

The  
LAST LIST  
of MISS  
JUDITH  
KRATT

A n d r e a B o b o t i s

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*For my mom, spinner of stories*



## **Murder Stuns Distinguished Family**

Quincy Kratt, age 14, sustained a fatal gunshot wound to his person in the early hours of Friday, December 20. Young Mr. Kratt was a scion of the cotton industry in Bound, South Carolina. His father, the influential businessman Brayburn Kratt, is one of our local captains of that industry. The principal suspect in the shooting is a negro called Charlie Watson, who is employed by the Kratt Mercantile Company and whose whereabouts are as yet unknown.

*York Herald,*  
Saturday, December 21, 1929



# ONE

*May 1989*

Whenever I hear a train's horn in the distance, that bruised sound, I think of Quincy. He spent half his days down at the depot, true enough, but it's the nature of the sound that reminds me of him, how it's at once familiar and remote. How upon hearing it, I feel obliged to lift my gaze and weigh the horizon, but how it leaves me with less than I had before, eyes reaching toward something I'll never see. After all, where that train's headed, stretching across some unseen field, is anybody's guess. Same could always be said of my brother.

That afternoon, the train's horn made me wonder: What would remind my brother of me? I thought it might be a good question for Olva, who was sitting with me in the sunroom, both of us warming our old bones, I on the cushioned seat and she the uncushioned (her preference), our feet sharing the wicker ottoman so that, now and again, my foot accidentally nudged hers. The sound of that faraway train settled in my ear like a teaspoon of water, but Olva, eyes closed, was humming a cheery little something, and every few bars, a smile surfaced on her face.

When I asked the question "What would remind Quincy of me?" her smile fled the room.

Perhaps it was unfair of me to saddle her with the question, especially since she was ignorant of its context. The train's horn was another reminder, an urging. I opened my mouth to tell her I was planning to write an inventory of the Kratt family's heirlooms but closed it again. I suppose I wanted to savor my idea, unspoiled by others' opinions, for a bit longer.

And she had not yet answered my question about Quincy. I had expected her to say something like "Miss Judith, do you mean back when your brother was alive? Or are we referring to his present-day ghost?" Because Olva is always willing to humor me. She didn't grow up with brothers and sisters and so has a limited understanding of the vagaries of siblinghood, the way devotion is splintered with contempt, but she also has the knack for answering all manner of questions, even the type that might require her to put words in a dead brother's mouth.

I saw her face tighten around an idea, something twisting its way from her mind like a screw digging its patient way through a plank, when, all at once, her face released, and she resumed her humming.

So I asked the question again.

"What do you think anyone—not just Quincy, it doesn't matter who—would associate with me?"

Again, her humming faltered, and just at the verge of my being able to identify the tune.

"Maybe it's the scent of rose water," I suggested—just for something to say, not meaning it. "The kind Mama taught me to make from scratch. The one I let you borrow when we were teenagers."

Olva gripped and released the arms of her chair. Her eyes

took a slow tour of the sunroom before finding mine. “Why, it’s this house, Miss Judith,” she said. “When people think of you, they think of this house.”

A little *oh* rose from my mouth, a bright note of satisfaction.

Olva never lets me down. She was right, of course. I am inseparable from this house, its six thousand square feet sitting on four acres, not to mention the adjoining five hundred acres of our family’s land that spills out to the west and north as far as the eye can see. When people think of me, surely this great structure assembles before their eyes. I would not be put off if my name called to mind phrases such as *triangular pediment*, *columned portico*, and *Palladian window*. Then again, most people in these parts could hardly be expected to possess even passing knowledge of architectural vernacular. If the words *Colonial Revival* fell out of your mouth in their presence, they’d go looking for a big white tent under which they’d hope to find everlasting salvation, courtesy of fire and brimstone.

“Olva,” I said, looking over at her. She had closed her eyes, as if trying to gain ground on a nap. “Olva,” I said, louder this time. “Invitations to this house were hard to come by, weren’t they? Back then, I mean.”

Her eyes opened softly. “Yes,” she said before closing them again.

Olva was right. Invitations were in limited supply. That is, unless you had some standing in town, or unless my father, Daddy Kratt, requested your presence. His requests, hard and brusque, arrived at the arches of people’s ears like orders. Any invitation to our home was pretense for an interview, in which Daddy Kratt would appraise how much you might help

him build his empire in Bound. Lurking outside the study, I sometimes eavesdropped on these interviews, feeling relief, a gentle uncoiling in my chest, that I was not on the receiving end of Daddy Kratt's abrupt questions. You never knew when he might choose to speak. Words dropped from his economical mouth with no warning, and if people made the mistake of attempting small talk, they were always taken aback by his reply, even if they anticipated it.

My father might have been frugal with his words, but he spared no expense for this grand house. Built from sand-yellow brick, it was like the sun itself, or so Daddy Kratt made it feel, with the whole of Bound orbiting around it. He modeled much of the house on the famous Biltmore mansion, right down to the copper showerhead in the upper bathroom. So you see, when I am long gone from this earth, I will not be dissatisfied if my name invokes little more than the plumbing. Yet I suspect I'll be remembered for more, starting with the other handsome items that populate the Kratt family home: the mahogany secretary in the hallway, the peach R. S. Prussia vase on the mantel, my grandmother's pie safe in the kitchen. I could go on and on.

The furniture was practically begging me to share my news.

"Olva," I said, and I didn't have to look over, because I knew she was listening. "I am planning to write an inventory of the items in this house."

I waited for Olva's reply, which didn't come. The silence held a faint whistling.

"Olva, I am planning to write an inventory of the items in this house."

“A fine idea.”

How right she was! It makes good sense to put down a record of the things in this house, seeing as Olva and I are its last human fixtures. Such evaluations require a long perspective. Having been on this earth seventy-five years, I stand that test.

I turned to her. “I can anticipate the question in your head.”

“Can you.”

“You are wondering for whose eyes this inventory is intended. Seeing as I have no heirs. A reasonable question.”

“I imagine so.”

I sat up taller as I came around to my point. “By virtue of my inheritance, I am”—I searched for the word—“I am the *keeper*. Not just of the Kratt family’s valuables but of its stories, too. I tell you, Olva, I woke up seized by the idea. Given its intensity, I was half-surprised not to find a hole burned through my pillow.”

“May I ask what the urgency is?”

It was not a question I had anticipated. I thought about the piece of mail I had hidden from her earlier in the week.

“The timing is right. That is all.”

As I set out to write this inventory, I am amused by the thoughts that take residence in my mind. The distant train, for instance, with its whale call, fills the house so resonantly in certain moments that it feels nearly like a thing, and I would not be surprised to glance up and discover the sound sitting in the corner, having materialized into a noble mahogany armoire.

Years ago, the train’s arrival was the highlight of the day. When it signaled its approach, boys out hunting would hotfoot it back from the fields. Shops would shutter, and mothers could

be seen ferrying picnic baskets to the depot with their young ones in tow. The turnout was a more accurate measure of our town's population than any census could pinpoint. Men, women, and children would gather to watch on the depot platform or the wide knoll facing it, and most likely, not one had any real reason to be there other than to marvel at how the train, one moment hammering toward town, could in the next be easing into the station, as if the weight of their scrutiny alone had subdued it.

The depot was one of the places where my brother, Quincy, collected his information. He didn't work for the train company or any of our local businesses, but I guess you could say he was a merchant in his own right, selling the secrets he learned about people. In return, he earned a little money and the racking dread of everyone around him. Never seemed enough, though. I suspect he would have traded it all for a single slap on the back from our father. The railroad inundated us with goods, but for Quincy, recognition was always in short supply. It was a shame. He never did have a head for letters or numbers, but he sure could get a read on people.

I have occasion to think of Quincy frequently these days, as many of the things in this house call out his name. And it is good to remember him, even if it causes discomfort, because don't memories have duties just like everything else in this world?

Here was another question for Olva.

I turned to her and asked, "Aren't memories a little like furniture of the mind?" We were still sitting in the sunroom, watching the late-day sun unburden its remaining light on us.

"Yes, Miss Judith," she replied and left it at that. She was

tilting her head back and forth in the way she does, considering a procession of ants ticking along the footboard.

Olva and I share the belief that the world reveals itself to you if you take the time to sit and wait for it. Waiting, I've found, is not most people's area of expertise. Olva is a blessed aberration. Just this morning, she studied a praying mantis for upwards of an hour, admiring the feline strokes of its arms and that long body curved like an ancient sword. As I watched her, it dawned on me that the measured way she tilts her head, combined with the giant spectacles that burden the bridge of her nose, sometimes give her the appearance of a praying mantis. I told her as much, and she seemed to take it as a compliment.

"What I mean," I continued, "is that our memories orient us just like the furniture in this sunroom."

Olva seemed to think about this. "And the view sure is different depending on where you're sitting."

Now, that was not at all what I'd meant. She'd taken my comment a tad literally. A rare slip for Olva, who knows my mind better than anyone. We grew up together, after all. Then it occurred to me that we have never moved any of the furniture in this house. Each piece sits where it did when we were children. It suits me, I suppose, when everything is kept in its proper place.

While I grew attached to the furniture, my brother had his own special relationship with things. Quincy's commodities, you understand, weren't the kind you could touch or lift. They were vaporous, coming to him through hushed voices over fences or eavesdropped conversations, and although they might have remained as innocent as air if left undisturbed, he

was a great conjuror, capable of transforming whispers into millstones. Because of this, people pussyfooted around him as if they might bring down the sun if they sneezed.

No one was immune to Quincy's snooping, not even our own mother. We were teenagers when he discovered Mama helping Olva and the other colored folk pick cotton. Quincy promptly alerted the field foreman, a hulking, glandular fellow whose skin, the color of ham, wept sweat even when he wasn't out in the sun.

"Olva," I said, glancing over at her. She had moved on from studying her ants and was sitting there with a gentle gaze. "What was that field foreman's name? The one Quincy sent to reprimand Mama."

Olva's body jerked as if the chair had abruptly withdrawn its comfort. "I can't say I recall," she said.

In fact, I knew his name (Amos something-or-other), but the piece of information was less important to me. I had gotten caught up in the memory. "Quincy was hoping Mama would be punished," I went on. "But when that foreman realized who Mama was and that Daddy Kratt might become embroiled in the conflict, he merely congratulated Mama on how clean her cotton was, which was a polite way of saying she hadn't picked very much for a full day's work. Poor Quincy. He was always trying to claim Daddy Kratt's attention."

I turned to Olva, in search of a shared laugh, but she was staring out the window.

"I'm planning on doing some spring cleaning," she said.

"It's springtime, so your timing is germane."

Her gaze floated back into the room. "Sometimes, all the

things must be taken from their boxes before they can be put back again.”

“Don’t you go moving around things so I can’t locate them,” I replied. “I’ve got my inventory to think of.”

My eyes sifted through the contents of the sunroom—the silver-plated butler’s tray, the Amsterdam School copper mantel clock, the Hamilton drafting table. My younger sister, Rosemarie, is still living, but no one should be fooled into thinking she might be another source of information about our family’s heirlooms. She hasn’t set foot in Bound for ages. A month ago, we received another blank postcard from her, postmarked from Huntsville, Alabama. Over the years, Rosemarie’s blank postcards have turned up, all addressed to Olva and hailing from different cities along the East Coast: Lowell, Baltimore, Englewood, and more. “All mill towns,” Olva once remarked. “Or once were.” I asked Olva if she didn’t think the one from Alabama was insultingly close, but she merely gave a half smile and resumed her dusting.

Leaving those postcards blank was a melodramatic gesture, but that is Rosemarie for you. One spring during our grammar school years, she adopted a family of slugs that had taken residence on the retaining wall of our front porch. I found her early on a Sunday morning lying belly down, her head telescoped out over the edge of the porch, watching the slugs squander their riches in long glistening trails. So lost was she in this diversion, it escaped her notice that her new companions had also feasted on Mama’s petunias.

Rosemarie was wearing a white cotton frock, one of the pieces of Easter clothing that Aunt Dee had sewn for us. I had

watched her cavort around in it with Easter service still a week away. The frock had already scaled the tallest water oak in our front yard and scuttled beneath the canopy of our crepe myrtle, flush with buds.

“You’ll ruin your frock,” I said, my arms folded, standing behind her outstretched body. I studied the hem of her dress, fringed with dirt.

“No,” Rosemarie replied, watching her slugs. Her head lifted only once to follow a group of colored boys making their way along the road toward the fields. This was another indication it was Easter time, the beginning of cotton season.

“You’ll ruin your frock,” I repeated, louder this time, tightening my arms across my chest, as if making my body more compact would distill my message.

Her head swiveled toward me. As she propped herself on her forearm, I saw how the brick floor of the porch had pricked up the white material on her chest.

Her mouth snapped open. “I will not ruin my frock,” she said. “This is your frock.”

Then her face almost broke in two with that smile of hers. We dissolved into giggles right there on the spot, and I squatted down next to her, mussing my own gingham skirt in the process. I sometimes lost track of myself when spending time with Rosemarie.

But I always managed to find myself again.

The morning after Easter service, when our preacher had made note of my sullied dress, his lips puckered in disappointment, I took matters into my own hands. I salted her slugs and, for good measure, also daubed them with a slurry of molasses

and arsenic, which we used on the boll weevils that sometimes plagued our cotton. A whole year slid by before Rosemarie forgave me. And how could I have known that her gray-marled cat, a grizzled thing and already far too old at the time, had a taste for molasses?

“Olva,” I said, breaking from my contemplation. “I would enjoy some coffee at the moment.”

“Would you like to give me a hand?”

I didn’t answer quickly enough, because she lifted herself from the chair and disappeared into the kitchen.

I heard the honk of a drawer opening in the kitchen. I braced. Olva moved back through the doorway and stood in front of me, clutching a squall of junk mail—coupons and flyers and whatnot. A single postcard sat on top.

“Ah, Olva! I knew I’d put this week’s mail someplace but couldn’t recall where. I haven’t sorted through it yet. Thank you for finding it.”

Olva stepped forward and handed me the stack of mail.

I examined the postcard. Perhaps I thought slipping it in the drawer would forestall its news. Or prevent Olva from seeing the connection between it and my new need for an inventory. More than anyone, she should understand the necessity of chronicling our family’s history. It is prudent, after all, to keep a record of how one sees things, especially when others perceive matters so differently. On the desk is a letter opener made of cut glass that we played with as children; we marveled at how, held to the window, it produced a different color for each of us. And isn’t that how memory works, too?

I studied the postcard again. Addressed to me, it pictured a

majestic building. The architecture looked Greek Revival. The caption across the top of the postcard read *Montgomery, Alabama* and across the bottom *The First Capital of the Confederate United States, 1861*. The whole bottom line had been crossed through with a red ballpoint, as though history could be changed with the stroke of a pen.

“Olva—”

But she was gone. I flipped over the postcard, which was unsigned. But I had known from the moment I saw it. It was unmistakably my sister’s hand, a muddle of agitated letters. The message had been scrawled off, with the last word sitting a bit apart from the others, as if she had been in the process of getting up from her chair as she wrote it.

*Sister, I am coming home.*

I stood with the postcard held aloft in my hand, as if aiming it at something. Or someone. It is important to know that Rosemarie has never been bound by any sense of responsibility to our family. You see, Quincy gathered secrets, but Rosemarie’s impulse was to scatter them to the wind. And my sister believes I killed Quincy.

Well now. It was time to get my inventory underway.

*Windsor chair*

*Wooden spinning wheel*

*Mahogany secretary*

*R. S. Prussia vase*

*Pie safe—Grandmother DeLour's*

*Butler's tray (silver plated)*

*Amsterdam School copper*

*mantel clock*

*Hamilton drafting table*

*Letter opener (cut glass)*



## TWO

Our family's misfortune began on a day meant for celebration. The date was Saturday, June 1, 1929, and Bound was slated to receive an electric current, an achievement for which Daddy Kratt considered himself responsible. The gentlemen at the Southern Public Utilities Company tasked with handling his aggressive and persistent requests were no doubt relieved that their business dealings with him were coming to an end.

To herald the electric current, Daddy Kratt had arranged for an open house at our store, which was the grandest structure in Bound in those days—ever since then, too. My father had given Bound its first department store. The store's stature alone was impressive: twenty-six thousand square feet, four grand floors, built in 1913 from brick Daddy Kratt had commissioned at a cut rate from a local mason. There was Wanamaker's in Philadelphia, Jordan Marsh in Boston, and Macy's in New York. And alongside those, the Kratt Mercantile Company in Bound, South Carolina.

As luck would have it, selling unrelated goods under one roof was Daddy Kratt's particular talent, honed from his days dealing bric-a-brac when Bound was just a trading post. He could sell a man a shoehorn and a chicken as though they were

a matching set. Running a department store also required an understanding of how to manage large numbers of people in one space. There again, Daddy Kratt's early experiences—this time with livestock—came in handy.

The Kratt Mercantile Company spanned two generations and was the lifeblood of Bound for nearly twenty years, selling provisions for families (furniture, groceries, clothing, and shoes) and local businesses (farm implements, cottonseed, buggies, mules, and cattle). At its height, our store housed the town's only bank, the Kratt Bramlett Bank of Bound, and its lone car dealership (Chevrolets at first, then Fords). Not to mention that my father's Cadillac had served as the local ambulance because it was the only car in town for many years.

The morning of the open house, I walked to the store, the day full of promise. The sky, honey-colored, was lifting the sun into view, and I paused to consider the light as it stretched in every direction, the red-breasted nuthatches dipping in and out of sight as they gleaned insects from the smooth bark of white pines. Despite a fine sun-soaked day, I would be obliged to remain inside the store. I didn't mind. It was the first time my father had allowed me to manage the store's inventory—I was just fifteen years old. That morning, I would check the new merchandise on the floor against our inventory ledger. Afterward, when customers arrived for the open house, I would take them on tours, every hour on the hour, which would culminate that evening in the first display of the electric current.

When I arrived at the store, Olva was helping our cook, Ima, set brass trays of strawberry shortcakes on an entrance table. Ima was in her forties, around Mama's age, although she looked

a good deal older than my mother. Ima had four children, if I recalled correctly, or perhaps five, and they lived somewhere on the expansive acreage of our family's land that abutted our house. As Ima surveyed the shortcakes, her face shone with satisfaction, even a cautious kind of pride. She had been required to show up when darkness still hung over the store to bake over a hundred strawberry shortcakes in the workers' kitchen. I knew her shortcakes personally, each one a precise union of sweet berries and snowslides of whipped cream, all heaped on the bottom half of a buttermilk biscuit, the biscuit's lid a golden crown. We stood admiring Ima's creations.

But then the store's double doors flew open. It was Daddy Kratt. He stood backlit for a moment, as if his dark figure had burned a hole straight through the weak morning light, until the doors smacked shut behind him and he strode forward. Luckily, Ima had set down the final tray of shortcakes—there were ten in all—or surely she would have dropped it. My father said nothing as he advanced on us, although he paused for a beat, long enough for one of his horned eyebrows to twitch when he saw Olva.

He stopped in front of the shortcakes. They sat quietly in their rows. With a steady and quick hand, Daddy Kratt sent three trays, one by one, sailing down. The trays flipped as they landed, the metal clattering and the shortcakes detonating as they hit the floor. Ima let out a cry, and Daddy Kratt merely looked down at his work boots, which were covered in a massacre of berries. His face held no note of emotion as he walked on, flattening a shortcake under his boot as he passed.

It was like that with Daddy Kratt. Even when you got

everything right, you never knew which of his reactions might decide to open the door and greet you.

Ima's expression was assembling and disassembling itself, and before her face could settle on any one feeling, she dropped to her knees and began scooping the mess with her hands onto one of the trays. Olva reached down and touched Ima on the arm, but Ima jerked away. Olva retracted her hand and studied the wrecked shortcakes with a blank stare, as if her thoughts had dropped there, too. I knew what she was thinking. Ima's rejection of Olva was not surprising to either of us, but she seemed no less hurt by it. Ima—not only Ima, our maids, too—regarded Olva with some aloofness, I'm afraid. Olva once told me they kept their distance because of her closeness with our family. "Maybe they're envious," I had said, and Olva had responded with a tired smile.

I looked again at Ima kneeling, Olva standing next to her, and the shortcakes in ruins on the floor. With a sense of determination, I turned around and steered myself toward the middle of the store. Retrieving the daily ledger, I set to work on the store's inventory, knowing I was capable of completing my duties. I was still worried my father would show up and punish me for some small mistake—or some accomplishment—but I didn't see him all morning. Going about my tasks, I accounted for a shipment of finely made Junghans mantel clocks we had received last week. I moved from floor to floor, making notations in the ledger, and then I checked the numbers on the new high-arm Singer sewing machines. These were a sight to behold: each measuring 17 by 8 by 13 inches, made of black cast iron with swirls of gold and red on their

bodies and large hand-crank wheels on the ends. With their needled noses pointing down, the machines resembled a row of people bending over, doing some kind of work. I thought of Ima hunched over, cleaning up the floor where I had left her and Olva. I considered whether I should have stayed to help.

But the noise of customers interrupted my thoughts. It was time for the tours. I smoothed my dress and moved toward the entrance. Seven trays of shortcakes sat on the table, the floor below them spotless, no evidence of the earlier scene. No evidence of Olva or Ima either.

All that morning, the tours ran easily. Daddy Kratt had insisted Quincy join me in leading the tours, but Rosemarie—who was thirteen years old, just a year younger than Quincy and not a child any longer—had been permitted to forgo the task altogether. Rosemarie had been let off the hook, as always, but perhaps it was for the best. Quincy and I were working well as a team, and customers seemed lighthearted and willing to listen to my details about the history of the store and its merchandise.

But then Byrd Parker showed up, and the atmosphere sobered.

Byrd Parker had the long face and hushed manner of a funeral home director, and he possessed such a profound capacity for stillness that I never once saw him draw or release a breath. Byrd was the owner of the only cotton gin in town our father had not managed to acquire, though he had tried several times. Looking back, Byrd was not responsible for our family's troubles, but we should have seen it coming when we saw what happened to him.

Dreadful circumstances had recently befallen Byrd, and wherever he went, a gloom followed. Three Sundays earlier,

Byrd's wife had left their church service, complaining of a headache. Rather than go home, she had crept out to the unnamed lake, into which she had swum two pew lengths and drowned herself. No one offered any reason for her suicide, and Byrd, already the melancholy sort, seemed to regard the tragedy as another in a long line of scourges that defined his life. In this way, Byrd was Daddy Kratt's most stubborn business rival; his despondency made him impervious to our father's threats. According to Byrd, something worse was always around the corner.

There he stood among the other customers, his face drained of expression and sorrow lifting off him like an odor, medicinal in quality, a bracing mixture of camphor and pickling lime. People edged away from him, as if the smell—and his suffering—might leach into their clothing. But Quincy leaned in. He leaned in with the look of someone who wanted to learn.

"Sir!" Quincy crossed over to where Byrd was standing. "Would you like to see something very special?"

Byrd's lips parted queasily. He glanced around at the rest of the tour group as if someone might answer for him.

I knew what special thing Quincy meant.

"Quincy, I hardly think—"

"Now, Sister, here's a man who deserves to see something special."

A few murmurs arose from the crowd—Quincy was bringing them around—but I knew that my brother's interest in Byrd was not rooted in sympathy.

"Let's take this man to see the Tiffany lamp!"

There was no stopping my brother. This, I knew. He

launched up the grand mahogany stairs, leading the group toward a roped-off section on the wide landing between the two main staircases of the store. I followed. I knew we weren't supposed to take people to the lamp yet, but all I could do was keep an eye out for Daddy Kratt.

Quincy had thrown his arm around Byrd. My brother wore a broad-shouldered dress suit, or rather it was wearing him, because he had bought a larger size than needed to mask his featherweight body. It was no use: the acute angles of his body jutted like icebergs through a sea of material when he moved. The fabric was the same tan color as the freckles crowding his nose, and he had custom-ordered the suit to match one of Daddy Kratt's. When our tailor, Mr. Redmond, had finished the suit, he was surprised to find he would be earning no money on it; my brother had laughed when he told me how he had paid Mr. Redmond with a promise. The promise was that Quincy would not divulge to Mrs. Redmond her husband's weakness for gambling.

Quincy had information like that tucked away about everyone in Bound. He knew, for instance, that Clay Babbitt juggled four mistresses and that Randall Clark, the car mechanic, took long walks to avoid his own home. He knew that Prudence Dean drank more corn liquor than all the men in Bound combined; that William Greeley, our butcher, had a taste for prurient literature; and that Priscilla Brown, age seventy-five, had poisoned her own dog, a terrier mix.

Quincy was not careless with these secrets, nor did they possess him in any lurid way. He was dispassionate, and apart from the rare times he used this backdoor information to his

own advantage, he disclosed nothing unless Daddy Kratt made a request. But when this happened, Quincy acted swiftly and without mercy. No sooner had Priscilla Brown back-talked Daddy Kratt at a county council meeting than she found the ugly truth about her dog spread all over town. She lived by herself, and afterward, no one would visit her, not even her own grandchildren. She died quite alone. My brother said I had a sensible enough head than to go repeating the secrets he shared with me. I listened quietly and carefully to everything. He seemed to enjoy simply having someone to talk with.

Climbing the staircase with Byrd, my brother looked ridiculous to me, all dressed up in his suit as if conducting some crucial piece of business. But then again, Quincy was always in the thick of some kind of operation, making a dozen transactions a minute in his mind about how Daddy Kratt might ruin a person's life. The tours meant something different to me: they were meant to honor our family and all the things we had brought to this town. I had opted to wear a cotton dress in a subdued floral pattern so that I wouldn't detract from the merchandise in the store.

Quincy was awfully good at making people feel comfortable or at least distracted—a gift of manipulation rather than compassion—and he got Byrd talking. Heads tilted in confidence, the two became absorbed in conversation. No one seemed to notice except me, because in embracing Byrd, Quincy had put everyone else at ease, and their minds were free to wander away from his despair and back to their own. By the time we reached the landing, the group was fizzing with everyday complaints.

I was not surprised that my brother had transfixed Byrd. To Quincy, it came easily. When he studied a group of people, he saw a more complex design than the rest of us. If he looked long enough, gestures passed unobserved by the average person—the ghostly caress of a wrist, an imperceptible nod, or a breath held in a heartbeat longer than usual—drifted into his view and took on startling shapes, like clouds twisting and untwisting in the sky. Quincy was a reader of the air, a diviner of the ordinary.

Byrd was talking in Quincy's ear, but for a moment, my brother's attention fell away from their conversation. Dovey Aiken had joined our tour. Dovey was the daughter of our town's pharmacist, and she was beautiful in a classic, wholesome way, though her large eyes were set a little wider on her face than was perhaps necessary. It gave her a look of persistent wonderment. She was always fussing her hands with something—tugging at the hem of her sleeve or pressing her palm lightly against her hair. I am a person who can recognize beauty but is rarely sent into a swoon by it. Dovey, though, seemed a rare sort of loveliness, the kind unaffected by the power it might afford her, and that, I appreciated. When she looked at Quincy, it was with an open and earnest face. My brother, noticing Dovey's eyes were on him, went a degree paler, like a leaf flipped to its underside, and he appeared a bit confused or like a spell of indigestion had taken hold. I wondered if he had eaten too many of Ima's shortcakes. Or was it something about Mr. Aiken? Had he discovered some secret about Dovey's father? Yet Mr. Aiken was bland as they came.

By now, the entire group had made it to the landing. The Tiffany lamp claimed our attention, finally Quincy's, too, but he

was still sneaking glances back at Dovey, as if she were a thing that could be misplaced. The lamp was a magnificent specimen. Nothing like it existed in Bound. A yellow-and-brown acorn motif adorned its shade (diameter 16 inches), and the base, in the shape of a Greek urn, had an exquisite moss-colored patina that managed to be both earthy and refined. It stood at 21¾ inches and was designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany, the son of Charles Lewis Tiffany. The lamp was not for sale—it was our personal property—but part of the thrill Daddy Kratt offered his customers was showing them things they couldn't possess. What's more, that evening, the lamp would take on even greater significance: the first electric current in Bound would spring forth from it.

I stood staring at the lamp. It had enthralled me all over again, and for a moment, I forgot how or why we had gotten there. Until Quincy lifted the rope so that Byrd could get a closer look.

"Quincy!" I cried, but he waved off my alarm. His spirits seemed high, as if Byrd had said something that pleased him.

"You see, sir"—he was instructing Byrd to peer underneath the shade—"there are three separate key switches for each of the lamp's three light bulbs. Now that's fine craftsmanship."

Before Byrd could respond, Quincy impulsively stuck his fingers underneath the shade and gave one of the switches a vicious crank. The light bulb didn't turn on, but the switch made the sound—unmistakably—of something breaking. A few feet away, Dovey's hands were fluttering at her neck, as if checking for a necklace that had vanished.

Quincy retracted his hand, his breath quickening. "It's fine. It's fine."

The tour disbanded on the spot. People hurried away from the mere thought of Daddy Kratt's wrath. Byrd just shook his head glumly, as if to say he could have expected it, how living skewed toward misery and how the occasional rattle of joy, when it did occur, was far-off and muted and happening to someone else.

After breaking the key switch on the Tiffany lamp, Quincy disappeared. As he left, his face was tense with worry. This frightened me, and I felt a surge of concern for my brother. I was left to execute the remainder of the tours with a knot in my stomach. On my way to the midday tour (I wolfed a piece of cornbread Ima had packed for me), I rounded one of the aisles and stifled a surprised cry. Daddy Kratt and Quincy stood with their heads drawn together in confidence. I retreated behind a display shelf, hoping to hear some of their conversation.

"Byrd Parker said what?" Daddy Kratt cried, a kind of frenzied pleasure in his voice. "Tell me more!" He eased in toward Quincy with a chumminess that irked me. My brother had obviously not told him about the broken switch. My concern for Quincy drained away; if my brother didn't admit to breaking the lamp, he would have to blame someone else. I leaned forward to listen.

Quincy's voice was faint. I heard it crack—his bravado could not stifle his fourteen-year-old hormones. I edged my head around the corner for a chance to read his lips.

"How about that!" Daddy Kratt boomed with such abruptness, I thought I'd been spotted. I hadn't. The two were carrying on like old pals.

As my brother continued to talk, in tones too low for me to

understand, my father's head nodded in affirmation. Quincy's eyes, for a split second, slid past Daddy Kratt's and locked onto mine. With a startled gasp, I recoiled, knocking back into the shelf and upsetting its contents (cans of motor oil, sent tottering, and odd-looking mechanical instruments, fussing and clacking into one another). I pressed my hands over my face.

Silence whirred in my ears, but after a few beats, their muffled conversation resumed. Quincy had not given me away, and Daddy Kratt, pleasantly distracted by whatever he had learned, did not inquire about the racket I had made. The two continued talking, but I heard none of it. Afterward, they parted ways, my father heading deeper into the store and Quincy the opposite direction. Quincy had told Daddy Kratt something about the tour with Byrd Parker, but I didn't know what.

I scrambled after my brother. "What did you tell Daddy Kratt?"

Quincy turned around. With a friendly shrug, he said, "Don't worry. I didn't give you up, Sister."

"Didn't give me up?" My throat was constricting. "I didn't do anything! *You are the one who broke the lamp.*" I could barely get the words out, my heart thudded so recklessly in my chest.

Quincy nodded his head in consideration, as if things that happened were always up for interpretation and another version of events, light and intangible, were as possible as the present moment.

"I wasn't talking to him about the lamp," he said. "Something much more important came up."

"Regarding Byrd?"

Quincy smiled. "Yes!" He drew his head close to mine. "I

knew there was more to the story than Byrd's wife cheating on him."

"Oh!" I said, startled. "Cheating? Who was the other man?"

Quincy's forehead widened. "A colored boy, that's who. At least his wife was dutiful enough to punish herself."

I stiffened at the word. *Punish*, as if she were a child.

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"Who?"

"That colored boy."

"I don't have a clue," he said. "But he ought to stay hidden, if he knows what's good for him." Quincy shrugged. "For our purposes, we don't need him. What we've got is enough."

"Enough for what?"

Quincy drew back a bit, studying me for a moment. "Enough to put the screws to Byrd, that's what."

I marveled at my brother. Quincy had used Byrd's own nature, his state of perpetual gloom, to draw the very information from Byrd that would be used against him. Byrd was always expecting the worst, which made him careless with disclosing his sorrows.

"There's more," Quincy said. "Byrd's wife was *pregnant*."

"With Byrd's child?" I whispered.

"Not Byrd's child," he sang, pleased by the scandal of it all. With a broad smile, Quincy took off through the store.

"Quincy!" I called after him. "Our next tour starts in a few moments!" But he had disappeared behind a rack of women's fancy drop-waist dresses, disturbing them as he slid out of sight, and they swooshed into one another in a slaphappy way, like boozy women at a party, giddy he had brushed up against them.

I thought about our unnamed lake, which sat to the north of town. I could not stave off an image of Byrd Parker's wife. There she was, belly thriving, standing barefoot, two feet at the edge of the lake like two smooth white stones ready to sink.

It would take me years to connect the events. To realize that Byrd's sudden change of heart—selling his cotton gin to Daddy Kratt a few weeks later, after years of refusal—was the outcome of our father blackmailing him. It was one thing for Daddy Kratt and Quincy to know about Byrd's wife and an entirely different thing for the rest of town to find out; Byrd might be loose-lipped about his troubles, but he was also no fool. Had I thought on it harder at the time, the blackmailing would have been plain. But the way luck always seemed weighted toward Daddy Kratt was a nonchalant truth, almost genealogical in its depth and sureness, like the way my eyetooth, its particular curve, had been shaped by generations before. I was untroubled by the way business transactions inevitably fell in his favor, and it never occurred to me to question it.

With Byrd's fall, Daddy Kratt's cotton fortune was solidified. He and his business partner, Shep Bramlett, now owned all three cotton gins in town. This was a huge step for Daddy Kratt. Byrd Parker came from plantation money in Charleston, but my father started with nothing. Bound was merely a crossroads junction when he showed up with his horse and wagon, establishing a trading post to buy and sell goods. He waited as a settlement lurched into existence, the crossroads junction graduating to a chartered town with the coming of the Charleston, Cincinnati & Chicago Railroad in the late 1880s. Just as the town was transforming itself, our

father seized the chance to remake himself. He had no lineage to speak of and was nineteen years older than Mama, whose father was a lucrative cotton wholesaler, but Daddy Kratt was as persuasive as they came, and in the end, he got Mama plus her generous dowry. Daddy Kratt was living in high cotton, as the saying goes.

The final tour of the day was miserable for me. Quincy was nowhere to be found. I kept straining for a sight of him, a distraction that rendered me useless for answering questions. After forgetting some details about our supply of cottonseed, which I knew by heart, and flubbing an answer about our millinery shop, people in my group took to talking among themselves, and I lost authority, my voice flattened by the steady roar of their conversations. I was sinking into exhaustion, too, having been on my feet all day, but despite my ineptitude, more people joined the tour group. We were nearing the important moment.

Dusk was falling, and light dwindled in the store. People's voices, rowdy the moment before, collapsed into whispers. There was already a tingle of electricity in the air, a pulse of expectation and unease, as though the lights had fallen in a theater for a new and strange performance. Mothers huddled with their children. Men, on break from farming duties, shifted restlessly in their spots. I saw the five Sullivan girls holding hands in a neat row, tangled hair rising from their heads; they came from one of the poorest families in town, but my father possessed the charisma to draw together unlike elements. Daddy Kratt had shut off the store's Delco generator, which charged rows of battery jars so that he could conduct business

after nightfall. As the store fell further into darkness, people's whispers dissipated, and a silence swept in that bristled with anxiety and left the hairs on my arms whiskered out.

*Clop clop clop.* The footfalls of some distant horse.

It took me a few moments to realize it was my father. He was, I could tell from the sound, wearing his church shoes, a detail that struck me as poignant, because he rarely wore his church shoes to church even. He came into view, rounding the corner and starting up the stairs. The shoes, buffed to a high gloss, seemed to extract the remaining light in the room, and they glinted and winked with each footstep.

"Folks, it's time!" he roared.

He strode to the lamp. Mama was already there. I could tell someone else had positioned her, her hands clasped and elbows bent in a staid and uncomfortable manner. Her body was present, but her gaze flickered like a candle. They were a comical pair. Next to Mama, who possessed a porcelain beauty, our father appeared especially coarse, as though he had been blasted from a quarry, clothes and all, and had simply dusted himself off and fixed his hat on his head before carrying on down the road.

As the twilight matured into deeper shades of blues and purples, I placed myself behind a farmer who had forgotten to remove his large straw hat. He smelled of sweat and stinkbugs, which lately had been swarming our juvenile cotton plants. I breathed through my mouth and sifted through faces in the crowd. I was looking for my brother.

Daddy Kratt stole my attention. He swept open his arms, and everyone hovered in stillness, as though he were a

conductor on the verge of storming into his first movement. The gesture erased all my anxiety. Arms raised, my father had set the evening into motion, ordaining a sequence of events I was powerless to alter.

He didn't seem to notice Mama, stationed right next to him. His eyes flew in my direction. "Now, my eldest child is here. Come join me, Judith."

My lungs tightened. Light-headed, I emerged from behind the farmer, my body floating along, and as I stood on the other side of the lamp, the crowd acknowledged me with a patch of feeble applause. Daddy Kratt nodded gruffly at me and then reached underneath the shade.

Prepared for the worst, I stood, my breath trapped in my lungs, when, with a flick of my father's wrist, light cracked open from the first bulb. Radiant! The color of the first healing rays of dawn in my room each morning, lapping onto the pine planks, sparking the dust in the air. My father, crouching now, his face pressed into the light, refulgent in its glow, the tips of his beard sizzling in its brilliance. All at once, breath rushed out of my lungs. The crowd roared, and Daddy Kratt gave an impish little grin. He flipped the second key switch. Light again! I was flush with joy. I saw the faces of those around me, mirroring my wonder. My father was a hero.

Daddy Kratt clicked the third switch. The bulb sat dumbly. He tried it again, and again and again. Terror seized my throat, but Shep Bramlett's voice bellowed through the tense silence.

"Here! Here!" he cried. "Mr. Brayburn Kratt has brought electricity to Bound!" The audience erupted into anxious applause.

Mr. Bramlett strode a few feet forward to congratulate

my father with a slap to his back, pushing the failure of the third light bulb into the past. Until that moment, I had never had much use for Mr. Bramlett. He was a boorish man whose two-storied face had extra square footage on his forehead—square footage that, based on his ruthlessness in all business matters, he would probably be willing to sell off in hard times. Despite my distaste for him, he had turned a dire moment around, and for that, I was grateful.

The crowd disbanded, and Daddy Kratt motioned for Mama to leave. I watched her walk down the stairs and, without saying a word to anyone, glide through the crowd and approach the front door. When she got to the door, she didn't exit but rather melted off toward a set of side stairs that led straight to the fourth floor. On the fourth floor was the milliner's office, and above that, the store's attic, where Charlie Watson lived. Charlie was a Negro who worked as our mechanic. Daddy Kratt's eyes followed Mama. She climbed the stairs all the way to the fourth floor, where she slipped out of sight.

Mr. Bramlett, who was admiring the lamp, elbowed Daddy Kratt in the side. "Too bad you didn't have Rosemarie with you," Mr. Bramlett said. "She's a pearl to look at."

Daddy Kratt drew his eyes from the staircase and gestured toward me. "This one's got a sturdy mind. She's the smartest of the three."

Mr. Bramlett turned his giant face toward me and drew a look as if taking a pull on a cigar.

"Don't forget, Shep. She solved our boll weevil problem," my father said.

During the outbreak, I had been the one to suggest paying

workers a penny for each of those nasty critters, which were devastating our cotton crops, and my plan had helped Daddy Kratt and Mr. Bramlett salvage more product than their competitors. A bud of pride stirred in my chest.

The satisfaction was short-lived. My father was no longer looking at me. He was staring again in the direction Mama had gone. He said something I couldn't hear, and Mr. Bramlett motioned to Quincy, who had materialized from the crowd. My brother made his way over, and Daddy Kratt said something in his ear.

Quincy's face remained passive. Then I heard his question, clear as anything, as if he were holding it up under the light for illumination.

"You want me to spy on Mama?"

I couldn't believe what my brother had said. But Daddy Kratt nodded, confirming it. After a moment, my father glanced at the lamp with a scowl. The memory of the broken key switch had returned; it hadn't taken long. He turned to Quincy. "Was it Olva?" Daddy Kratt asked.

Quincy paused, studying our father. "No. It wasn't her."

"Mmm," Daddy Kratt grunted, as if he hadn't believed it would be Olva, but she was on his mind. I remembered how he had taken particular notice of her before he sent the shortcakes flying. It made me nervous. To be in our father's thoughts was to be a target of them.

"Who broke the goddamned lamp?" Daddy Kratt said.

My brother's eyes cut toward me. As he turned to our father, I knew what was coming. Before I ran, I saw Quincy's mouth form the word *Judith*. I dashed down the stairs, managing

to escape the store. As I raced home, I saw Rosemarie up in a tree, one bare foot dangling. She watched me go. My sister had always lived a nymph's life, far from the concerns of the everyday world, climbing trees while the rest of us toiled on the ground.

*Windsor chair*

*Wooden spinning wheel*

*Mahogany secretary*

*R. S. Prussia vase*

*Pie safe—Grandmother DeLour's*

*Butler's tray (silver plated)*

*Amsterdam School copper*

*mantel clock*

*Hamilton drafting table*

*Letter opener (cut glass)*

*Tiffany lamp (diameter 16";*

*21¾" height)—broken*



# THREE

The next morning, I found Olva in the kitchen, her back to me. On the counter, biscuits bloomed their aroma, broad and consoling, which put to mind the warm smell of the seaside. When I was a child, we vacationed on the Carolina coast only once, because Daddy Kratt thought we should, and despite our accommodations, the finest hotel cotton money could buy, my sister chose to sleep on the balcony every night. I shook my head to try to release the memory. My sister was always creeping into my mind without invitation, outstaying her visit like a guest with poor manners.

“Would you like to know my progress on the inventory?”

Olva upset the saucepan from which she poured our instant coffee. I hadn’t meant to startle her. “Miss Judith, you need more sleep, I do believe,” she said, mopping the spilled coffee with a rag.

It was true that I had worked into the late hours. As a result, I felt sluggish, and a pinprick of pain had lodged itself between my eyes.

“Would you like to know my progress on the inventory?”

Olva dropped a metal measuring cup, which sang a plaintive note as it hit the floor.

“Are you quite all right?” Then I realized what might be

bothering her. “Don’t you worry about Rosemarie’s postcard,” I said. “She never was the type to make good on her word.”

Olva bent down to retrieve the measuring cup. “Miss Judith, since spring’s days are numbered, we should enjoy our breakfast on the front porch.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” I saw that Olva was preoccupied with her duties. We could discuss the inventory later.

When Olva righted herself, she reached for the two coffee cups with their twin exhalations of steam. She set them on the old wooden tray and loaded the rest of the contents of our breakfast onto it. I studied the tray for a moment, dismissing it. The tray had been in our family for generations—I knew that—but nothing distinguished it. It was not valuable enough for the inventory.

As I headed toward the front porch, I marveled at my new lens. I cast my eyes about the room, and the objects there—Victorian chaise longue, octagonal Jacobean parlor table, and mahogany sewing cabinet—sat up on their haunches expectantly. With a mild nod or shake of my head, I told them their fates regarding whether they would be remembered in my inventory. What hopes they had!

I reached the front door and turned my head back. “Bring out the doilies,” I said, but Olva was already moving through the door, doilies in hand. She set up our folding table, tucked a flowering branch of honeysuckle in a vase, and spooned little banks of orange marmalade alongside our biscuits. The doilies rose to the occasion, too, fulfilling their obligations by guiding our coffee cups back to their spots.

We sat drinking our coffee, and I shielded my eyes from

the sun. How bright the world was! Our street was as sleepy as usual, even though it was one of the main arteries through Bound. It was possible to sit on our porch and not lay your eyes on another house; a few were there, of course, about an acre away to the east and south, but hedges or rows of mature red cedars hid them. Our neighbors did not want to see us as much as we did not want to see them.

My gaze returned to what was in front of me. An earthworm, waterlogged from an early morning rain, lay marooned on the brick lip of the porch. Bird songs filled the air, and I considered how their calls would change as the day lengthened, how their light and constant morning chatter would cede to an afternoon of sporadic, urgent cries, and how at nightfall, their conversations would be drowned out by the shattering trills of crickets and frogs. When I looked down again, the earthworm was gone.

A burgundy Pontiac Grand Am crept into view on the street. It was Marcus, our paperboy. *Paperman*. Olva has reminded me of this distinction, even though from our vantage point, a man in his thirties counts as a boy. From the driver's side window, his thin black hand extended.

I turned to Olva. "I wonder how long he will retain *this* job."

Marcus could not seem to settle on any one way of earning a living. Olva didn't say anything, so I went on. "It's a shame he doesn't earn enough money fixing things." Despite his lack of ambition, Marcus possessed considerable skills as a repairman. He had once ably restored my Westclox alarm clock (Big Ben model), and I even talked him down to a lower price for his work.

“I’d say his difficulty keeping a job is not entirely his fault,” Olva said, and her face went a little slack, the caramel skin around her eyes sagging, as if what I had said about Marcus had pushed her deep into thought.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Bound is not always the most welcoming place.”

“Welcoming? Marcus’s family has lived in and around Bound for generations. Everyone remembers that.”

“A long memory is sometimes the problem,” Olva responded.

“Good grief, Olva, all I’m saying is that Marcus’s family has a history here.”

She exhaled. “Memory and history are bound up with one another. Where does one end and the other begin?”

She didn’t pause for an answer, because just like that, her expression snapped back to what was in front of her, and she called out “Marcus!” as she lifted herself from her chair. Before launching down the steps, she shifted her body back toward the table to grab one of the unopened jars of marmalade.

“Is that necessary?” I asked. “We already pay for the newspaper.”

She dismissed me with a wave of her hand and made her way toward the car. Marcus met her halfway. The two smiled at one another, and Olva traded the jar of marmalade for the *York Herald*. She said something to him and leaned back to give him a view of the porch.

Because it was required, I offered a little wave. He squinted at me, not waving back, and the two kept talking.

As I watched them, my attention was stolen by a burst of finches from a nearby bush. One hopped on the porch, angling

its thimble head at me. It was clear in that gesture, splendid in its precision, that he wanted some portion of my toast. I didn't give him any but marveled at our communication, at my ability to know his meaning without a word exchanged. How different it was with people, who always seemed to take offense, no matter how thorough my explanations.

Suddenly, the Pontiac's back door flew open. Marcus's six-year-old daughter jumped out, clutching the stuffed brown bunny I had never seen her without. A white blanket and several toys fell out of the car as well, and she hastily gathered the items up and stuffed them where she had been sitting.

"Good morning, Ms. Kratt," Marcus said as the three of them approached me.

"Hello, Marcus."

Marcus always struck me as taller up close than my usual view of him from the porch. He stretched so high, in fact, that his slender body assumed a slight sway, not unlike the fir trees out behind the henhouse that always seemed to be looking down on me as a child and judging my juvenile decisions. He would have benefitted from a sturdier build, for he appeared beset by a fatigue that whittled down his already gaunt frame. A boy wearing the exhaustion of old age.

I nodded at his daughter. "And hello to you, too, Amaryllis."

The child wore a thin yellow sundress but no shoes of any kind. Her poor bunny was naked, its fur frayed. I had known Amaryllis since she was a baby. Olva would bring her to the house when she was too young to accompany her father to whatever job he held at the moment, whether that was house painting or working as a dishwasher at the Bound Grill. The

poor thing was motherless. A car accident as her mother returned home alone with bread and milk from the market. In what casual corners tragedy lurked! After the death, Olva told me Amaryllis would survive because Marcus had a maternal way about him. The next day, Olva asked me if I wouldn't mind not mentioning that to him. Marcus and Amaryllis were the only black folk Olva spent any time with. Olva once told me this was because she and Marcus were both outsiders in their own ways. At the time, I had thought I might respond, but not knowing which words were suitable, I settled on none.

The child's eyes met mine. "Why are your earlobes so big?"

"Now, Amaryllis," Marcus said. She ran around to cling to the backs of his legs.

Children can be cruel, and I don't know why that isn't a more frequent topic of conversation.

"Is your bunny named Peter Rabbit? Are you familiar with that book? It is a classic."

She shrugged and moved around to hang on her father's arm. The child was always draped on him in some fashion or another, but it didn't seem to bother him. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it, though it could not have been comfortable in the least.

"If your bunny is indeed Peter Rabbit," I said to Amaryllis, "then he should be wearing a smart blue jacket with brass buttons. Did you lose his clothes?"

"Now, Miss Judith," Olva said.

Marcus appeared to be studying me. I coughed. "I will get her the book," I said. "I seem to remember we have an old edition in the house somewhere."

Amaryllis swung the bunny in circles by one of its legs.

It was a wonder the thing had managed to retain its limbs. “He lost his jacket in the garden,” she said. Then she stopped twirling the bunny and planted a look on me. “You are old like Mr. McGregor.”

“I will take that as a compliment. It was Mr. McGregor’s property, after all.” Amaryllis dashed toward the side yard, but I called after her. “And Peter Rabbit was the trespasser! One can hardly impugn Mr. McGregor for his actions!”

I looked over at Olva and Marcus, who were both stifling smiles, which they thought they could put past me. I pressed my lips together to let them know they could not.

Olva had something else on her mind. “Did you hear about the car manufacturer?”

“I did, Olva. As I’ve always said, Bound will survive.” A foreign car manufacturer had chosen Spartanburg, fifty miles to our west, for its North American headquarters. Its proximity would benefit Bound: our people could find work there, and if Spartanburg proved hospitable, other companies might follow. And then perhaps one of those companies would someday choose Bound.

Olva sniffed. I knew what she was going to say.

“Like a nickel in a fifty-gallon barrel,” she said. “How will those jobs make up for so many textile factories closing in South Carolina?”

Bound was once a classic cotton gin town. Nowadays, people don’t know what that means. Since the late nineteenth century, the Piedmont of South Carolina, where Bound is located, was a magnet for the textile business, partly because the fleet-footed rivers hugging our hilly terrain made for good

waterpower but also in no small part because of the sure-mindedness of residents like my father. It was true that the cotton industry had been on the decline in our area since the 1960s. Lately, so much cloth was imported from the far reaches of the globe. But I, for one, had faith that we would pull through. Towns like Bound built the South, after all.

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” I told Olva. “You need to leave off watching the nightly news.”

“I agree with you,” Marcus said. “I’m always telling Olva to look forward rather than backward.” With this last word, his hand cartwheeled to indicate our surroundings. I wasn’t sure if his gesture meant the South, our town, or my house in particular.

I wasn’t sure if Marcus had understood me completely. Of course Bound needed to look forward, but there was still value in looking back.

“You know, Marcus, you inherited your skills as a repairman from your great-grandfather Charlie. There was nothing he couldn’t fix in our store.”

Rather than let Marcus respond, Olva promptly gestured to something out in the yard, guiding him toward whatever it was, and they continued to talk with one another, their voices fading into the background. My eyelids settled over my eyes. Visitors were exhausting.

“Are you sleeping?”

“No, Amaryllis, I am not sleeping.” I opened one eye, then the other. The child had crept beside me without a sound.

“Do you sleepwalk like Miss Olva?”

“Olva does not sleepwalk,” I corrected.

The child shook her head doggedly. “She told Daddy she has been sleepwalking through life. She said that was about to change.”

I opened my mouth to question Amaryllis, but a riot of birdcalls filled the air, luring her attention. She wheeled off toward one of the large oaks in the yard. As she did, a blue jay dropped fluidly from the same oak and made off with another earthworm. He bolted upward into the lean clouds before sinking back toward the roof of the house. Just when it seemed he might land there on the red clay tiles, he pitched right, heading south toward our town’s main street. I saw him disappear down York Street.

I imagined that blue jay crossing the railroad tracks before he soared over the post office and the site of our old family store, which now sits abandoned. If he continued flying south, that jay would pass over the old Kratt residence, a squalid shotgun house that Daddy Kratt bought before he made his cotton fortune. He was sentimental about it, the first house he bought with his own money, where he went from being a nobody to a somebody. He built this impressive house, but I don’t think he ever loved it as much as that first one. If Daddy Kratt were alive, I wondered, what would he think of my inventory? He was certainly not shy of price tags, but value ran deeper for him.

It was a curious trait of my father. For all his hardness, wistfulness could visibly transport him. (We grew skilled at using those moments to dash out of rooms, away from him.) It might be an old horseshoe from his favorite mare. Or just as likely a bird’s nest saved from his childhood. I once did

find a nest hidden away at the back of his cedar closet. It was perfectly thatched, which made me realize that every bird's nest I've ever found—tucked underneath eaves of roofs or abandoned in old oaks—was whole and complete. Never in my life have I come upon a partial or damaged nest. You have to admire a house built so doggedly by a creature whose prevailing instinct is to fly.

That blue jay. I imagined him swerving over the abandoned train depot, gliding further west above the site of the old schoolhouse on which nothing else was ever built, then shooting straight up to take an even wider view of Bound: fields clotted with kudzu, creeks inlaid with blinding mica, and our unnamed lake to the north, where Byrd Parker's wife drowned herself and her unborn child. The lake was now so overrun with bluegill that it had assumed a moldering, feculent smell. On the other end of town, along the southern boundary, that jay would spy a row of houses—shacks really—that were old sharecroppers' lodgings. The Bramlett sisters now owned them.

"Miss Judith," Olva was saying. "Marcus and Amaryllis are leaving."

They were already walking toward the car.

"Marcus," I called after him. "Do you still live in one of those rentals owned by the Bramlett sisters?"

He stopped in his tracks. There was a long band of silence.

"Do you still live there?"

Marcus moved his chin so that I saw his profile. "Yes, we do."

My mind drifted back to the blue jay. Up he flew, taking that towering view again, looking down on where Marcus

and Amaryllis lived. The Bramlett sisters, Jolly and Vi, were the daughters of my father's most trusted business partner, Shep Bramlett.

"Have they come here? Looking for me?"

"What?" I said to Marcus. "No. Why would they?"

Silence settled between us again. I tried to think of something pleasant to say about Jolly and Vi, but a wind seemed to rattle around in my mind. I was therefore grateful when Marcus said he needed to get back to his route and gave Olva a polite salute before joining Amaryllis at the Pontiac. He hurried the child into the car.

As the Pontiac headed off, Olva returned to her seat beside me on the porch. We watched as earthworms continued to be picked off. I had never seen so many blue jays in our yard. Small blue bodies everywhere, as if the sky were relinquishing bits of itself.

"Life is bound by certain rules," I said to Olva, "and I guess we've got to play along." She didn't say anything, so I kept talking. "It puts your mind at ease when you think of things that way, wouldn't you say? Survival of the fittest, I suppose."

After a few moments, she spoke. "Just like old man Darwin taught."

She said it like she had seen him last Wednesday at the Piggly Wiggly. I do enjoy Olva's company. Her response sent us both into a little eddy of laughter, the gay sound rising into the morning air and carrying to the tops of the trees, where I wondered if the birds might be appreciating it in the same way we found enchantment in their songs. We sat in each other's company in silence, watching the birds and lizards and

earthworms and butterflies and every other cog in this brilliant mechanism churn on and on.

After a while, Olva began to stir.

I was still thinking of Darwin. “At the end of *Origin of Species*,” I mused, “Darwin talks about the *most exalted object*. Doesn’t that remind you of my inventory?”

“Mmm,” Olva said.

“What I mean—”

“I don’t think he’s talking about an actual object, Miss Judith.”

“Of course not.”

“If I remember correctly, that most exalted object is the evolution of a human being.” Olva paused. “A person.”

I sometimes forgot that growing up, Olva and I shared all the same books. And whenever tutors were thrust upon the three Kratt children, our Aunt Dee saw that Olva was there alongside us.

“Well, it’s possible you are right, Olva. Details sometimes escape me. At any rate, the phrase is beautifully put. *Most exalted object*. Darwin was a scientist but a poet at heart. I’ve always appreciated how he had the courage to write the way he wanted.”

Olva seemed to consider this. “It’s a luxury to be able to write or speak in the way you want.” She didn’t appear to invite a response to this, and she began clearing the plates.

I didn’t mind, because there was something else I wanted to know.

“Olva, I have a question for you. Amaryllis mentioned something about your sleepwalking.”

Olva paused suddenly, a plate in each hand. Her face dialed

in on something out in the yard. When I followed her eyes, I heard her breath catch. She had keener eyesight than mine, for all I saw was a smudge of motion in the place she was looking. It resembled a gray blemish of grease, like the residue of a nose pressed to a window, which I wanted to clean off with the cuff of my blouse.

“Is that Miss Rosemarie?” Olva said. Her voice seemed to carry less surprise than elation.

I stood up, but an acute rush to my head forced me back into my chair.

Olva didn’t notice. She squinted at the sidewalk, her face crimped in pleasure. “Oh, it is! Miss Rosemarie!” she cried.

Olva lifted her right hand and waved even though she still had hold of a plate. She snorted, put the plate down, then picked it up again. She was in such a state, I’m afraid she didn’t quite know what she was doing.

Rosemarie waved hysterically, prompting Olva to run out to meet her. Reaching one another, they embraced for so long, I had to turn my head.

My blue jay, from his grand height, had not seen everything. Here was my sister, after sixty years.

Olva accompanied Rosemarie all the way back to the porch. When they managed to get there, Rosemarie hauled one muddy boot on the first step and exhaled as if she had walked clear from the edge of the world without stopping until that very moment. I saw she had no plans to remove those boots before entering my home.

“You’ll have to do something about those boots.” It was an inadequate thing to say, these first words uttered to my sister in

more than half a century, but Rosemarie would have to earn my graciousness.

My sister bent down and unlaced her boots, leaning one arm at a time against Olva to remove them. When she lined them on a step, I noticed that her socks were even dirtier than the boots that had sheltered them. She leveled her chin and looked in my general direction.

“Sister.”

The word came out like she had poured it into an empty container and it had not quite reached the mark.

I was not prepared for my sister to be an old woman, and—with a distressing jolt—I wondered if she was having the same thought about me. She had been the town beauty. Both golden-haired and golden-eyed, she had learned early on what extraordinary beauty reaped: people tended to indulge her every whim just to see her face dance with pleasure, but accompanying that privilege was the constant scrutiny of older men, especially Shep Bramlett, whose gaze dispersed strangely when he stared at her.

Her faced had thinned considerably. I could see the muscles working under her cheeks as if they had been removed and rethreaded closer to the surface. Down her back hung a tassel of thick silver hair, tied off in the middle with a length of butcher’s string, and she wore a gray dress that held the sad promise of once being black.

“Do you have any other clothes in that bag?” I motioned at the small camel-colored duffel she had set down on the step. “You look like one of the Sullivan girls.”

“I’ll be staying here, Judith. In the house.”

I coughed. It was ridiculous for her to think she could waltz back into our lives. I wasn't about to acknowledge the idea of her staying with us. Instead, I said, "Do you remember the Sullivans?"

My sister's gaze settled somewhere above my head.

"It's apparent you have forgotten a great deal, Rosemarie." To supplement her memory, I reminded her of the time I invited the Sullivan girls, all five of them, into our house.

The arrangement was that those girls would pay me two marbles each to wash off in our parents' shower. It was one of those summers when humidity curdled the air and dark clouds buzzed like hives over the hills. We had grown accustomed to ferocious afternoon storms, which churned up the Carolina clay and dressed in a punitive shade of terra-cotta those wilder children who could not be coaxed indoors. I considered it a civic duty to clean up those girls, whose house did not have running water. Once a week, they were permitted a hasty scrubbing in the aluminum washtub that sat in their backyard. The Sullivans agreed to my arrangement when they realized the experience would involve going *inside*, the whole concept of bathing indoors being new to them. It wasn't lost on me that it would be a real treat for them to step into our house, what with the reputation our family had for collecting fine things.

At that time, a walk-in shower was one of a kind. Ours was especially magnificent, with thin rectangular tiles stained a rich caramel and a rainfall showerhead made of pure copper that dangled from the ceiling like the face of a giant sunflower. Those five Sullivan girls stripped down to their undergarments

and ushered themselves into the shower. Too petrified to move or make eye contact with one another, ever so faintly turtling their heads into their shoulders, they seemed relieved when nothing more than water rained down on them.

Once clean, their gratitude was less forthcoming than I expected. In fact, the whole occasion was cast with a somberness that I couldn't quite seem to wash away, no matter how strenuous my reassurances. On their way out, the eldest sister, Lindy, paused to look at the wooden spinning wheel that towered in a grand and frightening way on the landing of our staircase. I told her it was not part of the tour, thank you kindly, and pried an extra marble from her clean little fist.

When I had concluded my story about the Sullivans, I folded my hands in my lap. But it was like my sister had not absorbed a word.

"I plan to stay here, Judith. In the house."

I looked to Olva, whose mouth was set in a way I understood to mean she was not going to object to Rosemarie's proposal.

"Stay?" I said to my sister. "Here?" In my voice rose an old fury newly minted. "And how long do you intend to visit?"

Olva tilted her head in the way she did when calculating sums or noticing a grasshopper's shed skin, the brittle rind of a prior life. "Technically, isn't this house half Rosemarie's?"

I was stunned into silence. "Olva, really," I finally said. I didn't want to call attention to her ignorance, but we all knew Rosemarie had relinquished her part of our family's estate when she ran off from Bound.

So it was a shock to me what came out of my sister's mouth.

"Yes, it is," she said, climbing the steps and striding toward

the front door with renewed strength. In one swift, deliberate movement, she opened it. As she started across the threshold, she paused. Something new came into her face, and she leaned one arm against the doorjamb and plucked off her socks before continuing into the house.

Looking at that dirty little twist of socks in the doorway, I found myself wishing she had left them on.

Olva and I followed Rosemarie into the house as though she were giving us a tour and not the other way around. My sister never did understand how to make a proper arrival, in which she might bring a loaf of currant bread to show some courtesy to her hostess. When we were children, her version of a gift was an outstretched fist with a spring-loaded grasshopper hidden inside. It never ceased to astonish me that we Kratt children grew up in the same hot cocoon of childhood yet emerged as such singular organisms, barely even the same species.

Rosemarie swiveled her head around the living room, taking stock of its contents. “You haven’t moved anything. All this clutter.” She clucked—in judgment of my housekeeping!

I followed her eyes and studied the room myself. The large bookcase that stretched up the far wall was crowded messily with books, their covers in muted shades of brown and green. Books filled every vertical slot, and other books were stacked, balanced on lips of shelves, giving the bookcase the appearance of a majestic oak plagued with a bad case of bracket fungi. On the floor surrounding the bookcase sat more books, stacks upon stacks, as if waiting their turn for a proper spot. From the look of things—a frosting of dust on the shelves—their wait would be indefinite. How long had it been like this?

My eyes trailed across the rest of the room. An empty picture frame, all scroll and gilt, propped against the wall. A tangle of clothes—whose, I wasn't sure—on the sofa. Various drawers sat ajar (the Hepplewhite side table, the old watchmaker's workbench) as though someone hadn't bothered to push them back fully, and this gave the sense of the room having been tipped on its side and shaken by a curious child. I suddenly felt very warm. When I rubbed my hands together, they were covered in a film of moisture.

"Olva," I said sternly, but she was already trotting over to Rosemarie.

"Tell us everything!" Olva said, grabbing my sister's hand.

"Everything?" Rosemarie was enjoying the attention.

"Don't dare leave out a thing!"

"I hardly know where to begin," Rosemarie said and then fell silent, as if her experiences were threads too fine and numerous to catch hold of. An idea brought her around. "What is that dead traffic light in town?"

"Bound got its own traffic light!" Olva cried. "Can you believe that?"

Rosemarie laughed—uncharitably, I thought.

"It used to be a true traffic light," Olva went on, "and then a few years back, they replaced it with a single blinking yellow light. Then they turned off the blinking light. But they didn't even have the consideration to remove it."

"Is that right?" Rosemarie said, a perk in her voice. She no doubt found great satisfaction in the way Bound had gone down since she had left. I didn't think it was an exaggeration to say she probably saw her absence as contributing to its decline.

People can be wrongheaded in their assumptions about why somebody would stay in a small town. They imagine there must be a meekness in you for choosing to remain in a place where your possibilities are laid out in front of you so far in advance. I was not bothered, for instance, that my neighbor Ruth, who was a member of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian church, was buried in the same cream calico suit she was married in fifty years earlier.

I gave a little cough, but no one noticed. "Is anyone going to bring the breakfast plates in?"

Olva looked at me crossly, and neither one of them did anything, so I suppose I got my answer. I marched outside and cleared the table. When I returned inside and made a direct course for the kitchen, I heard Olva padding behind me.

"Go talk to your sister!" she said in a hard whisper. "You haven't seen her in half a lifetime."

I wheeled around. "Aren't you the least bit irritated she hasn't shown her face in sixty years?"

"Start small," she said gently. "Ask her about her trip home. How hard is that?"

I thought it over. "Not hard at all," I said, surprised by my answer. I was buzzing a little with the possibility as we made our way back to the living room.

When I saw Rosemarie, all possibility evaporated. I felt something hard crest inside me. She was tipping back and forth in the burgundy rocking chair, and I found merely the way she was sitting infuriating. She had an elbow planted in the upholstery, and her finger was pointing up at the floor lamp that flanked the chair. It looked as if she'd been waiting like

that, frozen in that position, while we were in the kitchen. My sister always made the assumption that someone would arrive to take notice of her.

“We need a new light here,” she said. Then looking around, she shook her head critically. “It’s so dark in this house.”

“Taking up your landlord duties so soon?”

For the first time, Rosemarie looked directly at me, squinting a little as if she would have to get used to the practice by degrees. “Is there a general store in town?” she asked, turning to Olva. “I can pick up some light bulbs.”

What little knowledge my sister possessed! She would not even know where to go in Bound for light bulbs. Our family store was no longer an option. Shep Bramlett bought it from Daddy Kratt in 1930 but shut it down shortly afterward. Mr. Bramlett lacked the business acumen of my father, and it was alarming to see how quickly the store went downhill. While I didn’t like to see it go, I felt its closing was a testament to Daddy Kratt’s abilities.

Shep Bramlett’s grandson now owns the only store in town—a scrawny convenience store—and his mother, Jolly, has shared with me, on too many occasions to count, how he can barely make a living selling those low-quality, disposable goods, which are delivered in filthy trucks that grind and belch down the road. Olva once witnessed a delivery in progress. It gave me great pause to hear how the cellophane-wrapped merchandise crashed to the ground, flung there without the least bit of consideration by a pimply-faced boy who hardly looked old enough to drive the delivery truck. When I was in charge of the inventory at our store, I held some reverence for

my duties. Our customers often had very little, and the items we sold helped them live their lives the best they could.

My sister was still sitting there in the burgundy rocker, glaring at me. I was so perturbed by her company, I had to leave the room. Olva and I had a laugh about it later, my storming out of the room on account of light bulbs. It just goes to show that conversations with siblings cannot be separated from all the conversations that came before. That is just the way of it.

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The day after her arrival, Rosemarie and I sat on the porch in silence. The cicadas let off their metallic drone as twilight approached. Earlier, Olva had said I was risking the mosquitoes by going outside, but I told her my old blood no longer interested them. She replied that my old blood was doing me just fine. I laughed and remarked that maybe it was the other way around: my blood had turned up its nose at those pests. Natural selection at work, I said to her.

For the past two days, Olva had been helping Rosemarie settle into the house, which generated more commotion than I judged necessary. I had heard Olva making a grand fuss over locating the linens for my sister, who could have found them herself within two minutes of searching. Rosemarie had taken it upon herself to move some items in the house—including a pair of Edwardian neoclassical brass candleholders (10 inches tall)—and while I moved them back promptly, I was immune to her provocations, because I had more important matters to attend to. I had shut myself in the study all day to work on my inventory.

As we sat on the porch, I turned to my sister, but her chin was locked forward. She seemed keen on not missing a moment of the fading light.

Into the driveway swooped a white Taurus sedan. Two figures emerged.

“Should you be driving at this hour?” I called out.

“Who is that?” Rosemarie asked.

“You don’t recognize the Bramlett sisters? I sometimes forget how long you have been away.”

Rosemarie escaped into the house.

Walking along the path toward me were Jolly and Vi Bramlett. I had known the Bramlett sisters my entire life. As children, we spent a good deal of time together, on account of our fathers’ business partnership. Although that hadn’t drawn us together, as it might have, we still shared the acrimony of being something like kin. From an early age, I had determined that Jolly was doomed to live up to the expectations of her unfortunate name. She had always been ebullient to a fault—a forced cheerfulness, the kind that blunts a terrible temper—and over the years, she had gained considerable weight, which had taken up residence exclusively in her cheeks and belly, making her appear, impossibly, even jollier.

Vi cut a different figure. She was alarmingly thin, and her mouth hung open. Her eyes had a soft, pleading quality, as if soliciting help for her mouth problem. Vi’s name was not short for Violet or Viola, and early on in life, she seemed to accept this as a mandate that she was to occupy only about a third of the space of a regular person. Next to one another, Jolly and Vi paired like a set of souvenir salt and pepper shakers.

Well now, I wondered what they were thinking about me.

“We were coming back from checking in on our rental properties, and we saw you sitting on your porch,” Jolly said.

“Do you always check on your properties so late?”

Jolly’s mouth flattened. “Dealing with tenants is like having children all over again.” Suddenly, her right hand reared up and smacked her arm. “Aren’t you getting eaten up by mosquitoes?”

I supposed it was going to be a war of questions, and fatigued by the idea, I pretended not to hear her. Undeterred, Jolly helped herself to a chair on the porch beside me. Vi remained at the bottom of the steps, rocking on her feet to the rhythm of some sad song in her mind.

Jolly was incapable of a quiet moment, so she said, “Do you remember when we used to put straight pins on the railroad tracks, and the trains would fuse them into Xs?”

“We used to play on the crossties, too,” I replied. “The ones stacked up next to the depot.” Here we were, having some memories.

“There was that young black fellow who got caught stealing from the depot office,” Vi said.

Jolly and I stared at her, and our shock at her unsolicited words momentarily dulled our reaction to what she was saying.

“What a sad thing,” Vi finished, shaking her head.

Jolly snapped to her senses. She waved her hand. “Oh, it wasn’t as sad as you remember, Vi. I think he just got in trouble because he was on the whites-only side of the platform.”

“No,” said Vi, and she was uncharacteristically firm. “He got caught stealing—it wasn’t very much, a few dollars from the till—but some of the boys from our high school caught him and

cut off the tip of one of his fingers. I think they used a cotton hoe. It was wrong of them.”

“Good Lord, Vi,” I said. “What in the world are you talking about?” Yet I remembered the boy, too, and what had happened to him.

Jolly set a stern look on her sister. But Vi had already retreated, settling into a doleful contemplation of the yard. “Saturdays were my favorite,” Jolly said, pressing on as if Vi’s comments had been an unpleasant detour. “The baseball games in the summer! And the laying-by time when all the cotton had been planted.”

Jolly turned to me, as if it were my turn to supply a good memory. I did not recall going to any baseball games—I hadn’t been invited to any—so I said, “Did you know that the site of the baseball field is of some historical interest?” Vi actually turned her head toward me, which for some reason gave my heart a jolt of stage fright. I coughed and went on. “It is my understanding that during the War of Independence, a patriot colonel and his troops made camp there after the battle at Kings Mountain. In his custody were several captured Tories, who were hanged and then buried at the site.”

Jolly murmured, “Very interesting.”

“Is it not funny,” I continued, “that when kids play baseball there now, they are running over Tory graves?”

Vi’s forehead wrinkled.

Jolly looked equally puzzled. “Kids do play there, Judith, but it’s not a baseball field any longer,” Jolly said. “It’s a playground now.”

“Of course it is,” I said quickly.

Jolly threw her hands on her knees and said, "Let's go down to the playground right now." Her eyes widened. "Or the depot. Let's go down to the old depot!"

I shot out of my seat. "No!"

"Is everything all right?"

It was Olva, peeping her head out the front door. When she saw Jolly, her face tensed. I had returned to my seat, the sudden movement making me woozy.

"Everything is fine," I said. "Jolly and Vi were just paying a visit." I turned to Jolly. "Was there something you wanted?" I was tired of being hospitable. It was wearing me out.

Jolly pressed her lips together. "I suppose you've already received your newspaper?"

"Of course we have. What kind of question is that?" I said. "Do you want to borrow it?"

Vi shook her head gently, as if to dissuade her sister, but Jolly went on. "What time would you say that black boy delivers your paper every day?"

Not missing a beat, Olva said, "It changes every day."

Jolly tilted her head in disapproval that Olva had replied to a question directed at me.

Olva saw this but pressed on. "Today was midafternoon, but there is no set schedule." She turned to me. "Your bath water's getting cold, Miss Judith."

Jolly moved her eyes from Olva to me.

What Olva had said was not the truth, but I was ready for this conversation to be over. "Jolly, let's chat another time," I said. "My bedtime approaches."

Olva walked inside, and when I approached the door to

follow her, Jolly stepped in front of me. She placed her wide hand on my shoulder. I could feel the warmth of it through my blouse. Inside her mouth, a piece of white gum flipped from one side to the other.

“Call me the next time you see your paperboy.”

“Good grief, Jolly, can you not find him yourself?” I moved out from under her hand. “Bound does not stretch very far in any one direction. He may be my paperboy, but he’s your tenant.”

“I’m shocked you would take a paper from him in the first place, Judith,” Jolly snapped. “Seeing that he’s related to that Negro who shot your brother.”

“Jolly!” Vi cried.

“Charlie was his name, wasn’t it?”

“Jolly!” Vi cried again. “Hush!”

To my surprise, Jolly closed her mouth.

I cleared my throat. “And how is your son, Jolly?” I struck off in a new direction, like swerving a car off the road, eager to find distance from her words.

Jolly’s face drew together as she weighed whether my question was genuine. She could not help herself when the topic was her son, Rick. He was always in a sorry state, which was never his fault. Jolly’s face released. “Oh, that poor thing!” she said, flapping her hands in the air. “He’s just *awful* these days. But he’s hardly to blame. He can’t earn a living running that store of his, and he’s a hardworking boy. It’s always the hardworking ones who get punished, isn’t it?” Jolly’s voice was getting louder, and I was satisfied with my distraction. “And those welfare blacks don’t lift a finger!”

“Ah!” I said. I had not distracted her but sharpened her purpose. “I have my bath running. You will have to excuse me, ladies.”

“It was such a pleasure to see you, Judith,” Jolly said, her voice high and tight. “I will be expecting a call from you.” The two sisters returned to their car, and it sailed away, the darkening sky taking the car and the road with it.

When I stepped inside, my sister was standing at the window, peering around the curtains. Olva stood a few feet from the door.

“You’ll run into Jolly at some point,” I said to Rosemarie. “If you intend on staying in Bound for any length of time, that is. We all know that is not your habit.”

Rosemarie turned to Olva. “What did Jolly want with Marcus?”

Olva looked at me. She hesitated. “He owes them money.”

“What kind of money?” Rosemarie asked.

“Rent money.”

“Then they are justified in looking for him,” I said.

“I doubt that!” Rosemarie countered.

“Who are you to know anything about it?”

“I know that the Bramletts are callous,” my sister told me. “*That* is what I know. And if Olva vouches for Marcus, then he is beyond reproach.” She turned to Olva. “I want to help Marcus. We’ll figure this out.”

“Into old age, you have carried your penchant for melodrama, Rosemarie,” I said. “What a heavy and florid load.”

My sister could not help herself. She huffed out of the room, just like old times. My satisfaction at having successfully goaded

her was cut short when I noticed Olva staring into the living room with a distracted look, as if tallying the chores she had to accomplish before bedtime. I did not envy her the task, the house being exceptionally large and freighted with so many objects.

Olva's eyes seemed to land on the rolltop desk. Perhaps she was thinking of my inventory, because I had opened the desk earlier to work on it.

"Did you know, Olva, that this rolltop desk is an Abner Cutler original?" She didn't respond, so I said, "Do you think it would remember Mama?"

Olva paused, letting out a deep, slow breath. I could tell I had hooked her, because she replied, with true pleasure, "*Desks can* have memories, can't they?" As if I had gotten to the real point, the one that confirmed the strange wonders threaded through everyday life. "Of course the desk remembers her. She was a sweet old thing."

"Old thing?" I said.

A laugh galloped out of Olva. It was a familiar joke of ours, the one in which Olva forgets she is the old thing now. I am fond of reminding her that she is a year older than I am. She calls it being chronologically gifted.

"She was a gentle soul," Olva said.

"That's what I'm getting at. You remember how we used to say that when Mama sat on the sofa cushions, she left no indentation, no impression at all that she had been sitting there?"

Olva chuckled, and a silence settled on us, the kind in which the conversation keeps going. Then she crossed to the window, and I felt a sudden heaviness in the room, like a new piece of furniture pushed between us, blocking my way to her.

“I hope Jolly doesn’t get her son involved,” Olva said, the dark window framing her. “A nasty fellow, that one.”

I stood behind her. Night had fallen, and the cold trill of a cricket rose from some unknown place in the house. “I’m sure Marcus will sort it out on his own,” I said. “Is it really any of our business?”

Olva reared around. “*It certainly is.*” Her voice flared at the tips.

She walked past me and through the living room, and I watched her climb the stairs a little more quickly than usual. When I turned back to the window, its wide, dark eye was staring at me, and I stepped forward to draw the curtains. But closing them seemed to drive the darkness to the next window, like a creature skittering from one opening to another, angling to see me, its breath hot against the glass. I hurried to sweep the curtains closed on that window, but as I did, the darkness ran to the next window, and when I secured those curtains, it sprang to the next, always a step ahead of me. The cricket cried sharply at my foot. When I snatched the final drapes closed, I had to lower myself into the Windsor chair to rest.

Sitting there, I thought of Jolly’s son. I hoped he would stay far away from us, too.

*Windsor chair*

*Wooden spinning wheel*

*Mahogany secretary*

*R. S. Prussia vase*

*Pie safe—Grandmother DeLour's*

*Butler's tray (silver plated)*

*Amsterdam School copper  
mantel clock*

*Hamilton drafting table*

*Letter opener (cut glass)*

*Tiffany lamp (diameter 16";  
21¾" height)—broken*

*Victorian chaise longue*

*Octagonal Jacobean parlor table*

*Mahogany sewing cabinet*

*Westclox alarm clock*

*(Big Ben model)*

*Hepplewhite side table*

*Watchmaker's workbench*

*Edwardian neoclassical brass*

*column candleholders (10" tall)*

*Abner Cutler rolltop desk*