

EYE OF THE MOON

IVAN OBOLENSKY



ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *EYE OF THE MOON*

“Obolensky conjures a remarkably imaginative tale, seamlessly juxtaposing the quotidian and the magical in a way that renders the latter mesmerizingly plausible... Alice’s complex character powerfully emerges as the plot’s tonal center, a bewitching amalgam of moral strength, intellectual vitality, and a lust for life... ingeniously constructed... an engrossing tale of mystery and magic.”

-*Kirkus Reviews*

“... *Eye of the Moon* by Ivan Obolensky is a thrillingly eerie mystery novel with a Gothic ambiance and supernatural elements seeping through the storyline... a fabulously spine-chilling plot ...”

- Susan Sewell for *Readers’ Favorite*, 5 stars

“*Eye of the Moon* throws you into the middle of the story, in a perfect way. It’s gripping, intense, thorough. Everything I wanted in a thriller, and then some...”

-Nick Thacker, USA Today bestselling author, *The Enigma Strain*

“... *EYE OF THE MOON* is sumptuous in its description of white-tie dinner parties and sexual tensions with baronesses, and sharp in its maneuvering of several secret puzzles at once... The mysteries are finely woven together and readers must think fast on their feet... a gothic mystery of the finest order, *Eyes Wide Shut* meets Agatha Christie.”

-*Indie Reader*, 4.7 stars, IR approved

“... The surprising revelations and apparent coincidences come fast and furiously as the novel approaches its climax, but the groundwork was carefully laid for this intricate plot structure.”

-Bradley A. Scott of *Foreword Reviews*, 4 stars Clarion rating

“... By the page 30, or so, I was well ensnared by Obolensky’s captivating spiderweb. Richly nuanced, complex, highly readable, this yarn combines mystery, implied horror, the patrician class seen through a glass darkly, romance, and a wholly acerbic view of the inherent goodness (or evil) of man (and woman). *Eye of the Moon* is anything but an author’s ‘first work.... A stellar, highly auspicious opening to a successful career.”

-Hugo N. Gerstl, international bestselling author of *Scribe*

“As a reader, it felt as if this novel had been exclusively produced just for me... there’s enough humour, mystery, suspense, romance and adventure to satisfy even the most jaded of appetites. ... a gothic classic... a grand novel worthy of admiration and an extensive audience.”

- Carl Delprat, *Compulsive Reader*

“Ivan Obolensky’s *Eye of the Moon* is a house party mystery much in the style of Agatha Christie—without the body.... Readers have time to get to know the characters and the lifestyle they’ll do so much to protect. It’s like having brandy and a cigar in the library with Lord Peter Wimsey...”

-*BlueInk Review*

EYE OF THE MOON

A Novel

Ivan Obolensky

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Published by Smith-Obolensky Media, DBA of Dynamic Doingness, Inc.

1146 N. Central Ave. #316, Glendale, California 91202

(818) 660-6852

www.smithobolenskymedia.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017912304

ISBN: 978-1-947780-00-2

Publication date: February 6, 2018

Printed by IngramSpark in the United States of America

To Mary Jo, who started me writing.

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.

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 Dodge’s 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 house guests 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 house guests 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 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 think I ever said it, 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.”

“Actually, 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 and 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 trusts 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 luminal 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 started 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.

I managed to carry both banker boxes up the stairs without dropping them. Pausing for breath, I decided I might as well go down and get a few more rather than wait to have them brought up. After several solitary trips from the bottom to the top of the house, I had gathered six boxes. They lay in a row against the back wall, like I was doing a forensic analysis or trial preparation for a big case. I was glad I was having a chance to organize the search at the outset. If ever there was an example of the difference between Johnny and me, it was in what I was doing now.

I believed in results based on meticulous preparation, while Johnny was inclined to avoid what he considered unnecessary work. Johnny did put in the required effort when needed, but his greatness lay elsewhere. His strengths were in the performance, the presentation, his passion, and his ability to get others to do what they would consider either beneath them or beyond them. He was a master of persuasion. Growing up, I had admired him, but I had been jealous too.

Life for him had seemed so easy, while I stumbled a lot. When things got unbearable, I had fled. Of course, life is never easy for anyone, even Johnny Dodge, but it had taken me years to understand that.

I sat down heavily. My thoughts had drifted down into what I considered to be my dark place. Months had passed since I had last wallowed in self-pity and depression. As usual, the reason was the crash.

Johnny and I had been so close growing up, only to go our separate ways. The split had happened years ago and had been completely my fault.

We had both graduated from college and then grad school — he in economics and me in financial analysis. Over a round of drinks, Johnny and I had decided to create a partnership. Our rise had been spectacular. I did the analysis. Johnny executed the trades and handled investors. We leveraged everything and anything, and after five years we were on easy street. We had made a fortune — not a large one, but impressive nonetheless.

That next summer, I traveled to Europe on a whim, while Johnny held the fort.

I was in France when I saw a chateau by a lake, complete with gardens and a small vineyard. It was for sale, cheap, and I wanted it. I realized then that I had the chance to own something comparable to the splendors that surrounded me growing up. I flew back the next day determined to make that dream a reality.

In truth, I had the money to buy the property right then and there in my portion of the partnership, but Johnny and I had made a rule: don't take money out of the business. If we needed cash, we made it. I was just a few good trades away from my dream. I got to work and came up with a foolproof plan. Soybeans were the commodity that was poised for greatness, and we would be too.

I convinced Johnny that beans would rise dramatically. He agreed, and he executed the trades, but just after our buy orders

filled, soybeans started to collapse. I told Johnny that something was wrong, and that we should get out of the position immediately. Johnny entered the sell orders, but before they could process, soybeans had reached a price so low that the commodity could no longer trade per the rules of the exchange.

Soybeans did not trade the next day, or the next, or the next. Each day the price dropped to the limit, and our sell orders remained unfilled.

Each day, 15 percent of our net worth disappeared. I was at fault. I knew this. I was paying the price for wanting something just for me.

By the fourth day, I found myself drunk in a bar. I told my tale of woe to anyone who would listen. I was eventually asked to leave. On the way back to my apartment that afternoon, I made a deal with God that if soybeans traded that day, I would quit the business. But beans did not trade that day.

On the fifth day, I decided that I was getting out of the business, God or no God. The moment I announced my decision to Johnny in his office, soybeans traded. All our sell orders filled in an instant, and we were out of soybeans altogether. We had experienced a catastrophic decrease in our equity.

Perversely, soybeans reversed like a scalded dog shortly thereafter, only we were no longer in the market. The train to riches left without us on board. Our trades had marked the top of the market and the very bottom. To me, the timing was a sign. All that was left for me to do was pack up my office.

Johnny tried to console me. He said I just needed to get back on the horse. He said these things, but I could tell his confidence in me was shaken. I told him I didn't have any fight left and that our business was over for me. I had dropped ten pounds in five days.

In my mind, I had had my chance, and I had blown my opportunity utterly.

There was a clause in our partnership agreement that if we

experienced a decrease of over 50 percent in a single quarter, we would return all funds to investors and dissolve the partnership. Luckily, the investors were just Johnny, a few clients, and me. I used the remaining part of my equity to return them the value per their last statement, avoiding any possibility of legal entanglements. I had a little left over but not that much.

I shook Johnny's hand, mumbled my sincerest apologies, and took the first flight I could get out of New York, which happened to be to Los Angeles.

Months passed before I pulled myself together. My money, what was left of it, was disappearing fast. I decided to resurrect myself in a new field: forensic accounting. I started from my rented apartment. Little by little, I began to make ends meet, and within a few years, I had several clients in the form of legal firms that needed my services. I leased a proper office. I kept raising prices to get rid of the few clients who were bothersome, but they kept offering to pay me what I asked and more. I stuck with it.

I would read about Johnny in the papers from time to time. He had joined with his dad at Dodge Capital.

Johnny and I had not met since the disaster until a year ago. I had flown to New York to see a client and ran into him at the King Cole Bar at the St. Regis. Nothing had changed. He was the same — flamboyant, brilliant, and persuasive.

Any jealousy or resentment I had harbored toward him had evaporated by that time. I had grown to accept my own limitations, but more importantly, I had accepted that others struggled similarly, albeit on different issues. He still considered me his friend, and that was a relief. He never blamed me for what happened, and for that I would forever hold him in high esteem.

I sighed and looked around the common room. I was back on the top floor, sitting on the couch. The dark clouds in my mind had moved off, and the sun appeared to be shining again. I was filled with wonder to be here at Rhinebeck. I had been so certain

that I would never see this place again, but here I was. Johnny and I had started a new chapter, and that was a good thing.

I looked at all the boxes in front of me. I needed to do some work. My dark thoughts could return just as quickly as they had dissipated unless I kept my mind busy on other matters.

I grabbed a legal pad out of my briefcase and began to catalogue and separate the hundreds of pieces of correspondence from periodicals, auction house brochures, and what looked like manuscripts from colleagues that had been forwarded to Alice to be checked.

I had gone through three boxes when I found something that I thought might be of use — a manila envelope addressed to an M. Thoreau, care of the Carlyle Hotel, from Alice in her personal hand. The envelope had been returned marked unable to forward and postmarked close to the date of her death. I debated opening it but thought Johnny should be present. Johnny was taking a long time with Stanley, and in this house, I knew from experience that to remain alone for long was not a good idea.

Much of this feeling was probably the result of an overactive imagination growing up. Just the same, Johnny and I often felt there was more going on around us than we could see. I would often have nightmares sleeping here.

My nameless fears and troubled sleep followed me to the West Coast. I decided to master fear in general by swimming alone in the ocean after dark. In deep water off the coast of California, I would occasionally feel myself lifted by the displaced mass of something large passing beneath me in the darkness. It would take all my self-control and effort to continue to count my strokes and keep a measured pace, lest my imagination take over and I scream and flail in panic at the thought of what hunted below.

Such attempts at mental toughness had proved only partially successful. Darkness and the same nameless fears remained and were still my foes that stalked me just outside my vision, like the

unknown predators of the deep that made their presence known, even if indirectly. Routine and a measured pace were my only anchors and salvation as I tried to quell my unruly imagination. I endured each day through discipline and effort rather than simply vanquishing my terrors to the nameless abyss from which they issued.

I shuddered. The envelope I held in my hand was definitely from Alice. It could mean something or nothing. I couldn't tell.

Alice and I had shared a bond, but that was long ago. In my attempt to put my life back together, I had put on hold many memories and debts owed to those who had helped me in the past, not the least of which was to Alice. Without her sixth sense, I would be dead. It had slipped my mind completely.

Alice had been a watchful presence while we were growing up, but in spite of her vigilance, strange things had a way of happening.

The game of hide-and-seek was a house favorite in which adults as well as Johnny and I participated. Alice would play when she was there, along with Johnny's parents. It was mandatory entertainment for house guests.

The rules were simple. There was one seeker, and all the rest were hiders. The seeker was chosen by lot.

After one hour, announced by the striking of the hall clock, the game was over. Any hiders not found were declared winners. The field of play was the entire house other than the servants' quarters. Adult winners were awarded the beverage of their choice, while Johnny and I received cups of hot cocoa. The game was held after our dinner and before the adult cocktail hour.

The seeker was to remain in the drawing room until the clock in the reception area chimed, at which point he, or she, was free to hunt. I remember Alice always cautioning the field that no hider was to remain hidden for over sixty minutes and had to report back to the drawing room shortly thereafter or be disqualified.

As we grew older, the game devolved to only Johnny and myself with no set starting time, although after dark was preferred because the house was creepiest at night. We added rules and subtracted them, but the one-hour rule we always retained.

In one round that occurred shortly before the arrival of Miss Ponchikov, I was the hider and had managed to get into the trunk room that was located at the top of the servants' wing. Although not exactly off limits, it was not precisely inside the established rules of the game either. Usually the room was locked. The rules stated unequivocally that the servants' quarters were out of bounds, but the trunk room, although in the servants' wing, was not technically part of the servants' quarters, since no servant lived there. At least that was my logic at the time.

Was I cheating? No, I had thought. Besides, I wanted to get one over on Johnny, and this hiding place I felt pretty certain would do just that. In addition, I could scare the pants off him if I opened a trunk from inside and screamed as he approached.

The trunk room contained more luggage than a luggage store. There were dozens of suitcases and dozens of trunks in all shapes and sizes. Lighting was by means of two bulbs in metal cages suspended from the ceiling.

One large trunk, set apart from the others, looked particularly promising. It was almost six feet long, three to four feet wide, and two to three feet deep. The sides were of black leather over a hard wood of some sort. There were brass fittings on all the corners, but they had grown dark with age. There were dull brass strips along each edge and brass bands that circled the trunk both lengthwise and crosswise.

The locking mechanism was made of a metal other than brass, perhaps hardened steel, and looked particularly robust.

The lock was made up of two parts. A hinged portion that lay flat when closed but connected to a bottom part that contained the lock. The key was in it and attached by a chain to an eyelet. The

key could be removed and the chain clipped to a ring for safekeeping when traveling. The key, too, was unusual. I unclipped the chain and examined the key closely. It was a work of art, complicated, finely cut, and intricate. One would not be able to pick this lock easily. This trunk would keep out all but the most determined thief, even if he had all the time in the world to open it.

After I inserted the key again and turned it, the lid opened smoothly on hinges hidden from view. The top and sides were lined with cushioned white satin held in place by hundreds of small brass studs in a regular pattern. The bottom was of the same white satin but with no cushioning.

Stepping inside, I felt like I was climbing into a coffin. I hesitated as I sat down before lowering the lid. What if the lid somehow locked? I decided to be very careful in how I lowered the lid, and just before I did, I remembered I still held the key in my hand and that the lights were on — a dead giveaway. I was pondering this when I heard a sound that might have come from the hallway outside. Quickly I got out of the trunk, tiptoed to the light switch, and turned off the lights. I felt my way back in the darkness and got back in.

I reached up and pulled the lid down. It shut faster than I expected and closed with a mild thump followed by a click, the sound of which was quickly absorbed by the trunk's lining. Was that the lock clicking into place? I was astounded at how truly dark it was. I opened my eyes and closed them. I could not tell the difference. What about the key? I tried to remember whether I had left the key in the lock before I got in. I pushed the lid. It did not budge. I searched for the key in what little room I had. In spite of my rising panic, I was able to think clearly enough that not having the key was more promising than if I had found it. Just the same, I had moved in a fraction of a second from experiencing a childish game to deadly peril.

I would like to think that I behaved admirably, but I did not. It was when it seemed hard to breathe that I started to become truly frightened; then I panicked in earnest. I screamed. I screamed over and over, but my cries were muffled in the confined space and only seemed to make my predicament worse. In time, I knew I would run out of oxygen and suffocate to death — my mummified corpse to be found years later, or maybe never. All I could do after that realization was whimper.

What started then was a peculiar dialogue inside my mind of cold logic on one side and panic on the other. I would observe myself crying and screaming. In a calm voice, I would think, *This is what it's like to die. I thought death was supposed to be extremely painful and awful. It doesn't seem that way. I'm too young to die, but that's what's going to happen — such a waste.*

While part of my mind remained calm, the other part went through endless loops of hope, fear, tears, and angry desperation at my approaching death. I don't know how long I had been in the trunk, when suddenly the lid was flung open, and there were Alice and Johnny looking at me. I wasn't sure how they had found me, or even if they were real, but there they were.

I was led away barely alive, given some brandy, and put to bed.

Later, I had to explain exactly how I managed to get into such a dangerous position. I told them I really had no idea, but I promised not to be so stupid in the future. I had never seen Alice upset, but she was then. She said she should have locked that trunk and taken the key. Johnny's parents as well as the entire household were beside themselves. My escape had been a close call.

Afterward, I lay in my bed and Johnny came into the room and sat down next to me. He looked a little pale.

"That was close. I had no idea where you were." He breathed out heavily.

"Leave it to me to both win and lose at the same time. I locked myself in a trunk. How stupid can you get?"

“Pretty damn stupid,” he said and laughed. I did too.

“How did you know I was in there?”

“It was Alice. I was searching upstairs when I turned around, and there she was. She asked me what I was doing. I told her we were playing hide-and-seek. It was pretty weird. She looked upset and proceeded to go through the house room by room really fast and then headed for the servant’s quarters. I followed her as she zeroed in on the trunk room. She opened the door and saw the trunk. She actually said the F word, as well as a few more. The key was in the lock, so she opened it, and there you were. You looked rather awful.”

“Yeah, I felt rather awful, and I was pretty sure that was the end for me. I really thought I was going to die. I mean, really.”

“You had that look that said your rescue was a near thing. I would’ve been so pissed at you. You’ve no idea. By the way, Aunt Alice said something else under her breath. She said that wasn’t the first time that trunk had locked someone inside, whatever that means. The moment was very creepy. I had no idea what to say, so I just shut up.”

“You didn’t ask her what she meant?”

“Are you kidding?”

“No, no. You did the right thing. Better to have let that slide.”

We sat there happy to be in each other’s company. Finally, I said, “I guess we won’t be playing a lot of hide-and-seek for a while.”

“Looks that way.”

After I recovered the next day, our hide-and-seek activities were severely curtailed and replaced by a great deal more household chores for the duration of that vacation.

That was a long time ago, but the incident could have been yesterday. I remembered what happened so clearly after having forgotten all about it for so long. I got up and went downstairs.

I wandered into the kitchen where Dagmar was making tea for herself.

“They’re in Stan’s office, last door on your right.”

“Thank you, Dagmar.”

I walked down the corridor to an open door. Inside were Johnny and Stanley, along with Robert the Bruce. Johnny and Stanley were drinking and chatting amiably. Straight whiskey, from where I stood, and they must have had more than one, because Stanley’s Scottish roots were much in evidence and Johnny had a grin on his face that seemed to be more or less permanent. Robert was lying down with his head on his paws with a peaceful expression.

“Ah, there you are,” Johnny said. “Join us. I was going to get you, but I couldn’t seem to make it out of the chair.”

“Yes, please,” said Stanley and offered me a seat. He whirled around with his back to me as he splashed two inches of amber liquid into a cut-crystal glass. “Try this on for size,” he said, handing me the glass.

I took the glass and sniffed. The smell was heavenly, if heaven had a slightly smoky aroma.

“Ninety-proof from his family’s brewery,” chirped Johnny. “Bloody marvelous.”

I sat down and took a swallow. My discovery and my questions evaporated in blissful satisfaction.

I raised my glass. “Marvelous indeed, Stanley.”

I had another swig, and as if by magic, I was grinning too.

“We’re celebrating?”

“Oh yes, we are,” said Johnny. “Stanley has saved our backsides once again. In fact, he saved them years ago; only we never knew it. Tell him, Stanley.”

“Well, you see, you left the bottles on the table in the cellar. I was telling Johnny here how I discovered you both had managed to drink the two ’59s. Naughty boys,” he said shaking his finger at us, “although I had to admire your taste.

“I also told your partner-in-crime that I had not fallen off the turnip cart yesterday. We in service know how things stand. Some young idiots grab an expensive bottle, and then the head butler has to replace it somehow, some way.”

He looked significantly in our direction.

“I saw the state of affairs and figured I would do everyone a good turn. To my mind, the ’61 Lafite is by far the better choice, better than the ’59, although some would tend to disagree, and more power to ’em, I say. Few have had the opportunity to choose between the two like I have.

“To steam the labels off the empties and apply them to two ’61s, which we happened to have at the time, was but the work of a moment.

“You see, the ’59 was what everyone drank, waiting for the 1961 to come into its own. That is why they became so rare. They were very good but definitely a runner-up when compared to the

'61. The '61 has aged delightfully well and can probably improve more, but I digress."

"He samples them. Can you believe it?" bubbled Johnny. "Every now and again he has a go to see how the wine is getting on. No wonder he loves this place. He's sitting on a wine lover's treasure trove."

"Well, 'tis true. I could not forgive myself if a spectacular wine was needed to impress a guest, and the reality wasn't that spectacular. The only way to know is to taste occasionally. Dagmar, bless her, pulls out all the stops on a roast beef Sunday dinner, and we have a taste of an Haut Brion or a Latour. Some vintages we've had to consume in full because they passed their peak. Most people nowadays have not had the chance to drink an aged Bordeaux of the quality found in this cellar. Such precious moments are rare. The dinner will be a great success, I'm sure."

"Well, Stanley, we thank you. You're a saint," said Johnny.

"It's my pleasure. Now, you mentioned you wanted some boxes moved."

"No need," I said. "I wanted some exercise, so I moved them up to our floor. Johnny, perhaps you should explain."

Stanley looked at Johnny expectantly.

"Ah yes. We thought we'd go through some of the boxes of correspondence and magazines and either chuck what does not seem worth keeping or archive it."

"I see, and you are doing this because...?"

Johnny paused. "I think curiosity is as good a reason as any. We didn't know Aunt Alice that well. We were too young. After she passed, her life and the circumstances of her death became subjects the parents didn't want to talk about. We knew her, of course, but not really. We weren't old enough to understand her life, particularly its context and complexity. Now that we're older, we would like to know more. We want to hear her story."

“I see. Allow me to think on this for a few moments, if you please.”

“Of course,” Johnny answered.

Stanley swiveled his chair away from us and looked out the window. We waited. The window overlooked the lawn that stretched down to the woods, hidden from view by the fog. He seemed to be making up his mind about something, and after a minute he turned back.

“I apologize, but I had to make a decision that took some time. I have worked for this house for many years. Your aunt originally employed me. During that time, I’ve been privy to many things, not all of them savory. We all have acted in ways that question our good opinions of ourselves. That being said, she was a marvelous woman, who led an extraordinary life. I saw some of it but not all.

“I asked myself, what would she have me do? Would she want me to tell you her story or not?”

“The truth is she never really cared what people thought of her. She marched to the beat of her own drum and tended to shun convention. That being said, my decision is difficult. I must reveal much that is dark in order for you both to appreciate how truly dazzling and rare an individual she was. Nobody, other than me, knows her story, and that is a shame.”

“So, you agree?” Johnny asked.

“Yes. What I would like, with your permission, is to sit down after dinner and tell you what I know. In addition, I would rather this remain between ourselves for reasons that will become obvious.”

Johnny stood up and put down his glass. “Stanley, that sounds excellent. In the meantime, we’ll leave you to get on, with our thanks.”

I said my thanks as well and accompanied Johnny up the back stairs to the bedroom hallway rather than passing through the

kitchen and bothering Dagmar. We arrived at the top of the house, where I had laid out all the boxes.

Johnny eyed them. "Just like old times."

"Yes, I was thinking much the same thing."

"Percy, I didn't mean to remind you..."

"Have no fear. I'm certainly not broken, and I can talk about my leaving and all that, so feel free to say whatever is on your mind. Fragile, I'm not, in spite of any appearances to the contrary."

"I'm so glad to hear it," said Johnny, looking at me closely. "For my part, I would like to say that you and I working together was the happiest of times. You have no idea how glad I am to see you and how much I've missed it. I mean, who am I really going to talk to? There's been no one."

Johnny turned away. I could see him make an effort to quell his emotions. He then asked, "So, what do you have going on here?"

"I'll show you, but first, thanks for saying that. I feel the same, but let's pick that topic up later, when we have more time. Perhaps you will also give me your other reason for my being here?"

"We'll get to that, but for now I'd rather forget my troubles until tomorrow."

"Fair enough; back to the boxes," I said, changing the subject. "I carried them up here and went through them on a cursory basis, pulling out the correspondence and seeing what was there."

I picked up my legal pad and consulted it.

"After her death, there were several requests from colleagues to look over research papers, a few invites, with the rest being printed stuff such as catalogues, periodicals, and the like. There were no bills or financial information. I assumed these were pulled by Mr. Dodge. The two things of interest were the figurine, which Robert keyed on, and this."

I handed him the envelope.

"You see it's postmarked just before her death and returned

unable to forward. It's handwritten. I thought you might be the one to open it."

"Interesting," said Johnny, examining the envelope. "I've never heard of an M. Thoreau. Shall we read it? I'll pass you each page as I finish, and then we'll see where we are."

Johnny sat on the couch and opened the letter. I waited for him to finish the first page. He handed it to me.

Dearest —

I am sorry we fought and that I upset you. Please understand it is not easy for me to write about these matters. I would rather not even now, but I seem to have no choice if we are to continue together.

You are so jealous. That green-eyed monster lives inside you like a beast. You need to lock that away. Promise me you will? Please?

I have the figurine en route to me. It does not look like much. Such things never do, but I am relieved to know it is safe.

“So, how did all this happen?” you wish to know. “Do I still love him?” you ask. How could you?

I am sickened to think that you would even consider the thought. But what can I do? I can only repeat over and over that you needn't worry yourself. You will anyway, but I suppose that is my cross to bear.

What follows will ease your mind, but then again, it may not, for reasons that will become apparent.

When last I saw Bromley, he was with Freddy and Arthur. They were drinking, laughing, and carrying on about how rich they would become. He referred to me as “that bitch” and told them how he was

looking forward to my comeuppance again after a few more drinks. I forced myself to not pull out the Webley I had hidden and see what size hole a .455 bullet would make in him, but I was only one, and they were three. They would find out soon enough. I was finished with them.

Thankfully, they were busy drinking what I had taken such care to provide. They had sent away all the guides and hired hands to safeguard the find.

We had discovered the tolas only a week before. It had been one discovery after another, but the most exciting was the figurine. Arthur found it. Typical—but lucky he was the one who did. He had seen enough raw stones to know exactly what he held in his hands. He said he had never come across one that size. The gem was held in the arms of a female figure.

Arthur realized that the discovery changed everything, and I did, too. I had become unnecessary, and I was alone.

I watched them whisper amongst themselves. I saw the looks on their faces, and they frightened me. I had to do something, and fast.

I had noticed quite a number of Brugmansia nearby. Whether *B. versicolor* or another species, I did not know. If you are not familiar with it, this is a large plant with many yellow, or in this case pinkish, trumpet-shaped flowers that droop down. The flower is particularly fragrant at night as it tries to attract certain pollinating moths.

I had encountered this plant and its seeds some time ago when examining various South American burial sites and tolas. It was used to drug wives and slaves, so they might be buried alive with their dead lords, but I found out from the indigenous peoples that in less concentrated forms, the plant can be used as a soporific, an anti-inflammatory, or a gateway to the spirit world. All parts of the plant contain powerful alkaloids that affect the mind and the body.

Since it was found at several digs, I had spoken about the plant with nearby shamans, who had cautioned me. Brugmansia was occasionally given to unruly adolescents so that their dead ancestors in the spirit

world could berate them for their behavior and make them more compliant. It was not to be used lightly.

One shaman in particular smiled and laughed when he saw me. He told me through an interpreter that he had heard from his father that I would be arriving soon and that he was to give me some seeds. Further, he was to teach me how to take the flowers and turn them into a tincture using the local alcoholic beverage. He even spoke my name.

When I demanded to know how this was possible, the shaman didn't answer but kept smiling and nodding. The interpreter said, "Learn what you can. Muy importante."

On the way back, my guide told me that the father had been a powerful shaman. He continued to be honored in the village even though he died years ago.

I still have those seeds.

The difficulty was the dosage and the taste. The amount of alkaloid present varies from plant to plant, leaf to leaf, and flower to flower. It is even affected by the time of day it is picked.

I found out much later one must harvest many leaves and flowers at the same time and experiment, creating stronger concentrations. Too much would send me into a delirium that can be truly terrifying. The drug can even affect the muscles of the eyes that control focusing, adding to its already hallucinogenic effects, which I can tell you are fierce.

Shamans use this plant combined with other ingredients to talk to those who are dead, to command those who are living, and to speak with those of the future to learn what the gods are planning.

Too concentrated, and the results can be horrific beyond any imagining. I am neither sorry nor afraid to tell you that the mixture they drank was so concentrated that whether they lived or died would be in the hands of the gods that guarded the tolas we had discovered. I trusted those guardians would at least welcome a little sport. Sitting around a tomb for years without end can be so boring.

I almost fell victim to my own plan.

I had wanted to see the results of my work. I strayed too close. They

grabbed me. Bromley was on top of me when sweat began to bead on his forehead and chest. His jugular vein and the veins on his forehead started to swell to the size of fingers and pulse in throbs that became faster and faster. His eye misted over and began to tear, while his respiration increased and his arms began to twitch. I threw him off. The others looked at me in a strange way and then not at me at all. Thick white foam began to form on Freddy's half-open lips while Arthur's eyes turned bright red. Both were covered in sweat that seemed to pour from their bodies. Their limbs began to contort, and that is when the screaming began. They started as murmurs and then rose to ear-splitting shrieks. The gods were busy.

I grabbed my clothes and began to search for the figurine. I went through each of their belongings, but I couldn't find it. I returned to where they lay, sprawled about. I grabbed Bromley by the hair and struck him violently across the face several times. I yelled to get his attention.

"Where is it? Tell me!"

He looked at me with vacant eyes, his mouth stretched impossibly wide. No sound came out. I dropped him and reached for Arthur, when I saw a bag underneath a chair. I knew the jewel was there. They wouldn't let it out of their sight. I grabbed the bag and started to walk away when I noticed Freddy. He was staring at his bleeding arm out of which he had bitten a meaty chunk. I wished him a merry feast, grabbed my pack, and left. I didn't look back. I was filled with terrible rage. I had wreaked a horrible vengeance. I was barely satisfied, but it would have to do.

They took months to get back to civilization. I heard that Bromley returned to his estate. Freddy I never heard from. Arthur contracted dengue fever and tried to visit me when he was recovered. I refused and had him thrown out instead. The divorce had already gone through by the time he showed up. His skin color, I am happy to say, had changed to gray.

So, my darling, you got your wish. I told you everything. Did you get more than you bargained for? Do you still love me?

Tell me, soon.

— ALICE

I finished reading, put the pages in order, and passed them back to Johnny.

“Wow,” I said, shaking my head. “Extraordinary. The letter answers several questions while generating a host of others.”

Johnny placed the sheets back in the envelope. “That it does. I can’t say I’m surprised by what she wrote, given the circumstances, although I am completely, if you know what I mean. It makes me angry.”

“Me too. She was a woman isolated and alone in a jungle, on top of that she was Alice, and we knew her.”

“Precisely. Just the same, she bided her time and got her revenge. I admire her for that. Her plan was well conceived and executed. I would have used the Webley, I think.”

“Three against one. Not the best odds. At least we know the story behind Arthur Blain and where that little statue came from,” I said.

“That we do. I suggest we keep our discovery of that little item between ourselves for now. I’ll have Simon take these boxes back down. For now, let’s dress for dinner. What do you say?”

“Good plan.”

Johnny and I changed into blazers and ties, the minimum attire for dinner. We went back downstairs with Robert close behind as the clock struck six. The drawing-room drapes were shut and a fire lit in the grate. Johnny went over to the bar to make us vodka tonics, while I gazed at the Constable. He came up beside me and handed me my drink.

“Cheers,” he said.

I clinked his glass.

We stood silently before the painting until Johnny commented, “He transports me into a place of peace and tranquility, although the clouds in the distance always seem to portend an approaching storm.”

“Rain, at the least, I think.”

“When I stare at it, I wonder which is more real: Rhinebeck or Constable’s nineteenth-century England?”

“You mean, both don’t represent reality.”

Johnny chuckled. “That’s why I like having you around.” He

slapped my shoulder. “You understand me. Remember the story of *Brigadoon*?”

“Yes, your mother took us to the Broadway musical when we were small.”

“I loved the idea of escaping into another world,” said Johnny. “Rhinebeck has been that mythical place for me. It’s always been far from the realities and struggles of life. At least I used to think so.”

“Not anymore?”

“I can feel something stirring. This house used to be quiet and restful, like the painting. Now the water looks a lot deeper than I thought, and there are things moving beneath the surface. My world is changing. Look at the picture on the table. Do you see the same person?”

I looked at the silver-framed photograph of Alice. “I admit our past image of her may have been naïve.”

“Tell me about it,” said Johnny. “And I have a feeling we’ll know far more than we bargained for by the time all is said and done. I am more than a little nervous. I really liked how I used to think of her. I loved her glamour and the security she represented.”

“Yes. Obviously the image of her that we believed growing up was just that — an image. Now that we’re seeing the real Alice, our notions of her are being shaken up a bit.”

“More than a bit — my entire perception of her has changed, and there’s no going back. It’s more than a little distressing.”

“Yes, but Alice is still the same Alice she always was,” I said. “She’s there in our memories, just as alive, caring, and vibrant. We can keep her that way if we want. We don’t have to judge her or her actions. After all, you never seemed to have judged mine, and if you want to know why I’m here, I think it’s because of that.”

He looked at me. “Oh, I judged you all right. I was so upset with you — you have no idea. But underneath all my upset, I had faith, faith that somehow you would recover and life would all work out.

That belief was unshakeable. It's kept me going, and here we are today talking to each other."

"Well, I'm certainly glad someone believed in me. Personally, what little faith I had in myself evaporated when I left. I held myself responsible. It took a long time to recover. I appreciate and thank you for your unabated confidence in me."

"You're welcome." Johnny looked back at the painting. There was just the sound of the fire.

"I propose a toast," I said, interrupting the quiet.

"A toast?"

"To faith, the universal solvent of all logic and rational thought." I raised my glass.

"To faith, the unending source of relentless persistence," replied Johnny, raising his.

Our glasses clinked again.

At that moment, Stanley opened the doors to the dining room. The long table was set for us and lit by two gigantic silver candelabras.

"Dinner is served. You may bring your drinks, or leave them. I have decanted a very nice Pétrus, should you choose to start afresh."

Johnny looked at me, swallowed the rest of his drink in one gulp, and said, "I'm for the Pétrus."

I did the same but placed my glass with a sip left on the table next to the picture of Alice as a token of my esteem and an offering for her continued protection. In this house, I felt better covering all the bases. I followed Johnny into the dining room and seated myself opposite him.

Robert's black eyes followed us, but he remained by the fire.

Simon entered with two bowls of consommé from behind a Chinese screen that hid the passage to the kitchen. Stanley busied himself with the wine, while Johnny and I sampled the soup.

Dinner moved from course to course as Johnny and I chatted.

After finishing, and gaining at least five pounds in the process, we thanked Dagmar, Stanley, Simon, and Jane for their efforts. The dinner had been superb.

Stanley said, "Gentlemen, I have laid out some port and brandy on the side table in the library. I will join you in twenty minutes."

Johnny and I, with Robert following, passed down the hall to the library. It was only slightly smaller than the drawing room. Three of the four walls were covered by floor-to-ceiling shelving, filled with books of all sorts. The wall facing the door had drapes that were closed for the night. Behind them, french windows looked out toward the sweep of lawn at the back of the house. We poured ourselves some port and lit up two Montecristos while we waited for Stanley.

About twenty minutes later, Stanley slipped in. He held a leather case in his hand, the size of a diary.

"I hate to disturb you now that you are sitting down, but I would rather we move to her ladyship's sitting room. It is rarely used, but I would feel more comfortable sitting there than here, where I often serve. It is hard for me to stop being a butler, you understand. The story I have to tell is long. If you both will follow me...Bring the port if you will, as well as the humidor. I will sample both to make sure the house is living up to its standards of excellence," he said with a thin smile.

Johnny and I got up and carried our glasses and cigars. I brought the decanter and an extra glass while Johnny took the humidor. We passed out of the library to the west wing, where Alice had resided. Robert's toenails clicked on the marble floor as we entered. The apartment consisted of a large, well-lit sitting room and a separate bedroom with a bath and walk-in closet that was entered through a connecting door. As we seated ourselves, Stanley lit the fire. There was a low black-lacquer table, a couch, and two comfortable chairs at either end. The theme of the room

was gray, done up in subdued elegance. Alice's long Louis XIV desk in dark mahogany and ebony was set in front of the window whose drapes had been drawn for the night. The carpet was unusually thick. Johnny sat in one of the chairs while I relaxed on the couch. Once the fire was burning brightly, Stanley turned off the lights, so only the glow of the fire lit the room. I handed him a glass while Johnny opened the humidior. The case he placed on the table. Robert stretched out by the fire and closed his eyes.

"Gentlemen, now that we are settled, I am sure you have questions, but before I answer them, I thought I would tell you the story of her ladyship from the time I first met her. I have always referred to her as 'her ladyship' because of her first marriage to Lord Bromley. What I will tell you should satisfy your curiosity and give you some of the context you seek.

"In addition, I have chosen to put aside my butler duties for the night and sit down as a normal soul. Starting tomorrow, the rest of the family will be arriving, along with guests, and I will have neither the time nor the inclination to discuss what I am about to relate. Tonight is all we have.

"Lastly, whatever I say is between us. What you do with the information is up to you, but as far as I am concerned, we never talked. Agreed?"

Johnny and I voiced our assent. Stanley cleared his throat and began.

"I first met her ladyship in England just after she had married Lord Bromley. We met in London at her suite at the Connaught Hotel where she and her new husband were staying before journeying to North America. She offered me a position as head butler. His lordship was not in attendance, a point that troubled me, but which was happily eclipsed by the warmth with which I was received.

"She informed me that she and Lord Bromley would be moving

to New York and that part of my duties would include opening up and maintaining this estate and her ladyship's apartment in the city. Both had been closed since the death of her mother.

"I asked whether in addition they would be keeping Lord Bromley's estate in Shropshire. She told me no. She had hired an independent accounting firm to do an analysis of Lord Bromley's situation. The firm had deemed it not only prudent but necessary to liquidate the property in its entirety to cover the various taxes and legal entanglements that had dogged Lord Bromley for some time. Unfortunately for him, his estate was too small to be profitable and too expensive to be run continuously at a loss. They would move to the United States instead.

"I then inquired when I would be interviewing with Lord Bromley so that I might meet with his approval. At this suggestion, there was a pause. She said quite carefully that *all* financial matters, including the hiring of staff, were in her hands. The trustees that handled and oversaw her assets were confident in her dealings, and if need be, she could be as frugal as any Scotsman.

"Here she poked fun at my Scottish accent, which was more pronounced at the time. She smiled at me and by doing so, vanquished any hesitation I had in making my decision to accept her employment.

"In those days, I must admit, I was a bit more impetuous than I am now. I considered that my favorable impression of her ladyship was sufficient grounds for taking the position and told her so. She shook my hand in the American way to seal the bargain.

"At another time, I might have had serious reservations.

"England in those days was a country whose government, heavy industries, and large estates were controlled almost exclusively by men. Not so in this case. Here, a woman signed the checks, hired the staff, and decided how to allocate resources. I also felt that she did not entirely trust her husband in financial

matters. I could explain her behavior and his absence in no other way.

“Even more alarming was the conclusion that she must have been the one to insist that his lordship give up a patrimony that must have been in his family for generations. This may have been sound financial maneuvering, but as a foundation for a tranquil marriage, it was a risky venture.

“At best, the arrangement might make for a rocky start. At worst, the loss of the property might be such a wound to his lordship’s pride that no amount of time could heal it. Violence and hatred might become his only means to restore his dignity.

“Although I did consider these things in a vague sort of way, there was nothing to be done. She had won me over completely, and that was that. On looking back, I think a little more thought at the time might have prepared me for what was to follow.”

At this juncture, he paused and took a drag of his cigar and a sip of port. He then got up to stir the fire and sat back down, as if he was debating how best to continue.

“I was to start immediately. My employer at the time had agreed to let me go if I should be accepted in the position, so I found myself awaiting my first meeting with Lord Bromley with both curiosity and trepidation. In service, at that time, there were whole networks of butlers, coachmen, chauffeurs, maids, cooks, and staff who were devoted to collecting the latest information regarding the leading families.

“My sources told me to expect a man of prickly disposition and accustomed to getting his way. He had attended Eton and then Oxford, where he excelled at sports, particularly rugby, but little else. He loved fast cars and airplanes, considered himself to be devilishly handsome, and thought himself the smartest person in the room. He enjoyed gambling at cards and was known as a lady’s man. There were also rumblings of a dark and sinister side, but as

to what exactly, no one could say with any precision, other than they had heard rumors.

“We met the following day again at the Connaught. Her ladyship was not present. The information I had did not prepare me for the overpowering charisma and charm of the man. I was no longer surprised that her ladyship had fallen for him. I doubted anyone would be safe once he had made up his mind that he wanted them, be they male or female. I don’t know why or how I got that impression, but I did. There was a sexual magnetism about him that was almost palpable. He balanced this with a grace and ease of communication that was so masterful that I wondered if I had misread him. We got along famously, and I ended up speaking far more about myself than I had expected.

“It was at the end of the interview that he received a note from the concierge delivered by a bellman. He apologized, took out a platinum fountain pen as he read it, and began to write something on the note. I caught my breath in this interlude and observed him more closely.

“He was a tall man and extremely fit. His hair was black as jet, the same color as her ladyship’s, and longer than was the fashion. His eyes, like her ladyship’s, were so dark as to appear completely black. His skin was white and somewhat translucent. He was dressed immaculately in a charcoal-gray suit, white shirt, and club tie. He was the epitome of the English lord in manners, speech, and behavior.

“As I sat there, I became aware of the more carnivorous nature of the man. It was not my imagination. I was sitting down in front of a black panther who glanced at me every so often in relaxed disinterest while the tip of his tail in the form of a pen traveled this way and that as if of its own accord. He was a predator, and I knew it. I felt at once at ease yet filled with a nameless dread. There would be no bars separating us.

“I knew then and there that if he decided I was prey, I would be

eaten. It would not be personal. Such lethality was both spellbinding and hypnotic.

“At that moment, her ladyship slipped into the room and perched herself on the arm of his chair. She encircled his shoulders with her arms as they chatted about the note his lordship had received. I relaxed as I watched. They were supremely well matched. Their beauty together and their palpable and obvious love for each other was something to behold. I was their head butler, and I decided that I was well pleased.

“Unfortunately, that equanimity was not to last.”

Stanley paused again in the narrative as he drank his port and smoked his cigar. Johnny and I sat back and waited for him to continue. I shivered, thinking that this was just the type of tale to be told on a rainy night in a dark room lit only by a fire. Stanley’s voice started again.

“We traveled to America aboard the Queen Mary and arrived in New York. From there I traveled to Rhinebeck to survey what would be required to open the house. After I made my report, I was given approval to make the extensive changes and repairs.

“It was not until the couple returned after about half a year to take up residence permanently that I felt something was amiss.

“There were two points that troubled me. The first was that her ladyship was unusually quiet. I thought that this might be the result of their not producing an heir, but this did not seem to answer why she seemed almost cowed. I observed that his lordship would ask her to do something and that she would immediately hop to it. The smile that had so captivated me had disappeared.

“The second was the trunk. It was an extraordinarily heavy and well-made affair that his lordship insisted be kept at the foot of their bed. I did not know what to make of it.”

Stanley poured some more port and continued.

“They were rarely alone. They either had house guests or they traveled to New York during the week. One night in particular,

there was just the two of them. They had dined and had moved to the library, where they began to argue.

“The servants had been sent to bed. I was the only one in attendance and remained in the hallway. The argument must have begun civilly enough, because I could hear nothing from outside the door. But by the end, the disagreement had escalated into a notable altercation. They screamed and yelled at each other for at least an hour, eventually devolving into cursing each other in various languages. The things they said to each other were violent and cruel. I could do nothing.

“Eventually, his lordship yelled that he’d had enough and that her ladyship was to be taught another lesson. I heard her ladyship scream, ‘No!’ when the door to the library burst open and slammed against the stop. I quickly ducked into a doorway.

“I heard him drag her down the hall, across the foyer, and up the stairs. She struggled, but it was no use against such a powerful man. I heard their bedroom door slam and then silence. I went into the library to collect the glasses and coffee cups, muttering to myself that my place was not to interfere. Such words did nothing to erase the shame I felt for having done nothing. Later, I soothed my conscience by deciding to speak to her ladyship, even if what I had to say cost me my position.

“I did not see her the next morning and asked her maid how her ladyship was feeling. She said she would be staying in her room for now. His lordship came down for breakfast in high spirits, announcing with his dazzling smile that he would be staying at his club in the city for a few days and returning on Friday.

“After he had left for town, I climbed the stairs to confront my employer. I knocked on the door and asked if I might have a word. I was refused, but I persisted until I was let in. I would not be denied.

“The room was darkened, and her ladyship was sitting on the

floor with her legs outstretched, leaning back against the far side of the bed.

“I could see the top of her head. She asked what was so important, not even bothering to look at me. I answered that if she wished to dismiss me after what I was about to say, that was her prerogative, but I was not about to stand by and see her ladyship manhandled by anyone, even his lordship, ever again.

“She said softly that there was nothing I could do. I disagreed. We went back and forth. But I can be quite forceful and persistent when I have made up my mind. I told her that she needed someone in her corner. I was that person, but we would not discuss the matter in her bedroom. She needed to get dressed and meet me in the study where there would be coffee waiting, as well as something stronger. To this, she agreed and promised to meet me in thirty minutes.

“She arrived looking pale but presentable. I served her coffee. She added a splash of brandy and sat down. She told me that she had made a decision but was uncertain exactly how to proceed. She understood my feelings but thought it best that I hear what led up to the current disturbance in full, before going any further. According to her, she had no one to blame but herself. She would not look at me as she spoke of the events leading to the night in question but stared steadily out the window as she spoke.

“Their life together had started out wonderfully. They were so in love. Life could not have been better; at least, that was her impression. She had known his lordship needed money. He had been upfront about this from the beginning. Nonetheless, her finance people were alarmed. She thought the state of affairs was fairly simple. She wanted a title, and if he needed money, that was the cost of doing business. Titles were paid for all the time. The trustees understood this easily enough and were quite content to go ahead with an arrangement if that was all that was required, but

there were other troubling indications as well. They had done some checking.

“Lord Bromley had recently been asked not to visit Brook’s in London due to concerns about his card-playing. Although he had not been asked to resign his membership, various private sources had confirmed that there had been a peculiar string of good luck in his favor and a corresponding string of bad luck against a member of the Court of Directors of the Bank of England. There was insufficient evidence to accuse him of cheating, but the laws of probability had been stretched far enough to warrant a prohibition.

“Additionally, there were stories that he dabbled in what could only be characterized as mesmerism or hypnotism of some sort. He appeared to have some power over women whereby they did whatever he asked.

“If there was any truth to these allegations, the trustees felt the match should not go forward. If for some reason she still thought she should, then their duty was to place a limit on the total amount of expenditure that would be authorized for a period of at least two years. The trustees advised her that this was to remain between her ladyship and themselves as a fail-safe, should she be coerced into authorizing expenses that, although she could well afford them, were deemed unsuitable.

“Her ladyship confronted him with these issues.

“His lordship admitted that he saw the member mentioned in the card incident as a pigeon ripe for the plucking. He needed funds. Cheating had not been necessary — the man had been that inept. And as to his supposed supernatural powers over women, he claimed the story was a complete fabrication. He had heard the rumors and had done nothing to discredit them, as they served him. Such supernatural tales had done wonders in backing off his creditors, of which he had more than a few.

“Gradually, she allowed herself to be persuaded that the reports

were the result of misunderstanding rather than fact and that the source of all of Lord Bromley's difficulties was the financial morass he had inherited when his father died.

"She went back to the trustees and wrangled an agreement to allow one of her many trusts to cover the balance of his debts, but only after his estate was sold. Everyone was in agreement.

"They married.

"The wedding was a success, and all seemed well.

"She told me they were in Tuscany when his behavior took a peculiar turn.

"One morning, a large trunk arrived for him at the villa where they were staying. His lordship had two men place it in a corner of their bedroom. When she asked why it was there rather than in a storeroom, he said that it was a work of art made for him in Germany to his specifications. He found it beautiful, and other than its aesthetic value, it served no purpose at this time. Such behavior seemed to her eccentric, bordering on the bizarre. Not wanting to disturb their harmony, she agreed.

"One morning, her ladyship was called to the telephone by the majordomo. His lordship was out riding and couldn't be reached. On the line was the accountant of the owner of the villa they were vacationing at. He wanted to know the name and address of her bank, so he could present the bill for their stay.

"Her ladyship said she was confused. Her husband had extolled the owner's generosity on allowing them to stay at his estate for a month for free. It had been a wedding present.

"To clear the matter up, she asked for and received the owner's telephone number in Rome. She reached him, and after a great deal of histrionics on both sides, the truth was finally revealed.

"The accountant had been ordered to speak only with his lordship and no one else. He was to have gotten the address of her ladyship's bank in New York so that he could submit a bill for the stay. She was not to know anything about it. In addition, the

owner and his lordship had struck a deal whereby the accountant would bill triple the cost and remit half to his lordship's bank in London upon receipt. Since this was their honeymoon, the bill would be mistaken for that of a hotel and be paid without a second thought.

“By the time his lordship returned, her ladyship was outraged. Why do this when if he needed money, all he had to do was ask? She met him coming up the stairs and confronted him with the deception. His lordship smiled at her, and everything changed in an instant.

“He struck her across the mouth with the flat of his hand. Her ladyship fell back on the stairs, stunned. He said to her softly, ‘Do *not* defy me. You are mistaken.’ She shook her head and attempted to reply, when he reached back and struck her again. Once more he said, ‘You are mistaken, aren't you?’

“She shook her head, only this time he grabbed her wrist and dragged her up the stairs to their room. He whispered to her as he pulled her along, ‘I was hoping I would not have to resort to this, but I see you need to be taught a lesson.’ He unlocked the trunk that lay in the corner of the room and proceeded to strip her naked. She struggled to get away, but he was the stronger. He dumped her in and closed the lid. The trunk had been for her.

“How long he left her there, she did not know. A simple routine was repeated over and over. He would open the trunk and let her out in the darkened room, so there was no way to judge the time. He gave her water and a small amount of food. He let her relieve herself, and then he would lock her back inside. She tried to escape, but that was impossible. He was always there to ensure she didn't. Time ceased to have any meaning. There was only the trunk, the darkness, and her isolation.

“Inside, there was no sound. Her thoughts would fly wildly one way and then the other. She was sure she was going insane. She wept often. She called out, but nothing ever came of it. Her

imprisonment continued. She slept. She woke. All she saw was black. She stank. She was alone. The ordeal continued with no respite.”

Stanley paused once again to let the magnitude of what he had said sink in. Johnny and I were speechless. Stanley took another drink to wet his throat and went on with the tale.

“At this point in her narrative, her ladyship stopped and turned to face me directly. She looked so anguished. I asked if she might wish to take a break, but she insisted we continue and that I listen carefully because what she was about to relate was likely to make me doubt her sanity and mental competence. After I agreed to listen and make no prejudgment, she went on. She smiled bravely, and as she spoke, she looked me in the eye from time to time to see whether my regard for her had been replaced by something less. I kept my face impassive until she finished.

“She had been in the trunk for what seemed like days and days when she began to see strange lights. She knew she was beginning to hallucinate. The lights did not necessarily bother her, but when the people appeared, she felt she was poised on the edge of madness.

“By any measure, she thought her mind had broken, only it hadn’t. Her thoughts were clear. She knew who she was, where she was, and how she had gotten there. But she also knew she was no longer alone. She would catch glimpses of pale figures at the edges of her vision. They spoke to her and kept her company in the dark. Sometimes, what they said was unintelligible, as if in a foreign language, but at other times, she understood every word. They told her not to worry. She would survive. They said there would come a time when she could change her fate, but not now, not for a while. The first thing she must do was learn to breathe.

“To breathe in and out slowly and evenly. If she did this, they would stay with her for a time. They told her a little about themselves. They were ancient. Earlier cultures knew of them and

spoke with them. Present-day cultures had no such pathways, except in the case of indigenous people, who retained their old ways. They said she didn't have to believe in them. She simply needed to trust. They told her that she would be released, but she was to agree to whatever she was told to do. Fighting back would come later. They asked her to think of herself as a raft being carried by a current and floating down a river.

"At this point, she was barely alive and beyond caring. Whoever, or whatever, they were, real or imagined, she was, at the least, not alone. They had provided her a support she needed most desperately. She agreed to do what they said and thanked them. As suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone. Where they went, what they were, she couldn't say.

"Shortly after, her husband let her out. Weak as she was, she felt relaxed and better than she had in a very long time, as if she had awoken from a deep sleep. When his lordship asked her if she had made a mistake, she readily agreed. He asked that she write him a check for their stay. She said yes. Life went on. They visited places. They saw friends. She went with the flow. She stuck to her agreement, but on the night of the quarrel that I had observed, she defied him once again, and with good reason.

"He had demanded that she sell Rhinebeck, and she had refused. They fought. He had told her in no uncertain terms that he wanted her to experience what she had made him do — sell that which was most dear to her. Because of her recalcitrance, he had locked her in the trunk to break her once again.

"This time, the people did not come. She was alone but not afraid. She was able to breathe and to think. She realized she did not need them to keep her company. The time had come for her to do something about her situation. In the dark, she made a plan.

"In the morning, he let her out and once again asked if she would sell Rhinebeck. She told him she would if he wanted. She

acted subdued, and he believed her. He was so pleased, he immediately left for New York to draw up the papers.

“So, here I am,’ she told me. ‘What are we to do? Even though I said I would do what he demanded, I have absolutely no intention of selling a thing. I am finished with him, with his trunk, with his abuse, with everything. I feel like murdering somebody, and I will give you three guesses as to who that might be.’”

The fire gave a loud pop, and sparks flew up the chimney.

The room was silent for a few minutes as Stanley gazed into the fire and said nothing.

Johnny and I looked at each other again. We'd agreed to ask no questions until the end of Stanley's narrative, but as the silence dragged on, Johnny could contain himself no longer and blurted out, "Jesus, Stanley, what did you do?"

Stanley looked at him. "I did what I always do whenever there's a crisis on. I rang for a cup of tea."

He chuckled and smoked his cigar. He looked at us for another minute. I watched his eyes. They did not blink. He looked back at us steadily in a detached way.

He reminded me of an attorney Johnny and I once met when we were in business together. We had been asked to meet the man in his office on Wall Street. He had a corner suite from which he could see the exchange. His gray hair was brushed straight back like Stanley's, and he had similar cold blue eyes. He didn't rise when we entered his office but simply motioned for us to have a seat. He didn't introduce himself.

With no preamble, he said, "I have a client who wants to invest a great deal of money with you. He is taking a risk and is willing to pay for that privilege. What valuable consideration will you be delivering to my client, and how will you be doing that exactly? Performance will be an issue, and my time is valuable. Be succinct."

I remember looking into that man's eyes and thinking: *They are very cold eyes. Be careful here; be very careful.* They looked like Stanley's eyes now. Concerned, I sat up straighter, alert. I could tell Johnny had also subtly changed his position. He had his game face on. Even Robert raised his head. Something was up.

"I am afraid I am going to make you uncomfortable," said Stanley. "I won't keep you in suspense, but we have reached the point in this narrative where we have to make a decision, the three of us. I think you have some of the context you desired, but from here on, I require something more than just your silence.

"We must make a bargain, and then we need to seal it. You are both familiar with contracts, I'm sure. There must be an offer and acceptance by competent parties. There must also be the exchange of valuable consideration to create what might be called a 'mutuality of obligation,' and here, I emphasize the latter phrase.

"Understand this: you have me at a disadvantage. I am this house's butler. I am not a member of the family. The valuable consideration I am giving you is this story. One that needs to be told, to be sure, but it contains information that many would consider harmful, even dangerous, if known. For a bargain or a contract to be actual, there must be something of value exchanged between the parties. So far, the movement has been in only one direction. Reciprocation is required. Let me say that it is not monetary consideration I want. Her ladyship took care of all my needs on that score. Rather, I want a promise, a pledge, from both of you, individually and together."

Here he paused and looked at us as he smoked. He had our attention. This was a side of Stanley I knew only in glimpses. He

was cold, unsympathetic, and implacable, just like the Lord Bromley he had described.

He interrupted my thoughts and said, "Here is my offer. In exchange for the rest of the story and the contents of this case, you must promise to honor the following: I will come to you at some point in the future, and I will ask you to do a service for me. You will agree to do what I ask without question or hesitation, no matter how strange, no matter how insignificant or significant. I will call upon each of you separately, or together, to honor your promise. I will tell you specifically that I am invoking the pledge you made this night, so there will be no mistake. You will be obligated to do what I ask, if we have an agreement.

"Once I have your promise, we will seal the bargain, and only then will I continue. How do you wish to respond?"

He looked at Johnny and then at me.

Johnny answered first. "May we ask you some questions and then confer in private before we give you our answer?"

"Of course."

"First question," asked Johnny. "What's in the case?"

"Her ladyship's diary. I took possession of it after her death. I thought doing so appropriate at the time."

"I see," said Johnny. "Have you read it?"

"Yes, I have, and I think you will find its contents engrossing."

"What if we refuse?" I interrupted.

"Then our conversation ends here. The diary will be destroyed, and sleep follows."

"Assuming we agree," said Johnny. "Can you give us an idea of what you'll expect us to do?"

"I can't because I don't know at this time."

"Will it be legal?" I asked.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Let me elaborate. First, I may choose never to redeem your pledge, but then again, I might. It is my choice. Second, I have looked after the members of this house for

many years, always with its best interest in mind. I do not intend to change that policy. Lastly, in some relationships and circumstances, there can only be trust or no trust. This is one of those times when you must decide. I will leave you for a few minutes to confer.”

At this, Stanley rose and silently left the room.

Johnny eyed the case that still lay on the table.

“Don’t even think about it,” I said. “He did that deliberately. He needs to know he can trust us just as much as we need to know we can trust him.”

“Just a thought...Well, this certainly has added some zing to an already remarkable evening.”

“We seem to be prone to that sort of thing. So, what do you want to do?” I asked.

“What do you want to do?”

“I asked you first.”

Johnny smiled and said, “I think we should go with it.”

“I think we shouldn’t. Remember that devilish attorney we met down at Broad and Wall, the one that even looked like Stanley? Recall how that worked out?”

“Ah yes,” said Johnny. “I was thinking much the same thing, but we survived, and it was a tidy piece of business, if you remember. We made a chunk and so did the client, but...”

Johnny held up his hand as I opened my mouth to protest. “I know what you’re going to say. There was that performance clause, and we went through hell when we were down 20 percent the first month. Too true, but we made it back, and we did manage to avoid a massive penalty by the skin of our teeth.”

“Oh, how quickly you forget. Do you even remember the number of sleepless nights we went through — the endless stress? Somehow, I was always the one who had to talk to that nasty little man and explain how we were only down a little bit more. The experience was positively awful.”

“You thought we’d made a deal with the devil. The pressure was a bit wearing, I agree, but everything did work out, didn’t it?”

“It did,” I said reluctantly.

“Besides,” said Johnny, leaning forward and looking at the case, “don’t you want to know what’s in the damn thing? I do. More to the point, as Stanley said, it’s all about trust. Do you trust Stanley, yes or no? That, right there, is the crux of the matter and is really all that counts.”

“Well, yes, I...”

“It’s settled then. We’re in agreement.”

Before I could voice any more protests, Johnny was up and at the door, calling for Stanley.

Stanley walked in as quietly as he had left and sat down. He looked down at the diary on the table and then asked, “You’ve made your decision?”

Johnny answered for both of us, just like in the old days.

“We have. Trust is a commodity that seems to defy what others might consider to be good sense, but that is the basis of our decision. We trust you, and that’s the truth of it. We agree to your terms.”

Stanley looked at us and said nothing for a time.

“Sometimes I am surprised by what others decide — not that I had much doubt as to the outcome. Just the same, I thank you for your agreement.”

Johnny and I nodded. I realized as I did so that we had crossed into territory that would once again change our lives forever. I did trust Stanley for the most part, but I knew that few victims of unspeakable crimes were ever dragged down into a cellar kicking and screaming — rather, they walked in of their own volition.

“So, gentlemen, we need to seal this bargain properly. Allow me a few minutes to prepare.”

Stanley got up and left, leaving Johnny and me alone once again.

“Well,” said Johnny, “I don’t know what he has in mind, but this evening has been extraordinarily entertaining at the very least.”

I put aside my negative thoughts but couldn’t help saying, “It is all a bit peculiar, you must admit.”

“*Peculiar*, I think, might be too strong a word. *Mysterious* would be more appropriate.”

“Okay, mysterious then, but, Johnny, I really think we’re in over our heads. I swore I wasn’t going to go off the deep end anytime soon, and yet here I am again. I can hardly believe it.”

“I wouldn’t beat yourself up too badly,” said Johnny. “It’s the nature of this place, so you might as well enjoy it. Besides, I’ll be right there with you. Just like old times.”

I sighed heavily as Stanley entered with a tray on which were placed three tiny crystal glasses and a small emerald-green bottle caged in silver. He placed the tray on the table and removed a small black book from under his arm.

He laid the volume next to the leather case and poured out three thimble-size measures of a dark liquid.

“Gentlemen, it is time to seal our bargain. We will do it the old way. First, you must place both of your hands on this book and swear to follow without question, and to completion, my instructions or suffer the consequences. Do you so agree?”

Johnny and I looked at each other. *Consequences? What consequences?* my thoughts screamed, but there was no backing out.

We stretched out our hands and placed them on the book. I looked at it carefully as I did so. The volume had wooden boards covered with black leather and certainly was no Bible.

“Repeat after me: I so swear.”

“I so swear,” Johnny and I repeated in unison.

“Very good,” said Stanley briskly. “Now we seal the bargain this way.” He held up one of the glasses. “Drink in one gulp, but only after you hear what I have to say.”

Johnny and I reached for the two glasses and raised them up. Robert the Bruce sat up and watched us, his eyes inscrutable.

Stanley spoke: "We have made an oath. May faith rule our fears, may trust overcome adversity, and may we be guided by the gods that now stand silent around us, watching."

Stanley drank it off and put down his glass. Johnny and I did the same. The liquid burned hot down my throat and tasted of meadow grasses and flowers but with a strong metallic aftertaste.

I managed to say, "Was there blood in that drink?"

"I will answer all your questions, but only when the tale is done. Shall we adjourn for a quick break, or are you both ready to continue?"

I opted for the quick break. Not only did I want to drink something to get rid of the aftertaste of whatever we had just consumed, but I also wanted to get a look at Alice's bathroom, since I had never seen it.

We agreed to a ten-minute recess, while Stanley made coffee. Johnny and I walked down to the library to grab some cognac. Robert clicked along behind.

Johnny poured us both a generous measure from the bar, which we both drank immediately, swilling the liquor around in our mouths before swallowing to get rid of the aftertaste.

We looked at each other.

"Well?" I asked.

"Well, indeed. Let's wander back," said Johnny, carrying the bottle. "Thank God for this cognac. I wouldn't consume that little draft on a regular basis, but you must admit it was a nice touch and strangely appropriate."

"Humph" was all I could say to that but finally I added, "I'll give

thanks if we simply remain in human form. Stanley drank some too, which raised my hopes, but I'm a little concerned about that 'suffer the consequences' clause that appeared out of nowhere at the very end."

"Yes, we were a bit sideswiped there. We should get that spelled out. It could be important."

"Damn right it could be important. I must admit old Stanley has been full of surprises. He sure had me fooled. So much for the gentle family retainer, all smiles and simpers — that idea has gone by the boards completely."

"Well, he's a member of the Dodge household and was Alice's factotum for years. It's no surprise when you think about it. Our retainers tend to be tough as nails and good at their jobs."

"Yes, I should have known...Still, Stanley of all people...Just make sure you have all those questions he's managed to duck at hand, so we can get them answered before we're done here. It's like old times, Johnny. I can hardly believe it. We're in it for sure."

Johnny laughed.

We were back in Alice's apartment. I went off to investigate the plumbing, while Johnny lounged about, looking into the fire. When I returned, nothing had changed other than Robert was now sitting directly in front of Johnny, gazing up at him. He turned as Stanley entered with a coffee tray.

"Gentlemen, please help yourselves. There are a couple of small sandwiches as well."

I had to hand it to the man. He knew how to do things right.

We were soon settled, and Stanley started up his tale again.

"As you will recall, her ladyship had confided in me her experiences at the hands of his lordship.

"I thanked her for being so candid, but I was nonetheless resolved to help in any way I could. Her confession about being visited by the people while she was locked in the trunk and in peril

did nothing to dispel that intention. I had heard of such visitations while under duress. The fells and moorlands of Scotland are strange places and have spawned tales and legends aplenty.

“As to his lordship, I thought we should stop short of cold-blooded murder, not because I was squeamish or felt the action undeserved but because the potential legal and criminal repercussions to her ladyship were too great to risk.

“It was my opinion that the man was a complete bounder and needed a good thrashing. Barring murder, I suggested that we send him packing in his own trunk to his club in New York. He would then experience the same ordeal as her ladyship. To this she heartily agreed and clapped her hands in approval. We just had to work out the details, particularly as to how to prevent his coming back and either charging us with criminal conduct or taking revenge by some other means — an action I was certain he would attempt.

“Her ladyship thought the matter over and said she might have a way. She stated that she had no qualms about taking out a full-page advertisement in both the *London Times* and the *New York Times* simultaneously, spelling out in detail Lord Bromley’s actions. She added that he must have practiced his ways on others before her and that a substantial monetary incentive for successful prosecution would have his former victims clamoring for his head on both sides of the Atlantic.

“The more she thought about it, the more she liked it. His life would become an open book, unless he agreed to all her terms. In addition, she pointed out she had more than enough money to weather any storm, while he had far fewer resources. Exposed for what he was, he would be branded forever in the eyes of the public as a depraved sadist, making any kind of future in a civilized country impossible.

“As a final touch, she would have a letter of instructions kept on

file at her lawyers' to immediately launch the campaign if she were to die in the next several years for whatever reason. She asserted that he'd better hope and pray she remained in good health and that not a hint of him should cross her path or he'd wish he'd never been born.

"She liked where she was going with this. She would make the arrangements with her legal people and have them draft a letter to be given to him at his club. She decided that I should be the one to present it. Further, to make sure he understood his position, I was to inform him that he would be arrested if he was seen anywhere near her properties.

"Their relationship was over, and she would divorce him as soon as possible. His only recourse to prevent all this coming out was to leave the country immediately. There were to be no negotiations. She had very good attorneys in New York and London who would be given extremely lucrative incentives to ensure he ended up penniless and behind bars, if she unleashed them. By the time she finished, she had convinced herself that life for her would begin again with a fresh start in a new direction.

"I was happy with her decision and told her so.

"I also informed her ladyship that the club should not be a problem. I knew the headman, Cedric, and he owed me several favors. I would arrange for a Saturday delivery and store the trunk in the basement of the club until I opened it. The only question that remained was how to get his lordship in it. To this we turned as our next order of business.

"His lordship was expected to return on Friday afternoon, which gave us just a few days to prepare. His usual behavior when he arrived was to ask for a whiskey with no ice. I would give him his drink, but with the addition of a powerful soporific, such as a combination of chloral hydrate and phenobarbital. I would also contact a veterinary friend of mine to get some kind of

tranquilizing cocktail, such as ketamine and atropine, that could be injected if all else failed.

“I’d had a fair amount of experience with horses and had to sedate many of them when there was a hunt and the rider’s skill was questionable. My former employer did not want to take the chance of having some luckless peer of the realm hurtling across the English countryside on an out-of-control mount. The proper dosage for a human would be critical, and this was an area where I would have to guess and have plans in place to handle any eventuality, including what I would do if I administered a dose that proved lethal.

“With our plans made, it was just a question of making adequate preparations. Her ladyship arranged to meet with her attorneys, being careful to avoid any contact with his lordship while she was in New York, and would return on Thursday with everything in place.

“For my part, I arranged the pickup of the trunk for Saturday morning. I saw my veterinary friend and came away well supplied.

“I thought about this extensively. Lord Bromley was not a man to be trifled with. If he got wind of what we were up to, there was no telling what he might do. I had to be prepared for every contingency. I rehearsed my actions in my mind, including what would happen if the drink proved ineffective.

“Friday arrived, and her ladyship and I went over our plans again to make sure we had missed nothing. In anticipation, I had arranged for the other servants to have a day off. Her ladyship and myself were the only ones present in the house. We were as prepared as we could be.

“Lord Bromley arrived that evening in high spirits. The front door was flung open, and he yelled immediately for his wife, holding a sheaf of papers in his hand for her to sign. Her ladyship informed him that she would sign them after dinner, but this was not soon enough for him. He wanted her signatures now. Her

ladyship sized up his mood and acquiesced, anticipating that he might calm down after that was done. She was correct, and after he watched her sign in several places, he was all smiles again and asked for a whiskey. I added more than enough drugs to knock out a large man, but to no avail. He was still standing with not even a slur after forty minutes. He asked for another, which I also doctored and gave to him with no small amount of trepidation. If anything, he seemed even more animated. I decided then that he needed to be injected. I announced that dinner was served, and that I would be taking care of both of them as several of the servants had flu-like symptoms.

“The syringe was in my pocket. I put the bowl before him with one hand and struck with the other. Unfortunately, he turned at the last second and the needle caught his shoulder blade, bending the point sideways. He cried out and started to rise from his chair when I hit him full in the face with my fist, still clutching the syringe. He went down with a crash, falling onto the table before rolling onto the floor, out cold. I doubt my skill as a pugilist knocked him out but rather the delayed effects of the drugs. Now I was worried that I might have given him too much. Her ladyship was beside me in a flash as we looked down at the man. He looked very pale.

“‘Is he dead?’ she asked.

“‘I don’t think so,’ I replied. ‘He’s breathing, but we should hurry in case he should come around.’

“I knew it would take time for both of us to carry the trunk down the stairs, strip him, and put him in it. I had the horrible thought of his lordship recovering and wandering off when we weren’t looking. I grabbed a lamp from the drawing room and tied the electric chord around his feet. We would hear him if he started to get away.

“We climbed the stairs to bring down the trunk. Carrying it was heavy work, and both of us were panting and shaking by the

time we got the monstrosity down to the foyer. We both sat on the lid to rest. Eventually, her ladyship got up and said in a tone of voice I will never forget: 'Let's send this man packing. Whaddya say?'"

"He was still stretched out on the floor, so we dragged him over to the trunk, stripped off his clothes, and dropped him in. His head hit the bottom with a thud. I flipped the lid closed, locked it, and pocketed the key.

"Her ladyship and I went upstairs to pack up his things. We decided that it would be best if he had something to change into rather than let the club deal with him when he was released, so I put aside a bag to take with me.

"I listened to the trunk before I went to bed. I could hear nothing. I didn't dare open it.

"Early the next morning, the trunk was picked up. That afternoon, I heard from the club that it had arrived and been put in the club's storage room in the basement.

"I had a distracted couple of days. Red wine was even served in white wineglasses. I was out of sorts. Even her ladyship acted preoccupied. All I could think of was appearing at the club and finding I had a corpse on my hands.

"Monday dawned, and I arrived as planned, having driven into the city. I spoke with Cedric immediately, who directed me to the basement. I was alone, and there was the trunk. I had the letter.

"What I was not prepared for was the condition of the man when I opened it. He was alive, I will say that much, but barely. I had to think fast. I closed the lid and went upstairs to the headman and informed him I needed a room and a doctor who was discreet. Cedric looked at me and asked if we had a situation. I said we did and that he would be compensated accordingly for his help in dealing with it. He said he had just the man and went off to make a call.

"He was back in a minute and said a doctor would arrive in a

quarter of an hour. In the meanwhile, he showed me a suitable room on the top floor. The trunk was carried up with the help of two men from the kitchen. I phoned her ladyship, told her the state of affairs, and advised she make plans to go to Europe immediately, in case things took a dark turn. She agreed and told me she would be in touch.

“It was now time to deal with his lordship. I placed several towels on the bed and opened the lid of the trunk. He scrunched up his eyes with the light. I reached in and took hold of his arm. He grabbed my wrist. His mouth worked, but what came out was a mewling sound that I interpreted as the word *water*, only an octave higher than I had ever heard him speak. I removed his hand and filled a glass with water, which I helped him drink. I got him up and out of the trunk somehow and into the bathroom, where I ran a shower. He was a mess and stank to high heaven. I washed him off and more or less carried him to the bed, when there was a knock on the door. It was Cedric and the doctor. I covered his lordship with a blanket, closed the trunk, and tried to air out the room.

“The doctor examined him and then turned to me. He said with some asperity, ‘The man looks to be in shock and is severely dehydrated. That he’s alive is a miracle.’ He looked at me, expecting an explanation. I shook my head and whispered to the doctor, ‘Not only that, he failed the physical part of the club’s admission process most horribly. The poor chap will be so disappointed.’ I can be amusing when I want to be. The doctor gave a start at my flippant attitude. I told him rather severely, ‘How this man got into the condition you see before you is no concern of yours. His recovery, however, is. How long until he is well enough to travel?’ He gave me a long look and then nodded. ‘I will give him an injection immediately and start a drip to help him rehydrate. He should have oxygen and round-the-clock nursing. I make no guarantees. We will see once he’s stabilized.’ Cedric

chimed in that there was a full nurses' station on the second floor with oxygen. The doctor said, 'Show me,' and went out with him.

"I was left with his lordship, who looked half-dead. If he lived or died made no difference to me. I would nurse him back to health because duty demanded it. Looking back on that decision, I should have smothered him with a pillow while I had the chance."

The fire popped again, giving Johnny and me a start. Stanley got up and put on another log. He poked at it until the fire was burning to his satisfaction and sat back down. He continued.

“I won’t bore you with the details of nursing Lord Bromley back to health. As he grew stronger, he became surly. Rage would dance in his eyes whenever he looked at me. I felt now was the time to take steps for my own safety and peace of mind. This man was a bully, and bullies need to be handled forcefully.

“It was in the morning perhaps a week later. He was sitting up in bed. I had just brought him breakfast and put the tray on the side table. I thought I would start right in. ‘Your lordship, I see you are making a recovery. Now is the time for you to consider your position. I have a letter from her ladyship’s attorneys.’ I gave it to him. His hand shook as he read it. He threw the correspondence aside when he had finished and looked out the window. He put his fist to his mouth and bit down. When he took it away, I could see the puncture marks from his teeth. He glared at me and said, ‘You

have all the cards. I surrender...for now. But know this and mark it well: you have not heard the last of me. I will have my revenge on that slut of a wife of mine...and on you. She has wrapped you around her little finger — I see that. You will not be able to protect her, I promise you. I will win in the end. You think you have taken everything from me, but I'm not without means. I have time. It's my greatest weapon. How quickly you'll forget, but I won't. Every day I'll remember. Now get out. I don't want to see you. You're beneath me.' He turned away and would look at me no more.

"It was vital that I did something then. He was too smug. This would only give him confidence, and I needed to unbalance him. I snatched the knife from the breakfast tray, grabbed him by the throat, and stuck the blade right up his nose. I did not draw blood, at least not much. I waited until his eyes began to water, and then I said, 'I have let you live. Remember that, when you get too high and mighty. I might just forget myself next time.' I removed the knife, gave his nose a playful twist that caused him to cry out, and walked out the door. I saw Cedric and told him that his lordship was on his own. Her ladyship would cover all expenses up to this moment and to send a bill for all costs including a cash bonus for his discretion and loyalty.

"His lordship was gone the next day. Where he went, I do not know, but in the end, he was right. We forgot about him. Her ladyship decided to take a completely new tack. Spurred, I suppose, by the unexpected spiritual experience with 'the people' whom she encountered during her husband's abuses, she decided to learn all she could about this type of phenomena. She took up psychology, anthropology, archaeology, Egyptology, as well as the occult. She gave liberally to the finest university departments that specialized in antiquities, who were only too happy to accept her as a student and, eventually, as a colleague. She consulted everyone from professors to fortune-tellers, gurus, and shamans all around the globe in her zeal for learning.

“Her pursuits caused her to spend less and less time at Rhinebeck. Partly, this was due to her studies at university and other places, but later, she joined in expeditions throughout the world. Her only stipulation for funding many of them was that she was allowed to take part.

“From here on, I can give you only snippets of her life, because the times I saw her grew fewer and farther between. I was never sure whether this was because she would rather not be reminded of Lord Bromley or because of something else. Once again, I must relate some personal details.

“I knew from the start that I was completely captivated by my employer, perhaps even besotted. I also knew that this was a potential disaster in the making. There’ve been numerous instances of those in service creating liaisons with their employers. These have either ended badly, or when the relationships have come to light, they’ve been at great cost to the reputations of those involved.

“In addition to this peril, being in service in a large house where the employer visits only occasionally can be a lonely and forbidding occupation. I would receive telegrams now and again: *IN LIMA STOP HOME MAR 11 LA*. The *LA* stood for ‘Lady Alice,’ or so I thought. She would stay for a week or two and then be off to somewhere else. She would remain in residence for perhaps eight weeks of the year. I pined and suffered in silence, until I determined to do two things.

“First, I resolved to read every book in the massive library, including the volumes accumulated by her ladyship’s mother, of which I will have more to say in a minute.

“Second, I needed to find myself a wife. Although her ladyship had the final say, I could put forward for consideration of employment whomever I wished. I had my eye on one such lady. She was in the employ of a banker in New York and had a

reputation as an outstanding cook. This, of course, was my Dagmar.

“I will never forget when I informed her ladyship that I had asked for Dagmar’s hand in marriage and that she had accepted. We were in this very room when I told her. She said simply, ‘Oh, Stanley.’ She paled and sat staring out the window. I realized that *LA* had always meant ‘Love, Alice’ and that she must have felt for me what I had only imagined. I was speechless. Eventually, she blurted out, ‘What am I doing? Of course you have my permission. Have you set a date?’ I managed to tell her when, and she said she would take care of all expenses. At the end of our conversation, she said, ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some letters to write.’ She did not appear from her apartment until the next day, when she announced she was off to Paris. She didn’t attend our wedding, and we did not see her again for an entire year. We did, however, receive a congratulatory telegram.

“It was shortly after that time that rumors of her participation in a very fast set began to hit the papers and magazines even in New York. In spite of my concerns for my employer, life with Dagmar proved beyond my expectations. I was, for the first time, happy beyond all imagining. We saw her ladyship for only brief periods over the next several years and had the house pretty much to ourselves. When her ladyship did appear, she often looked different from when we last saw her. Sometimes she would come back tanned almost black, when she had been in Egypt or in South America. Other times, she would arrive white as porcelain, when she returned from stints at the British museum or other establishments where she examined ancient texts. Boxes filled with books and manuscripts would arrive from time to time, many to be cataloged and preserved in the special library, which I will show you now.”

Stanley got up and walked to the wall to the left of the entrance to the sitting room. He flicked what looked like a light switch.

There was a click, a hiss, and the edge of a door appeared where before had been a blank wall. Light streamed from the opening. Johnny and I followed into a chilly space that was filled floor-to-ceiling with wooden shelving holding books of all shapes and sizes in no apparent order other than a series of numbers and letters.

The repository was larger than expected, some ten by fifteen feet, but the striking part was its height. The ceiling was higher than that of the sitting room. There was a sliding ladder to get to the upper reaches. Almost every shelf was filled to capacity.

There was a background hum of air-conditioning. Otherwise, the room was singularly quiet.

Stanley pointed to a pair of boxes.

“There is a filing system based upon subject matter, with a large section under *Miscellaneous*. The room is hermetically sealed, with temperature and humidity controlled automatically. Her ladyship was an avid collector of many books on the occult. Some of those that are stored here are hundreds of years old. You are looking at probably one of the most extensive libraries on witchcraft and black magic in the world.”

Johnny and I were speechless.

Johnny eventually said, “This has been here all along?”

“Yes. It was built before you were born and was her ladyship’s private repository. Her most valuable books, including some of her mother’s, are kept in here. Her ladyship was quite adamant that their existence and the location of the repository be limited to a few. Mr. and Mrs. Dodge know about the library, of course, but have chosen to let me remain the caretaker.”

I couldn’t help asking, “Stanley, were you the one who cataloged them?”

“Oh yes. Most of them I have read — at least those that can be. Many are in foreign languages and not of any modern variety. Some of those are beyond my skill, but I have looked at all of them at the very least.”

Johnny looked about, touching the bindings. "To think there was a whole room that we never knew about. We were only told that there was a locked section. By the way, is this a lending library? I mean could we borrow the odd volume now that we know about it?" asked Johnny.

"I see no reason you can't, provided they are returned. Most can be removed, except those kept in these cases over here. These must remain in this room because of the potential damage due to contact with untreated atmosphere. Each of the books in this library has been put through a freezing cycle to kill pests, but still, some are very ancient, particularly those made from papyrus, and must be especially protected."

"How about the one you had us swear on this evening?" The words came out before I could catch them.

Stanley smiled. "That was a personal copy, but there is another charming volume on summoning demons and other spirits that you might find amusing over here in this section."

He pointed to an oddly shaped book that could have been rectangular when bound, but was now bent out of shape.

"I don't know how much you believe in that sort of thing. We live in a modern world, after all, but let us go back to the other room. Such discussions are best done outside of this particular place."

We filed out. Stanley shut the door and toggled the switch on the wall. There was a hiss and a click. We took our places before the fire. Robert had not moved.

"Where were we?" he asked.

I was quite sure he knew exactly where we were, but said nothing. It was not that I now disliked Stanley. He had numerous outstanding qualities, but he was also a hard man, a cruel man, a man of many secrets, and we were being given only those he wished us to have, and for what purpose, I was unsure.

Johnny answered, "We were talking about spirits...and speaking of which, please pass the decanter."

It was by my elbow, so I handed it across. Johnny poured another round for all of us and sat back down.

"Spirits..." said Stanley. "I have always been practical by nature; after all, Hume was Scottish, and so was Adam Smith. Prior to my current employment, I had no place for superstition in my life. When I arrived, I had a house to run, so practicality was always foremost. But as a rule, we humans see only what we want to see, and that is not so much. If you've lived in this house consecutively day after day for as long as I have, you will have observed things that cannot be easily explained, which we will be getting to. Are we ready to continue?"

Johnny and I nodded. Robert continued to doze. Stanley started up again.

"One freezing night in winter, her ladyship arrived unexpectedly. She asked for a large vodka and a conference in her sitting room, while handing me her coat. We always assumed that she could show up at any time, so all was ready for her, including flowers in her room. I entered her quarters with her drink and served her. She gulped the vodka down in one go, put the glass on the table, and sat down in this chair. Her shoulders began to shake. Her tears turned to sobs. She held her head in her hands and whispered, 'Oh, Stanley, what have I done?'

"I said to her, 'My lady, you are home again. All will be well.' She seemed on the verge of collapse. She sat up and fell back in the chair, curling herself up in a ball.

"I went to her and lifted her up. She was light as a feather. I carried her to her bedroom, laid her on the bed, and covered her with a blanket. I whispered, 'Sleep is what you need. Everything will be better in the morning.' She was snoring by the time I closed the door.

"The next day, she asked to see me. She apologized for her

behavior the night before. She said she was exhausted by travel and that she should have held herself together a bit better. She asked how I was keeping and then blurted out that she had remarried. This surprised me, but I congratulated her. How could I have done otherwise?

“Her new husband was the mining magnate Arthur Blaine. He had made a fortune diamond mining in Africa. She thought that he was at least as rich as she was. The wedding had taken place in a thirteenth-century church near the fortified manor house that was now the Blaine residence in Shropshire. The ceremony had been small and discreet. There had been no news in the American press and hardly any in the British papers. I asked her why. She said that both of them preferred it that way. I had no problem with that, but then I asked how come she was here and not with her husband, to which she replied that after the wedding they had attended a party in London. Someone had snuck up behind her and put their hands over her eyes and whispered, ‘Guess who?’ Alice had whirled around and been struck speechless as she looked into the black eyes of Lord Bromley. ‘Surprised, Alice? I thought you’d be. I told your man we would meet again, and so we have. Arthur and I have known each other for years. What? Arthur never told you? I made sure of it. Poor, poor Alice.’ He had left her there with her mouth open. The surprise had been complete. She just made it to the bathroom before she got sick. As soon as she was able to, she fled and did not stop until she arrived at Rhinebeck.

“I had heard of Arthur Blaine, of course. In my circles, he was considered a bit of a lightweight, but to have amassed his considerable fortune spoke otherwise. I decided to suspend judgment until I saw him.

“I met him later that week. He arrived by car, knocked at the door, and asked politely to speak to his wife. She invited him in. He looked half-frozen, and they were married, after all. He begged her forgiveness. He explained most earnestly that he had seen her

at a shooting party long before she had wed Lord Bromley and had been in love with her ever since. After the divorce, he had informed Lord Bromley of his intentions to woo his former spouse. Lord Bromley had warned him that if he was to have any chance of success, not to mention their friendship. Her ladyship then acknowledged that had she known that the two were friends, rather than acquaintances, their wedding would never have taken place. Blaine appeared sincere and genuine. Her ladyship relented, and a new chapter started in her life. They moved into the upstairs bedroom. Her ladyship used this area of the house as her study and informed me that under no circumstances was the existence of the secret library to be revealed to him or to anyone.

“In spite of the rocky start, I think she was happy with Arthur. He was the opposite of Lord Bromley in almost every way.

“For a couple of years, all was peace and harmony, until they went off to Ecuador. They were lured there by a rumor of lost treasure that came in the form of a map and a letter sent by one of Arthur’s cronies, Fredrick Deprizio, known to all simply as Freddy. I think the excitement of a new find unknown to the modern world captivated them, rather than any monetary gain, although that may have been on Arthur’s mind. His fortunes had by this time suffered a steep decline due to the simple fact that he was not in South Africa looking after his business affairs.

“After doing some research, her ladyship announced they would embark on an expedition to discover the truth of the matter. I did not hear from them for half a year. Out of the blue, her ladyship appeared, without her husband and angry as a hornet. She filed for divorce immediately. I must say, I was not altogether surprised, but after she related what happened, I agreed with her in every way.”

At this point Johnny interjected, “I hate to interrupt, but we found a letter in our search of the basement that was written by

Aunt Alice to an M. Thoreau, care of the Carlyle. It was returned shortly after her death, unable to forward. I have the letter here.”

Johnny handed the letter to Stanley, who read it carefully. He showed no indication of surprise at its contents, however.

“I suggest this be kept in the repository” was all he said as he handed it back to Johnny. He then added, “It confirms what I have learned about the incident, but more importantly, what she writes hints at a change in her ladyship’s habits and concentrations. After her return from that expedition, she became much more obsessed with the world of the spiritual and the occult. I will have more to say about that shortly, but what is interesting is that she mentions the figurine, an object that I believe may be responsible for more than one death.”

“**M**ore than one death? What do you mean?” asked Johnny.

“That figurine her ladyship mentioned has been a source of trouble and intrigue for some time, but I will get to that in due course. Perhaps, more importantly, at least to me, is that the letter suggests her ladyship’s state of mind, which is what troubled me most after her return. She became a study in contradictions. She was at times filled with anger and rage. I would find her staring off into space with a look that surprised me. Lines of hatred that I’d never seen would crease her face. One day when I saw that expression, I asked if I could be of help. She said, ‘Stanley, I feel so violated. I’m so angry all the time! I wish I could find out what happened to them. I want to *know* how much they suffered. Maybe then I can let go of the rage that I feel almost constantly.’

“She got her wish. Arthur showed back up again, but a year after her return from the jungle, and much had happened during that time. She had rammed through a divorce and removed any

evidence of the man by dumping all his things in the garbage. Her periods of anger had thankfully become fewer, but these were replaced by what I now considered a mystic daze.

“As to the source of her changed personality, I think the drugs her ladyship experimented with had much to do with it. She had begun to collect seeds and plants from many locations. In this, I think she found escape, enlightenment, and relief. I noted her behavioral changes and asked her about the long-term effects of her investigations on both her physical self and her mind. She told me that the majority of her experimental efforts were interesting but of little utility, with one or two exceptions. Those exceptions were what mattered and allowed her to access areas she was keen to explore, which were inaccessible in any other way. Over time, she became thoroughly convinced of two things. First, that she was reincarnated and, second, that the use of certain drugs, particularly those she had learned to prepare under the guidance of various indigenous priests and shamans, were essential to create the states of mind she required to achieve greater awareness. I was less than sanguine at this development. To me, she was charting a course between death on one side and madness on the other. I was frightened for her, but what could I do? She was a grown woman, a keen researcher, and a force in her own right. There was nothing to be done.

“The evening Arthur Blaine returned, her ladyship was at home. We found out that the gruesome revenge she had called down on Arthur, Freddy, and Lord Bromley was not just speculation but real horror visited on real people.

“As with his first appearance, Arthur arrived unexpectedly, this time in the spring rather than the dead of winter. He knocked on the door, which I opened, and there he was. Her ladyship had come out of the drawing room. She recognized him and began screaming. The man cringed. I took him by the arm and hustled him outside. He looked about as if he was going to make a run for

it, but I held onto him. He must have arrived on foot, because I saw no car. To me, he looked a bit out of his mind, and I felt pity for him. Harry had heard the ruckus and came running. I told him to take the man and put him up in one of the rooms above the garage and that I would be there shortly. I had two concerns. The first was to calm her ladyship. The second was to find out the full extent of her ladyship's revenge from one who knew.

"I opened the front door. She was still standing there, her hand to her mouth. I said, 'That was Arthur Blaine, of course. I put him up in one of the rooms above the garage. We must know what happened. I will arrange for some food to be prepared and then go see him. Harry is looking after him for now.'

"She snapped out of her trance. 'Very well' was all she said and glided back into the drawing room. I went to the kitchen to get a tray made up and prepared myself to hear his story.

"I grabbed a bottle of scotch along with the food. I made my way outside to the garage and up the stairs that led to the rooms above. Arthur was sitting at a small table looking at his hands. He brightened with the sight of food and drink. He was ravenous and told me his story between bites. Here is what I remember him saying. He spoke in bursts of lucidity and tears.

"It was Bromley, that bastard. The trap was all his idea. He put Freddy up to it, of course. He just wanted to get Alice and me; well, Alice, actually, in the middle of nowhere, and his plan succeeded admirably. He knew she couldn't resist the bait of a lost city in the jungle. He had to be clever, though. She wasn't stupid, but Freddy's account stood up to a great deal of scrutiny, because he enclosed a real letter from a sixteenth-century Ecuadorian version of Father Junipero Serra that had been buried in the Vatican stacks for ages. God knows how Bromley had gotten the document out of there, but in the end, Alice decided it was genuine and worth a gamble based on the contents. The problem, we later discovered, was that the city we

searched for was nowhere near the location the priest had indicated.

“Instead, we found Bromley. Alice didn’t have a chance, and I could do nothing. He had hired a bunch of thugs, and we were in the middle of a jungle far from civilization. Tropics are not my forte, I can tell you — give me desert any day. We were trapped. Alice had driven him to display such cunning. He must have been consumed with paying her back, and he did so. He took her to his bed that night and every night. She screamed a lot at first, then not so much. Eventually, I figured, when in Rome, and so did Freddy. I’m not proud of what I did, but we paid the price. Did we ever pay!’

“Blaine broke into tears now. They stopped once he had a shot of whiskey, which I made sure he had aplenty. He gave his nose a blow and carried on.

“That Bromley, he was a careful file. He had Alice watched, so she couldn’t escape, but he underestimated her. In the midst of her captivity, she had found something we overlooked. Not too far from our base camp, which was set up near a river, was a series of mounds. She called them *tolas*. They were burial spots, and since they were untouched, she convinced us to do some excavating. That woman wasn’t going to waste an archeological opportunity, regardless of the circumstances. She sure loved a dig. She made her case to us all and convinced us that gold was the least of the treasures buried right next door, if we had a mind. I was the one who found it. Lucky that — anyone else would have missed it: a raw emerald as big as your fist, buried in the dirt. The gem was held by a carved figurine. Alice insisted the figure and the stone not be separated. I could understand that, so I convinced Bromley to leave the thing as it was. It didn’t really matter one way or the other until we got back to civilization. How the stone got to that place, I don’t know, but there it was. There were gold pieces and smaller emeralds, but the big one held my interest. Most have

impurities. This one looked highly transparent. The stone might yield two or three very special pieces. Cut right and marketed well, they were worth a small fortune. Bromley, I think, had it in mind from the beginning that the find belonged to him. That idea didn't sit well with Freddy and me. We began to argue about what should be done. There was discord in the camp. Even the hired men started getting uppity. Riches from the earth scramble the minds of men. Bromley had to order them off at gunpoint — all except two to help us. We moved our camp closer to the dig, which was a more defensible position. In our excitement, we forgot about Alice, and that was our undoing. She seemed so subdued, but she must have been plotting all the time. She saw her chance and took it. She served us drinks each night, which thrilled his lordship no end. He loved to have her ladyship do the work of a servant. She did not protest and was grand. Then one night, she slipped us something. The drug she used launched us on an express elevator to hell that lasted for days.'

"Here he broke down and blubbered some more until I shook him and gave him another drink. He got back on track.

"I lost my mind. I couldn't say for how long. I just remember that I experienced such pain and fear that it's a wonder I'm not insane. Well, maybe I am...a little. I must have been out for days. What woke me was pain. Ants were stinging and biting me all over. I scrambled to the river and dove in to get them off. I hurt so bad, all I could do was weep. I got out after the stinging stopped and started to look about. The tents were gone. Little remained of the camp other than garbage strewn about. Off to one side, I saw Freddy. Something had eaten him. I have no idea what, but whatever it was had gnawed great chunks out of his arms and legs. Bugs were feeding on what remained.'

"He began to weep some more. I shook him until he stopped.

"Freddy was dead. He had no eyes, just empty sockets. I looked around for Bromley...anyone, really. I found him staring at a tree

trunk. I touched his shoulder, and he launched himself at me, throwing us to the ground. His face was a contorted mask of pain and rage. I screamed, and he seemed to recognize me. He stopped and got off. I knew we needed to get to a place to recover and take stock. I spoke with him and soothed him, but he was still in a bad place. He would stand in front of the odd tree and rub his hands together, over and over, like a field mouse or squirrel. I let him be and rummaged about until I found some leftover food. I'm not sure if that had been left deliberately or was simply overlooked in the scattered remains of our camp. I buried Freddy as best I could, but the river got him in the end. I spent several days nursing Bromley back into some semblance of health, when the rain began — not just any rain, but a deluge. The river rose, and we had to move to escape the flood. We became trapped on the wrong side of the river. Our situation became desperate. I cobbled together what I could, and we made our way downstream until we stumbled into a village. We collapsed there. They were humans, at least. They must have pitied us, because they gave us food and water. I caught some sickness and could go no farther. I started to waste away in a fever-driven delirium that was almost as bad as what I experienced back at the camp. I recovered, but only after months. Bromley must have regained his strength and decided to press on rather than wait for me. When I finally came to, he was gone.'

"Arthur then passed out on the table with head in his arms. Before he did so, he gave me one last fact. Lord Bromley had made his way back to civilization, because he had left a note for Blaine at the American Express office in Quito. He wrote that he owed Arthur his life and that he was off to Europe. The postscript said that she would be paid back in kind, even if it took him all of eternity.

"I left Arthur asleep and went to tell her ladyship. I had been hoping that Lord Bromley had died in the jungle, but no such luck.

"When Arthur Blaine awoke the next morning, I informed him

of the divorce. He nodded to himself. He said he expected that and would be on his way. He mumbled that he had money, so not to worry. Harry drove him to the train station, and that was the last I saw of him.

“Her ladyship’s comment was: ‘So, he’s still alive. Shit. We had best watch ourselves.’ I agreed, of course, but the question was how...”

Stanley paused in his narrative and lit another cigar.

Once it was smoking well, he said, “With this next part of the tale, the occult, or otherworldly elements of her ladyship’s life, begin to figure prominently, and we must digress. I have held off discussing these matters until now so that the facts of her life were not eclipsed by the mere sensational. From this point on, that is not possible. To understand her ladyship, it is necessary to go down paths that are electrifying to some, incredible to others, and preposterous to most. I will say this by way of preamble that for myself, her ladyship was always an extremely intelligent woman endowed with extraordinary character and determination. Yet at the same time, it isn’t easy to encompass in that noble image a person who also felt that she carried with her a curse from a prior incarnation.

“How such a level-headed woman could believe in and pursue the stuff of hoaxers and frauds, while holding advanced degrees, is, likewise, difficult to understand. The sums she spent on artifacts and books alone, if known, would give even the most generous

and affluent pause for concern and open the door for many to question her sanity. Yet, I assure you, she was a remarkably sane woman. Most people are motivated by dreams, visions, or goals. Her ladyship was driven by nightmares.

“She told me about her affliction one morning shortly after the Bromley affair. We were coordinating an upcoming house party when she asked, out of the blue, if I had ever had a recurring dream. I answered that I had not. She said she had, and the nightmare was always the same:

“She is in ancient Egypt. Her father is a high priest, and she has stolen a golden necklace and an amulet from his temple. Her theft is discovered, but before she is captured, she hides what she took. Because she refuses to reveal the location and has desecrated the temple by her theft, she is cursed to be held in the dark forever. She is taken and placed, suspended between life and death, on a slab of stone inside a tomb beneath the ground and left there. It is utterly black. When she tries to rise, an arm reaches out from behind her and drags her back down. After numerous attempts to sit up, she would awake, shaking, and covered in perspiration.

“She told me that she had experienced this same dream off and on since she was a little girl. The nightmare played on that which she feared most and was relentless in its repetition.

“Some men have an uncanny ability to peer into our souls and divine our most secret terrors. Lord Bromley is such a man. Whether through intuition or some evil clairvoyance, his lordship had hit upon the one thing that would terrorize her more than any other: he locked her up in a box. To her ladyship, her nightmare, which had always been troubling, but never to be taken with complete seriousness, was now proved incontrovertibly real, frighteningly active in the present and had crept out of its nightly lair and into broad daylight.

“She told me that it wasn’t the darkness that frightened her but rather the dawning realization that she was factually cursed. She

knew there was nothing she wouldn't do to escape it, and that terrified her.

"To us, bad dreams, even recurring ones, are not life-and-death matters, but rather preoccupations of our imagination that can be shrugged off with a morning coffee. To her ladyship, it was a deadly business. How else could the years of dreams and her recent imprisonment be explained? With her final acceptance of the reality of her situation, a desire to change her fate and release the curse began to burn within her. From this time forward, an intensity and a passion for extremes permeated everything she did. After all, she had nothing to lose, and how else was she to convince herself she had tried everything in her power with the attention and focus it deserved? She believed in her doom, and thus her sentence to be held in the dark forever was made real.

"No possible avenue for commuting the curse was left unexamined.

"The 'people,' as she called them, the spirits she encountered in the trunk, seemed to offer a possible lifeline. She reached for them, but to do so meant her journey had to be an internal as well as external one. One discovered them either through experiencing prolonged periods of extreme physical hardship or through the use of drugs that unlocked the mind. She chose the latter path. She had met shamans who had explained to her in detail how to prepare and consume various mixtures of plants to be able to contact them, but there was danger. One's spirit could get sucked out of this world and into another, from which there was no return. At least, this was how she explained it to me. In addition, contacting them was not the end of her task, but merely the beginning. She needed to convince them to intercede on her behalf, to lift what assailed her when she slept.

"In her quest for expiation, she traveled many roads. She crisscrossed the world in search of mystics, mind-altering drugs, mountaineers, tomb raiders, shamans, spiritualists, and explorers,

because these were the demographic that understood and experienced something of what she had. The possibility of success was remote. She told me several times that she thought his lordship might have unhinged her mind, but she really had no choice but to persist. It was either carry on or check herself into an institution.

“She mentioned she had thought about institutionalization quite seriously. She even went so far as to visit several facilities under the pretext of making a donation. In the end, she thought her best course was to gamble on making her own way. The thought of his lordship discovering that she was alone in a padded cell in a straightjacket, put there through her own decision, was an affront too great to be born. She would rather have killed herself, which she told me she had seriously considered more than once.

“Contemplating suicide and staring death in the face eventually hardened her resolve to survive and solve her problem. She put her dilemma this way: If indeed she was cursed, the dreams and the manifestations would only transfer to her future lives. If science was correct, and we simply cease to exist after death, relief would be immense, but what if science was wrong? To her mind, the possibility of a heaven or a hell seemed unlikely; reincarnation a distinct possibility; and the infinite sleep of the cadaver, although welcomed, too uncertain. In her current life, she had resources far beyond those of ordinary people, so she thought it best to take advantage of them.

“The first step on her path became clear. She needed knowledge. She launched her career as an Egyptologist.

“From my point of view, she wanted to know if what she was experiencing was a re-experience of something that actually happened. She knew two facts: the location of her dream and that her father had been the high priest of Amon. From this beginning, she began her research.

“Her specialty became the Atenist heresy in which the

fourteenth-century pharaoh Amenhotep IV threw off the religion of the day and made his own. He took the name Akhenaten and founded the city of Amarna in the desert. Its discovery led to finding the Valley of the Kings and the tomb of Akhenaten's son, Tutankhamen — an event that electrified the early twentieth century.

“Using her vast wealth, her ladyship was able to acquire certain artifacts of the period, one of which was a peculiar necklace that she would wear on fancy occasions. I doubt anyone knew of its significance.

“That she was able to make such acquisitions should not be surprising. Her ladyship moved easily throughout the world of Egyptian antiquities as a collector, researcher, and monetary supporter. That she should wear such items as often as she did may have been foolhardy because it is possible that someone recognized them for what they were.

“On another tack, I don't mean to give the impression her ladyship during this time simply retired from society to further her research. She did not. She maintained an active social life. She needed contacts to seek out artifacts and human interaction to relax her. Parties lightened her spirits. She would travel far, even to Europe, to attend a particularly large and important one.

“At other times, she would turn inward.

“One evening, I entered her quarters having knocked and received no reply. I found her sitting in front of the fire just as we are but dressed in Egyptian clothing and wearing the necklace. This was not long before she died. She had a dazed look and was speaking in a language that I didn't understand. I gave a start.

“She turned to me and said, ‘He comes, Stanley.’ She went back to looking at the coals. I did not know what to say. I asked if there was anything she needed, and she shook her head. I left her.

“The next day I requested an interview. This she granted, and we spoke at length. She told me that she'd been experimenting

with the *Brugmansia* plant and hoped that I had not been alarmed. I told her that I was becoming so. I begged her to tell me how I might be of help.

“I was becoming truly concerned. To my mind, her behavior had turned erratic. She would oscillate between having weekend parties that were marked by a forced gaiety, where numerous lights from all walks of life would attend: famous artists, musicians, authors, actors, and socialites would participate. Your parents would make their appearance on numerous occasions. During the week, she would travel to New York.

“At other times, she would close herself off in this part of the house and ask not to be disturbed. Food would be brought on a tray only to be picked up later untouched. She lost weight.

“Still, there were moments of extraordinary lucidity and serenity. She would shine with an inner light that was almost holy. I have no other word for it.

“She told me during that particular interview that she had finally reached some sort of culmination of her research.

“She took the necklace from its hiding place in her repository and handed it to me. It was gold in color and made of a number of half-inch ram’s heads. The weight was unusual. I learned that the heads were made of bitumen dipped in solid gold. What struck me initially was the design. It was either very modern or extremely ancient. I must admit that I have rarely felt something that seemed to exude so much energy — whether for good or evil, I could not say. It leaked a force that was both electrifying and powerful. I gave it back and was happy to do so.

“She told me that the necklace had been hers. She had recognized it immediately and had moved heaven and earth to obtain it. She said that, wearing it, she had managed to make a breakthrough in her research and that she thought she had a way to lift the curse. She had to purify herself and atone, but to do this, she needed access to several ancient manuscripts known as Books

of the Dead, but not just any would do. There were many, and most were worthless, other than for their historical significance. Her ladyship explained that to the ancient Egyptians, it was necessary to have a map when entering the underworld, and that without one, it was possible to remain lost in the darkness, which she felt described her situation very well. There was one book in particular that she had to follow to the letter. She thought she knew where a copy might exist. She was filled with hope.

“On revealing this, she glowed happily. It had been so long since I had seen her do so with the artless innocence that I remembered from so long ago that I almost wept. There was more. She had met a special person but was not ready to reveal any more than that. Overall, life for her had taken a marked turn for the better. She asked that I be patient. The change in her was so apparent that I acquiesced and, once again, offered my services to aid her in any way I could. Before I left, I asked who ‘he’ was. I told her that she had turned to me last night and said quite distinctly, ‘He comes, Stanley.’

“At this, her smile faded. She turned away and then faced me. She said, ‘He is the one who cursed me. We are locked together in some fashion. I learned last night that he is aware of my efforts as I am aware of his. It is a race, and I am uncertain as to the outcome. Our collision is only a matter of time. I saw that last night. I have to move quickly. I am off later today. I will return soon.’”

“**H**er ladyship arrived back at Rhinebeck a month later. I was setting out some flowers when I heard the crunch of gravel on the driveway. As I moved toward the front door, it burst open, and there she was. She saw me and giggled like a schoolgirl. ‘I have it, Stanley. I have it. Come. Come. Let’s talk. I’m so excited.’

“She handed me her coat and hat and clicked rapidly toward her rooms, carrying a valise. She smiled at me over her shoulder and cried, ‘Bring me some champagne! And hurry!’

“I moved rapidly to the kitchen, picked out a nice bottle of Dom Perignon, and had Dagmar make up some smoked salmon and slices of toast, while getting one of the footmen to take the bags to her ladyship’s rooms.

“I carried in the champagne in an ice bucket, along with a single flute on a silver tray. She was lying back on the couch relaxing, happy as could be. She sat up and waited impatiently while I opened the bottle and poured. Once I had done so, she began to tell me how she had managed to find records of the scroll

she sought in the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung in Berlin, and from there, she went to the British Museum and on to the Petrie to confirm it was the one. She was able to trace a copy to that of a colleague in London. The scroll was not the original, as she had hoped. That had gone missing, perhaps misfiled. The museum had thousands of papyrus scrolls, but a single filing error, and the scroll could be lost among thousands of others. Such mistakes often took months to correct. She could not wait. Still, the copy was by all accounts faithful to the original. The colleague had been most reluctant to part with such a unique document. She had paid a high price, and only for a copy, but such is life. She had examined her treasure minutely. The text was older and rather different from the typical Book of the Dead in both format and content. This intrigued her. She was certain she was on the right track.

“After the champagne, she was in a jubilant mood, flush with success, and told me that she would have a party this weekend to celebrate. In the meanwhile, she would study her treasure and work out how to implement the complicated spells the text called for.

“I asked, of course, if I could help her in anyway. She laughed and told me to make the party a success, and that would be enough. ‘Death comes to us all,’ she said. The ancient Egyptians took comfort in their rituals, and so would she. There was nothing I could do.

“The party that weekend was a delight. The affair included several celebrities, including one of the guests we are expecting in the next day or so: Malcolm Ault. He was much younger then, of course. Your parents were in Capri and could not attend.

“Two days later she was dead.

“The breakfast tray was by her door, left there by one of the maids, as was the custom. I was called when there was no response. I have keys to every lock and entered her room, after

having knocked repeatedly. It was dark and completely still. She was in bed, dressed in white satin pajamas. A manuscript lay across her stomach. I called out to her but knew in my heart she had passed on. I checked for a pulse, and there was none. Although I was upset beyond all measure, I sat down in one of the chairs in her bedroom and looked over the scene. I had to discover for myself whether her death looked the result of natural causes or something more sinister. Her face was calm and composed. Her skin was cold. There was no visible sign of trauma or agitation. She had been dead for several hours. The appearance was that she had put herself to bed and died. I checked the windows behind the drapes, and these were locked from the inside. I carefully examined the floor around her. There was nothing out of place — everything from her hairbrushes to the toothbrush in the bathroom was as it should be. I was left with no alternative but to examine her body.

“I undressed her and examined her carefully. I was mortified, but I had no choice — I had to know. I can steel myself when necessary to do whatever must be done regardless of the circumstances. Her body was unmarked. There were no puncture marks, no bruising other than the pooling of blood at her back — nothing to indicate that she had been killed rather than died in her sleep.

“I sat down again and looked over the scene one more time. I could find nothing untoward. The police, who had yet to be called, would soon take over, and the tabloids would have a field day. The only thing out of place was the valise, which I moved to the repository. I left the scroll on the bed since the maids had seen it when I had opened the door. I had done all I could to protect her reputation.

“When I finished, I apologized to her lifeless form for having failed her. She had deserved a good and happy life. I felt she had been taken prematurely. My duty had been to guard her, and I had

failed. I remembered her words to me that ‘he comes.’ Perhaps ‘he,’ whomever ‘he’ was, had won the day after all; only I had no idea whether that was so. In my heart, I felt only sorrow.

“My eyes filled with tears then. She was so very beautiful. But there was no time.

“I pulled myself together, locked the room, and went to my office. I phoned the law firm that handled many of her trusts, the banks that managed the others, Mr. Dodge in Europe, and lastly the police. I knew that the house would become a circus and I the ringmaster, to ensure its continuation. I had to soldier on.

“The police arrived and took charge. There was no indication of foul play, but just the same, an autopsy was ordered. After a time, the findings came back. Cause of death was heart failure. The Book of the Dead was taken and duly reported, which sent the press into a frenzy of speculation, but eventually, the scroll was returned. I had it locked away.

“Your father took over the house, as was his right. Once the commotion had settled to a tolerable level, I sat down with him and related how I found her. He told me to pursue whatever avenues I saw fit in investigating her death, but since the authorities had returned a finding of death by natural causes, we should make every appearance of agreeing with them, at least on the surface. I was instructed to keep him informed.

“Time passed. The press found other pursuits. Her ladyship ceased to be front-page news, and the house settled down to its usual routine but with a new owner. Everything was kept as it had been. From all indications, we have at last come to the end of our story and, thus, our evening together, but life often takes strange and unpredictable twists. Contrary to expectation, the tale continues, but for that part of my narrative, you will have to wait. I must take a quick break.”

After Stanley left the room, Johnny looked at me and said, “This has been an eye-opener, I must say. I had no idea my aunt was so far out there. I knew she was eccentric and all, but this is beyond anything I imagined.”

“Indeed. She was in a league of her own.”

“She was. I’m grateful that Stanley did this. Still, we missed out on an extraordinary amount of drama, which is just too bad. I would have loved it. Could you imagine if we had known about all this at the time?”

“What could we have done? A wise move by the parents, given our ages, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but I should have gotten the scoop a lot earlier than tonight. To have had only a few hints for years, when Stanley had the story the whole time, is galling. I should have asked him sooner, but in truth, I didn’t have the nerve. He was always so imposing and reserved. Before tonight, I rarely saw him smile, let alone display any emotion at all. I may have thought I knew him, but not really. In fact, not at all.”

“So, why now?”

“Simple. We asked.”

“You and Occam would have been fast friends, but I have my reservations just the same. It’s out of character, and I don’t know why. I think Stanley is being candid regarding Alice, but I sense an ulterior motive.”

“You still don’t trust him, do you?”

“Completely? No. He has managed to hook us into agreeing to do who knows what, with unspecified consequences if we fail to deliver. We were tricked, pure and simple, and I’m not happy about that.”

“Well, don’t get your knickers in a twist. Not only have we hit the mother lode of information but I think there’s more to follow. Besides, how else were we to find out? Should we have waited until someone sat us down and told us? I don’t think so. It was never going to happen.”

“You’re right, of course.”

“And here’s something else: he said the tale continues. What does that mean? We did hear some rumblings about ghosts when we were growing up, although not recently. Remember that governess, Mrs. Ballway, who got so upset? She told anyone who would listen that she had seen the spectral form of Alice one night. She went sort of bonkers and then refused to ever return to Rhinebeck.”

“Oh yes, the famous Mrs. Ballway. There was a lot of commotion over that. Everyone clammed up after she was sent packing. I often wondered where your mother ever got some of those governesses. I mean, the psychological profiles of the majority of them would have been worthy of serious professional scrutiny and oversight.”

“Yes, they were a strange lot, and mother would always sigh after they left and exclaim, ‘But she had such good references!’”

Stanley reentered silently and sat back down. “How are we doing? Fine?”

We both answered in the affirmative.

“The night is still young...Well, not really, but we’ll just have to ignore the time for now. We should wrap up before too long. So, where were we?”

“You said the tale continues,” Johnny answered.

“Yes, I did. Before we end, I’m going to relate an incident that involved a guest who was a theater producer and scriptwriter from London. I will give you my perspective when I’m finished. What happened has troubled me for some time and would be a good point to end on. You still have the diary to peruse, but probably not tonight. Shall I continue?”

We both nodded.

“One morning not long after her ladyship had passed, we had a full house. Breakfast was served at nine sharp. If you were late, it was very likely you would not be invited back. This held true then and holds true in the present.

“Earlier that evening, a distinguished gentleman called from town to speak to Mr. Dodge. It was so rare for him to be in the city, your parents felt that to invite him for the weekend was the only option. The problem was that we were full up — except for one bedroom: the one right next to where we’re sitting. We felt we couldn’t very well put him up in the servants’ quarters or over the garage, so a hasty conference was called, and we decided by mutual agreement to allow him to sleep in this wing. This was a decision that was not arrived at without some trepidation. No one had slept in that room since her ladyship’s death. Everything had been left exactly as if she were alive. In some ways, this was done out of respect, and in others, because nobody wished to risk disturbing whatever resided in this part of the house.

“There has always been a presence of sorts here. We have all felt it.”

Johnny and I voiced our agreement.

“It is not something one can put one’s finger on exactly. As her ladyship ventured further into the more surreal, the house seemed to resonate in a strange way, as if it welcomed it. Since that time, the presence has not abated but continued like a chord that sustains itself just below our consciousness.

“I’m from Scotland. I am hardheaded, and I don’t put up with a great deal of shenanigans. I tend to be scientific. In her ladyship’s case, and in regards this property, our mutual perceptions and conclusions — independently arrived at by yourselves, your parents, myself, as well as those who knew her and stayed here for any length of time — all underscore our acknowledgment of an unknown yet potent force, that even if we cared not to believe in it, at the very least, instills a sense of caution. Call it superstition, but there it is.

“Your parents and I decided to put aside our vague misgivings and allow our guest to sleep in her room.

“He arrived at one in the morning. His hosts and the other guests had already made their way to bed, so it was only myself and a footman who greeted him. He wanted nothing other than a brandy, which he wished to have placed beside his bed. He also mentioned he wanted to read for a while to unwind from his journey. I saw him to his room. He commented that he had never been put up in this part of the house before. I replied that since he was a highly esteemed guest and good friend of his hosts, an exception to the usual was in order. I made sure his case was unpacked and left him, alerting him to the fact that breakfast was at nine and to be prompt.

“Later that morning, I rang the gong as usual at ten minutes to. By nine, your parents and all the other guests were seated, but not our late-night visitor. Your father instructed me to wake him and bring him to breakfast. He knew our habits and should have been present. I went to the bedroom and knocked. There was no

answer. When I entered, he cried out. I asked if there was anything amiss. He seemed disoriented, so I opened the drapes to let in some light. The covers were all thrown about, and he looked like he had had a rough night. He croaked that he had experienced a nightmare like no other. I apologized on behalf of his host. In short order, I had him presentable.

“I gave a sign to your father that there was something wrong and nodded in his guest’s direction. Your mother, being the more curious, asked if he had slept soundly. To this, he responded rather emphatically that he had not, and if possible, he would like a word with his hosts in the library at their earliest convenience. They agreed to see him immediately. Mr. Dodge asked if I might be present, to which the guest assented. The others resumed their meal, while the three of them excused themselves. I followed.

“Your parents took him to the library, where they all sat down, and your father asked what the trouble was. He informed them that he was off to the city as soon as he could arrange a lift to the train station. He was sorry, but he wouldn’t spend another minute in this house. It was haunted. He would not go back to his room and asked that I pack up his things. He would not explain or elaborate what prompted him to make that decision. He had some final words for his hosts before he left. He said, ‘I will now beat a hasty retreat. Why you let me sleep in her bed, I cannot fathom. What were you thinking? Over the garage would have been better. I will have nothing more to do with this place.’ With that, he parked himself outside the front door and waited for me to collect his things while Harry brought the car around.

“No amount of persuasion would alter his decision, and off he went without another word.

“Your father and mother discussed what to do next, but there was nothing to be done. They were extremely upset, of course. No other guest had ever complained about their time spent at Rhinebeck. He was the first. They asked if I might use my

connections to discover what had occurred specifically, and if there was any way to repair the damage. That I did.

“The gentleman had a manservant who cared for his house in London. I contacted him and asked if he might find out in detail what had happened to cause such a break between our respective employers. He wrote me a letter, which I will retrieve from the repository.”

While Stanley went off to get it, I whispered to Johnny, “Have you ever heard about this incident?”

“It’s news to me. Once again, I’m surprised by the number of goings-on in this place that I have been completely unaware of. It’s as if I’ve been living in some sort of parallel universe. Where have I been all this time?”

“Right here. Remember, the family only doles out information on a ‘need to know’ basis. You should know that better than me.”

“But, Percy, I *am* family.”

“You are, but there’s family and then there is *family*. We were never part of the inner circle.”

“I suppose. It’s almost humiliating.”

Johnny had stumbled upon exactly how I had felt for much of my life.

“Yes. Yes, it is,” I said.

He looked at me, but before he could comment, Stanley returned with a letter attached to several typewritten sheets of paper.

“I suppose,” said Stanley, “I could read the letter to you, but it might be best if you both read it over yourselves, while I put some of the things we have collected back in the kitchen.”

Johnny passed me the covering letter and then the sheets as he read them.

Stanley,

Thank you for yours of the 23rd. I trust you and Dagmar are well.

You asked if I could find out what happened that night. I can do better than that. Sir Henry returned quite agitated and called me in to discuss the matter. I told him that I had just received your correspondence the day before, inquiring as to the specifics of what had occurred and if there was any remedy that might heal the breach. He told me that he would be writing to the Dodges straightaway to apologize. In addition, he told me that he had written up an account, while his memory was fresh, to make a record of the incident and to possibly use in a later project. He asked that I send you his recollection of that night in answer to your query. See the enclosed. In addition, he told me he regretted his abrupt departure and wanted me to express to you his gratitude for both your care and your service, which he greatly appreciated.

Best,

— GEORGE

PS Are they paying you enough?

PPS That was a joke, but then, maybe not.

An Incident in the Night

I arrived after 1:00 in the morning and fell asleep almost immediately after reading only a page of a script I was trying to finish. I awoke at 2:50. I always wear my wristwatch and noted the time. I was not sure what had awakened me. I felt chilled to the bone and disoriented, so I sat up. I saw a hazy gibbous moon above me that gave a diffused light to my surroundings. I recalled that the drapes had been closed before I turned in, so how could I see the moon? I felt a severe sense of dislocation, as I put together slowly in my mind that I was not under the covers at all. I was, in fact, outside, sitting with my legs outstretched on a lawn. I looked about frantically, trying to grasp what was happening. There was thick fog at ground level, so my surroundings were hazy and indistinct. I was frightened, but the situation was so bizarre, I was more paralyzed in

bewilderment. My mind simply could not process what I was seeing. I turned my head. Slowly, in spite of the gloom, I recognized the wing of the house behind me as that of Rhinebeck. I dimly saw one of the large stone urns off to the side. That further confirmed my location. I also realized that I was freezing. My pajamas were soaked from the damp grass and the fog. How I got there, I don't know. I still don't know.

I'm usually a sound sleeper. I suppose I dream like we all do, but I rarely remember them. Not like this. I tried to stand, but I couldn't. My limbs just wouldn't respond. I tried to call out, but my voice was more a husky whisper. I began to shake from the cold. I don't think I was truly frightened. I was more puzzled, which probably kept me from panicking.

I began to hear a grinding sound, like something very heavy rolling toward me. The fog obscured the source, so I couldn't tell the direction the rumbling was coming from or what it was. Bit by bit, I perceived a dark-gray box making its way slowly toward me out of the gloom. I saw dim figures taking rollers from the back and carrying them to the front. Who was doing this, and where did they come from? I waited transfixed as the box inched toward me. The deep grumble of the rollers was all I heard.

I have no idea how long this took, but I was fascinated as I stared at its approach until the object was directly in front of me. The terrible sound of its movement stopped. I could make out the shape of a box clearly, but for only brief periods when the moon broke free. The object was rectangular, maybe ten feet long, four feet wide, and four feet deep. There were vague markings along the edges, but I couldn't make them out.

I'm not prone to hallucinations — at least, I didn't think so. Now, I'm not so sure.

The box I recognized as a sarcophagus, and I became very frightened. Was it for me?

I thought of Alice then. I had met her several times and recalled she had died suddenly and mysteriously. I'd been put up in her room, and I had slept in her bed. This so galvanized me that I was able to stand, but that was as far as I went, because something was happening with the box.

A number of the dark shapes grabbed hold of the lid and removed it. I heard them straining with the effort. The lid gave a tremendous thud as it fell next to the sarcophagus onto the grass. I felt the impact in my feet in spite of their numbness. My attention was drawn to the container inside. This had a more familiar form. It was shiny in a dull way, as if covered in metal. It was curved at the top, and the cover was of the distinctive headdress of buried royalty, Egyptian, for sure, although I am no expert. The dark figures lifted this out as well and laid it down carefully. There was a form beneath, certainly that of a woman. She was wrapped in gauze except for her head and her hands.

The fog above me parted for a few seconds, and what light there was grew brighter. Whoever was in the coffin was alive and awake. I saw her eyes move. They flicked from side to side, back and forth, back and forth. She seemed frightened, which made me lean forward. She noticed me and tried to sit up. Her eyes met mine. The light flared and then grew dim as the mist dissipated and closed in again.

In that brief moment of illumination, I saw that her hair was black and set in fine braids. She wore a simple necklace of gold fashioned to look like the curled horns of some animal. Her lips moved. I leaned forward to try and catch what she was saying, but no sound came from her mouth. She became agitated when she saw I could not hear her. Her body began to thrash about. The wrappings kept her arms pinned. I started to reach out for her as her mouth opened, and she started screaming something, but I could hear nothing. I thought for a moment she called out, "Help me!" — but that may have been my imagination. With a valiant effort, she lifted her shoulders above the rim, but then from behind her, an arm with a large forearm bracelet of gold set with a dark-red stone in the center snaked out, grabbed her mouth, and pulled her back down. She fought against the hand but could do nothing. Her eyes opened wide, and she thrashed about frantically. I reached out to her again, and for a second, I think I touched the rim, when I fell over.

One moment the sarcophagus was there, the next it wasn't, and I was under the covers. The curtains were closed. The table between the

windows was like it was when I went to sleep. The script was across my chest, and when I turned, my drink was still there. Everything was the same. I was now fully awake. I looked at my watch again and read 3:20 in the morning. I was soaked and still frozen. I sat up, happy that I now had control of my limbs, and downed the rest of the brandy. I decided I needed a hot shower and a change of clothing. I thought vaguely, I was probably suffering from hypothermia. I felt much better after my shower, but I was still troubled by what I had experienced.

There was a picture of Alice on the dressing table that I picked up and examined closely. I will not swear to it, but the similarity between the woman in my dream and the photograph was striking. It was still too early to get dressed, and I knew I was fatigued from travel and my recent ordeal. If I had bad dreams, good dreams, or no dreams, I was exhausted beyond caring and slept through the rest of the night without incident.

Stanley returned and seated himself as I finished reading. Johnny turned to him and said, “Extraordinary. I have a few questions. Do you think it’s true?”

“I have no reason to doubt it. Although he is a scriptwriter, Sir Henry is not one to simply tell a lie. Of that, I am quite certain. It would be completely out of character.”

“Did Sir Henry ever get back in touch?”

“He did, and the breach was mended; however, he has never set foot here again. Rather, he sees your parents at the Fifth Avenue apartment or in London.

“Lastly, was it a message?” asked Johnny.

“I don’t know the answer to that. Thankfully, nothing like it has happened since. When I received this account, I was alarmed. I sensed that her ladyship was trying to communicate something from whatever dark place she had fallen into, and that was deeply troubling. I was also concerned for another reason — the forearm bracelet with the blood-red stone. No one other than her ladyship and I knew of its existence. I repeat, no one. That he accurately

described it has forced me to reassess my views on many things. The fact is, I cannot explain his account, nor can I dismiss it, and that has bothered me ever since. Allow me to elaborate.

“All humans wish to give meaning to inexplicable occurrences. I am no exception. To put this in perspective, Rhinebeck has experienced a recent influx of crows. Is that significant? Crows are intelligent and resourceful. They’re also considered to be mediators between life and death. The crow was the symbol for the Egyptian goddess Nephthys, or Nebt-het, which means ‘lady of the house.’ Are we to suppose that this inundation is a manifestation of her ladyship, wishing to make her presence known? I think such things can be taken too far, yet the crows are real.”

“Stanley, there’s something that troubles me,” I said.

“And what is that?”

“You’ve obviously studied a great many of the books from Alice’s private collection. You give the impression that you don’t believe a word, yet your actions speak otherwise. For instance, you have Johnny and me swear on a black book, seal a bargain with an oath I’ve never heard before, and drink a liquor that tasted of blood. Perhaps you can help me understand what appears to be a contradiction.”

Stanley chuckled. “Thank you for your candor. I’m aware of your skepticism. In truth, I am conflicted. I tend to disbelieve, yet I’ve seen things that are hard to credit and for which I have no explanation. I’ve studied and tested many of the darker methods that are detailed in some of the books found in the special library, and I can say unreservedly that only occasionally have I encountered results that have given me pause. Every bit should be hogwash and a sham. And it is, until one comes across that small, yet ultimately significant, part that isn’t. Sir Henry’s account is such an example. There are others, but I won’t go into them.

“For myself, I think we’ve been led to expect too much from

what is commonly thought of as magic. Our concepts are based on myths and legends that are mere fantasies. The laws that govern how the universe works cannot be changed by appealing to some deity, demon, or spirit — at least I've found that to be the case. Real magic is quite surprising and unexpected."

"How so?" I asked.

"We humans have a limited sensory knowledge of the world, but we are compensated for this lack by minds that create, supplement, and often substitute their own information for that of the senses. We perceive the world through our beliefs. Alter our beliefs, and we change how we see the world. Powerful magicians have the ability to change, suspend, or accentuate certain of our beliefs for their own purposes. The will and the way are simply that."

"Mass hypnosis," said Johnny.

"Yes, which would seem to make the subject easy to dismiss, but as I said, there is this tiny other bit that throws everything on its head. Put in another context, there are saints and then there are *saints*. When one meets the real thing, there is the recognition one is in contact with a person who has reached places that are quite beyond the norm. There is the story of a young scientist from France who saw only a film of several Tibetan monks and was so struck by their spiritual presence that he visited them and became a monk himself. He recognized that they were gifted in some way, and he had to know more. I count her ladyship among those extraordinary individuals. They're rare — extremely so — but they exist nonetheless.

"A similar thread of the extraordinary runs through many of the texts in her ladyship's repository. Imagine reading a book of random letters and spaces. There is gibberish for thousands of pages, but all of a sudden one comes across whole sentences and paragraphs that make perfect sense. Coincidence? Perhaps, but

that doesn't make it any less disturbing. Real magic is like that — disturbing.

“I would like to make one last point before we end this discussion. For myself, magic has everything to do with the connections that we make. Life has little regard for our supposed accomplishments. How many lives are taken at their apex or even at their lowest point? Hardly any. Chances are, we die when we are old and unexceptional. Such is a bleak view when seen through human eyes, but life has different standards. It seems to value our connecting. We connect with others from the moment of our birth to the second of our death. It is worth considering.

“The overall patterns our connections form, only those with the gift of sight can make out, and even they cannot always see clearly. Real magic lives in the emergent surprises that result.

“I will say no more. For the rest, you are on your own.”

There was a silence when he finished. It was a lot to take in. This was a man of quite some depth and complexity. He had skillfully dodged the question about the book and the drink, but I understood the contradiction better. I was certain he would give me no direct answer. I looked to Johnny to begin his questions.

“Stanley, I'd like to thank you for taking the time and for being so forthcoming. It's been an extraordinary and revealing night. My first question is who is M. Thoreau? Alice wrote to him or her in the letter I showed you.”

“I don't know. Her ladyship had started a relationship that she was very pleased with before she died. That is all the information I have.”

“Was Alice murdered?” I asked.

“The available information is inconclusive. If I suspect she was, I am speculating. Lord Bromley was intent on seeing that she paid for what she did to him, so there is motive, but the how is elusive. That he indirectly played a part is closer to the truth. Conclusions are easy to jump to. The press has certainly done that.”

“You mentioned the figurine,” Johnny said. “Can you tell us something about it?”

“Her ladyship described the piece as a female figure holding a raw gem of some size and was quite significant. Its existence was known among the indigenous peoples of the area and, according to their oral tradition, was a source of great power that had been used for ill. They buried it for that reason. That Freddy died soon after it was unearthed and that Lord Bromley was so keen to possess it are reasons enough to think the locals were onto something. Her ladyship also told me that it was too difficult for her to carry into this country because not only would the authorities confiscate it but she might be liable for charges. The risks were too great, so she sent it to herself another way. She never said how, and the figurine was never received.”

Johnny continued. “I suppose we have other questions, but I, for one, am too tired to think of them. Just the same, I’d love to see the Egyptian pieces — the necklace and the bracelet. Can we?”

“I think that would be appropriate, but after that, we must part and get some sleep.”

Johnny and I agreed while Stanley opened the repository and disappeared inside. Robert got up, stretched, and then shook himself. He wandered over to the door and stood looking at it.

“I think he wants to go,” said Johnny.

“I think so too.”

Stanley returned with a black velvet box on which lay a gold necklace of tiny ram’s heads and a hinged gold bracelet several inches wide with clasps that allowed it to be attached to the forearm. On one of the halves was set a large reddish stone that was almost black. The gem picked up the light of the dying fire as Stanley put down the case before us. Johnny reached for the necklace and examined it before passing the piece over to me. The bitumen dipped in gold gave the necklace a heft I found unusual — lighter than expected but not so. As Stanley had observed, it was

either very old or very modern. I carefully laid it back down on the velvet. Johnny handed me the forearm bracelet. This was heavier than the necklace and was also made of gold. The stone in the center I could just make out as red. The clarity I found interesting and unusual. Perhaps it was the lateness of the hour, but at first, the bracelet seemed quite plain and ordinary. My perception of it changed when I noticed I had to use conscious effort to put it back on the velvet and drag my eyes away. I felt strangely tired afterward, like it had sucked something out of me.

Johnny ended our discussion. "Thank you, Stanley, for your time and information. Really extraordinary. I think that does it for now. I'll let Robert out the front to relieve himself, and then we're off to bed. Need we do anything here?"

Stanley said no. He would take care of whatever was left and wished us a good night. He had enjoyed our conversation and thanked us for the promise. Breakfast was at nine.

Johnny and I let Robert the Bruce out the front door and into the night. When he returned, we made our way upstairs.

"We have much to discuss," Johnny said as we parted in the common room, "but I am way too tired to make much sense. Good night."

I got undressed and lay down on the bed in the room I had grown up in long ago. Nothing had changed, but everything had. My image of Alice as a glamorous divine protector, who streaked through my early life like a sizzling comet, lay in pieces. In its place, I saw a woman who struggled with the dark corners of her mind like I did, but whose ultimate end was both tragic and disturbing. What lessons could be learned, and how I might salvage some of the luster and hope her life had given me in the past, I didn't know. For now, I felt the loss most keenly. I set the alarm for eight and concluded that if tonight was any indication of events to come, I might have to rethink many of my assumptions.

I awoke to light streaming through the window of my room. I got up and looked out. There was hardly a cloud in the sky and only a few wisps of lingering fog — the beginning of a glorious and beautiful day. I felt good in spite of only a few hours of sleep. I went out to the common room to get to the shower, but Johnny was already there, and Robert was standing with his nose against the bathroom door waiting for it to open. I stood in line.

By 8:40, we were dressed and trooping down the stairs to the drawing room to wait until breakfast was ready. Stanley, immaculately attired as always, came in, wished us good morning, and hoped we had slept well in spite of the lateness of the night before. We answered that we felt just fine. Stanley looked spry and energetic. There was not a hint of tiredness. He reminded us that the parents, accompanied by the von Hofmanstals, would be arriving in the early afternoon, with Malcolm Ault sometime in the night.

Johnny and I had a leisurely breakfast and decided to explore the grounds with Robert. I hoped we might use the walk to discuss

what was really on Johnny's mind. I also wanted to get his take on Stanley's narrative.

As we walked, admiring the day, I wondered about Stanley taking the time to tell us about Alice. There was no reason he shouldn't have, but other than as a means to extract our promise, I could discern no concrete motive for doing so. Altruism was not something that came quickly to my mind when I thought of Stanley.

In addition, all thoughts of today's upcoming arrivals had been forgotten. The dog-lady confrontation would be upon us shortly, and although minor compared to Alice's tale, and everything else, we needed some sort of a plan, even if it was as simple as keeping Robert the Bruce out of the way during the initial meet-and-greet, while Johnny determined if she was the one. After that, all was up in the air.

Still, the day was gorgeous, and I felt wonderfully alive. The fog had now burned off completely and the south lawn stretched before us. Robert, off the leash, frolicked about, racing this way and that as Johnny and I strolled toward the woods.

"Which would you like to tackle first: the real reason for getting me up here, dog-lady, or Stanley's tale?" I asked.

"Oh God, you would remind me, but I suppose we must discuss them. Easiest first: dog-lady."

"Okay, here's my suggestion: keep Robert the Bruce out of the way, at least until you confirm whether she is the dog-lady or not."

Johnny grunted.

"There are three scenarios: If she is and she recognizes you, there is no point in continuing to keep him sequestered. If she is and she doesn't recognize you, you will have to keep him hidden away. Robert will not take kindly to being kept out of sight of you for any length of time, but that will just have to be endured. If she is someone completely different, no problem."

I felt I had elaborated all the options succinctly. Johnny sighed and looked up at the sky as if seeking guidance.

"I suppose I'll just have to confront being matchmade, but maybe not." Johnny stopped as if his request for divine intervention had been answered. "Of course! Why didn't I think of that before? If she recognizes me and Robert, so much the better. In fact, I'm going to tie the damn scarf around his neck. It will be like breaking out a battle ensign and steering directly for the enemy. I like it! No more skirting the issue, and if our meeting all falls apart, I can hardly be blamed. 'She didn't like me' is what I can tell Mother. Brilliant!"

I could tell Johnny had grabbed onto this lifeline with gusto. He looked positively relieved. "Are you sure that's wise?"

"Of course it is," said Johnny, thrilled with his decision. "I know in my bones it's her. You'll see. Next?"

"You mentioned there might be another reason for inviting me this weekend."

"Ah yes. I suppose I did mention something along those lines. I hesitate because I have nothing concrete to confirm what I think. With the sun shining and a new day before us, my fears seem unfounded and without substance."

"Tell me anyway."

We walked along in silence. Finally, he said, "I'll put it to you this way — I think we're in trouble. By we, I mean Dodge Capital, my parents, Rhinebeck, everything. The economic environment has changed, and our little neck of the woods is under pressure. Costs have risen. Competition is fierce. It's not the same anymore. I feel our days are numbered. The parents feel it, and I know they're worried. They won't talk about money — at least not *their* money, and that bothers me. I need a fresh pair of eyes to confirm my fears or dispose of them. I need to know how bad the situation really is."

"You think it's bad and they're not saying."

“That’s pretty much how I see it.” He stopped and looked at me. “You were quite the analyst, Percy. You did get one wrong, but overall, we did quite well together.”

“Until we didn’t.”

“Until we didn’t. But one mistake does not negate the validity of the process.”

“The results say otherwise.”

“If the results were as bad as you think, then answer me this: why do I feel so rudderless and without purpose, and why do you feel the same? You know I’m right. Admit it.”

I looked away. “Perhaps.”

Johnny had struck far too close to home. I didn’t want to think about that.

Johnny continued. “I’ve been lost ever since our partnership went into the toilet, if you must know.”

We started walking again. He had more to say. I could tell.

“My trading has been lousy as well. Father will not tolerate much more incompetence in that department. He’s made that quite clear. I’m on thin ice, and I’m worried sick. I’m afraid that my future, along with everything that I know and love, will disappear, and there’ll be nothing left.”

Johnny shook himself.

“You see? I can get positively morbid even on a beautiful day like today. It’s criminal. We’ll go over all that in more detail later. I also thought I’d float the idea of reassessing our prospects together. I don’t wish to discuss it now. I just want you to think about it. What’s next on the list?”

Johnny would often leave what was most on his mind to the very end and then say it in an offhand way to downplay the significance. I sometimes did the same. Knowing him as well as I did, I knew his vision of the future filled him with dread, but I also knew he was a lot tougher than he let on, even if he didn’t think so. He would survive. He always would. He was a Dodge.

I continued. "Next on the list is your thoughts on Alice and Stanley's narrative, but before we go there, I would like to say that you're not wrong. Okay? Like you, I'm getting by day-by-day, but that's all. I put one foot in front of the other. That's the best I can manage. What you suggest has merit, but we should table all that for a later discussion. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Thoughts on Stanley's narrative?" I asked.

"That's a tough one. I think I'm still processing the information from last night, and I'm sure you are too."

"I am, but you were right about what you said about Alice just before dinner last night. My image of her is now hopelessly shattered. There's no way I can cement her back together the way she was in my mind, and that saddens me."

"I thought about that as well and have made a reassessment. Remember that time we managed to get lost in the woods in the middle of winter? Snow started falling so heavily our tracks were wiped out, and we couldn't see more than few feet in front of us."

"Our Artic adventure."

"Exactly. As darkness fell, the household went into an uproar. The next morning, when we finally returned home, everyone treated us as trauma victims, when in fact we thought our bivouac was great fun and said so. That didn't go over very well, if you'll recall. The truth was the parents were the ones traumatized, not us. All I'm saying is don't assume Aunt Alice had a miserable existence. She had a purpose and a reason to live. You saw her. She enjoyed life to the fullest. You can make a tragedy out of her all you want, but can you recall even one time she looked miserable?"

"No, I can't."

"Precisely. So, snap out of it. No more dark thoughts from you, Percy. The day is full of promise."

"Nicely put." I said, thinking it over. "You're right, of course. Stupid of me. You changed my mind."

“Excellent. She lived her life with gusto, burdened but unbowed, and we should too. I will follow in her footsteps to hell and back. To mark the moment, I’m resolved to do one thing.”

“And what is that?”

“I’m going to check out a few of those books from the secret library, now that we have lending privileges, and see what happens. I’m in the mood for a good demon summoning. We’ll know for sure whether this magic stuff is all hocus-pocus. What do you think of them apples?”

I shook my head and had to smile. “Very brave. Foolhardy, of course, but brave.”

“You think it’s all a crock anyway. Tell me the truth.”

“Well, yes, but ...” I knew I was often too grim in my outlook. I needed to get into the spirit of things, and Johnny’s insouciance was infectious. I continued. “The very thought of you and I, by some remote miracle, unleashing a relation to Moloch or Belial on our little family get-together in this house of all places could really create some drama and excitement. I suppose we could always say that Stanley did it, but, no one will believe us. My money’s on Maw, if there’s a showdown. Maw would probably eat it poached for breakfast.”

Johnny laughed. “I’m with you there, but what has come over you? Has Mr. Skeptic turned into Mr. Semi-skeptic?”

“I wouldn’t say that, Johnny, but the day is bright with portent, and as you are well aware, in this place, anything is possible. I feel better, and I might fancy a little experimentation, just to confirm, mind you. In this instance, a negative is as good as a positive.”

I had no idea what I was thinking, but it seemed a good idea at the time. It must have been lack of sleep, my lightened mood, and Johnny’s influence. I have tended to get a little reckless when we’re together.

“We’re on then. Now, where’s that dog?” asked Johnny, looking about. “I bet he’s in the woods. Damn. I have a tennis ball, but

that's not going to do a thing until he sees it. Robert! Robert the Bruce! Get back here this instant!"

Johnny and I headed into the woods. It was darker in here underneath the leaves, and the ground was sloppy from yesterday's rain.

After several minutes of calling and searching, we spotted Robert, wet and covered in mud, trotting through some shrubs with an ancient tennis ball in his mouth. He was happily chewing away until he was five feet from Johnny, at which point he dropped the ball and looked up expectantly.

"Damn that dog. How does he find them? I know what he's going to do. He's just going to snap it up when I get close and run away. I'll fox him. You watch."

Johnny pulled out his reserve ball and presented it to Robert, who eyed this new treasure with his beady black eyes. Still watching intently, he lay down on the wet ground and began to gnaw on the one he had. Johnny stepped closer with the ball in his outstretched hand. Robert stood up but continued to chew, his eyes never leaving the proffered ball. Johnny moved closer, but quicker than I would have thought possible, Robert spat out the one in his mouth, leaped, and snatched the ball out of Johnny's fingers. Johnny roared his displeasure. Robert, his theft complete, spun and bolted for the undergrowth. We could hear him streaking away through the brush as Johnny, screaming like a madman, plunged into the bushes in hot pursuit. I reluctantly followed but soon was bounding after Johnny.

Two hours of excruciating negotiations, mad sprinting lunges, attempted tackles, threats, pleadings, and screamed curses followed before Robert was finally captured and put back on the leash.

Wet, splattered with mud, exhausted, and hoarse from shouting, Johnny and I made our way back to the house. Robert, fresh as ever, strained against the leather. As we made our way

around to the front, Johnny summed up our hike by saying, "It's good to get him out, but he can be so frustrating. He led us on a merry chase, but I got him in the end, so I suppose that's something."

I croaked something unintelligible.

"Not to worry. He and I are going to have a talk."

I was too spent to comment. As we walked past Alice's wing, I became sufficiently recovered to ask Johnny about the figurine.

"Ah yes. I was wondering about that myself," said Johnny. "Let's keep that between ourselves. I'm not sure why, but I have a feeling that'd be best for now."

I thought for a moment and said somewhat hoarsely, "Strangely, I agree. The less others know, the better. By the way, I'm in need of strong drink and then a nap, in that order, so let's keep moving."

"Absolutely."

We were only a few feet from the door when Robert's ears perked up as a long black limousine turned left to make its way down the sloping driveway to the roundabout at the front of the house.

"Looks like they're early," said Johnny. "Damn."

The limo, with Raymond, Mr. Dodge's personal chauffeur, at the wheel, cruised sedately down the drive toward the roundabout. As if on cue, the front door of the house opened in front of us, and out came Stanley, followed by Simon and Jane, as they assembled to greet their employer and guests. Harry appeared around the far corner to help with the luggage. Johnny and I, looking disheveled and muddy, had no option but to turn and be part of the welcoming committee.

The car crunched to a halt and Raymond opened the rear door. Mr. Dodge stepped out. He greeted Stanley and the staff and then passed down the line to Johnny and me. He looked at Johnny closely and said, "You might want to get cleaned up once you meet our guests. I'm afraid they'll just have to meet you the way you are. No way around it, I'm sorry to say, without appearing rude."

Mr. Dodge then smiled at me and shook my hand. He seemed genuinely pleased. Johnny handed me the leash and followed his father to meet the rest of the party.

Mrs. Dodge disembarked and after giving Johnny a kiss,

whispered something to him. Probably that his sense of timing could be better. She moved down the line and stopped in front of Robert and me. She gave me a kiss and said she was thrilled I had made it. No hugs, which I thought was understandable, given our appearance.

After a brief pause, out popped the baron.

Baron von Hofmanstal was short, slightly round, and very pale. He looked like a reincarnated version of Napoleon. He wore his black hair brushed forward in the same fashion as the former emperor's and wore a countenance that boded ill to any who crossed him. Like most men of smaller stature, what he lacked in height, he made up for in subtle — and not so subtle — forms of intimidation.

His dress was immaculate from the tiny hand-made, dark-brown shoes that glistened with polish to his tailored three-piece gray suit. He blinked like a malevolent toad as he surveyed the house and the assembled servants without any change in expression, other than to take the camel hair coat that he was holding and flick it disdainfully about his shoulders, like an Italian movie director, as he reached in to hand out the baroness. She was a tall blond who favored a tan Chanel ensemble with matching leather purse in creamy beige. She looked like she could model for *Vogue*, and probably did on occasion. As she stood next to her husband, the difference in height was more pronounced. In heels, she towered over him by several inches.

I had just finished gawking at the incongruity when out stepped the final member of the party. Striking was perhaps an understatement. Her hair was black like her father's. It cascaded to her shoulders in silky waves. She wore a gray dress that fit her perfectly and accentuated her figure. Her eyes captured my attention even from several feet away. They were so blue they sparkled like gems. She was not as tall as her mother but not as short as her father. She gave one and all a dazzling smile.

They stood in a row in front of the assembled household and waited. Mr. Dodge beckoned to Johnny and proceeded to introduce him. I was so caught up in the proceedings that I failed to remember Robert's strength. One moment I had hold of the leash, the next it was ripped from my grasp as Robert bounded forward to be with his master, just as he was shaking hands with the baron.

I must admit the baron was quick. Perhaps it was his alacrity in stepping out of the way that caused the coat to slip off his shoulders and hit the driveway just as Robert arrived. The baron tried to snatch it up, but too late. Robert had planted his rear and then lay down in the middle of its creamy smoothness as he gazed fondly up at Johnny.

The baron cursed and tugged at the coat to no avail. He gave Robert a vicious kick in frustration. Outside of making a muffled thud that was heard by one and all, it did absolutely nothing. His daughter rescued the moment. She stepped forward, picked up the lead, and gave a strong jerk while yelling "Heel!" Robert, whether because this word harkened back to some long-forgotten obedience training or because he appreciated her commanding tone, complied by getting up off the coat and moving to her left. She promptly handed him over to Johnny and stepped over to her father to console him. She knew dogs. There was no question about that.

The baron had by now retrieved the soiled garment and held it out at arm's length, not only to survey the damage but to avoid it making the slightest contact with his suit. Stanley approached discreetly and took the coat from the baron's shaking hands. Still holding it out front like a matador's muleta, Stanley turned and announced that champagne would be served in the drawing room and to follow him.

While everyone started to move inside, I heard Stanley tell the baron that his staff were expert at cleaning anything and

everything, and that the coat would be good as new by the following morning. The baron grunted his disbelief and stomped toward the door. I stepped aside to get out of the way.

I waved at Raymond. I had not seen him in years. He looked the same, and true to form, he merely nodded back in acknowledgment. Johnny and I had known him all our lives. He was a permanent yet menacing fixture of the Dodge household. Crude, of sullen disposition, and immensely strong, he looked like a pirate and merely tolerated Johnny's and my existence when he would drive us to school and back. He worshipped the very ground Mr. Dodge walked on. Why he restricted his adoration to only Mr. Dodge, and what Mr. Dodge had done to command such unreserved loyalty and respect, was a constant source of speculation between us. Mr. Dodge would simply ignore us when asked, and to query Raymond for the reason demanded more courage than we could possibly muster. He had a nasty streak that was best left unprovoked.

I brought up the rear of the procession and noted the baron was limping just a little. Score one for Robert. The baron might as well have drop-kicked a rock when he tried to shift him off the coat. Johnny stepped to the side and let his parents and their guests go first. He fell in beside me and whispered, "Well, that was a memorable meeting."

Johnny cocked his head toward the stairs. We needed to change, so the two of us, with Robert firmly in hand, mounted the stairs to our rooms. When we got there, we cleaned and dried Robert as best we could and quickly showered. We changed into the more presentable attire of sport coats, dark flannel pants, and ties. We met in the common room to discuss what to do next.

"Well? Is she?" I asked.

"Dog-lady? Oh yes. Without a doubt."

"Did she recognize you?"

“She gave no indication, but Robert’s antics should have clued her fairly quickly.”

“Sorry about that. He got away from me.”

“Not to worry. It’s his nature, I’m afraid. By the way, we’ll have to consult with Stanley on our way downstairs. I think it best that young Robert not be part of our little gathering. If he knows he’s being separated from me, he gets really annoyed and eats things.

“Like scarves?”

“Much worse. He’ll chew entire chairs and couches into kindling. He gnaws the legs off. Filthy habit, and expensive if they’re antiques.”

“Well, I hope Stanley can think of something because I have no ideas. On a different subject: dog-lady. What should be our plan?”

“I think we will have to play things by ear for now. It’s just about lunchtime anyway. What do you think of the baron?”

“He’s a complete jerk. He even kicked Robert.”

“He did. How about the daughter?”

“What about the daughter?”

“You’re smitten already. I can tell.”

“Nonsense. Absolute nonsense.”

I said this with a little too much emphasis, because Johnny looked at me in that way of his and said, “Of course. Of course. Do you think it’s getting a little warm in here, Percy? Or are you naturally flushed as a rule?”

“Not funny, Johnny. Not funny at all.”

“I feel your pain, but duty calls. Are you ready to meet our guests?”

“I suppose so.” I resigned myself to at least being civil to the baron regardless of my first impressions. Then again, he was probably not too impressed with us either. I figured the score was even.

We went down the back stairs to the kitchen. Stanley was preparing to carry out some hors d’oeuvres of caviar. Johnny asked

where he should put Robert, and Stanley told him to put him in the office. He had a special blanket in there underneath Stanley's desk. It would hold him for a while.

We led him into the suggested space, and Robert seemed to accept his fate. He curled up underneath the desk and went to sleep. Johnny carefully shut the door and said, "Well, that's something. Things are looking up."

I wasn't so sure, but duty called. Off we went to meet the guests in what I hoped were better circumstances. At least we looked the part.

Johnny and I passed through to the drawing room by way of the kitchen and the dining room. Mr. and Mrs. Dodge and the von Hofmanstals were standing in front of the Constable, admiring it and chatting among themselves. Mrs. Dodge spotted us as we entered and announced, “Here they are.”

We were both welcomed as if the previous encounter in the driveway had never happened. I followed Johnny and was introduced to the baron by Mr. Dodge as a longtime friend of the family. He gave me a polite smile, which meant the corners of his mouth moved upward by a fraction as he offered his hand, which I took. His grip was shockingly firm, and if I had not moved my hand forward sufficiently against his when I took it — an old habit from childhood when Johnny and I would try to force the other to submit by gripping the other’s hand at the knuckles — I would have been in for a painful surprise. He looked up at me with pale-blue eyes that gave nothing away, but I knew he’d done it deliberately. As to why he should pull such a stunt, other than to assert himself, I had no idea. I decided to ignore the provocation

and make conversation instead. I noticed when we shook hands that he had a scar that split his left eyebrow. Mr. Dodge turned toward the baroness to answer a question about the Constable when I asked the baron in German if he had fenced in his youth. I had taken up both at university and then spent a year abroad studying economics at the University of Freiburg.

The baron muttered, also in German, that he fenced, and that saber was his weapon of choice, although he was skilled in both *épée* and foil. I told him I had fenced saber as well and wondered if that was the cause of the scar above his left eye. He reached forward like a striking snake, grabbed my arm in a vice-like grip, and pulled me forward and down, so his mouth was inches from my ear. He hissed with unrestrained venom that although the assumption was logical, I was mistaken. Saber scars were longer, deeper, and uglier. He had fought several duels. More than one of his opponents had lost an eye due to his skill with a blade. I had no idea what I was talking about. He then released me by shoving my arm away with undisguised contempt just as Mr. Dodge turned back. Sensing some tension, Mr. Dodge asked, "Is anything the matter?"

At this, the baron laughed and said in English, "I was simply making a point to your young friend here regarding assumptions. It is all too common, yes?" He looked up at Mr. Dodge, smiling sweetly.

Mr. Dodge answered in the affirmative and asked politely if he would like to make the introduction to his wife and daughter.

He scrunched up his mouth as if deciding and then answered, "You do it."

I reeled in shock from the baron's surprising hostility. I was introduced to the baroness and their daughter, but all I remember babbling was "It's a pleasure. It's a pleasure," as I shook their hands. I barely looked up. Finished, I stood to the side, perplexed and disheartened. I felt like an animal that had been whipped for

reasons it didn't comprehend. A feeling of humiliation washed over me as I sank into my dark place, even as I appeared to be present to those conversing around me. I had obviously hit a nerve trying to ingratiate myself with the baron and erred badly in mentioning the scar.

Wanting to be liked and to make a good impression were poor habits of mine that I thought I had left behind, but obviously not. I analyzed the encounter and concluded there was more to his animosity than my bungled attempt at conversation. The man had displayed antagonism toward me even before I opened my mouth. Whether this was directed against me personally, the Dodge family, or people in general, I didn't know. If the baron's target was the Dodge family, how could he possibly consider marrying off his daughter to Johnny? But how could it be me he had such contempt for, as I had never met him, or even heard of him, until yesterday. If he hated people in general, then why did he act civilly to everyone else? My mind buzzed with calculations and potential scenarios to explain the outcome, but underneath I felt wounded and immensely hurt. My emotions lay just beneath the surface, barely in check as dark feelings bubbled inside me.

I have never done well with physical confrontation and open hostility. I was not a coward, but my instinct was always to flee and only afterward regroup. I remembered being blindsided by an older boy at school. His name was Peter Lewis. Johnny was nowhere around. I was small, even at twelve, and the other was a year older than me. We were alone in the stairwell when he turned and punched me in the face with no warning. He screamed at me, "You think you're so great with your chauffeur and your money? There's no one here to protect you now! How does that feel?"

I saw stars as he stomped off. I burst into tears. I sat through my classes in a daze, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. I was certain I had done nothing personally to provoke him. It was my first experience of hatred for which there was no rational explanation.

At the time, I felt compelled to respond even if only to repair my damaged image of myself in my own eyes. I made a simple plan: find Lewis and attack, regardless of the consequences. I found him later in the day coming out of the locker room. I whipped him around and said, "I owe you one." I punched him and a melee ensued. We were pulled apart by scrambling teachers. Afterward, I was no longer so afraid, but I was dismayed by the unprovoked attack just the same. The incident bothered me long after, and I resolved to become better at defending myself. At my insistence, Johnny and I took up martial arts, fencing, shooting, boxing — we did them all. My plan had worked somewhat, until now, when once again I found myself defenseless and unable to respond.

In truth, I concluded I had an enemy. I silently asked Alice for some help.

While I was lost in my musing, Johnny slipped up beside me, holding two glasses of champagne and gave me one. "That baron is a bastard. I saw the whole thing."

I had forgotten how very little escaped Johnny even though he sometimes gave the opposite impression. I grunted, still in a dark cloud.

Johnny added, "Drink up and put a smile on your face, or else he'll have won completely. Our time will come, you'll see. Nobody shits on us in this house and gets away unscathed, that I can assure you, so brace up. Remember, we have access to higher authorities."

"Strangely," I said, "I was thinking that very thing." I drank half the glass and felt better.

"That's the spirit. Besides, there's always Maw, and she arrives tomorrow."

I drank the other half of the glass and actually smiled at the thought. It was the first time I ever looked on meeting Maw with something less than dread. She scared me more than the baron, although in a different way.

As I finished my glass, Stanley was at my elbow and said, "If

you both could spare a moment after lunch, I would like a word.” He took my empty glass and glided off.

Johnny and I looked at each other. He shrugged, and I did the same. It was nearly time for lunch. Stanley announced the fact at the dining room door. The party filed in with Johnny and me bringing up the rear.

The long dining room table was set with a white, embroidered tablecloth and thin, white china with gold edges. Seating was assigned by small cards with our names on them. The setting was more formal than usual, in honor of our guests. Mrs. Dodge was at the end of the table closest to the kitchen entrance while Mr. Dodge was at the opposite. The baron and baroness were seated on one side of the table, with the baron next to Mr. Dodge, while Johnny and I sat opposite, with the daughter in between. I sat at Mr. Dodge's right, facing the baron.

Stanley and Simon served the first course of smoked salmon flown in from Scotland, with small points of white toast, along with a cold Sancerre. It was delicious. Mr. Dodge and the baron were discussing some business ventures in Europe. I simply looked on until the lady on my right leaned over and whispered in my ear, "I'm pregnant." I wasn't sure I heard her right, so I turned and looked at her in surprise.

She laughed. She had a nice laugh. "Oh, I'm not, by the way...just in case you were wondering. I said that to get your attention. My

name is Brunhilde. My friends call me Bruni. You seemed elsewhere when we met a few minutes ago, so I wasn't sure it registered. Did it?"

"No, not really. I was distracted. Thank you for the reintroduction."

"You're very welcome."

"I'm Percy. In case you missed it."

"I know."

I glanced over at Johnny, who was in a discussion with the baroness and his mother. "I'm glad that's settled," I said to Bruni. "Do you often accompany your parents on visits?" I had no idea what to say to her, so that seemed fairly safe. Up close, she was frighteningly beautiful.

She looked at me with brilliant eyes that seemed amused at my awkwardness. "If I had said yes and left it at that, what would you have done?"

"I suppose I would have continued with 'Did you grow up in this country or in Europe?'"

"I would have said, 'Both.' But you didn't ask. How about I make an observation, and you comment on it?"

"Okay."

"I noticed my father doesn't seem to like you very much."

"I'm aware of that. I'm not sure he likes very many people, least of all a friend of the family."

"You see? This is much more fun than small talk. We've moved from the merely social to the more relevant. It's much better, don't you agree?"

"Perhaps, but you didn't answer my question."

"Was it a question?"

"It was a comment, but the question was implied, as I think you know."

"It was, but I prefer the direct approach by saying what you mean. It saves time."

We were interrupted by the next course, which was Scotch broth. I put my attention on the soup. Dagmar was a master and I a faithful follower. I finished before Bruni, and on a whim, I leaned over as she was lifting her spoon and whispered, "Will you marry me?"

The spoon dropped with a sharp clatter, interrupting the other conversations at the table. All eyes turned toward her as she picked the utensil out of her soup and apologized to the table. Conversations resumed, but I noted that the baron's gaze seemed to linger a bit longer on both of us before he returned to Mr. Dodge. Bruni turned toward me with a look that did not bode well for our future happiness.

I headed off the explosion by whispering, "You did say you preferred the direct approach, and marriage usually precedes pregnancy, does it not?"

She continued to look at me directly, as I watched her mind weighing possible responses. Finally, she laughed. I could learn to like that laugh. She leaned closer and said, "You're very bad. I suppose I deserved that. Shall we call it even?"

"Even it is. So, back to my implied question: does your father dislike most people or only select ones?"

She looked at me again for a long moment and replied with one word: "Both."

She turned away to converse with Johnny.

The honeymoon was over. It was just as well. I needed time to think. Her presence was only slightly south of overwhelming, and she knew that. I reckoned she had broken more hearts than most people had had ordinary conversations. I had definitely gotten a reaction on the marriage proposal, although what it meant I couldn't say at this point. She was extraordinarily good-looking, obviously intelligent, and an unknown factor in a host of unknowns. I resolved to be very careful. Falling in love with her

would be all too easy and very dangerous. If only I could convince my racing heart.

The baron interrupted my thoughts. “You find my daughter attractive?”

“Yes, she favors her mother.”

The baron laughed. “I see you’ve recovered. That’s good. Resilience is always an important aspect of trading. You were a trader, yes?”

Mr. Dodge looked like he was about to interrupt but held back.

“Yes, Johnny and I partnered a while back.”

“Not now?”

“No, we ended our partnership. I now do forensic accounting out of Los Angeles.”

“Too many losses, I suppose. It’s a hard business.”

“Yes, it can be — and it was.”

“Perhaps you can give me your card. I could always use another person to count my money.” He laughed at his joke, if it was a joke.

“I’m not an accountant or bookkeeper, per se. I investigate where money goes and where it comes from, particularly as it applies to legal matters. My clients are attorneys.”

“I see. Like an office detective.”

“More like an analyst. People who wish to hide either the sources of funds or where they stash them can be extremely sophisticated and creative. I discover what they have done, how they did it, and when.”

Bruni had leaned closer to me, even though she was still talking to Johnny.

“You’re right. Criminals are some of the smartest people I’ve ever met. Good luck with that.”

The baron asked Mr. Dodge a question, but as he did so, Mr. Dodge gave me a wink before turning back to the baron.

The next course was served — a series of pâtés with different sauces that were a delight to taste. This was followed by sorbet.

The baron ate with pleasure and complimented Mr. Dodge on having a cook of such outstanding competence and sophistication. He was enjoying himself, if only because he was no longer frowning. I looked about the room. Mr. Dodge was his usual unruffled self, attentive and completely present. Mrs. Dodge and the baroness were engrossed in conversation on some subject that only they were interested in, while Johnny looked to be in oscillating states of excitement and reservation, both of which were evident in his body language as he moved closer to Bruni one moment and then shifted away the next. Judging from the amount of wine he had consumed, the battle was heavy-going. I knew how he felt.

I turned to my left and listened to Mr. Dodge and the baron discuss yield curves and economic situations around the world, while another part of my mind tried to sort out what was happening here. I felt that we, myself included, were under scrutiny, but for what ultimate purpose, I hadn't a clue. Bruni handled herself with a sophistication and ease that was inconsistent with a young woman in need of a match. I was willing to bet that she had already fielded several offers of marriage from some very qualified applicants. There was no ring on her finger, and one hadn't been removed recently either. There was no telltale indentation or change in color. I tended toward paranoia. I drank more wine to shake the mood and noted Stanley's presence. He stood like a statue in front of the passage to the kitchen. When a glass became half-full, he moved ghostlike to refill the glass. He never looked at the company directly but at a point in the distance.

I had once studied black widow spiders because they fascinated me. With many dangerous creatures, one gets a sixth sense of their existence before they make themselves known. Black widows, however, are a psychic black hole. They have an ability to mask themselves completely. Stanley on duty was the same. One never

noticed he was there, but he was all the same, listening and observing.

The meal drew to a close. The ladies went to the drawing room, while the men moved to the library. Bruni, I noted, looked miffed at being segregated, but that was the rule of the house, and for once, I was only too pleased that it existed. Johnny looked relieved as well. He and I followed the older men.

“Well, what do you think?” I asked, unable to contain myself.

“Yikes. Conversing with that girl is like wrestling with a man-eating shark — an awfully attractive one, mind you.”

“Tell me about it.”

“She definitely gets the heart racing. I kept remembering that fortune-teller predicting the end of the world if I should marry. That was all that kept me and all living things from certain death.”

“Well, I beat you there. I already asked her.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

Johnny stopped in his tracks and asked, “What did she say?”

“She dropped her spoon, and after a brief honeymoon, we ended up divorced.”

“Well, you do move quickly, I must say. I think that was the fastest romance on record.”

We had reached the library door.

“Too true. But something bothers me — only I can’t put my finger on it.”

Johnny slapped me on the shoulder and said, “Something *always* bothers you, Percy, but I thank God for paranoid friends! They stimulate the mind. Let’s grab some good spirits, smoke a fine cigar, and sing the praises of male company. After that, we’ll look up Stan the man, and have a chat. Perhaps he has some information that will help. But first, we need to refresh ourselves from our brush with Circe personified. What say you?”

With my wholehearted agreement, we entered the library.

The baron and Johnny's father were seated next to each other in front of the fireplace. The baron was speaking to him in a low voice. He looked like a goblin king sitting on a leather throne with a cigar for a scepter and a snifter of brandy for an orb. Both of them looked up as we entered, but the baron merely noted us before turning back to Mr. Dodge to resume his conversation.

Johnny and I helped ourselves to cognac and cigars from the bar and sat down in the two empty leather chairs placed on either side of a small table. We relaxed, enjoying the cigars and the drink, until one of the baron's comments floated into our thoughts.

"This is a beautiful property," the baron said in his soft voice.

The baron's eyes flicked in our direction. They glittered briefly before he turned back.

"It is," replied John Senior. "I suppose you are now a major collector...among other things?"

"Among other things, as you say, but I am only a small player.

As you know, my businesses keep me occupied, but nonetheless, I have acquired some exquisite pieces.”

I was willing to bet he was understating himself to a large degree. I glanced at Johnny, who was staring off into space. He was listening.

The baron paused and looked at the tip of his cigar and said, “I would be most interested in viewing anything you might be willing to show me. Of course, everything would be held in strictest confidence. It is a delicate matter, and I do not wish to presume.”

Mr. Dodge said nothing.

The baron glanced about the room before asking, “Shall we join the ladies?”

Mr. Dodge agreed, but whether he referred to the request to view Alice’s collection or simply to rejoin the ladies, he left up in the air.

I took up the rear as we filed back to the drawing room. Mr. Dodge held the door for the baron and Johnny, but before I could enter, he said, “Walk with me.”

He closed the door and proceeded to take me out the front of the house. The air was cool and breezy. Clouds had sprung up during lunch, and the sun played hide-and-seek behind them, casting us in alternating bright afternoon sunshine and shadow. We stood for a moment and then began to make our way up the driveway.

Mr. Dodge spoke after we had stepped away from the house, “It’s good to see you. How’ve you been?”

“Quite well, sir.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’m happy that you and Johnny are friends again.”

“Yes, I am too. Now it’s like old times.”

We continued to walk at a leisurely pace.

Mr. Dodge interrupted the silence. "Friends are important. In the end, they mean everything, but I didn't pull you out here to lecture you on the value of friendship but rather to impart something that might explain a few things. Did your parents ever tell you the story of their marriage?"

"Just that they ran into each other in Europe and fell in love. Eventually, they married and moved back to the United States, where I was born."

"That's true enough, but like many simple stories, there's more to it. What I wish to tell you is quite relevant, as you'll hear. Your mother and my wife grew up together. They went to the same boarding school in Lausanne. Often, they would travel throughout Austria, Bavaria, and Italy without a chaperone — quite unusual in those days. I met Anne during one of their vacations and proposed soon after. She made an impact on me then and does to this day. I think we are one of a few genuinely happy couples. Every day, I thank all the powers that be for her coming into my life."

He paused for a moment and continued. "During one of their travels, and before I met either of them, both were introduced to a young Austrian aristocrat by the name of Hugo. He liked Anne but was completely smitten by your mother. He courted her and was successful, in the sense that they became engaged."

"Hugo von Hofmanstal, I take it?"

"The very same."

"So, we do have a history."

"Oh yes, and quite a history, as you shall hear. It's not the most flattering of tales, but necessary that you know it, even if it has a darker side. Your parents are some of our best friends. After all, that friendship allowed you to become part of our lives, and we are truly grateful for it." He paused and looked at me.

"And I am too. Really."

We continued in silence for a bit before he said, "Hugo was a

serious fellow, even then. He was small but a scrapper. He developed a formidable reputation as a fighter and a duelist. At that time, dueling was illegal, but nonetheless an accepted practice in his culture and level of society.

“Your parents met after your mother was already engaged to Hugo. How that happened exactly I don’t know. Anne said that Mary needed some assistance with her luggage. She asked your father for a hand, and he was only too happy to help. The two girls were traveling from Switzerland to Austria to visit Hugo’s family for the third time. For your future parents, it was love at first sight. They acted on their feelings. By the time they arrived at Hugo’s castle, they were committed to each other, and there was no turning back. To compound the issue, both had decided that Mary should break off the engagement with Hugo as soon as possible by announcing what had happened between them. This, they decided, must occur during the coming visit. To make sure there would be no mistake, she was to make the announcement in front of witnesses. Meanwhile, your father was to await the outcome at a hotel in a nearby village.

“Love can be so grand, but it’s a difficult emotion to deal with for many. It’s easy to throw caution aside, believing that love, if true, will conquer all. I knew your father from school. Thomas and I were good friends. It was just like him to downplay the consequences of his actions. We were constantly getting into difficulties from this facet of his personality. I was not there to counsel him, because I was visiting Paris with my father. I would have advised both of them to handle the matter in a completely different way, but I wasn’t there. They decided on the bold approach.

“Your father waited at the hotel for two days while events at the castle took their course. He was a bit far gone and called me at the start of the first day. He had to tell somebody of his joy and his

agony from being parted from Mary. When I managed to finally extract the story from him, I explained to my father what was going on, and he rightly concluded that I had best get there in a hurry, before events spun completely out of control.

“I traveled as fast as I could and arrived at the hotel by the end of the second day. We had barely greeted each other when the door of the hotel was thrown open, and Hugo, accompanied by two friends, stormed into the lobby. He went up to your father, seething with emotion, but the rules of etiquette forbade him from using physical violence then and there. He demanded satisfaction. He had been wronged in his own house, in front of his father, his friends, his guests.

Hugo told me later that he had had to argue the case for a duel to the old baron before he could proceed. In his argument, he stated clearly that even if the man who had wronged him was an American and ignorant of the standards of behavior expected in their level of society, he should be held accountable for his actions. He was in their country and on their turf. Mary was not to blame. After much arguing, the old baron relented, provided proper form was carried out.

“Hugo was surprised when he saw me. He had no idea I was involved. He asked, ‘John, is that really you?’ I said, ‘Hugo, it’s me.’ Hugo took hold of himself. Briefly, he explained the events leading up to the current meeting. He asked if I was to act as second. I delayed my answer. I told your father to go to his room, do nothing, and say nothing, while I talked with Hugo, and not to expect me until late.

“I left for the castle. Hugo and I had known each other since childhood. Our families were very close, and my father respected the old baron immensely. In Paris, when I explained what had happened, my father was very upset and urged me to try and rescue the situation before it escalated to this level. He told me to

do whatever I thought necessary but with one restriction: if there was a duel, which he felt was highly likely, given the magnitude of the offense in the eyes of Hugo, I was not to act as your father's second. The ties between our families were such that if I was forced to participate, the relationship with the von Hofmanstals would be forfeit, one way or the other. Whichever friend won, or lost, and I was forced to participate, there would be blood. Looking back, it was wise council. I was in an untenable situation nonetheless.

"When we arrived at the castle, I was met by the old baron, who invited us both into his study. He was as surprised to see me as Hugo. We spoke. I told him I was your father's friend, but I had been instructed by my family that I was not to be his second. I made my case for calm. Your father had no friends available who might be called on. Further, he had never fenced — a duel with swords was out of the question. Lastly, there must be some way to achieve satisfaction other than by a duel, which was illegal.

"I hoped that these arguments would put a stop to the proceedings, but I could tell from their attitudes that there would be no backing down, and no apology in whatever manner given would be acceptable. Hugo and Mary's engagement had been publicly announced. The way your mother had rescinded it left no doubt as to the nature of the relationship and the reason why. Further, this had been done before Hugo's friends and guests in their own home. The best I could do was negotiate for a more even match. The terms agreed upon were that Anne and Mary were to remain in their rooms at the castle until the duel was finished. Second, pistols would have to be the weapon used, and not just any pistols, but proper black powder dueling pistols. There was no way I would sanction Walther .380 semiautomatics or similar modern weapons. The probability of death of one, or both, was too certain. This was agreed. The old baron suggested that a

disinterested party would have to be the second. A professional man, a doctor who lived nearby, would have to do. Further, he was an amateur gunsmith and collector, who owned a splendid set of Gastinne-Renette percussion dueling pistols. The baron himself made the call and confirmed the arrangement.

“With a heavy heart, I returned to the hotel. The duel had been set for seven in the morning on a green patch below the castle walls. Death of one them was a likely outcome, but there was nothing to be done. When I arrived, I explained the situation. Your father was aghast. He had no idea what he had unleashed. He shook. He wept. He said he would run away, but I explained the consequences if he should do so. There was Mary’s potential shame to consider as well as the repercussions his flight would have on his family. In the end, Thomas decided to go ahead. He vowed that his love for Mary would see him through. I left him in the bar as I went up to bed to try and sleep.

“That morning, a car met us at the hotel, along with the doctor. The doctor protested the stupidity of the affair, but he had acquiesced because with a medical man present, perhaps lives might be saved. The parties met as agreed. There was no backing down. No apology was offered, and no reconciliation was possible. The pistols were loaded by each of the seconds and then assigned by a coin toss. I explained to your father that to fire the pistol, it had to be double-cocked. When released by the trigger, the hammer would hit a percussion cap that would explode, igniting the primer, which in turn, would set off the powder in the chamber, thus discharging the pistol. There was a lag between both events, and if he was to have a chance, he had to hold the weapon rock-steady for several seconds once he pulled the trigger. Deliberately shooting into the ground or into the air would require a repeat. Both would fire simultaneously once the signal was given. The old baron had decided that I was to be the one who

gave the signal by dropping my raised arm once the two were in position, as he looked on from the rampart above.

“When I lowered my arm, both fired, but Hugo’s pistol exploded, such that a piece blew back and struck him above the left eye, while the other ball went who knows where.”

“The scar!” I exclaimed.

“Exactly. Fortunately, the doctor was there. Hugo was unconscious. At first, we thought he had been shot, but the doctor confirmed that he had received the wound from the pistol’s fragments, and his life was not in any danger. Blood had been spilled and honor satisfied. Both men had acquitted themselves well.

“After making sure that Hugo would recover, and expressing my regrets to the baron, who assured me I was not at fault whatsoever, the girls, your father, and myself were driven to the hotel, where we had a jolly breakfast. I was relieved beyond anything you could imagine that the outcome had not been fatal to either party. Anne and I got quite drunk, and our relationship started right there at the hotel. Mary was also in good spirits, but your father was more reserved and even a bit pensive.

“It was not until we were back in the States that I was able to pull out of him the cause of his mental turmoil. He told me that after I had gone up to bed the night before the duel, the doctor paid a visit to the hotel bar. He needed a drink and did not wish to drink alone. They got to talking and discovered their mutual dilemma. The doctor detested the idea of being party to a duel. It was against the law. But because the baron had asked him, and because his income depended on being in the baron’s good graces, the request was interpreted as a command. Long after closing time, they brooded and commiserated over their respective situations, sharing a bottle of local spirits between them. They concocted a plan. Both reckoned the probability of surviving

without injury were at best one third, and more likely half that, given Hugo's proficiency at all types of weapons. But there was a way to adjust the odds. If one of the pistols were altered so that it misfired, or even exploded, the chance of his surviving unscathed would rise from 16 percent to a much better 50 percent. The outcome depended on who received the altered pistol. Rather than trying to ensure he got the right one, they decided to leave that to chance. They had changed fate as much as they dared. The doctor left to make the arrangements.

"So, he cheated," I said.

"In an absolute sense, he did indeed, but I tend to a more lenient view. He was facing a man who, in comparison, was a professional killer. The winner was an almost forgone conclusion. He did not change the game to such an extent that he would win outright or that Hugo would be killed. He set up the duel so that each of them had an equal chance. Had your father received the exploding pistol, he would have most certainly been killed because Hugo was a crack shot. After he told me this, he explained that he felt immense shame for what he had done. He felt like a cheat and a liar. His view of himself was irrevocably destroyed. In fact, he did not think he even deserved to marry Mary, the woman he had fought for. After trying to console him and seeing that he would not let go of his self-obsession, I went to my father's study and pulled out a revolver. No one was in the house other than us. I loaded five of the six chambers and slammed it on the desk in front of him. Thomas stopped his sniveling. I had his attention. I made him examine the pistol and tell me what he saw. He told me that one chamber was empty. I ordered him to close the wheel and spin it. He did so. I fired into the book case. The sound was immense. We were deaf for an hour. I actually had to pull out a pen and paper and write, *Those were the odds you faced, and that is what would have happened to you. How dare you squander such an*

extraordinary opportunity to lead a better existence, when the gods decided in your favor! The demonstration snapped him right out of it. After we could hear again, we broke out the best champagne and celebrated for the rest of the night. He never looked back. Few men can do that. He did.”

“I never knew any of this. Good God! I see your point, of course, and you are correct. I can be a bit judgmental, particularly when it comes to my father. It was a very good solution, given the circumstances. He survived, and no one was killed. It’s unbelievable that the practice existed even then.”

“It still does today.”

“I get the feeling that there is more.”

We headed back to the house.

“Yes. Yes, there is. Hugo, now Baron von Hofmanstal, suspects that all was not quite right with the duel. What makes him suspect, I have no idea, and I’m not going to question him about it either.”

“I certainly won’t,” I said. “He was remarkably frosty when we met. I suppose this must be the reason.”

“I’m sure of it. I think he was quite surprised to see you. Hugo and I have enjoyed a friendship that is over half a century long. He has many outstanding qualities, but I’m afraid you saw only the worst. He can be vindictive and a real pain in the ass, but then, can’t we all.”

“How do you suggest I handle this?”

“With grace. I’m afraid the sins of the father are visited on the children, and I’m sorry for that. I doubt you’re in any danger, but getting close to him will surely be an uphill battle. Courting his daughter might be difficult as well.” He looked at me again.

“I think that ship has sailed. She is lovely, exceedingly so, but to my mind, disturbing in the extreme.”

“For what it’s worth, I found Anne to be the same at first.”

“Oh boy.”

Mr. Dodge laughed and slapped me on the back, just like Johnny. We had reached the front door.

“Mr. Dodge...”

“We’ve known each other way too long for that. Call me John. Anne and I are so proud of you both.”

We entered the door and I wondered if he had seen Johnny’s latest trading report, but knowing him, he knew days ago.

Mr. Dodge and I walked into the drawing room. The baron and Johnny were standing by the french doors overlooking the lawn, while the ladies were clustered together on the couch at the other side of the room. The baroness and Mrs. Dodge got up when we entered. Anne asked John if he could relate a story about a mutual friend of theirs from Italy.

I wandered over to sit with Bruni. She didn't move but watched me as I approached. I noticed the indentation at the base of her neck and the fair skin below, which disappeared beneath the front of her gray dress. Her long legs were crossed as she relaxed into the sofa with one arm stretched across its back. On her left wrist, she wore a gold bracelet of large rectangular links. I sat down.

"Secret conference?" she asked.

"Family matters."

"That covers a broad area. Did it include my family as well?"

"The subject may have come up."

"I bet it did. Our family has known the Dodges for a long time. We're thick as thieves."

“For generations, if I’m not mistaken.”

“We have an interlinked history and a long memory. Light me a cigarette.”

I opened a silver box that lay on the side table and took one out. They were fresh, probably put there this morning. I lit one for her with a lighter in the shape of a silver bird that stood beside the box. I passed her the lit cigarette but not before I took a drag. I was slightly on edge. As she took it from me, our fingers touched. Electricity coursed upward from my fingers.

To cover my reaction, I asked, “A long memory...What does that mean?”

“We have many shared stories. They help define who we are.”

“I see. Maybe you’d like to tell me one?”

“Perhaps, a little later. You seem very familiar to me. Do you know why that might be?”

“I don’t know. I doubt we’ve ever met. I think I would’ve remembered.”

“Why is that?”

“Well,” I answered tentatively, “I don’t think you are a person who is easily forgotten.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. You grew up in this house with Johnny?”

Happy to change the subject, I answered more eagerly, “Yes, I did.”

“It’s a fascinating place, and I want to see it. Will you give me a tour?”

“Of course. When would you like one?”

“Now, unless you’ve something else you must attend to.”

I hesitated. The idea of being alone with Bruni was both appealing and intimidating. I was becoming aware that I really would like to spend more time with her, but I would be swimming into dangerous waters. Further, if we simply got up and left, we would be noticed, and being conspicuous was not my forte. I

decided to pass, but before I could voice my decision, I heard myself say, "Now is fine."

So much for free will.

If she had expected me to equivocate, she showed no indication. Her bracelet clinked as she smoothly unfolded herself from the couch. She walked over to her mother, spoke a few words, and rejoined me. I looked over at the baron, but he was talking animatedly to Johnny. His eyes glanced in our direction, but only for a moment.

"Let's go," she said.

I opened the door to the hallway, allowing her to go first. I closed it quickly behind us. I had expected some sort of objection, but there was none. We were alone.

I sighed.

"Nervous being alone with me? Many men are," she said, looking around the reception area and then walking over to the clock by the front door to have a closer look.

"Why do you think that might be?" I asked, joining her.

"I intimidate them. I'm smarter, more attractive than most women, and I have a mind of my own."

"Works for me."

"I don't intimidate you?" she said, turning to face me.

"Not in the way you think." I looked steadily back at her. She had the most marvelous mouth. Her lips were perfect.

I turned away and asked, "Where would you like to start?"

"Anywhere. How about down that hallway."

"Very well — it leads past the library and a larger reading area before entering the west wing where Lady Bromley resided when she was alive."

We walked down the hall. I opened the library door, showed her the room, and continued until we were in front of the door to Alice's apartment. We stopped for a moment.

She turned to me. "I've heard that she still lives here in spirit form, waiting to avenge her murder."

"Yes, there are many rumors. What have you heard specifically?"

"Nothing concrete, just tales from friends of my father. One man in particular won't set foot in this house ever again. Many in the group of collectors my father has dealings with say similar things." We stood quite close together. "What do you think?"

"That she was murdered? It's always been a possibility, but there's been nothing concrete, as you said. For what it's worth, I don't think the house is haunted. I never saw a ghost in all the time I lived here. That's not to say there isn't a presence. It seems to permeate the entire property, but it's strongest in this part of the house. We all feel it, at least those who have stayed here for a while. One treads carefully. Some things are best left sleeping."

"So you *are* a believer."

"I think there are things I can't explain. You would have to have known Alice to get a sense of why I think that way. She was a force to be reckoned with in her own right. She was a noted Egyptologist — a woman in a man's world. She held her own. She had a presence like no one else, other than perhaps Mrs. Leland, Johnny's grandmother, whom you will meet."

"I look forward to that. In the meantime, I'd like to see where Lady Bromley lived. Perhaps I'll *feel* something."

"Do I detect a note of sarcasm?"

She smiled. "Perhaps a little. I'm sorry. I tend to stick with facts rather than beliefs."

"By habit or by training?"

"Both. I engineer corporate and financial structures for my father, and I tend to be skeptical of the less material. Perhaps I'll tell you about it some time."

"I'd like that, but before we continue, a note of caution. We

rarely enter this part of the house. Touch nothing and be as quiet as possible.”

I had just put my hand on the doorknob when she said, “You think we’ll disturb her?”

I paused, my hand still on the door, and looked back at her.

“If you like. Just the same, the less we intrude, the better.”

“I’ll respect your beliefs, although I think they’re in error.”

“Fair enough. Just have a care. Here we go.”

I had cautioned her as best I could. I was not certain that showing her this part of the house was a good idea, but I could hardly refuse now that we had come this far. I opened the door, allowed her to pass, and followed inside. Her closeness sent my heart racing again.

The room was the same. Only a few hours ago, Johnny and I had listened to Stanley for half the night. One of the staff must have come in and cleaned. The room was spotless.

Bruni wandered about, looking over the furniture and the fireplace, saying nothing. I showed her the bedroom. She moved throughout the room, looking. I turned away for a few seconds. When I turned back again, I saw her put down the picture of Alice in fancy dress that had stood at the side of the dressing table.

“Sorry” was all she said and wandered about again. I went over to the picture but did not touch it. Alice was wearing an Egyptian costume with the necklace. I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I felt it was time to end the tour of Alice’s rooms.

I walked to the door of the bedroom and motioned her out. We walked through the sitting room and out of Alice’s apartment. I looked around as I closed the door. Everything seemed the same, but somehow it wasn’t. Some people hear but never really listen when they should. They insist on finding out for themselves.