

# The Rib King



ALSO BY LADEE HUBBARD

*The Talented Ribkins*



# The Rib King

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A NOVEL

Ladee Hubbard



**AMISTAD**

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# The Rib King



# Mr. Sitwell, the Groundskeeper

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1914



# I

## The Current Orphans

Mr. Sitwell had finished work and was passing through the garden on his way to Prescott Avenue when he happened to look up at the house and see something he shouldn't have. One of the Barclays' current orphans was standing in the main hall. Dressed in a gray shirt and dark blue knee pants, black stockings sagging above his brown shoes. The boy had his hands on his hips and head cocked to one side as he stared, transfixed by the antique starter pistol on the third shelf of Mrs. Barclay's *cabinet d'objets*.

Mr. Sitwell frowned. The child had arrived from the asylum with two others five months before and Miss Mamie, the cook who was in charge of their apprenticeship, told them the

very first day that scullery boys were forbidden from loitering in the front of the house. Yet there the child was, just inside the window, for all the world to see. Mr. Sitwell watched him reach into the cabinet and pull the pistol out. He peeked inside the chamber, then spun around and pointed it three times: left toward the velvet drapes, right toward the side table and straight above him toward the chandelier. Then he smiled and mimicked the gesture of sliding the gun into an imaginary holster. When his game was finished he put the pistol back and then turned and continued walking down the hall. But instead of heading toward the kitchen where he belonged he moved farther away from it, toward the conservatory.

Mr. Sitwell cocked his head and looked around the hall, trying to find the other two. The Barclays always brought orphans home in batches of three and, following the example of the industrial college, always between the ages of fourteen and fifteen, making them old enough to work but not so old that, in Mr. Barclay's view, "the clay had so far hardened that it could not be reformed." For the past twenty years they had been brought in at regular intervals to learn a trade under the supervision of the cook. Mostly they washed dishes but by doing so fulfilled Mrs. Barclay's sense of charitable obligation. The current orphans were extremely close and Mr. Sitwell knew that if he saw one the other two were sure to be nearby. They did everything together and in fact so favored one another that the first time he saw them, standing in a row on the kitchen porch with their hands clasped behind their backs for Miss Mamie's inspection, he'd had a hard time telling them apart.

He'd soon realized that the easiest way to distinguish between



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them was to look for their scars. Frederick was the one with the three nasty welts running in parallel lines down his left cheek, a memento of a frantic fork slashing from a south side butcher with whom he'd had an unfortunate run-in when he was seven. Mac was the one who'd lost part of his right ear to a stockyard dog when he was eight. The one loitering in the hall now was Bart; Mr. Sitwell knew it as soon as he started walking. Bart had a peculiar way of moving, a staggered hop-step caused by the fact that, due to circumstances he claimed he no longer remembered, he was missing the toes of his right foot.

Bart hopped down the hall for a few moments and then stopped when he reached the door to the conservatory. Something, it seemed, was amiss with his trousers, and he reached down to make some adjustment to his buttons. When he was satisfied he swung his arm behind him, grabbed a fist full of fabric from his rear, and lifted his right foot to shake out his pant leg. He set his foot down again and, after a couple more hops, disappeared through the conservatory door.

Bart seemed awfully foolish. Mr. Sitwell's first thought was relief that he was not responsible for him, that all three boys were, technically, Miss Mamie's problem. But of course, Mr. Sitwell was the one who'd seen Bart and, having seen him, realized he had to make a choice. Either he would continue walking toward his streetcar stop as planned or he would go back inside and drag Bart to the safety of the kitchen before any of the Barclays saw him too, in which case he would no doubt be sent packing.

Then the door to Mr. Barclay's study opened, unleashing a wide swath of light just inside the window where Mr. Sitwell

stood. He ducked down as a woman's voice called out, "Fine, Herbert. But remember this is not the Monte Carlo. We have not been to the Monte Carlo in a very long time." Mrs. Barclay appeared in the window, skirt swishing and heels clicking as she moved down the hall toward the stairs and the upper chambers. Without thinking, Mr. Sitwell found himself jogging along the side of the house, headed for the kitchen.

It wasn't until he'd reached the back porch that it occurred to him why he was doing it. He liked these boys, cared about them, wanted them to do well. In the twenty years he'd worked for the Barclays he'd seen dozens of orphans come and go and always thought it a shame that Miss Mamie's predecessor, Mr. Boudreaux, never did much to help them. He wasn't certain if it was something about these particular children or simply the fact that Miss Mamie handled her orphans so differently than Mr. Boudreaux had handled his that had made such an impression on him. He'd noticed how careful they were not to tramp on his flowers when they walked through the garden and he liked that they asked a lot of questions about herbs; he also liked that, when they did ask questions, instead of scolding them for slacking the way Mr. Boudreaux would have done, Miss Mamie seemed pleased they took an interest in something she considered useful. She was determined to actually teach them something and wanted them to leave the house knowing more than they had when they arrived. It was clear that she cared for them and, because of that, Mr. Sitwell found he couldn't help but care for them too.

He stepped inside the house. Also, of course, there was the fact that he had started out like them: waterfront orphan, bene-

ficiary of the peculiar mingling of the Barclays' need for cheap labor and their relatively liberal views on children's reform. Mr. Sitwell was only fourteen when he was plucked from the yard of the asylum. He'd started in the kitchen and, while other orphans came and went, had managed to stay on, gaining more and more of the Barclays' confidence through a combination of talent, wit, and fealty.

He passed through the pantry, pushed into the dark kitchen, then stopped when he saw Jennie, the new chambermaid, standing by the window next to a large stack of napkins set out on the work table, all tucked into three corner folds. She had her back to him and was looking out at the yard, a cigarette in her hand. When she heard him come in she turned around and smiled.

"Evening."

Mr. Sitwell nodded. He could feel the muscles in his face tighten and was glad the room was dark. He'd been practicing talking to Jennie in his mirror at the rooming house where he lived; he knew he had an unfortunate habit of frowning at pretty women and also that he looked ugly when he did. "You're here late."

"Had to finish these." She nodded to the stack.

Mr. Sitwell struggled to fit his face into a smile as calm and cool as hers. "Miss Mamie making you stay to do all that?"

"Honestly? She told me to do it this morning. I forgot," Jennie said, one arm wrapped in front of her waist, the other hand holding the cigarette. "Don't tell her."

Mr. Sitwell arched his eyebrows in an effort to keep his brow from furrowing over.

"How you getting home, Jennie?"

“What on earth do you mean?”

“I just mean it’s late.”

“Is it?” She glanced at the clock on the counter near the stove.

“Nine? Well, I guess it depends who you ask.”

She was still smiling. Mr. Sitwell had noticed that about her. She smiled a lot, had a way of talking to people as if what she really wanted to do was laugh at them. When she first started working there two months before it had hurt his feelings a couple of times before he realized she talked to everybody like that, even Miss Mamie. That it was just her way.

“I could walk you to the streetcar. If you’d like. Make sure you get there safe.” He looked away from her, toward the sink, and was disappointed when he saw the stack of dirty pots still piled there.

“Well, aren’t you sweet,” Jennie said. “That’s real nice, Sitwell. Honestly, I can’t imagine a girl needs much protection in this neighborhood, never mind the hour. But I certainly would appreciate the company.”

Mr. Sitwell nodded and looked back at the pots. If the Barclays didn’t send those boys back to the asylum for wandering the halls at night, Miss Mamie just might, if they were stupid enough to leave a mess like that.

“Could you wait a few minutes? I’ve got to take care of something right quick.”

“Alright, Sitwell. I don’t mind waiting. Gives me a chance to put these napkins away.” She flicked her cigarette out the window.

Mr. Sitwell reached down to straighten his tie, then pushed through the swinging door that led to the front of the house.

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As he passed through the dining room his heart was beating fast, but he had to figure that hadn't gone so bad. He'd been trying to think of questions to ask Jennie since she'd started working there, but that was the first time they'd been alone. Jennie, he decided, was a nice person, and looking back on their conversation, not scary at all. A lot of people on staff didn't know what to make of her, in part because of the smiling, but also because they were still adjusting to the fact that Petunia, the woman she'd replaced, was indeed gone. Petunia's termination had been a shock, not because she'd been good at her job but because she'd been there doing her job badly for so long. When Mamie got promoted and took charge of the kitchen, it seemed like the first thing she did was send Petunia home.

He walked up a short flight of stairs and entered the main hall, the chandelier above him shining a harsh light on the objects in Mrs. Barclay's cabinet. He looked at the pistol that had so entranced Bart and noticed at once that the gilt was peeling on the handle; several other items on the shelves were chipped or otherwise damaged. Electric lighting, which seemed necessary only because everyone else on the block now had it, had not been kind to this house. There was a reason for the care Mrs. Lawson, the parlor maid, took to ensure each lamp was covered with a cloth of a particular weight when company came to dinner. Some of the rugs in the halls were worn down and frayed from overuse, there were water stains on the side tables in the parlor, and the velvet cushions of the couch in the conservatory were sun-bleached in places. All of these flaws had been there for years but were made disturbingly visible in the new glare.

He continued down the hall. He still remembered when he

was a boy like the three he was looking for now, how fine that house had seemed to him, the glitz and glitter of the various curios in Mrs. Barclay's cabinet sparkling in the warm glow of the gaslights. There'd been a time when he'd been convinced this was not simply the finest house he'd ever seen but perhaps the finest there ever was. Then, one day when he was fifteen, he was standing in the front yard and happened to look beyond the Barclays' fence. For the first time it occurred to him that most of the houses on the Avenue were twice the size of the one where he worked, that the Barclays had neighbors who, if they wanted to, could have bought and sold both his employers and everything they owned several times over. He must have looked over that fence a thousand times before this actually occurred to him. Before that the house had always been just another part of the block, an extension of the world it belonged to, and therefore, extremely precious.

He moved past the stairs. Perhaps the Barclays weren't as rich and important as they once were, but it was still a good house. The boys had a good thing there, whether they realized it or not. What they'd been given wasn't exactly charity but it was better than the industrial college where scores of boys and girls shivered on cold factory room floors fourteen hours a day. Here they worked hard but they slept on warm cots at night and Miss Mamie made sure they were always well fed. The Barclays were not crazy enough to be unmanageable and, miraculously for the times, still maintained an entirely colored staff. The Barclays had come to the city from Missouri thirty-five years before with their cook Mr. Boudreaux; they did not believe in race mixing in the kitchen, rightly thought it caused too many problems.

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Because Mr. Boudreaux had been colored the rest of the staff, out of necessity, had to be colored too. When he finally left, Miss Mamie, his former assistant, had been the obvious choice to take his place. This meant that so long as she continued to cook and maintain order to the Barclays' satisfaction, the opportunity to be reformed in the kitchen would remain the exclusive preserve of three colored orphans between the ages of fourteen and fifteen.

When he reached the conservatory he heard a loud, "Oooooo-hhhh!" followed by a series of childish giggles. He pushed the door open and found the three boys huddled together on the floor near the piano with Frederick at the center. From the halting sound of Frederick's voice, Mr. Sitwell could tell he was reading.

"Now that Cherokee knew that Wash Talbot, his former deputy, had been arrested, he had to make a choice: keep his vow to never again set foot in Seminole county, or let the last remaining member of his gang fall into the hands of an angry mob."

"What are you boys doing?"

They spun around in unison and blinked at him with enormous brown eyes. They were handsome children with bright round faces, thick eyebrows, full lips and skin the dark red color of cedar wood. Their features were so similar that anybody would have mistaken them for actual brothers. In truth they were not blood relatives at all; their strong bond was formed in the interest of survival, on the waterfront.

"Nothing, sir." Mac smiled, eyes all innocent. "Just sitting here reading."

"In the front of the house?"

“Oh, nobody saw us. We made sure them folks was long gone before we came in here,” Frederick said. He lifted his arms and rocked back and forth, in imitation of someone else’s waltz. “We waited until they finished dancing.”

Mr. Sitwell frowned. “Somebody saw you. I did. Saw Bart playing in the hall when I was on my way out. Then come to find you haven’t even finished cleaning the kitchen.”

“Not true, sir. Kitchen’s all done,” Bart said. “Well, except for the pots. But remember last time, how Miss Mamie told us not to disturb Mr. Barclay’s guests with a lot of banging while folks were eating dinner? Figured this time we’d just wait until the dinner was over, so as not to bother nobody.”

The boy looked very proud of himself.

“It’s alright, sir. We don’t mind working late.”

“The last guest left over an hour ago,” Mr. Sitwell said.

“Really? Dang. It didn’t feel like we’d been in here but five minutes. . . .”

The boys stared at one another, as if there were something wondrous about their shared trance.

“You mean to say we’ve been sitting here reading all that time?”

Mr. Sitwell held out his hand. “Give it to me.”

Frederick gave him the book. On the cover was a picture of a tall, thin, white man with green eyes and a long red beard, clutching a pistol in each hand.

“What is this?”

“*The Life and Times of Cherokee Red, Wild Man of The Reconstruction*,” Frederick said. “You ever read it?”

“No.”



“But you heard about him, right? Started out during the war, robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. Now his gang’s all busted up. He and his ladylove moved out west to put the past behind them and he’s been trying his hand at being a farmer. But, just when it seems like his gunslinging days are over, he finds out Wash Talbot, last surviving member of his gang, was caught stealing hogs and got himself locked up back in Florida—”

“What?”

“He stole a hog.”

“Who did?”

“Wash Talbot.”

Mr. Sitwell squinted at the cover. He’d never heard of Cherokee Red but he knew the name Wash Talbot. From when he was a boy back in Florida. Just like in the book.

He handed it to Frederick. “Where does it say that name? Show me. Wash Talbot.”

Frederick opened the book and started flipping pages. After a while he set his finger down and read.

“Another infamous member of the gang was Wash Talbot, who never would renounce his lawless ways. For years after the gang disbanded he was still hiding out in the swamps of Seminole County, a terror to the neighboring towns—”

“That’s enough,” Mr. Sitwell said. “Pernicious lies.”

“Sir?”

“I knew that man.”

“Who? Cherokee Red?”

“Wash Talbot. He was a simple farmer.”

The boys looked disappointed.

“Probably not the same man then,” Mac said. “Was your Wash from Seminole too?”

Mr. Sitwell shook his head. “I don’t recall.”

He was lying, compelled by a childhood admonishment to say nothing about where he came from, even though he realized there was no cause for it any longer. It was the same reason he’d refused to give his real name when, lured by the promise of food, he’d voluntarily entered the doors of the asylum twenty years before. And then again, a few months after that, when he found himself standing on the Barclays’ back porch, hands clasped behind his back and wedged between those other two boys.

“Where did you get this?”

“One of Mr. Barclay’s guests gave it to us after Tuesday’s party.”

Mr. Sitwell frowned.

“It’s the truth, sir,” Frederick said. “We didn’t steal it, Mr. Sitwell.”

“I’m going to have to ask Mr. Barclay about that.”

“That’s fine but . . . can we finish it first? We were just getting to the best part.”

“What part is that?”

“It’s the beginning of the end.”

Mr. Sitwell sighed. Despite the lives they’d led and the work they did, they were still such children. Yet he knew if they did not learn certain lessons they would not last long in the Barclay house, to say nothing of the world outside it.

“You boys are going to have to be more careful. You’ve got to remember who you are, you’ve got to remember where. You

shouldn't be in the front of the house. You shouldn't be talking to Mr. Barclay's guests, much less, as you say, accepting gifts from them."

"I didn't lie." Frederick pouted. "I tell you he said we could have it."

"That's not the point. What if you misunderstood the man's meaning? Or what if the man simply changed his mind? Don't you realize that an accusation of theft can be just as bad as a theft itself? Sometimes it's even worse."

"No, sir, I suppose we didn't think about those things." Frederick nodded. "I understand."

Mr. Sitwell frowned. He could tell from the boy's expression that Frederick thought he understood but also that, in truth, he did not.

"Best get back there and finish that kitchen before Miss Mamie sees it."

"Yes, sir."

They scrambled to their feet and sprinted down the hall. Mr. Sitwell stood for a moment with the book in his hands, trying to decide what to do with it.

He looked at the cover. Mr. Sitwell was only nine when he left Florida, and there were many things about those early days he no longer recalled—the name Wash Talbot, however, was not one of them. The man had been a neighbor-friend of his mother's and, as he'd told the boys, came from a family of subsistence farmers much like his own family had been. It certainly seemed more than mere coincidence that, as was true of the outlaw in the book, the Wash he remembered had come to his end over conflicting claims with a man from the neighboring town

over livestock. Except—and this too Mr. Sitwell remembered with perfect clarity—the Wash he'd known hadn't been jailed over a hog. It was a mule. And he hadn't stolen it.

He'd shot it.

He watched the boys push through the swinging door to the dining room. You had to be careful in this world. Had to take precautions, always be prepared, even if you were telling the truth. That was the thing he remembered when he thought about Wash Talbot. One thing at least. If he didn't want the boys getting in trouble it was best to take care of this now, make sure there was no misunderstanding. He reached the door to the dining room then walked past it, headed toward Mr. Barclay's study.

The room, as expected, was still lit. Mr. Barclay did most of his work at night; the dinner parties that preceded these long evenings were just a part of how the man conducted his business. Through the half-opened door he saw his employer seated behind his desk, hunched over a stack of papers. A man in his sixties now, he'd gotten fat and lost most of his hair in the twenty years Mr. Sitwell had worked for him. He had bushy eyebrows and small, pale eyes that reminded Mr. Sitwell of glass beads.

"Is that you, Sitwell? What on earth are you doing in my house, lurking about in the dark, at this time of night?"

Mr. Sitwell nodded and tried to smile. He was already in the room before he recalled the foul mood his employer had been in lately. Mr. Barclay was a speculator by trade, which, so far as Mr. Sitwell could tell, meant he bought and sold properties he hadn't the least amount of knowledge about or interest in. Somehow he managed to make a good living this way, but it was a bit like musical chairs. As had happened a few times in the past, follow-

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ing the recent financial panic he'd found himself sitting atop ownership shares of several food manufacturing plants, charged with the sudden and somehow unexpected task of actually trying to make them profitable.

"Yes, sir. Hope I didn't startle you. I was just on my way out when I come across the kitchen boys with this."

He held up the book.

Mr. Barclay squinted. "What is it?"

"A book, sir. It looks like a book."

"What are you showing it to me for?"

"Kitchen boys had it. Told me one of your guests gave it to them after Tuesday's party. Sounded unusual is all. I just wanted to make sure it was alright for them to have it."

"Last Tuesday?" Mr. Barclay blinked. "Who was that? The Southerners? That doesn't make sense. Southerners don't give books to colored children. Hand it over."

He took the book. Mr. Sitwell watched him strain his mind to recall the events of the Tuesday before, the effort making him seem very old. After a while he set it back down on his desk.

"Alright, yes, I do remember. One of those Florida jokers was passing these out like party favors. I forget why. Might have been claiming some relation to the protagonist."

"Yeah? From Florida?"

"The two I'm after, yes. Had a whole group of them in here, trying to make them feel at home. Got a concern I'm after down there. They'll be back on Friday. I'm still trying to unload some of this junk. . . ."

Mr. Sitwell nodded. He was aware of Mr. Barclay's current negotiations, at least so far as they affected the kitchen. After

accepting that there was no way to divest himself from the food business without taking a substantial loss, Mr. Barclay had discovered an urgent need to shift production at one of his plants to the south where labor was cheaper. There was a functional plant on the market that Mr. Barclay was interested in purchasing but could not afford to do so until he sold one of his current ones. This meant he was negotiating two deals at once: one with a group of New Englanders he hoped to sell to and the other with a group of Southerners he hoped to buy from. Because of the particular way Mr. Barclay conducted his business, this also meant a lot of entertaining. Mr. Barclay was convinced that contracts were best negotiated on his home turf, preferably after a good meal, and Miss Mamie had been complaining all week about the difficulty of trying to come up with menus for two such divergent palates on the tight budget she'd been allotted for it.

Mr. Sitwell nodded to the book. "You say these Florida men claim some relation to this man on the cover?"

"I don't know, Sitwell. I don't listen to all the nonsense coming from the mouths of fools. I've got other things on my mind."

"But the ones you're dealing with . . . There's two of them?"

"That's right. Cousins."

"They tell you their names?"

"Well, of course, they . . ."

Mr. Barclay sighed. "Look here, Sitwell. What is this? Why are you bothering me with all these questions? Are you saying the boys are thieves? You come here to tell me you suspect they stole this book?"

"No sir. Just the opposite," Mr. Sitwell said quickly. "I just

wanted to make sure that they didn't get nothing confused somehow. Don't want them getting into trouble. Thought it best to bring it to you straightaways."

He watched Mr. Barclay's eyes glaze over.

"What do you think I do in here, Sitwell? At night, when you see a white man sitting behind a desk? And it's late and he's tired and should be in bed sleeping? I'm asking because I'd really like an answer. Do I look busy to you? Because it occurs to me that maybe if a man hasn't got a hoe or a shovel or a slop bucket in his hand, it doesn't appear to you that he's actually working."

Mr. Sitwell said nothing.

"How long have you been here anyhow?"

"A long time, sir. A very long time."

"Well, that's true now, isn't it?" Mr. Barclay said. "Never mind, Sitwell. You did right coming to me instead of Mamie. Matter of fact, speaking of the boys . . . Why don't you shut that door for a minute? I have a question for you."

Mr. Sitwell shut the door and sat down.

"How old are those children, anyway?"

"Mac and Frederick are fourteen. Bart just turned fifteen."

"And they are doing alright in that kitchen? You and Mamie are pleased with them so far?"

"Extremely pleased," Mr. Sitwell said. "They are good boys."

Mr. Barclay nodded. "Something I need to know. Can't ask Mamie, she's worse than you with the questions. So maybe you can help."

"Certainly, sir."

"I want you to tell me, if it came down to it, which one of those boys would you let go first?"

“Sir?”

“It’s a simple question. I’m asking you to make a choice.”

“But why?”

“I have to cut back on household expenses. Things have been hard since the downturn and, as much as I am dedicated to continuing my wife’s charity work, I’ll not endanger the stability of the house to it. And that means one of those boys has got to go.”

Mr. Sitwell shifted in his seat. Had he been inclined to speak his mind he would have reminded his employer that it was only charity so long as one discounted the fact that a grown man asked to do the same work would have demanded more than the two dollars a week the three boys were content to split between themselves.

Instead he said, “Are you sure you need to do that? I mean, I can’t imagine those boys account for a very large expense. If we need to cut back, perhaps there’s something else we might do, something that would have more of an impact on the actual—”

“No. Now, look, I don’t expect you to understand. But I’ve given this a great deal of thought and I simply cannot go on supporting all three of those children. We’ll just have to hope that the time the child has already spent here will have some sort of enduring civilizing effect.”

“Yes, sir. But . . . The boys are so close. They work so well together. How could I possibly pick one?”

“Well, you pick the one you deem the least valuable, of course. That’s usually how such things are done. It’s a simple question, Sitwell. Just answer it.”

“I really can’t say, sir,” Mr. Sitwell said. “I’d need time to think about it.”



“Well, you do that. You think about it. But do it in your own home, understand? Because it’s late and I want you out of mine. You can give me your answer tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Barclay gave the book a push toward the edge of the desk with the tip of his finger. “Take this nonsense with you. Let them keep it, I really don’t care.”

Mr. Sitwell picked up the book and walked out of the man’s study.

When he got back to the kitchen, the boys were hard at work washing pots. Had they simply followed instructions they would have been finished hours before, but by the way they laughed and jostled one another he could tell they’d been telling the truth: They didn’t mind working late. They’d meant what they’d said, had only been trying to be helpful and not disturb Mr. Barclay’s guests. They were good boys.

“Miss Jennie went to put the napkins away,” Frederick said. “Said to tell you she’d be right back.”

Mr. Sitwell nodded.

All at once, without thinking about it or even wanting to, Mr. Sitwell realized that he did know which one he would send away if it ever came down to that: Frederick. Not because he was the least valuable but, on the contrary, because he was the strongest. He’d seen the way Frederick looked out for the other two. The boy was a natural leader, the one of the three who stood the best chance of surviving if he ever were to find himself alone in the world. He was also the only one who could actually read, which would have meant the removal of a powerful distraction for Mac and Bart, and yet might also make him seem more desirable to

a potential employer who had not had occasion to take such a consideration into account.

This thought and the ease with which it manifested itself in his mind disturbed Mr. Sitwell so greatly that he had to look away from them. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest and his left eye began to twitch. Before he knew it, he had worked himself into such a state that when Jennie walked up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder he was so startled he flinched.

“Goodness, I’m sorry,” Jennie said. She’d put on her coat and had a small green hat fitted on her head. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. Where’d you go anyhow?”

“Had to do something for the boys.”

He started to tell her about seeing Bart through the window but realized that might somehow lead to having to talk about his conversation with Mr. Barclay.

“They’re sweet, aren’t they?”

“I worry about them,” Mr. Sitwell said.

“Why? They look happy to me.”

Mr. Sitwell could feel Jennie studying his expression. He nodded and tried to look normal.

“You started out like them, didn’t you? Apprentice in the kitchen? How old were you when you came here from the asylum?”

“Fourteen, maybe.”

“And you’re not from around here are you?”

“No, ma’am. Florida.”

“Oh, yeah? Had some Florida white folks over last week. Miss

Mamie was complaining about how ignorant they were. . . . Not a lot of your people up here, I imagine. You get lonely?”

“I don’t hardly remember it no how.”

“No?”

She looked back at the boys.

“Well, you shouldn’t worry about them. They’ve got each other. And they’ve got Miss Mamie looking after them, teaching them how to cook. Wants them to leave here knowing how to do something. It’s a lot more than I had at their age, believe me. I suspect they’ll be alright.”

They walked out together, through the garden, down the driveway, past the front gate and on to Prescott Avenue. The streets were quiet at that time of night, the sidewalk lit up by the dim glow of the gas lamps. They moved past the great houses that lined the block then turned on to Olliana; when they got to the omnibus stop the only other people there were two white women with thick ankles, gray coats slung over their matching maids’ uniforms as they talked to each other in a language that sounded like German.

Mr. Sitwell stood next to Jennie with his hands in his pockets. He looked at the trees running down the center of the Avenue and tried to think of something to say that wasn’t dull. His mind was still rattled, not so much by Mr. Barclay’s question as the ease with which he’d found an answer to it. And now Jennie was standing right beside him. She looked so pretty and he knew he was frowning, which somehow made everything he thought to say to her sound that much duller in his head. So he kept quiet.

The omnibus pulled to the stop and they followed the two maids inside. The four of them rode two stops together and the

maids got off; a skinny drunk got on, rode the car one stop and stumbled off again. The car was empty for a little while and then a large group of people got on; Jennie saw someone she recognized and threw her arm up to wave. All of a sudden Mr. Sitwell found himself a part of a crowd standing over him and smiling, all of them just as pretty as Jennie was. They were laughing and talking fast as they gripped the handrail and swayed from side to side.

Mr. Sitwell did not sway. Instead he stared down at his hands in his lap. He still had the book in the pocket of his jacket and, while Jennie talked to her friends, he pulled it out and looked at the cover, pretending to be distracted by the words on the front, although in truth Mr. Sitwell could not read. Still, just looking at the picture was enough to make him think about it. He remembered Barclay saying that the two men passing the book out had claimed relation to the man on the cover. He wondered if it was possible that there really was another Wash Talbot in Seminole County, an entirely different Wash from the one he'd known. And if this white Wash had happened to meet with a fate parallel to the colored Wash he still remembered.

He glanced at Jennie, remembered Mamie saying something about being glad she'd found a girl who'd been to school. If they were alone he might have asked her what the book said. But they weren't alone and he didn't want to spoil what seemed to be a happy mood.

"Come on out with us tonight, Jennie. You can bring your handsome man too."

"Oh, Aggie. He's not my man. He's a friend from work. Anyhow, I can't. You know I've got to get home."

"You mean that big old girl can't take care of herself yet?"

## THE RIB KING

Someone snorted and a couple of people laughed while Jennie frowned. For a moment, the swaying seemed to stop.

“That was a joke, Jennie. I didn’t mean it. We just miss you is all.”

Jennie glanced at Mr. Sitwell then turned back to her friend. “Still?”

“Yes, girl. Still.”

A hand reached out and squeezed Jennie’s shoulder. “Always.”

Jennie nodded. “I’ll stop by Saturday if I get a chance.”

“Any time. You know you’re always welcome.”

The car lurched to a stop near the theatre district and they all filed out at once. Jennie spun around in her seat, rapped her knuckle on the glass, waved good-bye, and laughed at something she saw out the window. Then the doors closed and the car started moving. She sank back in her seat and stared straight ahead.

When the car stopped again she stood up.

“Well, Sitwell. This is me. You take care and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

But Mr. Sitwell stood up too.

“No. Really, it’s alright. You’re sweet, but I don’t need anybody to walk me home. Believe it or not, I’ve been doing it for years.”

“That’s not the point,” Mr. Sitwell said. He tucked the book into his pocket and followed her out on to the street.

They walked along the crowded avenue.

“So you live around here too, do you?”

“Sure,” Mr. Sitwell lied. “Anyhow, it’s a nice evening and I like to walk. . . .”

Jennie didn't say anything. They made their way to the end of the block and turned a corner. She stopped in front of a two-story brick building.

"Well, now, Sitwell. This really is it. I would ask you inside for a cup of tea but—"

"I know. It's late," Mr. Sitwell said. "Perhaps some other time? I imagine you eat dinner."

"Once a day," Jennie said. "I mean, yes, that would be very nice. . . ."

She looked toward the house. Mr. Sitwell turned and saw the silhouette of a young woman waving back at them from a window on the second floor.

"That where you stay? That your roommate?"

"Something like that." Jennie took a deep breath and shut her eyes. "That is my daughter, Mr. Sitwell."

Mr. Sitwell looked at the girl in the window for a moment then looked back at Jennie.

"Don't act so startled," Jennie said.

"No, I'm not. It's just . . ."

But he was startled. He couldn't help it, without wanting to he was adding numbers in his mind. The girl in the window was at least as old as the boys and Jennie couldn't possibly have been older than twenty-five. . . .

"What is it, Mr. Sitwell? Something wrong? Women do have children, you know. They have them all the time. And sometimes when they do it's a blessing, understand?"

"Yes. Of course, I know that. It's just . . . I didn't know you had a child."

Jennie frowned. "That's because I didn't think it was appro-

priate to talk about such things at my place of employment. It's nobody's business. I do my job and then I come home. Alone. Understand?"

"Yes. Of course."

Jennie narrowed her eyes.

"Why don't you run along now, Sitwell? You've done enough. Got me safely to my door. Think about whether you still want to have dinner sometime. And when you decide, let me know."

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, of course I do."

He shook his head. He didn't understand what was happening but could feel things going wrong. He knew he needed to change the subject. He still had his hand wrapped around the book in his pocket; he pulled it out and tried to smile.

"You really been to school?"

"Why? I said so, didn't I? Never said I graduated. Got through a whole semester at the nurses' college before I had to stop. Had responsibilities. But I'm not a liar if that's what you—"

"No, I didn't mean . . ."

It was hopeless. He could feel a foul mood creeping up on him, like a shadow.

"I should let you see to your daughter."

"Yes, you should," Jennie said. "Thanks again for walking me. Real nice of you. But maybe now you'll understand when I tell you it's not necessary. I've got no problem taking care of myself, Sitwell."

"Yes, ma'am. . . ." He tipped his hat. "I understand."

He turned around and started walking home.

It seemed as if he'd messed up everything, first with the boys and then with Jennie. He tried to remember what he'd thought

would happen that night and found that vast parts of his mind were blank. It seemed nothing but foolish to have imagined she might have liked him. She belonged with the bright happy pretty people who rode the streetcar. People whose eyes danced when they talked. People who swayed.

The city was full of them and as he moved down the sidewalk they were all around him, everywhere he looked. Everybody rushing past him in a hurry to get somewhere. As long as he'd been in that city he'd never felt like he truly belonged. A part of him would always be country, his true home would always be a small village hidden in the swamps of Seminole County that, for the first eight years of his life, was the only world he had known. Founded by three runaway slaves back in days when much of the state was still unsettled land; they'd stolen a map from the man who'd owned them, run toward its nearest edge, and then kept running, wanting nothing more than to get off it. They'd made a home in the swamps, out of a landscape so wild and unmanageable that for a long time no one thought to claim it. Over time they had been joined by others—runaways like Sitwell's mother and his uncle Max, vanquished indigenous, deserters from various wars. For years they'd kept safe by sticking together and keeping to themselves. It wasn't until after the Civil War that people like Sitwell's mother and Wash Talbot started venturing outside, lured by the promise of paper money in exchange for work in what was by then one of several nearby towns.

He pulled the book out again and stared at the cover: a sneering white man whose eyes had been rendered a vivid green. And there in the quiet of his own thoughts, he started to remember



## THE RIB KING

things. He remembered how, as a child back in Seminole, he'd once met a man with eyes that color, and also that, when he'd asked who the man was and what he was doing there, his mother told him he'd come to attend funeral services for Wash. But aside from the color of their eyes, the man on the cover, with his straight hair, long beard, and top lip curled back in a savage grin, looked nothing like the one he was thinking of. That man had been small and compact, with a smooth, tan face and a high, bushy mop of brown hair. Mr. Sitwell couldn't recall the man's name, but he'd never forget the day he'd showed up on his mother's doorstep. It was the day before the shooting started and the last time he'd helped his mother bake a cake.

Mr. Sitwell kept walking. Before she ran away his mother had been a slave in a grand house in St. Augustine; it was there that she'd learned to cook. She was so good at it that even after Wash's hanging, when all of the other villagers who worked in the town had been sent home and told not to come back, Mrs. Farley, the woman his mother cooked for, had kept his mother on because Mr. Farley's birthday was coming up and Mrs. Farley wanted a cake.

He rounded a corner and remembered how, when he and his mother got into the wagon to go to town that last morning, the green-eyed man had sat on their porch waving good-bye. And when they returned that afternoon he was still sitting there, a rifle laid across his lap.

"How did it go, Lotta?" he'd asked Sitwell's mother.

"About what you expected."

The man helped her unload the wagon then followed them back inside the small cabin they shared with Uncle Max. Sit-

well's mother took off her jacket. She set her bag down on the kitchen table and said, "Mr. Farley called you a ghost nigger."

"Did he now?" The man smiled. "Well, now, Lotta, I got to admit. That's actually kind of funny."

Mr. Sitwell stared at the book's cover. Was that man Cherokee Red? A colored version to go with the colored Wash? Mr. Sitwell could not recall ever seeing him before the day he showed up for Wash's funeral and didn't remember ever being told the man's actual name. But of course he must have been told; it was just that so many people had come back to attend Wash's service and he hadn't known which ones he should be paying attention to, hadn't known what was important to remember. It was entirely possible that other people had called the man Cherokee and Mr. Sitwell had simply forgotten.

Now, amid the noise and clatter of the city streets, the man's voice came back to him, followed by his mother's laughter. Sounds from his past, which, though soothing in some ways, were not actually comforting. Because he *missed* those sounds and hearing them again only reminded him of how alone he now was, how far from anything that resembled home. They reminded him of a time when he'd been part of a world he hadn't paid much attention to because he'd never imagined himself being outside of it. Reminded him that his real home would always be a small village in the swamps of Florida that twenty years before he'd been forced to stand and watch as it burned to the ground.

All these memories summoned by a book he couldn't even read. Things he hadn't thought about in years seemed to push against his current mood, filling him with a sense that there was

something he was supposed to do. He looked at the cover. The man staring back at him sure looked white, but what if he'd only been drawn that way? There'd been people in his village who looked just as white as the Barclays, a couple of them with blond hair and blue eyes. But they'd been colored; he'd known they were colored simply by the fact that they were there. That's how things were in Seminole County; everybody seemed to just know who belonged where. If the man who drew the cover didn't understand that, he might have gotten confused.

He turned another corner, walked across the street, and finally saw the awning for his rooming house. He passed through the door and made his way to the front desk where Billy, the nephew of the woman who owned the house, was working behind the counter.

"You read don't you, Billy?"

"When I got to. Gives me a headache. Why? What you want, Sitwell?"

Mr. Sitwell put the book on the counter. "I want you to find the name Wash Talbot in there. I need to know whether he's colored or not."

Billy shook his head. "Afraid I'm gonna have to charge you for that. Not so much for the reading as the headache that comes with it."

Mr. Sitwell pulled a penny from his pocket.

Billy took the coin and picked up the book. He flipped through the pages, stopping every time he saw the name Wash Talbot written inside. The name appeared several times, usually in relation to some shoot-out or robbery. It was clear, from the brief passages Billy read aloud, that this Wash was not part

of any community Mr. Sitwell remembered but rather a brutal savage who'd spent his youth as a lawless outlaw hiding in the swamps.

Furthermore, Billy assured him, the book's Wash was, like the man on the cover and all the other people inside, without question white.

He shut the book. "Satisfied?"

Mr. Sitwell shook his head. Whoever wrote the book, if they hadn't even got that part right, surely didn't know what they were talking about. Perhaps the author had heard of the terrible events that had taken place in Seminole after Wash Talbot's murder and simply fabricated what he considered to be a suitable tale to precede it. The fire that had destroyed his village and sent Mr. Sitwell running all the way to the city had, in truth, sent people running from all over the county. Perhaps someone told the book's author about the violence, or maybe he'd read about it in a newspaper. The rest he must have made up on his own.

He looked at the cover again and could feel his confusion give way to anger. What did this Cherokee and a white Wash have to do with his people, with him? And now there was someone sitting in the Barclays' parlor, claiming relation to the man on the cover, passing out this book full of lies?

He slapped the book back on the counter. "See if it's got a Lotta Smith in there."

"Why? Who's that?"

"My mama."

"Mama? I didn't know you had a mama."

Mr. Sitwell narrowed his eyes. "Everybody got a mama, fool."

## THE RIB KING

“I know, I just . . .”

Someone walked to the counter wanting his mail. Billy sighed and shook his head.

“Give me a minute.” He went to fetch their mail.

When he came back Mr. Sitwell asked him, “How much I have to pay you to just go ahead and read the whole thing?”

“What do you mean? You mean read it to you? This whole book?”

“I got some questions. Need you to read enough to answer my questions.”

“In that case, the cost is gonna depend on what your questions are.”

Mr. Sitwell told him what he wanted to know and they agreed on a price. He gave Billy his money and went upstairs to his room.

He unlocked the door and tossed his keys on his table. He changed out of his clothes and watered his plants. Then he clicked off the light and went to bed.

That night Mr. Sitwell had troublesome sleep, full of strange dreams he did not understand. In the one he remembered when he woke up the next morning, he was lying in the grass reading a book when he felt someone reach down and tap him on the shoulder. He looked up and saw a woman in a long white dress standing over him, one hand gripping the bar handle of a mask with a face drawn on it, which she held in front of her own.

“Put that away,” she called from behind the mask.

Mr. Sitwell looked down at the book in his hands. “But this is the best part.”

LADEE HUBBARD

“Fair enough,” the woman said. “But you’re gonna have to finish it later.”

She held out her free hand.

“Right now, we’ve got to go.”

## 2

# A Matter of Taste

Mr. Sitwell woke up the next morning feeling no more rested than he had the night before. He lay on his back and stared at a long, thin crack that ran along his ceiling like a vein for a full twenty minutes before he even realized that he was actually awake. Then he turned his head, saw the potted plant on the windowsill beside his bed, the washbasin on the stand in the corner beneath the mirror, and the small wooden table and single chair in the middle of the floor. Somehow soothed by the blank familiarity of his own room, he realized he was no longer angry.

If anything, he had a hard time recalling how he'd managed to work himself into such a state the night before. It wasn't like

him, and he felt a little silly thinking back to how he'd slapped that dollar on the counter and demanded Billy find answers to questions that, in the clear light of day, no longer seemed to matter much at all. He already knew the book was full of lies. And even if that wasn't the case, it was hard to see why it should have made such a difference. That was his past, a reminder of a world he barely remembered and far from the life he lived now.

Out in the hall one of the other men renting a room on the second floor cleared his throat as he shuffled past Mr. Sitwell's door on his way to the washroom. Mr. Sitwell had lived in the house since he was sixteen years old, when he'd had to clear out of the Barclays' cellar to make room for a new group of orphans; the two he'd arrived with had been caught stealing and were sent away long before. Things were harder back then; it had been difficult to find a place to live that was both decent and affordable and also in a neighborhood that didn't prohibit colored people from moving in. He'd felt lucky to find a room in a gas-lit house on Union Street with an elderly widow willing to rent out one of her bedrooms to him. Then, a few years later, the widow, eager to profit from a sudden influx of colored people moving to the city, had paid to have renovations done to the downstairs, installed a proper front desk, and converted the parlor and library into four additional rentable rooms. The result had been a sharp decline in quality as suddenly Mr. Sitwell found himself no longer renting a room in a house but living in a proper rooming house.

"That's what I said. Isn't that what I just said?" a woman's voice came through the wall. Technically, women weren't allowed inside, but the widow was hard of hearing and if you



slipped Billy enough money pretty much anything was possible. The man living on the other side of the wall was a Pullman porter who only used the room for weekend trysts when he was in town. The other two rooms on Mr. Sitwell's floor were currently occupied by a waiter and a nervous man who was unemployed but claimed he was a hairdresser by trade. Mr. Sitwell didn't expect they'd be there long; people passing through the house now rented a room for a month or two while they were looking for something else—sometimes something better but more often, something even cheaper. Still, Mr. Sitwell saw no reason to leave. He was comfortable enough and so, at the age of twenty-nine, was technically the building's most senior occupant, aside from the widow herself.

"You better tell that heifer to let you alone," the woman shouted through the wall. He listened as she and the porter laughed. Then he stood up, grabbed his towel from his nightstand and washed his face in the basin. He put on his clothes, locked the door, and walked downstairs.

He pushed through the front door and stepped out into the gray dawn. Mr. Sitwell walked two blocks and made his way to the corner stop, where a row of women in sturdy shoes was already waiting for the omnibus. When it arrived they all climbed aboard and together rode past the two-story brick buildings that made up much of the south side.

Mr. Sitwell stared out the window until they reached Magazine Square, at which point he sank down into his seat and lowered his eyes. Although technically against city ordinance, it was common knowledge that blacks were not welcome to live or shop there; the neighborhood was notorious for the violence

in their efforts to keep black people out. Because of this, most people avoided the area altogether and Mr. Sitwell, for his part, didn't even like to look at it through the window as they rode past. He'd been taught from a very young age by his uncle Max that some people required the same treatment as wild animals: do not feed or molest them. Keep your dealings with them to a minimum and under no circumstances look them directly in the eye, because they tend to regard this as a threatening gesture and become enraged. This advice seemed particularly prudent lately because a large group of them had been on strike for several months and staged protests almost daily. It was his understanding that part of their antagonism toward the colored race stemmed from the fact that, as opposed to addressing their demands, the Employers' Association had attempted to blunt the effects of the strike by hiring scabs, most of whom were black men.

He was back at the Olliana stop by seven thirty. He walked down the Avenue, then pushed through the Barclays' front gate and made his way up the long drive. As he rounded the back of the house he heard the kitchen door slam shut, looked up, and saw Mamie hurrying down the steps, headed toward the larder. Mrs. Lawson, the Barclays' parlor maid, rushed out after her.

"Don't try to hide from me, Mamie Price," Mrs. Lawson said. "I want you to look at what your girl did to Mr. Barclay's shirt."

Mamie made it all the way to the larder door and had her hand on the lock before she stopped and turned around. Just over five feet tall, she was a woman in her early thirties who always looked harried without somehow looking hard. She was wearing a long gray smock dress and work boots and, as Mrs. Lawson

scowled, she kept her hand on the lock clenched so tightly that it seemed like her grip was all that was holding her upright.

“That’s not her job.”

“Since when? Where do you think we are? That’s not how things work around here and you know it.”

Mrs. Lawson, a tall, thin, hazel-eyed woman in her mid-fifties whose long nose and stony profile reminded Mr. Sitwell of a cigar store Indian, stopped talking as soon as she saw him walking past them on his way to the porch. He nodded and then, instead of going into the kitchen as planned, turned toward the vegetable garden. He had no intention of being drawn into their disagreement; he’d been working in that house for twenty years and knew that when the two of them started arguing the best he could do was stay out of it.

“Wasn’t doing anything but sitting out here smoking,” Mrs. Lawson said. “I told her if she had time for that, she could come back in the house and help me. And just look what she did.” Ms. Lawson waved one of Mr. Barclay’s shirts over her head like a white flag. “It doesn’t even make sense, starching a collar the way she done.”

“The girl just got started,” Mamie said.

“Well, that’s the point, isn’t it, Mamie? We don’t need anybody who ‘just got started’ here. Not now. As if I don’t have enough to deal with now that Mr. Thomas is gone. . . . Petunia might have been slow, but at least when she finally got around to doing something she did it the right way.”

“Petunia’s gone.”

“Yes, Mamie. I realize that. I’m asking you why. When you

sent Petunia away from here I just assumed you were going to find someone with some experience.”

“Experience costs too much,” Mamie said. “You know Barclay can’t afford that right now. Had to settle for smart enough to train.”

“So how is that any better than what we had before?” Mrs. Lawson shook her head. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mamie Price. Turning Petunia out like that. Maybe nobody else around here has the nerve to tell you to your face but don’t think they’re not talking about it. It’s starting to seem like nobody’s safe so long as you in charge.”

“Yeah? Well, I am in charge.”

“For now.”

“That’s right. For now. And so long as it’s true, I suggest you take your bony behind back inside and get to work. I mean, if you want to keep your job.”

There was a brief silence, then the sound of a door slamming shut.

Mr. Sitwell kept his head down. A full minute passed before he found the nerve to glance behind him, and when he did, Miss Mamie was still standing on the porch.

“You heard that didn’t you, Sitwell? The nonsense I got to deal with? And every damn day? I know you heard it.”

Mr. Sitwell nodded. He didn’t want to talk about it, but the fact was Ms. Lawson had been telling the truth—she wasn’t the only one in the house still feeling prickly about Petunia being sent away.

“You think I wanted to send anyone away from here? Mr. Barclay made me do that. Said we needed to cut down on ex-

penses, that someone had to go. Either it was Petunia or somebody else.”

Mr. Sitwell said nothing. He’d figured as much. Just like he knew that Petunia’s leaving wouldn’t have been so contentious if they weren’t already so understaffed. Shortly after Mr. Boudreaux left, Mr. Thomas, the butler, had suffered a heart attack. The man was over eighty so his passing was hardly sudden, but Mr. Barclay had been distraught. When Mamie took over for Mr. Boudreaux she’d naturally assumed that her first job would be to help find a suitable replacement for the butler. Instead Mr. Barclay had told her it would have to wait and reluctantly adjusted to being forced to dress himself, which he seemed to regard as a form of mourning. For the time being, not only would Mr. Thomas not be replaced, she would have to make further reductions to the staff.

“You know, Mr. Sitwell. I got to say. Every time I come out here it occurs to me just how smart you are. Stay out here in the sun all day, with the trees and the plants and the flowers. Flowers don’t talk nasty to you, do they, Mr. Sitwell? Flowers don’t try to call you out by your name, do they Mr. Sitwell?”

Mr. Sitwell shrugged.

“Yeah, you’re smart, alright,” Mamie said. “You and your durned plants . . .”

The porch door slammed shut.

Mr. Sitwell frowned. He’d planned on warning her about what Mr. Barclay had in mind for the boys as soon as he saw her that morning, but now he was glad he’d kept the troublesome news to himself. It seemed odd, but the best thing he figured he could do for those children was not tell the one person in

the house he knew cared even more than he did. But now was not the time. So much depended on Mr. Barclay's negotiations going well and, to the extent that those negotiations were at all effected by the meals that accompanied them, the best thing Mamie could do to help those boys was focus on doing her job.

Besides, sometime during his commute that morning Mr. Sitwell had managed to convince himself that things with the boys would never come to that. Mr. Barclay was in a state because of the stress of his current negotiations and Mr. Sitwell knew that there was no point trying to reason with him when he got like that. But it was also clear the man was not thinking straight. It was just a fact that the care and feeding of three boys was such a meager expense that it hardly made a bit of difference to the household finances one way or another. Once Barclay sorted out his deals with the New Englanders and the Southerners he was bound to be in a more reasonable mood. All Mr. Sitwell had to do was find an excuse to hold off on Barclay's request for another week or two; after that he was certain he could convince the man to pursue a more sensible course.

When the coast was clear, he stood up and went to the kitchen to have his morning coffee. Seated at the table, eating the biscuits Mamie left out for staff, was Mr. Whitmore, the Barclays' driver. As he walked to the stove, Mr. Sitwell glanced at Mr. Whitmore's rheumy eyes.

"Rough night?"

"Not so much rough as long," Mr. Whitmore said. He bared his teeth as he smiled, and Mr. Sitwell was reminded how little he seemed to belong there. Mr. Whitmore had worked as a meat cutter for twelve years before he came to work for the Barclays.

## THE RIB KING

The career change had meant a sharp cut in pay, but he seemed overly fond of the jacket, starched collar, and doffer's cap of a chauffeur.

"Woman kick you out again?"

"She thinks she did. Truth is I ran," Mr. Whitmore said. "Got half a mind to stay gone this time too."

Mr. Sitwell nodded. "What was it this time?"

"Same as always. Nothing. She got mad because I went out for drinks with my uncle."

"Uncle?"

Mr. Whitmore and Mr. Boudreaux were related through marriage. Mr. Whitmore's installation on staff had been one of the final changes Mr. Boudreaux had made to the house before he was told to leave it.

"That's right, Sitwell," Mr. Whitmore said. "Just because he's not working here doesn't mean the man has ceased to exist. I still see him from time to time, have a drink, catch up on old times. What's wrong with that?" He shook his head. "But it's all just carousing to her. Well, I'm sick of it, and Uncle says I got cause. Who wants to come home to a woman like that? No, sir. Not me."

He smiled. "Truth told I've been thinking about moving on to greener pastures for a while now."

"That right?"

Mr. Whitmore grunted. "Got my eye on that new girl, that Jennie. What do you think, Sitwell? She's looking mighty ripe to me."

"Don't talk like that in here," Mr. Sitwell said quickly. He nodded toward the boys. "It's not the place."

“No? Well, what is the place? We’re in the kitchen aren’t we? How should I talk in the kitchen?”

“Quite frankly, Louis, I’d prefer it if you didn’t talk at all. If you must, try to talk like you understand what it is you are doing here. Like you understand this is a place of business.”

“Place of business?” Mr. Whitmore laughed. “Your whole life is a place of business. Does that mean you always talk like that? Like you’re being paid to work?” He squinted. “It’s the tone I’m curious about. Like say you’re laying up in bed with a woman, assuming such a thing would ever happen.” He winked. “What do you sound like then, Mr. Sitwell?”

“Ask your mother,” Mr. Sitwell said.

Mr. Whitmore reared his head. For an instant he appeared mad enough to strike Mr. Sitwell. But then he looked around and seemed to remember where he was.

He laughed.

“See? There it is. That’s what I was looking for. I knew you were still in there somewhere. I’m just trying to draw it out.”

Mr. Sitwell sipped his coffee. Mr. Whitmore was a troublesome fool. Mr. Sitwell knew that the only reason Mamie hadn’t sent him away instead of Petunia was because, even if it wasn’t his actual job, the man still handled a knife like nobody’s business. It saved a lot of money to have a man on staff who, regardless of his official title, knew how to properly butcher a hog. Mamie had told Mr. Sitwell that, for all the meat that passed through that city, it was a sight more difficult to find someone with Mr. Whitmore’s skills who was willing to work for what they could afford to pay than she would have imagined before she’d actually had cause to try.



He saluted the man with his cup. "Just be careful you don't draw something else out, Whitmore. Something you wouldn't like."

"Yessum, boss," Mr. Whitmore said in an exaggerated southern drawl. "Whatever you say." He smiled. "How's that? For your kitchen talk?"

Then the swinging door opened and Mamie came into the kitchen. "Why are you still sitting there, Whitmore? I asked you to bring in those boxes."

"I'm gonna get to it as soon as I have my coffee."

"Nobody paying you to drink coffee."

"No, ma'am. But then again nobody paying me to bring in boxes either," Mr. Whitmore said. "I'm just kidding."

Mamie nodded. "Sitwell? Would you mind taking a sniff of Mr. Whitmore's cup, make sure there's no whiskey in it? Understand drinking is hereditary. Might turn out unemployment is too."

"I was just joking around," Mr. Whitmore said.

"Well, don't. Just finish your coffee, get up off your ass, and do what I told you to do."

She pushed back through the swinging door.

"Bitch," Mr. Whitmore said.

"Watch yourself."

"It's true isn't it? I mean you saw what she did to Petunia. To say nothing of my poor uncle. Man trained her and how does she repay him? By taking his job first chance she got."

"Your uncle was caught drinking in the larder. Mamie had nothing to do with that."

"You believe that? That somehow Mr. Barclay just happened

to go into the larder during my uncle's midday nap? What the hell was Mr. Barclay doing in the larder? No. My uncle was set up. By that woman. Because she wanted his job."

Mr. Sitwell shrugged. "Maybe she did want his job. Doesn't change the fact that she wouldn't have gotten it if he hadn't been drinking."

"So what if he was? What difference did it make, so long as he got the job done? That woman can't run no kitchen. Why do you think every time I turn around she's asking me to do something back here? Wasn't like this on Uncle's watch because the man handled business. Plus you got to give it to him. He can cook."

"She's better," Mr. Sitwell said.

"You think?"

"It's just a fact."

Mr. Whitmore, who clearly did not agree, walked out the kitchen door.

Mr. Sitwell finished his coffee. Then he took his cup and placed it in the sink. Truth was there were a lot of things going on in that house that would have to be dealt with sooner or later; it wasn't just Whitmore. Ever since she took over Mamie had been doing many unconventional things to try to keep down costs, like having Mr. Sitwell stand in as footman on those occasions she considered too important for the boys to handle. Mr. Sitwell did not mind the added responsibility; he understood it was temporary and was more concerned about her increasing reliance on ingredients taken from the fields near the fairgrounds as essential components of her evening meals. Some of these Mr. Sitwell had stumbled upon growing

## THE RIB KING

wild and some were there because Mamie had asked him to plant them. Mr. Barclay would have fired them on the spot if he knew how many field roots and vegetables had found a place on his dinner table. But there was not enough room in the vegetable garden to grow everything Mamie needed for some of the Barclays' favorite recipes and, quite frankly, some of these ingredients would have cost a fortune if Mamie tried to buy them at the market. It was an inconvenience, but so far the biggest problem was making sure that the tramps who slept there at night did not eat them themselves.

"Mr. Sitwell?"

He turned around and saw Frederick standing behind his chair.

"We're running out of bicarbonate. And I heard Mrs. Lawson say something about needing more bluing for the wash. And it occurred to me that perhaps you might like some fertilizer. You want me to ask Miss Mamie if she don't mind letting us go to the market to pick that up for you? I mean if you want it now. That way we can just go out and get it all at once."

Mr. Sitwell squinted at the peculiar phrasing of the offer.

"I take it all three of you must go?"

"Yes, sir. Take three to carry all that," Frederick said. "Also, it's colored day at the fair. Don't come but once a month and we already missed the last four. They keep changing the day, for some reason. Thought maybe we could stop by on our way to the market. I figured if I said you needed us to go, Miss Mamie's bound to say it's okay."

Frederick smiled. The boy was just so clever. Mr. Sitwell couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

“Alright. But I want all of you to come outside with me for a minute first. We need to talk.”

“We do something wrong?”

“No, I just want to talk.”

He walked out to the yard. The three boys came out to the back porch and sat in a row along the bottom step.

“I’m curious to find out how much thought you boys have given to what you will do when you reach maturity.”

“What do you mean ‘maturity’?”

“Well, when it’s time for you to leave here, of course. It must have occurred to you that Mr. Barclay couldn’t possibly afford to keep all three of you on indefinitely. Have you thought about what you will do then?”

The boys shook their heads. “No.”

“But it’s important.”

“We’re just happy to be here now,” Frederick said. “Try not to muck it up with thinking too much.”

They all nodded as if it were agreed: they must not muck it up with thinking.

Mr. Sitwell frowned. “Well, you have to think. Even if the Barclays did let you stay, eventually you’ll get too big for the room downstairs. What if one of you was to meet a nice girl?”

To his chagrin, the boys began to blush.

Bart giggled. “Well, sir, I guess the other two would just have to scooch over and make room. . . .”

“I’m serious. You’ll be adults one day, sooner than you think. What happens when you find yourself grown men, trying to make it out there on your own?”

The boys were still jostling and pinching one another,

thinking about the imaginary woman coming to join them in the cellar. For a moment it actually made Mr. Sitwell angry. He could not, for the life of him, remember ever having been so young.

“Stop that now. I’m trying to help you. I’m telling you it will happen. And when it does, you’ll wish you’d thought about it, you’ll wish you’d been prepared. You can’t spend the rest of your lives sleeping on a cot in some white man’s cellar.”

“We know that, sir. But we just want to stay together,” Mac said. “Long as we stick together, figure we’ll be alright . . .”

All three of them nodded in agreement. He could tell they were serious and something occurred to him that hadn’t before: the likelihood that, if one of them were sent away, the other two might very well go with him, in solidarity.

This thought so upset him that his hands were shaking as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a few coins.

“Take this.” He nodded. “We’ll discuss this again later. Go ahead and tell Miss Mamie I need you to go. But don’t dawdle. You can stop by the fair if you want, but you can’t stay all day. I expect you back in three hours. Tonight’s dinner is very important.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sitwell. And don’t worry. We won’t be late.”

They ran off toward the driveway.

“You gave those boys good counsel, Sitwell.”

When he turned around Jennie was sitting on a stump near the water pump, watching him.

“Imagine they do well to listen to you.”

Mr. Sitwell nodded and said nothing. He was still confused by what had happened the night before. He’d done something

wrong, offended her, when that was the last thing he'd wanted to do.

"I mean that. You're one of those decent men I've heard stories about, aren't you? Walking ladies to their door. Passing out money to orphan children . . . Just all around decent." She frowned. "I feel like I wasn't half as decent to you last night. Made me nervous, is all, having you at my door like that. I don't like things to get too mixed up."

"What's that mean?"

"It means I've got work and I've got my life at home. I try to keep the two separate. Because as strange as it might seem to you, I've never actually worked in a white man's house before. Just trying to be careful is all. Can't always tell when I'm about to offend somebody around here."

"What did you do before?"

"Honestly? I was a cakewalk delineator."

"What's that?"

"A performer, Sitwell." Jennie stretched her arms out in a sudden graceful movement and bowed her head. "Toured with Happy Hillman's Baby Blackbirds for seven years. Came here to do *The Creole Show*. You see that?"

"No."

"Well, that figures. Anyhow, when they left, I stayed." She sighed. "Miss Mamie took a chance hiring me, I do realize that. I'm just trying to fit in."

"Well, you seem to be making a lot of assumptions about what you're fitting into."

"That occurred to me last night as well."

Mr. Sitwell shook his head. "I never would have thought

something bad about you for having a child, Jennie. Hope you know that. Just surprised me is all.”

“I believe you. Truth is you have been nothing but nice to me since I got here. And that’s why I wanted to apologize. While I still have the chance.”

“What’s that mean? You going somewhere?”

“Maybe.” Jennie shrugged. “I don’t know. Honestly, I wasn’t planning on letting Mamie down quite so soon. But then she gives me this.” She held up a piece of paper.

“What’s that?”

“I do believe it’s a shopping list.”

“Can’t you read it?”

“Yes, I can read it. I just don’t understand half of what it says.” She looked down at the paper. “What on earth is a mirliton, Mr. Sitwell? You ever heard of that?”

“Of course I have. Must be something she’s got planned for when the Southerners come back for dinner on Friday.” Mr. Sitwell said. “Didn’t Mamie explain about the shopping to you?”

The shopping would have needed explaining. Mamie knew that. But maybe she was getting tired of trying to explain things.

“Would you like me to go with you to the market?”

“Would you do that? Could you do that?”

“I could.”

“And you won’t get in trouble for leaving?”

He smiled. “I’m the groundskeeper. Nobody knows what I do around here all day, unless something goes wrong. And it won’t. So let’s go.”

They walked out to the Avenue.

“Really, Sitwell,” Jennie said. “I am sorry I was rude to you

last night. Felt bad about it as soon as you left. This is all new to me and I don't really know how you people think, I mean the kind of people who don't go to *The Creole Show* . . . Just trying to be smart. Not so much for my sake, you understand. But my child."

"What's your daughter's name?"

"Cutie Pie. Cutie Pie Williams." Jennie smiled. She paused for a moment, as if expecting him to recognize the name, then seemed to remember whom she was talking to.

"We used to have an act together. The Dancing Darling Williams Sisters. But she's getting too big to play The Pick and I don't think I want her playing anything else."

"That why you quit the stage?"

She nodded. "Tired of touring. It's dangerous out there. Believe me, I had a hard enough time trying to keep myself out of trouble. Anyhow, I want her to go to a proper school."

"And the girl's father?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is he a performer too? Or somebody you knew before?"

"Ain't no before, Sitwell," Jennie said. "I don't mind talking about myself. I'm not ashamed of anything I've done. But as far as I'm concerned life started when I was fifteen and Cutie Pie was three, when the two of us hit the road and took to the stage. We'll just to have to leave it at that."

They climbed aboard the omnibus and got off again near the Water Street Market, a noisy crowded space made up of over 150 stalls. Mr. Sitwell led Jennie to a large busy stall where, behind a low counter, a thin man's hands were moving fast as he stuffed a bag with beets.



“See this man? He’s from Louisiana. Mamie ever give you a list like this again, especially if you know the Barclays are entertaining Southerners, just show it to him, he’ll help you out. Matter of fact, anybody here would be willing to help you, Jennie. Just so long as you let them know you work for the Barclays. The Barclays throw an awful lot of parties and don’t nobody out here want to lose their business. It’s what will keep them from trying to cheat you too.”

“I will remember that.” She looked around then pointed to another stall. “Look like you can get the same cheaper over there.”

“Taste cheaper too.” He sniffed. “Go ahead and pay the man.”

After they’d purchased vegetables they went to the butchers for meat. When they were finished, they only had about two thirds of what Mamie had written down on her list, but there were only a few coins left.

“Now what?”

Mr. Sitwell nodded. This was the part that needed explaining.

“You want to get in good with Miss Mamie? I’m about to show you how.”

He took her to the fields, a large green hill located on the back end of the fairgrounds. During construction for the Exposition, the land had been cleared and transportation tunnels dug beneath it to bring in building materials. Once the fairgrounds were complete the area had been reimagined as a public park. They put in grass, planted trees, and built a fence around it. But the area had not been maintained due to funding issues and had long since been taken over by tramps.

As he led Jennie through it, Mr. Sitwell explained, “I’d say a

fourth of what she's got on this list you can find growing wild if you know where to look. Especially the herbs. You want to make a good impression on Miss Mamie? You've got to figure out what's worth paying for and what you can get for free."

He looked around.

"Over there is the asparagus. And that there is mustard greens. I'm not entirely sure Mr. Barclay realizes it, but he and his wife eat an awful lot of greens. Mamie just sautés it, covers it with seasoned manioc flour. Sometimes she uses it as a garnish for bean soup."

Jennie shook her head. "I don't understand. How do the Barclays expect her to make dinner if she doesn't have the money to buy what she needs?"

"It's stupid, isn't it? The Barclays don't understand what Mamie does in that kitchen. They just eat. They'll tell her to go ahead and make a substitution then complain when it doesn't taste right. But they're not the ones who are going to be sent packing if one of their dinner parties doesn't go well. And I'll tell you something else people like to pretend they don't understand. In that house, the color of the staff will always match the color of the cook. That means if Miss Mamie goes, most likely we all going with her. That's why she's got to always be thinking. For all our sakes. Understand?"

"I do," Jennie said.

To his great relief, he believed her.

"The last thing I want to do is let Mamie down. But I've got to be honest. I don't know much about herbs and vegetables."

"I don't mind teaching you, if you're willing to learn."

He pointed to a bush heavy with red berries. "In a couple days

I'll come back for these. They make an excellent jelly, believe it or not. But you've got to be careful not to confuse them for their cousins—they're very poisonous, which is why folks sleeping out here know to leave them alone. I'll teach you how to tell the difference. Got to look to the leaf. See how they're different? When you see that, don't get near the berries on that bush. The leaves can be made into a powerful soporific, if you need one. But really the whole bush is just too dangerous to mess with if you don't know what you're doing."

"You speak from experience?"

"I've had cause to serve it once or twice."

"To Barclay's guests?"

"No. I got a before too, Jennie. Don't forget that. These leaves are a part of how I got here. I was in New Orleans at the time and needed a way up the Mississippi. Wound up feeding 'em to a ship captain who was not particularly amenable to providing me with passage on his boat."

Jennie squinted. "How old were you then?"

"Twelve."

"Well, you must have been a very clever child to have managed that on your own."

"I imagine you must have been pretty clever yourself." Mr. Sitwell smiled. "None of that matters now, does it, Jennie? It's past. A long time ago. And far, far from here."

It certainly seemed so as the two of them walked out of the fields and back on to the crowded avenue. They got on the street-car and rode back up the city's south side. This time when Mr. Sitwell sat next to Jennie he found it easy to talk. She seemed interested in the things he said and that made him feel funny

and clever. Everything went so smoothly between them that the turmoil and distance he'd felt the night before seemed to evaporate every time she smiled. In all respects it felt like a new day.

Mr. Sitwell was in a good mood when they pushed through the backdoor. When they entered the kitchen Mamie was sitting on a stool near the main worktable, Mrs. Lawson standing behind her, braiding her hair.

"What took you so long?"

"Got a little held up at the market," Jennie set the bags on the table. "Don't worry, it won't happen again. Mr. Sitwell was helping me out."

Mrs. Lawson sucked her teeth. "Girl, what's he got to help you out with? He's the groundskeeper, remember? You oughtta be telling him what to do."

Mr. Sitwell shrugged. "House is on the grounds."

"It's an entirely different sphere."

"Well, he seems to understand how things work around here well enough," Jennie said. "I appreciated it."

"That's not the point." Mrs. Lawson shook her head as she fitted a small kerchief over Mamie's braids. The bobby pin clenched between her lips bobbed up and down like a cigarette as she said, "there's still something called discipline and order, a chain of command. But see, you wouldn't know that because everything is all mixed up around here. We got the meat man driving the car, we got the yardman supervising household staff . . ." She looked Jennie up and down and sniffed. "Quite frankly I still don't know what the heck you're doing here."

"Why she's the cakewalk delineator, of course." Mr. Sitwell winked.

"You think this is funny? You think it don't matter what your title is, what somebody calls you? Well, you're wrong about that, Sitwell. It does matter. It matters a great deal. Trust me, I've been working in this house for thirty years and if there is one thing I've learned it's that there is a reason there is an order, a way things are supposed to be done. Because without it everything is bound to fall apart eventually. It's only a matter of time."

Mamie said nothing. She submitted to Mrs. Lawson tugging at her braids with a scowl on her face. As soon as the kerchief was tied she hopped off her stool, signaled for Jennie to follow, and stormed across the room. The door to the supply closet slammed shut behind them.

Mr. Sitwell turned to Mrs. Lawson. "Why you got to keep going on like that? You know it's not helping anything."

"I'm not trying to help that woman. I'm trying to tell the truth. Everything has been a mess around here since Mr. Boudreaux left and you know it. Quite frankly, if anybody should be upset about all this foolishness going on, it's you. You're the one she's got working two jobs. What time you get out of here last night anyhow?"

"Nine."

"Well, now, see? That's just wrong."

"It's temporary," Mr. Sitwell said. "You know there's no money around here right now and we're understaffed."

"What the heck did she bring that girl in for? Why didn't she just hire a man when she had the chance?"

"A man costs more than a girl, Mrs. Lawson. You know that. Mr. Thomas will be replaced soon enough."

He squinted.

"Nobody is trying to replace you. You know that, don't you?"

"I didn't say anything about me."

Mr. Sitwell nodded. "Good. Because nobody could. Need you too much around here, even I know we wouldn't last a week without you. But I also know you are smart enough to realize what is going on. There's no money until Mr. Barclay works out his business deals. Quite frankly, if things keep going the way they have been, it's only a matter of time before that man realizes he's got no business having a staff this large. And then what? You really want to be out there right now, trying to find another job? Or haven't you noticed what's going on in the streets, all the protests and strikes? People out there starving, fighting just to survive. So even if you don't want to help Mamie, I would have thought you'd have sense enough to help yourself."

Mrs. Lawson was quiet.

"You hear what I said?"

"I hear you." She frowned. "I'll say one thing, Sitwell. Mr. Boudreaux sure did name you right. Because the title does suit you."

Mr. Sitwell said nothing. Because it was true: the only thing Mr. Sitwell could remember Mr. Boudreaux ever giving him was his name. Shortly after he arrived at the house, because he'd refused to divulge his real one, Mr. Barclay had asked Mr. Boudreaux to assign him a moniker that might best remind him of those characteristics he should build upon as he sought to make himself useful to the household and hopefully someday a productive member the society that surrounded it.

Sit well.

It could have been worse. He might have just as easily wound up *Mr. Don'tbothermenow*

or *Mr. Keepyouropinionstoyourself.*

or *Mr.Don'tcryinmykitchenorIwillgiveyouareason tocry . . .*

"I know you and Boudreaux never got along," Mrs. Lawson said. "Just like I know the man had problems. But even you have to admit he would have never let things get this bad. Plus, you got to give it to him. The man could cook."

Mr. Sitwell shrugged. "She's better."

"You think?"

"It's just a fact."

Then the door to the supply closet swung open. Mamie came back out wearing a uniform identical to Mrs. Lawson's: a light blue, long dress and a thin muslin apron with straps that fluttered over her shoulders in short, puffed sleeves. She was still pulling at the straps as she charged through the kitchen, the kerchief on her head flopping up and down in counter rhythm to her heavy strides. Jennie trailed behind her, trying to tie her sash. When Mamie reached the swinging door she stopped, turned around, and slapped Jennie's hand away. Then, without a word, she pushed through to the front of the house.

Mrs. Lawson looked Sitwell up and down.

"At least wash your hands."

He washed his hands in the sink and then followed Mrs. Lawson out to the hall. They found Mamie standing near the front door with her back to them and her head down, softly muttering to herself as she prepared for the arrival of Mr. Barclay's guest.

"Mamie?"

She raised her right hand as a signal for them to keep quiet. She took a series of deep breaths then raised and lowered her shoulders and she rolled her head from side to side.

Through the window beside the door, Mr. Sitwell could see the car pulling to a stop in front of the house.

"You ain't got time for all that now, woman," Mrs. Lawson said. Mr. Sitwell glared at her.

"What I mean to say is, I hope you didn't take offense at what I said before. All that kitchen talk," Mrs. Lawson said. "That's all it was. I know you doing the best you can."

"You think you could do better?" Mamie said, still facing the door. "Because trust me, you wouldn't last a day."

"Now, Mamie Price, I am trying to apologize to you."

"I don't need your apology. Everything is gonna get sorted out soon enough and, in the meantime, try not to get too confused. I know exactly what I'm doing."

She took a final deep breath, then turned around.

"Open the damn door, Mr. Sitwell."

He pulled it back just in time to see Mr. Barclay bounding up the stairs. Beside him was a man in a dark blue suit whom Mr. Sitwell had never seen before.

"This is my cook, Mamie. The one I was telling you about," Mr. Barclay said as they stepped inside the house.

Mamie bowed and did a small curtsy.

"And she is clear on the restrictions for tonight's dinner?" the man asked. He handed Mr. Sitwell his hat.

"Yes, of course. You haven't forgotten have you, girl?"

"No, sir," Mamie smiled. "No meat. No meat by-products."

"That means no lard," the man said.



“Yessum, sir,” Mamie batted her eyes. “No lard. No ham hocks.”

Mr. Sitwell stared straight ahead. This was the performance Mamie had been gearing up for, another element of the complexity of her role in the house. All the other servants were expected to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible, but the cook was often called upon to interact with the guests, to become part of the entertainment. Smiling and bowing in the front of the house was just another part of her job.

Mr. Barclay took a deep breath and said, “this man is Mr. Pound, Mamie. He’s the progenitor of the cookless breakfast.”

“Cookless breakfast? Why, what on earth is that?”

“Delicious wafers of whole meal flour, molasses, and dried fruit. All baked and pressed under a patented process, introduced right here in the city, at the World’s Fair.”

“And do you eat them with ham and eggs?” Mamie blinked.

Mr. Barclay laughed. “No, Mamie. You pour them into a saucer of milk and serve it cold. Now when a man stands up from the breakfast table, instead of feeling sluggish and weighed down he is energized, full of the fuel he needs to start the day.”

“Mo’ fuel than ham and eggs?” Mamie’s eyes opened wide. “Lawdy, y’all white folks is a true wonder. What will you think of next?”

Mr. Sitwell looked at Mr. Pound. It was difficult to tell how much the man appreciated Mr. Barclay and Mamie’s performance. He nodded his head, looked around the hall, and smiled as if vaguely amused.

“Tell me, Barclay. Is your entire staff colored?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” Mr. Barclay said. “I prefer to main-

tain a staff of a uniform hue. Cuts down on conflict, and I've found, perhaps counterintuitively, the problem of theft."

"Is that right?"

"Indeed. I realize there is a fad these days to go with the Irish. But, quite frankly, from what I have seen, I still believe that if one is able to manage it, one is better off sticking with the colored race, in part because of the unfortunate prejudice. By which I mean that a perfectly respectable colored will happily work as a servant while the white man content to do so will inevitably be of a lower caliber."

"This is unfortunate," Mr. Pound agreed. "Yet so often true."

"Well, of course," Mr. Barclay said. "It is why even if one is able to find a decent Irish man he will so often prove surly, and I simply cannot abide surly. Ultimately it comes down to a simple question of genetic aptitude. One can't argue with generations of breeding; one can't argue with science. Isn't that right, Mamie?"

"I'm still trying to wrap my mind around this here cookless breakfast," Mamie said. She cocked her head and gave Mr. Barclay a puzzled look. "But tell me, sir. Why is it I've never heard of this marvelous invention before?"

Mr. Barclay sighed. "Alas, Mamie. Mr. Pound's fine product is not yet available in stores here in the city. But that is why our friend is here. He is thinking of purchasing one of my manufacturing facilities. This will cut his transportation costs in half so that soon his nutritious wafers can be made available not just in the city but throughout the entire country. Isn't that marvelous?"

Mr. Pound clucked his tongue. "That's enough now, Barclay. I'm well aware of what this deal would mean over time. Your

Mamie couldn't possibly understand such matters and you and I shall have plenty of time to discuss them tonight, over dinner."

"Yes, of course," Mr. Barclay said.

"And in the meantime, don't you worry none, Mr. Cookless Breakfast Man. About yo' restrictions. Much as it pains me to not throw a ham hock in there somewhere, I got something planned that I think is gonna satisfy you this evening. Yes, sir. Whip you up something real nice, leave you feeling proper energized."

"Thank you, Mamie," Mr. Barclay said.

She bowed and, with a wide swing of her hips, walked back to the kitchen.

"You'll forgive my enthusiasm," Mr. Barclay said. He and Mr. Pound began walking down the hall. "It's just so rare that I have the opportunity to play a hand in the distribution of a product I so deeply believe in."

"It's quite alright. I must say I am curious to see how our diet finds interpretation at the hands of your Negro cook."

"I'm sure you will be pleasantly surprised," Mr. Barclay smiled. "It will be a treat for me as well, to see what is to be made this diet of yours, as clearly it has served you well. You are looking quite fit, Pound. Not a day older than the last time I saw you."

"It has been a while, hasn't it? When did we last see each other?"

"I believe it was that night at the Monte Carlo."

"I believe you are correct."

"Well, perhaps this will prove another benefit of our transaction, the opportunity to see more of you in the city. Tell me, have you given much thought to who you intend to market your wafers to?"

“Yes,” Mr. Pound said, just before they disappeared into the parlor. “All of them.”

Mr. Sitwell waited until the door closed behind them. He hung Mr. Pound’s coat in the hall closet, then turned around, walked through the dining room, and pushed through a swinging door.

When he got back to the kitchen Mamie was already hard at work at the stove. Despite the theatrics at the front door, Mamie was well aware who Mr. Pound was: an old friend turned health reformer from Mr. Barclay’s college days. He ran a longevity spa in the Berkshires and was currently making great deal of money selling his breakfast wafers and a series of books meant to promote the moral lifestyle that was to accompany their consumption. He was now interested in purchasing the plant with the ambition of making his wafers available on a national scale. Mr. Barclay had made a point of telling Mamie about Mr. Pound’s peculiar dietary restrictions two weeks in advance, and ever since she had devoted a few hours each day to experimenting with different ingredients in order to come up with a meal that would be both sufficiently flavorful and would accommodate his particular needs. The elaborate seasoning she’d created was a combination of more than thirty ingredients, the most important of which were dried onion, garlic, dill, horseradish, mustard, parsley, white pepper, turmeric, green and red bell peppers, rose hip, summer savory, mushroom, safflower, coriander, fenugreek, basil, marjoram, oregano, thyme, tarragon, cumin, ginger, cayenne pepper, cloves, spinach, rosemary, cinnamon, paprika, yeast, celery, and orange and lemon peel. In combination these had produced a seasoning that was not only remarkably eco-

nomical but also unlike anything Mr. Sitwell had ever tasted before.

It was absolutely delicious.

He watched her shut the oven door.

“Twenty-eight minutes,” Mamie said to Mac as she wiped her hands on a dish towel. “Not a second longer, understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mac set the timer.

She turned to Mr. Sitwell. “You stay in the house for now. I need you to help serve dinner tonight and that means I can’t have that man seeing you out in the yard.”

Mr. Sitwell nodded. He sat down on a stool near the side window, glad for the excuse to be in the kitchen. He loved watching Miss Mamie work, knew for a fact that, though Mr. Boudreaux got credit for having trained her, she was a better cook than he had ever been. In some ways, Mr. Sitwell thought, Mr. Boudreaux was like the house itself in that there had been a time when he had been very impressed. Then, one day when he was fifteen, he’d gone to the larder in order to do some errand for Mamie and found Mr. Boudreaux lying facedown on the floor. It was the first of what would be many times he’d seen the man passed out drunk.

“Best to just leave him there,” Mamie told him when he ran to fetch her. That day had marked an important advance in his maturity, for it was when he began to understand how things in that house really worked. Throughout the time Mamie had been Mr. Boudreaux’s assistant she always acted on his authority. Every command that came from her lips was prefaced with the words “Mr. Boudreaux wants . . .” or “Mr. Boudreaux has asked . . .” when the truth was Mamie had been carrying him for

at least a decade before she got her promotion. It was why, as the years went on and Mr. Boudreaux's drinking and absences from the kitchen became increasingly frequent, there was scarcely any change in the daily operations of the house. If anything, it was an improvement.

Quite frankly, everything was more pleasant when the man slept.

Bart brought out a pitcher of iced tea and set it on the table. He filled two glasses with ice and placed them on a silver tray. He handed the tray to Mamie, who passed it to Sitwell in turn.

"Go on, Mr. Sitwell."

"Yes, ma'am."

He pushed through the swinging door.

"Really, Barclay, you must visit, even if it is only for a few days," Mr. Pound said as Mr. Sitwell entered the parlor with the tea. "We now offer a wide variety of services for men such as yourself. Many find that even a short stay promotes substantial improvements in terms of vitality and cognitive functioning."

"Is that right?" Mr. Barclay said. Mr. Sitwell set the glasses on the table between them.

"Absolutely. Our mineral infused colonic provides significant relief in just a few days. Depending on the level of blockage, of course."

"Enticing," Mr. Barclay said. "Perhaps someday soon."

"Well, not too soon I'm afraid. I'm told we are booked solid until the following spring."

"Oh? Business is that good?"

"Business could not be better," Mr. Pound said. "This venture has proven remarkably profitable. Has brought me success be-

yond my wildest dreams.” He smiled. “Looking back, Barclay, I must say I understand perfectly why you chose not to invest. Quite frankly, when I came to you seeking funding even I had no idea how much money there was to be made in the field of rejuvenation. But I suppose everything happens for a reason. Because, of course, it all turned out for the best.”

Mr. Sitwell handed Mr. Barclay his glass.

“That will be all,” Mr. Barclay said.

Mr. Sitwell bowed and took his leave.

Back in the kitchen, he watched Mac set a bowl on the worktable, shake out three cups of flour from the five-pound sack, and add a teaspoon of baking soda to a sifter.

“Make sure you don’t put too much soda in it,” Mamie said. “Last time it was a little too much . . .”

Mr. Sitwell smiled. He wondered why Mrs. Lawson could not see it, how much better things were now that Mr. Boudreaux was gone. For all the hardship they had endured since his departure and Mr. Thomas’s passing, Mr. Sitwell did not miss either of them. This was how a kitchen was supposed to feel. Warm and nurturing, a place of comfort and learning. More like the kitchens he still remembered from his childhood.

He watched Mac crank the handle. He’d spent a lot of time in the Farleys’ kitchen growing up and had learned a great many things from watching his mother work, much like Mac and Bart were learning from Mamie now. It was in the Farley kitchen that he’d learned the difference between a grate and a grind, a chop and a cut, a twist and a taste. Outside in the Farleys’ garden was where he’d learned how to identify herbs and edible plants, to distinguish sweet berries from their poisonous cousins. But

above all the kitchen was where he'd come to understand all the things the world outside the village had to offer. The Farleys' cabinets had been full of things you needed paper money to buy: heavy cream, powdered sugar, tea biscuits, almonds, and dates. Things that, once you'd had a taste of them, you couldn't help but want more.

Bart came in from the pantry carrying a plate of finger sandwiches. Mr. Sitwell watched him arrange them on a silver tray. When he was finished he held the tray up for Mamie to inspect. She arched her eyebrow, then nodded.

"Nice work," she said and handed the tray to Mr. Sitwell.

He pushed back through the swinging door.

"Of course, it's not really the Italians I am worried about," Mr. Pound said as he entered the parlor with his tray.

"Well, of course not. It's an adjustment, to be sure. But I've been here for thirty-five years and I'm telling you, they are no longer the primary issue. If this is a matter that concerns you in the slightest, allow me to put you in touch with the Employers' Association. They are the ones who are handling it."

"Importing scabs, I understand." Mr. Pound reached for one of the sandwiches Mr. Sitwell held out to him.

"It is effective. If you want a docile workforce, sometimes you have to go out and find one."

"A docile workforce? They are also potential customers, are they not?"

"Are they?"

"They could be. I wonder, has it ever occurred to any of your associates that, instead of constantly reminding them how inconsequential they are, perhaps the better course would be to



offer them some investment in the existing order? Perhaps then they would not be so determined to tear it down.”

“So that’s what you are selling now, is it? The opportunity for inclusion?”

“Shared habits, shared identity. Why not? Patriotism may be the banner of inclusion, but consumerism might very well be the anvil,” Mr. Pound said.

Mr. Barclay bit into one of the sandwiches then nodded toward Mr. Sitwell’s tray.

“Leave it,” he said.

Mr. Sitwell set the tray on the table then bowed and took his leave.

When he returned to the kitchen Mamie and the boys were still hard at work with dinner preparations. He watched Mamie pull a cake out of the oven and smiled.

It had been years since he’d helped his mother bake a cake but he still remembered—not simply the taste, but also the gestures of the making. The look of her strong brown arms reaching for the powdered sugar, her long thin fingers wrapped around the handle of a cup as she scooped it out and added it to the butter. She mixed them together and spread it across a flat pan. Then the two of them sat together at the worktable and created a sugar cookie daisy chain to line the sides of a birthday cake . . .

The clatter of a pan being dropped snapped him out of his reverie.

“Careful, Mac! What did I tell you about that?”

He sat up on his stool, startled by the ease with which his thoughts had drifted back to Seminole County once more. When he recalled the strange delirium that had seized him the

night before, he realized he needed to be vigilant about the melancholy such nostalgia seemed to provoke. It was why he was relieved when, a few minutes later, Mrs. Lawson came back into the kitchen and set an empty serving tray in the sink.

“Get on back out there.”

“That quick?”

“Yes, that quick. It seems Mr. Pound has another engagement.”

When Mr. Sitwell reached the front of the house the two men were already standing in the hall.

“You misunderstand me,” Mr. Barclay said as Mr. Sitwell handed a jacket to Mr. Pound. “I was merely referring to taste.”

“And I was referring to the fact that you are a snob.” Mr. Pound slipped his jacket over his shoulders. “One day you will realize that this sometimes prevents you from seeing the opportunities right in front of your face.”

“Yes, this may very well be true. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps if we could all just sit down together and enjoy your breakfast wafers, all the problems of our modern polyglot society would finally be solved.”

Mr. Pound frowned. “You think it’s funny? I assure you it is not. I see this product as a calling. I will not be satisfied until every man, woman, and child has had the opportunity to experience its benefits. Someday good health will no longer be the exclusive preserve of the wealthy; that will be my gift to them. I can see how that may seem absurd to someone like you. Perhaps you forget that unlike you I am a self-made man, I have had to work for everything I have become. If I believe so strongly in human potential it is because I know myself to be the proof of it.”

“I am well aware of your circumstances, my friend,” Mr. Bar-

clay said. "As I said, I was merely referring to taste. Speaking of which . . ."

He turned to Mr. Sitwell then reached into his pocket and pulled out one of Mr. Pound's breakfast wafers.

"What are you doing?" Mr. Pound said.

"I think you will find this amusing, Pound. . . . Mr. Sitwell?" He held out the wafer. "I would like you to hold that to your nose then recite a complete list of ingredients to Mr. Pound in descending order according to volume."

Mr. Sitwell took the wafer.

"Seriously, Barclay. What is this?" Mr. Pound said.

"Just watch."

Mr. Sitwell held the wafer to his nose. "It's . . . fairly simple, sir. Wheat flour, malted barley, salt, yeast, and a touch of molasses."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir."

"No nuts? No berries?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Barclay nodded. "Is he correct?"

Mr. Pound frowned. "How did he do that?"

"Well, in truth no one knows. But he did do it, didn't he? It's a trick of his, some sort of genetic adaptation, the origins of which I have not yet had time to investigate. Perhaps I would find that in the jungles of Africa such olfactory skill was useful for determining the proximity of predators, although it serves no actual purpose here, in the modern city. Yet it is amusing, is it not? And now it seems we have a complete rundown of the key ingredients for world peace."

He patted Mr. Pound on the back.

“Oh, Pound. Don’t be so serious. You know what I said was meant only in jest. And really, what does it matter what I think? Marketing longevity products is your area of expertise, not mine. The plant will soon be yours and you will run it as you see fit. And while I may not understand everything you have said today, I do know that you are a man of a keen intellect and that your product is one possessed of a unique value. I am fully confident that you shall make it a success.”

Mr. Pound nodded. “Very well, Barclay. Until tonight, then.”

“Yes. Looking forward to it.” Mr. Barclay smiled.

Mr. Sitwell turned to take his leave but Mr. Barclay stopped him.

“I’d like a word with you.”

Mr. Sitwell frowned. The only thing he could imagine Mr. Barclay wanting to talk to him about was his decision about the boys. He wracked his mind trying to think of an excuse for why he had not come up with one yet.

He watched Mr. Barclay wave as his guest made his way to the awaiting car.

“Negotiations going well, sir?” Mr. Sitwell asked.

“As well as can be expected. The man is a pompous buffoon.”

“But a rich buffoon, yes?” Mr. Sitwell said. “Perhaps from our vantage point there could be no better combination.”

It was an attempt to change the subject but Mr. Barclay arched an eyebrow at the comment. As Mr. Whitmore started the car and drove toward the gate, Mr. Barclay looked Mr. Sitwell up and down and frowned.

“Getting a little ahead of yourself don’t you think, Sitwell?”

“Yes, sir. Apologies. I meant no disrespect to your guest. Only that—”

“Not him. Never mind that idiot. I’m talking about the boys.”

“The boys?”

Mr. Barclay frowned. “I saw them walking down the block as Mr. Pound and I were pulling into the drive. It certainly did not escape my attention that there are only two of them now.”

“Two of them?”

Mr. Sitwell glanced toward the side of the house. In the distance, near the water pump, he saw Mac and Bart struggling to lift a heavy pail.

“Understand me. I do recognize the possibility of confusion stemming from our conversation last night. I asked you to take care of it, and perhaps you thought you were doing so. On a certain level, I appreciate that. But it is not your place to terminate anyone without my express permission. Not even a kitchen boy.”

“No, sir. Of course not. I would never . . .”

His eyes searched the yard, looking for Frederick.

“It’s alright,” Mr. Barclay said. “Or in any event, what’s done is done. I realize that I have at times allowed you to take certain liberties in this house, to conduct yourself with a degree of independence not at all appropriate to your station. But that freedom is predicated on your ability to demonstrate that you understand the limits of your actual position. There is still a chain of command. An order, a way that things must be done.”

“Yes, sir,” Mr. Sitwell said. “Of course. I realize that.”

“Good.” He patted Mr. Sitwell on the shoulder. “Just make sure it does not happen again.”

Mr. Sitwell walked back to the kitchen. He checked the pantry, then the cellar, but saw no sign of Frederick. He went through the back door and walked toward the water pump, where Mac and Bart were still struggling with the pail.

“Where is Frederick?”

Mac and Bart stopped what they were doing at once. They looked at each other and then at Mr. Sitwell.

“He’s not here, sir,” Mac said. “He . . . got a little bit held up at the fair.”

“Held up? What does ‘held up’ mean?”

“It means they’re holding him,” Bart said. “It means they won’t let him leave.”

“Won’t let him leave?” Mr. Sitwell squinted. “Are you saying he’s been detained?”

“Yes, sir. A little bit,” Mac said. Bart nudged him with his elbow. “I mean he’s not in jail. They got him in that room underneath the boardwalk, where they used to put the drunks. Said they’re gonna keep him until closing and then decide what to do with him.”

“Why? How on earth did that happen? What were you all up to out there?”

“Nothing, sir. At least not today,” Mac said. “The man selling passes for the Ferris wheel knew him from before. A long time ago, before he got to the asylum, before he was properly reformed.” He shook his head. “Seems the man used to have a fruit cart, and it’s possible Frederick might have taken an apple from it. It was so long ago that Frederick figured the man wouldn’t remember him. But he did.”

Mr. Sitwell looked at the clock. It was three in the afternoon.

“Why didn’t you say something before now?”

“We wanted to,” Mac said. “But Frederick told us to wait until after the party, said he didn’t want us disturbing Miss Mamie making dinner. Said he knew it was important, but if he wasn’t back by then we should tell you straightaways.”

“Look here, sir,” Bart said. “I can see you’re upset but I promise you, it’s alright. Frederick will get it straightened out. He always does, he’s smart like that. Until then, Mac and me can cover for him, no problem.”

They nodded in agreement.

“You won’t even know he gone.”

Mr. Sitwell frowned. It was clear the boys did not grasp the situation. But Mr. Sitwell knew that in Mr. Barclay’s mind there was no greater sign of moral turpitude on the part of a servant than theft. Mr. Sitwell had seen orphans sent away after being caught stealing a single silver spoon because Mr. Barclay insisted the pettiness of the object could never outweigh the implications of the act itself. If the Barclays found out what had happened, it wouldn’t matter when the transgression had occurred or whether Frederick had stolen a single apple or a hundred. Mr. Sitwell already knew what Mr. Barclay’s response would be.

“The child has decided his own fate. Best leave him to it.”

He reached for his hat.

“Don’t say a word about this to anyone until I return. Not even Miss Mamie. Just focus on getting everything ready for tonight’s dinner,” Mr. Sitwell said. “I’ll take care of it.”





# 3

## Needs Warning

Mr. Sitwell hurried through the garden and out the gate, headed toward the omnibus stop. As he ran he thought about all the other orphans he'd known over the years, boys caught stealing and sent away, never to be heard from again. So many boys had come and gone since he'd started working in that house that he couldn't even recall most of their names. Their features blurred and blended in Sitwell's mind so that they all seemed sad semblances of the two who'd stood beside him on the back porch the day he arrived. Those boys had only lasted a few months before they were sent back to the asylum for stealing silverware and ever after, that theft was how Mr. Sitwell knew that deep down he was still one of them. Because the truth was,

when those two others were banished from the house, Mr. Sitwell had been stealing too. Somehow he'd just managed not to get caught.

For the next twenty years he'd worked in that house and never once thought to intervene—yet here he was, running. What was it that made these boys different? What was it that made him run? All he could think was that it had something to do with Barclay asking him to choose between them, that somehow it had had the effect of making him feel responsible for them, accountable not only for the answer he had come up with but also for his own determination not to give it.

The bus pulled to the curb. He climbed aboard a crowded car and found himself wedged between two men in sanitation uniforms. He paid his fare, pushed past the men, and stood near a group of women in frock coats arguing in some Slavic language. The driver yelled, "push back," and Mr. Sitwell took a few more steps toward the rear of the car. He stopped next to a heavysset man in a blue fedora. He reached for the handrail and looked down at the elderly woman in the seat in front of him, humming to herself with her eyes closed. The car lurched and rumbled down Olliana Avenue, then rounded a corner headed past the Magazine. He climbed down near the Park and made his way through the remnants of the fairgrounds.

During the Exposition it was estimated that more than one million people had come to the city to see the fair, but there wasn't much to look at anymore. The entire exposition had been conceptualized as an "object lesson for the modern worker," meant to demonstrate the many marvels of capitalism, a display of the collective fruits of industrial labor. Its actual construction

had involved five years of brutal, backbreaking labor on the part of hundreds of men tasked with the arduous task job of clearing an entire swamp. Several had died in the process and for most of the survivors the glories of the fair had not proved sufficient compensation. Much of it had been reduced to cinders not a year after the Exposition closed, a casualty of a workers' strike.

He walked past the brackish water of a man-made lagoon where, during the Exposition, people had ridden paddleboats carved in the shape of swans. The year of the Exposition was the same year Mr. Sitwell came to work for the Barclays house. He had gone to visit just once before it was burned: on Colored American Day. The other two orphans brought in with him had been sent away just a few weeks before when Mamie, then a chambermaid, found him crying beneath the kitchen table following some altercation with Mr. Boudreaux. She had managed to coax him out from under the table, dried his tears, and then, in an effort to cheer him up, insisted that he accompany her to hear Frederick Douglass speak.

They'd ridden to the fairgrounds, pushed past the aggressive crowds, and made their way to Festival Hall. He remembered Mamie holding his hand as they walked through the front rotunda, pointing out the display tables full of charts and indices of Negro improvements since Emancipation. He'd nodded at the sight of them although in truth he could barely read and so was able to make little sense of the progress they claimed to record. Then there was the thunder of applause and Mr. Sitwell turned around in time to see the old man take the stage on the arm of a small white woman whose mother, Mamie explained, had written the script for the very first *Tom Show*.

For the next two hours Frederick Douglass spoke in a deep, sonorous voice that reverberated throughout the hall, a memory supplemented by the rapid flutter of several hundred hand-held fans in the audience. When Douglass was finished there was more applause; people rose to their feet and Mamie, deeply moved by the dignity of the man, had begun to cry. She and Mr. Sitwell went back outside and walked around the ethnic pavilion, where “exotic specimens” from various lands had been invited to perform their native songs and dances for the public.

Mamie bought him a box of Cracker Jack and then, for the very first time, told him about her life before she’d come to work for the Barclays. She told him how her mother had been born a slave to one of Mr. Barclay’s cousins and that she’d spent her childhood working for the same people who once would have owned her. She told him that this fact had caused her mother a great deal of pain and that she’d realized the only way to change Mamie’s fate was for her to leave home. So arrangements had been made for her to come work for the Barclays at the age of maturity, which, in her case, was apparently fourteen.

She told him she missed her mother terribly but insisted that wasn’t why she was crying. Instead it had to do with the fact that it wasn’t until she’d come to the city that she’d even realized Mr. Douglass was colored.

“I’d heard his name spoken a few times while I was helping my mother serve dinner, always in the most disparaging terms and always, it seemed, in conjunction with a Mr. John Brown. Somehow I must have got it in my head that the two were related.” She dabbed her eye with a handkerchief. “Can you imagine, Sitwell? Being so ignorant? It never occurred to me

that such a Negro man could even exist. And then I think that perhaps I would have never known if my mother had not had the strength and courage to compel me to come here and leave everything I knew behind.”

Mr. Sitwell sat and watched her cry. They were only separated by five years but what a difference that small span of time had made then. He hadn’t the slightest idea how to comfort her.

“But he does exist,” Mr. Sitwell said. “Doesn’t that make you feel better?”

“Of course it does.”

“So why are you sad?”

“I’m not sad.” She took a deep breath as she attempted to regain control of her emotions. Then she smiled. “People don’t always cry because they are sad, Sitwell. You should remember that.”

Then they shared the box of Cracker Jack while they stood on the boardwalk and watched the Dahomey men dance for money.

That was twenty years ago. The Dahomey men were long gone; in their place a penny arcade had been set up along the boardwalk. He walked until he found the stairs that led to the security compound underneath it, which, during the Exposition, had been used to hold drunks and petty thieves.

“Mr. Sitwell?” A voice called to him from one of the darkened cells. He turned toward a small barred window.

“Frederick? Is that you?”

“Yes, sir. It’s me. . . .”

He could hear the rattle of chains scraping against concrete as the boy came and stood near the window.

“Thank goodness you’ve come. . . .”

Mr. Sitwell looked at Frederick's face and was horrified. The bright happy child he had given a coin to just a few hours before now appeared completely transformed. His hair was matted and covered in cobwebs, his left eye was swollen, and there were the salted stains of dried tears streaked down his cheek. Mr. Sitwell could feel his own eye start to twitch in empathetic response.

"Who did this to you?"

Frederick shook his head. "It's the man who sells the tickets for the Ferris wheel. He used to have a fruit cart down on Cornelius, and I'll tell you right now, he's not wrong. I did used to steal from him. But it was a long time ago, sir. Before I was reformed. And I was awful hungry them days."

"So this happened more than once?"

"That I was hungry? Yes, sir. . . . But it wasn't like I was the only one. And it was so long ago I didn't think he'd remember it. Turns out he's still mad."

Frederick began to cry. "Please don't tell Miss Mamie about this, sir. I don't want to be sent away. I want to learn a trade, make something of myself. . . ."

Mr. Sitwell stared at the boy's swollen eye.

"Never mind that now. Hear me? Calm down. Let me get you out of here first."

"Thank you, sir."

Mr. Sitwell walked around to the front of the building and knocked on the door. A metal shutter peeled back to reveal a set of eyes.

"Nigger Day finished," a man said.

"I'm not here for Nigger Day," Mr. Sitwell said. "I'm here about the poor child you've got locked up in that dungeon."

## THE RIB KING

“Ain’t no poor children locked up in that cell. That cell is for degenerates, drunks, and thieves. If he got himself locked up, he must be one of those.”

“He is fourteen years old.”

“All the more to his shame.”

Mr. Sitwell frowned. “Listen here. He works for me and I’ve come to take him home.”

“Well, you can’t. Not until he’s made restitution.”

“Restitution for what?”

“I couldn’t tell you. I’m not the one that brought him in. Anyhow you’re wasting time talking to me. I’m not the one that does the negotiating with niggers. Hold on a minute and I’ll get the man that do.”

The shutter slammed shut.

“See?” Frederick called through the window. His voice was cracking. “They not right around here.”

Inside the compound Mr. Sitwell heard a sound like the rustle of heavy keys, then a drawer being slammed shut. The door swung open and a large man in a parks uniform walked out of it.

“You here about the monkey?” the man said. He was six feet tall, had dirty blond hair, and was clutching a set of keys.

“I’ve come to take him home.”

“That right? Well, you can’t. Not until he’s made proper restitution.”

“Restitution? For what? What exactly has he done?”

“It’s not about what he’s done. It’s what he is. A thieving menace. Run me out of business. Used to steal my apples, back when I had my own cart. Back when Cornelius was still a decent place to live.”

“It is my understanding that this theft of your apples occurred years ago, long before you were an employee of this park.”

“It’s not about the apples.”

“Yes, well, my point is you have no right to hold this child based on a theft of an apple you claim happened years before.”

“It’s not about the apple.”

“Furthermore, all this talk of Nigger Day? You think I don’t know what that is? It’s against the law, a violation of his right. I understand children call it that among themselves, but an actual park official in a park official uniform? If you do not release the child at once I shall be compelled to file a complaint. Because it is quite clear an injustice has occurred here. And I’m not referring to your apples. In fact—”

The fist came out of nowhere, a quick sharp jab to the gut that sent Mr. Sitwell reeling forward. It knocked the wind out of him, and he let out an audible gasp.

“How many times do I have to tell you it’s not about the apples?” the man said.

Mr. Sitwell was hunched forward, clutching his stomach. He stared down at his hat, which had been knocked from his head and now lay on the ground between them. Lying beside it was a small plank of wood with several nails sticking out of it. It occurred to Mr. Sitwell that, from where he stood, it would have taken him less than a second to pick it up and swing it at the man’s head.

But then he glanced at Frederick watching him through the bars, a terrified look on his face.

He shut his eyes.

“I understand,” Mr. Sitwell said. He stood up. “Clearly I



made a mistake in coming. I'll give your message to Mr. Barclay at once. Tell him you need to speak with him directly." He spoke calmly and smoothly although his eye was now convulsing violently.

"Who?"

"Mr. Barclay. Of Prescott Avenue. My employer. He is a member of the board of trustees here, so I suppose, in a manner of speaking, he's your employer too." Mr. Sitwell raised one hand to cover his afflicted eye and with the other hand, reached down to retrieve his hat.

"Mr. Barclay is the one who has taken charge of the child's reforms. Sent me to fetch him, in the hopes that this matter could be taken care of without having his dinner disturbed."

The man squinted. "I thought you said the boy worked for you."

"Yes. And I work for Mr. Barclay. Need the boy to serve dinner tonight. But no matter—I'll tell Mr. Barclay you have demanded to speak to him in person, let you explain to him directly about your need for restitution."

He nodded toward the dungeon.

"Until Mr. Barclay gets here, I would advise you to make sure the boy does not further injure himself. That particular monkey is his favorite, don't ask me why. But you can expect Mr. Barclay to be in a foul mood when he sees the conditions in which you've been holding him. Mr. Barclay doesn't like to see his pets damaged."

Then, without another word, he turned around and started walking back toward the boardwalk. As he did he could hear Frederick crying from his cell.

“Mr. Sitwell? Where are you going? Please don’t leave me here!”

But he did not stop walking until the man called him back.

“Wait.”

Mr. Sitwell turned around.

“How do I know what you say is true?”

“Well, of course you don’t. We’ll just have to wait for Mr. Barclay to come and confirm it.”

He could feel the man sizing him up, wheels turning in his mind as he tried to make sense of what was being said to him.

“Hold on,” the man said. Then he turned around and went back inside.

A few moments later the door opened again, and the man came out, gripping Frederick by the collar.

“Take him.” He gave the boy a shove toward Mr. Sitwell. “There is no need for this, no need to disturb the gentleman’s dinner. But let this be a lesson to him, you hear me? I don’t want to see him or his little friends in this park again. If any of them come back they will regret it. I don’t care who you work for. . . .”

Mr. Sitwell stepped forward, seized the boy’s hand, and led him toward the stairs.

The two of them began walking back along the boardwalk.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“You’ve already said so,” Mr. Sitwell said. His eye was still twitching. He raised a hand to cover his convulsive eyelid and felt his lashes flutter against his palm in successive spasms.

“But I am sorry, Mr. Sitwell. Sorry you had to go through that.” Frederick shook his head. “Honestly? I don’t know what would have happened to me if you hadn’t come.”

“Don’t you?” Mr. Sitwell said. He stopped walking, tilted his head back and stared up at the sky.

“Wash Talbot,” he said.

“What?”

“From your book. Cherokee did not get to him in time. He was dragged from his jail cell by an angry mob the same night he was arrested. By the time Cherokee got back to Seminole, Wash was already dead.”

It was what he’d been thinking about since he first saw Frederick sitting in that cell. Somehow it was a relief to say it out loud; it seemed to ease some of the pressure on his eye.

“How do you know? You been reading ahead?”

“I told you I knew him. He was a farmer, like all my mother’s people were. He did not steal a hog. He shot a mule. And he was colored,” Mr. Sitwell said. “Some white man from the neighboring town made like he wanted to buy a mule off Wash, then elected to not pay him for it. Wash tried to get the sheriff to help him out, but he told Wash he couldn’t do anything, had to take the white man at his word even if he knew that word was a lie. Wash must have figured if he wasn’t going to get paid for that mule, he would claim it back another way.”

“You’re telling me that a mob did that to him because he shot his own mule?”

Mr. Sitwell sucked his teeth. “Didn’t nobody care about the mule, boy. Nobody except Wash and the one who stole it off him. They did it because he was black and had the nerve to come to their town in the middle of the afternoon, carrying a loaded rifle.”

That was all it had taken to end Wash’s life. It was why his

uncle Max had warned Sitwell's mother to stay away, that the only way to be safe was to keep to themselves. None of them should have gone to town in search of paper money and maybe it wasn't until what happened to Wash that they understood how surrounded they now were.

He looked at Frederick. "Never forget who you are in this world. Never forget where. Got to take precautions, even if you are telling the truth. Got to make sure there's no misunderstanding. Like it or not, you must always remember that you live in a world where your life doesn't mean much compared to some rich man's need to have his dinner served on time." He frowned. "I mean to some people. Most maybe. Not me . . ."

"What should I do, Mr. Sitwell?"

"Whatever you've got to, son. Be smart, survive. And if a white man ever tries to put you in a cage again, have sense enough to realize that you shouldn't count on ever getting back out of it."

They kept walking, back along the boardwalk, past the spot where, twenty years before, he'd stood and watched the Dahomey men dance for money.



By the time they got back to the house the dinner guests had already begun to arrive.

"Where were you?" Mamie said as they entered the kitchen. "Mr. Sitwell, I told you I needed you to work the floor this evening. Instead you just disappear . . ."

She caught sight Frederick's face and stopped.

“What happened?”

The boy didn’t answer.

“Mr. Sitwell? What is going on?”

“It’s alright, Mamie,” Jennie said. “You’ve got enough to worry about. I’ll take care of Frederick.” She put her arm over Frederick’s shoulder. “You just focus on dinner.”

She led Frederick down to the cellar.

Mamie glared at Mr. Sitwell.

“You and I will talk about this later. Right now, Jennie’s right. I need you on that floor.”

Mr. Sitwell picked up a tray and pushed through the swinging door.

He found the guests assembled in the conservatory, where they were being entertained by a musical trio Mrs. Barclay had hired for the occasion. Most of the ladies were seated in a cluster near the front where Mrs. Pound, a lively blonde woman no more than half the age of Mr. Pound, appeared to be holding court.

“It was a wedding present from my husband,” she said as Mr. Sitwell walked past her. She ran her hand along the large strand of diamonds around her neck and smiled at Mrs. Barclay. “He asked me to wear it tonight, said that it reminded him of a necklace he saw you wear once, I believe at the Monte Carlo. He told me that you looked so elegant that evening that when he saw this one, he had to buy it for me. . . .”

Most of the men were standing farther back, drinking bourbon.

“And how are the Berkshires these days?” he heard one of them ask Mr. Pound.

“Marvelous. We’ve recently purchased another two hundred acres and are expanding the organic farm. It is, in all respects, an utter idyll. . . .”

Also in the room, to Mr. Sitwell’s great dismay, were Bart and Mac. Mac was holding a bottle of wine, refilling empty glasses while Bart stood beside him with a silver tray, passing out hors d’oeuvres.

Perhaps it was the stress of his recent ordeal combined with the memory of what had happened to Wash, but as soon as he saw them his eye began to twitch again and he could feel a strange hysteria bubbling up in him once more. He hurried across the floor, snatched the bottle out of Mac’s hand, and took the tray from Bart.

“What did we talk about yesterday? Get back in the kitchen where you belong.”

The boys looked around nervously.

“You weren’t here so Miss Mamie said—”

“I don’t care what Miss Mamie said. I’m here now, aren’t I?”

The boys hurried out of the room.

It wasn’t until they were safely beyond the door that Mr. Sitwell realized a few people seated nearby were watching him. He had spoken too loudly, behaved inappropriately, and now, apparently, the guests were disturbed.

The only thing to do in such circumstances was smile.

“Begging your pardon, ladies and gents.” He grinned as he tucked Mac’s bottle in the crook of his right arm. “There seems to have been some confusion as to who has earned the privilege of serving you this evening.”

With a flourish, he spun Bart’s tray around and then set it on

his right forearm. He reached for an empty glass on one of the side tables, picked it up with his free hand, then flipped it in the air so that they could watch it land right side up on his tray. He repeated the trick four times, which seemed to sufficiently soothe their alarm. A few of them began to applaud.

"Wait a minute, Barclay." Mr. Pound called out. "Is that the same one from earlier? The one that does that trick?"

He turned to his wife.

"This man is possessed of the most amusing talent. Barclay? You must show my wife."

"Of course," Barclay said. "Sitwell?"

Mr. Sitwell set the tray on the side table.

"Would one of the ladies be kind enough to lend me a handkerchief?" Mr. Barclay smiled.

"Give him mine," Mrs. Pound said. She handed her handkerchief to her husband, who in turn passed it to Mr. Barclay.

Mr. Barclay held it to his nose and smiled. "As I suspected, it retains the scent of your perfume." He handed it to Mr. Sitwell. "Now Mr. Sitwell. Will you kindly tell our assembled guests what that perfume is composed of?"

Mr. Sitwell held it to his nose.

"An elegant composition consisting of essences of lemon, bergamot, neroli, rosemary, petitgrain, myrtle and cedarwood."

Mr. Barclay nodded. "Is that all?"

Mr. Sitwell inhaled again. "A hint of sandalwood to round out the aroma."

"How marvelous," Mrs. Pound squealed. "I'll have you know that is one of the most expensive perfumes in all of Paris."

"Well, I must say, dear," Mrs. Barclay said, "If that is all it is

made of, it sounds to me as if perhaps you were overcharged.” She seemed to enjoy the laughter this comment produced.

“An amusing talent,” Mr. Barclay said. “Even if it serves no real purpose!”

The guests laughed and smiled then began to demand their own demonstrations in turn. Mr. Sitwell sniffed and recited the contents of the perfumes on four more handkerchiefs and the ingredients of a stick of chewing gum. Then he recited the different vintages of three glasses of wine. Finally he heard the tinkling of a little bell, turned around, and saw Mamie smiling in the doorway.

“Dinner is served,” she announced.

The guests stood up and walked to the dining room. Mr. Sitwell stayed behind to collect their empty glasses. Jennie came out to help.

“I see I am not the only performer in this house,” she said.

“Hardly.”

Everyone danced for money in this world, Mr. Sitwell thought. The jailer danced for the rich man, the rich man danced for his investors. Mr. Sitwell, it sometimes seemed, danced for all of them at once.

In the dining room the guests took their seats. Mr. Sitwell made a show of fussing over the gentlemen, holding napkins out for the ladies while Mamie stood at the head of the table and began introducing the meal. The food was brought out and lowered before the assembled guests. Then he poured the wine. As he bent over the table to fill Mrs. Pound’s glass she flinched, then quickly recovered and eased back into her seat.



“So much shade in your house, Barclay. I’m afraid we New Englanders are not quite accustomed to it.”

“I imagine it is the intimacy of contact that many in New England object to,” Mr. Pound said. “But you, Barclay, are originally a Southerner, are you not?”

“Missouri.”

“What I mean is, this is all perfectly normal for you, is it not?”

“The presence of black servants in the home? Why, it is the most normal thing in the world.”

“I hope you enjoy it,” Mamie said and took her leave.

The guests began to eat.

“Gracious, this is delicious,” Mrs. Pound said. “Tell me, Barclay. Do you eat like this every night?”

“Not every night, no. This meal was prepared especially for you. An effort by my cook to accommodate your dietary restrictions.”

“And the recipe?”

“Something Mamie came up with.”

“Well, I must say, if they all cook like this, it’s a wonder everyone doesn’t have a darkie cook,” Mrs. Pound said. “If they all cook like this, I want one too!”

Mr. Sitwell picked up his tray and pushed back into the kitchen.

“How is it out there?” Mamie asked him as he passed through the swinging door.

“Good, I imagine.” Mr. Sitwell shrugged. He set his tray the sink. “Everybody wants a darkie cook now.”

Mamie frowned. "Are you going to tell me what happened with Frederick?"

Mr. Sitwell shook his head. "A misunderstanding. He ran into someone he shouldn't have at the fairgrounds and—"

"Fairgrounds? What was he doing at the fairgrounds? They were supposed to go to the market then come straight back."

Mr. Sitwell was quiet for a moment. "I told them they could go."

"*You?* Without asking my permission? Why would you presume to do such a thing?"

"I did not foresee any danger in it. It was Colored Day, I thought they deserved a little fun."

"Colored Day? Fun?"

He could hear how foolish it sounded given what had happened. For the first time it occurred to him that he was partially responsible for it.

"Listen, Sitwell. I know that maybe no one else around here cares much what happens to those children. But *I* care."

"I know that, Mamie. I care too."

"Then you should have the sense to realize there is a reason I try to keep them with me in the kitchen, where they are safe."

"It won't happen again."

"Better not," Mamie said. "Because I realize a lot of hinky things have been going on around here lately and would hate to think that one of those hinky things is you. There are about to be some big changes, Mr. Sitwell. You hear me? Everybody is about to get put right. Or else they're getting put out."

She walked back into the dining room.

He knew she was right: it was a mistake to tell the boys they

could go to the fair, a lapse of judgment. And perhaps it was not the first time. Perhaps if he had not brought Mr. Barclay the book he would have never been asked to choose between them. The more he thought about it the more it seemed as if every time he tried to do those children a kindness he only wound up exposing them to more danger. And what if it were true? What if all his efforts to help those boys were only making things worse?

“Mr. Sitwell?”

When he turned around Frederick was standing behind him. Jennie had washed his face and a linseed bandage was now pressed again his forehead.

“I want you to know how much I appreciate what you did for me today and how sorry I am for it. Also I want you to know that it won’t ever happen again. From now on, every time I go out of this house I’m going to make sure to take precautions, like you said. Make sure I’m prepared.”

“Is that all?”

“No, sir. It’s not,” Frederick said. “Also . . . About that book. I didn’t steal it but the truth is, it wasn’t a gift either. One of Mr. Barclay’s guests was passing them out and I heard someone say he didn’t want it, making fun of the one what give it to him . . . He left it on a settee and I took it. Figured otherwise it would have just gone in the trash.”

Mr. Sitwell nodded. “Well, thank you for telling me the truth. Let’s not talk about it anymore. So long as you’ve learned your lesson and won’t do it again, I’m satisfied.”

“Thank you, sir,” Frederick said. “I won’t.”

Mr. Sitwell watched him leave, still thinking about the part he had played in Frederick’s ordeal, puzzling over the extent to

which he was responsible for it. It weighed on his mind for the rest of the dinner and then as he rode the streetcar home. He was so distracted by these thoughts that when he finally pushed through the doors of the rooming house he didn't even notice Billy sitting behind the desk until the man called out to him.

"Should be ready for you by tomorrow."

Mr. Sitwell looked up. "What?"

"Your book, Sitwell. Thing you paid me a dollar to read? Actually, it's a pretty good story." Billy smiled. "Listen to a bit."

"Wash had been sitting in that jail cell for ten days when Dupont come into the Sheriff's office one morning in a frightful panic. Someone had seen Cherokee pass through the market the day before. When asked about his sudden reappearance, Cherokee had told them he was just there to visit his uncle Max, but everybody knew that was a lie. Cherokee coming back to Seminole County could only mean one thing: trouble."

Billy smiled. "About halfway through. Ain't come across no Lotta yet, just so you know."

Mr. Sitwell was quiet for a moment.

"Did you say 'Uncle Max'?"

"That's right. Just a local drunkard living in some run-down shack. I wouldn't worry too much about Max. He's what you call a minor character. Not really important to the actual story."

Sitwell nodded. His eye was twitching again.

"What about a Farley?"

"He's the sheriff."

"Sheriff?"

"That's right. He's the one who organized the posse to take Wash into custody."

“Posse? You mean lynch mob, don’t you?”

“What? No, wasn’t no mob.” Billy shook his head. “They were just holding Wash, peaceful-like, until the marshals could transport him to the state prison. Then Cherokee shows up, guns blazing. And poor Farley can’t help but feel responsible for that, seeing as how he was the one who brokered the peace.”

“Peace? What peace?”

“With Cherokee’s people. When Cherokee promised to leave the county once and for all.”

He opened the book, flipped through the pages and started reading again.

“It had been ten years since Sheriff Farley brokered the deal that sent Cherokee away. Sheriff didn’t want any more trouble from the gang and Cherokee said he didn’t want any more harm coming to his kin. He told Farley he was tired of fighting, tired of all the bloodshed. Said he would get his people to lay down their weapons, then promised to go away and never return so long as Farley gave him his word that that would be the end of it, that there would be no retaliation against his people once he was gone. So the sheriff let him go. At the time it had seemed the surest way to keep the peace. Now Farley regretted it. Because if Cherokee was back, then all signs were pointing to an inevitable showdown. And the truth was, if it came down to that, Cherokee was the better shot.”

Billy smiled. “I’m about half way through.”

Mr. Sitwell pursed his lips. “So Farley’s the sheriff?”

“That’s right.”

“Any mention of Farley’s servants?”

“Servants? Naw. Ain’t no servants in here. It’s not that kind

of book. These are simple country folk. Farmers mostly. Everybody in this book is just trying to survive.”

Mr. Sitwell nodded. “I need it back by Friday.”

“No problem. I should be finished by then.”

“That good?”

“Oh, it’s a page-turner alright. Through and through.”

Mr. Sitwell nodded and walked up the stairs.

First Wash Talbot, now Uncle Max and Mr. Farley. All of which made it impossible to dismiss as mere coincidence: the book was, without question, telling a story about his people, the world he had come from. And yet everything it said was a lie. But it was such a strange lie because it seemed to constantly remind him of the truth.

He thought about that last day at the Farleys’ house. At one point Mrs. Farley had come into the kitchen and asked about the green-eyed man. Her agitation over rumors of his return had in many respects paralleled the anxiety of the townspeople from the book in the passage Billy had read to him, upon hearing that Cherokee had been seen in the market.

It was from her that he’d learned there was a reason he’d never seen the green-eyed man before, but from what she said it had nothing to do with any peace brokered by a local sheriff. Instead it had something to do with a conflict with the National Guard over conscription labor in the immediate aftermath of the war. There’d been some violence over this, which had led to Cherokee’s arrest. After serving his term he’d been required to vacate the state. According to Mrs. Farley, if his mother knew anything about him coming back, she was required by law to inform the authorities.

It was the first time he'd heard his mother lie. When Mrs. Farley demanded to know whether the man was in fact staying with Uncle Max, his mother had smiled, looked the woman directly in the eye, and told her she had no idea what she was talking about. There were indeed many people who had come to mourn the passing of their fallen brother, but the green-eyed man was not among them.

This had confused him. He hadn't understood the reason for this lie, and prior to it, had not been aware that his mother was even capable of lying. And so it had confused him: Mrs. Farley was a friend, was she not? They had worked in that house six days a week for years. They were safe in that kitchen, were they not? So why on earth would his mother lie?

The effects of the lie were equally confusing. Because if his mother was trying to soothe Mrs. Farley's alarm, she had instead done the opposite. Mrs. Farley was so upset that she told his mother that when she left that afternoon she was not to come back. In fact, she said she did not want to see his mother again; instead of having his mother serve the cake she asked that Mr. Sitwell do it, the woman who normally served having already been fired.

The townspeople had attacked the village that very night, completely unprovoked. That, ultimately, was why the book's lies upset him so much. The story it told was not simply a fiction but an erasure of the truth, thereby paralleling the erasure of his village through a cowardly act of violence from which it was only by some miracle he had managed to survive.

He reached his door and stepped inside his room. He watered his plants, took off his clothes and lay down on his bed. He

listened to a woman in the room next door laugh, a man move slowly up the stairs and down the hall, the sound of a closing door.

He shut off the light.

In his dreams that night he was alone and running down a dirt road when a wagon traveling in the opposite direction pulled up beside him. In the front a man sat holding on to the reins.

"You're going the wrong way, son," the man said. "You go back there now, there's a good chance you won't ever come out again. Best turn around now while you still can."

"I'm trying to get home."

"Ain't no home in that direction." The man shook his head. "Not anymore."

He looked and saw it was true: there was nothing but the road he was standing on and, in the distance beyond it, a plume of smoke billowing up to the sky.

The man nodded toward the rear of the wagon. "Get in. I can take you as far as the state line. Just put those blankets over your head, stay down, and keep quiet."

In the back of the wagon, the woman in the white dress was sitting on top of a flour sack, holding the mask with the hand-drawn face with one hand and a blanket for him to hide under with the other.

"Be quick about it—"

Mr. Sitwell shook his head and took a step backward. "No. I have to go back. I've got to get home, my mama will be looking for me."

The man who held the reins frowned. "Son? I don't know your mama. But I do know don't nobody want their child walk-



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ing that way, in that direction. So you're going to have to be a big boy now. Going to have to do what I tell you: get up in this wagon and act like you got some sense."

He held out his hand. "Hurry now. Ride with me. While you still got a chance."



# 4

## How He Got There

When Mr. Sitwell arrived at the Barclay house the next morning, he found Bart sitting on the back porch with his shoes off, stuffing rocks into the toe of his sock.

“Morning,” Bart said.

Mr. Sitwell nodded. Without wanting to, he glanced down at Bart’s mangled foot.

“What’s that you’re doing?”

Bart shrugged. “Old trick of mine. Keeps my shoes from popping off when I’m running upstairs.”

He held out the sock weighted down with rocks, wedged his damaged foot inside it, then shook the stump at Mr. Sitwell.

“Doesn’t that hurt?”

“No, sir. Not at all. Not for a long time. Itches sometimes, but that’s about all.”

Mr. Sitwell said nothing. He’d meant the rocks but the boy apparently thought he meant the foot itself. He started to ask why he didn’t massage the foot in linseed oil to keep the skin from cracking and then wrap it in something softer, like a cotton bandage. But instead he kept quiet. The boy was not his responsibility, he thought. Let someone else help him, someone who actually worked in the house.

Bart stood up and hopped up and down a few times. “See that?” Bart said proudly. “Take a lot more than a couple of missing toes to keep young Bart down.”

He held open the kitchen door. “Coming inside?”

“Not today.”

Instead Mr. Sitwell turned and walked toward the yard. He’d spent the whole night thinking about what had happened the day before and decided the best he could do for those boys was stay away from them. He’d let himself get too caught up in the drama inside the house and was now convinced that nothing he did was actually helping. For once he was determined to stay out of it and focus on his actual job.

He walked through the flower garden and looked at the grounds beyond it, taking stock of all the work he had sacrificed to Miss Mamie’s constant need of him inside the house. Given how much time he’d spent neglecting his own duties he was not surprised to discover that an invader had taken root near the north fence: choke weed.

He went to the shed, put his weeding tools inside the wheelbarrow and pushed it to the northern fence. Then he got down

on his knees and began the arduous task of trying to uproot everything that did not belong.

Vigilance: that was what was required to keep the weeds out, what he had started to lose sight of by spending so much time in the house. And this was true not just with respect to his responsibilities to the yard. For, in going over the events of the day before, it occurred to him that in telling Frederick the truth about Wash Talbot, he'd revealed more about his past than he'd ever told anyone in the city, even Mamie. He'd told Frederick that story because he felt the boy needed telling, but he wondered why he had not chosen another way to convey the message he was trying to express. He'd always been taught that one kept safe by keeping hidden; because of that, he was not sure if his telling what had really happened to Wash was not, in fact, a symptom of his finally beginning to forget who he actually was.

At some time around eleven, when the sun was high in the sky, a voice called out to him.

"There you are."

He turned around and saw Mamie standing behind him in the grass.

"You didn't come get your coffee this morning. Where you been, Sitwell?"

"Right here. Working." Mr. Sitwell shrugged. "I'm the groundskeeper, remember?"

"Yeah, well about that . . ."

She was quiet for a moment, distracted by something going on near the front of the house. Mr. Whitmore had brought the car around and was holding the door open as Mrs. Barclay and Mrs. Lawson climbed into the backseat.

"You heard the news? Mr. Pound made Barclay an offer last night. Coming by this afternoon to finalize the contract."

"Glad to hear it."

"Nothing is settled yet, of course. Barclay still has to deal with the Southerners. But it's a step. A big step."

"Good for you." Mr. Sitwell nodded.

"Good for me, good for everybody . . ."

The car wheeled past them, out the front drive.

Mamie chuckled.

"You see that? Mrs. Barclay is going shopping. Deal is not even finalized and they're already celebrating. Isn't that just typical?" She shook her head. "Know why Mrs. Lawson is going with her? She's buying fabric for a new uniform. I finally got the go-ahead from Barclay to hire new staff."

Mr. Sitwell nodded. "So, you're finally getting a real butler?"

"No, I'm finally getting a real groundskeeper." Mamie smiled. "Don't look at me like that. I'm not putting you out, Sitwell. I'm bringing you inside."

"What?"

"Already talked to Barclay about it. And honestly, he didn't take much convincing. Man is getting tired of trying to dress himself for one thing. And I imagine you impressed him with all that clowning you did last night. He said he understood you might need some training, but he thought it was a fine idea. You know how he is; managed to convince him it was better than bringing another stranger into the house."

"What are you saying? You want to make me the butler?"

"Don't act so surprised. It's something I've wanted to do for a long time. Now maybe folks won't act so confused about your

proper 'sphere.' You'll be the butler, and that means you'll take charge of the staff. It's called delegation of authority. I'm tired to listening to people complain."

Mr. Sitwell stared. "I don't know what to say, Mamie."

"Say thank you."

"I mean I'm flattered, of course. But you know very well I'm not properly trained."

"I shall train you. You are smart and you shall learn. Anyhow it's more money. And it's where you belong."

She sat down on a stump and looked around the yard.

"How old were you when Boudreaux sent you out here? Fifteen? I remember because it was right around the time he finally agreed to make me his apprentice. That man sure had a way of making it hard to like him. I spent an entire year pleading with him to let me come into the kitchen and when he finally consents, what does he do? Forces you out the very same day. He knew you were like a brother to me."

"Perhaps he had cause."

"No, he just didn't like you. Imagine he figured out pretty quick you were smarter than him, imagine it intimidated him. You don't intimidate me, Sitwell."

"Yes, well, regardless of the circumstances . . ." He looked back at the house. "Perhaps it's better this way. Truth is I'm happy here."

"That right?" She gave him a pitying look. "Well, too bad. Because your exile is now over. You're coming back inside, like I said. And that is final."

She stood up. "Enjoy your flowers while you still can. I intend to have a proper groundskeeper hired by the end of next week."

He watched her stomp back to the house.

She was angry, had no doubt been expecting gratitude and instead he'd told her the truth. He was relieved to hear that things were finally getting back to normal, if only because it meant that he could finally get the matter of the boys sorted out with Mr. Barclay. But he'd already decided he didn't want to be in the house. He didn't trust himself inside of it, found it too confusing for reasons he could not fully explain.

He was still thinking of ways he might prevent it from happening when a woman's voice called out to him once more.

"Hello, Sitwell."

This time when he turned around Jennie was standing behind him.

"Miss Mamie sent me to fetch you. Said to tell you Mr. Barclay wants to talk to you. Congratulations, by the way. Understand you are going to be the man in charge from now on. Which is funny because I was under the impression that you already were that. Guess they're just making it official."

"Nothing's official," Mr. Sitwell said. "Mr. Barclay got two deals to work out, remember? It's why we're having another dinner on Friday. Nothing around here has really changed and there is not really anything to celebrate. Not yet anyhow." He shook his head. "Seems like everybody else around here has forgotten that except me."

"Well, now you just proving my point, aren't you?" Jennie said. "Frederick told me what happened yesterday, by the way. He was crying in that cellar while I was trying to wash his face. He told me he figures you saved his life."

Mr. Sitwell frowned. "Probably best not to repeat that."



“Yes, I realize that too. I wouldn’t tell anybody who didn’t already know. Just wanted to make sure you know the boy understands what you did for him. Just wanted to make sure you knew that I understand it too.”

She smiled. “You do realize that, if it is true that you are coming into the house, it means the two of us will be forced to spend more time together.”

“I suppose it would.”

“Well, we shall just have to find some way to endure it.”

She shook her head, let out a dramatic sigh, then, in the most graceful movement he’d ever seen, spun around before him and bowed.

“What are you doing?”

“Cakewalk.”

Mr. Sitwell watched her glide back and forth through the yard.

“Must be hard for you, working in this house.”

“There are harder things.”

“I mean I imagine you must miss the theatre.”

“Oh, I loved my life. And it was a good thing too, seeing as how when I started out I didn’t have much choice in the matter. Perhaps Cutie Pie will choose to go back to it someday. But if she does decide to go back, that is what I would like it to be. A choice. I owe her that much. She did save my life.”

He watched Jennie dance. “One day I would like to thank her for that.”

“Perhaps one day you will get the chance. Perhaps over dinner some time?”

“Dinner?”

"You do eat dinner, don't you?"

"Once a day." He smiled. "I would like that, Jennie."

"How about Sunday? After Mr. Barclay's deals are sorted out. What do you say?"

"That sounds grand."

She spun around one last time and curtsied. Then she bowed and took her leave.

Mr. Sitwell watched her walk back through the yard. As he did it occurred to him that he'd been so busy worrying about his past that he hadn't even realized what Mamie was actually offering him by giving him that promotion: a future. If he wanted to court Jennie, he'd be a butler asking her out to dinner, as opposed to a groundskeeper. A butler, walking down the street, holding Jennie's hand . . . It made a difference, he knew that it did and deep down realized that Jennie knew it too. Knew she thought about such things because she had to think, if not for her sake then for the sake of her child, Cutie Pie.

When he walked back to the kitchen Mamie was sitting at the table dicing onions. Mr. Sitwell stood behind her chair.

"Mamie?"

"What is it?"

"Thank you."

Mamie sighed. "Never mind, Sitwell. It's alright. Just go on out there, do like I told you and stop acting like a fool."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mr. Sitwell pushed through a swinging door. He walked down the hall and knocked on the door to Mr. Barclay's study.

"Come in." Mr. Barclay said, then smiled when Mr. Sitwell entered the room.

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“There you are, Sitwell.”

“How can I help you, sir?”

“Yes, well, this time I believe it is I who can help you. Have a seat, my boy.”

He eased into the chair in front of the desk while Mr. Barclay gave him an appraising look.

“I have news. You may not be aware, but I am currently in the process of negotiating a substantial business deal. Once negotiations have concluded, the house will once again be on secure footing, and when that happens, I’ve decided to give you a promotion.”

“A promotion, sir?”

“That’s right, Sitwell. We are in urgent need of a new butler and I have decided to give the position to you.”

“Me, sir? Well, this is indeed an honor.” Mr. Sitwell smiled. “And most unexpected.”

“Of course, initially it shall be on a trial basis. You should consider it an opportunity to prove yourself. An opportunity I believe is well within your reach.”

“Thank you, sir. For the opportunity.”

“Not at all. I have already informed Mamie of my decision and found her highly amenable to it. She told me how much help you have been to her these past few months, a fact that did not surprise me in the least. Truth is I have long believed you belong in the house, never fully understood why Mr. Boudreaux seemed so convinced you would work better in the yard. It has always seemed to me that your instincts were better suited to an entirely different form of service. It’s not a groundskeeper whose advice I count on. Not a groundskeeper who would think to

take the initiative, to step in and handle the situation with those boys.”

“Thank you, sir. And . . . about that,” Mr. Sitwell said. “I can’t tell you how bad I feel about our misunderstanding.”

Mr. Barclay waved his hand. “Never mind. It’s past.”

“Still, I feel bad. And seeing as how things have changed and the house is back on firm footing . . . perhaps there is some way we could correct my mistake.”

“What do you mean?”

“Bring the boy back. The other two are still in contact with him. Perhaps it is not too late to have him reinstated. After all, we do need three to handle the workload in the kitchen.”

“Yes, that has always been the official number. . . .”

Mr. Barclay pursed his lips as he thought about it.

“Perhaps, Sitwell . . . Why don’t we give it a few days, let things get sorted out here first? Wait until the contracts have been signed. We don’t want to get too ahead of ourselves. . . .”

Mr. Sitwell smiled. “No, sir. Of course not. But thank you.”

Mr. Barclay turned toward the window and sighed.

“You know, it’s funny. Those children do look so much alike. Yesterday I would have sworn it was the other one you’d sent away. The one with those dreadful scars.” He ran his finger along his left cheek. “But now I see quite clearly it was the one with the deformity. It didn’t affect his hearing, did it? The missing ear? Is that why you chose to get rid of him?”

Mr. Sitwell turned toward the window and saw Bart and Frederick working together in the yard.

“Never mind,” Mr. Barclay said. “Leave it for now. We can discuss it later, once my negotiations have concluded.”

## THE RIB KING

“Yes, sir. And thank you again, sir.” Mr. Sitwell stood up. “I won’t let you down.”

Mr. Barclay smiled. “I know you won’t, Sitwell. You never have.”

Mr. Sitwell bowed and took his leave.

He walked outside to where Frederick and Bart were crouched in front of the water pump.

“Where is Mac?”

Bart shrugged. “He had to run a quick errand. Should be back straightaways.”

“Errand?”

“Don’t worry, sir. It’s nothing like yesterday,” Frederick said, “Just went to pick up something right quick. From the field.”

“What?”

“Berries, sir,” Bart said. “The nonpoisonous kind.”

“The nonpoisonous kind? What are you talking about? Did Miss Mamie send him out there?”

“No. It was for Miss Jennie,” Frederick said. He took a deep breath and then tried to explain. “When we came upstairs this morning she was at the stove boiling berries. She said you’d taken her out to the field and told her they’d make a fine jelly someday. She wanted to make some for you, as a surprise. Thing was, soon as we looked at what she was doing we could tell she’d picked the wrong ones. Got some of the bad berries mixed in with the good. And we remembered how you told us we had to be careful with them on account of the poison.”

They went back inside and led him down to the cellar, where they’d taken the berries and hidden them so that no one would

eat them by mistake. He took one whiff of the concoction and could tell it was true: Jennie's jellies were poisonous.

"She was very upset, of course, when we explained it to her," Bart said. "Started crying and everything."

Frederick shook his head. "I told Mac to let it alone. But, you know . . . she 's so nice and sometimes Mrs. Lawson gives her such a hard time. Mac said he'd go back to the field, get some good berries so she could make her jelly and wouldn't have to feel bad about nothing. Said he figured it wouldn't take more than an hour. If it wasn't for that, I would have told him not to go. Something must have happened to hold him up."

"I heard Mrs. Lawson say there was some kind of protest going on downtown," Bart said. "Might be they blocking the streetcar. Might be he had to walk."

"How long ago did he leave?"

"Must have been around seven."

Mr. Sitwell looked at the clock above the stove. It was eleven thirty.

"Look here, sir. I can tell you're upset, but I mean it when I say you got no cause to worry. Mac will be alright and Bart and me can cover for him until he gets back." Frederick smiled.

The two boys nodded in agreement. "You won't even notice he's gone."

Mr. Sitwell sighed. "Honestly, what foolishness. Just keep those jars where no one will find them. Then go and help Mamie in the kitchen. Mr. Pound is coming back this afternoon. I'll deal with cleaning the jars properly when I get back."

"Yes, sir." Frederick gave him a serious look. "I'm sure Mac is

fine. Matter of fact, you'll probably pass him coming in on your way out."

But Mr. Sitwell did not pass him on his way. He looked for him too, as he hurried toward the streetcar stop, then all along the Avenue as the omnibus shook over the pavement. When the car trundled past the Magazine he could see Bart was right about the protests; there was a great throng of people crowding the sidewalks, much larger than on previous days. From the signs they carried he gathered it was some sort of tailors' strike. They were shouting chants and waving their fists and the car was forced to stop several times in order to avoid hitting those who, lost in a trance of their own outrage, would every now and then wander directly in front of it. When the driver dared to honk his horn their anger only seemed to intensify. Before long, rocks were being thrown.

Mr. Sitwell kept his head down as both rocks and fists battered the windows of the car. After a long series of starts and abrupt stops, the car finally made its way past the turmoil. Mr. Sitwell kept riding until they reached the park then climbed off and hurried toward the fields.

He entered through the gate and began walking up the hill. He walked the entire length but saw no sign of Mac. He turned around and walked back the way he'd come; he'd almost reached the gate when, in desperation, he began shouting the boy's name. To his surprise a voice called out in response.

"Mr. Sitwell?"

He stopped walking. The voice seemed to be coming from some place nearby, but when he looked around he saw no sign of Mac.

“Mac?”

“Yes, it’s me!”

“Where are you?”

“I’m right here,” Mac’s voice cried out. “I’m in a hole.”

The voice seemed to be coming from behind a large patch of reeds near the fence.

“Careful, sir. Watch your step. . . .”

He pushed through the reeds and found, hidden behind them, a large hole, so deep and dark that he could barely see Mac trapped inside it.

“Thank goodness you’ve come,” Mac said.

“What happened to you?”

“A terrible thing,” Mac called from the hole. “Just came out here to run a quick errand. Figured I could do that and get back before anyone even knew I was gone. And I was right about that, only took me a few minutes to get the berries. Then I was on my way back to the omnibus stop. And that was when I saw him.”

“Who?”

“The boardwalk man. The one who locked up Frederick. He was standing on the corner, arguing with a group of men about the protests. He said the strikers were foreign anarchists and that he hoped they were all shot. Then he saw me and stopped talking to give me the most hateful look. So I did the only thing I could do. I ran. Ran all the way back here trying to find some place to hide. I looked back one time to see if he was following me and it seemed like the ground just gave way beneath me. Next thing I knew I was stuck in this hole.”

Mr. Sitwell looked at the broken planks of wood on either



side of the hole. He realized that Mac must have managed to fall into one of the many transportation tunnels that had been dug underneath the fields as a means of getting supplies to the fairgrounds during the construction of the exposition. The tunnels had been boarded up, but the wood must have rotted in the neglect of the years that followed its demise.

"Are you alright down there?"

"Not really, sir. I hurt my leg. It's why I can't get out."

"Don't cry, Mac. It will be alright."

"You talk like somebody who's never been stuck in a hole before."

"You should feel around down there. Perhaps there's something you could use to pull yourself up."

"There isn't."

"Perhaps there is. Something you can't see."

"No, I can see everything just fine. I see in the dark, sir. Did you not know this about me?"

"I did not."

"Well, perhaps it simply never came up." Mac cried, "Woe is me that it ever should have. . . ."

Mr. Sitwell listened to the boy sob. "You know, Mac. I have already walked by this spot twice trying to find you. If you couldn't get yourself out, why didn't you call for help?"

"I didn't know it was you."

"Yes, but how did you expect anyone to help you if you would do nothing to make yourself known?"

"I don't know," the child said between hiccupping sobs. "I guess I was scared. First I was scared of that boardwalk man and then I started thinking of all the other people I done met in my

life who I'd not want to ever find me in a circumstance like this. I figured Frederick and Bart were bound to come out here to look for me, eventually. So I thought it best to just stay quiet until I heard someone actually calling my name."

Mr. Sitwell looked out across the field. Yes, he could see the wisdom in that. It was a warning he himself had been given once, a long time ago.

From the green-eyed man: "Stay hidden and keep quiet. No matter what you hear going on outside, promise me you will not cry out until someone actually calls you by your name."

"I understand," Mr. Sitwell said. "No, you did right, Mac. Just . . . Please don't cry. I'm going to find a way to get you out."

"Thank you, sir."

But when he looked around him, he realized he didn't have the slightest idea how to do that. It was a very deep hole, so deep he was surprised that the boy had only injured his leg.

"I'm going to have to get some help."

"No! Please, Mr. Sitwell. Don't leave me alone. I'm scared!"

The boy was hyperventilating.

"Mac, stop crying. Try to relax."

For some reason, Mr. Sitwell found himself patting his pockets. His instinct was to give the boy something to hold on to, in order to vouchsafe his return. But his pockets were empty.

"I promise I'll be back."

As he hurried out of the fields and back onto the street, he puzzled at the strangeness of his own gesture, wondered what it was he'd expected to find in his pocket. It wasn't until he reached the omnibus stop that he remembered: that it was not true that he'd never been trapped in a dark place underground.

## THE RIB KING

He had once spent an entire night alone in the darkness, not in a hole but a cellar. It was where the green-eyed man had thought to hide him the night the townspeople raided their village. He'd hidden Mr. Sitwell then told him he had to go back to help the others; but before he'd left, he'd reached into his pocket, pulled out a locket, and tucked it into Mr. Sitwell's hand.

"Keep that for me. That's how you know I'm coming back. Because that there is precious to me. It's kept me safe and it will keep you safe too. Best believe I'd never leave it behind. . . ."

When the omnibus let him off near the Avenue, Mr. Sitwell began to run.

Back at the house he found Mr. Whitmore standing in the kitchen, chopping meat for Mamie.

"Stop what you are doing at once and come with me."

"Excuse me?"

"I need your help."

He ran out to the shed and searched for a length of rope. When he came back out, Mr. Whitmore was standing in the yard, watching him.

"What is this, Sitwell?"

"There has been an accident . . . Just come along, I'll explain on the way."

"No." Mr. Whitmore shook his head. "I am not going anywhere with you. Whatever it is, I can't help you. Bad enough I've got Mamie after me all day, asking me to do things in the kitchen that aren't my job. I'm not gonna get started in all that with you too. I was hired to drive the car, remember? You're the yardman. Something wrong in the yard, you can fix it yourself."

Mr. Sitwell frowned. "I take it you haven't heard the news?"

“What news?”

“I’ve been promoted. I’m the butler now.”

“Butler? Says who?”

“At present, I do.” Mr. Sitwell held out the rope. “That means you work for me.”

Mr. Whitmore stared for a moment, trying to decide if Mr. Sitwell was serious or not.

He took the rope.

The two of them walked back out to the Avenue.

“So you say you’re the butler now? Interesting. I mean it’s a bit unusual, don’t you think? Kind of makes me wonder if my uncle wasn’t right after all.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. It’s just that he figured it was what you wanted. Said he figured it was what you’ve been angling for all this time.”

“Your uncle doesn’t know a thing about me or what I want.”

“Yeah, well . . .” Mr. Whitmore shrugged. “He said you’d say that too.”

They climbed aboard the omnibus. When they reached the Magazine stop, the sidewalks were deserted; at first Mr. Sitwell was confused by this, but then they ran into the mob two blocks later. He realized the strike had not ended abruptly; it was on the move.

Once again the car was forced to stop in order to avoid those who were passing in the street. Mr. Whitmore watched the windows nervously as people began banging on the side of the car.

“It’s a tailors’ strike,” Mr. Sitwell said.

“No.” Mr. Whitmore nodded toward the crowd. “Some of

those men might be tailors. But I recognize some of the others. They are part of the gang sent out with the specific intent to assault men of color. The Good Time Gang. They're the same ones who ran me off the job."

"The Good Time Gang?" Mr. Sitwell squinted. "So that's what happened? Why you came to work for the Barclays?"

"Man came to recruit me back when I was still in Alabama. Said he wanted to make sure I was aware of opportunities that awaited in the North. Wasn't until I got up here that I realized I'd been hired to be a scab. In some ways, the man was right, of course. They gave us less than those white boys were making but more than I ever would have made in Alabama. Still, I can't say it sat well with me, nor many of the others who come up here. We tried to tell them that. Tried to form our own delegation, see if there wasn't some way to work something out between us. Man who volunteered to speak with them got a brick to the head for his trouble."

He stopped talking, distracted by something going on near the front of the car. A black man had risen from his seat and was standing nervously by the door, trying to decide if it was worth it to get off.

"Don't do it," Mr. Whitmore said.

"I've got to get to work."

"Sit back down. Can't work if you not living. Stay on the car until we get past it, then find some way to circle back around. Sometimes you got to be strategic. You try to get off here, those men will tear you to pieces and not think nothing of it. Trust me, I know."

The man nodded his thanks and waited until the car rumbled

past the strike. When the coast was clear he carefully stepped out on to the street.

Mr. Whitmore looked at Mr. Sitwell. "What did you think I was doing in that house?"

"Honestly, Whitmore? We thought you liked the uniform."

"I could have bought myself a uniform with the money I was making before. But I get it. Y'all think I'm a fool. Well, you're wrong about that. I am not a fool. What I am is a cattle butcher."

"Push back!" The driver yelled.

Mr. Sitwell and Mr. Whitmore moved to the very rear of the car.

At last they reached their stop and Mr. Sitwell led Mr. Whitmore to the fields. Three paddy wagons were parked just outside the gate and several police officers were busy setting up a barricade on the opposite side of the street in anticipation of the protesters' arrival. Mr. Sitwell hurried into the fields and led Mr. Whitmore to the spot behind the tall reeds.

As soon as Whitmore saw the boy sitting inside the hole, he frowned.

"What is this?"

"I believe it's one of the tunnels they used to bring supplies into the fairgrounds. They run all across the fields. It must have collapsed."

"No, I meant how did he wind up in it?"

"I'm not sure," Mr. Sitwell said. "Never mind that. How is not important. We've got to get him out."

"You are wrong about that, Sitwell," Mr. Whitmore said. "It's very important. In fact, it's the most important thing there is."

He shook his head.

“How old is that boy? Fourteen? That’s far too old to just be falling into holes. Unless he was pushed. Did someone push him?”

“Nobody pushed him, so far as I know.”

“Then perhaps he is simple. Is he simple, Sitwell? Because it’s the only other possible explanation, so far as I can tell. And yet you know as well as I do this world is not made for the simple and the slow.”

“He’s not simple. You know very well he is not. It’s Mac.”

“Well, if no one pushed him and if he is not simple I can see no discernable reason a boy as big as that one should wind up in such a predicament.”

There was a sound of breaking glass on the other side of the fence, some kind of commotion going on in the street outside the fields. Mr. Whitmore continued to stare at the hole.

“We shouldn’t have come,” Mr. Whitmore said.

“What?”

“I said we shouldn’t have come. It’s bad enough the boy managed to get himself into such a humiliating circumstance. The least we can do is let him get himself out.”

Someone screamed on the street behind them.

“What are you talking about, Whitmore?”

“The larger picture, Mr. Sitwell. You might think you’re doing him a favor pulling him out but trust me, you’re not. Because it seems to me that if that big old boy can’t figure out how to get himself out of a hole when there is no accounting for how he got into it, then he might as well stay there. Because we both know he’s not got much chance of surviving outside of it.”

Mac, who could hear Mr. Whitmore talking, began to whimper in the dark.

Mr. Sitwell stared at Mr. Whitmore.

"It's the truth. You know it's the truth. You might like to act like you don't know what I'm talking about, but you do. Deep down, I know you do."

Mr. Sitwell could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he listened to the protesters chanting, just beyond the gate. Mr. Whitmore stared down at the hole, almost as if he were in a trance.

"It's the mob, isn't it?" Mr. Sitwell said. "Those strikers have rattled your nerves. I don't know what you went through before you arrived at the Barclay house but believe me, you are not the only one who has lived through an encounter with the mob. The point is, I don't care. I don't care what you've been through, I don't care how Mac got in that hole and I don't care what it means. I want him out of it and that's all that matters. Because you work for me now, and so long as that's true you are going to do what I tell you and you are going to do it when I tell you to. Or else you can go right back out there and join the rest of those men who don't have jobs."

Mr. Whitmore looked up.

"I'm not Mamie, Whitmore. I'll cut the meat myself before I allow you to disrespect me. I do everything else in that damn house. No reason I can't do that too."

Mr. Whitmore nodded toward a nearby tree.

"Might be we could tie the rope to that and make a pulley," he said.

"Then do it."



Together, they tied one end of the rope to the tree then dropped the other end into the hole and instructed the boy to tie it around his waist. They stood on the edge of the hole, a length of rope in each of their hands. Behind them they could hear the chanting getting louder as the protesters got closer to the fields.

"Now pull," Mr. Whitmore said.

Mr. Sitwell pulled on the rope. And as he struggled to summon strength from his muscles, he heard the mob drawing closer and could not help but be reminded of the night the townspeople had raided his village. The sound of the guns, the screams of his neighbors as the green-eyed man led him to his hiding place in the cellar. He'd told Mr. Sitwell he would be safe there and promised someone would come for him; until then Mr. Sitwell had to stay hidden. Then he'd reached into his pocket and held out a small locket on a chain with a picture of a woman inside.

"Your uncle Max give this to me, a long time ago," the green-eyed man had said. "See, when I was your age I didn't live in a nice place like this. I was born a slave in Saint Augustine; figured I would die there too until I met a woman who told me she could get me free. I went with her and I was not the only one. She had a whole group of us traveling with her, which is why when I got sick with the fever she had to leave me here on account of all the other people depending on her too. It's how I wound up living with your mother and uncle Max. By the time I got better, she was long gone, which of course produced a powerful sadness in me. So your uncle Max drew this picture for me, so I'd have something to remember her by."

"Pull," Mr. Whitmore shouted.

"Hold on to that," Mr. Sitwell remembered the green-eyed

man telling him. "Keep it safe and it will keep you safe too. Promise me that no matter what you hear going on outside you will stay here. Don't come out until you hear somebody call you by your name. Because I promise, someone will come for you."

Then the green-eyed man had gone back out into the chaos and left him alone in the dark. And even though Mr. Sitwell never saw him again the man had kept his word. Because someone had come for him. Just before dawn someone had called his name and led him out of the burning village and back onto the main road; there he'd met a man in a wagon who'd taken him all the way to the state line. He'd explained the need to be careful, that everyone knew his family had been harboring the green-eyed man, that if he were caught he'd be held responsible for his mother's lie.

"Pull!" Mr. Whitmore said.

It wasn't until the following day that he'd opened the locket and understood what it was he'd been given. Inside it was a picture of woman's face, hand-drawn by his uncle Max. It was the face of the woman who had tried to lead the green-eyed man to freedom. It was the face on the mask held by the woman from his dreams, who'd been coming to him almost every night since.

The sound of a gunshot startled him from his revelry. He looked up and saw a woman in a torn blue dress running frantically past him through the fields. Mr. Sitwell pulled on the rope as hard as he could, then fell backward as the tension gave way and Mac appeared on the ground in front of them. He still had the berries he'd picked tied up in a handkerchief he'd strapped to his waist.

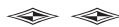
"Thank you, sir," Mac said.

## THE RIB KING

Mr. Sitwell clutched the boy to his chest. He looked up and saw an enormous crowd of people now running through the fields, a row of men on horseback charging after them swinging billy clubs left and right and all of them heading toward the reeds where the three of them stood. He held on to Mac and shut his eyes, as for a moment it seemed as though the three of them might be trampled.

Then something happened. The earth began to shake beneath him, followed by a loud crack as the wooden boards sealing the transportation tunnel gave way a few yards from where he, Mac, and Mr. Whitmore stood. A section of the crowd was sucked into the ground, replaced by a cloud of dust that came billowing out it. Mr. Sitwell raised his hand to shield his eyes then squinted at the chaos and hysteria that surrounded him. Through the fog of dust he saw a line of men with linked hands moving slowly and deliberately through the crowd, their footsteps tracing strange patterns in the ground as they wove their way through the fields. Mr. Sitwell recognized some of them as the tramps who lived there; he took Mac's hand and motioned for Mr. Whitmore to follow them all the way through the fields to a small hole in the fence on the opposite side.

The three of them slipped through it and carefully made their way back to the Avenue.



When they got back to the kitchen Frederick and Bart clenched Mac in a tight hug. Mr. Sitwell looked at Mamie standing near the stove.

“Am I late?”

Mamie smiled. “Quite the contrary. You are right on time.”

She handed him a serving tray.

He found Mr. Barclay and Mr. Pound sitting together in the parlor.

“So it is settled then?”

“I should think so. Just a few minor details to work out. I have one more meeting tomorrow; I just want to feel confident that I fully understand what I am getting into. I shall be more than prepared to make you an official offer by Friday.”

“But if you are getting into it, if that much is firm . . . I don’t see what this meeting has to do with our negotiations.”

“Rest assured, Barclay, the deal will go through. You have my word on that. Really, I find myself distracted by an all-together different matter.”

“Oh?”

“I take it you are aware of the current chaos downtown?”

“The strike? Yes, but it’s hardly chaos. More of a controlled burn. Sometimes it is best to let them rage a bit, get it out of their systems. I can assure you it is being closely monitored by the authorities.”

“Well, whatever you choose to call it . . . It appears it does have consequence. I told you about the luncheon my wife is intent on hosting tomorrow? Now the caterer she hired has pulled out at the last moment and she is convinced that it is due to the turmoil that she has not been able to locate a suitable replacement.”

“Whatever might be going on downtown, I assure you the two have nothing to do with each other.”

## THE RIB KING

“Perhaps not. But I am concerned that it speaks to larger themes.”

“Nonsense, it speaks to no theme at all. As a matter of fact . . . It occurs to me . . . Why not have her lunch here?”

Mr. Sitwell looked up.

“You’re certain you don’t mind?”

“Of course not. No trouble at all. My wife will be delighted.”

“That would be marvelous. And of course, I could pay you for the catering if that is an issue at all.”

Mr. Barclay laughed. “Nonsense! The opportunity for more of your company is payment enough.” He turned to Mr. Sitwell.

“Run and fetch Mamie so that Mr. Pound may explain what he requires.”

Mr. Sitwell frowned. “Yes, sir.”

In the kitchen he told Mamie she was wanted in the parlor. Before she pushed through the door he reached for her hand.

“It will be alright,” he told her.

He waited a few minutes then returned to the hall. He retrieved Mr. Pound's coat from the closet, then stood listening to the muffled voices on the other side of the parlor door. Then the door opened and the two men walked out.

“Tomorrow then.”

“Yes, looking forward to it. Hopefully we shall be doing business together for a long time.”

Mr. Sitwell handed Mr. Pound his coat. Mr. Whitmore drove the car around to the front of the house and Mr. Pound was already seated inside it when Mamie finally emerged from the parlor, the expression on her face a mix of anger and profound fatigue.

“So we are clear then?” Mr. Barclay asked her. “Everything must be ready by noon.”

“What would you have me serve them?” Mamie said.

“What do you mean? You know very well what to serve.”

“I know what I was asked to serve. And I also know we do not have the provisions to prepare it in the house. I barely have enough provisions to get through the week, including Friday’s dinner.”

“Is that not what the market is for? Go buy more. What is the matter with you?”

“Those who sell in the market expect to be paid,” Mamie said. “We owe money to every grocer in the city.”

“What did you just say to me?”

“I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.”

Mr. Barclay frowned. “Yes. We have indeed passed through a difficult period in this house. And yet somehow despite this, you have always been paid and paid on time. Is that not correct?”

Mamie said nothing.

“I do not expect you to understand everything I do, all the sacrifices I have made to ensure the stability of this house. Why should you understand? You are the cook. Cooking is all I have ever asked of you. I must say, however, that when Mr. Boudreaux left, I did have my reservations about giving the responsibilities of head cook to a woman. But you assured me you could handle the job, did you not?”

“I did,” Mamie said. “I do.”

“Then figure it out.”

He turned and walked down the hall. A few seconds later, the door to his study slammed shut.

## THE RIB KING

Mr. Sitwell followed Mamie back to the kitchen where the three boys were busy washing dishes. They noticed her expression and frowned.

“Miss Mamie? Are you alright?”

Mamie stared straight ahead.

The swinging door pushed open again and Mrs. Lawson rushed in, followed by Jennie.

“What is this I’m hearing about a luncheon tomorrow?”

Mamie did not respond.

For a moment the room was quiet. Everyone stared at Mamie. They looked frightened, as if they’d all suddenly realized how much they had depended on her these last few months. Depended on her confidence, on her assurances that things would get better. Without that, it was clear they hadn’t the slightest idea what to do.

Fortunately, Mr. Sitwell did.

He reached for Mamie’s hand. “What did I tell you before? It’s going to be alright.”

He went to the refrigerator and brought out what was left of the sauce she had prepared for the dinner the night before. He raised it to his nose, inhaled deeply then smiled. He went to the pantry and brought out a can of stewed tomatoes, brown sugar and vinegar and set them out on the table. He chopped garlic and onions then set the saucepan on the stove while Mamie watched.

“What are you doing?”

“Watch and see.”

He mixed Mamie’s sauce with the new ingredients.

Then he began to cook.

When he was finished he tasted it, then held a spoon to her lips. Her eyes lit up as if smelling salts had been placed under her nose.

“What is this?”

“A meat sauce.”

“It’s delicious. I did not know you could cook, Sitwell.”

“My mother taught me a few things when I was a child.”

“Your mother?”

“She was a cook, like you. A fine cook and a fine woman . . .”

“I don’t doubt it. But I can’t recall you ever speaking of your mother before.”

“Her name was Lotta,” Mr. Sitwell said.

Mamie tasted the sauce again.

“Did Mr. Boudreaux know you could cook like this? And yet instead of making you his apprentice, he chose to send you to work in the yard? Why, Sitwell?”

“What does it matter? I’m not outside anymore. I’m right here. With you.”



When he returned to his rooming house that night Billy was sitting behind the front desk, reading.

“How is that coming along?”

“Oh, there are dark days ahead, that much is clear. Cherokee’s assault is now inevitable and the town is bracing itself for what promises to be an attack of extreme violence.”

“Is that right?”



“And yet there is some beauty amid the terror. According to the author, the threat of attack is what brings the townspeople together. They’ve put aside all petty grievances and are determined to meet the threat as a unified force. As a result, perhaps the first time in its existence, the town is able to see itself for what it truly is.”

“And what is that?”

“A beacon in the darkness. A lonely outpost of civilization carved out of a wilderness that had them surrounded on all sides.”

“Is that right? And what of the village not a mile down the road?”

Billy shook his head. “There is no village down the road.”

“No, perhaps not. Perhaps not anymore. But there was. It was a beautiful place. Full of beautiful, strong, proud people. Until those townspeople whose story you seem so moved by decided to burn it down.”

“What are you talking about? There is no village. There never was. And these are good people in this book. They would never do something like that.”

“And yet they did. I know because I was there. I used to live there. This story you are reading is my story and that is how I know it is full of lies. And all these people you’ve mentioned in from the book? Wash, Cherokee, Uncle Max, Farley, Lotta . . . I knew them, I knew what they were really like. The village existed and it still exists. Because I’m still here and I remember.”

Billy frowned. “I’ve already told you, Sitwell. There is no one in this book named Lotta.”

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Mr. Sitwell nodded and walked up to his room.

That night, when the woman appeared to Mr. Sitwell in his dreams, he was waiting for her. For the very first time, when she stretched out her hand he did not hesitate.

He took it.