a she-male form erupted from my wigwam: a diminutive dame embellished in a torn frock and toting a small but deadly gat in her grasp. You could lamp a trickle of smoke curling from the roscoe’s muzzle as the jane burst into view. You could also pipe the panic in her

unnaturally widened peepers. She was Lorette Emory, of course, and she was high as an Alp with fear and hysterical determination to lam the hell away from that vicinity, even if she had to shoot it out with a herd of Texas Rangers.

Maybe the Texas Rangers would have let her get away with the caper; I hear they're pretty chivalrous. But the man who stopped her was no Galahad. He was Dave Donaldson, who chose that precise instant to come lumbering up the staircase paralleling the elevator shaft. Dave glommed a flabbergasted hinge at Ben Bradborough writhing wounded on the hallway floor; saw me alongside the gambler and yodeled: "A massacre, eh!" He then hurled himself at the fleeing Lorette, meeting her headlong and expertly batting the gun from her grip.

Whether by accident or design I couldn't tell, but the same swipe of his fist that ungunned her also clipped her on the prow, knocking her hips-over-appetite. She landed in a flurry of kicking, silk-sheathed props and Dave pressed his advantage by stooping down and festooning her wrists with shiny steel bracelets. A split instant later he tucked her under his arm and larruped over to where I was sprawling. "Hey, Sherlock! How bad are yon hurt?" He panted.

I said: "I'm not hurt at all, except my pride. Bradborough is the boy who stopped the slug." I arose, peered down at Benny the Greaseball and added: "A neat, clean hole through the thigh. With a tourniquet he ought to last long enough to get to the hospital for a vulcanizing job." Then I yanked off the chunky bozo's belt; wrapped it around his leaking limb and stanching the gush of gore.

HE thanked me with his eyes, but didn't get a chance to speak his gratitude in words because Donaldson chimed in first. "What's this all about?" Dave demanded petulantly. "First you take a powder back at Emory's house. That yellow-haired Marlowe

lad follows your lead. And in the confusion Emory's widow, here, does the same thing. So I put out dragnets and I come here to your apartment personally, thinking maybe I'll catch you sneaking in, and I run into gunnery with violence, with riots, with this dame waving a gat and making with the bloodshed—"

"Bradborough and I caught her red-handed, burgling my wigwam," I cut across him. "She was shooting her way to freedom."

Dave's brows beetled. "Burgling your wigwam, hey? What was she after?"

"A letter, I think." And I leered at the diminutive brunette quail; deliberately opened her pocketbook—a leather affair hung by a long strap over her shoulder. Rummaging in the handbag, sure enough I found what I expected to find. It was Jeff Emory's special-delivery letter to me; the suicide note.

Plus, of course, the five-hundred bucks enclosed with it.

I pocketed the cabbage, showed the letter to Dave. "Here's what the lady wanted. And I think I know why. Remember the insurance angle? If Jeff's decease could be officially termed murder, Lorette would collect double indemnity on his policies. But if it went down in the books as suicide, her cut would be sliced in half. And that half would be absorbed by Jeff's debts, leaving her flatter than the ham in a dime-store sandwich. Okay, your medico said it *was* murder; but I kept yapping about a suicide note. Well, when she suddenly saw an opportunity to get loose, she decided to mosey over here and purloin the letter in question—since I'd mentioned I must have left it in my flat. With the letter destroyed, there'd be no existing evidence to refute the murder theory. In brief, by glomming the note she figured she'd be sure of twice the face value of Jeff's insurance. Right, babe?" I turned to her.

"Y-yes. And go to hell!" she spat at me.

Dave was squinting at the scrawled special delivery. His mush furrowed fretfully. "It is a

suicide message!” he squalled. “You were leveling all the time!”

“Yeah,” I said. “I was leveling, but I was mistaken. Two gets you ten the note’s a forgery and the whole setup was phony; a crazy cover-up for premeditated croakery. As a matter of fact, you’ve got the killer right now.”

This brought a duet of bleats from Lorette and the Bradborough beezark. Dave ignored their denials, however. “Time to go down to the gow,” he announced in stern official accents. “A dame who rubs her husband for insurance or a dice shark that rubs him for unpaid debts—they’re both scum in my books.” He brightened. “Hell, maybe we can hook both of them for collusion. Maybe they were in on the kill together.”

“Hey, now, wait!” Bradborough scrambled upright, ignoring his punctured thigh. “I’m being double-crossed. I give Turner a grand to keep me out of this. He promised me—”

I broke in piously: “The guy’s a lunatic, Dave.”

“Yeah, sure,” Donaldson agreed. “I know you wouldn’t take any dough from a creep like him. Well, let’s go.” He then herded Jeff Emory’s widow and Benny the Greaseball to the elevator, paying no heed to their commingled yelps of protest.

I ankled along behind them, and presently we were all down in Dave’s official sedan making knots toward headquarters. I felt extremely satisfied with my night’s operations; my friend Emory’s murderer was caught and, in addition, I had fifteen centuries in my poke—five yards that had come with the spurious suicide letter, and the thousand I’d taken from Bradborough.

**B**YE AND BYE we all pranced into Donaldson’s homicide office; whereupon a couple of uniformed bulls brought in three more prisoners to clog up the premises. Two of these captives were Bradborough’s gunsels, the ones he had left at home to guard Jack

Marlowe. The third was the yellow-haired Marlowe yuck himself, raising hell because he’d been arrested like a common criminal. “I protest this outrage!” he shouted. “Just because these two hoods were holding me in Benny the Greaseball’s house against my will, that’s no reason why I should be hauled down here to jail!”

Donaldson impaled him with a frigid glare. “You escaped from my custody once tonight, when I ordered you held for questioning.” Remember?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Okay. Seeing as how my men were lucky enough to find you when they raided Bradborough’s place, we’re keeping you a while.”

“But why? On what charges?”

I dropped all overdue bombshell by saying:

“Murder charges, Bub. You’re going to the gas house for cooling Emory.”

“Wh-wha-what—?” He gave me the, wild-eyed gander. Donaldson stared, too. So did everybody else in the room.

I smirked sourly at the Marlowe louse. “Hell, I’ve known it a couple of hours, ever since I eavesdropped on your front-door conversation with Benny the Greaseball. That’s when you gave yourself away. You assured Benny he’d get the dough Jeff had owed him. Your exact words were: *Jeff told that private gumshoe, Turner, he wanted you to get paid. He told him so on the phone.*”

“So what?”

“So this,” I said. “How could you be so familiar with what Jeff said to me on the phone? If you’d been in the room with him, listening as he talked to me, then you’d have jumped him and disarmed him; you wouldn’t have stood there and let him shoot himself. Nor would he have committed suicide in your presence. As a matter of fact he wouldn’t have spoken so frankly to me on the telephone if you’d been anywhere around. And yet you knew everything that was said. Probably

because you said it yourself.”

He got pale around the fringes, indicating my arrow had struck home. “I . . . I don’t get you.”

“In a pig’s knuckle you don’t get me,” I snapped. “You arranged your sister’s kidnap. I think you then forged a suicide letter and sent it to me special delivery with Jeff’s signature. I think you waited until the time the letter would be delivered to me and then shot Jeff in cold blood. I think you’re the one who answered when I phoned his house. You impersonated him when he was already dead. Counterfeiting his voice would be easy for you, with your background.”

He staggered as if I’d bopped him in the teeth; tried to talk back but couldn’t get his voice working.

**I** WENT ON: “As soon as you hung up on me you planted the heater in Jeff’s mitt and scrambled for that fake rescue of Lorette. I think you timed it just right so you’d bring her home when I was innocently inspecting the corpse. You figured I’d be accused, and in order to clear myself I’d do some detecting; pin the murder on Benny the Greaseball. He was to be your eventual fall guy. That’s why you talked him into making a getaway in a stolen car: my car. The whole complicated plot was designed to fix your sister with a double-indemnity insurance payoff. Her alibi would be perfect, because she was a captive at the time of the kill. And with Ben Bradborough taking a murder rap, those

gambling debts wouldn’t have to be settled. Lorette would have the whole chunk of insurance dough, and you could help her spend it.”

He made an ineffectually challenging gesture. “Prove it,” he said weakly.

“Sure. First, nobody but a radio hack would dream up such an unnecessarily devious scheme. Second, your hands will show positive on a dermal nitrate test, indicating you fired the kill gat. Third, a handwriting expert will prove you wrote the fake suicide note. Fourth, I knew you were being held in Bradborough’s wiki-up; knew the cops were going to raid it and would net you in the haul. Therefore I was sure the murderer was safely in custody. Fifth—”

He didn’t wait to hear the fifth. He made a break for an exit nearby, and one of Donaldson’s guys plugged him through the lungs; dropped him defunct. Dave yodeled: “That getaway try was as good as a confession!”

“Yeah,” I said, and started out of the office. “Now you’ve got Bradborough for abduction, and Lorette for burglarizing my apartment. Not to mention her putting a pill through Benny’s gam. All told, you ought to be able to salt both of them down for a nice stretch in the cooler.”

Then I scrambled, wealthier by fifteen centuries. I didn’t keep it all, though. I spent fifty for flowers to send to Jeff Emory’s funeral.