

LATIN BLOOD

BY ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

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A CYNIC would probably have called it a publicity stunt but I didn't think so. Mike Porter seemed plenty sincere as he told me the story, and when a movie press agent levels with you, it's a major miracle. Moreover, Mike was a pal of mine; a guy I could trust. It wasn't likely he'd bust up our friendship with a load of

sheep-dip.

"I'm slipping it to you straight, Sherlock," he said. Late afternoon sunlight streamed through my office window, glinting redly against the thick lenses of his horn-rimmed cheaters. "Unless you help me blow this thing down somebody's going to get hurt—maybe even killed."



By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

Dan Turner got himself “engaged” to a girl he didn’t even know, in order to keep two jealous hambos from knifing each other—and the tough shamus’ reward for this bit of chivalry was to wake up finding a murder rap pinned on himself and the frame-up mounting in fury!

I leaned across my desk, fastened the speculative focus on him. “You’re sure this isn’t for headlines?”

“Hell,” he made an indignant mouth. “I’m trying to keep it *out* of the headlines.”

Now I’d heard everything. Here was a studio publicity chief doing his job in reverse; seeking to

smother a piece of news, hoping to keep it out of the papers. “Okay,” I stood up. “But golly help you if you’re needling me. Come on, we’ll see these two idiotic Latins.”

We barged down to my coupe, piled in, got started in the direction of Beverly where the aforementioned Latins lived. En route, I said:

His right brogan kicked her full on the gun-wrist just in time and very accurately.



"Let's be sure I've got the salient facts. Both Arturo Lanza and Felipe Barrio axe South American importations working for Monumental Pix—your home lot—starring in Spanish-language versions of the studio's successful domestic productions."

"That's right. Their films are for export south of the border; Monumental's bid for the Latin-American trade. That's the coming field, Philo. Every screen outfit here in Hollywood is making a play for it; and my firm is getting in on the ground floor by having Barrio and Lanza under contract. Those guys are tops with Spanish-speaking audiences."

"But they also hate each other," I said.

Mike nodded moodily. "To pieces." He winced as I grazed a passing Wilshire bus. "Professional jealousy plus some personal animosity over a girl, I believe."

"Always there's a girl," I commented. "Any time trouble rears its hideous head, you can count on finding a skirt somewhere in the background. So okay; today this Latin rivalry comes to a boil after a long period of simmering. One hambo spansks the other across the mush with a glove; challenges him to a duel. The challenge is accepted, and now you're afraid the two dopey nitwits will try to go through with it. Right?"

"Exactly right," Porter's expression was wry with distaste. "I know it sounds like a hack script for a B picture, especially coming from a press agent like me. But I take my oath that's how it stacks nix. And I'd like you to dip a finger in the brew—prevent anything serious happening."

I steered my bucket up the driveway of a swanky Beverly hotel, parked on the lot. "What do you expect me to do, bodyguard each ginzo from the other? I'd have to be twins to get away with that. Which I'm not."

"Bodyguarding's no good. I've got something smarter up my sleeve; something with a psychological twist." As Mike and I started for the hotel lobby, he went on: "The key to the situation is the girl I mentioned. She's Halo Sheraton, a contract actress at Monumental. Plays bits, mostly. Being groomed for bigger things, though. One of those honey blondes with zowie."

"How does she fit the scenario?"

"Well, as I said, Lanza and Barrio both fell for her. And how hard! She hasn't encouraged

either one of them more than the other, which is probably why they're so bitter. Each one thinks he's got the inside track; thinks the other is chiseling in. As a matter of actual fact, Halo doesn't really care a damn about either of them; she's just been stringing them along for the hell of it. You know how women are."

"Yeah," I said. "They're a pain."

"So here's my idea. You're to brace Barrio and Lanza together or separately, it won't make much difference. You're to say you're Halo's fiancé—"

"Hey, wait. I've never even met the dame."

"So what? You don't have to advertise that. Just tell these screwballs to lay off your sweetie, and if you catch them monkeying around her again you'll beat the living kleenex out of them."

"Oh, come now," I said.

MIKE grinned; pinned the appraising gander on my six feet plus of height, my hundred and ninety pounds of beef. "You're just the lad who could do it, if necessary." He chuckled. "Besides, listen. When they find out you're Dan Turner, Hollywood's toughest private eye, your name and reputation alone will fetch results."

"What results?"

"They'll both realize Halo played them for suckers; or anyhow they'll get the general idea she doesn't give a hoot for either of them. That will disillusion them, maybe make them sore—which would be a good thing. Mutual anger would draw them together, cause them to forget their rivalry. They'd call off their feud, cancel this dizzy duel they're planning. Everything would be okay again."

The whole thing sounded mildly whacky; maybe just whacky enough to make sense. "Okay, Mike," I said. "As a favor to you I'll do it. Here's hoping it works without anybody getting mangled." Whereupon we barged into the ornate hotel lobby and had the luck to encounter both Arturo Lanza and Felipe Barrio at one fell swoop.

The two South American hams were as alike as a pair of dice in a crapshooter's fist—tall, swarthy, slender and handsome if you happen to like sleek black hair and olive complexions. On casual inspection you might have mistaken them for brothers, except for the way they were snarling at each other. Apparently they'd met by accident

while en route to the cocktail bar, and now they were confronting each other with the stiff-legged stance of roosters getting ready to gaff.

Mike Porter gave me a nudge in the short ribs; made an imperceptible gesture toward them. "There they are, Hawkshaw. Go do your stuff!" he whispered.

I strode forward with my maulies bailed and my glims spitting sparks; reached the Latins and said loudly: "Aha. Just the lice I'm looking for."

"Lice, *senor*?" Barrio blinked at me.

"Yeah. I'm Dan Turner, the private strongarm. Maybe you've heard of me."

"In Hollywood, who hasn't?" Lanza purred politely.

I lifted a lip. "None of your soft soap. I understand you two jerks have been making passes at my chick."

"Your chick, *senor*?"

"Halo Sheraton, and don't deny it." Suddenly I reached out my mitts, grabbed each guy by the shirt-front. "She told me how she's been pestered by you two vermin, and I'm giving you fair warning. The next time it happens I'm coming

after you and I'll be loaded with a cargo of grief. Gun grief, savvy?"

Simultaneously they shook themselves loose from my clutch and backed off as if I'd sprouted horns and a spiked tail. Barrio muttered: "So Halo has been makeeng fools of us, eh? Thank you, *Senor* Turner, for letting us know." Then he linked arms with Lanza and they drifted in the direction of the hotel's groggery, as friendly as reunited lodge brothers.

Mike Porter, oblivious to the onlookers who'd been watching my truculent routine, came over to me with a grin on his kisser. "Perfect, Philo!" he said. "It worked the way I figured it would. Now they've got something in common: broken hearts and injured dignity. They've forgotten they were sore at each other—and Monumental owes it all to you."

"I'll send you a bill for services rendered," I told him. "If all my jobs were as easy as this one I'd be in clover."

In clover, hell. By midnight that night I was in the clink on suspicion of murder.

A BEVY of bulls roused me out of a sound sleep, charged into my bachelor-apartment stash around eleven-thirty and put the fast pinch on me; made me get dressed and then trundled me downtown to headquarters. My friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad was waiting for me there, but the expression on his beefy puss was far from cordial. "Well, hot shot," he greeted me sourly.

I yeeped: "Well, what? Who the hell is responsible for this setup? What's the idea of sending a pack of flatties to wrench me out of the feathers and—"

"You know why you're here. Quit stalling."

I wasn't stalling and I said so, loudly and indignantly. The arresting officers hadn't told me the score and I craved to know what was cooking. "If it's a rib, I don't like it," I rasped. "And I'll make damned sure somebody suffers for it."

Donaldson said: "If anybody suffers, it'll be you. In the gas chamber." Then he steered me to the morgue, prodded me toward an occupied marble slab with a white rubberized sheet over it. "Have a look at your victim," he growled.

He whisked off the sheet and I drew a gulping breath that almost stuck crosswise in my tightened gullet. "It's Felipe Barrio!" I strangled.

"As if you hadn't known."

I whirled away from the defunct Latin hambo; glared irately into Dave's bloodshot peepers. "Are you accusing me of creaming this guy?"

"Yeah, by means of a .32 slug through the belly. Neighbors in the next door bungalow—"

"What bungalow?" I interrupted him.

His neck swelled and reddened. "The bungalow where you croaked him. You know what bungalow! Neighbors heard the shot and came to see what was up, and they found the front door open and walked in. There was this Barrio on the living-room floor, plugged. You weren't there, though. You'd lammed the back way."

"What gives you that idea?"

"We identified the body and started back-checking. We discovered you'd had a ruckus with Barrio and some other South American actor late this afternoon out at a hotel in Beverly; several witnesses made preliminary statements that you threatened Barrio and the other lug, name of Lanza; Arturo Lanza. So we contacted Lanza and he said yes, that was straight goods; you did make threats. Over a jane."

"That much is correct," I admitted.



Dave said: "The jane's name was Halo Sheraton. A bit actress for Monumental."

"Right again." I dredged a gasper from my crumpled pack; set fire to it. "But—"

"But me no buts," Dave rapped. "It was in Halo Sheraton's cottage where this Barrio guy got cooled. Everything meshes. You had warned Barrio and Lanza to lay off her. Later you went to her house and found Barrio there, so you bumped him and scrambled. As soon as we pieced that much together I sent my men after you."

THINGS were beginning to click in my think-tank. "So it happened in the Sheraton muffin's igloo, hunh? Now we're getting places. Where was she at the time?"

"You tell me," Dave grumbled. "All I know is she wasn't there when the kill was uncovered. Nobody was there except the corpse," he indicated the deceased ginzo on the marble slab. "I've

planted a stake-out around her house, though. The minute she shows, we'll have her down here for questioning. All I need her to say is that you were crazy jealous of her, which substantiates your murder motive. Unless you want to confess right now and save trouble."

I shook my head. "No, thanks."

"Going to be tough, are you?"

"Just sensible," I said. "In the first place I wasn't jealous of Halo Sheraton.

In fact, I've never even met her."

"Why, you lying son—"

"Hush," I said. "Listen and I'll give you the low-down. Halo had caused strife between Barrio and that other lug, Lanza. The beef got so bad that one challenged the other to a duel. Naturally that would have meant bad publicity for Monumental Pix where they worked. So Monumental's press agent, Mike Porter, asked me to do something about it." Then I explained how Porter had persuaded me to pretend I was Halo Sheraton's fiancé; how I'd threatened the two Latin hams, thereby reuniting them in the bonds of friendship. "It was all a gag as far as I was concerned," I finished. "A favor to Mike Porter. There was nothing personal in it; therefore I had no valid reason to render Barrio defunct. Consequently I'm an innocent victim of circumstantial hogwash, take it or leave it."

"I'll leave it," Dave said.

I gave him the irate focus. "Even if I prove everything I've said?"

"We-e-ll . . . how can you prove it?"

"By Mike Porter. Let's go see him."

Dave Donaldson is an obstinate guy. He hemmed, hawed and rubbed the stubble on his beefy jowls: finally caved in. "Okay. But no shenanigans," he warned me as we went out toward his official sedan at the curb. "One wrong move out of you and it gives sudden violence, remember."

"Yeah," I said. We crawled into his bucket; rolled out to Mike Porter's wigwam on Yucca. A surprise was waiting for us when we arrived there. Porter had company.

The company was Halo Sheraton—in person.

PORTER'S STASH had big French windows in front and the drapes were drawn back a little in the left window where the lights were shining. Donaldson and I approached cautiously; that was the Sherlock instinct cropping out in us. And the instinct paid dividends when we gained the window, peered in.

The pane was a trifle ajar so we could hear as well as see inside, and I stiffened when I lamped Mike with the honey-blond Sheraton cookie. Of

course I'd never laid my glims on her before, but Porter kept calling her by name—and with a monicker like Halo I couldn't miss. Wrens with that particular handle are as scarce as square tires on a bicycle; and besides, this doll met all the specifications I'd been told about her. Porter had told me she had zowie. He was right.

Nervously he was saying to her: "None of this would have happened, Halo, if you'd married me. You know I'm nuts about you. If you were my wife, Barrio and Lanza wouldn't have made a play for you; wouldn't have got sore at each other or thought about pulling a duel—" His voice choked up and moisture filled his optics behind their thick-lensed cheaters.

Outside the window I pinched a blister on Donaldson's forearm. "Hear that?" I whispered. "It proves what I was telling you!"

"Yeah, maybe."

The dialogue continued within the room. "Please, Mikel!" the honey blonde quavered. "Let's not go into that again. D-don't you realize there was a m-murder in my bungalow? I'm afraid t-to go home, afraid I'll be arrested for questioning. Think wh-what it's g-going to mean to my future—my screen career! The scandal will drive me out of pictures. I'll be ruined!"

"Not necessarily. Maybe we can turn it to your advantage."

"How do you m-mean?"

"Just this," Porter said, reverting to press-agent type. "An unsuccessful suitor of yours is found killed in your house. Once your innocence is established and the killer convicted, you'll be a headline heroine. A man met death because of his love for you." Mike smiled crookedly. "Halo Sheraton, the *femme fatale*. The newspapers will eat it up—and Monumental will boost you to stardom on the strength of it."

"But Mike, wh-what if the police try to pin the murder on *me*!" she wailed.

"They won't. They can't. I'll alibi you if necessary. I'll say you and I were together at the time of the kill. Besides, you had no motive for shooting Barrio. It lies between Arturo Lanza and Dan Turner."

In the outer darkness, Donaldson dished me a sour glower. "So," he whispered. "Even this Porter bozo suspects you. And you claimed his testimony would get you out of the grease. What

the hell have you been feeding me?"

"The truth," I said furiously. Then, enraged, I straightened up from my crouch; plunged at the French window. It was high time for me to square myself, force Mike Porter to admit that my involvement in the mess was strictly fortuitous. In addition, I craved to make the Sheraton doll confess that she and I were utter strangers; it was the only way I could convince Donaldson I'd been leveling with him.

THE window smashed open under the impact of my hurtling tonnage and I went sailing over the sill breathing fire and brimstone. My unexpected advent froze Porter and the blonde jane in their tracks; left them momentarily stupefied. Taking advantage of their astonished silence, I yeped: "Okay, Mike. I overheard you saying you intended to frame a phony alibi for this quail."

"Turner!" he gasped. "Dan—"

Halo Sheraton was fast on the uptake. She was seeing me for the first time in her life, but when she heard Porter call me by name she seized the cue. "Dan darling!" she said throatily. "Oh, my dearest!" And I'll be an unprintable name if she didn't throw herself in my arms.

It was easy to savvy why she did this. Donaldson had bounded into the room behind me, and she must have tabbed him for a headquarters cop. Therefore, in an effort to shield herself from suspicion of the Barrio murder, she was craftily putting the finger on me. "Dan, sweetheart!" she repeated. "I know you love me, but did you have to k-kill Felipe? You shouldn't have let your jealousy go th-that far—"

"Belay that!" I grated, and gave her a shove that sent her spinning halfway across the carpet. "I'm in enough of a jackpot without you adding a fresh set of eight balls for me to hide behind." The metaphor was a trifle mixed but my meaning was clear. I turned to Donaldson. "The doll's a liar."

"Yeah?" he leered ominously. "There's more to this than meets the eye, it seems to me. First you say you don't know her; then she calls you darling. You tell me you had nothing to do with Barrio getting bumped, yet we overheard Porter, here, saying it rests between you and Arturo Lanza, that other South American ham. Hell and damnation, what kind of merry-go-round is this?"

"It's no merry-go-round at all." I said. "It's a straight track with the finish line in plain sight. Take this alibi talk we just overheard, for instance."

Blushing, Mike Porter horned in with: "Wait a minute. I'm sorry you eavesdropped on that, but I can explain it. I'm dead certain Halo had nothing to do with Barrio's murder. And I was trying to dope out a way of keeping her from getting smeared." With dignity he added: "I'm in love with her."

"So much so that you'd croak one of your rivals for her affections?" I asked him grimly.

He tensed. "That's silly talk, Sherlock."

"Maybe it's not so silly. You could have cooled the guy because he was beating your time to this cookie," I growled. "There could even be a second motive for your plugging him. Maybe you figured the publicity would zoom Halo to starring status and she'd be so grateful she'd marry you to show her appreciation."

"Oh-h-h, Dan, darling!" the blonde muffin whimpered. "How can you th-think such a thing when you know you're the only m-man in my life?"

That scalded me to the tripes. "*Will* you lay off?" I screeched at her. "I know what you're doing. To save Porter, you're hoping to make me the fall guy. But it isn't going to jell."

"Nothing's going to jell as long as we stand around here jawing like crazy," Donaldson snarled. "I think I'll run all three of you down to the gow and put you through the wringer." He made a lordly gesture. "March. Come on now, out to my car."

I SAID: "Wait, chum. As long as you're in the mood to arrest suspects, how's for including the Lanza ginzo while you're at it? You'll probably find him at his hotel in Beverly, and the Beverly cops will turn him over to you—"

"Don't tell me my business," he snapped. "I quizzed Lanza and he's out of the picture. That's why I turned him loose. He had no reason to drill his Latin pal. Hell, he and Barrio got friendly after you'd threatened them."

"That's just the point," I said patiently. "Lanza and Barrio were going to fight a duel; then I poked my beezer into the scenario and made them forget their hostility. But suppose Lanza was

merely putting on an act? Suppose he still yearned to see the color of Barrio's gore. Maybe he's an opportunist. There I'd made a public threat against both of them—so he proceeded to put a bullet in Barrio's giblets, hoping I would take the rap."

The Sheraton tomato picked up my conversational ball; ran it a few more yards toward the goal line. "That's it!" she said in breathless accents. "Mr. Turner's got it right! Lanza is the murderer—he must be!"

"I don't believe it," Mike Porter shook his head.

"Who asked you?" I fired at him. "All you're interested in is your job, your studio. You realize Lanza is Monumental's only remaining star for those Spanish-language productions; with Barrio defunct, Lanza's the guy you've got to depend on to snag the Latin trade. Naturally you'll try to front for him. That's just loyalty to your home lot—and it makes your opinion worthless. Hey, Dave?"

Donaldson made a quarrelsome mouth. "Ah, shut up, all of you. This palaver makes me dizzy. Let's go downtown."

"You insist on taking us into custody?" I said.

Yeah."

"And you don't intend to pick up Lanza?"

"No," he said stubbornly.

"You refuse to believe what I've been telling you?"

"I've heard so much I don't know what the hell to believe."

Halo Sheraton stepped forward. "But you've got to believe him, officer!" she protested. "Mr. Turner's telling the truth. Lanza is the g-guilty man. And I—I admit I lied about—about—"

"About what?" Dave stared at her narrowly.

Her shoulders sagged. "Mr. Turner isn't in love with me. I've never met him before. Not until right now."

"Well for pipe's sake!" Dave squalled resentfully. "Why don't you make up your mind to a story and stick with it? Now I'm all confused."

I said: "On you it looks natural."

"Okay, be lippy. I still say you're all going to the gow."

"All but me. Include me out," I said. Then I jumped at him and stiff-armed him, sent him

floundering backward. Before he recovered his balance I was through the French window and pelting buckety-gallop across the lawn with my hip pockets dipping grass.

IALREADY had a suspicion of homicide charge hanging over my noggin; now I'd added resisting arrest and assaulting an officer. An extra complaint wouldn't make a hell of a lot of difference, I reflected; so I aimed my scissoring strides toward Donaldson's sedan at the curb. Fortunately he'd left the ignition key in the lock. I piled into the front seat, turned the switch, kicked the starter, and blipped away from there in a cloud of sparks. "Grand theft auto," I muttered. "That's a felony, Turner, my lad, your jig is up."

As I stepped on the throttle I copped a slant at the rear view mirror; lamped Dave boiling out of Mike Porter's wigwam under a full head of steam. He couldn't run as fast as I could drive, however; he didn't have the wind. I shifted into high gear and made knots in the direction of Beverly Hills.

Halfway there, I realized Dave might put out a radio bleat for all cops to keep a glim peeled for his glommed jalopy; from now on there was a chance I'd be nabbed any instant. I twisted my rudder hard to starboard, whooshed down a residential cross-street; presently parked and abandoned the sedan. Then I hoofed toward Wilshire, wasted a good ten minutes locating a Yellow cab. At long last I spotted one deadheading with the flag down; hailed it and clambered aboard. "Beverly," I told the hacker. And I named the hotel where I wanted to go; the hotel where Arturo Lanza hung out. With luck I might catch him there; might even clean up the Barrio bump and get out of my jackpot.

It was worth trying. After all, what the hell; I had nothing to lose but my life.

THE LANZA hambo's suite was on the fourth floor of the hotel, I found out from the clerk. An elevator wafted me upward and I made a beeline for the door I wanted; started to pound on it with my knotted knuckles, then thought better of it. This was no time for frontal assault, I decided; strategy was what I needed. Particularly since I wasn't too sure of my ground.

Prowling the corridor, I gumshoed to another

portal that gave access to a sort of terraced balcony running around all four sides of this fourth floor, which was architected on a set-back arrangement. The outer terrace was dark, deserted—a palm-decorated sun deck unused by the guests at such a late hour of the night. There were chairs and tables and gaily striped umbrellas scattered all along the terrace and I had to move carefully to keep from bumping into the furniture, giving myself away. Presently I gained a window where soft light glowed.

It was the living room of Lanza's suite.

I copped a cautious gander through the clear pane; felt a hot blush suffusing my map. Lanza himself stood in the center of the room with his arms locked around a curvaceous she-male.

Even so, maybe he'd have been luckier if a house dick actually had nabbed him entertaining a dame—because the dame in question was slowly producing a small but deadly belly gun out of her coat sleeve as she clung to him. I recognized the roscoe as a snub-shouted .38 item.

Arturo Lanza was being given a Judas kiss. In another instant that rod would sneak up to his skull and go boom, whereupon he'd fall down defunct. I yanked my own .32 automatic from the shoulder holster where I carry it, reversed it and smashed the window glass to splinters with the butt. Then I took aim through the jagged aperture and yodeled: *"Drop that pea shooter, Halo Sheraton! You've spilled enough Spanish gore for one evening!"*

The shapely honey blonde twitched as if I'd rammed a burning bodkin into her; leaped away from Lanza's tender embrace. Simultaneously I smashed into the room in a shower of shards; dived at her in a flying tackle.

She tried to stop me with a slug from her fowling piece. Lanza snapped out of his trance in the nick of time, though, and lashed upward with his right brogan; kicked her full on the gun-wrist. It was damned accurate kicking. You could hear her arm bone snapping. She screamed, and the Bankers' Special went sailing in a lazy arc; clattered into a far corner.

Then I nailed her.

SHE fought me like a hellcat, tooth, claw and toenail. I made a reluctant fist, bopped her on the button and sent her sagging into Lanza's

waiting grasp. Then I said: "Okay, sister. You're under arrest for bumping Barrio."

Lanza panted: "She—she ees the one who killed Felipe?"

Yeah."

"You lie!" the blonde muffin shrieked. "I—you—"

"Look," I said. "Denials won't buy you anything now. I started to get hep back at Mike Porter's stash a little while ago. You seemed mighty anxious to establish your own innocence, and I wondered why. It struck me as highly peculiar that you tried so hard to pin the fall on somebody else; myself, for instance. Then, when my own story began to clear me, you switched to Lanza here. The instant I suggested him you hopped on it, tried to corroborate the theory."

She squirmed, tried to free herself from Lanza's clutch. "Damn you—that's no proof—!"

"It was a tip-off, though," I said. "I began to look for a possible murder motive that might have caused you to kill Barrio. It didn't take me long to figure out what that motive was. You're career crazy. You'd do anything to be a movie star. You had teased Lanza and Barrio, made them both fall for you, made them hate each other. They'd even carried it to the duel-challenge stage. Had the duel taken place you'd have garnered copious headlines. Mike Porter himself pointed out that you'd be known as a *femme fatale*—"

She panted: "No, I won't listen. Let me go!"

"Unfortunately, the duel got nixed," I went on. "Porter hired me to run a bluff, bring the two Latin hams together again. Which I did. Maybe you found this out; maybe not. Anyhow you salvaged your publicity scheme by luring Barrio to your bungalow and croaking him."

"That's not true!"

"Sure it is. The very fact that he got cooled in your joint gives you away. People don't leave their front doors unlocked in Hollywood; so how the hell could Barrio have got inside your wigwam—unless you yourself had let him in? And if you let him in, it was very likely you also shot him and scrambled."

No—please—"

"You figured people would think the duel had taken place after all, and Lanza would be pinched for the kill. My own intervention caused a

switch in your plans; for a while you tried to switch the blame my way. When you realized that was impossible, you again selected Lanza to take the fall. Guessing this, I made my play; got away from Dave Donaldson. I knew he would come larruping after me, which would give you a chance to leave Porter's igloo."

"You—you lousy snoop!"

I said: "You did just what I expected. You came here to Lanza's hotel suite, vamped him with a love scene. Your idea was to insert a pill in his conk, then smear his own fingerprints on the

handle of the gat. His death would appear to be suicide; which, in effect, would be his confession that he was the one who'd croaked his South American pal. But I arrived in time to spike you."

"You—you'll n-never p-prove—"

"Hell," I said disgustedly. "Your toy cannon will match the bullet that killed Barrio. That's enough to convince any jury. You're sunk, toots."

Then I ankled over to the phone; dialed for the cops. It was their baby now. After all, they're supposed to earn their salaries some way.