

HIS DEADLIEST ENEMY

by Kate Wilhelm

It was a lovely sunny day, last day of March, crocuses up, daffodils emerging, and on the table in her house Constance had seed packets waiting. There was a large bag of starting mix in the back of the car. "Heirloom tomatoes," she had said to Charlie, who had looked blank. "Not, as prolific as the newer hybrids, but better-tasting," she had gone on, to a continuing blank look. "How many tomatoes do two people need?"

He had dived behind his newspaper at that. She was smiling slightly as she drove. Thursday, her last aikido class of the week was done, and seeds were waiting. Charlie would be gone until late afternoon on Monday, or possibly Tuesday. Today plant the seeds indoors, a head start on real gardening time. Friday clear straw from the fence where she would plant peas. Saturday shop... .

She braked; a van was askew in the road, and a motorcycle half off the road, with a woman with a cell phone and several other people milling about a man on the ground.

Constance stopped and hurriedly got out of her car. "You're out of range here," she called to the woman. "How bad is he?"

She ran to the man on the ground and as she started to kneel beside him, she sensed movement behind her. Something was thrown over her head, over her shoulders; she was toppled and caught as the something was pulled all the way down her body to her feet, then drawn close, pinning her arms and her legs. She felt straps or a rope tightening around her. Helpless, she didn't try to struggle, didn't bother to scream or call out as she was lifted and carried. She drew in a breath, then tried to hold her breath, but it was pointless. She was already blacking out.

Charlie liked to fish, and he liked going fishing with Hal Mitchum, a good companion, next-door neighbor, pal, but by the time he pulled into the Mitchum driveway on Friday afternoon he admitted silently that he was pretty tired of Hal. They had left on Wednesday, and on Thursday Hal had stumbled in snow knee-deep, caught his foot in a hole, and had broken his leg. Thursday he had been in the hospital and now, Friday, Charlie was taking him home where his wife and however many of his four sons were around could listen to him complain. And Charlie would

go home to his nice fire where he belonged, snuggle a bit with Constance, eat good food, and not wade through snow up to his keister. No one had expected the snow, but there it was, and the fish were probably still in Florida.

All four sons met the van in the driveway, with Doris hovering behind them. The boys were all a foot taller than their mother and a hundred pounds heavier—football players. Two of them lifted Hal and carried him, one took the crutches, and the last one grabbed his duffel bag, while Doris wrung her hands and Hal yelled back to Charlie that he would make it up to him, sorry about this, rotten luck, did he want a ride home ...

Charlie hoisted his own duffel bag, walked around the house, and climbed the fence to the pasture, where Mitchum's goats came to see what was happening. He crossed the field, climbed the fence to his own yard, and went to the back porch door. He took his boots off on the screened porch, then entered a cold house where the three cats met him with howls of indignation and rage.

After two steps into the kitchen, he paused. She wasn't home. He could always tell and never could have said how, but the house was not the same with her gone. Her presence filled it, made it home. Brutus, the evil striped cat, stalked angrily around his feet while Candy, the tortoiseshell, cried piteously, and Ashcan tried to climb his legs. "Where is she, you guys?" Charlie said softly. Their food dish was empty, and the water bowl was dry. He walked on through the kitchen to the other side with cats as close as shadows, and saw a letter propped against a vase of flowers on the table. Seed packets were on the table, and her car keys. He picked up the letter, opened the envelope, and read the note: "Don't do anything foolish. No police, no FBI. Sit tight and wait for a phone call. Don't use the phone. She's safe and comfortable. I trust you had a good fishing trip."

A lump as hard and cold as an iceberg settled in his stomach as he read it a second time. He let it fall to the table and stood without moving for a time, then shoved Ashcan away and went back to the cat dishes, filled one with food and the other with water to shut up the beasts. After that he prowled silently through the house. There would be a listening device, he thought, something to let them know he had returned. No one would have expected him to enter through the back door. They knew he had gone fishing. Did they know when he had planned to return? He found the small device near the front door on the underside of a low table in the foyer. He didn't touch it. It was probably voice-activated, or sound-activated, in which case the cats might have set it off with their yowling. If they had, the phone might ring any minute now. He looked at his watch, and continued his silent search.

No sign of a struggle, nothing conspicuously missing. She had gone to her class in her gi, had not had a chance to change. Clothes were laid out on the bed, waiting for her.

Without a sound he went through the kitchen again, out to the porch, on to the garage, where the Volvo was parked. Her purse was on the front seat, a bag of potting soil or something in the back and, again, no sign of a struggle. Thursday, he thought then; they had taken her the day before.

Ten minutes had passed from the time he looked at his watch. He sat down at the kitchen table and examined the note again, not touching it this time, although he suspected that no fingerprints would be recoverable. Computer printout, cheap copy paper, cheap envelope, no stamp, no date. Who had known he was going fishing? A handful of locals, that was all. Ransom? He doubted that. Kidnapping was a federal crime, too risky for the meager sum he could come up with. Revenge, he thought then. And God knew he had made enemies over the years, first as an arson investigator, then a New York City detective, and most recently a private investigator.

He went over a mental list, shook his head. The folks he knew who might want to get even would not have written that she was safe and comfortable, and would not have added that bit about fishing. The envelope probably would have contained a bloody finger or ear.

He realized that both of his hands were aching painfully and he looked at his fists in surprise, then forced his fingers to open, to flex. The lump of ice was not melting. He wanted to kill someone.

Ransom, revenge, pure devilry, what else? In his head he heard a voice: "You're exactly the person I want, Meiklejohn. I want your expertise."

"Merrihew," he said under his breath.

March first. Overnight snow again, and a cutting cold wind. Endless winter, Charlie thought, disgruntled, when he went outside to bring in more firewood. He took the wood to the living room, added a piece to the fire, and went back to the kitchen to give a kettle of chili a good stir. It was his day to cook. Chili, cole slaw, cornbread. Feast enough for the gods, he decided, sniffing, then tasting. Too spicy? Maybe, but it was too late to do much about it. The doorbell rang and in his continuing foul mood he went to see what idiot was out there instead of inside warm and dry.

The man on the stoop was in his sixties, red-faced, but that could have been from the wind. Dressed in a heavy mackintosh, a wool cap pulled low on his head, heavy wool pants, and worn boots. Although he was carrying a large Manila envelope, he definitely was not a salesman type.

"Merrihew," he said curtly.

Charlie opened the door wider and stepped aside. "Just long enough to get warm. Is there a driver waiting?"

"No."

Charlie glanced at his boots, dry. He would not have waded in snow in the driveway or walkway to the house. Charlie had shoveled enough snow that winter to build his own ski resort. He motioned toward the living room. "You might want to keep your heavy things on until you warm up."

Merrihew was already pulling off the mackintosh. He strode ahead of Charlie and tossed the coat onto a chair along with his cap and the bulging envelope he had brought in, then went to the fire and held out his hands to it, facing the flames. He was a heavy man, solid, not fat, as if he worked out regularly.

"Mr. Merrihew," Charlie said pleasantly, "ten days ago I told your secretary that I am not at present looking for a job. One week ago I repeated that same message to you directly. Nothing's changed. I'm still not looking for work."

Actually, Merrihew's secretary had called and said quite coolly that her employer would consult with Charlie on Tuesday or Wednesday of the following week, and if he would name the day she would make a reservation at the Plaza for him. When Merri-hew called he had said brusquely that he would make it more than worthwhile and was keeping Wednesday afternoon open and would expect Charlie at three.

Merrihew swung around and just then Constance strolled in, looking as elegant as always, in a powder-blue sweater, slim black pants, and walking shoes. Her at-home work uniform. "Constance, meet Mr. Merrihew," Charlie said. "Dr. Leidl, a pleasure," Merrihew said, inclining his head fractionally.

Charlie raised his eyebrows at Constance and she nodded so slightly that it might have gone unnoticed. Merrihew had done some homework. Constance had a Ph.D. in psychology.

"I want thirty minutes of your time," Merrihew said. "I'll pay whatever the going rate is plus a substantial bonus on satisfactory completion."

With an exaggerated sigh Charlie looked at his watch, then waved toward a chair and seated himself in his Morris chair. Constance settled into the wing chair opposite him, and Merrihew took the green upholstered chair that neither Constance nor Charlie ever sat in. It was not very comfortable.

"My father was a hog farmer," Merrihew said. "I hated that farm with all my soul. He died when I was sixteen and I inherited three thousand dollars; my mother got the farm. I decided to spend my inheritance traveling and I went to South America, to Peru. I wanted to see Machu Picchu. On a train I kept seeing the mountains cut into tiers, stair steps with stone retaining walls, terraces with crops growing on each level. Corn, potatoes, beans, squash. . . It fascinated me. Those Indians did that with hand tools, baskets, no wheels, no pack animals bigger than llamas. Centuries later they're still there, still growing crops, irrigated, drained, cared for, and productive."

He was gazing at the fire with a contemplative expression. He sat stiller than most people, Charlie thought then, no twitches or adjustments of his position, no hand motions. As still as a buddha. "Something happened to me on that trip," Merrihew continued. "I didn't know what it was until years later, but that's when it started. I talked my mother into giving up the farm, going into the meat-packing business instead, and I made it work. I went to school, architecture and engineering, and began to branch out in other enterprises. I made a lot of money." He wasn't boasting. His voice was dispassionate, nearly a monotone. The cats came in and Brutus eased himself into Charlie's lap,

Ashcan into Constance's. Candy sniffed Merrihew's feet and legs; he made a shooing motion at her, and she raised her tail and stalked out disdainfully.

"When I was twenty-nine," Merrihew said, "I went back to Peru, but that time I knew what questions to ask and who could answer. The terraces are marvels of engineering in a landmass that must be the most inhospitable on earth. The Andes are like steeples in many places, nearly vertical in others, but nothing stopped those genius engineers. Wherever they wanted terraces, they carved them out of rock and created them.

"I'm doing the same thing," he said in a lower voice.

He paused and turned his gaze to Charlie. "Twenty-five years ago I located my mountain and bought the southern flank, all of it. I put together a team of architects and engineers, and we started work on the plans. Eight years ago we started earthmoving. I realized that that was what all the money had been about, to bring to fruition my boyhood dream."

He began to describe the community he was building and his face changed, became impassioned as he leaned forward with his eyes gleaming. Each terrace was sixty feet wide, houses no more than thirty-five feet deep, backed up by the mountain on the north, clerestory windows, skylights, solar panels. An elevator, an escalator. Each to provide a lift to the next terrace, a people-mover belt to cross the space to the next elevator or escalator, stairs, all covered with clear Lexan. A four-foot-wide walkway winding through gardens along the entire length of each terrace, spectacular views from every level. . . . "From below all you will see will be some retaining walls and endless gardens rising up the mountain."

Charlie glanced at his watch. Ten more minutes.

Merrihew's eyes narrowed and he stopped talking abruptly. A moment later, in the same dispassionate way he had started, with the same nearly impassive expression he had worn, he said, "Then the accidents started. Five years ago, two men, two fatal accidents. Four years ago two more. Three years ago, two. Last year, three fatalities. Plus near-fatal accidents each and every year since they started."

"Accidents happen," Charlie commented. "Construction is a dangerous occupation. I assume there were investigations."

"Of course. Locals, state, OSHA, insurance people. I hired my own detectives two years ago. Nothing. But someone is out to destroy it all, to destroy me." A gleam in his eyes became more pronounced and made him look dangerous suddenly.

Charlie dumped Brutus, stood up, and went to the fire to give it a poke. Sparks flared and he turned back to Merrihew. "Look, it's hopeless. Accidents, all investigated, that go back five years.

There's nothing anyone can do now. Use more caution on the job, bring in some new superintendents, new foremen, a whole new crew, whatever it takes."

"I've done all those things," Merrihew said. He stood up. "There's a person behind it. I want you to go to the site and spend a little time with the accident reports and the investigators' reports. I've looked into you, your past work. I know you push the envelope and get results. I want you, Meiklejohn, your expertise. Just find out how they got killed and who's responsible. I'll handle it from there. The end of the month or first of April. The snow will be gone by then. No work's due to start until late April. You'll have time to look around, visualize the deaths and how impossible it is that they were all accidents."

Charlie shook his head. "As I said from day one, no thanks. The end of this month I'm going fishing for four or five days and when I return, it will be tax-wrestling

time. After that, my wife and I are due a little vacation. Besides, Mr. Merrihew, it's hopeless. Teams of investigators worked on it while the accidents were fresh, memories unfogged by time. There's no point."

Merrihew stood up and walked to the chair where he had tossed his coat, picked it up, and pulled it on. "I intend to see Merrihew Terraces finished in the next few years. Each time there's a new death, it's a setback in time and I don't have time. I have early symptoms of Alzheimer's, Meiklejohn, and in five or six years I might not care. But I do now. I'll be in touch."

He jammed on his cap and walked to the foyer with Constance at his side. "I'm sorry," she said, and whether she meant Charlie's refusal to take the job or Merrihew's admission of Alzheimer's was impossible to tell.

After Merrihew left, Constance picked up the bulging envelope and wandered off to her upstairs office and Charlie returned to the kitchen and the simmering chili. He tasted it again. Maybe some yogurt, he decided, wiping his eyes, to temper the fire. He had never heard of doing that, but it seemed reasonable.

At dinner later Constance took a bite of chili and, looking surprised, reached for her wine. Charlie took a bite. "It's interesting," he said. She buttered a piece of cornbread.

"His project is amazing," she said then. "The mission statement says not a single inch of arable land will be used and the development will hold two hundred fifty houses, underground parking, a big clubhouse with swimming pool and gym, guest rooms. Real individual yards plus landscaped gardens. It's really incredible."

"He's a nut," Charlie said.

She pursed her lips. She knew that after the first call Charlie had looked up Merrihew and had found enough to make him want to have nothing to do with the man. He wouldn't have anyway, she also knew. Charlie was as incapable of taking orders from such a man as Merrihew was incapable of not giving them.

"And he's ruthless," Charlie continued. "No opposition allowed. He squashes opposition the way a sane person would squash a bug."

"It's really visionary, a prototype of how to house people without sacrificing any more arable land."

"He's a nut. One of the richest men alive. Probably knocked off his own father to get out from under the hog farm. Dangled his mother over a cliff until she agreed to let him run things his way. He wants that mountain to stand for a thousand years with his name linked to it. Immortality. What are we going to do with that chili?"

She eyed it. "Maybe you could freeze it in ice-cube trays and we could bring it out from time to time to use as seasoning."

A little later they had ham-and-cheese sandwiches and neither of them mentioned Merrihew again, or the chili, either.

Sitting in his cold empty kitchen, Charlie took a deep breath. Merrihew had said he'd be in touch, and Charlie had no doubt that he had kept his word. His fury did not diminish, and the ice in his midsection did not melt, but he was reassured. Merrihew would not harm her, just use her for leverage. He clung to that. It was Friday, and he was not expected home until late Monday or Tuesday. Time to consider his response to Merrihew's opening move.

As silently as before, he went upstairs, gathered a few things to stuff into his duffelbag, picked up his laptop and the big envelope, returned to the kitchen. He tore open the bag of cat food and put it on the floor, then raised the lid of the toilet. She hated for him to do that, but the cats didn't object. Then he went out through the porch, back over the fence to Mitchum's house. He would make up a story for the Mitchums, borrow a car, go check into a motel, and make some phone calls. The goats did not meet him this time. They were getting milked.

Charlie had worked with Ron Shipley in the past and said that if he ever wanted another partner Ron would be it. That night at eleven, Charlie, Ron, and Lucinda Popke sat in a roadhouse near the village of Fall Creek, New Jersey. For the next several days Ron and Lucinda would be Mr. and Mrs. Jackson Callahan, a couple fed up with New York City, looking for a nice place in the country within commuting distance. Ron looked as bland as a minor accountant, reddish-blond hair thinning, wiry build, and an incredible memory. Lucinda was taller than he was, with hair dyed jet black and heavy eye makeup. She probably would chew gum while they were scouting the area, and no one would give her a second thought. People told her things and she talked as if she were paying absolutely no attention and never missed a trick. They would do.

"So that's it," Charlie said, pushing an envelope across the table to Ron. He had photocopied all the information Merrihew had left with him. "The construction site is about five miles from here. Who's sore about the deal? Who loses? Who gains if it's stopped in its tracks? Rumors, speculation, whatever you can dig out. I want it all." He had given them the telephone number of his own motel room, ten miles

away; they would not meet in public again and he would not come back to Fall Creek again.

Behind Fall Creek the Kittatinny Mountains rose, and up there Merrihew's dream was being realized. Or not.

Constance felt as if her head were in a giant vise that tightened, relaxed, tightened again. She opened her eyes, then closed them quickly. The pounding was inside her head, in her temples, behind her eyes. After a moment she opened her eyes once more to a dimly lighted room. She was in a bed, still in her gi, her shoes off. Moving cautiously, she pushed herself to a sitting position, then didn't move again for several seconds. Dizzy. It passed and she saw that the light was coming from another room through a partly open door. Also, there was a blinking red light on a phone on a bedside table. She was so dry, she couldn't moisten her lips. Her tongue felt swollen and her eyes burned. She doubted that she could answer the phone, not with a mouth full of sawdust.

Moving with care, she got to her feet, but the dizziness was gone and she felt only an intolerable thirst and the pounding headache. She crossed the room to push open the door to a large bathroom. On the counter by the sink was an ice bucket with a bottle of water. Gratefully she opened the water and took a long drink, not bothering with the glass nearby. She drank again and saw a small medicine container, Tylenol. It held two tablets and she swallowed them both.

Holding the water bottle, sipping from time to time, she examined the bathroom. Lavish, with a gold Jacuzzi tub and a separate shower, a thick gold rug, heated towel racks. . . . She went back to the bedroom and turned on a lamp, looked at the blinking light on the phone, but did not touch it yet. The room was luxurious by any standard. King-size bed, carpeting made of pale clouds, dressing table with silver containers of face creams and lotions, a hand mirror, brush, and comb; a chair and another table next to drapes that looked like raw silk . . . Bifold closet doors, one partly open, and two regular doors. The first one she tried was locked. The other one opened to a living room as richly furnished as the rest of the suite. Another door in that room was locked. There was a television and a rack of movie cassettes, a CD player, music discs, a small refrigerator, microwave. She opened more silk drapes and then a sliding glass door to a balcony with bars. Unrelieved darkness was beyond the bars.

With her headache more manageable, she went back to the bedside table and picked up the telephone. A woman responded almost instantly, in an English

accent: "Dr. Leidl, you have not been harmed. The headache will be gone in a few minutes, but if you require medication there is Tylenol in the bathroom, and coffee in the carafe in the other room. I shall call again in half an hour." The phone went dead.

Constance hung up, returned to the other room, and found the carafe on a table along with a bone-china cup and saucer. She poured coffee and sipped it.

Her headache was easing rapidly and she continued to explore her rooms as she waited for the next phone call. She found her watch on the dressing table: seven o'clock. She had been out for nearly seven hours. Some clothes in the closet—her size. A nightgown in a drawer along with underthings, all her size. She finished the bottle of water and looked inside the refrigerator. More water, wine, cheese, juice. Apples and oranges.

Imprisoned in a four-star hotel. Books to read, current magazines, movies, a house phone, heated towels.

Charlie would be beside himself, she thought, sitting down with a second cup of coffee on a sofa with another telephone on an end table at hand. She was glad that he was fishing, that he didn't know yet, that he would have a few more days of peace. There probably had been a message with orders for him, and whoever had set this up would not want police and FBI agents brought in. Would he obey such orders? She thought he might, this once, take orders. She thought then of the cats, with regret. It wasn't that they wouldn't survive until Charlie got home; they had their own cat door and, clever beasts, they would scrounge from neighbors, do whatever it took, but they would be very unhappy. She amended that: They would be mad as hell.

Exactly half an hour after the first call, the telephone rang. The same Englishwoman said without preamble, "Your dinner has been sent to the anteroom adjoining the living room. Please do not remove any of the silver or china. When you have finished, return to the living room and close the connecting door. If you desire anything else, you have only to lift the phone and advise us. We shall try to make your stay comfortable." The line went dead.

Constance walked to the door that had been locked earlier, and this time the knob turned and the door opened. She stepped into the anteroom, about as big as the bathroom on the other side of the wall, uncarpeted, and bare except for a chair and a serving cart with a white tablecloth, gleaming silver, crystal glasses, good china, chafing dishes, and a lovely salad in a bowl on a bed of ice. There was another door that she didn't bother to test. It would be locked. They were taking no chances.

They knew she was trained in martial arts. The way they had caught her, immobilized her, now this. They knew. She glanced at the door she had just opened, and suspected that when she closed it again, it would automatically lock, but at the moment she was too hungry to examine it closely. She started to uncover chafing dishes, to look at the white wine in a cooler, another bottle of red wine, both already opened. She sat down to eat her dinner.

When she finished, she did as she had been instructed, returned to the living room and closed the connecting door behind her; it locked as she had thought it would. She stood by it listening closely. Fifteen minutes later she heard movement behind the door; the other door closed.

By ten that night she knew there was no town or road for a good distance behind her rooms, just impenetrable darkness. She had figured out the locks to the door between the bedroom and living room, and assumed the lock on the anteroom door to the hall was exactly the same, and she knew she could open it, if she could find a tool to use. Where she was was more problematic. If she had been driven in the van she had seen, she could be in Vermont or New Hampshire, even Canada. If they had boarded her on a plane, she could be just about anywhere. She turned on the television—Disney, more cartoons, History Channel ... nothing local, no news. When the Weather Channel came in, unblocked, she watched. Temperatures in Fahrenheit. Good. She was still in the states, then. And it was still freezing at night north of Rochester. Thoughtfully, she put an inch of water in a glass and set it out on the balcony.

She took a long bath, thinking hard, and formed what might be a plan, she told herself derisively. She had found nothing she could use as a tool to take apart the door locks.

Up before daylight the next morning, she checked the water on the balcony and found it cold but liquid. And as far as she could see, there was nothing but forest climbing a mountain.

The blinking light, the nice English-accented voice, breakfast. The same instructions as before. In the anteroom she picked up the knife, but knew it would not work to take apart the door locks. The end was too blunt, the screws too deeply recessed. The lock on the door to what she assumed would be a hall was like the others. And that door was locked. The lock to the living room door was different and was new. Not a simple doorknob lock this time. She examined it, and the recess where the bolt would slide in. Then she ate her breakfast.

While she was in the anteroom, someone had entered the bed room, changed the

bed, brought in fresh towels, left, all without a sound. She assumed the connecting door had been locked while that was going on. And that was what this day would be all about she told herself: Learn the routine being followed. Watch the shadows in the forest, orient herself so that when she left she would not become lost in a wilderness. There had to be a driveway, access to a road, on the other side of the building, and that was how she planned to make her way out of here.

That morning she mangled silk panties, tore off enough of the fabric to make a wad that would fit into the recess of the bolt; she watched shadows and learned that her windows were facing northeast. She was probably on the fourth floor of the building. It would be hard to make her way down the building if the rest of it was constructed the way the visible part was. Smooth wooden siding, no handholds. She definitely did not want to drop two or more floors to the ground. She eyed the raw silk drapes speculatively then nodded. Not the sheets; the maid would raise an alarm. After lunch, she told herself, she would work on the drapes.

When her lunch was brought in, she tried out the wad of silk stuffed it into the recess with a tag end hanging out, then cautiously closed the door. It did not lock. She opened it again. She didn't think they would bother to lock the hall door when this one was closed, not with that new lock. Why bother? And if it turned out to be locked, she would try something else, she told herself. As before, she waited until she heard someone removing the serving cart, the other door being closed, then another few minutes. She opened the anteroom door, and stood for a minute or two listening. When she tried the door to the hall, it opened. She didn't open it more than enough to make certain, closed it again, removed the silk wad, and closed the other door. Now it locked.

Examining the drapes, she knew that she had to have some thing that could cut through the fabric. It was heavy, and raw silk was tough. She had used her teeth to start a tear on the panties. She went back to the bedroom and picked up the hand mirror from the dressing table, took it to the bathroom, thought a moment, then went back to the closet and found a silk shirt. She wrapped the mirror in it, banged it on the counter, and took it into the living room where she carefully opened the shirt and picked up a shard of glass. She had to cut the drapes in daylight. It would be too conspicuous if someone glanced up and saw her destroying them at night, outlined by the light in the room. When she was done, she had cut the silk into eight strips, and with the drapes opened all the way, the fabric bunched, she hoped nothing would be noticeable with a casual glance. The rest would have to wait until the next day.

That afternoon she studied the bars on her balcony. New, like the automatic lock, and strong enough. They enclosed only her part of the balcony. She gazed at the forest, rising out of sight, deciduous trees not leafed out yet, brambles, scattered spruce and fir trees. It would not provide a lot of cover, but that couldn't be helped. She would have four to five hours, she hoped, a good head start. No one should miss her until lunch, unless someone saw her rope, and that could happen at any time. There were too many unknowns for comfort, but that couldn't be helped, either. How many people were in the building? Were there watchmen scattered around? Was the building perched on a cliff or something like that? Tomorrow, she told herself.

She got up before daylight the following day, dressed in the darkest clothes in the closet: black velvet pants, gray cashmere sweater, not appropriate garb for a hike in the forest, but her gi, which would provide much more protection, was white and too bulky to wear under the other things. She quickly detached the drapes from the pins and made her rope, tied it securely to a bar, and left the other end within reach of the continuation of the balcony without bars. Then breakfast was brought in.

After the breakfast things were cleared away, she opened the door, took out the wad of silk and closed the door, then went to the other door and listened for several minutes. She opened it a crack, wider, and left her prison. The room next to hers was another luxurious bedroom, empty. She crossed it swiftly, went to the balcony, drew her rope to her, and began her descent.

At that moment Charlie was listening to Phil Stern. "Do you know what time it is? Saturday morning, eight o'clock, for God's sake!"

"I know what time it is, Phil," Charlie said softly. "I need that information and I need it today, this morning. You can get it for me."

There was a slight pause, then Phil asked, "Are you in trouble?"

"Not yet," Charlie said. "You have this number. Give me a call when you find out." He hung up. He and Phil went back *a* lot of years, to college days, and he had done a lot of work for the insurance association Phil worked for. He would deliver. But it would take a little time. He would have to go to his office, do some computer research, call back ... Two or three hours, Charlie decided.

He made two more calls: He wanted to know if Merrihew's corporate jet was still

parked wherever he kept it, and if it had made a trip in the past two days. And he wanted to know where Merrihew was at present. Charlie knew he lived in a Manhattan penthouse apartment, but was he there? Now he could only wait for information, and seethe. And worry. What if he was wrong? What if Merrihew was not involved and he was missing the phone call that could tell him what to do to get her back?

Scowling at the telephone, he remembered his own advice to a rookie detective many years earlier: Until you have a solid lead, you go with your hunches. What he couldn't do was sit in that cold empty house and wait for a call that probably wouldn't come until Monday.

He picked up the sheaf of accident reports, compiled by one of the biggest private detective agencies in New York City, and began to read.

Constance dropped to the ground and crouched, then crept to the nearest shrubs and waited a moment, peering out. The rising forested hillside extended behind the building with no one in sight. She ducked under windows and kept to the shrubs around the back of the building, then stopped again when she reached the corner. Big gardens lay ahead. She retreated. Gardeners might be out there working already. She retraced her path back the other way and came to a parking lot with half a dozen cars, as well as the white van and motorcycle. Keeping behind cars as much as possible, she raced through the lot, into the woods beyond, and paused to look back at the building she had just left. It was a big fancy hotel, with a satellite dish on the roof. Still no alarm. What she wanted to do was get across the driveway and start down, but it was too risky here. Woods had been cleared on the other side of the driveway and she had glimpsed wide stairs going down. More of the estate, more gardens, something else to be avoided. She headed west into denser woods.

Twice she stretched out as flat as she could on the ground, within sight of the driveway, when she heard a car coming. Slipping and sliding in mud, clambering over rocks and fallen trees, she picked her way through the forest, sometimes angling more northward than she wanted when steep terrain made it unavoidable, and she always "turned south and west when she could, and tried to keep the driveway not too distant until she could cross it.

She was scratched, her clothes muddy and torn, her shoes threatening to fall apart. Court shoes were not designed for a wilderness trek. Blisters were starting to throb on both feet. She rested more often as the sun climbed higher, and where the breeze had been too cool earlier, now it was too warm, although in sheltered places

snow pocketed the rocky ground. Reluctantly she forced herself upright and onward again and again, afraid that she was still too close, and also that she might stiffen if she stopped very long.

At eleven-thirty she heard the unmistakable roar of a motorcycle, closely followed by a second racing car. Or van, she thought, crouching behind a rock. She suspected they had missed her. She sat down and rested, leaning against the big rock. What would they do? Send searchers into the woods? Park along the driveway, or out on a road and wait for her to show up? Get tracking dogs?

Wearily she considered her next move. She had thought she might get to a real road and hitch a ride to the nearest town; now she was afraid to try that. Not if they were patrolling the driveway and the road it had to lead to eventually. Several times she had approached the driveway, intending to cross, continue on the other side. Each time she had retreated. It apparently was a lot steeper on the south side, in some places with guard rails signifying a cliff over there. But she couldn't wait until she reached a county or state road. She had to be on the other side by then. South and west, she told herself. She had to continue southward and westward. And if she had to stay in woods all the way to civilization, so be it.

She started again, this time turning south, toward the driveway. The brambles weren't too bad in the woods proper, but closer to the gravel driveway, with more sun and more space, they thrived, and she kept having to detour or risk being shredded. Later, she heard another car coming, and tried to make herself invisible among the brambles. Peering out, she saw a Honda rounding a bend, going up; it drew closer and she saw Charlie at the wheel. Ignoring the brambles now she pushed her way through as the car drove past. She stood in the middle of the driveway waving her arms, and felt tears of frustration fill her eyes. Then the brake lights came on, and the car began to race backward.

She jumped to the side of the driveway; he jerked to a stop and leaped out to hold her so tightly that she couldn't breathe.

"Are you all right? You're bleeding. What did they do to you?"

She struggled for air and gasped. "I'm all right, scratched. We have to get out of here. They're looking for me. A white van and a motorcycle."

He yanked open the back door of the car. "On the floor. We're leaving." She closed her eyes as he raced backward again, stopped, made a tortuous turn, and sped on down the driveway. She was glad she couldn't see ahead.

"Tell me," he said.

"You first. How did you find me?"

"Phil found out where Merrihew had property insured. DeHaven House was high on the list. An executive hideaway in the Poconos, two hours out of New York, where he meets with European movers and shakers, others from the states. Next on the list was a hunting lodge in Idaho, another place in Oahu."

Merrihew! She had not even given him a thought.

"You talk. I drive," Charlie said then. "We'll come to the road in a few minutes and there's a white van cruising. Keep your head down. I don't want to have to start shooting."

But he would if he had to, she understood. She had felt his revolver under his windbreaker. She scrunched down lower and started to tell him. He stopped, turned, and she felt the difference when they were on the state road. He stopped speeding, not wanting to attract attention now.

A white van passed him and kept going and a minute or so later a motorcycle passed going the other way. "They're looking," he murmured. "Stay down a few more miles."

She stayed down another half-hour, until they crossed a bridge and entered Port Jervis, New York, the point where New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania come together.

"Find a Goodwill store," she said, pulling herself up to the seat painfully. She felt stiff and sore all over. "You have to get me a few clothes, then a gas station where I can wash my face and change, and then a proper department store."

Charlie grinned. "Shopping, that's all you gals know." There was no mirth in his expression when he looked at her in the rearview mirror and saw long scratches with dried blood on her cheek.

"Charlie, what are you going to do?"

"Kill him," he said.

She drew in a breath. "That's for later. I mean now, today, this afternoon?"

"Let you clean up a bit, get something to eat, get a motel room or probably a suite, wash your back, tuck you in for a nap. All that hiking, you must be tired. Leave a message for Ron to call me later at the new number, watch you rest."

She nodded. "Sounds reasonable. You must be tired, too. Stress is fatiguing."

"I'll help you rest," he said, and this time his grin was sincere.

By late Sunday evening they had both read every accident report several times, studied an enlargement of the work site, and now Constance was sitting on the floor by a coffee table, placing Go pieces as markers on the schematic. Charlie was on the couch behind her. There were five levels at the construction site, each twenty to twenty-five feet higher than the one below. The white Go pieces represented construction workers who had been in the approximate vicinity of the victim, and that one's piece was black.

"Number one," Charlie said when she drew back from the table. "Truck backed up and hit the guy. Pure accident. Witnessed by five or six guys."

She nodded and removed that piece.

"Two," he said. "Crane broke and dumped a load of dirt on the guy below. Again, many witnesses. Accident." She removed the marker. "Three. Guy stumbled and fell down the elevator shaft."

She hesitated. "He fell about twenty feet. That's the kind of thing people survive all the time."

"Not this guy," Charlie said. "You can fall over a curb and buy the farm if you're unlucky."

"You really think they were all accidents, don't you?" "Yep. And the people who were hurt and survived said the same thing. Accidents. Or else you have a bunch of different killers knocking off workers. No one person was at each accident site, remember." "One was after the third accident," she said. "That's when Merrihew started hanging around, keeping an eye out, he said."

"Right. And he didn't see a thing that contradicted the accident reports. The next guy apparently didn't notice a bulldozer heading his way and stepped in front of it. The driver couldn't see him. Bingo."

"How can you not notice a bulldozer?" She put the black stone near the bottom of the mountain where a road had been extended. She put another marker near it, one with a black cross on white. Merrihew's marker. "He said his back was turned."

Charlie nodded. "Honey, he's paid a fortune to have this whole mess investigated. Rudy Carlucci has a good bunch of people working for him and he doesn't come cheap, but he is thorough."

She nodded. They had known Rudy back in New York in years past, and she suspected his investigators were as good as Charlie said. "And this one." She

touched another black piece with the marked piece near. "Electrocuted. No one noticed the red warning light in time. Merrihew was there and didn't see the light."

Charlie grunted. "That's how accidents happen. Someone goofs, doesn't notice a warning, steps in front of a bulldozer, falls down a shaft, gets hit by a load of lumber being hoisted in place. All avoidable, if someone's paying attention." He watched her remove another black piece, with the cross-marked piece close to it. "What are you getting at?"

"I don't know. It's just . . . uncanny, maybe. Too many accidents. Witnesses. Merrihew right there time after time, his back turned, looking the other way, preoccupied by something or other. It feels wrong. Don't you think so?"

"Accidents tend to feel wrong," he said. "You can always point and say if he had done this instead of that it wouldn't have happened. That's what makes them accidents."

She continued to regard the Go pieces. "I don't blame Merrihew," she said. "I'd want another investigation, too."

"You're starting to sound like the people Ron and Lucinda talked to. Ghosts, evil spirits, curses."

Ron and Lucinda had checked in with their report that afternoon. Merrihew had met opposition years ago, they had said, but he had made promises and kept them and the mood had changed to acceptance and then to anticipation of the change in fortune the development would make in the area. He had not demanded tax breaks and, in fact, having construction workers move in had been an economic piece of good luck for a depressed town. Folks were looking forward to having two hundred and fifty affluent buyers move to the area. Businesses had started to expand in anticipation. Now pessimism had set in. There was general agreement that the project was cursed, doomed.

Constance gazed broodingly at the remaining markers. Every remaining black one had one with a cross very near. And he never saw a thing until too late.

She knew that if she looked up, caught Charlie's gaze on her, she would see a strange opaque flatness in his eyes. They could look like chips of obsidian at times, and at those times she was afraid, never of him, but for him. Years earlier, when he had insisted that she take martial-arts training, he had said that if anyone ever hurt her, she'd better take care of him herself and it would be self-defense, because if she didn't, he would, and it would be murder. He had said he would kill Merrihew, and she did not doubt for a second that he meant it. She had not referred to it yet, and

she would not until her scratches were completely healed, gone. Again and again she caught him examining her cheek, her hands, and arms with that cold hard look in his eyes.

"You know what I think?" Charlie said, placing his hand on her head.

"Not a clue."

"I think that it's ten after six, and that if we were to go to the desk and ask very nicely about a good restaurant not too far away, we would be given directions to a little place off the main drag that just happens to have a master chef in the kitchen and, furthermore, that the clerk on duty would be more than happy to call ahead and make us a reservation."

"I think you're brilliant," she said, rising.

Two hours later Constance put down her fork and sighed. Her veal marsala had been excellent, and the pinot gris superb. She watched Charlie examine the duck bones on his plate searching for a morsel that might have escaped earlier. The bones were picked clean. When the waiter appeared to inquire about dessert she shook her head, and Charlie looked over the menu. "Chocolate mocha torte with raspberry filling," he said. "Two forks. And coffee."

He leaned back with a contented look. "Told you there'd be a place like this tucked away."

"How can you possibly want dessert?"

"Since you won't give me any at home, I seize the moment whenever I can."

After coffee and the torte had been served, she said, "Something I wanted to ask and forgot. Why do you suppose Merrihew held out the last page of Rudy's report?"

He shook his head. "Probably just a summation of everything that went before. Who needs it?"

"I think we do," she said thoughtfully. "And why did Merrihew cut Rudy out and want you in? Aside from the fact that you're a genius, I mean."

"Honey, leave it alone. The reports speak for themselves. Accidents up and down the line. Rudy knows that and so does Merrihew, and why he won't admit it I don't know and don't care."

"It could be important," she said, still thoughtful. "Kidnapping me was an act of desperation. You said he was unscrupulous, but that was an extreme act. He's desperate, Charlie. I just wonder why."

Charlie nudged the torte to the center of the table and, smiling, she nudged it back.

"Okay," he said after taking another bite. "The summation probably suggests that there's only one person who could have been responsible for eight deaths. Merrihew himself. And he can't accept that, but neither can he accept eleven accidental deaths. It's a dilemma for him, and he wants an out."

She nodded approvingly. "You've thought that all along, haven't you?"

"Yes. But so what? If they were accidents, God's turned against him, something like that. And the role of Job has little appeal at his age. He wants a flesh-and-blood villain."

"One he would kill," she said.

"Without a qualm. He wants that project built while he has his faculties more or less intact. God alone knows how many millions he's already put into it. No consortium, no backers, his own money. He has no intention of sharing immortality."

"Does he have siblings?"

"A sister, a couple of years younger than he is. A doctor, I think, in the Philadelphia area. Why?"

"I want to talk to her."

Charlie put his fork down and picked up his coffee, regarding her over the rim with his curiously opaque eyes flat and hard. "Why?"

She could not tell him that she intended to do whatever she could think of to prevent his going after Merrihew. Instead, she said, "I don't know exactly. A nagging feeling that we're missing something. Look, he doesn't know when to expect you to return from your fishing trip. As far as he knows I'm wandering around in the forest, lost, in a ravine, eaten by bears, whatever. He must be in a sweat. Let's let him sweat another day, head for Philadelphia, talk to the sister, and then decide what to do next."

That was a problem, they had decided. Not only was Merrihew staying out of sight, there was little point in accusing him of kidnapping Constance. All traces of her presence in DeHaven House would be gone, and there would be no one there except a skeleton crew getting things ready for the opening of the facility in a few weeks. She had not seen anyone clearly, no license number, nothing tangible. Charlie had noted the license plates; he always did notice things like that, but that didn't mean a thing. She had not seen them. These were stated reasons for letting that issue

go. The unstated reason, one they both understood well, was that Charlie considered this a private affair.

Charlie had said, "How do you satisfy the kidnapper's demands when the kidnappee is sitting by your side? Damned if I know the answer.

"Besides," Charlie said after the waiter came to clear the table and discreetly leave a tab, "you can't just walk in on a doctor and demand answers to your questions."

"I'll make a few calls," she said. "People I know in Philadelphia. Someone may know her, or know someone who does."

He did not argue. She had a network that was enviable; she knew people all over the country, and the fact that she did peer reviews, and also published reviews of books on psychology, as well as publishing her own books, did not hurt a thing. Her network had paid off more than once over the years.

Debra Merrihew was a pediatrician, married to Alfred Finelly, an orthopedic surgeon. Nothing unusual about that, a mutual friend of hers and Constance's had said on the phone, except that Al's practice was in Los Angeles, and Debra's in Philadelphia. They saw each other on holidays and vacations, she had said a bit cattily, and that kept the marriage stable. There were three grown children.

At ten minutes before six on Monday, Constance and Charlie were in a dim bar waiting for Debra Merrihew Finelly, who had agreed to see them after office hours. She was late.

"At six I'm out of here," Charlie said grumpily. Perfectly at home in New York City traffic, he had found Philadelphia impossible to navigate at that time of day, and they had ended up parking the car in a lot and taking a cab to the bar.

Constance smiled at him and sipped Chardonnay. "I think she just came in," she said, nodding toward the entrance. A woman had entered, paused in the dim light, squinting.

Debra Merrihew Finelly was sixty-one, and at the moment she looked it, solid like her brother, and not fat. She had iron-gray hair, was dressed in a rumpled skirt suit and low shoes. She saw Constance and approached the table.

"Constance Leidl?"

Constance stood up and took her hand as Charlie pulled out a chair for her. "Dr. Merrihew? Or is it Dr. Finelly?"

She introduced Charlie and they seated themselves.

"Merrihew," Debra said. She held up her hand for the waiter. "Jack Daniels on the rocks, and a glass of water. Followed by a double burger, medium rare, and fries. Pronto!" Then to Constance she said, "I've had a hell of a day."

"I'm grateful that you could see us," Constance said.

"Two people I know and respect said I should," Debra said. "Seems people owe you, and I'm part of the payback. Way the game works. What do you want?"

"To talk about your brother."

"He's a louse, a heel, evil, wicked, bad news, dangerous, not to be crossed. Next topic?" She grinned, not to take the charge from her words, apparently, but to ease the sudden tension that had emerged. "Sorry. See, I put a kid in the hospital at five after five, temp one oh five, no diagnosis yet. Ordered a bunch of tests and they'll start coming in in about—" she looked at her watch—"an hour or a little more, and I have to be there when they do. I don't have a lot of time to discuss brother Jason. Cut to the chase, that's the order of the day."

"Good enough," Constance said. "Does he have long-standing enemies? People who would like to see him ruined? And know enough about him to see that it happens?"

"Enemies, sure. They'd like to see him six feet under. Nobody knows what makes him tick. Including me. Next?"

The waiter brought her drink and she gulped down half of it, then drew in a breath. "Needed that. Why are you asking about him?"

"Last week he had hoodlums kidnap me in order to coerce Charlie into investigating deaths at a work site that apparently means a great deal to him. We want to know more about him before we decide what to do about it."

Debra nodded. "That sounds like his style. His terraces? I read about them and the accidents. The only thing he's cared about since he was a kid. He's trying to expiate his sins or something. Not my field, but it figures."

"What do you mean?"

Debra looked at her watch. "Our father died in an accident that shouldn't have happened. A trapdoor opened and let a ton or more of grain fall on him, smothered him. He was a bully and a tyrant all around, but that was over the top. Jason swore that the trap was secure the last time he checked. Afterward, he made our mother give him some money and he took off for South America— we both thought for

good—but he came back, and he began to run things his way. He terrorized her exactly the way our father had done. Fourteen years ago, when she died, he came for the funeral, the first time he had been around for more than twenty years. We both said some pretty nasty things, and he slapped me hard. I yelled that he should look in the mirror, and he'd see our father looking back. He ran out and I haven't seen him or heard from him since. But what I said was true. He's turned into the father he hated and feared, and possibly killed. That day, fourteen years ago, he looked like him, talked like him, and acted like him. It spooked me, seeing Father in the house on the day we buried my mother." She finished her Jack Daniels and sipped some water. "Do you suppose they had to go slaughter a cow to make my hamburger?" She looked at her watch again.

"He was married, wasn't he?" Constance asked after a moment.

"Twice. The first time was a love match, but she died in an accident six months after they were married. If it had lasted, he might have changed, turned human. He was twenty-five, time enough to change his stripes if things had gone well." She shrugged. "Anyway, they were hiking at Child's Park in Pennsylvania, and Lorna fell off a cliff. He was at the bottom with some other people in the group and saw it happen, and that warped him more than he already was. Sent him off his own cliff, so to speak. He swore someone pushed her, but there wasn't anyone else up there. Guys in the group were taking pictures of her posing on the cliff. She was alone. He's been plagued by accidents, hasn't he? The second time, God only knows why they got married. She stayed a few years, took him to the cleaners, and got out. I was surprised that it lasted as long as it did, frankly. Four, five years. Then he started his goddamn terraces, and no woman or anything else has interested him since. He resented having to attend our mother's funeral, in fact—part of the reason we had a fight."

The waiter brought her a platter with a huge hamburger and a mountain of fries. "Double espresso coffee," she said, and tore into the hamburger.

She talked a little more as she ate, sometimes with a mouthful, sometimes between bites, and she kept an eye on her watch. "God, I hope it isn't meningitis," she said in the middle of something else. "He's only five." She looked at her watch again. "Sorry." She finished the coffee, then reached for her purse. "Hate to eat and run, but—"

"Thanks," Constance said. "I hope the little fellow is okay." She was not certain that the doctor heard her as she rushed away.

Constance drove after they retrieved their car from the lot. Charlie grumped that he was perfectly capable of getting them out of the city, and she agreed, then added, "But if you do it, I'll have to sit and listen to you bitch, and I'd rather not. Now, first a restaurant, then a motel. Right?"

He scowled, but nodded, and actually was relieved. "It's the oneway streets," he said. "Why do they always go the wrong way?"

"Because," she explained.

He laughed, put his hand on her thigh, and let her drive.

Later, in a motel, with carry-out coffee at hand, she said, "Do you remember our deal when I first started aikido lessons?"

His expression became guarded. "I didn't realize that we made a deal."

"We most certainly did. You said that if anyone ever hurt me I'd better take care of him myself. Now, Merrihew didn't actually hurt me. In fact, they were excessively careful, and I hurt myself in the forest, but no matter, theoretically it was his fault. But that was our deal and I insist that you stick to it and let me take care of him."

Her words were light, but her eyes were like pale blue ice. When she was like this he thought of the Snow Queen, implacable and remote, also beyond reason. He crossed the room to get his coffee.

"Charlie! I mean it. I'll take care of him my way. Sit down, we have to talk."

It was nearly five o'clock when they pulled into the driveway the following day. The cats met them with a clamor when they entered the house. Charlie yelled, "Honey, I'm home!" Constance rolled her eyes and walked ahead of him to the kitchen, shooing cats away effortlessly as she went. She had a bag of groceries that she started to unload. Charlie followed, and put down another bag. Five minutes later the phone rang. He picked it up and said, "Meiklejohn."

A cool, crisp female voice said, "Mr. Meiklejohn, you are to go to Fall Creek, and from there—"

"Honey, tell Merrihew to call me," he said, and hung up. He started to unload the second bag. A minute later the phone rang again. It was the same cool voice. "Mr. Meiklejohn, I have a message—"

"Merrihew," he said, and hung up again. The next time it rang he and Constance listened to her without answering. He found the bourbon he had been searching for and took two glasses from the cabinet. He had to do his cat dance around the beasts,

who were clustering around Constance telling her all about their woes in loud, raucous voices. The next time the phone rang Merrihew's voice came on the answering machine.

Charlie picked up the phone and said, "Merrihew, I'll expect you at two in the afternoon tomorrow. I have answers for you. Bring a cashier's check for twenty-five thousand." He hung up. Unhurriedly he returned to the foyer, found the listening device under the table, and brought it back with him, continued past Constance, who had not made a sound, took it outside and stepped on it, crushing it thoroughly. "Now, that drink," he said. "Water? Soda water? Straight?"

The telephone rang. Merrihew's voice was thick with fury. "Meiklejohn, I want to talk to you!" Charlie broke the connection, turned the ringer off, and muted the machine.

"Water," Constance said.

At five minutes after two the following day Charlie watched a black limousine pull into his driveway, stop, and three men emerge. Merrihew was dressed as befitting a multimillionaire this time, and one of the men was equally well dressed. The third one was thick, heavy, and too ugly to be entirely human, Charlie decided. He opened the door when the bell chimed.

"Merrihew is an invited guest," he said equably. "You two can wait in the car."

"This is preposterous," Merrihew said. "Stanley Loren is my attorney. He comes in with me. And my driver comes in, too."

Charlie pulled his revolver from his pocket. "In this county I have many friends, and a great deal of respect, too much, possibly. If I shoot trespassers, thugs who try to force their way into my house, I believe I would have a lot of sympathy from those friends, especially in light of the fact that my wife was kidnapped and forcibly detained just a few days ago."

For a moment no one moved. Then the driver nudged the attorney aside and moved forward. Charlie raised the gun and he stopped.

"For God's sake!" Merrihew snapped. "Wait in the car." He took a step and Charlie shook his head.

"We'll wait until they get back to the car," he said. He watched the other two all the way back to the limousine, while they got inside and closed the doors, before he opened his own door wider and stepped aside to admit Merrihew.

He walked ahead of him to the living room and motioned to the green chair that Merrihew had sat in before. He stood at the fireplace, where a feeble fire was burning. "Put the check on the table by your side," he said.

"You're insane. I want to know what I'm buying first."

Charlie pulled two tiny tape recorders from his pocket and put one on the table by Merrihew, the other one on the mantel at the fireplace. "One for you, one for me," he said. "They've both been turned on from the time I opened the door. Today is April sixth, two-ten in the afternoon. Merrihew, you said I push the envelope. Maybe I do. Also, I take charge. We do this my way or get out. The check on the table."

Merrihew's face had been red, not from wind that day since there was little. It turned a deeper red as he struggled, started to rise, slumped again, and finally pulled a check from his inside breast pocket and slapped it on the table.

"I don't know what you're talking about, a kidnapping or anything else," he said. "I hired you to find out who was responsible for the deaths at my work site, nothing more."

"You will keep your mouth shut or beat it," Charlie said. "My wife wandered all around DeHaven House before she walked away, and she deliberately left fingerprints in unusual places." That was his only lie, but he thought it sounded pretty good. "The only way you can eradicate her presence there is if you burn down the whole dump. With this conversation on tape, an arson fire at DeHaven House would in itself be as good as an admission of guilt. The license numbers of the van and the motorcycle are in my possession." He recited them both. "They can easily be traced back to you."

He shrugged. "Maybe with high-priced lawyers you could beat the rap eventually, but it would take time, years possibly, because I would be persistent in my charges. And since workers are pretty spooked about working on the terraces, it's also possible that it would come to a standstill while you're involved in a legal tangle."

"This is extortion," Merrihew said in a harsh voice. "What are you after? What do you want?" At that moment Constance strolled into the room, dressed exactly the way she had been on his first visit, in a pale blue sweater, black pants, running shoes.

Merrihew made a strangled sound in his throat as she seated herself in the wing chair and regarded him calmly. "You suspected a deadly enemy from the start," she said. "You were right. There is such an enemy and he has no intention of allowing

you to finish the terraces. Who killed Lorna, Mr. Merrihew?"

He gave a violent start, started to rise, then fell back into the chair, watching her as if hypnotized. "It was an accident," he whispered.

"So they decided. People were taking pictures of her on the cliff and no one saw another person up there. No one else was in the pictures that were taken. But you saw him, didn't you? You knew. When you look into the mirror, Mr. Merrihew, who looks back at you? Your sister saw him, didn't she? Then the message was sent and you received it just fine. A man killed in an avalanche of dirt, another in a fall. Just like your father, asphyxiated under an avalanche of grain, and your wife, killed in a fall. You understood the message perfectly well, didn't you? And you started to keep watch. To protect the workers? To keep your enemy away from them? Or, more likely, to make certain the terraces moved ahead in spite of his efforts. But he prevailed time after time, and you didn't see a thing, did you? In fact, aren't there short periods when your memory fails, when you have blank spots? You suspected Alzheimer's, or said you did, but those aren't the symptoms, Mr. Merrihew. Your memory failed when there was a fatal accident near you. Your enemy was responsible for those deaths, and he will keep causing them as long as the project continues and you are nearby. He wants you to understand that he is doing it. He does not intend for you to complete the terraces and achieve the satisfaction you yearn for. He has decided you don't deserve it."

She was speaking in a conversational tone, cool and reflective, regarding him steadily as she talked. And he continued to watch her as if entranced. "Who did you see on the cliff by Lorna?" she asked then, not changing her tone at all.

"My father," he whispered. "*I saw him.*" He shook himself abruptly, then said in a rasping voice, "It was an accident! Everyone knows it was an accident! The trapdoor was secure when I checked it!"

Constance stood up and walked from the room, and Merrihew turned toward Charlie. "It was an accident," he said in a choked voice. He looked as if he had aged ten years since entering the house.

Charlie shrugged. "I suggest that you set up a corporation or something, turn over enough assets to complete the terraces, rename them, and bow out all the way. Stay away from that site. Call them the Fall Creek Terraces, or the New Inca Terraces, anything else, and keep the hell away from there."

Merrihew didn't move for a moment, then he jerked up from the chair unsteadily and regarded the tape recorder at hand with abhorrence. He picked it up and threw

it as hard as he could into the fire. He walked like a very old man as he went toward the foyer and the front door without another word. He didn't give a glance at the check on the table.

Constance joined Charlie at the window. He put his arm around her shoulders and together they watched Merrihew make his way to the limousine, get inside, and leave in it.

Charlie was thinking of the conversation they had had in the motel two nights before. "You have to break him," she had said. "Take charge and keep it, disorient him. You saw the kind of control he has, not a twitch, not a flicker of his eye, as still as a statue. We have to get through that barrier for it to work, and you can do it." When he protested that it was pointless, Merrihew was a killer and a kidnapper, and they couldn't prove a thing against him, she had said, "He knows and he has to admit to himself that he knows. Let me take care of him my way, Charlie. The terraces are all he has to live for." And today they had watched a defeated man leave their house.

At the window, when the limousine had vanished from sight, he squeezed her shoulder and murmured, "He's his own worst enemy." And, he thought, she scared the bejesus out of him at times.

She looked at him with bright interest. "But you don't have a guilty conscience." And that was the scariest thing of all, he added to himself.

