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FLASH 500

Edward Silver stood stock-still, careful not to move. Moments before, he had crossed the room to switch off the light, and now hovered in the near-darkness. His office, in a small walk-up on Grand Street in San Francisco, had two windows, one that looked out to the street and one which was made of frosted glass and faced on to the building's internal hallway. The latter window now appeared as a cloudy grey-red rectangle, measuring roughly four-foot wide by three-foot high. The room's red glow came from the window behind him, which received light from the giant neon 'H' of Hay's Department Store across the street.

Silver's attention was focused on the internal window because it faced the hallway, and the hallway led to the stairs, and it is from there that he heard the short, sharp sound of breaking glass, followed by the barely discernable creak of the outside door opening. Silver knew from experience that this was the sound of a break in; accidents were louder and messier.

Although he was a detective, the job was rarely as exciting as the movies would have people believe. Recently, he'd taken his wife to the new Bogart, *The Maltese Falcon*, and she'd asked him if his job was anything like the film. He'd laughed, saying that it was mostly paperwork and sitting in cars.

Except now he was sweating, too scared to move, and cursing himself for leaving his pistol at home. Just then, the lights in the hallway snapped on, and the rectangle filled out with a strong yellow light. Worse still, a large silhouette of a man was projected on to the frosted glass. Silver couldn't make out any details, but he could see that the man was creeping closer, as his shadow was getting smaller and sharper in outline. It was possible now to make out that the man was wearing a hat, was physically stout, and was clearly carrying something in his hand. Silver didn't need to guess what this was. Could he also make out the man's nervous breathing, or was that his own?

Was it the Marten case? Or the Wright divorce? It hardly mattered; someone wanted to kill him and there was little he could do about it. He was considering whether he would survive a jump from the second floor when a sound much like the 'pop' of a champagne cork was followed by the brittle 'thunk' of the internal window splitting. Strangely, he noticed the hole in the glass before he felt the burning pain in his chest.

A curving, horizontal crack had appeared in the window, as well as a diamond-shaped opening where the bullet had passed through. It was only a few inches wide. His killer's form came into greater relief now. Lit from behind, he appeared as a black shape: a human outline with no features.

Silver lay on the floor, staring at this apparition as the blood leaked from his body until his vision went black.