

Mail Me My Tombstone



By
Charles Larson

When that detective story writer was called out to solve a locked-room murder, all he could think of was an invisible man who could crawl through keyholes. Only the keyholes were plugged. But the unseen slayer got through just the same to sling a deadly missile at the writer.

ELLEN said softly: "Hey."
"Um?" I raised my eyes.
"Could that be the telephone?"

For a solemn moment we listened to the mad jangling from the kitchen.

"Damned if I know," I murmured. "I can't hear a thing for the ringing."

"It's probably just me," Ellen admitted. Gently she kissed me.

But the phone kept on. Eight times. Nine. Ten. Eleven. And finally Ellen sighed and said: "No use. Maybe if I kicked it . . ."

She slid off my lap, moved toward the

back of the house, and I smiled after her pretty figure and reflected on the blessings of marriage. A year and a day. At first it had raised merry hell with my writing, but the novelty of having her around wore off after a while, and the writing was easier and better because I had someone to write for.

In the kitchen the phone stopped when she answered it. I leaned back in the chair and wondered idly who it was. My agent had said he'd call—but it was too early in the morning, not yet nine-thirty. Probably for Ellen. Bridge. Shopping. A shower for a new

bride.

“Jim . . .”

I turned my head, startled. She’d come back so quietly I hadn’t heard her at all. Slowly I blew my breath up over my face. “You walk like a cat, my pretty,” I said.

“Right now I feel like a cat.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

I twisted around in the chair, looked up at her. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing.” Her voice was sharp. She picked at an imaginary bit of dust on her blouse. “Go answer the phone.”

Puzzled, I stood up. “Who is it? My agent?”

“Not unless his voice is changing.”

I walked warily toward the kitchen. Already I felt guilty and a little ashamed, as though I’d been caught sneaking a solitary drink.

I squeezed into the narrow space between the refrigerator and the breakfast table and picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Jim? Oh, Jimmy darling . . . I’m so glad you’re home.” The voice was very feminine, very frightened—still, very relieved.

I said: “Oh?” It was asinine, but as far as I knew, I’d never heard the voice before. I glanced over the mouthpiece at Ellen who’d wandered into the doorway behind me, and shrugged.

There was a long awkward pause while the voice thought it over, then: “.Jim . . .”

“Yes.”

“You don’t remember me?”

“I’m sorry, really . . .”

“Rita Manning.”

ONCE I fell off a barn onto my head. Nothing like this. Rita Manning. Rita Manning. A thousand years ago I’d loved her—not the way I love Ellen, but sharper, quicker. In the seconds before I answered, I remembered a hundred emotions I thought I’d forgotten. Aching happiness, childish

despair. Long lazy college evenings, hot Sunday afternoons, and the sad trail of rain down a paneled sorority window.

“Rita,” I murmured.

“Jimmy, listen. I’m in terrible trouble and we have to talk quickly. They think I’m calling my lawyer.”

I shook my head. “What?”

“They think—”

“Who does?”

“The police. Will you please just listen?”

The voice was tired.

“Yes. All right. Go ahead. I’m listening.”

“Everything happened so quickly. Do you know Steven Loring?”

I’d heard of him. A big-time gambler. Too big to touch. I said: “I think so.”

“He’s dead.”

“So?”

“Don’t say it like that! I loved him.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I’m sorry. I thought—wasn’t there a doctor?”

“Doctor? You mean John. No. We were divorced two years ago. And he wasn’t a doctor, he’s with the government. He keeps after me, but—I *loved* Steve. And now they’re holding *me* for it.”

“Holding you for what?”

“The murder of Steven Loring! Don’t you ever listen? My heavens, Jimmy . . .” She was crying softly.

“Oh,” I said again. “Oh, I see.”

I’d heard, but I hadn’t heard. Murder? It happened only in my stories, not in real life. And if it did happen in real life, it happened to men like Dillinger and Nelson, not to people I knew.

I said: “Where are you? I’ll come over.”

“I’m at Steve’s house. Thirty-ninth and Klickitat.”

“Steve’s house!”

“Don’t make me explain now. We haven’t time. But believe me, Jimmy, I didn’t do it. I have three men who’ll swear they heard shots from inside the house while I was with my mother.”

“What men?” I asked.

“One is Steve’s next-door neighbor, a man named Switzer. He was mowing his lawn when it happened. Another is the postman on this route. The last I’m not too sure of. He’s a—a seedy looking little person who was delivering handbills. His name is Morris Lugg.”

I changed the phone from one ear to the other and wiped my sweating hand on my trousers. “Then what on earth are you worrying about? It sounds like a clear case of suicide to me.”

She laughed a little. “You and I seem to be the only ones who see anything clear in it. Everything points to suicide. The shots these three men heard, the fact that Steve’s door was locked on the inside, everything—and still they . . .” Her voice broke and she stopped.

“And you want me to prove that it *was* suicide?”

“Yes.” Her voice came faster. “You can, Jim. I’ve read your stories. You’ve studied murder. You know the tricks . . .” Suddenly her voice dropped. “Listen, they’re coming back. I’ll have to hang up. You’ll come?”

I said “Yes,” and in the next second the connection was broken.

Slowly and silently I turned.

“Wrong number, no doubt?” Ellen asked sweetly.

I looked at her long black hair. “No,” I said quietly, “that was Rita Manning. I knew her once at college.”

“Like the palm of your own hand, probably,”

“Please, Ellen . . .”

“Jim, when a strange woman shouts ‘Jimmy, darling’ in my ear like a drunken harpy before I can even open my mouth . . .” She stopped and swallowed. I could see that her mind wasn’t thinking funny thoughts at all.

I said: “Sweet, look . . .”

“Who was she?”

“An old friend. I haven’t seen her for years.” I brushed past her into the dining room, and picked up my coat and hat.

Behind me Ellen’s voice was much lower. “And where are you going now?”

“She’s in trouble, Murder. I’ve got to help her.” I shrugged into my coat, and turned back. “Darling . . .”

But she wasn’t there. She’d slipped past me into the bedroom.

I slapped my hat against my leg and walked slowly toward the front door.

STEVEN LORING owned more houses than the President, but the one he’d been killed in, or had killed himself in, was the only one in which he actually lived. The rest were gambling palaces. There was still a sizable crowd around this one when I climbed out of my car and it wasn’t easy to get through.

At the door I told the sweating cop I was Miss Manning’s lawyer and he passed me inside.

Rita was waiting. She was still the same, more mature, more sure of herself perhaps, but otherwise—the same. She smiled at me, held out a black-gloved hand, and said: “Hello, Jimmy.”

She’d been crying. I noticed that first. I said: “How goes it, Princess?”

“Poorly, thanks. You?”

“I never change. For me the whole world gloweth.”

She held tightly to my hand until a flash bulb exploded in the far corner of the room, then she said: “Steve’s over there.”

“I’d better take a look. You don’t mind?”

“Go ahead.”

She dropped my hand and I walked slowly across the blue Chinese rug to a gold sofa. Another flash bulb exploded, and for the time a breath is held, the faces of the men grouped around the body of Steven Loring seemed to be looking into Hell.

I touched one of them on the shoulder.

He glanced at me and moved aside.

Steven Loring hadn't died happy.

He'd been a big man, but he looked little and pinched lying there. There were two bullet holes that I could see. One, almost free of blood, in his temple, the other in the center of his chest.

I said: "I'm Miss Manning's lawyer. What happened?"

A gray-suited plain-clothes man raised his brown bald head and stared at me. His ear lobes were tremendous and his face was long and sad. A bloodhound of a man. He said:

"What do you know already?"

"That Steve Loring committed suicide at about nine o'clock this morning. That you're holding Miss Manning on as feeble a bit of evidence as I'll be likely ever to find. Enough?"

The man laughed without moving his lips. "Gimme a drag on that before you throw it away," he said.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. Except that it wasn't suicide, that he was killed around four this morning instead of nine, and that a more obvious suspect to a murder never lived than your spotless Miss Manning."

"*Four* this morning?"

The tiny, thin;-haired man who'd moved to make way for me cleared his throat. "I don't want to be disagreeable," he began, "but—"

He stopped when I stared at him and his small ears reddened. "Switzer," he said.

"Go ahead, Mr. Switzer."

"Yes . . ." He swallowed seriously and looked at the lapel of my coat. "I keep telling them that I heard shots when I was mowing the lawn this morning around nine o'clock. They came from here. Of course," he switched his look to the other lapel, "if it had been only me, I probably wouldn't have said anything about it. But two others beside myself heard them and I don't think th—"

"He's right," someone else said. I turned and saw the postman Rita had told me about. He was better than average height, and light-skinned. Blue eyes. Clean-shaven. Scandinavian.

"My name's Bjornson. I'd just turned to come back down the walk when the gun went off. It was very plain."

"Very plain," Switzer agreed, nodding vigorously.

"Well?" I said to the plainclothes man.

He was picking his teeth with a match. Lazily he smiled. "You're so damn gullible," he murmured, "I almost hate to do this. But just for laughs . . ." He took the match out of his mouth and looked over the heads of the men around the sofa. "Doc?" he called.

IN A MOMENT Doc waddled over. He was monstrously fat, but hard. His skin was brown instead of white. His eyes were clear and sharp, and the hams swinging at his wrists looked oddly capable.

"Our medical examiner," the plainclothes man said. "Doc, tell us the story of the shots that didn't go off."

"Loring? He was killed sometime after three and before five o'clock this morning. It's hard to say. The temperature . . ."

"And it couldn't have been suicide?"

"Not a chance in the world." Doc leaned, puffing, over Loring's body. "You see this wound in his temple? Almost free of blood. The point is that his heart had stopped pumping when the wound was made."

The plainclothes man smiled slowly at me when he'd finished. "Well, Mister . . ."

"It looks good," I said.

"Doesn't it, though? Now suppose you brood about it awhile and maybe talk to your client. Tell her how shaky the leg she's standing on turned out to be. Explain to her that discarded lady-loves make good murderesses . . ."

I heard them laugh, and I heard the squeak of their shoes as they walked away,

but I didn't look up. It was much worse than I'd expected.

Behind me someone coughed.

When I turned, the postman, who'd come up with Mr. Switzer, said: "You're a fool, you know. One of the biggest."

I pushed my head forward. "What?"

"You're like a little kid. Papa says grass is red, so grass is red. Why in hell don't you look for yourself?"

"I don't follow you."

"What is there to follow? I heard two shots this morning. I'm not in the habit of imagining shots. And when the police came, every door in this room was locked on the inside. What do I care about powder burns? What do I care about the amazing lack of blood from the temple wound? Maybe he shot himself in the chest and when he found there was too much pain, he shot himself again in the head.

"And maybe an ambitious cop who sees a chance to bring in an easy conviction, ignores the suicide theory, wipes a little blood away, and hints to a fat M. E. that it would be better to play along with him. . ."

It was fantastic, the whole thing. Yet...

"All doors were locked?" I asked.

"Doors *and* windows. On the inside." I bit my lower lip and looked at the floor.

A perfectly locked room . . .

"The front door," I asked suddenly, "was it locked or bolted?"

Switzer said: "It was bolted. The lock had been broken once when someone had tried to force it, so Mr. Loring put on a bolt. I know. I helped him."

Bolted. No pass-key then. But wasn't there a way, with a bent pin and a piece of string, to pull a bolt from the outside and to draw the pin and string out of the room?

QUICKLY I made my way to the front door. I wanted above everything else for my idea to be wrong. If it was, if there was no way at all for a murderer to get in and out

of the room, there had been no murder. It had been suicide. Juries would be impressed by a locked room. It was something they could understand.

At the door, I kneeled, my heart pounding, and stared at the floor.

There was no light showing; there was no room for it to show.

If the bent pin trick had been worked, where had the string and the pin gone? Normally in such cases, the pin, which has been looped over the out-thrusting bolt handle, was fastened with string which led either under the door or through a keyhole. Thus a person standing outside the door could pull gently on the string until the bent pin had drawn the bolt, after which, the bolt handle having dropped downward, the bent pin would slide off onto the floor. It was then only a matter of seconds to pull the string and the pin under the door, and presto! A locked room. Bolted on the inside. Unsolvable.

This time, however, no pin could have been drawn under the door because *there was no space beneath to go through*.

I got to my feet.

Switzer was looking at me anxiously; Bjornson, curiously.

I said: "If a murderer got into this room, it wasn't through this door. I'd stake my life on it."

"Then it *was* suicide?" Bjornson asked.

"There are dozens of ways it might have been done. I merely said that through this door wasn't one of them."

"Well, for Pete's sake, man, check the rest."

"Yeah." I rubbed my lip, looked around me.

First, the other doors.

There were two of them, one into a bedroom, one into a dining room. Oddly, both were fitted with bolts. On the bedroom bolt a thin layer of dust lay undisturbed. And the other was much too stiff to have been

pulled by a pin and string.

The windows next. Three windows. And in each case a covering of dust lay on the sills.

I found my heart beating faster and my throat felt big in my collar.

I crossed to the fireplace, squatted uncomfortably in the ashes, and looked up the chimney. Soot undisturbed.

Behind me I could hear Bjornson tapping the walls. It was a last childlike gesture of defiance, because now there could be no doubt.

The room had been sealed.

It was physically impossible for anyone to have entered after Steven Loring had pulled the three bolts.

I rose calmly, brushed off the knees of my pants, and glanced around the room. In the corner by the sofa, the bloodhound-like plainclothes man was talking to the fat M. E. and a kid in shirt sleeves. They were laughing and I thought: *Laugh, damn you. Laugh, good and hard, because, brother, someone else's turn has come.*

Smiling a little, I crossed the room toward them.

The medical examiner looked up first and said: "Ah. Our indefatigable lawyer. Join us, little friend. You should be interested in this."

"So?"

"Yes. We're the bearers of news."

"Sounds Like a meeting of the clan. I've got some dirt myself."

The doc nodded his great head slightly. "You're our guest. Do go on."

"It's nothing, really. Except that I've checked every feasible place where a murderer might get into this room—and found them all plugged. Only one man was here last night. Loring himself. I'm sorry."

Doc was silent for a moment. Then he said, without taking his eyes off me: "Tell him, son."

The young, good-looking kid in shirt sleeves flushed a little. "We—I just checked the murder gun for prints," he said, "There are two pair on it. Loring's . . ."

". . . And Miss Manning's," the plainclothes man finished. He pulled a match quickly across the seat of his pants, cupped his hands and held the flame to the end of his cigarette. In a moment he murmured, "Now—you were saying . . ."

The boy wasn't lying. The plainclothes man, maybe. Not the kid. He was too young and sincere and filled with righteousness. The prints might not be Rita's—there surely hadn't been time to check them with hers, but there *were* two pair. Someone else had been in the room. I didn't know what to say. It called for something funny but I couldn't think of anything funny. I was through with Rita; I loved Ellen—still to see Rita in prison, and finally executed—not a pretty thought.

"Well. . ." I said. I raised my hands a little from my sides and dropped them.

I had to have time to think. Wordlessly the three of them watched me as I turned and walked toward the door.

BEFORE I reached it, Switzer came running over. He hadn't heard what the law had said; he was still red hot with detecting.

"I've found something," he told me.

"Not now."

"I don't know. It might be important."

Wearily I looked at what he had. It was a long, powerful insect spray-gun. "Switzer," I said and stopped. I couldn't go on.

"I know," he murmured, reddening, "but this is still Winter, you might say. What on earth would a guy be doing with a spray-gun? Everything else in this room has a use. Not this thing."

"What do you imagine the murderer did with it?" I asked.

"I don't know. Poison maybe. He could have filled it with some kind of poison and sprayed it at Loring . . ."

Gently I smiled. "Switzer," I said, "how was Loring killed?"

He frowned. "He was shot."

"Um. With a gun. They've found the gun. It was in Loring's right hand. They don't need to look any further for a murder weapon. *So what in hell are you bothering me with that thing for?*" I brushed past him, trembling, and strode out the door. Behind me I could hear his small, "Oh."

Outside, the sky was gray and overcast, and the first sprinkle of rain was pockmarking the sidewalk. Bjornson was standing, hands in his pockets, talking to a raincoated cop. He glanced up at me when I moved past him and said: "How goes it? She cleared?"

"No."

I crossed slick wet grass to my car, jerked open the door and got inside.

"What do you mean?" Bjornson asked. He'd followed me and was peering in the window.

"It's simple enough. They found her fingerprints on the gun. Heaven only knows how she did it, but—"

"Her fingerprints? That's bad, isn't it?"

"You might call it that, yes," I said.

"But they couldn't be her prints."

"No," I said, "they couldn't. But they are." I stamped on the starter, released the brake.

"Where you going now?"

"I don't know. There must be something."

Silently he watched me shift gears, then he murmured: "You love her, too . . ."

"Too?" I looked at him.

He jerked his head back over his shoulder. "They tell me *he* loved her."

"Oh." I looked at the instrument board. "Yeah. Maybe he did."

"Mister . . ." The postman glanced away. "I don't know why I'm messing in this thing, But—sometimes I get hunches. I don't think the girl did it." He laughed softly. "Everything points to it, it's all but decided—and yet—" He shrugged. "I heard two shots this morning."

I paused. "What do you know about this Lugg fellow?" I asked suddenly.

"Lugg?"

"He claimed he was delivering handbills. He said he'd heard shots too."

"Oh, yes. Lugg."

"Well?"

"To tell the truth, I didn't notice him a whole lot."

"No." I stared through the windshield at the tightly woven mesh of raindrops. "No," I said, "very few people did."

I raced the motor. "I'll see you," I said.

He stood back. I let the clutch in and started for home.

THE house was cold when I got inside. I moved into the dining room and turned on the heat. "Ellen?" I called.

No answer.

I saw the note when I snapped on the lights. It was on the dining room table, under the chandelier, and it said something that couldn't possibly have happened:

"Don't try to find me, Jim. I'm leaving. Second fiddle doesn't interest me at all."

Stunned, I read it again. All at once I felt silly and conspicuous, and I wandered into the living room and sat down in my chair by the radio. I couldn't seem to put one thought after another in my mind. *Why had she done it?* I wondered. Where had she gone? It was all so—damned improbable, like a fairy tale.

In fact, everything that had happened to me today was improbable. Dreams I've had have had more sense to them. For years I'd made my living by having detective heroes solve improbable murders and yet, when I

was confronted with one myself, I was as helpless as a baby.

How could anyone have gotten into that room?

The invisible man himself—would—hardly—

I frowned.

Invisible man?

For a moment I forgot about Ellen, I forgot that the house was cold and there would be no dinner and no laughing. Because I was suddenly and sharply conscious that there *might* be a way to get into the bolted room, a way that I'd overlooked by virtue of its being so terribly obvious. And if I could find that way, the finding of the murderer would follow almost immediately.

It all hinged on an ancient homicidal trick called "mental invisibility." It was a slim chance, but a chance. In everyone's mind certain people and things are invisible, mentally invisible. In other words, certain people and things are seen so often that the brain ceases to register them. Can you describe the last waiter who waited on you in a restaurant? Or the page who brought you your book in the library? How many stairs are there leading to your front porch? You walk them every day . . .

I got my hat and coat quickly, and turned down the heat again. If I could get back in that room . . .

Rain was falling in uneven slanting sheets when I got outside, and although it couldn't have been past three o'clock, it might have been midnight for the darkness.

The street was empty except for my car and another half way down the street. I got in, started the motor, and headed again for Steven Loring's house.

THE cop at the door was nice about it, but he had his orders, he said. Maybe if I got an O.K. from the chief . . .

"Look . . ." I said patiently.

He shook his raincoated head.

"I've got to get in there!"

"Are you gettin' tough with me?"

There was, I saw, no use arguing with him. Maybe, if it hadn't involved crawling to the bloodhound-like plainclothes man—

I said: "I'm sorry I have to do this."

"Do what?" he asked softly. He stuck his chin forward.

That was wrong.

I hit him in the stomach and once on that conveniently placed chin. I caught him under the arms when he fell and eased him gently to the rain-soaked porch.

Then I walked inside.

The room was dark and chilly. Once in it, I didn't know what on earth to look for. Whatever it was, I'd have to find it quickly. The slumbering uniform outside wouldn't slumber forever. Something so obvious, no one would notice. Something so obvious.

A floorboard near the back wall creaked.

Instantly I flung myself to one side and toward the noise. Heaven only knows what I had in mind—certainly not what happened.

I ran straight and furiously into a wall.

When the noise and weaving in my head had stopped, I picked myself off the floor, found a light switch and pushed it.

Dead ahead of me, on his knees like a fat Chinese waiting for the ax, was Mr. Switzer. His rear was toward me, his face was buried in his arms. Beside him lay his insect-sprayer.

Weakly I said: "You?"

For a time there was no sign of life; then slowly the rear went down, the head came up, and Switzer said: "What?"

"Couldn't be," I mumbled.

"I wasn't satisfied," Switzer explained, clearing his throat nervously, "to—let things go, so easily. I—thought maybe this sprayer meant more than it seemed to." He beamed shallowly at me. "Fall down?" he asked.

When I didn't answer, he picked up the sprayer and smiled beyond me. "Hi," he

said. He nodded toward me, still keeping his eyes on the doorway.

"Fell down," he said.

I almost didn't look. I was tired and my head still hurt. If that damned cop had recovered so quickly . . .

I raised my arms slowly. "All right," I said, "you got me."

The bullet caught me high on the left shoulder, slammed my arm against the wall, and turned me nearly completely around. Enough around anyway to see the second shot about to come.

I dropped to the floor behind the sofa and the second shot plowed through it and showered lint and scorched cloth onto my head.

Then silence.

"I have four more," the voice of the postman, Bjornson, said. "Come out. Over in a second."

I couldn't understand. Even yet, it was beyond me. Bjornson, the postman. I said: "Why? For Pete's sake, Bjornson . . ."

"Still alive? And squirming, no doubt. Steve squirmed. Please deny loving her. He did. Make it complete."

"Deny loving whom?"

"Fine. Now I say 'Rita,' and you say 'Rita!' as though this is the first time you've heard the name. Go on."

I couldn't help it. I said; "Rita!"

Bjornson laughed.

Little by little things were beginning to fall into a semblance of sanity.

"I followed you to your home," Bjornson said. "After I found that you couldn't help Rita at all, I determined to kill you. But about the time I drove up, you came rushing out, and headed this way . . ."

"You're John," I said. "She said you worked for the government, but I didn't—I never—"

"She divorced me. What a laugh! She still loves me. She must have suspected I had something to do with it when she saw me,

but did she talk? Did she say anything at all?"

"But—why Steve? Just because he . . ."

"No. I got to gambling. I lost. Not fairly. I couldn't pay. How could I pay on my salary? So I came to ask him for some time. Rita was here with him, and he didn't even let me inside the house, just told me no. He hated to leave her long enough to even tell me no."

BJORNSON'S voice was becoming lower now and strangely sad and gentle. Slowly I raised my head. The postman was standing by the door, his black slicker shooting off tiny spears of yellow light when he turned. His gun was hanging listlessly against his side. Beside him, his back to the wall, and his plump insect-sprayer laden hands raised, stood Switzer.

I said: "And the locked room?"

His voice rambled on as though he hadn't heard me. "I came back around four this morning. It was easy to say I'd heard shots when I was on my regular route. Two fools even substantiated me." He breathed deeply. "You were right about the pin and the string. I couldn't believe you hadn't found it out when you began explaining."

And I saw.

As quickly and as clearly as that. As long as there's space for it to be drawn through, the pin and the string will work. I'd been incredibly stupid. When I'd made sure the pin couldn't have been drawn out through the keyhole or under the door, I'd considered the whole possibility closed. But in this room, as in a thousand front rooms in a thousand houses, there was an opening almost as big as a man's fist. I'd looked at it a dozen times and I hadn't seen it. Mental invisibility. But I saw it now.

That opening was the built-in mailbox at the left of the door.

What could be sweeter? What would suggest itself to a postman as a means of

undetectable breaking and entering faster than this?

I breathed: "The mailbox. That was it, you . . ."

Lightninglike the gun came up once more, leveled at my stomach.

"Pray, mister," Bjornson said.

The index finger was whitening on the trigger when it happened. A loud wheeze came from above Switzer's head, and when Bjornson turned his startled eyes, they caught almost the full blast of the insect-sprayer.

The few seconds he was turned away were enough. I vaulted awkwardly over the sofa, sprawled shouting into him, and together we hit the floor. Viciously I pounded whatever part of him was closest, and my hands came away red and wet. One of his feet caught the pit of my stomach, kicked, and the pain spread over me in tiny rhythmical waves.

"Get your head out of the way!" I could hear Switzer screaming.

I slashed outward with my crooked elbow, caught his mouth full on, felt the bite and tear of loosened teeth in my arm. Again the elbow, again the hot blood and the sting of teeth.

Swearing, I twisted back, and sitting on the floor, with one hand caught in the neck of his black slicker, I lashed forward with my right fist. His head rolled comically with the blow and more blood sprayed over me.

I had to hit him twice more before the eyes closed and the head stayed lax and loose over his shoulder.

And it was over.

While I sat there, waiting for the nausea in my stomach to quiet, Switzer said a little angrily: "Why didn't you get your head out of the way?"

"How the hell could I?" I mumbled.

"I'd have got him. You did O.K., but if you'd got your head out of the way . . ."

It was then someone kissed me.

Quickly I jerked around and my eyes looked straight into Ellen's.

I couldn't speak. It was hard even to breathe. I said: "Darling . . ."

"Don't. I heard." She was kneeling beside me, and now she got off her knees and sat on the floor. Her eyes were moist and hurt. "I—I had to get it look at any gal who could take my husband away from me."

I murmured: "That gal doesn't live."

"I want to go home."

"Sure." I paused. "And you won't leave? Nothing will have changed?"

She looked suddenly uncomfortable. "I won't leave," she said. "But—Jimmy—we have company—"

"Company?"

"Yes. I . . ." She glanced away. "When I got to Mom's tonight, I met her coming out and we just got in the car and turned back."

"Your mom is a wise mom," I said. "She made you stop and think?"

"No. She's leaving Pop for a couple of days. They had a fight . . ."

We looked at each other for a long time and then the laughter started, deep inside us, and we sat on the floor and whooped and shouted and laughed until we were both crying.

It was good to laugh again . . .