

bellewether

**SUSANNA
KEARSLEY**

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 afterward, 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 higher-society types 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 *The 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 to 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."