

**BURNING ATLANTA**

screenplay:

Anton A. Hill

story:

Anton A. Hill

&

Rachel Marie Meyer

FADE IN:

INT. LECTURE HALL - AFTERNOON

A modern space that holds about two hundred eager young minds. The students all pay close attention to their lecturer, EVAN COOK, early 30s, bookishly handsome.

EVAN

Which again proves that the Civil War was more a class conflict than one of race issues. And that leads us back to what?

His STUDENTS respond enthusiastically.

STUDENTS

Never trust history books!

EVAN

Even if?

STUDENTS

You wrote them!

EVAN

That's right!

They all laugh. NATALIE COOK, early 30s, clearly well-heeled, slips in the very back. Finds a vacant seat. Blows Evan a kiss. He returns the gesture with a wink.

EVAN

Before you leave me for the last time, I want you to know it's been a fantastic year, and I'm happy to write rec letters for any of you.

He pauses. Checks his watch.

EVAN

And... class dismissed!

His students give him a standing ovation. He bows.

EVAN

Don't forget. Final papers are due in my box by next Friday, 3:00 sharp. No extensions. No exceptions.

EXT. CAMPUS

Evan and Natalie, arm-in-arm, take a late-afternoon stroll.

NATALIE  
They're really gonna miss you.

Evan grins.

EVAN  
Jealous?

NATALIE  
A little.

Evan's cell phone rings. He answers.

EVAN  
Hello? Speaking.

He stops. Listens a moment. His face brightens up.

EVAN  
Thank you very much! I'll see you  
in a few weeks.

He puts his phone away. Grins at Natalie.

NATALIE  
Was it them?!

EVAN  
We're moving to...

He picks Natalie up in his arms. Swings her around.

NATALIE  
Atlanta!!

EVAN  
Tenure track!!

He keeps swinging her. Natalie laughs.

NATALIE  
We'd better pack!

EVAN  
And celebrate!

NATALIE  
In that order!

INT. DEAN'S OFFICE - DAY

Evan and Natalie sit across from the DEAN OF FACULTY.

EVAN

What do you mean by "temporarily relocated"?

DEAN

Repairs are already under way, but the storm damage was extensive. Your housing won't be inhabitable for a few months at least.

NATALIE

What are we supposed to do until then?

The Dean hands them a list of hotels.

DEAN

Housing will of course reimburse you while you look for an apartment. I sincerely apologize for the inconvenience.

INT. MOTEL ROOM

Evan gets dressed for work. Natalie circles apartment listings in a local newspaper while talking on her phone.

NATALIE

The place is... great. Listen, Mom, I've got some errands to run. We'll let you know as soon as we've moved in.

Evan whispers to her.

EVAN

Drop by for lunch? Noon thirty?

Natalie nods. Blows a quick kiss. Evan heads out.

NATALIE

Okay. Love you too. Bye.

She goes back to the newspaper. Calls one of the ads.

NATALIE

Hello? Hi, I'm calling about the apartment -- Oh. Thanks.

She hangs up. Crosses that one off.

INT. CAFE - AFTERNOON

A hip little place near campus. Evan munches a sandwich while Natalie scours yet another apartment listing. Her morning newspaper is now covered in dozens of crossed-out ads.

EVAN

How's the search going?

Natalie sighs, frustrated.

NATALIE

I think I'm gonna drive around. See if there's anything a little farther out. How about you?

EVAN

Nothing's available. At all.

EXT. APARTMENT COMPLEX

Natalie pulls up to a lovely, upscale complex. She knocks on the manager's door. Retouches her hair and makeup. A woman in her 30s, the MANAGER, answers.

NATALIE

Excuse me. I wanted to check the availability of your 1-bedroom with bath.

MANAGER

Darlin', this is a college town. We don't have nothin'...

EXT. APARTMENT COMPLEX

A much shabbier place. This Manager is a frat-boy type.

MANAGER

...not at all...

EXT. APARTMENT COMPLEX

These complexes can't get much worse. A fat, balding Manager answers.

MANAGER

...not for months...

EXT. APARTMENT COMPLEX - EVENING

Natalie's face is dirty. Her hair's become frizzy. Her armpits are sweaty black stains. She tries to negotiate with a kindly, older woman at a place she'd normally never even drive near.

NATALIE

Please. It's just my husband and myself. No kids. No pets. I've been searching all day. All over town. Anything would be great.

MANAGER

I'm very sorry. We just don't have anything.

She starts to close the door. Natalie blocks it. Pulls out a slip of paper and pen. Scribbles something down. Hands it to the woman.

NATALIE

This is the number of the hotel where we're staying. If anything comes up, please call me.

The woman sighs pitifully.

MANAGER

Honey, no one's moved outta here in twenty years.

Natalie nods, defeated. The Manager closes the door. Natalie schleps back to her car. Trips on the curb. Snaps the heel off her shoe. Swears under her breath. Collapses into her car.

EXT. STREET

Natalie comes to a stop sign. Makes a call.

NATALIE

Hey, baby. No. Well, there's one more area I haven't been to, but I can't imagine it's got anything. I'm pretty far from campus.

She pauses to listen and turn up a street. She half pays attention as she drives past a row of very old homes.

NATALIE

Yeah, I know, I just didn't want you to have to drive to school or take the bus --

Something catches her eye.

NATALIE

I'll call you right back.

She drives back a few yards. A strikingly well-restored mansion bears a handmade sign that reads simply, "vacancy." She parks. Dons a pair of flip-flops. Crosses to the front door. Reaches for a door bell. Finds none. Knocks instead.

After a moment, she hears a pair of feet shuffle to the door. A young voice politely asks:

CHARLOTTE

Who is it?

Natalie addresses the voice in a diplomatic tone.

NATALIE

I'm here about the vacancy.

The door opens a crack. CHARLOTTE, barely 16, wearing an oversized men's suit jacket, casts curious eyes at her. Natalie points to the sign. Charlotte squints. Tries to remember.

CHARLOTTE

Uh...

The detail finally creeps back into her mind. She nods slowly.

CHARLOTTE

Oh yeah.

NATALIE

What's your name?

CHARLOTTE

Charlotte.

NATALIE

Such a nice name. Can I speak with your parents?

CHARLOTTE

Daddy's dead. You can talk to momma.

She yells inside the house.

CHARLOTTE

Momma!

A plain and proper woman, LAUREL, 40s, finds them.

LAUREL

No need to yell, Charlotte dear.

She smiles at Natalie.

LAUREL

You must be here about the rooms.

Natalie extends her hand. She and Laurel shake.

NATALIE

Natalie Cook. Pleased to meet you.

LAUREL

Laurel Braddock. Please, come in.

She opens the door all the way.

INT. MANSION

A splendid home completely remodeled back to its former antebellum glory. On all the walls hang elaborate candle sconces, and framed illustrations of creepy children at work and play. Charlotte and Laurel show Natalie around.

NATALIE

This house is amazing.

LAUREL

It's been in our family since before the Secession.

NATALIE

Evan would love it.

CHARLOTTE

Who's Evan?

LAUREL

Charlotte, dear, don't be rude.

NATALIE

I don't mind. Evan's my husband. He's a history professor. An expert on all things south of the Mason-Dixon.

LAUREL  
I just adore educators! Are you a  
professor as well?

NATALIE  
I'm a nurse and English tutor.

LAUREL  
How lovely.

She leads them into the next room.

LAUREL  
This way to your rooms.

INT. BALLROOM

Laurel, Natalie, and Charlotte enter a gigantic room  
decorated in portraits of ancestors.

LAUREL  
Before the war, our family hosted  
some of the country's most  
respected artists and dignitaries.

She stops. Faces one of the portraits.

LAUREL  
Now all that remains are the faces  
of our dearly departed.

NATALIE  
Who are the portraits outside?

LAUREL  
Illustrations once found in our  
volumes of children's literature.

NATALIE  
You're publishers?

LAUREL  
That was how our family achieved  
its stature. But we've long since  
left that enterprise.

She continues on. Leads Natalie down a passage off the  
ballroom.

INT. MANSION

Laurel points to a nearby room.

LAUREL

This would be your and your  
husband's room, bath, and study.

NATALIE

So where do you live?

LAUREL

In a separate wing on the other  
side. I assure you, the house is  
spacious enough for all of us to  
enjoy our own peace and quiet.

CHARLOTTE

It's so big, I don't even remember  
what some rooms look like!

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Large, impeccably furnished, warm, and welcoming. Natalie's  
completely taken aback. It's as if the room had been  
prepared just for her and Evan.

LAUREL

I'm afraid that our humble home is  
a bit lacking in certain luxuries,  
such as television.

NATALIE

That's no trouble. Evan and I  
never watch TV.

LAUREL

As my momma says, why should one  
distract one's self from life, when  
life already has so much to offer?

NATALIE

Your mother sounds like quite the  
wise woman.

LAUREL

She does know a great many things.

She leads Natalie to the next room.

INT. KITCHEN

Laurel shows Natalie where the dishes are.

LAUREL  
We subscribe to a delivery service.  
And of course, we invite you to  
share our meals.

NATALIE  
That sounds perfect.

LAUREL  
The dining room is this way.

INT. MANSION

As Laurel, Natalie, and Charlotte exit the kitchen, they spot ROLAND, 40s, quietly miserable, as he exits the dining room. He stares at them. At Natalie.

LAUREL  
Good afternoon, Roland.

Roland doesn't say anything.

CHARLOTTE  
This is Natalie. She and her  
husband are gonna move in.

LAUREL  
Natalie, my baby brother, Roland.

Sensing awkwardness, Natalie attempts to shake Roland's hand.

NATALIE  
Pleased to meet you. You have a  
lovely home.

Roland doesn't return Natalie's gesture. Natalie pretends not to notice.

ROLAND  
It's our parents', not mine.

Laurel's voice sternly urges Roland on his way.

LAUREL  
We were just about to show Natalie  
the dining room.

Roland's eyes still locked on Natalie, Roland doesn't seem to have acknowledged anything.

LAUREL  
Roland?

Roland turns away. Heads off down the hallway.

NATALIE

It was nice to meet you.

INT. DINING ROOM

A dark, musty area, it features a long table with eight places neatly set, and a coat of arms decorated with two antique revolvers. Laurel circles the room. Details everything.

LAUREL

Dinner is at 8:00. In consideration of my parents, lights are out at 10:00.

Charlotte shows Natalie the place at the head of the table.

CHARLOTTE

You can sit here. Your husband can sit here. Or if you want, we can put you both on this side.

NATALIE

I don't think we need to decide that now.

LAUREL

Charlotte, I think it's about time to let Natalie be.

CHARLOTTE

I was just tryin' to be friendly.

LAUREL

And I'm sure Natalie appreciates your efforts, but you have to finish your lessons.

Charlotte nods.

CHARLOTTE

Bye, Natalie.

NATALIE

It was lovely to meet you, Charlotte.

Charlotte shuffles out of the room.

LAUREL

Did you have any questions?

NATALIE

No, you've been very helpful.

EXT. STREET

Laurel sees Natalie to the door.

NATALIE

This is too wonderful. I'm so glad we found you.

LAUREL

I'm so glad we were found.

NATALIE

We'll let you know as soon as possible.

LAUREL

I look forward to hearing from you.

They shake. Very pleased, Natalie heads to her car. At the car, she stops. Faces the mansion. Laurel's already gone back inside.

It's just the house and Natalie. Under the light of the setting sun, the mansion seems to glow. Natalie smiles. This feels right. She gets in her car.

INT. EVAN'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Evan and Natalie debate the issue over Chinese take-out. Evan also busies himself with clearing up his office.

EVAN

I don't know how I feel about living with a family. I haven't had house mates since college.

NATALIE

It's only temporary. The second university housing opens up, we're gone.

Evan thinks about it for a moment.

EVAN

Natalie, you know I don't care. You're the expert. If you like it, I'm sure it'll be perfect.

NATALIE

I love it. I know you will too.  
And I am not scouring the streets  
again to get us something else.

EXT. STREET - MORNING

Evan and Natalie pull into the driveway.

EVAN

She's a grand belle, but she's  
definitely seen better days.

Not sure what Evan's talking about, Natalie eyes the mansion. It looks much older than it did yesterday. The brilliant white facade has faded to a numb grey. The paint has peeled in places, exposing cracked, dry rotted boards underneath.

NATALIE

I guess she has.

Evan points.

EVAN

Whole west side is about to  
collapse.

They get out. Natalie checks where Evan's pointing. The wing in question looks like it's been abandoned for decades.

EVAN

And they could use a gardener. Or  
at least a hose.

Almost offended, Natalie turns her attention to the front lawn. It's brown and pock-marked with patches of dirt.

NATALIE

I didn't even notice.

She takes Evan's arm.

NATALIE

Wait till you see the inside.

Wearing the same black jacket she always wears, Charlotte waves from the front door.

CHARLOTTE

Hey Natalie! Hi Evan!

Evan and Natalie greet Charlotte. Natalie notices that Charlotte's face is a sickly pale.

NATALIE

Good morning, Charlotte. Are you feeling well?

Charlotte nods excitedly. Sticks her hand out to Evan.

CHARLOTTE

You're Natalie's husband.

EVAN

That I am.

They shake.

CHARLOTTE

Come on in. Momma's preparing your rooms.

They all go inside.

INT. MANSION

In stark contrast to the outside, inside, everything is as it should be. Evan takes a moment to look around.

EVAN

Natalie, this house is the finest example of Georgian Federal I've ever seen. Places like this just don't exist anymore.

NATALIE

I knew you'd love it.

Laurel finds them.

LAUREL

Why, good morning! And this handsome young man must be Professor Cook.

She and Evan shake.

EVAN

Pleased to meet you.

Natalie notices that Laurel also looks sick... even older. The lines on her face and her crow's feet are more sharply defined. A bold grey streak now cuts through her quiet brown hair. And her face is the same pale as Charlotte's.

LAUREL

Likewise. Your rooms are ready if you'd like to move in your things.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie and Evan unpack their clothes.

EVAN

You were right. This place is great. And it's not even that far from campus.

Laurel pops her head in.

LAUREL

Knock knock. Natalie, if you two aren't too busy, I thought I'd steal your husband away to show him around.

Evan faces Natalie with pleading eyes. Natalie smiles.

NATALIE

Go play.

INT. BALLROOM

Laurel shows Evan the portraits.

LAUREL

My ancestors spent a substantial amount restoring this house after the Secession.

EVAN

How much of it was destroyed in the battle?

LAUREL

I imagine quite a bit. Though I'm not entirely sure. That's the trouble with records of those days.

INT. MANSION

A knock at the front door. Charlotte answers. It's a DELIVERY BOY, about her age, weighted down with the day's groceries. He flirts with her.

DELIVERY BOY

Hey, Charlotte.

Charlotte accepts the bag. Doesn't look straight at him.

DELIVERY BOY  
You sure you're alright?

Charlotte nods quickly.

DELIVERY BOY  
You guys havin' a party or  
somethin'?

Charlotte shrugs.

DELIVERY BOY  
'Long as I can remember, I only  
come by once a week. Maybe twice.

CHARLOTTE  
So?

DELIVERY BOY  
This is the third time today.

Charlotte passes him a note. He accepts it with a grin.  
Passes her a plain, brown paper package. Charlotte does her  
best to hide it under her shirt.

INT. BALLROOM

Evan barely maintains balance as he wanders the room, staring  
at the ceiling.

EVAN  
The detailing is definitely  
antebellum. It's remarkable. I  
don't see any fire damage. I'd  
almost swear it's all original.

Peering out into the front room, Laurel places a hand on  
Evan's shoulder.

LAUREL  
Pardon me, Professor Cook.

INT. MANSION

The Delivery Boy hands over another sack of groceries.

DELIVERY BOY  
Haven't ordered much flour or cans.  
Only produce, meat, bread. Easier  
for me, I guess.

Laurel joins them. Glares at the Delivery Boy.

LAUREL

Thank you. That will be all.

She shoves a tip into the Delivery Boy's palm. Closes the door in his face.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie organizes the bathroom. She steps back into the bedroom. Gathers a few toiletries. Goes over to the window. Outside, the Delivery Boy kicks a clot of dirt at the front door. Flips the bird. Takes off.

INT. MANSION

Laurel leads Evan down a hallway.

LAUREL

And over here is the music room.

Evan takes a quick look inside. His eyes snap open. He hurries in.

INT. MUSIC ROOM

This room also looks like it's been abandoned for decades. The centerpiece is a long forgotten, antique piano. Despite the dust, scratches, worn edges, and handful of missing keys, it was clearly once a gorgeous instrument.

Evan gets as close as he can without touching it.

EVAN

This is a Steinman original! Only a thousand made. Major luxury item.

Laurel joins him.

LAUREL

How did you come to know so much about pianos?

EVAN

I'm writing a book on the correlation between Pre-War Southern music genres and socioeconomic conflict.

He sees that he's lost Laurel.

EVAN  
I've also played since I was five.

LAUREL  
A professor, author, and pianist?

EVAN  
"Author" is generous. Every new  
tenure-track professor has to  
publish before they're granted  
their tenure.

He sees he's lost Laurel again. He goes back to the piano.

EVAN  
The detailing here looks custom-  
made. Very expensive.

Laurel beams proudly.

LAUREL  
Once our ancestors' finances  
recovered, they purchased this fine  
instrument to celebrate the  
family's survival of the war.

Doubt flashes across Evan's face.

EVAN  
Do you know what year that was?

LAUREL  
Why, Professor Cook, you have  
stumped me today. I believe in the  
late 1870s.

EVAN  
...I see. Well, you're right.  
She's a very fine instrument.  
Probably wouldn't even take that  
much to restore the old girl.

Remembering the time, he checks his watch.

EVAN  
I'm sorry to have to cut this  
short. I have to get to work.

Laurel walks him out of the room.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Evan runs in to grab his coat. Natalie stops arranging their things.

EVAN

Hey baby, I'm really sorry, but I've gotta go. Meetings all day. Leave stuff for me to unpack.

NATALIE

Don't you worry, Professor Cook.

He smiles. Gives Natalie a quick kiss.

EVAN

See you tonight. Love you.

NATALIE

I love you too.

Evan leaves. Laurel slips her head in.

LAUREL

I don't want to intrude on your moving in.

NATALIE

Don't be silly. I love intrusions.

Laurel steps inside. Smiles.

LAUREL

Are you finding everything to your liking?

NATALIE

Everything's perfect.

LAUREL

I would help you settle into your new home, but I have a few errands to run, which means Charlotte will miss her lessons.

NATALIE

I could tutor her.

LAUREL

I wouldn't hear of it.

NATALIE

It's no problem.

LAUREL  
I hate to be a bother.

NATALIE  
Let me put these last few things  
away, and I'll go find her.

LAUREL  
Take your time.

She leaves.

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM

Mysteriously absent are the typical rock band posters, angst-ridden diaries, and other teenage standards. Instead there hang only a Confederate flag, and a sprawling family tree randomly marked in black Xs and slashes.

Sitting at Charlotte's desk, Natalie and Charlotte go over some grammar and vocabulary books.

NATALIE  
Any time you see "if" in a past-tense sentence, it's introducing the imperfect subjunctive.

Charlotte nods.

CHARLOTTE  
Natalie? Can I tell you something?

NATALIE  
What's that?

CHARLOTTE  
I'm glad you and Evan are here.

NATALIE  
Thank you, Charlotte. I'm glad we are too.

CHARLOTTE  
You're so much nicer than Aunt Martha and Uncle Jim.

NATALIE  
They lived here too?

Charlotte nods.

NATALIE  
Were they mean to you?

Charlotte shakes her head.

CHARLOTTE

I think they just didn't like it here anymore.

NATALIE

Is that why they left?

CHARLOTTE

No, Gramma threw 'em out 'cause aunt Martha had a baby.

NATALIE

I don't understand. Wouldn't your grandmother be happy for them?

CHARLOTTE

She wasn't.

NATALIE

When was this?

CHARLOTTE

The day before you visited.

INT. ROOM - DAY

Laurel, Roland, and Charlotte wait while AUNT MARTHA, 30s, chubby, gives birth over a basin of steaming water. Her husband, UNCLE JIM, 30s, combed over, holds her hand.

CHARLOTTE (V.O.)

When Aunt Martha told Gramma she was gonna have a baby, Gramma told her she couldn't keep it. Gramma said it'd be too many.

With Uncle Jim's help, the baby slides out with relative ease.

CHARLOTTE (V.O.)

Aunt Martha and Gramma argued for months. Then Gramma stopped. Totally silent.

Laurel opens the door a crack. Outside, Charlotte sees her grandparents sitting in the shadows. Laurel nods to her parents. Closes the door.

CHARLOTTE (V.O.)

The next day, Aunt Martha and Uncle Jim were gone. So was their baby.

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Natalie's intrigued by Charlotte's story.

NATALIE  
I'm sorry to hear that.

Laurel comes in. Charlotte pretends to be in the middle of her lesson.

CHARLOTTE  
If the car were accelerating, it  
would go faster than the truck.

Natalie glances at the both of them. Joins Charlotte.

NATALIE  
Excellent.

LAUREL  
I hate to end the party early,  
Charlotte, but we have to get ready  
for dinner.

Charlotte nods. Gets up.

CHARLOTTE  
Thanks, Natalie.

NATALIE  
You're very welcome.

Charlotte leaves.

NATALIE  
Need any help with dinner?

LAUREL  
Oh, I wouldn't want to trouble you.

NATALIE  
It's no trouble.

INT. KITCHEN

Natalie washes some vegetables. Laurel slices some herbs with a mezzaluna.

NATALIE  
Laurel, can I ask you something?

LAUREL  
Why, of course. Anything.

NATALIE

I don't mean to be rude, but I was wondering, how long has Charlotte been home-schooled?

LAUREL

Since she started. Just like the rest of us. We've never put much stock in the federally-funded schools.

NATALIE

Have you ever considered private education?

LAUREL

As my momma says, you should learn your letters where you learn your values.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Silently staring at a roast, Roland's face is now just as lined and pale as Laurel's. He and his 30s, odd-looking, sickly brother CURTIS, sit across from each other at the long sides of the table.

Laurel wheels in her hideously ancient father, GRAMPA, to the head of the table. Then her equally wrinkled mother, GRAMMA, next to him.

Charlotte stomps in. Still in her jacket. She slouches next to Curtis.

LAUREL

Would you please remove that filthy jacket?!

Charlotte ignores her.

GRAMMA

Where are the last two?

LAUREL

One second, momma.

She rushes out of the room.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie reads a book. Laurel sticks her head in.

LAUREL  
Natalie?

NATALIE  
Hey. Need help with something?

LAUREL  
It's 8:00.

Natalie's confused for a second.

NATALIE  
Oh, right! Dinner!

She puts her book down. Gets up. Joins Laurel.

INT. MANSION

Laurel and Natalie go back to the dining room.

LAUREL  
Where's Evan?

NATALIE  
Still at work.

INT. DINING ROOM

Laurel and Natalie enter.

LAUREL  
When should we be expecting him?

NATALIE  
I'm not sure. He hasn't called.

Laurel takes her place next to her mother.

GRAMMA  
Where's the last one?

LAUREL  
He's not here yet, momma.

GRAMMA  
We can't start.

NATALIE  
We can eat. Evan won't mind at all.

Gramma glares at Natalie. Grumbles under her breath.

GRAMMA  
No manners.

LAUREL  
Momma, hush!

Natalie tries to cool the situation.

NATALIE  
I'll give him a call. See what's  
keeping him.

She leaves.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie finds her cell phone. Makes the call. After a moment, she stares at the phone. Goes back into the hallway.

INT. MANSION

Natalie walks around. Tries to get a signal.

INT. DINING ROOM

Natalie comes back in. Sits.

NATALIE  
Strange. There's no signal.

She gives up. Puts her phone in her pocket. With that, the conversation ends. Everyone stares silently at the food. Natalie notices Roland's signs of sickness and age. His eyes find her. She looks away. Hears a distant clock ticking --

Then a thump. And footsteps. Laurel jumps up.

LAUREL  
Might that be Evan?

Natalie stands.

NATALIE  
I'll go check.

INT. MANSION

Sure enough, Evan emerges from the ballroom.

EVAN  
Natalie?

Natalie meets him there. Takes his arm.

NATALIE  
They're really annoyed.

EVAN  
What happened?!

NATALIE  
I don't know.

INT. DINING ROOM

Natalie and Evan sit down.

GRAMPA  
Start.

All family members hold completely still. Stare straight ahead. As if they were in some kind of binding trance. Gramma asks for names.

GRAMMA  
Roland?

ROLAND  
Here.

GRAMMA  
Curtis?

CURTIS  
Here.

GRAMMA  
Charlotte?

Charlotte stares at her grandmother with cold bitterness.

CHARLOTTE  
Here.

Gramma turns her sagging face to Natalie.

GRAMMA  
You.

Natalie feels a chill under the old woman's gaze.

NATALIE  
Evan and I are both here.

Gramma turns her attention back to Laurel.

GRAMMA

Continue.

LAUREL

Please join hands.

Shifting out of their trance, the family comply. Bow their heads. Natalie and Evan are a little hesitant, but also join in. Laurel leads them in grace.

LAUREL

Dear Lord, thank you for this bounty you have so graciously provided us. Thank you for the newest members of our family.

Charlotte smiles at Natalie.

LAUREL

Bless us and keep us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Everyone but Natalie and Evan mutters "amen." Laurel carves the roast.

LAUREL

Natalie? Evan?

Natalie and Evan pass their plates. Laurel serves them.

LAUREL

Now that you've partaken in our sustenance, you're part of the family.

NATALIE

Thank you.

EVAN

It's an honor.

LAUREL

Professor Cook, I don't believe you've met my brother Roland.

EVAN

Nice to meet you.

Roland nods.

LAUREL

And I don't believe either of you have met my brother Curtis.

NATALIE  
Nice to meet you too.

Curtis nods.

EVAN  
So, Roland, what do you do?

Roland glares at Laurel.

ROLAND  
I'm... between things.

EVAN  
I see. What about you, Curtis?

Curtis looks to his sister and brother for help. Laurel nods encouragingly.

CURTIS  
I'm... between things. Too.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Evan's in bed. Natalie's getting ready for bed.

EVAN  
I'm sorry, Natalie. I'm a new professor. It's going to be like this for a while.

NATALIE  
I know. It's just... they're our landlords. I don't want them to evict us.

EVAN  
Over one dinner?

NATALIE  
Well, they're odd. The grandmother evicted Charlotte's aunt and uncle because they had a baby.

EVAN  
That's not as odd as two very grown men living at home.

NATALIE  
Plenty of grown men live at home.

EVAN

And you know what else? Laurel showed me their scratched up, antique piano that's at least fifty years older than she said.

NATALIE

That is weird. She seems so proud of this house. You'd think she'd know.

EVAN

So besides my being late, how was your day?

NATALIE

Okay I guess. After I unpacked, I spent most of the afternoon tutoring Charlotte.

EVAN

How'd that go?

NATALIE

Fine. She's a good student. Very curious. She reminds me a lot of Beth.

EVAN

She looks a little bit like her too.

They hear a knock at their door.

LAUREL

Knock knock.

Natalie gets up. Answers it. Notices that Laurel's looking much better. Her face is full of color. The lines, crow's feet, and grey in her hair have all but disappeared.

LAUREL

Everyone tucked in?

NATALIE

Warm and cozy.

LAUREL

Pleasant dreams, Natalie.

NATALIE

Good night, Laurel.

Laurel leaves. Natalie closes the door. Goes to the window. Just before she closes the drapes...

Natalie notices the front yard. Even under the pale light of the moon, she sees that the grass has almost completely grown back. Only a couple dirt patches remain. She even spots a few flowers.

FADE OUT:

Groooooaan... Creeeaaak... Hiiiisss...

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Natalie wakes to the deep, low, almost human sound. She looks around. It seems to be coming from somewhere within the mansion. The sound slowly dies down. She checks the time. Midnight. She goes back to sleep.

BLACK.

FADE IN:

EXT. MANSION - MORNING

The lawn is again blemished with scabs of brown grass and patches of dirt. The paint's peeled away from a few edges and corners. Not nearly as decayed as the day before, but also not what Natalie saw when she visited the first time.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie wakes to Evan's lips gently kissing her cheek.

NATALIE  
...Mmmorning.

She reaches out. Carefully grips Evan's tie. Attempts to pull him down to bed.

EVAN  
Baby, I gotta go.

Natalie opens her eyes.

NATALIE  
What time is it?

EVAN  
Almost nine.

Natalie sits up.

NATALIE  
Why didn't you wake me?

EVAN  
You looked like you needed the rest.

NATALIE  
I wanted to have breakfast with you.

She gets up. Throws on a bathrobe. Notices a dark line stretching up the corner of the room.

EVAN  
Sorry.

NATALIE  
...That's okay. There's always tomorrow.

Evan kisses her.

EVAN  
I'll try to drop by for lunch.

NATALIE  
Have a good day.

EVAN  
You too.

He leaves. Natalie takes a closer look at the corner. A thin web of black mold reaches up from the floor. It branches out over the entire ceiling. She shudders at the revolting sight. Takes a look out the window.

NATALIE  
What happened?

She feels the window sill. Paint flakes right off. She goes to her bathroom.

NATALIE  
What's that smell?

She turns on her light to discover mold everywhere. Pulling back the shower curtain, she sees it's in every corner, groove, and crack of the tub and tiles.

NATALIE  
Disgusting!

She covers her mouth. Draws the curtain.

INT. MANSION

Natalie hurries down the hallway toward the kitchen.

NATALIE

Laurel?

No answer.

INT. KITCHEN

No one's there.

NATALIE

Dammit.

She eyes the refrigerator.

NATALIE

Appetite-Killing Bathroom versus  
Starving.

She weighs her options. Nods.

NATALIE

Starving.

She opens the refrigerator. Instinctively turns away.  
Coughs at the stench.

NATALIE

Oh my God!

Covering her mouth and nose, she takes a look at what's  
rotting...

Everything. Fermenting fruits. Mold-covered vegetables.  
Decaying roast leftovers. Crawling with maggots.

Natalie slams the door shut.

NATALIE

What happened?!

She turns away. Her foot bumps into something. She looks  
down. A shoe. Connected to a leg. She moves a chair --

It's Curtis. Skin white with death. His head soaks in a  
small pool of shattered glass and curdled milk. His right  
hand still grips his chest.

Natalie screams. Laurel rushes in. Followed by Roland. They both look pale and haggard. Not as much as yesterday, but neither of them looks as young and healthy as the day Natalie visited.

LAUREL  
What's the matter?!

Natalie points to Curtis' corpse.

LAUREL  
It's alright.

She puts her arm around Natalie. Leads her out of the room.

INT. MANSION

Laurel turns to Roland.

LAUREL  
Did you call the Alcoxes?

Roland nods. Leaves.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Still in her robe, Natalie nurses a cup of tea while Laurel finishes arrangements with an UNDERTAKER in the hallway.

UNDERTAKER  
We'd like to offer our deepest  
condolences and sympathies.

LAUREL  
Thank you so much.

The Undertaker leaves. Laurel steps into Natalie's room. Places a comforting hand on her shoulder.

LAUREL  
You feelin' alright, darlin'?

Natalie nods. Looks up at her.

NATALIE  
I suppose so. How did he die?

LAUREL  
It'll be some days before we know  
for sure, but it looks like a  
myocardial infarction.

NATALIE  
A heart attack?!

LAUREL  
I'm afraid so.

Natalie looks away, thinking.

NATALIE  
He was so young. I can't believe  
he was at-risk.

LAUREL  
I'm afraid the condition runs  
rather common in our family.

Natalie stares at her.

NATALIE  
This has happened before?

LAUREL  
Oh heavens yes. Over the years.

She gives Natalie's shoulder a squeeze.

LAUREL  
Well, I'd best start on dinner.

Natalie stands.

NATALIE  
Laurel? Is there something wrong  
with the refrigerator?

Laurel faces her.

LAUREL  
I don't believe so. Why do you  
ask?

Natalie takes a step toward her.

NATALIE  
Before I found Curtis, I was  
looking around for some breakfast.  
Everything in the fridge was  
rotten.

Laurel smiles.

LAUREL

Well, we do tend to forget our  
produce. Keep it past its prime.  
You know how that goes.

She turns to go.

NATALIE

But we had the roast last night.

Laurel stops. Doesn't face Natalie. A hint of impatience.

LAUREL

Well then, perhaps you're right,  
Natalie. I reckon I'd better take  
a look at it.

She faces Natalie.

LAUREL

Since I'll be busy with that, would  
you mind helping Charlotte again?

NATALIE

Not at all.

LAUREL

You're such a dear.

She gets on with her day. Natalie closes the door. Turns a  
suspicious eye to the lawn outside. She contemplates the  
sight, then returns to her tea.

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Natalie waits as Charlotte works on exercises. Just like her  
mother, Charlotte looks exhausted and a little pale.

NATALIE

If you need to take a break, I'm  
sure your mother would understand.

CHARLOTTE

Why would I need a break?

NATALIE

Because of Curtis.

Charlotte shakes her head. Stops writing.

CHARLOTTE

I'm glad he's dead. He used to...  
look at me. Like Evan looks at  
you.

Guessing at Charlotte's meaning, Natalie proceeds with caution.

NATALIE

You mean...?

Charlotte nods.

NATALIE

Did he ever...?

CHARLOTTE

He knew I would've kicked his balls  
off.

Natalie laughs.

NATALIE

Good for you.

CHARLOTTE

Most of the time he stayed in his  
room.

INT. CURTIS' ROOM - DAY

The lights are off. Other than the soft, serene sound of constant rainfall, the room is silent. Curtis, looking much healthier and younger than the day Natalie and Evan met him, sits in a chair facing the window. Lost. Mesmerized.

CHARLOTTE (V.O.)

If it rained, he'd just sit there  
watching it. For hours.

From the barely open slit in the bedroom door, Charlotte waits in the darkness. Watching Curtis.

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Natalie nods with relief.

NATALIE

I'm glad to know he never hurt you.

Charlotte nods. Her mind wanders a moment, then finds something.

CHARLOTTE  
Have you ever lost someone?

Natalie nods.

NATALIE  
My younger sister Beth. She was  
about your age.

CHARLOTTE  
When did it happen?

Natalie grows more and more uncomfortable with Charlotte's  
questions.

NATALIE  
A few years ago.

CHARLOTTE  
How did she --?

NATALIE  
We should probably continue with  
your lesson.

She realizes her tone was a little harsh.

NATALIE  
Don't wanna piss off your mom.

Charlotte nods.

INT. DINING ROOM - EVENING

Everyone's there but Evan.

LAUREL  
When should we be expecting Evan?

NATALIE  
I have no idea.

LAUREL  
Could you try calling him?

NATALIE  
I don't think my phone will work.

She realizes they'll wait all night if they have to. She  
stands.

NATALIE  
I'll go try.

She leaves.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie unplugs her phone from the charger. Checks the signal. Nothing. She puts it back.

INT. DINING ROOM

Natalie comes back in. Sits down.

NATALIE  
No signal.

GRAMPA  
We can't start!

LAUREL  
Daddy, we have no choice!

Gramma glares at Natalie.

GRAMMA  
Cursed machine.

ROLAND  
It's not her fault.

His family stares at him in surprise. He gives Natalie a supportive nod.

ROLAND  
Let's just eat.

Laurel faces her parents.

LAUREL  
He'll be here soon.

GRAMPA  
Start.

The rest of the family assumes its trance.

GRAMMA  
Roland?

ROLAND  
Here.

GRAMMA  
Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE  
Here.

GRAMMA  
You?

NATALIE  
Natalie. Here.

The family goes normal. Laurel stands.

LAUREL  
I'll only be a moment.

She heads for the kitchen. They all wait in silence.  
Charlotte taps her fingers on her plate.

GRAMMA  
Stop it!

Charlotte sticks her tongue out at her.

GRAMMA  
Cursed child.

Laurel returns with a dish piled high with pancakes. She  
serves everyone. Charlotte grumbles.

CHARLOTTE  
What's with the pancakes?

LAUREL  
That's all we have for now.

GRAMPA  
It's starting again.

LAUREL  
What's starting, daddy?

GRAMMA  
Abigail needs to come home.

Roland stares at her.

ROLAND  
We've been over this. Abigail is  
happy at school.

NATALIE  
Who's Abigail?

ROLAND  
My daughter.

LAUREL  
And she's coming home.

ROLAND  
No, she's not!

LAUREL  
Roland, momma just said --!

ROLAND  
I don't care what momma said!

Laurel hammers the table.

LAUREL  
Roland, her mother is dead!! She  
should at least have a father!!

Roland's about to rip into her, then he stops. His silent  
rage turns into suspicion. Laurel waits for his reply. He  
hisses.

ROLAND  
I'll make the arrangements.

Laurel sits.

LAUREL  
Please join hands.

Everyone obeys.

LAUREL  
Dear Lord, thank you for the food  
you have provided us. Please care  
for our departed. Bless us and  
keep us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Everyone but Natalie joins the "amen."

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM - NIGHT

In her pajamas, Natalie lies on her side, wide awake.  
Footsteps approach. She sits up expectantly. Someone knocks  
on her door.

LAUREL  
Knock knock.

Natalie rolls her eyes. Gets up. Answers it.

LAUREL  
Is Evan back yet?

NATALIE  
No, Laurel.

Laurel fights to control the anxiety in her voice.

LAUREL  
Have you heard anything --?

NATALIE  
No. Laurel.

LAUREL  
We're concerned is all.

NATALIE  
I'm sure he appreciates that.  
He'll be back soon. Good night.

She closes the door. Returns to bed. She hears Laurel wander away.

Seconds pass before Natalie hears the front door open. Then footsteps. Then Laurel's relieved voice.

LAUREL  
Thank goodness you're home,  
Professor Cook. We were so  
worried.

EVAN  
New professor. Late nights. No  
need to worry.

LAUREL  
Your lovely wife has waited up for  
you.

EVAN  
Thanks, Laurel.

LAUREL  
Good night.

Their footsteps part ways. Then Natalie's doorknob turns. Evan slips in. Goes to the bed. Leans over her. Kisses her cheek.

EVAN  
Sorry I missed lunch.

NATALIE  
And dinner.

Evan sits on the bed. Starts taking off his clothes.

EVAN  
Things were crazy.

NATALIE  
Curtis died.

EVAN  
Who?

NATALIE  
Laurel and Roland's brother.  
Charlotte's uncle. You met him  
last night.

Evan lies down.

EVAN  
What happened?

NATALIE  
I found him on the kitchen floor  
shortly after you left.

Evan rolls over. Holds her.

EVAN  
Oh, baby, I'm so sorry.

NATALIE  
I was fine. It was just a shock.

EVAN  
How did he die?

NATALIE  
Heart attack.

EVAN  
That's odd. Didn't seem prone.

NATALIE  
Laurel says it runs in the family.

EVAN  
I see.

He slips under the covers. Natalie smiles.

NATALIE  
What are you doing?

The covers muffle his voice.

EVAN  
Nothing.

Natalie slides down with him.

NATALIE  
Liar.

EVAN  
My pants are on fire.

NATALIE  
Dork.

She giggles. Then moans.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie wakes up naked in their mess of sheets to find Evan across the room, fully dressed, putting on his shoes.

NATALIE  
What are you doing?

EVAN  
Going back to the office.

NATALIE  
You just got here!

He stands.

EVAN  
I know. I'm sorry. I was  
struggling with a chapter all day,  
and I just realized what I can do  
to fix it.

NATALIE  
Can't it wait till tomorrow?

EVAN  
I'll be back in a couple hours.

He kisses her cheek.

EVAN  
I swear.

NATALIE

Evan, please. I don't wanna be alone.

Evan gestures to the other rooms.

EVAN

Laurel and Charlotte are right down the hall.

NATALIE

Evan...

Evan's almost out the door.

EVAN

I'll be back.

He leaves. Natalie lies back down. Stares into space.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Still lying on her side, Natalie sleeps lightly.

...Scrape. She sits up a little. Looks around the room. Finds no source for the noise. Listens. Nothing. She lies back down again.

A moment passes. Scrape. She sits up again, sure that she heard something. She gets up. Holds still.

Scrape. She tries to figure out which direction it's coming from. At first she can't locate it --

Scrape. She instinctively turns toward the sound. Finds that she's staring at...

The rug. In the middle of her floor. Now more curious than scared, she gets out of bed, and lies down on the floor, her ear to the rug.

Scrape, scrape. Her eyes widen as she realizes that it's coming from below. She sits up. Peels back a corner of the rug, revealing:

A trap door. She finds a handle. Carefully lifts it. Dusty light reflects up from an ancient stone and timber staircase. She descends cautiously, unsure of the safety of these old steps.

INT. BASEMENT

Each step creaks with age, but holds firm. The moment Natalie's descended past the floor, she listens again.

...Scrape.

NATALIE

Hello?

No answer. She reaches the bottom of the steps. The light shifts. All goes dark.

NATALIE

Laurel? Roland?

No answer. She feels her way along the edges of the basement.

NATALIE

Anyone?

Scrape. The basement fills with light again. She stops. Her breath quickens.

NATALIE

I have a gun!

No response. She can now see that the basement is fairly large, clogged with decades of discarded furniture and antiques. The light cuts through the dust like a lighthouse over a foggy graveyard.

Natalie finds a stick. Arms herself. Makes her way to the source of the sound. Bumps into a bricked-up wall. Now the light is no longer reflected, but shining out of a corner a few feet away. She grips her stick tightly.

NATALIE

The police are on their way.

The sounds stop. She takes a breath. Swings at the light -- Charlotte screams. Drops her flashlight.

NATALIE

Charlotte?!!

She finds the girl doubled over in pain, over a large laundry basin filled with steaming water.

CHARLOTTE

Natalie! Help me! Please!

Natalie drops her stick. Rushes to Charlotte's side.

NATALIE

What was all that noise?

Charlotte points to the basin.

NATALIE

What's wrong?! Why are you down here?!

Charlotte pulls back her jacket. Points at her swollen, pregnant belly. Natalie notices an open brown paper package of goods. Diapers. Baby powder. Formula.

NATALIE

Oh my God! Charlotte, we have to get you to a hospital!

CHARLOTTE

No!! We can't!!

NATALIE

Charlotte, listen to me! You need a doctor!

CHARLOTTE

You're a nurse! You can get my baby!

NATALIE

We're in a basement, Charlotte! We need proper facilities!

CHARLOTTE

I can't!! They'll kill me!!

NATALIE

No one's gonna hurt you!

CHARLOTTE

Momma and Gramma will!!

NATALIE

Charlotte, they're not gonna kill you!

CHARLOTTE

They threw Aunt Martha out for having a baby, and she was a grown up! I'm a kid!

NATALIE  
Charlotte --!

Charlotte grabs onto her.

CHARLOTTE  
Please, Natalie!!

As much as she hates it, Natalie sees that she has little time, little choice. She grabs a nearby crate. Sits Charlotte down onto it. Finds a glass lamp. Smashes it against the bricked-up wall.

CHARLOTTE  
What's that for?!

NATALIE  
The umbilical cord.

She kneels in front of the basin, across from Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE  
The umbilical --?

NATALIE  
Put your feet up on the sides of the basin.

Charlotte nods. Obeys.

NATALIE  
Now push.

INT. BASEMENT

Wrapped up in Charlotte's jacket, the baby sleeps soundly on a makeshift crib of two couches turned face to face. Natalie and Charlotte gaze at the tiny child.

CHARLOTTE  
What am I gonna do, Natalie?!

NATALIE  
Raise your child.

CHARLOTTE  
I can't!! If momma and Gramma find out --!!

NATALIE  
They won't kill you.

CHARLOTTE  
You don't know them! It's outta  
wedlock! My baby's a... bastard!

NATALIE  
Charlotte, calm down!

Charlotte takes a breath.

NATALIE  
We need to get you to a hospital.

Charlotte grabs her arm.

CHARLOTTE  
No, Natalie! You don't understand!

Charlotte starts sobbing. Natalie sees she's not getting  
anywhere.

NATALIE  
Listen. I promise I won't tell  
anyone.

CHARLOTTE  
Thank you.

NATALIE  
But in exchange for that promise,  
you need to see a doctor --

Charlotte's about to protest.

NATALIE  
I'll give you two days to tell your  
mother. After that, anything  
she'll do won't matter if you don't  
see a doctor.

Charlotte nods.

NATALIE  
Promise me.

CHARLOTTE  
But --

NATALIE  
Charlotte!

CHARLOTTE  
I promise.

NATALIE

Good. Let's get outta here.

They head back upstairs.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

After Natalie and Charlotte climb out of the trap door, Natalie takes a quick second to check the time. Midnight. Natalie also notices a fast asleep, snoring lump in the bed. She whispers.

NATALIE

Sh. Evan's back.

She puts a finger to her lips. Charlotte nods. Natalie leads Charlotte to her room.

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM

Natalie puts Charlotte to bed.

NATALIE

Your baby needs to be fed and changed regularly.

Charlotte nods. Natalie gives her a light embrace.

NATALIE

You need to get to sleep. You need rest. I'll check on the baby in the morning.

She stands. Turns to go.

CHARLOTTE

Natalie?

Natalie faces her.

CHARLOTTE

Thanks.

Natalie nods. Leaves.

INT. MANSION

Natalie heads down a hallway.

Creak creak...

Natalie cautiously turns a corner to find Grampa a few feet ahead of her, patiently rolling away. She holds still. Whispers to herself.

NATALIE  
What's he doing up?

Grampa stops. Listens. Turns half way around. Listens again. After a moment, he turns back. Heads down the next corner. Natalie hurries past him.

INT. BALLROOM

Natalie slips in. Crosses to the other side...

Darker... brighter... darker... brighter...

Natalie notices the reflected candlelight. Looks up at a sconces. Its tiny flame burns brightly and dims calmly in steady succession. Natalie's eyes find the other sconces. Exactly the same. Natalie takes in a short, amazed breath.

Ssshhhh... Hhhuuhhh... Ssshhh... Hhhuuhhh...

Now Natalie hears the equally tiny sound of a relaxed breeze moving through the room. The sound is synchronous with the candlelight. Caught in the experience, a word escapes Natalie's lips.

NATALIE  
Breathing.

The moment she hears her own voice, she dismisses it with a shake of her head. Continues on her way.

EXT. MANSION - MORNING

The lawn is in full bloom. The entire house looks brand new. Not a trace remains of the previous days' tarnish.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Facing the wall, Natalie lies in bed, half asleep. She hears distant footsteps approach the front door.

NATALIE  
Evan?

She sits up. The bed's already empty. Natalie grumbles.

NATALIE  
Work.

A knock. Then Laurel's voice.

EXT. MANSION

Laurel, looking as healthy and young as the day Natalie met her, greets ABIGAIL, 17, spit and vinegar, her platinum hair streaked red-hot.

LAUREL  
Good mornin', Abigail. It's so  
good to have you home.

ABIGAIL  
Cut the Comfort, Scarlet.

Laurel takes a patient breath.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie gets up. Slips on some clothes.

LAUREL  
Let me get your things.

ABIGAIL  
I'm starving. Where's breakfast?

LAUREL  
Right this way.

Natalie hears them head to the kitchen. She follows.

INT. KITCHEN

Natalie finds Charlotte, looking surprisingly healthy, rested, and happy, chatting with Abigail. Laurel serves them with a silently tolerant scowl. Laurel's the first to notice Natalie.

LAUREL  
Good morning, Natalie.

NATALIE  
Good morning.

LAUREL  
I don't believe you've met my  
lovely niece --

Abigail stands up. Offers Natalie her hand. They shake.

ABIGAIL  
Abigail.

She rolls her eyes at Laurel.

ABIGAIL  
But nobody calls me that. Friends  
call me, "Abby."

CHARLOTTE  
Lovers call her, "Baby."

She and Abigail laugh. Natalie smiles. Laurel grumbles.

LAUREL  
Might you girls offer Natalie a  
seat?

Both Charlotte and Abigail stand.

NATALIE  
Thank you. I'm fine.

She grabs a chair next to Charlotte.

NATALIE  
So, Abby, where were you at school?

ABIGAIL  
Back east. Had to take a frickin'  
overnighter to get here in time.

NATALIE  
In time for what?

ABIGAIL  
Ask Laurel.

Laurel serves Natalie.

LAUREL  
I think perhaps we should give  
Natalie some time to have her  
breakfast.

The girls calm down for a second. Natalie gets in a few  
bites. Then Charlotte starts up again. Points to the red  
streaks in Abigail's hair.

CHARLOTTE  
Could you do that to my hair?

Abigail examines a strand. Grins.

LAUREL  
No, she cannot!

CHARLOTTE

Momma!

ABIGAIL

I've only done it on myself. I could try it on you, but it'll probably be terrible.

NATALIE

My sister and I used to color our hair all the time.

CHARLOTTE

Really?!

ABIGAIL

Like this?

NATALIE

Any way you want.

CHARLOTTE

Could you do mine?!

Natalie eyes Laurel.

NATALIE

Only if your mother approves.

LAUREL

Once you've finished your lessons.

INT. MANSION

Carrying a handful of napkins, Natalie heads back to her room.

LAUREL

Did you get enough to eat?

Natalie freezes. Faces her.

NATALIE

Yes. Thank you.

LAUREL

Where's the mess?

She points to Natalie's napkins.

NATALIE

Oh! Allergies.

She pretends to blow her nose. Laurel crosses over to her.

LAUREL  
Now darlin', don't be vulgar.

She pulls out a handkerchief. Offers it.

LAUREL  
The good Lord provides.

NATALIE  
That's very thoughtful of you.

She accepts. Does a better job of pretending. Holds it out to Laurel.

LAUREL  
No, no. You keep it. I have plenty.

NATALIE  
Thank you.

LAUREL  
The girls are in Charlotte's room whenever you're ready for their lessons.

NATALIE  
I'll be there in a few minutes.

Laurel nods. Heads back to the kitchen. Natalie returns to her room.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie closes the door to a crack. Waits patiently for Laurel to go away. The second Laurel's out of sight...

Natalie goes for the trap door.

INT. BASEMENT

Leaning over the baby's "crib", Natalie carefully undresses the baby. Grimaces at the terrible smell. Using the napkins and handkerchief, Natalie sets about cleaning up.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Holding a wad of the baby's mess, Natalie emerges from the trap door. Stops.

She notices that the walls and ceiling are clean. She closes the trap door. Covers it with the rug. Goes to the bathroom. Dumps the baby's mess in the toilet. Flushes it down. Sniffs the air. Pulls back the shower curtain...

All clean. There's no sign of the previous day's rot and mold.

NATALIE

When did Laurel find time to clean?

She goes to her window. Stares at the lawn.

NATALIE

And plant flowers?

She touches the window sill.

NATALIE

And repaint the house?

INT. MANSION

Natalie pokes her head out. No one's around. She runs down the hall.

INT. KITCHEN

Natalie opens the fridge...

All fresh. No mold. No rot. No maggots. Either brand new leftovers of a roast and vegetables have been put in the place of the old leftovers, or the leftovers Natalie had seen rotting have miraculously rejuvenated.

Natalie asks herself.

NATALIE

What is going on here?

INT. MANSION

Natalie winds her way back toward her room. Stops when she finds the music room.

INT. MUSIC ROOM

The room and its piano are both completely restored and remodeled. As pristine as they were in their glory days.

NATALIE

Scratched up??

She gets on her way.

INT. MANSION

Puzzled by the piano, Natalie accidentally wanders off in a random direction, but stops when she finds an open room. Something hanging on its wall catches her eye...

It's a set of five photographs. One in the middle of the wall. Four hanging about three feet out from each of the middle one's corners.

They're all of Roland.

Each one is from a different era. Each one was taken somewhere in the mansion. In each one, Roland is completely miserable. Except in the middle one. His wedding day. His arm around a beautiful young woman, he glows with joy.

ROLAND

Black never was my color.

Natalie shouts. Spins around.

NATALIE

Roland! My God!

Like his sister and niece, Roland looks healthier and about ten years younger than he did yesterday.

ROLAND

I didn't mean to scare you. I'm not used to finding other people in my room.

NATALIE

The door was open. I didn't mean to intrude.

ROLAND

I don't mind.

He walks over to the wedding picture.

NATALIE

Where's your wife?

ROLAND

She's dead.

NATALIE

I'm sorry.

ROLAND

She was the most wonderful, most beautiful creature I ever laid eyes on. Every moment of every day I wish I had died instead.

Natalie isn't sure what to say. Roland notices her discomfort.

ROLAND

Do you mind that I talk about her?

NATALIE

Not at all.

Roland faces her.

ROLAND

Mother won't let me.

NATALIE

Please. Tell me.

ROLAND

We were on our way back from our tenth anniversary.

INT. CAR - DAY

A younger Roland and his WIFE, both happy and laughing, drive down a lonely, soaked, rural Georgia road.

ROLAND (V.O.)

There was heavy rain. I'd had a touch of wine. I never even saw it coming.

EXT. ROAD

Seemingly out of nowhere, a huge oak tree catches them on the right.

ROLAND (V.O.)

An old, giant oak. Middle of the turn. The kind boys play on, and young lovers kiss beneath.

The car smashes right into the tree.

ROLAND (V.O.)

I didn't get a scratch. Not one.

He crawls out of the car.

INT. MANSION

Her body broken and bruised beyond repair, Roland's wife convulses in bed. The rest of the family watches her. Gramma, Grampa, Laurel, and Curtis block the only exit to the room.

ROLAND (V.O.)  
She was in agony...

INT. ROLAND'S ROOM - DAY

Roland stares at his dead wife's picture.

ROLAND  
I can still hear her cries.

He faces Natalie.

ROLAND  
After a week of torment, she let go. Every moment of every day, I wish it had been me.

NATALIE  
Roland, I'm so very sorry.

Roland nods.

NATALIE  
My little sister was killed in a car accident. I was nowhere near her. Every day I wonder, if I had been, would she still be here?

She tries to lighten the mood.

NATALIE  
At least you still have your daughter.

ROLAND  
I'm afraid for Abigail. The house hates joy. Punishes happiness. If my wife and I hadn't dared to celebrate, she'd still be alive.

NATALIE  
What do you mean --?

LAUREL  
Oh there you are, Natalie.

Roland steps out of the way of the pictures so that Laurel's staring straight at them. Noticing the gesture, Laurel walks to the wall. Turns her back to the pictures. And Roland.

LAUREL

I hope my dear brother hasn't bored you too badly.

NATALIE

Not at all.

LAUREL

The girls are waiting.

Roland frowns at Natalie. Shakes his head.

NATALIE

...Laurel, I'm so sorry, I completely forgot I'm having lunch with Evan.

Roland nods.

LAUREL

Oh, I see. I suppose I'll teach them myself then.

NATALIE

When I get back, I'd be happy to help them with their hair.

Laurel gives her a restrained smile.

LAUREL

That would definitely give them something to look forward to.

NATALIE

Well, I'll see you later.

She moves past Laurel.

LAUREL

Natalie? Is somethin' the matter?

Natalie steps out of the room. Struggling to stay calm, she stops. Faces Laurel.

NATALIE

No. Not at all. Why?

LAUREL

You seem... on edge.

NATALIE  
Everything's fine.

LAUREL  
I'll let the girls know you'll find them later.

NATALIE  
Okay. Bye.

She leaves.

INT. COLLEGE LIBRARY - AFTERNOON

Seated at a computer terminal, Natalie skims dozens of newspaper articles, book excerpts, and photographs.

Obituaries for Braddock family elders appear now and then, until 1864, when five appear in the same day. All children. All natural causes. No others for a few years.

Then, about ten years later, more appear, young and old, a few times every generation. Always natural causes. Each time, the Alcox family takes care of funeral arrangements within a day.

According to newspaper articles and military reports, contrary to what Laurel claimed, the house wasn't damaged at all during the war.

Several headlines, dating from decades before and right up to the war, tell a story of the family's wealth, power, and prestige. Despite this, one, dated 1864, reads, "Braddock Books closes doors."

INT. MANSION

Carrying a folder of print-outs, Natalie steps in to find a disappointed Laurel, arms folded, waiting for her.

LAUREL  
The girls are done with their lessons. They're waiting for you in Charlotte's room.

NATALIE  
I'll be there in a minute.

She turns toward her room.

LAUREL  
How was lunch?

NATALIE  
Productive.

She goes in.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie hides her folder under the bed. Opens her door.  
Finds Laurel waiting nearby. Avoiding Laurel's gaze, Natalie  
moves down the hall.

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM

Natalie finds the girls in Charlotte's bathroom, messing with  
dye and other hair products.

NATALIE  
Sorry I'm late.

Charlotte and Abigail spin around, overjoyed.

CHARLOTTE  
Hey!

ABIGAIL  
Thank God you're back!

Natalie inspects the jobs they've done so far on their hair.  
Takes over.

INT. DINING ROOM

Everyone is present except Evan. Charlotte and Abigail beam  
proudly at Charlotte's newly streaked hair. Natalie's about  
to keel over. Laurel's eyes are chillingly vacant. Gramma  
and Grampa fidget. Roland is as resigned as ever.

LAUREL  
Natalie, when should we expect --?

NATALIE  
I don't know, Laurel!

LAUREL  
I'm sorry, darlin'. I was sure  
you'd discussed your plans with  
your husband when you two were at  
lunch.

NATALIE  
We didn't.

Laurel's about to say something else when Evan shows up.

EVAN  
I'm so sorry I'm late, everyone.

GRAMPA  
Start.

A smile springs onto Laurel's face.

LAUREL  
One moment, daddy.

She stands. Crosses over to Evan.

LAUREL  
Not at all, Evan. We were just  
startin'.

She pulls his chair out for him.

LAUREL  
Please, sit down.

Evan smiles. Laurel crosses back over to her place.

LAUREL  
How was your lunch?

EVAN  
Lunch?

Natalie kicks him under the table.

EVAN  
Oh! It was great. Very good.

LAUREL  
Productive?

EVAN  
...Yes.

GRAMPA  
Start!

LAUREL  
My apologies, daddy.

GRAMMA  
Charlotte?

CHARLOTTE  
Here.

GRAMMA  
Abigail?

ROLAND  
Don't answer.

ABIGAIL  
What?

ROLAND  
Don't answer her.

LAUREL  
Roland!

ROLAND  
I'm sick of this ridiculous tradition, Laurel! Abigail is my daughter, and I'm telling her not to answer!

LAUREL  
As a member of this family, you and she both have an obligation to respect our traditions regardless of how you might feel about them!

EVAN  
Laurel, Roland, this is hardly necessary --

LAUREL  
This does not concern you, Evan!

EVAN  
Excuse me, Laurel! Natalie and I might be your tenants, but that gives you no right to attack --!

Gramma pounds her fist on her chair.

GRAMMA  
Enough!!

They're all taken aback by Gramma's ferocity. Roland stands up.

ROLAND  
Enough is right.

He heads out.

LAUREL  
Where are you going?!

ROLAND  
Anywhere!

He storms out.

INT. MANSION

Roland marches down the hallway --

Ruuumble! Craaack! A tremor shakes the house. It sounds like a freight train passing nearby. Almost the opposite of the sound which woke Natalie two nights ago.

INT. DINING ROOM

Shaking with frustration and fury, Laurel goes after him.

LAUREL  
Roland!!

Tired of waiting for the adults, Charlotte and Abigail start in on dinner.

GRAMMA  
Cursed children!

Natalie starts eating as well. Following her lead, so does Evan.

INT. BALLROOM

Marching through the ballroom, Roland heads to the front room. Above him, the candle flames burn and dim in the same way as Natalie saw before. Only this time, they roar upward one second, and die down the next. A furious pulse.

EXT. MANSION

The front door practically flies open as Roland bursts out. He slams it behind him.

LAUREL  
Roland!!

Roland crosses the front porch. Hurries down the stairs. About to step onto the lawn, he pauses, swings around, sees that Laurel's way behind.

ROLAND  
Go to hell, Laurel!!

That moment, a rafter snaps. Bends silently down to exactly neck-level. The splintered end stretches out. A twisted, wooden hand.

Satisfied with bitching out his sister, Roland resumes his march to the street. Smacks right into the rafter. Catches his throat on its torn claws. Blood trickles down his neck. He gags.

Another rafter snaps. Several inches behind the first, its split end slams down onto the back of Roland's neck.

Roland's pinned. Gripping the rafter in front, he tries to push it down far enough to free himself. It doesn't budge. He awkwardly tries to push up the one on the back of his neck. No use.

Laurel's voice is closer, but still too far to save him.

LAUREL

Roland!!

Roland tries to speak. Blood rushes to his face. Flows down the front and back of his neck. He squeezes out one word.

ROLAND

...Abigail.

Then the noise. The slow, churning creak of twisting metal. Roland's eyes follow the sound...

The rain gutter. Just like the wooden rafters, one end comes loose. Its sharp, rusted edge dangles threateningly. The rafters ease Roland a few inches forward. Roland takes a heavy breath. Closes his eyes. Relaxes into his fate --

Laurel bursts outside --

The rain gutter crashes down. Slices Roland's head clean off. Blood splatters all over the front porch. The gutter tumbles to the ground. Its echoing clang snuffs out Laurel's scream.

INT. DINING ROOM

Evan stops eating.

EVAN

What the hell was that?!

He gets up. Heads for the front door. Natalie follows.

EXT. MANSION

Laurel's frozen. Her eyes dart back and forth between the house, Roland's decapitated body, and the place where his head fell. Making up her mind, Laurel runs back into the house. Closes the door behind her.

INT. BALLROOM

Evan and Natalie pass through. Natalie casts a quick glance at the sconces. The flames are still. Almost frozen.

INT. MANSION

Evan and Natalie reach the front door. Laurel stands in front of them. Stares off into space.

EVAN

What happened?

Laurel faces them.

LAUREL

He's gone.

NATALIE

Where did he go?

Laurel eyes her.

LAUREL

...I don't know.

Evan goes to look outside. Laurel holds up her hand.

LAUREL

It would be best, Professor Cook, to stay away from the porch. I'm afraid Roland damaged it on his way out. It's quite dangerous.

EVAN

I'll need to get to work in the morning.

LAUREL

I assure you the damage will have been cleaned up by then. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to make some arrangements.

She leaves.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Seated on the floor, Natalie shows Evan her notes.

EVAN

A couple odd obituaries and you think the house is haunted??

NATALIE

No, not haunted! But something's going on. Evan, our bathroom was crawling with filth. Now it's spotless.

EVAN

Natalie...

NATALIE

The lawn. Barren one day, green the next. The house looks like shit, then it's all fixed up with a brand new coat of bright white.

EVAN

Somebody could've come by and taken care of it.

NATALIE

I would've noticed!

EVAN

You were teaching Charlotte.

NATALIE

Fine. I'll show you.

She stands. Pulls him to his feet.

INT. MUSIC ROOM

Natalie and Evan stand before the piano.

NATALIE

You said it was scratched up, right?

EVAN

Laurel could've had it fixed.

NATALIE

In the last two days??

EVAN  
It wouldn't be easy, or cheap, but  
it's possible.

Natalie faces him. Desperate.

NATALIE  
Doesn't it seem strange that this  
family hosted presidential balls,  
then lost nearly everything the  
same year their kids died?

Evan thinks for a second.

EVAN  
You know what I think it is?

NATALIE  
What?

EVAN  
I think a certain someone moved to  
a strange city, into a strange  
house owned by a strange family...

He cracks a smile.

EVAN  
...and her bastard husband is never  
around.

Natalie hits him playfully. Smiles.

NATALIE  
Asshole.

Evan leads her out.

INT. MANSION

Evan puts his arm around Natalie.

EVAN  
I'm serious, Natalie. I'm sorry  
I've been away. Especially last  
night.

NATALIE  
No, I understand. Your book. And  
you're right. I'm being silly.

EVAN

Let me make it up to you. Tomorrow  
night we won't dine with the clan.  
We'll go out.

NATALIE

Where?

EVAN

Anywhere you want.

They kiss.

INT. BALLROOM

Natalie and Evan walk hand-in-hand back to their room.

NATALIE

Even Indian food?

Evan laughs.

EVAN

Even Indian food.

Natalie remembers.

NATALIE

Wait.

She points out the sconces.

NATALIE

Watch the flames.

They both stand there a moment. The candlelight does the  
same thing it did when Natalie saw it last... but completely  
at random. Evan calls it what it is:

EVAN

A breeze, Natalie.

He holds his hand up in the air. Sure enough, they both hear  
a quiet, natural breeze. Natalie stares at Evan.

NATALIE

Evan, I swear I saw --

Without another word, Evan turns her toward their room.  
Walks her out. But just as the door closes behind them --

All the flames roar to life in one fierce burst.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM - MORNING

Fast asleep in each other's arms, Natalie and Evan wake to incessant pounding on the front door.

JACK  
Anybody home?!! Open the fucking  
door, Laurel!!

Natalie gets up. Slips on some clothes. Opens the door a crack.

EVAN  
Who is that?!

Natalie waves for him to be quiet. Evan gets up. Also slips on some clothes. Joins her at the door. They see Laurel march to the front room.

EXT. MANSION

Laurel greets JACK HAAVIG, 30s, slimy in looks and manners.

LAUREL  
Jack, please! Keep your voice  
down!

Jack shows her a yellow, toothy grin.

JACK  
So, the day's finally come. A  
Haavig steps inside the great  
Braddock manor.

LAUREL  
Welcome home.

She waves for him to come in.

JACK  
Don't mind if I do.

He struts in like he just bought the place. Laurel struggles to maintain her courteous composure.

LAUREL  
Breakfast will be ready soon.

INT. BALLROOM

Laurel follows Jack inside. Winces every time he deigns to touch or look at anything.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie closes the door.

NATALIE  
Breakfast?

EVAN  
Wouldn't miss it.

INT. KITCHEN

Jack leans against the sink. Slurps his food. Belches. Does his best to shove Laurel over the edge. Charlotte and Abigail teeter between finding Jack fascinating and revolting.

ABIGAIL  
Any word from my dad?

LAUREL  
Not yet, darlin'.

CHARLOTTE  
She scared him off. Like everybody else.

Natalie and Evan join them. Grab seats across from the girls. Laurel serves them breakfast.

LAUREL  
I don't believe you've met my cousin, Jack.

Jack struts over. Vigorously shakes Evan's arm.

JACK  
What's up, Buck?

He clasps Natalie's hand.

JACK  
As lovely as the new-fallen snow.

He goes back to the sink.

JACK  
So, Natalie, Evan, what brings you to this shit-hole --?

LAUREL  
Professor and Mrs. Cook are our tenants.

JACK  
Huh. First time for everything.

Evan checks the time. Wolfs down a couple more bites.

EVAN  
I gotta go, baby. I'll pick you up  
at eight.

He stands.

JACK  
You just got here, Buck! What's  
the rush?

EVAN  
Work.

He kisses Natalie good bye.

LAUREL  
...What's the occasion?

NATALIE  
Some alone time.

LAUREL  
When would you be back?

EVAN  
I dunno. Twelve? One?

Laurel runs over to the freezer. Opens it. Shows off a  
couple steaks.

LAUREL  
Please, don't bother with the  
trouble and expense when I could  
prepare somethin' special for you.

EVAN  
Thanks, Laurel, but we'll be fine.

LAUREL  
Oh, but I insist.

JACK  
Scrape out the wax, Laurel! Buck  
shot you down!

LAUREL  
Stay out of this, Jack!!

Shocked at her outburst, Jack chuckles at her.

NATALIE  
It's really okay, Laurel.

LAUREL  
It would be my honor.

EVAN  
How about this? We'll be back by  
ten, and we can all share dessert.

Not satisfied, but not about to argue, Laurel nods.

LAUREL  
Dessert then.

INT. MANSION

Dressed for a day out, Natalie's nearly out the door when Laurel, Gramma, Grampa, and Jack find her.

LAUREL  
Where are you off to today,  
darlin'?

NATALIE  
Errands.

LAUREL  
My, my. You seem to have quite a  
few of those these days.

Natalie nods. Leaves.

INT. BUS

Seated near the back, Natalie skims over some of her notes. The bus pulls up near a modest cottage with the sign, "Alcox Funeral Services - Est. 1864."

INT. ALCOX FUNERAL SERVICES

Natalie enters a dark, cozy casket showroom. She browses for a couple moments. Doesn't spot any staff. She pretends to admire one of the coffins.

UNDERTAKER  
May I help you?

Startled, Natalie swings around to find the same man who took care of Curtis.

NATALIE

Hi. Yes. I'm staying at the  
Braddock house --

UNDERTAKER

Mrs. Cook. You found young Curtis.

NATALIE

I never got a chance to pay my  
respects. Is there any way I could  
visit the deceased?

UNDERTAKER

You would normally have to have  
permission from the next-of-kin,  
but that doesn't matter now.

NATALIE

Why not?

UNDERTAKER

Young Curtis has already been  
interred.

NATALIE

It's only been two days. What  
about the funeral?

UNDERTAKER

The Braddock family never holds  
funerals.

NATALIE

I see. I'd still like to pay my  
respects.

UNDERTAKER

You can visit his final resting  
place at Hillside Memorial.

He points the direction.

UNDERTAKER

A brisk six blocks walk from here.

NATALIE

Thank you.

UNDERTAKER

At your service.

Natalie leaves.

EXT. HILLSIDE MEMORIAL CEMETERY

The burial grounds for wealth and refinement, elegant tombstones dot the meticulously tended grounds.

Natalie enters. Takes a quick look around. Finds a directory. The Braddock name is listed under "Confederate." She heads to the other side of the cemetery, to a hill topped with an enormous mausoleum.

EXT. BRADDOCK MAUSOLEUM

Natalie slowly climbs the front steps of the polished grey marble and granite building.

INT. BRADDOCK MAUSOLEUM

Built for efficiency rather than reverence, it boasts no sculpture, stained-glass, benches, nor flower vases. Columns of graves stretch out seemingly forever.

As Natalie creaks the door closed, she shivers at the sudden temperature drop. Even for a tomb, the place feels eerily desolate. Her footsteps echo loudly as she ventures deeper within.

She reads the nearest grave, "Thomas Thurston Braddock - 1793-1851." A few more down, "Emil George Braddock - 1850-1855." Natalie touches Emil's plate.

NATALIE

Only a child.

She skips a few. "Samuel Thomas Braddock II - 1852-1864." She skims some of the earlier ones.

NATALIE

I don't see your father.

She continues reading the ones nearby. "Lorelei Alice Braddock - 1854-1864." "Christopher Lawrence Braddock - 1856-1864." "Kelly-Anne Elizabeth Braddock - 1858-1864." "Matthew Thurston Braddock - 1859-1864."

NATALIE

So much death.

The year of death of the first grave in the next column is 1874. Another child. Same with 1876, 1879, and 1880.

NATALIE

What happened? An annual plague?

As the years progress there are only a couple more deaths, until 1884. This time it's five in the same year. The next year ten. Then no more deaths until the 20th century.

She walks past a few columns to get to modern times. She finally finds the one she's been looking for, "Curtis Braddock."

NATALIE  
Poor Curtis.

She freezes. Drops her things.

NATALIE  
Oh my God.

Right below Curtis' grave are two shocking ones. "Martha Braddock" and "James Braddock."

NATALIE  
Aunt Martha and Uncle Jim!

And above Curtis' grave is a brand new one, "Roland Braddock."

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Charlotte and Abigail hang out listening to music. An urgent knock strikes the door.

CHARLOTTE  
Fuck off!!

NATALIE  
Charlotte, it's me.

Charlotte jumps up. Opens the door.

NATALIE  
Where's your mom?

ABIGAIL  
She gave up after like half an hour.

NATALIE  
Where's she now?

ABIGAIL  
Fighting with Jack somewhere.

CHARLOTTE  
We are so bored!

NATALIE  
You girls like history?

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM

Natalie, Charlotte, and Abigail look over Natalie's notes and Charlotte's family tree. Natalie runs her finger down a line of black Xs.

NATALIE  
So Xs are natural causes?

CHARLOTTE  
Yeah.

NATALIE  
And slashes are...?

CHARLOTTE  
Accidents.

NATALIE  
A lot of them.

CHARLOTTE  
Yeah, I know.

Abigail lies down on Charlotte's bed. Counts ceiling cracks. Suddenly sits up. Declares to the other two:

ABIGAIL  
I'm bored! I'm gonna get somethin'  
to eat. Anybody want anything?

NATALIE  
No, thank you.

CHARLOTTE  
Uh uh.

Abigail shuffles out.

INT. MANSION

As Abigail makes her way to the kitchen --

Ruuumble! Craaack! The same tremor shakes the house that preceded Roland's death.

INT. KITCHEN

Abigail goes to the refrigerator. Pulls out some cheese and bread. Sets them on the counter next to the sink.

Browses the selection of knives. Pulls out the largest, sharpest-looking one. Jack saunters in.

JACK  
You know, little girls shouldn't play with knives. They might get hurt.

He slides up next to her. Gives her his toothy, yellow grin.

ABIGAIL  
I been slicin' since before you was born.

Jack laughs. Goes to the other side of the sink. Rearranges the plates.

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM

Natalie examines another line on Charlotte's family tree.

NATALIE  
Can you remember any accidents?

CHARLOTTE  
Last one was a long time ago. Momma said it was this chick fell down the stairs, split her neck open on the bottom step.

NATALIE  
Any others?

CHARLOTTE  
Oh yeah. One was this guy somehow strangled himself hanging Christmas lights. And this other genius slit his throat while chopping wood.

NATALIE  
Always the neck.

CHARLOTTE  
Huh?

INT. KITCHEN

Abigail slices some cheese.

JACK  
Heard anything from your dad?

ABIGAIL  
No. I'm really worried about him.

She accidentally drops the knife into the sink. It slips down the drain. She reaches for it.

JACK  
Don't cut yourself.

He crosses over to her. Holds her hand out of the way of the sink. Moves his other hand over the drain --

Ruuumble! Another tremor. But this time, it focuses directly on the kitchen.

Thunk! Jack shouts.

JACK  
Fuck!

He yanks his hand out of the sink. Blood drips down from the knife which has stabbed itself through the palm of his left hand...

...At the same time, a strip of tiles peels away from the wall above the drain just far enough to create a curve pointing neck-level.

Jack pries the knife from his hand. Chucks it across the room. Buries his injured hand in his shirt. Stumbles around swearing like a sailor. Abigail moves to help him when --

Ruuumble! Another tremor hits the kitchen. A bunch of utensils crash into the sink. The mezzaluna slips down the drain.

Shink! The next instant, the mezzaluna launches straight up out of the drain, spins off the tile curve, and flies past Abigail, sticking itself into the wall across the room.

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM

Natalie checks her notes.

NATALIE  
And the Alcoxes always took care of the funerals.

Charlotte nods.

NATALIE  
Let me see this again.

She quickly skims over the family tree. Runs her index finger down a couple specific lines. Points to a name in the 50s. An idea strikes her.

NATALIE

Charlotte, how many people were living in the house when this person was born?

Charlotte takes a look. Recognizes the name.

CHARLOTTE

Oh yeah, momma's great aunt May. I dunno. Eight I think.

NATALIE

Did anyone die around the same time?

Charlotte takes a closer look. Points to two other names.

CHARLOTTE

...Yeah. A couple of my great-great uncles.

NATALIE

And no one else was born the same year as your aunt?

CHARLOTTE

No one except her twin brother.

She points to a name nearby Natalie's finger.

NATALIE

Eight. Two births. Two deaths. Eight again.

INT. KITCHEN

The tiniest drop of blood drips off the edge of the mezzaluna. Jack gazes at it --

Abigail's left hand snatches Jack's arm for dear life. He faces her. Her right hand clutches her throat even tighter than his arm. She gags desperately. Her eyes bulge in terror. She fights to make a sound. Only more gagging.

JACK

It's okay. It's okay. Down the wrong tube. Lemme see.

He pries her hand away.

JACK

Oh fuck!!

Blood spurts from twin, razor-thin, horizontal gashes across Abigail's throat. Jack stumbles backwards.

JACK  
Oh fuck!!

Abigail struggles to walk. Manages a couple steps. Tumbles to her knees. Tears at her neck. Opens her mouth. Manages only a distant, fading whine. Finally, slams face-first onto the floor.

INT. MANSION

The Undertaker wheels out Abigail's corpse. Jack tries to help, but with his bandaged hand, mostly gets in the way. Natalie waits nearby. Glares fiercely at Laurel. Charlotte can't take her devastated eyes off Abigail's body.

LAUREL  
It's so very sad. She was so young. So full of life.

UNDERTAKER  
We'd like to offer our deepest condolences and sympathies.

LAUREL  
Thank you so much.

The Undertaker leaves. Laurel closes the door. Feels Natalie's and Charlotte's eyes. Faces them.

LAUREL  
Such a tragedy.

NATALIE  
That's all you have to say?!

Laurel gives her a bright, condescending smile.

LAUREL  
Why my dear, I don't know what you mean.

She struts off down the hallway. Before she disappears:

LAUREL  
Dinner will be ready shortly!

INT. DINING ROOM - EVENING

Patiently watching Laurel eat, Natalie takes her time with dinner. Charlotte stares at her plate. So does Jack.

GRAMMA  
Someone needs to come home.

LAUREL  
Momma, there is no one else.

GRAMMA  
Now!

LAUREL  
Momma, please!

She turns her attention to Natalie.

LAUREL  
Evan?

NATALIE  
Any moment now.

JACK  
I can't believe she's really gone.

LAUREL  
We'll all miss her, but now it's  
time to move on.

CHARLOTTE  
She was so cool. Like a sister.

LAUREL  
For heaven's sakes, Charlotte. You  
only knew the girl two days!

JACK  
How can you be such a fucking  
insensitive, black-hearted bitch?!!

LAUREL  
I've had just about enough of you!!

Evan arrives. Kisses Natalie on the forehead.

EVAN  
There you are. Ready to go?

Natalie keeps her eyes on Laurel.

NATALIE  
We're not going anywhere.

EVAN  
Baby, I made reservations.

Natalie doesn't respond.

NATALIE  
So, Laurel, any word from Roland?

LAUREL  
I'm afraid not. I suppose he  
simply left us.

Natalie stirs her food. Lacking anything else to do, Evan sits.

NATALIE  
It's interesting you say that,  
Laurel, 'cause I saw him today.  
And Martha and Jim.

LAUREL  
And where was that, my dear?

NATALIE  
Hillside Memorial.

LAUREL  
I'm afraid I don't understand.

EVAN  
We're gonna be late.

NATALIE  
I saw Roland's, Martha's, and Jim's  
names right by Curtis's, marking  
their places in the Braddock family  
vault.

Now Gramma and Grampa are paying attention.

NATALIE  
I don't know how they died, or how  
this family keeps things so quiet,  
but I'm gonna find out.

Laurel's smile disappears.

LAUREL  
Why, Natalie, my dear, I assure  
you, I haven't the faintest idea  
what you mean.

Natalie stands. Pulls Evan out into the hallway.

INT. MANSION

Evan's confusion quickly evolves into frustration.

EVAN  
Natalie, what's going on?!

Natalie puts a finger to her lips. Evan speaks in a forced whisper.

EVAN  
We're gonna lose our table!

NATALIE  
Evan, we can't go. I'm really sorry.

EVAN  
Why not?!

NATALIE  
We can't leave Charlotte here alone with Laurel.

EVAN  
You think Laurel's gonna kill her own daughter?

NATALIE  
She is somehow responsible for Curtis, Roland, Abigail, Martha, and Jim. Who knows how many others?

EVAN  
Natalie, this is insane!

NATALIE  
I'll prove it to you!

EXT. MANSION

Natalie and Evan sneak around the side yard.

NATALIE  
Charlotte said that her Aunt Martha and Uncle Jim were thrown out because of a baby. If they're both dead, what happened to the baby?

EVAN

Natalie, I know you think you saw the graves of two people you've never met, and one person you barely knew, but you didn't.

Natalie looks under a few bushes. Nothing.

EVAN

I'm really worried about you. This is approaching delusional psychosis.

Natalie stops searching. Faces him.

NATALIE

Dammit, Evan, I'm not making this up!

EVAN

Natalie, just calm down --

NATALIE

There!

She points to a disturbed patch of dirt near a tree. She runs over to it. Evan follows. Natalie digs up clumps of dirt with her hands. Evan kneels next to her. Natalie brushes away a final layer of dirt...

A cloth bundle rests beneath. Natalie and Evan wince at the smell. Natalie carefully unfolds the cloth...

The still, dead eyes of a newborn child stare up at them. Worms crawl in and out of the corpse's tiny, rotting mouth.

EVAN

Oh God.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Natalie sits on their bed, while Evan paces back and forth.

EVAN

We can't just adopt Charlotte and her baby!

NATALIE

Maybe we won't adopt them... Maybe we could get Charlotte emancipated and then... advise her.

EVAN  
Advise her?!!

Natalie stands. Tries to hold him. He resists.

NATALIE  
Evan, Charlotte and her baby need  
our help. All I wanna do is get  
them outta here.

EVAN  
What if Charlotte doesn't want to  
come with us?

NATALIE  
I'm not sure.

EVAN  
Then what did you have in mind  
exactly?

NATALIE  
Let's pack up the big stuff  
tonight, talk to Charlotte, if she  
says yes, we'll inform Laurel.

EVAN  
If she says no?

NATALIE  
We'll get outta here.

They hear a knock at the door.

LAUREL  
Knock knock.

Natalie opens it.

LAUREL  
Everyone here?

NATALIE  
Yes.

LAUREL  
Good night.

NATALIE  
Good night.

She shuts the door.

EVAN

Let's go see Charlotte.

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM

Blaring some awful, loud music, Charlotte stares vacantly at her family tree. She doesn't hear the knock at first. Then she drags her feet to the door. As soon as she opens it, Natalie and Evan slip inside. Charlotte turns off the music.

NATALIE

Keep it on.

Charlotte turns the music back on. Natalie adjusts the volume to a tolerable level.

NATALIE

Charlotte, how would you feel about leaving? Here? Forever?

CHARLOTTE

I don't understand --

NATALIE

You and your baby come live with me and Evan.

Charlotte's face brightens a little.

CHARLOTTE

Really?

Natalie nods.

CHARLOTTE

What about tellin' momma --?

NATALIE

Don't worry about her. We'll take care of it.

She goes over to Charlotte. Holds her like she would her own sister.

NATALIE

Tomorrow we're all four gonna leave, and we're never coming back.

Charlotte nods. Another knock at the door.

LAUREL

Charlotte?

Charlotte opens it.

LAUREL

Oh, excuse me. Am I interruptin'  
anything?

EVAN

We were just consoling Charlotte.

Charlotte starts to cry.

CHARLOTTE

Abby!!

NATALIE

Good night, Charlotte.

She and Evan slip out.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

With half their things packed, Natalie and Evan are fast asleep.

EXT. MANSION

The Delivery Boy from a couple days ago sneaks onto the property. Picks up a rock. Runs to a nearby window. Throws it.

Bang! He does it several times before the window next to the beaten one slides open. Charlotte sticks her head out.

CHARLOTTE

Over here, genius!

DELIVERY BOY

Sorry!

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM

As the Delivery Boy gropes her, Charlotte moves his hands off her body. Gets down on her knees.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Ruuumble! Craaack! Natalie sits up.

NATALIE

What was that?!

Evan grumbles.

EVAN  
Just a train.

A tremor shakes their bed. Natalie checks the time.  
Midnight.

INT. MANSION

Off in some other corner of the house, Grampa goes about his  
night wandering.

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM

The Delivery Boy zips up his pants.

DELIVERY BOY  
You got one mean tongue.

CHARLOTTE  
Can you stay?

DELIVERY BOY  
Never wanted me to before.

CHARLOTTE  
Things are different now.

DELIVERY BOY  
What about your momma?

CHARLOTTE  
Natalie's gonna take care of me.

INT. MANSION

Grampa wheels himself slowly down a hallway.

INT. BALLROOM

The moment Grampa enters --

Slam! The door behind him closes. He investigates. Tries  
the knob. Unlocked. But he can't open it. He grumbles to  
himself. Heads the opposite direction. As he's about to  
reach that door --

Slam! It closes too. He tries the knob. Unlocked, but no  
use. He leans back in his chair. Takes a deep breath.  
Summons any strength left in his tired, withered arms and...

Takes off down the length of the hall. As he approaches each  
set of doors, they slam shut. The faster he goes, the faster  
they close.

The candle flames begin their dance. At first, smooth and steady, but as Grampa moves, the intensity and frequency of the flames' burning increases even beyond the levels of when Roland died.

Grampa notices this, but keeps going...

In the distance, a playful, but menacing, sound scratches its way into Grampa's ears. Children. Running. Laughing. Mocking.

Grampa reaches the end of the ballroom. Breathing hard. The only other sign of life is the vicious candlelight.

Hush... It came from behind him. He turns his chair back around. Doesn't see anything.

Hush... Closer this time. Sounded like it came from under the doors.

Hush... Faster now. Air sucks out from under the doors. He can see dust clouds suck out along with it.

Hush, hush, hush. It's rushing toward him. He turns his chair halfway toward the closest end of the room. Faces the last door as air disappears from beneath it.

His eyes leap over to the nearest set of candles. With a final hush, the flames perish --

--time screeches to a near halt. In the last moments as the light dies, Grampa sees five small figures at his feet, their features obscured in the flooding darkness.

GRAMPA

At long last.

As if in response to his statement, the five figures leap for his neck --

--time roars back to speed. The figures are gone.

In near pitch dark, Grampa gasps for air. Gags. Wraps his fingers around his neck. Tries to eke out a sound. Nothing comes. He claws fiercely at his neck, quickly losing his battle with death. His eyes roll back into his head.

With one last, weak exhale, he expires. Tumbles forward. Hits the ground. Sprawled. Lifeless. Hands clutch at nothing.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

INT. CHARLOTTE'S ROOM - MORNING

Charlotte and the Delivery Boy are fast asleep in her bed. Laurel's sudden screech wakes them right up.

LAUREL  
DADDY!!!

The Delivery Boy takes this as his cue. Jumps out of bed.

CHARLOTTE  
Where you goin'?

The Delivery Boy nods in Laurel's direction.

DELIVERY BOY  
Away from that.

He throws his clothes on. Climbs out the window.

CHARLOTTE  
When will I see you --?

The Delivery Boy's gone.

EXT. MANSION

The Delivery Boy takes off across the lawn. It dries up. The mansion's paint peels. The wood rots.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie wakes with a slight smile, as if from a pleasant dream. She reaches for Evan. Finds empty mattress. It takes her a moment to register his absence. She pats the area a couple times as if that would make him appear.

NATALIE  
Evan?

She opens her eyes. He's not there. She sits up.

NATALIE  
Evan?!

She gets out of bed. Checks their things. His aren't any more packed than they were last night. She throws clothes on. Notices the rotting walls and ceiling. Runs into the bathroom. Pulls back the shower curtain. Worse than before.

NATALIE

Shit.

She grabs her phone. Remembers its indoor functionality.

NATALIE

Dammit.

She runs out into the hallway.

INT. MANSION

Natalie goes for the nearest ballroom entrance.

INT. BALLROOM

Natalie almost trips as she turns toward the front room.

INT. MANSION

Reaching the front door, she halts. Several floorboards have been pried and bent up in front of the door as a makeshift wooden gate. The display now looks like the mouth of a starving, wild, wooden animal.

NATALIE

Oh my God.

She hears movement. Spins around --

Without a word, Laurel cold-cocks her with one of the antique revolvers from the dining room.

Black.

INT. FORGOTTEN CELLAR

Natalie wakes in a pit of darkness. She tries to stand up --

Click! Holding a candle in one hand, Laurel shoves her revolver into Natalie's face.

LAUREL

She may be older than the phonograph, my dear, but I assure you, this piece can still send you straight across the Styx.

LAUREL

Char-lotte?!

CHARLOTTE

Comin', momma!

Laurel turns her attention back to Natalie.

LAUREL  
Get up. Slowly.

Natalie obeys. They hear Charlotte shuffle over. Baby in her arms. Natalie glares at her. Charlotte starts to cry.

CHARLOTTE  
You said you wouldn't tell anyone about my baby.

NATALIE  
Evan's my husband.

LAUREL  
You see, Charlotte? I told you she'd confess.

She slowly backs Natalie to the wall.

LAUREL  
Now you know she's a liar. What does Gramma say about liars?

CHARLOTTE  
"And all liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."

LAUREL  
That's right. Now, go take care of your child.

Charlotte retreats a few feet away, to Gramma, who waits quite comfortably in the dim candle light.

NATALIE  
Laurel, if you touched one hair on Evan's head --

LAUREL  
He's fine. But he won't be if you don't behave.

NATALIE  
What do you want me to do?

Laurel points.

LAUREL  
Sit there. Next to him.

Natalie walks past Gramma, Charlotte, and the baby, to Jack, seated in a dining room chair, tied up and gagged.

LAUREL

Sit down!

Facing Laurel, Natalie sits next to Jack. In the reflected candlelight, she sees that this is the part of the basement sealed behind the bricked-up wall...

These walls are a slimy black, with rotten brown stains. Behind her, Natalie can see a mess of glass shards twinkling in the candlelight. Above the shards hangs a makeshift, cloth noose.

NATALIE

Now what?!

Laurel stammers, unsure what comes next. As she talks, Natalie quietly works at loosening the binds on Jack's hands.

LAUREL

Momma says you and Evan have to stay, but since you're outsiders, and we can't trust you, you have to stay here.

NATALIE

We'll die here, Laurel.

LAUREL

I'll bring you food and water.

Natalie laughs sarcastically.

NATALIE

What happens when Evan doesn't show up for work? They'll look for him. And what about Jack? Someone's gonna come looking for him.

LAUREL

This family's survived for generations! It will survive you!

NATALIE

Did momma tell you that too?

Laurel stomps over a few feet.

LAUREL

Quiet, or I'll end you right now!

His hands now free, Jack tears the gag out of his mouth.

JACK  
Like hell you will!

He leaps for Laurel. Knocks her over. Her gun goes off. Her candle hits the ground. Charlotte screams. Hides behind Gramma.

JACK  
Fuck!

He tears the gun out of Laurel's hand. Punches her. Points it at her.

NATALIE  
No!

She runs over. Sees that Jack was shot in the shoulder.

NATALIE  
It's not her.

She faces Gramma, sitting calmly behind them.

JACK  
You're right.

He points the gun at Gramma. Natalie grabs it.

NATALIE  
You'll shoot Charlotte!

She takes the gun. Points it at Laurel.

NATALIE  
Get up.

Laurel obeys. Natalie twists Laurel's arm behind her back. Sticks the gun to her head. Walks her to Gramma.

NATALIE  
Tell me. Everything.

Gramma stares at her. Charlotte steps out from behind Gramma. Joins Natalie.

NATALIE  
Now.

Gramma sighs.

GRAMMA

I was born Emily Kay McKellan. I  
married Samuel Jonathan Braddock.  
We had six children.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ATLANTA - NIGHT

Under the black of night sky, Union troops lay siege to the  
once-thriving, vibrant city...

INT. MANSION

In a stately home only blocks away from the heat of battle, a  
mother and her five children move a grand piano up against  
the front door. The mother, EMILY, is in her early 30s,  
every inch a proud, Southern lady. And expecting.

Besides the piano, the house is bare. Naked windows hold no  
curtains. Dark squares on the walls betray the absence of  
the once formidable collection of portraits.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

The city had been under siege for  
weeks, with no end in sight. The  
slaves had fled. We'd long since  
eaten our last rations.

Her eldest SON, a strapping lad of twelve, offers a tall,  
brass coat-stand. Emily nods her approval. Her Son braces  
it against the windows.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

Despite this, the children stood  
firm, like proud Confederate  
soldiers, never shying from the  
hell they witnessed.

Emily looks out a window. Sees troops heading their way.  
Faces her Son. Gives him orders.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

I instructed my eldest to take the  
little ones to their place beneath  
the house. They were to wait there  
until I returned for them.

Her Son nods obediently. Rounds up his siblings. Emily  
leads them out of the room.

INT. DRAWING ROOM

The children follow Emily to the edge of an elegant rug. She pulls back a corner, revealing a crudely fashioned trap door. Her Son opens the door. Climbs down. His siblings follow. Once they're all in, Emily joins them.

INT. CELLAR

The eldest Son leads them a few yards back...

The hiding place has been provisioned with blankets, a lamp, and the last morsels of food. Outside its large wooden doors, a huge iron bar lies ready to reinforce.

INT. HIDING PLACE

The children file inside. The youngest ones take immediate refuge in the blankets.

GRAMMA (V.O.)  
I told them they mustn't leave  
until I'd returned.

The children all nod, except her eldest. He mouths Gramma's words.

GRAMMA (V.O.)  
"What if you don't come?"

Emily kneels before him. Holds his face in her palms.

GRAMMA (V.O.)  
I promised him the entire Yankee  
army couldn't stop me.

Though his eyes are filled with terror, and his face is full of doubt, the Son nods his understanding. Emily stands. Backs away from the hiding place.

GRAMMA (V.O.)  
That it would all be over soon.

INT. CELLAR

Emily closes the doors. Sets the iron bar in place. Moves a couple of boxes in front. Hastens upstairs.

INT. MANSION

Emily enters the front room. Surveys her home's security one last time. Looks out the window. Sighs to herself.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

As I awaited a miracle, I thought  
of my husband, Samuel, who'd been  
away so long.

She braces fire pokers against the windows. As she places  
the last one, she spots a flicker of blue outside. She  
searches the room urgently. Locates the brass coat-stand.  
Arms herself with it. Seeks courage within it.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

I made threat after threat,  
feigning courage when I truly felt  
none.

No answer. She hears some thumping and scratching around one  
of the nearby windows. She swings to face whatever comes --

A stone crashes through one of the panes. Emily shrieks.  
Forgets all about her weapon. It clangs to the floor.

INT. HIDING PLACE

The Son flinches at his mother's distant scream. Some of the  
other children begin to weep.

INT. MANSION

Emily flees for the next room. Trips on her petticoats.  
Hits the floor.

A leg clad in Union cloth kicks out the remainder of the  
window. The flimsy fire poker flies across the room. The  
SOLDIER leaps through. Takes slow, careful steps towards  
her.

Emily comes to as the Soldier reaches her. The sight of a  
looming Yankee in her home is enough to choke another scream  
out of her.

INT. HIDING PLACE

The children shudder.

INT. MANSION

The Soldier squats at her side. Covers her mouth. Scoops  
her up in his arms. Carries her deeper into the house. She  
struggles every inch of the way.

INT. EMPTY ROOM

The Soldier sets her on her feet. Whispers.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

"Emily!"

INT. HIDING PLACE

Directly beneath Emily and the Soldier, the children cling to their every word.

INT. EMPTY ROOM

Emily's muffled screams come even more urgently now that the Soldier has somehow divined her name. The Soldier removes his hat. Emily stops screaming. The Soldier uncovers her mouth. Puts a finger to his lips. Emily whispers.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

"Samuel?!"

Samuel nods.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

I told him the children were safe.  
He demanded that we flee.

She points to the floor. Samuel looks down. Through one of the cracks in the floor boards, he can just make out his eldest Son.

INT. HIDING PLACE

The children call to their father.

INT. EMPTY ROOM

Samuel smiles. Puts a finger to his lips. The children obey. Emily touches Samuel's uniform.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

He knew they were coming. He'd fled his camp, killed an enemy soldier, stolen his uniform, and hidden himself among them.

She backs away from Samuel. He takes a step toward her. Explains himself.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

No matter what he said, I knew, and the children knew as well. We were the family of a deserter. As good as dead.

INT. HIDING PLACE

The children shudder and whimper.

INT. EMPTY ROOM

Emily's sorely disappointed.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

Again, he pleaded. "There's no food! We must save the children below, and the one you carry in your belly."

Emily mouths Gramma's words.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

If there's no food for six mouths here, there's no food for eight mouths anywhere!

INT. HIDING PLACE

The younger children start to cry. Their big brother does his best to comfort them.

INT. EMPTY ROOM

Samuel attempts to reassure Emily.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

As much as he tried to comfort me, we both knew the truth. We had no choice but to survive here on our own. Yankee army or no.

INT. HIDING PLACE

Their Son comes to a decision. Gramma's voice and the Son's voice echo the same sentiment.

GRAMMA (V.O.)

We'll never survive.

SON

We'll never survive.

He turns around. Eyes his siblings. And the lamp.

INT. EMPTY ROOM

Realizing nothing will persuade Emily, Samuel arms himself. Heads back to the front room. Emily joins him.

GRAMMA (V.O.)  
If judgement were to come, we'd  
face it together.

INT. MANSION

Samuel and Emily wait by one of the windows. Samuel aims his rifle. Ready for anything.

INT. MANSION - MORNING

Wide awake and ready, Samuel waits stone-still. At his feet, Emily's passed out.

Outside, Samuel spots a flash of color. He fires a warning shot. The person jumps aside. A fat arm waves a white handkerchief. Hands raised, AMOS ALCOX, a bespectacled man in his sixties, waddles out.

GRAMMA (V.O.)  
Our neighbor, Amos Alcox, was the  
first to arrive.

Alcox mouths her words.

GRAMMA (V.O.)  
Confederates have surrendered!  
Fresh supplies are on the way!

INT. CELLAR

Emily is the first one down. Samuel and Alcox follow.

GRAMMA (V.O.)  
I called for the children again and  
again, but they didn't answer.

Emily heads for the hiding place. With the utmost urgency, she and Samuel remove the boxes she'd placed in front of it. Samuel removes the iron bar. Rips the doors open --

Emily's shriek shakes the entire mansion. Alcox waddles over to them as fast as his fat little legs will carry him.

INT. HIDING PLACE

Trembling with horror, Emily points inside. Samuel steps past her. He can barely contain his own screams.

Before them, the four younger children sit tied together, in a pool of their own blood, drained from their slit throats.

Nearby, the eldest Son hangs from a clumsily fashioned noose. One hand clutches a blood-crusted shard of glass. Nearby him lies the shattered lantern.

Samuel holds Emily. Shields her eyes. Neither can speak nor move. Alcox removes his hat. Eases past them.

Alcox nears the eldest Son. Inspects his face. Hours dead. He releases the glass from the dead boy's hand.

Clink! The glass hits the ground. A scrap of cloth flutters down along with it. Alcox picks up the cloth. Rejoins Samuel and Emily.

As Alcox closes the hiding place doors, his eyes stay with the Son's head in the noose...

DISSOLVE TO:

The noose Natalie noticed earlier.

INT. FORGOTTEN CELLAR - MORNING

Everyone is awestruck.

GRAMMA

We buried them that very day.

She wipes her eyes, the heartbreak still fresh.

GRAMMA

It took us years to realize what pain the children had left behind.

She stares off into space.

GRAMMA

Every day Samuel and I drew closer to the grave, but every year, death refused us.

She takes a folded scrap of cloth out of her pocket. Despite its age, the cloth looks as fresh as the day Alcox found it. Gramma offers it to Natalie. She unfolds it. Reads the desperately scrawled, browned, blood-stain letters.

NATALIE

Too many mouths.

GRAMMA

All I wanted was to protect the children. And they've punished me for it ever since.

NATALIE

...How old are you?

GRAMMA

Decades have passed since I last counted my years.

NATALIE

All those graves. Loved ones lost. If any more than eight people ever lived here, the children's curse took the extra lives.

JACK

Roland, Abigail, Mr. Braddock.

GRAMMA

If any fewer than eight lived here, the house tore itself down to its very foundation. Slowly strangling us every step of the way.

NATALIE

The lawn, the food, the piano, the rotting house.

GRAMMA

There had been no disturbance for quite a while, until my sweet, little niece gave birth. Her child destroyed the balance.

NATALIE

What about Martha and Jim?

GRAMMA

They could not be persuaded to leave or end their child's life. Samuel and I did what we had to do to maintain the balance.

JACK

What about Curtis?

GRAMMA

Curtis died of his own accord. The children did not take him.

NATALIE

But why take in Evan and me?

GRAMMA

During the last disturbance, the children took outsiders. We thought perhaps this time, they'd spare us, and do it again.

NATALIE

But you didn't know about Charlotte's baby.

GRAMMA

And so the children began their slaughter.

Laurel trembles with fury.

LAUREL

No!! We are a good family!! A proud, Southern family!!

NATALIE

Don't you see what's going on?! The house is cursed! It owns you, and it always will!

Gramma nods to Laurel.

GRAMMA

Laurel?

She points to Natalie. Before Natalie can react, Laurel elbows her as hard as she can. Natalie doubles over. Laurel grabs the gun. Points it at Natalie and Jack.

LAUREL

Back into that corner.

Jack eyes Natalie. She nods. He kicks Laurel in the shin. Laurel hollers. Drops the gun. Jack grabs it. Shoots Gramma right between the eyes.

JACK

Fuck you!

The second he does --

Groooaan...!! Creeeaaak...!! Hiiisss...!!

The sounds last several seconds. A heavy rumble shakes the house. Charlotte screams. So does the baby. All heads turn to the place where the children died...

The noose swings quietly back and forth. In the darkness, Natalie and the Braddock family can almost make out the shadowy apparitions of the dead children.

LAUREL

Momma!!

Jack turns the gun on her.

JACK

And fuck you too!

He shoots Laurel in the chest. Pockets the gun --

A louder rumble shakes them. The noose swings like a pendulum. Now Natalie and the Braddock family can all see the edges of clothes, hair, and pale skin. The apparitions of the dead children are clearly merging into the real world.

NATALIE

What did you do?!

JACK

What someone should've done a long time ago!

NATALIE

Now there are only five of us! The house is rotting away, and we're in the basement!

She turns to Charlotte.

NATALIE

How do we get outta here?!

Charlotte only manages to shake her head and sob.

Natalie kicks the brick wall. Jack joins her. They knock out a small hole, then get on their knees, and pull out huge chunks. The more they grab, the easier it gets. Finally, there's enough space to squeeze through.

Natalie grabs Charlotte. Shoves her and her baby through. Gets out of the way.

JACK

You first!

Natalie crawls through. Jack's right behind her.

INT. BASEMENT

Natalie, Jack, and Charlotte run to the opposite end, up the stairs. A couple steps snap under their weight. Charlotte screams again.

INT. NATALIE & EVAN'S ROOM

Natalie, Jack, and Charlotte climb out the trap door. Mold, rot, and filth crawl out of the trap door, across the floor, and up the walls. The house is literally falling apart right before their eyes.

NATALIE  
Where's Evan?!

CHARLOTTE  
I dunno!

NATALIE  
Charlotte!

CHARLOTTE  
I swear!

They run out into the hallway.

INT. MANSION

A crumbled pile of ceiling has already fallen down, blocking their closest path to the ballroom. Natalie calls out Evan's name. As if in reaction, a few more pieces of the ceiling tumble down.

Jack kicks in the first door they come to. Chunks of the wall come out with it. No one's there. Jack smashes every nearby door. Knocks down pieces of the walls. No Evan...

Until about the tenth door, when they hear a distant groaning.

NATALIE  
Evan?!!

They listen. It's definitely nearby. Another few ceiling pieces fall. Natalie, Jack, and Charlotte cross through a couple more rooms.

INT. MUSIC ROOM

Then, finally, Natalie, Jack, and Charlotte find Evan tied up to the piano. Jack gets to work freeing Evan.

They all see the piano actively decompose. The scratches deepen. The keys' ivory peels away. The strings spring free. The sound board plate rusts over. At the same time --

Crack! In a nearby corner, a couple floor boards collapse under Charlotte. She screams. Catches herself on the edge of the floor with one arm. Holds her baby to her chest with the other.

The weight of the decaying piano only expedites the collapse of the floor. Soon, Evan will be in exactly the same place as Charlotte is now.

Natalie runs over to Charlotte. Drops to her stomach. Grabs Charlotte's arm.

NATALIE

Gimme your baby, and I'll help you up!

CHARLOTTE

No you won't!

NATALIE

Charlotte, do it now, or you'll both die!

CHARLOTTE

You're a liar!!

Faced with losing not only Charlotte and her baby, but Evan, Jack, and herself, Natalie snatches the child from Charlotte's arm.

CHARLOTTE

NO!!!

Reaching for her baby, she loses her grip. Disappears into the black below.

Jack frees Evan. Natalie runs back to him.

EVAN

Natalie, thank God you're okay.

NATALIE

Let's get the hell outta here.

They take off.

INT. BALLROOM

Natalie, Evan, and Jack run in. The moment they do, they hear a loud rumbling through the house, as if it were about to vomit something terrible.

JACK  
What was that?!

NATALIE  
Let's move!

They set off again. The door behind them slams shut. Jack hesitates.

NATALIE  
Come on!

Jack keeps going. Just like last night, more doors slam shut.

Crack!! Jack hesitates again. The floor boards near the doors tear free. Fall away.

NATALIE  
Jack!

Jack gets moving again.

The closer Natalie, Evan, and Jack draw to the front of the house, the more the doors slam shut, and the floor collapses.

Evan runs ahead. Leaps into the doorway to the front room. Braces himself against the door. Forces it open.

The disappearing floor catches up with them. Boards fall from between Evan and where Natalie and Jack run.

EVAN  
Natalie!

He holds out his hand. Natalie glances at Jack.

JACK  
Go!

Natalie passes the baby to Evan. He holds the baby in one arm. Extends the other.

EVAN  
Come on!

The gap between Evan and Natalie grows dangerously large. Natalie takes a running jump...

Slams down on the jagged boards sticking out from under the door. With the wind knocked out of her, Evan pulls her to relative safety.

Natalie and Evan turn to Jack. He backs up as yet another set of boards fall into darkness. Now the distance between Jack and escape is several feet long.

NATALIE

You'll make it! We'll catch you!

Jack takes a second to consider.

JACK

Get outta here!!

He runs back to the middle of the room.

EVAN

Let's go.

He helps Natalie to her feet. They run...

Standing in the middle of the room, Jack notices something below. He goes to the edge of the floor. Peers down.

A corpse gazes back up at him. She's in her mid-20s. Throat slashed. Dressed in the clothes of the late 19th century.

Jack stumbles backward.

JACK

Oh God!

He sees another one. And another. Each ghoul gazes at him with the same intensity. No matter which era was that of their demise, they all feature some bruise, cut, or other wound about the throat.

Though their lips remain frozen, he can hear them repeat his name with growing intensity.

JACK

Oh God!!

More and more of them appear. Soon, the entire area below the vanishing floor is filled with the spectres. Jack notices similarities between them and the pictures on the walls.

Then the familiar ones. Roland. Abigail. Samuel. Laurel. Emily. Charlotte.

Jack backs away as far as he can. He's standing in the dead center of the room, on less than five square feet of floor...

More boards tumble down. Jack teeters. Sways.

The ghouls below slowly raise their arms to Jack. Welcoming him. He's about to scream out when --

Air sucks out of the room. Jack gags. Passes out. Falls...

Down...

Down...

DOWN...

INT. MANSION

Evan and Natalie tear at the now-crumbling front door wooden jaws. All around them, the floor collapses. Evan kicks the front door out. He and Natalie dive through.

EXT. MANSION

Tumbling down the front steps, Natalie and Evan escape just as the floor behind them collapses. They jump into their car. Take off. Behind them, with a final few groaning, crashing death throes, the mansion collapses in on itself.

FADE OUT:

THE END