

THRESHOLD

SOME HOUSES SEEM TO want to hold their secrets.

The Wilde House, standing silent in its clearing in the woodlands on the eastern shore of Messaquamik Bay, Long Island, holds more secrets than most houses.

From the start, in 1682, when Jacob Wilde came across from England and first chose the rise of land above a small cove of the bay to build his house on, it was rumored he was fleeing a dark scandal in his family. There were whispers he had killed his only brother in a rage, and so had fled to the Americas by way of doing penance. What the truth was, Jacob never said, and if the hands that laid the first square timbers of the Wilde House had indeed been stained by blood, the house stood stoic in that knowledge and concealed it.

Like most houses of its time and place, it started as a basic square with two large rooms—a ground-floor hall or “keeping room” and one great chamber on the floor above—and a stone fireplace on the eastern wall. Beneath the rafters was a garret used for storage, and below the hall, reached by a trapdoor, was a cellar lined with dry-laid fieldstone.

In defiance of the rumors, or perhaps to show his soul was blameless, Jacob painted his house white. A pure and blinding white.

And yet the whispers held, and grew.

They grew when Jacob’s firstborn son, a boy he had named Samuel—for his brother, it was said—breathed only one brief hour and then no more, becoming the first Wilde to be buried

in the private family graveyard at the forest's edge, above the cove. They grew still more when Jacob's barn was struck by lightning in a storm and burned until it scorched the ground. He built another in its place. And when the living children started coming—first two daughters, then a son he christened Reuben—Jacob took his tools in hand again and made his small house larger in the customary way, doubling its size with the addition of a second downstairs room and upstairs chamber on the east side of the great stone chimney stack, which now became the central warming heart of this expanded dwelling.

The house, for those few years, appeared content.

Until his younger daughter died of ague and his wife fell ill, and Jacob shuttered up the white house on the cove and moved his family west along the island to the settled farms at Newtown, where he deemed the air more healthful. Another son, named Zebulon, was born there. And in time, when Jacob died, the house at Newtown passing to the elder of his sons, it was this Zebulon who brought his wife, Patience, and their own two small boys back to Messaquamik Bay, and to the little wooded cove, and to the solid four-roomed house that had, for all those years between, stood silently amid the trees and waited.

It was not an easy homecoming. His first two children grew and thrived but three more sons were born and lost and buried in the private family graveyard, and through these years of tribulation Zebulon, a carpenter by trade, enlarged the house yet further, stubbornly improving it by building a lean-to along the back wall, thus creating a kitchen and pantry and one more small chamber downstairs, with a steeply sloped garret above.

At last another son was born, and lived. And then another. And a daughter, Lydia.

It seemed for a time that the Wilde House, at last, would

know happiness. But there were locals who still nodded sagely and said there'd been blood on the hands of the man who had built it, and blood would have blood, they warned. Blood would have blood.

In truth there were few who were truly surprised by what happened next; for in the mid-eighteenth century, with one war winding its way to a close and another about to begin, it was not such an uncommon thing to find families dividing and splintering under the strain. And if one of the bodies that found its way into the Wilde family graveyard was that of an outsider...well, there was violence that happened, sometimes.

It was then, in those years, that the light in the forest first started to shine.

Sailors on the ships that came to anchor off the cove in Messaquamik Bay would often claim they saw the light within the trees, much like a lantern swinging from an unseen hand. The British officers who occupied the Wilde House in the Revolution swore they'd seen it also, and a young spy for the Patriots had written in his journal of the light that seemed to guide him safely round the posted sentries and which, having seen it first at dusk, he'd fancied had been carried by a soldier in French uniform.

The British officers told other tales, of steps that trod the stairs by night, and doors that opened by themselves when no breeze blew to move them, but those tales were told with ale in hand, to test each other's courage, and when they were gone the old house closed again upon its secrets.

As the years passed, its remote location and lack of amenities reduced it to a summer home for Zebulon's descendants, who by then had relocated to the city of New York. In due time, one of these descendants—Lawrence Wilde, a poet of some reputation—chose to take the money he had earned through publication and invest it in what he desired to be

a grand retreat, away from civilized distractions, so in 1854 he had the Wilde House enlarged a final time with a new Victorian addition that amounted to a second complete house, overlapping the footprint of the original and indeed attached to the first by means of opening up a part of the lean-to wall.

The house, in this condition, carried down the generations, and the light within the trees still beckoned to the ships offshore.

Who held the light, and why, and what that spirit's purpose might be in the forest, no one knew, though locals often fell to speculating, nodding just as sagely as their forebears had when telling stories of the secrets held within the Wilde House.

The house, when I first saw it, seemed intent on guarding what it knew within its walls as long as it stayed standing; but we all learned, by the end of it, that secrets aren't such easy things to keep.

CHARLEY

ROUTINES, MY MOTHER CLAIMED, could help you get through almost anything.

No matter what calamity occurred, she rose and made the bed and made my father's coffee and her tea and read the morning paper, in that order. Life, she'd taught me, ran more smoothly when you tamed it with these rituals and kept it in control.

I tried; I really did. But even though I was, in many ways, my mother's daughter, I'd lived almost thirty years now without settling on a pattern that would keep my own life organized.

And that was why, although I had been working for a week now at the Wilde House, in this little upstairs room that was assigned to be my office in the new museum, and although I'd known for all that time the local paper would be sending a reporter out on Saturday to interview me, I had waited until Saturday to start to clean.

I'd brought my breakfast with me and had made a bit of progress. When I'd started, it had looked as though a paper bomb had detonated on my desk, but now its sturdy dark oak breadth was almost tidy, with the papers split between the stacks of those I'd dealt with and the ones still needing my attention. My computer, which had started off half-buried by those papers, had a small desk of its own now in the corner just behind me, by the window.

But that left me with a pile of things that didn't have a place to go.

I tried to fit a few of them on shelves, to fill the bare spots, but they cluttered. In the end I simply opened the big empty bottom file drawer of my desk and swept the spare things into there, and slid it shut.

That, too, was something I'd been taught at home: whatever parts of life you couldn't organize, you hid.

And that I *could* do.



I'd been waiting for the question, so it came as no surprise. The elephant, as some might say, had been there in the room since the beginning of the interview and both of us could see it, but it still took the reporter from the local paper several minutes before she acknowledged it.

"Your last name's kind of famous in this area." Her smile was bright. "I take it you're a relative?"

I found a smile—not quite as bright, but nearly natural—to answer with. "Yes, I am. Werner Van Hoek was my grandfather."

From there it was a simple thing to work out the connection. Of my grandparents' two children, both conveniently born boys to carry down the family name, only one had survived long enough to marry and have children. But she asked me, all the same, "So then your father would be...?"

"Theo. Theo Van Hoek." I waited to see if she'd take it a step further, and if so, which term she'd use. My father called himself a draft resister, though most other people, I had learned, preferred the more alliterative "draft dodger."

The reporter was younger than me. Not by much, though, and people of our generation weren't all that concerned with the Vietnam War or the draft or the men who had dodged it, but even so, I'd heard my father called other names, too: Coward. Traitor.

I could see her take a moment to consider, then she simply asked, “And he lives up in Canada?”

“In Toronto, yes.”

“That’s where you were born?”

I’d actually been born in Montreal, as had my brother, but my parents had moved to Toronto just a few months afterwards, so in the interest of simplicity I just said, “Yes.”

“So you’re a Canadian?”

I didn’t see the point of getting into the complexities of what I was on each side of the border. There were many who believed my father should have lost his right to be American when he tore up his draft card and refused to fight in Vietnam, but immigration laws relied on facts and dates and, in the case of both my brother and myself, they’d made it possible for us to claim our citizenship in the States and cross that border back again. I said, “I’m an American, too. At least, that’s what the IRS thinks. They keep taking my taxes.”

The young reporter smiled. She clearly felt that we were back on safer ground now, and it showed in how she settled much more comfortably within her chair, the tricky question over.

I was starting to get used to people asking it. Even when I’d lived upstate the name Van Hoek had opened doors, spurring some of the more socially-minded to ask whether my brother Niels and I were “of the Long Island Van Hoeks”—a question we’d never known quite how to answer, in honesty, because we were, and we weren’t. But down here, in this part of Long Island’s north shore, with my grandparents’ mansion set off in its own gated park looking over the bay, a short drive from where I was now sitting, I couldn’t just walk around town with a name like Van Hoek and expect people not to remark on it.

Usually, after the “Are you a relative?” question, came the

inevitable ones about my father, and then a final one aimed more directly, with a pointed barb: “And what does your grandmother think about you coming back here to live?”

I could have answered that I wasn’t “coming back,” since I had never lived here to begin with. But I didn’t. I could have answered simply it was none of their damn business. But I didn’t do that, either. I had learned to simply shrug and smile and tell them they would have to ask my grandmother.

Truth was, I didn’t know. I’d never met her. Never seen her, save in photographs. She’d never taken notice of my brother, Niels, the whole time he had lived here, and she hadn’t bothered coming to his funeral in the spring.

To be fair, my father hadn’t been there either, but that hadn’t been his fault. He’d been stuck in the hospital, recovering from surgery to fix his stubborn heart. The doctors hadn’t told him about Niels for several days—not out of fear the shock would do him in, but out of fear he’d rip his tubes out, rise up from his bed, and take the next flight to LaGuardia. He would have, too, but by the time he’d learned his only son had died, my mother had arranged a second service in memoriam, at their church in Toronto.

I had gone to that one, also, even though I never found much comfort in the ritual of eulogizing. Niels, I knew, had hated it. I hadn’t told my parents that. I’d stood there and supported them as I’d supported Niels’s daughter, Rachel, who had looked so lost. And when they’d asked a favor of me, I had told them yes, of course. *Of course I will.* No hesitation.

The reporter asked me, “How long were you with the... Hall-McPhail Museum, was it?”

I regrouped my thoughts and did the math and told her, “Almost seven years.” The Hall-McPhail was not a large museum and a lot of people didn’t recognize the name, so she wasn’t alone. “It’s a historic house, a lot like this one, only our

focus was all on the Seven Years' War. The French and Indian War," I explained, when she looked at me blankly.

"Oh," she said. "Like *Last of the Mohicans*."

"Yes."

"And what did you do there?"

The board of trustees who had hired me here as curator two weeks ago had asked me that same question. I'd sat at the end of the table downstairs and I'd faced them and dutifully detailed the various titles I'd held at the museum—a succession of positions that had seen me doing everything from being a museum guide to managing the interns and the volunteers; from dealing with the paperwork to helping manage budgets. I'd assisted with the conservation of historic texts and then translated those same texts from French. I'd helped to handle documents and weaponry and textiles. I'd created exhibitions and installed them. I had—

"Well, a bit of everything," I said. "But for the past two years I've been assistant to the curator."

"They must," she offered, friendly, "have been sad to see you go."

They'd wished me well, in fact. I told her that, and showed her what they'd given me my last day as a parting gift—a reproduction powder horn designed to look like many of the ones I'd catalogued for the collection, and engraved: CHARLOTTE VAN HOEK HER POWDER HORNE, and during the whole time that I was doing this I tried to keep in mind the cheerful voices of the party on that last day, and not dwell on Tyler's more reproachful comments as he'd watched me packing up my car.

"I can't believe," he'd said, "that you would say yes without talking to me first."

"They're my family."

"Yes, but—"

"What? You would have told me to say no?"

“No. No, I—” He had broken off again to rake a hand through his endearingly unruly hair. “I just don’t think you’re thinking about *us*.”

And he was right. I hadn’t been. But in reply I’d only told him, “Ty, I have to go.”

“But two years? Really? That’s a hell of a long time.”

“I’ll still be in New York, and you can drive there in five hours. We can make it work.”

He’d looked at me with open irritation. “Do you *want* to make it work?”

“Of course I do.” My face had probably displayed some irritation too, because I’d thought it crazy he would even ask. “Of course I want to make it work.”

I hated arguing. We’d almost never argued, from the time six months before when we’d been introduced by friends at a reception. Our relationship so far had been a relatively calm one, free of drama, so this recent patch of turbulence had left us both off balance.

I restored my balance now by briefly fixing on the broader world that showed beyond my window, which looked out across the mossy shingles of the older section of the house and gave a peaceful green view of the branches of the nearer trees.

Their shade was welcome. Even with the window-mounted air conditioner along the hall, it was still August, and the morning sun would otherwise have made this room an oven.

As it was, the young reporter had begun to use her notepad as a fan.

I sent her a small smile as I acknowledged this, apologizing for the heat. “We can finish this downstairs, if you’d like? And there’s no air-conditioning in the colonial part of the house, so if you still want that tour we should probably go while the sun’s where it is.”

She still wanted the tour. She had gathered her notebook and pen and recorder and stood in the time that it took me to push back my chair, and by the time I'd crossed to join her she had flipped the stapled pages I had given her when we'd begun our interview, to look more closely at the page of floor plans for the house.

She said, "So this room, your office, is actually *in* the colonial part of the house."

"Well, it is and it isn't. This would originally have been one of the garret rooms in the colonial house, but then in the mid-1800s they opened up this corner of the back wall and the roof so they could build on the Victorian addition, so now this room is kind of half-and-half." Like the rooms of the Victorian addition, it had undergone a total renovation in the 1980s, with the painted woodwork and the wallpaper to prove it; but the floor, though painted, was still the same wide-planked floor that had been here when this was just a garret room in the back corner of the old house, and I still got that wonderful walking-through-a-wardrobe-into-Narnia feeling every time I opened the old-fashioned paneled door in the wall behind my desk and stepped through into what felt like another century.

The spacious upstairs bedchamber that lay beyond that door had not seen many changes since colonial times. Large and square, it had a lovely feel to it with all its windows opened wide to let in the faint breeze that danced and rustled through the leaves outside, casting shadows over the floorboards and the dusty fireplace hearth. The air was fresh, the room was quiet, and I felt myself relax. In the older part of the Wilde House, this room was my favorite.

I was about to launch into a proper description of how this first house had been built, and what things had been altered, and how our new project was going to restore them, when

the young reporter, studying her floor plan, cut me off with, “Which room was Benjamin Wilde’s?”

From her tone, anyone would have thought him a living celebrity—someone with legions of fans who would line up to see where he’d slept.

I was still getting used to that.

Benjamin Wilde, I had learned, was our museum’s claim to fame. A daring privateer, a dashing hero of the Revolution, and—if one could trust the portraits—devilishly handsome, he was largely why the Wilde House had been designated a historic building to begin with, and why funds had been donated for its restoration. Benjamin’s descendant, Lawrence Wilde, may have become a fairly famous poet of his day and dined with presidents, but all these years afterward, Benjamin’s was the name everyone knew. The man everyone wanted to hear about.

I smiled and told her, “Over here.” We crossed the landing to the other upstairs bedchamber. This one was essentially the mirror image of the first—a square with two windows at the front and another in the side wall overlooking the green clearing at the forest’s edge, where guests would soon be gathering to hear the speeches and take part in the official groundbreaking ceremony.

The room was plain, with nothing in it I would call remarkable, but still the young reporter seemed to revel in its atmosphere. She crossed the floor with reverence. But I thought I caught, within her voice, a hint of disappointment. “There’s no furniture.”

“It’s all been put in storage. There’s a bedstead that’s original, and two chairs and a table that we know belonged to Benjamin, because during the Revolution, while he was away fighting and the British came to occupy his house, his wife wrote down a careful inventory of what was in each room.

She must have thought the British officers would damage things, or steal them.”

“Did they?”

“Not that we can tell. Most of the furniture that left the house left in the usual way,” I said. “Sold off by later descendants who didn’t want old-fashioned things.” And who would have most likely been shocked by the prices colonial furniture fetched these days in fine antique stores. “We know where some pieces went, and we’re working to get them back. But what we can’t track down, we can at least replace, thanks to the records of Benjamin’s wife.”

She made a note of this, then looked around appreciatively at the peeling plaster walls and scarred wood of the paneling surrounding the room’s fireplace. “So you’re going to have this whole house restored to the way it looked when he was living here?”

“That’s the plan, yes. With luck, we’ll be able to have the museum officially open for visitors sometime next summer,” I said, “but we have some ideas for special events in the meantime, so people can follow along with the project: a Christmas open house, maybe, and a plastering party in the spring.”

“And ghost tours at Halloween?” Seeing my blank face, she said, “There’s a ghost here, right?”

I couldn’t tell from her tone of voice if she was being serious, so I kept my reply neutral. “I’m not aware of one.”

“Oh. Well, you’re new here. I’m new here myself, I just moved here last winter, but I’ve had lots of people tell me things about the ghost.”

I waited politely, but she showed little interest herself in sharing the tales she’d been told, so I agreed with her it might be fun to do a Halloween event, and on that note we moved on with our tour.

She didn’t show much interest in that either, though in

fairness it was getting close to noon and with the sun directly overhead the upstairs rooms were growing hotter. She began to fan herself again, and seemed content to briefly peek into the downstairs rooms and take a picture of me standing posed beside the massive old stone fireplace in the kitchen before we went out to join the others on the lawn.

The crowd, though small, was starting to assemble.

At its center stood the town of Millbank's mayor, a handsome man in his midforties with broad shoulders and a smile designed to charm. The young reporter fixed her sights upon him, shook my hand and thanked me for my time, and left so quickly that I doubt she was aware of my relief.

But someone was.

Malaika Moore, the current chairwoman of our board of trustees, sent a knowing smile across the space between us as she raised a hand to call me over. Standing in the sunshine, she looked elegant as always, the deep violet of her linen dress a perfect foil for the dark-brown tone of her skin, her closely clipped hair giving her a huge advantage over my own pinned-up hairdo that had started off this morning looking almost chic and now had wilted to a sagging mass of waves beginning to escape their clips. I tucked a strand behind my ear and crossed the lawn to stand beside her.

"Well," she said, "that's done. How many questions did she ask about your grandmother?"

I tried to recollect. "She didn't, really. She just asked about the family name, and moved on pretty quickly. She found Benjamin more interesting."

"Everyone loves Benjamin." Malaika smiled, assessing me with a calm look that didn't judge yet still had an opinion. "You look tired."

"It's just the heat."

"You're still not sleeping."

“I sleep fine.” An outright lie, but I delivered it with confidence, and when Malaika let it pass I changed the subject. “We’re supposed to have a ghost here, did you know?”

I knew what sort of glance she’d give me in reply to that, and so she did, replying dryly, “That’s a local superstition. Don’t believe it.”

“Oh, I don’t. But I should know about it, if it’s common knowledge.”

“Frank’s the one to ask. He tells the story best.”

I’d learned to trust Malaika Moore.

She’d been my brother’s friend and, in a way, his business partner. Real estate lawyers like Niels needed good contacts, and in Malaika, the best high-end agent in this part of Long Island, he’d found a steady supply of referrals. They’d liked one another. Respect had grown into a friendship so firm that she’d transferred that goodwill to me when I’d come here, and when she had learned I’d be needing a job, she had wasted no time recommending one.

“I’m on the board of the local museum,” she’d told me, “and we need a curator. Give me your résumé.”

She hadn’t told me that she chaired the board, but when I’d had my interview it had been clear she was firmly in charge. “We’d be lucky to have someone with Charley’s qualifications,” she’d said to the others, in front of me. “I think she’s perfect for this.”

It had not been unanimous. I knew at least two directors had not been in favor at first, and they’d made that plain to me since I’d been hired, but the others had welcomed me, solely because they, too, trusted Malaika.

It should have been her, I thought, making this opening speech to the crowd.

I eased the cotton collar of my light blouse from my neck, where it had stuck from the damp heat inside the house.

“Aren’t we waiting for the contractor?” I asked. I hadn’t met him yet, and so I didn’t have a hope of recognizing him in the assembled group in front of us, but still I scanned their faces as I stalled for time.

“He couldn’t come. He’s working on another job,” Malaika said. “He wants to get that finished off so he can start here Monday.”

There was movement in the little crowd.

Malaika said, “It’s time. You ready?”

“No.”

She smiled and nudged me forward anyway, and told me, “You’ll do fine.”



“Good speech,” was Frank Wilde’s curt review of my performance when he came to find me later. He was carrying an extra glass of lemonade. “You look like you could use this.”

“Is it spiked?”

That earned a smile from him. Frank was an older man with features tanned and weathered from his years of farm work. He was stingy with his smiles. “It should be.”

Frank was also a director on our board, by virtue of his being a descendant of the man who’d built the Wilde House, and a cousin of the woman who had willed it, with its wooded acres, to the town of Millbank on condition that they make it a museum. Many said it had been Frank who had persuaded her to do that, since Ophelia Wilde had never really been the giving type. Frank, they told me, always got his way, though I’d have said that came less from persuasion than from his refusal to back down once he had set his course. He wasn’t like the mayor, who tried to charm his way through every situation. Frank was aptly named. He said exactly what was on his mind.

“You’ve done enough,” he told me, with a pointed look at the untidy stack of paper plates I was collecting from the plastic-covered table where the cake had been. “Let Sharon and her girls do that.”

I glanced across the clearing to the bustling red-haired woman who ruled over our few volunteers, and had them all now busy stacking chairs. “She has enough to do.”

“She argued against hiring you as curator.” His tone was dryly practical. He pressed the lemonade upon me. “Let her do her own damn job.”

I wasn’t going to win against a man who’d had his way for seventy-odd years, so I gave up and took the glass from him and thanked him.

He acknowledged this and looked at me assessingly. “I’m told you want to hear about the ghost.”

“Oh. Right. Yes, the reporter from the *Herald* said we had one. Do we?”

“Well now, that depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether you believe in ghosts.”

“I don’t.” With someone else, I might have been less absolute, not knowing whether *they* believed, not wanting to offend them, but from what I knew of Frank I figured I was safe on that count.

His short approving nod confirmed this. “Good for you,” he said. “My aunt, now, she wouldn’t go into the old house at all. Always hearing things. Jumping at shadows. She used to leave Uncle Walt’s lunch on the back step and whistle for him to come get it, when he was at work in there.”

Frank’s uncle Walt was the reason the house had come down to us in its preserved condition. A self-styled handyman, he’d also been a keen family historian, proud of his ancestry, and even after the family had moved to Manhattan

and no longer lived in the Wilde House full-time, coming only in summer to make their escape from the city's heat, Walter had worked hard to keep the house standing. Or so we'd been told.

Frank had stories, and he loved to tell them. I had only been on site a week, and I'd already heard at least a dozen of his tales.

"There was one time," he told me now, "my aunt came screaming downstairs saying someone was touching her hair, she could feel it."

"And nobody was?"

"Not unless you count spiders." He took a long drink of his lemonade. "Plenty of those in the house."

I agreed. I had seen them.

Across the clearing Sharon and her volunteers had finished with the chairs and were gathering, actively looking for what to do next. Frank appeared to have noticed this, too, because he gave another brief nod at my glass. "Drink up. Let's take a walk."

I'd already drunk nearly all of my lemonade, so I was able to empty my glass in one swallow and follow Frank as he set off toward the nearest path.

My favorite path, in fact, because I hadn't yet got lost on it. The property was riddled thick with walking paths that twisted through the woods. The longest, starting at the far end of the clearing near the parking lot, was crossed by all the others and could take you all the way around, if you knew which turnings to take, but I still hadn't conquered it. I managed better on this shorter path that wound down through the trees to the edge of the cove.

The trees closed above us. The air here was instantly cooler and quieter, and through the tangle of green leaves I glimpsed, in small patches, the blue of the bay.

It almost felt like nothing could intrude upon us here.

Frank said, “The story of the ghost has been around for generations, and every generation adds their bit to it, but I’ll tell it the way I first heard it from my uncle Walt—the way *he* heard it at his great-grandfather’s knee, so he said.”

From what I could remember of Frank’s family tree, his uncle Walt’s great-grandfather had been the poet Lawrence Wilde, who’d likely told a decent story.

“Back before the Revolution,” Frank began, in the same tone he always used when starting on a story, “back when we were fighting on the same side as the English, in the French and Indian War, Zebulon Wilde and his family took in a French officer, captured and sent to these parts as a prisoner.”

“Zebulon Wilde,” I said, checking my memory, “was Benjamin Wilde’s father, right?”

“That’s right. Benjamin was barely out of his teens at the time—twenty-two, twenty-three maybe—still a bit reckless, so his father kept him at work on the farm. Didn’t want him to run off and join the militia. The one brother, Joseph, had already been halfway ruined by the war. Nearly killed, so they say, in the raid on Oswego, and never quite right in the head after that.”

There were so many names to remember. I asked him, “Was Joseph the brother who went to the West Indies or the one who was a merchant in New York?”

“Neither. Joseph was the one who turned a traitor in the Revolution, and went up to Canada.”

“A Loyalist? I don’t remember hearing about *him*.”

“Well, we don’t talk about him much.” Frank’s voice turned dry, but when I glanced at him he winked. He knew that I was half Canadian. “Anyhow, here was this Frenchman, this officer, living right here in the old house with Zebulon Wilde and his sons. And his daughter.”

I thought I could see where the story was going, but I let Frank tell it.

“The daughter,” he said, “was a lonely young lady. She’d been set to marry a neighbor boy, one of the friends of her big brother Joseph, but he had gone up with her brother to work on the fort at Oswego, and when the French attacked them he was killed. That’s what drove Joseph over the edge, they say: seeing his best friend get butchered in front of him. So Joseph came home half-crazy, and his sister—Lydia, that was her name—lost her fiancé.”

Over our heads the leaves rustled and danced as a breeze from the bay brushed my cheek like a sorrowful sigh, as though somehow the forest around us was listening, too, and recalling that long-ago loss.

“Then this Frenchman arrived,” Frank said. “Handsome and charming. And Lydia, she fell in love with him. They kept it secret, of course. Had to. Zebulon wouldn’t have liked that his daughter was sneaking around with an enemy officer.”

“Maybe he ought to have thought about that before bringing the officer into his house to begin with.”

“Maybe.” The dryness was back. “But then we’d have no story to tell, would we?” Frank reached to take hold of a low-hanging whip of a branch that I otherwise would have walked into, because I was watching my feet on the path and not looking ahead. As he let it fall back into place he went on, “So the Frenchman and Lydia, they fell in love, and the plan was, she’d help him escape and they’d run off together. They had a boat waiting. But when the night came, there was no moon at all, so the officer, he took a lantern to light their way down to the water.”

“And somebody saw them,” I guessed.

“Are you telling this story?” asked Frank.

“No.”

“Okay, then.” The path took a turning and started a steeper descent and he waited to see that my footing was sure before going ahead as he picked up the thread of the story. “And somebody saw them. Her big brother Joseph, he saw that light passing his window, and he stopped them there on the path and he shot that French officer.”

From all around us the trees sighed again as the breeze from the bay became stronger. The path here gave way to a series of wooden steps edged with a railing and softened with wind-drifted ridges of sand and old fallen leaves, and I followed Frank down to the second-last step, where I sat, as he did, with my feet only inches away from the clear shallow water.

This little cove—Snug Cove—had been where the Wilde family’s ships had once ridden at anchor before setting off on their voyages to the West Indies, where one of the brothers had married and settled and managed their business of trade. That was all long ago and forgotten. The only sails now were the little white sails of the yachts skimming over the bay on their way to Cross Harbor’s marina.

The tide had come in. By this evening, the half-moon of pale sandy beach would be partly exposed, with the reeds and a handful of rocks at its edges, but now reeds and rocks were submerged and the small waves came furling toward us and flattened themselves into nothing. I slipped my feet out of my sandals and edged my toes closer, enjoying the cool of the small strip of sand on the soles of my feet.

“So, what happened to Lydia?”

“Well now, they say since her lover had died, and her brother had killed him, she just turned her face to the wall and died too, of a broken heart.”

“And people think she’s still haunting the house, do they?” One of the incoming waves reached to roll itself over my feet, but I barely acknowledged the brief touch of cold. I was

thinking of how, even without the ghost part, the legend itself made a pretty good story, and one we could possibly use in our museum programming.

“Nope.” Frank’s short sideways look set me straight. “It’s the Frenchman supposedly doing the haunting. The tale that’s come down is, they buried him back in the family plot. Wanted to keep it a secret. No marker. No stone.”

One more wave rolled in lightly and rose and surged over my feet, dragging sand from beneath them and tugging them deeper.

“So that’s why some fools in this town think he still walks these woods with his lantern, the same as he did on the night he was killed,” Frank said. “Waiting for Lydia Wilde to come follow him, so he can light her way down to the water.”

LYDIA

SO THIS, SHE THOUGHT, was what she had been needing without knowing it. This one still, perfect moment when the whole world held in balance.

If she breathed, she feared she'd spoil it, so she held her breath and closed her eyes and tried to make it last, to mark the feeling so it would not be forgotten.

Round her knees, the water of the wide bay nudged her steadily with unseen currents, drawing in the tide, as though it sought to push her gently shoreward, but she held her footing firm against it and remained exactly where she was, her skirts drawn up and held within both hands, the tidy hemlines of her shift and cotton gown suspended just above the water.

The clouds were thin across the searing sky and yet they held a heaviness that signaled storms approaching. She'd been feeling it all morning, both withoutdoors and within, where with her father having gone out in the wagon before breakfast-time, her brothers had seen little need to temper their hostility.

They showed it in small ways at first: a slamming door, a clipped command. But by the time the sun had climbed above the trees and made the air inside the house too hot and thick to breathe, her brothers' sparring dance with one another had become an open argument.

If Mother had been here, she would have ended it. She'd never stood for fighting. She had raised four boys and buried three and, as she'd liked to say, there was a reason why her first name had been Patience. But she'd had a gift for making

peace, and when there'd been a gauntlet dropped between the brothers she had stepped between them, picked it up, and neatly sorted it away as though it were naught but another bit of linen wanting laundering.

Their father had once said that had the English had the foresight to send Mother up to meet the French on the St. Lawrence, she'd have settled things so there'd have never been a war. She'd laughed at that, as had they all.

But that had been before Oswego, and before the laughter in their house had died and she had died along with it, and now no matter how the gauntlets fell and hard words with them, she would not be coming back to keep things tidy anymore.

A chilling wave slapped cold at Lydia's bare leg and caught the hemline of her shift and so she gathered up the linen folds more tightly in her hands, still standing firm against the tide's insistence she return to shore.

They looked to her now, and she knew it.

"You are so like Mother," Benjamin would say—sometimes in praise, sometimes in irritation—and she knew that he and Joseph and their father and her older brothers looked to her to steady them. And so she tried.

But some days, such as this one, it felt too much of a burden to be shouldered, and she feared that she would stumble if she did not find her balance.

"I am trying," she said quietly, though none stood by to hear her, for she knew her mother's grave amid the trees above the cove would have been echoing all morning with the angry voices warring in the house, and with the hard and ringing sounds of Joseph's axe as he released that anger into action, stubbornly retreating, as he did these days, to silence.

There was no one there to give her any answer.

She stood her ground and raised her face, and waited for the storm.

JEAN-PHILIPPE

THERE WAS A WOMAN in the water.

He had seen her for the first time when the wagon's nearside wheels had caught another rut along the road as they came round the headland, and the jolt had been enough to shift him from his frowning contemplation of the trees, and in that moment he had glimpsed the cool blue of what looked to be a bay.

The woman wore a yellow gown, and stood some little distance from the shore. That had seemed strange enough to warrant his attention.

Of the three men in the wagon, it appeared he was the only one who'd noticed her at all.

The heavy-shouldered driver who was now to be their gaoler—or their “host,” by the polite terms of this war—had for some time now been in conversation with the other officer, de Brassart, who seemed able to speak comfortably in English.

Jean-Philippe, who knew no English save for “Lay your weapons on the ground” and “Do not move” and knowing neither phrase would be of use in present circumstances, had found these few hours of their journey nothing but a waste of time.

He'd occupied himself in the beginning with a study of the man who had collected them. The English magistrate who'd been in charge of them at first had introduced the man as “Monsieur Wilde,” a man of reputation in this colony. A man to be respected.

He was older, and the hair beneath his hat showed thickly white, his face more lined than Jean-Philippe's own father's, though his strong frame looked to be more powerful.

Whatever work he did, he used his hands. They had the calluses and strong veins of a man who did not use them just to hold a pen or glass of wine. And there was something in the man's straightforward, level gaze that Jean-Philippe suspected might be honesty.

Which made a striking contrast to de Brassart.

In their time at Fort Niagara he had seen de Brassart many times, but never once in battle. Such a man knew well the ways to keep behind the men in his command so that he never shared their danger, while yet standing so his shadow blotted out their claim to any part of victory. A man who used his charm the way another man might use his sword, and with as deadly an effect.

In his years of military service, Jean-Philippe had learned the workings of a man like that so thoroughly de Brassart did not hold his interest long, and when the day's heat had begun to hang more thickly in the forest his attention had begun to drift among the shaded places on the narrow road between the trees.

Until those trees had parted, and he'd seen the woman in the water.

Now each time the trees grew thin, he looked for her, first idly then with growing curiosity.

Each glimpse, however brief, gave him a chance to add new details to his former observations.

She was slender. She had gathered up her skirts above the waterline. Her hair—what little he could see of it beneath her plain white cap—was dark. She might have been the age, he thought, of any of his sisters; he was too far off to tell.

She stood more still and for a longer time than any woman

he could call to memory, as though she were fixed in place by some force yet invisible, within that clear blue water.

By the fifth time he caught sight of her, he had begun to envy her that stillness. He had never learned the way of it, himself.

“This one,” he still recalled his uncle saying to his father once, “will never settle long enough to be a man of leisure. He was born to be a soldier.” And like that, his course in life had been decided. In the year of his tenth birthday he’d been taken on as a cadet within his uncle’s company, where many of the officers were, like himself, Canadian. “We are not like the officers in Old France,” he’d been warned. “There, men can pay to buy advancement through the ranks. Here, you must earn it. You must prove that you deserve to be promoted, on your merit.”

He had proven it. His rise had been a steady one, helped by the European wars that cast their ripples over here and by the hard campaigns along the changeable frontiers that gave him countless opportunities to show his worth. He’d made full ensign by eighteen and now, at twenty-seven, he’d been two years a lieutenant in command of his own men, and in that time he could not call to mind a single day—not one—in which he’d had no task to focus on, no work to do, no orders needing action.

Until this day.

The English had removed him from his men. They’d had no right to. In the journey down from Fort Niagara to New York his English captors, holding to the terms of the surrender, kept the officers together with their men. But once he’d signed the paper giving his parole of honor at New York, the English all at once had broken faith, forgetting both the laws of war and their own word, and sent his men in one direction and him in another, over all of his objections. Not that any

of his arguments had been of use. The only man within that room, besides his fellow prisoners, who'd understood a word he'd said had been an English captain who did not have the authority to alter what was ordered, but who'd merely passed him to the keeping of a New York magistrate, who in his turn had brought him, with de Brassart, to this wild part of Long Island and this morning had delivered them into the care of Monsieur Wilde.

De Brassart was using his charm to his benefit, but Jean-Philippe felt no call to be charming. He felt like a bundle of pelts being traded from one person on to the next without having a say in the matter or knowing his end destination. Uncertainty, he'd learned to deal with. Life was an uncertain thing. But he had never done well when deprived of all control.

He had kept what he could of it. Worn his full uniform, even the long white wool *justacorps*, though if he'd been on patrol in this heat he'd have shed that fine coat first of all and gone just in his long-sleeved blue waistcoat. He'd shaved and he'd tied back his hair and he'd fitted his hat on as smartly as if he had been on parade, for wherever he ended up next he'd be damned if they'd see him disheveled. Nor would he allow them to break what control he yet had over his own emotions and drive him to anger.

The woman in the water was a welcome point to focus on at first.

But he could sense the subtle changes in the air within the woods and in the chatter of the birds that were the herald of a turning of the weather, and beyond the bay, above the strip of mainland, he saw darker clouds begin to roll and gather in a coming storm.

The woman stood unmoving.

Someone needed to call out to her, to warn her that the water was no safe place to be standing when the weather

turned, but Jean-Philippe from his position knew he could do nothing.

In that moment, as the trees began to close again upon his view, the woman in the yellow gown became a vivid symbol of his myriad frustrations. He was powerless.

De Brassart turned and said, in French, “He says we’re nearly there.” De Brassart’s smile, as always, did not touch his eyes, so Jean-Philippe felt no compulsion to return it.

“Good,” was all he said. “Let’s hope we beat the rain.”
They didn’t.

CHARLEY

I HADN'T EXPECTED THE RAIN. I'd been checking the forecasts for days now and keeping my fingers crossed there would be sun for the groundbreaking, and all the weather reports had assured me there would be, and they had been right. Any chance of a rainfall, they'd promised, was scant—only twenty percent—and if rain came at all it would be late tonight.

But the rain, having not read the weather reports, came exactly when it wanted to: just after five o'clock, when all the cleanup had been done and everybody else had gone and I was getting set to lock up the museum.

I liked to be the last one out. I'd always liked the ritual of locking up. Routines again, I guessed—my mother's influence. But there was something calming in the simple act of passing in an ordered way from room to room and making sure that everything was in its proper place, secure and safe.

Nothing in my life right now was any of those things, so it was good to feel, however briefly, I was in control of something.

I'd devised a route that took me through both conjoined houses in a logical progression, starting in the empty corner room downstairs, just underneath my office, in the colonial side of the house. From there I went through the big square room that had, in the old days, been known as the "keeping room"; passed from that into the front lobby with its broad door and big dog-leg staircase, then into the other square downstairs room we called the parlor, and having now made sure the

front of the house was locked tightly, I crossed through the parlor's back doorway into the colonial kitchen and buttery and up the narrow back stairs to the second floor. Here, in the two little storerooms set under the steeply sloped roof of the kitchen addition below, there was not much to check on or see, but the space opened up again as I stepped through into Benjamin Wilde's chamber and made my way—careful to step to the side of the one springy floorboard I didn't trust—over the landing and into my favorite room, where for a moment I stood and enjoyed the peace, liking the sound of the rain on the roof and the play of the rivulets chasing their way down the window glass.

The records from Benjamin's time had suggested that this was the room where his daughters had slept—he'd had three of them—and that was how we had planned to interpret it, but now I wondered if we couldn't maybe expand that to make space for Lydia Wilde's story, too. This was already going to be the most notably feminine room in the finished museum, and since we had nothing to tell us where Benjamin's sister had actually slept, we could speculate he might have given her room to his daughters. We'd still tell *their* stories, of course, but because they'd all lived quiet lives it might not be a bad thing to add in the tale of their aunt's tragic romance. The only thing people liked more than a ghost story was a good love story. This one was both.

It was just an idea, of course, and the trustees would have to approve it, but still, as I passed through my office and carried on fastening windows and turning off lights in the newer, Victorian side of the house, I was thinking of all the ways we could use Lydia's story—not only for Halloween, as the reporter had said, but for Valentine's Day.

I became so absorbed in exploring the possible angles that, by the time I came downstairs to the staff kitchen where the

main back entrance was—the door I usually went out by—I was unaware of just how hard the rain was coming down until I realized that I couldn't see a thing beyond the windows. The sight of water sluicing at an angle down the windowpanes made me rethink my options.

There were spare umbrellas hanging from the coatrack, so that wouldn't be a problem, but umbrellas offered limited protection when the rain was coming furious and sideways, and since my car was parked out at the far end of the parking lot, closer to the front door of the old part of the house, it made more sense to go out that way and make a dash from there. I'd still get wet, but wet was preferable to soaked.

I locked the back door, switched the kitchen light off, and unhooked a pink umbrella from the rack, before starting over where I had begun—moving through what would be the exhibit space, under my office, and into the ground-floor colonial rooms. This time, though, while crossing the large keeping room, I heard something I hadn't before: a steady, repetitive squeaking of floorboards above me that sounded, in that empty, echoing space, just like footsteps.

I stopped, and the noises stopped, too, and I realized that was probably because they *had* been echoes. Old houses could be good at playing tricks with sound, and this house was older than many I'd been in. I wasn't about to become like Frank's grandmother, jumping at every stray sound and imagining ghosts.

Whatever the cause of the echo, it seemed to be confined to that first corner of the room because as I crossed the rest of it, there were no sounds above me. The shadowed front lobby was quiet, too, thanks to the nondescript carpet that some former Wilde had seen fit to install here between the front door and the stairs—a gray carpet, much weathered, that never looked clean. We'd be tearing it up in the new

renovations, restoring the floor underneath, but for now it was working to soften my footsteps.

And that was a problem. Because when the creaking began again, over my head, I could not put it down to an echo. Especially when I stopped dead in my tracks and the sounds on the floor above didn't break stride, moving onto the staircase, taking the few short steps down to the first narrow landing, and turning...

In that moment my mind spun wildly. There wasn't anything here anybody would want to steal, unless you counted my office computer and the somewhat obstinate coffee machine in the kitchen, and—

Now there were visible boots on the stairs. A man's work boots, attached to legs encased in faded jeans, that in their turn a few steps down were joined by a gray T-shirt and the chest and shoulders of the man who owned it.

One of the workmen, I thought in relief. He was halfway down the stairs now so I saw him full in profile, enough to see that he was not much older than myself, with the tanned skin of a man who worked outdoors and the imprint of a hardhat still compressing his short-clipped dark hair, the wires of earbud headphones trailing down to one front pocket of his jeans.

At the bottom landing of the staircase he made the ninety-degree turn to come down the final three steps and he noticed me then, with an equal surprise. His recovery, though, was more fluid than mine. "Oh, hey," he said, tugging the headphones from his ears and releasing a faint burst of wailing guitar before moving his hand to his pocket to switch off whatever device he'd been playing. "I thought everyone was gone. Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

In spite of the fact the umbrella was still tightly grasped in my hand like a weapon, I chose to pretend that I hadn't been

scared. That I wasn't still nervous. But, as was my habit when facing a male stranger, I kept an eye on my possible exits and cautiously tried to establish if he posed a risk.

He was taller than me, broad and muscular, but not aggressive. He wasn't invading my personal space. He had stopped when he'd noticed me, and hadn't tried to advance.

"That's okay," I said, standing as straight as I could in a businesslike posture. "You're one of the construction guys, I take it?"

"Kind of." He had a slow smile that seemed genuine. Friendly. Extending his hand for a handshake, he said, "I'm Sam Abrams."

I *did* relax then. "The contractor?"

"That's right."

Accepting the handshake I told him, "I'm Charlotte Van Hoek. Everyone calls me Charley."

"What do you like to be called?"

"Charley, actually." I was surprised he would ask me. No one ever had before. It made me take a better look at him.

Up close it was clear that his tan was not really a tan, but his natural skin tone. He had a nice face—dark eyes, straight nose, strong jawline. More handsome than ordinary, but not so handsome you couldn't look straight at it.

He had a nice handshake, too. Brief, firm, and self-assured.

Turning his left hand a little he showed me the bright-orange tape measure held in his square palm. "Just checking the width of a window. I'm done now. You locking up?"

"Yes." Since I'd already locked all the doors it was obvious he had his own key. "Which door did you come in?"

"This one."

The front door, behind me. Meaning all the others were still safely locked. I gave a nod and started to unfasten my umbrella.

“That’s not going to be much help to you out there,” he warned me. “Where’s your car parked?”

“Over by the barn.”

“I’ll drive you over.”

Under normal circumstances I’d have never gotten in a car with someone I’d just met, no matter how nice and harmless they seemed, but I knew Malaika spoke highly of Sam Abrams and since I trusted Malaika, I told him, “Okay.” I was glad that I had, when we opened the door to discover the rain pelting down with a vengeance.

He’d parked his black pickup truck two steps away from the door, where the overhang sheltered the front stoop a bit, which explained why he hadn’t been soaked coming into the house in the first place. And he’d been right: my pink umbrella didn’t help me much at all as I sprinted around to the passenger side. I hadn’t had to climb into a pickup truck since high school, so I wasn’t very graceful as I hoisted myself up onto the seat. To my relief, he didn’t seem to notice.

He was studying the windshield as he put the truck in gear. “What kind of tires do you have on your car?”

Once again, not a question I’d ever been asked before. “All-season radials. Why?”

“Old or new?”

“New last summer.”

“You should be all right, then.” He steered the truck around to slowly roll across the narrow gravel parking lot toward the farther end. “I wouldn’t take the main road, though. It never drains right when there’s this much water, and you don’t want someone hydroplaning into you. I’d go the back way, down the shore road.”

He sounded like Niels, looking out for my safety. *You sound like my brother*, I wanted to tell him. Instead I cleared

my throat of the small lump that had just blocked it and said, “Okay.”

“Have you driven on the shore road?”

“Once or twice.” It wasn’t a straightforward route. It had some twists and turnings, like the footpaths in the forest, and changed names at least once on its way down into Millbank.

I must have looked uncertain when he glanced at me because he said, “Well, that’s the way I’m going. You can follow me.”

He stopped alongside my blue Honda Accord and I thanked him and made the short dash to my driver’s seat, happy to hear my car’s engine behave when I started it. By the time I’d backed out of my spot, Sam had moved his truck into position to take the lead.

I wasn’t nervous of driving in bad weather, but I was happy to have him in front of me as we rounded the two western corners of the large Wilde property, approached the grid of residential streets, and turned instead to take the sloping road that led us back toward the bay. We were within the trees again, and sometimes they closed over us, but every now and then they opened up to let the rain sweep in and made me grateful for the truck’s red taillights.

He drove a little slower than he had to, putting his turn signals on well ahead of the corners we came to, and when we came to the place where the shore road—or whatever it was called here at the edge of town—passed underneath the shelter of the elevated highway that ran right across this north shore of Long Island, he pulled over to the shoulder, rolled his window down, and waved me up beside him to the stop sign.

I braked as I drew level with his truck and put my window down as well.

“Okay now?” Sam called over.

“Yes,” I told him. “Thank you.”

With a brief thumbs-up and nod he rolled his window up again and let me travel on ahead of him.

I didn't have too far to go. But once I left the underpass my full attention focused on the windshield and the road, and so it wasn't till I'd turned off and was halfway down the steep drive to the house and heard the friendly honk behind me as the pickup truck swished past that I discovered he had stayed behind me. Following me, possibly, to make sure I got safely home.

And because that was another thing my brother would have done, I found I had to sit outside a moment in my car, just by myself, until my cheeks were dry enough that I could blame their dampness on the rain.

Only a month ago, just walking into the house had been difficult. I'd almost conquered that now. It helped that my brother had only been here for a year, and that I'd only been down one time for a visit at Christmas, so I didn't have many memories of him in this place, and the house itself hadn't absorbed very much of his character. Nor did it really have much of its own.

Niels had never been fond of old houses. He'd inherited that from our mother, most likely, since she had been born and brought up in the same old stone farmhouse outside Quebec City where her family had lived for a hundred and seventy years. By her reckoning, six generations had weathered the same winter drafts in that house and she'd left it as soon as the chance had presented itself, taking a job at a bank in Montreal, where she had met my father. The first house they'd lived in as newlyweds, at Mom's insistence, had been clean and modern with no stone in sight. We'd always had new houses. Dad was no handyman, so when the gleam had worn off one house and things started needing repair, we'd moved on to the next. I'd enjoyed having new rooms to decorate, but to be

honest I'd secretly loved that old stone farmhouse my French Canadian grandparents had never left, and my visits there had, I felt sure, been the start of my love of museums.

My brother had, by contrast, carried on just as my parents had and never bought a house if it was more than ten years old. Unlike Dad, though, Niels had never learned his limits when it came to wielding tools. He'd watched the home improvement programs on TV, and every home he'd lived in showed the scars of it.

The house he'd chosen here, in Millbank, was a plain two-story house with horizontal siding freshly painted the color of caramel fudge with lighter-yellow trim framing the neat rows of windows, the peak of the roof, and the flight of broad steps leading up to the wraparound porch. The porch, in my view, was its finest feature, unless you were counting its setting, because that was fine, too—it sat in a hollow behind and below the main street leading into the town, with tall trees to each side of it and a sloping backyard that was half-filled with reeds from the edge of the water where the mill stream widened into Messaquamik Bay.

The front yard had been graveled over when he'd bought it, which had suited Niels because he'd hated mowing lawns and it had made a perfect parking place for clients. I'd parked tonight where I always did, under the huge sycamore that sheltered the front porch, my headlights shining into the more lush back garden of his only neighbor, Mrs. Bonetti. Behind me, on the far side of a tall and tidy myrtle hedge that ran the length of the front yard, was nothing but a wide expanse of parking lot belonging to a restaurant that, in all the time I'd been here, had been under renovation, so the lot was always empty.

Sometimes the emptiness spooked me a little, especially since my apartment in Albany had been one of five in a big

old house right in the center of town, so there'd always been someone close by.

But tonight I was glad of the fact there was no one to notice me wiping the tears from my face one last time as I dashed from my car to the porch in the furious rain.

Niels had "improved" the porch railing, which meant that it wobbled a bit as I raced up the steps and along to the side entrance, where he had added a fancy screen door that was fussy to open and took its time closing again, but I came through those obstacles without a mishap and, safely inside, took my coat off and shook it and added it to the collection that hung from the freestanding coatrack.

I turned to find Rachel, my niece, standing two steps in front of me. Though she was barely nineteen and petite, fully half a head shorter than I was, she still stared me down as though I was attempting to sneak in past curfew. She lifted one hand. She was holding my cell phone.

"You left this again."

"I know." I'd been at the museum before I had missed it, and by then there'd seemed no point in driving back here just to fetch it when I could as easily use the museum's phone. "Sorry, I thought—"

"I was trying to call you for over an hour before I found *this* on your dresser," she cut me off. "Gianni said there'd been an accident because of all the rain, and I heard sirens, and—"

I interrupted in my turn, but gently, because now I understood the reason for her irritation. She'd been worried. I was touched by that, and made a mental note to be more careful, more considerate. "I'm really sorry." I'd have given her a hug, but Rachel wasn't much for hugging.

She had always been an independent kid. She'd been a tiny thing, just seven, when I'd first moved down from Toronto to live with Niels in Saratoga Springs. He'd fixed up an apartment

for me over the garage, and I had driven the half hour down and back to university at Albany, and in the evenings and on weekends I had paid him back, in lieu of proper rent, by babysitting Rachel.

I would never have won prizes for my babysitting. Usually we'd spent the time together sitting on my thrift-store sofa watching movies on TV. She'd liked the scary ones the best, back then. She'd take whatever blanket I had thrown across the sofa back and wrap herself up tightly in it so that she could hide her eyes if things got too intense, and she would do the same thing if we watched sad movies, so that she could cry without my seeing her.

She hadn't let me see her cry at all since Niels's death, not in the whole time I had been here, but I sometimes caught a brief glimpse of that kid beneath the blanket, trying hard to keep it all together.

Reaching out, I took my cell phone from her hand. "I'll try not to do it again."

"Okay."

This little tiled area between the side door and the kitchen functioned as a mudroom and I left my wet shoes here as well, before I followed Rachel the few steps into the kitchen. Something smelled so good that, even if she hadn't mentioned Gianni, I'd have known that he'd been over.

"Ziti?" I guessed.

"No, lasagna."

Our neighbors were kind. At least once a week, Mrs. Bonetti made meals for us and sent them over with Gianni, her son, who at twenty-two still lived at home with her, working by day in the town's main street deli. If I'd been my niece, I'd have fallen for Gianni the minute I'd met him—he was stunningly good-looking with nice manners and a cocky sense of humor—but it all seemed lost on Rachel.

“Have you eaten yet?” I asked.

“Not yet. I wasn’t really hungry.”

But she’d set our places at the table with the fancy cutlery and wineglasses and place mats, and I found that touching, too, because I knew her well enough to know that meant she wanted company. I switched my phone off, washed up, and took over, dishing the lasagna out and opening the bottle of red wine she’d chosen from her father’s stash down in the basement.

We hardly ever sat down at the table for a meal. It was partly a practical thing. There were only the two of us, and we were usually eating at different times, so it was simpler to pull up a stool at the breakfast bar and toss things right into the dishwasher afterward. And partly it came from us both being far too aware of the chair at the head of the table, and why it was empty, and who should be sitting there.

Missing my brother, for me, was a physical pain. Three months on, it still felt as though some vital organ inside me had been ripped away and the wound stitched up badly, the edges too ragged to heal; but I hid that wound under my everyday clothing, and because I looked, on the outside, the same as I always had, nobody saw I was no longer whole. If my mother were here, she’d have probably noticed, but we hadn’t been in the same room since I’d gone up to Canada for the memorial service in May. And my parents, like Rachel, were dealing with wounds of their own. I’d be no help at all to them if I gave way to my grief.

So I angled my chair now to face it a little away from the head of the table, and smiled at Rachel. “So, how was your day?”

“Okay.”

“You applied for that course?”

She corrected me. “Seminar. And yeah, I emailed the instructor, so I’ll have to wait and see if she has room for me.”

“And what was it about, again?”

“Transgressive women in eighteenth-century British fiction.”

Which put an end to that, because there wasn't much that I could bring to conversations about English literature. My own degree had been in history, and while I loved reading I read differently than Rachel did. She reveled in identifying themes and analyzing structures, and wrote papers that examined Dostoyevsky's polyphonic style, on which I couldn't offer an opinion.

We ate our lasagna in silence a moment, but I could still tell that she didn't want silence. I'd always had an easy time interpreting her body language because she'd inherited so much of it from Niels. She didn't look like him. She took more after her mother, who'd been Niels's girlfriend and lived with him all through the years he was going to law school, before deciding she was not cut out for motherhood. She'd left them shortly after Rachel started kindergarten, and apart from Christmas cards from the West Coast the first few years, she'd dropped out of their lives completely.

I would have had trouble remembering what she looked like if it hadn't been for the fact she'd gifted Rachel with the same rich auburn hair, pale skin, and petite frame.

But the shrug and partial eye roll Rachel gave me, when I asked what else she'd done today, was pure Van Hoek. And I guessed who had earned the eye roll even before she said, “Tyler called.”

She'd never had a high opinion of my boyfriend. It was mutual. Whenever they were in the same room, I felt like an arbitrator.

“Really? When was that?”

“At lunchtime. He ‘forgot’ today was your big thing at the museum.”

“Yes, well, he’s been busy with work.”

“So have you,” she said. “Don’t get me started. He said he’d be out tonight, he had some dinner or something to go to. He said you could Skype him tomorrow at two.”

I covertly studied her face while I sipped my wine. Her mouth had turned down at the edges, which meant that she was disappointed. And in more than just my choice of men. It was the same look she wore anytime an outing she’d looked forward to was canceled, or a treat she had been promised was forgotten in the rush of daily life. I cast my mind back over what we’d talked about this week, and what we might have planned.

And I remembered. I said, “It’ll have to be later than two. We’re still doing that whole Sunday brunch thing tomorrow, right? And checking out the new bookstore?”

The light in her eyes was my answer. And my reward.

I had wondered, when I’d first agreed to do this, whether I’d be any help at all to Rachel. She was practically an adult, even if she’d have to wait another two years, until she turned twenty-one, before she could inherit both this house and Niels’s money in her own right. He’d set things up like that when she’d been five, and hadn’t seen the need to change his will since then, because along with all the rest of us he’d never thought he’d die at forty-two. He’d been ridiculously healthy. When his heart had stopped, he had been in the parking lot outside his gym, just coming from a workout. It was dark. He’d fallen in between the cars. No one had seen him.

Rachel had called me a few hours later in tears, and the hours after that had been frankly a blur, but I’d been here by sunrise. I’d fielded the calls from the funeral home and from my mother in Canada, sorting things through, with my father still lying up there in his hospital bed, getting over his surgery, not yet aware.

I remembered the lawyer explaining that Niels had left everything, as we'd expected, to Rachel, but with the whole estate held in trust until her twenty-first birthday. My parents were named the trustees, which would work for the finances, but my mother had spoken aloud what we both had already known: "There is no way that your father will go back to Millbank. Even if his health allowed it, which it won't for some time yet, he just won't go. So there's the problem of the house, because I hate the thought of Rachel living there all by herself. And when she's off at university, someone needs to look after things."

I'd known what she was asking me to do, before she'd even put the words in proper order.

"Charlotte, I know it's an imposition, but do you think you could...?"

"Yes, of course," I'd said. "Of course I will."

There'd been no need to think things through. No hesitation.

And when Rachel smiled like she was smiling now, I knew I'd made the right decision.

With a nod she let me know we were still on for Sunday brunch and shopping. "I got us a reservation for eleven thirty."

"Perfect. Let's just hope this rain lets up by then. It's no fun driving in it."

"Did you see the accident?" she asked me. "Was it really bad?"

I shook my head. "We didn't come down the main road."

"We?"

"Sam Abrams, the contractor, told me the shore road was safer, so I followed him."

"Oh, is that the guy Malaika knows? The one who does the work on all her houses?" Rachel asked. "The Mohawk guy?"

"No, his hair's just cut normally."

“I didn’t mean a Mohawk haircut, silly. Mohawk as in Native American. He’s like, about your age, a little older maybe, really built, short hair? He drives a big, black truck? I’ve never talked to him or anything,” she said, “but he seems nice.”

“He is. He’s very nice.”

“Nicer than—”

“Hey, go easy on the wine,” I interrupted as she reached to pour a second glass. “You’re underage. If Mrs. Bonetti comes over and finds you drunk, I’ll get in trouble.”

“Mrs. Bonetti won’t care if I’m drinking wine. Anyhow, New York law says I can drink at home.”

I’d tried that argument myself at her age, but I’d quickly learned that, when you argue with your brother and your brother is a lawyer, you get slammed by all the subclauses. The sad part was, I still remembered most of them. “Well, *technically*, it says that you can drink at home if there’s a parent with you, or a legal guardian. And since I’m neither one of those—” And then I stopped, because I realized what I’d said.

Rachel glanced past my shoulder to the empty chair behind me.

Mentally I kicked myself. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” she said. “I’m fine. You’re right, I shouldn’t have more wine. I’ve still got lots of reading to get finished before classes start.” She set the bottle down and forced the little smile that hadn’t changed since she was seven, and was just as unconvincing now. And then she rose and cleared her dishes off the table and retreated upstairs to her room.

Left alone, I reached over and picked up the bottle and filled my own wineglass. I filled it as near to the brim as I could. And I looked, in my turn, to the chair at the head of the table.

I said, “I am trying.”

But if Niels was anywhere where he could hear me, he didn’t reply.