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Necklaces For The Dying

By Frederick C. Davis

(Author of "The Smiling Killer," etc.)

It was the rabid passion of a great cat that glared at her out of the stone-cutter's eyes. But more than his evil lust—more, even, than his weird, hypnotic power over her—Claire Forester feared the heavy, fabulously strong hands that shaped cruel necklaces for the dying . . .

HE was afraid—but she did not know what it was she feared. It was nothing, yet it was a dread that haunted her every waking hour. It was everywhere—in the sunshine and in the

dark, in the quiet, and in her own laughter—yet it was nowhere. Strive as she might, she could find no reason for the terror she felt—but she was afraid.

Claire Forester gazed at her cat. He



A Soul-
Chilling
Novel of
Eerie Peril
and Baffling
Mystery



was sitting at her feet, bushy tail curled, a magnificent grey Persian with luminous yellow eyes. She had acquired him as a tiny, blind kitten and he had been with her ever since—a companion, a confidant, a being she loved. Yet since they had come to this house to live, he seemed changed. The shining, inscrutable eyes of Marco

Polo were directed at her now—a gaze that was somehow ominous.

As she took him into her arms he answered with a friendly purr, though he seemed unwilling and discontented. “Do you feel it, too, Marco?” she asked in a whisper. “Is there something making you uneasy? Would you like to go away?”

The cat's amber eyes looked into hers while he sang. "I think *you* know—"

She told herself it was all nonsense. Here she was, wearing an old sweater and a tweed skirt, snug woolen stockings and oxfords scuffed from long walks through the Connecticut hills—a sensible, sane young woman. She was twenty-two, self-reliant, thoroughly and happily married. Everything about herself, everything around her, was so real. Of course!

There was Jim, the man she loved, stalwart and handsome, puffing away at his old calabash, working with square and pen at his drawing-board. He was computing specifications, skeining out lines that would some day become the stone and steel of an impressive building. Nothing was worrying him. They didn't have much money, and it wasn't easy to manage, and of course he was concerned about that—but he wasn't worrying about anything else.

And there was Bob Baird, Claire's younger brother, slumped in an easy chair near the fireplace, absorbed in a magazine—a fine chap, hard-headed and genuine. He was a chemist in the laboratory of a proprietary drug manufacturer and therefore a realist—more than that, a born debunker who enjoyed exploding false beliefs. Certainly Bob felt none of this weird fear that had seized Claire.

But she could never free herself of it for more than a few minutes, and inevitably it came back, trickling into her quickening heart like chill water.

"**JIM!**" she said suddenly—and the anxiety ringing in her voice made the cat cease purring. "Don't you feel something strange about this house? Don't you, Bob? Somehow don't you sense that—that something horrible is about to happen?"

Jim Forester looked up, pen poised, eyes crinkling in a smile. "I'll tell you what's going to happen. In about an hour

I'm going to quit work, have a night-cap, go to bed and sleep the sleep of the innocent. Maybe you're too used to the jangle of the city, sweet—the peace and quiet here are giving you the jitters. You'll get used to it soon."

Bob Baird tossed his magazine aside. "Something else is going to happen right now. I'm going to take a walk. You mustn't let this thing get you, Claire. How about tramping back to the quarry with me?—make you feel better."

Claire said earnestly: "I'm not just being silly. You know I'm not like that. There *is* something here. . . ." Though the dread persisted in her heart, she laughed. "You run along, Bob, and Jim, you keep right on working. If you won't listen to me, I'll find someone else. I've an idea. Maybe Hugo Cliffe can tell me what I'm afraid of."

The cat seemed to sense her decision before she made it—he bounded from her lap landing soundlessly on padded paws. He looked back with his wise, yellow eyes and drifted toward the kitchen. Jim and Bob watched Claire amusedly as she got into her leather jacket and perky felt hat. "See you later, gentlemen," she tossed at them, and went out.

When she reached the tar road, at the end of the dirt path, she paused to look at the house curiously. It was a cheerful old place with craggy, wooded hills piled behind it. A peaceful retreat, miles from Elmsford and more than two hours from New York—Claire and Bob had inherited it from their father and his brother. The spreading suburbanizing influence of the city had not yet reached it, and the main lines of travel had left it untouched. Its brooding tranquillity was a delight, yet somehow the quiet was fraught with the nameless terror which Claire Forester could not elude.

She could not forget that Barnett and Gaylord Baird, her father and uncle, had

died in that house—mysteriously, horribly. . . .

The dark, deserted road led her to the ramshackle dwelling on the adjoining property. Its windows streamed white light. A granite monument sat near its entrance, neatly engraved: *Hugo Cliffe, Craftsman in Stone*. A bright shaft was issuing from the open door of the shed behind the house, and as Claire approached it she heard the ringing tap-tap of a hammer and chisel. Hugo Cliffe was at work.

She had watched him wrestle, single-handed, huge blocks of granite from the quarry on her property, and had marvelled at his strength. He was past sixty now, and all his life he had worked in stone, making doorsteps and gate-posts and monuments, as his father had before him. The hands of the Cliffes had marked the graves of all the neighborhood's dead during decades past. Every time Claire Forester passed Hugo Cliffe's house she heard the clanging of his busy chisel, for he labored with incredible tirelessness, day and night.

As she approached the workshop, a quick black movement on the ground startled her. An animal darted into the light and paused warily, turning gleaming yellow eyes upon her—Marco Polo.

THE cat sped ahead, as though drawn by some desire stronger than her friendship for him, and vanished through the door of the shed. Immediately the rhythmic clicking ceased.

Hugo Cliffe's voice came—a soft, throaty sound. Puzzled, the girl looked into the shed. Its floor was a white packing of stone chips. Its walls were powdered with white stone dust. Monuments sat against the walls, their shining surfaces blank, waiting for Cliffe's chisel to inscribe names upon them—waiting for the coming of death. The stone-worker

was sitting on his bench, his tools put aside, fondling the cat.

He was speaking in a peculiar, purring tone, as though the animal could understand him with human intelligence. The cat was looking intently into Cliffe's eyes, answering him with a high-pitched mewling. To the amazed girl they seemed to be carrying on a conversation—the cat and the man. She started when he looked up suddenly and saw her in the light, for she noted something, then, she had not realized before—that Hugo Cliffe's eyes were like a cat's.

“Good evening! Come in, Mrs. Forester!”

His eyes—amber, with elongated pupils—like a cat's! They had the same inscrutable intensity as Marco Polo's—but the girl scolded herself for being alarmed. She knew the reason for the striking resemblance of Cliffe's eyes to a feline's—twice he had undergone operations for cataract, and each time a particle of iris had been removed by the surgeon's knife. This man, she told herself, was the confidant of the countryside—her friend. She went in with hand cordially extended.

“I'm glad you've come,” he said—his voice was still soft, but now it lacked the strange purring quality. “I've taken three blocks of stone from your quarry this past week. I owe you for it. Here's the money. It is satisfactory to you—the arrangement I made with your father before he—died?”

With a smile Claire accepted the three small banknotes which Cliffe fumbled out of his dusty overalls. “Of course it is,” she answered. “I want to talk with you because I'm worried—I don't know why. Perhaps you'll laugh at me, like Jim and Bob for being afraid of something I can't put my finger on—but I *am* afraid. I dread to close my eyes and sleep because. . . .”

She broke off, a strange chill stirring her heart, gazing at the cat. Marco Polo

was rubbing himself against Cliffe's ankles, purring ecstatically, writhing back and forth—consumed with an almost obscene pleasure. Claire sensed again the strange, evil kinship that seemed to exist between the animal and the man, and an irrepressible shudder passed over her. She watched the cat with a terrified fascination, almost unaware of Cliffe's throaty voice:

"You are afraid. You told your husband, 'I felt it the moment I stepped through the door.' He doesn't understand—but I know your deepest feelings, I know every thought that passes through your mind. You were alone with him when you told him that, but I know—because we are one—one being—you and I. . . ."

HER widened eyes rose to the feline eyes of Cliffe. She stood stock-still, chilled, overwhelmed by the intense power of his gaze. The superhuman strength of his muscles was puny compared with the force she felt enwrapping her merely because he was looking at her. In his face she saw desire—lust—a consuming hunger that fixed itself inescapably upon her. She could not take even one recoiling step while his dusty, voracious hands rose.

Suddenly she was fighting. His sinewy arms were squeezing around her, his dusty lips were striving for hers. His fingers dug like talons, his close-pressed body wove with a feline suppleness as a sound of desire came from his throat—a rasping purr. She felt the hopelessness of a mouse trapped by deep-piercing claws as she frantically struggled to escape. Breathlessly she tore back, cringing from the glare of his consuming, amber eyes.

"I thought—you were a friend—but you're a fiend—a fiend!"

She ran. She flung herself from the shop, past the monument marked with Cliffe's name, along the black and deserted

road. She fled from a dogging terror that had suddenly materialized in an evil being who was more of a cat than a man. If he was following her, with swift feline agility, his footfalls were making no sound. She stopped in a paralysis of exhaustion at the entrance of her house, widened eyes searching the gloom. At a sound her breath came back, because it meant Hugo Cliffe was not stalking her.

It was the rhythmic tapping of a hammer, the ringing of a chisel biting into stone. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The Chained Death

SHE stood there a long time, striving to still the tumult of her heart. Through the window she could see Jim working absorbed at the drawing-board—his nearness reassured her. She hesitated to tell him what had happened, because already it seemed like a ghastly dream, because she knew Jim would laugh and protest that old Hugo Cliffe was incapable of such an act. Yet the stone-worker's evil intensity had filled Claire with a sense of suffocation she could not fight down.

"He wants me. He means to take me."

The horror of that certainty kept her mind in turmoil as she listened to the metallic tapping. Suddenly the ringing beat paused. For long minutes there was nothing but empty silence. Her fear rising, the girl waited for it to come back. At last it returned, far away, echoing strangely. Its direction had somehow changed—it did not seem to be coming from Hugo Cliffe's workshop. It issued faintly from many points at once, its rhythm destroyed—and then, again, abruptly it ceased.

Claire steadied herself as she opened the entrance. Jim, continuing his work, glanced up to ask: "Well? Feeling any

better?" She smiled bitterly, because her fear had increased a hundredfold, but she fought the impulse to blurt out the story. Neither Jim nor her brother would believe her—she was quite sure of it. She asked, as casually as she could:

"Where's Bob?"

"Taking his walk."

Claire went to Jim quietly. "Do you remember," she asked, "what I said last night, when we were getting ready for bed—when we were talking about this fear I feel?"

Jim answered as his pen scratched: "I felt it the moment I stepped through the door—those were your exact words."

"Yes," Claire repeated tensely: "Yes—my exact words. We were alone when I said that, Jim, weren't we—completely alone?"

"I hope we were," Jim said with a smile. "You were wearing very little, darling."

"But Marco was there."

"Yes, Marco was—"

"He heard it."

Claire's face was white. Jim saw the haunting fear in her eyes, and put down his pen. He gently took her cold hands in his—she tried to keep them from trembling. He asked quietly: "What is it, sweet? You're not ill, your mind is perfectly clear, there's absolutely nothing to be afraid of. What could happen here?"

"I don't know. I don't know, Jim, but something—*something*—"

It broke suddenly in the hush—a hacking, choking cry. An inarticulate call, bursting out of the night—it brought Claire Forester instantly to her feet. Footfalls were sounding outside, ragged, stumbling. The strangling voice shouted again, this time high-pitched, torn with terror. Abruptly there was a crash at the entrance.

Bob Baird lurched in. He tottered weakly, tearing at his throat with both hands. He turned a face of horror toward his sister—bluish, swollen, his eyes pro-

truding starkly, his tongue slaving out over puffed lips. He dropped to his knees, still clawing at his throat, forcing out distorted syllables:

"Take it off—*take it off!*"

CLAIRE hurried to him as he rolled to the floor, fighting desperately for air that would not come, robbed of his last strength. His fingernails had gouged his neck—his skin was ripped and bleeding. Claire seized his wrists, tried to force his arms away, but she could not. Jim crowded beside her as a sob broke through her lips. He fought Bob's hands down. Then they saw it—the chain.

The linked circle was banded deep into Bob's throat. Puffed flesh and gorged blood-vessels almost concealed it. The scant air whistling through the stricken young man's crushed windpipe was not enough to support life. His face was distorted with ghastly suffering—he was dying. All his desperate efforts had not been enough to rid himself of the choking chain—and Jim Forester, frantically seeking an open link, could find no means of removing it.

"The tools!" he urged Claire. "Bring my cutters—anything! God, I can't get it off!"

She ran into the room adjoining the kitchen where Jim kept the tools he used for odd jobs around the house. It was stored with accumulated odds and ends. This afternoon Claire had seen the saw, hammer and pliers lying on the bench in the corner. She groped for them in the dark, too consumed with anxiety to think of turning on the hanging light—but she did not find them. Lips cold with anguish, she grabbed at the bulb, turned the key, reached into the glare. She stood frozen with consternation because the tools were not there.

Horrible choking noises floated to her as she looked around swiftly. She did

not see the cutters. She ran back along the hall, scarcely aware of the sound of the opening door, of a new voice speaking. The man who had come in was Dr. Ellis Hunt, who lived half a mile down the road—she gave him only a quick, unseeing glance as she gripped Jim's shoulder.

"I can't find them, Jim!"

"I left them on the bench—they must be there! Good God—he's choking to death!"

Jim sprang up, rushed back to the store-room. Bob's efforts to breathe had become ghastly spasms. Dr. Hunt bent over him, striving somehow to detach the crushing circle of chain, but he could not even bring it into his fingers because that would tighten it around the choking man's neck. While clattering sounds came from behind her—Jim frantically searching—Claire stood stricken with helplessness, gazing transfixed at her brother's blood-bloated face—watching him die.

"Your car!" she blurted suddenly. "Doctor—there are tools in your car."

She started through the open entrance—but a hand flashed to her arm, gripped hard, stopped her. She stared into Dr. Hunt's ruddy, loose-jowled face, trying to tear away from him. The car was standing directly outside, its headlamps beaming—but his grasp on Claire's arm was secure, his gaze forbidding.

"There are no tools in my car," he declared gruffly. "Do you understand? Call the State Police. I'll keep trying. Hurry!"

He thrust her toward the telephone. She took it up, spoke automatically, looking horrified at her brother. Dr. Hunt was again bent over Bob, endeavoring now, his fingers on a link of chain, to bend its joint apart. It was too strong for him, Claire realized that with growing despair as she rushed her message over the wire. She was replacing the phone when Jim's voice roared:

"*Agda! Agda!* Where did you put my tools?"

The calm, mellow voice of the house-keeper answered from the kitchen: "I haven't touched them, Mr. Forester."

JIM'S steps sounded quickly. Metallic things clattered a mocking cacophony as he hurled unwanted objects aside, emptied drawers, thrust into cabinets. Claire heard it all, like a din in a weird dream, as she watched Dr. Hunt striving to remove the chain—in vain. Suddenly Jim appeared in the doorway, eyes glinting with desperate urgency.

"They're gone. Somebody took them away. Somebody stole them!"

Dr. Hunt blurted in despair: "I can't get it off!"

Claire saw a screwdriver in Jim's clenched hand. He snatched a bronze paper weight off his drawing-board, fell to his knees at Bob's side. Bob's convulsive attempts to breathe were ceasing. Tremors passed through his body as Dr. Hunt pulled at the linked circle. At a ghastly, crunching sound, Claire shrank back, covering her eyes—the noise made by cartilage breaking in Bob's tortured throat. Then a quick, frantic hammering—the paperweight striking the head of the screwdriver—a rhythmic pounding that drove Claire's mind toward Hugo Cliffe. Hugo Cliffe had chisels—sharp-edged chisels—instruments that could free Bob from the deadly collar far faster than the blunt point of the screwdriver. The hope drove Claire toward the door—a hope stronger than her fear of the man who owned the implements. She was hurrying past Dr. Hunt's car filled only with the thought of saving her brother from suffocation, when she heard Jim's voice ring:

"It's loose!"

She turned back. Through the entrance she watched, wide-eyed, Jim pulling the encarnadined links from the swollen folds

of Bob's neck. Jim threw the chain aside, stooping to press his ear to Bob's still chest. Stung by surging grief, Claire studied Jim's blanched face, his pinched lips, as he rose. He looked at her with silent compassion—but the eloquence of his silence told her that Bob's heart was no longer beating.

Dr. Hunt rolled Claire's brother face down, straddled over him. Spread hands pressed to Bob's ribs, he leaned forward, then back. With an even, regular beat, he forced air in and out of the lungs that death had stilled. Coldly fascinated, still wordless, Claire went into Jim's arms. A sound parted them—the whine of a car speeding along the road.

It swerved sharply from the pavement into the dirt drive. When it bucked to a stop near the entrance, two blue-uniformed men ducked out. They were State Troopers from the barracks in Elmsford, only a few miles away—Claire's call had

brought them at top speed. They hurried into the house carrying a resuscitator. Claire kept watching, her cold hand in Jim's, the efforts of these men to restore a life that had been horribly snuffed out.

They carried Bob into the bedroom on the ground floor. Claire did not follow—she remained in the living-room, listening to the wheeze of the machine as it pumped. Valves clicked and air hissed—it went on and on, mechanically, unendurably.

THE beating sound continued a long time, each click of its valves undermining the girl's hope that it would restore her brother to life. Her mind was a kaleidoscope of terrifying images while she listened. Bob's swollen face as he burst in the door—the eyes of the cat—the grimly set features of Dr. Hunt as he said: "There are no tools in my car." Claire thought that strange. No tools in an automobile? It seemed incredible—

when a few seconds might have made the difference between Bob's life and death.

She went out toward the car, wondering, her haunting fear urging her to make sure of every possible reality. The four men were working feverishly in the bedroom—she was certain she was not being watched. Carefully, without making a sound, she shifted the seat cushion of Dr. Hunt's coupé. In the glow of the dash she saw the glitter of tools.

Jim's tools! She recognized them at once. His claw hammer, with his initials branded in the handle. His cold chisel. His strong-jawed cutting pliers—she recognized a nick she had herself made in the steel edges. She did not touch them. She gazed at them in stunned wonderment, remembering that Dr. Hunt had said: "There are no tools in my car." But there were tools in his car—Jim's own.

She replaced the cushion. When she turned back to the entrance, she knew what she was going to do. She would say nothing of this to anyone until she had told Jim. She was sure of herself, but she wanted Jim's clear-headed counsel. As she stepped into the living-room, she saw Jim turning away from the bed on which Bob lay.

The pulmotor was not operating now. One of the State Troopers was restoring it to its case. Dr. Hunt was spreading a blanket over Bob. And Jim's pallid face told Claire that her brother was dead beyond recall.

A uniformed man was standing at the table, holding the red length of chain between a thick thumb and a stubby forefinger. Claire knew his name—Lieutenant Korbart. He was squat, bull-necked, taciturn. His black eyes smouldered with hidden thoughts. Instinctively she mistrusted him. As she gazed at him, inspecting the bloody links that had choked

Bob's life away, he became a part of the dread that haunted her.

He lived alone in a cabin, far back in the hills—Claire had seen it, hidden in a hollow, almost a secret retreat. In the State Police car, he came and went over a lonely back road no one else used, and when on duty he patrolled the main highway with a dogged regularity. She had come upon him in odd places, standing silent, watching something—he seemed to be everywhere so that, whenever she wandered into the hills, she went with an expectant dread that she would come upon him, standing silent at some mysterious, self-appointed post.

She watched him intently as he lowered the chain to the table and turned his smouldering gaze upon her.

"That's the way the others went," he said in his peculiar, chesty tone. "First your father, then your uncle. Choked to death—like *him*—with a chain around the neck."

CHAPTER THREE

The Graven Decree

SHE tried to piece it all together as she sat in the living-room with Jim, a closed door shrouding her brother's body in silence. An investigation would be held, Lieut. Korbart had told her. Dr. Hunt had gone, with the two State Troopers. Claire and Jim were alone, silent and stunned.

"First your father, then your uncle."

Claire had been honeymooning with Jim in England when the news of the death of Barnett Baird had reached her. She had not heard the strange details until after her return—how he had been found in the garden, a swollen-faced corpse, strangled with a circle of chain. Only one conclusion was possible—murder. The investigation had brought no suspect to

light, had not even revealed a motive. Yet, months later, Barnett Baird's brother Gaylord had met the same doom.

Gaylord had inherited the house upon the death of Claire's father, and had come here to live—a quiet, scholarly gentleman of the old school, alive with a searching curiosity. Claire and Jim, living then in a small apartment in the Greenwich Village section of New York City had frequently paid him weekend visits. They had arrived one Saturday to find Lieut. Korbort in charge and Gaylord Baird dead—dead with a linked band around his neck. And again the investigation of the police had yielded not the slightest clue.

"Jim—I found your tools in Dr. Hunt's car."

Claire said it abruptly. Jim jerked up, alarmed, yet incredulous. They were silent a moment, striving to grasp the full dread meaning of those few words, until Claire repeated them:

"I found your tools in Dr. Hunt's car."

"You must be mistaken."

"You said yourself somebody took them away—somebody stole them. I believe that. It was done so we would have no means of getting the chain off Bob's neck. The man who did that to him wanted to be sure it would kill him. I saw the tools—under the cushion—in Dr. Hunt's car."

"You might easily be wrong about their being mine, Claire," Jim said slowly. "You were upset, naturally—and tools can look a great deal alike. They couldn't have been mine—the ones you saw. What reason could Dr. Hunt have for—"

"But he said he had no tools. He kept me from going to the car when I mentioned it. The cutters were there. They might have saved Bob's life. But he told me—I remember it distinctly—"There are no tools in my car.'"

She was silent another moment under Jim's searching gaze. She stirred un-

easily as she felt a presence in the room—an uncanny warning that someone, or *some thing*, was gazing at her. Alarmed, she looked around. In the shadow in the corner she saw two yellow eyes. The cat was there, watching her—listening.

She blurted: "Don't talk now, Jim. We mustn't say anything while he's here. He'll—tell—Hugo Cliffe!"

"Claire!"

The consternation ringing in Jim's voice startled her. She saw a strange, questioning light in his eyes. His gaze turned to the grey cat sitting in the shadow—almost invisible save for its shining eyes—then he rose. He sat on the arm of her chair, slipping his arm reassuringly around her.

"Claire, darling, you're over-wrought. You're saying things you don't mean. In the morning, when you've had a chance to rest, we'll start from the beginning and—"

"Someone's coming."

A CAR was grinding into the drive. Jim's arm tightened around Claire before he went to the door. "Keep hold of yourself, sweet—this isn't like you at all." Headlamp shafts swept across him as he opened the entrance. Brakes squeaked, and two men trudged to the door. One was a serious-faced young man wearing a dark topcoat over a white interne's uniform. The other was Dr. Hunt.

"Sorry to disturb you—a damned awkward thing," the shaggy-headed physician rumbled. "I've lost a tubule of radium. I was using it on Mrs. Chedwick—cancer patient, you know—and taking it back to the hospital tonight. Found out when I arrived I didn't have it. It's valuable, and needed at the hospital. Do you mind if I look for it here?"

Claire asked uneasily: "What makes you believe you lost it here, doctor?"

Hunt came in, followed by the interne.

The young man was carrying a sealed glass flask, containing two fluttering bright leaves supported by a wire hook attached to a cork. He held it tenderly as Dr. Hunt explained:

"It must have dropped out of this little lead box—the catch is loose." He opened his case and removed a flat container, not more than two inches across, of dull, greyish lustre. Raising its hinged lid to disclose a pad of cotton marked by an empty depression, he added: "It might have lodged in the coils of my stethoscope and dropped to the floor. It's very small, but worth thousands of dollars. If you don't mind—"

Jim answered quietly: "Not at all."

Claire Forester watched, with fascinated bewilderment, this friendly old man in whose car she had found Jim's missing tools. He had paid them many neighborly calls—his presence at the time Bob was choking to death could easily be explained in that way—yet Claire could not forget the tools. While she watched, she wondered if Dr. Hunt's explanation was a blind to cover some secret purpose that had driven him to return.

The interne drew a shining rod from his pocket, and briskly polished it. He brought the rod near a brass ball affixed to the cork of the flask. The two drooping aluminum leaves suspended on the hook inside immediately flew apart. He held the flask close to the floor and began to move it about, watching it anxiously.

Dr. Hunt rumbled: "Like charges repel. It's an electroscope. If it is brought near radium when charged, the radium emanations cause the leaves to collapse. In that way we can locate the tubule. If it isn't here I'll have to take it along every inch of the way to the hospital. We've already gone all over my car with it—it isn't there."

"But—" Claire almost said it aloud—"the tools are. . . . Jim's stolen tools. . . ."

The interne made a circuit of the room while the leaves of the electroscope remained spread like the wings of a sliver bird in flight. "Thousands of dollars," Dr. Hunt mumbled. "I'll have to make it good if I don't find it—" A hush filled the room as the search continued, with Claire's alert gaze never leaving the ruddy face of the doctor. In the corner, near the old desk her father had used, the interne straightened.

"Not anywhere in here," he said. "Looks like—Hello! It's discharging!"

Slowly the silver leaves drooped until they hung limp. Dr. Hunt strode into the corner jubilantly. Taking the electroscope into his hands, he urged: "Charge it again!" While the interne briskly rubbed the rod, generating static electricity, Jim frowned curiously. "In the desk?" he asked. "That couldn't be. It hasn't been open tonight."

At the touch of the rod to the brass ball, the silver leaves again flew apart. "Rolled under it, perhaps," Dr. Hunt said as he stooped—but, while he moved the flask about near the floor, the strips of aluminum foil registered no discharge. Looking puzzled, the doctor rose. Then, again, the leaves began to droop. He moved the instrument closer to the glass door of the old secretary, and abruptly a complete discharge registered.

"You didn't find the tubule," he asked quickly, "and put it in the desk?"

"Not I," Jim Forester answered. "Did you, Claire?"

"No."

Dr. Hunt mumbled: "Strange. Something inside there, perhaps in that little chest, caused the electroscope to discharge. This is very important to me, you know—the amount of money involved. Do you mind making absolutely sure?"

Claire observed: "That old chest was my father's, doctor. It's locked, and we haven't found the key."

"Then I don't understand," the physician exclaimed. "I don't!"

JIM opened the glass door, removed the little chest. It was heavy, and as he moved it something rattled inside. Age had seasoned its wood, blackened the copper strips which bound it. Claire knew its lid was firmly fastened, but Jim tried it to make sure. Then, once more, the interne charged the electroscope—and once more, immediately it was brought near the chest, the leaves quickly and completely collapsed.

Jim said decisively: "I'll break it open."

He pried a letter-opener into the crack. The old wood groaned. Suddenly the metal catch snapped. Claire came close as Jim raised the lid. The chest contained leather-bound books, closely packed in, which gave off a rich, musty smell—diaries, according to the golden word stamped on their covers—but at one side lay two velvet-black objects, irregular as stones, gleaming with a pitch-like lustre.

Dr. Hunt curiously took up one of the fragments. The interne observed: "Whatever it is, it's radioactive." They made a test, while Claire and Jim watched, putting the charged electroscope on the table, then bringing the black stone near it. Again the discharge of the leaves was prompt and complete. Dr. Hunt, frowning, asked: "Curious—may I take this with me?"

"Certainly."

"Thanks—thanks. But this isn't finding my tubule of radium. I'm sorry it's necessary, but do you mind if—" His blue-veined hand gestured toward the door behind which Bob Baird lay dead.

Jim's nod gave permission. As Hunt and the interne stepped into the hushed room, Claire again became conscious of a steady scrutiny. She turned, her heart speeding, searching for the yellow eyes—and she saw them, gleaming in the dark

corner. The cat was there, his implacable gaze radiant with a subtle, evil wisdom—silent, watching, listening.

He moved, a gliding black shadow, toward the entrance. At the door he mewed. Claire's breath caught as a realization chilled her. "Jim!" she said in a whisper. "Cat's do talk—we both know that. Do you understand what Marco is saying now? He wants to go out. He's saying, 'Please open the door'. Do you hear him, Jim?"

Jim's hand took Claire's. "Darling—"

"I'm not going to let him out. He's been listening—listening to everything we've said. He'll go straight to Hugo Cliffe—and they'll talk together—and Hugo Cliffe will know everything that's happened here. I'm not going to let him go."

While she spoke she gazed intently at the grey cat, and the cat emitted a pleading mew that said: "Please open the door—open the door."

She turned on Jim suddenly. "How else can you explain it? I said it while we were alone upstairs—I felt it the moment I stepped through the door'. No one could possibly have heard it outside our room. We were alone, just you and I, Jim—and Marco. Tonight Hugo Cliffe repeated my very words—I felt it the moment I stepped through the door'."

"That's impossible, Claire."

"But listen to Marco now, Jim! He's talking. Can't you understand him? I can—clearly. And Hugo Cliffe can understand him completely—because he isn't a man. . . . Not a man, but a human cat—more of a cat than a human being!"

Jim was staring at her, with a startled, bewildered light in his eyes she had never seen before. He doubted her—she realized it with a hopeless pang. No one would believe her about Hugo Cliffe. She stood mute with despair. During a moment of hush she heard soft footfalls in the room

were Bob lay dead. She turned when the door quietly opened.

Dr. Hunt came out, holding a small metal tube in his fingers. "Fortunate," he said. "Very fortunate." Placing the tiny object in the leaden case he added: "It was lying in the fringe of a rug. Might never have found it without the electro-scope." He closed his case with a click of finality. "Thanks very much for being so considerate. Good night."

Jim murmured: "Not at all."

Dr. Hunt opened the entrance quickly. Claire was looking at the cat. "Marco!" she called suddenly, sharply. The cat writhed out—a swift flowing, grey movement. "Marco!" Claire thrust the door wide while Hunt and the interne stared. Her heart quickened coldly as she stood outside, unable to see the cat in the darkness, but sensing its movements through a faint, furtive rustle. It was slinking somewhere in the gloom, gliding even then toward the shop of Hugo Cliffe.

Dread held her motionless as Dr. Hunt went to the waiting car. "Good night, Mrs. Forester."

When the starter snarled, and the coupé began jouncing along the drive, she turned back and went indoors. Jim was looking curiously into the old chest packed with diaries. He took her arms, forced a reassuring smile.

"Chin up, Claire."

She said in a tight whisper: "Marco is going back—taking a message—to Hugo Cliffe."

JIM'S head wagged. "Look here. You're not yourself, darling. Won't you try to rest? I'll stay down here, in case the police come back tonight, and—"

"I can't rest. I'm going to follow Marco. I've got to make sure, somehow. If I don't, I'll go mad. Come with me, Jim."

He protested gravely: "We can't leave Bob alone."

"I'm going," she insisted. "Even if I have to go alone. Jim, can't you understand? Please come with me!"

His hands tightened on her shoulders. "Listen to me, Claire. You can't let this get you. Tonight you're so upset you don't know what you're thinking or doing. Tomorrow it will all seem different—easier. You're going to bed."

His tone was sternly paternal. He was scolding her like a frightened child. He didn't — couldn't — wouldn't understand. Hopelessness flooded into her mind again, but her determination to learn the truth did not waver. She answered guilefully:

"All right, Jim. I'll try to get some sleep."

She went wearily into the hall. As she climbed the stairs, she heard Jim moving agitatedly about the living-room. She waited at the top of the flight until he quieted. She went down, step by step, making no sound. Through the doorway she saw Jim slouched in a chair, staring into space. He did not notice her. She slowly followed the wall into the dark kitchen. Silently she sidled out the back entrance.

Far across the stone wall the lights of Hugo Cliffe's workshop were gleaming. She stood listening for a faint rustle that might betray the presence of the cat lurking in the dark. She heard a different sound—a rhythmic clinking that chilled her. It was metal striking metal, with slow, even blows, somewhere in the open night. It was not the wind carrying the beat from Hugo Cliffe's shop. It was coming from somewhere near the road.

The sound made Claire's blood icy because it turned her tormented mind to Bob—Bob, dying in horrible pain, a chain choking the life from him. Somehow he had been held helpless while someone clamped the steel collar around his neck. Someone had banded it deep into his throat, hooking an open link, then pound-

ing the joint firmly together. Claire had heard a faint tap-tapping echoing in the night at the very moment the chained doom was trapping Bob. And now she was hearing it again, issuing from the depths of the darkness.

Clink-clink! Clink-clink!

A magnetic horror led her past the front of the house, seeking the source of the sound, while it continued to echo through the gloom. When she neared the road a light appeared, gleaming behind thick bushes flanking the pavement. *Clink-clink—clink-clink*—it was coming out of the glow. Apprehensively, Claire groped to the wall and pulled herself over. She ventured across a grassy field toward the light and the ringing rhythm.

She crouched behind another wall that paralleled the road, peering through the bushes. A car had stopped at the edge of the pavement. The light was beaming from its headlamps. At its side a husky, dark figure was kneeling, shoulders hunched. The shadow man was intently at work, wielding a hammer. He paused at his task and straightened. Claire saw his face, and what he was doing.

It was Lieut. Korbort. He was changing the rear tire of his police car. He was holding a wrench in one hand, hammering it to release a frozen bolt. Unaware of Claire's scrutiny, he went on working. A rasping, nerve-chilling screech sounded as the bolt twisted in its rusty socket. Claire suppressed a broken laugh of relief—yet she could not shake her dread of the man working there in the gloom.

She crept away from the wall. Following a narrow foot-path across the field, she gazed searchingly at the bright light shining from the workshop of Hugo Cliffe.

THE girl approached slowly. The door of the shed hung crookedly on a broken hinge, and through the crack a fan of light spread. She dared step into it, so

that she could look into the shop. She saw Cliffe, squatting on his bench, in front of a tombstone with polished face. His chisel, ringing under the regular blows of his hammer, was etching characters on the shiny surface. And at his feet was the cat.

The grey cat was writhing back and forth against Hugo Cliffe's ankles, purring voluptuously, mewing plaintively, obsessed with a drunken hunger that expressed itself in flowing, silken movements. Cliffe grinned evilly as the cat's lithe body rubbed him. He looked down, spoke in a feline tone, placed his tools aside. He brought the cat into his dusty, strong hands—and the girl heard them talk.

The cat's high-pitched voice quavered, the man answered with crooning, throaty words. The girl listened to an unholy communion between them. "You are a friend—a true friend," Cliffe purred. "Now I know—where it is hidden—because you came to tell me. Go back now—watch and listen—let them have no secrets. No secrets. . . ."

Cliffe carried the cat gently to the partially opened door, placed it on the white, chip-packed floor and turned back to his work. The weaving of the cat's tail, his pleading mewing, said that he did not wish to go. Reluctantly he turned, gliding off into the gloom. From the bright interior of the shop, the clinking of metal on metal, of metal on stone, came again. Claire Forester was turning away with a shudder when she glimpsed the characters etched into the shining surface.

They brought her closer with a hypnotic lure. She almost ceased to breathe as she yielded to a spell of terror that drew her closer, step by step. There were two tombstones standing near Hugo Cliffe's bench—he had been at work on both of them. The inscriptions were incomplete, yet the words were starkly legible—words that

put a paralyzing frigidty into the girl's heart.

On the monument standing nearest the door she saw the name of her husband:

JAMES GREGORY FORESTER

Born January 10, 1907

Died

And on the other—the stone on which Hugo Cliffe's chisel was working while she watched—her own name!

CLAIRE BAIRD FORESTER

Born June 2, 1913

Died

Markers for graves—prepared for the day of death—with only the date of a promised doom waiting to be enscribed by the tools of Hugo Cliffe!

A CHOKING cry of terror broke from Claire Forester's numb lips. Her hand pressed to her mouth to stifle it—but Hugo Cliffe looked up. His feline eyes, gleaming yellow around their elongated pupils, fastened upon her with their horrible, paralyzing power. His tools dropped with a clatter. He started toward the door, hands raising to seize the girl. She tore herself desperately away from the hypnotic stare threatening to engulf her—wrenched away into the darkness—and ran.

Flying along the road, frozen by the dread that Hugo Cliffe was stalking her on swift feline feet, she was unaware of the police car until she was almost upon it. Sight of Lieut. Korbart struck her a new, fearful blow. He was standing in the glow of the headlamps, motionless, silent, his smouldering gaze squarely upon her. She felt, as she fled past him, that her feet were dragging through loose sand. When she flung herself against the entrance of her home she was weak with overwhelming fear.

Jim jerked up from his chair. She threw herself into his arms. She clung to him as the only salvation she knew in a world of inescapable horrors.

Through her sobs she heard his startled questions: "Where have you been? How did you get out? What's happened?" but she could not answer. She steadied herself with an effort, her hands closed tightly on his arms, steadfastly meeting his intent gaze.

"You've got to come with me."

"Where, Claire?"

"Back to Hugo Cliffe's shop. You've got to come. You've got to see it with your own eyes. You'll believe me then."

"What did you see?"

"Tombstones—two of them. One with your name on it, Jim, the other for me. Ready to be put on our graves—everything there—except the date of death." Her voice rose frantically. "It's true, Jim! I saw them!"

Jim said tightly: "Keep hold of yourself, Claire."

He snatched up his hat, jerked open the front door. His hand closed firmly on Claire's arm as they went out. While they followed the dirt driveway, a motor sang along the road. Claire saw the car when they reached the pavement, its tail-light a vanishing red beacon. She knew it was Lieut. Korbart—but she was thinking now only of the two gravestones she had seen—ponderous promises of a waiting death. She kept close at Jim's side as they rapidly approached the shop of Hugo Cliffe.

She paused to whisper: "Do you hear it, Jim?"

The rhythmic tap-tapping of metal on stone—it was beating out of the stoneworker's shed. Beyond the broken door, in the bright glare, he was busily at work. Claire saw him through the crack as she clung to Jim's arm—hunching at his bench, tapping his chisel with his hammer while

stone-dust sifted through the air. There were the two headstones, as she had seen them, but now. . . .

Jim stopped as he pulled the loose door wide. Hugo Cliffe looked up with a smile and said affably: "Why, good evening."

Claire went in with Jim, slowly. Bewildered, appalled, she gazed at the two tombstones. One of them, the nearest, on which she had seen her own name engraved, was—blank! And the other—it bore a name that struck grief into her heart, but it was not the name she had seen:

ROBERT BARNETT BAIRD

Born May 25, 1904

Died October 13, 1935

Hugo Cliffe said gravely: "I hope you will accept it as a token of esteem from an old neighbor. I made the headstones for your father and your uncle, Mrs. Forester. Will he be buried in the cemetery beside them? I thought he would—it is a large plot—large enough for all the family."

Claire shuddered as she asked: "Where are the others? What did you do with the other two stones?"

Cliffe echoed gently: "The others?"

Jim was looking at her searchingly. She turned to him tensely, her gaze imploring him to believe her. "These aren't the two stones I saw. He changed them. He's terribly strong—he could do it without help. He put the first two away, then put these others in their place. Look for them, Jim—please look for them!"

Her husband asked Cliffe stiffly: "You didn't waste any time going about it, did you—carving a stone for Bob?"

"I started it as soon as I heard," Cliffe answered. "I always do. It's the same as the stones I made for his father and his uncle."

"How did you hear?"

"Doctor Hunt dropped in."

"Who is the other stone for?"

"Mrs. Chedwick—Doctor Hunt's cancer patient. She died tonight."

Claire stepped trembling toward the cat-eyed stone-worker. "You did change them. Two tombstones—one with Jim's name, the other with mine—they were standing where these are now. What did you do with them? Where did you put them?"

Cliffe said: "I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Forester."

She turned again imperatively to Jim. "He won't tell the truth. They must be somewhere in this shop. Those—against the wall. Turned face in—do you understand, Jim? Please look—please find them—or I'll go mad!"

JIM walked toward the row of stones sitting against the dusty shop wall. The faces turned toward him were shiny, unmarked. Their rear surfaces were placed within an inch of the dusty boards. Jim gripped the upper edge of one of them, tried to pull it away. The weight of the massive block was too much for him—his muscles were supple and tempered by daily sessions of tennis, but he could not move the block. He went from one to another, trying each, but in every case his attempt to see the rear surface of the slab was baffled by its ponderous mass.

Claire was gazing accusingly at Hugo Cliffe. "Why don't you help him?" she asked huskily. "You're strong. You can move them alone. I've seen you do it in the quarry. Why don't you move them, Hugo Cliffe?"

Cliffe did not stir. He repeated: "I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Forester."

Jim Forester turned away from the row of stones. He frowned at the marker bearing Bob Baird's name, then looked at Claire—and she saw doubt lingering in his eyes. He said quietly: "We'd better go back, Claire." She shook her head in

protest, but he went to the door. As he was pushing it open, he stooped and picked a bit of cardboard from the stony floor—a small carton, crushed. He smiled wryly, slipped it into his pocket, and said firmly:

“Come on, darling.”

Utter bewilderment filled Claire. She went to Jim, not because she had abandoned her certainty of what she had seen, but because the evilly powerful eyes of Hugo Cliffe were hungrily upon her. She slipped her arm anxiously through Jim’s as they walked toward the road. Moving slowly through the darkness, they heard again the ringing tap-tap of Hugo Cliffe’s chisel trimming Bob’s name in the gravestone.

They did not speak until they were in the house. As they stood gazing at each other silently, the uncanny sensation of being watched returned to Claire. Looking around apprehensively, she saw the yellow eyes—the eyes of the grey cat, watching her from the shadow in the corner. She turned quickly, picked him up. She opened the door, tossed him into the darkness. He landed silently on his padded paws, turned his amber gaze upon her, mewed a protest.

“Go back!” she told the cat. “Go back and tell him I’m sure of what I saw. Tell him I’m going to make everyone believe it—everyone—because it’s true.”

The ring of her voice sent the cat slinking off into the gloom. Closing the door, turning, she saw the old chest sitting on the leaf of the secretary. She remembered Hugo Cliffe talking with the cat, and felt suddenly that the chest was important: “Now I know—where it is hidden—because you came to tell me.” She went quickly to Jim, searching his tired eyes.

“We’ve got to go away, Jim. We’ve got to leave this house and never come back.”

“We can’t go, Claire—you know that.”

“Anywhere—but we can’t stay, Jim. We can’t! The horrible things that have happened—they’ll come again. I know they’ll come again because I saw our names on the tombstones Hugo Cliffe was cutting. It drives me out of my mind when I think of it, Jim—finding you as we found Bob tonight—with a headstone waiting, all ready except the date of—”

“Claire!” Jim spoke in a low tone, firmly. “You’ve been right from the beginning. There’s something terrible at work—something that killed your father and your brother and your uncle—something hovering over this house. But we can’t go—not only because we haven’t any money—but because we can’t admit we’re licked. We’ve got to fight it, Claire—stay and fight it.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Fight it. . . .”

She turned to the desk, and took up the seasoned chest laden with old diaries. She carried it under her arm as she went up the stairs. The sound of a closing door came down the flight—then there was silence. Claire Forester’s husband sat alone in the library, silent and motionless, keeping a vigil over the dead.

CHAPTER FOUR

Doom Knocks

BRIGHT sun streamed through crystal-clear air when Claire Forester turned her car off the highway late in the afternoon of the next day. She left it in the driveway and went into the house carrying a heavy package. In the store-room near the kitchen she unwrapped the bundle. She left her purchases on the table in the corner—a pair of strong-jawed cutters, two smaller pairs of pliers, a hammer and a keen-edged cold chisel.

Before she turned away she made sure of the position of each tool so that she

might, if necessary, find them at once in the dark. She stepped into the kitchen. Agda, the housekeeper, was making preparations for the evening meal. She was a plump woman, her grey hair drawn tightly back in a knot, her eyes a mild blue. Claire asked her quietly:

"Where is Mr. Forester, Agda?"

"Sleeping, Mrs. Forester. He asked to be wakened for dinner."

Claire looked at Agda Cliffe intently. This woman was the sister of the stoneworker. She shared Hugo Cliffe's trait of tireless industry. She was busy in the kitchen at dawn: her activity never ceased until late at night. She never stepped outside except to do her chores—never, during all the weeks since Claire and Jim had come to live in the house, had she crossed the stone wall to visit her brother, and never had she so much as called Hugo Cliffe on the telephone. Her world was bounded by her endless toil—yet, Claire told herself with sharp misgivings, she was the sister of Hugo Cliffe, and she always fed the grey cat.

The cat was in the kitchen now, wandering after Agda from sink to cabinet to refrigerator, contentedly purring.

"Agda." Claire said incisively.

"Yes, Mrs. Forester?"

"There are some new tools lying on the table in the store-room. You are not to touch them. No one is to touch them except Mr. Forester or myself, ever. Do you understand that, quite clearly?"

Agda Cliffe turned her steady blue eyes on Claire. "I've never touched Mr. Forester's tools—never. I'll leave them strictly alone."

Claire felt somehow, as she turned away, that the woman was telling the truth, that she would keep her word. She went out of the house, intending to put the car in the garage which sat at the rear, but as she opened its door she paused. The sound inevitably put a chill

in her blood—that regular, ringing metallic tapping. She heard it carrying on the wind, from the craggy hills.

The clear sunlight had helped Claire fight down her fear, though she could not free herself of it entirely. The tap-tapping she heard now began to bring it back—it was a challenge to her composure, a threat against her sanity. Because she was determined to defeat that consuming dread, she left the car and walked toward the source of the sound. It led her along a path, into the rugged hills.

The quarry lay below her—as she paused on the crest of a hill. It was a ragged, cubical cavity in the valley. Simon Cliffe had opened it and Hugo Cliffe, carrying on his father's craft, had deepened it. Its walls were sheer and mottled, dipping deep into a mirror-surfaced pool. The rains of the years had collected in its depths. From it had come the stones which now marked the graves of the village's dead.

Hugo Cliffe was working on a ledge far above the still surface of the pool. He was wielding a sledge, driving wedges into holes he had bored in the deposit. While Claire watched, knowing he was unaware of her presence, he labored without a second's pause—strenuous, back-straining effort that would soon have exhausted another man. The power of his supple muscles suddenly split a line between the row of holes with an explosive crack, and a slab of stone leaned out.

A warm, soft touch at her ankle startled Claire. Her eyes jerked down. At her feet the grey cat was moving—rubbing himself against her, purring hungrily. Claire recoiled at the contact—but she tried to fight the fear put into her heart by the animal. "After all," she told herself, "this is a pet I've kept for years, and loved." She stooped to pick him up—but suddenly, with a frightened mew, the cat darted away.

He was a grey movement trickling

down the crags of the quarry. He vanished with a sleek rapidity—in the direction of Hugo Cliffe.

The girl's eyes returned to the man. He was tearing the block of stone from its socket with superhuman strength. He whipped a rope around it, pressed one hard knot upon another. When he began climbing up, Claire marked the amazing feline liveness of his movements. At ground level, he began to draw the rope through a pulley, hoisting the heavy slab higher and higher, never for an instant ceasing his effort.

While Claire watched fascinated, Hugo Cliffe dragged the stone toward a light truck stationed near the brink of the quarry. He turned it end over end, then with incredible dexterity and power, tilted it into the truck-bed. The stone fell flat with a resounding crash that testified to its immense weight. Cliffe was turning toward the wheel, evincing not the slightest sign of fatigue, when a black movement streaked across the ground toward him.

The cat. . . . It rubbed itself sensually against Cliffe's ankles. He brought it into his dusty hands, and they gazed at each other—the cat and the man. Claire could hear the animal's mewing, the man's crooning purr. Then—as though the feline had told Cliffe exactly where she was standing—the stone-worker turned his powerful eyes upon Claire.

A CHILL struck through her, but she stood her ground as Cliffe came toward her. She did not retreat because it would have been an admission that she was afraid. He paused, stood silent a moment, the lodestone of his eyes acting evilly upon her. He said in a low, smooth tone:

"He stands between us—your husband. Nothing in the world can combat the power that binds us together—not even

his life. It's only a trifle, a small obstacle to be swept aside. You feel it—you can't resist it—this force that makes us one through all eternity."

The girl stood transfixed, so fascinated by the spell of the stone-worker's eyes that his voice seemed a far-away chant.

"It will come to him because it must—death. It will come at it came to the others—the chain around his throat. You must tell no one that it is nearing him. Hour by hour it comes closer, because our love decrees it—an influence stronger than the force whirling the planets through their orbits. We are waiting for it together—his death—you and I. . . ."

Claire blurted: "You're mad—mad!"

She forced herself to turn away, but she did not hasten. She walked deliberately along the path, feeling the pull of Hugo Cliffe's horrible cat's eyes. Without allowing herself even to look back, she approached the house—but the fear had returned to her, the dread had clamped again upon her heart. Her terror became a sharp, stinging chill when she came to an abrupt pause, peering at a figure standing silent in the long shadows cast by the sinking sun.

Lieut. Korbart. He was stationed among the trees on the far side of the stone wall, motionless as a graven image, his smouldering black gaze upon her. Still she would not allow herself to betray her apprehension. She nodded to him with simulated casualness, and went on.

She tried to seem calm and self-possessed while the fear gnawed deeper into her soul. Jim was shaving, getting ready for dinner—she talked with him lightly. When they went down she stole a moment to look into the store-room. The new tools were still in their places, untouched. Agda served dinner with her usual efficiency—and Marco Polo sat, as always, at Claire's side, his amber eyes expectantly upon her.

But the cat's gaze increased her dread. She could not keep her thoughts from her lips, in spite of his presence. She told Jim of her walk to the quarry, of seeing the cat and Hugo Cliffe talking together—how he had looked up to impale her unerringly with his gaze. "Marco told him where I was. He looked straight at me at once."

"A movement you weren't aware of Claire—a sound you didn't hear."

"But there is something between them, something we can't grasp. Marco is drawn to him in some strange way—"

Jim laughed softly. From his pocket he removed the crushed cardboard carton he had picked off the floor of Cliffe's workshop the night previous. He tossed it across the table to Claire with a chuckle: "There's the strange power Hugo Cliffe has over Marco. Cat-nip—that's all."

Claire echoed his laugh, but it was forced. She grew silent for a while, then her thoughts forced her to speak:

"Hugo and my father were boys together—friends. It was a queer sort of companionship—it lasted until Father's death. Yet I always felt there was something lurking in the background. I asked questions when I was in the village today, about Hugo Cliffe. His father committed suicide, under dishonorable circumstances, but I didn't learn anything definite. Behind it all, Jim, I know there's some sort of secret."

JIM did not speak, but in the silence Claire heard a memory of Hugo Cliffe's voice that made her shrink: "*We are waiting for it together—your husband's death—you and I. . .*" A promise of impending doom: "*Hour by hour it comes closer. . .*" Claire remained quiet, striving to retain her poise, until she had drained her coffee cup. Then, quickly, she rose.

She went at once to the telephone. Recollection that this was a party line made her pause. Six instruments, she knew, were connected with the same wire—among them Hugo Cliffe's, Dr. Hunt's, Lieut. Korbart's. With a determined set of her lips she made her call. The rumble that answered was Dr. Hunt's voice.

"Mrs. Forester calling, Doctor. There is something Jim and I must talk over with you immediately. Please come right over."

"Yes, of course," the physician answered. "I'll walk it, if you don't mind—need the exercise. By the way—speaking of the queer black rock we found in your father's old chest—do you mind if I have it analyzed? Very curious. I have it wrapped now, ready to mail to the city."

Claire answered: "It's not necessary, doctor. I know what it is. . . . We'll wait for you."

Jim was at her side when she pronged the receiver. He asked: "What are you doing? What's on your mind?" Her chin lifted with renewed determination as she went toward the secretary. She answered: "I can't endure this any longer, Jim. I'm going to get to the bottom of it. I'm going to ask Doctor Hunt about the tools."

Jim frowned. "Do you mean you're going to accuse him of stealing them? Don't you realize that's tantamount to accusing him of murder?"

Claire removed the old chest from the shelf—but she paused, because the grey cat was looking at her. Seated near a chair, his amber eyes fixed upon her in penetrating scrutiny, he was listening. Claire fought an impulse to drive him from the room. She turned squarely to Jim, the chest in her hands.

"There are so many other things besides the tools, Jim. There must be a reason why Father and Uncle Gaylord and Bob all were killed the same way—choked to death by a chain. The same

man must have committed the three murders, in each case for the same motive. I think I know what's behind it all—but that isn't as important as something else. The same thing may happen to you, Jim—and me."

Jim began: "You know—?"

"Hugo Cliffe believes it's going to happen to us—because he has the tombstones ready. I did see them, Jim. Perhaps he doesn't know who the murderer is, but he expects it to come. It is coming—hour by hour, it's coming closer." Claire shuddered as she heard herself echo the words of Hugo Cliffe. "There's only one way we can save ourselves. We've got to learn the secret before that ghastly, choking death claims us, Jim!"

He asked her tautly: "Claire, what have you learned?"

She placed the chest on the table, removed one of the diaries, opened it to a scribbled page.

She was silent while Jim read. The eyes of the cat were still upon her. To free her mind of the chill brought by the unflinching, yellow gaze, she followed the words over Jim's shoulder. "The first entry," she whispered, "was written several weeks before Father's death."

It was:

While walking in the hills this afternoon we found a curious mineral near the edge of the quarry. Though I can identify most of the rocks characteristic of this location, it was strange to me—a deep black substance that shines like pitch. I have sent a sample of it to the city for chemical analysis, on the chance that it might be valuable, but more particularly to satisfy my curiosity.

"He wrote 'we'," Claire pointed out quietly, "but he forgot to mention the name of the person who was with him. The next—"

Extraordinary good fortune! The chemist's report on the black substance I found

near the quarry is that it is pitchblende. It is the most precious ore in the world because it yields radium. Most pitchblende, I find, is mined in Africa, but it is also found in the United States—in Texas, North Carolina, Colorado, and in other parts of Connecticut. The ore may be worked at a profit even when it yields no more than one gram of radium to ten tons of ore. This is because the value of radium is fabulous—about \$1,000,000 per ounce, while gold, by comparison, is worth only \$35 per ounce at the present market price. There are only about 250 grams of radium in the United States at this writing, and in all the world not more than a pound and a quarter has been produced so far.

This afternoon Dr. Hunt dropped in for tea, and we had a long, friendly chat. He left only a few moments ago. Now for a brisk walk before dinner.

JIM turned the page and stared startled at unfilled lines. He blurted in amazement: "It's the last entry he ever made!" He flipped back to the date and jerked out of his chair. "He wrote it the day he died!"

Claire forgot the stare of the cat. She leaned forward tensely, her hands closed into small fists. "Don't you see, Jim? Someone else knew, from the very beginning. Someone killed Father to keep the secret. He wanted it for himself—that precious stuff. He wanted it so much he didn't stop at murder."

Jim reached into the chest, brought into his hand a fragment of the pitchy mineral. The black sheen of its surface seemed to be yielding a hidden truth as Claire rushed on:

"First Father, because he'd found the deposit. Then Uncle Gaylord, because he must have learned of it through Father's diary. Then Bob—because Bob walked back to the quarry that night, and he must have discovered someone digging—stealing the ore. Now, Jim—you and I—because we know! We know, and the knowledge means death—with our tombstones waiting for us now!"

"Yes!" Jim was gazing intently at the last words written by Claire's father before the choking death had claimed him. "Dr. Hunt. . . a long, friendly chat." You found the tools in Hunt's car. He came in, all of a sudden, while Bob was fighting for life. He came back later, hunting for radium he said he'd lost—but if he's the man, why didn't he—"

"Jim! Listen!"

Claire had heard it—the faint, echoing tap-tapping of metal against metal. It throbbed through the night with the inexorable rhythm of knocking doom. It trickled an icy chill down her back as she hurried to the entrance and flung it wide. It became louder—*click-click, click-click*—but it was not coming from the workshop of Hugo Cliffe. It was not the grating of a chisel against stone. It was a clear, metallic ticking that echoed everywhere in the night.

Suddenly it stopped.

Claire blurted: "I heard it—just like that—before Bob rushed in choking—!"

She turned quickly, leaving the door open, driven by a fearful suspicion. She hurried along the hall, thrust into the store-room. In the dark she groped to the table in the corner and passed her hands across the empty surface. She turned the key of the hanging light and looked transfixed into the glare. The new tools were not where she had left them. The tools were gone!

She hurried out of the store-room, into the kitchen. Agda Cliffe was at the sink, washing the dinner dishes, her hands busy and quick. Claire said abruptly: "Agda, I told you not to touch Mr. Forester's new tools." The woman looked up, her blue eyes inscrutable. She made no answer until Claire said even more sharply:

"You were not to touch the tools."

Then: "I haven't even seen them, Mrs. Forester."

Dismayed, baffled, Claire hurried back to the living-room and Jim. Jim was turning the pages of a diary. She stood tensely silent, listening—and again she became conscious of the stare of the cat. He was sitting in the shadow, watching her. The door was still standing open, but he had remained—gathering secrets that he might carry to Hugo Cliffe. Jim's eyes jerked up when Claire blurted:

"The new tools are missing."

"New—?"

"I bought some today—because I was afraid we might need them as we needed them for Bob. I put them in the store-room. Now they're gone. Somebody's stolen them. Jim! Do you realize what that means? It's coming—again—*now!*"

Even as she spoke a strangling, gasping cry carried in from the night. It turned her frozen toward the door. It brought Jim alertly to her side. It came again—that ghastly choking, gagging sound—and then they saw the man. He was running wildly along the drive, toward the house, staring insanely, clawing at his throat. . . . Dr. Hunt!

He stumbled in as Jim hurried toward him. His eyes were protruding in a horrible glare, his swollen tongue parting his puffed lips. He sagged against the wall as he tore at his neck, his fingers bloody, the skin of his throat ripped by his desperate efforts. He slipped to the floor as Jim fought his hands down. And in the blood-gorged folds of his flesh Claire saw the glitter of the chain.

The doctor's voice was a frantic, slaving mumble: "Take it off! *God, take it off!*"

One tense moment Jim bent over the torture-wracked man, striving to find a means of loosening the deadly links. He jerked up, ran to the rear of the house seeking tools which Claire knew he would not find. As she turned to assist him in the hopeless search, tearing her eyes from

the blood-swollen face of the doctor, quick footfalls froze her.

They were sounding in the driveway. Swiftly they approached. The man who sped into the light was wearing the blue uniform of a State Trooper. He paused beside the dying man, his smouldering gaze directed straight at Claire—Lieut. Korbort.

CHAPTER FIVE

Prey of the Quarry

THE girl stood transfixed as Korbort turned, kneeling over Hunt. She caught the gleam of an implement he snatched from his coat pocket. His thick body covered the movements of his hands as she listened to the ghastly strangling sounds made by the dying man. A burning wonder was flaring in her mind:

How did he know? Where did he come from? What is he doing?

Korbort rose straddled. He lifted Dr. Hunt's limp body in his stocky arms. Trudging heavily, he went to the door of the room where Bob's body had lain, and kicked through. Claire saw him placing the physician on the bed. Immediately he strode back, closing the way. His eyes, like smoking coals, turned upon her as he took up the telephone.

He was completing a call to the State Police barracks in Elmsford when Jim returned breathless to the library. Korbort went back to the door which shielded Dr. Hunt. As he stepped through, Jim glimpsed the physician's lax body sprawled on the bed. He started in, but Korbort blocked the way, thrust him back.

"Stay out there! I'm handling this!"

The door snapped shut. Jim turned away, stricken with dismay and bewilderment. Claire's gaze turned from his drawn face into the shadow in the corner. There in the gloom yellow eyes were shining. While she watched, the grey, sleek

body of the cat weaved toward the entrance. He passed silently into the night as Claire whispered:

"He's going to Hugo Cliffe. He's going to tell Hugo Cliffe everything he's heard."

Jim said tightly: "I'll see for myself."

Claire hurried out the door with him.

Bright light was streaming through the broken door of the shed. No *clink-clink* of metal was issuing from it now—the stone-worker's chisel was idle. The gleam drew the grey cat. He was a dark, flowing movement, almost invisible, as Claire and Jim followed. He glided into the light, through the crack of the door. The girl and her husband heard him speak inside—a plaintive mew.

The workshop was empty. Hugo Cliffe's tools lay on his dusty bench, beside the stone bearing the name of Robert Baird. The cat hopped upon it, crying again. Claire shivered with an understanding of his wail: "*Where are you? I am here. I have news for you. Where are you—where?*"

Jim took slow steps toward the cat. It retreated, bristling with fear, as his hands reached. It leaped—but Jim's movement was swifter. He caught it in midair and held it grimly in spite of its squirming, clawing efforts to escape. He sat on the bench, forcing it against his legs, and pushed his fingers through its shaggy, silken hair.

He said suddenly: "Here's something!"

It was white, small as a medicinal capsule. As Jim's fingers combed it out of the cat's fur a faint snapping sound resulted. A black silk thread was tied to the rolled bit of paper and had circled the cat's neck—Jim had broken it. He allowed the cat to bound away as he peeled the little white roll into a crinkled square of paper. Eyes widened, Claire leaned over his shoulder to read:

They know all about the ore. Tonight is your last chance.

Jim snapped: "Agda wrote that! She's used the cat to carry messages to Hugo Cliffe. She's eavesdropped on us continually. But he must have known anyway—by listening in on the telephone. He's at the quarry now—I'm sure of it."

Claire seized his arm as he hurried from the shop. Her protesting pull did not slow him. She was forced to run to keep up with his long, firm strides along the rutted road that led back into the hills. She realized now that danger must not stop them—they must have the proof of their own eyes. As they hurried toward the quarry they heard no sound but their own quick footfalls, saw no light. The glow of the moon made the quarry a deep, silver-bottomed hole when they paused at its brink.

Then a rhythmic sound. It was not the sharp *click-click* of metal, but heavier, and muffled, as though a pick were driving into the earth. It drew Claire and Jim along the edge of the quarry. They paused, peering down at a glow brighter than the shine of the moon. It was spreading across rough rock from a cavity in the sheer wall. They saw it clearly—a slab swung back, disclosing a hollow from which the light issued. From it came the even beating of tireless blows.

Jim called down: "Come out, Cliffe!"

The dull pounding ceased. A figure appeared in the shine. Amber eyes with elongated pupils looked up. Almost at once Hugo Cliffe seemed to vanish—but quick, feline movements were lifting him up broad stone steps to the level where Claire and Jim stood. He materialized suddenly in the moonglow, facing them, cat eyes gleaming.

He drew one hand from his pocket. They heard the rattle of a short length of chain. He began to take slow, cat-like steps toward them.

SUDDENLY a rushing movement startled Claire. It came without warning from the hump flanking the quarry. She turned to see a terrorized face limned white in the moonlight—the haggard features of Agda Cliffe. The woman was wildly flinging herself forward. She hurled herself, not at Claire, but at the man at Claire's side.

"Jim!"

Jim turned too late from the threat of Hugo Cliffe's stare. The woman's mad thrust propelled him sideward. He tottered on the stony brink, striving desperately to keep his balance—but he could not. A strained cry of horror broke from Claire's lips as he dropped. A hard, crunching sound came out of the deep darkness. She looked down to see Jim lying on the next ledge, sprawled motionless, his forehead marked by a bleeding gash.

A snarl of fury turned Claire as Agda Cliffe rushed at her. Claire threw herself from the yawning cavity, fighting to escape the woman's clawing hands. She backed, striking desperately with small, hard fists. The cool fury of her attack cut through the woman's wild grappling. Agda Cliffe groaned and fell forward. Her head struck stone with a sharp, crackling sound. She rolled face up and lay still—and Claire, conscious of a paralyzing power, looked up to see Hugo Cliffe's feline eyes still upon her.

He had not moved. His gaze had not wavered. He was standing near the edge of the shelf, one hand extended, holding the short length of chain.

He came toward Claire with panther tread. The force of his eyes held her as he brought the chain closer. She knew that once his hands fastened upon her she could not hope to escape his superhuman strength. Once his arms crushed around her she would become a captive of Death. She could feel the cold iron links draw-

ing around her throat, growing tighter, tighter. . . . As the chain crushed deep into her flesh, strangling her, she could hear the metallic tap-tap of the link being closed. . . .

She hurled herself at Cliffe. All the strength of her numb muscles exerted itself in the leap that threw her weight upon him. The jar of her pulsing body against his made the chain jangle. She let herself drop as she felt his fingers snatching at her shoulder. Emptiness opened beneath her. She clutched frantically at the edge of rock, supporting herself while scarcely aware of it, as a succession of crunching thuds sounded below her.

Then silence. Claire hung at the limit of her arms, flat against a sheer stone wall, suspended only by the strength of her fingers. She could not see how deep the drop was below her. She felt the depths claiming her as the muscles of her fingers yielded in spite of all her efforts to hold them in place. The black despair enveloping her was swept away, suddenly, by a crazy joy that came with a whispered call:

"Claire. . . . Claire. . . ."

Jim was all right. He was hurt, but alive. Jim. . . . Claire felt her fingers sliding. She was letting go . . . letting go.

Hard fingers gripped her wrists. She hung limp, feeling powerful muscles lifting her. *Hugo Cliffe*—the name haunted her whirling mind. She was being dragged back to the shelf as though her weight were nothing. *Hugo Cliffe*. . . .

From below came faintly: "Claire. . . . Claire. . . ."

A firm, chesty voice called down: "She's okay, Forester."

Lieut. Korbart. Claire gazed at him incredulously, dizzying relief surging through her mind. He had turned from her. He was looking down over the brink of the quarry. She saw the thing he was

gazing at so intently—a huddled figure lying on the edge of the lowest ledge.

It was a broken thing that had rolled down, step by step. It was moving, slowly, under the instinctive pull of crushed muscles. As Claire watched in horror, it rolled over the edge, broke the surface of the silver water, vanished among glimmering ripples.

"I've been working on this case for months," Lieut. Korbart said matter-of-factly, "but I never suspected it was Hugo Cliffe."

CLAIRE'S arm tightened snugly around Jim's shoulders as they sat by the fireplace, reading the yellowed page of an old diary. It was the first of all the day-to-day records Claire's father had kept. It had yielded the secret of Hugo Cliffe and the choking death.

The entry, written when Barnett Baird was a boy, told its story in an immature scrawl:

Last night the house was robbed again. The thief has been robbing houses all over the neighborhood and has never been seen. This is the second time he has robbed us. He got away with a good sum of money. Father thinks he knows who did it. He found a footprint on the floor under the open window, and he says it's stone dust. Father thinks Simon Cliffe is the thief. . . .

Days later, another entry read:

A horrible thing happened today. I don't like to think about it, because Hugo Cliffe is my chum, and I don't want to lose him as a friend because of what has happened between our fathers.

Today Father accused Simon Cliffe of being the burglar. He had the police with him, and the police searched the workshop. They found some of the money stolen from this house. That proved Simon Cliffe was the burglar. The police were very hard on him. They put handcuffs on him—old slave cuffs connected by about a foot of chain. They took him away. Hugo and I saw them

do it. It hurt Hugo so much he couldn't say anything—he ran away to be alone.

Hugo and I were together when we heard about the horrible thing that happened. While the police were taking Hugo's father to jail, he made a desperate escape. He hid in a field while they hunted for him. When they found him he was dead. He had killed himself, by wrapping the chain of the handcuffs around his neck. They brought him back to the house and Hugo saw him, his face terribly swollen and with the marks of the chain on his throat. Hugo went sort of crazy. He jumped on me and yelled: "Your father's to blame—I'll make you pay for it someday!"

The ring of the telephone drew Claire. The voice of Lieut. Korbort, brisk and chesty, came over the line.

"We've found the stolen tools buried in his shop. I've just got word from the barracks that Agda Cliffe has confessed. There's Dr. Hunt's statement, too—as to how he recognized Cliffe when Cliffe jumped on him coming along the road The doc's feeling lots better today, by the way. Everything taken together proves Hugo Cliffe was guilty all the way through—but I never would have believed it, otherwise. Can you come over with your husband, Mrs. Forester? We need you to identify the tools."

Claire walked with Jim along the highway. Behind them the grey cat trailed. The girl had lost all fear of him, and her heart was completely free of the dread that had haunted her. The menace of the choking death was a horror of the past. The future was made clear and bright by the promise of wealth to be dug from the good earth. At the side of the man she loved, Claire felt a joyous, boundless sense of freedom.

But, when she paused just inside the door of the stoneworker's shop, it flooded back upon her for one brief moment—the horror of the strangling death that might have claimed her and Jim. The police had torn up the floor, searched every corner of the shed. One of the tombstones, moved from the wall, stood opposite the broken door. Its face bore a mocking inscription:

HUGO CLIFFE
Born May 5, 1875
Died

It awaited the grave of the craftsman in stone—but the date of death it lacked must be filled in now by another hand.

THE END