

Mary glanced at the mirror  
and screamed



## WRONG NUMBER

By JOHN L. BENTON

*Ambition and envy stir up a seething cauldron of crime!*

MARY MARSHALL fumbled in her evening bag, seeking the key to the apartment door. From an open window at the far end of the long seventh floor corridor a chill wind swept toward her, and she remembered it had started to snow as she got out of the taxi and entered the lobby.

"Having trouble?" a voice asked.

She turned to find a man standing in the open doorway of the apartment across

the hall. The room behind him was dark and he loomed tall and shadowy in the doorway, his dark eyes gazing at her intently. His suit was blue and his shirt a dark gray, his tie bright red.

The suit and shirt blended with the shadows so that only his face and necktie were clearly visible.

"No trouble, thank you," Mary said, and she found it hard to make her tone casual and impersonal. "I was just looking

for my key.”

She found the key and drew it out of the bag, and then glanced up. He was still watching her. She wondered how long he had been standing there. She was sure his door had not been open when she left the elevator and came along the hall, and yet she had heard no sound until he had spoken.

“You are Miss Mary Marshall,” he said finally. “I’m Lansing Cooper, and I have a message for you.” He stepped out from the shadows and she saw he was older than she had thought at first. “A rather strange message.”

“A message for me?”

The wind that blew along the corridor was stronger now. Mary could feel the damp chill through the mink cape she wore—a breeze ruffled her blonde hair. She unlocked the door of her apartment, swung the door open, then turned to Lansing Cooper.

He closed the door behind them as he followed her along the short hallway of the apartment. She switched on the lights in the big living room and turned to face him again. His hair was thick and dark, but there was a lot of gray at the temples, his face was lean, and he wore his clothes with the casual air of one who selects the best of everything as a matter of course.

“I’ve been trying to think of a way to explain about the message without sounding completely wacky,” Cooper said with a smile. “It is hard to do.”

“At least it sounds intriguing,” Mary said. “Do sit down.”

SHE tossed her cape aside and sank into a chair. The clock on the mantel over the fireplace told her it was just two-thirty in the morning. She wondered if she hadn’t made a mistake in going to a night club with Tom Bradford after the show, for she was very tired. Still she was very

fond of Tom. He was young, attractive, and his work as a first grade detective gave him so little time off that it had been nice to do as he wished tonight.

“About the message?” Mary asked, noticing Cooper was staring at her strangely.

“Oh, yes, about midnight my phone rang,” he said. “I answered and a man asked if I lived in the same apartment house with Mary Marshall the actress. I said I believed you lived across the hall from me, though we had never met. He said he had been trying to reach you all evening, but got no answer.”

“Naturally, since I was at the theater acting in the show,” said Mary. “Go on.”

“Here’s the silly part of the whole thing,” said Cooper. “The man on the phone said, ‘Give Mary Marshall this message—tell her this is Barton Thorne calling and she is going to die before morning.’”

“Barton Thorne!” Mary stared at Cooper, and there was fear in her lovely eyes. “But he’s been dead for ten years!”

“I told you the whole thing was silly.” Cooper rose to his feet and began to pace the floor. “Probably the work of some crank who knows you’re a popular actress and wants to annoy you.” He paused and stared at her. “Though I didn’t like the way he said you were going to die before morning. That sounded like an actual threat.”

“You mean you think I might be murdered?” Mary asked like a frightened little girl.

“I doubt it,” said Cooper. “But there’s no sense in taking any chances. Perhaps we had better report the whole thing to the police.”

“And have them think it is just an actress trying to work a publicity stunt?” said Mary. “They will think that you know.”

"I guess so." Cooper dropped into a chair. "Tell me about this Barton Thorne, who was he and what happened to him?"

"He was an actor," Mary said slowly. "We both started our careers together fifteen years ago. Just a couple of kids who wanted to go on the stage, and were lucky enough to get a break. We did a dance routine in one of those reviews with a lot of young people in the cast. After that I went in for dramatic acting and Barton kept on as a dancer."

"And you were a success and he never amounted to much," said Cooper. "That it?"

"I wouldn't say that." Mary shook her head. "He was drowned while swimming at a beach in New England one summer about ten years ago. The body was never found."

"Then there is no reason for his threatening your life, even if he was still alive," said Cooper, getting to his feet. "That message must have been a joke. I'm going now, and if I were you I would forget all about it, Molly."

She just sat staring at him as he went toward the short hallway between the living room and the front door of the apartment. For the first time she noticed that he walked with a decided limp. She heard the door open and then close softly.

"Ten years," she thought. "I was eighteen then and Barton was twenty-seven. He did resent my becoming more successful than he was and told me so before he went to New England that summer."

She remembered the note that had been found in Barton Thorne's coat on the beach. He had evidently plunged into the sea fully dressed save for that coat, and in the pocket had been a suicide note addressed to her. "I'm a failure and you are a success, so this is goodbye." the note had read.

Mary stood up feeling very old and tired. Here she was the star of one of the most successful plays on Broadway this season, and only twenty-eight, yet nothing seemed to matter much.

She walked over to the large doll with the wide hoop skirt that stood on a table in one corner of the living room. She hesitated and then turned away. She picked up her fur cape and went into her bedroom. The apartment seemed strangely lonely, almost sinister. Her maid went home nights.

In the bedroom Mary undressed, got a nightgown and went into the bath and took a shower with the door closed. When she had finished she put on the nightgown and came out.

The phone rang and Mary went to it and picked up the handset.

"Hello?" she said.

"Mary? . . . This is Tom Bradford . . . I don't know why, but I have been worried about you. . . . Everything all right?"

MARY glanced at the mirror of her dressing table as she listened to Tom's voice coming over the wire. Suddenly a hand holding a large pair of scissors appeared from behind a curtain to her left. She screamed as the scissors cut the telephone wire near the base.

She dropped the phone and ran into the living room. She was standing in front of the hoopskirted doll a few moments later, when Lansing Cooper stepped out of her bedroom, the sharp pointed scissors still in his hand.

"I'm glad you didn't try to get away," he said as he moved nearer to her. "That you didn't rush to the door and scream for help. I wouldn't have liked that at all. You see I have planned this for a long time."

"I know, Barton," Mary said. "You see I really thought you were dead. I didn't recognize you at first, your face is

changed.”

“That’s right.” He nodded. “I was badly injured in a train wreck ten years ago after I faked that drowning in New England. Plastic surgery gave me a new face. I have been in South America for the past ten years. I didn’t want to come back to this country until the war was over.”

“You lied to me about having received a phone message, of course,” Mary said. “Made the whole thing up to frighten me. But why, Barton?”

“Because I want you to suffer as I have,” said Barton Thorne. He glanced at the scissors in his hand. “I wonder if your face was scarred and disfigured if you still would be such a great success, Molly.”

“You always called me Molly instead of Mary,” she said. “That’s why I realized you were Barton Thorne when you left me a little while ago. You forgot and called me Molly then.”

“But I didn’t leave,” said Thorne. “I merely opened and closed the door from the inside and waited there. When I heard the shower running I sneaked into the bedroom and waited for you to come out of the bath.”

The way he glared at her frightened her, but she knew that she had to keep him talking, to prevent him from slashing her face with those sharp scissors he held.

“Why do you hate me so, Barton?” she asked. “It wasn’t my fault that I became a dramatic actress and you decided to keep on as a dancer. There are lots of successful dancers in show business—you could have made good if you really had tried. But you

didn’t try—you just blamed me for your failures.”

“That’s enough!” He moved closer to her. “I’m tired of talking. Now I’m going to slash that pretty face of yours to ribbons—”

“No, you’re not!”

It was a husky, dark haired young man who spoke as he stood at the entrance to the hall covering Thorne with a gun.

“Tom!” exclaimed Mary, moving away from Thorne. “Oh, I’m so glad you got here in time.”

“Who in blazes are you?” demanded Thorne, glaring at the other man.

“Tom Bradford, Headquarters Detective Bureau,” said Bradford. “And I’ve got someone listening on the phone and taking down everything that has been said here in short hand.”

“On the phone!” exclaimed Thorne. “But the phone is useless. I cut the wire.”

“You cut the wire on the extension phone,” said Mary, picking up the hoop-skirted doll and revealing a second phone on the table. The handset was off the pedestal. “You see I took this phone off the hook as soon as I came in here. I hoped that Tom might still be connected and he was.”

“You’re under arrest, Thorne,” Bradford said. “There’s a squad car coming. They better get here soon or I’ll be tempted to beat the life out of the man who scared my fiancée the way you did.” He looked at the phone and grinned. “Seems to me you got a wrong number, Thorne.”