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DESIDERIUM: A NOVEL

by

**REBECCA BLANKS
A THESIS**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in
The Department of English
to
The School of Graduate Studies
of
The University of Alabama in Huntsville**

**HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA
2022**

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Rebecca Blanks

October 25, 2022

(student signature)

(date)

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Submitted by Rebecca Blanks in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English and accepted on behalf of the Faculty of the School of Graduate Studies by the thesis committee.

We, the undersigned members of the Graduate Faculty of The University of Alabama in Huntsville, certify that we have advised and/or supervised the candidate on the work described in this thesis. We further certify that we have reviewed the thesis manuscript and approve it in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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ABSTRACT

The School of Graduate Studies
The University of Alabama in Huntsville

Degree Master of Arts College/Dept. CAHS/English
Name of Candidate: Rebecca Blanks
Title Desiderium: A Novel

Mia is an underestimated and overworked intern at a journalism company in New York City, but everything changes when she's sent to Charleston, South Carolina on an assignment. Mia attempts to complete her assignment and return home, but before long, she gets wrapped up in taking care of a centuries-old plantation. When Mia finds out that there is no known history about the place, she can't help but try to fill in the gap with her imagination. But how can she write a history of a place from scratch? As her stories break down and angels and dragons begin to creep into her writing, Mia risks losing herself in the process.

Abstract Approval: Committee Chair Anna Weber October 31, 2022
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Act I

“In the beginning, God created Heaven and Hell. Somewhere in between was the Camellia Plantation.

The expansive land was nestled in the lush green of South Carolina’s lowcountry. When the men of many generations stood on the front porch, they were able to turn their approving glances outward and view the even lines of crops, as far as the eye could see. They saw the round, arched bodies of those working for them, with every bend and lean, it seemed, picking money right off the ground and putting it in their master’s pocket. Weaving in and out of the lines in the fields were the sunburnt men on horseback, peering down and ensuring nothing but the strictest obedience.

Women throughout the years would sit in the large, airy sitting room of the Main House and chortle while they embroidered or sipped tea. They would entertain guests as they nibbled on food that they didn’t acknowledge (or even really remember) arriving. Perhaps a few young children, too young to run about outdoors, but too old to be in a nursery, would be sitting on the floor or in someone’s lap.

The House was prone to heat, but large Magnolia trees surrounded the three stories, shielding them from the sun in a waxy green cocoon.”

Mia sighed and glanced out the window to the magnolia trees. Were they waxy? What did it really *mean*, for leaves to be waxy? She pondered for a moment and backspaced a few lines, ready to try to start from scratch again.

New York City was drizzly that morning. Mia stared out the window of the break room at her office, admiring how dreary the city looked in the gray of November. All the people outside

formed a bumpy black sea of umbrellas scurrying here and there along the sidewalks and competing with yellow taxis.

The microwave beeped and Mia jumped. She let out a small breath and retrieved the now-hot mug of water. Mia kept her head down and scurried to her desk, hoping the non-descript-ness of her low bun and gray sweater would be enough to keep her from being called upon.

With a sigh of relief, Mia made it to her desk and dropped a tea bag in the mug. As she watched the color seep into the water, Mia tried to reason to herself why she was hiding. It wasn't really because she didn't want anyone to notice her, she wanted to be recognized for the work she did. *It's just tiring*, she realized. It took a lot out of her to be waiting, hand and foot, for the real employees of the newspaper company. There wasn't much she could do about it for now, as she was just an intern. But, Mia mentally vowed, once she was hired on full time and rose through the ranks, she would value interns, not just treat them like a waitress or a janitor.

Mia took a timid sip of her scalding tea and tried to enjoy her rare moment of solace. *Maybe I should try this more often*, she thought. *It's not like anyone can—*

“Mia?”

Mia spun around and stood up.

It was her boss, Ramona, looking perplexed. “There you are,” she continued. “At ease, soldier.”

Mia let herself nervously chuckle and slowly sat back down in her chair, though she continued to sit up straight and at attention.

“I was just going to ask, would you like to get lunch with me today? I might have a project coming up that I want to talk to you about.”

Mia's mind raced with possibilities. "Yes, yeah, absolutely, for sure!" She replied.

"Just one yes would have sufficed, but thank you, Mia," Ramona said, then turned to walk away. Before she left, though, Ramona turned back around and added, "Oh, and if you could bring me a coffee ASAP that would be great. You know how I like mine."

Mia did as she was asked, then played with the pens on her desk until it was noon. Her mind wouldn't stop wandering to the meeting ahead of her. Mia had been hoping for the last few weeks that someone would approach her to offer her a full time position, or even a part time position with the ability to get promoted later. Ramona had mentioned a project, though, so maybe there was a large and important task they were entrusting her with. Maybe it was even a test of her abilities. Sullenly, though, Mia realized that if it were something that good, some of the other staff members would have been assigned to it. The project was probably something none of the real employees wanted to do.

When Ramona walked out of her office, Mia started throwing her stuff in her purse and jogged over. They made small talk as they rode the elevator down to the ground floor and braved the rain. Mia followed Ramona as she walked down a block and ducked into an Egyptian restaurant that Ramona frequented, and which Mia was often sent to retrieve the pick-up order. Mia's hair frizzed as it dried. She stuttered through her order, trying her best to pronounce the words in front of the teen behind the counter, who corrected her without so much as a sympathetic smile.

Mia swallowed her shame as she sat down across from Ramona. Although she knew this woman's habits, likes, dislikes, life philosophy, writing style and coffee order, she suddenly realized that they didn't have much of a personal relationship.

"So... how was... your weekend?" Mia attempted.

Ramona didn't look up from her smart phone. "It was fine," she replied. "You?"

"Um, yeah, good." Mia bit her nail and stared out the window, into the gray-scape of the city.

In a few minutes, the food arrived, and Ramona was suddenly much more attentive. Mia compared the beef skewers in front of her to the heap of meat, colorful vegetables, and bread in front of Ramona, and wished she had just asked for the same.

"So," Ramona began, "you've been with us for a few weeks, right?"

"Um, well, it's been four months, actually," Mia said, suddenly embarrassed for some reason. She nibbled on her kebab.

Ramona's eyebrows raised slightly. "Four months! Wow," she mused. "Well, you've been here for a bit, then. Where do you see your future going with the company?"

Mia cleared her throat. She'd been practicing this speech in her head every day. "Well, as you know, I recently graduated from NYU with a 4.0 and a degree in journalism, and over the course of my internship here, I feel like I've proven that I'm ready, willing, and capable to tackle headfirst any assignment. I would love to be considered for a permanent, full-time position." She used a shaky hand to reach out and take a sip of her drink. Mia already wished she hadn't said "*I feel like*." She should have been more assertive. She studied Ramona's face and thought she saw a glimpse of approval.

"That's great!" came Ramona's reply. She was smiling. "We might have an opening coming up soon, I would love for you to apply."

Mia nodded along enthusiastically.

"In the meantime, I have something really special to ask of you."

Mia held her breath.

Ramona leaned back slightly. “Three weeks ago, we sent one of our staff writers down to South Carolina to write a piece on a historical manor. There’s been local talk of tearing it down to build some apartments, and it’s sparked a national conversation.”

“Oh, yeah, I think I heard about that!” Mia interjected.

Ramona continued, “The only issue is, two weeks ago, we lost all contact with her.”

Mia’s jaw nearly dropped. She waited for an explanation, but Ramona didn’t supply one.

After Ramona made a bit more of a dent in her lunch, she went on, “We’ve emailed and called, and gotten nothing. At some point, we will cut her from the payroll and consider her having quit,” Ramona pointed her fork at Mia, “we still need that article written. So that’s where you come in. What do you think, are you up for it?”

“Yeah, for sure!” Mia answered, without a second thought. “I would be honored.”

Caroline pulled a layered green dress over her head. She had fought with her nurse for this right, feeling it important to prove her independence.

“Don’t forget to wear your shawl, miss. Your mother gave me specific instructions. She’ll be upset if you disobey.”

Upset at who? Caroline thought savagely. She had seen and heard enough from sneaking around, and knew that it was the nurse, not Caroline herself, who would bear the brunt of her mother’s criticism.

Caroline’s nurse admired the ruffled lace of her dress in the mirror as she put ribbons in Caroline’s blonde curls. When her nurse was finished getting Caroline ready, Caroline tore out of the room and down the stairs. She pushed past her brother and tumbled into the dining room.

“Hello, dear,” her mother said, without looking up.

Caroline slid into a cherry-colored, high-backed wooden chair. “Morning,” she mumbled, as she reached for a piece of toast. Crumbs from the crispy bread tumbled all over Caroline’s front, while she slowly started working on undoing her hair. She felt the eyes of the dark-skinned dining room staff on her, but she knew they wouldn’t dare say anything. Caroline dropped the ribbon onto her plate. She reached out again, grabbed some sausage, and asked, “May I be ‘scused?”

“It’s ‘may I be *ex*-cused,’ Caroline.”

“Yes, you may,” she replied, climbing out of her chair already.

Her mother did not smile. “Why are you in such a rush?”

“I ‘spose I have to go practice my pronunciation.” Her answer was met with narrowed eyes, but no protest.

Caroline wandered around for a bit, but as soon as she heard the sound of the door opening down the hallway, she ran towards it. Before she made it there, a small, freckled girl with strawberry blonde hair got to her.

“Amelia!” Caroline exclaimed, and they hugged. Then, before any adult could stop them, they grabbed each others’ hands and ran out the back door and down the porch. Once they felt they were a safe distance away, they slowed their pace and began walking instead.

“Do you wanna try and find bugs?” Amelia asked. “I betcha didn’t know that under any big rock, there’s a bunch of bugs under there.”

Caroline scoffed. “I knew that,” she said, though she didn’t.

With that, the pair set off. They found a few good sized rocks, but the only bugs they found were earthworms and deemed not very interesting. Caroline put them back on the ground, but Amelia quickly grabbed them back up.

“I might need these later,” she said, in a way of explanation. Then, “Did your parents tell you we have to live with Tiffany for a while?” Tiffany was a girl their age, Caroline’s cousin. She always acted prim and proper, and never wanted to play outside, so naturally, they were sworn enemies.

Caroline immediately grew sullen. She had heard no such thing. “Yeah,” she grumbled. “But why?”

“A tree fell on our roof and people have to fix it. I don’t know why we can’t just stay in another part of the house, though. I don’t want to stay with Tiffany.”

Caroline scowled but said nothing. She lifted another rock to help Amelia find more worms.

When the girls got bored of the rocks and Amelia’s hands were full of worms, they started trodding back towards the house. On the way, though, Caroline insisted on stopping at the small grove of fruit trees.

Caroline ran over to a small cage. “Look, here it is!” She exclaimed to Amelia.

“What is it?” Amelia asked. She received her answer when Caroline lifted the wiry box to reveal a squirrel stuck inside. The squirrel reacted to this by panic squeaking, which made Caroline laugh.

Amelia was not as amused. “Caroline, just leave it alone,” she said. “Let’s go back.”

But Caroline ignored her and began climbing a peach tree. “Just one second,” she called out, over her shoulder. Amelia could do nothing without jeopardizing her worm supply. Once Caroline was able to hoist herself onto a thick enough lower branch, she leaned over and dropped the squirrel trap. The squirrel made even louder and more terrified squeaking noises, which Caroline found hilarious. Amelia, no longer wanting to be involved, huffed and walked away.

Caroline, unable to resist, climbed the tree to drop the squirrel one more time before running after her.

“You told her you would be honored?” David repeated, incredulously. Mia was eating pizza with her boyfriend, later that day, after the sun had set and the moisture from the rain had turned into a muggy cloud, threatening to choke the city.

Mia was suddenly worried, but she stood her ground. “Well, yeah, I mean, it did feel like an honor. She thought of *me* to go and do this really important story. I’ve barely gotten to write anything, and when I do, it’s all inconsequential. This is something important.”

David shook his head. “Don’t you think it’s suspicious that you’re just their errand girl for months, and then out of nowhere, they hand you something like this? Why wouldn’t someone else go, someone with more experience?”

“Do you think I’m not qualified?” Mia shot back. “Maybe they’re finally acknowledging my potential, have you ever considered that?”

“Look, I don’t doubt your abilities. I just don’t trust that company, okay? I think they may have an ulterior motive or something.”

Mia stared at her half eaten slice of pizza, watching the grease reflect the lamplight of the small room. Her voice broke as she spoke again, “What else am I supposed to do? This was the only place that I could get an internship at. Plus, Ramona mentioned possibly hiring me on full-time soon. I feel like this will really be a turning point for me. I feel good about it.”

David shrugged in submission. “Alright. I mean, it’s ultimately your choice. I just hope everything goes smoothly.”

Mia reached over to hug him. She whispered, “*Thank you,*” into his chest, and he kissed her forehead.

All week, Mia obsessively researched everything she would need to know for her trip. She found a motel in the area that she could stay pretty cheaply, and planned on renting a car during her stay. She discussed the details with Ramona and got a travel budget to work with. It wasn’t much, but Mia felt she could make it work. She booked plane tickets for the following weekend.

The Friday morning of the flight, David helped her pack, still slightly begrudging of the trip.

“Do you know how long you’ll be gone?” he asked.

Mia shrugged. “Probably just a couple days, I guess. But I’ll bring clothes that match each other in case I need to re-wear some of them.” David nodded solemnly and he slipped Mia’s laptop charger into her backpack. “Thank you for helping me pack,” she said, with a small smile directed at him. David nodded.

“Just be careful, okay?” he asked. “Promise me?”

“I promise!” Mia assured him.

David tilted his head down. “We can talk every day, right?”

“Of course,” Mia whispered, and leaned up on her toes to kiss him. They were interrupted by a phone chime announcing the arrival of Mia’s ride to the airport.

David sighed and closed his eyes. “Let me know when you land?” Mia nodded in agreement. She put her backpack on and grabbed her carry-on luggage.

When she made it to the airport, she was greeted with an overwhelming flurry of sights, sounds, and smells. The scent of cinnamon rolls mixed with sushi and barbecue in the air, floating above the overlapping conversations of travelers trying to make it to their gates. Mia put her head down and tried to avoid distractions as she followed a map to the loading area for her flight. She sipped a lukewarm water bottle she'd bought and paced around as she waited to board. Because she was trying to save money, she bought the cheapest plane ticket available, which meant she was nearly last onto the plane.

She shuffled down the main cabin, struggled to hoist her suitcase up into the storage area, and then finally squeezed between two businessmen. Though she wished she hadn't been forced to get a middle seat, Mia tried to keep her spirits up. The flight was only around two hours, and then she would be on the ground in an exciting new place, ready to report on the conflict. It was all very romantic, she felt.

Mia googled what slavery was like in the 1700's and began to imagine how hard it must have been to live in those conditions. She bit her nail and began to type into her phone's notes app.

Lucy bent down, warm pain coursing through her legs. She plunged her hands back into the water to retrieve another handful of rice seedlings. All around her, there were other men and women working at the same repetitive task.

Grab stalks, grab stalks, grab stalks, grab stalks, tie together in a bundle, put to the side. Grab stalks, grab stalks...

Sweat dripped down Lucy's forehead and dripped off her nose and chin. She was miserable in the heat, but she'd learned long ago that she'd be much more miserable if she

stopped working. Aside from verbal abuse, which happened on a daily basis anyway, any misbehaving slave would have lashings (either immediately or later, put on display for everyone to see), would receive less food or water, would have their clothes taken away, or would be thrown in a metal box to suffer outside in the sun for a day or two. People didn't always survive that one.

Often, when Lucy was working away in the fields on miserable auto-pilot, she liked to pretend she was back in Africa. She didn't remember anything about Africa, of course, since she was born in the Colony. Her mother didn't remember anything about Africa either, from what Lucy could remember. She was sold when Lucy was young. Lucy had very few memories of her, but she remembered sleeping, curled up, in her mother's arms every night.

No, any knowledge of Africa came from other enslaved people who either remembered themselves, or remembered the stories from their ancestors. They told her that when the white people came to the Colony, when they stole the land, they didn't know how to use it to grow anything. It was the enslaved people who brought their knowledge and expertise from Africa. They knew about rice, about how to change and shape the land, how to add the water and re-plant the seedlings, how to harvest and prepare the rice for eating. Lucy fantasized that they were all in fields in Africa. They were free, and all the work that they did would be all for them, not for a red-faced man who was more eager to hand out punishment than food.

On this swampy afternoon, Lucy glanced up from her rice re-planting and saw a white boy. She would normally assume it was a young overseer, or perhaps the son of one, but with such an ornate coat on, Lucy figured he had to be more important than that. With a quick intake of breath, she realized who it must be.

Benjamin Marshall, the son of the master's family. She hadn't seen him in years. This was to be expected, as Lucy worked outside, not in the manor, but still, Lucy couldn't help being surprised at him. The last time Lucy saw him, he was just a kid, with messy clothes and food on his face. He must have been going through puberty, because the parts of his body didn't quite match each other. His arms were too thin and long, his head too big. Now, though, everything looked more than just proportional. The thin arms had thickened with muscle, and he was as tall as a man.

Lucy watched as he wandered around, occasionally marking something down in a journal he held. She struggled to balance the work in front of her with trying to crane her neck to catch as many glimpses of Benjamin as possible. Since the enslaved workers saw so little of the Marshall family, any news about them was sure to receive ample attention. Lucy continued to look up at Benjamin, then down at her work. Up and down, up and down, up and—

With a splash, Lucy fell over and was submerged in the pond of rice. She sat back up, spluttering, and heard footsteps sloshing near her.

“Are you alright?”

Lucy looked up, open-mouthed, to see Benjamin standing in front of her. She just looked at him, stupidly.

He smiled. “Here, let me help you up.” Benjamin offered his hand. Lucy reached up and took it, and allowed herself to be pulled to her feet. “I'm Benjamin, what's your name?”

Before Lucy could answer, the overseer yelled it out.

“LUCY!” She and Benjamin both whipped their heads around, Lucy in fear, Benjamin in surprise. As he marched up to them, he continued ranting. “I've told you a million times not to

talk to anyone while you do your work, especially not one of the masters. Why is he in the field? What have you done? You've gotten the young sir's nice clothes all wet and ruined."

"I think the young sir can make his own decisions regarding ruining his own clothes," Benjamin said coolly. "Lucy wasn't bothering me at all, I came over to her."

Lucy blushed, her heart still beating with wild fear of the overseer's punishment. To her surprise, he stepped back.

"Right, of course. She's all yours," he grumbled, before half-heartedly walking away.

Benjamin turned back to Lucy. "Well, I suppose I better let you get back to it," he said. "It was nice to meet you... Lucy."

As the plane began its descent in South Carolina, Mia peered out the window across the aisle. She saw rows of houses, and so much green. There were trees everywhere, dotting the landscape. When she deboarded the plane and stepped out into the air, though, she was shocked to realize how cold it was. In Mia's mind, Charleston was warm, sunny, and humid. Around her, gray skies and cold wind disagreed.

She stopped at the car rental office and meandered to a small local restaurant. She ordered fried fish, fried shrimp, and french fries. She took the crispy golden meal back to her room and ate as she began to do research on the story she'd been sent to report on. The plantation, it seems, was actually a bit outside of Charleston, surrounded by cotton fields. Mia figured she could drive over to it, to get some photos for the article, if not some information. Another potential source of information was the Charleston Historical Society. Mia tried to make an appointment to talk to an expert or view some historical photos or documents, but the first

available one was a week out. She sighed and made the appointment anyway, just in case she was in town long enough and still didn't have what she needed.

As Mia got ready for bed, she pondered what she thought about the whole situation. While it instinctively seemed wrong to tear down a historical home, she had to admit there were a lot of similar ones in this area. What purpose did a historical manor serve to society? Is that purpose fulfilled when there exists a certain number of them already? Mia wasn't sure what it was that the project managers wanted to build if they were successful in demolishing the home, but at what point did the goodness of that thing overpower the possible badness of destroying the house? What if they built multiple houses, or a hospital? Would an apartment complex justify it? A school, or library? She watched the shadow on the ceiling of the tree outside.

Benjamin stared into the eyes of a portrait on the wall as his father spoke. The portrait was of some ancestor of his, a very important-looking man with ruffles around his neck. The picture must have been painted back in England, as there weren't many professional portrait painters in the colonies. As he looked up at the somber face on the canvas, Benjamin wondered what this past family member would think of him. Based on the stories he heard of his family, Benjamin knew many of them were tough, economical, and ingenuitive. He looked down at his feet.

“Are you even listening to me, boy?”

Benjamin's head snapped up. “Yes, sir.”

With a scoff, his father said, “This is what’s wrong with youth. You think you’re so smart, daydreaming and not paying attention. Then, one day, you’ll be shit out of luck when you realize that you don’t know anything at all and you should have been listening all along. Do you want that to happen to you?”

“No, sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

His father answered with a huff through his nose. “What I was saying was the thing to remember is that you have to show them your authority consistently, so they don’t get any ideas. The slaves are mindless, stupid animals, but just like animals, they won’t hesitate to bite the hand that feeds them, or scatter, if they get the chance. You understand?”

Benjamin nodded tentatively.

“Good,” his father continued. “And how would you show your authority?”

“Well, I would, um…” Benjamin’s throat cracked, and he cleared it, trying to force the pitch deeper. “I would wear nice clothes, and I would talk loudly.”

“No, no, no, no!” Benjamin’s father’s face started getting red. “That’s what the overseers do to overcompensate for their lack of real power. You can’t just put on a show for everyone else. That means they have the power. What you want to do is set the expectation that things are done a certain way, in a timely fashion, or there will be serious consequences.”

Benjamin stared out the window, his heart beating faster and faster as he remembered hearing hoarse screams from men being whipped within an inch of their lives and the smell of sizzling flesh in the hotbox out in the field.

His father noticed. “Does that make you uncomfortable, son?” He laughed and clapped Benjamin on the shoulder. “You better toughen up before Saturday.” When he was met with silence from Benjamin, he quieted a little and commented, “You know, it’s for their own good.”

Benjamin looked into his father's eyes and wasn't sure what he saw.

When Mia woke up, she decided to visit the manor first. She packed up her camera and her audio recording device (in case anyone was up for an interview). Mia plugged the address into her GPS and drove through the busy traffic of Charleston, then the flat, tame roads going out of the city. The horizon was expansive, and the roads guided her across many swamps and even some large lakes. The drive took Mia the better part of an hour, and when she got to the historic home, she was eager to explore. Unfortunately for her, the gates were closed.

Mia sighed, and took stock of her surroundings. In front of her was the entrance to the grounds, closed in by a large, black, wrought-iron fence. Connected to the front fencing was layers of stone reaching all the way around the property. Sprouts of ivy shot out of the ground and intertwined with each other like lace, covering the border like an old woman's doily.

Disappointed but still trying to make the best of the trip, Mia retrieved her camera and took a few snapshots of the ivy-covered stone fence. She then turned around and captured the swaying branches of the willows on either side of the road coming up to the property. After that, since it would have been a shame to drive the whole way for nothing, Mia crept up to the gate, and stuck her large camera lens in between the cold metal of the gate. Through the camera, she could get a glimpse of the cool blue and white of the house, surrounded by pristine greenery. Before she could take the picture, her view was suddenly blocked.

Mia looked up, frightened, to see a dirty-looking man wearing all khaki and a large frown.

"No photography," he told her, in a gruff voice.

Mia cleared her throat. “Oh, um, well I’m actually from NYPNS. I’ve come to do a story on the recent events with the manor, and, um, and everything.” She swallowed. “Is there, by chance, anyone who would be willing to sit down for an interview? Or, or make a statement?” Mia realized she was breathless and panting. She gave a convincing smile to make up for it.

“No photography,” the man repeated, giving her a wary eye. He glanced at her car, then added, “And no trespassing.”

Mia nodded, her cheeks burning. She got back into her car and drove away. Once she had processed everything, she began banging on the steering wheel out of frustration. Then she almost swerved into the lane next to her, so she forced herself to calm down quickly. This trip was not going as planned. After racking her brain and paying less attention than she should have on the road, Mia decided to visit the city’s public library. Perhaps they would have some sort of special collection or archives there, which could help Mia’s research.

She pulled into the parking lot of the red brick building. While the building was large, Mia started having doubts when she walked in. The place was bright and colorful, almost garishly, and children ran around, laughing loudly and screaming occasionally. Mia instinctively recoiled and covered by the gray map in the lobby. She located the Special Collections area, on the top floor, and headed up the stairs.

Mia slowly walked into the room and let out a silent breath of relief. The area had a museum-like hushed quality, and seemed a bit older and darker than the other areas. Still, Mia felt much more comfortable. She glanced around and saw an older woman at the counter, hunched over a large book. When the woman heard Mia’s shuffling entrance, she looked up.

“Hello dear,” she said, in a slightly wavering voice. “How can I help you?”

“Hi,” Mia replied, and had to think for a moment. What exactly did she come to find?
“Um, I’m a reporter from New York. I’ve come to write a piece about the Anadelle Plantation. I just visited, and they didn’t want to talk, or even let me take any pictures of it. I guess I was wondering if maybe you had any information about the place here?”

The woman nodded and gave Mia a knowing smile. “I’m sorry, but like I told the others, we have nothing. All the records should be with the Historical Society.”

The others? Mia wondered. Then she realized, of course there were other reporters that came here, asking about the same thing. With terror, Mia realized that if she didn’t write something soon, she might be taken off the project. Once every other news outlet had covered the event, who cared about Mia’s take?

The woman returned, and Mia steadied herself. “Oh, okay. Well, thank you, uh…”

“Gretchen,” she supplied.

Mia blushed. “Thank you, Gretchen. I really appreciate it. I’m Mia.” She put her hand out, and Gretchen shook it with a smile. “So, have you had a lot of journalists come asking about the Plantation?”

Gretchen shrugged. “A few. The family who owns The Camellia don’t want to be involved in all the hype, I suppose, so they’re not very keen to end up in the newspaper.”

“Do you know anything about the family?” Mia asked.

“Not much,” she replied. “I believe they’re like most of the families around here. Some devote their lives to keeping up the home, but most of the time they’re off doing something else, starting businesses, becoming musicians. Maybe they have a home in downtown Charleston, maybe they don’t.”

Mia nodded. “Do you know any family that might want to talk about their experiences?”

After a moment of hesitation, Gretchen answered, “If I knew anyone, I imagine they wouldn’t want to talk to a reporter. It’s not personal, dear, they just don’t want to be involved.”

“Of course,” Mia readily agreed. “I completely understand.”

Mia decided to leave, after thanking Gretchen again. When she walked out of the special collections area, Mia thought she saw a familiar back. She wasn’t completely sure, so she tiptoed around the figure slightly. Yes— Mia could’ve sworn it was her.

“Alex?” she asked, incredulously.

The familiar girl looked up, with fear in her bloodshot eyes.

“Alex, is everything okay? Ramona said she hadn’t heard anything from you. I think she’s cutting you from payroll soon. I’m actually here to finish what you—”

“What are you talking about?” Alex hissed back. “I don’t know who you are, but I’m not the person you’re looking for.” She stalked away, throwing a dirty look over her shoulder.

Mia was rattled. She kept replaying the incident as she drove back to the motel. When she got to her room, Mia took a shower in the dingy white plastic, trying to rinse off the confusion and disappointment of the day. Then, she sat cross-legged on the bed and began typing. She might as well have some sort of rough draft for when she got some real information.

The Anadelle Plantation was built in 1835 by John Sherry. He named the Plantation after his wife.

Mia sighed, hit backspace, and started over.

The Anadelle Plantation sits slightly outside of Charleston, surrounded on all sides by boundless green. Not long ago, the fields were covered in cotton plants. Today, they are pristine gardens. Tomorrow, it could be an apartment complex.

Mia bit her lip. She decided to keep that for now, but tried again to start over. Her fingers danced across the keyboard, trying to find their place.

The lush, green landscape of the South Carolina lowlands is home to cotton fields, civil war history, and America's most recent controversy.

Mia sighed and looked up at the ceiling. With every word she wrote, she imagined someone much smarter and more talented than her writing the same thing a week ago. What was she doing here? She had been in town for a day and a half of precious time and accomplished nothing. She slammed her laptop closed and decided to get out and clear her head. Just then, her phone rang. She looked down and realized it was David. Mia held her breath and answered.

“Hi David!”

“Good afternoon, lovely. How’s your work going?”

Mia wiggled her foot and looked around the room for an answer. “Um, it’s going okay. I visited the plantation, and they didn’t want anything to do with it, they wouldn’t let me take pictures or anything, so I went to the library for a bit of history and whatnot.”

“That sounds like great progress!” David encouraged her. “You think you’ll head back soon?”

“I’m not sure. It feels like I don’t have enough to write anything good.”

David laughed through the speaker. “Isn’t that what makes a good writer? Being able to create something out of nothing?”

Against her will, Mia’s lips curled into a half smile. “I guess so,” she answered.

“That’s my girl,” David said. “You got this, baby.”

Just as Amelia had mentioned, a few days later, Tiffany and Amelia arrived together at Caroline's manor.

Tiffany entered the room first, her nose in the air, and her hair plaited perfectly behind her.

“Hi, Tiffany,” Caroline said, sullenly.

Tiffany sniffed. “Greetings, my dear cousin,” came her reply.

Caroline rolled her eyes. Tiffany had always been the type to pretend she was a grown-up woman, always striving to be elegant and somber, and never any fun.

Then Amelia followed in behind, looking unusually pinned-up. Caroline realized with a snort that Amelia had her hair done in the same way as Tiffany– they both had two long, thick braids. Caroline bit her lip to force a laugh from bubbling to the surface. Surely Amelia was mocking Tiffany by showing her how stupid and boring she always looked. Amelia didn’t give Caroline a mischievous grin, though. It was worse. She simply gave her a placid, empty smile.

Amelia then gave Caroline a small curtsy. “How do you do,” she said.

Caroline snorted. She leaned down in front of Amelia for an exaggerated, sarcastic bow. Then she straightened back up quickly, and proclaimed, “Howdy do to you, too!”

Amelia’s cheeks turned pink, and she said nothing else. She went to stand near Tiffany instead. Caroline was left standing alone, still facing the door as Tiffany began to speak about recent events that had occurred since the two had seen each other last, then, thankfully, the tutor arrived. He was a very reliable person—always old, bumbling, and funny looking. He hadn’t been in the room two minutes before he started mumbling to himself.

Caroline snickered and glanced over at Tiffany and Amelia. Despite the fact that Tiffany had become different lately, making fun of the tutor had always been one of the things that they bonded over. Tiffany didn’t laugh, though, or even smile.

In fact, she cleared her throat and said, “It’s lovely to see you this morning, Mr. Magruder.”

Mr. Magruder looked up, startled.

“Oh... yes, you as well,” he mumbled.

“Did you have a pleasant Sunday?” Tiffany went on.

Realizing that this was going to be an entire conversation, rather than just a passing pleasantry, Mr. Magruder looked up from his maps and books. The two of them went back and forth for a while, making small talk. Caroline slumped and watched the door, willing Amelia to interrupt, as she always did, and make tutoring fun again. Amelia never did.

Caroline struggled to understand what was going on. When she turned around, she saw Mr. Magruder, Tiffany, and Amelia all sitting down, civilly discussing the weather. Caroline scowled.

When Mia hung up the phone, she tried to hold onto that golden, safe feeling David gave her, but it leaked away when she glanced at her laptop. She pondered again what she was going to write. Then, Mia rubbed her face and decided it was time to get out of the motel room. She decided on Applebee's as her dinner, as it felt both like a place of comfort and also of desperation. While it was tempting to try out a place from a travel blogger's list of Charleston Must-Eats, Mia didn't feel like sitting amongst happy vacationers and successful locals. She wanted to wallow.

So much so, in fact, that she decided to sit at the bar and order a margarita. What did she have to lose? Just then, Mia heard the waiter seat someone behind her. She turned slightly, out of curiosity, and was surprised to see Gretchen sitting down. Pleasantly surprised, Mia waved to her, and received a warm smile in return.

"Are you dining alone, dear?"

Mia replied with a blush. "Yes, are you?"

"Perhaps not," she replied. "Care to join me?"

Mia gladly accepted. She let the bartender know, and carried her drink over to the table. Gretchen noticed.

"Long day?" she chuckled.

Mia sighed. "I just don't know what I'm doing anymore." She relayed her recent thoughts and anxieties.

Gretchen nodded. "And why would it be bad if your article sounded like everyone else's?"

"Well, I want to do a really good job, because this is my first real assignment at my job, well, my internship, and I want them to hire me full-time."

“Hmm,” Gretchen said. “And do you like your... internship?”

Mia hesitated. She imagined herself getting everyone’s coffee, taking notes for other people during meetings, and having her comments go unacknowledged. She gave Gretchen a sheepish smile. “I mean, I guess working there as an intern hasn’t been the best, but I really care about journalism and I want to be a good reporter. There’s just something about being able to get to the bottom of a story—look at all the perspectives, all the facts, and find the truth of an event.” Mia blushed, then shrugged. “It’s idealistic, I guess, but...”

“If we don’t at least start as idealists, what will society come to?” Gretchen mused, with a twinkle in her eye. “Why don’t you stay in town a little longer and see if the Historical Society aids your research?”

“I would, but I’m running out of money. My boss didn’t give me much to fund this trip, and I still have to buy an airplane ticket back home. Each night I stay in the motel eats up another chunk of cash.” Mia took a long sip of her margarita. “Maybe I’ll just fly home tomorrow.”

The waiter arrived, and took the women’s orders. When he left, Gretchen was silent for a moment, then slowly said, “I think we might be able to help each other.”

As Mia sat, dumbfounded, Gretchen explained that her family owned a large plantation nearby, with a historical manor house and everything. The land had been passed down for decades, and, while at first, there was a power struggle among siblings about who would be granted the role of being in charge of the property, the interest had all but died over the last few generations.

“I was handed the plantation because I didn’t have anything else legitimate enough to do, I wasn’t a doctor or lawyer. Now, none of my children or grandchildren want the responsibility,

either.” With a rueful smile, Gretchen turned to Mia. “So, I suppose my offer is, will you house sit for me?”

She elaborated that she was in the process of speaking with different historical preservation groups on how best to proceed, but she no longer wanted the burden of staying on top of all the landscapers and cleaning services. If Mia would take care of general upkeep of the house, Gretchen told her she could stay there for free.

Naturally, Mia accepted.

“Wow, I would be absolutely honored!!” Mia gushed. “I’m... I’m speechless! Thank you!”

Gretchen nodded. She provided Mia with the address and asked her to come visit the next afternoon.

Caroline could barely pay attention the entire morning. Why weren’t her friends acting like themselves? Tiffany, while usually the most prim and proper of the group, would still goof off and joke around with them. And Amelia acted like a completely different person. Were they playing a prank? Maybe this was all a joke they were playing on Caroline. She gazed out the window as the empty branches on the trees swayed in the wind.

When it was lunchtime, one of the members of the kitchen staff brought in some fish, rice, collard greens and bread. Amelia daintily reached out to take a piece of bread, but before she got to it, Caroline snatched it away from her grasp.

Amelia, taken aback, let out a small gasp. Tiffany’s eyes got wide. Caroline laughed at their reactions. She squeezed the bread in her fist and ran across the room. “Come and get it!” she called out.

“Caroline, that is not funny!” Tiffany exclaimed.

Caroline stuck her tongue out at her. “No one cares what *you* think, Tiffany.”

Tiffany sniffed and turned back around, ignoring Caroline. Amelia’s expression was still serious. “Give it back, Caroline,” she ordered, in a small, meek voice.

That was what Caroline had been waiting for. “If you insist! Catch!” she called out, cheerily. Then she leaned her arm back and threw the bread, with as much force as she could muster. The bread hit its target exactly—it smacked Amelia on the head.

Amelia didn’t catch it.

The bread silently tumbled from Amelia’s shoulder to the floor. Caroline’s glee faded in the quiet, non-responses she received from the other girls. It seemed that they were each holding their breath, then Amelia sniffled. Much to Caroline’s surprise, Tiffany reached over and hugged her.

“It’s okay,” Tiffany soothed Amelia. Caroline watched in disbelief as Tiffany picked the bread up off the floor, and wiped Amelia’s tears away. “Here, I’ll help you fix your hair,” Tiffany continued, and smoothed her flyaways. She even straightened out the ribbon on Amelia’s head.

Caroline stomped her foot. “Fix her hair?” she asked, incredulously. “Who are you people? What have you done to my *friends*?”

“I still wanted to be your friend,” Amelia said. “You’re the one who’s being rude.”

“But... this is what we’re always like,” Caroline argued, her anger wilting.

Tiffany butt in. “Well, some of us grow up,” she said viciously.

Mr. Magruder cleared his throat, a sign he wanted to stop listening to the chatter and get on with the lesson. Caroline watched as her wobbly legs carried her to her seat, now oceans away from Amelia and Tiffany.

Act II

A few days after her incident with Benjamin, Lucy was heading out to the field, when she was stopped by the overseer. She held her breath. Lucy knew that she would finally face punishment for talking to one of the masters.

“You,” he called out, pointing at her. Lucy lowered her head and tried to remain steady on her feet. There would be time for an emotional breakdown later, but not now. Not while she was being watched. “They want you in the house now,” the overseer stated, with a tone of gruff disapproval.

Lucy’s jaw dropped. “They... what?”

“I said *NOW!*” he repeated, pieces of spit flying from his mouth.

Lucy jumped and braced herself for a hit, but it didn’t come. She turned and walked toward the manor before the overseer had a chance to change his mind. As Lucy walked past all the pond-fields of rice, she really took in just how massive the land was, how much rice all the enslaved people created, how much money they made the Marshalls. The most impactful thing Lucy noticed, though, was all of the workers. While she was working, Lucy never looked up and around at the others, but now that she was, she realized how little she and her own life were. She was just a nobody working in a field, surrounded by other fields with other nobodies.

When Lucy arrived at the manor, she stared open-mouthed at the outside for a bit, but then realized she didn’t know where to go. She figured she wasn’t supposed to walk in the front door, so she walked around the side of the house until she found the kitchen. She heard voices inside, and timidly walked closer.

Suddenly, the door burst open and two women in pristine black and white uniforms appeared. They were carrying large platters of steaming food, and talking busily among themselves. While the door was open, Lucy peered in and saw a lot of women, all dressed the same, buzzing around each other, cooking. One woman in particular glanced out the door and saw Lucy.

“Hey! You!” she called out.

Lucy stiffened and walked towards her.

“You the new girl?” she said, when Lucy got closer. Lucy nodded. “Alright,” the woman said. “My name’s Grace. Before you can start, you need to wash yourself and get new clothes.” Lucy glanced down and suddenly did feel embarrassed in her dirty, tattered cream-colored dress.

A haggard-looking girl, younger than Lucy, led her to a small cabin where she handed Lucy a wet cloth and a black and white outfit, identical to the others. Lucy stripped down, did her best to rub all the sweat and dirt off her face and arms, and donned the new dress. The young girl sighed and braided Lucy’s knotted hair, while Lucy grimaced from the pain.

When Lucy returned to the kitchen, Grace nodded approvingly. “Much better,” she said. “Now, come on. We’re one short in the dining room today. Just go with the others, stand stock still, and help serve up the food. Oh, and don’t make eye contact.”

Lucy grabbed the tier of small cakes she was assigned, and tried to breathe slowly to keep her resolve. She repeated Grace’s instructions in her head over and over. Before she knew it, Lucy was jostled and followed the others into the house.

When she entered, she was taken aback by how different it was. The ceilings were higher than any other building she’d ever been in, and this had the effect of dissipating the warm, sticky air into a much cooler lightness. Everything was clean, too—something that seemed otherworldly

compared to the mud-caked surroundings Lucy was used to. She realized that these people barely went outside, and when they did, others cleaned up every speck of the evidence.

As much as she wanted to stand and gape, Lucy did her best to keep looking forward at the back of the woman's head in front of her. They quickly arrived at the dining room, and Lucy heard a whispered voice from behind her say, "Just put your dish on the table with the others. We'll all line up, place them down, and then back up to the perimeter of the room." Lucy nodded slightly and stood up straight. She followed the instructions, turning and lining up with the others, and placed her silver dish on the table, only slightly behind the others. Lucy let out a slow breath of relief and backed up. She nervously glanced around to see how close she was to the wall, but then quickly looked forward again when she remembered Grace's instructions.

At first, her ears were ringing from the stress and effort it took to remember the right things to do. After a few minutes, though, Lucy was able to take some deep breaths and become more comfortable with existing in the space. It wasn't until then that Lucy started listening to the conversation at the table. The family was discussing other people in the nearby area.

"The Allisters have a pretty good chunk of land," a booming voice asserted. "Not as good as ours, of course, but nothing shabby. Maybe Caroline can marry one of their boys."

Lucy heard a fork clatter to the ground, and one of the women she came in with quickly and silently replaced it.

"Of course, we'd have to find someone even better for our Benji here. Can't let all the training I've given him go to waste. Maybe Virginia Wellington? She's a little young, but it's good to get a wife early. You can train 'em easier that way."

Lucy heard a feminine throat clearing, then guffaws from the loud man. But Lucy's mind was racing. Benjamin was here? Her pulse sped up. She wanted more than anything to get a

glance at him, but she didn't want to mess everything up on her first day. If she did, she would probably be sent back out to the rice fields and get punished. So, she kept looking straight ahead at the wall across the room. In the back of her mind, though, she wondered if Benjamin saw or noticed her.

"I mean, I don't know if I'm really ready for all of that, dad. Don't I still have stuff to learn about the plantation?" It *was* Benjamin. Lucy gulped.

"Well, sure, son, but there's not really too much to marriage. It'll be a great way to get a big, fat dowry." Lucy realized, with fear gripping her heart, that the man was Jacob, the master of the entire plantation. She held her breath. He let out a guffaw.

Later, when Lucy couldn't sleep that night, she thought about that guffaw. She was tossing and turning, uncomfortable in the new cabin she found herself in. As she lay on a squishy sack of hay, flanked by bodies on both sides, she reflected how different her life had become. Before, as long as she kept her head down and completed her tasks, she could hope to get by without getting in too much trouble. Now, though, she was terrified that any slightly wrong expression or movement would have grave consequences. As Jacob's laugh rang in her ears, she reflected that it was the laugh of a dangerous man.

The day after she met Gretchen in the Applebee's, Mia arrived at the edge of the historical home Gretchen gave her directions to. Even though the years hadn't quite been kind to it (ivy grew up the sides, strangling windows, and brown-black patches of dirt and decay colored the white surface), it still had a timeless majesty that made Mia suck in her breath. She stopped her car at the gates, and shifted uncomfortably as she pressed the button and said, "Um, hello?"

When she heard nothing in reply but the whistling of the wind, she tried again. “It’s Mia. I’m looking for Gretchen’s house, we spoke last night?” With that, there was a beep, and the gates began to creak open, groaning slightly from being out of use. Mia parked in the gravel to the side of the house, and walked up to the front.

As she walked, Mia mused that all things considered, the manor was in good repair, but something about the structure seemed foreboding. There was paint peeling, window shutters were missing, and there was darkness coming from deep inside the house. She knocked on the front door and a small voice, barely audible through the thick wood, called out, “Come in!”

Mia opened the door and walked inside. She felt very small in the huge foyer, but was relieved when she saw Gretchen.

“Hi, this place is beautiful!” Mia exclaimed, in the cheeriest voice she could muster. She hoped that she was able to mask the sudden fear of staying at the manor alone. Mia needn’t have bothered, though, because Gretchen was eager to leave.

“I’m heading to Florida with my sister in an hour, and I have to go pick her up.” Gretchen didn’t make eye contact. She handed Mia a thick manilla envelope. “This has papers with all the information you need. The workers should take care of everything, but here’s their schedule and things like that.”

Mia accepted the Manilla envelope. “Thank you, uh…”

“Oh, right, I set up a futon and some blankets in the attic, if you don’t mind using that as opposed to anywhere else. It’s all historical, you know,” Gretchen said, with a roll of her eyes.

“Of course,” Mia agreed, with reverence.

Gretchen sighed. “Well, I suppose that’s about all I have for you. Thanks again for doing this.”

“No, thank *you*,” Mia insisted. “I’m so glad I get to stay and keep working.”

Gretchen gave Mia a half smile and walked out the door with a small suitcase. When Mia was alone, the silence was deafening. She looked around, tentatively. Mia reasoned, though, that there wasn’t complete silence. Wind rustled the leaves of trees outside, and the house shuddered. Mia crept around, feeling like a ghost haunting an abandoned site.

The house looked like a museum. As Mia silently stepped from room to room, she saw the furniture and art was historical (or looked like it, at least). She was too afraid to touch anything. Eventually, she made her way up to the attic and breathed a sigh of relief. The attic looked normal, like it could be the attic of any random house. It had a few large boxes with “Christmas” scrawled on them, a poster from a concert in the 90’s, and, like Gretchen promised, a futon with a thin blue fleece blanket. Also, thankfully, Mia spotted a microwave.

Mia decided to make a trip to the nearest superstore to get a few things. On her drive, she called David. She did her best to sound upbeat when he answered.

“Hey, David!” she exclaimed.

“Hey, how’s it going?” came his easy-going answer. “You heading home soon?”

Mia took a deep breath. “No, actually! You’ll never believe it. I met this woman and she heard me talking about how I was running out of money and she offered to let me stay in this beautiful historical home. She’s not charging me at all, I’m just house sitting for her and I get to stay in the area and keep working. Isn’t that great?”

There was silence on the other line. Mia gulped. Eventually, David’s voice came back. “Are you sure that’s... safe? I mean, how much do you know about this woman?”

“Well, her name is Gretchen,” Mia supplied quickly. “Her family owns the place, but none of them care about it much. Can you believe it?”

“I mean, do you even know who else has a key?” David asked. Mia was silent. She had no answer for him. He cleared his throat.

“I’m excited about it,” Mia said, meekly. “I think I can get a lot done now. Ramona will be proud of me, and I’ll finally be hired for real.”

“Yeah, that would be great,” David sounded despondent.

Neither Mia nor David said anything.

“I, um, I’m almost to the store. I can talk to you later,” Mia said, nowhere near the store.

“Alright, bye.” David said, then hung up.

Once Upon A Time...

No, that was too much, Mia decided. She started over.

Benjamin and Lucy had the love story of a lifetime. Benjamin was the son of Jacob and his wife Lillian, who owned land and a beautiful, shining white plantation home in the heart of South Carolina. Lucy doesn’t remember what her parents’ names are or where she was from. As soon as the two made eye contact, they both felt a spark between them.

Lucy spent her time out in the fields, enjoying the sun and talking to her friends. Every day, Benjamin would meander around outside to try to catch a glance of Lucy. Lucy would notice him, too, and they would watch each other and smile.

One day, a very mean man was yelling at Lucy. His face was red and he seemed really angry. When the man raised his arm to hit Lucy, Benjamin swooped in and saved the day.

“Hey!” he said, sharply, to the overseer. “What are you doing?”

The angry man looked confused. “Well, I’m disciplining the girl. She’s taking too long. It’s midday, and she ain’t even got half the rice she’s meant to.”

Benjamin looked pointedly at the man, which caused him to shift uncomfortably. “Perfection takes time, my good man,” he told him, then gazed at Lucy. “I am quite sure that anything this woman touches would be quite perfect indeed.”

Lucy met his eyes, then blushed and looked at her feet. The overseer was a blustering mess. “Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir,” he kept repeating. To apologize for his cruelty, he also gave Lucy the rest of the day off.

As she walked off with Benjamin, she thanked him profusely for saving her, which Benjamin shrugged off. “Any man who sees a beautiful woman in trouble and doesn’t step in has no right to call himself a man,” he told her, and left it at that.

The pair strolled around for a while and couldn’t help but delight in each other’s company. At last, they wound up sitting at the base of a large tree, taking relief in the shade. Lucy was drawing a flower that grew nearby, and Benjamin was chewing grass and staring at the sky. Lucy glanced over and noticed that the sky was reflected in Benjamin’s eyes so beautifully that no artist could ever hope to replicate it.

Benjamin noticed Lucy staring and smiled at her. Then he shifted to lean a little closer to her and said, “Lucy, can I ask you something?” Lucy, who was already feeling breathless, nodded. Benjamin thought for a moment, then asked, “What are your feelings about working here, for my father?” Before she could say anything, he reassured her, “And don’t worry, you don’t have to flatter me. I won’t get you fired or anything for truly speaking your mind.”

Lucy turned to look out at the horizon as she thought. She tried to sound measured as she replied, “I feel really lucky to be working somewhere that is so kind. So many others have it much worse...”

Benjamin nodded, then prodded her along. “But?”

“But it is difficult, sometimes, with the heat, and the mosquito eggs and snakes and all.”

“The what?” He looked at her to see if she was being serious and realized she was. “I had no idea conditions were that bad. I know it gets a little warm out but I assumed...” he trailed off. Then, he stood up. “That’s it. I can’t let you continue out here knowing how it is. I’m moving you to indoor work.”

Lucy was shocked. “But... but, isn’t it your dad who...”

Benjamin laughed wryly. “I don’t care what my dad says. I care about you too much to let you suffer. Come on.”

The next day, Mia woke up with a start. She felt her stomach drop when she didn’t recognize her surroundings, until she remembered the events of the past few days. Mia tried to steady her breathing as she looked around the small attic she was staying in. She rummaged around her shopping bags from the previous day and found a package of bagels, and ate one. While she chewed, she glanced out a small octagonal window and noticed the empty fields surrounding the manor. Long stalks of grass waved in the wind, creating ripples as far as the eye could see.

When Mia finished her bagel, she wiped the crumbs off of herself and crept downstairs. Being alone in the still, sunshine-filled rooms was just as unnerving as it was the day before. Mia was glad she had somewhere to be and didn’t just have to sit in the house all day, in the confounding emptiness and presence of it all. It was finally time for the appointment she’d made with the Charleston Historical Society.

Mia couldn’t help but be annoyed while driving through the touristy areas of downtown. Other cars and stupid pedestrians were one thing, but horse-drawn carriages were just another

headache thrown into the mix. Finally, Mia was able to find the small side road that led to a broken-down parking lot and headed to the Historical Society office.

She was greeted in a clean, quiet office and offered a coffee. Then, a middle aged man in a bow tie ushered her into his office.

“What can I help you with today?” he asked.

Mia tried to remember. “Do you have anything on this plantation?” She asked, handing him a sheet of paper with the name and address of Gretchen’s place. The man nodded knowingly. He disappeared for a few moments and Mia sipped her burnt coffee and listened to the obnoxiously loud A/C. Eventually, Mia got so antsy, she turned around and tried to peer out the office door. For a second, she wondered if he died. Eventually, her strained ears picked up on his voice, talking to someone right outside. She couldn’t make out his words, but he sounded frazzled.

Mia jumped when he walked in the office. His hair looked more tousled, and his bowtie was slightly askew. He held up his hands in defeat. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry. This is the first time in the fifteen years that I’ve worked here that we have absolutely zilch on a historical home like this.”

Those words echoed in the back of Mia’s mind during her entire drive back to the manor. What was it about this house that made her skin crawl? How were there no historical documents connected to its existence? When Mia walked through the front door, she refused to let the silence engulf her. She used her phone to play a local radio station, and gripped it for her life as it played repetitive pop music and ads for car dealerships.

She walked around and looked around the house again, but this time menacingly, as if threatening it, demanding to know its secrets. One of the rooms she entered had a large desk, and her heart began to beat faster. Perhaps there were hints and clues at a history in its deep oak drawers. It would make sense, if they weren't at the Historical Society, for them to be here, privately owned.

Mia's fingers shook as she reached out and pulled softly on the drawer. It didn't budge. She pulled again, a little harder, and jiggled. It creaked open, but Mia was disappointed to see the light, unfinished wood indicating the bottom of a drawer. She pulled it open a little more and glanced inside. Nothing. Zilch, as the man with the bowtie would have put it.

Mia tried again and again with each of the many drawers, and even crawled on the floor and felt around for a secret hatch, but there were no documents to be found. She was stumped.

In a moment of bravery, Mia sat down on the old chair and crossed her hands on the desk, demanding her presence. She looked around the room for a moment, then grabbed her laptop and a soft drink from the attic. Then Mia returned to the desk, let her mind wander, and began to type.

The next morning, Caroline stood still, solemn as her nurse got her dressed and ready.

“How was tutoring yesterday, madam? How are Tiffany and Amelia?”

Caroline stiffened, then answered, with great dignity, “It was splendid. Delightful, even. My acquaintances are fair.”

The nurse nodded, a little confused. “Alright, well, that sounds good. Do you want your hair done the same as always today?”

“No,” she answered. After some thought, Caroline said, “Give me something that will look grown-up.”

The nurse, never one to ask questions, obliged, twisting Caroline’s hair into a knot at the top of her head—no bows involved.

Caroline held her head high as she entered the dining room, and said, “Good morning, mother,” as she sat.

Her mother looked at her, suspicious. “Good morning, dear.”

Caroline daintily sipped her tea. She then took small bites of bread, and her mother stopped paying attention. When Caroline was finished with her meal, she rose from the table and had a seat in the drawing room.

Caroline picked up some embroidery that she had started at her mother’s insistence weeks ago. Before, she would pull her needle painstakingly slow, hoping her mother would eventually give up and let Caroline run outdoors. Now, Caroline shook her head at the follies of youth. She couldn’t quite remember the lessons her mother gave her on form and patterns, but, too ashamed to ask for help, Caroline managed the best she could. She poked the fabric and pulled the thread, creating slightly misshapen letters of the alphabet.

When her mother entered the sitting room, Caroline was working on the tricky letter Q.

“Are you... embroidering?” her mother asked, shocked.

Caroline nodded, and continued her work. Her mother sat at the piano and began to play. After a few minutes, a dark-skinned servant Caroline hadn’t seen before introduced Miss Tiffany and Miss Amelia to the room. Caroline stood up.

“Good morning. Please, have a seat. Mr. Magruder has yet to arrive.” Then, with a furtive glance, she added, “I was just doing some needlework.”

“I enjoy needlework, as well!” gushed Amelia, making Caroline smile.

“As do I,” Tiffany said, with a straight face. “Tell me, Caroline, do you prefer the old world style, or the colonial style?”

With great confidence, Caroline answered, “I primarily use the alphabetic style.”

Tiffany stifled a laugh, and when the unfamiliar servant girl announced that Mr. Magruder arrived, the conversation was over and the trio headed upstairs.

During the lesson, Caroline did her best to both appear totally unaware of Tiffany and Amelia, while simultaneously outdoing them in every way. She sat up straighter than straight, crossed her ankles when she sat, and stuck her pinky out when holding anything. Caroline was even overeager in her lessons, trying to master everything immediately. During the afternoon, Mr. Magruder was reviewing Latin, and had the girls recite the colors. While Mr. Magruder took a break, Caroline turned to her friends. “My favorite color is *caeruleus*,” she said, with a sophisticated air.

Tiffany ignored her. Amelia smiled, and said, “Mine is *roseus*!”

“Yes, pink is the color of the season,” Tiffany added.

Caroline was confused. “Spring?”

Amelia laughed, and Tiffany sniffed. “It's this fashion season's color. It's a pastel pink.”

“Oh,” Caroline said, thoughtfully.

“Me and Tiffany are actually getting pink dresses soon. We went to the tailor's together to get fitted,” Amelia told her.

Caroline stayed silent, contemplative.

“I feel like just about everyone will be wearing a pink dress soon, won’t they, Amelia?”

Tiffany said.

Amelia shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Then, Tiffany turned to Caroline. “Oh, that’s kind of sad, though, you don’t have a pink dress, do you?”

“Yes, I do,” Caroline quickly claimed.

Tiffany just shrugged, and changed the conversation. Caroline clenched her jaw. She figured that lying might be immature and unladylike, but no matter. She was confident that she would be able to get a pink dress soon enough.

David was calling. Mia answered her phone happily. “Hi David! How’s it going?”

“Um, fine, how are you? How is the work coming along?”

Mia considered. “Well, you know, some days are better than others, but it’s going.”

There was some silence from the other end. “Okay,” David replied. “If that’s the case, why did Ramona call me to ask if you were alright? She said you’ve been ignoring her calls and emails.”

Mia bit her lip. She knew Ramona had been trying to get in contact with her, but she didn’t realize she’d try *that* hard. Mia tried to keep her tone light. “Oh, I’ve been meaning to get back with her about some stuff! I’ve just been really busy doing research and writing and everything. You know how I get when I’m in the zone.” She forced a laugh.

David didn’t laugh. He sighed. “Well, I guess I can just let her know you’ve been busy and you’ll get back with her ASAP.”

“Thanks, David!”

“Yeah, no problem,” he replied sarcastically. “It’s not like I’m also busy and have more important things to do than to play telephone with you and your boss.”

This time, Mia was quiet. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have put you in that position. I didn’t know she would contact you.”

“It’s... fine, I guess. It’s just— when are you coming home, Mia? Whenever we’ve talked about it before, you always said that you didn’t want to travel a lot for work, you just wanted to do local stuff, and then this comes up, and now you’ve been gone for like, two weeks. I’m just confused.”

Mia sniffled. “I know, I know, David, I’m sorry. I just took this on to try and get a full-time position, and then all this stuff came up while I was here. I miss you, though, I want to come back as soon as I can.”

“Okay,” David said, with a hint of reservation and mistrust in his voice. “Well, hopefully I’ll see you soon.”

After David hung up, Mia sighed and threw her phone on her bed. She felt torn— split between David and her job and home in New York, and the alluring mystery of this place. The more she found out, the more questions she had.

Lucy was much happier working inside than she was when she worked outside. Now, she was able to spend her time cooking delicious meals (which she always had to taste test, of course!) and meticulously baking little treats. She found it so fun, Benjamin often found her working away in the kitchen when she didn’t even need to be, just experimenting with new recipes in her own little world.

That doesn't sound right, Mia thought, as she wrote, *but how could she make the story more fun and light-hearted?* She chewed at a non-existent eraser at the end of her pencil and kept going for the moment.

Of course, once Lucy realized Benjamin was there, she was much more interested in him. She'd throw her arms around his neck and pull him close as he grabbed her small waist. They enjoyed their small moments together, whenever they could both cobble together a few minutes here and there. Lucy's gratitude toward Benjamin for saving her had sparked a flame in her, and she felt a magnetic attraction towards him. Benjamin's feelings had grown from admiring her beauty from afar to falling in love with Lucy's mind and soul.

Benjamin lifted Lucy up until she was sitting on the countertop, where she wrapped her legs around his chest. He leaned in for a kiss. Lucy kissed him back. She giggled and relaxed into his arms.

"Did you see your dad today?" she asked, looking up at him through long, fluttery eyelashes.

Benjamin's lips pursed into a frown. "No, I didn't."

Lucy chewed on her fingernail for a moment, then, in a small voice, said, "You're going to have to say something eventually. Don't you get tired of hiding and sneaking around?"

"I mean, I do, but—"

"But what?" Lucy demanded, getting more bold. "You told me you wanted to be with me forever!"

“Lucy,” Benjamin said, reproachfully, holding her shoulders. “You know I want to be with you. But some things are complicated, okay? You just have to trust me and let me take care of everything.”

Lucy nodded slowly.

“Good girl,” Benjamin whispered, his gaze fixed on her pillowy lips. Lucy leaned forward and kissed him.

Just then, an android squawked and marched in, on cleaning duty... Mia scratched the last sentence out. Maybe later.

A few days later, Mia was eating a Poptart in the dining room when her phone started ringing. She sighed and glanced at it, fully preparing to ignore it, then she saw who the caller was. Ramona. Mia gulped and quickly clicked *accept call*.

“Ramona, hi!” Mia gave a chuckle that she hoped wouldn’t sound like nervous laughter. “I’m so glad you called, I’ve actually been meaning to call you, too!”

Ramona gave a sigh. Not a long, disappointed one, but a short, I-don’t-have-time-for-this sigh, which felt worse somehow. “Look Mia, here’s the deal. As you know, we practice at-will employment here, so if you want to quit, just tell me so I can get on with hiring someone else.”

Mia panicked. “No, no, it’s the opposite, I swear!”

“Then why have you been gone so long? Where is the *one* small article I need? What are you even still there for?”

“Ramona, please,” Mia tearfully begged. “I found this really interesting other manor. I know it’s not what you sent me here for, but it’s such a cool place. I’m trying to write something about it, and I know- I just know that it’ll be great. I’m just having a hard time, it’s-”

“Whatever,” Ramona snapped. “It better blow my socks off and be in my inbox by yesterday, or I’ll replace you without calling again.” The line went dead.

Mia slumped forward on the table. Now what? Her piece wasn’t anywhere near ready, and even if it were, it likely wouldn’t earn her a full-time position, now. Mia contemplated quitting, but that seemed impossible. The house was calling to her. She had no choice but to keep going, damn the consequences.

The next morning at breakfast, when Caroline asked her mother for a new, pink dress, her mother looked bewildered and confused.

“A new dress?” she asked. “What about any of your other ones?”

Caroline suddenly wished she had prepared a little more. She assumed her mother would be overjoyed at Caroline taking an interest in clothes. “Well, I’m growing up. I want the chance to start looking older and taking care of myself better. Myself and my things. Plus, pink is the color everyone is wearing.”

She peered at her mother staring into space. Finally, she nodded slowly. “Alright, we can go into town with your father and brother this weekend. I’ll take you to the tailor’s then.”

Without thinking, Caroline whooped with excitement, then hastily cleared her throat. “Thank you, mother.” As she excused herself from the table, Caroline’s mind raced, thinking about how great it would be to have the new dress. She’d be able to show Tiffany and Amelia up, and they would all be matching and doing something together, just like they used to. Before long,

Caroline just knew they would all be sitting together embroidering or sipping tea. She smiled a little to herself.

Mia was sitting on the back porch of the manor, on the phone with David, listening to him talk about his day. She must have zoned out, because suddenly, David was saying her name and asking her if she was even listening.

“I– yeah, I’m sorry, I am. I was just looking at how pretty it is here, but no, yeah, I’m listening.”

David sighed. “What’s pretty about it? The humidity and mosquitoes?”

“No, it’s... it’s all the flowers, and all the fields and the architecture. I don’t know, there’s just something special about this place. I really love it. It’d be nice to move down here someday.”

“Wow.” David said.

Mia gulped. “What? I mean, obviously, you’d want to visit first, but I think–”

“Mia, what happened to our plan? I thought we were both going to hustle in the City for a few more years, try and get good career opportunities and save money, and then move to Idaho to be near my parents and start our own family. We’ve talked it through dozens of times.”

“I know, I just...” Mia bit her lip. “I mean, isn’t there any room in the plan for unexpected things to happen? I think we could have a family here. It’s nice and warm, and near the beach...”

“And hundreds of miles away from my family. Is that what this is about?”

“What? No–”

“You know, when we started dating, you promised me you’d never put me in a position to make chose between you and them, so if that’s what this is–”

“Are you serious?” Mia balked. “I thought you meant picking sides in an argument or something. Are you saying that if I wanted to move down here, you would actually have a hard time choosing between moving here to be with me or moving to Idaho? I’m not... I wouldn’t be... You don’t think our relationship would be worth it?”

All Mia could hear was David’s breathing, until he said, “I don’t know.” At that point, she hung up and threw her phone as far as she could.

Benjamin and his father walked down a cobblestone street and entered the large, open area. It was crowded with all types of people—there were men that looked like them, standing up straight and dressed in nice coats and hats. On the perimeters, slightly more humble looking men and women sold fruit, vegetables, flowers, and baked goods. They yelled out their offerings and haggled with customers. Benjamin suggested getting something to eat, but his father turned his nose up at the prospect and ignored him. He was focused on the other groups of people in the area: the reason they made the trip.

In the center of the square, about a hundred Africans were bound in thick chains and made to stand in a straight line for inspection from potential buyers. Skinny, weaselly-looking men swarmed around them, muttering threats at the black people and bragging about their qualities and skills in the next breath.

Jacob turned to Benjamin. “All right. How do you think we figure out which ones are the best?”

Benjamin peered at the line up. He shifted uncomfortably. “I dunno. Do we even need more?”

“Have you not been listening to the lessons I’ve been giving you?” Jacob asked, then sighed. “Listen. The more slaves we have, the more work gets done. The more work gets done, the more rice we can produce and the more money we make.”

Benjamin looked at his now-dusty shoes. His father continued, “Do you like having new clothes? You like living in a big house and having good food? Having all your work done for you? Never having to lift a finger? You want to travel one day?” He stared down at Benjamin until Benjamin finally nodded. “Good. So we agree. Now. How do you think we figure out which ones are best?”

Benjamin took a deep breath and forced himself to look at the Africans closely. “Maybe by their muscles?”

“That’s a good start,” his father agreed. “What else?”

Benjamin racked his mind. “Umm, maybe their... eyes?”

Jacob gave him a small grunt of approval. Benjamin let out a breath of relief as his father began telling him the correct answer. “You’re partially right. We’ll want to look at muscle mass and eyes, but we’ll also want to check out teeth, hair, and fingernails. Then we’ll see about their skills and obedience from the wranglers.” Benjamin avoided eye contact but nodded. “Don’t worry, son, you’re doing a good job. Probably better than I was at your age, to be honest. You’ll make a great master of a household one day, son.”

Benjamin looked up and beamed at his father, unused to such praise. Jacob led the way forward. He approached and began expertly inspecting different parts of the men and women, pointing out different tips to Benjamin as he went along. Then Jacob turned to talk to the men selling the slaves, and Benjamin couldn’t help but keep looking at them. Some of the younger

women sniffled and let out small sobs occasionally, but a quick whispered sentence from a man with a large whip ended it quickly. Benjamin wondered why she was crying.

“All right,” Jacob said, regrouping with Benjamin. “I know which two we’re going with.” He eyed him carefully. “Which ones do you think they are?”

Benjamin glanced at the line and pointed at two young men, and pointed their way.

“Them, maybe?”

Jacob clicked his tongue. “At first glance, maybe. But you’ve got to think holistically.” He pointed at a plump middle aged woman with a hard face. “At her age, she’s proven that she’s hardy. She can take anything. And she has years of experience cooking, she’ll have new recipes and be around for a while.” Jacob then gestured at a scrawny boy on the cusp of manhood. “He’s weak for now, but a little while in the field will shape that up. The trader says he’s insecure and needy. That means he’s moldable, unlike the older strong ones.”

Benjamin soaked this in, and kept looking at the faces of the slaves getting picked apart and observed. The crying girl at the end of the line succumbed to silent tears. Jacob followed Benjamin’s eyes and smirked at his son.

“What, you like that one?”

Benjamin snapped out of his pondering. “What? No! I mean, I don’t know, I just saw...”

Jacob laughed loudly and clasped his son’s shoulder. “No, you’re right, you’re about that age. Tell you what. I got such a good deal on the others, we’ll throw her in, too.”

Benjamin stuttered in disbelief. Jacob winked, said, “You’re welcome,” and then went to talk to the merchants. They took his cash, smiled and shook his hand eagerly, and set about gathering up the wares.

Benjamin watched as the girl was jostled out of line. She glanced around with large, frightened doe eyes. They looked watery, no doubt threatening to spill over again. She didn't see Benjamin until she was grouped together with the others and pushed towards Jacob. Her gaze met Benjamin's, held for a moment, and then returned to frantically looking around.

Jacob called out to Benjamin. He had to shout to be heard above the chatter and clanging. "She has nice fingernails, son. You have good taste!"

After a few weeks of working in the manor instead of the fields, Lucy felt much more at ease. The original discomfort with her new situation had worn off, and she was grateful to be inside often, in the large, cool rooms. She took the additional responsibilities in stride, and began to take more pride in her work and even appearance. In fact, Lucy had even begun to indulge in the guilty pleasure of gossiping about the Marshalls.

One day, Lucy was serving tea to the young mistress Caroline and her friends, when she heard Tiffany yell at Caroline, "That's why your dad doesn't love your mom!" Lucy knew enough about children to know that they are brutally honest—they don't often make up lies like that. Like a professional, Lucy kept her mouth in a totally straight line until she was out of the room, then broke into a big smile. She couldn't wait to tell the other staff what she'd heard.

"What's so funny?" a casual voice asked. Lucy froze. Her smile dropped and she glanced in the voice's direction. It was Benjamin. Lucy felt her heart stop. She was suddenly warm everywhere.

"It's okay, you don't have to stop," he said. "Your smile is nice." He gave her a funny look, then walked off, whistling.

Lucy slowly let out a breath she didn't know she was holding, then rushed outside to the kitchen, trying but failing to stop from beaming.

Mia jolted upright from a fitful sleep. It was the middle of the night, she was pretty sure, but the room was bathed in unnaturally bright light. Standing at the foot of her bed was a familiar face. Cheeks whose plumpness were beginning to fade into structured muscle, a boyish smile, and perfect golden curls.

Mia whispered, incredulous. "B- Benjamin?"

The young man spread his arms open proudly. His voice seemed to boom from all directions when he answered, "It is I." Mia must have paled, because he continued, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people." Benjamin leaned in, "You have been on the righteous path of discovering truths and freeing the ghosts of the past. For this, it has been decided. You will be the receiver and the giver of words and knowledge. You have tried to uncover stories from the files of bureaucracy and from the linens of history. But now, you are called upon by the most high to uncover them from the ground, the soil, the flesh of the land itself. Do this, Mia, and you shall find what you seek, and your labors shall be rewarded, on Earth and in Heaven."

Mia blinked, and suddenly Benjamin, with his light and booming voice, was gone. The room was as dark and silent as it should have been when she first woke up. She looked around and tried to process what Benjamin was trying to tell her when her eyes landed on the window. Mia looked past it, to the acres beyond, and realized she had to dig. Mia looked for some sort of shovel, but when she failed to find even a small, rickety one, she just started parting the hard dirt

with her hands. She clawed through the yard for hours, until the noon-day sun beat down on her and she couldn't remember why she was even digging in the first place.

Benjamin and his father dismounted their horses when they arrived at the small town of Charlestowne. They dropped them off at an Inn with an attached stable and Jacob flicked a gold piece to the skinny stable boy.

“But father, where do the slaves come from?” Benjamin asked, as they walked toward the town center.

Jacob gave a gruff sigh. “I explained it to you already. They are people who have been captured from far away lands by our army. It's a kind fate, really. Much better than murder. At least the common citizen can get some use out of them.”

Benjamin considered this. “But, why are slavery and murder the only two options? Can't they go back home?”

“Well, it's our right, once our soldiers have captured their towns. We can do what we want with the people, the livestock, the land, anything. Where do you think our house and all these cities came from?”

Benjamin was silent, thinking about this, as they walked through a shortcut to get to the town center. A smoky haze made it difficult to see and breathe. Small, dirty children darted around, some of them asking Jacob for money, which he ignored. Women with tables and stalls set up called out that they could read Benjamin's future, or could sell Jacob a love potion.

As they got closer to the square, the air became more clear and the wares became more legitimate, ranging from mince pies to slightly wilted flowers. There were also many more people crowded into the area. Much to Benjamin's disappointment, they had just barely missed a

hanging—someone was caught killing a pheasant in the king’s hunting grounds, apparently. Nevertheless, the reason Benjamin and Jacob were there was just beginning.

A bearded man in a raggedy cloak led a line of downtrodden women and children across the small stage that was still wet with blood. Immediately, everyone interested in purchasing pushed forward and got out their gold and silver.

“A’right,” the man said, walking over to the left of the line-up. “Let’s start here. Who wants this littlun’?”

Shouts rang out, offering five silver, no, ten silver, until a winner arose at seven gold pieces. The small boy was released from the line of handcuffs and pushed toward his new owner, who scuffled away with him. The process repeated over and over again, sometimes with Jacob hanging back, other times with him pushing to the front, with a fistfull of coins in the air.

The ebb and flow of the sales was so engrossing that no one noticed the dragon until someone started shouting about it. Once everyone realized, though, there was no mistaking it. People were running everywhere, mostly not screaming, but rather in a trance of trying to calculate the safest place closest to them. There was a distant sound of fire crackling, no doubt homes being burned. The cathedral opened its blissfully thick stone doors, inviting everyone in. An occasional large shadow haunted an otherwise clear and sunny day.

Jacob started pulling Benjamin towards the cathedral, but his grip was broken by someone rushing between them. Benjamin could only stare, transfixed, at the grim resolve of the people who were being auctioned. Their seller was long gone, and they were all stuck on the stage. No one was attempting to help them, they were just standing there, accepting death, hoping it would at least be swift. Finally, the sound of the dragon’s deafening roar shook Benjamin into action. He ran up onto the stage and flicked open his small pocket knife.

When some of the enslaved people saw his knife, their eyes widened and they cowered away from him. Benjamin saw this and tried to explain over the noise of the chaos.

“No, no, I’m trying to help!” He pointed at the rope tying them together and mimed cutting it, until they let him approach. Benjamin quickly got to work, sawing at the thick cord with all his strength. It took what felt like hours, but eventually one person was cut free, then two, then three. After an eternity, Benjamin cut the last rope and looked around to see that he was alone.

He ran over to the cathedral, but by this time it was too late, they had shut their doors. Benjamin frantically looked around until he spotted a well, and headed that way. He pulled the bucket up and doused himself in water, hoping that would make him more difficult to burn. Benjamin sat and cowered near the well until he heard the mumblings of the townspeople returning to the square. He cautiously stood up and then felt a hand clasp his shoulder.

Benjamin nearly jumped out of his skin, but when he turned to look, it was his father.

“Glad you’re okay, son. I guess we got separated by the crowd.” Benjamin nodded and tried to squeeze some water out of his clothes. “Anyway,” Jacob continued, “Apparently, all the slaves were able to escape while everyone was running around, so we don’t have much else business here. What do you say we grab an ale?”

Benjamin slowly exhaled, realizing he wouldn’t be caught. He tried to smile and nodded to his father.

Caroline studied her image in the mirror. She was draped in her new pink dress, adorned with white lace and little embroidered flowers. She twirled and laughed at the dress swooshing

around. She was so lost in thought that she jumped when a dark woman suddenly appeared in her room.

“Your schooling is beginning in a few minutes, miss,” the timid voice came, then the woman was gone just as suddenly as she'd arrived.

Caroline felt butterflies awaken in her stomach and take flight. Tiffany and Amelia had been wearing their pink dresses for days now, but Caroline could finally join in. Plus, she felt her dress was the nicest of the three.

With her head held high, Caroline walked into the parlor-turned-schoolroom. Silence fell over the room, and though she didn't watch their faces, Caroline could feel Tiffany and Caroline watch her dress in envy. She smirked a little. Mr. Magruder even mumbled something about her looking nice, a rare occasion. Caroline pretended not to notice, and took her seat.

Amelia whispered something to Tiffany, and Tiffany whispered something back. Caroline heard her blood pulsing in her ears, from the excitement. Mr. Magruder began talking, but Caroline couldn't pay attention. She kept glancing down at herself to look at her new dress again. At one point, in the middle of the day, Caroline even noticed that Tiffany already had a dirty hem. Tiffany noticed Caroline staring and shifted to try and hide the brown stains, to little avail.

Around the afternoon, Mr. Magruder decided to take them outside so they could see live examples of the flora they were meant to be memorizing. He pattered around the lush gardens, pointing out this or that part of flowers and leaves. Eventually, the girls started leaving more and more distance between them, until they were out of earshot and more or less left up to their own devices.

“Your gardens are very pretty, Caroline!” Amelia said.

Caroline smiled at her. “Thank you!”

Tiffany sneezed. “I prefer places that are a little more civilized. I’m going to Charleston soon, you know.”

“Oh, I went there recently. That’s when I ordered this dress. It just came in, though, of course.” Caroline flushed.

Tiffany had a cross expression on her face as they walked around aimlessly for a few minutes. Then, she gasped and felt her ears.

“What’s wrong?” Caroline asked.

Tiffany started sniffing. “My... my earrings!” she said. “I must have lost them!”

“But...” Amelia began, before Tiffany cut her off.

“There they are!” she exclaimed, pointing at the grass. “Caroline, do you see them? They’re right by your feet!”

Caroline lifted her feet and looked around at the grass surrounding her. Then, suddenly, all she saw was the sky and all she felt was the ground. She pushed herself up and realized, when she heard a squelching sound, that she’d fallen into a patch of mud. Her jaw dropped in horror when she stood up and realized she was absolutely covered in brown. She looked over at Tiffany in disbelief.

Tiffany was trying to cover her grin with her hand, but her eyes revealed everything. When Caroline began tearing up, Tiffany grabbed Amelia’s wrist and dragged her back towards Mr. Magruder. Caroline just stood and watched the mud drip off of her.

Act III

Mia bit her lip as she waited for David to pick up the phone. They hadn't spoken since their last fight almost three weeks ago, and while Mia was relieved by the distance at first, she had decided it was time to show she was making an effort.

She breathed a sigh of relief when David answered with a low, "Hello?"

"Hi, David! I'm glad you answered. I just... I figured it was time to talk."

Mia then realized there was a lot of background noise coming from David's end, with what sounded like a lot of people talking and laughing over loud music. As soon as Mia noticed it, though, it faded. David must have stepped outside from... wherever he was at.

"Yeah, yeah. I definitely agree," David said, sounding somber. "I really appreciate you calling first, about it, because I wasn't really sure what to say."

Mia was a little confused by what he meant, but she just replied, "Of course."

David took a deep breath. "Look, I think we've both sort of realized that we're more at odds than we thought about the future and everything, and, well, if I'm being honest, our last... conversation really got me down."

"Me too," Mia hastily agreed, trying to gain a semblance of control on a conversation that suddenly felt like it was slipping out of her hands.

"And, I know that this wasn't the best thing for me to do," David continued, "But one night I went out drinking with Mark and the guys, and I..." he sighed. "I met this woman..."

Mia turned her phone's microphone away from her mouth and let out a long sigh. She covered part of her face with her hand and stared out into the horizon, now emotionally withdrawn, as David spoke.

“We just matched up with our sense of humor and our dreams, and like, on one hand, I realize that it probably just seems like a crazy fling, but on the other hand, it makes more sense than...”

“Than us being together,” Mia supplied, flatly.

“Exactly,” David said. “I’m glad you understand. I mean it seems like you really want to be there, and I just really want to be here, with... well, you know. So I’m glad that things have worked out now, right?”

“Totally.”

Mia heard someone, a woman’s voice, she thought, through the phone. David replied that he would be right there, then spoke again to Mia. “So, just let me know if you’ll ever be back in the city to get your stuff, or if you want me to mail it to your new place, or what.”

“Awesome.”

David spoke with slight hesitation now. “Awesome! Alright, well, it was good talking to you.”

Mia hung up.

Mia paced up and down a hallway in the manor, sending loud creaks and groans echoing through the house. She was mumbling to herself, trying to rationalize the choices she’d made in her writing and why they worked.

But... maybe they didn’t work? What was missing? Mia could look around each room and vividly see these things happening, but was she doing them justice with just words? Maybe these stories should be told through a visual medium, instead. Mia struggled to remember the basics of screenwriting she’d been taught in college, then gave it a go.

INT. MARSHALL DINING ROOM - EVENING

The room is dark, save for small sources of light here and there. It is decorated luxuriously, but impersonally. The family sits around the table, slowly eating their dinner. They avoid eye contact with each other. JACOB has been drinking and is talking loudly about something no one cares about. LUCY is standing in a corner in her maid uniform, and seems exceptionally nervous.

JACOB

But I told that son of a bitch our smallest runt could overpower that so-called stallion of his!

JACOB wheezes and smacks the table loudly, making BENJAMIN jump.

JACOB

What's the matter, son? Did I scare you? You gotta toughen up if you want to be the man of a house one day! Or any nigger that comes along will just say "boo" and take it from you!

JACOB wheezes louder. LUCY shoots daggers at him with her eyes. BENJAMIN just glares at him.

JACOB

(with derision)

What, you're just going to look at me? You're like a girl.

LILLIAN

(trying to change the subject)

Speaking of which, Caroline told me today that she needed a
new dress.

JACOB

(Flippantly, to LILLIAN)

Okay.

(to BENJAMIN)

You know, son, some days you seem like you're a full-grown
man, ready to take my place. But other days, it's like I'm
talking to a wilted flower. What's wrong with you?

LILLIAN

(to BENJAMIN, referring to CAROLINE)

No, it's not okay. She just got a new dress a few weeks
ago. Remember? The pink one?

JACOB

(to LILLIAN, he couldn't care less)

How am I supposed to remember something like that?

(to Benjamin)

You know, I'm going to start trying to arrange something for you with one of the girls that are in the area. You're going to have to shape up real quick-

BENJAMIN stares at his plate. JACOB is interrupted by-

LILLIAN

(to JACOB)

Well, it doesn't matter whether you remember the dress or not. The point is, it wasn't cheap, and on the very first day she wore it-

CAROLINE

(to LILLIAN)

I told you, I didn't do it on purpose!

LILLIAN

(sharply)

I know you, Caroline.

BENJAMIN

(to his dinner plate)

I mean, I don't know if I really want...

JACOB

(to LILLIAN)

Just buy her the new damn dress! We can afford it.

LILLIAN

(to JACOB)

It's the principle! She got mud-

CAROLINE

(loudly, to EVERYONE)

Tiffany pushed me into the puddle! I'm not lying!

JACOB slowly stiffens.

JACOB

(quietly)

Tiffany?

(not so quietly)

Lillian, I swear to God, if your little whore of a niece is
fucking with Caroline, today will be the last day-

CAROLINE

(scared)

Dad!

LILLIAN

I really don't think that's what-

JACOB

(trying to subdue his fury)

Alright, well why don't you two figure out what the fuck is going on before dragging me into it. I don't give a shit whether you buy her a new dress or not. I'm sure one of our very expensive slaves can scrub a little mud out. Benjamin and I are trying to have a man-to-man conversation here.

BENJAMIN

I don't want to get married!

JACOB

(immediately)

You don't mean that.

(A BEAT. BENJAMIN doesn't say anything.)

JACOB

(suspicious)

What would make you think that?

(BENJAMIN glances at LUCY, whose lips are pursed. JACOB notices, and looks at BENJAMIN, incredulously.)

JACOB

What, you think using some black ass here and there means you can't get married? Everyone does that on the side, boy. It doesn't mean a thing.

LILLIAN

Jacob, please...

JACOB

NO! I'm the one who is going to make the decisions around here. I don't give a shit if Caroline ruined her dress on purpose. Buy her a new one. We need people to know that she's desirable. And as for you, (he points at BENJAMIN) you're going to do what I say, and you're going to thank me. Because one day you'll realize that I'm teaching you how to get ahead.

JACOB throws down the napkin he was holding. He begins furiously cutting his food and shoving bites into his mouth. After a few moments of being frozen in shock, the other members of the family slowly and carefully begin eating again, as well. The last shot of the scene should be reminiscent of the first.

Mia sighed. She couldn't help but feel that it all seemed basic and overdone. What was a more original visual medium? There were trendier options, to be sure, but she wanted legitimacy, too. She gnawed on her lip and tried again.

By the time the sun came up, Caroline had been awake for hours. A servant girl came in to wake Caroline up and open the blinds, but she got lost quickly after seeing the expression on Caroline's face. She lay for a few minutes longer, but the sun hitting her face only made her angrier, and her small body couldn't handle much more rage. She threw her blankets off violently and dressed herself in one of her older, plainer dresses that had seen better days. It reminded her of the last time she and Amelia ran and played outdoors together. Her lips tightened at her reflection in the mirror. Caroline realized that she looked like a younger version of herself, but also an angrier version. A vindictive ghost, back from the dead.

She stomped downstairs, but walked right past the dining room. She knew no one there cared if she ate breakfast with them or not. Instead, she walked outside and kicked through the long grass towards the edge of the property. She pushed her way into the rickety building that the sunburnt overseers kept their horses and supplies, and occasionally slept in. A sweaty, gruff-looking man saw her enter and was visibly taken aback.

“Miss Caroline, what a pleasure!” He announced, though his tone and the panic in his eyes revealed his true feelings. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Caroline cleared her throat and lifted her nose. “I need your whip.”

“My... my whip?” He chuckled nervously.

“Let me rephrase myself,” Caroline said, patiently. “My father needs your whip.” She looked at him expectantly.

The man finally started looking at her with deference. “Oh, yes, of course,” he said, and turned his back, hurriedly trying to locate it. Caroline crossed her arms and tapped her shoe. The man sweated more. Eventually, he was able to find it, and, after only a moment’s hesitation, he handed it over. It looked larger than life in Caroline’s small, pudgy hands.

As Caroline walked out triumphant, she noticed the placement of the sun in the sky and noted that it was about time for Tiffany and Amelia to be arriving. She quickened her pace.

Caroline squeezed the door handle, then threw the door open. She watched as Tiffany slowly turned to look at Caroline, with raised eyebrows and a derisive glare.

“That’s such a pretty dress, Caroline. Your other one was nicer, though, what happened to that one?” Tiffany’s lips twisted upward, cruelly. Then Caroline watched as Tiffany’s gaze fell to the whip Caroline held in her hand. Caroline saw Tiffany swallow and look a little surprised.

“Hi, Caroline,” Amelia said, timidly. Caroline glared at her.

Without raising his head, Mr. Magruder said, “Sit down, Caroline. You’re late.”

“I don’t give a shit if I’m late, you old man,” she declared calmly. Mr. Magruder lifted his head. Caroline lifted the whip and quickly brought it down hard on Mr. Magruder’s surprised face.

“Caroline, what’s wrong with you?!” Tiffany screamed.

“What’s wrong with *you*, Tiffany?” Caroline shouted back. “Why do you have to be such a BITCH?” She lifted the whip above her head and forced her arm to follow through with the action. Tiffany screamed at the top of her lungs. Blood splattered Caroline’s dress. She whipped Tiffany again. “What’s wrong, Tiffany? I heard red is next season’s *color!*”

Tiffany sobbed.

“Stop it, Caroline!” Amelia shouted, tears streaming down her face.

Caroline feigned surprise. “Oh, *me* stop it?” Amelia’s eyes got big as Caroline stepped closer to her. “I don’t remember you telling *Tiffany* to stop it when she was TORTURING me!” Caroline slashed out with her whip. Amelia turned away and cried. Caroline got closer and whispered, “It didn’t have to be like this, Amelia. You were my friend. If you hadn’t betrayed me, none of this would have ever happened.” She slashed again for good measure, sending red sprinkles across the room.

Caroline’s hands shook with exertion from holding the handle of the whip so tightly. She dropped it to the floor, and it fell as merely an echo amongst the sobs of the girls who were once her friends.

Mia was scribbling words down on a notepad in the sitting room. She had been using her laptop, but when the battery died, she couldn’t drag herself away from her writing for long enough to get her charger and search for an outlet. Suddenly, she heard a loud creak and jumped.

She was used to the small creaks and groans that the house made, but she knew for a fact that one was louder than any she’d heard yet. Mia slowly turned to look around the room, suddenly feeling very aware of the fact that she was a strange trespasser in the manor.

She didn't immediately see anything amiss, but every hair on her body was standing up straight. Something felt really wrong. Mia tried to control her breathing, and called out, "Hello?"

There was no reply. As slowly and quietly as she could, Mia stood up and walked to the doorway. With horror, she couldn't remember if it had been closed before or if the door had always been open. She timidly glanced down the hallway, turning her head both ways and listening hard. While she was peering to her left, she heard a loud creak again, albeit a little muffled, from her right.

Carefully, one step at a time, Mia crept down the hallway, following the noise. She came upon one of the bedrooms, decorated with patterns of pale pink flowers that now looked brown and incredibly aged. The door was open and moving ever so slightly back and forth, as if it had just been pushed open, hard.

As she glanced around the room, Mia had to admit that it looked pretty much normal. Then, the wind picked up and Mia noticed something weird. The curtain in front of the window began billowing. When she stepped a little closer, Mia realized it was because the window was open. Mia stuck her head outside, not sure what she was looking for, but the only reply she got was blinding sunshine and the loud squawks of birds in the trees.

Lucy was shaken awake by Grace. Such a thing never happened, so she was terrified that something was wrong and bolted upright, immediately alert.

Grace put a finger to her lips and beckoned Lucy to follow her. Lucy looked around at her cabin mates. They all seemed fast asleep. Slowly, Lucy rose to her feet and quietly padded along the floor following Grace outside.

"What's going on?" she asked, her voice cracking.

Grace avoided eye contact with her. “Master Jacob is promoting you,” was all the answer she gave.

“Wow, really?” Lucy combed through her mind. She barely interacted with Jacob one on one, so she wondered what made him notice her enough to promote her. Lucy’s heart jumped a little when she realized it might have been Benjamin, putting a good word in for her, yet again. A smile teased the edge of her lips.

When Grace had gotten far enough away from the nearby shacks, she turned to Lucy and looked her dead in the eyes. Lucy stopped in her tracks and her smile quickly melted. “I’m sorry, Lucy. I tried to hide you to protect you. I really did.”

“What? What’s wrong?” Lucy started to get a sinking feeling in her stomach.

Grace just shook her head and continued walking. “It’s an honor, really. He sees something special in you. You’ll be very useful. But there’s nothing I can tell you now that would help you. It’s too late.”

Lucy had no choice but to follow her. She struggled to think of any fate that would be so terrible that even Grace, a woman who had seen so much suffering, wouldn’t even tell her. After Lucy’s mind could no longer fathom any ideas of her future, she just tried to appreciate her surroundings– the smell of the pre-dawn morning, the sound of crickets and frogs.

Eventually, the women neared a building near the edge of some woods. Although the building was relatively small, it looked sturdy and clean. Better, in fact, than many others, including the one she was just sleeping in. Lucy gulped. Grace stopped once they got to the entrance and nodded to her. “Goodbye, Lucy,” she said, with the sound of deep regret. She lingered for only a moment, then turned on her heels and walked away quickly.

Lucy was watching her go when she heard the door open. She turned and saw Jacob standing with his arms open. “Lucy, I’m glad you’re here. Come in.” His voice had more of a commanding tone than a welcoming one, but Lucy had no choice anyway. She lowered her head and walked inside the building.

The first thing she noticed was the noise. There was a cacophony of beeping and whirring coming from all directions. As Lucy looked around, though, she realized that the sounds were the least strange thing there. All around her were other black women, standing up, but looking asleep. They were all connected to various wires and tubes.

“I’m sure you’ve wondered, since you arrived here, how this plantation is so much more successful than its competitors,” Jacob began. Lucy said nothing. “Well, this little room right here is the secret. Did you know that trees talk to each other? The roots systems of trees and other plants are all interconnected, and they pass coded messages to each other about various factors that might affect their growth and reproduction, like an early frost, or heavy rains.”

Lucy was barely listening. All she could do was stare into the faces of the women around her. Women who had worked hard their whole life but still were told they had to give up more. Women who, at one point, were in her position, alone and terrified, sure to meet their ominous fate in a matter of hours, if not minutes.

Jacob continued, “I found that women who worked closely with the land were perfectly primed to be able to intercept and decode these messages. It took a few years of trial and error, but here we are.” He opened his arms and looked around proudly. “Now we have more information than ever about what our crops will be facing and what the best course of action is. And the money comes rolling in.”

Lucy started backing away from Jacob. He didn't seem to notice. "Now, I know it isn't an ideal situation for you, of course," he admitted, "but try to see it like I do— you're making a contribution to your family. Your sacrifice will be well worth it."

Lucy hit a hard surface with her back. She had misjudged the direction of the door, and was now cornered in front of Jacob. All she could do was let out a sob before he grabbed her arm and jabbed a needle into it. In no time, the sting, the fear, and her surroundings all dissolved into nothingness.

Mia was going through a phase where she couldn't seem to write anything. She just kept pacing and thinking and pacing and thinking until her growling stomach and her aching feet forced her to stop. She made herself eat some ramen and decided on a whim to try a different medium, yet again. While a music video with interpretive dancing crossed her mind, she decided to try something a little more traditional. Plays were some of the oldest ways to recreate history and tell stories, weren't they?

A cool light lights up the stage. The family is sitting around the table eating. As the light comes up, Jacob is speaking.

Jacob: But I told that son of a bitch our smallest runt could overpower that so-called stallion of his!

He laughs whole-heartedly, but notices that no one else does. Jacob looks around.

Jacob: What is it? What's wrong, everyone?

No one replies.

Jacob: Okay, I'll do the rounds. Lillian, my beautiful bride, is there anything eating you?
Besides all of the mosquitos, I mean?

Lillian sighs and puts down her fork.

Lillian: If you must know, I'm upset at Caroline because she begged and pleaded for a new dress and then it got absolutely ruined the first day she even wore it.

Caroline interrupts—

Caroline: I told you so many times! It wasn't my fault! I got pushed!

Lillian: Well, maybe I would believe you, if you weren't constantly running around outside and climbing trees and getting into whatever other messes you can find.

Caroline stands up, ready to protest, but Jacob puts his hand out, silencing them both. He begins to pace the stage (Stage Left). After a few moments of pacing and thinking, he breaks the silence.

Jacob: Caroline.

Caroline: Yes?

Jacob: Tell me what happened to your dress.

Caroline: Well, I was wearing it, and everything was fine, until Tiffany pushed me into a puddle of mud.

Jacob nods.

Jacob: Okay. And why were you near a big puddle of mud?

Caroline is quiet for a moment. Lillian clears her throat.

Caroline (quiet, embarrassed in hindsight): I was helping Tiffany look for her earring. She said she lost it and then saw it by my foot.

Lillian covers her mouth and sits up straighter.

Jacob: Final question– why were you two outside in the mud in the first place?

Caroline: It was for a lesson. We were supposed to look at some plants and stuff.

Lillian (standing up): Okay, well the dress was still ruined and it would be a waste of money to just get her a brand new one immediately.

Jacob: What about this— we can go and talk to the store owner about it. He might not make us another one for free if we explain what actually happened, but perhaps if we blame it on the delivery boy, we can get Caroline a brand new dress, free of charge.

Caroline exclaims joyfully and runs to hug her father. Lillian watches with a slightly begrudging smile. Then, Jacob turns to Benjamin.

Jacob: Alright, Benji, you've been quiet. What can I solve for you?

Benjamin breaks down into tears. The family crowds around him, hugging him, patting his hair, wiping his tears, etc.

Benjamin (sobs): I'm in love with someone!

Everyone is startled. Jacob laughs and claps Benjamin on the back.

Jacob: Well, that's great, son! Who is she, one of the Fitzpatrick girls?

Benjamin: No, she's... she's not like us, dad. That's why I'm upset. I know you've been teaching me all this stuff about the plantation, and, and I really appreciate it, it's just... I'm worried you won't approve and we won't be able to be together.

Jacob: Come on, now, Benjamin. Any girl who loves you and makes you happy has my approval. You should know that by now! Who is it? Do I know this lucky lady?

Benjamin nods slowly. No one moves or makes a sound.

Benjamin: It's Lucy.

Lillian gasps.

Jacob: Lucy? I don't know a Lucy.

Lillian: Jacob, she's on the kitchen and serving team. She's a- a...

Jacob: A slave?

Benjamin sobs again.

Jacob walks around the table, once, slowly, thinking deeply.

Jacob: Benjamin, get out.

Benjamin: Wha- what?

Jacob: Get OUT! I have poured years of time and effort into shaping you up to be someone respectable, someone knowledgeable for the future of our family, and THIS is how you repay me? You want to see the majesty of our home littered with brown rats? You would be the cause of our family's downfall. You're a disgrace. Caroline, you're about old enough to wed. I'll find a commanding young man, someone from around here, or Charlestown or another nearby city perhaps, and I'll just cut my losses and start over with him.

He can't look at Benjamin.

Jacob: You're no longer my son. I believe I told you to leave my house. You don't want to know what happens if you don't.

Benjamin looks around at his mom and sister, who both avoid eye contact with him. He lowers his head and slowly walks off stage as the lights fade to darkness.

Lucy sat in a large, plush chair, twiddling her thumbs. Jacob had called her in and invited her to sit only moments ago, but in the heavy silence that followed, it felt as if it had been years. Jacob had been stroking his beard, shuffling some papers, and generally paying Lucy no mind.

Then, suddenly, he cleared his throat, which made Lucy jump. Jacob noticed the jump and laughed a little. "Sorry, girl, didn't mean to scare you!" he said. He leaned back.

“So, I’ve been keeping an eye on you for the few weeks you’ve been working in our house.” Lucy gulped, but Jacob gave her a reassuring smile. “It’s okay, you’re not in trouble.” He raised his eyebrow. “I’ve just noticed that you’ve been doing an excellent job. Always on time, doing your duty, friendly personality, efficient, always looking neat, keeping things tidy, and whatnot.”

Lucy blushed with pleasure and lowered her head. “Thank you, sir.”

Jacob leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. “That being said, I’d like to make you an offer.”

“An offer?” Lucy squeaked.

Jacob smiled. “Yes. I want to offer you the plantation.”

There was a moment of thick silence. All Lucy could do was look at Jacob incredulously. His smile drooped a little.

“Wow, I mean... I- I don’t know what to say!” Lucy exclaimed. She stuttered and stumbled over her words, trying to find her way to say that she wanted to accept. Eventually, she got there. After a tearful nod, she asked Jacob, “Why?”

Jacob shrugged. “I’m getting old and tired. I’ve put in a lot of work building and maintaining everything for the last few years, and I want to just rest and let the legacy continue on with someone else running everything. So what do you think?”

“I’ll do my best to make you proud, sir!” Lucy exclaimed.

“I know you will,” he told her.

Mia was lying alone on her futon, wearing silk pajamas. She tossed and turned, unable to fall asleep. Suddenly, she felt a fingertip trace up her leg and began to breathe heavily. Her eyes were closed, but she somehow knew it was Lucy.

The finger traced all the way up Mia's body and along her jaw. Then, Mia felt Lucy's entire hand cup her cheek. Mia bit her lip for a moment and lifted her head up ever so slightly, craving more touch. She felt a comforting stroke of her hair, and a firm grip on her wrist that lifted her left hand above her head and pinned it to the bed. Mia let out a small gasp.

Mia felt Lucy leave a trail of soft, warm kisses along her body, each more gentle than the last. Mia started to get restless, wiggling and yearning for more, but the more Mia squirmed, the harder Lucy pressed down on her wrist. They became a tangle of limbs, softness and firmness, a rhythm of giving and withholding.

Then, with a start, Mia's body jerked and she realized she was alone in the dark and her scratchy cotton sweatshirt. She unclenched her muscles and turned over in bed, trying in vain for sleep again.

Benjamin got woken up in the middle of the night by his father standing over him. He jumped back slightly, and his father gruffly gestured.

"Come on," he muttered.

Benjamin rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "What?" he asked, still confused from being woken up. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see," was the only response he got. "Let's go."

Benjamin flopped out of bed, stumbling around in the darkness. His father held a lantern up and guided the way. In silence, the two walked out of Benjamin's bedroom, down the hallway,

down a flight of stairs, through the foyer, and out the door. They crept around the pearl-colored house that looked empty and still.

Finally, Jacob stopped. Benjamin looked in front of him and saw that they were at the front of a slave cabin. Without saying anything, Jacob creaked the door open and Benjamin followed him inside.

The image that struck Benjamin was the long legs. As Jacob put the lantern down and Benjamin blinked, trying to see, he realized that the legs were tied to the end of the bed, one on each side. Then he realized that the legs were attached to his mother.

As he cautiously stepped closer, he saw that his mom's arms were tied to each other, and she had cloth covering her mouth that muffled some whimpers. Benjamin looked at his father, a mix of confusion and horror on his face. Jacob just clapped his son on the back.

"The last few times we talked about marriage, you seemed really confused and lost. So I want to help you figure some of your stuff out." He began taking off his pants. Benjamin took a few steps back, and almost fell over.

"Dad, this is... wrong," he said softly, in an almost-whisper.

Jacob shook his head. "No, son. That's what I'm trying to show you. This is right. This is how it's supposed to be." He finished taking off his pants. Benjamin avoided looking. "Women are made for this. They were created, by God, to procreate with us."

"But..."

Jacob put a strong grip on Benjamin's shoulder. "Son, I promise, it feels good. Women like being dominated, and as men, we like dominating. Okay?"

Benjamin suddenly realized the gravity of the situation. His father had been trying to make him a man, a leader, the figurehead of a household and of the plantation. Jacob had praised

Benjamin when he went along with what he encouraged him to do. As Benjamin played back the last few months in his head, he pondered what his life would look like without the support of his father. Jacob could simply marry Caroline off to someone he approved of, then give the house and land to him, Benjamin realized solemnly. Benjamin might have a chance at marrying a woman with no brothers, but it would be a humble, homely woman, for sure. Otherwise, Benjamin might be given an apartment in Charlestown and told never to speak of the family again. He might be made an overseer of the land he once romped.

Benjamin took all of this into consideration, then looked at his dad square in the eye and said, "Alright. What do I do?"

"Attaboy, Benjamin!" Jacob smiled at him without mirth for the first time in a very long time.

Benjamin walked up to the pale, cold legs and closed his eyes. He had some trouble at first, but once he was able to clear his head and get a rhythm going, he had some success. After a few minutes, he had a lot of success.

After he came, his father took a turn, and, over his shoulder, told Benjamin that he knew he had it in him, and he was proud to call him his son.

"I know you'll do a great job with the plantation when I'm gone, Benjamin."

Benjamin smiled, accomplished, despite himself.

Mia was a nervous wreck. Although she had just ventured to the Charleston library a few days ago (Or, weeks, maybe? It couldn't have been months, could it?), everything felt different now. She felt different. She felt like she needed to go, though, to talk to Gretchen about the house. She hadn't heard anything from her since the day she moved in. Plus, there were too

many strange things happening, and the lack of history surrounding the plantation was slowly eating away at Mia.

She drove there in a trance, not really sure how she could have possibly remembered the way. Sure enough, though, she pulled into the parking lot, safe and sound. Mia winced as she stepped inside. She had forgotten just how bright and garish the place was. It felt like red, yellow, and green were attacking her eyes.

Mia headed towards the Special Collections desk, but as she got near, she realized that the person at the counter wasn't Gretchen, it was a young guy, probably just fresh out of college. Mia hesitated. She wasn't sure what to do, now, since her plans had rested on Gretchen being there. She took a deep breath and walked up to the man.

He gave a polite smile as Mia got closer. "Hi, what can I help you with?" he asked.

"Um, yeah, I was just wondering if Gretchen will be here today?"

He furrowed his brow. "I- I guess I'm not sure," he told her.

That was all Mia needed to know. She rubbed her forehead. "Okay, thanks." As she started walking down the stairs, lost in thought, she heard a voice from behind her. A woman in her 20's with nervous energy appeared and stared at Mia.

"Do I know you?" She asked.

Mia was taken aback by the girl's brazenness. "Don't think so," she replied, and kept walking.

The stranger followed. "But you look so familiar! Are you famous? Or were you on the news or something?"

"Nope," Mia said over her shoulder. She began walking away even quicker. Then suddenly, Mia realized she was walking up the drive to the manor. Though she was surprised by

this, Mia assumed she had just gotten lost in her thoughts again. From this angle, Mia realized there was a strange, comforting pull of gravity that felt inevitable, that she somehow felt would continue forever.

Lucy's hand shook as she poured wine for Benjamin's mother. His father was going on and on about what potential mates he thought would be good for Benjamin to marry. Lucy bit her tongue and fought back tears. With each new name and lewd description, Lucy just imagined another beautiful woman that Benjamin would probably rather be with than her.

Just as Lucy neared a breaking point, Jacob finally realized that Benjamin wasn't saying much.

"What's wrong, son?" he asked. "Can't choose between all the good options?"

Though she kept her head lowered, Lucy shot a glance at Benjamin to try to read his face. He was looking down. Lucy took a long breath to try and steady herself. She supposed it was about time to admit to herself that they would never work out. A single tear was caught in her eyelashes and began to roll down her cheek when Benjamin cleared his throat.

"Actually, dad, I don't want to marry any of those girls."

Lucy's head shot up. Benjamin's dad laughed. "What? None of them are good enough for ya? I mean, I suppose we can expand our search a little, but you can always have a mistress... or two."

There was a tense moment when everyone looked back and forth between Benjamin and Jacob. Benjamin spoke in a measured tone, "Actually, I'm in love with someone."

"Well, well," Jacob exclaimed, and opened his arms. "And who's the lucky lady?"

Benjamin looked up. "It's Lucy," he answered. Lucy held her breath.

Jacob chuckled uncomfortably. “Who’s Lucy?” he asked, after a moment.

“*Dad*,” Benjamin said, annoyed. “This is Lucy.”

Lucy felt her cheeks burn. Benjamin gestured towards her, and chairs around the table squeaked as everyone turned to get a look.

“That’s a joke, right?”

Benjamin got out of his seat and stood behind her. “No, it’s not. We’ve wanted to tell you for a while now.”

Jacob’s fingers were turning pale with his grip on his utensils. “You mean to tell me... you’re in *love*.. with this negress? This animal?” He stood up so fast, his chair toppled to the floor behind him. Suddenly his hand was around Lucy’s throat. “He thinks he’s in love with you, huh? You whore? What fucked up African witchcraft did you use on my son?” He slammed her head against the wall behind her. “TELL ME!”

Suddenly, the pressure on Lucy’s throat was gone. She gasped air in and saw Benjamin toppling his father to the ground. She felt like her head was underwater, but she was vaguely aware of Benjamin yelling insults and hitting his father. Before she could react, Benjamin had a hold of her hand and was pulling her out of the room.

She followed his lead, and the two of them ran out of the house, and kept running after that. Over the sound of their feet hitting the ground again and again, Lucy heard yelling and a few gunshots. She twisted her body to turn around and see, but Benjamin kept pulling her forward. Eventually, they crossed paths with a carriage full of friendly-looking people who asked if they needed help. Benjamin explained to them that they were eloping and needed to get away, so the carriage agreed to take them into the city.

Once there, Benjamin used most of the money he had on him to pay for two tickets to England. Along the way, however, tragedy struck. In the middle of a clear night, with no storm clouds on the horizon, the ship suddenly started rocking back and forth violently. The women and children huddled inside the belly of the boat, while the men and the crew grabbed what weapons they could and headed to the deck. They watched in horror as a serpentine head rose above the water and, as if in slow motion, knocked the ship over from one side. There was nothing any of them could do to prevent it. There were no survivors.

No, no, no, no, no. That wasn't right. No, worse. It wasn't good.

The journey was long, but finally being able to be together in peace kept Lucy and Benjamin's spirits up. Upon landing in England, Benjamin set about finding a way for them to make a living. He got a loan from a bank to build a two-level building—a bakery on the first floor, room for a family on the second. Lucy got to bake to her heart's content, and the two of them had beautiful babies together. *And they all lived happily ever after.*