

EYE

OF
THE

A NOVEL

MOON

IVAN OBOLENSKY

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NOTE TO THE READER:

This is a work of fiction. It is a product of my imagination. As with most stories, it is anchored in some form of reality. Rhinebeck existed. I visited only for a few vacations during my childhood, but its influence on my life was much greater than the time I spent there would seem to indicate.

The characters in this novel are not real, although some of the names are of people who lived. Most of them have passed away. None of them said or did the things I have written other than on the most conventional level.

The novel takes place in the period of the 1970s before there were cell phones and computers were in their infancy.

This work was written with only one purpose in mind: to delight the reader. If it does so, then I will have achieved what I set out to do. It is, after all, a story, and I like good stories. Most people do. I hope you will find it as delightful to read as it was to write.

This is a sample of the first four chapters of the novel. To read more, visit my website at ivanobolensky.com/purchase for options to get your copy.

Rain was threatening as I looked out my window on that Wednesday morning in the spring of 1977. I was anticipating breakfast in my room at the St. Regis in New York when there was a knock at the door. I answered in my bathrobe, expecting a waiter with a trolley, but in walked Johnny Dodge instead.

“Oh, no,” I groaned.

Johnny was just over thirty. His blond hair was worn long, but he looked slim and fit in a dark pinstripe from whose breast pocket peeked a dark-blue handkerchief with small white polka dots that matched his tie. He wore a cream-colored shirt with french cuffs that were held in place by small gold Cartier cufflinks. I knew the cufflinks were from Cartier because I had given them to him several years ago.

He and I were practically brothers. We had grown up together. My parents were good friends with his parents, but mine were often traveling and out of the country. All concerned thought that such a nomadic lifestyle was ultimately not in my best interest and

that I take up permanent residence at the Dodges'. There had been plenty of space in their Fifth Avenue apartment on the fourteenth floor overlooking Central Park. I slept in the same room as Johnny and went to the same schools. I was considered a semi-Dodge, which Johnny would often point out carried certain privileges but, just as importantly, carried certain asymmetric obligations that demanded my immediate involvement, even now, years later.

Now, I wanted to shut the door, but I didn't. I knew that he would only keep knocking or ambush me when I attempted to leave.

"And a nice hello to you, too, Percy," said Johnny. "Now, I know you're waiting for breakfast. Not to worry, it'll be up in a minute. I sent the order back and added some things because I'm joining you. We have a lot to discuss, and there's a car waiting downstairs, but we'll get to that in due course."

"We're going somewhere? Only to the airport to catch my afternoon flight back to California."

"Yes, yes, of course." He smiled at me, gave me a light slap on my shoulder by way of a hello, and then began rubbing his hands in anticipation as he looked around. "Nice room," he said, changing the subject.

Johnny could be so infuriating. He knew just what to say and what to do to get me to go along with his schemes. He always took advantage of my sense of obligation to him and his family, and I was sure this time was no exception.

"Johnny, I don't mean to pry, but how exactly did you manage to know I was here?"

"The concierge. He's on the Dodge family payroll, as if you didn't know, but I'm very glad he is, and you should be too."

"Glad?"

"Yes, very glad. I'm saving your bacon."

"Oh God."

I knew right then the situation was worse than usual. The

magnitude of the difficulty Johnny was involved in was in direct proportion to how much he thought someone else was at fault.

“None of this ‘oh God.’ You think that I have a big problem because I’m blaming you. Rest assured, you have a problem too. Think back to the last time you were up at Rhinebeck.”

Rhinebeck was the name of the town in Dutchess County where the Dodges’ hundred-acre estate was located, situated on a high bluff overlooking the Hudson River. Johnny and I called the estate Rhinebeck. We would often visit during school vacations, and in later years, it became a refuge on weekends.

Johnny took off his jacket and laid it on the bed before sitting down in one of the chairs facing the window and waited for my response.

“The last time I was at Rhinebeck was with you quite a few years ago. Frankly, my memory’s a bit hazy.”

“Of course it’s a bit hazy. You were in an alcoholic stupor for much of the time, and I must admit, so was I, but that’s beside the point. Do you remember anything about you and me drinking a couple of bottles of Château Lafite?”

Rhinebeck did have an outstanding wine cellar into which Johnny and I often descended when no one was looking.

“Lafite, yes, they were very good, if memory serves. In fact, they were positively outstanding. I remember your delight when you discovered those two bottles hidden in the back of the cellar. We consumed both, one after the other, and you kept repeating that the wine was fit for the gods.”

“Well, that may have been the case, but do you remember the vintage? Think carefully.”

I thought for a moment and said, “Unfortunately not, but I do recall you saying that we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it, should our pilfering be discovered.”

“Too bad you don’t remember the year because I don’t either, and I’m afraid that the bridge may now be before us. Let me

explain. The parents have enjoyed quite a number of years of wedded bliss, as you know, and have an important anniversary coming up. They decided to celebrate the occasion with an intimate dinner for a select number of houseguests this weekend. You're invited, by the way. I managed to mention to them that you might feel slighted if you weren't, since you were in town and are family — or semi-family, at the least."

Johnny reached into his breast pocket and placed a small envelope made from thick cream-colored paper on a side table. I recognized the writing of Mrs. Dodge's secretary. "Your personal invite, as I know how you get when I simply say you're invited."

Before I could protest, the bell bonged, and Johnny jumped up to open the door. Two breakfast carts were wheeled in, and what looked like a veritable feast was set up in short order. The problem must be impressive. Johnny was pulling out all the stops.

Johnny thanked the waiters and passed them a couple of bills. "Keep the change," he said and hustled them out the door.

I grabbed a piece of toast and a cup of black coffee and looked over my eggs Benedict. "Okay, Johnny, you have me seriously worried. What gives?"

"Ah yes, I'll be getting to that. But first, let's dig in."

"Johnny!"

"Okay, okay, but I'm starving."

He poured himself a cup of coffee and grabbed a piece of toast with bacon, which he munched on between sentences. I ate and listened.

"A number of years ago the parents decided to lay away a couple of bottles of Château Lafite 1959 to be opened on a very special anniversary. Knowing how outstanding this wine was, they hid them in the back of the cellar at Rhinebeck. It was their secret, but last week I overheard them talking about their little stash. Well, imagine my horror when I found out that those bottles were not

kept under lock and key in New York, as they should have been, but hidden in plain sight where they could be discovered. They expect to drink what has been considered one of the finest vintages of Château Lafite ever created this Saturday night at dinner. I can barely conjure up in my mind the surprise and outrage they'll feel when they find out that those two bottles are missing — consumed some time ago by none other than you and me."

"I see. But did we really drink them? Perhaps we didn't, and they're still there."

"Too true, and therein lies the problem. We must be certain or come up with a plan to replace them."

"To replace them might not be too difficult," I said. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't there cases of Lafite in that cellar?"

"Indeed, there are, but not '59s, or even '61s, I assure you. Bottles of those years are very rare. The parents even wrote little love notes to each other on the labels. I've been almost sick with worry thinking that we might have gotten our hands on them and that our theft is about to become very public knowledge — this week of all weeks."

"Bad week?"

"Horrendous." Johnny stood up and began to pace. He was definitely bothered. "I've been carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders for the last few days. The monthly trading report generates on Friday, and Father will be getting a copy for his review over the weekend. This will not make for a happy moment. Sometimes I hate that we have a family business."

"Bad report?"

"Awful. I really screwed up. A trade leg got unwound at the wrong time, really pumping up my losses for the month. He's aware of some of them, but not last night's attempted arbitrage, which really went south. He'll not be in a good mood after he gets the report. Add to that the missing wine, which they've been

looking forward to for years, and my promising career could be flushed down the toilet.”

Johnny made his way over to the window. He parted a curtain and looked out as if to distract himself. I knew from experience we were coming to the crux of the matter.

“And then there’s the matter of Brunhilde,” he whispered.

“Brunhilde?”

“Yes, Brunhilde. Bruni for short.”

He turned away from the window and sat back down in his chair. He sighed and began to nibble nervously on more bacon. I let him take his time. At last, he stopped and looked at me.

“To add to my woes, Mother wants grandchildren and is eager to see me marry. She’s put forward Brunhilde as a possible match. Not that she can force me. It’s the twentieth century, after all, but she’s starting to ratchet up the pressure as only mothers can. The whole subject is starting to get contentious between us. I know she’ll lose patience completely if this latest gambit of hers should fall apart. To give you an idea of what’s involved: Brunhilde’s parents are Baron and Baroness von Hofmanstal. Very suitable and very rich. Mother has invited the three to Rhinebeck as houseguests for the special dinner and a look-around this weekend.

“Brunhilde, according to Mother, is extraordinary and able to stop traffic, which is the good news, and of which I have no doubt. The bad news is the mere thought of settling down with anyone makes me very nervous. I had a tarot card reading once, to say nothing of several other attempts at divining my marital future, and all have said the same thing with complete certainty: don’t. One went so far as to say that a planetary disturbance of cataclysmic proportions might result and pleaded with me on hands and knees to never marry. I know you think that’s a bit overly dramatic, but the incident affected me greatly, and I have, to date, avoided any such entanglements, with happy results.

“Besides, I fall in love far too easily, and that’s always been my problem. I see no indication that my character has changed, or will any time soon, so I’d rather forego matrimony at all costs. My intention is to carry forward with my resolve, but I don’t know if I can withstand a beautiful girl, my mother’s machinations, and assured future great wealth for any extended period — hence, our conversation.”

“Why, Johnny, that’s quite a statement. I’m impressed with your astute self-observation. You never cease to amaze me.”

I drank more coffee. The breakfast was having its effect, and the fact that Johnny was being so candid had softened my determination to resist at all costs accompanying him up the Hudson to Rhinebeck. The house’s stately beauty cast a soft focus over much of my memory, but I knew that interspersed among the long interludes of tranquility and happiness were disturbing periods of disquiet, and more than one instance of terror that prevented me from simply acquiescing.

“Yes, even I can occasionally be aware of my own shortcomings. But there’s once again more to it. I may have run into Brunhilde before, and meeting her again might prove to be extremely awkward.”

“Oh yes?”

“Oh yes, indeed. I’m pretty sure I’ve met her. I mean, how many Brunhildes does one happen to run into who have black hair and electric-blue eyes and are called von-something? I never did get this woman’s last name fully. I’d really like to forget that meeting. I place the blame squarely on that damn Robert the Bruce.”

“The fourteenth-century Scottish king or your white bull terrier?”

“The dog.”

“You told me that he was permanently banished to Rhinebeck. I take it this has something to do with that?”

“It does.” Johnny got up, sat back down, and sighed deeply. “I’ve

told this story to no one, and I impart it to you in strictest confidence only because if this is the same Brunhilde, you can understand my predicament.”

“I’m listening.”

“A few years back and very early one morning, I took Robert across the street to Central Park for a walk.

“I was going out with Laura Hutton at the time. She was very into dogs, so I purchased the young Robert the Bruce to impress her. I had no idea the breed was so damned pigheaded and ate anything that was not tied down. I mean, buying that dog was like jumping off a cliff and figuring that something would be worked out on the way down. I had no idea what I was doing.

“The creature was obsessed with tennis balls. I always carried a couple to throw and give him some exercise, along with one in reserve to help leash him when I wanted to return home. Of course, the little bastard would play coy and wait a few yards out, looking at me with those beady little eyes until I walked over and pried the damn thing out of his jaws. I’d utter a prayer that he wouldn’t remove my hand in the process as he tried to get a better grip. I also had to be quick at firing the ball off again, or he would snap it out of my fingers with those teeth.

“That particular morning, we were playing fetch when up walks this absolute knockout with two yellow labs. She proceeded to let them off the leash and stood close to me. She asked if the bully was my dog and what its name was — that sort of thing. She looked my age, my height with black hair, wonderful clear pale skin, and the most electric-blue eyes I’ve ever seen. She was positively breathtaking, so much so that Robert went right out of my mind. He’d been waiting a few yards off, gnawing on the ball, expecting me to come get it. I’d normally respond rather quickly because left to his own devices, he’d pop the damn thing with his teeth and then rip it to shreds. This time, he flicked the ball in my direction, hoping to get my

attention. But one of the other dogs intercepted and ran away with it.

“Well, this turned into a good-natured rumpus, with dogs bounding and sprinting here and there. We continued to talk and look up every now and again to see if everyone was behaving. I was facing the dogs, and she had her back to them when Robert decided that this amount of excitement had stimulated him to the point that he needed to relieve himself. He hunkered down while the other two dogs swirled about with the ball. Everything seemed normal until I noted in the back of my mind that he was taking an inordinate amount of time. I wondered what he had been eating lately. He was some distance away, but the color of what he was producing appeared decidedly green, and that was odd.

“While I was watching, one of the dogs flicked the ball to Robert, who momentarily paused what he was doing and lunged for it, in spite of not having completed his business. He then proceeded to perform several ‘run, stop, and hunkers’ while the other two dogs tried to get the ball away from him. The more times he did this, the longer the greenish, brown log became. By now the length was such that even a Great Dane owner would have been astounded, and still it continued. I grew uneasy, but I was still captivated by the beautiful creature before me and spoke to her as if nothing was happening, while the more sensible part of my brain was beginning to register all this with some alarm. Her dogs started barking louder and louder as they became more and more impressed with Robert’s Herculean performance. I, however, was hoping they would all just go away.

“I tried to keep the gorgeous lady looking in my direction, but the hue and cry proved too much. She turned to see what was going on.

“She gave a bit of a start and said in a breathless voice, ‘Is there something wrong with your dog? He seems to be growing something out of his bum.’

“I actually said, ‘Oh, that’s quite normal,’ or some such nonsense, to play the whole thing down, but truth be told, some perverted magician was performing some ghastly endless-handkerchief trick with my dog. The thing was now over three feet long, and to make matters worse, Robert had begun to bound and hunker in *our* direction. The ball now forgotten, the two labs followed, barking aggressively at the snakelike thing that flopped behind.

“I wanted nothing to do with him, but Robert had decided on this occasion to bring the ball to me.

“As he approached, the wonderful woman next to me suggested that I get a stick or something to help relieve the poor dog of whatever he was having trouble expelling.

“Her suggestion was not winning her any prizes, as my definition of complete mortification was being recalibrated upward by several orders of magnitude with each passing moment. I felt like I’d been thrown into some sort of horror movie, and I could not get my wits around what was happening — when I recognized what Robert was disgorging.

“Laura had been missing one of those expensive oversize scarves and was incensed over the loss. She said she was sure she had the scarf when she arrived for dinner the other night and that someone, probably one of the servants, had stolen it. Laura could jump to conclusions at the drop of a hat, but here before me was the answer.

“Robert had eaten it. Problem solved.

“I babbled some inane comment, but Robert the Bruce was now beside me. He banged the ball on my leg for me to take, when one of the woman’s dogs managed to stand on the end of the thing while Robert jumped up. A foot more was expelled, and the whole mess fell to the ground. The stench was horrible, but the relief was immediate. Robert now jumped an additional two feet in the air with the ball in his mouth to get my attention.

“Instinctively I grabbed it out of his teeth and hurled it as far away as possible. All the dogs streaked away.

“I looked down and said, ‘My God! Look at that. Hermes.’ I gazed, fascinated, at what remained of Laura’s scarf.

“Well, the person next to me interrupted my musings by saying, ‘You’re not going to just leave that on the ground? Aren’t you going to pick it up and throw it in the trash?’

“Of course I was going to leave the bloody thing there. What else was I going to do with it? Only I didn’t say that.

“She was beautiful, but she really was becoming a bit of a trial. All I wanted to do was flee. Under normal circumstances, I would’ve bolted and hoped that Robert would follow, but she stood in front of me, blocking the way, and continued to point out that I should somehow be responsible for the travesty that now lay before me. Whatever spark there was between us was rapidly disappearing. Giving in to her demands seemed the only course open to me.

“There were no trees nearby, so I stomped off to find some sort of stick to pick the thing up with and transport the remains to a trash can.

“Robert and the rest followed me with the ball. I took out my frustration by hurling it very far away indeed, and off they flew again.

“After several minutes of searching, I finally found a suitable pair of sticks and returned. I’d hoped that during that time she would have collected her dogs and gone. Instead, she had waited and then watched as I proceeded to gingerly pick up the gooey monstrosity, drop it, pick it up again, walk a few steps, and repeat the process. Eventually, I made it to the trash can and got rid of the mess once and for all. I almost threw up several times, but in the end, I succeeded. The damn thing was surprisingly heavy.

“Only after she had verified that I’d thrown the remains away

did she whistle — quite impressively, I thought — leash her two dogs, and depart.

“I called out to Robert. I think I screamed rather loudly, ‘You fucking bastard.’ She was at a distance, but she turned around, looked at me now with disgust, and then continued to walk away.”

Johnny paused and reached for some coffee.

“Good heavens!” I said. “That is embarrassing. Did she get your name?”

“I don’t remember ever giving it to her, but she might recognize me if we were to meet again. I’d certainly recognize her. Unfortunately, that’s not the end of the story. There’s this other part that sort of puts the icing on the cake.”

“I doubt you could make it any worse.”

“*Au contraire* — I had a chance to take a good look at the scarf while I was holding it at arm’s length, gagging every few feet, when I noticed that the silk was still in pretty good shape. There were no teeth marks or rips that I could see, and since this was Laura’s absolute favorite, and maybe because I felt a little guilty chatting up the blue-eyed vixen, I decided to rescue the remains from the trash and get it cleaned as penance. Complete insanity, to be sure, but I’d spied an empty paper bag in the same trash can that got me thinking that might be a good idea. Robert bounded over, so I put him on the lead and walked back to where I had chucked it. The bag was there, but the sticks were at the bottom of the trash can and out of reach. I contemplated what to do and concluded there was no way around it. I had to pick up the soiled scarf by one end with my bare fingers. I put Robert’s leash on the ground and stood on it to free up my hands and then lifted the horror out of the bin. I tried to hold the bag underneath with the other hand, only the scarf was too long. I was forced to let go and take a grip somewhere in the middle. Imagine my surprise when whom do I see coming back again but that witch with her two dogs. She stopped short, gaped for a moment, and then turned around. The

look on her face was one of such unmitigated revulsion and disgust that I hope never to experience anything like it in the future at any time, let alone by someone that good-looking. It was awful, just awful. Unbelievably bad.”

“So you think she may be the same girl?”

“Exactly. Let’s do the math, shall we? Let’s state as given: she’s the same woman, and meets the same man with the same dog again, but in a different location. What do you suppose is going to happen?”

“I’d hate to say,” I offered, “but you definitely have my interest.”

“Very funny. How much of a chance do you think he has of any sort of relationship, let alone a future marriage proposal?”

“Well, the odds of her being the same woman are pretty long, but I agree. If by some bizarre quirk of fate, the woman you are about to meet at Rhinebeck is the same one you subjected to that ordeal, I’d think you’re pretty much a nonstarter. By the way, if you don’t mind my asking, what happened to the scarf?”

“I eventually got the travesty into the bag, which I brought to a dry cleaner in a different part of town. I was forthcoming as to the fact that the article had been stained with some dog doo, which explained the bag tied with a string; however, I was perhaps remiss in that I didn’t reveal the full extent of the soiling. I gave the man a hundred dollars in advance for his services after telling him quite firmly to open the bag away from public view. I could do no more. The result was worse than mediocre. The colors seemed faded, and by the time I got it back, Laura and I were no longer an item. I sent Robert to the country where he could run around and attached the scarf around his neck by way of farewell. He still has it, as far as I know.”

“Well, if it’s the same girl, you might want to bury the thing. But what are the odds, really?”

“What do you reckon they are?”

“Remote. Very remote. Billion to one?”

“Normally, I’d agree with you, but my belief is that life has peculiar ideas about probability that are quite different from our own, to the extent that I would wager Brunhilde von Hofmanstal and Brunhilde the dog woman are one and the same. Besides, there was a calculation I saw once that concluded that everyone who lives to be over seventy years old experiences at least two one-in-a-billion events during their existence.”

“I do recall seeing that as well.”

“You get my point. This may be my one in a billion, and I think you should accompany me to Rhinebeck to see with your own eyes whether she is the one or not. What do you say?”

“Let me consider that for moment. I admit that originally I was not about to accompany you, but the situation is intriguing. What about my flight?”

“Not to worry — I’ve already taken care of everything. I canceled your reservation and have you on the company Lear out of Teterboro on Monday that gets you into Van Nuys at around three.”

“That’s more than a bit presumptuous...” I said with some alarm.

“I know. I know,” he said, raising his hands. “Look! I can’t put it any plainer. Please!”

Johnny went over to the window again. He stood there looking out.

There had been a desperation in his voice that was unusual and that concerned me more than anything he could have said. Johnny was never one to offer up his true motivations to anyone, at least not on the first go-round, or even on the second. He wasn’t telling me the whole story, this I knew, but I was concerned for him and found myself saying, much to my surprise, “Consider it done. I’m coming with you.”

“You will?” He turned back to me obviously relieved.

“Yes.”

“That’s the best news I’ve had in a while. I mean it. You’ll help me with the Lafite business?”

“Of course.”

“And with Brunhilde?”

“I’m not sure how I can, but I’ll try. What would you have me do?”

“I don’t know. Talk to her?”

“I suppose I could manage that, but I doubt either of those are the real issue, are they?”

He looked at me carefully. “It’s been so long that I’ve forgotten how well we know each other. You’re right, of course, but for that answer you’ll have to wait. Can you do that?”

“I can, if I must.”

“Then that’s settled. Best we get going. You’ll need to pack, and the car is waiting downstairs. Chop-chop.”

Whatever vulnerability he had shown was gone in an instant. He was always like that, but I knew he was troubled, and that was a rare day. He’d asked for my help, and that was rarer still.

Having decided to alter my plans and accompany Johnny to Rhinebeck, I quickly dressed, packed, and checked out of the St. Regis. True to form, a car was waiting downstairs to take us up the Hudson, just as rain began to fall.

Johnny and I sprawled in the back of a long black limousine for the two-hour drive. As our ride swished up Park, I asked him, “Has Rhinebeck changed much?”

Johnny took off his jacket and put his feet up on the jump seat before he answered. “It’s still the same for the most part. A few improvements in the kitchen — upgraded stoves, fridges, countertops — but pretty much as you remember it. Stanley and Dagmar soldier on together. Stanley still wears a morning suit and is every inch a model of the English butler, but he now has a new helper, a young fellow named Simon, who looks after the more mundane tasks, like polishing silver. Simon also helps at table. The bell pulls have been replaced by electronic ringers.

“Dagmar rules the kitchen and cooks as well as ever. She looks forward to dinner parties, so she can order up a flock of

help, but these have been less frequent. She has a permanent helper named Jane, who is also new. Oh, and Harry, the groundskeeper, is still there. He's as crusty as ever and drives a new faster fleet of lawnmowers. The grounds look immaculate; you'll see."

"You know, I still dream of toast at breakfast in those silver racks and Dagmar's famous Scotch broth for lunch. In my mind, Rhinebeck remains a mysterious and wonderful place."

"It's as mysterious as ever," said Johnny, turning toward me. "As you know, Great-Aunt Eleanor, who built it, was into fortunetelling, prognostications, witchcraft, that sort of thing. I think those qualities rubbed off on the estate itself. Besides, she snared my grandfather, old John B. Dodge, using those arts, according to some. Others have said it was because she was damn good-looking with a bosom unmatched in her generation. I'd be inclined to the latter, but you never know."

"Was Eleanor a fortune hunter?"

"Hardly. She came from a fine, upstanding banking family out of Philadelphia. Still, she was considered quite scandalous in her day. Churchmen were said to avoid her like the plague, either because she might tempt them down paths best left unexplored or because of her hankering for the occult. Which frightened them more was hard to say.

"After Alice was born and they endured several tumultuous years together, the two divorced, which did nothing to lessen Eleanor's reputation. Unfortunately, she passed shortly thereafter, and Alice took up in the scandal department, where Eleanor left off."

I nodded. "I'd say surpassed her, but I loved Alice growing up. She was always so glamorous."

"She was, but under the surface, her life was messy. Her marriages all bombed, mostly because she was either steeped in her research or gallivanting with someone else. I doubt there was a

man alive who could have hung on to her. Stories about her death continue to circulate although years have passed.”

“Ah yes. The famous ‘socialite dies under mysterious circumstances’ that sent everyone into a tizzy of speculation at the time.”

“Precisely, and the parents are still silent about what happened.”

“Do you think they know something?”

“I suspect they know more than they let on. I do try to get them to talk about it every now and again, but so far very little has been forthcoming. Mother changes the subject, and Father ignores the question entirely. He was quite close to Alice — maybe closer than anyone. I think her death is still a source of sorrow.”

Johnny looked out the window at the rain while I looked back at that time and marveled at how skillfully we had been kept in the dark. Johnny and I did not attend the funeral because such things were considered inappropriate for children. Years passed before we learned how sensational her death had been. It was not that we didn’t know her. We vacationed at her house and saw her regularly. We were in awe of her. In some ways, I was thankful we were left with only the happy memories of her alive.

Johnny stretched and said, “I don’t blame the parents for not discussing her death. It was a dark time. The press had a field day. ‘Plot thickens. Police called in’ — that sort of thing. The headlines were enough to sour anyone on the subject. On top of that, there was no will. Although much was spelled out in the many trust instruments that handled her finances, there was a significant bit not covered. I can hardly believe that her banking people didn’t force her to write one up, but such lapses weren’t particularly out of character. By the way, I hope I’m not boring you.”

“Hardly — her life has always been a point of fascination for me. I only wish I had known her better and when I was older. I could have appreciated her more, but I remember her fondly as

someone larger than life and always there in the background watching us.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. She was something to be reckoned with. I have done a little digging. Not much, but some.”

“And what did you come up with?”

“Unfortunately, not a whole lot, but some things you may not know. Her peers in the academic world considered her to be an exacting and brilliant researcher, but those who knew her socially thought she was careless in her personal affairs. The Mellon bank handled most of her money, but many things fell through the cracks.

“Father said that when he took over her finances after she died, there were huge clumps of pending bills, from parking tickets to demands for payment from Van Cleef’s for diamond earrings. She had plenty of money. She just didn’t have time for what she considered life’s boring details. He ended up having to sort out the mess she left.”

“I bet that took a while,” I said.

“It did. She was always losing things. She misplaced a husband or two — left one in some remote location. He took years to return to civilization.”

“I remember that. Arthur Blain?”

“Yes, that was the one. Alice married him after she divorced Lord Bromley. She cut loose from Blain just before the rainy season in some South American jungle. He was stuck for months along with his party. They ran out of food, drank bad water. There were rumors of murder and cannibalism. He contracted some tropical disease like dengue fever and almost died — took forever to recover. He came back a wreck, begging for forgiveness for something he had done on the trip, but nothing doing. Alice had moved on. She wouldn’t even see him. He later told tales that she had wanted to kill him over something they found. She stole it and left him there to die.”

“I had not heard that. Do you think that’s true?”

“From what I understand, the guy was a real amateur in the jungle expedition game, so leaving him behind might be construed in some circles as a death sentence, but the reality was she left with only a single pack. He had most of the equipment and the crew. It was well timed. About what they found, I know nothing.”

“I’m amazed that we knew so little about her. All that we were ever told was that she was ‘away’ for long stretches of time.”

“Archeological expeditions were a major part of her life. She knew her way around a dig. She had the money to finance and support projects all over the world. I only found out about all this much later.

“As to what caused the break with Arthur, I discovered nothing concrete. There was a story going around at the time about him dallying with a native, gender unspecified, which could explain it. I can understand her leaving him, but she had plenty of partners of her own before and after, so I can’t see her being all high and mighty and bugging out in a huff. She had a secretive side, so there was probably more to it.”

“I thought she was supposed to be very overt. The papers painted her as one of those ‘what you see is what you get’ types, and often scantily clad at that.”

“The papers portrayed her that way with good reason. After the Blain debacle, she became much less discreet in her personal life. Her many affairs drove Father around the bend because I think he admired her and hated that her appetite for sex and scandal overshadowed a monster intellect that few could see. Her antics reflected badly on her, according to him, although I think she used that as a cover.”

“A cover for what?”

“Her private self, her collecting, and her research, I suppose. She was a noted Egyptologist with several works to her credit; however, she’d rather have people perceive her as a fool and a

dilettante, when she was anything but. You knew her. She played on many levels.”

“I remember that she could read us like a book. She was always one step ahead of us in the prank department.”

“Exactly. Father tried to do his best by her in practical matters, but she was on a different channel than everyone else, tuned to what was happening in the outer cosmos as opposed to here on Earth.”

“That was the problem, I think.”

“Yes, and as a result, she left it to those around her to pick up the pieces. After her death, parts of her estate not covered by trusts had to be probated and became a matter of public record. The publicity frenzy started all over again. Father was the executor, and since he was the last surviving relative, most of the assets passed to him. I don’t know all the details. The parents can be very tight-lipped on financial matters and still are, but Rhinebeck, another apartment in New York besides the current one, an extensive library worthy of a major university, as well as a large chunk of financial assets passed to him and helped turn Dodge Capital into a much larger player.”

“I read about her in a magazine a while back. The article noted the suspicions surrounding her death, and how they keep persisting.”

“There are rumors of foul play still around. Father benefitted the most from her death, but he was away with mother in Capri when she died. The fact that he had more than enough money of his own should have silenced them, but still the stories continue. Alice had many followers who refused to believe she simply died.”

“Still, the circumstances were bizarre. She died at Rhinebeck in her bed reading an Egyptian Book of the Dead, according to one report.”

“Yes, and that’s true as far as I know. I remember one of the tabloids printing in big caps: ‘Socialite died from pharaoh’s curse.’

Mystery deepens.' The facts must have seemed pretty weird at the time. I can tell you what I know and my own conclusions, if you like."

"Please."

"She was an academic as well as a socialite. Reading such a text was not out of character. I'm sure classics professors read Homer in the original Greek for fun all the time."

"What about all the rumors of murder? No one told us about those for years."

"The police found nothing suspicious. The book, according to the papers, was supposed to hold a clue, but few knew what an Egyptian Book of the Dead really was. The mere mention of the title created a sensation and sold papers." Said Johnny.

"I'm still not sure I know what one is."

"Most people don't. In truth, there's no single edition of the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The practice of using one started out as 'for pharaohs only' but proved so popular, high government officials began using them. Eventually anyone who could afford to have one drawn up got into the act. Each book was custom-made, at least up until a certain point in time, when they became standardized and consisted of any number of spells, of which a couple of hundred are known.

"Some were to preserve parts of the body and aid a person to navigate through the underworld. Some allowed one to come forth by day, have power over one's enemies, and then return to the underworld at night like an ancient kind of vampire. There was even a spell to prevent one from consuming feces and urine."

"Splendid. Just what every mummy needs."

"The book was supposed to be placed in the sarcophagus of the deceased as a road map, survival guide, worst-case-scenario handbook, and travel diary all rolled into one so the dead could make their way successfully in the afterlife."

"Was Alice simply reading one?"

“I don’t know. The book was taken in as evidence and then returned, but as to where it ended up, no one seems to know. We don’t have a lot of information. Maybe she wasn’t even reading it. Perhaps it was placed there by someone as a message, or a warning. The later books were all about being judged for one’s transgressions.”

“That sounds kind of sinister.”

“It just depends on how you look at it. I could make a possible case for murder, or I could make a case for accidental death in that she was trying out a tricky spell and things went south. Regardless, it’s all speculation. For now, the death certificate and the police investigation found nothing suspicious, and that’s the only concrete opinion there is. That doesn’t seem to stop the speculation. Even in death, she can’t stay out of the papers,” concluded Johnny.

I sighed. “It amazes me that mystery still surrounds her, but given the public’s thirst for gossip and scandal, it’s no wonder. She had quite a library. Maybe it might give us some hint as to what she was researching.”

“The library has to be seen to be believed. Remember, that area was off limits to us growing up, and still is to some degree. There are parts that are kept locked, but where there’s a will, there’s a way, and we might have some time to do some research. I wouldn’t mind getting into the locked parts. I overheard Mother and Father talking, and they said some insurance appraisal people had reported they hadn’t come across anything like it ever. The library is still unexplored as an avenue as far as I know. I doubt it will give up its secrets on a quick once-over, but we should at least see the damn thing.”

“Excellent. That’ll help pass the time before everyone starts showing up.”

“For sure. And speaking of things that are ancient and showing

up like a mummy's curse, Maw is arriving on Friday. She'll be attended by her familiar, Bonnie."

"Good God. Your grandmother looked old when I first met her. I can't imagine what she looks like now."

"Trust me — she's very much alive, and more crone-like than ever. I suggest you gird your loins because dinners are going to be a source of entertainment not to be missed."

"She hasn't gone back to riding horses, has she?"

"Not lately. Since her last fall, several corporate boards have made giving up riding almost a condition for her continued participation. It was that or be faced with mass resignations. Healing apparently made her quite contentious."

"I should think so. Well, the house will have quite a collection: Maw, Bonnie, Brunhilde, her parents, your parents, you, and me. Are there any more coming?"

"I haven't a clue, but I'm hoping the mixture of guests will be so volatile that the trading report and the famous wine theft will be overshadowed by the fireworks that are bound to occur."

"Let's hope."

"I'm going to grab a nap. Wake me when we get there." Johnny closed his eyes while I thought about my spontaneous agreement to make this journey in the first place.

I felt nervous and unprepared for what lay ahead. The Dodge family had always tolerated, rather than welcomed, my presence — except for Johnny. He had fully accepted me into his life as a fellow conspirator from the start, and for that I owed him my unwavering support, and that explained my decision to some degree. But there were other considerations that gave me pause.

Rhinebeck embodied all that was precarious in my world as I grew up. The house was magnificent, but it had a dark side that would seep into my dreams and disturb my sleep, even now. Johnny, too, had sometimes been hard to bear. He was not always

as forthcoming as he might have been, and often, I was unable to pierce the shell he used to shield his inner thoughts.

Right now, I knew he was troubled, but by what, I didn't know. He was much like the house itself, wonderfully engaging on the surface, but beneath roiled dark currents. His was the struggle to prove himself in a family that gave no sympathy for failure. I had felt a similar pressure. There was rest at Rhinebeck but no ease. Performance was continually demanded, and only the best was met with even limited approval. I suppose this was harder on Johnny than me, being the son, yet here we were, once again, under scrutiny.

The collection of guests added another troubling element. Putting all of them in the same room was like dumping several large solitary wolverines into a single pen and standing back to see what would happen.

There was Maw, Johnny's grandmother, the matriarch. She had been born wealthy and had married three times. The first marriage had been to John B. Dodge, out of which came John Senior. Divorce followed, along with a substantial settlement. Each of her next two husbands survived only a couple years of marriage before they expired, whether from being worn out or simply being beaten down was unknown. With each passing, her fortune increased several times over. The last marriage had been to a savings-and-loan pillar of the Southern states and had given her a daughter by the name of Bonnie.

To the family, she was known as Maw. I called her Mrs. Leland, after her last late husband. She caused me no end of nervousness. She lived for strife, and I did everything and anything to avoid it.

The competition and skirmishes between John Senior and his half-sister were legendary. Maw played one against the other. Although rich in his own right, John Senior could not resist one-upping his half-sister, and Bonnie was determined to see that Maw's

fortune was left to her in its entirety as payback for the upset and inconveniences her half-brother had caused her. Part of Maw's estate included the apartment on Sixty-First and Fifth, where Mr. and Mrs. Dodge currently resided. Bonnie dreamed of the day she would be able to turn the Dodge faction out on the street once and for all.

Colossal amounts of money would change hands depending on who won the test of strength between the two siblings. Maw amused herself by coldly prodding whichever party slackened in their efforts to win the ultimate prize for being obedient and acquiescing to her every whim.

Although familial competitions and her wealth were of interest to her, they were not her passion. That fire had been reserved exclusively for her horses and her dogs. Those, she loved.

The woman I remembered was a formidable equestrian. Powerful horses with nasty dispositions that planned to toss their riders at the earliest opportunity would stand quiet, blowing with contentment, whenever she was in the saddle. I knew of only a handful of riders who could do that, and in that group, she had no equal.

To my mind, horses must have recognized her as their equine matriarch in another form. Not just horses but dogs too. At a command from her, a pack of yelping foxhounds would silence. Their tails would tuck between their legs as they milled about her in servile whimpering.

Animals obeyed her. Humans feared her and did the same.

She had once been an astonishing beauty, but a life of constant outdoor living had left her skin prematurely tanned and wrinkled, particularly her neck, like that of an old fur trapper of the American Northwest.

This aspect of her appearance had been my undoing when we were first introduced. Johnny and I had only just met and were getting to know each other. At that time, he was only too happy to take advantage of my prodigious gullibility. Johnny would tell me

tales about her. He had me convinced that if I touched her, I would be infected by an affliction whose symptoms would leave me horribly wrinkled and my limbs deformed, to be followed by a long and painful death. Adults and blood relations were immune. I believed him and dreaded the day when Maw and I would meet.

We eventually did. My parents were there. I was told to go up and shake Maw's hand. I stood before her and froze. I was prodded and cajoled while Maw sat watching me. Finally, I burst into tears and screamed out, "I don't want to turn into a prune. I won't shake her hand. I won't!"

Time seemed to stand still after that outburst. My parents were horrified. The Dodges even more so. Maw, however, asked for an explanation. I knew the answer, but in my panic, I couldn't speak. I was removed from the room in short order like a puppy that had just peed on an eighteenth-century carpet. I was sent to bed at one in the afternoon.

Johnny joined me in my misery shortly thereafter, consigned to the same fate. He said, "I'm sorry. That was not a nice thing to do. It won't happen again. You didn't tell on me to Maw, and that's important. Friends?" He stuck out his hand.

I thought about his offer and decided to take it. "Friends," I said. "But you should know that it wasn't because I decided not to say anything. It was because I couldn't."

"Well, you didn't, and that's good enough for me. Anybody else would've told on me. No one can defy Maw when she wants to know something, and you did the next best thing. You were like a stone. I couldn't have done that."

That was the first time that Johnny admitted there was something that I could do better. We had made a start.

Later, he told me that Maw had pulled him aside after my removal and extracted the truth. Before he was sent off, she whispered in his ear that in time I would either stand with him or against him and that he would be better off to have me as a friend

than an enemy. Enemies required constant vigilance, while friends needed none.

Then, and in the future, Johnny and I took such utterances that Maw delivered with the same respect given to oracles of earlier ages. Whether true or not, between us we thought she tapped into powers beyond those of mere mortals and that taking heed was the wisest course.

The relationship between Johnny and me changed permanently after that. He could and did ensnare me in many of his schemes, most of which caused me no end of trouble, but always as an equal and never again as the target.

Maw had treated us equally, and the entire household adopted this basis. Rewards and punishments were thereafter meted out in equal measure, regardless of who did what. We spent many an hour shoulder to shoulder, cleaning, mending, and generally helping the maids, butlers, and others who worked for the many Dodge households. We were no strangers to messy and tedious work, regardless of our sumptuous surroundings. We may have been born with silver spoons in our mouths, but unlike others of similar status, we sure learned to polish them, as Johnny would say.

Maw's presence was going to add fuel to an already incendiary mixture of personalities. One could only wonder what the von Hofmanstals would make of it, and whether they had any idea what they were getting into.

I hoped they had some spirit, or I was pretty sure they would be eaten alive.

We reached the Dodge estate close to noon. The rain had stopped, but the sky was overcast and dark with the promise of more rain to come.

We turned onto a private road marked by two granite pillars. The wet asphalt ran west toward the Hudson beneath a leafy canopy of trees. Large drops dripped and splattered onto the windshield as we passed beneath the branches until the trees gave way to a close-cropped lawn covered with mist. The car slowed as the main driveway entrance appeared on the left. We turned onto a gravel road that sloped gently down to a large rectangular roundabout. The large, gray fieldstone house took shape out of the low-lying fog that swirled about the grounds.

A three-story part made up the center portion, and two wings stretched out right and left. The one on the left was two stories tall, while the one on the right was only a single floor. This last had been Alice's residence and contained her sitting room and bedroom. To the left were the kitchen and servants' quarters and,

farther still, was another driveway that ran down to the garage. The main structure was capped with four chimneys.

“Johnny,” I said, “it looks exactly the same.”

“Yes, it does. Is it any wonder that Rip Van Winkle was supposed to have slept his way into history at the foot of the Catskills across the river?”

“No wonder at all. There is something timeless about this place, for sure.”

The car pulled up in front of a door of dark, polished wood beneath an ornate white pediment. The doorknob was a large brass lion’s head. As the car stopped, the door opened, and out stepped Stanley with a large umbrella, followed by a younger man whom I assumed was Simon, Stanley’s helper, with another.

Stanley wore a morning suit consisting of a dark coat and gray trousers along with a light gray vest and dark tie. He was a tall man of indeterminate age — sprightly, knowledgeable, and extraordinarily silent on his feet. His hair had turned whiter from the frosty gray I remembered.

I got out and greeted him. “Stanley. It’s a pleasure to see you again.” I looked into his eyes. They were as coldly blue as I remembered.

“Welcome back. It’s been some time.”

“It has. Good to see you.”

“Indeed.”

I stood aside and watched Stanley as Johnny put on his jacket, walked around the car, and stood next to me. Stanley had been a background presence during our childhood. Despite knowing each other for years, he and I interacted only when necessary, and when we did, he was always formal, coldly distant, and unapproachable. Whatever feelings he had, he hid behind a mask of almost scientific detachment. We had tolerated each other, and judging from my current reception, that would continue to be the case. He

rarely smiled, and we never shook hands, as was the custom at Rhinebeck.

Whatever Stanley's mood, Johnny was always pleasant and never seemed to mind. "Stanley, splendid to see you as always. How are you and Simon getting on?"

"Very well, sir. Very well, indeed."

"Excellent. Glad to hear it. Have you figured out where we're staying?"

"Both of you are at the top of the house, as usual. Simon will bring up the luggage. There will be some refreshments in the drawing room. We have been expecting you."

"Sounds perfect. Lead on."

We made our way up the front steps, while Simon put away the umbrellas and grabbed our bags. I didn't envy him carrying them up the two flights of stairs to our familiar rooms at the top.

We passed from dripping weather to the quiet interior of the house.

In my life, I have known few places where the immediate past was of no concern and the future did not seem to matter. Rhinebeck stood apart from the normal stream of time. How long it could continue to exist, I did not know, but I gave thanks to whatever liminal deity had preserved it until now.

I followed Johnny inside and looked to my left. There was the clock — an English longcase that was always the first thing I looked at when I arrived and the last thing I saw when I left. On its face, five ships of the line tilted back and forth, counting out the seconds on an angry ocean of blue-gray lacquer. Above the rocking ships were phases of the moon and constellations that moved slowly across the top dial. The loud click of the escapement and the moving ships would mesmerize me when I was younger. The clock chimed on the half of every hour.

We walked across the marble entrance to where a long table

stood with gladioluses in a vase and a marble bust of Alexander on a pedestal next to it.

Johnny and I walked over to him and patted his head. We thought the tradition gave us luck, a useful commodity that we often needed in copious amounts.

We passed through a set of double doors and into a large drawing room sumptuously decorated with Louis XV furniture. There were tapestries on the wall and carpets on the floor. To the right was a large Constable that transformed the room into that of an English country house. The french doors looked out on a lawn that stretched away into the fog.

Johnny walked over to a humidior that sat on a side table and took out a cigar just as a large white English bull terrier flung open the double doors with his head. They banged against the door stops.

“Ye gods, it’s that creature!” said Johnny, turning and putting back the cigar.

Robert the Bruce was obviously glad to see him. He bounded over to Johnny and stood looking at him. His tail wagged back and forth like a metronome marking out the time in tenths of a second. He looked up expectantly at Johnny. Johnny stared back and unconsciously patted his pocket.

He caught himself and said forcefully, “No. I don’t have a tennis ball. Forget it. Good heavens, I forgot about him.”

“Obviously he didn’t forget about you. By the way, where is that famous scarf?”

“I have no earthly idea. I’ll ask Stanley just the same — can’t have that thing turning up at the wrong moment.”

Johnny gave him a pat and rubbed his ears.

Robert gazed at Johnny and then flopped into a sphinxlike position with his legs stretched out behind. He seemed quite content to simply look at him. He ignored me entirely. Johnny gave him another pat and said to me, “I was going to offer you an

illicit Montecristo, but I doubt we'll have time to enjoy one at the moment. How about after dinner?"

"Absolutely, with some brandy."

"Of course."

We both sat down.

Johnny took out a cigarette as Stanley entered with two flutes of champagne on a silver tray. He offered one to each of us and announced, "Lunch will be served in half an hour. Scotch broth and Welsh rarebit."

Johnny said, "Splendid. We'll have a smoke, freshen up, and then we'll be ready for Dagmar's delights. By the way, we're the first to arrive, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who else is expected?"

"Your parents are arriving tomorrow, Thursday, along with Baron, Baroness, and Miss von Hofmanstal. Mrs. Leland and Miss Leland arrive the day after. Mr. Malcolm Ault is expected, but his itinerary is uncertain as to his arrival time, but I would expect him tomorrow late."

"A full house then. It's been a while."

"A while indeed — we are all looking forward to it."

"Excellent, and before I forget, we would like to peruse the wine cellar after lunch."

"Very good, sir. The key will be on the side table."

"One last thing. Do you happen to know where Robert's greenish Hermes scarf might be?"

"He sleeps with it. One doesn't dare touch it, as he seems quite attached to it. I have taken the liberty of moving his bedding up to the top floor, so he can be with you, which I believe is where he wants to be."

We all looked at Robert, who remained suitably inscrutable, gazing at Johnny with the rapture that only a dog can muster.

"I see," said Johnny. "Thank you, Stanley."

Stanley glided away and closed the double doors.

“Scotch broth and Dagmar’s Welsh rarebit. My favorites!” I exclaimed.

We sipped our champagne.

“I told Dagmar you were coming, and she remembered what you liked. Plus, tonight is roast beef with Yorkshire pudding. I figured we could explore the cellar, see what’s what, and then take a look at that library while no one else is around.”

“Good plan. Although it’s rather wet, I wouldn’t mind taking a look around the grounds as well.”

“Absolutely. I doubt we’ll see that much in the fog, but I like the place when it’s like this. We could be in England. We’ll take young Robert along.”

“By the way, who is Malcolm Ault? Have I met him?”

“Probably not. You would know if you had. Malcolm lives in England and has something to do with films. I don’t know exactly what he does, and I don’t think anyone else does either. He is tall. That’s his main claim to fame. Apparently, he can see over the top of everyone, and that has proved useful at horse races and directing. I have no idea what he’s doing here, but Father and Mother like him, so there you go. He’s quite well off, lives in Shropshire, and pops by whenever he’s in the States. He knew Alice, but how well I don’t know.”

“I never met him, then. Shall we head up?”

We drained our glasses and walked out of the drawing room, across the entrance past the clock, and up a broad staircase. Robert the Bruce brought up the rear. He wasn’t going to let Johnny out of his sight if he could help it.

The second-floor hallway led to the master bedroom and several guest rooms. The dark red carpet was thick and soundless as we walked to the far end, where on the right was a special door that was set flush with the wall. The door opened outward by means of a small, recessed handle. Before us was a narrow flight of

stairs that led steeply upward and ultimately to another door that opened onto a large common area. This was the top of the house. Light streamed down into the center of the room from a large skylight of frosted glass.

The common area was set down two steps and contained two comfortable armchairs with standing reading lights, along with a sofa and table. Set in each wall was a door. The one to the east led to the stairs we came in from. The one to the north led to Johnny's room, which overlooked the driveway. The one to the south led to mine and overlooked the back lawn. Each of our rooms had a distinctive circular window. Opposite the entrance were two doors: one to a large modern bathroom, the other to the governess room, if there was one in service. Along each of the walls were bookcases that stretched from floor to ceiling and were packed with books. There were the entire Tom Swift series, the Hardy boys, Nancy Drew, Edgar Rice Burroughs, encyclopedias, textbooks, an outstanding collection of fairy tales and myths from around the world, works on military history from Xenophon to Liddell Hart as well as novels of all sorts.

Johnny and I had spent hours and hours in this room simply reading. The space was set up exactly for that purpose.

I opened the door to my room. Simon had placed my bags on a rack at the foot of my bed. I looked at the desk with my ship models and then at the window. The room seemed smaller than I remembered but still marvelous in its sameness to when I was growing up.

I stepped out into the common room, and there was Johnny in his chair, looking at a large book on English landscape artists. Robert lay beside him on the floor. Just outside Johnny's door was Robert's bed, and sure enough, in it was a green, blue, and white Hermes scarf. It looked a little faded.

"Good heavens," I said. "There's the scarf."

"Yes, that's the beastly thing. Care to touch it?"

I shuddered. "Absolutely not." I went over to a book shelf, grabbed an old book on World War II airplanes, and sat down. "Nothing's changed. I can't get over it."

"Yes. At least that's the appearance. It has stayed in its own time while we've moved on. Still, it's great to be here and grab a few moments of peace and reflection before the coming fray. Which reminds me, the earlier we get into that cellar, the better. At least we might be able to put to rest *one* of my nightmares. Let's wash our hands and have some lunch."

The three of us were descending the main staircase when a gong sounded to announce that lunch was served. The dining room was accessed through the drawing room. The long, polished table was set for two. We sat down opposite each other, and Stanley entered with the soup.

I tasted some and said to Johnny, "This is heaven. It's as good as ever." At that moment, a smallish, bright-eyed woman in an apron appeared. I sprang up and gave her a big hug. She laughed and said, "You've grown a bit, and is that some gray hair I see?"

"Well, maybe. Dagmar, you look the same. I'm so happy to be here. You've no idea how much I've missed your cooking."

Johnny said, "He tells me that so often, he's like a broken record."

"Well, I'm glad you do, and it's such a pleasure to see you two together again."

She and Stanley went back to her kitchen.

We finished lunch, drank coffee, and smoked in complete contentment.

I asked Johnny, "Well, how about the cellar? Dare we find out?"

"Time we did."

"Then lead on. I'm ready for almost anything."

The cellar was entered by a concealed door underneath the main staircase. The three of us — Johnny, followed by Robert and me — descended the narrow stairs.

The light was dim, but what could be made out immediately was a series of wine racks that stretched for a distance to our left. To our right was shelving that held banker boxes as well as bundled and not-so-bundled objects.

“Johnny,” I asked. “I don’t remember all these shelves. Are they new?”

“Relatively new. Harry, the ever-resourceful handyman, built them to accommodate what continued to arrive after Alice’s death as well as make a storage space for things that nobody knows what to do with or dares chuck out. Take that antique lamp, for instance. Hideous. That being said, we should check out Alice’s section once we find those bottles. I doubt anyone has really gone through everything except on a cursory basis.”

“Really? How is that even possible?”

“Alice subscribed to many journals, magazines, maps, societies, you name it. There are boxes of the stuff. Besides, who’s going to go through all this junk? Father? Stanley? I don’t think so.”

“I could start going through it right now.”

“Not on your life. First, the wine; then, the treasure hunt.”

“Okay,” I said. “Lead on.”

We turned left and headed down the dimly-lit aisle. Racks of wine bottles extended from floor to ceiling.

Robert was leading the way when he froze. His tail quivered and stood straight up. He growled low in his throat. His lips curled up to reveal a set of truly frightening teeth.

“Rats or ghosts? What do you think?” Johnny wondered.

“I’ve no idea, but he seems a bit put out.”

“Go get ’em, Robert,” commanded Johnny, but just as suddenly Robert stopped his growling, and his teeth seemed to recede into his mouth. He wagged his tail and continued down the aisle, as if nothing had happened.

I looked at Robert. “I tell you, that’s one dog I wouldn’t want to meet in a back alley. I’m glad we have him around, but is he temperamental, or am I imagining things?”

“He’s quirky,” said Johnny, “and he scares the hell out of me when he does that growling-teeth thing. I just hope he frightens anything else, living or dead, that might be wandering around these parts. This house can be seriously creepy.”

“Tell me about it.”

The creepy aspect of our surroundings was a topic Johnny and I had long discussed as we grew older within its walls. Rhinebeck had a sinister side that we both loved and hated. The dark shadows by the cypress trees or the brooding marble statues could harbor all sorts of spirits, both friendly and unfriendly. The dark, silent emptiness could be a scary place to grow up in, and I was easily frightened.

Still, I had to acknowledge that this element had made me feel deliciously alive. I suppose Johnny felt the same way, although he had hidden it better than me. We had nonetheless played on each other's fears. Our games of hide-and-seek were just as scary for the seeker as the hider. The setting was too perfect, the possibilities too numerous. If ghosts existed, there was no better place for them to inhabit than Rhinebeck.

While scaring each other was exciting, frightening the daylights out of others was even more so.

As per usual, Johnny and I often went too far.

Nannies were a regular part of our upbringing but never a permanent fixture. We went through them on a continual basis. Often they left after spending only a single vacation at Rhinebeck, as was the case of a particular one of Russian extraction named Miss Ponchikov. She was a youngish woman. Mrs. Dodge liked her because she spoke several languages, including French, and hoped that her ease with foreign tongues would somehow rub off on Johnny and me. It didn't, but she seemed like a nice quiet creature, having passed a month's trial at the Fifth Avenue apartment and gained Mrs. Dodge's approval in the process.

Alice was still alive at that time and in residence at Rhinebeck. Johnny and I were nine.

The Miss Ponchikov incident began on the second morning of a school vacation. We had settled in on the top floor the day before.

Children were served breakfast at seven each morning in the dining room. Adults were served at nine.

That particular morning, we were alone with Miss Ponchikov. Mr. and Mrs. Dodge, as well as Alice, were in New York and would not be back until Friday night. We had finished eating our oatmeal when Miss Ponchikov asked if we had heard anything during the night.

Johnny and I looked at each other. The question was unusual simply because we were never asked anything as a rule. Johnny recovered and said, "No, Miss Ponchikov. Did you hear something?"

"Yes, I did. I thought I heard someone crying."

"It wasn't me," I said.

"It was the sound of a woman weeping late in the night. When I got up to find out, the crying stopped."

"Ah yes," said Johnny. "The parents told us not to talk about that very thing."

"Talk about what very thing?" asked Miss Ponchikov.

I wasn't sure where Johnny was going with this, but I followed his lead and hissed, "You're going to get us in trouble, if she finds out."

"Finds out what?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Ponchikov," said Johnny. "I shouldn't have said anything. It's about a previous nanny. We were told specifically not to mention it. It's not suitable for children."

While fishing for sailfish or marlin, we had been taught to release the drag on the big Penn Senator reels and let the bait drop after an initial strike. A big fish would turn back and swallow the bait if it appeared incapacitated, allowing the angler to set the hook in earnest. One had to be patient.

We waited to see if she took the bait. Miss Ponchikov looked like she was about to say something. Her spoon paused halfway to her mouth before she continued eating, and the moment passed. We finished our breakfast and moved on to our homework.

Johnny and I always had homework to do over vacations that usually required a fair amount of reading. Miss Ponchikov insisted that we study every morning. We set up our materials underneath the skylight at the top of the house, while Miss Ponchikov leafed through magazines or read her romance novel.

An hour later that particular morning, she asked how we liked our previous nannies. Our Russian fish was back.

Johnny sighed, got up, went to his room, and closed the door.

“What happened? What did I do?” she asked me.

“It’s nothing,” I said. “He’ll recover.”

“Was it something I said?”

“Miss Ponchikov, I’m really not supposed to talk about the previous nanny. Please don’t make me.” I looked at her imploringly.

Johnny opened his door. He carried a handkerchief and sat back down. He looked like he had been crying.

“Are you all right?” Miss Ponchikov asked him.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“What’s the matter?”

Johnny turned to her and told her, “I can only talk about her if you promise me from the bottom of your heart not to mention this to anyone. Do you promise me, Miss Ponchikov?”

He looked her in the eye, a little blond boy with blue eyes and a sincere expression.

Miss Ponchikov put her hand over her heart and said, “I promise.”

The hook was set.

Johnny sighed. “She was a nice woman. Her name was Tabetha Tinsley...”

I wondered just how he could possibly get away with a name like Tabetha Tinsley. The name was just too preposterous, but Johnny always said that if you are going to tell a tall tale, be outrageous, because the bigger the lie, the more ornamentation it will hold. He was only being true to form.

Johnny proceeded to spin Miss Ponchikov a story of a well-bred woman betrayed by fate. Her lover had disappeared under mysterious circumstances. She was forced to take care of children to make ends meet.

Miss Ponchikov sat and listened in enraptured amazement, her society magazines and romance novel forgotten.

I wasn't sure which plot line Johnny was following, but I knew that few could withstand the sight and words of an angelic little person telling a story far too grown-up for him to imagine, with an innocence and sincerity that would set any heart aflutter.

Little did others know of the masses of books of all types we had consumed within these very walls. We may have been small, but we were quite well read.

Miss Ponchikov, however, was Russian. She came from a culture that lionized wealth and power, believed strongly in the supernatural, and was superstitious by nature. At Rhinebeck, she was surrounded by riches and status in abundance, along with something mystical that was peculiar both to the location and the house. I never doubted its existence. I just never knew what to call the presence I felt. Although not necessarily malevolent, I thought that whatever it was could change its mood quite easily.

My mind returned just as Johnny was wrapping up with a bit about the luckless nanny having received a mysterious letter. She learned the fate of her former lover. He was dead. She was undone. Johnny told her how he, little Johnny, had tried desperately to comfort her, but in the end, the heartbreak proved too much. She took her own life by hanging herself in this very room from the iron ring that hung from the skylight. The tragedy had broken his little heart and seared his soul. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Miss Ponchikov held him and rocked him in her arms. Her eyes were wet.

I thought the whole charade was a little thick, but I had to give him credit. Johnny was always gifted. How else could he get people to fork over millions of dollars today and thank him for the privilege?

Once his tears had dried, Johnny quietly explained that the

sobbing of her ghost was what she had heard. He had heard the weeping too but didn't want to say anything.

Into this pregnant silence, I injected, "Johnny, if the folks find out that you told Miss Ponchikov about her, we'll be roasted."

Miss Ponchikov said, "No, this will be our secret. I will tell no one." She smiled but appeared a little pensive.

I had no idea what was going through the woman's head, but I could tell the tale had affected her. She stared at the ring in the center of the skylight. She got up and went to her room for several minutes.

My experience even then was that people, including myself, did irrational things when they were afraid. The seed had been planted, and I started to form the opinion that we had once again gone too far, and that this might all end rather badly. She believed what Johnny said. I had no doubt. Her ready acceptance and subsequent unease cast light upon her mental state, which I thought was more fragile than she let on. Although she was an intelligent woman, historically, the display of innocence has fooled far more souls than the appearance of guile, and Johnny looked like an angel. Besides, she was in the presence of a master, even if he was only nine years old. She had been thoroughly taken in.

Later, when Johnny and I were alone, I scolded him. "Johnny, tell me we are not doing the hanging maiden trick on her."

"Precisely! We just need a wet and stormy night. I looked at the forecast, and something suitable is coming up in a couple of days. She bought the whole thing — hook, line, and sinker."

Johnny was thrilled with his performance. There was just no talking to him. He chortled and cackled, the very picture of self-satisfaction. I shook my head.

The days leading up to that memorable night were filled with eager anticipation. I too got caught up in the excitement. Alice and Mr. and Mrs. Dodge were due to arrive on Friday. We had the run of the house.

In a previous vacation, we had discovered a mannequin tucked away in an upstairs closet that now found itself in Johnny's closet. It looked quite lifelike if one squinted one's eyes and used a bit of imagination. To this we added a purloined wig of long black hair, compliments of Alice.

The item had been left out one day in the laundry room. Alice's reputation of being only slightly less powerful than Morgan le Fey in the intuitive sorceress department meant that anything belonging to her was pretty much out of bounds. The wig was an exception simply because it was left in an area of the house she did not frequent.

We collected other materials, including a serviceable hangman's noose that both Johnny and I learned to tie one summer, as well as some old sheets.

To keep the presence of ghostly spirits firmly in mind, the next couple of mornings, Johnny asked Miss Ponchikov if she had heard anything the night before. Miss Ponchikov replied each time that she was not sure. She appeared to be sleeping badly. Johnny told me that he had thumped about in the wee hours and even went so far as to do some chain-rattling. He almost got caught when she flung open the door to her room and called out.

I suppose I contributed to her unease shortly thereafter, when I knocked over a lamp on my way to the bathroom in the middle of the night. I saw the light go on underneath her door and fled to my room. I leaped into bed and feigned sleep. A few moments later, my door quietly opened. I slit my eyes and made out the drawn face of Miss Ponchikov looking in on me, illuminated by the moonlight streaming through my window. I breathed regularly, and the door quietly closed.

The next morning, I mentioned to Johnny about the fact that Miss Ponchikov appeared to be a little unstable, but Johnny had a full head of steam and said her precarious state would make the

whole trick even more memorable, which proved remarkably accurate.

During our study time, Johnny would occasionally sit up straight and appear to be listening intently.

“Vut, vut is it?” Miss Ponchikov would ask, her Russian accent more pronounced as her unease grew under both the steady pressure of Johnny’s ministrations and the house itself, which could take on a sinister aspect starting in the late afternoon. This attribute increased in strength as darkness fell and mist formed outside the windows and obscured the grounds. We were, after all, completely alone, except for Stanley and Dagmar, who slept in a different part of the house, along with the rest of the staff. Harry had a room over the garage. The isolation could unsettle even the most stalwart soul.

Friday morning, the air hung close and unmoving. Miss Ponchikov complained about the weather, while we prepared ourselves for that night’s festivities.

Mr. and Mrs. Dodge arrived at three.

We waited out front along with Stanley, Harry, and Miss Ponchikov. Johnny and I both gave them a big hello, said we were enjoying ourselves, and that Miss Ponchikov was very pleasant.

Alice arrived at four. She loved to drive, so she rarely used a chauffeur.

All of us, including Mr. and Mrs. Dodge, were outside to greet her. Her dark-green Jaguar convertible with the top down crunched toward us and rolled to a stop. She shut down the car and stepped out.

She was a striking woman in black slacks and a white shirt. Her hair was jet black and cut short. It contrasted with her pale skin, which set off eyes so dark they could be mistaken for black as well. She exuded energy, command, and sexuality that drove both men and women mad. All of them were either in love with her or hated her. Johnny and I were simply in awe.

She gave us kisses, hugged Mr. and Mrs. Dodge, flung the keys to Harry to get the bags and put away the car, gave a warm hello to Stanley, and proceeded to skip up the stairs, when she stopped in her tracks. She turned toward Johnny and me and asked, "What have you little men been up to?"

Johnny gurgled, while I gawked. She had that sort of effect on us. We were saved by a low rumble in the distance. She looked up at the sky and said, "There is a delicious storm coming. You boys aren't afraid of a little thunder, are you?"

We said, "Oh no," in unison.

She laughed and disappeared into the house in a flash.

Johnny and I breathed a sigh of relief. We were seconds away from telling her everything.

By dinnertime, which for Johnny, Miss Ponchikov, and me meant six, the threatened storm was still hanging in the distance with furious rumbling that often went on for minutes at a time. The sound was like distant artillery, not loud but unmistakably present and ominous. Miss Ponchikov was nervous, whether because of the approaching storm or the presence of her employers, I did not know. Her Russian accent was even more in evidence, and she clutched a rosary of pale amethysts as a constant companion. We would hear the mutter of her prayers as they slipped out between her lips at odd moments.

Rain was falling when we went to bed at nine. By ten, it was pouring, and by eleven, Johnny was at my door. The storm was approaching in earnest, and the electricity was out. We dragged our maiden into the common room as lightning flashed above our heads and illuminated us through the skylight. Thunder followed four to five seconds later. A big cell was about a mile away. Normally I would have been a frightened wreck, but our preparations kept me focused. By the time we had finished, it was close to midnight, and the storm was on us. Rain drummed on the skylight with a roar as lightning coruscated across the sky. The

plan was simple: to wait for a huge flash of lightning and for me to scream as loudly as I could and then to cut it off abruptly.

I was wondering when to begin when there was a simultaneous flash and peal of thunder that was so loud I was scared in earnest. Miss Ponchikov's door flew open, and I screamed. In the flickering light, Miss Ponchikov looked positively awful. She was in a long white nightgown tied at her neck. Her hair was sticking out in all directions. Her eyes were so wide I thought they would fall out at any moment. I heard a quick intake of breath as Johnny let loose a scream that put mine to shame. Her eyes looked upward in her appeal to the heavens and noticed the hanging lady swinging from the skylight. She grabbed her face with her hands and, in that moment, lost her mind completely. She gave out a shrill, keening sound like an animal and then bolted down the stairs. She was in the grip of a panic so profound that she was discovered at the end of the driveway by Harry, whom Mr. Dodge had ordered out after her. Apparently, she had almost knocked over Johnny's parents as she flew down the stairs, before she flung open the front door and disappeared into the night. They admitted they felt terrible because they too had screamed in fright when they saw her ghastly appearance in the light of a candle they were holding as they climbed the stairs.

After Miss Ponchikov's abrupt departure, Johnny and I decided that prudence dictated we hide away our creation before we were visited by parental authorities. The storm raged but was forgotten in our haste. We were not sure how much we were responsible for what had happened, but the less evidence on hand seemed the wisest course.

Mr. Dodge came up shortly with a flashlight. We ran to him and made our way downstairs. The family gathered in the drawing room, which was lit by candles, as Dagmar put on a kettle in the kitchen. Alice and the parents were still dressed, having not yet gone to bed, while we were in our pajamas. Alice wrapped us in

blankets on the couch. Miss Ponchikov was discussed in hushed voices. Before long we were fast asleep.

The next morning broke wonderfully sunny and clear.

Dagmar took care of us at breakfast. Alice, the parents, and Miss Ponchikov were nowhere to be seen. Dagmar informed us they were dealing with the authorities. We had no idea what that meant exactly, but the implications sounded bad. We were good as gold, knowing that our doom was approaching with each passing minute.

The adults arrived, and we were summoned to appear before them. We had discussed our likely fate thoroughly before this, with no consensus reached, since we had sailed into uncharted waters.

It was Mrs. Dodge who told us that Miss Ponchikov would not be back. She apparently had a history of nervous breakdowns and should not have been looking after us in the first place. She apologized. We relaxed until Alice asked pointblank about what we knew of a previous nanny committing suicide. How she knew this, I don't know. She must have questioned Miss Ponchikov and gotten the story from her. She looked at us steadily. We cried. We howled. All to no avail. We confessed everything.

The matter was argued, discussed, and decided by the adults present, not for the first time regarding Johnny and me, that idle hands do the devil's work, and that we should occupy our hours with more constructive activity. We were turned over to Harry to work with him on the grounds. Further, our guardians decreed that henceforth Teutonic nannies should be the order of the day — the Russians being too mystical, the French too mercurial, and the English too dull.

That summer we were introduced to camp in the great state of Maine. By Christmas that year, Alice was dead.

My mind came back to the present. "I just flashed on the Miss Ponchikov incident. Do you remember it?"

"Oh, don't remind me. That was a bad one." Johnny stopped

and looked at me. “We really traumatized that woman. I think we even stopped all pranks for a year. No, probably only a few days. We were such little shits. That was also the last time we saw Alice.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.”

“Time has certainly moved on, yet here we are, and we’re *still* in trouble. Some things never seem to change. Let’s continue. Perhaps we can avoid some sort of karmic retribution now that you mentioned her. At least poor Miss Ponchikov didn’t die of fright.”

“Barely.”

“Yes, barely.”

Robert judged the coast clear and trotted on ahead. We followed and arrived at the back of the cellar where there was a table, a candle, an ashtray, and two chairs.

“We return to the scene of the crime.”

Johnny and I had sat in those chairs many times. We had consumed some excellent spirits and had gotten seriously blasted in the process.

“We had some good times down here.”

“That we did. Let’s get busy. Those ’59s were somewhere in the far rack, if I recall,” said Johnny.

I went back to the far rack, which must have held over a hundred bottles. They were Château Lafites of various vintages. We spent a good fifteen minutes looking at bottle after bottle of Château Lafite, but the 1959s we wanted were not among them.

“Crap,” said Johnny. “I was afraid of that. Looks like we’ll have to consult Stanley on this one after all. I was hoping to simply verify they were there, and that would be the end of it. No rest for the wicked, I’m afraid.”

“Okay, so let’s start exploring the shelves while we have the chance.”

We retraced our steps until we saw the shelves that Harry had built.

There were several banker's boxes in Alice's section as well as several stacks of magazines, periodicals, and auction house brochures. Robert had moved on down the line but stopped and rose on his hind legs to sniff and peer more closely at one box on the second row.

"Johnny, why don't you start with that one, while I take this one."

"Might as well. Robert likes this one."

I took down my box and lifted the lid. It was full of envelopes, mostly of museum and auction brochures, invitations, and correspondence to Alice.

"You really think nobody's gone through this stuff?"

"I should think not, but I don't know for sure. We could take the boxes upstairs and go through a few of them to see if we need to really tear the place apart. Hey, look what I have here."

Johnny's box contained a smaller square package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. He took out a penknife, cut the twine, and began to unwrap it.

Robert was interested as well. He stuck his nose in the box and began to whine.

"Back off, you mangy mutt. Let me see this thing."

Inside the package was a cardboard box in which lay a lumpy object wrapped in cotton cloth. Johnny unwound the cotton to reveal a worn figure of dark stone while Robert took hold of the cotton wrapping and began to shake the strip back and forth like he was killing a rat.

"I have no idea what this is — odd that it's down here," said Johnny. "There might be more things tucked away, so why don't you grab a box? I'll take one as well, and let's go upstairs." He put the figurine back. "I'll ask Stanley to bring the rest up to the top floor where we'll have some room to go through this stuff."

The three of us tramped up the stairs with Robert the Bruce bringing up the rear, the wrapping still in his jaws.

We arrived in the foyer, and Johnny put down his box.

“Take this upstairs if you can, while I go and talk to Stanley.”

I took the extra box. That was typical of our relationship, but I didn't mind. We had all afternoon, and there was nothing like a mystery to stir the imagination.