

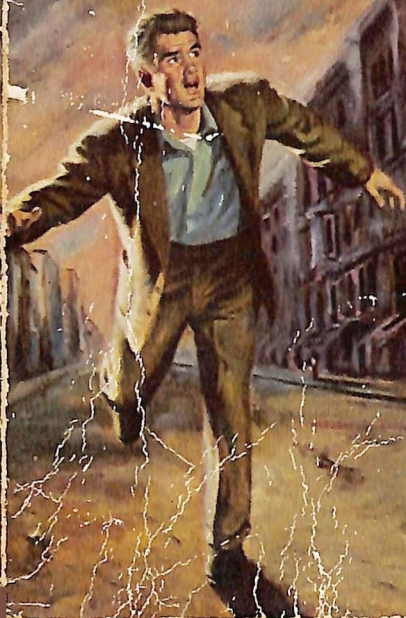
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**ACE** D-63  
DOUBLE NOVEL  
BOOKS

**TWO COMPLETE NOVELS 35c**

# YOU'LL DIE NEXT!

HE PUT UP HIS  
WIFE AS  
SECURITY FOR  
MURDER!



An ACE Original  
by  
**HARRY  
WHITTINGTON**

YOU'LL DIE NEXT!  
HARRY WHITTINGTON

AT 100  
7



## **STAND-IN FOR A KILLER!**

Henry Wilson believed in love. He had to, because why else would Lila have married him? She could have had everything: swanky clothes, high-priced cars—the works. Instead she chose Henry, his run-down cottage, his old jalopy.

Then one morning the sky fell on Henry's head and he found himself confronting a side of Lila he could never accept. And in the midst of his horror, he awoke to a nightmare from which there seemed no escape . . . a nightmare that made Henry the frenzied target of an entire city's murderous wrath!

This ACE original has no let-up in its breathless suspense and tingling excitement.

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***Turn this book over for  
second complete novel.***

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**HENRY WILSON**—In a deadly game of tag, he was IT.

**LILA WILSON**—A beauty with a past, she was about to lose her future.

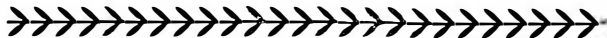
**SAM MALACHI**—He was a bloodhound hot on the trail until a red herring was dragged across the path.

**PINKY**—A kill-hungry punk with a gang full of puppets.

**GLORY**—A gal with pink hair and no trace of yellow.

**CASS MURCHISON**—He stumbled over the truth but couldn't get back on his feet again.

YOU'LL  
DIE  
NEXT!



*by Harry Whittington*

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street

New York 36, N. Y.

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**DRAG THE DARK**

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**Printed in U.S.A.**

## Chapter One

THE front doorbell went *thong-ding-thong* just as he started to eat breakfast. Henry glanced up at Lila. "Before eight in the morning?" he said. "What gives?"

"Maybe somebody wants to sharpen knives."

Henry grinned at her. He knew grinning didn't do much for him. He was just an ordinary, homely guy: nose somebody cracked in a football game, big ears, and a cowlick right where he should have parted his hair.

He stood up, looking longingly at the popovers. Lila had said she could bake popovers and Henry'd laughed at her, not believing her. When he'd come in to breakfast, yawning, still knotting his tie, there was this dish of popovers on the table. He picked one up. Light? Like trying to hold a cloud in your hand. Nut brown. He bit into it, felt it melt against his teeth, starting sugar juices bubbling around his tongue.

"Are they all right?" Lila asked.

"All right?" He turned, still chewing. "Never tasted anything so good in all my life."

"Good as the ones your mother used to make?"

"As good? Honey, Mother's a great girl, but she just never learned to cook."

Lila sighed. "I'm glad," she said. She had a soft, throaty voice. "Sit down, hon. You got to eat 'em while they're real hot."

He sat down, watching her. She went back into the kitchen. He sighed. Lila looked better going away from you than other women did, coming at you head on. She walked like a model. She'd been one. She had a voice like a ballad singer. Why not? That's what she'd been doing when he met her.

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It'd always worried him. He knew what he was, a guy making \$65 a week take-home pay from a government vet administration office. She'd had guys paying sixty-five bucks for flowers she sniffed maybe once and dropped in a wastebasket. At twenty-three, Lila had everything. She could have married mink, Cadillacs, Bergdorf-Goodman charge accounts.

He'd eaten three popovers before she got back. Her eyes lighted when she saw that, a soft gentle light that made goose pimples along his spine. She kissed his cowlick while she filled his coffee cup.

She removed the top from a casserole dish and set it before him. He saw eggs scrambled, bacon, crispy potatoes that'd never even heard of grease, four pieces of toast, dripping butter. Then she sat across from him with a cup of black coffee.

He dug in. "That all you gonna eat?" he said.

"You know I can't eat this time of day. It's still night to me. I'm not even alive yet."

He felt uncomfortably warm. "Then why get up two hours ago to fix all this for me?"

"Because I love you. Because I used to watch you eat breakfasts in restaurants before you married me. And," she winked at him, slowly, covering one deep brown eye with a lid almost as lovely, "besides you were pretty wonderful last night."

"Hell," he said, around his eggs, "guy couldn't be wonderful in bed with you is dead. Just dead."

"I wouldn't know about that." She took a long sip of black coffee.

The doorbell rang again. Henry scooped up a popover and started through the living room. He was aware as he went out the door that Lila was putting the casserole top over his plate.

The doorbell went *thong-ding-thong* again before he could reach it.

"Take it easy," he muttered.

He unlocked the door.

The man standing there looked out of place in this quiet residential section. It flashed through Henry's mind that he



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hadn't seen a go-boy like this since he stopped hanging around the Kit-Kat Club to see Lila.

The man's eyes looked tired, as though he'd never even known the sun came up this time of day. His face was slug white and his cream-colored suit was tailored to the last gasp.

The man smiled. It was an odd smile, a matter of twitching his wide mouth. The pale blue eyes seemed not at all affected.

He said, "This 916 Oak Street?"

Henry nodded. "That's right."

"You — uh, you Henry Wilson?"

Henry nodded again and started to say yes. But he never got to say it. A white claw flicked out scrounging up Henry's tie, shirt and coat lapel.

Henry gasped in a breath, but the man jerked him off balance and out on the porch before he could speak or cry out.

"This won't take long, pal," the man said. "It ain't gonna hurt me half as much as it does you."

Henry was still trying to get back on the soles of his feet when the man's right fist smacked into his temple. With professional calm, the man twisted Henry and struck him with exactly the same force in the other temple. Henry gave up trying to get back on his feet. What happened to him was something he'd never even known could happen — terrible, humiliating loss of muscular and nerve control.

His legs buckled and he tripped to his knees. He ignored the pain in his head and clutched at his stomach with both hands, as he tried to brace the awful crumbling of control walls there. He couldn't get up for the moment. He couldn't move. He'd never known that to be struck expertly like that would so completely paralyze you.

He knew Lila was standing in the living room door watching. Suddenly all he cared was that she saw him reduced to nothing so quickly.

The man was standing there over him.

Lila screamed and ran to the front door.

"Just stay where you are, doll," the man said. "This is just a little matter between Henry and me. You know why

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I'm here, don't you, Henry? Sammy said you'd know. Sammy said to tell you hi. Hi. Sammy said this was just the start. Sammy says he wants you to think about it first. The way Sammy's had to think about it. So think about it, Henry."

He turned around then and walked down the steps just as though he had all the time in the world.

## Chapter Two

HENRY stayed there on his knees. He was shaking all over. Through a kind of smog he could see that man going away from him along the walk. He wanted to get up and run after him.

He shivered. First he wanted to beat that guy's head in. Then he wanted to grab him and make him tell him what he'd meant by that gibberish. *Sammy said to tell you hi. Sammy wants you to think about it first.* Who was Sammy? Who was that guy walking out there in the fog? And he knew there wasn't any fog except across his own optic nerve. A bright sunshiny morning that began with popovers had suddenly become a nightmare.

Lila fell to her knees beside him. Having her there made him want to get up. He couldn't lie there and let her see him this way. But the hell of it was, he couldn't get up either. Not yet.

"Henry." She caught his face in her hands. Where her gentle fingers reached his temples they sent messages of hot agony blinking through his head, as though she were tapping a telegraph key. He had to stretch his head away from her. "Henry, what's the matter?"

"God knows," he gasped. "Ask him. Ask God."

He pulled away from her and stood up. The leaves on the trees started doing the can-can.

He reached out, steadied himself against the wall.

"Henry. That man." She put her arm around him, trying to help him. "What did he want?"

Henry looked at her. "He wanted to paralyze me," he

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said. His voice broke. "But I fooled him. I was . . . too tough for him."

"Let me help you inside."

"Yes. For God's sake, let's get inside."

She helped him through the door. Some of the pain ebbed away. It was only when he moved his head suddenly that waves of it swept upward, licking at his brain as if with scalding water.

Lila closed the door and, from habit, gathered up the mail that had been pushed through the door slot.

She put her arm around him again. He pulled away from her and limped into the living room. He flopped in his easy chair under the reading lamp. He leaned forward, braced his elbows against his knees and sank his head on the palms of his hand. There was no thought of breakfast now, of popovers.

Lila slipped to her knees in front of him. She started to speak. He just glanced up at her, his misery-ridden eyes dark. She bit her lip, didn't say anything.

He kept breathing through his mouth until his heart slowed and some of the emptiness left his diaphragm.

Lila stayed where she was, shuffling the letters in her fingers slowly, hardly looking at them.

She looked at one letter, started to shuffle it and then stopped. She turned it all the way over, looking at it.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"It's a letter for you," she said. Her voice sounded odd. "No return address at all. And the way they've typed 'esquire.' They've typed it, 'Henry Wilson, Ex-Squire'. Somebody trying to be funny maybe."

"I don't feel funny," he said. "Let me see it."

She glanced at the envelope once more, handed it to him.

He stared at the envelope. It was smudged and typed with an anaemic ribbon. 'Henry Wilson, Ex-Squire. 916 Oak Street, City'. Very funny. He frowned. Only not very funny. Maybe he wasn't in the mood.

He ripped the envelope open and shook the letter out. It had been typed with that same pale ribbon.

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He began to read, his eyes widening, lips parting. The blood drained out of his face.

Dear Henry, you bastard:

How does it feel, Henry? 916 Oak Street, Richmond. Three thousand miles from San Fran, eh, Henry, you stinking dirty rat. A job. And now she calls herself Lila, eh, Henry? You rotten slob. Did you really think I wouldn't find you, Henry? You poor dumb son. And now I found you, Henry. Don't try to run again. I'm too close to you now, Henry. I'm real close. You don't know how close, Henry. I'm watching you all the time. Ain't that a joke, Henry? A joke that's all on you, you dirty stinking slob of a rat. Be seeing you, Henry.

Sammy.

Lila had pulled herself up on her knees and was reading it over his shoulder. Her hand closed on his arm.

"Henry," she whispered.

He reread that letter — that stupid, senseless letter.

"Sammy?" he said. "Sammy who? Sammy what?"

"Maybe it's a joke," Lila said.

He growled at her. It was so easy to snarl at the ones you loved. The more helplessly you loved them, the easier you snarled.

"Joke? Ask the guy that's been hit the way I been hit."

She touched his face. "Then it's just a mistake," she said. "It's all a mistake."

His throat was so tight he thought he'd choke.

"Mistake?" He read, "And now she calls herself Lila, eh, Henry? That's you, isn't it? That's your name. Nine-sixteen Oak Street. That's us, isn't it? That's — that's what that guy told me out on the porch."

"But, look," she whispered. She touched the letter with her finger. It was shaking. "San Francisco. You've never been there, have you, Henry?"

He shook his head, swallowed. "No," he said. "No, I never have. But you have, haven't you, Lila?"

She sank back, resting against her heels. Her face looked white as though he'd struck her.

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She nodded. "Yes, Henry. Once. I sang there."

"Sure you did." His voice stuck in his throat. "Tell me about it. Go on, tell me."

"It's nothing to tell. A night club. I wasn't even a hit. I didn't . . . last a week." She shook her head. She looked like a million dollars even in a flour-smearred apron. "What are you driving at, Henry? What are you trying to say?"

"I don't know. Only I don't know anything about San Francisco. But you do. You sang there."

"Yes, Henry. Once. For a week."

"For a guy named Sammy? Is that who you sang for, Lila? A guy named Sammy?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were wide. "No. I know it wasn't anybody named Sammy. The man who owned the place — I can't even think of his name."

"Well, you've got to think of it. Because you've got to tell me what it is they want? What is it they think I've done? What do they want with me?"

She got to her feet, awkwardly, not even looking at what she was doing, her stark eyes fixed on his face.

She brushed at a stray wisp of hair on her forehead. God, she was beautiful. She was so beautiful. She was a million dollars. Married to a guy who brought home sixty-five stinking dollars a week.

"Tell me." He snarled. He slashed the back of his hand across his mouth.

She stared at him. "Tell you what, Henry?"

He waved his arm helplessly, fist gripping the letter. "Tell me what this is all about. Who is Sammy?"

"I don't know. God help me, darling, I don't know."

He stood up, the pain moving like an unsheathed sword straight through him.

"Who was the guy out there on the porch, Lila?"

"Why would I know him?"

"Why not? I saw sixty guys just like him when I hung around the Kit-Kat waiting for you. Hell, maybe I even saw him. What is it, Lila? What is it you've done that they want me for? I don't care what it is, just tell me so I'll know."

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Tears filled her eyes, spilled over and ran down her cheeks. She kept her arms at her sides.

"I don't know," she said. "I haven't done anything. I've loved you, Henry. That's all I've done."

He shook his head. "You've got to know. That guy out there. He knew me. Why? I tell you there isn't any other reason but you. It's got to be you."

Her head tilted. "Why didn't you tell me what you thought of me before you married me?"

"I didn't know what I thought about you," he said doggedly. "I still don't know. God help me, all I know is I got up this morning. A guy knocks the — hits me. He looks like a go-go-boy from the Kit-Kat. What am I supposed to think? Look at me. I did one exciting thing in all my life. I married you. That's all. And it looks like the excitement hasn't even begun yet. Looks like some of your friends just don't want to let you go."

She shook her head and her mouth trembled. "Oh, God, Henry, how can I love you so much and you think things like that about me?"

"Well, I do. You might as well understand that."

She straightened her shoulders and her eyes flashed. "Why? What have I ever done?"

Why? What had she ever done?

He couldn't say. He didn't know. The whole thing was just off-beat, just out of key — that was all. It was nothing you could put your hand on. It was just a feeling. But when you thought about it long enough, it could make the hackles stand up across your shirt collar.

Six months ago, he'd been Henry Wilson. A guy in a rut. A guy who was digging a groove into a grave. Once, he'd had a hell of a lot of dreams: Java, Sumatra, Pago Pago, air freight — a quick wing, a fast kiss, a comfortable bed and a lingering good-by. Then his folks died and he'd stopped with six months at the University. He'd hit just enough of the intermittent police actions to become a veteran. He'd looked around for a job and realized he didn't know anything. Then

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he took an exam and got a job at the Bougainvillea Veterans Administration Office at Richmond.

He started handling the claims and the troubles of other vets and decided he better stop dreaming, hang on to his job and hit a night school somewhere.

One night, he and two pals from the VA happened into the Kit-Kat Club. There were soft lights, stupid blonde hostesses built like brick bourbon bottles, waitresses rubbing against your leg while they made change, four-piece combo that liked to play it sweet.

Then the floor show started. One of the hostesses came over. She sat between his pals and they started hiding dollar bills inside her dress. A spot light blossomed and Lila appeared in the center of it. Something happened inside Henry. Something that had never happened before. Something that made him weak and empty.

She moved as she sang. Her soft, throaty voice crooned up the hairs on your toes. She'd pause for a moment and sing to you and if that didn't do it, they called the embalmer.

When she got near where Henry sat, twisted away from his table, unaware of his pals and the hostess, she smiled faintly and started to sing to him. He thought nothing of it. Sure. It was a cute act. She sang to some guy and gave him a fit. Sure. He'd string along with her.

She finished the song. Everybody applauded, except Henry. He didn't move. She didn't either. She began to sing again. Another soft love song. And she sang it all the way through. Right straight to him.

And then she was gone. He smoothed out the rumples the goose pimples had made in his coat and reached for his drink. The hostess was downing it. He shrugged. Sure, a clip joint.

He ordered another drink with the waitress giving him the business. Then he saw Lila. She was standing before him. Her smile was uncertain.

He grinned to himself. Sure. Uncertain smile. This girl was a hell of an actress. She was wasted in this place.

"May I sit down with you?" she said.

He stood up, knocked over his chair. The waitress re-



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tried it. Sure. Sit with the customer after the act. Drink with him. Get a cut on the tab. Why not? A guy this angel sat with should never complain about a few cadged drinks.

"Sure. Sit down," Henry said. His pals were staring. "What do you want to drink? Champagne?"

They always ordered champagne, didn't they? Champagne. You paid champagne prices and they drank cold tea.

"I'd just as soon have a whisky sour," she said. Hell, this girl didn't need music. Her voice was music. "If you don't mind."

"Mind? Honey, I love it."

He held a chair for her and she sat down. He glanced around. Everybody was watching. He felt funny. Hell, there were bald old codgers in this place who had more pocket change than he had in his wallet.

She was smiling. He said, "What's funny, honey?"

She smiled again, then shook her head. "Nothing. Do you like my singing?"

"Like it?" He grinned at her. Hell, he wished even a grin would make him a little handsome like it did for some guys. "Honey, you don't like singing like yours. You eat it. You eat it up with a great big spoon."

Her smile lighted her face. "I like you," she said.

"Sure you do." He nodded. She liked all the suckers. He wished he was rich enough so this could last all night.

A cigarette girl stopped beside them. "Cigarettes, sir?" He was staring at Lila, shook his head. The cigarette girl was persistent. "Maybe the lady would like some, sir?"

He straightened. Sure. You had to buy them everything in a place like this. That was the rules of the stupid game. "Okay," he said. Some of the smile seeped from his face. "What do you want, honey?"

She touched his hand. "I don't want anything."

He swallowed. The script was all wrong. She had her lines mixed up.

He decided to press his luck. What the hell, when she finished this whisky sour, she'd go back where she came from.

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"Hot in here," he said. "Sure wish we could get out somewhere."

"I do, too," she said. "But we're open until two."

He forced himself to smile. "It's all right, honey doll. Just wanted to get everything back according to Hoyle."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, every guy asks you to go out with him — you have to say no. But you use the show as an excuse." He took a drink. "It's all right."

She wasn't smiling. "You give up real easy, don't you?"

"What am I supposed to do? Grab you by the hair and pull you out of here?"

"No. But you might say you don't mind waiting until two."

He grinned, sighed. "Look, beautiful. For you I got the word. I would wait right here, with drinks a buck and a quarter a throw, until five A.M. if I just thought it would do any good."

Her eyes twinkled. "But you don't?"

"I sure don't. Why should you go out with me? By five A.M. at these prices, I'd be broke. Tell you what. You're a beautiful, beautiful girl. I wish I could afford you. Someday when you're a big television star, I'll tell people I bought you a whisky sour once at the Kit-Kat."

She touched his hand, moving her fingers through the hairs on the back of it.

"Tell you what," she said. "I've got to do the next show. But I can skip the last one, if you'll wait for me."

He was waiting for the joker. She watched his face. "Oh, I will," he said. "I will." Hell, he could go along with a gag.

"I go on in ten minutes," she said. "You got a car?"

"Sure. Why?"

She smiled, wrinkling her eyes at him. "Well, I don't want you to spend all your money in here. Besides, when I leave, one of these dames might come over here, and there's something wrong with me. I'm jealous. I always have been." She stopped smiling and spread her hands. "When I like somebody, I don't want him to like anybody but me."

"So you want me to go out and wait in the car?"

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She nodded. "Yes. It'll be fun thinking about you waiting out there for me. Besides, I've told everybody in here I won't date. I'll come out that side door and you meet me out there. Okay?"

He had to grant her one thing, this was a new one.

He nodded.

Minutes dragged by out there in his car. Thirty minutes seemed like three hours. Once he decided she wasn't coming. Okay. He'd wait a while. It was a gag of some kind.

She came out of the side door. There was an expectant smile on her face. The neons and the street lights fought to touch her first. He sighed. She was so damned beautiful she didn't even look real.

He called to her and she slipped into his car beside him. He said, "You were expecting maybe a Cadillac?"

She shrugged, glancing around. "No. What kind is it?"

"Take my word for it. It's no Caddy." He pulled away from the curb. She was looking back over her shoulder.

"What's the matter?" he said.

She slid over closer to him. It was like that. Quick. No preliminaries, no sparring. It was the way she wanted to be. That was it. "Nothing," she said. "It's just once those guys see you dating *anybody* — it's murder."

He had his tongue in his cheek. Sure. "Where you want to go." He smiled inwardly. If she wanted to shoot his bankroll that was all right with him. If a guy had this much beauty with him even for a little while, he ought to be willing to pay.

He couldn't help it that he kept waiting for the gimmick.

"I know a place," she said. He glanced at her. I'll just bet you do, honey, he thought. She directed him out on the highway to a drive-in eat spot.

First, he thought she was kidding. And when she ordered two hot dogs and black coffee, he was set up for the pay-off.

"Hot dogs," she said. "I love 'em. Do you love hot dogs? When I was a little girl, we were very poor. And pop hit the bottle most of the time. I remember that the big moment of my life wasn't Christmas or birthdays. It was the times when pop was working, and on the wagon, and we'd be in the

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money enough to afford hot dogs. Not just one. But a lot of hot dogs. All we could eat."

He turned on the seat, facing her, drinking in her beauty, possessed by that throaty voice, and yet not believing any of it for an instant.

"And what are you celebrating tonight?"

She smiled. "Didn't I tell you? It's my birthday. I'm doing exactly what I want to do."

They made a date for the following night and the night after that. His world was suddenly topsy-turvy. He dashed home from the VA office at four-thirty, fell in bed and slept until one A.M. He got up then, showered, shaved and raced to the Kit-Kat. They were together then until it was time for him to check in at the VA and Lila went home to bed.

He kept waiting for her to end it. He felt perched on the highest star in heaven. But he never expected it to last. He was trying to keep his head above water. It was going to hurt like hell when she said good-by. Then she wanted to get married. After he got over the idea that she was joking, he told her what he felt would be the supreme test. He told her she'd have to give up her career. That would make her laugh. That would tear it.

Only here she was, in an apron, mussed and making pop-overs. Six months and it had been all straight paradise. But what could a guy do? What could he believe?

Here was a girl so lovely it hurt to look at her, tied down to kitchen aprons and vacuum cleaners. Did it make sense? And when you thought about it, what did he know about her? Why had she fallen in love with him first? Because he called her 'honey.' A reason . . . or an evasion?

What did a guy do when he had a wife that was too lovely to be true? He didn't know. Hell, he felt like crying when he thought about it.

### *Chapter Three*

"WHAT have I ever done to hurt you?" Lila said. She chewed the inside of her full underlip.

He shook his head. "It isn't that you've done anything to hurt me. Lord knows you haven't."

"But you've never loved me. All this time."

He stared at her helplessly. "No. Maybe I haven't loved you. I've heard about these people who love each other and get married and bored and wished to God they were out of it. If that's what you mean, no I never loved you. I've been crazy about you. So crazy I never cared who you were, or what you were, or who you knew before I came along."

She breathed deeply. "But now you care?"

He clenched his fists, relaxed them. "Is that so horrible? A guy that looks like a Kit-Kat regular hits me. He talks about a guy named Sammy. What am I supposed to think? What would you think?"

Her voice was lifeless. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe I'd think like you do, that my wife was no good. Maybe I'd think because she sang in night clubs, worked as a model, she must have slept with a hundred guys. I guess that's what I'd think."

"Lila." He stepped forward, caught her arms. He kissed her, but her mouth yielded under his without any warmth.

"Isn't that what you think?" she asked.

"I don't know. I was mixed up, hurt. I was just trying to understand how a guy can walk into your house like that —"

"And it had to be because you married a girl that was no good, is that it? Why didn't you ask at the Kit-Kat Club about me, Henry? I was so proud of you when you didn't

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pry. You didn't try to spy. You just loved me. Just because I was . . . me. And I was proud."

"What difference would it have made if I'd asked? What would I have found out?"

She moved her head from side to side and pulled away from him. "I don't know, Henry. I don't know. Maybe you wouldn't have found out anything. Maybe the only difference would have been the way I'd have felt about you if I heard you pried."

"All right. I didn't."

"No. And I thought it was because you loved me. Now I know, don't I? It was because you were so hot — it didn't matter what I was, just so you had me."

"I married you, didn't I?"

"I asked you to."

"Yes. You're damned right you did. Because I never thought you'd have me. I thought you were too damned fine and beautiful for a guy like me."

She burst out crying. "Oh God, Henry. How can we fight? I love you so much. I know you love me. We — we were both scared . . . and we went kind of crazy."

He slipped his arms around her. Her tears burned against his throat.

"I don't know anybody named Sammy, darling," she said. Her voice was drowning in her tears. "You had every right to ask me."

"No. You're right. If I'd loved you enough, I'd know better."

"It's all a mistake, Henry. This whole business. It's some other Henry Wilson. You know how many there are in the phone book. Remember the time we counted the Wilsons in the Richmond phone book? Eighty-nine of them — and four of them had the first name, Henry."

"Yeah. It's got to be some mistake."

He kissed her good-by and she clung to him. Her eyes were still rimmed with her crying. She didn't mention the breakfast he hadn't finished.

He felt empty. He walked down the front steps and along the walk. He stopped and glanced back.

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"You're going to be late, darling," she said.

"I am late." He wished he could get rid of that nagging sense of wrong.

He went on out into the street. They'd fought and there was a rift between them that hadn't ever been there. Things had been said that had never been said before. They could never be unsaid.

The hell of it was, that was only part of the feeling of wrong inside him. Now there was the nagging thought: If she had nothing to hide, why would she care if he pried into her life?

He could feel the letter from Sammy in his inside coat pocket. It brushed against his shirt and he couldn't ignore the bulge of it. He looked both ways along the walk when he came out of his yard. Fine. He was jittery. What was there to be afraid of out in this neighborhood?

Everything looked just as it always had. Two women were standing across a hedge, gossiping. He noticed a blind man dozing in the sun across the street. A seeing-eye Shepherd dog was lying beside his chair. A child was bouncing a ball along the sidewalk. Henry shook off the chill that crouched between his shoulders, and hurried toward the bus stop on the corner.

When the bus finally came along, he got on it. He'd missed his regular bus, the crowded one. He sat on the right side, near the front. The seat beside him was empty. It was one thing to tell himself to forget something, but it was something else again to be able to do it. Somebody was watching him. He felt it.

He turned in his seat, slowly. Women shoppers, a few men, and nobody even paying the slightest bit of attention to him. He forced himself to turn around again and settle down in his seat. Nobody was looking at him. Nobody even cared that he was on the bus. But he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched.

He stared out the bus window. He noticed a flag unfurled above a yellow building, the Richmond Main Post Office. He

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reached up, yanked the signal cord. After he got off, he waited a moment, watching the bus. The other passengers didn't even glance up.

He shrugged his coat up on his shoulders and walked up the post office steps. At the parcel post window the clerk was looking at the pictures in a magazine.

He looked up at Henry. "Yes, sir?"

"Who do I see about a letter I got by mistake?"

"I can take it, mister. You just mark on it that it's not for you."

"Fine," Henry said. It was so simple. It made him feel ten years younger. He took the letter from his inside coat pocket, fumbled out his fountain pen and laid it on the counter. "What do I write? Just, 'not for me?'"

"No. You can just say it was left at the wrong address."

Henry swallowed. "Well, no. You see, the address is all right."

"Oh. Well, maybe it's for the people who lived in the house before you. Sometimes that happens. Just write on there that the person addressed to doesn't live there."

"But that's it. It came addressed to me."

"Wait a minute, mister. What do you mean?"

"I mean this is my name, all right. And my address."

The clerk frowned. "Then what makes you think the letter is not for you?"

"Because I don't know the man who wrote it. They've just got the wrong Henry Wilson, that's all."

The clerk sighed. "Your name Henry Wilson, mister?"

"Yes. But —"

"You live at that address? What is it — 916 Oak Street? That where you live?"

"Yes. But —"

"Look, mister: your name, your address, a letter you don't want. We've done all we can do for three cents."

"But there's a mistake. It's the wrong Henry Wilson."

"Sorry, mister. We get all kinds of complaints. But not many about delivering letters addressed right — to the right address." He grinned at Henry, but not with him. The clerk



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shook his head and turned to the woman standing beside Henry. "Yes, ma'm, what can I do for you?"

Henry looked at the clerk and then down at the letter. He shook his head and started to turn away.

The clerk was weighing a package. He said, "I got an idea, mister."

Henry turned. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Why don't you just drop that letter in a waste basket and forget all about it?"

Henry swallowed and walked out of the wide doors. He stood on the top step, feeling empty and alone in the bright sunlight. He was still gripping the letter in his hand.

## Chapter Four

HENRY pushed open the glass door marked ACCOUNTS in the sprawling VA office. He glanced at the clock, feeling guilty. Nine thirty-five. They'd gig him good for this.

He noticed the people sitting near the time clock grinning at him.

Fred Smathers came over. "First time you been late like this in six months, buster. Used to be because you stayed up all night with your wife. Who you staying up with now?"

Henry grinned at him. "Yours," he said.

Fred smiled. "You fool," he said. "You poor silly fool."

Henry hung his hat and coat in the office locker. He reached for his time card and noticed the note pinned to it.

Scrawled in red pencil was notation, "See Mellor."

Fred read it over his shoulder. "That's Mellor," he said. "Stinky Mellor. He can always smell the mornings you're going to be late. Then he pins notes on your card, just to make you more uncomfortable."

"This just isn't my day," Henry said.

"Well, it ain't mine either," Fred said, "so don't blame me."

Henry sighed. "Guess I better get in there and see him. Not going to gain anything by waiting, except ulcers."

The gold lettering on the glass door read PERSONNEL. Henry pushed the door open, carrying Mellor's note.

Mellor's secretary looked up without smiling. When an employee came in to see Mellor it wasn't safe to smile at him. Mellor might think you were a friend of his. This was the day of loyalty in government . . . and loyalty checks.

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"See Mellor," Henry said. Why were his lips so dry? He handed the woman the note.

"All right," she said. "Go in."

Mellor looked up with an expansive smile when Henry came in. He was a very tall man with faded gray hair that flopped over his forehead.

"Yes, sir," he said. "What can I do for you?"

For the first time Henry realized there were so many employees that Mellor didn't even know them.

"You left a note on my time card," Henry said. "You wanted to see me."

Mellor's secretary had followed Henry into the office. "This is Henry Wilson, Mr. Mellor. From Accounting."

Mellor fumbled some papers on his desk. "Ummm. Yes," he said. "Yes." Then he found a paper and nodded. The smile was gone. "Oh, yes. Wilson. Employee 619." He frowned and leaned across his desk. "I'm sorry, Wilson, I've got to ask for your resignation."

Not even the man who struck him in the temples had stunned him any more. Henry just stared.

"Why?"

"Wilson, you know as well as I do why."

"Look. I don't know why."

"Examine your own conscience, Wilson, your own mind. Your own past. Ask yourself if you didn't know that to lie on an employment application for a government job is to defraud your own government."

Henry's mouth tightened. "Look, let's stop waving flags. This job pays sixty-five bucks a week. I do what they ask of me. I didn't lie to get it. I haven't defrauded anybody."

Mellor stood up. "I'm prepared to let you resign, Wilson. I hope you won't try my patience. I'm not a mild man. You can get yourself in a lot of trouble if you persist in forcing me to bring charges against you."

Henry clenched his fists. He felt the sweat on his forehead. "Charges of what?"

"Wilson, we have proof in this office that you once served time in the state penitentiary in California. A man with a prison record is not acceptable for employment in this office."

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"Well, it's a lie. I was never in any prison. I was never in California."

"I'm sorry to see you take this stand. I give a man the benefit of every doubt. No one gets to my men except through me. One of my boys needs help, I go to the plate for him. I bat for my men, Wilson, bat hard. But when one of them does me dirt, I'm merciless, Wilson. Merciless. Now, we have proof, dates and affidavits. If you want to resign, I'm going to let you. But if you want to make an issue of this, believe me I won't leave you a leg to stand on."

"Why can't you believe me? I've never been in prison. I was never in California."

"You'd hardly be expected to confess to a matter as serious as this when you've already lied on your application."

"I didn't lie!"

Mellor's face was cold. "This is your last chance, Wilson. Are you willing to resign?"

"No! This is my job. I've a wife to support. Why should I resign because of somebody's lies?"

Mellor's voice was soft. "Now, Wilson, I want to be as friendly as I can. Just as long as I can. You can save yourself a lot of grief by signing this resignation. I'm a man who never goes off until he's primed, cocked and ready. I'd never have asked you in this office on such a serious matter if I hadn't been sure of my ground. Now, why not sign this paper and save yourself a lot of grief?"

"Because I want to hear that proof."

Mellor sighed. His mouth hardened. "All right, Wilson. We'll notify you. In a few days your case will come before the Board. Meanwhile, consider yourself on suspension until such time as your hearing is called."

Lieutenant Cass Murchison looked up when the patrolman led Henry into the small, poorly lighted office on the second floor of police headquarters. Murchison was a thick-chested, heavy-set man with flushed face and unruly brown hair.

He scratched his fingers through his hair backwards so his hand looked like a crab crawling through seaweed. He said, "Yes, sir. What's your complaint?"

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"I got a threatening letter through the mail," Henry said. "I want to know if there's anything I can do about it?"

"There certainly is," Murchison said. "You got any idea who sent the letter?"

"No." Henry shook his head. "It's signed 'Sammy.' But that doesn't mean anything to me."

"Never had any enemies named Sam? You know, sometimes something happens that doesn't mean a thing in God's world to us. But something is screwed up in the minds of the other person, and he'll carry a grudge until it festers into hate that nothing will contain."

"I never knew anybody could even hate as hard as the guy who wrote that letter," Henry said.

"Could I see it?"

"Sure." Henry handed the letter across the desk. The lieutenant examined the envelope, the letter, and shook his head. "Pretty bad," he said at last. "And the letter was mailed here in town. You sure you don't remember anybody by that name, say out in San Francisco?"

"I've never been in San Francisco. I've never even been in California."

"I see. Maybe you got somebody else's letter."

"That's what I thought," Henry said. "That's what I'd like to think." He told the lieutenant about the man who'd slugged him before eight that morning and told him the professional work-over was from Sammy.

"And then that letter came?"

"Yes."

"Well, it looks a little more serious than a crank. Can you describe the man who hit you?"

"Yes." Henry told about the fish eyes, the way the mouth sawed itself into a smile, the slug-white flesh, the professional going-over.

"A guy like that shouldn't be hard to find," Murchison said. "We'll line up some pictures. We'll want you to look at them. We might want to call you in to a line-up. Could you give me your address?"

"Nine-sixteen Oak Street," Henry said. He gave him his telephone number.

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"That's fine. Now in case we want to reach you during the day, Mr. Wilson, where do you work?"

Henry swallowed hard. He dragged his tongue across his lips. Murchison looked up.

"I'm not working just now," Henry said. "I got fired, this morning."

Murchison frowned. He glanced at that letter again. Henry began to wish he hadn't come here at all.

"Where did you work?" Murchison said. There was a change in his tone.

"The VA. In Accounts," Henry said.

"You mind saying why you lost your job? Did it have anything to do with this letter?"

Henry breathed heavily. "I don't know. That's why I came straight here when I got suspended. They said they had proof I'd been in prison in California."

"Oh, I see." There was something charged in the room.

"I told you. I was never in California."

"Yet the government would suspend you? They must have pretty good evidence against you."

"I tell you, that's why I came here. They do have evidence. They do! But it's all wrong. That's why I came to you. A beating like this morning. That was rugged. But I could take it. And this letter. Maybe it was a crank. Maybe it was a mistake. But now I've lost my job — something's got to be done about it."

Murchison leaned back in his swivel chair. "Maybe you better start by telling all there is to tell about yourself."

"I told you. It's a mistake. I was never in California." Henry was sweating, and his clothes were sticking to his body.

"How about your wife, Wilson? You married? Does your wife know about this?"

Henry dampened his lips again. He now knew he'd been hasty coming here. Murchison would be throwing questions at him about Lila.

"She had nothing to do with it," Henry said. "She doesn't know anything about it."

"Could she have had a boy friend named Sammy? Seems he knows her. Lila. Is that your wife's name?"

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"Yes." Henry stood up. "Yes, that's her name."

"Maybe you better ask her about it, Wilson. She might be able to tell you quite a lot."

"All right. All right." Henry set his hat back above his sweating forehead. "I'll ask her when I get home."

Murchison was watching him coldly. "Yeah, you do that. And keep in touch, Wilson. I'll keep in touch with you. And I'll just hang on to this letter. Okay?"

Henry's stomach was tied in knots and he could feel it shaking. He nodded at Murchison again and backed all the way to the door. He opened it with Murchison's eyes fixed on him. He thought he'd feel better when he got that door closed between him and those eyes.

But he didn't.

## *Chapter Five*

HENRY stepped out into the sunlight. There was no warmth in the day, at least none that could reach the chill that jelled the marrow of his bones.

He started walking aimlessly. The streets were crowded. It was almost eleven A.M. He wondered what Lila was doing this time of the day? He wanted to go home to her. Hell, there was nothing else to do. Nowhere else to go. He'd gone to the cops and what had that got him? A cop staring at him like he'd written that threatening letter instead of receiving it.

He exhaled. How was he going to tell Lila about his job? He just couldn't imagine himself saying to her, "Honey, I'm sorry, I've been fired."

He felt his eyes stinging. He stopped walking and looked around the crowded street. Where could he go, what could he do? He didn't see how he could face Lila yet. Hell, first he had to get used to the idea of being fired.

He shook his head. He started walking again. There was a chill in the air for everybody else. They hurried to keep warm. But Henry was sweating. How could he take this latest hurt home to Lila?

In his mind he could see her, working around the house. Hell, she kept that place like she was always expecting the Captain's inspection. A doll like that — she could have had a millionaire — and he had to tell her he'd lost his lousy sixty-five-buck-a-week job.

How could he do it? He wanted to give her orchids, but maybe once a month he could afford a couple of gardenias. The least he could do was give her security. That was all



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he had — that and a dogged devotion that seemed to excite her.

He crossed the street. A car horn blared at him. He didn't even look around. He noticed the traffic was thinning. He was before the entrance to the John Quincy Bailey Park. A few cars swung past him to enter the park drive.

He walked along the drive and then crossed a plot of grass to a green bench that was in the full glare of the sun. Nobody was near the bench. Henry sat down, staring across the park without seeing it. Before him the bronzed statue of John Quincy Bailey was delivering a silent address.

He thought about his job and the way he'd lost it. One thing was sure. Mellor was sincere. Somebody had the goods on a Henry Wilson, and it was near enough to him to sell Mellor. Mellor hadn't lied. He always tried to know where he was before he acted.

"A no-good frimp," somebody said.

Henry started and felt his heart pound. He looked around. A stout man in a wrinkled black suit had sat down beside him on the bench. Henry looked around. There were no other empty benches. The stout man smoothed his gray hair and took a bag of popcorn from his pocket. He began to feed the pigeons. Pretty soon there were a dozen of them around the bench.

"I said he was a no-good frimp," the gray-haired man said. He jerked his flushed face toward the towering statue of John Quincy Bailey. "Listen. I knew that old pirate. He never gave anybody the sweat off his — Founder of this town! That's a laugh. He robbed everybody blind. He charged six prices for all this land. Only reason the town settled here was the mines and J.Q. owned them."

"Yes," Henry said. He thought, it's no good going to the cops. Police never believe anybody. A man was supposed to be innocent until proved guilty. That was crap. You're guilty, no matter what you prove. No. He didn't have any faith in them. Murchison was going to watch him. That was fine. Swell. Sammy could kill him. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Now the cops knew Henry Wilson lost his job. That made them sure something was queer about him.

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"Only reason old J. Quincy gave them the land for this park was to get 'em to put up that bronze effigy! He got old, saw the town growing up in spite of all he could do to stop it. You a stranger around here?"

"No." Henry thought, maybe Murchison was right about one thing. Lila must have known these guys somewhere. No. Damn it, he wasn't going to start that again. She'd been an angel for six months. He'd hurt her this morning. That was all. He wasn't going to put her through any more hell . . . So then, what was he going to do?

"You lived around here long?"

"Yes."

"How come you aren't working this time of day, fine young fellow like you?"

Henry looked at him. "Why aren't you working, a gabby old windbag like you?"

The stout man laughed. "Got troubles? That it, friend? Woman troubles?"

"Why don't you take your pigeons and go somewhere?"

"Can't do that, friend. My pigeons and me meet right here every day this time. Besides, might help if you talked about it. Your wife stepping out on you?"

Henry didn't answer. He could feel it building up inside him terrible enough to burst.

"I can tell you this, friend," the stout man said. "Women are all trouble. Good ones. Bad ones." He shook his head. "They don't mean to be, some of 'em. But they are."

"Okay," Henry said. He thought, *maybe if I could find that slug — that white-faced hatchet man who called on me this morning — maybe I could make him tell who hired him.* Somebody had hired him. Who?

"Learn not to expect anything of them, friend. You learn that, you're all right. You expect nothing of a woman, that's what you'll get. You won't be let down."

Henry got up. The pigeons fluttered out of his way and settled back on the popcorn.

"Take it easy, friend. You have to scare my pigeons?"

Henry glanced at the stout man over his shoulder as he crossed the grassy patch to the drive.

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The stout man was standing up, trying to soothe the frightened pigeons.

*That slug, Henry thought. If I can find that slug.*

He heard the sound of a motor being gunned, hard. He jerked his head around. He was just stepping out on the drive when he saw the car leap away from the curb inside the park and start toward him.

He started on across the street. The car was coming too fast! He saw he wasn't going to be able to make it.

Quickly, he turned back, moving to get away from the on-coming car.

He leaped as far as he could onto the grass, trying to dodge. He saw two things that were burned into his mind: there was a woman at the wheel. Her eyes were fixed on him. The man beside her was yelling directions at her. Was he teaching her to drive? Was he telling her to swerve up over the curb?

The right front wheels came up over the curb. Henry went scrambling back across the grass toward the bench. He could hear the car roaring behind him. They weren't going to let him get away. They were going to run him down.

The pigeons got airborne with a rusty whirring of wings. In a blur of movement, Henry saw the old man leap to his feet and run across the walk. He grabbed Henry by both arms and pulled him toward the bench.

At the last possible moment the big car wheeled back on the drive, bumping and clattering off the curb. The woman driver pressed on the gas pedal and raced toward the park exit.

Henry was still on his knees. He tried to twist around and scramble to his feet. But the stout man was holding him and trying to lift him. By the time Henry shook himself free, the car was gone. He swore.

"What's the idea of holding me like that?" he rasped. "I wanted to get that license number."

"She damn near ran over you," the stout man said.

"She damn near did," Henry said. "And I wanted her number."

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"Gosh, friend, I'm sorry. Gettin' her license number just never occurred to me. Guess when you get old like me, your reflexes aren't so good any more. You sure moved fast, friend. Nothing wrong with your reflexes."

"Okay," Henry said. "Okay."

He turned and started across the grass again. The man said, "Friend."

"What?"

"I can tell you one thing. That license. It was white. Blue letters on it, I think. Or green."

Henry tried to control the jittery nerves in his stomach. "All right," he said. He started away again.

"Friend."

He jerked his head around. "What do you want?"

"I don't want nothing, friend. I was just thinking. You'd be a lot safer if you kept to the sidewalks."

Henry exhaled a long frustrated breath, recrossed the grassy turf and strode along the sidewalk. He looked down at himself. The knees of his trousers were mud brown and grass green. And that was just about how he felt inside. He'd have to go home now. No matter what Lila thought when he told her he'd lost his job, he'd had enough for one day.

He saw a Wise Owl Drugstore over on the corner of Quincy Park Drive and Eighth Street. He crossed the busy avenue, went into the air-conditioned drugstore.

In a phone booth he sat on the slab that had never been meant for comfort. But for the moment he wasn't looking for comfort.

He thumbed through the Richmond Phone Directory to the W's. He ran his finger along the columns until he came to the Wilsons. He remembered that he and Lila had counted them once just for the hell of it. Counting the Wilsons who spelled their name with two l's, there were almost a hundred of them. There were four Henry Wilsons. There were three Henry Willsons.

He sat and stared at the pay phone. Somebody wanted to kill him, or they wanted to kill another guy named Henry Wilson and they had their lines crossed. But bad.

He swallowed. They were watching him. They'd seen him

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go in the park, watched him when he tried to leave it. They were probably watching him now.

He took a gander through the window of the phone booth. There were a few customers, clerks. Nobody was looking toward him.

It seemed to Henry that the best thing he could do was find the right Henry Wilson. He had to get these people off his back, he had to have his job, he had to save his own life.

He looked again at the names of the four other Henry Wilsons. Would it do any good to call this time of day? If he did call what would he say? Do you know a homicidal maniac named Sammy? Were you ever in a California prison?

He felt ill. There was only the slimmest chance he'd find the man he wanted, and nobody was going to talk in such a serious situation.

He took a small pad from his inside pocket, copied out the addresses of the other Henry Wilsons. He didn't feel any better. He replaced the pad and stood up. The place was air-conditioned, but he was wet with sweat — chilled sweat.

Henry got off his bus at the corner of Bailey Boulevard and started slowly along Oak Street. Nothing had changed much. The blind man and his dog were still in the sun. A slatternly looking woman had come out and was sitting in a straight chair and talking at him steadily.

Henry could see his own house down the block: the small patch of lawn, the dinky porch; inside were the five rooms. The thing that made that house different and beautiful was Lila. He thought that every afternoon. Only now it wasn't afternoon. And he was bringing home trouble, like two pork chops wrapped in a neat little package.

He'd tell her about it. That for sure. There was no use lying, or delaying, or misrepresenting anything. He'd change his clothes and then he'd go out looking for the slug-faced man.

He wouldn't tell her about that.

He went up the steps, noticing the loose board on the porch. He'd been meaning to fix that. Well, now he had plenty of time.

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He called, "Honey."

There wasn't any answer. In the street a car drove by lazily. Somewhere a housewife was running a vacuum. He found his key and unlocked the door.

The house was immaculate. He walked into the front room. Everything looked polished and bright for Captain's inspection. He peered into the bedrooms, and things were furbished in there, too. He smiled. He'd have to give her a "well done."

"Lila. Honey?"

She must have used polish to make the bathroom gleam like that. She always said all she ever wanted was a house and she'd keep it like a house was supposed to be.

He stopped in the kitchen doorway. The feeling that something was wrong went all through him. Where was she? At neighbors? The store? What did he know about where she spent her mornings? Or the whole day as far as that was concerned?

Suddenly, the way the house looked so polished and clean didn't seem so impressive. She worked like hell, polished everything and went out somewhere. Where? Then she'd get home in the afternoon in time to have dinner ready.

He felt weak in the region of his heart. Doubt was eating at him like a tumor. He cursed himself. He had to cut it out. What reason had he to believe wrong of Lila? Why should he stand there in that door and be so sure there was anything wrong?

His gaze moved to the kitchen table and he knew what was wrong. In the spotless kitchen they stood out like crazy. Two cocktail glasses. Still half a drink in the bottom of one of them. Lila. She drank only to be sociable. She never finished a drink in her life.

He stood and stared at those two glasses. Light got lodged in them through the window, or maybe his eyes blurred over. Anyway, it was as if those glasses winked at him. They were like two harlots in a bawdy house window.

## Chapter Six

HENRY told himself to calm down. But that was another one of those little things that was easier to tell yourself to do than to do.

He walked over to the table and looked down at those glasses in that spotless kitchen — those winking, dirty, rotten, filthy glasses. He picked one up, the one that was empty. He held it and looked at it as though it could speak, tell him what he wanted to know.

Where was Lila?

He shook his head. He picked up both glasses, carried them over to the sink and washed them out. He let the water run on them a long time, and then he rinsed them. He found a dishcloth and dried the glasses until they shone. Then he put them away. He admitted it: he was doing anything that would keep him from thinking.

He didn't want to think. It was very easy to say that she was at a neighbor's house and that she'd be back soon. But then, it was also easy to see the line in that letter: *she calls herself Lila now, eh, Henry?*

Where was she?

He was terrified, with a horror stronger than anything he'd ever known. He knew that he could not stand to let her go, no matter what she was, who she was, or what she had done, he could never let her go.

He breathed in deeply, and felt better because he had thought that. It helped. It made everything better. It was like laying out the battle lines and getting everything all squared away.

He looked around the room. His mind was ready for the

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Captain's Inspection now. It was clear. He didn't give a damn what she'd ever done — she'd been seven kinds of an angel since he'd known her. What had he ever done but doubt her? He cursed. Hadn't he thought the worse, the minute he walked in here and saw those glasses?

He felt that twitch in his diaphragm. The hell with that. She could explain that. It would have a simple, ordinary, everyday explanation. A neighbor's wife. Anybody. The milkman. The thing was that she would explain it. And he wasn't going to hound her about it. He wouldn't mention it unless she did. It was time he started trusting her. He was in trouble. If he didn't have her with him all the way, nothing was worth the effort. Then he might as well pick up the marbles.

So there was only one thing to do, wait until Lila came home so he could ask her about the glasses. No. Wait until she came home to find out where she went mornings.

*Oh, God, he thought, help me. Make me know I can trust her as much as I love her. It isn't that I'm crazy, or mean, or even neurotic. It's just that I still don't see how an angel could love a character like me.*

That brought him back to the fact that he still had no job, he had not found out who Sammy was, or whom this letter was intended for.

He went through the house again, making up his mind to go out to look for the slug who'd hit him that morning. That was the important thing. When he came back home, Lila would be there.

Wasn't she always home when he got there? At least, hadn't she been, until now? But hadn't the world been a sane place until now?

He ran from the house, like a man trying to escape something. In this case, the something Henry was trying to escape was his own thoughts.

He stopped at the walk and looked back at the house. He felt a physical ache of loneliness and wrong. He had to get things back as they were and nobody could help him but himself.

He walked down to the boulevard and waited for a downtown bus. The very world felt strange. The air was too cold,



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and the sun on him was too hot. It made him sweaty and uncomfortable. And God help him, he couldn't escape the thought that somebody was watching him.

The back of his neck ached and he wanted to wheel around and look. But he forced himself to stand without moving until the bus came.

The place he knew best was the Kit-Kat Club. For him it was the border between the world he'd always known, and the strange jungle world infested by men in sharp-tailed, cream-colored suits.

The Kit-Kat was closed at noon. It was strictly a supper and show club, and didn't cater to the beer trade that the other joints along Market Avenue picked up during the day. Henry stood for a moment on the walk and looked up at the unlighted neons. They looked anaemic in the sunlight.

A boy was watching him from the shoe-shine stand beside the entrance to the Kit-Kat.

"Shine, Mister Wilson?"

Henry turned, remembering how many times he'd had his shoes shined while he waited for Lila. It was better than sitting inside the Kit-Kat. He nodded, and climbed up in the chair.

"Haven't seen you long time," the boy said.

Henry managed to smile. "That's right," he said. "My shoes really need a good shine."

The boy was working. "Always know where you can get a good shine, Mister Wilson. Yes, sir."

Henry sighed. This was what you got for being a good customer, a steady citizen. He leaned forward while the boy worked. "Buzz," he said, "I'm looking for somebody."

There was an almost imperceptible miss in the rhythm of the boy's cloth. "Yes, sir?" He cleared his throat. "Everything is all right with you and Miss Lila?"

"Yes," Henry said. "Yes, fine."

This was wonderful, he thought. He wondered how many men Buzz has seen who had married girls from this dump, and then come down here, alone and frantic, in the hot noon, looking for them?

"That's nice."

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"The guy I'm looking for might hang around here."

"Oh."

Again Henry was sure he could read Buzz's thoughts. Henry's wife had a lover from down here. That happened all the time, too. Not to us, Henry thought, his fists clenched. Not to Lila and me.

He said, "This hasn't anything to do with Lila and me." He thought quickly, "No. This is some veteran's business. I'm in Accounting at the VA office, you know."

"Oh." Buzz didn't sound convinced. "What's the gee's name?"

*There, Henry thought, was proof of the foolishness of lying.*

He'd have to invent a name, that was all. He'd started this ridiculous lie, and he couldn't back out of it. The VA never sent you out looking for a vet without supplying his name.

With a million names in the world, why was it so hard to hit on one. He said, "Muggert." That was a dilly of a name. "His name is Fred Muggert."

He could feel the chill between him and Buzz. "Don't know the name, Mr. Wilson."

"Maybe if I describe him to you."

"Maybe."

He told Buzz how tall the man was, and how white his face was, and how dead his eyes were, how tailored his suit was. He finished lamely, because he knew Buzz had seen dozens of men like that right here in front of the Kit-Kat.

"Know something else about him?" Buzz said. "How he walks, or the way he talks, or anything?"

Henry shook his head. He was a good customer and Buzz wanted to help him. But Henry knew there was no way. He had to find the slug himself, alone.

He paid Buzz, tipped him heavily and walked down Market Avenue, feeling Buzz's eyes on him. Buzz's worried eyes.

Henry looked around at the scabby buildings. He had forgotten that in a town as wealthy as John Quincy Bailey's Richmond there could be such squalor, such poverty.

He had been in a dozen bars along Market. At Twenty-

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third, he turned right because there were more bars down there. The bartenders looked up and smiled when he walked in. But when he looked around and didn't buy, the smile faded and some of them asked sarcastically, "You looking for something, friend? We also sell beer."

Henry was tired. He knew that the slug might be asleep in any of these cheap flophouses. He might be anywhere. But it never occurred to Henry to stop looking. A man like the slug couldn't stand loneliness. Sooner or later, he'd come out, looking for company. And when he did? What?

Henry felt more tired than ever.

In the afternoon, these streets were quieter. The shop owners stood out front and talked and watched Henry. They watched him pause before the dirt-smeared windows of Jose's Mexican Restaurant and peer through the glass.

Before Henry could move on, a beggar in a tattered army uniform stopped him. "Got a quarter, Buddy? Ex-service man, Buddy. Down on my luck."

Henry gave him a quarter. He moved on down the street, reached the tracks and the warehouses. He crossed the street then and started back along the other side.

The B-girls were coming to work in the hot spots by the time he got back to Market Avenue. One of them smiled at him from the bar in Nicky's Place.

He went over to the bar. He sat down beside her and she ordered a champagne.

She said, "What you doin' down here, honey?"

Henry looked at her. He was so tired that his legs felt bloodless when he took his weight off them.

"I'm looking for somebody," he said. He was too tired to think of any smart cracks.

Something happened to her face. "You a cop?"

He shook his head. "No. I'm just a guy. I work for the VA. This guy I'm looking for — I might have something for him."

She was interested. She turned on the stool and wriggled nearer to him. Her dress hitched further along her thigh.

"My name's Rose," she said. "What you got for this guy? He got some insurance of some kind that he didn't collect?"

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Henry nodded. "Something like that."

"What's his name?"

*Here we go again*, Henry thought. "His name is Muggert," he said, his voice tired and hopeless. He drank off his whiskey straight. It was tasteless, emasculated. *Hell*, Henry thought, *and this time I really need a drink.*

"Don't know the name," Rose said. "What's he look like?"

He described the man carefully this time. It would be a miracle if she knew him, but he was tired enough to need a miracle.

Rose stopped smiling. "I know a guy like that," she said. She looked at Henry narrowly. "Just one thing. Guy I know looks like that never was in the army. He wouldn't have any VA insurance."

"Where does he live?" Henry said. He knew he was too excited. "Maybe he was in for a while and never told you — just long enough to start the account. If you'll tell me where to find him . . ."

Rose wasn't smiling at all now. "No," she said. She stared at Henry. "No. This guy wasn't in the army. Not for any time at all. They wouldn't take him. They never wanted him."

"But he might be the guy. Where does he live?"

Rose shook her head. "Sorry. If you're looking for him for what you say you are, it ain't him. If you're not, he'd beat hell out of me for puttin' you on him. Sorry." She turned away and called to the bartender. "Hey, Charlie, bring me another champagne, will you?"

Henry pushed off the stool and walked out of Nicky's Place, leaving Rose to pay for her "champagne" herself.

He went to the boarding house next door. He described the man again. The landlady sniffed and shook her head. Henry knew then. They weren't going to help him down here. If he found the man, he'd do it alone.

He pushed his hat back from his forehead. There was a fruit stand that looked as if it were set up in a lean-to. Seeing a fat man in a straw hat and dirty apron staring at him, Henry walked over to the cluttered stand.

"Where could I buy a drink around here, mister?" he

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asked. "If you wanted a drink of whiskey that wasn't ninety-proof water, where would you go?"

The fat man chewed at his moustache. "You tried Luigi?" he said. He pointed halfway up the block. "No dames, no TV, just drinks."

"Thanks." Henry walked slowly along the street toward Luigi's bar. He passed a Greek restaurant, a Chinese laundry and a loan company. When he came to the bar, he didn't bother giving it a once-over. After he'd had a drink, he'd feel better. He could start again.

It was dark in Luigi's and half-filled with men busily drinking at tables or booths along the wall.

There were only a few men at the bar. Henry started toward it and stopped. For the space of a breath, his heart stopped too. There the guy was, near the back of the room, nursing a drink and staring at nothing. It was the slug, the one Henry was looking for.

## Chapter Seven

AT FIRST, Henry didn't do anything. He stopped staring at the slug because he was afraid the very intensity of his gaze would cause the man to turn around.

Suddenly, Henry wished he could merge into the background. He realized he hadn't really thought he would find the slug. Anyhow, he'd made no plans for what he would do when he did find him.

This was the slug's home field. Probably all the men in the place were his friends. Even when the guy was alone, Henry had been helpless against him. He looked around at the men in the room. So far none was paying any attention to him. The bartender was busy, but Henry knew that in a moment he would turn to him and speak across the bar. Would the slug look up then? And if he did, what chance did Henry have against him?

*Great, Henry thought. You're here. He's here. Now what?*

Unarmed, against a professional mugger, and among people who'd never seen Henry before, he knew his chances weren't worth much. He backstepped from the bar, went between a row of crowded tables and started toward the rear of the room. He saw then that there was a mirror on the wall behind the bar. He had only one chance. That mirror was dark, the room was poorly lighted. Maybe the reflection was no more than a blur.

He moved steadily, aware that he wasn't even breathing. If the slug so much as saw him, Henry doubted that he'd get out of the place alive.

He was directly behind the slug. He saw the man lift his head slightly. Henry went weak. Did he see him in the surface

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of the bar, or was he aware only of movement behind him, and with animal instinct was also aware of danger?

*Me, danger?* Henry thought. He drew in a deep breath and stepped between the tables. There was less than two feet between him and the slug's cream-colored back. He saw the lean back go tense, knew the man was about to turn.

Henry leaped forward. He shoved his right arm across the wide shoulder, bent it and came back with all his strength against the slug's Adam's apple. He forced himself to chortle with laughter.

"Fred!" he said, the hysteria under his voice adding to the quality of unrestrained laughter. "Why, you old son of a gun. I haven't seen you in years. Fred! How have you been?"

"Agh." said the white-faced man.

Henry had dragged him off the stool and turned himself so that he had the slug between him and most of the room.

He laughed again. "Imagine meeting you here, Fred! I tell you, Fred, this is wonderful."

Men had stopped drinking, some of them had stopped breathing for the moment. Decision hung suspended in the room. The slug was trying to gain his footing. Henry closed his arm against the Adam's apple again and moved two steps backward. The slug lost his balance and by now was clawing at Henry's arm.

The slug's face was twisted and had gone slightly purple so that his eyes looked like small grapes bursting from a large bunch. The slug couldn't even breathe. Henry knew his arm was vised on the slug's throat with all his strength, and he was aware he might kill him. But he was afraid to release his grip even enough to allow the mugger to breathe.

He laughed again. "Where you been keeping yourself, Fred?"

He jerked his arm again, felt the life stop in the slug for an instant. The white claws stop pulling. The men in the room weren't sure. There was Henry's laughter, but the slug looked as if he'd suddenly acquired a Miami sunburn.

"Come on back here where we can talk, Fred," Henry said.

He danced the lean man along like a straw scarecrow, keeping him off balance, not giving him a chance to cry out.

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Henry watched those men in the room. He knew that one word from the mugger would be his death sentence. He kept moving backward. He saw some of the men turn to their drinks. The tension relaxed. His laughter had sold them, as well as the fact that the mugger didn't protest. Henry saw that the decision was in his favor. For the moment at least.

There was a door at his back. He fumbled behind him, found the knob. He opened the door and laughed aloud again. "Fred, you old dog!"

The slug tried to turn, writhing. He tried to set himself on his heels. His hands dug into Henry's arm and his breath rasped across his mouth. He was trying to pull in enough air for a loud yell. Henry clamped his arm together again. The slug went limp all over for a moment, and the small reserve of air burst across his mouth.

He tried to yell, but he made only that same sound again. "Agh!"

Henry let the door close behind him. For the moment he felt better. At least, he couldn't see those faces in the barroom. The room was piled high with cases of beer, the bright labels leering at him from the webbed darkness. The lane between the cases and the barrels was a narrow one.

The slug grabbed at the cases, trying to stop them long enough to get set. His fingers closed on a full case and held fast. Henry felt the slug pull forward and in fear, he clamped his arm tight. Too tight.

The slug relaxed against him, and now he was like straw. Henry looked around, feeling sick. There was another door. It was locked. He kept listening for steps of men coming in from the front.

He turned the key and sweating, he pulled the slug's limp body outside into the alley and slammed the door behind him. There were two steps down. The slug's heels bumped down to the bricks. His arms hung loose and he was no longer fighting.

It was a boxed-in alley. Walls reared high on three sides. The only opening was far between these close walls, and at the end of it a street light glowed foggily. That was the only light. Everything else was in shadows. Refuse cans lined the



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unbroken walls, and cats slithered through the darkness. Henry felt as though every shadow was full of other shadows. It was the darkness of a nightmare. In the rest of the town it was early twilight, but the sun never poked down in here except at noon.

He dragged the slug a little way along the alley and found a recessed doorway that was shielded from view by high-stacked garbage cans. He dropped the slug to the puddle of water beside the door. The slug lay still for a moment and Henry started to bend over him.

Suddenly the slug twisted and lunged upward. However, Henry was too full of terror to be anything but tense and alert. He brought the side of his hand down across the man's face. The slug was coming up to meet the blow, and the impact sounded like crushing bones. The slug fell away, turning with his arm over his face.

Henry caught the front of the long-tailed cream coat and pulled the slug back around. For a moment they stared at each other. Henry sensed those long arms moving upward. He doubled his fist and struck the slug on the point of the jaw. He knew he was hitting him too hard. The head snapped to the side and the slug passed out again.

Henry hunkered over him there in the darkness behind the garbage cans. Then he moved his hands, in rapid pinching movements along the man's inert body. He made a haul. First was the switch-blade knife, gleaming and vicious even in the dark. He found brass knuckles and a sheathed ice pick. He felt a shiver move along his spine. But when he found the nylon cord, he sat on his haunches staring at it, seeing in his imagination just what sort of animal this being was.

The slug stirred. Henry caught him by the coat lapels and hoisted him upward so that the man half-sprawled against the wall. His vision cleared slowly and he stared up at Henry.

"Do you know me?" Henry said. "Do you know who I am?"

The slug's head nodded, those dead eyes didn't blink.

"I want to know why you slugged me this morning," Henry said.

"Go to hell." The man barely said it. There was none of

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that assurance that had been in his voice this morning. The words rasped out of his throat. The slug was hurt.

Henry doubled his fist. "You ever been hit — like you hit me?" he said.

The slug tried to writhe away. Henry reacted violently. He drove his doubled fist down, the third finger jutting into the slug's temple. The man flopped over, crying out. Henry twisted him, his fist doubled.

"No." There was agony and terror in the slug's voice.

"It's up to you," Henry said. His body was drawn up taut and his stomach was in knots. But he knew he wasn't going to let up until this man talked. "Why'd you do it? Who hired you?"

"A man."

"Don't be smart with me."

"A blind man."

Henry felt some odd sensation inside him. A blind man?

"What blind man?" His fingers tightened on the coat front.

"Man named Malachi. Sam Malachi."

Malachi. The name meant nothing to Henry. But Sam did. Sammy — the man who wrote the letter.

"Where is he?" Henry said.

The slug was getting some of his strength back. He tried to twist away. Without stopping to think, Henry struck him in the other temple. The slug cried out and flung himself face down on the bricks.

Henry caught up the long tail of the cream-colored coat and yanked it upward with all his strength. He pulled it forward over the slug's head so that it caught under the man's chin, forcing his head back. The drape cut of the coat permitted Henry to pull it under the slug's armpits. Then he buttoned it at the middle of the man's back.

Henry stood up. The shadows seemed to be crowding in closer upon him. A cat upset a garbage cover, the noise clattered and echoed in the pit of his stomach. He stared down at the slug. The man looked like some strange kind of animal, flopping on the ground with his head bent back on his neck and his mouth open, gasping for air.

Henry looked around. He was crowding his luck. He had

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two facts he had never even hoped to get: the man's name, and the fact that the man was blind. Sam Malachi, a blind man.

The slug was waving his arms, trying to free himself. He couldn't even cry out and every time he moved his arms, the coat choked him.

"You won't believe it," Henry said, "but you look a lot better like this."

There was movement somewhere in the alley. It might have been a cat, but Henry knew he couldn't take any chances. He looked one more time at the slug, then he turned and started away, leaving the slug lashing around in the slime of the alley.

It was a long way to the street. Henry stayed in the middle of the alley, his hand clenched around the slug's switch-blade knife. His mind was working, racing ahead of him in the dark street. A blind man? Now he remembered that he had seen a blind man that morning when he'd started to work. The man had been sitting in the sun across the street. Hadn't that same man been sitting there when he came home?

He remembered the last lines of Sammy's letter. He didn't need to see that letter to remember it. He knew that he would remember it all the rest of his life. The trick was going to be forgetting it. *I'm too close to you now, Henry. I'm real close. You don't know how close, Henry.*

What could be closer than the house right across the street from 916 Oak? Henry shivered and glanced over his shoulder.

*I'm watching you all the time. Ain't that a joke, Henry?* Watching you all the time. Ain't that a joke? What could be a bigger, uglier joke than being *watched* by a blind man?

Henry pressed his hand against his stomach to steady the shaking he felt in it. He knew he was right. The blind man . . . Sam Malachi . . . watching him from across Oak Street.

He was almost to the corner of the alley. He looked back over his shoulder one more time, and then he started to run.

## *Chapter Eight*

IT WAS a long way from Market Avenue to Oak Street. Henry had never known before just how far it was. But now he was in a hurry to get back up there. He wanted to get away from the slug in that alley. He wanted to find the blind Sam Malachi. He wanted to see Lila.

He came running out of the alley on to Market Avenue. The street was bright and brassy. The evening was just beginning. Punks, pimps and prostitutes — all were wearing the uniforms of their trades. A Salvation Army band added to the din, playing with all its strength at two bums watching from the curb. Neons glittered, rose red and bile green, and reflected in the dirty puddles at the curb.

Henry stood still a moment, his heart pounding, and looked along Market Avenue. A taxi wasn't anywhere in sight. Henry started through the crowded sidewalk toward Bailey Boulevard. He moved in a shambling, half-running, half-walking gait — something like what he'd called a "Scout pace" when he'd been a kid. He couldn't slow down to a walk and the street was so jammed, it was almost impossible to run.

He jostled a fat woman and she turned, glaring, her face twisted. "Look where you're going, already!" Her eyes went over Henry, softening as they moved.

He apologized, turning sideways to move through the crowd past her.

She was smiling, a fat, sticky smile. "It's all right, honey."

She called something else after him but he was already too far away to hear.

Market Avenue seemed strange, like a nightmare place. Every shop and bar and restaurant was wide open. People

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were crowded on the front stoops of the buildings, or standing along the curbs, or hurrying like a river of people, rushing somewhere . . . rushing nowhere.

He got to the corner of Bailey Boulevard and still was unable to find a cab. Up here the buildings were better; this was fringe country. He saw a cab stand in the next block. He stepped out in the street to cross to it when he saw a bus that would pass Oak Street. Hailing it, he jumped aboard.

The bus was not very crowded and Henry sat down next to the window, halfway back. The city streamed past him, like lights strung on the wind. He was glad he'd caught this bus instead of a cab. He wanted to think.

Things were confused for Henry. He was sure he could straighten everything out as soon as he could talk to the blind man, Sam Malachi. He knew nobody by that name, surely no stranger wanted to see him fired, discredited, beaten or dead.

It was a mistake. Sure it was. Everything would be all right as soon as he got to Sam Malachi and convinced him he'd made an error. He tried to believe this. He was drawn up in a tense knot, and he knew he had to relax. But he couldn't do it. He kept thinking about the slug, and the way he'd left him in that alley. He thought about the nylon cord, the sheathed ice pick, the switch-blade knife. Somebody had hired a man who played for keeps. Henry shivered.

Before it seemed possible, Henry saw the bus was near Oak Street. The driver pressed on his horn, and it wailed through the early night. Henry sat forward in his seat. He saw there were people spilling off the sidewalk into the street, and he spied cars parked along both curbs. A cop was clearing a path on the boulevard for the bus. A wreck probably, Henry decided.

Henry yanked the signal cord and the bus hissed to a stop in the middle of Bailey Boulevard. Henry stepped out the rear exit, and the bus sped away through the opening in the crowded street.

Henry walked toward the curb, his gaze fixed on Oak Street. The whole street was lighted up like a carnival. Every

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house was bright with light. Cars were wedged along the curbs, and all their headlights were burning.

He pushed through the knot of chattering people at the corner and started to cross Oak Street. He stopped. He saw the ambulance backed up before his house. His house was as lighted as all the others, more, because the beams of cruiser lights were fixed on it.

Confused, he stood still on the walk a moment and stared at the police cruisers parked before his house.

He caught a man by the shoulder. "What's the matter?" he said. His voice sounded hoarse. "What's happened down there."

"Man killed his wife."

Another man turned. "Man named Wilson, battered his wife up. Ran."

"Henry Wilson," another said. "Henry Wilson. Beat his wife to death and then he ran."

"The ambulance came for her."

"The police are looking for the killer."

"Henry Wilson killed his wife."

The lights started to wheel in front of his eyes. People were not talking around him now, they were yelling. The words were the same, but now they screamed at him over and over, whirling in his brain, pounding at the backs of his eyes. He felt tears burning at his eyelids. His hands were shaking and he was afraid he was going to fall.

He knew it was crazy. The whole thing was crazy. He hadn't killed his wife. He was Henry Wilson. There was some terrible mistake. But that was his house down there. That was an ambulance backed up to his door. And in his churning stomach, he felt it. They had come for Lila—something had happened to Lila.

He looked around, feeling ill. There was no place to sit down. He was sure he was going to fall. It didn't matter. That was what he wanted to do, to fall down and weep against the walk. Lila. What had happened to Lila?

He couldn't speak. He stared ahead of him at that ambulance and began to push his way forward. People resisted at

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first and then they turned. When they saw his face, they gasped and fell away from him.

He knew they stared at his face. He knew he must look hideous. That was the way he felt inside. What did it matter what he looked like? What fool things a man thinks about. What had happened to Lila?

The thought of someone unknown striking at Lila was more than Henry could take. It became an unbearable burden piled on top of the other things that had happened to him. The beating, the loss of his job, the attempt to run him down — what did any of that matter compared to what had been done to Lila? How could anyone hate him so terribly?

The people crowding along Oak Street were faceless, a blur of wide eyes and flapping mouths. He moved through them, the sense of final loss making him stagger.

“Murderer!” He heard the word, as if it'd been hurled like a stone.

He kept walking. How could the word be in any way connected with him? He had all the grief and despair a man could stand.

“That's him! That's the murderer. Does he think I didn't see him going out every morning in that hat and coat? Just because he ran out the back way — ”

The woman's voice battered through the wall of agony to Henry's brain. Those words were stones, hurled at him. He stopped and looked around.

The shrewish woman was pointing at him. Car lamps illumined her thin face, throwing it into strong light, strong shadows, making her mouth a twisted gash.

“That's him! I saw him run away.” Her cries were louder than all the other sounds. The others ceased, ebbing away.

He recognized the middle-aged woman who lived in the house next door. A friend of Lila's, she had never got much attention from him; but now he stared. Her finger was thrust out, a sword aimed at his heart. “That's Henry Wilson. That's the murderer.”

Henry felt his insides dissolve to whey. He shook his head, but knew immediately it was no use. In his mind he realized this was more than the mistake he'd thought it was, a mistake

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he'd felt he could clear up by finding the blind man named Sam Malachi. This plot against him had been more sinister than he'd been able to understand, and now he was faced with Lila's death and this woman accusing him.

It wasn't enough that Lila was dead. The hat and the coat: they were careful evidence to prove that Henry did it. His stomach shook — and that was only on the outside of the house. God alone knew what the killer might have planted inside to prove Henry guilty. God help him — guilty of killing the woman he loved more than his own life! It was too much to accept at once. Henry had lived all his life without any trouble; suddenly his mind was staggered by it.

He managed to pull his gaze from Mrs. Kransky's twisted face. Uniformed cops moved through the crowd toward him. He turned around, more came from behind.

"Hold him. Somebody grab him." Henry turned all the way around again, seeing without really seeing: the ambulance, Mrs. Kransky, the spotlights. A man barred his way, grabbing at Henry, arms out. Henry reacted in pure terror. He swung, felt his fist strike the man's face. The man cried out and staggered back.

Henry ran. Women screamed, men shouted, but he ran between them and they didn't reach for him.

Mrs. Kransky screeched behind him. Cops yelled at him to stop. "Stop or we'll shoot." Something in Henry's brain warned him to stop. Tell them the truth. Tell where you were. Would they believe him? Against the evidence of hat and coat seen by Mrs. Kransky, and God knows what framed-up proof planted inside the house?

He kept running. They weren't going to shoot. Not in this crowd. Bailey Boulevard stretched wide and endless — the kind of corridor you'd run through in a nightmare.

He glanced over his shoulder. The cops were having trouble getting through the crowds. He could still see the ambulance. He told himself he had to get back, he had to stop running. No matter what else, they'd tell him what had happened to Lila.

But he didn't stop running. The crowd was a wolf pack,



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cops were all like Murchison. You were guilty until proved innocent . . . guilty forever.

All that mattered was to know how Lila was, but he was afraid to stop running. He wasn't thinking. He was in panic. Now, for the first time in his life, he really knew what panic meant. He looked around, and he was shaking all over. Just one thought flew wild as a bat in the dark cave of his mind. *Get away. Get away. Get away.* People yelled at him to stop and the very sound of their voices went through him and made him run faster than ever.

## Chapter Nine

HE PANTED as he ran down the street. He kept glancing back over his shoulder. The cops were gaining on him. Two police cruisers whipped around and pulled out of the snarled traffic. That ought to make it a lot easier for them, Henry thought.

It was tough, running with cops on your tail. It was a lot tougher, running with that grief like something leaden inside your chest so you couldn't even breathe deeply any more. He was so tired he wanted to fall, but he couldn't slow down. He breathed through his mouth, and his throat burned and ached everytime he breathed.

People stood in their doorways and on their steps. They watched him as though he were from another world and had nothing in common with them. He decided maybe they were right. Maybe he wasn't even human any more.

He stared at those people in their doorways as he ran past. They lived simple, uncomplicated lives. Had he ever lived like that? He tasted the bitterness. He'd belonged to their world once. This morning. This morning — a million light years ago.

The light of the police cruiser raked across him. It was as though it stabbed at him, pinning him against the fabric of darkness. The scream of brakes lanced through him as the police cruiser skidded to the curb.

He twisted his head and saw the police in the car. His legs still moved tiredly, carrying him in a drunken, forward lurching along the walk. The cruiser was only a few feet behind him. This was it.

He darted off the walk, crossing a yard. The cops yelled at him. A dog lurched against the porch screen, growling.

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Henry recoiled, gasping. Panic pushed him faster through the shadows between the houses. In the back yard, ducking low to miss any clotheslines, he crossed to a board fence. He ran along it, a rat caught in a maze, trying to find an opening.

He found the gate. It was locked. His hands shaking, he slapped off the catch. He jumped backwards, pulled the gate toward him. He heard the heavy tread of cops behind him. He pulled the gate closed after him and ran. The alley was dark and unlighted. He could hear the cruisers over on Bailey Boulevard. Sirens screamed after him. They were like hounds baying at a rabbit.

He staggered out into a cross street. He stared at the six long blocks of modernistic apartment dwellings . . . all alike . . . unending rows. He started running between them.

He sensed the cruiser's turning into the street even before it happened. He leaped off the walk, ran between two buildings. The cruiser turned into the alley at the moment he reached it.

Henry ran out into the alley and ran along it to the next gangway between the apartment houses. The driver tried to turn the cruiser around in the alley. The other cop jumped out of the car and ran after Henry, gun drawn.

Henry reached the end of the gangway, turned the corner and ran into the street. The cruiser out there was beyond him, but it stopped suddenly and backed for a turn.

The cop behind Henry shouted. Henry ran, the apartments pressing close in on him, an endless row in illumined darkness.

"I'll shoot." The cop yelled.

The cop had his gun leveled out before him. Henry twisted and ran off the walk into another gangway. He lurched along it toward the alley. It's a fool thing to do, he thought, that cop couldn't miss me in here. He ran out of the gangway as the cop entered it behind him. He held his breath as long as he could, trying to ease the burning ache in his chest.

He thought about that ambulance backed up to his door. What had happened to Lila? Why was he running like this? If he gave himself up, couldn't he prove he hadn't been at home? Wasn't he making it worse by running? Or was he?

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Who'd be his alibi? The unknown blind man? The white-faced killer he'd left in that alley behind Luigi's?

A cruiser skidded to a stop at the end of the alley, bottling it up. A cop leaped out with his gun drawn. Henry stopped, turned around. The other cop ran out of the gangway behind him. Henry took two long steps and stopped again.

The cop at the gangway yelled at him, brought up his gun and fired. The sound exploded in the alley like a cannon and bounced off the walls. Henry threw himself into the shadows between two buildings. He heard a yell that went through him, a scream of agony and terror. That bullet had hit somebody in the alley.

Scarcely breathing, Henry pulled himself up and stared down the alley. The cop had jumped out of the cruiser right into the path of that bullet. He was sprawled on the ground, writhing like a hurt insect. The driver had run around the cruiser. He bent over his partner, shouting at him helplessly. The cop who'd fired from the gangway forgot about his quarry and ran by the place where Henry hid.

Staying crouched in the shadows a moment longer, Henry then crept cautiously along the gangway to the street. The street was alive with police cars. The wail of sirens struck the apartment buildings and reverberated. Cruisers screamed to the corner and skidded to a stop.

Henry sank into the darkness against the building and watched them. He pressed his fingers against his throat, breathing loudly through his mouth. Carefully he moved around the side of the building. It was the newest in the development and was unfinished. It was a shell with stairs leading up to an unfinished roof.

Henry stepped inside and started up the plaster-spattered steps. The smart thing would have been to get out of the area while there was all that excitement over the wounded cop. He kept climbing. He was stupid . . . maybe. But Henry was doing it because he was tired. When you got tired enough, you didn't care any more.

The roof was only partially covered. He catwalked the exposed beams to the rear parapet. Staying in the shadows,

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he could see below him the cops and the cruisers and the growing crowds.

At first, time raced. An ambulance came and took the wounded cop away, sirens screaming. The cruisers moved out then, circling the block, slowly, continually.

It was never going to end. Minutes began to seem like hours. Uniformed cops entered every apartment dwelling in the vicinity. Finally the street grew quiet. More and more of the cruisers were pulled away to other assignments, until at last, only a few patrolmen remained, walking the alleys, pacing the street.

The lights blinked out in one window after another. About two A.M. rain started to fall.

He huddled against the parapet and stared at the slow steady raindrops stalking each other downward in the night. At no time did the rain fall hard. Instead, it kept up that steady drizzle that crunched into his clothing and shoes, soaking and chilling him.

It was a bad night: long, dreary and wet. He was bone cold but did not shiver. The rain and the chill didn't matter. He crouched there and thought about Lila, and wanted her . . . and the rain didn't matter.

Finally, the rain ceased, daylight spread dull and gray over the faces of the new apartment buildings. Henry sat up, stretching his arms, stiff with cold. He stood up and walked around, trying to get his blood circulating.

There was no sign of the cops who'd prowled in the street below him most of the night. He stood at the edge of the roof, searching the street and knowing he had to get moving. He looked down at his clothes. He wouldn't go far without attracting a lot of attention. The suit was wrinkled and mussed. The trouser legs were spattered with lime dust.

He massaged his chin. It was thick with bristles. He looked like hell. Common sense told him that the police looked first at the way a man dressed. He wouldn't be going far before some cop questioned him, and then he wouldn't be going anywhere at all.

A shrill whistling startled him. A newsboy on a bicycle

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was throwing morning newspapers at the apartment doorways. He watched the boy cross the street and start back along the other side. He checked the street again, started down the steps.

At the first building, he clutched up the nearest newspaper, strode back across the plot of grass and re-entered the unfinished building. He didn't return to the roof. His watch showed twenty minutes to six. Working crews would start at eight, but they might arrive earlier.

He slipped the rubber band off the newspaper, shook it out, and the headline screamed at him. His hands shook. He sat there staring at:

### BERSERK MAN ASSAULTS WIFE, SHOOTS COP

It took a long time for that headline to beat its way into his consciousness: they were talking about him, about Henry Wilson. To cinch the matter, his picture was there. He stared at it. It was one Lila'd insisted they have made just after they were married. He shook his head. Such a simpering grin. *What the hell you got to smile about?*

He scanned through the story, not caring yet what was said about him, looking only for mention of Lila.

He found it about three paragraphs below the lead:

Mrs. Wilson was carried to the City General Hospital last night. Physicians there described her condition as critical. At a late hour, Mrs. Wilson had not regained consciousness. Police are waiting to question her.

There was more — plenty more — about Lila's career as singer, model, radio actress, the fact that she'd been employed at the Kit-Kat Club at the time of her marriage. Jealousy was indicated as motive for assault, according to the police.

Henry felt numb all over. His hands held the newspaper, his eyes read the words, but nothing seemed real. He pulled his gaze back to the top of the column and started to read again:

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Henry Wilson of 916 Oak Street startled his neighbors yesterday by going completely berserk in a spree of violence that began with his assault on his wife, Lila, and ended with his seriously wounding a police officer in an alley gun battle last night.

The liars, Henry whispered. The dirty, stinking liars. He didn't even have a gun. Those two cops were the only ones in any gun battle. The cop who'd run out of that gangway had shot at Henry, missed and hit the other patrolman.

Henry shook his head. When you were down, the world jumped on you with both feet. Why would the cops admit that one of them had killed another cop when they could blame it on a fugitive? He stood up, trembling. The cops could do anything they wanted to, suppress evidence, destroy it, change it. Who could prove that bullet came from the cop's gun? Henry knew the answer to that. Nobody. He let the newspaper fall from his hands. He was fired, accused of assaulting Lila. God was his witness, he'd never even touched Lila in anger. Accused of shooting a cop . . . accused . . . The shaking started slowly in his stomach and spread outward to his arms and hands. All night in the rain and cold he hadn't shivered, but he was shivering now.

He started slowly down the steps. One thing: they had made up his mind for him. They'd piled it too high. If he didn't have a chance any more, what was the sense of fighting? Now he could do the one thing he cared about doing. He could go to that hospital and see Lila. If they caught him then, all right. But first he had to see Lila.

## *Chapter Ten*

CAUTIOUSLY he moved out of the opened door to the walk. People were still asleep in this neighborhood. He saw no one. But somebody might be watching from one of those windows . . . a hundred windows . . . a thousand eyes.

He retreated through the gangway. He had a better chance of getting all the way to the hospital by using the alleys. Of course, they'd catch him. He expected them to and was filled with a cold and angered kind of resignation. Nothing was going to get him out of this trouble. Nothing made sense. No matter what he did, it got worse. More hopeless.

He began to run through the alley. It was a long, tortuous route to the City General Hospital. He went through alleys, back streets. He didn't slow down. He plodded forward, gaze fixed ahead, his mind and his will on Lila in that hospital bed.

He stopped in an alley across from the Ambulance and Out Ward Entrance. He stared at the sun gleaming on the new marble. He felt helpless. How could a tramp get in this slick new hospital and find anybody? He glanced at his clothing. If the place wasn't alive with cops before he got over inside, it would be immediately after.

He looked at the sign again: **AMBULANCE & OUT WARD**. Wasn't that a break? Shouldn't Lila be somewhere inside that wing? He started across the street. He heard a car engine pop into life and he jerked his head around. It was the car that had tried to run him down in the John Quincy Bailey park.

He stood paralyzed, staring. He saw the woman at the wheel, the faded pink hair. And he saw the man beside her,



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talking at her as hard as he could. The woman got out, came around the car, leaving the engine running and the man chattering at her. She walked toward Henry.

Her appearance made the whole incident more nightmarish. She was a crone. Somewhere between fifty and sixty, but gone to hell, and she'd let herself go. She'd never bothered dyeing her red hair any more. It looked drab pink, moored to her head with pins, caught in a bun at the nape of her neck, strands straggling over her forehead, around her face. She looked like a woman who'd turned to vinegar inside. All she had left was hate.

She was carrying a large knitting bag. Her bitter eyes were fixed on Henry. She came within three feet of him and he still hadn't moved, watching her.

She took her hand out of the knitting bag and held the small gun pointed at him.

"Hello," she said. Even her voice was nasal and rasping. In Salem, they'd have burned her for a witch.

"What do you want?" Henry said.

"I want to talk to you. Are you Henry Wilson?"

"Yes."

"Come over to the car." She motioned with the gun.

Henry shook his head. "You tried to kill me once . . . tried to run over me. You might have made that look accidental. I don't think even you would shoot me right here."

She laughed, an ugly harsh sound without mirth. "Don't you? Before you take any bets, maybe you better come over to the car. I could shoot you. Right here." She glanced around. "And I could get away with it."

Henry scowled. He'd seen her somewhere before. Such a slatternly woman, he didn't see how he could forget. It was plain she had something to do with the slug's beating him. He knew she'd tried to run over him in the park. Suddenly he wasn't so sure that she wouldn't shoot him right then and there.

He swallowed hard. He glanced up at the hospital and then he moved slowly across the parkway to the car.

"You're smart," the woman said.

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He stopped beside the car. He was aware that the man inside was squirming on the seat with excitement.

"What do you want?" Henry said.

"Open that back door and get in," the woman said.

He opened it, bent down and stepped inside. Sitting down, he stared at the man in the front seat. It was the blind man.

Only he had never seen such a blind man. It wasn't that his eyes were sightless. It was something more terrible. Something — an acid maybe — had eaten at his eyes, or maybe an eagle had eaten them out. His eyes were gone from their sockets, and he wore nothing over them, no glasses, no pads. He wanted to share his horror with everybody that looked at him. He had a gun steadied on the back of the seat. It was fixed directly on Henry.

The blind man had once been heavy. The flesh around his jowls hung in rubbery pockets from which the fat had dissolved. His hair was black, streaked with gray. His mouth was wide, twisted, and kept sawing from side to side with his inner tensions.

"That you, Pinky?" he said. His voice shook as though his guts were in knots. The hand on the gun trembled. "Don't move, Pinky. Don't try anything. I can't see. That's right. I don't have to see, Pinky. I can hear. Just any sound, Pinky. I can put a bullet in your belly. Don't make me do it before I'm ready."

The slatternly woman slammed the door next to Henry. The blind man winced. Every sound tore him up.

"That you, Glory?"

"I did it," Glory said. "Stop yapping. Just keep that gun on him."

"Right. Right. I'll keep the gun on him. Why can't you be quieter? Be just a damn little bit quieter."

She snarled something at him, her voice hating him almost as much as she hated herself.

She went around the car and got in behind the wheel.

"Right," the blind man said. "Let's get out of here."

"We're going," Glory spat back at him. She shifted gears. It was an old car. Glory acted like a woman who hated all cars and was afraid of them. It was as if she had learned to

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drive under protest. Maybe because the man beside her was blind?

"Waited here for you, Pinky," the blind man said. "Pretty smart, ain't I, Pinky? Found you. Never thought I'd find you, eh, Pinky? But I found you. And I fixed you. And now I'm really going to fix you. I said to Glory, I said, 'Know where he'll go, Glory? He'll go to that woman — that woman. She's at the hospital. He'll go there.' I knew you'd sneak over here, soon as you saw it in the paper. I knew what you'd do. Been on to you for a long time, Pinky. Been thinking about nothing but you for a long time. I know how you think, Pinky. I know what you'll do next. And I was right." He laughed exultantly, laughter bubbling out of his mouth. "We were waitin' here for you, Pinky."

Henry said, "You're crazy. You don't know me. You've never seen me before in your life."

Something happened to the blind man's face. It was as though it were heated wax that almost melted under the sound of Henry's voice.

Then he laughed again. "Trying to fool me, Pinky? Thought you could fool me even now, with a voice change. You poor stupid jerk. I don't know how you ever got away from me. But I know one thing, Pinky. It won't happen again."

The blind man twisted slightly on the seat. He was almost jumping with excitement. He yelled at the woman. "Glory! Faster! Let's get there, Glory. Let's get there."

## *Chapter Eleven*

“GOING to see Abbey, were you, Pinky?”

“Her name is Lila,” Henry said.

The blind man’s laugh was as bitter as his twisted mouth. “Oh, that’s right. Calls herself Lila now, does she, Pinky?”

Henry stared at the blind man’s face. The man was facing him so intently that he found it hard to believe Sammy couldn’t see him.

“Her name is Lila.” Henry forced a calmness in his voice that he didn’t feel. “And my name is Henry Wilson. Otherwise you’re all wrong about us.”

“Am I, Pinky?” The false concern in Sammy’s voice made Henry wince. “Am I wrong about you now? Change Abbey’s name, but don’t change your own. So ordinary a name. Run three thousand miles. Who’d ever look for you in a town like Richmond? I would . . . Even a jerk like you oughta known I’d never stop until I found you.”

Henry looked at the blind man and shook his head, feeling helpless. Whoever it was that Sam Malachi sought, he’d searched so long and so intently that he’d lost his reason. He had been disturbed because Henry’s voice was different. But now his mind was so twisted that he could convince himself it was another trick invented by his enemy to deceive him one more step.

He was so sure he’d found the man he was looking for. Henry could have felt sorry for Sam Malachi, but there was too much fear in him—fear of that gun in Sam’s trembling hand.

“Look,” he said. “You got a bum steer. Somebody sent

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you on a wild chase. You've caught Henry Wilson. Sure. I'm Henry Wilson. But I've never been in California."

Sam Malachi began to laugh uncontrollably, little sobbing sounds bubbling from him.

"Beg, Pinky," he said. "Oh, damn you. Beg. Makes me feel all the more wonderful. I knew you'd beg. I knew that when I found you, you'd get on your belly like a snake and you'd beg." He stopped to laugh some more. "But this is a better one than I ever thought I'd hear. So you're not even really Henry Wilson. Oh, you poor miserable scared rat. Beg. I want to hear you. It won't do you any good, but I want to hear it." His voice rose to an excited screaming. "Go on, beg for your life — your stinking, worthless life."

Henry wanted to shiver, but he was afraid to move.

The blind man up front was still laughing, but Henry had the creepy feeling that inside Sammy Malachi was crying his heart out. There was some kind of dam in Sam Malachi. It held back the tears — tears for those eyes he'd lost, and the life he'd lost, and tears for whatever terrible thing it was that some Henry Wilson had done to him.

Sam Malachi couldn't sit still. Henry would have believed that the man was on some kind of dope jag. But he felt he knew better. The jag Sam Malachi was on was a lot simpler than that. Sam was about to burst with the excitement of finding the man he believed was his old enemy, the man he'd been looking for so long.

Henry pulled his gaze away from Malachi and the crone at the wheel. He watched the people and the buildings and the cars whip past. He saw three police cruisers in two blocks. He saw patrolmen walking their beats. It seemed to him that they stared inside this old car, looked right at him, and it seemed that their silent gazes called him: *killer*.

Sam Malachi laughed again. "Lots of cops out, Pinky?"  
"Some."

"Looking for you, Pinky. Should have been looking for you for more than a year. But they're looking for you now. But don't worry, Pinky. I'm not going to let them get you. I'm not going to let anybody get you."

Henry's voice was cold. "That's fine. But before you pull

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something that you can't undo, you better be sure of what you're doing."

The gun trembled in Sam's hand, and Sam's body shook and he twisted on the seat as though it were more than he could do to sit still any more.

"Shut up, Pinky," he warned. "Don't say any more. Every time you whine, it makes me want to put a bullet in your face. Don't make me do it, Pinky. Because I will."

Oak Street would have looked the same. But as they turned into it from Bailey Boulevard, Henry sensed some miasma of horror rising from the pavement itself. He stared at the little house where he and Lila had lived until yesterday. His eyes blurred and he pulled his gaze back to the blind man. He found it easier now to hate him.

"Did you do it, Malachi?" he said. "Did you hurt Lila?"

The blind man almost danced with excitement. Glory whipped the car into a driveway and he almost lost the gun, falling against the door. Henry started forward and Malachi caught himself. He steadied the gun and laughed.

Henry exhaled. Whatever it was Malachi had, it was keener than sight.

"Don't get any fool ideas, Pinky." Malachi's voice was harsh and rasping. "I'll kill you before you can get your hands on this gun."

Glory bucked to a stop under a car port. A side entrance opened across a glassed-in porch to the house. Glory got out, grasping the small gun in her bony fist. She strode around the back of the car, but Malachi didn't move. He remained half turned on the front seat, the gun fixed on Henry.

Henry asked the question again.

The man remained silent. Then he said, "Malachi. So you know my name. You're not the right Henry Wilson, but you know my name."

Henry said, "Why shouldn't I know your name? I got your letter. Your stupid letter. I found the guy you hired to work me over yesterday morning. He told me your name."

Malachi breathed deeply, laughed. "So you fixed Carper,

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did you, Pinky? Thought Carper'd be smarter. Went hunting him, did you? Why didn't you come hunting me?"

"I did," Henry said. "As soon as I found out who you were."

Glory opened the door for Malachi. He sat there for a moment, shaking with laughter. "Oh, yes . . . That same fairy story. Wrong man. All a mistake."

Henry stared at Glory. She stood, holding the door open, hair stringing wildly, her eyes trained on him. "This woman," Henry said. His voice shook. "If she's been with you very long, she ought to know the guy you're looking for."

Sam cursed him. "You know better than that, Wilson. Stop the clowning. The part of my life you were in, Glory didn't even know about — not until after you blinded me. Did you, pet?"

Glory opened the back door. She didn't bother answering him. "Let's get in the house," she said.

Malachi's voice was hard. "Glory lived like a lady. Didn't know what I was doing — didn't know I was mixed up with rats like you, Pinky. That's part of it. Part of why I'm working it this way. You ruined me, Wilson. I lost everything . . . before I was through. It touched the decent part of my life."

Glory said to Henry. "Get out of the car."

Henry stepped out to the pavement. He looked at Glory, trying to find the sort of respectable lady Sam suggested. But there was no trace of her in this crone.

Malachi's voice followed him through the door. "No, Wilson. Don't pull that one. Glory never saw you. But she heard all about you. Since I've been blind. Told her all about you. All of it." His laugh was full of bitter hatred. "She'd been fooled only about part of it. She never suspected I could be dishonest, mixed up with the syndicate. But — but she already knew about Abbey."

Glory stopped and spun around on her heel, facing Malachi. Her face was white and her hands shook. She screamed at him:

"Stop talking about her. I told you. Stop talking about her."

"Jealous," Malachi said. "She always has been jealous."

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The house smelled musty, as though it had not had a window opened since Sam and Glory had moved into it. The Venetian blinds were closed and the shades around them were heavy. When they entered the foyer, Glory snapped on the lights. It was like early darkness in this house, even at noon.

They told Henry to cross the foyer to the front room. He walked ahead of them into a room that had been furnished thirty-five years ago and never been changed. The people who had lived in this house had used this furniture, scarred it up. But they had never been able to make of it anything except what it was: an old house for rent.

Glory turned on the lights in the front room. Henry stood in the middle of the room and tried to find some sign that they had lived here. The whole house had the barren chill of empty places. There were no books, no magazines. There was nothing but the outmoded furniture and the dust that had been here before them.

Nobody relaxed. Glory crouched on the piano stool. She didn't release the pistol. She held it in her lap and stared at Henry without blinking. Sam told him to sit down.

"Want to know why I didn't just kill you when I found you, Pinky?" Sam asked in a low voice.

"I want to know why you go on with this. You ought to have sense enough to know when you've got the wrong man."

"Oh, but I haven't, Pinky. I got it straight. Right along the vine."

Malachi paced back and forth in the room, the gun at his side. His ear was cocked as though listening for any movement from Henry, the very sound of his breathing.

Malachi's voice shook. "I'd trailed you to Denver, Pinky. I was off. Way off. They told me where you were. They wanted me to stay out there and let a hired boy come on East and handle you."

Malachi wagged his head, breathing through his mouth. "Oh, no. Kill you? Just walk up and put an ice pick in your back some night on a dark street? Why should you get off so easy? Why? Damn you. Why?"

Henry said, "Maybe you got a right to hate. But you got



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no right to hate me. I don't know what kind of mix-up it is, but I'm the wrong guy."

Sammy laughed, shoulders moving. "That's right — the wrong guy. You been a wrong guy since the first day I knew you."

"You can't kill me and get away with it."

"Can't I? You forget, Pinky. The cops are looking for you at last. The hundred and fifty grand was hot money and you knew I could never report it. Now they're looking for you. Wife beater, cop killer. Know what I'm going to tell 'em, Pinky? That you came over here, forced us to hide you after you tried to kill your wife. You got violent, Wilson — and I had to kill you."

Henry jumped to his feet. Malachi was startled, and he jerked the gun up, leveling it.

"You did try to kill Lila," Henry panted. "You tried to make it look like I did it." He stepped forward, his eyes blurred with tears.

"Stay where you are," Malachi said.

"Pull that trigger, damn you. Pull," Henry whispered. "What you did to me, that was one thing. But you better start shooting because I'm going to get you for what you did to Lila."

Sam Malachi took one backward step. Something was happening to his face. He hitched up his shoulders. He forced himself to laugh. The laugh had the sound of rats scurrying in an empty attic.

"Me?" Malachi said. "Me? Beat her? No. I didn't do it, Pinky. But whoever did it, it fits right in with my plans."

## Chapter Twelve

HENRY felt the short painful jabs of agony inside his brain. He was deep in the nightmare now. He glanced at Glory. Outside a bad dream, no woman had ever looked so much like a witch.

His gaze moved back to Malachi's stark face. *Please God, he begged, get me out of this. Let me wake up.*

The hurt inside him showed in his voice. He said, "You didn't try to kill her? You're a liar as well as insane. Who else could have done it? Who else would have wanted to?"

Malachi laughed again. He almost danced with the unbearable tensions in him. "Who else could have done it? I'll tell you, Wilson, you rat. Since Abbey ran away with you, I really began to hear what she was. So unless she has changed a lot, there must be plenty of guys she's hurt — plenty of them that she's jinxed — like she did me. I never stopped to think about who really did it, Pinky. There are plenty of guys who'd want to."

"No." Henry looked around helplessly. Talking to these two people was like yelling from the bottom of a well in a wilderness. "Nobody wanted to hurt her. Her name is Lila. She was a singer and a model when I married her. I met her at the Kit-Kat Club. We've been happy. The only thing wrong that ever happened to us was you. And that started yesterday morning."

Malachi spat at him. "Stop that line, Wilson. I found out you were a yellow welcher, a coward. You even made Abbey steal the money from me. How'd you ever get guts enough to throw acid in my face, you son? Abbey make you do that, too?"

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Henry groaned. "I don't know what you're talking about. Now listen to me. And listen close. This isn't just my life I'm talking for — it's my wife's. So listen, damn you. If I'm the Henry Wilson you're looking for, listening won't hurt, and nothing will save Lila in that hospital. But maybe I'm not the guy you want."

Malachi relaxed, holding the gun fixed on him. "Go on. I like this. I like hearing you beg."

Henry breathed in deeply. "You say that Glory doesn't know what this guy you're looking for looks like. Right?"

"I told you. You already knew it. So that's a point."

"All right. But you know what he looks like, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Then you ought to know I'm not the guy you want."

"That's where the joke is on you, Pinky. You threw the acid. You blinded me. I don't see so well no more, Wilson."

"Maybe you don't see. But you can remember, can't you?"

Malachi's mouth twisted. "I can remember. I can't forget. That's my hell, Wilson. I can't forget what you look like, with your simpering, lying face."

Henry reached up with his hand, moved his fingers across his own face. He had never known it would be so hard to describe himself. His hand touched his hair line.

He said, "I've got a cowlick, Malachi. Right where my hair should part in front. Did that guy have one?"

Malachi hesitated. He said, "No, but he was a good liar though."

Henry said, "Ask Glory if I'm lying."

"He's got the cowlick," Glory said. Her voice was flat.

Sam got nervous. His legs started dancing in front of his chair. "Glory! Where's his cowlick?"

"Left side," Glory said. "In front."

Sammy was panting. "All right. What else?"

Henry's fingers moved along his nose. "I got my nose broken — in a football game — in high school."

Sammy's voice got shrill. "Glory?"

Glory said, "Looks like it could be broke. A long time. Got a crooked bridge."

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Sammy waited, panting. The silence stretched thin in the room.

Henry said, "My — my ears stick out. I'm not much to look at."

"Glory?"

"His ears stick out."

Sammy jumped up. He held the gun at his side. His voice was high-pitched, near the breaking point. "Come here! Come close to me!"

Henry moved closer. Sammy let the gun fall at his side, forgotten. Henry's hands came up, involuntarily. He was ready to lunge at Sammy. Then he remembered. He glanced over his shoulder. Glory sat there coldly, that small gun fixed on him. He saw in her eyes that she knew what he'd been about to attempt.

He let the breath exhale slowly from his chest.

Sammy laughed. "Don't take me for a fool, Pinky. That's been your trouble. Always been your trouble. We're watching you all the time, Wilson. If I'm not, Glory is. Aren't you, pet?"

"I'm here," Glory said in her flat voice. "Get on with it."

Sammy nodded. He shoved the gun in his coat pocket and reached out for Henry's face.

Henry caught his breath. One thing was obvious at once. Sammy expected to find a much shorter man.

"He's tall," Glory said. "You got to reach up."

At that, Sammy Malachi began to sob in his throat. The life flowed down out of him, leaving him weak and empty. He ran his hands over Henry's face, touched the broken bridge of his nose, his ears; he felt the way the cowlick grew where Henry should have parted his hair.

Henry felt his heart ease up a little. Sammy knew. Sammy Malachi realized at last he had the wrong man. Henry had never before seen a man crumple up and go to pieces. He saw it now. Sammy drew back his hands and stepped away from Henry. He kept his sightless eye sockets fixed on Henry as though he could see him.

Malachi's face twisted into ruts of pain and agony and despair. The running and the searching, the hunting in the

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night — and none of it was any good. It tore Sam Malachi apart . . . The friends in the syndicate that he had trusted . . . the friends who had been as false as the lead they gave him . . . the loss of whatever life he'd had in San Francisco, the loss of his sight, and the aching loss of the tramp woman Sam Malachi had loved in spite of himself — maybe even still loved. . . . All these terrible hurts twisted up his face. They knotted his body and made the sobs break across his mouth. "

Malachi's knees crumpled under him and he sank to the floor, sobbing. The sobs tore at him and he couldn't stop them. He scrubbed his hands against his face and rocked his body and moaned because the last long search had ended like this — and Sam Malachi knew that without his eyes he couldn't ever find the man who'd crossed him.

It hurt Henry to look at Malachi like that. Henry knew now what grief like that was, and what it could do to a man. You had to love somebody — love them more than life — and then lose them, to know about the grief that squeezed your insides dry.

He pulled his gaze away. He looked at Glory, beyond her and then back at her again. She sat there with the gun trained on Henry. She glanced at Malachi every few minutes, but she was cold at the sight of his grief. None of it touched her.

Henry shivered. He swore there was some perverted kind of pleasure in Glory's thin face. All she had left was hate. And that encompassed the blind man, too.

Finally, Sam raised his head. His voice was choked. "Glory. I've been suckered. Again. He's beat me again."

"Yes," she said.

"I came here. I trusted the men who sent me here. I came running, and I knew I couldn't be wrong. Even the woman's name. They said it was the same, and that she had changed it. You know what they've done to me, Glory? Do you know?"

Her voice remained flat, unemotional. "There's some reason they sent you here. Some reason why they picked this one man."

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For a long time Sam stayed there on his knees. He rocked, nursing himself from the grief inside him and not even aware of what she had said. But Henry heard her. It made sense. Some cold kind of logic showed that the Henry Wilson whom Sam wanted was somewhere in this area. He had to be, or they'd never have picked on him.

Henry didn't say anything. He remained tense, feeling Glory's cold gaze on him.

At last Sammy looked up toward Glory again.

"What did you say, Glory?"

"I said, they sent you here. Whoever sent you here was sure you'd be suckered. Just the way you were."

Sam thought on that for a long time. He said, "You — Wilson, are you mixed up with the syndicate any way? You owe them anything? They hate you for any reason?"

"I told you. I never had any trouble. Not until you made it for me."

Sammy rocked a moment, wringing his hands. "Why should they send me here, then? That's what I got to know. That's what I got to find out — and that's what I can't find out, not until I can see!"

"I can see for you," Glory said.

"Yeah . . . Yeah. But you don't know what to see. You might pass him in the street. I got to know." He beat his fists together. "I got to know."

A man spoke from the doorway to the foyer.

"Maybe I can tell you, Sammy."

Sam Malachi scrambled up to his feet. Glory stood up beside the piano. Henry turned around, staring.

Sam wailed. "That voice! That voice! That's his voice. Shoot him, Glory. Pull that trigger. Shoot him! Now! There's Pinky. That's him. That's the son I'm looking for."

The man in the doorway laughed. It was a cold sound, full of contempt, and the threat of sudden death.

"Yeah. Here I am, Sammy. The guy you been looking for. But I wouldn't tell Glory to try to shoot me." His voice had a shrug in it. "Oh, I haven't got a gun fixed on her. I'm too busy with it. I got it trained right on your navel, Sammy."

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Glory pulls that trigger, I pull this one. Her little pop gun might do some damage. Maybe not. But nothing like what this .45 will do to you, Sammy — and it's pointed right at your guts."

## *Chapter Thirteen*

MALACHI'S VOICE sounded dead. "Hold it, Glory. Don't shoot."

The fat man in the doorway laughed. He made something evil and unclean of laughter. Henry stared at him, feeling a sinister threat in the fat man.

"Knew you'd see it my way, Sammy," the fat man said. "By now, you must know you're no match for me."

Malachi's voice shook, his sightless head moved. "I decided I don't want her to kill you. Anybody kills you, I must."

The fat man's voice was contemptuous. "Forgot I have the gun? Tell the woman to drop hers."

Now Malachi laughed. A bitter heartbroken sound. "Why don't you tell her, Pinky?"

Henry watched the stout man's face go white. "I've told you I'll kill you, Malachi."

Malachi shook his head. "Go ahead. It won't buy you much. Pull your trigger. Glory still will get you." His laughter broke suddenly. "It's up to you, Pinky. You can get one of us. Sure. But only one. And it'll be the last thing you do on earth."

Pinky shifted his coat up on his heavy shoulders. Henry saw him as a dangerous man gone to lard. Pinky wasn't much taller than his blind enemy. He was somewhere between forty and fifty. He had black, greasy hair. His puffy face would smile at you while he knifed you in the back.

Henry stirred and Pinky's gun jerked nervously. Pinky said, "Stand still, chump. I got other troubles right now. I'll get around to you."

"Don't count on it," Malachi told him.



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Pinky cursed. "Still think you got a chance against me, *blind man*?" He rode that description hard and Malachi winced.

"I got this far," Malachi said. "I found you, Pinky."

Pinky Wilson's laugh was a fist across Malachi's mouth. "You found me?" His face twisted. "Listen, stupid. *I sent for you.*" The fat man glanced at Glory. "Still sorry for him, Glory? Even when you know he was crossing you with Abbey? He was leaving you, Glory, for Abbey. Only she couldn't take it."

"Shut up!" Glory screeched at him.

Pinky laughed and faced Malachi again, suddenly more at ease. Pinky might be out of the habit of violence, but evil was part of him. And it wasn't buried very deeply under his tallow hide.

Henry watched them: the blind man — trailing the crooked Pinky Wilson across the country — too obsessed to quit, no matter how big the odds; the fat Pinky, sick of having the blind man on his tail. By the time Pinky got to Richmond, he must have figured a perfect angle: send for the sightless Malachi and frame some other guy named Henry Wilson.

Malachi was shaking his head. When he spoke he was not speaking to his old enemy, but to himself. "Men I knew . . . trusted. My friends . . . brought me back the lies."

The fat man shrugged. "We both had some of the same friends, Malachi."

Henry took a backward step. He thought about those friends of Malachi's and Pinky's. Who would those "friends" be loyal to? A blind man who had lost everything — with nothing left but a wife and a seeing-eye dog? Or an over-fed man who could be expected to pay off? You didn't have to be very smart to figure out the answer to that.

Henry watched Sam Malachi stand there with the truth eating at him like slow acid. What Malachi was thinking showed in his face.

Pinky stepped forward into the room. He seemed to have forgotten the small gun in Glory's hand. But Glory hadn't forgotten him. Henry moved backward again, watching them. Every step Pinky took, Glory's gun followed him — as

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if numbering the last moments on earth of an evil man named Pinky Wilson.

Malachi said, "If you were so smart, Pinky, you wouldn't be here now. That ain't smart. Somebody might have seen you come in."

Pinky's fat-pork shoulders moved. "Neighborly visit. I'm not Pinky Wilson around here. Just a neighbor. Guy named Edward Slater. Live across the alley on the next street. Why shouldn't I drop in?"

Malachi licked his tongue across his mouth. "Why are you here to set this thing up? You were so sure I'd kill this guy thinking he was you."

Pinky smiled coldly. "Found out, Sam, that you'd gone nuts. Flipped your lid. Thought you'd only have to have some guy named Henry Wilson shot, you'd go away satisfied. Oh, no. You had to have a big show."

Henry saw the reasoning. Malachi's twisted mind had to see Henry Wilson suffer, grovel in the gutter before he finally killed him. When Pinky learned this, he knew Malachi would take time to check on the chump he was about to kill.

Pinky said, "Just came over to see the job was done right. Was here when you three arrived. Your mutt just laid on the floor and grinned at me. . . . Your seeing-eye dog is almost as stupid as you are, Sammy."

Malachi's breathing eased. Henry couldn't see why. To Henry, it seemed the evil Pinky was calmly dealing a pat hand from a cold deck.

The fat man said, "So now you kill your Henry Wilson, Sam. But in the fight, he kills you and Glory. Sad, Sammy. Sad as all hell. But you can see how it is, can't you, Sammy?"

Malachi's sudden laugh made the flesh quiver along Henry's spine. He was sure the blind man had lost his last fingerhold on sanity.

Pinky Wilson stared at Malachi, too.

"So I got you here," Malachi said. "No matter how it happened, I couldn't have planned it better."

"You've blown your cap," the fat man whispered.

Malachi fixed his sightless gaze on Pinky. His ruttred face was twisted with his laughter. The crazy sound of it rang

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in the silent room. Wanly Pinky looked around and Henry took another backward step, this one almost involuntarily.

Suddenly Malachi spoke. "Guard!"

The German Shepherd appeared as if by magic. He stood, fur bristled along his neck, in the doorway through which the fat man had come.

Henry stared at the dog. Pinky had boasted that the shepherd had only lain on the floor, grinning at him. The animal was trained. That was the reason. Expertly trained, Henry now saw.

The dog waited, scruff erect, fangs bared.

Henry sighed. Another command from Malachi . . . or just any movement in that room . . . anybody. The dog was rigid, but Henry saw its legs trembling from the tension. The dog was set to spring.

The fat man was suddenly sweating. He whispered, "Call him off, Sammy. I'll shoot him first."

Malachi laughed. "Go ahead. You better kill Whim. Looks like the odds are upped against you again, Pinky. If you don't shoot Whim, he gets you. Look. See how he's waiting? One word. Know what it is, Pinky? Got any idea? Any minute I'll say it. You better shoot him."

"Call him off."

Pinky talked tough, but Henry saw him hesitate. There was a reason. Pinky was faced away from Whim. If he moved, the dog would attack. Pinky had to be ready to shoot the instant he turned.

"Why don't you shoot him?" Malachi taunted. "Pull the trigger, smart man. You had it all figured, all fixed. So pull the trigger. Only I better tell you one thing. When you shoot, Glory shoots . . ." His mouth trembled. "You got just one shot." He stopped talking and the laughter poured out of him. "Take your pick, Pinky. Me. Glory. Or the dog. You can't get us all. You can get just one. So here's your gamble, Pinky. Time to place your bets. And this time, you got to be right."

## *Chapter Fourteen*

“TAKE!” Malachi shouted.

It was the word the crouching dog had been awaiting. It turned him into a slaving, ravenous wolf. For a split second, the dog settled on his haunches, and then there was a blur of gray.

Henry stepped back. He was drawn taut all over, and he felt the quivering start in his stomach. He watched the dog streak past him, eyes fixed on the fat Pinky.

Henry caught his breath, held it, forgetting to breathe. He watched Pinky spin around to face the dog. In that snap of time, Henry's gaze raked across Malachi and Glory. They were watching coldly. Glory still held her gun, safety off, ready to fire.

Then Henry realized another truth. He and the dog were the only excited creatures in the room. The others were cold and unemotional, even Pinky Wilson — especially Pinky.

Henry stared. He stood rooted to the floor in the closed, musty room. The opened door behind him was forgotten. He was watching death and seeing it as a business. For these people, death was a business. They were coldly unmoved by it, even when their own demise was involved.

Now that the dog was attacking, the fat Pinky was ready. He spread his legs, setting himself as the dog lunged at his wrist, fangs bared, snarl filling the room. Henry watched Pinky get set for the huge dog. If Pinky was afraid any more, it didn't show in his face. Sam Malachi had played his ace. Pinky was about to trump it.

As the dog leaped for Pinky's wrist, the pudgy man fainted with his left. It was enough, just enough to turn the dog's

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fangs. The dog twisted its head, snapping at Pinky's left wrist. Pinky struck downward with the heavy gun.

The dog was still following Pinky's moving left arm. There was a sound like crunching egg shells. The snarling died in the dog's throat and ended on a whine. The dog went forward for a moment, but only for a moment. When its body struck the floor, it didn't even move.

Glory whimpered. "Whim."

Malachi had no way to see what had happened, but he must have known, as well as Glory or Henry. Only he didn't need to hesitate, staring at the unconscious dog the way Henry and Glory did, even as Pinky did. For that second, Pinky was off guard.

Before Pinky could turn back, Malachi leaped on his shoulders. Malachi's weight drove them against a heavy club chair. It tipped on its side, teetered for a moment with the two men scrambling on top of it. Then it toppled over with a crash that shook the room and echoed through the empty house.

Malachi gouged his hands into Pinky's neck and face. His fingers were claws that were trying to strangle the fat man. They rolled off the chair to the floor, landing with Pinky on the bottom. He grunted when the air was blasted from his lungs.

He wasn't bothering to fight Malachi off. Henry had never seen men who let their emotions control them so little. Pinky still had his gun. That was his implement of trade and he clung to it with Malachi beating at him. Pinky tried to twist enough so that he could either put a bullet into Malachi, or stun him with the gun butt as he had done the dog.

Malachi didn't seem to know or care that Wilson had the gun. This was the man that Malachi had killed a thousand times in his dreams. This was the man who had laughed at him in his nightmares. Here was the man who'd robbed Malachi, blinded him, stolen his mistress, and run.

Finally he had caught up with the man he'd trailed for three thousand miles and untold months. Malachi no longer cared what happened to himself. He wanted one thing: to kill the fat man.

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Henry glanced over his shoulder toward the side porch. Freedom was beyond it. The hell with them, he thought. Let them kill each other. He wanted something, too. He wanted out of here. He took a quick gander at Glory, at the pink hair stringing wildly about her face. The gun was fixed on the writhing men on the floor. The gun snout moved, jerked, following them, still poised on every move Pinky made.

He swallowed hard, stepped backward again. She let him take two steps. The gun snout jerked upward, and he stared at her stark face above it. For a long moment they looked at each other. Henry peered into her eyes, trying to see beyond the madness that stirred there like fiery pinwheels on a stick. He tried to find the woman who'd once had security, a place in society. But whatever had happened to her since Malachi had gone blind had erased all she'd been until that moment.

Now she was a wild woman — almost as wild as the two men grunting and fighting on the floor. She held the gun on Henry and her eyes were on his face, and her eyes seemed even more deadly than her gun. Her gaze traveled over him slowly. It was full of hate, of venom, of madness.

Then they both heard Malachi cry out. Her head jerked for an instant toward the floor. Henry moved. He spun around and lunged toward the porch, expecting to be shot in the back. He hurled himself forward, diving through the doorway. He landed on the porch on his hands and knees and went scrambling forward toward the door.

He didn't look back; he was afraid to. He kept waiting for the sound of that small gun, the last sound he'd hear on earth. He struck against the door. It flew open and he toppled down the steps to the cement. Still crouching low, he ran along the side of the car and out on to the drive.

Freedom and fresh air struck him in the face. He heard the screen door slam behind him. But for the moment, out in the sunlight, he felt better. He was out of that house, away from that nightmare.

Gulping in the cold clean air, he moved along the drive to the street. He looked around. He was still a fugitive. Only the two men in that house behind him could clear him of any connection with the violent past of Pinky Wilson. He didn't

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know who could clear him of having attacked Lila — except Lila herself. He went all empty. It seemed a million empty hours since he'd seen her.

And the cop who'd been shot in that alley? Henry shook his head. There wasn't much more freedom out in the street than in that house.

Drawn taut, he moved across the walk. Oak Street was silent. Two black cars were parked in the block, but there was no one near either of them. Police cars? He couldn't tell. There were no markings on them. He turned, striding toward Bailey Boulevard. His steps slowed. He was on the go again, moving aimlessly, without destination and without hope.

He stopped. Nothing had ever prepared him for this kind of emergency. He had to think. He'd already tried running and that got him nowhere. Maybe if he went to the police?

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. All he really wanted was to see Lila. If she was all right, he could get out of this mess somehow. And if she weren't all right? He clenched his fists. He wouldn't finish that thought.

He glanced down. His clothes were wrinkled and shoddy. He remembered the last time he had gone to the police. The way Murchison had stared at him. Guilty before tried. Convicted without a hearing. Henry had looked pretty decent then. What chance would he have now? His clothes were wrinkled and shoddy. He needed a shave. If he went to the police like this, he'd be trying to strike out.

He breathed deeply and crossed Oak Street. His house looked silent and empty in the afternoon. He tried to tell himself this was home, this was the place he'd come hurrying to every night for the past six months.

It was no good. Nothing was the same any more. He was a stranger, walking into a stranger's house. There was nothing in that place for him. . . . Not unless Lila was there.

He felt the sweat break out on his face. If he went into his own house, wouldn't some of the neighbors, maybe Mrs. Kransky, be watching? They'd report him to the cops.

He shrugged the thought away. Let them. No matter what happened, he was through with running. It didn't matter much whether he went to the police, or they came for him.

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He kept waiting for the sound of gunfire from across the street. Nothing happened. He went up on the front porch of his own house. That loose board squeaked under his shoe, and he felt an odd tightening in his throat, an emptiness in his stomach. He fumbled out his key and opened the front door.

He thought about the way Lila's house had looked when he walked into it yesterday morning: ready for the Captain's inspection. Nothing out of place — except those two cocktail glasses on the kitchen table. His heart lurched at the thought of those two glasses.

He let the front door close behind him. He leaned against it and stared. The room was wrecked. It looked as though children had had a party in it, or as if two puppies had roughhoused in it all day. Or somebody had fought in it . . . violently.

Chairs and tables were overturned. Books, magazines and papers were strewn on the floor. He shook his head. The room was as torn up as it might look in one of Lila's nightmares. She wouldn't have believed this wreckage of her neat house.

He walked woodenly to the bedroom, trying not to see the shambles. This house was like their lives — yesterday, tranquil and neat; today, battered and lying in unexplained wreckage.

He threw off his clothes as he went into the bedroom. In here, things were untouched. Henry tossed his shirt and trousers to the floor. He sat on the bed and peeled off shoes and socks. Still damp, they clung to him. He sat on the bed a moment, looking at his shoes, and then he let them drop to the floor. Even the thudding sound they made reverberated in his stomach.

Naked he went into the shower. He turned it on, full hot and full cold. He let it beat against him until his body tingled. He stepped out then, dripping on the tile floor. He dried quickly and started to shave.

It hurt to stare into his own eyes. He moved the safety razor rapidly, nicking himself and not caring. He was afraid and it showed in his eyes. He didn't like to recognize his own



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fear. But he was in trouble — accused of shooting a cop, assaulting his wife. What if the cop had died by now? He remembered Cass Murchison's suspicious gaze.

He finished shaving and got out of the bathroom.

Although he dressed hurriedly, he seemed to make no speed. His fingers were numb and they shook as he tried to button his shirt. When he was dressed, he looked better. But he didn't feel any better.

He went out into the kitchen. He told himself he should be hungry, he had better eat. He opened the refrigerator. There was food in it: left overs. Lila was very economical. He cursed, feeling bitter. Everything had been wonderful about her: not only was she beautiful, she was also economical.

He slammed the refrigerator door and went into the front room. He opened the Richmond Phone Directory and found the number of City General Hospital.

He dialed, and after a moment a woman answered. Her voice was as crisp as a nurse's uniform.

"I'd like to ask about Mrs. Henry Wilson," he said.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Henry Wilson. Please. She's an — an assault victim. I — I want to know if she's all right."

"Who is this calling, please?"

Henry felt himself begin to sweat. Sure, a cop was standing there beside that receptionist. They'd been waiting for him to call. She was trying to stall him while they traced the call.

She said, "Who is this calling, please?"

Henry drew in a deep long breath. He moved the receiver, held it at arm's length, staring at it. He slowly replaced it on its cradle. He backed away from the telephone, fists clenched. They wouldn't even tell him how she was, they wouldn't even let him know if she was alive.

There was one thing he could do. He could go over to the hospital. He'd tried it once. This time he'd make it.

He looked around at the house, feeling as though he were looking at it for the last time. Then he stepped out on the porch and started across to the steps.

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He heard the sound from the corner of the house and he spun, crouched, tense, staring toward it.

A man ran around the side of the house. He yelled, "All right. Stop there!"

Henry didn't think. He just reacted. He wheeled, leaped off the porch and ran.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

FOR THAT MOMENT, he lost his head, forgot all his decisions and resolutions. In the past two days he'd lived in terror, he'd begun to react in fear. The man yelled again and Henry raced around the corner of his house. He ran toward the back yard and the alley beyond it.

"Stop, Wilson. I'll shoot."

Henry jerked his head around, staring over his shoulder. The man was just rounding the front corner of the house as Henry reached the rear. He was a thick chested, heavy-set man with flushed face and unruly brown hair. Henry knew he'd seen that man somewhere before. But he didn't stop now to figure where.

The man fought a gun loose from a shoulder holster just as Henry lunged around the corner of the house. Halting in the shadow of the house, he felt the protection of it against his back. He stared at the short space between him and the alley gate. Six long steps would carry him across it.

But every step he would be a standing target for that man running behind him. What if the gate were locked? If it were, the man's bullets would impale him against that fence. Above the pound of his own heart, he heard a heavy tread coming around the house. Only a few seconds had passed. It seemed an eternity. He had to try that open yard. There was no choice.

He bent over slightly and hurled himself in long steps across the yard. He plunged against the gate. It was locked. For a second he fought the lock, but he could not loosen it. His fingers had gone numb.

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The man stood half across the yard now. Henry felt that gun trained on the small of his back.

"Turn around. Put your hands up and turn around."

Henry stopped fighting the lock. He raised his arms slowly above his head and turned around.

He recognized the man. It was Lieutenant Cass Murchison — the man he had gone to yesterday morning with Sammy Malachi's letter.

Henry stared at the police lieutenant and felt a surge of relief all the way through his body. It was like the last-ditch arrival of the Army, Marines and Navy all at once. He'd been in one hell of a spot across the street in Malachi's house. He'd managed to save his skin, and now he knew who'd written that letter, who'd tried to kill him — crooks fighting over a hundred and fifty grand in stolen money.

His mouth moved, but for the moment he couldn't speak because the words wanted to tumble across his lips. He had all the answers and here was the man who could do something about them.

"Over there," Henry panted. "Across the street. They've got guns. They're going to kill each other. They were going to kill me —" Henry stopped talking and stared at Murchison's rage-twisted face.

Murchison said, "Shut up. Beat your wife senseless. Shoot a cop in an alley. Now you crack up when you're caught."

Henry just shook his head. "They're over there."

Murchison snarled. "Sure they are. But you're over here. Big brave killer. Gone to pieces all of a sudden. Cop killer. Wife beater. Don't know which I hate worse. Remember, fella. You're both. Don't give me any trouble. I might accidentally shoot you."

Henry went weak all over. *Guilty until proved innocent.* Sure. Wasn't that the way it had been the very first time he saw Murchison? He tightened his fists at his sides, gave up trying to tell the lieutenant anything.

"I told you. I'm ready to go." Henry shook his head. "But all the rest of it. You're wrong. I didn't do it. I'm not guilty."

Murchison's mouth curled. "Sure you're not. You're not guilty." His voice went soft. "Why did you run?"

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Henry sighed. "Because I was scared."

"Scared. But you're not guilty. Where'd you think you were going?"

"I didn't know. I — I started out to the hospital. I wanted to see my wife."

"That's real touching. You wanted to see your wife. Why?"

"Because I've got to know how she is."

"Why? So you can kill her if she's not already dead?"

"No! I've never even hit her — not in all my life. I never would."

"You'd think you had — if you could see her."

"How is she?"

Murchison's eyes narrowed. He slapped downward with his hand. "If I knew, Wilson, I wouldn't tell you."

Henry shook his head. His voice quivered. "Why can't you wait until I'm proved guilty before you convict me?"

Murchison snarled at him. "Look, Wilson, cops are just like anybody else. They want to be right. This time. I'm sure I'm right. We've got a case against you, Wilson — one that you're not going to get out of. Want me to tell you why you tried to kill your own wife, Wilson?"

Henry didn't say anything. He just stared at Murchison.

Murchison said, "Because she was going to sell you out. Wasn't she? This guy Sammy had caught up with you. With both of you. How? Through your wife? Eh, Wilson? And when you found out she'd crossed you, you beat her, tried to kill her."

Henry just shook his head.

Murchison's mouth pulled down. "You got a better one, Wilson? Listen to this. Neighbors saw you come home about eleven o'clock yesterday morning. That was after you left my office — after you got fired because the government found out you'd served time in San Quentin."

"Never." There was no hope in Henry's voice. He felt as though he spoke a different language from Murchison. He could listen, but he couldn't reach the police lieutenant.

Murchison said, "Then your neighbors saw your wife come in —"

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"But I was already gone! She wasn't home when I got there."

"Were you gone? That's funny, Wilson. Those neighbors swear they saw you come in. But nobody saw you leave."

"I didn't stay but a few minutes. I went right back out."

"Why?"

Henry stared at Murchison, feeling more helpless than ever. How could he make him believe he'd gone looking for the mugger? He shook his head.

"All right," Murchison said. "That's better. Tired of your own lies now, Wilson?"

"I haven't lied. I left the house."

"Sure you did. And Mrs. Kransky knows when. She says she saw you run out of your back door, across this yard and out into the alley. You jumped into a car and got out of here."

Murchison grinned down his nose at Henry as if he'd played a trump card that ended the game.

He went on, coldly. "But that wasn't a few minutes after you got home, Wilson. That was after your wife got home and Mrs. Kransky heard an awful racket and then your wife began to scream. That's when you ran out of your house, Wilson — when your neighbors called the cops late yesterday afternoon."

Henry's voice was tired; fatigue pulled at every fiber of his body. "There's no sense talking to you. You won't believe me. I came to you yesterday for help. You started suspecting me then — right in your office."

"Fishy smells are loud, fella."

"But everything I told you was true. I was never in California. Across the street, right now, are the two men who started this. One of them is named Henry Wilson — only he calls himself Edward Slater now — and he served time in San Quentin. The other man is Sammy Malachi, and he's the one who told the VA about Henry Wilson's prison record. I was suckered in on the thing — just as I told you I was — and that's the truth."

Murchison frowned. He started to say something, hesitated. Then he said: "All right. Go on."

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"That's all. I didn't shoot the cop. I don't have a gun. I never hurt Lila. Never."

Murchison's laugh was cold. "You mean you started an involved fairy story like this and you're not going to finish it?"

"What's the use?" Henry said. "Take me in. I've had all of this I can take."

Murchison's voice was soft, thoughtful. "Just a minute. What's this about two men across the street?"

Henry nodded. "I ran out of there. They were fighting. They had guns. This Slater guy killed a dog over there. I saw it. I've been waiting for the gunfire. I haven't heard it yet."

Murchison stared at him. "All right, sucker. Two men with guns, but they haven't used them! Fighting over there. You're right — I convict you without giving you a chance. I'm taking you in. But first, you and me, we'll go over there and see these men who're fighting with guns."

Henry's voice showed his eagerness. "The man called Malachi is blind," he blurted. "His wife's name is Glory. She has string hair, long thin face. The other guy tried to kill Malachi's seeing-eye dog."

Murchison didn't sound convinced. "Let's go over. But remember this, Wilson. I got my eye on you."

Henry nodded again. "I'll stake whatever chance I've got on this. But be ready for trouble. They've got guns — like I told you."

Murchison said. "I'm ready for anything. Even one of your tricks. Let's go."

Henry nodded. They started around the side of his house. He glanced at the granite-faced cop. Murchison was reluctant to swallow any part of his story, but he was going to check. Henry had won his first victory.

As they crossed the walk before Henry's house, a young cop opened the door of the black car.

The cop said, "You got him all right, eh Lieutenant?"

Murchison's laugh was cold. "I told you I could handle it all right, didn't I?"

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They stopped beside the car. Murchison glanced at the cop inside and then at Henry.

Murchison said, "Here he is, Waldron. This is the guy that shot Patrolman Nelson in the alley last night."

Henry caught his breath, started to speak. There was no sense in talking to these men. They'd already convicted him. He bit down on his lip and didn't say anything.

Murchison laughed. "Yeah, Wilson. Be careful what you say. Maybe it's better you don't say anything. Waldron was there. He's the cop that was behind you in that alley. He was there when you shot Nelson — matter of fact, Waldron was chasing you."

Henry's head jerked up. He could feel the blood drain down from his face. He stared into the eyes of the young cop.

Waldron raised his head and for a moment his gaze met Henry's. They were tortured eyes. Then the cop's gaze fell away and he nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. That's right. I was there. Yeah."

Henry felt himself go weak with the hatred that flooded through his body. For the instant, everything stopped for him. He could barely see Waldron's anguished young face through the blur of red that clouded his vision. He didn't speak. He didn't trust himself to say anything. He closed his trembling hands until his fingernails dug into his palms. There were at least two people who knew he hadn't shot Patrolman Nelson. He was one, and there sat the other in that police cruiser. But the cop was safe behind his badge.

"Don't worry, Waldron," Murchison said loudly. "We got him now. Cop killer. Nobody shoots a cop in this town and gets away with it. We're going to take him in. We'll hold him, and it'll be bad enough for him even if Nelson lives. If Nelson dies — this gee will be begging for the electric chair before we're through."

Waldron's voice was barely audible. "Yeah."

Murchison said, "Stay here with the cruiser, Waldron. Wilson has told me a hot story about two guys trying to kill each other in that house across the street. The guys that framed him." Murchison laughed. "Yeah. What you know about that, Waldron. Wilson was framed." He cut the laugh-



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ter off sharply. "We'll be right back, Waldron." He touched Wilson's arm. "All right, Wilson. To show you I don't frame nobody — let's go."

Henry got his first premonition of terrible wrong as they started up the driveway beside the old house. The car was gone from the carport.

He swallowed hard. "We drove in here. An old Plymouth. The woman parked it right here."

Murchison just looked at him, he didn't say anything.

Henry reached out a trembling hand and tried the screened door to the side porch. It was locked.

His voice wavered. "It was open. I ran out of it."

Murchison said, "Thought they were fighting over here. But they've had time to lock the doors from the inside and drive away in their car."

"Something's wrong," Henry whispered.

"You're damned right something's wrong. Kid, you're it."

Henry stared at him. "We've got to get in this house."

Murchison shrugged. "Sure. Go ahead. Breaking and entering charge won't amount to much beside what we already got against you. We'll go in. Find a way in and I'm right behind you." He laughed at his own joke. "Looks like from now on, Wilson, I'm going to be right behind you."

Henry cursed. The helplessness in him was dissolving into a kind of cold set fury.

"They were in here," he said. "They're in here now."

He shoved past the police lieutenant and went around to the front porch. He crossed it, with Murchison at his heels. He tried the thick front door. It was locked.

"Looks just like any other vacant house I ever saw," Murchison said, his voice mild.

"We've got to get in," was all Henry said.

He looked around, found a flower pot and started toward one of the glassed windows.

Murchison said, "Wait a minute. If you're that set on getting in here, I'll get us in."

Murchison shook out a key ring from his coat pocket, selected a skeleton key. Henry replaced the flower pot and watched the cop. The thick door swung open. The musty air

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of the place rushed out at them. Murchison glanced at Henry.

"After you," he said.

Henry moved into the house. He said, "They were in the front room, here. They were fighting all over the place."

He stood in the doorway of the front room. He stopped speaking; for the space of a breath, his heart stopped beating.

The room was in perfect order. The chairs and tables were standing. There was no sign anyone had been in this place. It looked like what it was: a house for rent. Henry felt the muscles in his stomach tighten.

He stared at the place on the rug where he had seen Whim fall under a blow from Pinky's heavy gun. He ran forward, fell on his knees. He searched the rug for some sign that the dog had been there. He found nothing. He scraped his fingers along the nap, looking for dog hairs. There were none.

He glowered over his shoulder at the amused Murchison who stood watching.

"They were here," he muttered. "I saw them."

"Sure they were." Murchison's soft voice mocked him. "Look, Wilson. According to you, they were fighting over here. You got away. So they stopped fighting, worked together, cleared out a dog's body, cleaned the house and drove away in the car. You were across the street. Did you see them drive away?"

Henry jumped up. He ran across to the foyer closet. He threw it open. It was barren, dusty. He wheeled around, leaving the door ajar.

He ran through the house, opening closets and pantries. Murchison moved behind him, taking his time, a cold smile on his mouth. Henry ran up the steps. Murchison plodded after him. In the first bedroom, Henry found clothes that must have belonged to Glory.

He jerked the dresses from the hangers and turned, shaking them in his fists at Murchison. "They were here," he said. "These are her dresses."

"Look like Salvation Army Rummage to me," Murchison said.

"I don't care what they look like," Henry said. "I never

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said she was beautiful. I said she was here. These clothes prove that."

He dropped them and walked past Murchison. The next room was Sammy's. Near the bed, Henry found a dog harness. He stood there and held it up before Murchison's face.

"Here, damn it," Henry said. "This belonged to the dog." He threw open the closet. "Here are the clothes that belonged to Malachi. Now, damn it, will you believe me? They lived here. They were downstairs. I don't know what happened. But I do know you got to help me find them."

The contempt was gone from Murchison's face. "I'll check on them, Wilson."

"No!" Henry's voice broke. "Checking on them won't do. You've got to find them. Now."

"Don't tell me what I got to do."

"I am telling you. You've accused me of shooting a cop, of beating Lila. These people can prove I didn't do it. We've got to find them. Now. Before that Pinky kills them. And if he took them out of here, that's what he means to do."

Murchison's voice was almost kindly. He said, "Take it easy, kid. You ain't in the electric chair yet."

"But I can be. Those people can clear me. They've got to clear me."

They both heard it and they went tense, wheeling toward the doorway. It sounded like the sudden skittering of a rat in a vacant house. But they both knew better.

Henry started past Murchison and that was when Pinky Wilson stepped into the doorway. He held the gun in his hand.

Murchison stood at Henry's side. He snarled. "This the friend you been stalling around waitin' for, Wilson. You lying bastard."

"Damn you," Henry cried. "This is Slater."

Murchison said, "All right, Slater — Pinky — whatever your name is. You've done enough. Get smart and drop that gun."

Murchison's hand moved toward his shoulder holster. Henry was staring at Pinky's fat face. He saw it flinch from

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the effort of pressing the trigger. The gun in the fat man's hand bucked and flared bright orange.

Murchison doubled up. The force of the bullet drove him back a step and then he crumpled forward, trying to catch his balance. He got his gun in his hand, but he couldn't hold it. It slipped from his fingers, struck the floor. Murchison fell hard, jarring the room. He didn't move.

Pinky Wilson's face was white. His lips were pulled taut across his teeth.

"Let's go, Henry," he said. "There's a cop around front. He's on his way over here right now. Make me wait for him and I'll put a bullet in you — just before I put one in him.

Henry looked down at Murchison. He moved by him, walking dazedly. Pinky grabbed his arm and thrust him down the rear stairs. He pushed a gun in his back, forcing him through the kitchen, across the back yard and into the alley.

A black car was parked out there. There was a woman at the wheel. In the back seat, Henry saw Sammy Malachi, bound and gagged.

The woman reached over and pushed open the door.

"Have any trouble with Sammy?" Pinky said.

"I never have any trouble with Sammy," the woman said. She laughed. Henry saw Sammy pressed back against the seat. This wasn't Glory. Henry had never seen her before.

Pinky jabbed Henry in the back with the gun. "In the car."

Henry got in. The woman had the car moving before Wilson had the door slammed behind them. She was doing fifty as they came out of the alley.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

"EASE OFF," Pinky told her. "What you want, Abbey? Trouble with the cops?"

They both laughed. Henry sat between them, feeling their laughter like something unclean against him.

Abbey was even a worse driver than Glory. Henry glanced around. Where was Glory? Was that why the old Plymouth was gone? Had Glory gotten away in it?

Abbey almost tagged the tail of a truck and Henry forgot about Glory. From the corner of his eye, he studied Abbey. She knew how to drive, knew how to handle a car — probably like she knew how to handle men. But her vice was recklessness. She was vicious about it. She didn't care — not about herself, nor about anyone else.

After a moment, Pinky stopped laughing and watched the street as intently as Henry did. Suddenly Henry thought Sammy was, at the moment, fortunate to be blind.

They just skimmed past an ice wagon. Tires screamed against the pavement. Abbey stepped harder on the gas and laughed in her throat.

Henry sat rigid. Was Abbey insane? Or was this recklessness, this vicious irresponsibility part of her way of life? He remembered that Sammy had said Abbey had helped to blind him. Henry shivered.

Pinky yelled again. "Damn it, Abbey, I told you to ease off!"

She just laughed at him. This was some kind of jag for her . . . excitement. There wasn't enough excitement for her. It wasn't enough that Pinky had shot a cop in cold blood just

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a few minutes ago, she had to go searching for more perverse thrills.

You couldn't look at her and guess what went on behind those eyes as pale as rinse water. She looked bad, bad all the way through. Her hair might have been blonde once, but she'd discovered bleach and she couldn't get it platinum enough to suit her. She'd taken all the life and all the sheen out of it. There was a fresh beauty parlor wave in it, and she'd spent a lot of time on her face with mascara and rouge and lipstick. Abbey was living it up — right down to the last penny of the hundred and fifty grand they'd taken from Sammy Malachi.

Abbey's green skirt was high above her knees, showing legs that belonged in a chorus line somewhere.

"What's the matter, darling?" Her voice taunted Pinky and she turned, staring at him on the other side of Henry. She didn't slow down in the thickening traffic. "You turning chicken?"

"I got no insurance," he warned her. They were two animals snarling at each other. "Kill me and you got nothing."

Her laugh struck back at him. "With you alive, darling, I've got no overflowing cup."

"Crawl back under your rock anytime you want to."

"Darling," she mocked. "How you talk."

"All right. Never mind how I talk. Ease off. I want this thing to go off right. A cop stopping us could queer it all. You know I'm sick and tired of running. Why you suddenly go nuts?"

They sliced through the layers of traffic on Bailey Boulevard. She eased on the gas.

"You killed a cop back there," Abbey said. "I don't like being in that part of town. I'm trying to get out of it."

"Getting more cops on your tail won't help," Pinky said. He glanced over his shoulder. "Damn you. There's a cruiser back there now."

"It's been back there," the blonde said, "ever since we came out of that alley behind Oak Street. Don't worry, sweetie. They haven't caught us. And they won't, unless they've souped up those cheap engines they use."

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Henry lost his balance as Abbey whipped the car into the John Quincy Bailey Parkway. They roared through the winding road and came out on the other side of the park without even slowing down.

"Kiss those cops goodbye," Abbey said. She slipped the big car into a side street, drove a block, took another tire-torturing turn.

Henry's heart lurched and a heaviness gripped him as the black sedan whipped along through the side streets, digging deeper into the back alleys of Richmond.

He glanced at Pinky. Henry knew there wasn't a lot of time left. Somehow, Pinky had decided that if a Henry Wilson was killed, along with Malachi, it would end the whole matter. Somehow, it would be made to look like Malachi had killed Henry Wilson, and lost his own life in the attempt. Pinky was desperately trying to buy freedom. He didn't care what it cost, as long as he didn't have to pay it.

Maybe this wild ride was his last chance, Henry thought. He sat still, scarcely breathing, blood pounding in his temples. He tensed, waiting for Abbey to swing the car around one more corner. The pulse in his throat beat fast enough to choke him. He lifted his left hand and pressed it hard against his throat.

He turned and Pinky was watching him, a grin on his fat mouth.

"Thinking, Henry?" Pinky said. "Forget it. Don't think you're the only guy that sees things. Grab for this gun, and I'll put a bullet in your gut. Now relax, Henry."

Abbey burst out laughing. She said, "If you'd taken care of his wife the way you should, you'd be in a hell of a lot better spot right now, Pinky."

He snarled. "Never mind that. I'll take care of that, too."

The thoughts spun inside Henry's brain. *Sure. Here was the guy who'd beaten Lilo.* He felt the ragged beat of his heart, the weakness in his arms, and the sure knowledge that no matter what happened, he was going to get fat Pinky Wilson.

He stared ahead. He saw narrow, scabby back streets. He was now moving deeper into poverty and slime than he'd

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wandered yesterday looking for Carper the mugger. They passed the last of the drab tenements and started across a flat waste. It stretched gray, holding the cold ashes of a million dump fires — the smoldering smoky fires eating away the refuse of the city.

Abbey knew her way well. The ruts were crooked, cut by garbage trucks, but she followed them expertly. Here was a girl who'd know her way straight down to hell.

Pinky said, "Glad you quieted off, Henry. Hated to see you thinking of that break back there. I want things to run smooth. I like things to run my way."

Henry was too full of hate to speak. His insides felt as raw and ugly as this strange, wet, putrid-smelling world down here. He saw gray-looking people wandering through the humps of garbage, probing and picking. Then the tires rumbled across a single-span wooden bridge. Debris littered the creek and the water was the color of blood, the color of rust.

He saw the shack. It sat on a small mound that overlooked the creek and the city dump. Wild bushes grew profusely around the shack, and Henry supposed only its roof could be seen from the dump.

Abbey whipped the car into the ruts before the closed weather-beaten door. Behind the shack was parked a cream-colored Cadillac. She stopped the car.

Pinky said, "All right. Let's go inside."

The blonde said to Henry, "It's humble, but you wouldn't like it anyway." She laughed again.

Pinky Wilson got out and held the gun fixed on him. He reached over warily and opened the back door.

The blonde said, "All right, Sammy darling. Get out. This is it."

Henry glanced over his shoulder. Sam Malachi winced at the sound of Abbey's voice. He seemed to draw inward.

*God, Henry thought, the way that poor guy must have loved her once. Almost as deeply as he now hates her.*

Sammy stumbled getting out of the car. Abbey caught his arm and laughed at him.

"Be careful, Sammy darling. You'll hurt yourself."



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Her voice mocked Sammy, mocked everything decent any man might feel for any woman. Sammy didn't answer. Henry watched the sag of the blind man's shoulders. Sammy was old now, and beaten.

"All right, you," the fat Pinky said to Henry. "This is your party, too. Let's don't be late for it."

Then it happened. Henry gathered himself up and came out of the car fast, with all the thrust he could get from his legs. He landed hard on Pinky, carrying the fat man over backwards. Pinky yelled, but he didn't have time to shoot.

They struck the ground hard and Pinky's breath was jarred from him. Henry's knee sank into Pinky's stomach as if he were pressing against lard. He came up, moving forward like a runner sprinting for a fast start. He heard Abbey screaming at him as he ran toward the wooden bridge. In the middle of the bridge, he hesitated and looked back.

A gun rasped at him from the knoll where the shack was. He spun about, crouched next to the wood railing. He stared back up the incline. Pinky was running down the road toward him. He stopped and fired again.

Henry crouched a moment longer, listening to the clop of Wilson's heavy shoes on the road. Another second passed and the sound stopped. Wilson fired again. Henry heard the bullet crease the railing beside him, splinters flew.

Henry turned and ran across the narrow bridge. He clasped the rail and leaped over the side, sailing outward and landing with a splash in the middle of the shallow creek. Bent over, he sloshed through the putrid smelling water toward shore. He passed bed springs, the frame of a car, an old ice box.

He came out of water on gray ash heaps. Swollen rats skittered out of his way, streaking into caves in the debris. He looked back over his shoulder.

Pinky was standing on the bridge, and he looked like one of the fat rats.

"Stop!"

The fat man held out the gun and fired. Henry hurled himself forward. Ash dust mushroomed upward and clouded

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over him. He plunged along on his knees until he put a mound between him and the bridge. Then he jumped up and ran.

He heard Pinky yelling behind him. He saw the skyline of Richmond far across the gray wastes. It was like another world, another galaxy — an impossible distance away. He was sure he could never reach it, and just as sure that he had to. He looked back. At least he was in better physical condition than the fat Pinky.

His feet padded up powder in the ankle deep ashes. It was like running in dry snow, slowing him down and tiring him.

He ran by gray people who were stooped, poking in the rubble. They turned and stared at him without straightening their bent backs. They were like nightmare people, and Henry decided that they couldn't straighten up. They were all part of this nightmare world: the stooped people fingering the refuse; the rats, too swollen to run, and the fat man behind him with a gun.

He heard a car and saw that Abbey was streaking along the ruts, trying to cut him off. He turned, running away from the road. The pistol cracked again. The people straightened up. An old woman began to laugh shrilly at the top of her voice. Some of them pointed at Henry, shouting.

Henry breathed through his mouth. The fetid odors went through him. His throat burned. He felt that if he had just one breath of fresh air, he'd be all right. Only there was none.

The pistol exploded behind him. Nearer this time. The people chattered at each other and at Henry, skittering aside as he ran toward them. There was the sudden sound of lightning and thunder, and it was as though a mammoth wasp had stung Henry along the side of his head. The world went skimming crazily, whirling all around him as he fell.

The sky was beneath him — the blood-red sky. People in rust-black clothes, streaked and blotted with gray, spiraled around his head. Their faces were gray and so were their eyes. Then they began to fall away into darkness.

Henry threw out his arms and went sprawling face first into the gray filth.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

HE WAS riding the billowy clouds, floating across the bloody sky. He had hit a stretch of rough weather; there was thunder and Henry was jostled, rolling until he almost fell off the cloud.

He stirred. The side of his face was moist. He ran his fingers along the jagged streak the bullet had creased in his temple. His eyes burned. He squeezed his eyelids shut and then opened them.

First he saw only legs, trousers that were smeared and streaked an ash gray. Henry let his gaze slide upward. Pinky was sitting on the car seat over him. Henry had been crammed into the rear on the floor. The car was climbing a slight incline. Then it stopped. For a fraction of a second, Henry's heart stopped, too. They were at the weather-beaten shack again. Back where he'd started from. Great.

Pinky slapped the door open and got out. Henry sat up. The fat man and Abbey were standing outside the car. Their guns were fixed on him. He was still groggy.

Pinky reached in, caught Henry's arm and jerked him from the car. Henry stumbled, falling to his knees in the dirt.

"Let's get inside," Abbey said.

Henry got up and walked dazedly into the shack. Abbey leaned against a wall. She held the gun loosely, pointed at the floor.

Sammy Malachi was bound in a chair, facing a wall.

Abbey said. "They're here, Pinky. Let's get it over with."

Pinky closed the door. "I'd feel better if I knew where that damned Glory was."

"You let her get away."

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Pinky snarled. "Happened I was busy at the time with your lover — Sammy boy."

Abbey said, "I'd feel better if I thought you had sense enough to handle anything right."

"Afraid, Abbey?"

"I'm all right," Abbey said. "I just found out what a fool you can be when you try real hard."

"I'm taking care of it."

"Are you? Killing a cop. Leaving that woman alive to describe you to the police."

"I'll take care of her, too. As soon as I take care of this business." Pinky stepped forward into the room. "Don't worry about me. I'm not leaving anything undone this time. When I finish that little job at the hospital, I'm free."

"Get started. I want to get it over with. I want to get out of here."

There was the rumble of thunder again. At first Henry believed it was thunder. But the way Pinky and Abbey tensed, listening, told him: it was the sound of car wheels on the bridge.

His heart lurched. He stared at the others. Abbey came away from the wall. She stood rigid, her legs apart, the gun at her side. She was listening so intently she was unaware of the others inside the shack.

Pinky ran over to the window. He rubbed his hand over the dirt-crusting glass. He stood, half-facing them, and peering outside.

"It's a car," he said.

"Bright boy," Abbey said. "You figure that out all by yourself?"

"Cops?" Pinky yelled the question at her.

"How would they follow me?" she wanted to know. Her mouth twisted. "That's a city dump out there. You got the jumps."

Wilson's voice cracked. "I got the jumps. Yeah. There's a car out there! Whose car, Abbey?"

She let her mouth twist. "How would I know whose car. Get it over, Pinky. Now!"

She turned and leveled the gun at Henry. He stared at its

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black mouth. Abbey was the master of this pair. If there had to be a killing, she was capable of doing it. The moment for her to go to work had arrived.

The car roared up to the outside of the shack and stopped. The car door slammed. Henry didn't take his eyes from that gun in Abbey's hand. Pinky started from the window to the door. But before he could reach it, it was thrown open.

Henry felt the breath seep out of him. He didn't know what he'd expected, but not Glory Malachi. She stood there with that small gun in her hand, and looked like eleven-thirty the night of October thirty-first.

Pinky had his gun on her, but Glory didn't even seem to know it. Her wild eyes were fixed on one thing, one person. If there'd ever been any sanity in those eyes, it was gone now. Her gaze was glued on Abbey.

"You. The bleached bitch!" Glory's shrill voice cracked.

Henry watched the gun snout move away from him as Abbey turned on her heel to stare at Glory.

Glory's face was twisted. "You. The evil woman. You took him. You ruined him. Made him crooked. Blinded him. No more, woman. No more men. You've ruined your last man. You went to hell the day you took my man."

"Don't move, Glory," Pinky warned. "If you lift that gun I'll shoot."

He was talking to himself. Glory didn't even know he was alive. She took another step into the room.

Her voice lashed at Abbey.

"You think I was simple and stupid enough to come back to Sammy — blind Sammy — just to stay with him and help him look for Henry Wilson? Oh, no. I never looked for Henry Wilson. I was looking for you, woman. That's all I've been looking for. Right from the start. I knew. Find Pinky Wilson and I'd find you — if Pinky's money lasted long enough."

Abbey started to speak. She opened her mouth. That must have been what Glory was waiting for. She was daring the blonde woman to speak to her.

Glory pressed the trigger and shot Abbey in the face. She

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pulled the trigger until there was no sound in the shack except the reverberating sound of Glory's gun.

Pinky Wilson screamed, his scream ripped through the sound of the shooting like a woman's scream. Henry stood, still dazed from the bullet crease and the shock from witnessing the sudden death of the blonde Abbey.

Sammy Malachi sprang off his chair and lunged across the room in the direction of that scream. Pinky stood still, sobbing, his fat legs wide. Almost mechanically he shot Sammy as he ran across the floor. Sammy staggered, and fell, still moving forward. He struck the floor hard and lay still. Glory wheeled around and jerked the gun toward Pinky. She began pressing the trigger, but it struck on empty chambers. She'd emptied her clip on Abbey.

The gun bucked in Pinky's hand. Glory slumped back against the wall. She dropped the empty gun and clutched at her stomach with both her scrawny hands.

This was Henry's last chance and he knew it. He reached behind him, grasping the back of a chair. His fingers closed over it and he started it over his head, putting every ounce of his strength behind it. The chair came down over his shoulder as Wilson fired. Henry was hardly aware of the gunfire. He released the chair, saw it strike Pinky, driving him back.

He heard the fat man grunt as the chair drove him back against the wall. Henry couldn't see Pinky clearly through the red blur that obscured his vision. Red fog suddenly enveloped the shack.

He drove his fist into Pinky's fat face, felt the shock of it all the way to his shoulder. He saw Pinky jerk the gun up. He heard the breath sobbed out of the fat man.

Henry clutched wildly at Pinky's wrist as the fat man leaped past him toward the door. Henry missed and stumbled. He heard the thunder of gunfire, and then his stomach turned to a mass of flame. He felt his knees sag, and then he crumpled to the floor. He was no match for the fat man. He never had been. He never would be.

He sprawled out on the floor. The last thing he remembered

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was that somebody kicked him over on his back, and he could feel the blood hot and sticky down his side. He was thinking about Lila, and then it was dark and he was unconscious.

## Chapter Eighteen

HENRY rolled over on the floor and blinked as if strong lights were suddenly being played on his face. He saw no lights at all, except the lavender dancing kind that glittered and exploded when he moved. The pain in his stomach was intolerable and for a moment he lay on the shack floor and tried to think things through.

Pinky had shot him. For one painful and brutal instant he remembered throwing the chair, the sound of the gun, and the burning in his stomach. He had fallen. When? How long ago?

"Lila." He whispered the word aloud, but inside he was yelling it. Lila was in danger. Through his mind pounded the words Pinky has said to Abbey. When he had finally killed the girl in the hospital, Pinky would have silenced his last witness, bought his freedom.

He pressed against the floor with all his strength and managed to sit up. He wavered like a straw in the wind, and the shack wheeled around his head. He bit down on his lips. For a second he blanked out. *Go ahead*, he cursed himself, *pass out and Pinky will kill Lila.*

He managed to open his eyes and move his gaze about the room. Somehow, Pinky had managed to kill everybody else. His old blind enemy would never follow Pinky in the night any more. Sammy was dead and Glory was dead. Henry's gaze paused at Abbey. She was sprawled on the filthy floor. Even in her chic clothes she didn't look out of place in this shack.

He wished he knew how long he'd been out. Maybe he was already too late. He tried to tell himself that he had



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nothing to worry about. Wasn't Lila in the hospital? How could Pinky get to her? But he knew — Pinky would get to her. Pinky would get into that room at the hospital and there would be no one there to help Lila.

Could Pinky shoot Lila and hope to get away with it?

Henry crawled over to the wall and pulled himself up against it. Pinky could use a knife in that hospital, couldn't he? Of course, he could. Pinky was desperate. Lila was the only one who stood between Pinky and freedom.

And *me*, Henry thought.

He heard the rumbling thunder of car wheels on the bridge. The hope that it might be Pinky leaving gave him strength enough to lurch across the room and throw open the door. He stared down the road. It was the cream-colored Cadillac. Pinky was on his way.

Henry began to tremble. The gray wastes danced before his eyes. Across there, across town, Lila was alone and helpless. Who'd expect someone to try to kill her in the hospital? Sure. Pinky was counting on surprise. He'd drive right up to the front door. Why not? There was nothing in this world less suspicious looking than a lush-looking Cadillac.

Henry looked around the room. Abbey's gun lay just beyond her outflung hand. He staggered over to her, holding his hand at his side. He had to let himself down on his knees before he could pick up the heavy gun. It took all his strength to lift it. He dropped it in his pocket and wondered how he'd ever get back on his feet?

Suddenly he knew a way. It was the magic that was going to take him out of here. He said aloud, "Lila."

He got up, swallowing the agony that choked him. He looked down. His shirt was sopping wet and red. He drew his belt in tighter, buttoned his coat.

He said, "Lila."

He put out his arm and fell forward against the door jamb. He had to rest there a moment. He looked back into the room. Abbey? Abbey was dead. But Pinky would get over it. There were other Abbeys. Pinky would find them.

Without knowing how he was able to do it, Henry was running across the short, interminable distance to Abbey's

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car. He pulled open the front door and half fell in under the steering wheel. The keys were gone.

Tears blurred his eyes and his mouth trembled. He leaned over on the seat and reached under the dashboard. He shoved his hands around under the ignition switch until he found the two wires. He ripped them out. Only it took him a long time. Forever.

He said, "Lila. God I love you, Lila. I ever tell you how much I love you?"

His trembling fingers twisted the ends of the wires together. He sat up, pressed the starter button. He was startled when the engine turned over, caught. He would have laughed. But laughter hurts your belly.

He put both hands on the wheel, clenched them. The world settled. He shifted gears, backed around and started down the incline. Somebody had shrunk the bridge. It was not nearly wide enough for the car. Besides that the bridge was wavering crazily.

He had to slam on brakes just before he reached it. He held on tight and finally inched the car across it. *Great*, he thought. *Pinky has a Caddy, and a head start, and nothing on his mind but murder.* He stepped harder on the gas. He kept saying Lila's name over and over.

The car bumped through the winding ruts across the wastes. He was thinking about the hospital and the best way to get there. Maybe he had one advantage over Pinky after all. He knew all the streets in Richmond, every back alley, every short cut, or every street where he might avoid traffic signals and heavy traffic.

For a moment the world went red and he lost control of the car. He had to stay awake. He snapped on the radio, turning the volume up full. A dance band blared out at him. That was fine. *Lila*, he thought, *shall we dance, Lila?*

He came out of the ash heaps and struck a speedway. He turned right, sure that Pinky had chosen the other way, through the slums, across John Quincy Bailey Park.

He told himself he had to keep a sharp lookout for the cross street: Eighteenth. It crossed town with fewer signals

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and less traffic than any other. He could turn off within two blocks of the hospital.

The music ceased abruptly. An announcer said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we've just had a news bulletin, released by the Richmond police department in the case of Henry Wilson, now at large and a fugitive from justice. Two hours ago, police said, Patrolman Ed Waldron admitted that his stray shot was the one that had struck down Patrolman Nelson last night. This charge at least has been dropped against Wilson, although others more serious remain lodged against him, and he is the object of intense police searching. According to hospital reports, Wilson's wife Lila has regained consciousness. She was victim of a near-fatal assault by her husband —"

Henry reached over and cut off the radio.

He swung into Eighteenth street. He kept his gaze fixed on the street and managed to hold his speed down to thirty miles per hour. That was five miles above speed limit.

He drove the car into a parking place outside the City General Hospital. He had stopped on the west side near the Out Ward & Emergency entrance. He knew better than to try to go through the front door.

His front wheel struck the curb hard. He fell forward against the wheel. He tried to shake the dancing flares of agony from his mind. He stared at the parking lot before the hospital. As he watched, he saw the white Cadillac turn in the parking lot, moving slowly, steadily.

"Lila," he whispered.

He got out of the car, holding his side. He didn't take his eyes from that white car. He left the motor running and started along the driveway, lurching drunkenly from side to side. He shoved his hand into his pocket, fitted his finger against the trigger.

He watched Pinky get out of the Cadillac. Pinky brushed at his coat, straightened his tie: man of distinction . . . on an errand of murder.

*Where's your knife, Pinky?* Henry thought. *Or is it an ice pick?* Henry's legs moved him along faster.

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He saw the police cruiser then, and the two cops in it. Were they watching him? It didn't matter. To hell with them.

*Lila, I love you.*

He said, "Pinky!"

The fat man of distinction was at the curb. He stopped, staring at Henry.

Pinky's mouth sagged open. Pinky's eyes bugged. Pinky shook his head. Pinky's hand leaped toward his coat pocket. Henry fought the gun out and almost dropped it. His knees sagged. He stared at Pinky, hating him, and wondering if he could pull the trigger.

He said, "Lila."

The explosion of the gun in his hand almost deafened him. He felt it jar his stomach. It was too much for his knees and he sagged. His legs crumpled and he stumbled forward, still watching Pinky.

Pinky had forgotten the gun in his pocket. The fat man had been sprawled backwards by the force of the bullet, and he was scrambling around on the ground like a beetle turned on its back.

The cops were out of the cruisers now. Henry toppled forward on his face. The gun fell out his hand.

He grinned to himself. He had done it. It didn't matter now. Pinky could never get in there to Lila. He had other witnesses now, and Pinky couldn't kill them all. The cops would pick him up, and Pinky was going to have to explain that gun, that knife, and those bodies back in that shack.

He said, "Lila."

And that was all he remembered.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

HENRY opened his eyes. It was a white room, a hospital room . . . private . . . a white, comfortable hospital bed.

He moved his head and saw the cop sitting in the chair. Not so wonderful.

The cop said, "You all right, Mr. Wilson?"

Henry felt like laughing. Mister Wilson?

"Yes," he said at last. "I'm fine." Sure, he was fine. He could hardly see the cop's face. But at least he was alive. "I want to see Lila," he said.

The cop smiled. "Sure, Mr. Wilson."

"Is she all right?"

The cop smiled again. He was a young fellow with dark hair, nice smile. Hell, cops weren't so bad.

"She's getting along swell, Mr. Wilson."

"When can I see her?"

"Pretty soon."

"God it seems a long time."

The cop stood up. "I'll see what I can do."

He went out of the room. Henry lay there and stared at the ceiling. At first it was gray and distant. Finally it took shape, turned white . . . spotless. He began to smell the hospital odor. Disinfectant of some kind, he supposed.

The cop came back. Henry tried to sit up. The room spun and he had to lie down again.

When he opened his eyes, they were standing beside his bed: the cop and a tousled-haired young fellow who looked like a football player. Henry frowned.

"This is Patrolman Nelson," the young cop said. "He wanted to say hi."

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The blond young giant grinned. "Glad you're coming out of it, Mr. Wilson. Sorry as hell about that boo-boo Waldron and I pulled the other night."

Henry frowned again. Nelson laughed. "We're sorry the story got out that you'd shot me. A reporter got real ambitious. The story was out before Waldron could tell the department he winged me, trying to get you."

Henry nodded and they went away. The young cop said, "We'll bring your wife in, Mr. Wilson."

"Yes," Henry said.

The cop said, "Lieutenant Murchison said I was to tell you that he's going to be all right. A blood transfusion, but that's all. He's made a report. He sure worked hard, right in this hospital, to be sure they cleared you." The cop laughed. "Lieutenant Murchison says to tell you next time you come in, he'll believe every word you say — like gospel."

The cop was gone. The door opened. Henry turned, looking for Lila. It was Mellor, his boss from the VA.

Mellor said, "Henry, I won't stay a minute. Just a minute. Want to tell you I'm sorry. Went off less than half-cocked. I wasn't primed at all. The man that'd served time in California was named Henry Wilson all right, but that was all."

"It's all right," Henry said. He looked beyond Mellor, watching for Lila. The trouble was, nobody seemed to realize that the one you loved was all that mattered.

Then finally she came. Lila was dressed carefully. She looked as neat as she kept her house. She looked like an angel. She looked wonderful. She sat down on the side of his bed and put her arms around him.

Henry was afraid to touch her. He held her gently.

"Not like that, Henry. Hold me tight."

"I'll hurt you."

"No, I love you."

He closed his arms about her. He kissed her mouth and for him nothing had ever tasted so good.

"I love you," she said again.

He smiled. "I know."

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Her frown mocked him. "You mean you really know I love you?"

"Why not?" Henry said. "I'm a hell of a guy. I just never had a chance to prove it before."

"I — I just wanted to help, Henry."

"Help?"

"The other morning. After I cleaned house, I went down to the Kit-Kat. I tried to find out about that awful man who hit you. I went back home, and then this man came to tell me his name was Carper and who'd hired him. I gave this man a drink for his information, and we went looking for the man who hit you. We couldn't find him. But somebody found out I was asking about him, and they told that awful fat man — he was waiting at the house when I got back —" She shuddered and he held her close.

She tightened her arms about his neck. Her lips moved up his throat. She did love him. Good lord, it was even possible she loved him as much as he loved her. He must be a hell of a guy!

For a long time they stayed like that. Lila said, "Henry, what are you thinking?"

"A hell of a thought," he said. "Hell of a thing. I'm almost glad this — this thing happened. Maybe it took something terrible like this to show me what I should have known all along."

She smiled. "You mean you finally know how much I love you."

He grinned. "Finally."

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