

CRIME

PROLOGUE BOOKS *presents*

*d e a d ,*

*s h e*

*w a s*

# BEAUTIFUL

*Hilda Wishart—more dangerous dead than alive*



WHIT MASTERSON

# THE MURDERED WOMAN WAS NO STRANGER

---

Once Hagen had loved her. Once he had hated her. Lying dead beside the expensive swimming pool, she was just as beautiful as when she was alive.

Only the dead girl knew who had wanted to kill her. But Hagen needed to know, too—and he needed to know fast.

Because the only guy who looked like he had a motive was Hagen. And the cops were giving him just enough rope to hang himself.

**WHIT MASTERSON**

---

**DEAD, SHE  
WAS BEAUTIFUL**

---

**PROLOGUE**

a division of F+W Crime

# 1

AT first, it looked like a joke. But the sign was real enough. Billboard size and freshly painted, it proclaimed proudly, This is Oakmar, A Modern Community for Modern Living. On all sides of it the sagebrush stretched away, unbroken.

Mort Hagen didn't laugh, not being easily moved to mirth, and not seeing anything humorous in the signboard's boast, anyway. On this hot October morning, Oakmar was fit only as a home for rabbits and lizards, a tangle of mesas laced with tortuous canyons and blanketed with grey sagebrush. But Hagen knew that, should he drive this way six months from today, the boast would be literally true. He had seen it happen before, the miracle that could be wrought by an onrush of population. All Southern Californians had.

He looked around, visualizing what was to come. Already a grader had passed back and forth, gouging scars where the streets would be. Small sub-division flags marked the outline of house-sites. A tarpaulin-shrouded stack of water pipe sat by the side of the paved highway. Oakmar's gestation period had begun. Perhaps, after six months—and several million dollars—even the name might have real significance, although at the moment the only oak was scrub-oak and the ocean, several miles distant, was permanently blocked from view by the hills. But trees could be planted and Hagen wasn't too sure that the hills couldn't be levelled, either.

For this was a Wayne Wishart Development, and Wishart was a name to be reckoned with locally, a synonym for the southland's mushrooming growth. Hagen had never met him, although Wishart had been his client since four o'clock yesterday afternoon. Mort Hagen was a private detective.

He didn't look much like a detective or much like anything else either, which was a great advantage to him. He was just above medium height with ordinary brown hair and ordinary brown eyes and a face that was neither handsome nor ugly but generally expressionless. Hagen cultivated this ordinariness diligently, even to his suit and the automobile he drove, both of which were brown also and somewhat nondescript. Yet the car and the man himself were capable of greater speed and endurance than appearances would indicate.

The dust boiled up from his wheels as he nosed the car down the freshly levelled street. He drove slowly and vigilantly, since his instructions had been vague, stopping now and then to let a huge tumbleweed scud by. A hot dry wind was blowing in off the desert, sending the mercury soaring unseasonably. It was known locally as a Santa Ana condition, just why nobody could say. Hagen would have liked to remove his coat but didn't, since he was here on business.

He slowed in front of the tract office, the only building on the subdivision. It was a small structure but pretentious, a pseudo-castle of grey stucco with towers at each corner decked with pennants. It sat on concrete pilings and could be carted off to the next Wayne Wishart Development once its function here was fulfilled. It was open for business but not doing any in the heat.

Hagen continued on, following the path that the grader had laid out for him, past an occasional sign that indicated the future location of a super-market or a school or a branch of one of the city's banks. When at last he reached the end of the street, out of sight of the sub-division castle, he stopped the car. The man who had been waiting for him there got up from his seat on a large rock by the roadside.

Hagen put on a professional smile and got out. "Mr. Wishart?"

"Yes. I presume you're Hagen." He took the business card that Hagen proffered, studied it intently and then threw it away. He was a tall spare man in his fifties, with iron-grey hair and sunken cheeks. "Good. Anybody see you come out here?"

"A rabbit or two maybe."

Wishart gave no answering smile. His manner was brusque and commanding, as if he owned the world. Hagen reflected that Wishart did own this particular corner of it. "Then listen closely. I don't have the time to repeat myself. You're a divorce detective, I believe."

“Domestic investigations is what it said on the card. But have it your way.”

“I want you to investigate my wife. I suspect her of being unfaithful to me.” He spoke impatiently, as if the subject bored him and he was anxious to dismiss it and get on to more important things. Any questions?”

“Yes,” said Hagen. Wishart’s bluntness put his teeth on edge. “How about some background, some facts to go on?”

“Facts are what I want you to give me. If I knew any more, I wouldn’t be hiring you. How much will you charge?”

“My rates are fifty dollars a day plus expenses. That includes my regular professional services, a written report on my findings and an appearance in court to testify if you wish. Anything else will be extra.”

“Sounds reasonable enough,” said Wishart, shrugging. From the expensive cut of his clothes, Hagen surmised that fifty dollars a day—or even an hour—didn’t mean much to Wishart. He wore a grey gabardine suit, a homburg and, despite the heat, a black topcoat. “When can you start?”

“I’ve already started. Or I will when we make it official.” From his inside coat pocket, Hagen drew forth the paper he had prepared and uncapped his fountain pen. “Please sign this down below where it says Client.”

“What’s this?” said Wishart dubiously, without reading it.

“The usual form which authorizes me to conduct my investigation. It’s for my own protection, just in case.”

“I hope you understand,” said Wishart, staring at him, “the precise scope of your employment. I do not desire any publicity. In fact, that is why I’m hiring you—to avoid publicity. Please keep that in mind at all times.”

Hagen merely nodded and held out his fountain pen.

“The success of my operations hinges upon an impeccable credit rating,” Wishart continued. “If my wife is behaving foolishly, I must know it before anyone else does—and, of course, take steps to remedy the situation.” As an afterthought, he added, “Naturally, I hope that I’m mistaken in my suspicions.”

“Naturally,” Hagen echoed piously and put the signed authorization carefully away in his wallet. Still holding the wallet, he said, “It’s

customary to give a retainer. Fifty dollars all right? A cheque will be fine.”

“No cheque,” objected Wishart and gave him a single crisp bill instead. “I don’t want my office to know that I’m in town today. They believe that I’m in Los Angeles. That’s why I had you meet me out here.” He correctly interpreted Hagen’s glance around. “A taxi brought me. You can give me a ride to the station. I’ll catch the noon train.”

“Sure. Where you staying in L.A.? I might have to contact you.”

“No, you won’t. I’ll be coming home tomorrow and I’ll call you then. What time is it? I don’t want to miss my train.”

Hagen glanced at his wrist watch. “We’d better mosey along. You can fill me in on the vital statistics on the way.” As Wishart moved around the car to occupy the passenger’s seat, Hagen noticed his client’s shoes. They were high-topped army brogans, comfortably old and well-worn, in sharp contrast to his expensive clothes. As he slid in behind the wheel, Hagen commented on it. “I see you wore your walking shoes. Afraid I might not show up and you’d be stranded?”

Wishart snapped, “When you’re my age, you’ll learn that you can do as you please and nobody cares. There’s a lot of things more important than style.”

Hagen wondered if that applied to wearing a topcoat on such a hot day, but he kept his mouth shut. He had no wish to lose the job, which he needed, and a rich client’s peculiarities were his own business. He started the car back toward the highway, avoiding the tract office.

When they were on the paved road and headed for the city, Wishart seemed to relax a trifle, as if a distasteful business were over. He stiffened again though when Hagen asked if he had brought a picture of his wife.

“No, I didn’t. Why? Is it necessary?”

“It always helps. Give me a description, anyway, so I won’t make any mistakes.”

“Well,” said Wishart grudgingly, “my wife is younger than I am, considerably so. She’s rather tall. Blonde hair. Quite handsome by ordinary standards.” There was no affection in his voice; he might have been describing a stranger. “She generally wears a mink coat when she goes out.”

Must be a cold-blooded family, Hagen thought. Aloud he said: "Mrs. Wishart is home now?"

"She's supposed to be. You'll find the address in the phone book. Camden Drive." He didn't give the number. "My mother lives with us. Also my secretary. Neither of them is blonde however, so there should be no confusion."

"Anyone else?"

"A cook—and there's a Mexican girl who comes in twice a week to clean." Wishart stared at him. "I hope you're not intending to question anyone in my personal household. I wouldn't like that."

"Whatever you say."

"Let me be perfectly clear. I'm not asking you to gather evidence that will stand up in court. There will be no divorce, no matter what you find. I don't care what my wife does, as long as it doesn't become known. All I want is a complete and continuing report on her activities."

Hagen nodded, pleased with the profitable prospect. He had been in the domestic investigations business too long to speculate on motives. Wishart professed to be devoid of jealousy but Hagen wasn't ready to buy that, not yet. Very few men, particularly those with young wives, would own up to their true reasons, even to themselves. And no matter what the truth was, it still added up to fifty dollars per day for Hagen, with no undue strain that he could foresee.

Hagen made a couple of remarks about the unseasonable heat to which Wishart responded curtly and, aside from that, they conversed no more until they pulled up in front of the big railway terminal near the harbour.

"I'll call you when I come back from L.A.," said Wishart as he left. "I'll expect you to have some information for me."

"I'll get on it this afternoon," promised Hagen and watched Wishart's tall figure march away into the station. The big army shoes looked almost comical viewed from a distance. Hagen wished he were wealthy enough to afford idiosyncrasies and abrupt manners.

His next move was not routine, but simple curiosity. He found a parking place near by and walked back to the station. Unobtrusively, he circled the waiting room. Wishart wasn't there. Outside, the noon



train was poised, ready to depart. Hagen stood inside the terminal for a while, studying the passengers boarding it. He did not see his client.

Finally, murmuring, "It's only money," he crossed the bricks to the train and swung aboard. Deliberately, he walked the length of the train, from observation car to diner. When he descended, just ahead of the conductor's warning shouts, his face was as expressionless as ever. But his eyes were thoughtful.

Wayne Wishart had not taken the train to Los Angeles. Why not? And where had he gone instead? Hagen waited until the diesel slid away and he was alone by the tracks. Then he walked slowly back to his automobile to begin his job. He couldn't help but wonder. However, Hagen was careful not to wonder more than fifty dollars worth.

CAMDEN DRIVE was a quiet meandering street in the city's oldest, and still most respectable, residential section. The Wishart home was the newest house in the area and, as Hagen anticipated, a show place. It was extremely modern in design, with much plate glass and polished redwood, a low house that achieved an effect of height by being built on several levels. The front yard was negligible but the back yard was tremendous, since the house occupied an entire block. The rear was shielded from view by a high wall of glass brick but Hagen could see a diving platform, which indicated a swimming pool, and a wire backstop, which indicated a tennis court. It was not the sort of home that appealed very much to Hagen but the overall effect spelled money, and this Hagen liked a great deal.

He took up his position shortly after noon, pausing only long enough on his way from the railroad station to eat lunch and to check the address in the telephone directory. At the drive-in where he ate, he purchased several cold sandwiches and had his thermos bottle filled with coffee; from experience, he knew he might have a long wait.

Hagen didn't care much one way or another. He was a patient man and he enjoyed his work, within limits. Even when he didn't, the pay was good and any job had certain drawbacks, after all. Sometimes, in a mood of self-criticism, he would admit to himself that he was in a dirty business but even then he couldn't think of anything he'd rather do. Or that he was qualified to do, for that matter.

The army had given him his start, by assigning him to Intelligence where he had eventually risen to the rank of captain. Before that, he had had no career to speak of and he had taken to Intelligence eagerly. He enjoyed fitting pieces of information together. The significance of

the picture didn't matter to him; the parts were more important than the whole. Given the proper training, Hagen would have made a good research chemist or engineer. Instead, at war's end, he had moved naturally into the field of private investigation. Soon he discovered that most of the cases coming his way involved divorce and because he had an orderly mind he decided to specialize.

He came to this decision in a bitter moment but he never regretted it later. It coincided with the break-up of his own marriage for the reason most familiar to him, infidelity. So specialization in marriage failure seemed to him to be ironic retribution, a repayment to the world generally. It was also a punishment for himself since marriage was the one thing he had never been able to make sense of. He still sought some all-inclusive answer in every case he handled. But he hadn't found it yet.

Hagen doubted if his present assignment was going to supply it, either. On the face of it, Wayne Wishart's wife should be the last woman in the world to stray. Wealth, position, security ... they were all embodied many times over in the mansion Hagen scrutinized. That left out love, of course, but Hagen was convinced that love was a vastly over-rated commodity; it hadn't stopped his own marriage from foundering.

"Might as well admit it," he murmured aloud, coming to the same old answer. "People are screwy." But since one particular person was screwy enough to pay him well for sitting here in his car, Hagen had no real reason to complain. So Hagen sat and waited.

His patience was at last rewarded. He had begun to doubt that he would accomplish anything this afternoon. The Wishart house basked somnolently in the hot embrace of the Santa Ana, with nothing to indicate that life existed within. About three o'clock, however, the wind fell off to be replaced at once with a cooler breeze from the ocean. As if this had been a signal, Mrs. Wishart appeared.

From his position across the street, Hagen couldn't make out her features. She came down the driveway at the wheel of a crimson MG roadster, her back to him. She wore rakish dark glasses and a beret. But Hagen saw that her hair was blonde and that a mink coat was thrown capelike over her shoulders. She fitted the description Wishart had given him. He started his own car and followed the MG off.

The chase gave him no trouble; he was skilled in trailing through traffic and the crimson car was a vivid target. He kept discreetly behind, never closing to within a half-block. His job was to observe without being observed, to observe and then to report. Success depended upon the quarry remaining unsuspecting.

At the end of an hour, Mrs. Wishart still seemed completely oblivious to his presence but Hagen had little to report, either. From her home, she had driven directly into the heart of the city's business district, left the MG in a parking lot and struck off on foot. A distinctive figure with her yellow hair and mink coat, she presented no problems for her pursuer. It was so easy that Hagen stayed a considerable distance behind barely keeping the woman in sight. It wasn't an unpleasant task; he liked Wayne Wishart's taste in women more than his taste in architecture.

But, though Hagen meticulously noted all her movements, the record was prosaic. Mrs. Wishart was shopping, nothing more sinful. Her path, an erratic one, led from drugstore to department store to millinery shop, with many side excursions to scrutinize window displays. Once she stopped to shut herself in a telephone kiosk and make a brief call. There was nothing suspicious in this, nor in any of her actions. Mrs. Wishart acted nothing at all like a lady with mischief to hide.

Just the same, Mort Hagen carried a vague uneasiness within him, nothing tangible, just the stirring of some intuition as yet beneath the level of consciousness. It nagged at him, like a forgotten name. He couldn't pin it down but at least twice during the afternoon it translated itself into the weird sensation that he himself was being followed, that he was not the pursuer but the pursued. He laughed at himself but he looked over his shoulder every now and then, anyway. He saw nothing amiss, just as he expected, and he blamed the Santa Ana for making him jumpy.

The first store lights were coming on when Mrs. Wishart turned back toward the parking lot. Her last stop was at a sporting goods house where she lingered for a time studying the window display before entering. The window featured archery equipment, bows and arrows and brightly painted targets. But when the woman reappeared she had not purchased anything so large—or anything at all that

Hagen, loitering across the street, could discern. While she waited for her car, Hagen reclaimed his own from a nearby loading zone. He had not received a ticket; he bought commercial licence plates every year for just this reason, although the cost was somewhat higher.

The flow of traffic from downtown was homeward and the two cars, the sleek MG and the nondescript Ford, were borne with it. Now he stayed bumper-to-bumper with his quarry, fearful of losing her in the gathering dusk. The strangeness he had felt before was intensified in this twilight world which always made things look ghostly, anyway. And he was suddenly obsessed with a desire to see Mrs. Wishart's face. For almost three hours he had trailed a shock of blonde hair and a mink coat without ever glimpsing her features. Hagen thought, maybe that's what seems so peculiar; just let me see that she's got eyes and a mouth and a nose like everybody else and I'll get over it. When they stopped for red lights, he tried to study her in her own rear view mirror but without success. Despite the approach of night, Mrs. Wishart still wore her dark glasses.

They returned to Camden Drive. Hagen gradually dropped behind until, when the MG turned into its home driveway, he was a discreet block away. He stopped there, got out and went the remaining distance on foot. He heard the garage door slam down at the side of the Wishart house. Hagen halted and in the shadow of a palm tree made the afternoon's final notation: *Mrs. W. returned home 5.45 p.m.* As he put the notebook away, he heard her high heels on the driveway and saw her tall figure cross to the porch.

Automatically, Hagen stepped back into deeper shadow. And then, abruptly, he halted all motion, even his breathing. Mrs. Wishart had stepped into the pool of amber light that flooded the porch. As she did so, like an actress stepping upon a stage, she turned her face in the direction of her unseen audience.

She had removed her dark glasses and her face was plainly visible at last. It was this that caused Hagen to freeze. It was a pretty face and Hagen knew it well, as intimately as any face in the world except his own. Three years had changed it not at all, except in the name it bore. Now it was called Mrs. Wayne Wishart. Then it had been called Mrs. Mort Hagen.

### 3

THE last year of the war Hagen had spent on a coral atoll in the south-western Pacific, a bleak and lonely outpost usually referred to by its inhabitants as “Die-Hard Rock.” By actual measurement, there was no woman closer than eight hundred and thirty-two nautical miles. When, by the grace of God and the demob system, Hagen’s captivity finally ended he yearned for the sight of a female figure and the sound of a womanly voice in the same manner that a man dying of thirst yearns for water. It did not occur to him then that a thirsty man who does not use proper judgment when water comes to hand can get a terrible bellyache. It did occur to him later.

He met Hilda Christy the first week he was home. He married her the second week. The marriage lasted two years and a few months, legally. Actually, it was over considerably sooner than that. He had never expected to see her again.

And now, through some quirk of fate, he had been hired to follow her.

Hagen was not a man who dealt in ironies and the revelation left him shaken. He was not so confused, however, that he forgot the mechanics of his job. He returned to his automobile and parked it across the street from the Wishart home in a position of surveillance while he pondered his newly discovered status. And, though he was far from hungry, he forced himself to eat the tasteless sandwiches and drink the coffee, which was now barely lukewarm.

His first inclination was to call it quits and go home. Twice he started the engine of his car and twice he shut it off. Repelled he was, but intensely curious too. What wild coincidence had brought Wayne Wishart to him, of all people—or had it been coincidence? Yet there

was nothing to indicate otherwise, no reason that Wishart should deliberately hire his wife's ex-husband to entrap her when there were a dozen other agencies to choose from. No, it was obvious that Wishart hadn't been aware of the connection. Perhaps Hilda had never told him of her previous marriage. It wouldn't be the first lie she was guilty of.

It added up, when Hagen considered it for a while, to a pointless joke on all of them. Particularly on Hilda who he didn't doubt was guilty of everything that Wishart suspected, and more. The question remaining was: what should he do about it? Hagen wasn't sure but he congratulated himself on his intuitions of the afternoon. Something had been hovering over him all right—his own past—and now he wondered why he hadn't recognized it instantly. But then, Hilda hadn't recognized him either so he could be excused. People generally saw only what they expected to see.

He certainly had never expected to see Hilda in such a luxurious setting. Or perhaps that was wishful thinking on his part. Yet there she was, plainly visible every now and then through the huge lighted windows as she passed from room to room, obviously the mistress of the house. There were other women present too, a grande dame whom Hagen took to be Wishart's mother, and a younger woman, probably the secretary. He couldn't make out their faces very well and didn't pay them much attention except when they provided a background for Hilda.

Grudgingly, he had to admit that she fitted into her new background nicely. There was a poise he didn't remember, an assurance in her walk that helped explain why he hadn't recognized her earlier. Money made a difference, all right. Hagen grinned nastily, speculating on how long her poise would last if she knew who was watching her, and for what reason. He was not generally vindictive but in this instance his imaginings were pleasant.

So he continued his lonely vigil, still undecided on his future actions, while the Wishart menage went through their accustomed evening routine under his steady gaze, like exotic fish in an aquarium. Cocktails were served and dinner followed and the television was turned on. The elder Mrs. Wishart settled down to watch it, all the while stabbing some instrument into her lap as if she was chipping at

stone handiwork. The secretary disappeared somewhere but no new lights came on to show where she'd gone.

Hilda wandered restlessly to and fro on the main level and Hagen thought, she hasn't changed completely, she still gets bored in a hurry. Right now she's spoiling for an argument. He well remembered her quarrelsome side and often thought of her as Hilda of the Arguments, like a character from the heraldic age. He sat up a little straighter in anticipation as he recalled another possibility. He had witnessed that pacing act on evenings in the past when it portended other than verbal outlets.

"Seven to five she's got a date," he murmured. "Or intends to have."

As if to justify his words, Hilda stopped her pacing. She glanced at her wrist watch, shot a quick look at the older woman and left the living room. A moment later, windows lighted at the rear of the sprawling house. Hagen couldn't witness her actions now but he guessed that she had gone to her bedroom to dress, preparatory to going out. He put his thermos bottle away and flexed his fingers, his decision made. Since he had come this far on the job, he would go a little further just for his own amusement. When the lights of Hilda's bedroom were extinguished, Hagen started the engine of his car and slowly backed up the dark street to a more advantageous position.

His preparations were in vain. The woman who left the Wishart house was not Hilda. Judging by the silhouette, it was Wishart's secretary who was at the wheel of the crimson MG, and as she passed Hagen he could see little but that she was alone in the vehicle. Of Hilda there was no sign at all.

Disappointed at the failure of his own logic, Hagen alighted and walked back to his former sentry post. Hilda had not returned to the living room, either. The old woman still sat before the glowing screen, placidly punching holes in whatever she held out of sight in her lap. Hagen looked at his own wrist watch. It was barely eight o'clock.

"She couldn't have gone to bed," he muttered. "Not her own bed, anyway."

As he stood there, wondering, the answer was supplied. The grounds at the rear of the mansion were abruptly bathed in light from low-angle flood lamps. The diffused beams made the glass brick wall glow as if it were phosphorescent. Hagen didn't hesitate. He crossed the street, and



following the pavement, circled the barrier, hoping to find a gate. He found one but it was as tall as the wall itself and he couldn't reach the latch on the inside. From within the enclosure came the faint sweet strains of an orchestra. Hagen was reminded of an enchanted castle, complete with beautiful princess—although he couldn't recall any fairy tale in which a divorce detective had figured.

"Might as well write my own," he said aloud. He could put his hands on top of the wall; he did. Digging his knees into the bumpy glass surface, he was able to pull himself up to where he could see, at least a little. The grounds were lushly verdant, a small jungle of tropical foliage that grew right down to the diving platform that overhung the pool. At the shallow end, closest to the house, a redwood cabana stood, outfitted with patio furniture and umbrella tables. An archery course had been laid out on the grassy area alongside.

Hilda was reclining in a redwood chaise longue. Hagen's assumption had been partly correct; she had changed her clothes but what she had donned was a bathing suit. Over it she wore, in casual incongruity, her mink coat. She was apparently alone but on the table by her elbow sat a pitcher of drinks—and two glasses.

The sight of the glasses decided Hagen. He slipped over the wall and dropped quietly into the soft earth of a flower bed. He thought he understood now. Hilda had a date, all right, but in the safety of her own home. Pretty clever, he thought; she gets rid of the secretary and sends the old lady to bed. Very cosy and discreet; she's learned some things since I knew her. Just how much he was curious to discover.

It was hard to advance toward the pool without making any noise, due to the profusion of shrubbery, but he did his best. He hoped that the music, drifting out of the amplifiers on the cabana roof, would cover his movements. And when he halted in the shadow of the diving platform to wait for events to unfold, he was confident it had. Hilda was staring dreamily up at the stars, apparently lost in reverie. Hagen quietly sat down behind a clump of lantana and made himself comfortable. This might take several hours.

It didn't even take several seconds. Hilda turned her head, looked directly at his place of concealment and called pleasantly, "Why don't you join me over here, Morton? It's much more comfortable."

For an instant he just sat there, feeling like a small boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Like such a boy, a half dozen impossible courses of action flitted through his mind and came to naught. He had been caught and he would have to take his whipping. Pretending to smile but actually gritting his teeth, he walked the long distance down the poolside to where Hilda sat enthroned, like a queen granting an interview to a subject.

She smiled too, regally. "How nice to see you again, Morton. Please sit down and have a drink. You can see I brought a glass for you."

"Thanks," he said stiffly but not obeying her. "How'd you know I was there?"

"When I heard the noise, I guessed it was you. Don't tell me you weren't following me this afternoon, Morton?"

She knew he loathed being called Morton but there wasn't much he could do about it now. He said, "Nobody could ever tell you anything, as I remember. I guess I'm getting clumsy in my old age." He considered that a point for himself. Hilda didn't like to be reminded of the passing of time. Truthfully he had to admit that she didn't show any signs of deteriorating; in fact, she looked better than he remembered. Her face had always been pretty but added maturity had brought out the striking Nordic features to advantage, the high cheekbones, the slightly slanted blue eyes and the cream-pale skin. Hilda still missed real beauty, though, because of her expression, a tense and watchful look that was engraved on her face even when she was relaxing.

Hilda was not flustered by his inspection. "You might try straining a point and tell me that I'm looking well." She casually flung the mink's folds aside to reveal the long firm lines of her body, enhanced by the clinging white swimsuit.

"You're looking well," he said woodenly.

"And you also, Morton. Well, aren't you going to sit down? I made manhattans because I remembered you dislike them so."

Hagen sat down because it seemed ridiculous not to. However, he shook his head at the drink she poured. "I'm not drinking."

"Same old Morton," she murmured, sipping her own and studying him over the rim of the glass. "You haven't changed a bit. Don't tell me you're still running that shabby little detective agency."

Hagen flushed. "Why else would I be here?"

"I don't know. I've been wondering all afternoon." Hilda grinned slowly, displaying her white even teeth. "It couldn't be that deep down in that romantic heart of yours a flame still burns, could it? I'll bet that it does. You had to see me again because you couldn't help yourself."

"That ended years ago and you know it."

"Do I? Still—here you are. Well, perhaps it was just vulgar curiosity then. You wanted to find out how I've done for myself." She waved a negligent hand around at her surroundings. "Well, Morton, what do you think? How *have* I done?"

"Why don't you tell me?"

"I'll tell you. This house cost seventy-three thousand five hundred, and that's without the furniture. I'll bet you didn't know there was that much money in the whole world. And that's just the house—"

Hagen stared at her as she went on enumerating her possessions and their price, ticking off the items on her slender fingers. He wondered how he had ever conceived himself to be in love with her. Hilda had always had the soul of a tramp and the dollar sign was her hallmark of value. That had been their trouble from the beginning—money. The unfaithfulness had only provided the final excuse they both needed to end the marriage. He had discovered that she was receiving presents, expensive bits of costume jewellery that hadn't been purchased out of his meagre commissions. One bleak evening he had made the direct accusation; she admitted it; he moved out the same night. After the legal formalities, she had drifted away, since that was her nature, presumably in search of bigger game. And she had found it as Wishart's wife.

He interrupted her abruptly. "How long has it been going on, Hilda?"

"Wayne and I were married last year, in Las Vegas."

"I mean how long have you been playing around?"

Her blue eyes narrowed and she slowly put down the cocktail glass. "And just what is that supposed to mean? If you're trying to be funny —"

"I'm not laughing. Your husband knows that you're two-timing him. He hired me to get the facts."

"You're lying!"

“That’s your department, not mine. I’ve got his retainer in my pocket and if you’re around tomorrow you’ll see me give it back to him. I didn’t know who Mrs. Wishart was when I took the job but now that I do know I don’t want any part of it.” He smiled slightly. “I don’t think it’s quite ethical for a man to be trailing his own ex-wife.”

She leaned forward to seize his knee and her nails were sharp. “Do you really mean what you’re saying?” she demanded, staring at him. “Wayne hired you to follow me? Mort, I haven’t done anything!”

He disengaged her grip. “Baby, this is me you’re talking to. Save the wide-eyed act for Daddy Warbucks.” He reached for the jug. “And since I’m no longer on the job, I’ll have that drink now, thanks. I could use it.”

“You don’t believe me. You think it’s true.”

“People don’t change much, I’ve found. When you’ve got a weakness, it usually comes out, sooner or later. Just how much does Wishart know about you, anyway?” Hagen chuckled at a new thought. “Pardon my vulgar curiosity, but Wishart isn’t the one from before, is he?”

Hilda looked bewildered. “Before?”

“Three years ago. The guy who gave you that jewellery.”

“Of course not. That was—well, you’ll never meet him, you can be sure of that.” She laughed abruptly, a brittle sound. “I don’t know why I’m even bothering to talk to you, really I don’t. If there is the least bit of truth in what you’re saying you’re twisting it around simply to hurt me.”

“That’s right,” he agreed mockingly. “Your husband really hired me to protect you. He’s worried about your safety.”

To Hagen’s surprise, she seemed to accept that explanation. The frown that had contorted her forehead erased itself and she actually smiled. “Why, of course. Wayne was concerned because I’m alone so much. How sweet of him—but he needn’t have worried.” From the pocket of her mink coat Hilda drew forth an object that glittered in the light. It was a hunting knife, shiny and new. “You see, I can protect myself in case I’m attacked.”

“I never doubted it.”

Jokingly, she waved the gleaming blade back and forth in front of his eyes. “You’re not going to attack me, are you, Morton?” Her

composure had returned; she was using his full name again. "I warn you that I'll fight to the death."

Her tone was light but he didn't think she was joking. He didn't move back from the knife. He said slowly, "Let's understand a few things. When we got our divorce I washed my hands of you. That still goes. I'm not going to upset your applecart because I've got a strong hunch you'll do that without any help from me. So you can put the knife away."

She didn't argue for a change but did as he suggested. "You're really a dear boy. You know I wouldn't hurt you, anyway." He knew no such thing. Underneath her flippant sophistication Hilda possessed a vicious streak which occasionally manifested itself violently. Once she had thrown a pan of boiling water at him during an unimportant quarrel. He suspected she was capable of more violent action when something vital—like her present position—was at stake.

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't tell your husband anything."

"What is there to tell?" She rose, shedding the mink. "I'm going to take a dip. The heat's been awful, hasn't it? There are some spare swim trunks in the cabana if you'd care to join me."

"I'm going home. I'm not used to rich living."

"It's the only way to live, actually. At least, have one more for the road."

Hilda sauntered away toward the diving platform, putting on her bathing cap, tucking her golden hair up under it. She strolled slowly and hippily, as much on display as a fashion model. Hagen hesitated, admiring her self-assurance despite himself. Hilda had been more nearly right than he would admit: there still was an attraction, even after everything. It was a good thing he had already decided to give up this case; there was no use in reopening old wounds.

Abruptly, he turned his back on her as she ascended to the diving board, simply because she expected him to watch her. She had enumerated her possessions earlier to incite his envy; now she was doing the same thing with her body. Hagen didn't intend to give her the satisfaction of posing for him. He filled his glass instead, just as if he enjoyed her too-sweet cocktails.

"Pour one for me, too, Morton!" she called down the length of the pool, prompting him to look. "I'll be right there!"

He didn't turn and, a moment later, heard the splash. He didn't wait for her to join him but downed the manhattan in a silent bitter toast to the house that had cost seventy-three thousand five hundred, without furniture. She was welcome to it, and it to her. He intended to make that his goodbye.

But when he finally turned, there was no one to hear it. The surface of the pool was bare except for tiny ripples that spread in ever-widening circles. Hilda had not come up.

FOR a moment longer he thought it was a joke and that Hilda was trying to worry him by holding her breath below water. Once he went to look for her, she would emerge, laughing at him. That would be just like her. But, after another full minute had passed and still no Hilda, Hagen was suddenly gripped by a cold premonition. He hastened to the edge of the pool and looked down.

Hilda was plainly visible through the shimmering water, which was lighted from beneath. She lay on the bottom at the nine foot depth and she was beyond playing pranks on him or anyone else. In the bare flesh of her back, squarely between the shoulder blades, stood the feathered shaft of an arrow. From the wound a thin ribbon of blood weaved upward to the surface, coiling like smoke from a cigarette.

Hagen stood at the water's edge, stunned, gaping downwards at the shocking sight. His mind at first refused to accept it as reality. It groped instead for some saving explanation. But it found none and suddenly he realized what had happened and he ran along the pool side toward the deep end, shedding his coat as he went. "Got to get her out," he muttered. "Got to ..."

He had kicked off his shoes when reason returned, and he stopped. He was too late. Hilda was beyond rescue. Hagen had seen other dead persons in his time and the signs were evident here even to an untrained eye. Going in after her body would only ruin his clothes without helping her—or the police, who would want to see everything just as it was so they might find her killer.

"Killer!" Hagen said aloud, because it was a new thought. The arrow had come from somewhere; some human hand had directed its flight. The archer must still be within the walls.

Hagen cast a quick glance around. Nothing moved. "Arrow was in her back," he said. Hilda had been shot while on the diving board. That meant the arrow had come from the shrubbery at the far end of the yard, the direction from which Hagen himself had entered. He ran that way.

It did not occur to him that there might be more arrows and that he presented an inviting target. Hagen possessed no sort of weapon himself; he did not even own a gun, and did not miss one now. At the moment, he was preoccupied only with proving the correctness of his deductions, preferably by discovering the identity of the bowman.

He found the bow instead. He stumbled over it immediately after stepping off the tiled area around the pool. It was a long bow, tautly strung, with painted tips that indicated it was part of a set. It leaned against the thick bole of a palm tree, so close to the diving platform that whoever had used it must have had an almost point-blank shot at Hilda's back.

Hagen's hand went out to seize it, then halted in mid air. Partly it was because of professional caution; there might be fingerprints. But mainly it was because at that instant he heard a new sound, the sound of a gate being softly closed at the rear of the garden. Someone was leaving the grounds. Scorning caution, Hagen charged after, raising his voice in a shout.

He was too late. When he reached the wall the gate was latched as before. In the distance Hagen could hear the receding sound of running feet. He fumbled with the latch and when it proved stubborn, hauled himself up to the top of the glass brick wall. Pursuit was out of the question. He was in his stockinged feet and his car keys were in his coat, back at the pool side. The best he could hope for was a glimpse of the intruder.

In this he was partly successful, but only partly. A block away, a street lamp cast a lonely glow. Through its circle of light, momentarily passed a man's legs, running hard. The upper half of the man's body was obscured by the drooping branches of a pepper tree. Hagen was too far away and the glimpse too brief, even to be sure of the colour of the man's trousers. Immediately afterwards, he heard an automobile engine grind to life.



Hagen swore in exasperation. The car noise faded away; the murderer had made good his escape. Frowning, he lowered himself to earth and slowly tramped back the way he had come. He had stubbed his toe but, during the chase, had not paid any attention to it. Now it began to throb.

He forgot it again immediately, however, as he reached the lighted area of the pool. He was no longer alone. The elder Mrs. Wishart, drawn forth by his shout probably, was standing in the shelter of the cabana. She was holding a telephone receiver to her head and Hagen could hear her voice plainly.

"Yes, murdered," was what she was saying. "There's no question about it. Please hurry."

She heard Hagen's approach and she turned her head to stare at him. Neither her arrogant expression nor her voice changed. She drew up her hand as if for a dagger-thrust and light flashed from the tool she held. It appeared to be a four-inch awl, a leather punch. Some belt-like strips of unworked leather were draped around her neck, and they seemed to establish her mysterious stabbing gestures while watching television. She said into the telephone, "I believe I have the murderer right here. I'll hold him for you until you arrive." She hung up and stood looking at Hagen.

He said, "Do you mind if I sit down? My feet are killing me."

"By all means," she said coolly. "But I'd like to warn you that I can scream very loudly."

"I don't doubt it," he said, although his first impression was that Mrs. Wishart had never done much screaming, loud or otherwise. Bellowing seemed to be more her forte. She had a bluff indomitable face, well-tanned, with hard grey eyes. Her hair was grey too, but there was nothing aged about her bearing. She wore black slacks, held up by a fancily carved leather belt, and a ruffled blouse. She looked too young to have a son Wayne Wishart's age. "By the way, Mrs. Wishart, my name is Hagen. Mort Hagen."

"Since you already know who I am, that takes care of introductions." Mrs. Wishart stepped forward vigilantly, holding the sharp awl outthrust, but Hagen was only bending over to put on his shoes. "Why did you kill Hilda?"

He gestured at the jug of manhattans. "She forgot the Angostura." The idea that he might be suspected struck Hagen as amusing, nothing more, and he refused to take it seriously. He wasn't afraid of the old lady but he didn't intend to be punched up like leathercraft, either. He finished lacing his shoes and then, seeing her still standing on guard, said, "Oh, come on now, relax. I didn't kill her or anyone else, and I don't intend to start with you."

"You just sit there," she warned. "And no tricks."

Hagen shrugged and didn't argue, since it didn't matter what she thought, anyway. He didn't speak again until he heard the sirens in the distance, coming fast. Then he rose and said, "We'd better let the boys in." Wary of the awl and Mrs. Wishart's threatening expression, he went to admit the police.

Two uniform cops were the first to arrive in a prowler car. They were followed by a detachment of plain-clothes detectives from Homicide, and shortly afterwards Captain Troge himself showed up. A murder involving the wife of Wayne Wishart was important enough to rout even the homicide chief out of his easy chair. Hagen expected that the district attorney would be the next arrival.

It turned out to be the police surgeon, together with a deputy coroner and a contingent from the crime laboratory, photographers and fingerprint men. Within the space of twenty minutes the quiet Wishart mansion resembled a small factory, except that there was no visible product.

By this time Hagen had repeated his story twice, to ascending echelons of authority. He was beginning to worry a little, since he knew cops rather well. Nothing had been said to him; no accusations had been made. Everyone had been very polite—too polite, he thought. Was it possible that the police were going to react in the same manner as Mrs. Wishart, that nobody was going to believe him? It was in this disquieting frame of mind that he finally reached the top echelon, Captain Troge himself.

Troge was at the Cabana, smoking placidly while he watched the efforts of his subordinates to bring up Hilda's body. They were having a good deal of difficulty since the arrow that killed her had driven the breath from her lungs and the body lacked buoyancy. When Hagen

reached the scene, a detective in swim trunks was attempting to attach a rope to the corpse.

“Hello, Hagen.” Troge greeted him pleasantly. He was a big bear of a man with a shrewd affable face and salt-and-pepper hair. Hagen knew him slightly but mainly through reputation. Troge was an efficient man-hunter, with better than twenty years’ experience at his job. “What can you tell me about this?”

“Pretty nearly everything except who killed her.” Hagen was sure that Troge already knew the story but he repeated it anyway. “I was hired by Wayne Wishart this morning to investigate his wife’s activities. You know the sort of work I do. I followed her all afternoon. Hilda spotted me somehow and pulled a switch on me. I was snooping around the garden and she invited me to have a drink with her. While my back was turned, somebody shot an arrow into her. I got to the wall in time to see his legs running off down the street but that was all.”

It sounded implausible even to Hagen, the bare facts related in this manner. Troge gave no evidence of scepticism. “She know why you were following her?”

“I told her.”

“How come? I thought you fellows had a duty to your clients.”

“Hilda and I used to be married. I figured that took me off the case.”

“Uh-huh.” Troge scratched his chin reflectively. “Kind of a funny deal, it seems to me. A man hiring his wife’s ex-husband to follow her around. Doesn’t sound quite human.”

Hagen said slowly, “I can’t argue with that but maybe there’s an answer. When I first tumbled to who Mrs. Wayne Wishart was, I thought that it was just a funny mistake. A coincidence, a one-in-a-million shot. Now I’m not so sure.”

“Why not?”

“While I was tailing Hilda this afternoon, I had the funny feelings that somebody had an eye on *me*. Maybe I was watched, to make sure I carried out my sucker play exactly right. So it follows logically that maybe I was picked for this job on purpose. I was hired to be on the scene of the crime, by somebody who knew that a crime was going to be committed.”

“You’re putting the finger on Wishart. Well, it’s a thought,” agreed Troge noncommittally. He told one of the uniformed men to find Mrs.

Wishart. The cop misunderstood and glanced dubiously at the pool. Troge said testily, "Mrs. *Rosemary* Wishart, the body's mother-in-law. I know where the body is, for the love of Mike!"

Then he and Hagen stood aside to allow the photographer to film the interior of the cabana. Hilda's mink coat still draped carelessly across the chaise longue where she had thrown it. "You didn't like her much, did you, Hagen?"

"I've never seen a friendly divorce yet."

"How'd she feel about you?"

"The same way. We broke up over another man. Hilda liked to live fast."

Troge nodded and greeted Mrs. Wishart, who came through the shrubbery from the direction of the house.

"Mrs. Wishart, it is Mr. Hagen's claim that he was hired by your son this morning out at this Oakmar development. Mr. Hagen is a private detective and he says your son wanted him to follow Hilda."

"That's absolutely impossible," she said, giving Hagen a hostile look. "My son Wayne is in Los Angeles. He wouldn't hire a detective, anyway. The whole idea is ridiculous."

"He's not in Los Angeles," Hagen contradicted her. "He's just pretending to be. Actually, he's here in town. I don't believe he ever left."

Troge said, "It's easily checked." He told the uniformed officer to telephone the Los Angeles hotel where Wishart usually stayed. When the man had gone to obey his instructions, Troge said, "Mrs. Wishart, you say that the idea of your son hiring a detective to follow his wife is ridiculous. Do you mind telling me why?"

Mrs. Wishart hesitated. "What possible reason could he have had? That's what I mean."

"There wasn't any trouble between them, then? They had a happy marriage?"

Again she hesitated before replying. "I suppose so. No marriage is altogether without flaws, you know. But certainly if Wayne suspected anything, he'd be man enough to handle it himself. I don't know why this is necessary, Captain—you've already found your murderer."

"Just routine," said Troge. He didn't contradict her accusation.

Hagen said, "Hilda brought out two glasses from the house. She told me that the other one was for me but that just doesn't figure. She couldn't have known I'd come over the wall."

"No," agreed Troge, "that is, unless you're not telling us everything."

"Who was she expecting?" argued Hagen. "That secretary, what's her name, Avis Gill? Or a lover? Or maybe even an enemy?"

"Hilda didn't have an enemy in the world," said Mrs. Wishart quickly.

"She certainly had some peculiar friends then," said Hagen, waving at the pool where the diver was working. "She was carrying a hunting knife in the pocket of her coat. I know because she showed it to me. That isn't the sort of thing a woman generally carries around for no reason.

"Hilda had no enemies," Mrs. Wishart repeated stoutly. "Except you."

"Well, I haven't exactly seen you shedding any tears," he snapped.

Mrs. Wishart bristled but her reply was prevented by the return of the uniformed officer Troge had sent to telephone. He reported to the homicide chief in low tones and then departed again. Troge said to Hagen, "Wayne Wishart is registered at the Biltmore, has been since yesterday."

"You see?" crowed Mrs. Wishart. "What did I tell you?"

"Did your man speak to him personally?" persisted Hagen.

"No," admitted Troge. "But we'll keep at it until we do. Any other thoughts, Hagen?"

Hagen hesitated, casting about for fresh ideas. He was aware now, if he hadn't been before, of the precarious position he occupied. And he thought that his best defence was in suggesting new lines of inquiry, pertinent or not, to divert attention from himself. His gaze fell upon the archery course alongside the pool. "I'd be interested in knowing who around here knows how to shoot a bow-and-arrow."

Troge looked at Mrs. Wishart. She shrugged. "The whole household has dabbled with it, off and on. The only person who was really any good at it was Hilda herself. She took it up in college, I believe."

"Ping pong's my game," said Hagen. "I wouldn't know one end of a bow from the other. Whoever shot Hilda knew his stuff."

“If she was shot,” mused Troge. “No reason why an arrow has to presuppose a bow, is there? Though we did find a bow in the bushes, of course. But it might be possible to use an arrow like a sword. You know, for stabbing.” He smiled slightly. “You would know one end of an arrow from another, wouldn’t you, Hagen?”

“Not if I’m as dumb as you think I am.”

“I’ll tell you. On one end there’s feathers, on the other there’s a steel point. And your Hilda wasn’t tickled to death.”

“Don’t call her my Hilda. How about the fellow I saw run away?”

“There’s a call out for a man with legs, driving a car,” said Troge blandly. “But how do you expect the police to catch him if you couldn’t? No connection, of course, but how many manhattans did you have at this party?”

At that moment there came a shout of triumph from the deep end of the swimming pool where two detectives hauled at a rope like fishermen reeling in their catch. Hilda’s body had broken the surface. With the shaft sticking out of her back, the sight reminded Hagen of a small harpooned whale being dragged ashore. He felt a little sick. Mrs. Wishart reacted in the same manner. She turned quickly away with a muttered, “If you don’t need me any more, I think I’ll ...” She went toward the house, her bearing not quite so indomitable as before.

Troge alone had no particular reaction. He said to Hagen, “Let’s go take a squint.” It wasn’t an invitation; it was a command. Hagen followed silently, having no choice. The detectives, their task completed, moved aside and the police surgeon and deputy coroner took charge of the dead woman, while the photographer waited patiently for his turn to come.

Troge leaned over the medic’s shoulder, observing impassively and occasionally glancing at Hagen out of the corner of his eye. Hagen kept his own face expressionless, though he was far from calm inside. The dead woman stretched out beside the pool was no stranger and he had loved her once. And once he had hated her but it was harder to remember that now while she lay wet and helpless, her bare limbs and full figure exposed to the brutal winking of the flash bulbs. Dead, she was beyond hate, and even Hagen, armoured in his personal bitterness, could feel a little sorry for her. The arrow had to be removed from her back before she could be turned over for more pictures. The steel point

dripped blood on her bathing suit. Her pretty face had relaxed as it never quite had in life and to Hagen at last she was the ideal he had married long ago, not the reality he had become familiar with. The tenseness had gone from her mouth, the watchfulness from around her eyes. Hilda's argument with the world was over. Dead, she was beautiful.

The surgeon rose, drying his hands on his handkerchief. To Troge he said, "Well, she's extinct all right, if that's what you're hanging around to hear." He studied Hagen. "This the fellow who did the job?"

"Maybe," said Troge. "See that I have your report in the morning first thing, will you?" He jerked his head at Hagen and they moved off on to the grass of the archery course. White-garbed bearers were bringing in a stretcher.

Hagen said, "Well, Troge, where now? Going to book me?"

"I'll lay it out for you, just the way it looks from here," said Troge. He lit one cigarette from the glowing stub of the last. "Then you tell me, Hagen. You admit there was no love lost between you and your ex-wife. You came sneaking in here over the wall tonight, you admit that too. Next thing we know, she's dead and your story is that it all happened while you were looking the other way. The bow is part of this set here. So is the arrow. That gives you presence at the scene, access to the weapon and opportunity."

"How about motive? I had no reason to kill her."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. Jealousy, an old quarrel, maybe even blackmail—those are possibilities. Sure, it's as circumstantial as all hell. But what do you have to stack up against it?"

"Just my word—and a piece of paper." From his wallet Hagen dug out the retainer that Wayne Wishart had signed. Troge studied it intently, holding it up to catch the glow from the floodlights. "Sure, I could have forged it. But let me ask you this, Troge. Did you ever see a killer who hung around waiting for the cops when he could have gotten away without ever being seen?"

"No," Troge admitted candidly, "and that's the only reason that you're not downtown being questioned this very minute, Hagen."

Hagen felt a flare of hope. "I didn't do it, Troge. I'm not lying."

"If you are, we'll know it soon enough." Troge put the retainer in his pocket. "I'll keep this so you won't lose it. In the meantime, you

keep yourself available and out of trouble, Hagen, since you do happen to be the principal “—he hesitated, smiling—” witness.”

“I’ll keep available all right,” said Hagen. “But the way things are going, I can’t promise to stay out of trouble.”

“Make a big effort,” advised Troge. “You’re already in enough for one man.”

The sheet-draped stretcher was being carried out of the house as Hagen left. He followed the ambulance most of the way downtown but not through sentiment; his home was in that direction. He finally turned off on the proper street. Hilda went on to the morgue.



HE stalked into his office, kicked the door shut and spread the morning papers across the top of his desk. In accumulation, they looked even worse than they had on the news-stand. Hagen read them through, his face bleak.

As anyone might have predicted, the murder of Hilda Wishart dominated the city's front pages. WIFE OF LOCAL BUILDER SLAIN, said one, and another: SOCIETY BEAUTY IN ARROW MURDER. But what bothered Hagen were the subheads which all said in effect: Police Question Ex-Husband. The bodies of the stories were more explicit, identifying Hagen in some detail as "the head of a prominent local detective bureau."

This made him grunt. He was the head of his agency in the same manner that a man in a rowboat might be said to be a captain. Hagen himself constituted his whole force; he didn't even employ a secretary. The small office held only the necessary furniture and none of it was new.

"The way things are going I'll be lucky to have a place to hang my hat," he muttered. Captain Troge had dealt honestly with all concerned, Hagen included. Yet the inescapable fact implicit in all the newspaper stories was that he was the only person yet identified as having any strong link with the murder. So far he was referred to as a "witness" but that wasn't very far from "suspect." And Hagen knew that this sort of publicity wasn't going to do his business any good. The public tended to regard a private detective as a rather shady operator anyway; to a large extent, his success hinged on maintaining an impeccable reputation.

What a dame, he thought. Dead, she's still lousing me up. Yet he knew that this was not quite fair. For once Hilda had only been the innocent bystander. From the front pages, her photograph gazed up at him, faintly quarrelsome.

"Okay, baby," he said aloud. "This time it wasn't your fault." He went to the window and opened it and stood staring out across the city. Hagen's office was six flights above the busy street but the altitude did not serve to cool the hot desert wind, or his own angry thoughts. On top of the building opposite, a billboard for an airline urged him to travel to faraway places, but between himself and the airport lay police headquarters, literally as well as figuratively. The only travelling he was likely to do in the near future was under guard.

Someone intended him to be the patsy. Hagen considered it from every angle during the night and he could come to no other conclusion. He had been offered to the police on a silver platter as Hilda's murderer—complete with motive—in hopes that they would look no farther. The police might fall for it but that wasn't going to end the matter. Hagen intended to see it through himself. And when he did..

Something round and hard was suddenly jammed into the small of his back. In his ear, Hilda's voice said, "Would you rather be shot—or would you rather jump?"

In the moment that Mort Hagen stood frozen with surprise, he couldn't decide which shock was the greater, the gun pressed against his spine or the dead woman's voice in his ear. He reacted to the physical stimulus first. With a swift continuous movement, just the way the Service had taught him, he spun. His left elbow knocked the gun arm aside. His right fist thudded against the woman's jaw.

Both the woman and the gun landed on the office floor, but in different directions. Hagen's concern was for the weapon; he pocketed it before turning to its owner. The solid feel of her chin against his knuckles had reassured him that his visitor was no ghost.

Yet when he looked he was not so sure. She sat huddled against his desk, holding her jaw with both hands and glaring up at him, an implacable vindictive gaze that Hagen knew well from the past. They were Hilda's eyes, blue and cold, stabbing him from Hilda's face. Even her legs fetchingly exposed by the crumpled skirt, were Hilda's, long and shapely. There was only one difference. Instead of blonde, his

adversary's hair was a glossy black. And, unlike Hilda, she was very much alive.

"For crying out loud," said Hagen softly, "who *are* you?"

"Aren't you even going to offer to help me up?" she snapped. But without waiting, she scrambled to her feet. "Never mind. I don't want you to touch me."

"Sorry I hit you so hard," he said. Her jaw was beginning to swell, spoiling the heart-shaped symmetry of her features. "First time I ever really used that trick, except in practice. Glad to see the field manuals were right."

She was smoothing her skirt, staring grimly at a huge run in one nylon. "You're a brave man, you are, beating up a woman. Look at my stockings!"

"I don't mind. And I don't like being stuck with a gun, even by a good-looking woman."

"Where is my gun? I want it back."

"First, we talk," said Hagen. With his foot, he shoved a chair in her direction. "And we'll start with question number one, which is: just who in blazes are you, anyway?"

She didn't sit down. Sullenly, she said: "I'm Dagne Christy."

"Hilda's sister?"

"Naturally."

"Hilda didn't have a sister," he said automatically. "Much less a twin." But he was so obviously mistaken that he corrected himself immediately. "At least, she never told me."

"And I'm sure that Hilda told you everything," she said sarcastically.

"Touché," Hagen murmured. From the desk, he picked up the newspaper and stared at the picture of the dead woman. The resemblance was even greater in the shadowy halftone reproduction since Hilda's bloneness wasn't so apparent. Even had it been otherwise, he wouldn't have doubted the truth of what she said. Dagne was a perfect facsimile of her sister, even to gesture and inflection. "Excuse me. I got quite a jolt seeing you."

"Certainly you did. Just when you thought you'd killed her and—"

"Stop right there," commanded Hagen. "I don't know what fool notion brought you here but you're making a mistake."

“I came to kill you,” Dagne said levelly and, while he stared at her, she added, “Do you have a cigarette?”

“Help yourself,” he said, indicating the box on his desk. He watched her light up. Her hands were steady. “I don’t want to appear dense, but just what would killing me do for you?”

“It isn’t a question of doing anything for me. It’s for Hilda. You don’t think that I’m going to let you get away with it, do you? Perhaps you can bulldoze the police, but I know the truth.”

“If you know the truth, then you know I didn’t kill her. Don’t believe what you read in the papers.”

“It’s not just the papers. Hilda told me herself.”

Hagen gaped at her foolishly.

Dagne said, “Yesterday, I mean. She phoned me from somewhere downtown and told me you were following her and she was afraid of what might happen.”

“Now listen to me. It’s true that I was following her and it’s true that she did make a phone call yesterday afternoon. But the rest of it is all wrong.” He was speaking slowly with an effort, trying to force through her implacable resolve with words. This angry girl meant business, no matter how calmly she spoke. “I did not kill your sister.”

“Then who did?”

“I don’t know. Nobody does.”

“I do.” Again, with the sudden shift of subject that Hagen found discomforting, she went on, “You’re really better looking than your picture. Now I can understand what Hilda saw in you.”

“Sit down,” he ordered and she did, crossing her legs to hide the ruined stocking. “We’re going to do a little plain talking, Dagne—either here or down at the police station. It’s up to you. You can tell Troge about Hilda’s phone call and I can tell him about your trying to shoot me. Maybe they’ll give us adjoining cells.”

She studied him. Finally she said, “I’m not scared of you, you know, Hagen.”

“No reason why you should be.”

“But I don’t believe a word you say, either.”

“Maybe it’s mutual. Maybe I think it’s sort of peculiar, your showing up here with blood in your eye over a sister who didn’t even admit you existed.”

Dagne gazed out of the window. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me. I'm easily convinced." He waited.

"I loved Hilda and she loved me," she said softly. "You just don't know what it's like to be a twin. You might think you do, but you don't, not really. You probably suppose it was a big lark. Nobody ever sees what it's like being condemned to a pattern. Is there anything more hateful than predestination?"

"Is that the way Hilda felt about it?"

"We both did. Mom and Dad were simply mad about us being identical twins. From the day we were born, we had to dress alike and act alike—my God! We were even supposed to think alike. We were never allowed to be separate people. All through school, we had to take the same courses." She shuddered. "You can't imagine how sick I got of being just 'one of the Christy twins'."

Hagen inquired, "Where were you last night, by the way?"

For a moment she frowned blankly. Then she gave him a small wintry smile. "No, Hagen—that all ended a long time ago, seven years ago to be exact. That's when Mom and Dad died—in a plane crash—and there wasn't anyone else to make us live that kind of life any more. We made a pact never to be known as twins again, and we kept it. We flipped a coin to see who would die her hair—it turned out to be me, as you can see—and then we quit college and went our own ways. I don't mean we disowned each other or anything drastic. We just kept it a secret, that's all. Hilda often came around to my apartment when she wanted to talk. I'm still single. I couldn't visit her because she was married, first to you and then ..."

"Are you sure that Wishart doesn't know?" Hagen asked, toying with an idea.

"I don't think so. I know Hilda never told him and who else would? She didn't even telephone me from her home. You never knew who might be listening in." Dagne was silent a moment, then shrugged. "That's about all there is to it."

"You still haven't told me where you were last night," Hagen pointed out.

"Why should I? But, all right—I was working on my books." From her purse she extracted a card and handed it to him. Her name was in a

corner. In the centre it read: Nu-Way Figure Control Salon, Beauty Through Health. The address was an uptown suburb. "I own it."

"I'll keep this," said Hagen, pocketing the card. "No telling when I might need a treatment."

"I'd love to work you over but we only take women." Dagne rose and said casually, "Now, may I have the gun back?"

Hagen shook his head, smiling. "I wouldn't want to have to sock you again. Might scare off your customers."

Her eyes flared at him. "That will never happen again, I promise you. If you think you can push me around, I have a partner who can handle you with one hand tied behind his back. You'd better give me the gun—it belongs to him."

"If he's as tough as all that, he won't need a gun." Hagen opened a desk drawer, put the gun in it and locked it away. "I don't figure on hitting you again, Dagne, because you're not going to make it necessary. I didn't kill your sister. Wayne Wishart hired me to follow her and when I found out who she was, I was ready to call it quits. Turns out it isn't going to be that simple. I'm in this mess up to my eyebrows and I don't have any choice. I've got to protect myself and my good name."

She laughed.

He said, "If you're as anxious to nail whoever killed Hilda as you claim to be, you'd better calm down and use your head. I'd rather help you than hurt you."

"I don't want your help," she snapped. "All I want is my property."

"Sorry."

Their eyes duelled. Finally she murmured, "It's not the only gun in the world."

"Then we know where we stand." Hagen said it regretfully. He didn't want to be an enemy to this bitter girl whose every movement reminded him so disquietingly of another. It didn't seem right somehow, that he should have to go through this again. "If you should change your mind—"

The telephone rang, robbing him of her reply which was probably just as well. Hagen answered it and it was Troge.

The police captain's voice was serious. "Wayne Wishart just got in from Los Angeles."

“That’s his story. He never was in Los Angeles.”

“He just got in from Los Angeles,” Troge repeated. “You’re in trouble, Hagen. Wishart says he’s never heard of you.”

“I’ll be right down,” said Hagen thinly.

“I was going to suggest it.”

“Ten minutes,” Hagen promised and hung up. Dagne was watching him closely. “That was the police. Looks like we’re going to have a showdown. I’ll see you later.” He had already half-forgotten her, thinking only of his coming vindication now that he could meet Wishart again face to face. He’d get the truth if he had to choke it out of the man. He grabbed his hat and went out.

Two steps down the hall, he halted, remembering. He went back to his office. Dagne was already working on the desk drawer lock with his letter opener. She threw it at him and missed. Hagen sighed. “Just like your sister.” She glared at him. He took her wrist and led her from the office. This time he locked the door.

They rode the elevator down together but without speaking. On the sidewalk they parted without a farewell. Hagen didn’t think it mattered. He was sure he would be seeing Dagne again, probably sooner than he cared to.

## 6

THE desk sergeant directed Hagen to Troge's office, but the homicide chief wasn't there. Hagen scouted around and finally located Troge in the squad room, chatting with two younger men, obviously subordinates. Hagen didn't know them. He wasn't well acquainted at police headquarters since his practice was usually confined to civil matters.

They were all expecting him, however, from the way the conversation broke off at his entrance. A young woman stenographer was seated in a corner by the window. When she saw Hagen, she flipped to a fresh page in her notebook and looked expectant.

Troge was the most casual of all. He didn't get up from his seat on top of the desk. With his foot, he indicated for Hagen to take a chair. "Just talking about you, Hagen. There was some opinion that you wouldn't show."

"Why not?" Hagen looked around at the others. They were all studying him intently, even the stenographer, although her pencil was moving. "I want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do."

One of the men, a thin-faced fellow with an unruly shock of red hair, made a sound of scornful derision. Troge's expression was merely polite. "We're getting there. Like I told you on the phone, Wayne Wishart's back from L.A. He says he didn't hire you, Hagen."

"That paper he signed says different. Where is he?"

"Wishart claims he never signed the paper. He says he's never even seen you."

"Then he's lying all the way," said Hagen hotly. "Stack Wishart and me up face to face, Troge, and I'll prove who's telling the truth and who isn't."



“I don’t think that will really be necessary,” said Troge. He swung sharply toward the man who had laughed. “What about it, Mr. Wishart—does what you said still go?”

“It certainly does, Captain,” the man said. “I never saw him before in my life. And I think it’s quite obvious that he never saw me, either.”

Troge spread his hands and looked at Hagen. “There it is.”

Hagen was gaping at the red-haired man Troge had called Wishart, still not quite comprehending. Stammering a trifle, he said, “What’s going on here? This guy isn’t Wishart. I never saw *him* before. There’s a mistake somewhere.”

“That’s the first true word he’s spoken,” said Wishart grimly.

“But he’s not Wishart!” Hagen insisted. Floundering, he went on, “Wishart’s older, grey hair—when you see him you’ll ...” He stopped, though no one had interrupted him, because it was obvious no one believed him.

Wishart said, “I don’t see how he thought he could get away with it.” He was considerably younger than the man who had used his name, closer to Hagen’s own age. His tanned face, normally thin-featured, was drawn and haggard as though he hadn’t slept the night before. The green eyes that pierced Hagen were bitter and bloodshot. “He must be crazy.”

Hagen said heavily, “Not crazy—just plain stupid, that’s me. I figured out that the rest of the set-up was phoney. I should have realized that Wishart was a ringer, too.” He looked at Troge. “Well, what happens now?”

Troge said, “That depends. First, I’ll trot out a few facts to save time. As you know now, if you didn’t know it before, this gentleman is Wayne Wishart, the one and only. He not only wasn’t out at Oakmar yesterday morning, he wasn’t within a hundred miles of the place. L.A. checked him out on that score. The boys in the lab say that his signature doesn’t match the one on your retainer.”

“I didn’t forge it, if that’s what you’re getting around to.”

“That’s what I’m getting around to. We’ll know soon. The lab is checking a sample of your handwriting from your agency licence application.” Troge paused. “If you flunk this one, Hagen, there’s not going to be much room for doubt.”

“It strikes me that there’s no doubt at all,” said Wayne Wishart, his voice quivering slightly. “What more do you need except his confession? Hilda’s dead, Captain! This isn’t any time for splitting hairs. I want some action!”

“I can understand that, Mr. Wishart,” said Troge soothingly. “But when you arrest a man on suspicion of murder, you’ve got to be sure of your ground. Like building one of your houses—the foundation has got to be solid or the house won’t stand very long.”

“But if the man is guilty—”

“That’s the whole question.” Troge swung back to Hagen. “Well?”

Hagen’s mind, which had been virtually paralysed by the surprise of meeting the real Wayne Wishart, was beginning to function again in a normal manner. It told *him that he was in an incredibly bad spot. His position* before was shaky enough; now it had collapsed. His alibi had been yanked out from under him and Hagen felt a glare of anger as he realized that the archer had intended it to be. Yet he fought down his temper. This was no time to lose his head. So far, Troge seemed determined to give him the benefit of the doubt but he knew this wouldn’t go on much longer. Somehow, from somewhere, it was up to Hagen to produce an answer. He said, “It seems to me that the most important thing right now is to find this other fellow who claimed to be Wishart.”

“If there is such a fellow,” Troge agreed.

“There is. And I’m pretty sure he’s still in town.” Hagen told of the peculiar circumstances at the railroad station—not so peculiar now, in the light of what had happened since—and went on to give a description of the phoney Wishart. Since he was trained in such matters, he was able to make an impressive job of it. He gave height, weight, facial characteristics, colour and cut of hair, and bearing. He imitated his tone of voice. He described his homburg, topcoat, suit, shirt and necktie. Hagen only withheld a couple of crucial details for his own use. He wanted a head start in order to redeem his reputation in the newspapers.

“Sounds like a con operator all right,” said Troge when the description was apparently complete. “Nobody I know, though.”

Hagen was glad to be taken seriously for once. Because of his lucidity, all of them except Wishart seemed a bit less sceptical. So for

good measure, he threw in, "It could have been this impostor who I saw escaping after the killing. I didn't see much of the running man but there weren't any obvious discrepancies, length of stride, for example."

"Oh, don't make the story too pat," said Troge. "Leave yourself some loopholes in case you need them later."

"I already have," replied Hagen, as if joking.

"Smart boy. Now tell me, how did the fake Wishart get out to Oakmar?"

"Taxi, he said. But maybe he was brought by someone else." Hagen glanced at Wishart calculatingly. "Naturally, it's downright foolish to picture Mr. Wishart hiring a man to impersonate himself."

"Yes," said Troge. Then he told the other detective, "See if you can find anything in the record books," and the man left the squad room. Troge turned next to Wishart. "That description mean anything to you?"

"I don't know anyone who looks like that. Neither did Hilda."

"Maybe you just weren't aware of it," said Hagen. "Hilda knew a lot of people, particularly men. From what your mother said last night, I got the idea you didn't even know about me, Mr. Wishart."

Wishart flushed angrily but he spoke to Troge. "Captain, I don't see how blackening my wife's reputation is going to prove anything."

"I'm simply trying to show that such a person could exist, and Hilda know him, without your knowledge," Hagen put in quickly. "I'm sorry if that comes under the head of blackening her reputation. But she's dead and I'm trying not to be. Look at it from my angle. Here's a man who masquerades as Wayne Wishart, who hires me to follow Wishart's wife. Doesn't it stand to reason that he had some connection with one of you? I'm betting it was Hilda." He hesitated. "This isn't going to be very sweet, Mr. Wishart, and I'll apologize ahead of time. Three years ago I divorced Hilda because she was playing around with another man. Maybe history repeated itself."

Wishart said thinly, "I don't believe a word of it. It's very convenient that Hilda isn't here to defend herself."

"I said maybe. But since it's my neck, I've been doing a lot of thinking. I never knew who the other man was—but it could have been the guy who hired me yesterday and then killed her."

Troge shook his head slowly. "Hagen, I got a better case than that right here. You're just throwing up a smokescreen."

"Call it anything you like. But one fact you can't get around is Hilda herself. How much do you know about her? How much do any of us know about her?" He swung toward Wishart. "You didn't know she'd been married before. I'll bet you didn't even know she had a twin sister."

Wishart looked blank. "What on earth are you talking about? Hilda didn't have any family at all. Her parents were dead and—"

"Her sister was in my office this morning when you called, Troge. Her name is Dagne, Dagne Christy." Hagen produced the business card and gave it to the police captain. He didn't think it necessary to reveal the purpose of Dagne's visit. "I'm not saying that it's important, except as part of the picture. Hilda hid plenty behind that pretty face and I say that one of the things she hid was the reason she was murdered."

Wishart was studying Dagne's card. He looked up to meet Troge's questioning gaze. He shook his head as if bewildered. "I don't know what to say. Christy was Hilda's maiden name, all right, but she never mentioned any sister to me."

"We'll check it out," Troge promised and put the card in his pocket. "Hagen, you talk real pretty. Don't stop now."

"I'm about talked out," Hagen admitted. "You want proof and I'm pretty short on everything except guesses. But if Hilda could have an ex-husband and a twin sister that nobody knew about, why couldn't she have had an enemy too? Don't ask me who—I haven't seen her in three years. Ask the people who knew her better. Like her husband, or that secretary, Avis Gill. Where was she last night, by the way?"

"That's a good question," agreed Troge. He looked across the room to the stenographer. "Where were you last night, Miss Gill?"

"I went to a movie," the woman replied without looking up.

Hagen stared at Troge. "You're full of surprises, aren't you?" He had paid no more attention to the stenographer heretofore than to the desk on which Troge sat, accepting her as a piece of the furniture. He hadn't recognized her from the evening before because he had seen her only from a distance and he had been occupied with Hilda.

Avis Gill wasn't the sort of woman who made a lasting impression, anyway. She was a small plump creature, somewhat pretty but with no real warmth, like a wax doll. Her hair was an undistinguished brown and her fixed smile didn't extend to her eyes, which were brown also and slightly glassy. This glassiness gave away the contact lenses she wore. She fitted unobtrusively into her background, as much a part of the stark squad room as the luxurious Wishart mansion.

Troge was relishing his discomfiture. He said, "Mr. Wishart brought Miss Gill with him. I'm not quite ready for a transcript yet, myself."

"I like a record of what goes on," Wishart said defensively, to no one in particular. "Miss Gill goes everywhere with me."

"But she didn't go to L.A. with you," said Hagen quickly. "You were at home last night, Miss Gill. How come?"

She said placidly, "That's Mr. Wishart's business."

"I thought she needed a rest," said Wishart. "Miss Gill has been working awfully hard, especially with getting this Oakmar development under way."

Hagen wondered if there might be another reason that Wishart wasn't telling. Avis Gill didn't appear to be the type who ever needed a rest. But he had no real reason to challenge this so he said, "If you went to a movie last night, you've probably got your ticket stub. Care to dump out your purse?"

"No," she replied. "I mean—no, I don't have a ticket stub because there wasn't any ticket. It was a free showing over at the museum." As she spoke, her fingers were busily recording her own words. "They had a film on Indian basket weaving, a documentary. I often attend them. I'm a patron of the museum. Mr. Wishart is on the board of directors, you know."

The telephone on the desk beside Troge rang and he answered it. Wishart said softly, "Hilda was so proud of that. She liked the museum ..." He turned away abruptly and went to stare out the window at nothing.

This was a side of Hilda's nature that Hagen hadn't known about. He couldn't recall the last time he had visited the museum himself. He wasn't even aware it had been reopened after being barred to visitors following a series of petty thefts, teenage vandalism. He tried to picture Hilda wandering among the archaeological displays and found

it difficult. Yet he had said that none of them had really known her, himself perhaps least of all. He cleared his throat, wanting to say something comforting to Wishart.

Wishart didn't give him a chance. The moment Troge replaced the receiver, he swung around to the police captain. His voice was a little husky. "Do you mind if I go now? I think I've told you everything I know—and you can always get me when you need me. I didn't sleep much last night and ..."

Troge nodded sympathetically. "No reason for you to hang around, Mr. Wishart. Or you, Miss Gill. There's going to have to be an inquest, of course, but that'll be in a day or so."

"Thanks." Wishart jerked his head at his secretary, who rose and closed her notebook. He didn't glance in Hagen's direction. "And, please, if there's anything I can do to help—for Hilda's sake ..."

"I'll let you know," Troge promised. When the door closed behind them, he sighed. "Nice guy. He's taking it pretty hard."

"He'll get over it. There's a lot of women anxious to sympathize with a million bucks."

"The trouble with you, Hagen, is that you're a cynic."

"The trouble with me is that I was married to her, too. That's the whole trouble with me." Hagen hesitated. "I suppose it's a foolish question—but can I go too?"

"Why not?" His surprise was so apparent that Troge chuckled. "Maybe I just like to keep you off-balance, Hagen. Or maybe that was the lab on the phone to tell me that you didn't sign that retainer, after all."

"Or maybe you know I really didn't kill her."

"I don't know anything. When I do, you'll hear from me."

Hagen left quickly, before Troge could change his mind. He had another reason for hurrying, and he reached the police parking lot just as Wayne Wishart was getting into his car, a Buick station wagon. Wishart swung around at his hail, then frowned as he saw who it was.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "I thought that—"

"I didn't break jail, if that's what you mean. Troge is giving me enough rope, that's all." Hagen put his proposal bluntly, knowing no other way to handle it. "Listen, Mr. Wishart—no matter what you believe, I didn't kill Hilda. I want to find out who did as much as you

do, maybe even more. I need a client to give me an excuse to poke around and I thought that maybe you—”

“You’re out of your mind,” said Wishart and he looked angry enough to strike Hagen. “I want nothing to do with you, except to see that you’re put where you belong. I just hope the police know what they’re doing. Now get out of my way.”

There was a good deal more Hagen would have liked to say but Avis Gill had already flipped open her ubiquitous notebook. He shrugged and stepped back and watched Wishart drive out of the lot.

“Well, you sure didn’t get much out of that,” Hagen told himself. He hadn’t—unless he counted the fifty dollars. He had intended to return the retaining fee to his client, but to a real client, not a stranger. Now, the way things were going, Hagen doubted if he would ever have that opportunity. Besides, the archer had probably got his money’s worth.

FROM the outside, the Nu-Way Figure Control Salon looked as discreet as a doctor's offices. It was, in fact, located in a section of the city sometimes known as Pill Hill because of the preponderance of medical men. The modern stucco building was unmarred by advertising displays, its identity proclaimed only by an antique bronze plate near the door. Hagen had a hard time finding it.

Inside, conservatism had been junked, the proprietors evidently going on the principle that any customer who once got inside the door was there for a purpose and wouldn't be scared away by a little gaudiness. The thick carpet was a vivid burgundy and the wall-paper displayed a lush jungle motif and there were a number of posture chairs around the waiting room. The air was sweetly perfumed, probably to eliminate the odour of sweat, and music played softly from invisible speakers. It was a new experience to Hagen and didn't fit his picture of the anteroom to what, after all, was actually a glorified gymnasium.

There were no customers waiting, which wasn't unusual since it was now nearly noon. The receptionist was also absent and though the door chime heralded his arrival, no one appeared to greet him. While he waited, Hagen snooped around the waiting room. Most of the magazines were addressed to Dagne but there were one or two subscriptions in the name of Larry Beldorian. Hagen presumed that this was the partner Dagne had mentioned.

When it finally became apparent that his presence was going to pass unnoticed, he tried the door that led to the rear of the building and, finding it unlocked, passed through. A corridor branched off in both directions, each branch containing a number of closed doors. But in



one direction, Hagen could hear a man's voice counting rhythmically so he went that way. The corridor terminated in a large high-ceilinged room with a hardwood floor and some exercising equipment, obviously the gym. Hagen peeked in at the uninspiring sight of a group of middle-aged women determinedly going through some ragged callisthenics at the command of a muscular Adonis in a skin-tight loin-cloth.

He didn't see Dagne among the group and his own presence was not noted, so Hagen went back the way he had come, pausing to rap softly on each door he passed. He was halfway down the other corridor and beginning to despair when Dagne answered his knock, inviting him to enter. He did so.

The sign on the door told him that this was the diet consultation office, and the walls were hung with calorie charts, muscle diagrams and pictures of what the female form should ideally be. Dagne was standing on a chair, adding another poster to their number, and Hagen thought she herself was a better example than her charts. On tiptoe with arms upstretched, she reminded him of a pagan goddess.

Her reaction on seeing him was down-to-earth, however. Her eyes frosted and she demanded, "How did you get in here?"

"The usual way."

"Well, don't slam it, going out."

Hagen closed the door instead. "For all you know, I might have come for a consultation about my diet."

"I don't think you'd like what I'd prescribe for you," said Dagne, descending from her pedestal. She wore a simple V-neck white blouse and a full navy-blue skirt, apparently her working clothes, that enhanced her handsomeness more than an elaborate ensemble. She faced Hagen squarely, her hands balled into small fists. "You threw me out of your office this morning. Now it's my turn. Get out."

"I heard what you had to say first, remember. Let's play fair."

"That's so," she said, considering him through narrowed eyes. Then, without any warning, she slapped Hagen viciously across the left side of his face. "Now we can start absolutely even. What do you want?"

Hagen's cheek stung from the unexpected blow and his first reaction was to throttle her but then he couldn't hold back a grin. He said, "I'll bet that tropical wall-paper out front was your idea."

She had been expecting a more violent reaction. Taken aback, she said, "What do you mean? What has that got to do with anything?"

"That's the way you live. The law of the jungle."

"You bet it's the way I live. Don't you forget it. I pay my debts." The bruise where Hagen had struck her earlier was just a faint shadowing along her jaw line; the swelling had subsided. "But don't get the idea that my slapping you settles our account, Hagen. There's still Hilda."

He sighed. "You're a hard woman to convince. I don't know why I bother."

"Is that why you're here—to convince me of something? You're wasting your time."

"I'm here to convince myself of something. That you really exist and that you're what you claim to be. I've had some trouble recently with people not being what they claimed."

Dagne went around the desk and sat down, leaving him standing. "I'm hardly interested in anything you have to say."

"You will be," said Hagen, "when I tell you that I'm not what I claimed to be myself. Wishart didn't hire me to follow your sister." Dagne stared at him and then her hand crept toward the telephone. "If you are thinking of calling the cops, don't bother. They already know."

"What's your angle, Hagen?" she demanded warily. "What are you trying to gain by confessing that you're a liar?"

"That isn't what I said. I thought if I put my cards on the table, you might see your way clear to help me a little." Dagne snorted, but he went on calmly, "I need some information badly, information about Hilda and a man she knew, maybe a couple of men. You'd know if anybody would. Maybe you won't want to tell but if you really want to do something about Hilda, this is the first step."

He paused, awaiting her reaction. Finally, Dagne said, "I'm listening. I won't promise any more than that."

"The first man I've never seen. I don't know anything about him, even a name. But three years ago, more or less, he was Hilda's boy friend and the reason that my marriage broke up. Did your sister ever confide anything to you that—"

Impatiently, she broke in, "You don't know what you're talking about. Hilda was the last person in the world ever to be unfaithful. She

had very strong ideas on that subject. I resent these insinuations, Hagen.”

“The word is facts, not insinuations. And I’m more interested in protecting myself than Hilda’s good name, if any.”

“I’m not.”

“The second man I have seen,” Hagen persisted. “The name he used was Wayne Wishart but it isn’t his. That’s what I meant earlier.” Succinctly, he described again the impostor who had hired him, meanwhile watching Dagne’s face for any flicker of recognition. There was none. “I’m toying with a crazy theory that maybe the first man and the second man are one and the same.”

“I got a better theory than that, Hagen. I don’t think there is even one man I believe you’re making the whole thing up to cover your own tracks.”

Hagen sighed and sat down in the leather lounge chair across from her. “That’s not an original idea, Dagne. The cops have it too. So you won’t help me.”

“I didn’t promise to do anything except listen. If you’re through, I wish you’d go. I have a class to attend to.”

“I’m not quite through. My main reason in coming—”

He was interrupted by a knock on the door. Dagne called, “Come on in!” and rose. Hagen rose too, to face the newcomer. He was the muscular instructor in the loin-cloth. He came in, saying, “The girls are ready for you, Dag—” He broke off when he discovered Hagen. “Oh, sorry—didn’t know you were busy.”

“I’ll be right there, Larry,” Dagne said. “Mr. Hagen was just leaving.”

“Hagen?” Larry scowled. He was a swarthy youngster still in his twenties, with a sullen insensitive face that didn’t reveal any particular intelligence. His development seemed to have taken purely physical lines and his body was awe-inspiring. He looked like a physical culture photo come to life. Hagen assumed that this was Beldorian, Dagne’s partner. “Is this the guy who’s been bothering you, Dag?”

“He bothers me, yes,” Dagne agreed.

“Well, well.” Beldorian surveyed Hagen grimly. “I hear you swiped my gun, buddy.”

“Let’s say I’m just holding it in trust.” Despite the other man’s muscular development, Hagen wasn’t particularly alarmed, not on that score. He was more concerned with what Beldorian held in his hands. It was a long-bladed knife, a throwing knife with a wooden handle carved in Polynesian designs. And Beldorian was manipulating it as if he was skilled in its use. He juggled it from one hand to the other as he eyed Hagen, catching it expertly without ever seeming to look at it.

“I want it back,” Beldorian told him. “Don’t give me any crap, buddy.”

“You don’t look to me like a man who needs a gun to protect himself,” Hagen said easily. “Not with those muscles—and a knife besides. Mind letting me look at that, Larry?”

At the quick change of subject, Beldorian appeared bewildered. Then he grinned wickedly. “Catch!” With a swift underhand motion, he tossed the knife in Hagen’s direction. He put no real power behind the throw but Hagen was forced to dodge. Beldorian guffawed. The knife dug into the padded arm-rest of the lounge chair and stood upright, the handle quivering.

“Larry, you should be more careful,” Dagne chided her partner. “You might have hurt him.” Mockingly, she asked, “Are you going to add that to your collection, Hagen?”

He disappointed her by not even touching it. “It’s not my type, after all. I’m only interested in hunting knives, the kind that Hilda was playing with just before she was killed.”

Beldorian was scowling again, his forehead knitted as he tried to follow the byplay. “What’s he talking about, Dag?”

“It’s not important, Larry,” she said soothingly. “Do me a favour and get the class started until I get there, will you?” It was obvious that Beldorian didn’t want to leave but it didn’t occur to him to oppose her. Hagen didn’t have any doubt as to who ran the show. Beauty and the beast, he thought.

Beldorian turned reluctantly. “Sure you’ll be all right?” The sleekness of his back was marred by an ugly scar resembling a puncture, high on his right shoulder. “I’ll be glad to throw him out if you say so.”

“I can handle him myself,” Dagne promised and Beldorian went out, with a final jealous glance at Hagen. “You can thank me for saving you

from a broken neck, Hagen. Larry could break you in two.”

“He didn’t get that scar on his back running toward a fight, I’ll bet you.”

“Larry was in the war. He got a medal.” Dagne gazed at him coldly. “You’re a great one for thinking the worst of people, aren’t you?”

“People don’t give me much choice.” Hagen shrugged. “Look, Dagne, I’ve got a proposition for you.”

“Whatever it is, the answer is no.” To his surprise, she unzipped the side fastener of her skirt and began to lift it over her head. She wore no slip beneath it, only white tailored shorts. “I’m busy. My class is waiting for me.”

Hagen thought she had the most beautiful legs he had ever seen, even shapelier than Hilda’s. “My original proposition was that you hire me to investigate your sister’s death.” He grinned. “Now I can think of a better proposition than that, especially since you’ve already slapped my face ahead of time.” She didn’t answer but began to unbutton her blouse, revealing the halter top beneath. “All right, let’s go back to the first one. How about it, Dagne?”

She finished undressing and then folded her discarded clothing into a neat pile on top of the desk before answering. Finally, she said, “Hagen, you baffle me. I don’t think I understand you at all. Why on earth should I hire you, of all people?”

“There’s a good reason—for you as well as me. This morning—”

The telephone buzzed softly and he stopped while she answered it. Silently, he cursed the interruption. He felt that he was almost on the verge of convincing her, or at least softening her enmity. Now, watching her, he saw Dagne’s face again resolve into grim lines, although her part of the conversation was noncommittal enough. She said, “Yes, this afternoon will be convenient for me. Yes, certainly. I’ll be there.” She hung up.

“What I was about to say—” began Hagen, starting all over again.

She virtually spit her words at him. “Do you know who that was? That was the police! They know all about me! Who told them? Was it you?”

“Of course it was me.”

She came around the desk like a fury, her eyes blazing. “You had no right! It was my secret, mine and Hilda’s! I’ll ...” Her gaze darted

about, as if seeking something to throw. There was nothing available except Beldorian's primitive knife and Hagen put his hand on it, just in case. Thwarted, she flared, "Get out of here!"

Hagen didn't move. He said, "Not till you think this out, Dagne. I need you for my client. But now I think you need me just as much." He forced her to hold his gaze. "You're in this thing along with me now. Maybe Troge will buy your story, peculiar as it is, and maybe he won't."

"If he's a man, he'll buy. I've got a sweet face."

"A lot of people are going to wonder, anyway, because it just doesn't sound natural, even though it's true. The papers will have a field day. If that's what you want, okay. I'm no publicity hound myself. I'm the old-fashioned type who believes that a reputation is important. I can protect yours—and mine—if I can get to the bottom of this. But I can't do it alone."

"I don't understand you."

"Here's another angle. I think it's a fifty-fifty chance that you need some protection. You and Hilda looked exactly alike—except for the hair colour. But when she was killed, she was wearing a bathing cap." He paused. "Maybe the archer made a mistake, Dagne. When the story about you hits the papers, he'll know it."

"But—" she faltered incredulously, "but that's impossible! I don't have any enemies."

"I have it on good authority that Hilda didn't have, either. But she's dead."

Dagne sank back against the edge of the desk. She tried a smile and finally one stuck. "You're trying to scare me, Hagen. Aren't you?"

"Sure. I need the job."

"But what can you do that the police can't?"

"For one thing, I can find the fake Wayne Wishart faster—and he's the key to the rest of it."

Dagne said slowly, "You know, you've almost got me believing in you. Almost, I said. Do you really think that nobody will believe it about Hilda and me?" She didn't wait for an answer but chuckled suddenly. "It's funny, isn't it? Both of us keeping it a secret all these years, and now the whole world will know."

“Does it really matter?” asked Hagen, touched by her sudden helplessness. “You’re free now.”

“No,” she corrected softly, “I’m alone now.”

“Not necessarily. We’re together. We’re after the same thing.”

She raised her head. “Maybe you’re right, Hagen.”

“Then I’m hired?”

“Let’s not go so fast,” she replied, suspicious again. “Let’s say that for the present you’re just on approval.”

“That’ll do—for the present.” He pushed her pile of clothing along the desk toward her. “Get dressed. I’m going after the fake Wishart and this time I want a witness.”

She objected, “But I’ve got a class—and these are just old clothes ...”

“Let Muscles run the business until you get back. And don’t worry about what you’re wearing. You’ll be right in style where we’re going.” Hagen grinned. “Or do you object to a little slumming?”

THEY ate lunch at a café that didn't have any tables, just a row of stools at an open-air counter that was screened from the hot noon sun by a tattered awning. They munched hot-dogs piled high with sauerkraut and sipped beer from frosted mugs, and Hagen found it all very pleasant, including the presence of the pretty girl at his side.

Dagne seemed more amused than anything else. "I'm glad my figure control class can't see me now. This lunch is hardly on my recommended list."

"I noticed that you ate two hot-dogs."

"Well, I'm not likely to meet anybody I know down here."

"I suppose not," said Hagen. "I wish I could say the same." He fitted into the surroundings a good deal better than the girl who, even in her simple blouse and skirt combination, obviously didn't belong there. On all sides of them flowed the shabby traffic of Fathom Street, the main artery of the city's disreputable district. It was a squalid neighbourhood of chili parlours and flop-houses, war surplus outlets and all-night movies. At night, the multitude of gaudy neon obscured the grime and softened the faces of the men and women who lived there. By day, there was no pretence at all.

Seriously, she said, "I still haven't figured out why you brought me along."

"It's a cheap date," he said and paid the bill, which amounted to fifty cents. "Oh, I have my reasons, Dagne. Like I told you, I may need a witness when I round up this fellow. Besides, I figure it's safer to have you around where I can keep an eye on you."

"Safer for me—or for you?"



“No comment,” he said and helped her down from the stool. “Ready to take up the scent?”

“Do you really know what you’re doing, Hagen?” Dagne looked distastefully up and down Fathom Street. “This is about the last place I’d begin to look for the type of man you described to me.”

“You’re thinking just like the cops. Troge thought this phoney Wishart character sounded like a high-class confidence operator, and I’ll bet he’s got his men checking all the better hotels right now. He’s judging by the clothes and that’s my waste of taxpayers’ money because I didn’t tell him about all the clothes. I didn’t tell him about the shoes. Or the wrist watch.”

“What about the shoes and wrist watch?”

“He wore old army shoes and passed them off as a rich man’s whim. But what if the shoes were the real person and the rest was salad dressing? In which case you have a heel-grifter, a bum, maybe a wino who’s seen better days. Quite possibly an ex-actor, considering how he took me in. As for the wrist watch, he didn’t have a watch of any kind. He had to ask me the time. In other words, somebody hired a tramp to impersonate Wishart, which is no compliment to Wishart’s appearance.”

“Or to your intelligence.”

“You’re so right. That’s why I’m trying to be so brilliant and make up for yesterday. Suppose somebody did hire this guy. The job was to be an impersonation only—you don’t hire a killer out of the gutter, not if you want the job done as well as this one. No, the archer hired the bum for the first act only. And it was the archer who was following me around yesterday afternoon while I was cleverly tailing Hilda. End of second act. The third act was last night when Hilda took her farewell dive with the arrow in her back. It was the archer, not the bum, who I saw running away afterwards. Now do you understand about the shoes?”

“No.”

“The archer gave the bum, say, a hundred bucks to buy some fancy clothes. Suit, shirt, tie, hat—and shoes. But the bum looks to the future. He can use all of these things except the dressy shoes. He doesn’t need style in shoes, he needs endurance. So he spends the shoe money on a topcoat which an old man will need just as soon as the

weather changes. That explains why the fake Wishart was wearing a topcoat on a hot day. He probably didn't have any safe place to leave it. His buddies around here would steal him blind. Or maybe he bought a topcoat instead of shoes because a topcoat is easier to pawn for drink money."

"But wouldn't whoever hired him make sure he left town afterwards?"

"You bet, they'd try. Maybe the archer bought him a train ticket. But tickets don't have to be used. They can be cashed in. I'm pretty sure that's what happened and that our bum is still hanging around town. I just hope we reach him before the archer does."

Dagne said slowly, "You started out by saying you thought that the man who pretended to be Wayne Wishart was Hilda's lover. Now you're saying he was just hired by somebody else. You can't have it both ways, Hagen."

"I'll be happy if I can have it just one way. Right now, I claim that the bum was hired to pose as Wishart because the archer didn't dare face me himself. That must mean that I'm in a position to recognize the archer sooner or later. Of course, I'm supposed to be safe in jail on a murder charge—that's what the killer intended by assigning me, Hilda's ex-husband, to the scene of the crime. See, the police were supplied with not only a murder, but with an ideal suspect. I was supposed to be the archer's smokescreen. So if I don't keep moving, I'm dead."

"You're awfully convincing," she said. "Maybe too convincing to be believable. I don't know. Every time you're cornered, you've got some logical excuse. At least, it sounds logical until something else comes along and then you've got another answer for that. I still don't trust you, Hagen—even if you did buy my lunch, for which I thank you."

"How about dinner? Under soft lights I look darn near honest."

"No," she said but she accompanied her refusal with a smile, then changed the subject before he could pursue it. "This is a big neighbourhood. Wouldn't it be easier if I took one side of the street and you the other?" Her smile went away as he hesitated. "I guess you don't trust me either, do you?"

"That isn't the question. This job isn't easy and, furthermore, it's all new stuff to you. Maybe you'd do it up brown but I'd be wondering all

the time and I'd probably end up doing it all over again, anyway. Understand?"

"Of course," Dagne replied coldly and what little warmth had grown between them was utterly gone. "Be sure to tell me if I get in your way, won't you? Where do you want to start?"

Hagen shrugged. "Right here will do." He indicated the corner liquor store and headed toward it, Dagne following him aloofly and silently. He wondered why this girl—what she thought, how she reacted, her opinion of him—should be of any importance to him, except professionally. She was hardly the handsomest girl he had ever met, or the most lovable. In fact, she could be downright infuriating. And dangerous, Hagen added; he couldn't forget the gun locked away in his desk. Yet he was drawn to her, albeit unwillingly. He had known her only a half-dozen hours but she was not a Stranger to him. He felt the same compelling excitement of the early days with Hilda, before the disillusionment had set in. Careful, he warned himself, remember what happened the last time. But he wondered if Dagne too sensed anything of the bond between them; women were usually more perceptive along those lines. He couldn't tell.

The search went slowly. By the time an hour had passed, they had covered barely three blocks and without result. Shopkeepers, hotel clerks, taxi drivers, waitresses ... they all had the same answer, a shake of the head. Sorry, pal, but I don't know anybody who looks like that. Sure, I'll keep an eye out—and what's going on, anyway? Hagen gave the same story everywhere, a vague mention of an inheritance and a missing heir, and a reward to anyone who located him. He figured that would get more results than the truth. The Fathom Street crowd, like all the downtrodden, protected its own. Nor was he discouraged at his failure to find his man. Success quite aside, there was pleasure in the pursuit itself.

Dagne put it into words. As they paused to light cigarettes in front of the burlesque theatre's blatant posters, she said, "You're really enjoying yourself, aren't you? You like this sort of thing."

"Well, it's my job. I might as well like it."

"You're pretty good at it, too," she admitted. "Thorough, I mean. I'd have given up long ago."

"Tired, baby?"

“Don’t call me that,” she said irritably. “I Hate that term applied to a grown woman. Yes, I’m tired. This isn’t exactly my cup of tea. Everybody looks at me as if they think I’m a floozy. Another hour down here and I’ll feel like one. Did you know that that man in the card room actually patted me on the behind when you weren’t looking?”

“Probably thought you were somebody else,” said Hagen, nodded toward the nearest life-sized photograph. “How’s that for figure control? Come on, I’ll buy you a drink.” He took her elbow and guided her into the bar next to the theatre. She accompanied him grudgingly.

The small lounge was cool and dim after the sultriness of the street. They were the only customers. The bartender put down his paper and came along the counter to serve them, yawning broadly. “Hi, there,” he greeted them. “How you been? What you going to have?” Hagen ordered highballs.

“Friend of yours?” Dagne inquired sulkily while the drinks were being mixed.

“Yours, I’d say.” Hagen indicated the newspaper the man had been reading. “Five to one there’s a picture of Hilda on the front page.”

“Still one of the Christy twins,” she muttered and drank her drink when it came without responding to Hagen’s toast.

Hagen downed half his glassful before he put the routine inquiry to the bartender. He forgot about the other half because the man, instead of shaking his head, was nodding affirmatively. Hagen felt a stab of pure delight. “You know this guy?”

“Maybe. From that description, I’d say it might be Doc.”

“Doc.” At last, he had a name to give his quarry. “Doc what?”

“Who knows?” The bartender shrugged. “The boys call him Doc, that’s all. I don’t think he’s really a doctor of anything, except maybe hangovers.”

“Where can I find him? I’ve got some business with him.”

“I figured you did. I haven’t seen him around lately.” He watched Hagen place a five-dollar bill on the bar and then he added, “Try the burleycue next door. He hangs out there a lot. Used to be an actor, to hear him tell it.”

Hagen nodded. He seized Dagne’s hand and hauled her after him out into the sunlight again. “We’re in business, honey. Is honey all right—

or do you object to that too?" He was bubbling with anticipation.

"Aren't you getting awfully excited over almost nothing?" she asked, trotting to keep up with him. "It might not be the same man at all. He might have just been kidding you to get the five dollars."

"When you're thirsty, a pond looks as big as the ocean. Old Spanish proverb." The front entrance to the burlesque theatre was padlocked, the box-office empty. "Come on—there'll be a back door."

There was. Hagen pounded on it until he heard footsteps inside. Then the door was opened and a weasel-faced man peered out at them. He was elderly, with a day's growth of beard and about him hung the sour smell of wine. He said huskily, "Come back later. There's nobody here but me."

"You'll do," said Hagen and put his foot between door and jamb so that it couldn't be closed. "I'm looking for Doc."

"You won't find him here," said the man, obviously the doorman. "Not after ..." His voice died away to a mumble in which Hagen could only catch the word "ungrateful."

"Do you know him?" Hagen persisted. "Where can I find him?"

"Sure, I know him. You bet I know him. Doc and me, we used to be friends. Anybody can tell you. Shared everything with him, everything that was mine was his." He stabbed Hagen with a shaky forefinger. "That's what it means to be a friend."

"Sure, Pop. Where's your friend Doc now?"

The old man took time out to squint at Dagne. "You dance here, honey?"

"No, thanks," she said fervently.

"Sharing, that's what a friend is for," the doorman muttered, eyes withdrawn. "When I had it, Doc had it too—I always saw to that. You can ask anybody. They'll tell you."

"He's drunk," Dagne whispered. "Can't we come back later?"

"I'm not drunk," the old man declared with sudden loud vehemence. "I'm just disappointed, that's all, disappointed and sick at heart." His voice dropped down to a mumble again. Hagen shook him gently by the shoulder. "Excuse me—what was I saying?"

"You were telling me about Doc. Where is he?"

"Doc." The old man cleared his throat rackingly as if he wanted to spit. "Don't even mention his name. He's no friend of mine. You know

what the Bible says? It says that greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. That's real friendship and don't forget it." He peered belligerently at Hagen.

"Right?"

"Right as rain," agreed Hagen patiently. "Doc is no friend of yours."

"You bet your sweet patootie he isn't. When he got all that money did he give me any? Did he do anything except come prancing around and lording it over me, who shared everything with him, the way a friend should?" Sudden tears came to the bleary eyes at the injustice of it all.

Hagen drew a deep breath of vindication and looked at Dagne. "It checks. Where else would he get a lot of money all of a sudden?"

"It won't do him any good, though," said the old man. "God takes care of those things, you know. He watches out for His own. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay."

"Sure," agreed Hagen. "Your turn is coming, Pop. Maybe sooner than you think. Where's Doc now?"

"It's already come!" crowed the old man triumphantly. "The hand of God has smote him down, just like the Bible promises!"

Hagen felt his stomach contract with a chill premonition, felt his exhilaration shrink. He grabbed the doorman by the front of his ragged sweater. "What are you talking about?"

"The hand of God!" the old man babbled. "It smote down Doc this morning. I saw the ambulance myself. They took him to the county hospital!"

IT is one thing to fail when there seems to be no hope of success. Such failure can be accepted, if not with pleasure, at least with a certain degree of equanimity. It is quite another thing to fail after you have come to believe that you have been successful. Only a stoic or a fatalist can remain unmoved in those circumstances.

Mort Hagen was neither a stoic nor a fatalist. On the contrary, he was a quite normal human being whose hopes had soared high, had for a moment appeared to have been realized—and then somebody cut the string. His fall was a whopper, and he reacted as most men would.

“My,” said Dagne in something like awe. “I didn’t realize that anybody could go on for so long without repeating himself at least once.”

“I’m just starting,” muttered Hagen, but actually he was finished. He didn’t regret his outburst; it had done him considerable good. With very little exception, his every move since entering upon this strange case had led to his own frustration, and an explosion was long overdue. Now he felt somewhat purged and capable of going ahead. But where was he headed?

At the moment he was headed toward the county hospital, physically at least. It was all he could think of to do but he didn’t expect anything worthwhile to come of it. With a sure doomed instinct, he knew that he had seen the last of Doc, alive at least.

“And I came so close, too,” he told Dagne, sitting beside him, for perhaps the tenth time since the drunken old watchman had blurted out the awful truth. “That’s the worst of it.”

“Maybe you’re giving up too soon, Hagen. A lot of people go to the hospital and come out alive.”

“Not this one. I feel it in my bones. It’s too pat, Dagne. Doc was the only one who could put the finger on Hilda’s killer. If I could figure that out, the killer could too, sure as shooting.”

She was frowning, watching the scenery skim by the speeding automobile, block after block. “I don’t know. It sounds awfully cold-blooded to me, hardly human, I mean. I can imagine killing somebody you hate or somebody who has hurt you—but to kill somebody just because he might be dangerous ...”

“Self-preservation is the number one instinct, and don’t you forget it.” He smiled mirthlessly. “If you knew that the gas chamber up at San Quentin was all laid out for you and that the only way to dodge it was to kill somebody else, you’d see how long it would take you to make up your mind, honey.”

Dagne was silent for a while. Then she said slowly, “Something good may come out of this for you yet, Hagen. You couldn’t have been the one who killed Doc—you were with me, or the police, practically all day.”

“Where does that get me?”

“Well, I guess it’s sort of negative proof that you didn’t kill Hilda, either.”

Hagen patted her knee. “Thanks. Do you know that’s the first even halfway open admission you’ve made that you believe in me? I’m afraid that the cops won’t buy it so easily. It’s still only my word that Doc is the man who hired me. Troge will think it’s pretty clever of me, hinging my whole story on a dead man, even if he doesn’t come right out and say so—and he probably will. No, Dagne, I needed Doc bad—alive. Dead, about the only help he’ll be is proof to myself that I’m not out of my mind.”

“Turn right at the next corner,” she warned and didn’t argue any more.

Hagen swung into the long parkway that led up to the imposing lemon-coloured bulk of the county hospital. It was an old rambling structure with many haphazard wings jutting out in all directions. It had been much smaller when first built and it had grown along with the city shooting forth a new branch with each new generation until the original clean lines had been virtually obscured. It was a maze, and some called it a firetrap, but it served its purpose as well as a newer



building would have. A good many of the persons brought there were in no condition to appreciate architecture, anyway.

Hagen knew the place from melancholy experience and he did not pause at the parking lot, nor at the sign that said Positively No Automobiles Beyond This Point. Instead, he continued on around to the rear of the hospital building and stopped near the ambulance emergency entrance. No one challenged his right to do so.

"If you want to wait in the car, I don't think I'll be long," he told Dagne. "And this probably won't be very pleasant."

"Are you kidding? I've come all this way, I want to see the finish of this thing. Wait for me."

Together they entered the wide emergency doorway and he found the office of the superintendent of nurses. It was open and Hagen went in without knocking. The head nurse was a stout middle-aged woman with the forearms of a wrestler and the fixed stare of a marmoset. She viewed their intrusion as if she suspected they had no business being there.

Hagen didn't give her time to put the suspicion into words. "Police business," he informed her brusquely, but didn't prove it with credentials. "I want to find out about a man that one of your ambulances picked up on Fathom Street this morning." He described Doc quickly.

"I came on duty at noon," the nurse objected, beginning the age-old litany of denial-of-responsibility. But when Hagen pointed out that the information would be in the register, she went grudgingly to consult it. Clucking to herself, she spent enough time reading the morning's entries to have memorized them before she finally nodded to Hagen. "Here it is. 2891 Fathom Street. Unidentified man, white male American. Oh, it says D.O.A. That means—"

"I know what it means," Hagen interrupted wearily and turned away. Up to that moment, he had unconsciously been keeping a weak flame of hope alight. Now it flickered and went out. The man he knew only as Doc was dead and for ever beyond confirming the truth of Hagen's story. He turned back to the nurse. "Who certified the death? I'd like to talk to him."

She had already closed the register and so she had to search for the entry again. "Dr. Dworkin. He's one of our trainees. I don't know

where—”

“I’ll find him,” said Hagen. “Thank’s a lot.” He took Dagne’s hand and led her out into the corridor.

She whispered, “I was hoping she’d page him. You know, like they always do in the movies.”

“Want to wake the dead?” He was already moving down the hall. “Now, if you wanted to find a doctor at this time of day, where would you look? Surgery? The lab? The bedside of a dying patient? Not on your life. I’ll give six to three that he’s having coffee at the snack bar. Any takers?”

“Not me,” Dagne panted, trotting to keep up. “You have a disconcerting habit of being right.”

They found Dr. Dworkin at the counter of the hospital lunch room, drinking black coffee. He was one of a group of white-garbed young trainees who were kidding perfunctorily with the two homely waitresses. They all broke off to regard Dagne with solemn approval. Dworkin was glad to join Hagen and Dagne at a table in a quieter corner of the lunchroom.

“Sure, I picked up the old boy down on Fathom Street,” he replied to Hagen’s question. “There wasn’t anything to do for him. He was too far gone.”

“When did he die?”

“In the ambulance on the way here. Maybe, if we’d been able to get him on the table ...” Dworkin shrugged. “But you never know. What’s your interest in this, Mr. Hagen? He a friend of yours?”

“Just investigating his murder.”

Dworkin’s attention had been mainly directed at Dagne. At Hagen’s words, however, his gaze snapped around. “What are you talking about? There’s no murder here.”

“ But I thought—it must—” Hagen halted. “Are you sure?”

“I don’t sign any certificate without being sure. This fellow died of a heart attack, a coronary occlusion brought on by gastritis. From what the registrar at his lodging-house told me, he simply ate himself to death.”

“But couldn’t it possibly have been some sort of poison?”

“It was poison but not the kind of poison that would kill you or me.” The young trainee looked at Dagne, pleased with the chance to show

off. "It was simply rich food, there's your poison. I understand he came into an inheritance a day or so ago, started to splurge—and his stomach just couldn't take it." Dworkin spread his hands. "What do you think of that?"

"I'd rather not say," said Hagen. "There's a lady present."

"It didn't stop you before," Dagne reminded him. "I rather enjoyed it."

Dworkin was a little bewildered. He said, "I'm sorry if I'm not telling you what you'd like to hear."

"Why should you be different?" murmured Hagen. "Look, Doctor—I don't suppose you could sneak me in to see the body, could you? I'd at least like to have the satisfaction of verifying a hunch."

"Why couldn't I?" countered the young man, with a glance at Dagne. He rose. "Come on—simplest thing in the world."

He led them out of the lunchroom, with a condescending nod for the other trainees, down the corridor and to the elevator. As they waited for the car, Dagne whispered in Hagen's ear, "Don't leave me alone, will you?"

He pressed her hand and whispered back, "Scared?"

"Not of the dead ones." She winked at him and Hagen couldn't suppress a grin. Even now, with the laboriously constructed castle of his hopes levelled to the ground, he still felt happier for Dagne's presence. And he wondered about this a little. Up to now, he had been able to blame her attraction for him on the resemblance to Hilda, but he couldn't remember feeling this way about his ex-wife. Or had he just forgotten?

They went down in the elevator to the basement and along another corridor to the hospital morgue. It was a cheerless low-ceilinged room with cold cement walls and merciless fluorescent lamps. Dworkin approached one of the shrouded slabs and thumped the covered shape resoundingly on the chest.

"Here he is," he announced jovially. "Just where I left him."

Hagen turned back the sheet and surveyed the thin face, the iron-grey hair and the sunken cheeks of the man who yesterday had claimed to be Wayne Wishart. He was beyond pretence now. Hagen sighed. "End of the line," he said. He jerked his head at Dworkin. "He didn't happen to say anything that you remember before he died, did he?"

Dworkin shook his head. “No, not that I ... Wait a minute. In the ambulance he mumbled something about ‘wishing’. At least, that’s what it sounded like to me.”

“Could it have been Wishart?”

“It might have been. Would that help you any?”

“ I don’t know,” said Hagen. If Doc had truly mumbled the name Wishart, he might have been recalling only his impersonation—or perhaps the person who had hired him. He studied the dead face on the slab. No help in that direction. Then an idea struck him, and he glanced covertly at the others. Dagne had turned away after her first quick glance of Doc and the young trainee was being very solicitous. Neither of them was watching Hagen.

Using his back to shield his actions, Hagen ran his hands quickly through Doc’s pockets, blessing the fact that the corpse was still wearing his own clothes. He found nothing; if there had been any identification, the hospital had already removed it. But Hagen wasn’t disappointed. He had something else in mind. In Doc’s shirt pocket he tucked one of his own business cards. He needed the alibi badly and if Doc couldn’t help him one way, Hagen didn’t see anything wrong in getting Doc to help him in another.

Dagne came up beside him. “Aren’t you through here? I’m getting a chill.”

“Just a second.” Hagen turned to the trainee. “You’re sure about the cause of death? A lot depends on it.”

“It was practically a textbook case,” said Dworkin stubbornly. “We’ll be doing a post this evening or in the morning, but there’s no question in my mind.”

“Okay, thanks,” said Hagen and, sighing, took Dagne’s hand again. “I wish I could say the same.” He went upstairs to phone Troge the bad news.

TROGE came out in a fast squad car, complete with wailing siren. It was a good indication, Hagen thought, of the pressures that were working on the homicide chief. Troge ordinarily ranked with the calmest of men, but the Wishart murder was now nearly twenty-four hours old without an arrest and Troge was only human after all. Everybody from the mayor on down would be riding him, just because the dead woman had been named Wishart. Hagen hoped that this didn't bode trouble for himself; he didn't care to be sacrificed to the morning papers.

There was no indication that his position had changed one way or another in Troge's eyes. He listened to Hagen's story impassively, heard the corroboration from Dr. Dworkin and stomped away to view Doc's body, trailed by his henchmen.

Hagen didn't accompany him. Instead, he sat with Dagne on the hospital steps and watched the fog bank begin to creep in from the Pacific. The Santa Ana condition was gasping its last hot breath. The fog meant that it would be cooler tomorrow.

"The heat will still be on as far as I'm concerned," he replied to Dagne when she made the weather observation, "That is, unless I get lucky all of a sudden."

"Funny," she mused.

"I don't think so. It's my neck."

"No, I mean it's funny how things turn out. This morning I was ready to shoot you. Even at noon I felt the same way. And now here I am sitting on the steps of the county hospital and letting you hold my hand."

He didn't relinquish it. "I'm holding on for support, Dagne. If I let go, I may sink."

"Is it really that bad, Hagen?"

"Maybe not." He was thinking of the business card he had planted in Doc's pocket. Troge had been down in the morgue a long time. Had he found it yet?" I'll know better when I talk to Troge. But I do know that I haven't exactly been playing in luck. Present company excepted, of course."

Seriously, Dagne asked, "Hagen—why didn't you and Hilda make a go of it?"

"I told you. She preferred another guy."

"That's not a reason, that's a symptom. Of course, it's none of my business." She smiled suddenly. "Have you ever noticed that whenever anyone says 'Of course, it's none of my business', that's a sure sign that they intend to make it their business? Like now—I have no right to ask but I'm asking anyway."

He played absently with her hand, seeking an answer and finding it hard because he had never been quite sure himself. "I don't know, Dagne, and that's the truth. I used to think it was Hilda but now—I don't know."

"Why now?" she asked quietly, watching him.

"Because being with you brings back so much of the good stuff that it makes me wonder. Maybe it was a lot of things instead of just one big thing. You know, I asked an attorney once what are good grounds for divorce in California. What do you think he said? Marriage!" He grinned wryly. "You tell me."

She said slowly, "I think you'd be a hard man to live with, Hagen."

"Didn't Hilda ever tell you?"

"No. Actually, there was a time, right after you were divorced, that I didn't see Hilda at all. About a year. I'm not even sure where she was." Hagen felt the fingers he held slowly become rigid, form a claw. "And now she's dead. Somebody is going to have to pay for that, Hagen."

"Pay day's coming soon," he said and rose. "And so is Troge. I hear the muffled pad of flat feet."

Hagen was right. Troge and his entourage came into view from the direction of the stairs. Hagen hailed him and Troge nodded. He spent a few minutes in low-voiced conversation with his aides and then they

departed while the homicide chief came to join Hagen and Dagne on the steps. Hagen expected that Troge would tell him immediately of finding the business card on the dead man but Troge was more interested in Dagne. He listened intently to the story of the twins, finally commenting, "Well, it's a strange one but not impossible, I guess. You understand, Miss Christy, that I'll have to do some routine checking on What you've told me."

"I expected it. Of course, I don't relish the publicity but ..." She shrugged her slim shoulders. "I wouldn't let that stand in the way of you catching Hilda's murderer."

"That's fine. Do you mind telling me where you were last evening?"

"Home." She gave the address, an apartment in the fashionable park area. "I was working on my business accounts. It's almost the first of the month, you know."

Troge nodded and looked at Hagen. "Well, you're still staying one jump ahead of me. This Doc character matches the description you gave this morning. Pretty lucky for you."

"If you're going to bring luck into it, how about the killer? The only witness against him keels over from natural causes just as I've got him cornered. Doc could have cleared me."

"Uh-huh," Troge said and Hagen waited for him to mention the business card. Instead, Troge added, "That is, you say he could have cleared you. Doc isn't saying anything one way or another." He rose. "I've got a team back-tracking on Doc. By morning we'll know everything about him—maybe even including who hired him, if anybody did."

Hagen couldn't wait any longer. He took the bit in his teeth. "Say, Troge, I was wondering. Did your men search the body? I hadn't mentioned it before but I gave Doc one of my business cards out at Oakmar when he hired me. He might still have it on him. And if he did —"

"He didn't," Troge said flatly. "I looked over his stuff myself. See you later, Miss Christy." With a nod to Hagen, he left them, heading back into the hospital building.

Bewildered, Hagen almost ran after the police captain with the foolish suggestion that perhaps they had missed it, that they had better

look again. He fought down the impulse with an effort. He knew better than that; the police were thorough, to say the least.

Dagne said, "Can we go now—or do you plan on staying the night?"

"We can go," he muttered absently and went in the direction of his car, leaving her to trail after him. He couldn't understand it. He *had* put his card in Doc's pocket, hadn't he? For an instant Hagen wondered if his mind had begun to play tricks on him.

"What's the matter?" Dagne asked him irritably. "Have I got poison oak all of a sudden?"

"What? Oh, I'm sorry. I was just kind of surprised at something Troge said, that's all." He started the car. "Where do you want to go, Dagne? Back to the gym?"

"Salon," she corrected him. "No. Take me home. I'm tired, Hagen." She put her head back against the seat and stared moodily out the window.

Hagen didn't attempt to make conversation as he drove the girl across the city to her apartment. He kept going through the same silent dialogue time after time. He had put the card in Doc's pocket, hadn't he? Yes, he had. Troge hadn't found it there, had he? No, he hadn't. Well, then, his mind cried exasperatedly, what the hell happened to it? Hagen didn't even know where to begin to look for the answer.

It turned out that he didn't have to look at all. The answer was handed to him. He pulled into the kerb before the address Dagne had given him, a Spanish-style two-storey apartment building of white stucco and red tiling built around a verdant patio. He stopped the engine and sat there, still frowning, until she swivelled her head to look at him.

"Don't bother to get out," she said, a trifle bitterly since it was obvious that he had no thought of doing so. "I can open the door for myself. What's bothering you, Hagen?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing important."

"I thought it might be this." She opened her hand and showed him the rectangle of stiff paper she held. It was his own business card, the one he thought he had left with the dead man. "Or am I mistaken?"

Blankly he stared at it. "Where did that come from?"

"From where you put it. I saw that sleight-of-hand act of yours back in the morgue, so while you weren't looking I did a little of my own."



Her pink mouth quirked at his amazement. "You don't suppose that I'd let you get away with it, do you?"

He said slowly, "I'll be switched! So it was you that fouled me up."

"You fouled yourself up when you tried to pull a stunt like that," she told him scornfully. "I wasn't going to stand by and let you hoodwink justice, not for a minute, Hagen."

"I wasn't hoodwinking anything," he retorted. "I was just trying to save my skin. And it was all true anyway, so what harm was it, will you tell me that?"

"I'll be glad to," she flared, matching his angry tone. "Though I don't know that you deserve it. For that matter, I don't know why I didn't tell the whole thing to Captain Troge and let him lock you up, where you probably belong."

"Thank you, Madame Defarge. Would it have put such a strain on your conscience to give me the benefit of the doubt? Maybe I did it because I can be more use to Hilda loose than behind Troge's eight-ball."

"Just don't ask me to be a party to your cheap tricks, that's all."

"I thought that, after this afternoon, you wanted to help me," said Hagen, stung by what he considered her betrayal. "It's a cinch we're after the same thing and I thought you might even be getting to like me."

"We travel different roads. Oh, I do like you—better, anyway," Dagne admitted judiciously. "But I can't stomach your greasy little methods. You're not going to sign me up as your client, if that's what you're hinting at."

"Hinting, hell! I thought it was practically settled!"

"No thanks, laddie. I don't want your tactics rubbing off on me."

"Yeah, I'm pretty filthy, I am."

"Well, I believe in letting the chips fall where they may, Hagen."

"That's easy to say from where you sit. You're not getting hit by any."

They sat for a moment in a stormy silence. Hagen felt the blood pounding in his temples. The fiasco with his business card wasn't so much in itself but it was the last straw, the culmination of a day of frustrations and unpleasant surprises. It was so damned unfair, he raged to himself. He hadn't wanted to get mixed up in this mess in the

first place, it was Hilda's fault somehow, and now her living image was continuing to make his life miserable.

Suddenly, almost without conscious intent, he reached over and took Dagne by her creamy throat. "I ought to strangle you," he declared between his teeth.

She didn't flinch. Her eyes challenged him. "Why don't you shoot an arrow instead?" she asked mockingly.

Hagen said thickly, "I'll show you how I rub off on people, baby." He dropped his grip to her shoulders and pulled her roughly to him. His mouth sought to crush hers and pay back, in some obscure fashion, the hurt she had given him. He wanted her to struggle and experience helplessness, as he had experienced it during the past day and night.

But then he realized suddenly that Dagne was not struggling. Instead, she was returning his kiss as fiercely as it was given. Her fingernails were digging painfully into his back, holding him tightly. He was so surprised that he released her and drew back.

She opened her eyes and gazed at him inscrutably, her eyelids heavy, her lips softly parted. Huskily, she murmured, "Hagen, that was very enjoyable. But I really should know better, shouldn't I?" And without a change of expression, she slapped Hagen full across the mouth for the second time that day. Before he could recover, Dagne slipped out of the car. When he lunged for her, she nearly slammed the door on his fingers.

He yelled after her but she was already marching away in the direction of her front door, her back as straight and proud as a cadet's. She disappeared into her apartment without once more glancing in his direction.

Hagen looked sheepishly up and down the quiet street, sure that every inhabitant had witnessed his embarrassment. But he encountered no amused stares, heard no raucous laughs. This made him feel a trifle better, but only a trifle. His face stung—Dagne hadn't pulled her punch even a little—and his spirit was abused.

"Women," he muttered aloud like a swear word. When was he ever going to learn? Every time he got involved with one he ended up with a bad taste in his mouth, or worse. "If I had any sense at all, I'd reenlist and see if the army wouldn't send me back to Die-Hard Rock." This was not the first time he had had that thought.

You're talking like you've got a choice, he mused. You're not going anywhere, Hagen, not even back to the peace and quiet of Die-Hard Rock. Even the Army won't take a man with a murder rap hanging over him. And let's not kid ourselves, boy, that description fits you. Troge hasn't come right out and said it yet but the way things are going, he'll get around to it. He may even have one of his men waiting at the house for you now.

In this, Hagen was too pessimistic. There was a man waiting for him but it was not one of Troge's underlings. He sat on the steps of Hagen's court bungalow with the patience of a bill collector or a process server. He didn't even get up at Hagen's approach.

Hagen stopped in front of him. "Something I can do for you?"

The man looked him up and down. "Maybe, if you're Hagen." He was a big fellow, a burly square block of flesh with a thick neck and a head that belonged on a pile-driver. "Are you Hagen?"

"I've got a driver's licence that says so."

"Very slick," observed the other man and rose slowly, like a mountain on the move. "Well, you can call me Jack. Let's go inside out of the damp, Hagen. You and me got some business together."

A NUMBER of impressions put Hagen on his guard. He didn't like the looks of the man who had identified himself only as Jack, either his amoral stare or his bulk. Jack wasn't hanging around his front porch for social reasons. He had the build and visage of a bruiser, a breed for which Hagen held no particular fondness, anyway. Whatever Jack wanted, it wouldn't be for the benefit of Mort Hagen. Jack's kind didn't hand out anything free except punishment. If he knew something of value, it would have to be taken away from him by force.

Another intuition told Hagen he wasn't man enough, not right now, which made him madder yet. He was tired and in no mood for company or trouble. It had been a hard day and he had just come from having his face slapped. He was aching to take it out on somebody and he sized Jack up with the cool inspection of a mortician.

"Well?" said Jack, when he made no move to enter the house. "We just going to stand around out here?"

"That depends. If you want to see me on business, I've got an office for that purpose. This is my home."

"I've been to your office. You aren't in very much." Jack had a deep guttural voice, possibly caused by his nose which had been mashed flat against his face. Hagen thought he was half-Mexican at least; his skin had that swarthy look as if it was just about to break into a sweat. "Look, Hagen—I'm doing you a favour."

"Do me another one. Get lost."

Jack smiled and his teeth were very regular and startlingly white, false, Hagen thought. Jack had taken a terrific beating at some time in

the past, perhaps several times. He said, "You're a real mean boy, aren't you? Serve you right if I did leave."

"I'm not that lucky. What is it you want? A dime for a cup of coffee?"

"You shouldn't ought to ride your friends that way," Jack told him. "I am your friend, Hagen, that's why I'm here. It's about the Wishart murder. You're in bad trouble, boy."

"I didn't need you to tell me that."

"I could get you out," said Jack softly. "I'm the only one who can."

Hagen gave a mirthless chuckle. "Who are you—my good fairy? The only thing that's going to get me out of the hole is a confession."

"Well, I might even do that." Jack shrugged. "If there was enough money in it, I mean."

Hagen considered him thoughtfully for a long moment. Then he said, "Much as I hate to back up, I guess you'd better come in, after all. I think I ought to know you better, Jack."

"I grow on people," the burly man admitted and stood aside for Hagen to unlock his front door. He stepped inside then and looked around the living room with a condescending air as if ready to say, H'm, not bad.

Hagen didn't wait to hear Jack's opinion. He followed the other man into the house and hit him with all his strength, a judo cut with the stiffened palm across the back of the thick neck. He put a lot into the blow. He was paying back several people. Jack fell like a tree and lay face down. Hagen shut the door.

"Nice of you to drop in, Jack," he murmured and knelt down beside the outstretched figure and began to go through the man's pockets. He didn't find much besides tobacco crumbs. Jack carried a key ring that indicated he owned an automobile. There was also a handkerchief, overdue for the laundry; a package of cigarettes and a local book of matches; a box of tablets and a switchblade knife. The most interesting item was a train ticket, the return half of a round-trip fare from Los Angeles. The ticket had been sold the day before Hilda's murder.

The blue stub had fallen from Jack's wallet and Hagen had laid aside the wallet momentarily to examine the ticket. He might have learned more had he gone on to open the wallet but he didn't have time. He made a bad mistake. It was a sin of omission and it consisted

of not paying any attention to Jack. From the blow he had dealt out, Hagen confidently expected his victim to remain “hors de combat” for at least an hour. He underestimated the toughness of the thick neck. Without even a warning twitch, Jack suddenly reared up from the floor, like a horse bucking. Hagen didn’t have time to be surprised. The top of Jack’s bullet head struck him flush on the jaw.

He kept falling for a long time, down an endless slope toward an unseeable bottom, and something kept hitting him as he fell. He couldn’t imagine what this was and then he decided that someone was shooting arrows at him. That didn’t seem fair, he already had enough to think about, and he wished that whoever was laughing would shut up. All at once he struck bottom and Hagen rolled his head from side to side and then had to spit out a mouthful of lint.

His eyes took a little time in focusing and his mind a little bit longer than that to comprehend that he lay on his own carpet in his own living room. Remembrance flooded back. He raised his head and moaned aloud at what the effort cost him. His jaw throbbed like an impacted wisdom tooth.

Nevertheless, he eventually came up on his hands and knees and found other pains to catalogue. His right hand was aching and swollen as if it had been stomped on, and his side hurt him every time he breathed.

“Nice guy,” he muttered hoarsely. “I only hit him once.”

Hagen looked around for Jack but the burly man had gone, taking his wallet and other belongings with him. Visible evidence of his presence still remained, however, and the sight of the living room made Hagen forget his own bruises momentarily. The room had been vandalized, deliberately desecrated. Hagen’s books lay on the carpet, some of their pages ripped out. The reading lamp was a shattered cripple. And the upholstery of the furniture had been slashed viciously and some of the stuffing pulled out, like eviscerated bodies.

Jack had taken ample revenge for Hagen’s treatment of him.

“He’ll pay,” Hagen mumbled to himself. “There’s got to be an end to this some day and then it’ll be my turn. It’s coming. Everybody just look out.”

With this to salve his feelings he stumbled out to the bathroom to mend himself physically. He was relieved to find that nothing appeared

to be broken, though it was hard to tell about his ribs. But he still had all his teeth and he could manipulate his fingers gingerly. He didn't even look too bad, once he washed the dust off his face.

"Rugged, that's me," he told his reflection. "Not brainy, but rugged."

That was what came of letting your frustrations get the upper hand, he thought. Just because he had been edgy, he hadn't even heard what Jack had to say. He wondered what the other man's mission had been in seeking him out. He might never know now.

"We grow so soon old and so late smart," he said aloud. It had been one of his father's favourite aphorisms. Hagen had never appreciated it so much before. If he had played his cards right, Jack might have been some help to him. At the very least, Hagen wouldn't be standing here now, aching in all parts of his body, with his living room a shambles.

When he felt up to it, he tried straightening the mess but it hardly looked the same, and wouldn't without professional assistance. Discouraged, he sat down at the kitchen table and waited for his coffee pot to percolate. That was really the worst thing about not being married, he decided; you had no one to gripe to in moments like these. Hagen considered the telephone thoughtfully. The sight of it squatting there by his elbow started his mind to pull itself out of the slough of self-pity.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and tried to recall the exact sound of Jack's voice. He practised it aloud, striving to capture the inflections, or lack of them, in the guttural speech. Gradually he evolved a combination of sentences in his mind and he went over the phrases time after time until he had achieved a passable impersonation, at least in his own opinion.

"Well, we'll see," he murmured. "Maybe Jack's going to be some help, after all. Or maybe I'm wrong about that ticket to L.A. in his pocket."

He dialled Wayne Wishart's number and sat listening to the faraway ring. It was still early and he counted on Wishart being home. A man usually doesn't go out on the town the night following his wife's murder. And because he had no other lead to follow, Hagen was curious to learn Wishart's response to his impersonation. He couldn't

forget that Wishart had spent the day before in Los Angeles, and Jack had come from that city too.

It was Avis Gill who answered the telephone in her best secretarial manner. "This is the Wishart residence. Whom do you wish?"

"Hello," Hagen growled. "This is Jack ..." He had his lips parted to add that he wished to talk with Wishart.

She didn't give him a chance. Her professional manner cracked and her voice trembled. "What do you want now? You know you're not supposed to call here. We'll call you." And she hung up.

Hagen slowly replaced the receiver, a feeling of elation beginning to sprout inside him. The call hadn't turned out exactly as he had expected but it had borne fruit of a sort. There was some connection between Jack and Wishart—or, at least, the Wishart household, he amended. And Avis Gill had sounded definitely scared. Of what?

He knew that he wouldn't learn the answer sitting in his kitchen. Hagen had a final pull of coffee, stuffed a banana and two doughnuts in his coat pocket, and left the house. He drove across town to take up his position near the Wishart house again just as he had the night before, but with one big difference. This time nobody was paying him.



ON the way to the Wishart home, Hagen stopped at a drugstore to buy the evening papers on the off-chance that the police had solved Hilda's murder and hadn't bothered to tell him about it. They hadn't but the papers were full of information about Doc, whose name, it turned out, was actually Ira Gruber. He had been vaguely dubbed a "mystery man" by the reporters and Hagen discovered sourly that the police had taken the entire credit for tracking down and identifying the old bum. "Routine police methods," Troge was quoted as saying.

Hagen turned on his car radio and got more of the same from a local newscast. He understood. The cops, lacking a definite answer in Hilda's death, weren't above feathering their own nest with Hagen's straw.

"Better that than my hide," he muttered and turned off the radio. His vanity was injured but that was all, and his neck was what counted. The stories tonight had dropped him clear on to page two and that suited Hagen fine. Of course, this did not preclude his eventual reappearance as big news but he could hope for the best.

Right now, his hopes were concentrated on the Wishart house down the street from where he parked. His impersonation of Jack had kicked up some dust, though exactly what the significance was, Hagen couldn't tell yet. He had found that in the private detective business as in war, at least ninety per cent of the battle consisted of waiting.

Tonight, however, he was not content to wait in his car as he had done on the previous evening. Something Avis Gill had said—"We'll call you"—led him to believe that this course of action might prove futile. So Hagen, after a few moments' scrutiny of the rambling house from the front, quitted his automobile and once again circled the

outside of the glass brick wall. He used his flashlight boldly, planning to tell anyone who questioned him that he was on police business. However, no one challenged him and he soon found what he was seeking: the telephone wires leading to the house.

Hagen had the odd sensation of reliving a past experience as he again hauled himself up the slick wall and dropped into the flower bed on the other side. For a moment he stood quite still in the bushes, listening and looking, as if he expected to see Hilda's mink-draped form and hear her argumentative voice calling to him. *Don't tell me you've come back, Morton. Don't tell me you can't forget.* Directly ahead loomed the diving tower, unlighted now, where she had drawn in her last breath and posed for him and he hadn't even bothered to look. Was there someone up there—or was it only a cloud in the night sky beyond? Hagen gritted his teeth and got a grip on his nerves. He saw no one and he heard nothing and the weird feeling passed.

He moved across the yard. The simplest place to attach his wire-tap set was where the wires came down the side of the house. But he also wanted to watch the house as much as he could, rather than huddle blindly against the foundation. So he tracked the telephone wires to the house and then back a little way, choosing his lookout and listening post carefully. Where he picked his spot, the overhead wires were beyond the reach of his fingers so he scouted around in the shrubbery for something to stand on. He stumbled into a wheelbarrow. With this as a platform, he was able to snap his lead-in cables to the Wishart wires quite easily. He had done it many times before and his equipment was expensive. Hagen had no scruples about it, though wire-tapping was generally held in bad repute. But Hagen could see little difference between following a man to a clandestine rendezvous and listening to him make the appointment. The only real difference was that in the latter case Hagen would know where he was going ahead of time. A wire-tap for him was merely a labour-saving device, since the evidence wasn't admissible in court anyway.

It was for this reason that he had brought the phone trap with him to the Wishart house. If someone in the house had an appointment with Jack, or intended to have, Hagen would follow him, come hell or high water. But if that someone should entrust the secret to the telephone wires, well, Hagen would be saved that much unnecessary worry.

The key word in this theory, as in all of his theories, Hagen reflected, was “if”. He couldn’t be sure Wishart or his mother or his secretary would try to contact Jack tonight, in which case his vigil in the bushes would result in nothing more than a cold. But that was a chance he had to take—and he had nothing better to do, anyway.

There was another possibility which occurred to him as soon as he had adjusted his headset. Because, at that moment, someone within the house was just hanging up the receiver. Hagen was in time only to hear the final click of the cut-off bar and then the buzz of the dial tone. Who had been on the line—on either end, for that matter? There was no way of telling.

Nevertheless, there was nothing to do but gamble that he hadn’t already missed the important call. Hagen made himself comfortable in the wheelbarrow and ate his dinner and wondered what Dagne would say if she could see his fare. He thought he must make it a point to have a diet consultation with her one of these days. By now he was thinking very pleasantly of the girl again. After the beating he had absorbed from Jack, her slap seemed the merest love tap. He hardly recalled it now anyway, preferring to remember instead the kiss that had preceded it. It had been worth it, he decided.

Even with these pleasant memories, the vigil eventually began to pall on him. The simple truth was that nothing was happening. There were no incoming calls to the Wishart house. Once someone in the house dialled a number and Hagen tensed expectantly. But whoever it was only was checking the correct time and merely listened to the recorded voice before hanging up again.

Hagen might have thought the place deserted if he had only his ears to guide him. But his eyes told him otherwise. The draperies had not been drawn across the windows that overlooked the grounds and most of the rooms were lighted. At intervals Hagen could see the people within as they passed to and fro. They looked strange to him, like actors in an old silent movie, since he could hear nothing of what went on inside. Avis Gill, for example, sat near the record-player, apparently listening to the music and keeping time with it by rocking her head. To Hagen she resembled a person with palsy.

And Wayne Wishart, pacing back and forth through the various levels of his sprawling house, might have been a marionette by his

jerky erratic movements that reflected, Hagen surmised, a nervousness that was virtually tearing him apart. Once he paused to have a violent—and soundless—argument with his mother, and Hagen was reminded of a Punch and Judy show. He wouldn't have been surprised if Wishart had suddenly begun to belabour the old woman with a stick in the classic manner. And, recalling Mrs. Wishart's personality, he wouldn't have interfered.

The fog had begun to settle down, a light grey mist that did not restrict the visibility much but caused the temperature to plunge. Hagen began to feel his bruises more intensely and his mind began to sort out reasons why he should go somewhere more comfortable, with his own bed heading the list.

Hagen got up and moved around, as far as the trailing wire of the headset would allow, trying to recapture his earlier enthusiasm for the game. He finally compromised by agreeing with himself that he would wait another half-hour. That would be ten o'clock and it was unlikely that any business would be done after that hour. Wayne Wishart might even go to bed....

His next glimpse of the red-headed sub-divider didn't tend to bear out Hagen's hopes, however. Instead of donning pyjamas, Wishart appeared in his bedroom and selected a tan topcoat from the closet. In one hand he carried a book which made it appear as if he had interrupted his reading to come for the garment. This didn't make any sense but when Hagen saw Wishart put on the coat, he quit wasting his time with theories. A man didn't put on a topcoat to read a book, or to argue with his mother, either. Wayne Wishart was going out.

Hagen moved quickly, congratulating himself on his patience and sure that it was going to pay off for him. He detached the wire-tap, folded the equipment into the leather carrying case and headed for the wall. The light in Wishart's bedroom was out now and an instant later Hagen heard the slam of the door that gave access to the garage. Hagen scrambled up to the top of the wall.

At that moment, as he was poised ready to leap down to the sidewalk, the telephone inside the house began to ring, clearly audible to him through the extension in the cabana. Hagen sat atop the glass barrier, gripped with indecision, not knowing which way to jump. Should he go back and hook up his wire-tap again on the chance the

call might be important? Or should he forget the phone and follow Wishart? It was obvious that he couldn't do both and time was short. In the garage he heard an automobile engine cough to life.

He decided to stick to his original decision. Wishart, more than anyone else, held forth promise of being the key he was looking for. His decision made, Hagen jumped heavily to the sidewalk.

"But if he's just going down to the drugstore for a soda, I'll shoot myself," he muttered aloud and began to run for his car.

The wire-tapping equipment banging against his sore side, didn't add any speed but Hagen covered the distance in quite a respectable time. When he slid, panting, behind the wheel, Wayne Wishart's automobile had not yet appeared in the driveway. Hagen could hear the engine racing as the other man let it warm up. He started his own car's engine and waited.

Hagen continued to wait. The seconds stretched into minutes and still there was no sign of Wishart. Did he forget something and go back? Hagen wondered. Or, worse yet, was that phone call for him and he's in there now talking to Jack while I sit here listening to his engine purr? He fidgeted, straining his eyes for the red glow of tail-light that would show Wishart backing out of his garage. It didn't come.

Finally Hagen couldn't stand it any longer. Fearing that he was making a sucker play but unable to resist, he got out of his car and went to look. Then he frowned. In the darkness of the driveway he couldn't see Wishart's car. After a moment he realized that it wasn't the darkness at fault, after all. Wishart's car wasn't in the driveway.

Risking discovery Hagen pointed his flashlight down the dark path of concrete. To his surprise he saw that the garage doors were still down.

"But I can hear the engine running," he muttered, seeking an explanation. "So where in the world ..."

The answer struck him so suddenly that he gasped, as if the blow had been a physical one. He threw caution and concealment to the winds. The beam of his flashlight stabbing the darkness ahead of him, Hagen sprinted for the building at the end of the driveway. He reached it, grappled with the pull handle of the nearest door and flung it upright. It crashed resoundingly against the top of the frame.

Smoke, acrid and strong, billowed out at him. Coughing, Hagen groped for his handkerchief. Holding it over his nose and mouth, he stumbled into the murky garage and along the side of the Buick station wagon till he reached the driver's side. The fumes tore at his throat and corroded his lungs and burned his eyes. By touch he found the ignition switch and turned it off.

Then, choking and gasping, he grabbed Wayne Wishart by the belt of the tan topcoat and, tugging at him like a sack of laundry, pulled the unconscious man out into the cool, damp and—blessedly—fresh air.

HAGEN rolled the unconscious man over on to his face in the driveway and, straddling him, began to administer artificial respiration. Wayne Wishart needed fresh air, lots of it, more than his own shallow breathing would supply at the moment. Hagen pumped away rhythmically with the old refrain—out goes the bad air, in comes the good—until the lungs beneath his palms were doing their own work. Wishart began to give great sobbing gasps.

Satisfied that he had done as much as he could and that nature would now take over, Hagen waddled to one side and began to do a little deep breathing for himself. He felt ready to drop and every muscle ached from this latest task he had imposed upon them.

He surveyed Wishart grimly. “I sure hope you’re worth it, buddy. I’ve had nothing but trouble ever since I heard your name.”

As he began to get his energy back and become more cognizant of his surroundings, Hagen discovered that he was sitting on some hard object other than the driveway. He put his hand down to investigate and discovered it was a book. He couldn’t imagine at first what a book was doing lying in the middle of the driveway until he recalled that Wishart had been carrying one. Apparently it had been in the pocket of his topcoat during his attempt at suicide and Hagen had unwittingly dumped it out while dragging him from the car.

In the darkness, he couldn’t tell what kind of a book it was but his curiosity was piqued. Why should Wishart carry a book to his rendezvous with death? He found his flashlight and examined it. Hagen whistled softly. The book, gilt-edged and leather-bound and richly embossed, was a diary. He recognised the handwriting. It was Hilda’s.

Since there was no one to stop him, Hagen put it into his pocket for perusal later on.

Wayne Wishart was beginning to moan and turn his head from side to side as the effects of the deadly gas lessened. Hagen decided that it was time he secured a little professional assistance; his own knowledge of carbon monoxide poisoning was strictly academic. With a tired sigh, he pulled Wishart up by his armpits, stood him erect momentarily and then allowed the other man to fold across his shoulders. Wishart wasn't a very robust individual, but in Hagen's condition he weighed like Man o' War. Staggering under his burden, Hagen crossed the concrete to the porch and tried the back door. It was locked.

In the dark he couldn't locate the bell immediately so he kicked at the panel several times, figuring he would raise somebody. He did. There was the sound of high heels crossing the linoleum, then the drape was pushed aside, the exterior light came on and Avis Gill peeped out at him. Her eyes widened so much that Hagen feared her contact lenses would fall out. When she saw Wishart's red head hanging upside down, the last glow of colour left her wax-doll face and her lower lip vanished between her teeth, as if she was about to burst out crying. And then she disappeared into the house, leaving Hagen and his shoulder-sagging load standing outside.

"Great!" he said between his teeth. "Think I've got nothing better to do but stand here all night?" Angrily he kicked some more at the locked door.

More foot-noises came from inside and this time it was Rosemary Wishart who peered at him through the glass. Half-bowed to the ground by now, Hagen lifted his head to glare and bellow, "Open the door, will you!"

She did. She wasn't panicky the way the secretary had been. Instead, she barred his way with a pistol only a few inches from his nose. In a voice that was remarkably well under control, she announced, "If you don't stand where you are, I'll shoot!"

"Another minute and I'll die on the spot and save you the trouble. Let me in!"

"What have you done to Wayne? Is he dead?"

"Not yet. But if you don't let me in—"



That did it. Concern for her son overrode her fear of Hagen. Mrs. Wishart stood aside and Hagen stumbled into the kitchen. He croaked out a request for directions to Wishart's bedroom and, bandy-legged, followed the woman through innumerable doors and down a corridor that seemed endless until at last they reached the destination he sought. With no attempt to be gentle—it was beyond him even if he had cared—he dumped the semiconscious Wishart on to the bed.

Mrs. Wishart fell to her knees beside her son, clutching him with a hand that incongruously still held the pistol. "Wayne! Wayne! What has he done to you?"

"Saved his life, that's what he's done," said Hagen sourly. He discovered Avis Gill staring at Wishart from the hall and he growled at her, "Quick, bring some whisky!" She scuttled off.

Mrs. Wishart glared at him across her unconscious son. "You're going to pay for this, Hagen. Just as soon as I can call the police—"

"Take my advice and call a doctor instead," Hagen said. "And make it one who'll keep his mouth shut, either for money or friendship. You call the cops and they're going to want to know why your son tried to commit suicide."

"Suicide?" she echoed and her harsh face went suddenly slack. "Wayne tried to commit ..."

Hagen nodded. "In the garage, by letting the engine of his station wagon run. I got him out just in time." He didn't bother to explain how he happened to be so handy and it didn't occur to her to ask. "You don't have to take my word for it. He'll tell you himself—or if he won't, a doctor will."

"Suicide," Mrs. Wishart said softly. She gave the impression of not hearing anything Hagen had said after that one word. Her fingers, relaxing, let the gun slide on to the bed. She didn't notice.

Avis Gill came back, almost running, with a generous glass of whisky. "It's Scotch," she panted. "It's all I could find—"

"It'll do," said Hagen, and drained the glass. "Um, good."

She gaped at him. "But that was for Wayne!"

"I need it more than he does." Hagen handed her back the empty glass. "Who's the family doctor—and can he be trusted to keep his mouth shut?"

“Why—” she stammered, unable to follow his rapid-fire change of subject, “I guess that Dr. Hebb—he’s the one who usually—”

Hagen looked at Mrs. Wishart for confirmation. She seemed to be snapping out of her daze. She said, “Dr. Hebb will be fine. Just tell him that there’s been an accident and that Wayne is hurt. Don’t tell him how.”

“I don’t know how myself,” Avis Gill said. Hagen pushed her firmly out into the hall and closed the door.

“Now,” he said, “we’ve got to have a little talk, Mrs. Wishart.”

“Later. After I’ve taken care of Wayne.”

“He can wait and this can’t.” He paused. “I’ll lay it on the line for you. Your son tried to commit suicide tonight, right in the middle of the investigation of his wife’s murder. As of now, you, he, I—and maybe Miss Gill—are the only people who know that. Add the doctor and you have five, which is a nice cosy number, not too big for comfort.”

She studied him narrowly. “What are you getting at?”

“The only one of the five who hasn’t any real reason to keep his mouth shut about tonight is me. In fact, I stand to gain by doing my duty as a citizen and reporting the whole story to the police.”

“You wouldn’t do that.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because if you intended to go to the police, you wouldn’t be telling me about it in this way,” she stated calmly.

Hagen grinned. “You ought to take up fortune telling. You’re partly right, Mrs. Wishart. I don’t intend to go to the police—if I get what I want out of you and your son.”

“Just what do you want, Hagen? Or am I being naïve?”

“I want you to hire me to investigate Hilda’s death.”

She nodded slowly and then rose to her feet. “Just a moment,” she said and left the room. Hagen waited, wondering what she was doing. He found out immediately. Mrs. Wishart returned with her purse and a sheaf of currency in her hand. She said coldly, “I have only about two hundred dollars in the house. Now take it and get out!”

Hagen didn’t touch the money. He said, “I know this is going to come as a surprise to you, but I’m not interested in the dough. This

isn't blackmail that I'm proposing, Mrs. Wishart, at least not the ordinary kind."

"I don't understand you," she muttered, still holding out the money.

"I'm not deep. But I need a client real bad, so I can have a solid footing in this case. Up to now, nobody's wanted me—which is really a shame because, as you can see, my rates are very low."

"Am I to gather," she asked, "that you will work for nothing—and keep silent about Wayne's, ah, accident tonight—simply if I agree to hire you?"

"Well, let's back up a little," Hagen amended. "I'll work for nothing unless I come up with some results. In that case, it will be my usual fee—fifty bucks a day plus expenses. The rest of what you said is correct, though."

"I'd be a fool to turn you down, wouldn't I?"

"Well, yes," Hagen admitted modestly. "That's the way it looks to me. And since I know that you're no fool, Mrs. Wishart, I'll consider myself retained as of, well, let's say a half-hour ago—so I can use the old duty-to-my-client excuse if the police ever want to know why I didn't tell them about Wayne's, ah, accident." He grinned at her.

She smiled back at him, a bit grimly. "You think of everything, don't you, Hagen?"

"Not exactly. I still haven't thought of a good *second* reason why Wayne should try to kill himself tonight."

"Second reason?" Mrs. Wishart raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"Well, the first reason is obvious. He murdered Hilda and didn't want to face the music. But since he's my client, we have to rule that out and find the second reason. Got any suggestions?"

"Well ..." She hesitated, obviously groping for straws. "I wouldn't be surprised that Wayne was so upset about Hilda—yes, that's it, of course. He was extremely despondent tonight—he misses Hilda terribly you know—and so, of course ..."

Hagen nodded gravely. With his own opinion of Hilda, he couldn't quite buy this story. But there was no point in arguing with Mrs. Wishart about it. She didn't know any more than he did, or—if she did—she didn't intend to tell him. Even so, Hagen preferred an evasive client to no client at all; they were too hard to come by these days to let little matters such as mutual confidence upset him.

So he said, "Well, that's possible and it won't hurt to go on that assumption for the present." He was prepared to go into more extensive probing when he heard the doorbell ring. He guessed it was the doctor and Mrs. Wishart hurried off to see that he was admitted.

Left alone with the torpid Wishart, Hagen picked the woman's pistol up off the bedclothes. It was a .32, a standard purse model bulldog, loaded. He reflected that he seemed to have a penchant lately for relieving women of their firearms, but it certainly wouldn't do to leave a gun lying around in this house. Wayne Wishart might be tempted to use it. A man who tries suicide once finds the second time easier.

Hagen strolled into the bathroom. He raised the porcelain cover to the back of the toilet and dropped the pistol into the water. He flushed the bowl to make certain the gun didn't block the mechanism and returned to the bedroom. He didn't think anybody would find the weapon in a hurry, and he felt safer all around. He would have preferred to lock it up in his desk drawer with Dagne's pistol—Larry Beldorian's, actually—but that would involve transporting it across town. At this point in his career, Hagen didn't want to chance being caught armed.

The doctor, a contemporary image of Mrs. Wishart, bustled in and commenced to work. Hagen hung around only long enough to hear his prognosis confirmed—Wayne Wishart was in no danger—and then he effaced himself, leaving Wishart in the doctor's hands and the doctor, in turn, in Mrs. Wishart's hands. He thought she could be counted on to seal the doctor's lips.

On the way down the hall, he overheard the last of a telephone conversation. Avis Gill was telling someone that Mr. Wishart would be unable to keep his appointment this evening, due to an accident. "Perhaps tomorrow. Yes, we'll call you. Goodnight."

Hagen had no way of knowing to whom she had been speaking. He half-suspected it was Jack but he didn't question her. It was the wrong moment and he wasn't sure Avis was the person to ask, anyway. A question of that sort was mainly a matter of intuition and timing, asking the right person at the right moment. He could wait.

Instead, he went for a place where he could be alone and wound up outside in the cabana by the pool. He sat down on the chaise longue that Hilda had occupied the previous evening, put his feet up and

relaxed pleurably. Then, almost immediately, he rore, struck with an idea.

He crossed the lawn to the archery course and opened the cabinet that held the bows and arrows. One of the bow racks was empty and he knew that one of the arrows was gone also, though its absence was not apparent since all the quivers were filled. Hagen chose one of the deadly shafts and hefted it in his hand absently. He did not take down a bow.

Turning, he walked the length of the course to the gaily-painted target, backed by a bale of straw, that stood on a large easel. He paced back about ten yards and holding the arrow like a spear, hurled it at the target. It bounced to the ground harmlessly. It did the same on the next two attempts. But on the third, by fudging a trifle on the distance, Hagen was able to make the steel tip stick in the canvas.

Thoughtfully, he walked back to the chaise longue. If he, strictly a novice, could make an arrow stick in the target in that manner, a practised knife-thrower probably could do a great deal better. It was an idea with possibilities.

Still musing over this, Hagen stretched out once more on the comfortable patio furniture and took Hilda's diary out of his pocket. He laid the book in his lap and groped for a cigarette. Without an effort on his part, the volume fell open to a well-thumbed page. His eyes skipped over the familiar handwriting.

"Holy smoke!" he exclaimed and sat bolt upright, any lassitude vanished. Incredulously, he re-read the page. And then read it again.

Under the date of June 8, the entry began like this: *Today I killed Bruce ...*

THE diary was a thing of beauty in itself, quite apart from the treasure it contained. Ordinary book size, it was of English manufacture, expensive but not custom made. Blank editions were probably sold at “better” shops all over the world. The pages were edged in gilt as shining as Hilda’s hair. The book was bound in limp black leather, embossed with a golden floral design. Intertwined leaves and stems proceeded in bright intricacy up the spine to blossom into formal red and blue flowers, gold centred, on the front and back covers. It was a glistening thing. Obviously, Hilda had valued her secrets.

At the moment, however, Mort Hagen’s appreciation for the book was quite apart from its aesthetic qualities. He was hardly a lover of books for their own sake, anyway. The contents were what mattered to him—and in Hilda’s diary he realized that he had struck a gold mine.

*Today I killed Bruce.* ... Nobody had to urge Hagen to read further.

After he had finished, he remained in the cabana a while. He still couldn’t quite believe everything he had read, nor could he fit the picture together, not exactly. The diary was both a help and a challenge. A help, because it supplied him with information he hadn’t possessed heretofore; a challenge, because it didn’t supply him more.

The entry that had caught his attention was probably the most explicit thing about the record. Otherwise, the book was inclined to be vague. There wasn’t even a year mentioned to hang the dates on, although the diary began precisely on January 1 and concluded the following December 31. But Hilda hadn’t dealt in specifics. There were no items at all of the type: Today I went shopping and bought a pair of earrings; or, Today John Doe and I saw *Love in a Bucket* and

went dancing at the Diablo Room afterwards. Instead, the diary dealt with longings, emotions, dreams. Hagen was surprised. He hadn't imagined that Hilda thought so much.

There were a few proper names and place names, mentioned casually in passing, and from their flavour Hagen wondered if Hilda hadn't spent the year covered by the diary in Hawaii or some other place with similar atmosphere. He couldn't remember her ever mentioning such a sojourn as occurring previous to their marriage. But, of course, that had been three years ago.

Bruce was mentioned several times, the most prominent name in the diary, previous to the June 8 entry. Again specifics were lacking, including Bruce's last name. The suspicion occurred to Hagen that Bruce might be a pet frog or spaniel that Hilda had finally been forced to put out of the way. He discarded this notion when he read the description of one particular dream which involved Bruce. No, he decided, Bruce had to be a man, quite a man. And from the tone of the entries, he thought that Hilda had been in love with him, as much as she was capable of being in love with anyone besides herself.

After the fatal entry, Bruce's name vanished entirely from the diary, except by implication. On July 8 the entry was quite short: *One month today. I'll do it again!* The second sentence was heavily underscored. And later on, there was a long essay on her failure to feel regret. What she might be expected to regret was obvious, Hagen thought.

So what it all added up to was that Hilda, at some period in the not-too-distant past, had killed somebody named Bruce. Where, why, how, and who Bruce was were questions the diary didn't answer. And Hilda was no longer around to satisfy Hagen's curiosity.

"It's all wrong," he muttered aloud, frowning at the blue waters of the pool where her life had ended. "A person who kills once usually kills again. They don't get killed themselves, except ..."

The exception that came to mind was vendetta. Had someone tracked Hilda down and murdered her in vengeance for Bruce? Well, it was possible—particularly if the roots of this Bruce affair were buried in some far-off exotic soil where such behaviour was common—but in Southern California it sounded a little far-fetched. Another notion occurred to him and brought a grimace with it. Had Hilda's death been

a mistake? Had someone else been the intended victim, perhaps Hagen himself, and the scheme miscarried?

“One thing I got to remember,” he admonished himself, “is that I was hired to be here the night Hilda died. It wasn’t a coincidence.”

Hagen decided that he had gone just about as far as he could go on the basis of the present evidence, so the logical move was to go collect some more. He had heard Dr. Hebb’s car pull away some time before, which indicated that Wayne Wishart was out of danger and presumably able to talk. Hagen thought that he and his new employer had a good deal to discuss.

As he went back to the house he saw a light in the garage. He peeped through the window. Avis Gill was industriously searching the station wagon with the aid of a flashlight. Hagen didn’t bother to watch or to comment. He went into the house instead and sought the bedroom.

Wayne Wishart was sitting *up* in bed. He looked pale and shaken, his pallor emphasized by his red hair. The sight of Hagen didn’t appear to cheer him up any. Mrs. Wishart looked unhappy too, but not about Hagen particularly. He gathered that the mother had been giving her son considerably more than a piece of her mind concerning his actions. A kind word would have been a more cheering note on which to re-enter the world, but Hagen thought that the present situation was probably typical. Mrs. Wishart would still be giving instructions to the undertaker as they threw the first shovelful of dirt in her face.

She told him his place now. “Hagen, you’ll have to go. I thought you already had. Dr. Hebb says definitely no visitors.”

“Quite right, too,” Hagen agreed. “Lucky for me I’m just an employee so the rule doesn’t apply.”

Wishart said huskily, “What’s this? What’s he talking about?”

“Oh, hasn’t your mother told you? I’m working for you now in my professional capacity.”

Mrs. Wishart said, “I thought I’d better, Wayne. It seemed the only way to insure that he’d keep his mouth shut about—about what happened.”

Wishart shrugged. “It makes no difference to me what he says. Go ahead, Hagen, you can tell everyone. Wayne Wishart tried to commit



suicide. Go ahead, tell them—you'll be quite a hero and get your name in the papers."

"I've already had my name in the papers, thanks."

"Well, it just doesn't matter to me," said Wishart indifferently. "One more thing won't hurt."

"Wayne, don't talk that way," his mother admonished. "This isn't like you, quitting when the going gets tough. Where's your spunk?"

Hagen doubted if Wishart had very much. Men with mothers like Rosemary Wishart usually didn't. He said soothingly, "No use to look on the dark side. As far as I'm concerned, nothing happened tonight except that you hired me to look into Hilda's death. Let's forget everything else and talk about that."

"I don't want to talk to you about anything," said Wishart. "Please get out."

"It's not that easy. We got things in common." Hagen tossed the diary in Wishart's lap. "Read any good books lately?"

He didn't think it was possible for Wishart, in his present condition, to pale further. But he did. His mother gasped. Wishart said softly, "So that's where it was!"

"That's right," agreed Hagen. He sat down on the foot of the bed and got out cigarettes and offered them around. No one accepted so he smoked alone. "And to save time, let me add that I've read it from cover to cover, except for a few dull spots. I presume you've done the same thing?"

"Yes," Wishart muttered, staring down at the book. He hadn't touched it, recoiling almost as if it were alive. "Both Mother and I've read it."

"Well, it'll never make Book-of-the-Month Club but it has its points, as the man says." Hagen blew out a smoke ring and regarded it pleurably. "When did you find it?"

"Today, when I was—going through Hilda's things." Wishart turned suddenly to the woman. "Get me a drink, will you? I feel like I'm coming apart at the seams."

"I don't think I'd better," she objected. "Perhaps Dr. Hebb—"

Hagen said, "Oh, give the man a drink. He needs one. Maybe we all do. I got a bad taste in my mouth." When Mrs. Wishart, still grumbling, had gone, he said, "Now what were you going to tell me?"

“I didn’t want her to hear,” said Wishart, a trifle sheepishly, “because I promised her I wouldn’t tell. It was really she who found Hilda’s diary today. She was poking around Hilda’s bedroom.

“She didn’t want me to mention it. She wanted it to look like I was the one who found it, so she wouldn’t appear to be an old busybody.”

“Now who’d think a thing like that?” said Hagen.

“It’s not really important to anyone except her. But I thought I’d humour her.”

“Let’s get back to the diary. What did you think about it?”

Wishart shook his head as if it ached. “I don’t know. God, I couldn’t believe it. I still don’t. Hilda wasn’t ... I don’t care what it says there. It must have been her idea of a joke.”

“Great sense of humour,” agreed Hagen. “The only question is: who’s laughing? I’ll bet it isn’t Bruce.”

Rosemary Wishart came back with two glasses, their bottoms barely awash with liquor. Hagen eyed his wryly but said nothing; after all, he was on duty. She remained standing while they drank. She said, “If you want to know what I think, I’m not surprised at all. I never did care for that woman.”

“Be quiet,” said her son. “Be careful what you’re saying.”

“Fiddlesticks. It’s no secret. I never trusted her and made no bones about it.” Mrs. Wishart tossed her head. “I won’t claim that I suspected she was a murderess, but I certainly wouldn’t put it past her.”

“I don’t think it’s fair—when Hilda isn’t here to defend herself.”

“We should consider ourselves lucky. You might have been next.”

Hagen, listening to what seemed to be a normal wrangle between the two, had a pang of sympathy for the dead woman. An unstable husband, an antagonistic mother-in-law.... Despite what Hilda had said, her life in this house couldn’t have been a bed of roses. He kept this opinion to himself, however.

Finally, he interrupted to say, “Well, that’s all water under the bridge. I’d like to bring the minutes up to date.” He examined the diary and looked at Wishart. “Where were you taking this tonight?”

Wishart didn’t hesitate. “To the police. We had a little—discussion, mother and I, and we decided that it was too important not to go to the authorities. That’s where I was going.”

“But you didn’t. Instead, you turned on the gas. Why?”

“I don’t know that I can tell you,” Wishart said wearily. He looked off across the room, away from Hagen and also his mother who appeared to be as eager for an answer as anyone. “I really intended to go to the police, right up to the moment I got into the car. I have one of those electronic gadgets, you know, that opens and shuts the garage doors from the car. I remember I started the engine and was going to flip the control switch and then ... well, I thought, what if I don’t? What if I just sit here until I go to sleep? I know it was the wrong thing to do but it seemed such an easy thing to do.”

Because his tone sounded a trifle wistful, Hagen made his own stern. “I’m going to give it to you straight, Wishart. If you think what you tried to do tonight was either smart or easy, you’ve got another think coming. All you were doing was trying to duck out and let somebody else take the bumps. Now I know from experience that a man who really intends to kill himself can’t be stopped. I’ve seen men hang themselves with their shoelaces and open up their wrists with broken watch crystals, even when they were under twenty-four hour guard. They couldn’t be stopped. *You* can’t be stopped, by me or anybody else—except yourself. I hope you’ll smarten up. I hope you’ve learned your lesson.”

Wishart muttered, “I know you’re right.”

“Bet your life, I’m right. If you kill yourself, everybody will hang Hilda’s murder on you, whether it’s true or not. I hope you think more of your name and your family than that.”

“Whether it’s true or not,” echoed Wishart. He looked surprised. “Hagen, if that means what it sounds like—well, it’s not so. I didn’t kill Hilda.”

“Now you’re getting to sound like me,” said Hagen. “Believe me, buddy, I’m in a lot worse spot than you are, and you don’t find me in any smoke-filled garages, do you? Except to pull out guys who should know better.”

Personally, Hagen thought he sounded like a self-righteous busybody but Wishart appeared too weak to resent it. He had a more intimate reason than the good of society for keeping this man alive. It was a good and simple motive: Hagen didn’t want to be blamed for Wishart’s murder too. And it could have looked like murder much too easily. Had he perished in the monoxide tonight, the police would have

been extremely curious about Hagen's proximity. One death at a time was plenty.

But Wishart took his pious prating seriously. He nodded. He even managed a wavering smile. "You don't have to worry about my trying that stunt again. You're absolutely right, Hagen. I was an ass to let it affect me that way. Truthfully, though I hate to admit it, I was more upset about Oakmar and what's going to happen to it than I was about Hilda."

"You don't have to be afraid to admit that to me. If I had to choose between Hilda and Oakmar—"

Mrs. Wishart broke in, "I don't really understand what you're so worried about anyway, Wayne. Just because a witch on wheels got herself murdered isn't going to make any difference in Oakmar that I can see." She gave a harsh chuckle. "Might even increase the value. I know people."

Hagen felt the same way. He thought that there was still more worrying Wayne Wishart than the man was willing to admit. He said, probing, "I'd like your ideas on this diary. To start with, what's the year?"

"I don't know," Wishart admitted. "I wondered too. I really knew so very little about Hilda"—his mother snorted—"and what I do know is scanty. We'd been married a year and she never talked about anything that went back over a year past that."

"That would be two years," figured Hagen. "And three years ago she was married to me. So it's simple. The diary covers the year following our divorce, when she dropped out of sight." He sighed and got up. "Well, looks like a little legwork is indicated."

"What are you going to do with it?" asked Wishart in surprise. Hagen had picked up the diary.

"Taking the torch from your failing hand." Hagen patted the diary. "It goes to Troge in the morning." He smiled at both of them. "Just to keep our stories straight, I'll claim the credit for finding it—as your employee, naturally."

Wishart leaned forward in bed as if he were going to protest Hagen's actions. But then he apparently thought better of it, bit his lip and frowned and said nothing. Hagen waited, wondering a little.

They were interrupted by the appearance of Avis Gill. The secretary came in, her hands grimy. She said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Wishart, but I couldn't find it any—" She broke off as she saw Hagen. "Oh."

"Never mind," he said, and went to the door. As he passed Avis, he showed her the diary. "This is it." In the doorway he turned as if in afterthought. "Oh, by the way, Wishart—when you see Jack, give him my regards."

From his position Hagen was able to see each face. Mrs. Wishart had no particular reaction. Avis was startled. She looked immediately at Wayne Wishart who was positively thunderstruck. He stammered, "I don't understand—Jack who?"

"Last name omitted," Hagen said. "Seems to be catching. But all things shall be revealed. Goodnight."

He left the house unescorted and crossed the street to his car. But he didn't drive off immediately. Instead, he lingered until the lights in the big house began to extinguish themselves one by one. Then Hagen got out and walked the length of the driveway to the garage. He removed the distributor head to the engine of each car and put them to one side where they might be found—but not without a search.

Satisfied that no one in the Wishart household would leave via their own automobiles tonight, Hagen drove off. He stopped at the first service station he came to and used the pay telephone to call the city's principal taxicab company. He was friendly with the dispatcher since Hagen's services at one time had enabled the dispatcher to shed one wife and garner another. Hagen considered this a dubious favour but the dispatcher apparently did not.

When he hung up, he thought he could relax. The dispatcher had promised that, should anyone at the Wishart house call a cab, a record of the trip and destination would be kept.

"That takes care of one angle," he muttered. He got in his car and drove off to take care of another.

DAGNE'S apartment windows were dark but he rang the bell anyway and stood with his finger jammed against it until at last he heard some movement from inside. Then the door was opened a crack and part of Dagne's face peered out. She looked foggy with sleep but at the sight of him her blue eyes came to life. She opened the door wider but not wide enough to admit him.

"Well, are you or aren't you?" Hagen asked pleasantly. "If you aren't, then say so and I can begin busting down the door. I've got to talk to you, Dagne."

She considered him hostilely. "Do you know what time it is, Hagen?"

"My watch is busted. So are my arches from standing out here in the cold. Come on, let me in."

She did so reluctantly. In a caustic voice, she said, "I keep an extra key on the shade over the porchlight. I'm surprised you didn't use it and walk right in."

"Didn't know it was there," Hagen admitted. He looked around the living room—it was expensively furnished in Swedish modern style—and chose the sofa. Dagne was still standing. He patted the cushions. "At ease, honey. Smoke if you got 'em."

She saw nothing halfway humorous in his presence. She was wearing a cream-white negligee of heavy silk with frothy lace at ankle and wrist. It, and the nightgown beneath it, translated a good deal that was flattering about her luscious figure. Dagne had the warm soft look that certain women achieve when awakened from sleep, a kitten charm that invites cuddling. It didn't extend to her face, however. She

regarded Hagen with refrigerated suspicion. "What exactly do you want, Hagen?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you."

"I can listen standing, thank you. I don't want you to get too cosy."

He shifted around invitingly on the sofa. Then, since she merely stood and waited, he said, "Well, might as well get to it. Did you ever see this before?" He held up Hilda's richly-bound diary.

Dagne gave it an incurious glance. "No, I don't think so."

"Well, don't you even want to know what it is?"

"It looks like a book to me and I suppose that's what it is."

"Yes, it's a book but a special kind. It's a diary. It belonged to your sister."

This stirred her. She forgot to hold up her guard of hostility and came forward, stretching out a hand for it. Hagen opened the book before he gave it to her. He opened to the page headed June 8, and waited for her reaction.

He wasn't disappointed. Dagne's face, at first merely curious, slowly congealed as she read, and then as slowly began to dissolve. Her lips started to tremble, then Hagen saw her shoulders quiver and he sprang up. He caught her as she staggered and dropped the diary. It fell to the floor in a sprawl of pages. Hagen eased the girl to the sofa. She was shivering as if gripped by a chill.

He said, "Then you didn't know."

"No," she whispered and then rallied her voice with an effort. "It's not so! That can't be Hilda's diary, it can't be. I know that she wouldn't do anything like ... It must be a forgery!"

"Why should it be?"

"You think it's a forgery, don't you, Hagen?" She peered at him and gripped his hands tightly.

"No," he said gently. "I'm sorry, Dagne, but I think that for once in her life Hilda was telling the truth."

"But that would mean—" Suddenly, she put her head down into her hands. "I won't believe it! There wouldn't be anything left. Hilda was headstrong, God knows, but she wasn't—she wouldn't ..."

Hagen put his arm around her bowed shoulders and held her protectively. "Dagne, there's no such thing as a born killer. There are

only people and circumstances. Put them together wrong and sometimes it adds to murder.”

She didn’t reply or look at him and they sat there for a while in silence. Hagen didn’t mind their proximity a bit. Although respecting her grief, he could not share it, and so the moment was far from unpleasant for him. But finally Dagne raised her head. “What happens now, Hagen?”

He shrugged.

“I mean, does anyone else have to know?” She looked at the diary where it lay on the floor and then back to him, craftily. “It wouldn’t hurt anybody if we just kept it between ourselves, would it?”

Hagen said slowly, “Dagne, it’s sort of ironic. Tonight you’re asking me to do the same thing you threw in my teeth this afternoon. Mislead the cops. But, believe me, it’s not because I want to pay you back that I’m going to have to say no.”

She moved slowly away from him along the sofa, in command of herself again. In a half-coquettish, half-speculating tone she asked, “Isn’t there anything I might say—or do—that could make you change your mind?”

“There are a number of things that might make it harder for me,” Hagen said, “but I don’t think there’s anything that would stop me.”

“At least, you’re honest,” she admitted and gathered her negligee a trifle more modestly over her knees.

Hagen grinned at her. “We’ve come a long way just to get you to concede that.” He picked up the diary and put it on the coffee table in front of them. As he did so, he glanced at his wrist watch. It was a few minutes past eleven. “Well, we’ve got time for a little group discussion about this thing, Dagne. I’m asking your help. Not for my own sake, though I’ll admit that’s what I’m principally concerned with at the moment, but for Hilda’s sake. I’ve got a strong hunch that this diary is the key to the whole thing, why she was murdered. Don’t ask me to prove it because it’s only a hunch right now.”

Studying him, she said, “You’re awfully quick sometimes, Hagen. It frightens me a little, what you may think next.”

“If I was as quick as all that, you wouldn’t be sitting at the other end of the sofa.”

“Would sitting any closer be helping Hilda?”



“I told you I was thinking principally of myself. But you’re right. Business is business. The question I want you to answer is this. Did Hilda ever say anything about going to Hawaii or any place in that general vicinity?”

Dagne shook her head slowly. “The answer would have to be no. Hilda never *told* me anything of that nature. I think I told you that there was a time, about three years ago, when I didn’t know where she was.”

“For about a year, maybe?”

“About that long. I’m not sure the exact—”

“Could she have been out of the country—in the Islands?”

Dagne hugged her knees, frowning. “It’s possible.”

“Funny she didn’t tell you,” Hagen said. “Also, funny you didn’t ask.”

“I never asked Hilda anything and she treated me the same way,” Dagne said coolly. “That was part of our bargain. And I certainly can understand why she would want to keep mum about Hawaii, if what it says there is true. Now, may I step down from the witness chair?”

Hagen smiled and held out his wrist. “Go ahead—slap it. I’m sorry if I sounded like the cops. I’ve been on the outside of this thing so long that now I’ve got a foothold I can’t help digging in.”

“That’s all right, Hagen,” she told him, softened measurably by his apology. “I guess I’m a little worked up or I wouldn’t—”

At that moment, there began a thunderous pounding on the front door of the apartment. They both started to their feet and looked at each other in surprise. Hagen asked, “Expecting company?” and Dagne said, “Who in the world?” at the same moment. Then she went to see. Hagen sat down again on the sofa.

It was Larry Beldorian who burst in upon them like an avenging angel. Dagne’s muscular partner was flushed and dishevelled, as if he had been doing callisthenics on the porch. But it soon became apparent that his rumpled condition was due to emotion, not exercise. He came in, bellowing. “Where is he? I’ll break every bone in his stinking body —”

He was already on his way into the bedroom when he discovered Hagen sitting on the couch. Beldorian was obviously taken aback at

this unexpected turn of events. He halted in mid-charge and blinked uncertainly.

“What are you doing there?” he challenged Hagen, regaining his belligerency.

Hagen held up the diary. “Reading, of course. You’ve heard of it?”

“Stand up,” said Beldorian. “Stand up and get what’s coming to you, Hagen.”

Dagne had been silent, following her first surprised greeting of the newcomer, but now she demanded, “Just exactly what do you think you’re doing here, Larry, do you mind telling me?”

“I was outside, watching. I thought something like this might happen. And I was right. Well, I won’t take it, Dagne.” He strode toward Hagen. “You better stand up unless you want it sitting down, buddy.”

Hagen rose, sighing. He had no desire to fight Beldorian tonight, after the day just past. For that matter, he had no real desire to fight the gym instructor at any time. But there seemed to be no way out, even if it meant a whipping for himself. Particularly with Dagne looking on; his pride demanded that he meet the challenge. However, he hoped that Beldorian wouldn’t touch on any of his many sore spots.

Dagne interposed angrily. “Larry, I don’t know what you’ve been thinking but whatever it is, you’re mistaken. Mr. Hagen and I were discussing business.”

“Hah!” Beldorian snorted, boring in toward Hagen.

“And even if we weren’t, it’s none of your damn business—and I forbid you to turn my apartment into an arena! I warn you, Larry—”

Beldorian, stung by her tone, made the same mistake Sharkey made against Dempsey. He turned his head to appeal. Hagen hit him flush on the chin with a right hand that had the entire weight of his body behind it. Beldorian had a glass jaw. He went down flat on his back.

He was strong, though. He came staggering up at the equivalent of an eight-count and Hagen thought wryly that it was just his luck to be matched against the rugged ones. First Jack and now Beldorian. He prepared to receive the fresh onslaught. Regretfully, he waved Dagne out of the way.

However, Hagen was pleasantly surprised. Either Beldorian was muscle-bound or the knockdown had sapped him, but his punches

lacked power. Moreover, he was clumsy for all of his gym work. Realizing this, Hagen's spirits soared and he went to work on his opponent with considerable élan. Dagne was yammering at them to stop it, stop it this instant, do you hear me? but Hagen was enjoying himself too much to stop. He walked around his bigger foe, chopping at him like a woodman at a tree, until at last Beldorian fell. This time he didn't get up but lay there, moaning and shaking his head and spotting Dagne's thick beige carpeting with blood that streamed from his nose.

Hagen said, "All right, buster, let's clear the ring." He grabbed Beldorian by the wrists and dragged him toward the door. Beldorian was able to walk the last few steps and so Hagen had to forgo the pleasure of actually throwing him out. But the result was the same: Beldorian went without another word, snuffling blood.

Dagne was staring at Hagen when he turned from shutting the door again. "I've got to give you credit. I didn't think you could handle Larry."

"I didn't think so myself." He flexed his fingers. His hands were already swelling. "Couple more days like this and I might as well take up fighting professionally."

"Are you hurt anywhere?" Dagne asked solicitously, coming to him.

"I'm hurt everywhere." Beldorian's signet ring had opened a small cut on his cheek. Hagen submitted gratefully to Dagne's gentle ministrations. "My mother used to kiss it to make it well."

She brushed her lips quickly across his cheek. Her breath was sweet. "Don't get me confused with your mother, though, Hagen." She eluded his tentative grasp. "I'll get a basin and some hot water so you can soak your hands."

"It's probably safer," he admitted. While she so busied herself, he sat down and opened the diary once more. Something in the encounter with Beldorian had stirred his memory and now he leafed through the pages until he found what he sought. He read it several times to himself and then aloud to Dagne when she returned. Early in the year, under a March heading, was this reference, tucked away among several others of no particular significance: *Larry called while I was out but left no message so that probably ends that. He reminds me of a blue-ribbon bull trotting around a pasture pointlessly, nothing on his*

*mind but his satisfactions (or excesses) and presenting a lovely picture. I wish I could forget myself in myself!*

"You don't suppose," said Hagen, "that by some wild coincidence, Hilda might have been referring to Larry Beldorian, do you?"

"Oh, I don't think so." She began to bathe his hands with the hot water. "He doesn't remind me of a bull."

"Has Beldorian ever been in Hawaii? He was in the service, you said. Was he stationed at Pearl or Hickam or Schofield? He ever say?"

"I don't recall that ..." Dagne hesitated for a long moment, then looked thoughtful. "It was Hilda who introduced Larry to me in the first place."

"That's interesting." He looked at his wrist watch; during the fight, it had stopped. "What time you got, Dagne?"

"Nearly midnight. Hagen, do you think that Larry might have had something to do with Hilda's murder?"

"Tell me the minute it's twelve, will you?"

"Why? Do the gnomes reclaim you then? Or do you have another date?" She viewed him and chuckled softly. "I'm afraid you're too battered for anyone but me, Hagen. And I don't like you because you don't answer my questions."

"I'm not evasive. I just don't know."

Her first aid treatment completed, Dagne picked up her sister's diary and leafed through it slowly. Hagen watched her as she sat on the floor at his feet, her face in profile to him. He had to restrain himself from stroking her glossy black hair because it seemed such a natural thing for him to do. And suddenly he thought, I feel at home here as if this is where I belong. He hadn't felt that way anywhere for a long time.

Dagne murmured, "Isn't it strange? Right here in my hand is a whole year of my twin's life that I never knew anything about. It's almost like reading about myself. I've had some of these same thoughts."

"I can't quite figure out why Hilda kept a diary for just one year. Why didn't she go on with it?" Dagne didn't answer and he mused, "Well, I guess it makes sense, at that. She was on a trip and a lot of people like to keep records of that sort of thing."

"And she was in love, too," Dagne added softly. "Don't overlook that, Hagen."

“I haven’t forgotten it. I’m wondering if this Bruce character could have been the guy who broke up our marriage. The time element fits.”

“There’s nobody left to tell you now, is there?”

“No.” He gnawed his lips. “It must have been tough on Hilda. She never could keep a secret and here she was sitting on top of the biggest one in her life, and not able to tell anybody. That’s probably the real reason she kept the diary—she had to argue with somebody even if it was just herself.”

“Poor little Hilda,” Dagne sighed. “If only I could have helped her ...”

“What time is it?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. It’s past twelve already. I hadn’t noticed. What are you waiting for, Hagen?”

“Where’s your phone?” Dagne pointed into the bedroom and he went to use it. What he’d been waiting for was the press deadline at the morning newspapers. Sitting on the edge of her bed, he called the editorial offices. Dagne listened sadly while he told each paper the same story, that he had been retained by the Wayne Wishart household to investigate Hilda’s murder, that he had discovered pertinent information in the murdered woman’s diary, and that he would present the same to the district attorney first thing in the morning. He recited the Bruce entry and gave his guesses as to approximate date and general locality. He permitted himself to be quoted. When he finally hung up the sweaty receiver, he was positive that his revelations would be headline copy in the dawn editions.

Dagne asked, “Now exactly what was the purpose of all that? I thought you didn’t like your name in the papers.”

“Better there than on the police blotter.” He stood up up and stretched and massaged his cramped ear. “But that’s enough business for one day. Let’s get a new day started, and started right. Come here and marvel over me.”

Without hesitation she walked over to him. He closed his arms around her. She blinked up at him tenderly and said, “I’m marvelling—what next?” He kissed her with all the hunger in his system. They swayed and nearly fell down together. Afterward, she caught her breath and murmured, “In case you’ve lost track, it’s now twelve-thirty, Hagen, darling.”

He closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against the fragrant sleekness of her black hair. He thought, it must have been like this at first with Hilda, this utter tranquillity and yet you beat inside like a drum, time stops for you but you still keep time with your blood.

“Hagen, darling,” repeated Dagne. “What time did I say it was?”

“In my family, it’s bedtime.”

“Yes. In my family too.” She wrenched away from him abruptly, stood searching his face with her hands holding his elbows. “We shouldn’t let ourselves play games. Not in the bedroom.”

He smiled. “I’m awful tired.”

“I didn’t notice. All I notice is that I’m awful emotional and awful sentimental. And now I’m scared.”

“You left out something.”

“All right then, awful sexy. But let’s get out of my bedroom and say goodnight before I make a fool of myself. You’d just be ashamed of me. I’ve been non-foolish for a long time, Hagen, believe me—and I don’t want to break my record. I’d rather break my heart than my record.” She almost ran into the living room.

With a last longing look at the bed, he followed her. She was standing nervously by the front door, blushing, a hand already on the knob. She said, “You are going to leave me alone, aren’t you? You aren’t going to *make* me make a fool of myself, are you?”

“Could I?”

“Yes, damn you, you could. With just one false move.”

“Good. At least, I can withdraw with my ego intact.”

“Don’t joke.”

He kissed her again by the door, both of them leaning against the wall. “Who’s joking?” he asked.

She mumbled, “Darling, when we know each other better—and can make some sort of decent plans—but with Hilda dead only last night ... You stay another minute, Hagen, and I’m going to burst into flame.”

“Save it,” he said, and bit her ear and slipped out the door. It shut instantly and he thought he heard her whimpering through the panel.

He shook his head wonderingly as he walked down the steps. The night air was still but terribly cold against his cheek. When he looked back, Dagne’s lights were out again. There was a frenzied fluttering of

the venetian blind as she waved to him. He threw her a salute. He decided that the new feeling he felt for her, the attitude he'd never had toward Hilda, was pride. He was proud that Dagne had will power enough to kick him out. He also decided that he must be crazy. That bed of hers had looked awful comfortable.

HAGEN did not go home that night. He had at least two reasons for this, either one of which would have been sufficient. The first involved the police. He was reasonably sure that the newspapers, now that he had put them on the scent, would already be prodding the cops for additional information. The cops in turn would be trying to find him—and Hagen wasn't quite ready to talk to them yet. The second reason was that once the sunrise editions hit the streets, as early as 5 a.m., the archer might try to find him, for purposes even more marked. Hagen had no idea who this marksman might be and at the moment he didn't care to be surprised.

So he spent what remained of the night in the manner he deemed most safe. He drove up the coast highway for nearly a hundred miles, listening to the radio and thinking and stopping only for gasoline and caffeine pills. Hilda's diary was locked away in the glove compartment. When he had gone far enough, he turned around and drove back.

He arrived in the city as it awoke to go to work. The first rays of the sun were dispelling, the remains of the night's fog and the day held forth promise of being pleasant. Hagen had high hopes for it, the weather quite aside. By rights, he should have been a candidate for a hospital bed. Actually, however, he felt quite chipper. Part of this was due to the caffeine pills. But most of it sprang from an inner conviction that he was at last making progress. He was still in the dark but he could begin to glimpse light around the edges. There is nothing like imminent success to minimize a man's aches and pains.

So, with his stomach churning but his spirits buggling, Hagen ate breakfast at a drive-in near the city's civic centre and spun out his



usual two cups of coffee until the buildings opened. It was here that the district attorney had his offices but this was not Hagen's first stop.

He went instead to the hall of records, the diary safe in his pocket, and persuaded one of the clerks to search the files on the chance that Larry Beldorian had registered his discharge papers. It was a free service of the city—Hagen had availed himself of it several years before—and he hoped that the microfilm record would reveal whether, as he suspected, Beldorian had ever served in the Asiatic Pacific Theatre.

However, his quest was unsuccessful. Beldorian's discharge was not on file. Disappointed but not dismayed, since he had known from the onset that the odds were against him, he chose another route to reach the same destination. He telephoned Dagne.

He rather expected that his call would awaken her but she answered on the first ring, not at all sleepy. He apologized, anyway. She said, "It's perfectly all right. To tell the truth, I was just lying here thinking about you."

"Regretfully, I hope."

"Only partially. I find you've promoted yourself to the top of my problem list, Hagen, darling."

"We'll tear up the list at dinner tonight."

"Don't you understand? Getting within reaching distance of you just makes my problem that much worse." Her tone had been languidly light but now she grew more serious. "The more I see of you, the more I seem to get involved. I'm afraid you spell misery for me, Hagen."

"I'm never very good at spelling anything."

"Of course, your intentions are honourable," she pretended to muse.

"In an underhand way."

"Oh, it's the blasted business!" Dagne exploded suddenly. "On top of everything else, what am I going to do about Larry? After that performance last night, I mean. He *is* my partner, you know, and I've put too much into the salon to let any childish jealousy wreck it now."

"Is that all? I've got a solution for that too, Dagne. We award Larry to the cops as Hilda's killer. If he can juggle a throwing knife, he can launch an arrow somehow. He's probably got special muscles so he could have spit it into her."

There was a silence. "Hagen, don't," said Dagne at last. "Not about Hilda. I guess we'll never get together on that. I loved her. You didn't."

"I'm sorry," he said. "But I'm not necessarily joking about Larry. He interests me. Was he watching your apartment last night or did he arrive there from following me? Somehow he strikes me as too much of an oaf to be true."

"Well, you've seen him at his worst. He's a capable fellow."

"That's what I mean. How come I beat him up last night? I'm not so tough and I was tired. That's been bothering me. Sure, maybe he's muscle-bound and not a born fighter but if he did take a dive—why? And you say Hilda knew him before you did. Well, where'd she meet him? I'd like to know some of these things. Ready to help me find out?"

"Sure, but Larry—well, goodness, I'll admit he's not all brains but after all—"

"Get organized," Hagen said a trifle bitterly. "If we're going to shoot our whole wad on intuition, I might as well turn in my bankroll right now. I'm in bad need of facts. So far, by your method, I'm the only one you think capable of killing Hilda. My nose must twitch like a rat or something."

"Oh no, that was before I knew you better," she said gently. "Now about all I can remember is your mouth." Hagen's self-respect bounced back. "Of course, I want to help you. Just tell me how."

"Pick his pockets." He chuckled at her gasp. "It's not as hard as it sounds. Beldorian must have a locker at the salon, some place he changes clothes—or does he ride the bus in that loin-cloth? Well, while he's conducting one of his classes, you go through his wallet. See if he does the same as most ex-service men and carried a miniature photostat of his discharge papers. If so, just copy off the information and put it back. He'll never know."

"What if I'm caught?" she complained. "See what I mean about you bringing misery into my life, Hagen? Now you want to turn me into a thief."

"Stick with me long enough and I'll make an honest woman of you. Are you going to do it?"

"Which? Pick Larry's pockets or stick with you?" Dagne laughed. "I'll give you a qualified yes on both counts, Hagen. If I get scared and

change my mind, I'll let you know."

"Let me know at dinner," he advised. "About seven all right?"

"Oh, won't I see you any sooner than that? Darling, I'm ready to start tonight anytime. I mean we can set our watches and wear dark glasses and—"

"You'll just have to suffer until the real seven o'clock. I'm going to be locked up with the authorities most of the day, I figure. Or maybe I'm just going to be locked up. The D.A. will have to decide."

"I'll follow your progress in the papers, then, and take frequent cold showers," she agreed. After a pause, she suggested less gaily, "Do take care of yourself, Hagen." He heard her kiss the telephone receiver. Hagen quitted the phone booth with a pleased smile.

He was still smiling—even broader, since he had an audience—when he reached the door of the district attorney's offices a few minutes later. The corridor was fairly well jammed with representatives of the Press, reporters and photographers and a newsreel camera-man for one of the local television stations, plus various hangers-on who lingered out of curiosity. They were all waiting for Hagen. They converged on him like women around a bargain counter.

Their questions showered him from all angles, pleas for a statement, demands from the photographers that he look in a dozen directions at once. Hagen did his best to oblige as he made his way slowly toward the door, like a ship pushing through an ice pack. There he paused to hold the diary aloft and register his smile for posterity while flashbulbs silvered the air. He was playing it big.

The district attorney's outer office was a spacious room, divided by a long counter with benches on one side and desks for the lesser functionaries of the department on the other. There was little work going on due to the commotion outside. All eyes were upon Hagen as he entered, and most of them were hostile, which gave him a good idea of the reception he could expect. He wasn't surprised.

The only smile that responded to his own came from Captain Troge. The homicide chief leaned against the counter, sucking at his cigarette, and viewed Hagen's entrance equably. "No brass band?" he inquired.

"Union rules," said Hagen. "What got you up so early, Troge?"

"You," Troge admitted. "Busy little bee, aren't you?"

“I get around.” Hagen was propelled from behind by the newspapermen crowding into the reception space behind him. They immediately began to fight for his attention. The clamour brought the district attorney bounding out of his private office, bristling with indignation. He was a plump well-manicured man named Austin McCracken, full of the dignity of his office and known familiarly as “Grandma” to his co-workers. Hagen, who had watched him operate in court, considered him a windbag, though shrewd enough where his own interests were at stake.

McCracken’s opinion of Hagen apparently wasn’t any higher. He gave Hagen a glance that would have curdled milk and barked, “This office will be cleared immediately!”

No one paid any attention; it was unlikely that anyone heard. Hagen quitted the uproar finally by announcing that the district attorney would have a statement to give them immediately after their private conference. The inference was that Hagen was going to brief McCracken and then generously allow the district attorney to take the credit. This didn’t go unnoticed by McCracken who, tight-lipped, ordered Hagen inside. Or by Troge who followed, his eyes merry.

“Headline hog,” he murmured to Hagen as he shut the door.

“You should talk. You grabbed the credit pretty fast yesterday about finding Doc. I’m just trying to protect my reputation.”

“Sure,” agreed Troge genially, “but the police department needs credit all the time. My reputation is up for sale every time a bicycle is stolen.”

The district attorney saw no need for either geniality or humour. He sat down stiffly behind his big desk and said, “I hope for your own sake, Hagen, that you have a good excuse for all these shenanigans.”

“I didn’t come here to make excuses. I came to bring you this.” He placed Hilda’s diary on the desk with a flourish. He felt beneficent, grandly so. “The word you’re groping for is thanks.”

“I’m not groping for anything,” McCracken told him, “except possibly a reason why both Captain Troge and myself had to learn of the existence of this remarkable document from the Press.”

“Was it in the papers?” asked Hagen, feigning surprise.

McCracken flushed. He levelled his forefinger at Hagen. “You know damn well it was in the papers. All of the papers, even the Los Angeles

papers. You gave them the story yourself. Why? I have more than half a notion to rack you back for attempting to obstruct justice, Hagen.”

“Who’s obstructing? There’s the diary.” Hagen spoke confidently, sure that the district attorney’s bark was worse than his bite, at least for the moment. “I only found the thing last night and here I am bringing it to you bright and early this morning. Who could ask for anything more?”

“You know very well that we should have been notified first.”

“In the middle of the night? I thought I was doing you a favour.”

McCracken surveyed him grimly. “On the ridiculous assumption that you might be sincere, I want you to know that I was routed out of bed at one o’clock this morning by your reporter friends and I haven’t slept a wink since. There’s your favour, Hagen.”

Hagen shook his head sorrowfully. “That’s the curse of public office, isn’t it? You can’t call your soul your own.”

McCracken frowned, trying to recapture the lost thread of his denunciation. Before he could do so, Troge interrupted. The big policeman had pounced upon the diary immediately and had scanned it assiduously through the verbal sparring of the other men. He put it down in front of the district attorney now, open to the June 8 entry. He said, “let’s get down to cases and save the arguing for later. Read that, Mac.”

McCracken did, several times. A bit grudgingly, he finally admitted, “Well, this looks genuine, all right. Exactly where and how did you come across this, Hagen?” Hagen told his story, a carefully doctored version of the truth. The way he related it, he had been hired by Wayne Wishart yesterday to investigate Hilda’s murder and had stumbled across the diary while searching the dead woman’s effects. It wasn’t completely false and Hagen consoled himself that this particular story concealed nothing vital from the authorities and at the same time protected his client.

When he had finished, Troge said, “How did you talk Wishart into hiring you? Yesterday he hated your guts.”

“He decided he needed some guts.”

McCracken said reluctantly, “Well, since Mr. Wishart hired you, you have some flimsy excuse for meddling in official business, I suppose. But I strongly advise you to cease as of this moment and leave the

investigation of Mrs. Wishart's murder to the proper authorities. All right, Hagen—you can go."

Hagen didn't get up. He said, "Don't rush me. So far, I've done all the talking. Now it's your turn. Don't tell me that you haven't done anything about this business"—he nodded at the diary—"since one o'clock last night except buy the newspapers."

Troge and McCracken exchanged a long glance and Troge shrugged. "Might as well tell him. Otherwise he'll probably be guessing out loud where somebody might hear him."

McCracken automatically looked in the direction where the newspapermen waited and cleared his throat. Hagen lounged patiently. The district attorney finally said, "Yes, I suppose you're right. Well, Hagen, acting on the information you so kindly conferred upon the newspapers, I telephoned Honolulu early this morning. I spoke to the chief of police. From what he told me, it appears that this diary isn't a complete hoax—which was my first impression of it."

"Bully for me," Hagen murmured. "So it was Hawaii, after all. Who was Bruce?"

"Bruce Shanner," said Troge, "was a young man about town who died quite suddenly about three years ago. Murdered by person or persons unknown. There were no arrests made. It's an open case on the Honolulu police books. Or was until today."

"Any other details?"

"A few. A complete report is coming by cable. It was quite the 'cause célèbre,' according to the Honolulu boys. Shanner was wealthy, heir to a sugar brokerage. Seems he was found out in the wilds after telling friends that he was going boar hunting. Apparently he went alone, though that didn't sound like him since he had enough girl friends to form a hula line. Anyway, he was alone when he was found."

"Cause of death?"

"Heart failure," said Troge blandly, "helped along a bit by being stabbed in the back. The weapon wasn't found but the coroner's report puts it down to a round pointed instrument, like a metal punch or a thick ice-pick."

Hagen shook his head slowly. "You know better than that, Troge. Bruce wasn't stabbed. He was shot—with an arrow. In this case the

arrow was removed. The archer had more time.”

Troge didn’t answer but the district attorney snapped, “We know nothing of the kind. The official verdict was stabbed.”

Hagen asked, “Any mention of Hilda? Was she questioned?”

“The Honolulu cops never even heard of her, or anyone matching her description. They questioned a lot of women, naturally, but Shanner’s taste apparently ran to redheads and brunettes as a rule.” Troge was relighting his dead cigarette. “Of course, a man can vary his diet, I suppose.”

“Hilda’s diary proves that.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure. Shanner had just announced his engagement, three days before he died. And it wasn’t to Hilda.”

Hagen found it impossible to remain seated. He got up and paced to the window and stood looking out at the street without really seeing the traffic passing by. “It makes sense to me, knowing Hilda. Here’s how I reconstruct it. After we were divorced, Hilda took a trip to the Islands. She met Shanner, fell in love with him. He sounds like the kind of guy she went for, certainly. She was serious, he wasn’t. When he told her he was going to marry somebody else, she killed him.”

Troge didn’t get excited. Puffing smoke he said, “Got it all taped, haven’t you?”

“It’ll do until I’m proved wrong.”

“Answer me a question or two, Hagen. If Hilda killed Shanner with a bow-and-arrow, who killed Hilda—also with a bow-and-arrow?”

“I don’t know,” Hagen admitted. “The way it shapes up is for revenge. You know, the eye for an eye stuff. That’s the only way to explain the use of the same weapon, particularly that weapon. I’m betting that someone from Hawaii tracked her down.”

“I’ll come back to the same question,” said Troge. “Who?”

“How about Shanner’s fiancée? Or his brother—if he has one?”

“Shanner’s fiancée married another guy six months later. His brother is now sole heir to about three million bucks. I can’t see either one of them burning with vengeance, can you?”

Hagen studied the police captain exasperatedly. “You’re a lot of help, Troge. I’m trying to do your work for you and all you can do is shake your head. Sure, I don’t have the answers. But they’re in there somewhere. Hilda’s diary proves that much.”

“I don’t know what Hilda’s diary proves,” Troge said. “If it wasn’t for the confirmation we got from Honolulu, I’d suspect you wrote the thing yourself.”

“You hated your ex-wife, didn’t you?” the district attorney interjected. “Is that why you’re so anxious to link her with this Shanner murder?”

Hagen shrugged. “All right, have it your way. I killed Bruce Shanner too. His sugar was too refined.”

“This is no time for witticism,” McCracken said stiffly.

Hagen made a disgusted noise in his throat. Troge said with some degree of kindness, “Let’s look at this thing objectively, Hagen, with no preconceived notions. Three years ago a man named Bruce Shanner was murdered in Hawaii. The record says he was stabbed. You say a bow-and-arrow did the job but that’s just your long distance guess. Two days ago a woman named Hilda Wishart was shot with an arrow here. Today we have her diary that says she killed somebody named Bruce. Okay, so far so good. But the diary is undated, as you know. Again it’s just your guess that the times jibe.”

“Some things you don’t have to prove,” Hagen muttered.

“In my job, you do. Now, what about this diary? Hilda was a strange type, from what I can gather. You’ve told me she was an inveterate liar. Isn’t it possible—even likely—that she lied to her diary in the same way she lied to people? What would have prevented her from reading about Shanner’s murder and then inventing her whole connection with it?”

Hagen stared at Troge’s serious face, struggling against the smooth flow of the policeman’s logic. For the first time, he began to wonder. What actually did he know? Or, more precisely, could he prove? He said slowly, “I can’t buy that, Troge. What earthly reason would she have for making up a day dream for what amounts to a whole year?”

Troge smiled slightly. “Has it ever occurred to you, Hagen, that perhaps we know more about your ex-wife than you do?”

It hadn’t. Blankly, Hagen asked, “What are you talking about?”

McCracken stood up. “Captain, I think that this has gone quite far enough. Perhaps too far. I’m going to put my foot down and declare that this interview is terminated. We have to draw the line somewhere.”



“What?” Hagen insisted of Troge.

“You heard the man,” Troge told him and rose also.

“Look, if this is something I should know—”

“It isn’t,” said McCracken, “for the simple reason that this whole affair is none of your business, no matter how you may have tried to cut yourself into it. I consider I’ve been lenient toward you, Hagen. I certainly don’t intend to trot out information I consider vital and secret just for your own personal edification—and that of your newspaper friends.” That reminded him; he began bustling without leaving the spot where he stood. “Captain, excuse me long enough to give the Press a statement. I’ll be right back and we’ll go over this thing together.” He looked hard at Hagen. “Alone.”

Troge nodded and waited until the district attorney was gone before he spoke. His tone was almost fatherly. “Where’s the big smile now?”

“You let me make a sucker of myself, didn’t you? And all the time you’re sitting there with an ace up your sleeve.”

“I don’t try to improve on God’s handiwork. But since you bring it up, you are a sucker, Hagen, thinking you can beat us to the punch. You’ve gotten a lot of mileage by yourself, but you came in here this morning riding for a fall. Thank your lucky stars we didn’t make it any worse.”

“I’m not asking for any breaks.”

“Well, you’ve gotten some—anyway—both from me and from Grandma. He could have made you sizzle.” Troge winked. “Luckily it’s an election year.”

Hagen stared at him. “All right, Troge. We understand each other. I came in here this morning with all my cards on the table, thinking I was being a help. My mistake.”

“Read that again,” Troge advised mildly. “You came in here to grab yourself a little glory. And when did you ever put *all* your cards on the table, Hagen?” He rapped Hagen’s shoulder lightly. “I could really make it tough for you boy, sew you up like a shroud. I’m not going to. do it because I think maybe you’re going to give up this lone wolf act.”

“What if it turns out that I’m right—and Hilda did kill Bruce Shanner with an arrow, and there’s a connection between the two murders? What if—”

When he stopped abruptly, Troge eyed him shrewdly. “Another angle, Hagen?”

He had been about to mention his suspicions of Larry Beldorian but, considering the reception his other theories had got, Hagen shut his mouth.

“You learn hard,” sighed Troge and stood aside to let him leave. “But if you don’t mind some advice, don’t spill your guts to the papers any more.”

“What could I tell them?” Hagen asked bitterly.

On his way out of the building, he passed the panelled room where the district attorney was holding his press conference. The tag-end of a phrase drifted out to Hagen as he went by. “... due to the unrelenting efforts of my office ...”

No one noticed Hagen. He had arrived a conquering hero. He departed an ordinary mortal, a little seedier than most, needing a shave. The caffeine had worn off and so had his feeling of success. The trouble was, he admitted privately, that Troge was right. So was Dagne. He had lost sight of the principal objective, nailing Hilda’s murderer, and instead had played it to the grandstand. He had thought only of Mort Hagen. That was what came of working the angles—pretty soon you couldn’t recognize a straight line. And following enough wrong angles, you end up back where you started.

He stood in glaring sunlight on the marble steps of the civic centre and lit up a cigarette. The pigeons and seagulls strutted around his feet hopefully.

“Nothing today,” he told them. “Unless you’ve got the inside dope on who really killed Cock Robin. I never did go for that Sparrow confession, did you?”

A couple of passers-by gave him quizzical looks. The birds muttered about this and that, and wandered away. Hagen watched them scavenge the stairs and pavement in short mincing steps.

Well, that’s one sure way, he thought. They’ve been over that ground before but there’s always a chance. He decided to start at the beginning again, move in a straight line, and as fast as he could with his head down. If he ran into something big, he was liable to crack his skull. But on the way, there was always the chance of finding a titbit that he had overlooked the first time.

HAGEN visited his office with a pressing hope that something might have turned up in his absence, which now amounted to nearly twenty-four hours. The mail that waited for him was exclusively bills and circulars. A check with the telephone service that monitored his calls revealed nothing he couldn't have guessed. A man had called several times the previous afternoon without leaving a message. Undoubtedly it had been Jack.

Reminded, Hagen phoned his contact at the taxicab company. Again he drew a blank. There had been no summons from the Wishart house for emergency transport. Hagen realized that this was not proof positive, of course. The automobiles he had immobilized might have been repaired. Jack might have gone there instead.

He shaved with an electric razor he kept in his desk for such emergencies and tried to think. The buzzing of the razor interfered, so he finally quitted his office, having got no further than when he had arrived. He began to wander through the business district aimlessly, waiting for lightning to strike. It didn't. He spent a few minutes lingering in front of the army recruiting office and reading the attractive posters wistfully. Then he tried phoning Dagne, first at her home and then at the figure control salon. Neither number answered.

The call, though abortive, gave him an idea. Fruitless as it seemed, it appealed to him simply because it offered activity and a destination of a sort, both of which he needed at the moment. Hagen began to retrace the steps he had taken pursuing Hilda two days before. He didn't expect to find anything. But that afternoon had been the beginning of this weird affair, or close enough to the beginning, and perhaps by

repeating his actions his mind might open to something previously overlooked.

Since his memory was retentive in such matters, Hagen was able to duplicate the previous odyssey exactly, although this time he enacted Hilda's part rather than his own. He began at the parking lot where she had left her crimson MG, visited the same heterogeneous collection of stores, even entered the same phone booth she had used to call her sister. Hagen read the scribbblings on the booth wall and the doodlings on the directory, thinking one of them might have been made by the dead woman. He found nothing.

He came at last to Hilda's final stop on her shopping tour. As she had done, he stood outside the sporting goods house and examined the window displays. They were the same as they had been two days ago. Hagen paid particular attention to the archery sets, wondering if they had been what had engaged her interest. It was possible, but he couldn't manufacture anything significant out of it. If, as he still believed, Hilda had killed Bruce Shanner with a bow-and-arrow, the display might have had some morbid attraction for her. But she could hardly have foreseen that her own life would be ended by a similar weapon a few hours later.

Hagen shrugged and advised himself to forget it. Troge was right; alone and unaided, the odds against his making any worthwhile progress were staggering. What he should do was go home and get some sleep so he would at least be fresh for dinner with Dagne. And since that was obviously the proper course to follow, he did just the opposite. He entered the sporting goods store and looked around for a clerk.

After the brightness of the street, the store was dim and seemingly crowded. However, most of the figures Hagen took at first to be customers turned out to be handsome dummies, sportily dressed and demonstrating various items of outdoor equipment. Live customers were at a premium and a clerk descended upon him eagerly. "Yes, sir? May I help you?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe you can. Were you working here the day before yesterday?"

"Guess so. My day off is Saturday." The clerk, a husky young fellow in a sports shirt, regarded him dubiously. "What is it? You want

to exchange something?”

“Not exactly.” Hagen hesitated, unsure what tack to take, then plunged ahead. “I was wondering if you’d know who might have waited on my wife then. She came in about closing time, I believe. A pretty blonde in a mink coat.”

The clerk furrowed his brow, then nodded. “I remember her. The mink coat, you know—Tuesday was such a scorcher. I waited on her myself. What’s the trouble? She lose something?”

“In a way.”

“Well, we can check with the office—”

“That won’t be necessary. If you could just tell me what she bought ...”

“She didn’t buy anything,” the young man said positively. “Not a thing. Reason I know is that we’re having a contest here, you know, among the employees. The one who sells the most gets a couple of tickets to the U.S.C.-Notre Dame game next month. I thought sure I’d sell her something—women don’t come in here as a rule unless they’re going to buy. But she fooled me. Said she was just looking around.”

“Archery sets, maybe?”

“No. Let’s see—she didn’t go much farther than this counter right here.” He rapped his knuckles on the glass case. It contained hunting equipment. “She said something about maybe getting a baseball mitt for her son. I got some out for her but she couldn’t seem to make up her mind. Didn’t even know what kind she wanted. What’s this all about, anyway?”

Hagen didn’t have the least idea. But he was reluctant to leave. What had possessed Hilda to enter the store and then lie about her motives? Casting about for a means to keep the conversation alive, he saw the rack of hunting knives at one end of the counter, gleaming blades and handsome bone handles. His memory stirred. “Sure she didn’t buy a hunting knife?”

“She didn’t buy anything,” the clerk repeated impatiently. He scented that Hagen also was not a prospective purchaser.

“Maybe from one of the other clerks?” Hagen pressed.

“Not a chance. We’ve got a rule, particularly when the contest is on—you don’t cut in on somebody else’s sale.” Hagen nodded his thanks

and started to turn away. "Funny you should mention hunting knives, though."

Hagen swung back quickly. "What's funny about it?"

"One of them was stolen a couple of days ago. You know, taken right out of the rack there. Queer thing to steal, huh? They only cost a buck fifty and they're not worth half that. The blade's no good. Must have been some kid who liked the looks of it." He gazed past Hagen and his eyes brightened; another man had entered the store. "Would you excuse me a minute?"

Hagen would. Left alone, he lingered by the counter, staring at the rack of shining knives. What did this mean, anyway? There was no doubt that the hunting knife Hilda had carried in the pocket of her mink coat matched the ones in the rack. It was fantastic enough to believe that she had bought the thing. It was impossible that she had stolen it. Yet the clerk had said ... and Hagen himself had seen the weapon ... so where did that ...

And suddenly, as he prayed it would, his mind cleared. What if Hilda, despite her marriage to wealth, *had* stolen the knife?

He nearly shouted as this new idea seized him in an overpowering grip. It was as if he had been standing in a dark room and all at once the light had been turned on, illuminating every shadowy corner. No, he thought, not every corner, but now that he could see he could proceed with confidence, sure of his bearings.

"Have to go somewhere," he muttered. "Got to think." Eyes fixed on the clearing picture inside his brain, he blundered out of the store. On the way, he bumped into one of the lifesize dummies and murmured, "Excuse me." The dummy didn't reply but Hagen didn't notice.

He was jostled by the passers-by on the pavement. Like a leaf carried by a stream, he was eased to the kerb into the shelter of a lamppost and stranded there. There he remained, staring fixedly at the façade of the small hotel across the street for at least five minutes. At the end of that time Hagen couldn't have told, had his life depended upon it, whether the building was white or black or even what the name of the hotel was.

He watched a woman push open the glass door and come out on to the sidewalk opposite. His gaze followed her automatically as she

walked quickly down the block, rounded the corner and disappeared. She had been gone a full fifteen seconds when he suddenly realized that it had been Avis Gill.

That snapped him out of his self-imposed trance. Wake up, boy, he admonished himself; you've been handed the biggest break you're likely to get but you can't stand around admiring it. You're not out of the woods yet.

Hopefully, he ran to the corner and scanned the street down which Avis had vanished. He was too late. There was no trace of Wishart's secretary amid the throng of bustling shoppers. Hagen was only moderately disappointed. There would be ample time to question Avis later. And, for that matter, he thought that he knew the answer already. He crossed the street and entered the building she had left. Its name, he noted now, was the Kent Hotel.

The lobby was small, as befitted the size of the rest of the establishment, with room enough only for the registration desk, a couple of battered leather chairs and an elevator shaft which gave access to the rooms above. The Kent Hotel was the type that the tourist folders never mention, barely clinging to middle-class respectability and no different in anyway except name from a hundred others. In his capacity of divorce detective, Hagen was quite familiar with the genre. It was the kind of place where a man might bring his secretary. But, although Avis was Wayne Wishart's secretary all right, it was not Wishart that Hagen expected to meet there.

The lobby was empty but a repeated banging of the bell ultimately brought the desk clerk forth from some private cubbyhole. He too was a type that Hagen knew well—a middle-aged employee, blasé and indifferent—and he understood how to deal with him.

In an authoritative voice, Hagen announced, "Police business. Did you see a young woman just leave your hotel? "He didn't show any credentials.

The desk clerk didn't demand any either. He nearly yawned. "Afraid not, officer. I've been working in the back room. She a guest here?"

"No. She was visiting somebody."

"Well, I wouldn't know then. Only way I'd have seen her is if she'd asked for the room number." He jerked his head at the elevator. "Self-service, you know."

“You got anybody here from L.A.?”

“Could be. What’s the beef, anyway? Somebody get rolled?”

“Let’s have a look at the register,” said Hagen, ignoring the other man’s questions. The clerk shrugged and dug out a large ledger from beneath the counter. His attitude indicated that he had been through this sort of thing before. Hagen opened the book and ran rapidly down the list of entries.

There were two Los Angeles registrations on the current list. One didn’t interest him since it bore yesterday’s date and was a woman. But the other caused him to smile grimly. Jack Ferreira was the name. He had registered three days before. The room number was 319.

Hagen pointed at this entry. “Know this guy? Big, heavy-set fellow, built like a wrestler?”

“If you say so. Personally, I don’t pay much attention. In this business they come and they go. As long as they don’t try skipping their bill, they can have two heads as far as I’m concerned.”

“Okay.” Hagen returned the register and turned to go. “Thanks for the help.”

For the first time, the clerk seemed a trifle surprised. “Aren’t you going up? I could give 319 a ring if you want.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Hagen said and left the hotel. He didn’t go far. He lit a cigarette, smoked half of it and then sauntered back. As he had expected, the clerk had disappeared again. Quietly, Hagen re-entered the lobby and crossed to the tiny elevator. Unobserved, he pressed the button marked 3. The car began to ascend.

He stepped off on the third floor and looked for the proper door. The corridor was deserted and quiet and smelled of dust and disinfectant. 319 was midway to the fire escape. Hagen halted before the door and flexed his fingers in anticipation. He knew just what was going to happen next. He would knock and Jack would answer. There would be a split second of surprise—on Jack’s part, not his own. That would be enough. He had downed the big fellow once; he was confident he could do it again. But this time the aftermath would be different he vowed grimly.

Hagen knocked. There was no answer from within. He knocked again with the same result. He began to frown. He was sure that Jack



was home. Avis Gill would hardly have risked the visit without a definite appointment. Had he been spotted? Was this a trap?

“Never find out standing here,” he muttered aloud. Drawing a deep breath, he tried the door handle. The door was unlocked. In one swift movement, Hagen kicked the panel open and plunged inside, ducking a little and ready for anything. Then he stopped in his tracks.

Jack was home all right. He sat in the big easy chair by the window and he didn’t rise at Hagen’s precipitate entrance. He didn’t even look around or raise the bullet head that had fallen forward on his chest. Stomach contracting, Hagen slowly closed the door and walked forward to confirm what he already knew.

They come and go, the desk clerk had said. In this instance, he was mistaken. Jack was not going anywhere, ever again, Jack was dead.

AS a matter of routine, Hagen tried to find a pulse. There was none. Jack's flesh was still warm but so was the room. It was going to be difficult to establish time of death on this one and Hagen was no expert in legal medicine. From the fact that Jack was freshly shaved and the window shade was up, he guessed that death had occurred this morning, rather than during the night.

Hagen stood for a while looking at the dead man. He felt very little, neither gladness nor grief at Jack's passing. He had been prepared to kick the other man's face in a moment before, but all thoughts of vengeance had vanished and now what he experienced was a vague regret. Jack might have been able to tell him something of value.

Jack was long past the point of confiding in anyone, however, although his mouth hung open as if ready to speak. His false teeth, a full set of uppers and lowers, had dropped out and lay in his lap where they seemed to grin up at Hagen in a grisly manner.

Hagen had to look closely to ascertain the cause of death, since there was no blood or obvious signs of violence. Jack's swarthy face was mottled and puffy and Hagen could see that his tongue was swollen. He looked as if he might have suffocated or been smothered in some manner. However, he had been strangled and the garrote still remained, almost buried from sight in the flesh of the thick neck.

Hagen examined what he could see of the noose and raised his eyebrows. It was a bow cord, thin and tough. The archer hadn't used an arrow this time but he had stuck to his favourite weapon as far as he was able. Nor had it been a spur of the moment attack. The killer had come prepared. To each end of the bowstring a small wooden handle had been tied, to enable him to pull the sharp cord without cutting his

hands. It had been a smooth job, well thought-out and executed cleanly.

The sound of footsteps in the corridor outside made Hagen abandon his morbid admiration. He went to the phone, ready to be interrupted in the act of calling the police should anyone intrude. But the footsteps passed on and faded down the hall and Hagen didn't touch the telephone after all.

He prowled around Jack's dingy room instead. It was the conventional hotel set-up, a bedroom with a small adjoining bath. The bedroom had the usual furniture, a bed and a dresser and a couple of chairs. Hagen looked over, under and around the furniture but learned nothing except that the Kent Hotel had an inefficient cleaning service.

Inevitably, he returned to the dead man. "Now how in hell," he inquired softly, "did a smart tough cookie like you just sit still and let somebody garrote you and you not move a finger?"

On the little night-stand beside Jack's chair sat a bottle of whisky, nearly empty, and one glass, completely empty. Or was it? Hagen, peering at it without touching it, detected a sediment of some sort on the bottom. He gingerly inserted his hand into the mouth of the glass as far as it would go and managed to scrape up a little of the sediment on the end of his finger. He went to the window to examine it.

It was a white powdery substance, caked now. Hagen sniffed it. It was odourless. With some trepidation, he touched the tip of his tongue to it and was rewarded. The sediment did have a taste, rather bitter. He puzzled over it, thinking that he had tasted something like it before, until it finally came to him. He had experienced a similar bitterness one night several years ago when he had accidentally bitten into a capsule of nembutal. The stuff was a barbiturate of some sort. Sleeping medicine.

"Now I lay me down to sleep," he muttered, looking at Jack sardonically. He wondered if Jack had ever known the old nursery prayer and decided not. If Jack had ever prayed—and it seemed unlikely—his prayers probably had been in Spanish. But it was appropriate here. Jack had died before he waked, all right. If the amount of nembutal or seconal or whatever had precipitated to the bottom of the glass was any indication, the amount remaining in suspension would have been enough to stun a dinosaur.

How had it been administered? There was just one glass on the night-stand but beside it a second circle of wetness had dried, leaving its tell-tale ring behind. Of course, that might indicate only that Jack had put his glass down in a second place. But Hagen thought not. The way he reconstructed the affair, Jack had been slipped a mickey under the cover of a little social drinking.

After that, the archer had simply waited for Jack to nod. Then—the bowstring. Despite himself, Hagen shuddered slightly. It wasn't a very pleasant thought, two people drinking together, maybe laughing and exchanging a few wisecracks, then one getting sleepy while the other eyed him speculatively. Hagen's collar felt a little tight and he loosened it. Any murder was bad enough but to be struck down while you were sleeping, cut off without even a chance ...

"Don't worry, buddy," he told Jack. "Somebody'll pay for it." Hagen had made the same promise to himself only yesterday, but then Jack had been the intended recipient of his vengeance. That showed you how the world changed.

Since he and Jack were on the same side at last, in a manner of speaking, Hagen felt no qualms about searching the dead man's belongings.

Jack had brought a suitcase with him and had unpacked most of it, but neither the suitcase nor the bureau drawers yielded Hagen anything of much interest. Jack had bought his clothes in Los Angeles stores, which indicated that was his home. He used a popular brand of toothpaste and razor blades, plus a sweet-smelling shaving lotion so strong it made Hagen's eyes water. But there was nothing among his clothing or toilet articles to indicate that he was anything but Jack Ferreira, Stranger from Los Angeles.

So, reluctantly, Hagen turned again to Jack himself. His reluctance didn't spring from any fear of the dead but he had hoped he wouldn't have to move Jack, since Troge would surely have something to say on that score later. But there was no other way to get into the man's trouser pockets, so he hauled Jack forward and removed his wallet. Then he let Jack plump back into his original position. The false teeth fell to the carpet but Hagen let them lie there. Jack's dentures were hardly of any importance to anyone now.

He sat down on Jack's bed and looked carefully through the wallet until he found what he had been looking for. It was a small official card, laminated in plastic to avoid wear. Hagen was quite familiar with the card; he carried one himself. All private detectives licensed in California did.

"Well, that settles that," he said. "Just another crummy private cop, left with the dirty end of the stick."

Now that he knew this, even Jack alive could hardly have told him very much more, with the exception of the identity of his drinking partner. And Hagen thought that he would know that himself before the day was over.

He didn't bother to restore the wallet to Jack's pocket. He tossed it carelessly on the top of the dresser instead. Nor did he bother to remove his fingerprints from the many objects he had touched. When the time came to explain to Troge, it wouldn't matter.

However, the time was not now. Hagen remembered too keenly his humiliation of a few hours before to go running to Troge with information that was as yet incomplete. He told me I was a sucker to believe I could out-think the police department, Hagen reflected. All right, let him stew. I'll give it to him all in one nice neat little package. That included Jack.

He opened the hall door cautiously and listened. There was no sound from the corridor. Reassured, he slipped out and locked the door behind him. On the knob he hung the cardboard Do Not Disturb sign that the hotel provided. That would suffice for a few hours, he thought, long enough for me to wrap this thing up.

Hagen hesitated a while by the elevator doors, eyeing the fire escape thoughtfully. He finally decided against it. He would be sure to be noticed by people on the street and while by using the elevator he might encounter the desk clerk in the lobby, the odds were less. He rang for the car.

The odds paid off for him. He stepped off into a deserted lobby, crossed it quickly and plunged into the protective cover of hurrying pedestrians. He didn't look like a man who had just left a corpse and was en route to trap a murderer. He looked just about like anyone else, perhaps a little happier than most. It is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between a smile and bared fangs.

IT was mid-afternoon when he arrived at the Wishart house. The intervening hours had been spent telephoning various people in Los Angeles. His hand felt as if it might stiffen permanently into a claw from clutching a receiver so long, but his bleak sense of satisfaction made up for that.

There was a tow-truck parked in the driveway and he could see men in greasy overalls fussing with the automobiles in the garage. Hagen didn't bother to tell them where the trouble lay. For one thing, he wasn't sure they didn't already know and weren't just running up the bill. And for another, he had more important business inside.

He very nearly didn't get past the front door, however. A Mexican girl in a maid's uniform answered his ring, took his name and carried it back into the house without inviting him in. A few moments later Mrs. Rosemary Wishart appeared, looking hostile.

"Whatever you have in mind, the answer is no," she told Hagen. "Go away and don't bother to come back."

"I want to see Wayne."

"He doesn't want to see you—not after reading the papers." She started to close the door but Hagen put his foot against it. "Did you hear me?"

"I think you'd better let me in," he advised softly. "I've just seen Jack."

Her harsh face became uncertain. She hesitated, glancing around as if for advice from the air, then opened the door wider. When Hagen had already stepped inside, Rosemary Wishart recovered her balance enough to ask, "Jack who?"

Hagen didn't answer. Instead, he hold her, "Get rid of your maid and anybody else who's here—except Avis. We've got some plain talking to do and it's the kind that's best not overheard."

"I don't understand," she said, although it was plain that she did. "Well—all right, if you think ..." And she trotted away to do his bidding.

Since Wayne Wishart wasn't visible anywhere in the big living room, Hagen went down the long hallway and entered the bedroom where he had carried Wishart the night before. His client was there, in bed, sitting up with pillows propped behind him. Copies of the daily papers, including the noon editions which Hagen hadn't seen yet, were strewn around.

Wishart was still pale from his ordeal of the night before but at the sight of Hagen he flushed angrily. "Are you back?" he demanded. "I didn't think you'd have the gall to stick your nose in here again after all this." He indicated the newspapers with a vicious sweep of his hand.

Hagen sat down on the edge of the bed. "You forget that you're my client."

"Not any more. You're fired, Hagen." Wishart leaned forward belligerently. "And if you think you can blackmail me—or my mother—by what happened here last night, you're mistaken. It'll be our word against yours and I'll bet that the police will—"

"You may be an authority on blackmail," Hagen interrupted him wearily, "but save your breath. Fire me if you feel like it. I don't really need you as a client any more. But I don't think you want to lose me now."

Wishart was a little taken aback. He had obviously given a good deal of thought to what he intended to tell Hagen. The only trouble was that Hagen wasn't picking up his cues. Wishart took refuge behind a weak, "What do you mean?"

"I mean it's really in your best interest to have me on your side. That's not blackmail, that's just common sense. You need a lot of protection, Wishart. I can't promise to give you as much as you need, but I can give you some."

"What do I need protection for?" Wishart demanded, recovering his truculence.

“Jack,” said Hagen simply and watched his client subside. “And that’s just one item.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” murmured Wishart, but there was no conviction in his tone. His hands fought with each other nervously against the covers.

Mrs. Wishart came in at that moment, trailing Avis Gill. The secretary looked preoccupied. Her fixed smile was absent and she didn’t meet Hagen’s gaze or answer his greeting. Mrs. Wishart said, “I did what you told me. We’re alone in the house now.”

Just in case, Hagen got up and shut the door. “Better make yourselves comfortable. We’ve got a lot to talk about.” He gazed pointedly at Avis. “Don’t take notes if you know what’s good for you.” He remained standing, the better to dominate the group. “Let’s start with Hilda, shall we?”

Wishart looked at his mother for support. For perhaps the first time in his life, he didn’t get it. She put him on his own with a shrug that said: it’s up to you now. He muttered, “What about Hilda?”

“Just this,” said Hagen. “When did you discover that she was a kleptomaniac?”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. I found out today in a sporting goods store. It was pretty plain that your wife had swiped a cheap shiny knife she had no possible use for. How long have you known about her weakness?”

Wishart’s shoulders slumped as if a huge weight had suddenly been lifted. He raised his head and looked straight at Hagen. “For nearly a year.”

“I’ll have to hand it to you,” Hagen said. “I was married to her a lot longer than you were, and I didn’t tumble until today.”

“Perhaps you didn’t have my opportunities,” said Wishart quietly. “Hilda’s tastes grew more expensive as she grew older. And there’s the law of averages. The longer you keep on with something like that, the more people know.”

“The police know, don’t they? Troge hinted at it this morning.”

“And most of the department stores,” Wishart agreed. “They just added whatever she took to my bill and I paid it. The museum affair was the worst. I’m on the board of directors and we closed it down temporarily when we thought a teen-age gang was rifling the



archaeological displays. Then Hilda came out to dinner one evening dressed head to toe in ancient jewellery. I returned the jewellery but it was a terrible matter to hush up. She did look attractive in it." He spoke without any bitterness at all. Hagen liked him better than he had ever liked him before. "You see, I was unfortunate enough to love her."

"Unfortunate. That's a good word where Hilda was concerned. It works both ways, for herself and for the rest of us who knew her." He could understand so much that had been inexplicable about her until now and, by understanding, forgive. "I should have guessed. Maybe if she and I had had a real marriage I would have guessed. I could have helped her. She didn't have any secret lover. All those presents she got and couldn't explain she stole for herself. Anything that she thought was pretty, she couldn't resist. And she preferred that I should think she was unfaithful rather than tell me what her real weakness was." He smiled wryly. "I guess she knew that it was all over between us, anyway."

"I don't think you could have helped her," insisted Mrs. Wishart remorselessly. "Nobody could help her because she didn't really want to be helped. She laughed in my face when I tried."

"We all tried," murmured Avis Gill.

Hagen regarded the young woman steadily. "That's interesting," he said. "Was it part of your secretarial duties?"

She didn't flinch. "No, it was a matter of friendship."

"For whom?"

"Really!" interposed Mrs. Wishart. "I think it's obvious that we all *wanted* to help Hilda."

Wishart sighed. "Well, she's at peace now." He sounded envious.

"So is Jack," said Hagen. "I wish somebody would deign to tell me about Jack."

Nobody offered to.

"Okay," he said, "then I'll speak my piece. In the first place, Wishart, you lied to me last night. I'm not yelling foul, because I bulldozed you into hiring me and I can't expect the usual sort of trust. You told me that you found the diary yesterday. But that's impossible. The diary is the reason you went to Los Angeles. So when did you find it?"

“Last week, obviously,” said Mrs. Wishart. “I found it, Hagen. I just happened to be going through Hilda’s room.”

Hagen said carefully, “I presume you were seeing whether the cleaning girl had got at all the odd corners. That diary wouldn’t have been left lying around in the open.”

“It was hidden in a hat box in the closet,” Mrs. Wishart grinned. “I was snooping. I found it and I read it and I took it. A mother has some rights, you know. There was never a peep out of Hilda. She was in no position to complain.”

“Maybe she never knew it was missing.”

“Mother brought it to me, naturally,” said Wishart. “You can imagine what my reaction was. I was willing to forgive Hilda’s kleptomania—it’s really a form of sickness and should be regarded that way—but I couldn’t just shrug off a murder. What would you have done, Hagen?”

“The same as you. Gone to L.A.”

“Yes, I went to L.A. I felt I needed some skilled help, someone to keep an eye on Hilda until I could make up my mind how to deal with the situation.” He rubbed his forehead uncertainly. “I suppose I should have gone to the police right away. Maybe she would still be alive. But, God, the thought of her behind bars, the publicity ...”

“Not to mention that Oakmar is just getting under way.”

“Yes.” He smiled briefly. “I won’t pretend that Oakmar didn’t enter into it. My work is important to me, Hagen. Oakmar is my biggest gamble. If it goes bust, so will I right along with it. Should I have acted noble and gone to the police in the beginning and to hell with my wife and my reputation and the future of my entire family?”

“Who am I to tell you anything? The point is that you didn’t call cops.”

“I hired a private detective instead. I thought by bringing in a man from Los Angeles instead of using a local agency, I might avoid scandal.” Wishart sighed and made a small hopeless gesture with one hand. “That shows you how wrong you can be.”

“The idea was sound. The big fault with it is that you picked the wrong man. How did you get on to Jack, anyway?”

“Picked him out of the phone book,” Wishart admitted. “He looked and acted capable enough, didn’t ask too many questions, seemed

reliable. I'd never had any dealings with a private detective before. I guess I should have shopped around."

"You should have," Hagen agreed. "From what my contacts in L.A. tell me, Jack Ferreira has a pretty bad reputation. He was kicked off the police force. His private licence was suspended once for unethical behaviour, playing both sides. He got it back because the charges were dropped. But it shows you what he was like."

"I don't have to be shown. I already know."

"I guess we both do."

"I hired him on Monday," Wishart said. "He came here Monday night and went on duty then. I stayed over until Wednesday on some other business. When I got back Hilda was already dead, as you know."

"Well, that checks with Jack's railroad ticket. Which means that Jack was busy watching Hilda before your impersonator hired me to do the same thing. So when I went on duty Tuesday afternoon, Jack followed the both of us around. We must have made quite a parade."

"He claimed to have been here Tuesday night when—" Wishart began dubiously.

"Oh, he was," Hagen assured him. "Jack was outside the wall, still keeping tabs on Hilda, while I was inside the wall talking to her. Makes a pretty picture, doesn't it? Two detectives on the job and neither of them saw your wife die."

"Jack Ferreira said he did."

"I doubt it. I think he saw the archer sneak out the back gate and followed him. I'm pretty sure it was Jack's legs I saw running away after the murder. He was trying to catch up with the archer. I heard a car start up. It might have been the killer's but it was probably one that Jack had rented."

Wishart frowned. "You mean he didn't know who killed Hilda at all?"

"Certainly he did," said Hagen. "This morning proves that."

"Of course, I never saw Jack Ferreira in person after I hired him. He phoned me when I got back to town. He wanted me to pay him extra to keep his mouth shut."

"What was he bargaining with?"

“He threatened to tell the police everything he knew. You see, I’d already told him how much I feared idle gossip. So there he was, ready to spread it around about my wife and how I had to have her watched. And he said he’d tell about Tuesday night in such a way that the police might think I killed Hilda myself.”

Hagen chuckled. “Oh, he was an angular boy. When he found out from the papers what a spot I was in, he intended to try a similar shakedown on me. But I turned out to be more trouble than I’m worth. Jack had three suckers lined up, and the archer was the third. With the archer, he reached the final negotiations stage this morning. Jack should have known better than to shake down a murderer.” He shook his head sadly. “But that’s taking the broadest possible view.”

“What do you mean?”

“There doesn’t have to be three suckers, Wishart. There only has to be two. Me and you. Jack would have had a lot more to threaten with if he’d said he saw you kill Hilda.”

Wishart made a choked sound of surprise. Both Mrs. Wishart and Avis moved closer to him, protectively. Wishart sputtered, “But he never said that!”

“Nobody’s going to contradict you,” said Hagen gently. “Yet we can’t overlook the fact that you’re a man who frequently acts on impulse. That’s the way you married Hilda. That’s how you hired Jack. That’s how you decided to dust yourself off last night when the going got complicated.” He paused. “These questions are bound to arise. The question of Hilda being in your way.”

Wishart drew out his words painfully. “I guess so, Hagen. It’s worth your pay to face the facts. I’ve fumbled the ball from the very beginning, so much that’s personal was involved. No use pretending otherwise.”

“And now the question of Jack being in your way also. He’s dead. All of you know it. For five minutes we’ve been talking about him in the past tense and nobody objected.”

“Yes, we know it,” said Mrs. Wishart. “But we don’t intend to observe mourning.”

“The police are going to observe something. Jack died of a bowstring around his neck. Right, Avis?”

"I wouldn't know," said the secretary. Every inch of her face and body was now under perfect control. Her voice was flat and polite, although not quite deferential. She made but one betraying gesture. She put her hand on Wishart's shoulder, as if for support, and left it there.

Hagen asked, "How much of the night did you spend at the Kent Hotel?"

"None of it. Please don't be insulting."

"How was Jack the last time you saw him?"

"Dead, I believe. I didn't go near him. His face looked dead. But I couldn't see what had killed him. For all I know he was in the last stages of heart attack and I wasn't going to help him." Her hand still held to Wishart's shoulder, her nails clenching the pyjama material. Hagen wondered who was supporting whom. Avis added wistfully, "I don't see very well, you know."

Wishart said tensely, "What are you getting at, Hagen? Are you accusing me or Avis? Make up your mind."

"I wish I could. For my client's benefit, I'm merely thinking police thoughts. Let's book you first. Your future's tied up in Oakmar and you wanted to protect that, even if it meant sacrificing your wife. When Jack butted in you killed him too."

"Ridiculous. I'm sick in bed."

Hagen went on inexorably. "Or if you don't care for that, let's book Avis. She also had access to the weapon, opportunity and motive. Jack saw her leave through the back gate after deflating Hilda. So she played along with Jack. She borrowed the sleeping medicine the doctor left here last night. She had a sociable drinking party with Jack until he was groggy enough for her to strangle. After all, I did see her leaving the hotel this morning."

Avis said nothing. Mrs. Wishart shook her head at the secretary reassuringly but Avis didn't appear to need help. In fact, the faint smile she bestowed on Hagen looked a bit pitying.

Hagen kept trying. "Or we can make the bed up for two. You shared the labour. You killed your wife and Avis killed your blackmailer."

Mrs. Wishart was glaring by this time. "These scare tactics are a lot of nonsense. Neither of these young people killed anybody. Wayne was going out last night to try to reason with that Ferreira person.

Unfortunately my son had a momentary fit of depression, for which nobody can blame him. As for Avis, I sent her to the hotel this morning myself. The sum demanded was exorbitant but I thought it better to pay Ferreira off and be rid of him. Avis found him dead or dying and returned immediately. With the money."

"Good." Hagen smiled. "I'll be sure of my fee then, won't I?"

Mrs. Wishart snorted. "Do you think you've earned any?"

"I'm about to. I'm picking up some valuable information this evening at seven o'clock. What with the information you people have been kind enough to give me, I expect a great light to burst over me any time tonight. I only hope I'm not threatening anyone present."

With that Hagen walked out of the bedroom. He was nearly to the front door when he heard his name being called. Wayne Wishart was following him, barefoot and without bothering to don a robe over his pyjamas. Hagen waited.

"I wanted to ask you a question privately," said Wishart. "Back there, when you were talking about Avis, you said she had motive for killing Hilda. What did you mean by that?"

"Well, Avis lives here and she's a young lady. You live here and you're a man of considerable means. Hilda is dead, so don't you see what that makes you?"

"No."

"Single," said Hagen. He went out and left Wishart standing in the doorway, staring after him.

HE arrived at Dagne's apartment precisely at the hour he had promised, seven o'clock. He had crammed a good deal, including an hour's sleep, into the time since he had left the Wishart house. He looked better than he felt, however; the freshness was only surface deep.

Although Hagen was punctual, Dagne was not. Her windows were dark, the shades were up and Hagen could detect no life within. He rang the door bell for a long while but didn't get an answer. He went back to sit in his car and wait but he felt uneasy. He remounted the steps and searched for the extra key that she had said she kept above the porchlight. It was there.

The apartment was warm from the heat of the day and fragrant with the scent of the owner. But it was empty. Hagen checked rapidly through the small rooms to make certain and then chose a spot on the sofa to wait for Dagne's return. For a while he sat in the dark but that made him drowsy so he finally got up and turned on a lamp.

It was then that he saw the note. It had been placed on the mantelpiece above the fake fireplace and weighted down with a brass candlestick. It was really two messages, on separate pieces of paper.

The first was typewritten. Neatly double-spaced, it began: Army of the United States. Honourable Discharge. This is to certify that LAWRENCE F. BELDORIAN 39 022 529 Sergeant ... It went on to loose him from the military service and to testify to his Honest and Faithful Service to his country. There was a good deal more, comprising his Enlisted Record. Hagen searched out Section 36, the report of foreign duty. On such and such a date, Beldorian had

departed for the Asiatic Pacific Theatre. The date was long before Hilda's missing year.

And Beldorian had been discharged from Schofield Barracks. The letters TH stood out like a brand. This date fell in December, in the last month of Hilda's missing year. Beldorian had been in the Territory of Hawaii at the same time as Hilda.

He read the second piece of paper. It was hand-written, a hasty scribble. *Dear H,* it said, *I knew you'd come in out of the rain so am leaving this info on L.B. that you asked for. Sorry to duck out on you, but got a call to come out to Oakmar tonight at 7.30. Something about Hilda. Be right back. Love, D.*

Hagen stood frowning, reading the note a second time. Oakmar ... 7.30 ... something about Hilda.... He looked at his watch. It was nearly 7.30 already.

He had a crawling intuition that Dagne wouldn't be right back.

And then the bright light burst over him, just as he had warned the Wishart household. It was a brilliant radiation—fittingly gaudy—that pierced through his mind like an arrow and inflamed every corner of his brain. He swore in wonder. All day he had been on the verge of this discovery, ever since he had figured out the meaning of Hilda's hunting knife. And now he held the answer in his hand, the final titbit that made him a contented pigeon—or a dead one.

Unwittingly, Dagne had written out the identity of the archer. Hagen shoved the two notes into his pocket and ran for his automobile.

He drove like a menace. His hands seemed to melt into the steering wheel and his feet into the floor pedals. He and the car were a single straining machine, pointed for Oakmar. He had to reach there in time. A hitherto secret place in his mind kept asking, *In time for what?* but he closed a door on it. Houses, stores, street lamps raced by to the tune of his engine, all burning peaceful lights, the placid glow-spots of men and women of good will. I don't belong with them, he thought. I belong at Oakmar where it began.

It had been only two and a half days since he had driven this way the first time. But the truth wouldn't fit into that cramped time period, it needed a longer time, at least a life or two. In the span of those few hours, he had seen Hilda dead, and Doc and Jack. He had said goodbye



to a yellow-haired woman he once loved and had found himself falling for her identical dark image.

The lights of the city sank behind him and became an ember streak in his rear view mirror. The cool night breeze whipping the scent of sagebrush across the barren mesas, seemed intent on holding him back. There was no moon and the stars winked in dim mockery. It was a beautiful night, but for his savage hurrying ambition, the kind of night to spend driving with your girl, with plenty of falling stars to wish on. Hagen had a lot to wish for.

He squinted his eyes ahead, seeking the read tail-light of an automobile, thinking that his maniac pace might have been enough to overtake her. But though he rushed abreast of an occasional other car, he did not catch up with the one he sought. He came at last to the gloomy desertion of Oakmar.

The Modern Community for Modern Living was no more alive than the first time he had seen it. It was still an advertising promise, an unborn town. His head-lights, swinging in a wide arc as he skidded off the main highway, startled a large white owl perched atop the billboard. The bird flapped away like a retreating ghost. But there was no sign of human life.

Driving slowly now, using his spotlight to sweep back and forth, Hagen bumped along the dirt road. He passed the surveyor's office, the little imitation castle. It was padlocked and uninhabited. Tyre tracks showed a corrugated pattern in the dust of the roadway but he had no means of telling how fresh they were.

Rabbits bounded across the gouge that served as the main street, dazzled momentarily by the brilliant spread of his headlights. A roadrunner darted into the open and kept his company for a few yards. At various unexpected locations construction machinery—bull-dozers and graders and ditchers and earthmovers—loomed out of the night to startle him, like gods in some heathen pantheon.

“Dagne,” he whispered, probing with the searchlight. “Where are you?”

He found her car at last, parked on a scrubby slope of the subdivision where the road wound upward along a narrow mesa between two precipitous canyons.

Dagne's car was empty. One door hung open, as if she had got out too hurriedly to close it. Or as if she had been dragged from it. Or as if she still lay across the shadowy front seat.

Hagen pulled up and stopped his engine but didn't cut his lights. For a moment, he sat listening to the night sounds, peering at the car before him. Then he slid out, flashlight in hand, and went to investigate.

He had taken only two steps when a lizard scurried through the underbrush. At the rattling sound, Hagen swerved aside. The lizard saved his life. The arrow stabbed into his shoulder.

THE arrow knocked him to his knees and Hagen flung himself down the rest of the way. His flashlight bounced from his hand and flickered out as its lens splintered against a rock. Hagen crawled rapidly for the cover of the brush. He had to get away from the damning radiance of his own headlights. He couldn't roll for shelter because of the arrow shaft that stood like a flagstaff in his right shoulder.

Panting, he reached darkness and stopped his noisy scrambling retreat. He didn't know whether other arrows had followed his headlong crawl or not. He lay pressed against the ground and now the pain began in his shoulder. He gritted his teeth against it and after a long moment the agony subsided to a slanting column of pain, with twinges of fire every time he shifted his arm. He hadn't realized an arrow hurt so much. It felt like a telephone pole stuck through him.

He tried to consider the blessings of his position. He was invisible for the moment. The arrow wasn't in the middle of his back, as intended. He could move about, although his right arm was out of commission.

Yet the deadly fact remained that he was not alone. Somewhere on the mesa lurked the archer, waiting for a sound, a glimpse, stalking him like an animal. Only an accidental lizard had saved Hagen from the first shaft, and the archer would be carrying a whole quiverful of arrows.

Hagen looked back at his car. There was the protective armour he needed but it waited for him in its own bright glow, the perfect trap. If he made a dash for it ... He could picture himself grovelling in the dust of the road, a human pincushion. He gave up the car idea.

He lay helpless and unarmed, listening with his entire body, peering into the murk to see where his nemesis waited. He heard the breeze rustle through the weeds, he made out the squat shadows of bushes and stunted trees but nothing more. It was the moment for gambling on long odds. Hagen took the chance.

He called out, "I didn't think you'd go through with it—not without telling me why." As soon as he spoke, he quickly clawed his way ahead. He heard the arrow whistle through the air behind him. The archer had shot for a crouching man. From his quick glimpse of the feathered shaft, Hagen thought he could figure out the approximate direction of his murderer.

The moon was about to rise. It peeped redly over the jagged edge of the eastern hills like a fearful spectator. In a few minutes, Hagen would be able to see much better. Of course, he reflected painfully, that works both ways. I'm going to be a better target.

He had no choice but to do battle with what he had. He shouted again, "Better talk to me while you got a chance. The cops are on their way." Another arrow sped for his voice, aimed for a prone man this time, but Hagen had already scuttled away. His progress was impeded by the shaft standing up from his shoulder. Every time it caught on the underbrush, he wanted to pass out. Though he knew it would start fresh bleeding, he clenched his teeth and, clumsily reaching with his left hand, wrenched the arrow free. Although unflanged, the steel point felt like a fish hook coming out. He felt the gush of blood run warmly down his side. His shirt and coat began pasting themselves to his body.

He brooded over the arrow in his hand, four inches of its tip blackened with part of his own life. He examined it thoughtfully. At least it was pointed. It wasn't much of a weapon unless he could get close to the archer, but it was better than a single empty hand. His left hand, at that. If he could out-maneuvre his enemy....

"The moon's coming up," he warned. "I've got a gun."

The reply this time was not another arrow. It was a laugh. And then he saw the archer. She strode deliberately out into the middle of the road and stood grinning toward his hiding place. She wasn't more than fifty feet away. She wore jeans and a girlish sleeveless blouse and her head was bare. By her casual garb and the quiver slung across her back

and the long bow in her hand, she looked like a lady engaged in harmless recreation.

"You amuse me, Hagen," she said. "And it's the first time. Go ahead. Use your gun, whistle up some cops." She laughed again, scornfully.

"Don't make me do it, Dagne." He crouched, ready to spring away if she strung her bow.

"I won't—because you can't do it, Hagen, darling. I know you backwards and forwards. I knew you'd rush out here to save me because of your hero complex. I knew you wouldn't bring any cops, not a lone wolf like you. And as for you having a gun! Really, don't pretend you ever carry one. I made sure of that every time I kissed you."

Hagen shifted his position as noiselessly as possible. She was idly fitting an arrow to her bow. Suddenly she fired, her eyes concentrating, her mouth smiling pleasantly. She fired almost straight up. It was a playful lobbing attack. The arrow disappeared from sight in the sky and then speared down into a mesquite bush about two yards away from him. Dagne was playing with him.

He said, "I'm going to be a lot harder to hit than you think. This is a big landscape, plenty of room to dodge."

"You're wounded. I can pin you down any time."

Time was on her side. She wouldn't risk running out of arrows. He had to talk her out of shooting at all. While she talked he was safe. She's a woman, he told himself desperately, and she's Hilda's twin. Pretend she's Hilda. *Get her in an argument.*

Hagen said, "No, I can run faster than a boar, faster than Bruce Shanner."

"You and your guesswork."

"Guesswork, hell! I scavenged out the answer bit by bit. Troge told me this morning that Bruce Shanner was one gentleman who preferred brunettes. That didn't point to Hilda. Where was Hilda during that year if she wasn't in Hawaii?"

"There you have the key to the whole thing, Hagen, and I'm the only one who knows. Where would a thief like Hilda be? She was in prison back in Illinois. You can't steal as a whim and not get caught sometimes. She served a term under a made-up name. I knew no one

could ever prove where she was that year. She never told anyone but me.”

“Her loving sister? You’re just like her, Dagne, that’s the terrible truth.”

“You’re trying to anger me. It’s not true and you know it. I’m not a tramp. I have a reason for every move I make. Don’t tell me otherwise.”

Dagne could argue but the truth was there and it sickened Hagen. She looked like Hilda and she sounded like Hilda. Only the black hair was different and that was a lie from the beauty parlour. Identical twins, and their identity was more than skin-deep. They thought alike and acted alike. Hagen cursed himself for not following that assumption from the first. But, brooding about his failure with Hilda, he had yearned for a second chance. Dagne had supplied it and he had gone blind to everything else. Next time you fall in love, he warned himself, study the woman’s character. That is, if you live to fall in love again. The place for you is still Die-Hard Rock, where the women can’t get at suckers like you.

It was all in the character. Hilda’s impulsiveness and lack of moral fibre had expressed itself in kleptomania. Dagne’s twin soul expressed itself in murder. Different manifestations sprouting from the same twisted root. And once the patterns had been set, neither sister could escape the consequences.

“Okay,” said Hagen, “so you had a reason for making me your patsy Tuesday night. It was pure ego that brought you around to my office Wednesday morning.”

“Use your head,” advised Dagne. “I saw by the papers that the cops had been too dumb to arrest you. I knew you were a fool for women because you’d once married Hilda, so I put on my best vengeful attitude and immediately got next to you. You were my listening post, Hagen. I could find out how the investigation was going without making myself conspicuously nosy at police headquarters.”

Slowly, Hagen began backing away. He did it inch by inch so that his voice wouldn’t fade abruptly as he talked. Now that he had located Dagne, he wanted to draw her into the brush. He didn’t dare charge her where she stood in the open road. He still clutched the arrow in his left

hand. He said, "The note you left me tonight was the big give-away. Your handwriting told me that you were the archer."

"You came, didn't you?" she argued back at him. "I counted on your affections, Hagen, not your perception. Don't worry, I'll remember to take the billet-doux off your body before I go."

That gave him an uncomfortable moment. She did know him pretty well to realize that he had stuck her decoy message in his pocket. Was he manœuvring now exactly as she expected him to? He couldn't believe that. The smiling brunette beauty shadowed in the roadway was only a murderess, not a sorceress.

"What about my body?"

"What about it? I suppose it'll be found someday."

"And my car?"

"It's a big ocean. Meanwhile, the police will hunt you all the way across the country and I'll gradually be forgotten. You've been very close to me, Hagen, darling, but you were getting too close." She giggled. "The bargain is this. I'm going to forget you and you're certainly not going to think about me."

"Did you forget Bruce that easy? I can see why he jilted you, Dagne. You didn't have to skewer him because he abandoned you. You could have scared him to death."

"That isn't funny!"

"I think it is. It must be hard pretending to be a human being. Quite a song and dance you gave me about how much you and Hilda loved each other. You hated Hilda and she undoubtedly despised you. Why would you two have made such a production about splitting up and trying to destroy the resemblance if you were so damned fond of each other?"

Dagne's eyes were narrow and her mouth tight. She drew forth another arrow and didn't reply.

Hagen said hastily, "The arrow was the first tip-off. You told me that you and Hilda had to take all the same courses in school. And Hilda had learned archery in college. You should have used another weapon on Hilda but I guess you couldn't break out of the pattern you'd started with Bruce Shanner."

Dagne adjusted her leather wristguard sullenly. "I do as I please. I have no patterns. When Hilda learned about the Bruce business, I

simply thought that archery was appropriate.” She strung the arrow.

“Your note tonight gave me the whole picture. The Beldorian stuff you carefully copied out on a typewriter at work. But your note had to look like a last minute thing. Hence, you were finally forced to give me a handwriting sample. And the sample showed how similar your penmanship was to your twin sister’s. That’s what fooled everyone about the diary. Since it was found in Hilda’s room and the writing looked like hers, naturally, it must be her diary. But it wasn’t. She stole it from you, didn’t she? That was why you killed her.”

“Of course. Hilda had the eye of a magpie. Anything that glistened or glittered she made off with. I suppose the pretty binding caught her fancy. I shouldn’t have let her out of my apartment without searching her.”

“Then you have a whole set of diaries? One for every year. That explains why it began so neatly in January and ended in December.”

“I like to preserve my thoughts,” said Dagne.

I wish I knew them now, baby, pondered Hagen. In his gradual withdrawal, his foot reached out into space. He had come to the edge of the canyon. The moonlight showed him a steep slope of loose shale vanishing down into shadow. He considered slipping over the edge but decided his descent would be too noisy. In a moment Dagne could reach the canyon brim and shoot down on him at will. He crawled to his right, tracing the tortuous lip of the gulch.

Apparently, he decided, Hilda hadn’t feared her sister even after stealing the incriminating diary and reading about the Hawaiian murder. Hilda had been waiting for Dagne to call Tuesday night. The manhattans, the second glass hadn’t been for Hagen at all. Well, Dagne had called. And here he grovelled, trying to make up for that night.

“Hilda was blackmailing you, wasn’t she?” he said. “She had to die because she had your handwritten confession that you killed Shanner.”

“Oh, you never saw her happier than when she finally had something to hold over my head. She wouldn’t give me the diary back and I had no way of knowing where it was or searching her house.”

“But you two women always thought alike. If she was blackmailing you, then you must have been doing the same thing to her for years, or ever since she married money. You knew about her kleptomania. I’ll bet Hilda’s sickness paid for that overdecorated salon of yours.”



“You should talk about taste! You married *her* once.”

“And I fell in love with you, sweetheart,” called Hagen sardonically. That won him an arrow. It whirled by him and lost itself in the depths of the canyon. But Dagne didn’t come after him immediately although she got ready another shaft.

Hagen said, “Well, the joke was that Hilda couldn’t return your diary. Mrs. Rosemary Wishart had swiped it from her. Of course, by that time, you’d figured out that if Hilda died, the diary didn’t matter. It’d be found among her possessions and, because of the similar handwriting, assumed to be hers. Her unknown year in prison matched the diary’s murder year.”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“It’s not working now. You manœuvred me into Hilda’s death scene as the prime suspect, but that didn’t work because the police didn’t hold me. You figured that an ex-husband would take the pressure off you, as her nearest relative, but you couldn’t hire me personally because I’d recognize you as Hilda’s twin. So that’s how poor Doc got dragged into the act, as your go-between. Why, you’ve been ready to break through the ice every minute since Hilda died. The day I took you down to Fathom Street, you were nearly recognized twice as the woman who had hired Doc. The bartender and the doorman at the burlesque theatre both thought you looked familiar.”

“But that could be blamed on Hilda’s picture in the paper. Clever of you to give me alibis.”

“And you nearly broke through the ice with Jack Ferreira. He didn’t see the killing but he saw you leave by the back gate and thought you were Hilda, who he was supposed to follow around. So he followed you to your apartment. Obviously, his confusion was cleared by the morning papers.”

Dagne asked, “Am I supposed to feel sorry for him too?”

“That’s up to you. I’m just glad I wasn’t you the day you discovered you’d killed one blackmailer only to pick up another. I don’t miss Jack but I am curious. Did you kiss him before you slipped him the mickey?”

She chuckled. “Suppose you just worry about that, darling.”

“I won’t. Funny thing about us suckers. Everything we feel for a woman drains out the hole when we get shot in the back. You’ve had

quite a collection lately, me and Jack and Larry Beldorian. I suppose he's in love with you. He probably followed you over here from the Islands just to lick your boots. It's smart of you, Dagne, always to keep at least one more patsy up your sleeve. Have you set a date for *his* funeral yet?"

"You're a strange and clever lad," she informed him. "If you knew so much truth, *why did you come out here tonight?*"

"Yeah," he muttered but didn't tell her any more. Why did I? he wondered. His back ached stiffly and his head was spinning from loss of blood. He keenly felt his humiliation, hiding in the bushes from a woman. Why did I come? I've got the answer here somewhere but I'm afraid to look at it. I came because I thought I could save her. I came hoping she could prove to me that killing Hilda and Jack and Bruce Shanner were the right and honourable things to do. That's the kind of damned fool a woman can make of you when you love her. I wanted her to make me proud of her worst sins, show me plainly that she was worth loving. And if she'd shown me anything but her cheap tinsel for guts, I'd have broken the law for her and sold my soul. Well, I've failed. I've failed again. Take a good look at your idealism, Hagen, throw that broken sword away and don't buy another one. Dreams are harder than diamonds and you'll always break your toy swords on them, right up to the day that you break yourself. You failed with Hilda and you've failed with Dagne. You better try another brand of hope.

He rubbed away the fever-heat that was reddening his eyesight. His hand shook so that the arrow sweating in it rattled noisily against the dry packed earth.

"Hagen!" called Dagne. "Have you fainted? If you're in pain, tell me, darling. There's no need for you to suffer."

At the sound of her disdainful voice, his strength came back. He said distinctly, "I'm not going to suffer. You want to know why I came tonight? Simply to apologize for lying to you last night. I had no business taking advantage of you."

"What do you mean?"

"About your emotions, your glands. It wasn't fair of me to get you worked up like that when all I wanted was a place to sleep. I was awful tired."

"Do you realize what you're saying?"

“I’m sorry if the truth hurts. I always have been an opportunist, Dagne, and your bed looked mighty comfortable. Oh, I’ve no doubt you’re a very desirable woman, under the right circumstances—and with the right man.” Hagen chuckled. “Forgive me? I was exhausted, and you should never believe a man who wants nothing more than a place to flop.”

He did know one thing about women. They can be called anything but undesirable.

“You dirty liar!” yelled Dagne. “You wanted me!” She loosed the arrow at where his voice had been. “And now you’re going to have me!” Drawing another shaft from her quiver, she came off the moonlit road.

He lost sight of her in the brush but occasionally he could hear the slinking tread of her shoe as she nudged a dry leaf or passed through the whispering meadow grass. He huddled in the blackest shadow he could find, a wind-bowed scrub-oak. A helpful cloud dulled the moon for a minute, two minutes....

When he saw Dagne again, she was poised on the edge of the canyon, searching the depths below. Her bowstring was drawn tight and the arrow point roamed back and forth, ready for the slightest movement.

“Hagen?” she inquired softly. “Hagen, darling, you were lying, weren’t you?”

Gradually, with aching slowness, he raised his left hand with the arrow in it. He tried hard to remember how he had thrown the arrows at the target by the Wishart pool. One of them had stuck. But that had been with his other hand, his good hand.

Dagne was the same distance away, ten yards. The moon came out in treacherous splendour. Dagne turned and saw him.

Hagen threw the arrow with all his might. It didn’t come within a yard of her.

But her eyes widened in horror as she saw one of her own feathered sticks sailing through the air toward her. She danced out of the way, the wrong way. Some of the shale skipped out from under her shoe. For a frenzied instant, she fought for her balance and lost it. Her impatient bow fired its missile straight up and, with a scream, Dagne plunged into the empty darkness. In the fraction of time that she hung

poised before vanishing, she looked like a diver springing from the board. Then she was gone into the pool of blackness.

Hagen was left crouched for a charge, his one usable arm outstretched. He had intended to distract her aim and take his chances on rushing her. But there was nothing left to grapple with. There were only the sounds, the echo of her first scream, the rocky scraping noise when she hit, and her second liquid scream that was ended quickly.

He waited in the silence. Presently, he groped in his pockets for a book of matches and eased himself down the slope to find her.

Dagne lay at the bottom of a steep arroyo. Remains of scrap lumber and tin from the construction of the Oakmar billboards had been dumped here. She was on top of the heap. It would have been more poetical if one of her own arrows had pierced her heart, but it was only a cast-off piece of lath, splintered to a point, that had bayoneted her stomach.

She was awkwardly sprawled face-down on the trash pile. Hagen, holding a match flare aloft, started to turn her over to a more restful position. He changed his mind. Dagne's face had scraped over a piece of tin. She was unrecognizable. She didn't look as if she'd ever had a face.

Hagen let his match burn out and didn't light another. He thought he ought to say something. He muttered finally, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all of us." He could remember Hilda. Relaxing in death, she had finally achieved true beauty. But what had Dagne achieved? He shook his head, trying to forget. At least, she no longer resembled her sister. Dead, she was nobody.

He climbed up to the mesa again and went to his car. It was difficult to drive with only his left arm but he managed to reach the stucco medieval castle in the heart of the tract. The door was padlocked on a chain and wouldn't give way. Hagen kicked in a window and climbed through to the telephone.

His first call was to Troge.

By the time he finally heard the sirens whining in the distance, Hagen had smoked several cigarettes in the dark and thought a lot of thoughts. His shoulder ached miserably but it would heal. It was the rest of him that he wondered about.

His second call was to the recruiting office. The staff there was working late just as he was. The sergeant who answered the phone thought Hagen was kidding about reactivating his commission. And he had never heard of Die-Hard Rock. The sergeant said, "What rock are you talking about? Go on back to the party, pal, you don't know when you're well off. And see if she's got a sister for me, will you?"

"That's the trouble," said Hagen. "She did have."

He hung up. He could explain tomorrow. For now, he took the sergeant's advice. He climbed out through the broken window and went back to his party. The first guests were just arriving in a squad car.

THE END

This edition published by  
Prologue Books  
an imprint of F+W Media, Inc.  
10151 Carver Road  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45236  
[www.fwcrime.com](http://www.fwcrime.com)

Copyright © 1955 by Whit Masterson, Registration Renewed 1983  
All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, corporations, institutions, organizations, events, or locales in this novel are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. The resemblance of any character to actual persons (living or dead) is entirely coincidental.

eISBN 10: 1-4405-4064-0  
eISBN 13: 978-1-4405-4064-6