

SHADOW OF THE SON

THE SEQUEL TO *EYE OF THE MOON*

A novel

Ivan Obolensky

Special First Look - Three Chapters

Johnny Dodge and I had returned to New York after settling my affairs and moving myself and my forensic accounting practice out of Los Angeles. It was a Wednesday morning in the spring of 1977, and I was sitting in one of the client chairs in Johnny's office at Dodge Capital when his phone rang.

Johnny answered and then passed it across the desk. "It sounds like the baron, looking for you."

I took the phone.

"Percy?"

I recognized the voice. "Baron."

"Call me Hugo."

"Hugo ..."

"You need an office."

"I do. It's next on the list."

"Well, get it done. On another matter, meet me at 21 at 7:00 p.m. tomorrow. We'll have dinner, just the two of us. We have some things to discuss. Don't be late."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"Very good," he said and hung up.

Hugo was the Baron von Hofmanstal and my future father-in-law. He and I were technically on a first-name basis, but I tended to call him by his title. Hugo would correct me, but only sporadically. My addressing him as baron, I thought, stroked his already prodigious ego. He was, after all, small of stature and a little round, but then so was Napoleon. Hugo

looked like the former emperor and had a similar presence. He was at once charismatic and intimidating. He also had a cruel and violent nature. Hugo enjoyed dueling, hunting, deal-making, and crushing those who dared to cross him. As a rule, I was careful not to give offense, and with Hugo I was doubly so, but I had yet to formulate a consistent protocol as to when to call him Hugo, or when to address him as baron. It was one of many things that I was trying to work out as I wrestled with the fact that he and I would be seeing a great deal more of each other. Such a relationship was not without its advantages. For a start, there was his daughter and my fiancée, Brunhilde, or Bruni to her friends. I handed back the phone.

Johnny took it. “You were thinking of her again,” he said, looking at me across his desk. He was in his typical office attire, dark suit, cream-colored shirt, and dark blue tie with small white polka dots. His hair was golden blond and worn somewhat long, as was the fashion.

“I was indeed. You’re jealous, of course.”

“I don’t think so. Enjoying that future father-in-law of yours?”

“Okay, maybe not. Hugo wants to dine with me tomorrow at the 21 Club.”

“Just the two of you?”

“Just the two of us.”

“Excellent. Perhaps he’ll confess his darkest secrets, now that you’re part of the family—or almost.”

“I doubt it, but I’ll tell you what I can.”

“Make sure you do. On another subject—one I hesitate to bring up, but one I must, since it’s the next item on our list—the office. How would you feel about renewing our partnership?”

This was a decision that couldn't be put off any longer. Johnny was my best friend. He and I had grown up together in the Dodge household, where I was a long-term resident since my mother and stepfather were often abroad. We had formed a trading partnership, but that had imploded thanks to Johnny's grandmother, better known as "Maw" to the Dodge family, and in the corporate world as "The Crone." Johnny had worked out a deal with her whereby both of us had been compensated for her deliberate sabotage of our little enterprise. Since then, I had thought a great deal about renewing our partnership and had finally concluded that now was a time for new beginnings.

"All right. I agree. We give it another go."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. It was a happy time for both of us, other than the ending. But with the understanding that I continue my forensic accounting practice for now. My fees will hopefully cover the overhead while we gather assets. It's also a cross-selling opportunity."

"Agreed, but subject to change once we're established."

"Fair enough. Your dad will have to be informed, and he might not be pleased at losing you to private practice."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. Frankly, I could do with a chance to stretch out a little, and he would no longer have to worry about what I'm doing all the time. It could work for both of us. I'll broach the matter and get his agreement. He and Mother are heading up to Rhinebeck this afternoon. I could head up there as well, inform them tonight, and be back tomorrow?"

"Sounds good. As for the office, let's start with something functional and not too ostentatious."

“I would have to disagree. A good location and a sophisticated presentation can be quite effective in overcoming investor reluctance. Too spartan an appearance, and the public will think we’re operating on a shoestring and can’t afford their business.”

“Too extravagant, and we *will* be operating on a shoestring.”

“True. But I have some good news. Our old offices are available. How about I give the leasing agent a call and set it up?”

“All right.”

Johnny was reaching for the phone when another call came in. He picked up, listened for a moment, and asked, “Who’s calling?” After a pause, he said, “One moment” and put the caller on hold.

“I don’t know if you want to take this. The caller says he’s Bruni’s husband.”

“That’s unexpected.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Speak with him.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“No, but news travels fast it seems, and some things can’t be avoided indefinitely.”

Johnny passed me the phone and took the line off hold.

“So you’re Percy?”

The voice on the other end had a French accent and sounded far away.

“Yes, I am.”

“My name is Bernard Montrel, Bruni’s soon-to-be ex-husband. Listen, for I have little time. I harbor no ill feeling toward you, as unlikely as that may sound. I doubt there was much you could have done to avoid the position you’re in. I

was in a similar place. How dire it was I had no way of knowing. You face similar perils, which is why I tracked you down. Someone must say something. Trust no one in that family. Their loyalty is only to themselves. She will wrap you in silky threads and spin you round and round, before she sucks you dry. Remember, I had the courtesy to give you fair warning. *C'est tout.*"

The line went dead.

““Trouble?” asked Johnny.

“Without a doubt.”

“Why am I not surprised? Tell me.”

I repeated what Bernard had said. Johnny didn't answer right away but rocked back in his chair and looked out the window at the office building across the street.

“I think this qualifies as an ‘Iago’ moment,” he said at last, turning to face me. “There is poison in the man's words. If you were Othello, I'd advise you to ignore him completely, but you're not. You're my friend, and as your friend, my loyalty is only to you, irrespective of the state of your future marriage or other relationships. You may not like what I have to say. Should I continue?”

“Disliking what you have to say wouldn't be particularly new, would it?”

“I suppose not, but this is different. I know how I am when I'm involved with someone. I can barely see straight, let alone listen to reason. Speak against the one I love, and I struggle to contain myself.”

Johnny's love affairs had been a surprising source of trouble. They were incessant, tumultuous, and created endless difficulties for both of us. I was the one he turned to for advice, which he invariably misinterpreted, misconstrued, or plain ignored at critical moments.

“I understand,” I said. “I was always careful about commenting on your love affairs for that reason. We are different in that regard, but I get your point. It’s personal.”

“Remember when we first met the von Hofmanstals, and our heads were filled with suspicions about them?”

“I think I was more than a little paranoid at the time.”

“Indeed, but remember we were right in our initial assessment. The baron did want Alice’s treasures and was there to obtain them. The parents, on the other hand, told us more than once that they were good people and worth knowing. My suspicions were quieted, but, in truth, never laid to rest. Now, don’t get me wrong, I think Bruni is a good match for you, and I have a high opinion of your future in-laws, but they have their own agendas. Their family is not my family. And Bruni’s former husband presented no hard evidence other than his opinion, but if it were me, I doubt I would have expended the time and effort necessary to find you. Other than a genuine attempt to warn you, I can see no other motive for tracking you down. Would you agree?”

“It’s quite likely,” I answered. “Although I sensed some vindictiveness in his words.”

“There might be some of that. Talk to your butler and majordomo. If Stanley says Bernard’s claims are nothing, then dismiss them from your mind, and I’ll do the same. But should Stanley think there’s something to it, I’d definitely want to know what he would advise.”

“Perhaps this weekend.”

“Sooner is better. In fact, I recommend we drive up to Rhinebeck now. You can talk to Stanley, revisit your property, and I can speak with Father. After that, we can all have dinner together, and you and I can drive back tomorrow morning. Besides, there’s always Dagmar’s cooking to feed the soul, an

opportunity not to be missed. She might have some words as well.”

“Why now, when I’ll be there on Friday?”

“I’ll get to that. My further advice is speak to Bruni. Tell her about the phone call, but I think the chat with Stanley should be a private one. Not because I distrust her, but because it will allow a more free-flowing conversation that may not be possible this weekend when she’ll be there.”

“No Bruni then.”

“That’s what I recommend.”

I had some reservations about going back earlier than I had planned, but returning now seemed the better choice given the nature of the call.

“Very well. I agree. It would be a prudent move. That being said, I’m more than willing to welcome whatever von Hofmanstal secrets, machinations, or eccentricities exist. I made that decision when I decided to marry Bruni. It’s part of the package, and I accept all its implications.”

“That’s as it should be. More information has never been a problem. It’s the lack that causes difficulties, from what I’ve seen. You have a chance to lay any and all suspicions to rest, and that can only be good.”

“Or inflate them.”

“That, too, but, if it were me, I’d rather be forewarned, than not. Wouldn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“That’s settled then. I’ll get my assistant to arrange a car and make an appointment with the leasing agent. On another matter, which this last call brings front and center, you will be getting married, and our relationship will change. Both of us will have to adapt, and that may be hard. Whatever happens, I don’t want to become a pain or a burden to you.”

“I doubt that’s possible. We’re entering a new configuration is all, and since you and I are partners again, I’ll likely spend as much time with you as with Bruni. I’m not worried about that aspect, even if you might be.”

“I am, a little. Still, I feel better having mentioned it. Now, I’ll speak to my assistant and give you some privacy to make your call.”

As Johnny left, I reached over his desk and dialed the baron’s office. Bruni was his in-house attorney. A receptionist answered and put me through to my fiancée after a short wait.

“Percy, it’s been so long.”

“A couple of hours, but it seems like forever.”

“It does. Time slows when we’re apart. What’s up?”

“I had a couple of interesting calls. The first was from your father. He wants to meet me for dinner tomorrow at 21, just the two of us.”

“Lucky you. You’ll have the sole?”

“Since he’s paying, absolutely. I also had a call from your ex.”

“Oh? What did he have to say?”

With that question and tone, Bruni had switched to her professional mode. I repeated what he had said in full.

She paused for a moment. “Bernard is skillful. He’s managed to let you know that he accepts that he and I are done, while sowing a seed of doubt between us, hoping it will grow. He’s trouble, but we won’t have to worry about him much longer. You should also know that my family, your family-to-be, *always* has an agenda. There will never be a time when there isn’t something cooking. My father would go mad if that wasn’t the case. Both my parents like you a great deal, which means you’ll be part of whatever it is they have in mind,

and I want that as well. By the way, last night was delicious, but tonight I have to work. Expect me very late.”

“That may prove a benefit. I should also tell you that Johnny and I have decided to renew our partnership, but he wants his father’s blessing. John Sr. and Anne will be in Rhinebeck tonight as part of a long weekend. I thought I’d drive up with Johnny and return tomorrow morning. I’ll also have a chance to speak to Stanley, check out Alice’s apartment, and make any needed adjustments before you and I drive up on Friday.”

“I think that’s sensible. I also feel that a partnership with Johnny’s a good idea. You’re good for each other. Besides, I have to look over a monstrous business proposal before a meeting tomorrow. I might even sleep at the office.”

“At your desk?”

“There’s a bedroom here. It’s tiny, but there’s a shower, and a change of clothes.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“And I’ll miss you. I can’t wait to drive up with you on Friday. By the way, I wouldn’t read any ghost stories before bed tonight.”

“Not a chance. I intend to sleep like a baby.”

“Talk to you tomorrow. Love you.”

“Love you.”

I hung up the phone. While I waited for Johnny to finish making arrangements, I thought about Rhinebeck. Inevitably, that started the train of thought that had drifted in and out of my mind ever since I'd left. I wanted to savor the timeless beauty that awaited me, but I was uneasy. As the chauffeur-driven limousine had swept up the drive, I had heard someone calling out, imploring me to come back. The voice had been clear enough to cause me to twist and look behind, but as I peered back through the swirling fog in the car's wake, I had seen no one.

At the time, I had debated whether what I'd heard was real or my imagination playing tricks on me. Over the years at Rhinebeck, I had occasionally heard peculiar sounds or vague murmurings at the edges of my hearing in late afternoons. Whispers would move among the shadows in the drawing room, behind the curtains in the library, or pass me as I climbed the stairs to the top floor. I would turn, or follow, but always they moved off until I couldn't hear them anymore. I had spoken to Johnny about them, but he would shrug his shoulders and say, "I haven't heard such things. It could be your imagination, but maybe not. The place is strange, what can I say?"

Johnny may not have been able to confirm the things I'd heard, but he and I both agreed that there was something odd about the west wing where Alice, Johnny's aunt, had lived and

died. Growing up, we had entered her apartment only when invited, and such occasions had been brief and far between. After Alice had died and passed to places we could only imagine, we had sometimes felt we were being watched. A chill would settle over the house, and cheery spaces would grow dark and gloomy. The staff would be on edge and inclined to whisper. Even Stanley would be affected, his normal ghostlike service more tentative and unsure. Dagmar in her kitchen would snap at anybody who was moving slowly, which, according to her, was everyone.

Johnny and I never knew what caused such feelings, only that the house was unsettled and disturbed. We would be good as gold until the feeling dissipated, and we could gravitate to our normal antics with little to fear, other than being assigned more chores when we went too far.

From my first visit, the house had projected an aura of mystery and a brooding watchfulness. Deep currents moved beneath the surface. I remembered Rhinebeck's dark gray exterior looming out of the fog on a threatening afternoon in December just before Christmas.

Johnny had briefed me on the estate's many secret hiding places, but most of all, he had wanted to introduce me to Alice, his favorite aunt. Not only did she have an uncanny ability to thwart mischief, he informed me, but an alarming prescience that was vaguely comforting. He was unable to articulate such feelings at the time, other than to warn me to guard my thoughts, as he was willing to bet his aunt was able to read minds, including mine. I considered the implications and was more than a little intimidated from the outset.

If she could read my mind, then she would know how tentative my existence was, and how I yearned for a sense of belonging. She would also know the loneliness and the

darkness that lay within my soul, and that was more than I was willing to convey to anyone. I fretted over this as I endured the long drive to meet her.

We had turned down the sloping driveway to the squared roundabout that marked the entrance. I watched the front door open, and a tall woman with jet-black hair stepped out wearing a thin, cream-colored dress that seemed to defy the bleakness of the weather. She stood alone at the top of the steps as she waited. She smiled as the car approached, but for a moment I saw a flicker of something else. It might have been that she too anticipated our meeting with a sense of trepidation. I wondered at the reason. She knew Johnny and Raymond, Mr. Dodge's chauffeur, therefore that passing emotion must've been due to meeting either the new nanny or myself. That I could elicit such a feeling was inconceivable, but in that brief moment of vulnerability, my heart went out to her. I saw that she, years older and an adult, was as alone and fearful as I was.

As we crunched around the driveway toward the front door, I watched a man in a somber morning suit step out, drape a dark blue shawl about her shoulders, and then step to the side. The car stopped, but Johnny didn't wait for Raymond to open the door. He flung it open himself as the nanny squawked, and he dragged me along in his enthusiasm to be the first to introduce me to his aunt.

Johnny bounded up the steps with me in tow and announced, "This is Percy. He's staying with us."

The lady smiled and leaned slightly toward me as she held out her hand. Still caught in that precious moment of impossible connection, I stepped in close and hugged her waist. She laughed and said, "Whoa, little man. Here we do things a little differently, but I thank you just the same. I'm Alice."

I stepped back a little flustered, but as I looked into her dark eyes, they sparkled with a pleasure that seemed to focus only on me.

“My name is Percy,” I said, looking up at her.

“Yes, it is. And this is Stanley,” she said, turning toward the man in the dark suit next to her. Something passed between them, and then he looked down at me. I stuck out my hand, but he didn’t take it. I let it drop to my side. He examined me with bright blue eyes that could have hidden any emotion, or none at all. He didn’t speak but only nodded. And so Stanley, a few seconds after Alice, entered my life as I had entered into his.

“Dreaming again?”

I jumped. Johnny had entered and stood at the door observing me. I shuddered and said, “I was thinking.”

“Ah, yes. You do seem a tad jumpy. Tell me about that in the car. It’s out front.”

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LIST OF CHARACTERS

(in alphabetical order)

Alice: **John Sr.**'s half-sister. Formerly married to **Lord Bromley**, whom she divorced. She later married and divorced **Arthur Blaine**. Alice died under mysterious circumstances when **Johnny Dodge** and **Percy** were ten. She had no children.

Anne Dodge: Mother to Johnny and married to John Sr.

Arthur Blaine: Mining magnate and Alice's second husband, whom she divorced.

Bonnie Leland: John Sr.'s half-sister and **Maw**'s daughter.

Brunhilde von Hofmanstal (Bruni): Daughter of **Elsa** and **Hugo von Hofmanstal**. Works for her father as an attorney.

Cobb: Dr. Angus Maxwell-Hughes. Lord Bromley's doctor.

Dagmar: The cook at Rhinebeck. Married to **Stanley**.

Elsa von Hofmanstal: Wife of Hugo and mother of Bruni.

Hugo von Hofmanstal (the baron): Longtime friend of Lord Bromley and John Sr. He was briefly engaged to **Mary**, Percy's mother, before marrying Elsa. She and Hugo have two children, a daughter, Brunhilde von Hofmanstal and a younger son, who lives in Europe.

Jane: Kitchen staff member, who works with Dagmar.

John Sr. (John Dodge): Married to Anne Dodge and father of Johnny. He owns Dodge Capital, an early Hedge Fund.

Johnny Dodge: Grew up with Percy, son of Anne and John.

Lord Bromley: Former husband of Alice.

Malcolm Ault: Longtime friend of Alice, Lord Bromley, and the Dodge family.

Mary: Percy's mother and close friend to Anne Dodge. She lives in Florence, Italy with her husband, **Thomas**.

Maw (Mary Leland): Matriarch of the Dodge family. She married John B. Dodge, had John Sr., and later divorced. Her last marriage was to a southern banker, who died. She is the mother of Bonnie Leland. Known to the family as *Maw* and *The Crone* in the corporate world, she has the economic resources of a small country.

Percy: The narrator of the novel. He grew up with Johnny in the Dodge household.

Raymond: John Sr.'s personal chauffeur.

Robert the Bruce: English bull terrier formerly owned by Johnny Dodge and now owned by Maw.

Simon: Household staff member, who works with Stanley.

Stanley: The head butler of Rhinebeck. Married to Dagmar, the cook.